

# Landscape Seen and Thought

*A six-decade survey revealed the often sublime and always disciplined vision of Helen Lundeborg, one of L.A.'s most admired painters.*

**BY MICHAEL DUNCAN**

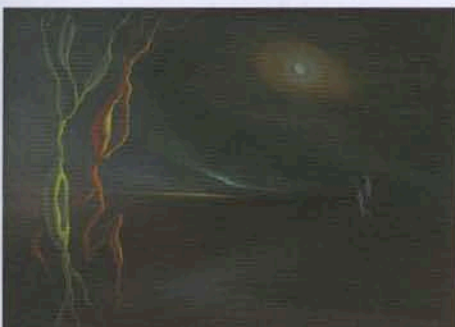
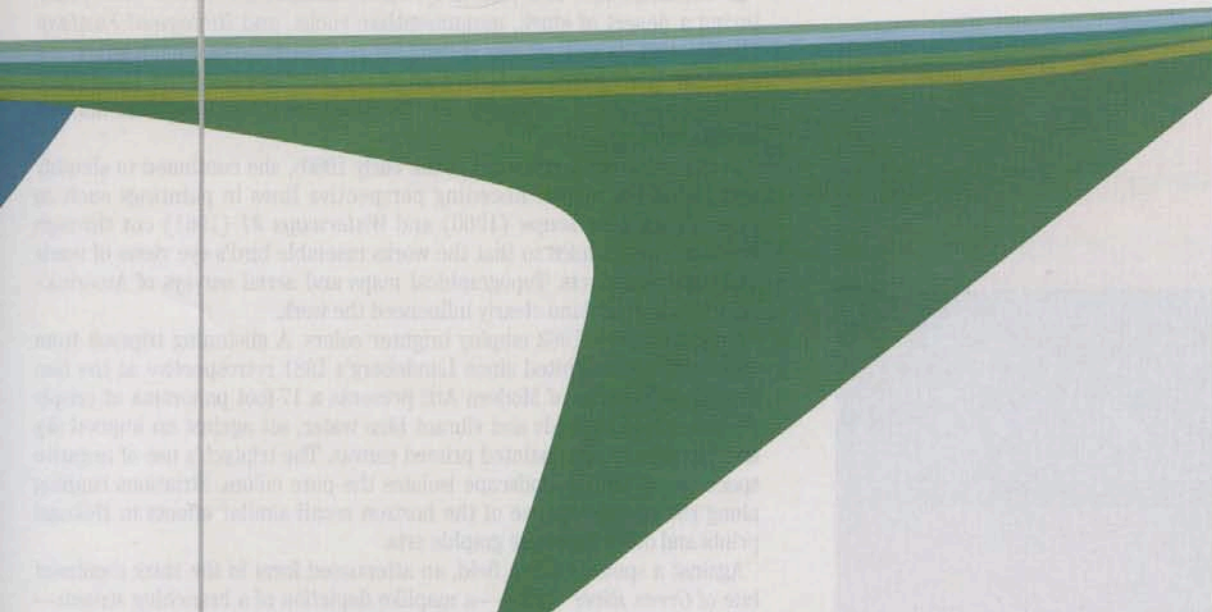
Los Angeles at last seems to be acknowledging that its art history did not begin with the Ferus Gallery, Ed Kienholz and Ed Ruscha. By the late 1940s, in fact, the area had developed a distinctive school of hard-edge geometric abstraction, which was celebrated in the 1959 exhibition "Four Abstract Classicists" that featured works by John McLaughlin, Lorser Feitelson, Karl Benjamin and Frederick Hammersley.<sup>1</sup> Seemingly in response to the revival of that style in the past few years by a number of young West Coast painters (such as Yek, Bart Exposito, Tim Bavington and



*Waterways #1, 1961, oil on canvas, 50 by 40 inches.*

**Helen Lundeberg:** Triptych, 1963, oil on canvas, 60 by 204 inches overall.

Images this article courtesy Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood.



**Biological Fantasy, 1946, oil on paper board, 10 by 14 inches.**

Darcy Huebler), the Abstract Classicists have all been featured in recent exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> This winter, Dave Hickey organized a group show—pointedly titled “The Los Angeles School”—at the Otis College of Art and Design that included the quartet from the 1959 show along with two women working at the time who were unjustly omitted: Helen Lundeberg and June Harwood.<sup>3</sup>

Lundeberg (1908-1999) has chiefly been recognized for her psychologically astute self-portraits and allegorical still lifes of the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s, however, she began to use spare, geometric shapes in abstract compositions that convey the quiescence of nature. A recent revolving exhibition at Louis Stern Fine Arts in West Hollywood of about 40 of her paintings (from 1933 to '90) demonstrated the quiet power of her work and its contemporary relevance.

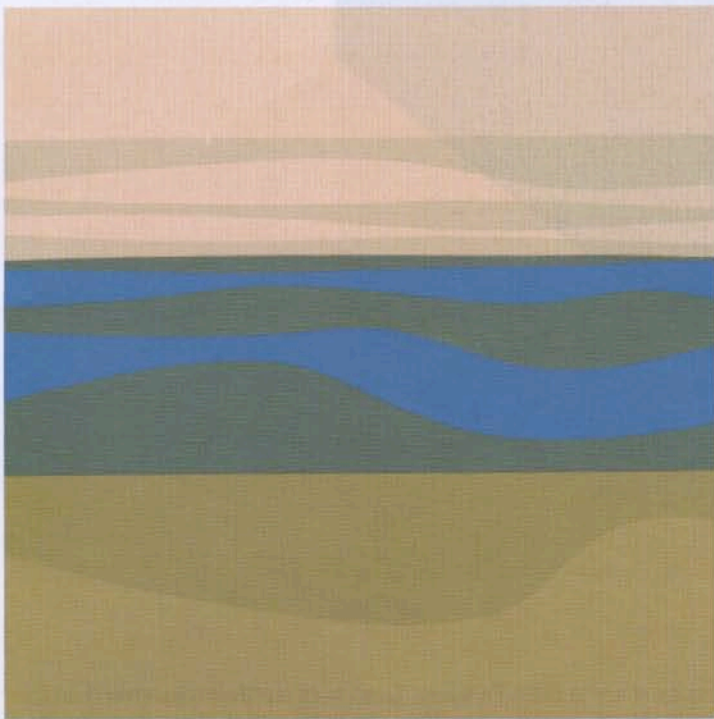
Evoking space through horizon lines, suggestions of architecture and crisp shadows, Lundeberg's paintings distill natural vistas into flat, subtly colored arrangements of rectangles, trapezoids, stripes and smoothly curved shapes. Like Ellsworth Kelly, Lundeberg reduces the visual field to essential, simplified forms, while relying more on a conventional notion of the picture plane as a window onto the world. Her first painting in an abstract style, *A Quiet Place* (1950), suggests an ambiguously defined courtyard flanked by rectilinear columns and passageways. Later paintings present landscapes compartmentalized by waterways, roads or architecture. One untitled painting from 1959, for example, features a moonlike disc behind a group of brown, slab-like stripes that read as simplified columns or tree trunks.

Coming of age in 1920s Pasadena, Lundeberg saw the region grow from an agricultural community to a bustling city. In art school, she came under the spell of her professor, Lorser Feitelson, an experienced artist who had exhibited in Europe and New York. A devotee of Renaissance draftsmanship, Feitelson imbued Lundeberg with a deep respect for classical composition. In the early 1930s the two artists, who later married, organized the short-lived “Post Surrealism” movement, a sophisticated response to Surrealism made at a time when the European movement was barely known in this country. The Post Surrealists—a group of about 10 artists



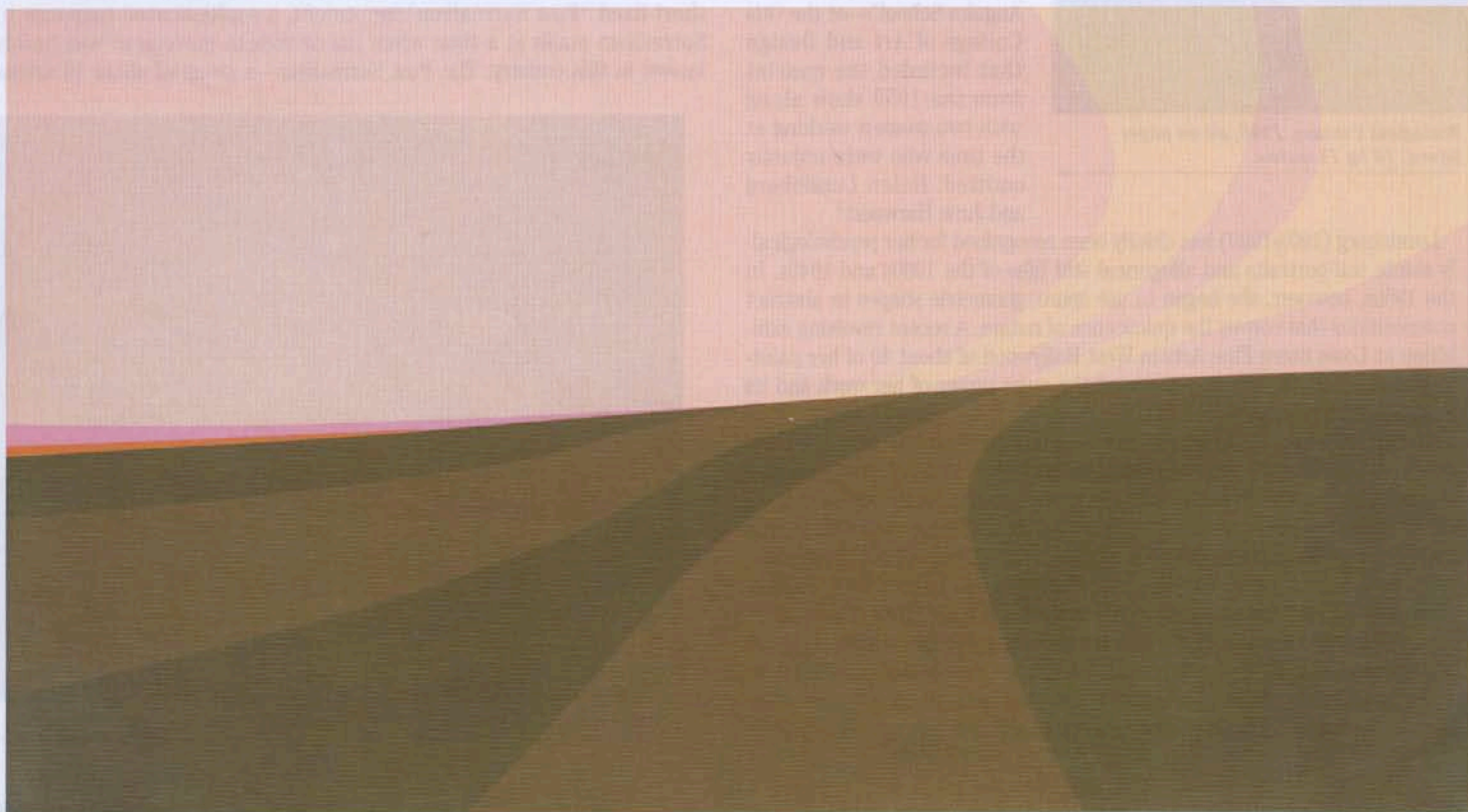
**A Quiet Place, 1950, oil on canvas, 16 by 20 inches.**

**The oddity of the aerial views seems intended to underscore the illusory character of any system that purports to control or discipline nature.**



*Ocean View, 1970, acrylic on canvas, 20 inches square.*

*Landscape, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 30 by 54 inches.*



that included Knud Merrill and the young Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish—advocated the creation of symbolic tableaux based not on dream imagery but on conscious, rational associations. Lundeberg's paintings from that period are rebuslike compositions of tightly rendered symbols.<sup>4</sup>

**T**he Louis Stern exhibition included a few paintings in the Post Surrealist style that read as symbolic landscapes. *Sundial* (1934), featuring a desert of stark, monumentlike rocks, and *Biological Fantasy* (1946), with its crepuscular setting for podlike growths, demonstrate the cerebral quality that underlies all of Lundeberg's work. As Lundeberg insisted throughout her career, her paintings are studio inventions and not based on actual scenes.<sup>5</sup>

In the reductive landscapes of the early 1960s, she continued to simplify and refine her vision. Receding perspective lines in paintings such as *Cimmerian Landscape* (1960) and *Waterways #1* (1961) cut through fields of twilight hues so that the works resemble bird's-eye views of roads and rural aqueducts. Topographical maps and aerial surveys of America's agricultural heartland clearly influenced the work.

Seascapes from 1963 employ brighter colors. A glistening triptych from that year, not exhibited since Lundeberg's 1981 retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, presents a 17-foot panorama of crisply delineated green fields and vibrant blue water, set against an implied sky and foreground of unpainted primed canvas. The triptych's use of negative space to set off the landscape isolates the pure colors. Striations running along the entire expanse of the horizon recall similar effects in Hokusai prints and other Japanese graphic arts.

Against a spotless white field, an attenuated form in the stark dominant hue of *Green River* (1963)—a maplike depiction of a branching stream—reads as a large-scale calligraphic character. Lundeberg was fascinated by the perceptual extremes of microcosms and macrocosms. The insistent oddity of her painted aerial views seems intended to underscore the purely illusory character of any system that purports to control or discipline nature. Elsewhere she uses architecture as a kind of framing device for the contemplation of vastness. The solid forms in the foreground of *Evening* (1964) suggest a terrace that offers an endless vista into autumnal, olive-tinted light, piqued by a swipe of violet and a sunset stripe of fading pink.



*Two Mountains, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 35 by 50 inches.*

Lundeberg's paintings of the late 1960s depict shifting landmasses and colored sand dunes, executed in blocks of striated earth tones. In *Landscape* (1968), the brown curve of a two-lane highway miraculously continues into a bowed swath of cream-colored cloud. *Ocean View* (1970) employs horizontal, edge-to-edge, curved bands of color that indicate sand, sea and sky. Like the plastic components of "Colorforms," the crisp, flat, monochrome elements assert a purified visual ideal.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, Lundeberg kept pace with her husband, who had developed his own manner of reductive abstraction based on forms of the human body. Feitelson's sensuous late works consist of single lines that emulate the gently angled curve of an arm, thigh or buttock. More ethereal, Lundeberg's late paintings present distant views conceived as strata of pale pastels. *Two Mountains* (1990) is one of her last depictions of illusionistic space: a canvas bisected by the image of a moundlike mountain and its nearly identical lake reflection. After this, failing health prevented her from painting.

In his catalogue essay for the exhibition at Louis Stern, Hickey notes Lundeberg's "phenomenological overlay of passionate seeing and that which is seen, of interior and exterior atmospherics."<sup>6</sup> Crediting her work as a precursor to that of Ed Ruscha and Robert Irwin, Hickey emphasizes Lundeberg's ability to create works that both reflect and idealize nature. The self-consciousness of her approach also relates to that of contemporary artists—such as Kevin Appel, Matthew Ritchie, Adam Ross and Chris Finley—who straddle the divide between abstraction and nature painting. In her thoughtful, lonesome works, she uses abstraction to intercede with nature, quietly grasping what she can for the organizing, perceptive mind. □

1. Curated by Jules Langsner, "Four Abstract Classicists" opened at the San Francisco Museum of Art (since 1975 the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) and traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, London's Institute of Contemporary Art and Queens University, Belfast.

2. John McLaughlin was the subject of a traveling survey organized by the Laguna Art Museum in 1996 (see *A.I.A.*, Sept. '97). In the past two years, Louis Stern Fine Arts has organized surveys of Lorser Feitelson and Karl Benjamin. Last fall, works by Frederick Hammersley were exhibited at LA Louver (see *A.I.A.*, Nov. '04).

3. "The Los Angeles School" was on view Nov. 13, 2004, to Jan. 22, 2005, at the Ben Maltz Gallery, Otis College of Art and Design, in Los Angeles. The neglected June Harwood, wife of "Four Abstract Classicists" curator Jules Langsner, created extraordinarily sophisticated hard-edge abstractions, often using shifting planes or jagged curved forms. Her works were the subject of a remarkable 2003 exhibition at NoHo Modern in North Hollywood.

4. Post-Surrealist works were surveyed in a 1935 exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art that traveled to the Brooklyn Museum. Works by Lundeberg, Feitelson and Merrill were subsequently included in Alfred Barr's 1936 Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism." See Michael Duncan, "Post-Surrealism: Genesis and Equilibrium," *Post-Surrealism*, Logan, Utah, Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, 2002.

5. See Diane Moran, "Helen Lundeberg and the Illusory Landscape," in *Helen Lundeberg and the Illusory Landscape: Five Decades of Painting*, Los Angeles, Louis Stern Fine Arts, 2004, pp. 13-17.

6. Dave Hickey, "Helen Lundeberg: Without Whom . . .," in *Helen Lundeberg and the Illusory Landscape: Five Decades of Painting*, p. 11.

"*Helen Lundeberg and the Illusory Landscape: Five Decades of Painting*" was on view at Louis Stern Fine Arts, West Hollywood, Apr. 22-Aug. 28, 2004, and accompanied by a 136-page catalogue featuring essays by Diane Moran and Dave Hickey.

Author: Michael Duncan is a freelance writer and curator based in Los Angeles.

# Art in America



APRIL 2005

KEHINDE WILEY  
TERRY WINTERS  
JOHN BALDESSARI  
REPORTS FROM  
POLAND

\$5.00 USA  
\$7.00 CAN £3.50 UK