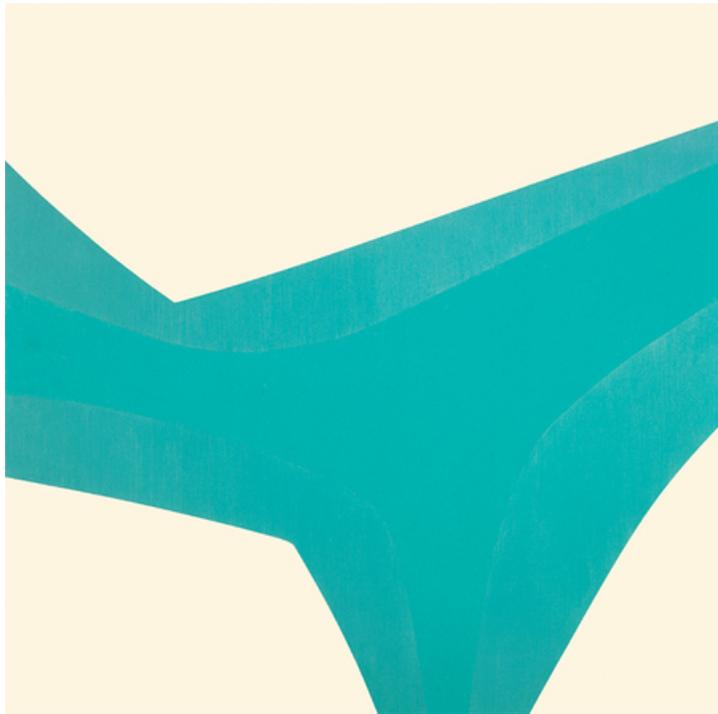


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ARTFORUM

Helen Lundeborg

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Helen Lundeborg, *Water Map*, 1963, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60".

Helen Lundeborg (1908–1999) is an important if underrecognized figure in California art. Perhaps best known for her enigmatic “post-Surrealist” figurative paintings of the 1930s, she made a transition to hard-edge geometric abstraction in the '50s; the latter works, marked by their austere and ingenious eccentricity, were the focus of this revealing show at Cristin Tierney Gallery.

Abstract without purely being so, pieces such as *Seascape*, 1962; *By the Sea II*, 1962; and *Water Map*, 1963, clearly allude to the sea. It must be a serenely unruffled sea, for its surface is flat and unmoving (suggesting, perhaps, that Lundeborg is not exactly “moved” by it). Three other, browner works—*Sunny Corridor*, 1959; *Desert Road*, 1960; and *Arches 5*, 1962—evoke the earth, although they all also have hints of blue. In comparison with these, *Untitled*, 1959, is in a class by itself: A sequence of vertical bands, which expand as they move across the canvas from left to right, almost block out a view of what appears to be the ocean beyond them. Unlike the other works that were on view, *Untitled* is boldly straightforward in its geometry and structure. (It was also the most directly

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representational.)

All these works belong to the school of California hard-edge painting, centered in Los Angeles, where Lundeberg lived and worked. (Her art was the subject of a recent retrospective at the Laguna Art Museum.) They convey a “classic attitude”; the phrase, which is also the title of the exhibition, is derived from a statement Lundeberg wrote for a 1942 exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. “By classicism,” she writes, “I mean . . . a highly conscious concern with esthetic structure which is the antithesis of intuitive, romantic, or realistic approaches to painting. My aim . . . is to calculate, and reconsider, every element in a painting with regard to its function in the whole organization.” If this sounds like an orthodox assertion of reductive formalism, however, the works in this exhibition contradicted the statement. Boasting titles that conspicuously flout allusions to natural phenomena (sea, earth, light) and real places (a road, a corridor, arches), Lundeberg’s work is peculiarly romantic and intuitive: She reduces her subject matter to pale mnemonic traces, its reality just barely evident in the ghostly abstractness. It seems Lundeberg could escape neither her environment nor her unconscious.

Compared with her early representational work, such as *Double Portrait of the Artist in Time*, 1935 (which is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC), Lundeberg’s deadpan abstractions seem timeless and impersonal. Yet this also raises a question: Are her geometries a creative “breakthrough” or an ambivalent abandonment of representation? Indeed, I suggest that there is no such thing as purely abstract painting: Experience of reality and of the self is always implicit in abstraction’s forms and structure.

—*Donald Kuspit*