

Art in America

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Four Americans at Marlborough Chelsea

A disparate gathering of artists spanning generations and crossing disciplines, Manny Farber (b. 1917), Sven Lukin (b. 1934), William Tunberg (b. 1936) and Camille Utterback (b. 1970) seem most linked by a questioning of the necessity for the traditional support in contemporary painting. Curator Maurice Tuchman titled this exhibition "Four Americans: Post-Spiritual Abstraction," a nod to his previous curatorial engagement with "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985," a 1986 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The title also alludes to Clement Greenberg's hurrah for Color Field painting, "Post-Painterly Abstraction," the title of an earlier exhibition at LACMA, in 1964.

Although the California-based Manny Farber [see interview, p. 116] has entertained painterly representational license in recent years, the work included here consists of several magisterial abstractions dating from 1972 to 1974. Nearly monochromatic, they are shaped, variously earth-colored and large, push-pinned to the wall, and consist of nothing more than acrylic paint on grids of collaged sheets of kraft paper. About 10 feet on a side, the modulated, taupe expanse of *Untitled (8177/8677)* is shaped like a vast, reductive heart or plectrum, its surface lively with multiple rivulets of acrylic. Nearly 6 feet in diameter, *Untitled (8196/8696)* is a slightly convex mustard-yellow disc suggesting the surface of some uncharted moon. A third painting, shaped like an elongated olive and roughly 6 by 11 feet, seems burnished, and is circumscribed by an inch-wide band of acrylic and paper. With scant regard for the convention of the stretcher as support, Farber's paintings are conceived as bifacial and may be installed recto or verso.

Well known since his pioneering work in the development of the shaped canvas in the 1960s, Sven Lukin extends his recent work in such a way that the support becomes the painting. Shaped, carved into and painted upon, Lukin's reliefs of Styrofoam propose a radical and witty transformation of unlikely materials. Measuring 8 feet high by 4 feet wide, the lively *Snake and Mongoose (2003-04)* is divided into two panels of activity. Below, a bright red snake draws its repetitive, curvilinear form from the decorative calligraphy of Arabic writing, extending along a simulacrum of blue tile; above, a frenzy of curved, red, arrowlike bars reiterates the violent encounter suggested by the title. If several paintings recall the patterning of benday dots in the work of Roy Lichtenstein, *Detour (2004)* signals to the reliefs of Larry Rivers with a wedge of striped red, yellow and black, like an element of a traffic barrier emerging from the representation of a half-completed tire.

Sculptor William Tunberg introduced marquetry as the substance of his esthetic production 15 years ago. His singularly handsome multicolored sculptures have the shape and presence of totems or shields, with the hallucinatory effect of complex kaleidoscopes. (Those included in this exhibition all date from 2003.) He intersects relatively large, shaped elements of color and grain with smaller shapes and hues, joining their unblemished surfaces with gleaming, polished finish. The 42-by-42-by-5-inch *Medallion* reveals, on close inspection, an iconography associated with riverboats, including wheels in the lower left corner, flanked by a graceful anchor. *Nabucco* consists of five bowed vertical elements, the highest member at the center.

Regarded as a pioneering programmer of interactive installations, video artist Camille Utterback proposes the viewer as prime mover. Utterback was inspired by Calder mobiles to cre-

Right, Sven Lukin: *Fusama*, 2003, acrylic on Styrofoam, 48 by 60 inches. Below, Camille Utterback: *Untitled 5*, 2004, computer, video camera and projector, dimensions variable; both in "Four Americans" at Marlborough Chelsea.



ate visual systems that respond to the space they occupy, and in the process wrote software code that directs the video camera and projector of the single work included here, *Untitled 5 (interactive video projection)*, 2004. The programming allows her to follow, abstract and then project the movement of gallery visitors as they enter a tracking field, an area designated by a large pad roughly 7 by 10 feet, placed on the gallery floor below a ceiling-mounted projector. The projector casts a changing series of images on a wall area of the same size as the floor pad. As the viewer walks onto the pad and turns or gestures in any direction, projected elements of abstracted form and color respond to that movement. In

moments of stasis, the passages of form remain immobile. In its active state, the projection becomes the visual equivalent of the theremin, an instrument performed rather than played.

Tuchman observes in the exhibition's brochure that these four artists share a belief in the validity of abstraction. He offers an invitation to reconsider the antic possibilities inherent in the shaped support, a project not yet concluded, nor even sufficiently explored, in the accelerating parade of What's Next. —Edward Leffingwell