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Mullican, with no sunny disposition

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Hot on the heels of a fantastic survey of works by Lee Mullican (1919-98) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Marc Selwyn Fine Art has organized a similarly stunning show of paintings Mullican made in the 1960s. The 10 oils on canvas from 1963 to 1968 blaze with the same luminous intensity as Mullican's more famous works from the 1940s and '50s, which feature a dazzling palette of radiant golds, luxurious ochers, sumptuous yellows and shimmering whites.

Subtitled "An Abundant Harvest of Sun," the museum retrospective drew 35 of its 46 paintings from the '40s and '50s. Sunny abundance is nowhere to be found in Mullican's paintings from the 1960s. Rather than embodying the golden light of cosmic transcendence or the contemplative stillness of blissful hippie serenity, his '60s pictures are more down to earth, conflicted and gritty -- not to mention socially charged, disquieting and timely.

The sequence of paintings in the dimly lighted gallery recalls Dante's imaginative descent in "The Inferno." In the entryway, "The Lights, the Celestial Paths" bids adieu to the heavens. The nearly 4-by-8-foot canvas is an abstract rendition of the night sky, one that pays equal homage to Monet's water lilies and Klimt's gorgeously patterned fabrics. Its watery blues and illusionistic deep space occur nowhere else in the show.

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In the main gallery, the palette is primarily defined by fiery oranges, scalding reds, smoldering browns and smoky blacks. Even Mullican's supersaturated blues seem to be the centers of flames. Apocalyptic conflagrations or the hellish light of nighttime fire-bombings are evoked by his abstract compositions, in which every square inch simultaneously seems to be exploding and melting down.

From left to right, brightness gives way to darkness. "Shattered Passage" is bright but hardly optimistic. Its fragmented forms and jagged contours resemble a road map to nowhere, the street plan of a city that has lost its way. The next five paintings depict the details of life in such a civilization.

The largest, at nearly 7 by 10 feet, looks like a cross between Van Gogh's "Starry Night" and a Navajo blanket. Asymmetrical zigzags cut through a pulsating field of concentric circles to create a type of cacophony that Mullican somehow manages to control -- but not without conveying the possibility of absolute incoherence. Strange shapes snake through the masterfully calibrated mess like devilish serpents or broken strands of DNA.

Inchoate icons emerge from the furiously worked surfaces of other works. Some resemble Day of the Dead skulls. Others recall ancient fertility figures, leering monkeys and the smiley face symbol. These schematic shapes are the forebears of similar images in works by Keith Haring, A.R. Penck, Lari Pittman and Michael Reafsnyder, contemporary painters who, like Mullican, give visual form to the primitive side of modern life.

Although Mullican's paintings from the '60s are less resolved, harmonious and resplendent than his works from the '40s and '50s, they are also more poignant, especially in their willingness to grapple with darkness, failure and chaos. This makes them timely, perhaps even more a part of the 21st century than the 20th.