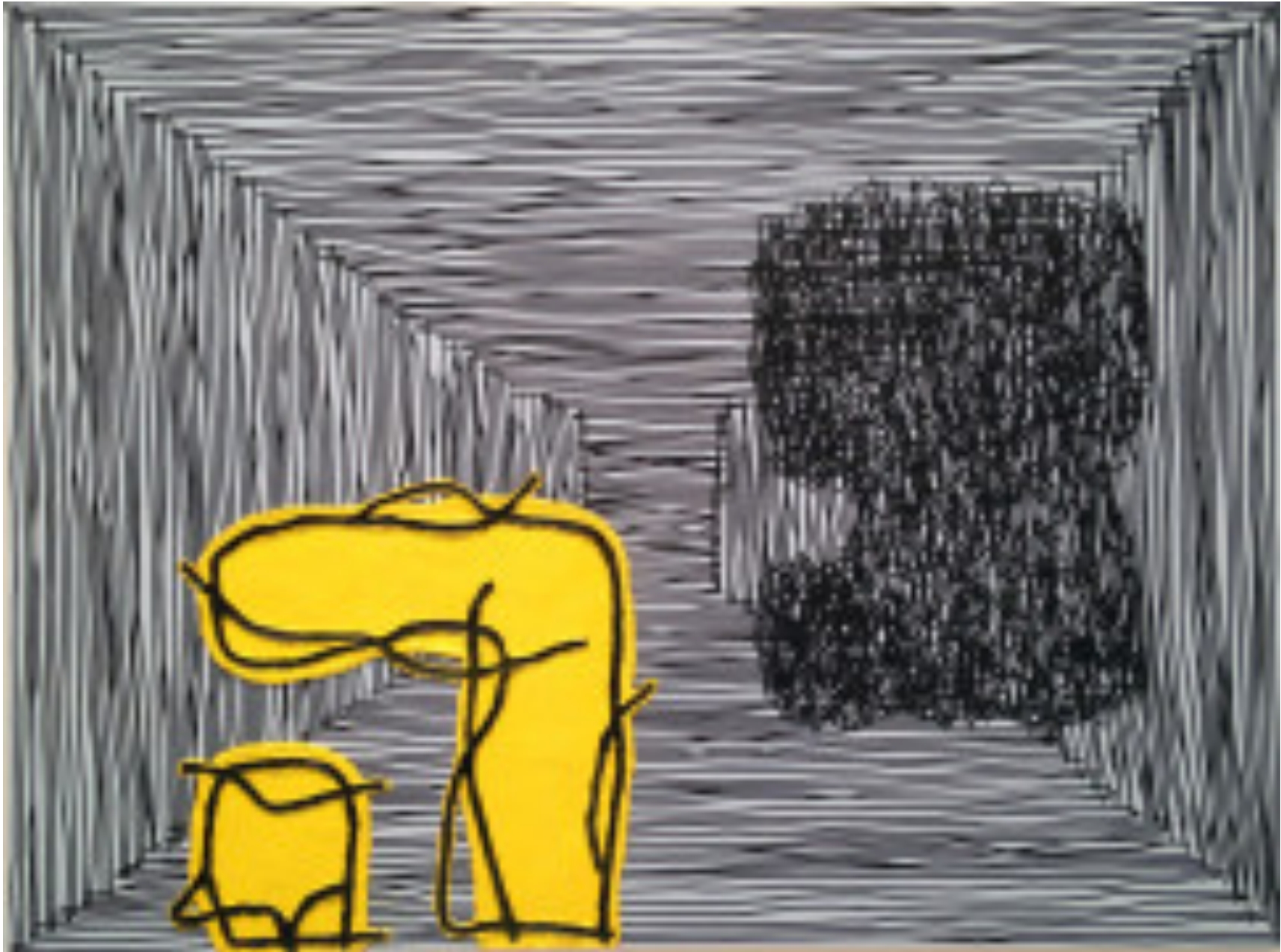


Discourse, Dazzle, and Snap: Jonathan Lasker's New Paintings

by [Thomas Michelli](#) on January 30, 2016



Jonathan Lasker, “The End of Relevance” (2015), oil on linen, 60 x 80 inches (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Jonathan Lasker’s approach to painting hasn’t changed materially in decades, and so why would his work, which struck me as an alienating (if not irritating) closed system when I first started looking at it in the 1990s, now feel so open, urgent, and fresh?

Lasker’s [new show](#) at Cheim & Read, his first since 2007, presents his usual couplings of dissimilar elements, which boil down to thickly painted blobs against thinly painted lines. Check that: there are two large works, “Democratic Beauty” and “The Remnant of Spirit” (both 2015), that eliminate the lines entirely under trowels of oil paint. But that can’t be the only reason this show feels different.

From the start of his career, Lasker has steadfastly explored what he describes in his essay “After Abstraction” (1986) as “discursive, rather than monotypical” painting. He declares that abstraction was “finished” when Frank Stella made his *Black Paintings*: “The goal of modern painting, which represented nothing but its own pure form, had been attained.”

In the essay’s concluding paragraph, he describes his attempt to create a new kind of discourse

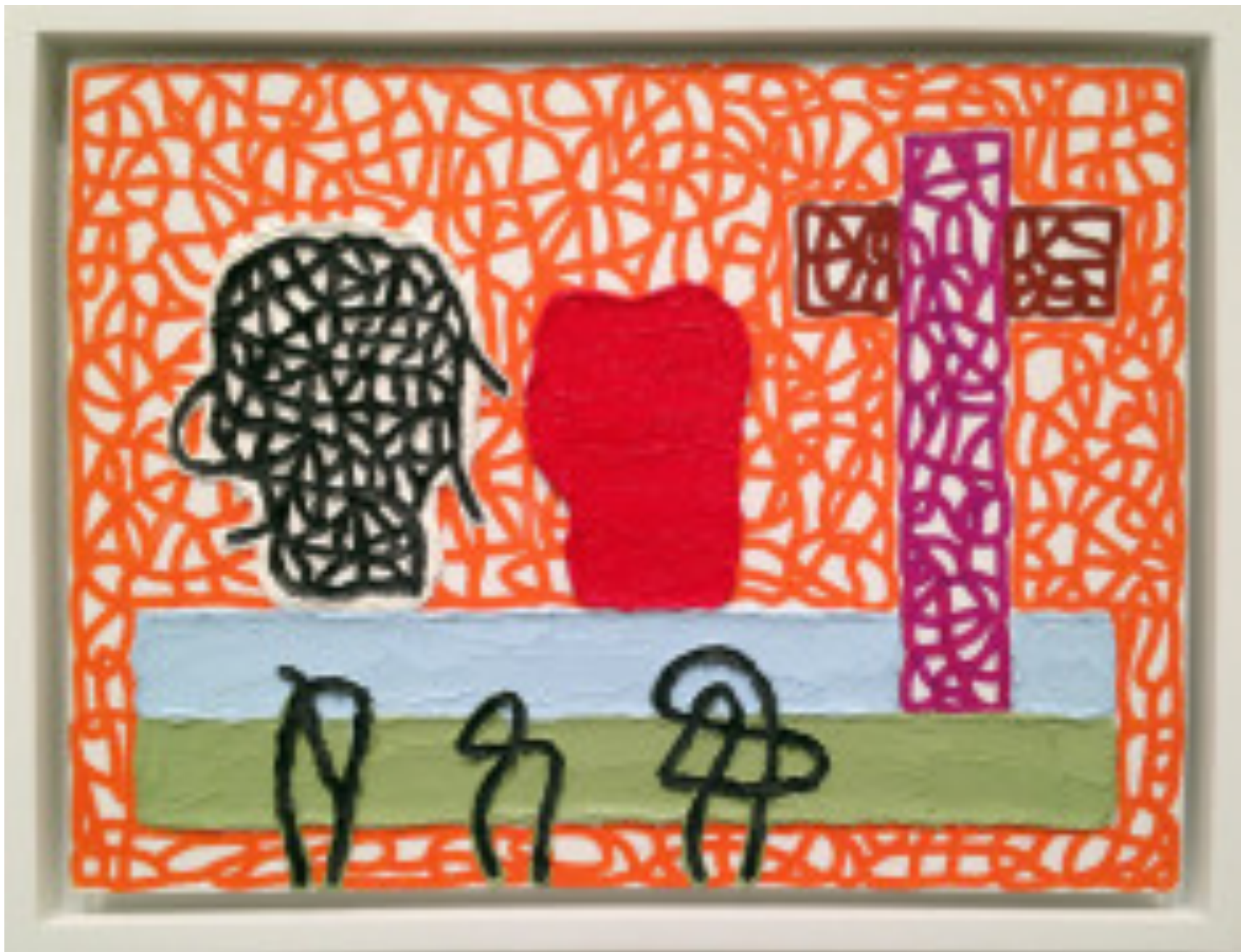
within his paintings:

It is towards this end that I have painted unhappy marriages of the biomorphic and the decorative, the mark of the “loaded brush” and the geometric, the psyche and popular culture. I want a painting that’s operative. I’m seeking subject matter, not abstraction.

It’s fitting that he chose “unhappy” as an adjective, because his juxtapositions of opposites remained cold and distant, no matter how much their forms aspired to real-world metaphors. Whether the lines were zigzagged, scribbled or ruled, or the acres of impasto were plopped, smeared or stroked, his compositions conveyed a willful arbitrariness — randomly determined exercises in which one gesture seemed just as good as another.

So what, you may ask, is wrong with that? Nothing, I suppose, except that the resulting disjunctions propelled the paintings in their own orbit. Despite Lasker’s avowed goal of swapping pure abstraction for discursive subject matter, his works seemed stamped with a cerebral gamesmanship, purposefully steering clear of an emotional connection with the viewer.

I am reluctant to write that, with this new show, Lasker has established that connection, because that would presume it hasn’t been there all along. It would be more measured to state that his idiosyncratic vision has emerged from behind my own aesthetic blind spot.



Jonathan Lasker, “Trust over Truth” (2015), oil on canvas board, 12 x 16 inches

Whatever the reason, Lasker’s customary exuberance with paint, especially in those chunky passages where he presses it into ridges and vents, speaks with a bracing eloquence. The recurrent motifs, whether a cruciform, a squiggle, or a blob evoking a head and neck, create a narrative trail

from painting to painting that underscores the unity of Lasker's thinking and the exhilarating thingness of each work.

(The cruciform, which appears in several works, is not, as Raphael Rubinstein notes in his catalogue essay, code for "the artist's religious conversion," despite titles like "The Remnant of Spirit" and "The Plus Sign at Golgotha" (2014), but rather a shape that "emerged more or less unbidden as Lasker played with chopping up one of his recurring motifs, the grid.")

In one small work in oil on canvas board, "Trust over Truth" (2015), two horizontal bands, one powder blue, the other mossy green, open up a depth of space unseen in any of the other paintings. The rest of the surface, which includes a two-tone cruciform, is covered mostly with variously colored scribbled lines, in contrast to the all-impasto "Remnant of Spirit," mentioned above, whose composition is almost identical.

The visual fields in the latter, larger painting, however, remain entirely on or above the surface — thick swaths of powder blue, cadmium yellow, raw sienna and moss green over a flat, mottled expanse of pink and gray. In a departure from Lasker's usual practice, there is a sooty-gray, (anatomically) heart-shaped silhouette thinly worked into the middle of the pink-gray field (a similar gesture occurs in "Democratic Beauty"). Along with the elimination of line, this flatly-painted shape may signal to longtime watchers of Lasker's work that a new avenue of investigation has potentially been opened.

For the paint-hungry eye, "Democratic Beauty" and "The Remnant of Spirit" are the most satisfying works in the show, but the uniformity of their surfaces eliminate the discordant factor in the artist's discourse, which produces, if not a softening effect, then a very different viewing experience — a less fractious yet thoroughly recognizable Lasker.



Jonathan Lasker, "The Remnant of Spirit" (2015), oil on linen, 75 x 100 inches

"The End of Relevance," which, like the two all-impasto works, was done in 2015 (it would be intriguing to learn where the completion of the three paintings fell chronologically), is the most optically dazzling work in the show: composed of wobbly black lines over a pale blue field, with a mass of black scribbles dominating the right half and two black-outlined blobs of yellow paint in the lower left quadrant, the visual buzz set off by the close proximity of the lines messes with your eyes and brain. Look at it, and almost immediately the entire surface starts to quaver, as if heat waves were rippling off a bonfire on the floor.

But that's not all. The wobbly lines are both vertical and horizontal, with the verticals forming two planes that converge on the center as if receding in single-point perspective, but they never meet. The rest of the field is taken up with horizontal lines whose insistent flatness resists a perspectival reading of the picture plane, much like Jack Tworok's planar abstractions of the 1970s. This creates a furious surface tension capped off by the graphic snap of the black-bordered slabs of yellow paint.

Times change, perceptions change. The "unhappy marriages" in Lasker's paintings evince a nonchalance toward irresolvable conflict, a posture that I initially viewed as a form of resignation, an intimation that contemporary art cannot hope to achieve synthesis without succumbing to nostalgia.

Now, with cultural and civic life unraveling at an alarming rate, the premeditated lack of harmony among his heterogenous elements feels more like a form of acceptance, an accommodation to reality that's required simply to go on.

Jonathan Lasker continues at *Cheim & Read (547 W 25th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan)* through *February 13*.

Cheim & Read Featured **Jonathan Lasker**