

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

February 3rd, 2016

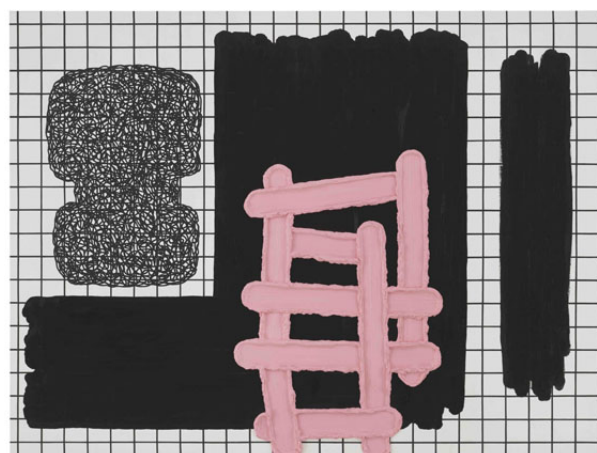
## JONATHAN LASKER

by Kate Liebman

CHEIM & READ | JANUARY 7 – FEBRUARY 13, 2016

Throughout his career, Jonathan Lasker has explored the gap between marks and signs. A mark refers primarily to itself, to its physical presence, while a sign signals a referent external to the painting, something known and recognizable. In this selection of new paintings, Lasker pushes his language a bit further, risking references to signs that exist outside of his own, invented visual vocabulary, which he has developed and modified over decades. Each painting hints at a known meaning, one we might be able to decipher, but any obvious message is withheld, tantalizingly within reach, yet fundamentally elusive. The repetition and rhythms Lasker creates with his marks give these paintings their internal, formal meaning, a meaning the viewer can recognize only through sustained looking.

Each of Lasker's paintings relies on a strong compositional structure. In the first painting seen upon entering the gallery, Lasker reduces his normally ebullient palette to black, white, and pink. The black and white elements lie flat against the picture plane, making the thick, impasto, almost sculptural pink paint look as if it's been glued to the surface. Though one of the simpler paintings in the show, *Commerce and Darkness* (2014) requires attention to see how the forms cohere into an image, an image whose components riff on each other: the pink almost-ladder shape resembles the gridded substrate on which it sits, and it is the same size as the squiggle, which perches near, but does not touch, the black L-shape. Abstract but not gestural, compositionally balanced but not static, *Commerce and Darkness* exemplifies the restrained energy that pervades Lasker's paintings.



Jonathan Lasker, *Commerce and Darkness*, 2014. Oil on linen, 60 × 80 inches. Courtesy Cheim and Read.

One of the three *Untitled* (2013) charcoal-and-ink studies hung in the back room anticipates the tropes seen in *Commerce and Darkness*. Though different in size and material, both works rely on forms that reappear again and again in Lasker's work: an L shape, a ladder of sorts, a scribbled blob pinched at the middle, and an elongated rectangle. While these forms are suggestive of letters, of architectural structures, of a woman's waistline, how we interpret them reveals more about us than the forms themselves. These marks constitute Lasker's visual vocabulary, and he plays with them by flipping, widening, stretching, coloring, doubling, rearranging. Lasker constructs an idiosyncratic language that allows him to engage the viewer more deeply in the formal aspects of the work; the viewer becomes more aware of what she now perceives, what she has perceived, and how it is the very process of seeing that makes meaning.

Though most of Lasker's forms resist our innate tendency to find signs, some of his marks actually do function as readable images. In the small, mostly cadmium red *Signatory Powers* (2015), Lasker twists his idiosyncratic line into a signature, recalling the work of Stuart Davis, for whom the signature is also an important compositional element. Because the signature looks as if it's just a careful manipulation of Lasker's linework, he lessens the gap between mark (line) and sign (signature), showing us how tenuous our perception of meaning can be.

Furthermore, Lasker includes a crucifix in three of his paintings, all of which he cleverly titles: *The Plus Sign at Golgotha* (2014), *The Remnant of Spirit* (2015), and the smaller *Trust Over Truth* (2015). These cheeky titles demonstrate that Lasker recognizes both the formal and symbolic content of this shape. Yet lest we rejoice in a recognizable sign, Lasker has ensured that we can also see it as a simple arrangement of lines. Just as much as it is a crucifix, it is also a grid broken unequally, which Lasker reveals by painting the horizontal bar in one color and the vertical in another.

While Lasker certainly has affinities with his fellow abstract painters who also came of age in the 1980s (Mary Heilmann, Elizabeth Murray, Bill Jensen, Tom Nozkowski, David Reed, etc.), a more striking comparison can be made with Giorgio Morandi. Just as Morandi painted and repositioned his vases repeatedly, Lasker uses and plays with a similarly restricted visual vocabulary. Often bottom heavy, their paintings cluster forms in the lower half of the picture plane, and the central arrangement of forms reveals a keen awareness of the canvas's edge. Their shared visual strategy of placing forms on flat bands of color allows us to 'read' the painting, to recognize how multiple forms fit together. They alternate compression and space: sometimes the narrow gaps between objects allow room to breathe, though at other points there is a tightness that constricts the spatial depth. Both artists are equally concerned with atmosphere (Morandi's air, Lasker's loose line work) and the solidity of forms that occupy it.

Like Morandi, Lasker is an artist who makes meaning through context and repetition. Through careful compositional planning and intelligent color choices, his paintings hum with energy. Lasker's highly developed visual language forces his viewer to grapple with his paint's simultaneity: on the canvas, each physical mark is denuded, just itself, and at once suggestive of a sign, a form, a thing.

**CONTRIBUTOR****Kate Liebman**

KATE LIEBMAN is a painter who works in Brooklyn.

**RECOMMENDED ARTICLES**

## Mark di Suvero

by Jessica Holmes

**DEC 15-JAN 16 | ART BOOKS**

Cranes, steel beams, and industrial rigging don't easily evoke carnality, sensuality, and human connection, but after reading *Mark di Suvero*, it might be impossible to subtract these bodily qualities from the artist's mighty steel sculpture.

## Five

by Tom Savage and Bill Kushner

**OCT 2015 | POETRY**

Tom Savage is the author of eleven books of poetry including the latest 136 collaborations (mostly sonnets) with the late Bill Kushner. His other books include *Afghanistan: From Herat to Balkh and Back Again* and *Brainlifts*. He has had poems in *The New York Times* and many print and online venues. He has received grants from the Fund For Poetry and taught at The Poetry Project.

Bill Kushner (1931-2015) was a poet, playwright, actor, and director at the The New York Theater Ensemble and Theater Genesis. His books of poetry include *Head, Love Uncut, He Dreams of Waters, That April, In the Hairy Arms of Whitman, In Sunsetland with You, and Walking After Midnight*. Some poems, recordings, and fabulous interviews with Bill can be found at poet Don Yorty's blog. A memorial reading for Bill will be held at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, where he was an important presence for decades, on Monday, November 16 (see poetryproject.org for more details).

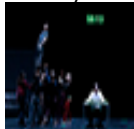
## Picture This: New Orleans

### Mary Ellen Mark's Last Assignment

by Charles Schultz

**SEPT 2015 | ARTSEEN**

There was no way to tell Mary Ellen Mark only had four weeks left to live when she embarked on her last assignment, photographing the recovery efforts in New Orleans for the tenth anniversary of Katrina. It was spring and she'd been sent by CNN, who assigned a videography team to work behind her.



## Singing clear through a forest of signs: On Bill T. Jones's *Story/Time*, the

# performance and the book

by *Madison Mainwaring*

**NOV 2014 | DANCE**

However “cool” the form, Jones could never really belong to the rest of the post-structuralist dance scene and its disdain for direct story-telling. The way in which his work drew from real life experience was made all too clear for those looking for conceptualisms.

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