

GORDON ONSLOW FORD Paintings and Works on Paper: 1939-1951

by John Yau

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The first solo show of Gordon Onslow Ford (1912 – 2003) in New York since 1946, which brings together major works made between 1939 and '51, is a landmark event that, among other things, further expands our understanding of what was happening in art during the 1940s. For those interested in the development of Abstract Expressionism, as well as the strong alternatives that flourished alongside it, the English-born Ford is a major figure who has been largely effaced from history, particularly as told by at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Although not included in this exhibition, the often-reproduced “Without Bounds” and “Space Web” (both 1939) have never been satisfactorily contextualized until now. For these works and others he made in Paris in 1939, Ford poured fast-drying Ripolin enamel onto canvas lying flat on the floor, over which he fixed a geometric web of white bands. According to Martica Sawin, author of the precise, illuminating monograph accompanying the exhibition:

He called these works *coulages* from the French word *couler*, to pour. While most of the *coulages* disappeared from his Paris studio at the end of the Occupation, two were among the paintings he shipped to the U.S. in 1940 and could have well been seen in New York by his young American friends such as William Baziotés, who helped him construct a partition in his 8th Street apartment. Coincidentally in 1941, Baziotés, wanting to try out a new quick-drying lacquer paint, experimented on collaborative drip paintings with Jackson Pollock and Gerome Kamrowski.

Sawin is being diplomatic about the connection between Ford's pours and Jackson Pollock's drips because she doesn't believe in a Newtonian universe ruled by cause-and-effect. The real tragedy is the loss of a body of work that haunts art history, like a ghost that we know exists but will never actually witness. In addition to this connection, Onslow Ford, who was the youngest artist to be invited by André Breton to join the Surrealists in pre-War Paris, gave a series of four lectures at the New School of Social Research in New York in the first months of 1941. During each lecture, works by the artist were shown concurrently in the school's gallery. The first three lectures were on Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, and Rene Magritte, while the last one touched upon the work of Paul Delvaux, Victor Brauner, Wolfgang Paalen, Stanley William Hayter, Kurt Seligman, Roberto Matta, Esteban Frances, and Onslow Ford himself. Luckily for us, Onslow Ford wrote down the lectures. Years later, he told Sawin that he didn't exactly follow what he wrote, but used it to focus on what he was going to say. These lectures, transcribed and edited by Sawin, are included in the monograph. Now we have a sense of what was heard by the audience, which included William Baziotés, Peter Busa, Arshile Gorky, David Hare, Stanley William Hayter, Robert Motherwell, and, according to some, Jackson Pollock. While the then rather

small New York art world had been introduced to Surrealism in *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art in the winter of 1936–1937, they had never heard it explained so clearly and thoughtfully by one of its practitioners. At the end of the fourth lecture, Onslow Ford appealed to the audience to bring about a “revolution in consciousness.” In retrospect it is clear that Onslow Ford’s lectures gave the artists permission to think differently about painting, to reconceive it. The power of Onslow Ford’s injunction—its inherent optimism in a dark time—cannot be underestimated.

So far I haven’t said anything about Ford’s friendship with the New Zealander Len Lye (1901–1980), an abstract filmmaker who began scratching directly onto the celluloid in the 1920s; his friendship with the Austrian-Mexican Wolfgang Paalen (1905–1959) and the American Lee Mullican (1919–1998); or the *Dynaton* exhibition, which featured Ford, Paalen, and Mullican at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1951. Such cross-cultural pollination began long before the word “globalism” entered the vocabulary. Onslow Ford was one of the conduits for Surrealism into San Francisco, laying the groundwork for artists such as Jess, Bruce Conner, and others. But Ford was far more than a transmitter of crucial information, and this revelation was brought home by the powerful work he did during the years covered by the exhibition, none of which has been seen in New York until now. Onslow Ford is more than a period painter, and the works in the show make clear that, in contrast to his East Coast counterparts, who believed that paint was paint, he believed that paint was colored light. This is what he had in common with Paalen, particularly in his *fumages*, which were developed from the smoke and soot of a lit candle, and Lee Mullican, who used a printer’s ink spatula to apply thin, ray-like lines of yellow paint onto ochre grounds.

As early as 1939, in “Crime meets Crime,” Ford is interested in superimposition and transparency, and by 1941, in “Temptations of the Painter,” transparency—its layered, interpenetrating space—is crucial to the composition. His vocabulary is an intriguing *mélange* of symbols, signs, and abstract marks, all of which he could explain. (The gallery will provide copies of the artist’s elucidations). If the early “Self Portrait–The Navy Years” (1933), which is reproduced in the monograph, is any indication, Onslow Ford was familiar with the work of the Pointillist painter, Paul Signac and, most likely, Georges Seurat. He may have also learned about aboriginal art from Lye, whose abstract films probably enhanced his thinking about the plane as a transparent screen on which he superimposed thin layers of gouache or oil paint. He thought about the plane very differently than his New York counterparts, and was never a literalist, much less a devotee of formalist thinking.

“The News” (1945) shares something with the visionary paintings that Forrest Bess started working on around the same time, which is understandable given their interest in archaic symbols and Jung’s theories. The arrows and undulating patterns convey movement and change, sexual energy. In his works on paper from 1950–51, which were done after he moved to northern California from a remote Mexican village where he had lived from

1941 to 1947, Onslow Ford layers semi-transparent abstract forms and varied patterns (concentric circles, vertical bands, thin diagonal lines, and misty clouds) within a film-like space, hovering delicately between emergence and dissipation. The one parallel that I can think of is celluloid film transparencies overlaying each other. His “Forest Go Round” (1951) and “Lunelipse” series (1951) both anticipate the work of Philip Taaffe and David Reed, among others. In a very real sense, Onslow Ford is trying to turn the poisonous, blinding light of the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki into something spiritual. This concern with spirituality and the transformative power of paint is still vital, as the work of Suzan Frecon and Chris Martin attests, while his interest in the optical power of repetition and of permeable circular forms has been picked up on by such younger artists as Craig Olson and Ben La Rocco. Onslow Ford, a reclusive artist, was both of his time and ahead of his time, which is one mark of greatness.

In 2006, the Grey Art Gallery mounted the eye-opening “Lee Mullican: An Abundant Harvest of Sun.” In her *New York Times* review, Roberta Smith wrote: “It reminds us that the history of art only gets larger and more interesting, and that as it expands, cracks appear.” Onslow Ford’s exhibition is another large crack in the fortress built by those dedicated to preserving a false and narrow history. Following upon the Mullican show, it seems that a restaging of the 1951 *Dynaton* show in San Francisco might make apparent that New York wasn’t the only center of art in the 1950s, and that Abstract Expressionism wasn’t the only game to play. Wouldn’t it be great to finally have that monkey off our backs?

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