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First Retrospective of Works by Lee Mullican Comes to New York One of West Coast's Most Important Abstract Artists

Lee Mullican: An Abundant Harvest of Sun
on view at the Grey Art Gallery April 25 through July 15, 2006

New York City, February 9, 2006—New York University's Grey Art Gallery presents the first museum retrospective of works by Lee Mullican. Organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Lee Mullican: An Abundant Harvest of Sun* is on view at the Grey Art Gallery from April 25 through July 15, 2006. The show features 46 paintings, 24 drawings, and 10 sculptures by this important West Coast artist, who has been acknowledged as a leading exemplar of "the postwar opening of the American mind." Despite this and other accolades, he has been relatively neglected—no major exhibition of his work has been organized since 1980.

For over 50 years Mullican (1919–1998) created paintings, drawings, and sculptures of great beauty and shamanistic power. The richness of his imagination, coupled with the breadth of his interests, resulted in an oeuvre that simultaneously engages the eye, mind, and heart. His works reflect a broad range of influences and references, including Native American art and culture, Surrealism, Zen Buddhism, and Hinduism. Throughout his career, Mullican addressed the apparent conflict between abstraction and figuration, the absorption of both Western and non-Western sources, and the relationship between form and content—in short, issues that are central to the art of the second half of the twentieth century.

Mullican created the majority of the works in the exhibition in the 1950s and 1960s, when Abstract Expressionism ruled the New York-centric art world. Although he had shown in some of New York's major galleries—including six solo shows at the Willard Gallery from 1950 through 1967—neither he nor most other artists working in Southern California received much attention in the national and international art scenes. This imbalance began to shift in the 1980s, when younger California artists such as Chris Burden, Mike Kelley, and Lari Pittman received wide recognition. Yet only now are earlier California-based artists garnering national attention.

Lee Mullican: An Abundance of Sun has been organized by Carol S. Eliel, the distinguished LACMA Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art. "At its core Mullican's art is about what it meant to

be a human in the second half of the twentieth century, a period bracketed by the deployment of the atom bomb in 1945 and Mullican's own death in 1998," notes Eliel. "His artistic concerns were simultaneously as expansive as the entire cosmos and as minute as the hundreds of printer's knife strokes out of which he built his imagery Mullican sought both within himself and throughout the cosmos for the familiar as well as the awesome; he then strove to express the specific as well as the universal through his art, which encompasses both abstraction and figuration." Grey Art Gallery Director Lynn Gumpert comments: "We are thrilled to host this striking exhibition. As NYU's museum, we have developed a reputation for featuring artists that have yet to receive the credit they are due, for example, our recent retrospectives of the work of Paul Kos and Atsuko Tanaka. It's one way that, especially as a small university museum located in the center of New York City, we can contribute to the cultural life of this great metropolis. Lee's paintings will also come as a surprise to many who are familiar with the work of his son, Matt Mullican, who has been a stalwart of the New York scene for the past thirty years and who recently participated in our acclaimed *Downtown Show*."

About the Artist

Born in 1919 in Chickasha, Oklahoma, Mullican developed an interest in art during his late teens. He attended both Abilene Christian College in Texas and the University of Oklahoma; however, it was not until he enrolled at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1941 that his serious artistic training began. Mullican was inducted into the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers the following year, and his studies at Virginia's topographical school in Fort Belvoir greatly influenced his later artistic production. Fort Belvoir's location allowed Mullican to visit museums and galleries in Washington, D.C. and New York City, and his Army Corps work with aerial photographs influenced his paintings and drawings.

It was during his time in the army that Mullican discovered *DYN* magazine and the work of its publisher, artist Wolfgang Paalen. The periodical, whose name derived from the Greek word *tó dynatón*, meaning "the possible," focused on relationships between art, science, and the imagination. It also highlighted Surrealism and non-European—especially Native North and South American—art. Mullican was immediately drawn to the magazine's content. Discharged from the army in 1946, Mullican moved the next year to San Francisco, where he met fellow painter Gordon Onslow Ford and later Paalen. In 1951, the three artists collaborated on an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art called *Dynaton*, which included not only their own art but also the Native American works that would continue to serve them as an important source of artistic inspiration.

In 1952, Mullican settled in Santa Monica and began teaching, first through UCLA Extension, then at USC, and finally at UCLA. Through both his works and role as an educator, the artist became a mainstay of the Los Angeles art community and a mentor to many younger artists. Renowned painter Lari Pittman contributed an homage to Mullican as teacher and mentor to the LACMA exhibition catalogue. Although Mullican's work evolved over the years, it continued to reflect his early concerns. Setting aside the grandeur and heroicism of the Abstract Expressionists of the New York School, Mullican took a quieter, more intimate

approach, continuously investigating both his inner world as well as the cosmos in his paintings, drawings, and sculptures.

Lee Mullican is accompanied by a 136-page illustrated catalogue with essays by curator Carol Eliel, Amy Gerstler, and Lari Pittman. The exhibition is made possible in part by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the Herta and Paul Amir Art Foundation, and The Judith Rothschild Foundation. Additional support was provided by the Pasadena Art Alliance. The presentation of Lee Mullican at the Grey Art Gallery is made possible in part by Robert Anthoine, Stephen Figge, Miani Johnson, and the Abby Weed Grey Trust. Public programs are supported by the Grey's Inter/National Council.

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Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays: 11 am – 6 pm

OPEN LATE Wednesdays: 11 am – 8 pm

Saturdays: 11 am – 5 pm

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