

HYPERALLERGIC

Artists Who Unlocked the Modernist Grid

Melissa Stern | April 11, 2018

A gallery show that turns the form of the grid inside out, shedding more light on this iconic 20th-century favorite.



Arshile Gorky, "Still Life" (c.1930s), oil on canvas, 8" x 10"

For the past 100 years or so the basic geometric grid has proved an irresistible form for many visual artists. Perhaps there's something about the possibility of ordering the world and the restless nature of the artist's mind that has fueled the allure and ambivalence of this relationship. Sometimes the simplest of concepts prove to be the ones most ripe for interpretation.

The current show at Lori Bookstein's new gallery on the Upper East Side takes the notion of the grid as artistic palette in a delightfully different direction. The show entitled *Unlocking the Grid* focuses on artists who for the most part have chosen to take the "grid" apart, that is to work against its ordering qualities and screw around with the possibilities that this liberation affords. It is an impressive showing of some great 20th century painters including Arshile Gorky, Joaquín Torres-García, Adolph Gottlieb, and James Sienna. The range and degree to which each of these artists has played against the grid underscores the fascinating possibilities of such a seemingly simple gesture.

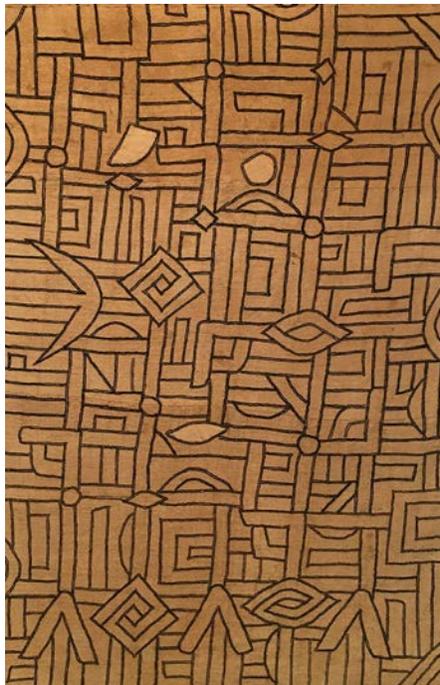




Adolph Gottlieb, "Nostalgia for Atlantis" (1944), oil and tempera on canvas, 20 x 25 inches

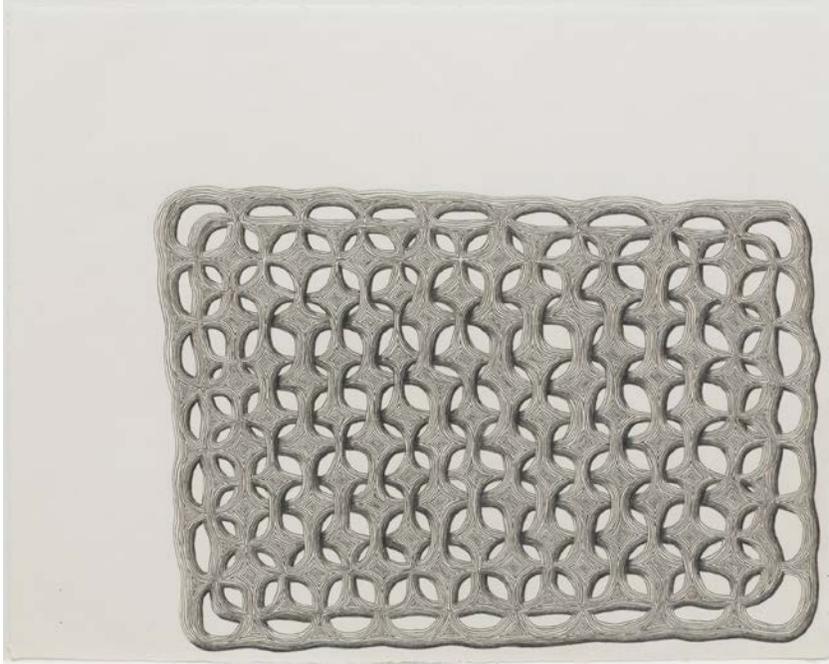
"Nostalgia For Atlantis" (1944) by Adolph Gottlieb is painted with a sense of whimsy that I've never associated with him. Gottlieb, in the mid-1940s, was in the midst of developing his *pictograph* series, loosely defined as a system of visual images that serve as clues for "reading" a painting. This Gottlieb piece is a series of comic and emotional faces and expressions, interspersed with bold gestural marks. It's lightly

variegated blue and neutral-tone palate is shocked into animation by one gorgeous streak of brilliant cadmium red. There are other artists in the show working within the "pictograph" formula including Torres-García and Fonseca, but this Gottlieb painting, with a hint of humor in its narrative flow, is the standout.



Anonymous, Kuba Peoples, early 20th century, Central Africa, Circa Textile, 36.5" x 24.25"

An unattributed early 20th century textile made by a member of the Kuba peoples from Central Africa is a brilliant addition to the show. I'm always intrigued when someone makes a significant visual connection between Western and non-Western art, and the inclusion of this piece certainly does that. Not knowing any more than what can be visually observed (the image appears to be painted onto a linen-like fabric) one can only marvel at the beauty of this piece. Rhythmic patterning changes as it dances across the wheat-colored surface, punctuated by several hits of a lighter tone. I love how it is both orderly and disorderly at the same time. The eye wants to create a repeated neat pattern, but the maker has slyly tweaked the design so that is never possible. Unfortunately this piece is hung in a narrow corridor outside of the main exhibition, lessening the impact of its presence in the exhibition.



James Sienna, "Large Manifold, Second Version" (2016), graphite on paper. 20" x 25"

"Study For Mural Based on Egyptian Motifs" (1955) by Louis I. Kahn is another surprise in this show. Though I've seen many drawings of Kahn's plans for building projects, I had never seen anything quite like this. Meticulously drawn in fine charcoal the piece is highly structured but shows the presence of a free hand, the charcoal is allowed to drift across the paper in gentle tones. It is a mosaic-like

composition, which reads as both something and nothing. Observing close up, you notice the mark making, the irregular edges of the drawn tiles. However when viewed from afar the shapes all coalesce into the abstracted features of a portrait. There's a playfulness in this beautifully rendered drawing that is, to my mind, delightfully unusual for Kahn's oeuvre.

The exhibition is a candybox of terrific 20th century blue-chip artwork, with the sole exception of a rather tepid Jennifer Bartlett. ("Swimming Pool," early 1970's). It's an odd inclusion of work from an artist who has worked extensively and very innovatively with the grid structure. But Bartlett aside, it is a delight to see such a disparate group of painters nestled under the curatorial construct of the "grid." I loved the process of both ordering and disordering the world that unites all of the work in this show.

Unlocking the Grid continues at Bookstein Projects. 60 East 66th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) until April 14.

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