

Helen Lundeberg

*Within*

31 March – 6 May 2023

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Bortolami Gallery is pleased to announce *Within*, an exhibition of interiors by Helen Lundeberg (Swedish American, b. 1908, Chicago, IL; d. 1999, Los Angeles, CA). Lundeberg, a reclusive painter who rarely left Southern California, remains an unsung pioneer of American abstraction. She co-founded two wholly different art movements: Post-surrealism, an offshoot of European surrealism, as well as Hard-edge painting, a distinctly West Coast approach to crisp, rigid geometric abstraction in an era otherwise dominated by Abstract Expressionism.

Throughout her aesthetic evolutions, Lundeberg looked to interior scenes to explore her idiosyncratic approach to color and compositional space. In the 1940s and 1950s, she painted domestic spaces bathed in shadowy, tertiary greens, siennas and blues with the same dramatic poise as her surrealistic works of the 1930s. These darker hues only served to intensify the occasional thin, dramatic pathway of light emanating from unseen windows or doorways.

By 1960, Lundeberg had sharpened her line and her work had become much brighter in key. Objects and rooms were demarcated by contours, situated in a suggested space composed of overlapping planes and harsh diagonals. Two versions of a still life composition called *The Mirror and Pink Shell* illustrate this progression. The earlier painting, finished in 1952, features a cool, hazy color scheme with a radiant underpainting glowing from within, a pink conch shell its lone source of warmth. The second painting, begun in 1952 but not completed until 1969, reimagines practically the same composition in stark, contrasting fields of monochrome which confuse the boundaries of positive and negative space.

In the 1970s, Lundeberg stretched and pulled bands of color into abstractions evocative of mountains, seas and skies, neutralized and surrounded by a wide expanse of beige, grays, or off-whites. *Studio Interior* (1980) would envisage the final decade of her practice. Painted shortly after the death of her husband and fellow hard-edge painter, Lorser Feitelson, Lundeberg collapsed indoor and outdoor space into a new metaphysical amalgamation. In the composition, an easel emerges from a sun-drenched room with the same limitless boundaries of the landscape just outside its window.

Lundeberg's contributions have been recognized by the many institutions which have collected her paintings and her work continues to circulate on the periphery of mainstream recognition. Her painting *Studio-Afternoon* (1958-1959) was recently exhibited in Hilton Als' exhibition, *Joan Didion: What She Means*, at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. A detail of Lundeberg's painting was the cover image of the catalog.

And Lundeberg even inspired a track called "Helen Lundeberg" on Sonic Youth's final album in 2006. However, she still remains best known in her home state. From her first exhibition in 1933 to her last in 1998, a year before her passing, Lundeberg staged 44 solo exhibitions in California. By comparison, she exhibited just once in New York during her lifetime.

A posthumous retrospective of Helen Lundeberg was held in 2016 at the Laguna Art Museum. During her lifetime, Lundeberg had solo exhibitions at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and was included in group exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum. Lundeberg also designed several murals between 1938-1942 for the WPA, several of which remain to this day in the greater Los Angeles area. Works by Lundeberg have been collected by institutions including the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; LACMA, Los Angeles; SFMOMA, San Francisco; the Museum of Fine Art Boston, the Orange County Museum of Art and many others.