

JOHN HULTBERG

Wings and Anchors

Selected Paintings 1949-1993



Earth Woman I, 1986
Acrylic on canvas, 93 x 143"

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JOHN HULTBERG: Wings and Anchors 1949-1993

"... literary poetry in a painter is something special and is neither illustrative nor the translation of writing by form." Gauguin, 1901

Under the canopy of a mercurial sky, the transformed urban landscapes of John Hultberg are composed of accumulated debris that have burrowed into the earth. In many of his paintings, spectators as sentinels of hybrid cities watch the horizon in expectation as if, in Hultberg's words, "Something is about to happen."

Hultberg, a Californian of Swedish descent, is of the generation that came of age during World War II, an epoch characterized by a sense of displacement and discontinuity. However, these very conditions stimulated a restless energy that ultimately led many postwar artists to search for forms that would embody a new content. Although not involved in combat, Hultberg served in the U.S. Navy from 1943-46 as a lieutenant and eventually became a navigator in the South Pacific.

Certainly, a sense of collective triumph was part of the postwar period, but the newly discharged veterans felt a disquietude as the quotidian pace of civilian life encroached upon an arena once open to heroic action and a heightened sense of time.

It is in this milieu that Hultberg began his artistic career at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco in 1947. He writes in his journal of:

"mad vets who were not craftsmen in denim, for they wanted to get away from the image of the artist as a person who takes infinite pains. Their one important pain was a sense of having to make up for lost time and they trained themselves fast..."

Since many of the students, as well as some of the teachers, were WWII veterans, the usual distinctions between instructor and pupil did not exist in the informal and democratic atmosphere of the school. Richard Diebenkorn, Clyfford Still, David Park, Clay Spohn, and Mark Rothko, a visiting lecturer, encouraged ideas of modernism, particularly the work of Miro and Picasso. Concurrently, an ongoing dialogue existed between the New York school and the Bay Area artists in which both groups stressed involvement in process, "the unconscious mind," gestural brushstroke, and the use of junk materials such as wood fragments and industrial paint. It was during this period that Hultberg began working with film-like strips that divided his canvas into separate frames containing objects and signs. In this respect, he acknowledges a kinship with Gottlieb's photographs stating: "I like what he did - putting a whole bunch of pictures into one picture."

In 1949, Hultberg moved to Manhattan seeking the stimulation of a dynamic art center and enrolled at the Art Students League. New York, with its intense rhythmic urban landscape, certainly differed from California's lyrical landscape with its vast horizons. Even in New York, Hultberg could not easily let go of an ingrained proclivity to depict the thrust of deep pictorial space and would often state his intention to break the picture plane despite all the tenets of modernism.

The semblance of a perspectival system is juxtaposed against a cubist scaffolding in many of Hultberg's paintings. Eventually these elements become emblematic of his pictorial language. An early example of this lexicon of compartmentalized cubicles can be seen in *Shacks*, 1949, a painting that reflects his response to cramped apartments in Manhattan and the shacks of the Sausalito hills. Through the jagged edges of ravaged burnt wood, a blue sky appears only to be shattered by fragments of animal and skeletal remains imprisoned in their enclosures.

A rural ramshackle world is part of Hultberg's childhood. Having been a literature major and editor of his college newspaper, he records with a sharp and nostalgic eye the places and things of his past:

"Behind my orchard swing stands a chickenhouse converted into a workshop messy with abandoned projects: a cigarbox violin, cracked mud molds for papier mâché Halloween masks..."

Thus, Hultberg's world is one of discarded and eroded objects that meld into rows of architectonic forms while still retaining aspects of organic shapes. In this sense, he reveals his affinity with the surrealist focus on a metamorphic fusion of mechanical and organic form.

When Hultberg arrived in Paris in 1954, the surrealist influence was still evident in the work of many postwar painters who emphasized accident and new materials. He encountered a circle of artists, both American and European: Sam Francis, Alberto Burri, Antoni Tàpies, Georges Mathieu, and Michel Tapié, a critic and founder of "Art Autre." It was during this period that Hultberg met Martha Jackson and became a member of her newly formed international gallery.

In *Paysage de Pierres*, 1956, one looks through a darkened interior out a window or screen to some sort of conveyance that seems to transport barely discernible human forms to an ever receding imaginary vanishing point. Although Hultberg had been influenced by de Chirico, the stillness of classical space was not his domain. His world is more one of impermanence and movement in which the inhabitants live in precarious shacks and temporary perches. Windows, porches, and the semblance of film and television screens are the vantage points in which this world is recorded.



Charred Edge, 1968 (panel #2 of four panel painting)
Acrylic on canvas, 38 x 50"

In Windows, 1960, a woman's silhouetted form looks both inward and outward surrounded by windows that are containers of arrested time. Each rectangular frame becomes a vessel for different states of mind and times of day. Concealed in some of the compartments are shadowed objects and signs such as a bottle, box, or an oval Yin and Yang sign that allude to private meanings. The skies reflect the key to mood. Hultberg often recalls that when he studied in California, Spohn told him to pay attention "to the difference in weather patterns, clouds, that's where the importance lies."

During the years 1958-67, Hultberg was on the open road and constantly on the move—painting, exhibiting, and teaching from New York to Maine, California, and Oregon, to Paris and Italy, Spain, Mexico, and even living for a time in Hawaii. Although he did not paint any specific landscapes of these places, the internal changes that travel often imposes were reflected in a new sense of tempo, light, and the discontinuities of space and time.

Charred Edge, 1968, is a four-paneled painting, each a variation on a massive dark, fragmented pier-like structure. Embedded in the charred and ravaged wood are humans, birds, flags, and signs tenuously clinging to a precarious architectonic construction. A white sky penetrates into the crevices of this flimsy shelter where spectral forms survive despite a transient and foreboding future.

In 1969, Martha Jackson, his friend and dealer, died suddenly, closing a decade of personal and professional backing.

In Epitaphs, 1977, a series of rectangles move back toward distant lights on a dark horizon. In each small screen are fragments of bodies: legs, hands, faces, torsos, and bones, some contained in port-holes. In the foreground plane, a dark curved silhouetted form presses into a half-charred, piano-like structure. These containers suggest files of stored memories that fill the space as far as the horizon. Submerged and excavated forms erupt toward the surface, igniting recollections of past experiences.

In 1983, Hultberg decided to live year-round in the Monhegan island home he purchased in 1962, commenting:

"I love this dark dank basement in Monhegan where I paint. It's full of memories. I have never felt so close to the earth as in this room. Breathing the earth and water of this room, rocking in my chair into a coma, I sing a dirge above all pain."

After years of incessant travel, Hultberg temporarily anchored himself in his cellar, earth-home.

In Earth Woman I, 1986, the forms of a woman

are revealed in the curvature of a mountain. This protective and yet jagged mound evokes the topography of both the Monhegan cliffs and the rolling Californian hills of his childhood. The white, ethereal clouds contrast with the darker, chthonian roots of the mountain, again exposing his continual dialogue between spiritual and earthly concerns.

In Great White Window, 1992-93, a change seems to have taken place. Hultberg's division between interior and exterior, terrestrial and celestial spaces is no longer as distinct. His interior architectonic structures have merged with a great white, apparitional sky. Were the world of Plato's cave and shadows recast by Hultberg, the spectators would be turned toward the cave's opening and would see the shadows as a form of ultimate reality.

At the end of the century, Hultberg, a poet-painter, summons an assemblage of conflicting philosophies, combining a touch of the American transcendentalists with an ironic fatalism. His stories, true to the spirit of our fin-de-siecle have no beginning, middle, or end. He plays an even hand in exposing the antics of his demons and angels that roam freely over earth and sky. His terrain offers no permanent stability for his spectral inhabitants.

In an age when many painters are grappling with the role of narrative and its relationship to a formal pictorial language, Hultberg has been tackling these crucial issues for decades. He has merged both abstraction and narration by restructuring a unique world view in the manner of the *Weltlandschaft* (world panorama) of sixteenth century Flanders. This world panorama in Hultberg's paintings moves both horizontally toward a distance point and vertically into the subterranean or heavenly region of the psyche.

In his journals he speaks to his alter ego: "You must go as deeply into the realm of hard things...as I go into my undocumented poetic insights..."

Thus, Hultberg's world resides on two planes: the "horizontal" one that spans the clutter of earthly things and the "vertical" sphere that journeys into the self where Hultberg often yearns to retreat: "I want to go deeper into my own climate."

Wendy Gittler
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