Lee Adler | *A Mad Man Amid the Machines*

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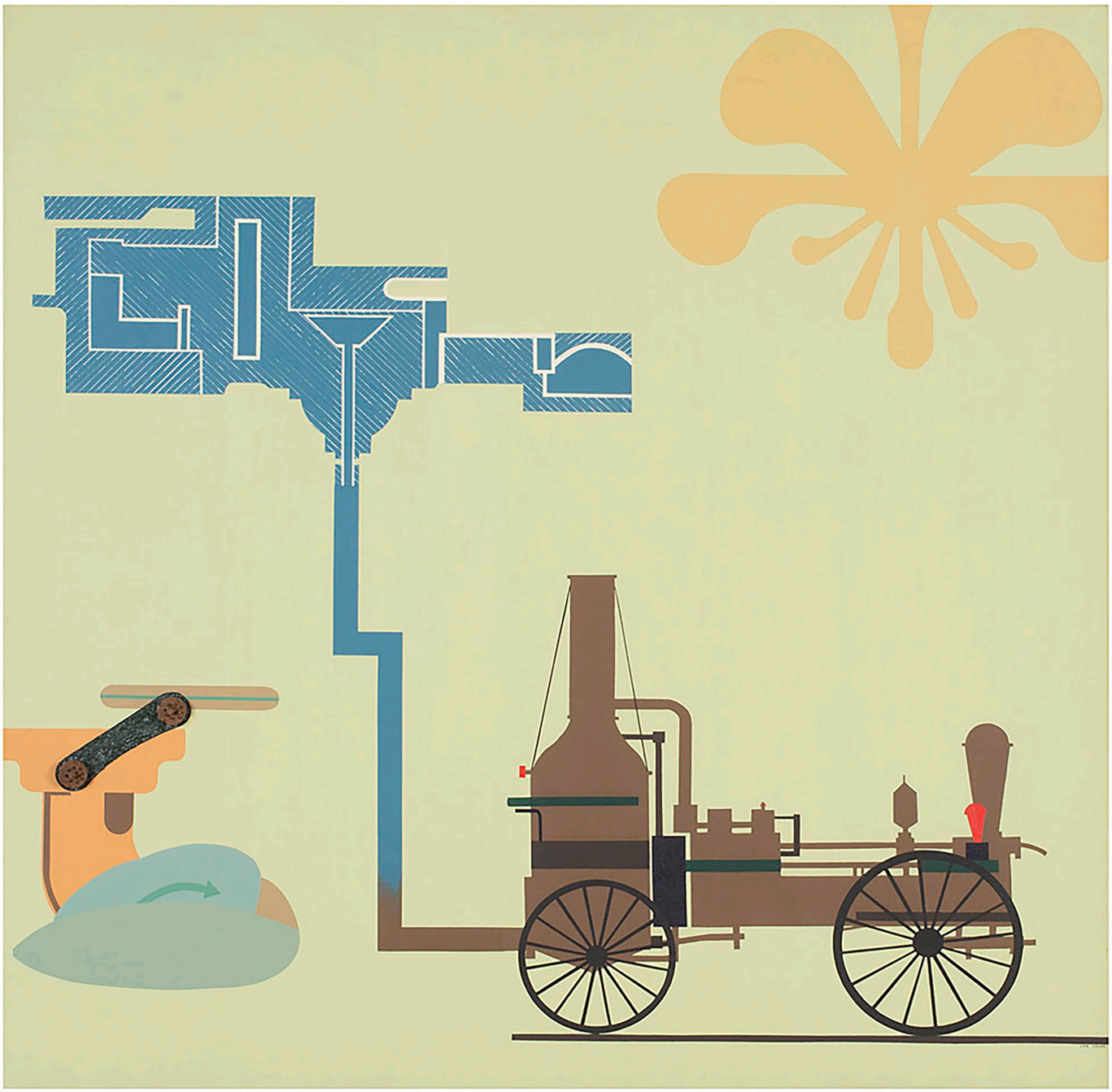

Lee Adler, *Modern Composition no. 1*, 1972. Mixed media on canvas. Collection of the Ulrich Museum of Art.

Lee Adler: A Mad Man Amid the Machines

Lee Adler: A Mad Man Amid the Machines brings out of storage and out of obscurity the work of Lee Adler, a painter and printmaker whose oeuvre is overdue for critical reassessment. The Ulrich Museum of Art is in a unique position to do so. Thanks to its voracious collecting of contemporary work in the 1970s-80s, the museum appears to have the largest holdings (thirty-six) in public hands of works by Adler, which were last on view in 1991-92. As stewards of this work, we began last year to research the prints and paintings in our collection and the artist who made them. This exhibition is the result of those labors.

Adler was born in New York City in 1926 and spent most of his life there, building a successful career in advertising and marketing (hence the "Mad Man" of the exhibition's title). His engagement with visual art began with a discovery of art as a hobby around 1950 and was limited to sketching from 1955 until the early 1960s. In 1962, he began to study art formally (see Chronology), and his efforts then intensified into fifteen years of fervent creative activity that resulted in over 300 paintings and 75 editions of prints. Those efforts ended abruptly in the early 1980s, when the loss of studio space, a personal tragedy, and disillusionment in the art world led Adler to abandon art making.

In the years he was active, Adler developed an evocative visual vocabulary to capture life in a world where mechanization and technological change were increasing their pace and impact. Life amid such change has been a key preoccupation of modern art from the 19th century on, but it gained a new urgency and currency in the 1960s and 1970s. These were the the decades when rising consumerism brought electric and electronic gadgetry into every aspect of daily American life; when new mass media technologies became ubiquitous, giving rise to Pop Art's focus on the barrage of messages such media produced; when technological advancement served as a key battleground in the Cold War, as evidenced by the space and arms races; and when the Vietnam War foregrounded concerns about the "military-industrial complex" (so named by Dwight Eisenhower in 1961) as the driver of technological advances.

Adler's work reveals an ambiguous stance toward life in a highly technological society. "I'm a chronicler of the symmetries of the mechanical world around us," he wrote. A pamphlet accompanying his first solo exhibition quoted Paul Klee: "Art does not render what is visible, but renders visible." Adler saw it as his mission to make more visible the ubiquitous presence and the psychic power of technology without offering ready answers about the meaning of the shifts happening around him. His own artistic development, though, suggests that he tapped into those shifts on a visceral level. Adler's earliest sketches showed non-descript urban scenes until he discovered the industrial sites along the Brooklyn waterfront. He then filled many notebooks with images of the machinery and infrastructure that had defined the borrough, but in the early 60s stood on the cusp of disappearance due to deindustrialization. Narrowing his focus further, in the mid-60s, Adler created his Roof-Top series, painting abstracted and geometricized scenes of typically invisible mechanical structures, which took on surprisingly human-like appearances. Adler anthropomorphized technology from then on.

In 1967, his work changed again. "I dropped down from the roof-tops," he recalled, "and took a look inside the buildings. I discovered…the inexhaustible wealth of ideas that has kept my art going ever since: more machines, gears, electronic parts, belts, power transmissions, variable speed pulleys, stencils, printing blocks, IBM cards, computer tapes, TV parts, ray guns…all sorts of things that work in communication devices, transportation and data recording." Adler's work was now inspired by the guts of machines, with a particular focus on the innards of information technologies coming to the fore at the time. Adler's way of depicting imaginary groupings of these machines' rearranged parts is boldly colored, flat, precisely delineated, diagrammatic, frontal, and focused on recognizable fragments composed into mysterious new wholes. Adler's way of working with his visual motifs was also modular and iterative, as if he was applying industrial R&D methods to the very process of making art.

Writings about Adler's mature work consistently discuss it as a visual language and reference calligraphy, pictographs, and hieroglyphs. These references imply that a meaning is encoded within, but it's not one we can easily parse. What makes Adler's contribution to the discourse on art and technology distinctive is that his visual "language" captures the ineffable—the emotional difficulty of resolving our culture's ambivalence towards technology. His works have been read as both whimsical techno-optimism and ennui about humanity's future, and Adler himself embraced this ambivalence. A 1973 statement read, "Lee Adler…simultaneously…celebrates the beauty he sees in the symmetries and order of our high-technology society [a]nd…deplores the difficulties in inter-personal relationships interposed by the scale and complexity of a mechanized, impersonal world created by that same technology." The desire to reconcile with the ambivalence of the human-machine relationships and to face the estrangement that many feel from the technologies on which they intimately rely is the emotional core of Adler's work. Once we accept the emotional complexity—the simultaneous attraction and revulsion—in our relationship to technology, we can begin to make sense of the sea change at hand. This is evident in Adler's manipulation of scale: by blowing up and anthropomorphizing fragments of often tiny devices, he presciently recognized the magnitude of the transformations that these small components would bring in aggregate. As if to underscore this point, many of Adler's works can be read on multiple levels, ranging from the micro (as insides of miniature electronics) to the macro (as aerial surveys, topographical maps, or schema for operating complex systems). Today, fifty years after Adler made his work, we are hardly closer to understanding the long-term impact of the technologies whose advent he urged its viewers to acknowledge, but the need to grapple with them, at least, has become undeniable.

– Ksenya Gurshtein, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Lee Adler: A Chronology

1926 – born Leo Adler on the Lower East Side in New York City to Isidor and Anna Adler
1942 – graduates from James Madison High School in Brooklyn
1943-1946 – serves in the U.S. Army during World War II, with final year spent in Japan
1948 – graduates with a BA in English from Syracuse University
1948-1949 – hitchhikes west; works at a steel mill in Chicago; lives in a bohemian artist community near Monterey, CA
1949-1950 – briefly pursues graduate studies in literature at the Sorbonne in Paris; returns to New York
c. 1952 – begins work in the advertising industry in New York, becoming a pioneer of marketing research and publishing a number of articles and books on marketing
1959 – moves to Brooklyn Heights, Brooklyn
1962-1964 – studies at the Art Students League
1964-1965 – studies at the Brooklyn Museum Art School
1967 – first solo exhibition at the Salpeter Gallery
1969 – studies printmaking at the Pratt Graphics Center
1974 – solo exhibition *Industry and the Artist* at the Hagley Museum, Wilmington, DE
1970s – numerous solo exhibitions primarily in U.S. galleries and at gallery and museum venues in Canada, England, Germany, India, Mexico, New Zealand, and Spain
1977-1978 – solo exhibition travels to Albert White Gallery, Toronto, Canada; Lillian Heidenberg Gallery, New York; the Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro, NC; The Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC; and Hermitage Foundation Museum, Norfolk, VA
1977 and 1991 – donates his papers to the Archives of American Art, Washington DC
1983 – leaves Brooklyn; moves to Lime Kiln Farm, Climax, New York; stops making art
2003 – dies in Climax, NY, aged 77

The information above was gleaned from materials in the Ulrich Museum archives, the Lee Adler papers at the Archives of American Art, and from archival documents belonging to Lee Adler's son, Derek Adler, for whose help in the compiling of this chronology we are deeply grateful.

This exhibition is generously supported by Derek Adler and Noreen Weiss; Keith and Georgia Stevens; Lee and Ron Starkel; and the Reuben Saunders Gallery.

Lee Adler, *Engine III*, 1971 (left) and *Diagram III*, 1973 (right). Screen prints. Collection of the Ulrich Museum of Art.

Ulrich Museum of Art

Wichita State University

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