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THE
HUFFINGTON
POST

The Minimalist Luxury of McLaughlin at LACMA

1/03/2017 | by Edward Goldman

The only excuse I can come up with for not seeing the exceptional exhibition of John McLaughlin's paintings at LACMA until just a few days ago is the two other blockbuster exhibitions at the same museum: *Picasso & Rivera* and *German Art in the Age of Dürer and Cranach*. I went to see these two blockbuster exhibitions several times already and each time rejoiced at the richness and diversity of the artworks on display. So, how can any other exhibition survive a competition with Picasso and Dürer? On the very last day of 2016, I went to LACMA again, this time with one purpose, and one purpose only — to see the retrospective exhibition of John McLaughlin (1898-1976).



Installation view, *John McLaughlin Paintings: Total Abstraction* at LACMA

Anyone interested in the history of Southern California post-war art will recognize his important contributions to geometric abstract painting. I've seen McLaughlin's works on a number of occasions, and have always been aware of its importance. But not until this exceptional exhibition at LACMA was I able to connect with his art not only intellectually, but on a deeper emotional level.



Installation view, *Joe McLaughlin Paintings: Total Abstraction* at LACMA

McLaughlin's medium-sized paintings, with their rectangles of solid colors, give an initial impression of simplicity. But a very complicated simplicity it is, with strong echoes of abstract compositions by Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. What makes this exhibition so special and so unique is the fact that it's the first (and long overdue) retrospective of his works since his death 40 years ago.



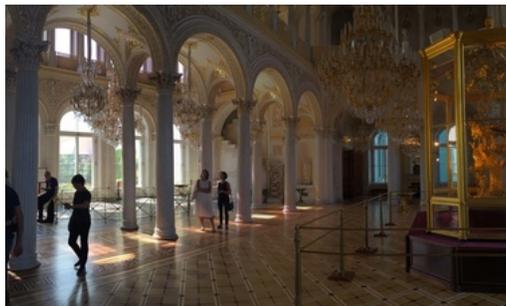
Installation view, John McLaughlin Paintings: Total Abstraction at LACMA

I didn't plan to spend more than 15 or 20 minutes walking through the exhibition. But much to my surprise, I stayed there for over an hour, marveling at the sophistication and minimalistic luxury of McLaughlin's art. And here's yet another rather unexpected twist: each room of the exhibition has a few wooden chairs designed by well-known sculptor and furniture-maker Roy McMakin (b. 1956). He was commissioned to design these twelve chairs in response to McLaughlin's paintings. At first glance, all twelve chairs look the same, but pay attention and you'll discover subtle differences in their designs that compliment and echo the geometric compositions of the abstract paintings around them.



Portrait of Catherine the Great by Dmitry Levitskiy (1783)
Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg

So my friends, if you haven't treated yourself yet to these three exceptional exhibitions at LACMA: do it now, in the first days of the New Year. Have fun. But please save a little bit of time and energy for yet another museum adventure — a conversation at the Getty Center on Sunday, January 15 at 3pm. This one will be devoted to the minor German princess who married into the Russian imperial family and subsequently transformed herself into Catherine the Great (1729-1796).



(A) Pavilion Hall
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg
(B) Italian art gallery
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

There is a fascinating new biography of Catherine by Susan Jaques, titled *The Empress of Art*. The book has a particular focus on her passion for art, which she collected voraciously throughout her reign. With the help and advice of such luminaries as Diderot and Voltaire, Catherine often acquired the entire collections of European nobility in desperate need of money.



(L): Big Throne Room
Winter Palace, St. Petersburg
(R): "The Return of the Prodigal Son," Rembrandt van Rijn (1661-1669)
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

The hundreds of paintings she acquired became the foundation of the world famous Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg. The history of the Hermitage and the life of Catherine as the Empress of Art will be the subject of a conversation between the author Susan Jaques and myself at the Getty auditorium on Sunday, January 15th at 3pm. The event will be open to the public but tickets should be reserved in advance.

“There are few women in history more fascinating than Catherine the Great, and for the first time, Susan Jaques brings her to life through the prism of art.”