

VAN DOREN
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The Marvelous Void: Exhibitions in Los Angeles and New York of John McLaughlin

by Joan Boykoff Baron and Reuben M. Baron | Tuesday, January 31st, 2017

John McLaughlin Paintings: Total Abstraction at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

November 14, 2016 to April 16, 2017

5905 Wilshire Boulevard, between Fairfax and Curson

Los Angeles, California, lacma.org

John McLaughlin: Marvelous Void at Van Doren Waxter

November 2, 2016 to January 7, 2017

23 East 73rd Street, between Fifth and Madison avenues

New York City, vandorenwaxter.com



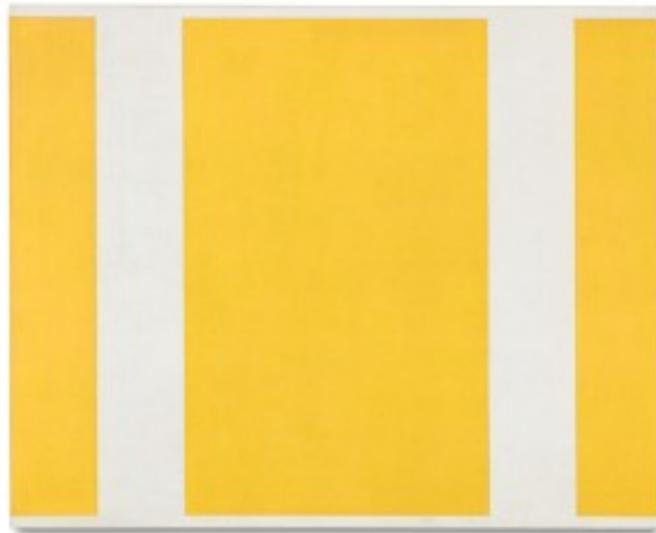
Installation shot of the exhibition under review including, far right, *Untitled*, 1955, 1955. Oil on Masonite, 38 x 32 inches, discussed in this review. Photo: Joan Boykoff Baron

The recent presence in New York City of the purist abstraction of artists such as Agnes Martin, Mark Rothko, Carmen Herrera, Joseph Albers, not to mention the artists of the *Paths to the Absolute* exhibition at Di Donna (Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Newman, Pollock, Rothko, Still) suggests that the zeitgeist is ripe for a full examination of the work of John McLaughlin, too. McLaughlin (1898-1976) sought, both in his paintings and writings, to provide a rationale for abstract art that eschewed the

specificity of objects in the world. Indeed, he went so far as to criticize Mondrian for failing to achieve a freedom from representational sources in his work, such as “Broadway Boogie Woogie”.

“Asian painters made me wonder who I was. Western painters, on the other hand, tried to tell me who they were,” McLaughlin said. He sought a purer basis for abstraction in the Zen concept of the “marvelous void”. Using empty spaces between rectangular forms to imply absence, McLaughlin sought to draw the viewer into a meditative state in which the noise of everyday life is shut out or at least deferred. He intentionally used neutral geometric forms that had no counterparts in nature in order to give his viewers complete freedom to find their own meaning in his paintings. This objective is well captured by McLaughlin’s suggestion that his paintings are best viewed in bedrooms—silent and enigmatic, yet full of intimacy.

Nevertheless, seeing a John McLaughlin exhibition is stimulating as well as meditative. Initially, the paintings have a calming effect brought about by their strong sense of balance and harmony. Being in their presence for a while begins to reveal some unexpected tensions and visual surprises, however, that set one’s eyes and thoughts in motion. This is paradoxical, as meditation and visual stimulation are typically considered to be mutually exclusive or at the very least, incompatible. It is McLaughlin’s ability to harness this paradox that helps to explain what makes his work so satisfying and significant.



John McLaughlin, #4-1965, 1965. Oil on Canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter, New York.

Exposed to Japanese prints while growing up in Boston, McLaughlin spent close to three years living in Japan and traveling in China, beginning in 1935. In Japan he was surrounded with rectangular structures in the narrow hanging ribbon ties and horizontally placed images on vertical scroll paintings as well as the movable screens common to Japanese domestic design. He was especially captivated by the large open spaces, “the marvelous voids” in the paintings of Sesshū Tōyō and other 15th and 16th century Japanese artists. Some Western artists also resonated with McLaughlin, including Malevich, who eliminated the object, and Mondrian, who used rectangles as neutral forms. By using the rectangle in concert with relatively large “empty” areas, he strove to make the viewer part of the organization of the painting, free to see and contemplate without the interference of objects. Throughout his career, McLaughlin never abandoned the rectangle. As his work matured, he sought to create new combinations of structures and colors that maintained his commitment to pure abstraction in ways that were visually challenging. Because some of these works provided visual puzzles, it was not surprising that McLaughlin was included in William Seitz’s 1965 “Responsive Eye” show at MoMA.

Edward Albee picked up on the paradoxical aspect of McLaughlin when he described “a cold burning purity” in his paintings. We find it helpful to use the principle from physics of complementarity (with which McLaughlin may or may not have been familiar) to help understand this paradox. Niels Bohr conceived of this principle in 1927 using as an exemplar the finding that an electron could be seen both as a wave and a particle—but not at the same time. The existence of these two mutually

exclusive entities depended on the conditions of their observation. In the same way, McLaughlin's work can be seen as both meditative and visually energetic, but (again) not at the same time.

The well-selected and revelatory retrospective at LACMA contains 52 paintings and 9 works on paper, some of which are collages that served as McLaughlin's maquettes and demonstrate his precise planning and placement of forms before beginning a painting. To provide opportunities for contemplation and slower viewing, LACMA commissioned the creation of 12 highly geometric McLaughlin-inspired slat-back wooden chairs by the artist Roy McMakin.

Untitled (1955), included in a large room of close to a dozen asymmetrical works from the 1950s, has an overall calming effect. At first glance, it appears to be balanced and harmonious with several contiguous rectangles in soft grayish earth tones near its center and large white areas on each side. With continued looking, one's eyes begin to jump around, noticing the two narrow black bands or the two narrow white ones jutting out from the white side sections and piercing the earthy middle sections. One may wonder why the two vertical white areas surrounding the middle bands are not the same size, or why the narrow white bands on the right and left appear to thrust themselves into the center of the painting. Surprisingly, the painting manages to maintain both its original harmonious calmness and its visual challenges—in sequence, but not simultaneously. In the next room, there is a majestic symmetrical painting, #14 (1959) featuring two large void-like rectangles in light blue and deep black to offer a place of contemplation for the viewer. It soon becomes apparent that whichever large form one focuses upon is the one that appears to move closer to the viewer. But before long, the quiet contemplation shifts to more active problem solving as the horizontal blue rectangle at the bottom edge of the painting appears to cause the larger forms to rise.



John McLaughlin, #1-1968, 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody. Photo: Joan Boykoff Baron.

Painting #1 (1968), which might have been a perfect choice for MoMA's Responsive Eye show, is dominated by large and intensely red rectangles. These are inviting as voids, but are then interrupted by black and white areas. Are the three vertical black areas meant to serve as frames for the red areas or to pair up with the three white vertical bars immediately to their left, leaving the white bar on the extreme right with no companion? At some point, the white strips at the top and bottom of the painting come into view, so that the red and black forms are then seen as resting on a large white background. This combination of contemplation and visual excitement is the magical complementarity of McLaughlin.

A film just outside one entrance to the exhibition features the painter Tony Berlant and several other established Los Angeles artists discussing the contributions of John McLaughlin. From this video, it is indisputable that he was a strong influence on several generations of artists, particularly on the West Coast. In addition to Tony Berlant, the painters and sculptors who were likely to have known McLaughlin and his work include Joe Goode, Ed Moses, Sam Francis, Ed Ruscha, James Haywood, Tony Delap, Billy Al Bengston, Ron Davis, David Novros, Marcia Hafif, Edith Baumann, John McCracken, Ken Price and Peter Voulkos. A slightly later cohort inspired by McLaughlin includes Scot Heywood, Alan Wayne, David Reed, and Don Voisine, among others. Furthermore, McLaughlin is widely acknowledged to be a forerunner of the Light and Space movement of the late 1960s and 1970s because of his importance to Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, James Turrell, Mary Corse, Peter Alexander and Craig

Kaufmann, who further dematerialized their art and provided slowly revealing immersive works that challenged the perceptions of their viewers.

Therefore, we were disappointed to learn that this thoughtfully curated show of major works, many of which have not been seen before, will not travel, despite its having been offered to more than thirty museums nationally. People not able to get to Los Angeles will have to be satisfied with the scholarly and beautifully illustrated catalogue with insightful and well-documented essays and chronologies edited by the co-curators, Stephanie Barron and Lauren Bergman.

Fortunately, all was not completely lost for New Yorkers. Van Doren Waxter, which represents the John McLaughlin estate, commissioned Robert C. Morgan to help organize a pocket-retrospective of six McLaughlin paintings, representing each decade of the artist's career, along with two Japanese scrolls. Morgan, using his deep knowledge of Oriental art, has written an informative essay about the "marvelous void" both in Chan and Zen aesthetics and McLaughlin's abstraction.

The largest in the New York exhibition, #4 (1965), captures the apparent simplicity and predominance of the void in many of McLaughlin's late paintings. At first, its bright yellow color dominates. Almost immediately, however, the two white rectangular columns that run from top to bottom near the left and right of the painting become salient. On closer inspection, the white columns appear to be the same size as the yellow areas closest to the edges of the painting, creating a visual pair at each edge. The different perceptions of this painting fluctuate depending on one's focal point, emphasizing either the large yellow void in the center or the two white columns near the sides.

The complexity inherent in McLaughlin's works, evident in both these exhibitions, continually challenges perceptual and cognitive capacities. Psychologists have long recognized that unresolved problems exert a tension that keeps them alive in memory. McLaughlin's shifting geometries visually exemplify this principle.



Installation shot of the exhibition under review, including, far right, , #14-1959, 1959. Oil on canvas, 60 x 46 inches. Photo: Joan Boykoff Baron