

# Art in America

## John McLaughlin

LOS ANGELES

at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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John McLaughlin (1898–1976) is an avatar of a peculiarly animated and individuated proto-Minimalism associated with Los Angeles artists including Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, and John McCracken. He is widely held as first among equals in the group of LA abstract painters to whom the term “Hard Edge” was initially applied. It is thus almost inconceivable that, even though his work has been the subject of previous museum exhibitions, there hasn’t been a large-scale retrospective of his paintings until now. This apparent neglect seems less a personal affront to the artist when you realize he didn’t start painting until the age of forty-eight, after extensive military service. The exhibition, at LACMA’s Broad Contemporary Art Museum, featured fifty-two works ranging from 1947 to 1970 and was organized by curators Stephanie Barron and Lauren Bergman.

Growing up near Boston, McLaughlin took a deep interest in the Boston Museum of Fine Art’s great collection of Asian art and started collecting Japanese prints. In 1928, he married Florence Emerson, a grandniece of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Florence shared her husband’s enthusiasm for Asian cultures, and the two moved to Tokyo and then to Beijing. When they returned to Boston, in 1929, McLaughlin opened his own Asian art gallery. Even though he was in his forties and had served in World War I, McLaughlin returned to active duty and worked in various administrative capacities throughout World War II, eventually returning to the States with a Bronze Star. When he and Florence moved to Dana Point, on the coast south of Los Angeles, he finally committed to being a professional artist.

From his late beginning, McLaughlin was dedicated to a rigorously abstract art. He admired the radical abstraction of Mondrian and Malevich, and appeared to be working through the inheritance of their language of refined planes and bands along with limited, powerful color set off by white. However, McLaughlin saw the white area of his paintings through the Japanese concept of *ma*, or the “marvelous void,” as expressed by the fifteenth-century Japanese landscape painter Shessu Toyo. Shessu’s empty spaces, seemingly pools of mist, are a kind of quantum ground out of which emerges the gestural material of geologic and arboreal features. The “void” takes up as much space as the brushwork, or more. McLaughlin was profoundly influenced by Shessu, and this transposition of Japanese aesthetics and philosophy into a proto-Minimalist language of interlocking and, ultimately, floating rectilinear planes imparts the almost ineffable animation that permeates his work. In a video made to accompany the show, several LA artists, including James Hayward, Tony Berlant, and Ed Moses, attempt to articulate the unquantifiable in discussing McLaughlin’s painterly touch (he doesn’t use tape), color, proportionality, and scale. Hayward talks about running his eyes along the edges of McLaughlin’s rectangles and seeing the ever-so-slight wavering of a hand-brushed area.

The aggregate effect of McLaughlin’s imagery is that of excruciatingly calibrated neutrality raised to an exquisite pitch—something like Barnett Newman without the heroism, but with the abjuration of heroism present as a felt emanation. Maybe it’s the human scale of his work. His largest canvases are four by five feet, which encompass but do not dwarf the viewer. While most of his “mature” compositions involve some play on symmetry, McLaughlin intuitively positioned his intervals rather than drawing them from measurement. Thus, his compositions never seem nailed down to the inexorable orders of Minimalism. His colors are flat, similarly without affect, but spacious. Early in his career, he used green, blue, black, and white; then he added taupe, a canary yellow, a light blue, and red. By midcareer, he restricted his canvases to no more than four colors, and his last paintings are black and white, achieving an apotheosis of tensile balance.

McLaughlin was a self-taught artist (another entry in the ledger of great American autodidacts—Emerson would have approved). For all the elegant doggedness in his painterly touch, or lack of touch, he could be shockingly cavalier about the craft and care of the painted canvas. I once heard his dealer, Nicholas Wilder, discuss his horror at lifting the garage door to the artist’s studio after his death and seeing paintings stacked

horizontally like pancakes and realizing that McLaughlin had tried using kerosene as thinner. Wilder's stories may have been apocryphal and told for effect, but there's a photo in the exhibition catalogue of the artist posing with a painting in the bright sun of a local golf course.

As it turns out, many of McLaughlin's paintings have had to be restored. Still, the curators were able to select a large number of pristine paintings for the five galleries devoted to the show. Twelve subtly differentiated chairs inspired by McLaughlin's compositions were commissioned from designer Roy McMakin and placed for viewers to contemplate the paintings individually. Given the beauty of the work, it is a misfortune that no other museums, including lenders, agreed to take it on.