

An Appreciation of John McLaughlin

Sheldon Figoten

"... to reduce forms to a state intended to induce within the spectator the sensation or consciousness of insight..."¹ These words describe the goal John McLaughlin had set for himself. When he died, on March 22, 1976, the art world lost a unique figure whose work and personal integrity were revered by younger abstractionists working in Southern California during the 1960s. Among these artists were Ed Moses, David Novros, Ron Davis, Robert Irwin, and Tony Delap. Now, his achievement clarified by time, McLaughlin's influence has stirred a new generation.

With his early emphasis on reduced form and color and his original approach to spatial relationships, John McLaughlin anticipated ideas that emerged from Southern California in the sixties and seventies. The work fits into the larger genealogy of painting traced from Cézanne to Cubism, Malevich, and Mondrian. To this historical perspective, however, McLaughlin brought his special history and his incisive intelligence. Through his papers, given before his death to the Archives of American Art, we can now see a more complete picture of the ideas, beliefs, and inspirations that nourished his artistic growth.

Born on May 21, 1898, in Sharon, Massachusetts, John McLaughlin was one of seven children. His father was a child genius who graduated from Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., at fourteen years of age, became a lawyer, and an associate justice of the Superior Court of Massachusetts. The family's respect for art revealed itself in various ways. Outings to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston provided early exposure to the famous collection of Far Eastern art; a great uncle was an artist; another uncle hosted young Japanese students who, to

repay his hospitality, brought offerings of oriental art. These gifts were left to McLaughlin's mother and displayed in their home. Through his mother came the interest in the Orient that led to his "prejudice" against Western styles.

McLaughlin attended Roxbury Latin School and Phillips Academy, Ando-

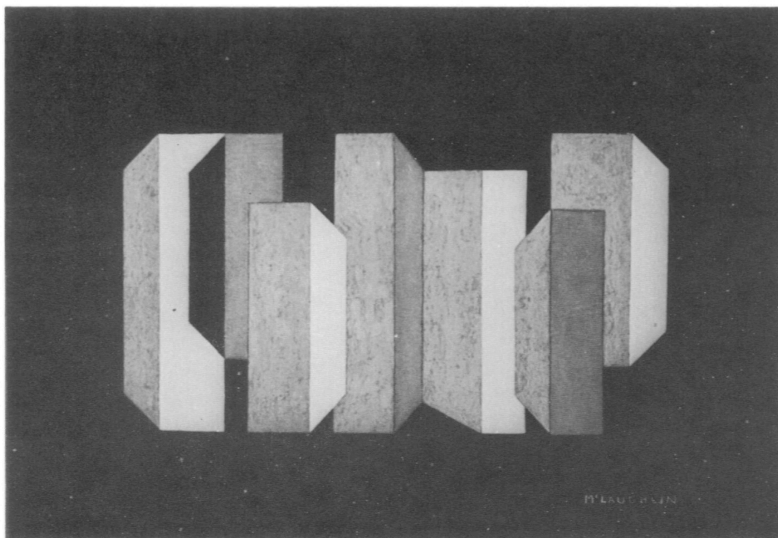
ver, Massachusetts. By his own admission his academic career was undistinguished: "I enjoyed Latin and Greek and French but beyond that nothing."² Graduation found the young man unsure about his future, but as World War I began, with the help of his father, McLaughlin obtained a position on a naval cargo ship. He



John McLaughlin, April, 1979. McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art.

Painter Sheldon Figoten, born in Detroit in 1945, arrived in Southern California a year later and lived there until he moved to the northern part of the state in 1966. He studied at U.C.L.A. under Frederick Wight and Kurt von Mier, at the University of California in San Francisco, and at the San Francisco Art Institute. He is represented by the Janus Gallery in Los Angeles.

Figoten became interested in John McLaughlin's work upon seeing it in the exhibition *California: the Modern Era*, held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1977. McLaughlin is represented in the exhibition *L.A.: The Sixties*, scheduled for July 16 - October 4, 1981, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



John McLaughlin, *Untitled*, 1949. Oil and casein on masonite, 10½ by 16 in. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas B. Robertson. McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art.

served for two years, traveling between New York and Queenstown, Ireland. When the war ended, McLaughlin entered the business world in Chicago and later in Boston, where he met Florence Emerson, a graduate of Wellesley College. They were married in 1928.

As McLaughlin's attraction to oriental art developed, he began a small art business specializing in Japanese prints gathered from local sources. Whenever business was slack, McLaughlin went to his nearby apartment to paint. He also began to study the Japanese language and became friendly with Japanese living in Boston. This interest in the art and culture of the Orient grew to such a degree that he made a sudden decision to leave Boston for the Far East.

Considering the times and his conventional upbringing, the idea of leaving home, business, and everything familiar for such a journey must have shocked those around him, including his wife, who resisted the idea. She said he could go without her. McLaughlin's passion to get to the source of the art which so moved him was unabated and he began preparations for his departure. At the last minute Florence agreed to accompany him. They left Boston in 1935.

Their stay lasted into 1937 and they traveled extensively in China and Japan. McLaughlin not only examined works of art, he also visited historic and cultural sites, monasteries, temples, and palaces. He lived in Tokyo, experiencing Japanese life first-hand while continuing his study of the language with a tutor who came to his house each day. No casual visitor or tourist, McLaughlin immersed himself for two years in the fullness of Chinese

and Japanese culture. Returning to Boston with many new Japanese prints, the McLaughlins reopened their art business and he made several trips during the next few years to bring back new acquisitions. McLaughlin's fascination with oriental art had grown to such an extent that it affected the course of his life and became the central core of his philosophical and artistic beliefs.

Prior to the beginning of World War II, McLaughlin was approached by the Marine Corps because of his knowledge of Japanese and was asked to take a language examination. After passing, he agreed to join the service as a Second Lieutenant. He was studying in Honolulu the day Pearl Harbor was attacked. When the war began, McLaughlin left the Marines because of regulations regarding age restrictions for combat; now 43 years old, he joined the Army and spent 1941-1942 at an Army language school outside of Minneapolis. He served (1943-1945) in the India-China-Burma theater as an intelligence officer with the rank of Major. At war's end, in 1946, the McLaughlins settled in Dana Point, on the California coastline between San Diego and Los Angeles. Finally, at forty-eight years of age, McLaughlin had the time he needed for painting.

The course of McLaughlin's life conveys a strong sense of dignity and self assurance, qualities he carried directly into his art. Though his interest in art began early, more than half his life had passed before he settled down to full-time work. In an interview, McLaughlin explained his attitude toward painting in those early years: "I was crazy about it. I had to—I would do anything to make

time to do it. . . . It was a perfectly natural thing for me. I wanted to paint. That was all. Over the years there hadn't been much opportunity to do it. I had to go to work at something—you can't ride two horses, you can't work and then come home at night and work on painting."³ He might have expected financial support from his family but his turn-of-the-century Bostonian background had instilled a deep sense of individualism and pride that led him to achieve financial independence in order to devote himself to painting.

Now, with so much experience behind him, his progress was rapid and sure. By 1948 he had produced the earliest of the works associated with his mature style. By the mid-fifties he was using the vocabulary he would refine over the next twenty-five years. The McLaughlins settled into a routine of life revolving around painting and until his death McLaughlin pursued his artistic goals with unending self-discipline and integrity. His art developed independently, but not without awareness of the art of his time. In conversations and writings, McLaughlin always stressed his philosophical and artistic connection to the Orient, but his wife clearly emphasized his continuous interest in and study of contemporary art.

In searching McLaughlin's statements, notes, and letters for the delineation and source of his ideas, we notice an absence of references to earlier artists and art movements. He was strictly devoted to the twentieth century. In a letter to Alfred Wilson dated January 15, 1951, he said, "I can't go along with you on the good to be gleaned from the Renaissance. The past 50 years or more have helped to break those suffocating shackles. Let's not retrogress."⁴ He briefly mentions Cézanne and the importance of the Cubists and the de Stijl artists and alludes to the Abstract Expressionists: "Today painting has, to a considerable extent become the means of expressing the immediate problems of the painter himself by means of the unconscious. In my own case I have not become involved with the subconscious."⁵ Always conceptually clear, McLaughlin knew what was relevant to him. The few artists whose work motivated or confirmed his discoveries are acknowledged repeatedly: Mondrian, Malevich, and certain Japanese painters of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.

Through a few key works of Malevich, McLaughlin linked his essentially Eastern goals to the tradition of Western painting. It is of interest to note that for McLaughlin the impact of Malevich's work came through statements about the *idea of White on White*. It was the conceptual basis upon which he drew, rather than the paintings themselves. He rejected Malevich's diagonals, spatial concepts, rhythm, palette, and technique—but wrote of his importance:

Let's look at Malevich's [sic] *White on White* for a moment— In principle this painting is the key to my painting (although I arrived at my conclusions independently). I feel that, conceptually, *White on White* was the magnificent breakthrough which completely eliminates the object, confronting the viewer with the most penetrating, demanding, and at the same time simplest vehicle by which he may see himself in relation to nature *on his own terms*. Actually, I believe the painting suffered from technical inadequacies— physically it is impossible to impose white on white and at the same time distinguish the separate form. In an attempt to overcome this the painter in one of these canvases drew a fine line to indicate boundaries (and for some unaccountable reason the line bounded a form tipped at an angle) . . . only the title was effective. While the idea was valid, means stifled realization.⁶

The importance of *White on White* is re-emphasized fifteen years later in the interview conducted by Paul Karlstrom of the Archives of American Art:

. . . the thing that really made me know I was right was when I read something about Malevich and his *White on White*. . . . With *White on White* it's impossible to have anything at all. That was it. I was the happiest guy in the world.⁷

We also find another telling comment on Malevich in a letter to Jules Langsner written on December 11, 1959:

. . . referring to his *Black Square* on a white ground, he [Malevich] is quoted as having said "the black square was by no means an empty square but the feeling of the absence of an object." This to me is a very thrilling statement and is revealing in connection with my work. . . . to paint the object is one thing—to paint in the knowledge that an object exists is another.⁸

It is apparent that Malevich provided a great impetus toward McLaughlin's goal of neutrality. In the opening essay for the catalog of the 1969 McLaughlin retrospective at The Corcoran Gallery of Art, James Harithas suggests that the artist's greatest achievement lies in this area:

McLaughlin re-examined the fundamental premises that underlie all art and came to the startling conclusion that it is equally valid to postulate an art that expresses no content as it is one which provided content. In

other words, art need not be used only to interpret or record experiences or provide solutions to problems. It can itself *pose basic problems* by expressly withholding any familiar or recognizable sensory data or any other information and have a profoundly different effect on the viewer. This insight is the basis for all of McLaughlin's work.⁹

The other Western artist who had an impact on McLaughlin was Mondrian. Like Mondrian, McLaughlin employed the horizontal and the vertical; a reduced palette (though not the primaries); two dimensional structure; the absence of volume; and above all ". . . the rectangle whose potential Mondrian has so ably demonstrated."¹⁰ The rectangle is the foundation of McLaughlin's art—"Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of my painting is that I develop the composition by using rectangles exclusively."¹¹ It was Mondrian's late paintings that drew his attention and here he ties the thread between Malevich and Mondrian:

He [Mondrian], as you know, was essentially preoccupied with line—which symbolized equilibrium through opposition and is expressed by the right angle. This obtained for many years—up to the time of his "Boogie Woogie" paintings, done shortly before his death. Prior to his latest period he had destroyed the plane and now he sensed the need to destroy the guts of his structure—the line! He failed in implementing this new theory because the line was still there—only in pieces; but the important thing to me is that he had come to think in terms of *White on White* . . . dump object and symbolism and get down to brass tacks. He had in effect finally decided to release the spectator from the dogma of his restricting statement . . . had he lived a little longer he would have easily found the means of successfully employing the opulence of the rectangle free from the strangling line. . . . It must be clear to you now that I am seeking what I really believe these two men were after.¹²

However important these two artists were to McLaughlin, the major influence came from the Orient and Japanese painters of past centuries. From them, and from his contact with Eastern culture and philosophy, McLaughlin drew his artistic intentions. He said:

As time went on my interests were more—almost entirely—addressed toward Oriental art, which has been the motivating instrument that caused me to paint as I am painting

today. . . . Eventually I had the great satisfaction of adopting, to a great degree, the attitudes of the Japanese and Chinese in expressing my feelings about myself and my fellow man.¹³

McLaughlin held that "Certain Japanese painters of centuries ago found the means to overcome the demands imposed by the object by the use of large areas of empty space . . . the 'marvelous void'."¹⁴ He singles out two painters—Sesshu (1420-1506) and Sesson (1504-ca. 1589):

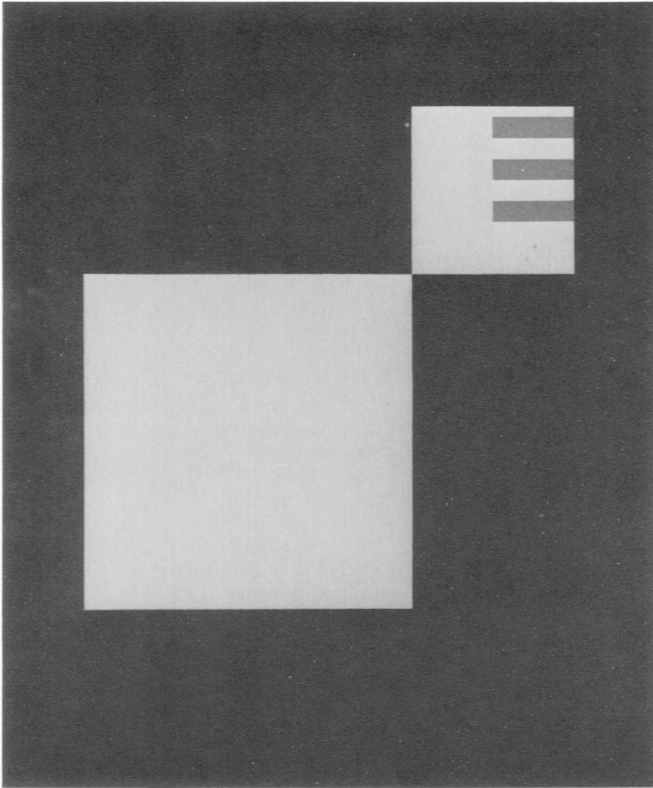
I was instinctively attracted to these painters largely because of their use of space. In the case of Sesson, for example, he tried to arouse in the spectator a sense of exaltation designed to enable him to experience, if only for a brief moment, the attainment of enlightenment. This he accomplished largely by the use of great, impressive areas of empty space.¹⁵

In another context, the painter talked about Bach and his "monotonous repetition . . . he isn't saying a hell of a lot but you know that there's a lot there. I would liken that to my feeling about Oriental art."¹⁶

McLaughlin arrived at a method for achieving the totally abstract, devoid of particular associations or ideas, independent of nature or experiences from nature or symbolism:

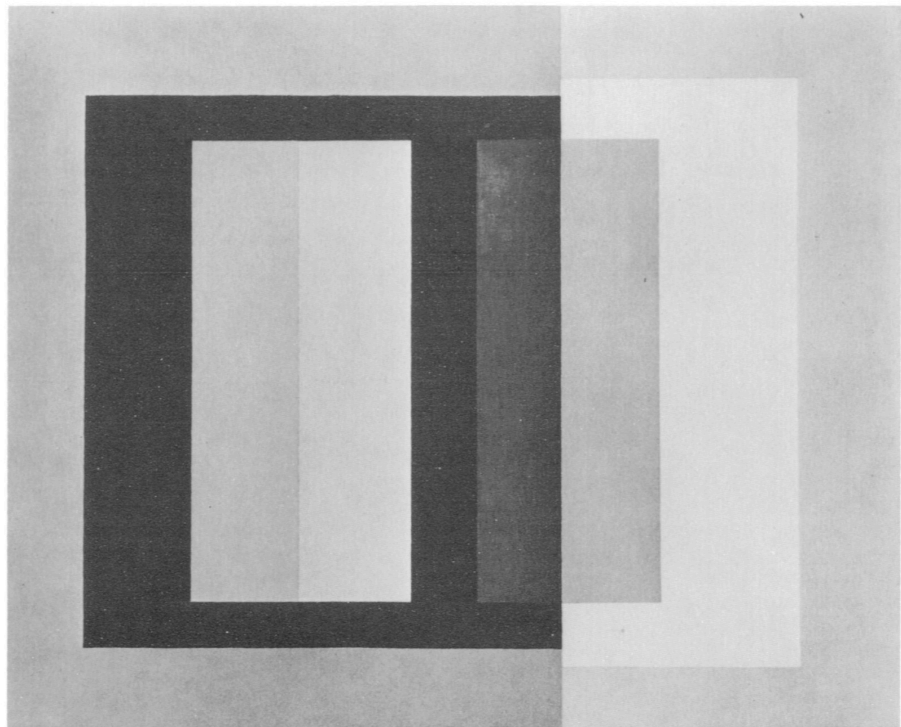
I avoid imagery or symbolism as well as the imposition of personal reflections. . . . I believe that forms other than rectangles assume a kind of entity and in a sense become objects and are therefore misleading. By the use of the rectangle in concert with relatively large "empty" areas I strive to create a feeling of anonymity in terms of the total canvas.¹⁷

While the means are derived from the twentieth century art of Malevich and Mondrian, the ends are decidedly Oriental. McLaughlin wished to "free the viewer from the demands or special qualities imposed by the particular by omitting the image (object). The reservoir of total experience may be reflected by the void or anonymous form. . . ."¹⁸ [whose] function [is] merely to indicate that whatever truths the beholder seeks will be found within himself."¹⁹ In Japan, through the centuries, there have been no clear boundaries between religion and philosophy, and aesthetics have always been a vehicle for enlightenment. McLaughlin's Eastern framework placed him among the abstract artists of this century whose intentions have profoundly illuminated our time, but his was a singular dialectical approach.



Left: John McLaughlin, *Untitled*, ca. 1953. Oil and casein on panel, 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Private collection, San Francisco. McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art.

Below: John McLaughlin, *F-1957*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 36 by 48 in. Private collection. McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art.



McLaughlin used only a few compositional devices. He altered spatial readings by varying the position, size, color, and value of rectangles. He might use a system of asymmetrical symmetry, i.e. set a symmetrical structure, and within the static arrangement provide a certain inconsistency, to yield a perpetual imbalance. Or he would set up a perfectly symmetrical situation but provide tension through the use of high contrast, usually black and white. He sometimes used eccentric placement of form, often in combination with strong contrast.

Inevitably, the work of a painter must stand on its own within the continuum of art history. McLaughlin's work exemplifies the continued exploration of the Constructivist - de Stijl tradition that has had its practitioners on both the east and west coasts since the 1930s. In the east many were members of the American Abstract Artists group, among them Joseph Albers, Burgoyne Diller, Ilya Bolotowsky, Balcomb Greene. On the west coast, Florence Arnold, Lorser Feitelson, Frederick Hammersly, Karl Benjamin, and others were working in hard-edged, geometric styles. What all these artists were facing, as Bolotowsky pointed out in an interview,²⁰ was the prejudice of the art establishment against a style derived from Europe and hence not thought to be American. As Abstract Expressionism came into being, it was hailed as the true American painting style. Not until the inevitable reaction against Abstract Expressionism set in, with the work of Reinhardt and Newman, and later Stella, Martin, Kelly, and the minimalist painters and sculptors of the sixties and seventies, would geometry again be accepted as a vehicle for American painting.

Of these artists, it is Newman and Reinhardt (with his black paintings of the sixties) to whom McLaughlin is most frequently compared. He was aware of their work and acknowledged similarities but areas of great divergence exist.

Barnett Newman pioneered a method of articulating large fields of color with carefully placed, vertical bands painted in a loose and expressionistic manner. McLaughlin used this structural arrangement as one of a number of types of compositions employing banded planes of various sizes and colors. Unlike Newman, he employed horizontal bands on vertical canvas, horizontal bands on horizontal canvas, vertical on horizontal, and vertical on vertical. He developed this compositional format methodically over the years, along with a variety of other compositions—e.g. banded planes and bars, rectangles on a field, bars on a field. McLaughlin's paint application is always as even and controlled as possible within the methods and materials he chose. The early work (1948-1955) is in oil and tempera on masonite, then oil on canvas (1956-1971), oil and acrylic (1972-1974), and, finally, just acrylic on canvas (1974-1975). He applied paint with brush and palette knife and would not use masking tape to create the edges of his forms. Only in the later years did he begin to use a roller to spread the background color. The forms were lightly outlined in pencil and the hand-painted edges give the works a humanistic warmth despite their rectilinear geometry.²¹

Newman, too, frequently used a restricted palette and black and white, but it is in his use of the canvas's whole shape as an integral element of the composition that these painters are most in agreement.

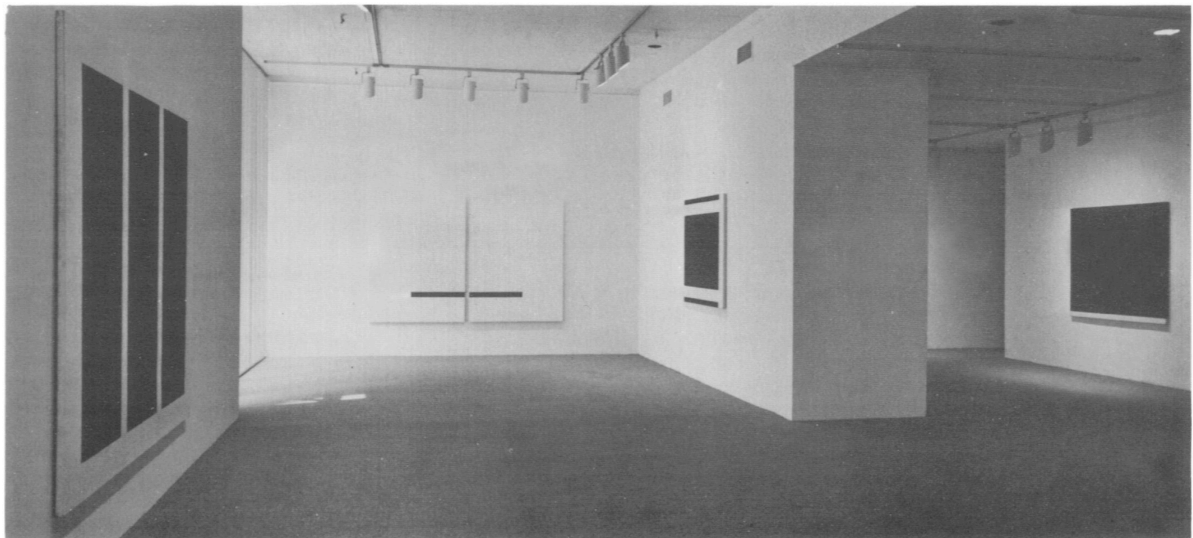
Newman's paintings, however, always carry elements of the heroic and symbolic, with their monumental size and such titles as *The Euclidian Abyss*, *Vie Heroicus Sublimis*, and *The Stations of the Cross*. These attributes McLaughlin renounced. "... when I think of Barnett Newman's paintings, those are an expression of some experience."²² Concerned with relational as opposed to experiential painting, McLaughlin rejected "... the method of selecting a thing, a condition, or an event whereby its image is made to symbolize some particular aspect of nature. ..."²³

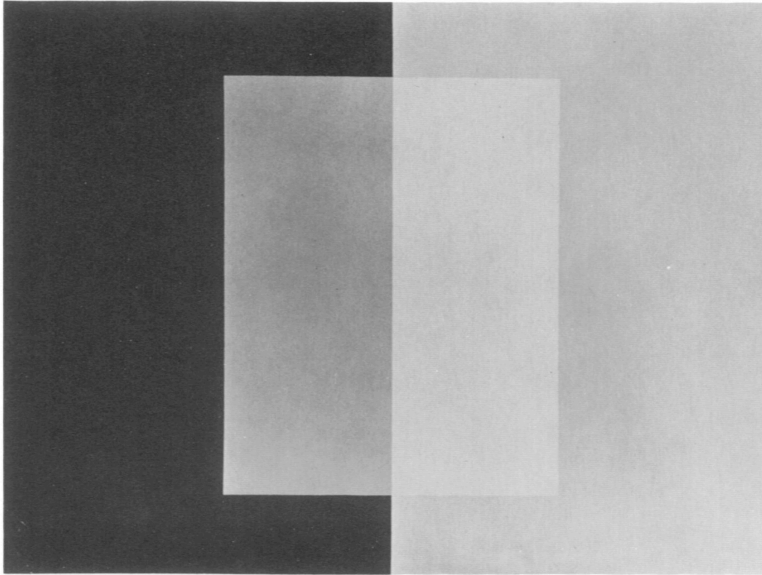
While Newman frequently worked on a mural-sized scale, McLaughlin's work resides in the easel tradition of painting; a usual size during the sixties and seventies was 48 by 60 inches and the largest painting he produced was 72 by 90 inches.

With Ad Reinhardt, one finds areas of common endeavor in the reductive method, the geometry, and the emphasis on cognition through perception which the black paintings elicit. McLaughlin recognized this similarity of goals, and in a rare instance of communicating with another artist, wrote to introduce himself and his work.

Reinhardt tried to create a sensation of the absolute through a reduction of painting to its essential means, repeatedly using a square support and a cross-like structure, the structure emerging from the overall black tone through carefully measured variations of hue. The paintings are solemn, mysterious, dense, and still. For McLaughlin, each composition was unique. He never used a serial approach; nor was color a major vehicle, as it is in Reinhardt's black paintings. In-

Installation view of the John McLaughlin retrospective exhibition held at the André Emmerich Gallery, New York, September 11-October 3, 1979. Photograph: Bettina Sulzer. Courtesy of the André Emmerich Gallery, New York.





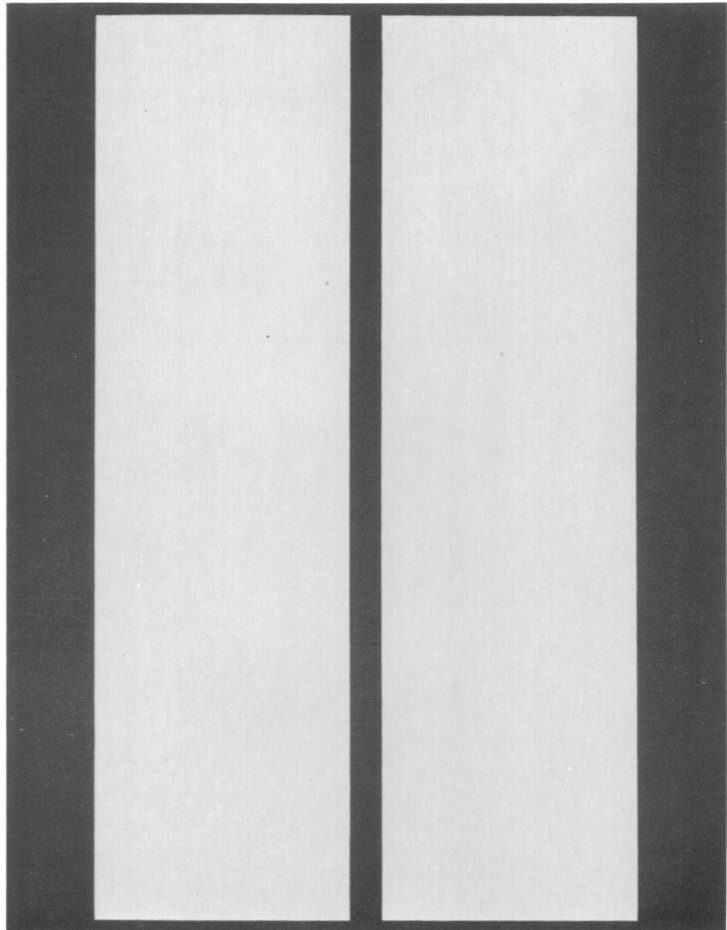
stead, he used structural relationships and contrasting values, especially pure black and white, that gave his work an optical sparkle, liveliness, and visual movement. Reinhardt's configuration has a strong iconic-symbolic value; McLaughlin, however, never used the circle, triangle, square, or other *primary* geometric shapes because of their "finality" and specific nature.

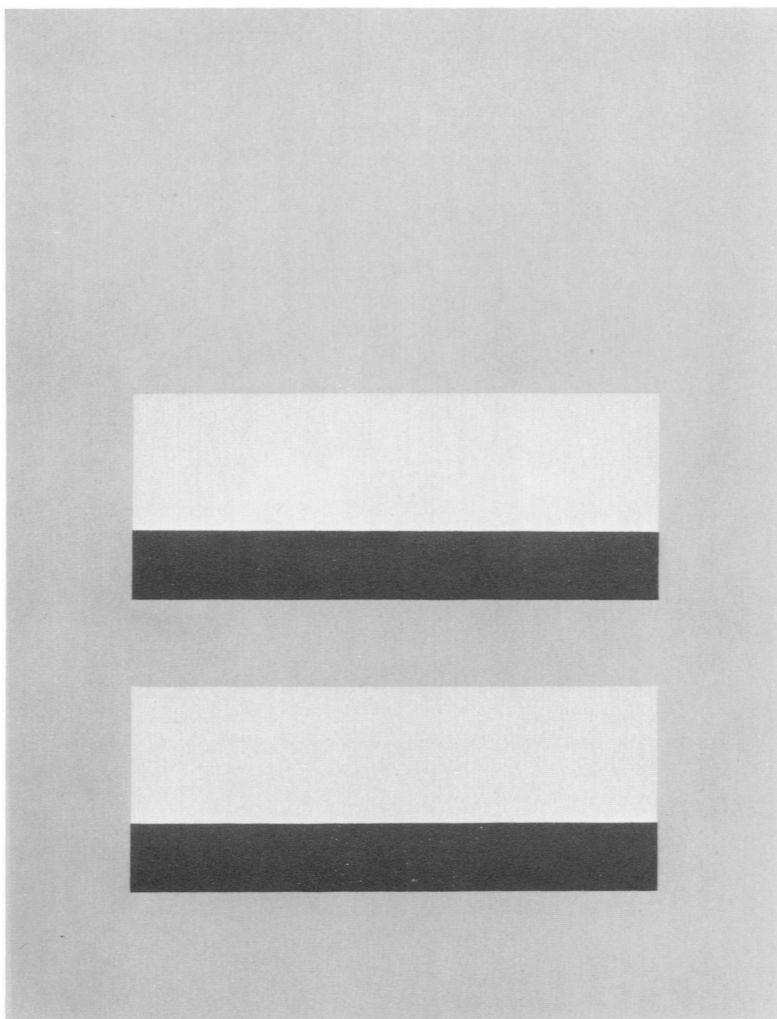
While Reinhardt tries to still the mind through the wholeness of his images, producing a mental and visual quietude, McLaughlin provokes, puzzles, and unbalances, awakening the viewer's senses. Both painters aimed at mystical experience, a transcendence beyond the limits of logic, but their approaches are like opposing sides of a coin.

Much remains to be said and written about the life and paintings of John McLaughlin. These words are intended to shed preliminary light upon the artist's singular personal history and the resulting inspirations and ideas. Many artists

Above: John McLaughlin, 5-1961, 1961. Oil on canvas, 42 by 60 in. Private collection. McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art.

Right: John McLaughlin, 18-1966, 1966. Oil on canvas, 60 by 48 in. Private collection. McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art.





John McLaughlin, 1-1974, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 60 by 48 in. Collection of Mr. and Mrs. James De Woody. Photograph: Geoffrey Clements. Courtesy of André Emmerich Gallery, New York.

have reduced the elements of their media to enlarge the meaning of art, but none has done so with more variety of conception and consistency of quality than McLaughlin. Perhaps the key to his inventiveness is that, for him, the restrictions he so carefully defined were not limitations at all. Instead of boundaries, McLaughlin found a marvelous freedom where his intuition was given free rein.

NOTES

1. Letter to Jules Langsner, April 27, 1959. John McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 1410, frames 138-142.
2. Transcript of interview conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom, Dana Point, California, July 23, 1974. John McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *California: Five Footnotes to Modern Art History*, exhibition catalog (Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1971), pp. 86-87.
5. John McLaughlin, undated notes. John McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 1411, frame 832.
6. See note 1.
7. See note 2.
8. *California: Five Footnotes to Modern Art History*, pp. 88-90.
9. James Harithas, essay in *John McLaughlin: Retrospective Exhibition 1946-1967*, exhibition catalog (Washington, D.C., The Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1968) n.p.
10. See note 8.
11. See note 1.
12. *Ibid.*
13. See note 2.
14. John McLaughlin, undated notes. John McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 1411, frame 844.
15. John McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 1410, frame 148.
16. See note 2.
17. See note 8.
18. *A Retrospective Exhibition: John McLaughlin* (at the Pasadena Art Museum), exhibition catalog (Cunningham Press, Alhambra, California, 1963) n.p.
19. John McLaughlin Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm roll 1411, frame 784.
20. Susan C. Larsen, "Going Abstract in the 30's, an Interview with Ilya Bolotowsky," *Art in America* 64 (5) (Sept.-Oct. 1976):76.
21. Desiring the absence of any sign of struggle, McLaughlin worked out his compositions beforehand with construction paper models. With the maquettes proportioned to his canvas, he could freely change the position, size, and shape of the rectangular elements. He then knew precisely what he wanted. Once started, he worked quickly, giving his painting the ease of execution consistent with his goals. These maquettes are now deposited in the Archives of American Art.
22. See note 2.
23. See note 5.