

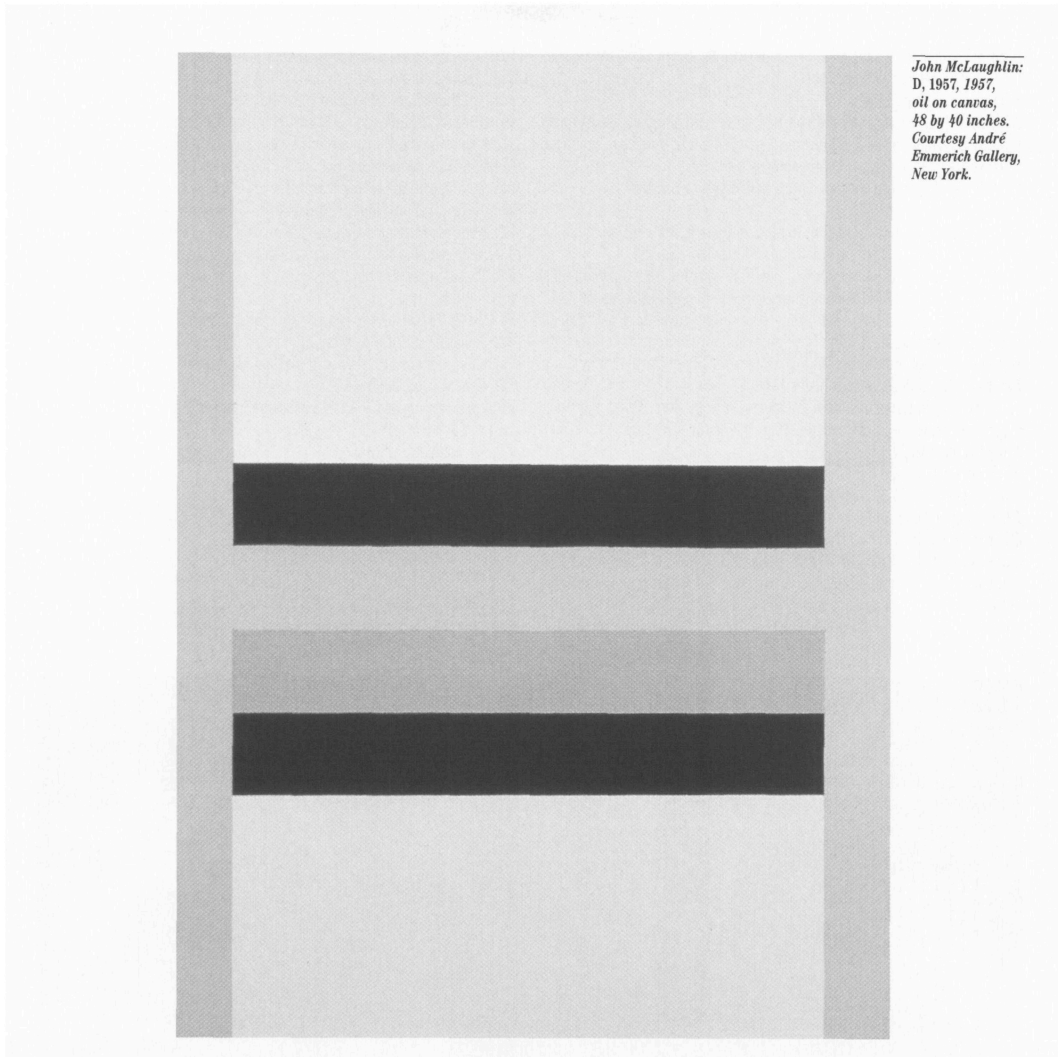
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John McLaughlin: Transcending the particular

Michael Duncan

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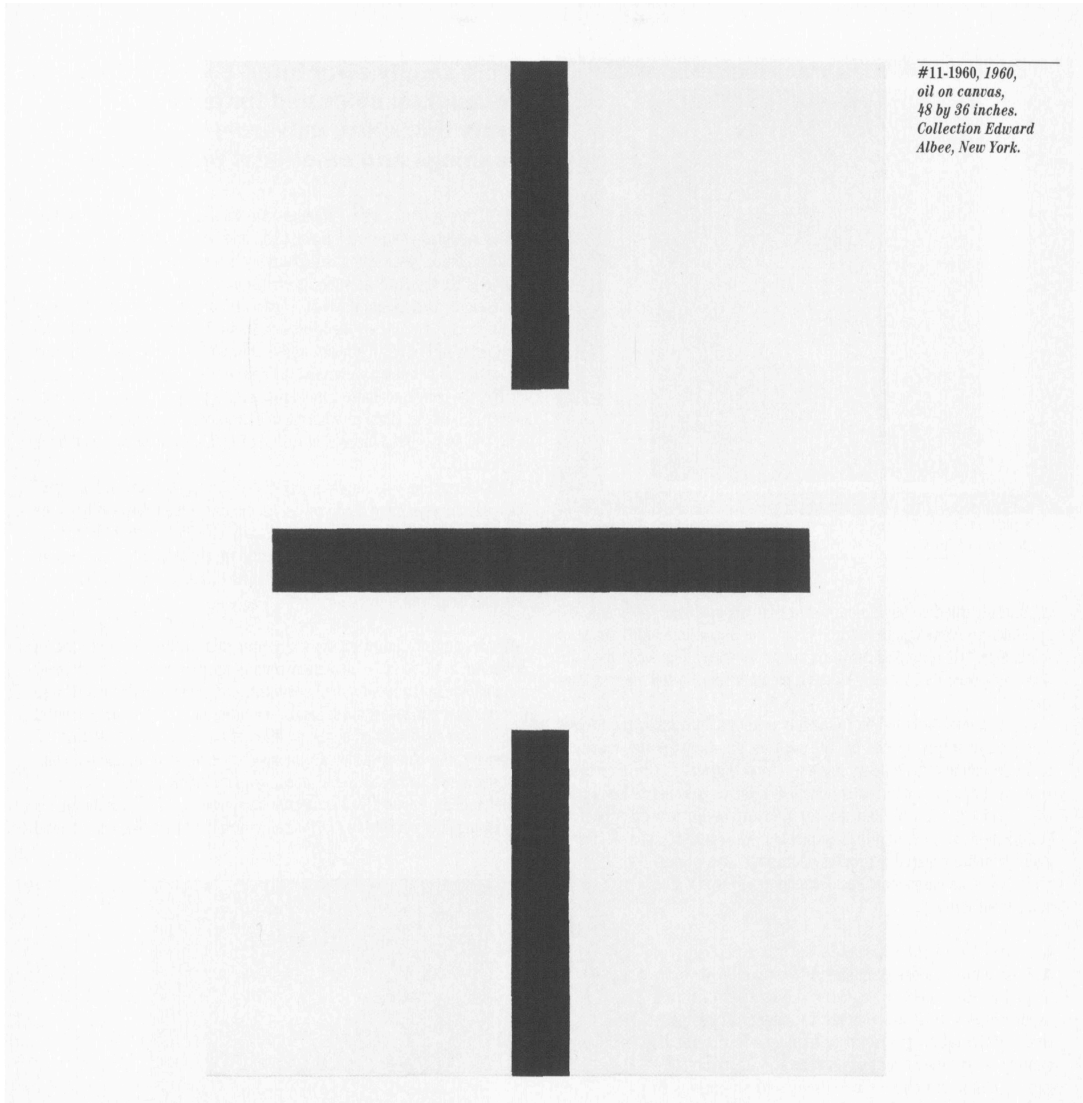
*John McLaughlin:
D, 1957, 1957,
oil on canvas,
48 by 40 inches.
Courtesy André
Emmerich Gallery,
New York.*

John McLaughlin: Transcending the Particular

As revealed in a recent traveling survey exhibition, the stripped-down geometric abstractions of John McLaughlin reflect the artist's encounter with Asian art.

84 September 1997

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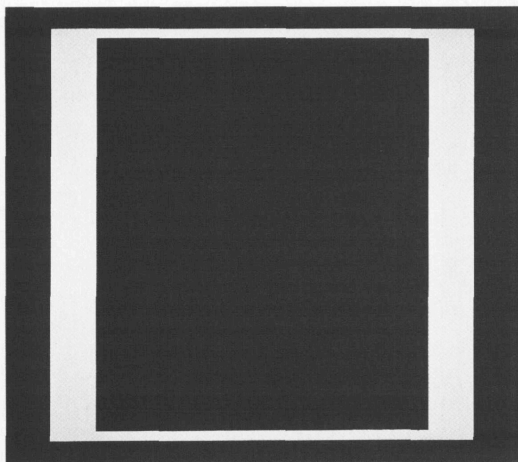
BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

Vastly underrecognized, California painter John McLaughlin (1898-1976) remains an "artist's artist," a maverick geometric abstractionist whose unsettling, exploratory canvases thrive on a particularly Asian style of paradox. With its refinement and formal austerity, his is one of the century's most coherent bodies of abstract work. Using simple geometric forms and sparse coloration, McLaughlin imbued every nuance of his reductive abstractions with weight. As a maker of enduring objects for contemplation, he is also a crucial West Coast predecessor for Light and Space artists such as Larry Bell, James Turrell and Robert Irwin.

Recently touring the country was "John McLaughlin: Western Modernism/Eastern Thought," the first museum survey of the artist's work in over 20 years, curated by Susan C. Larsen for the Laguna Art

Museum (now part of the Orange County Museum of Art). As Larsen details in her catalogue essay, McLaughlin was a serious student of Japanese culture and for years a dealer in Japanese prints and antiques. He lived in Japan in the 1930s and served as a Marine Corps language officer in Asia during World War II. A late bloomer, he took up painting full time only at age 48, after moving to Dana Point, a small community south of Laguna.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint McLaughlin's specific debt to Japanese precedents, it is clear that his spare abstractions share the cerebral character traditionally associated with Japanese ceramics, calligraphy, painting and architecture. With their open compositions, his paintings, like the best Japanese art, encourage the active engagement of the spectator. Corresponding to his understanding of the principles of



#29-1964, 1964, oil on canvas, 48 by 60 inches. Collection Patricia Faure, Santa Monica, Calif.

Japanese esthetics, McLaughlin said that his goal was "to enable the spectator to contemplate nature beyond the limitations of an image or symbolism." He espoused Asian paintings because "they made me wonder who I was. By contrast, Western painters tried to tell me who they were."

In interviews, McLaughlin frequently acknowledged his early interest in the large empty spaces in 15th-century paintings by the Japanese artist Sesshu and his follower Sesson—what they called "the marvelous void." At Laguna, concurrently installed in the large gallery's lower atrium, a rock garden by Zen master Kyozan Joshu proved a perfect complement to McLaughlin's paintings. The garden's spare, formal arrangements created a properly contemplative atmosphere, while its nature-inspired asymmetries evoked a kind of troubled serenity.

In this exhibition, Larsen's astute selections of McLaughlin's most geometrically streamlined works helped confirm his ties to Asian thought. After initial experiments with more complex, architectural compositions, McLaughlin got down to business in the 1950s, limiting his vocabulary of forms to precisely placed rectangles, squares and circles. Variations and alterations to horizontal symmetries in the 1960s gave way to more vertical formats in the 1970s. As the works selected for this exhibition suggest, a gradual simplification of forms and colors took place, with the late work achieving a kind of bluntly elegant Minimalism.

In her catalogue essay, Larsen traces McLaughlin's debts to Mondrian and Malevich, and she analyzes the essential differences that separate his "modest and self-effacing" works from the "grand, confident, and emphatically declarative" canvases of Burgoyne Diller and the transcendental symmetries of Ad Reinhardt. She makes a case for McLaughlin's unique position in art history, pointing out the inadequacy of the term Hard Edge to describe "the paradoxical and interrogative core of his artistic program." McLaughlin himself disavowed any affinity with Minimalism, presumably faulting the movement for not focusing exclusively on the viewer's perceptual experi-

In his simply structured compositions, McLaughlin searched for essential forms that carry universal meanings and emotional resonances.

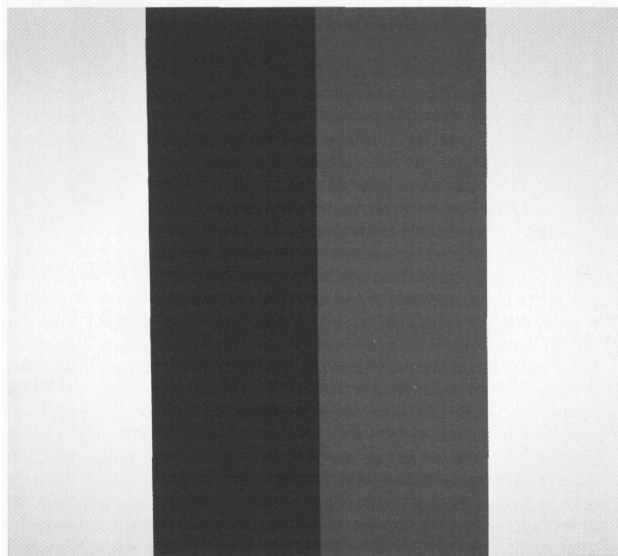
ence of the art object. It is that single-minded interest in the viewer which connects McLaughlin's work to the Light and Space artists.

McLaughlin's own simply structured compositions focus without distractions on visual ideas such as enclosure and the void, and on such oppositions as horizontality and verticality, or black and white. These visual tropes, he felt, are tied to basic natural phenomena such as the experience of the earth's horizon, the alternation of day and night, and the condition of human erectness. Loaded with an inherent psychological charge, the motifs he chose lend McLaughlin's paintings a kind of primal power. Insisting that he wanted to "transcend the particular," he searched for essential forms that carry universal meanings and emotional resonances.

Yet McLaughlin was hardly a traditional formalist. Many of his paintings play off asymmetry and skewed geometries. Like Ellsworth Kelly, he engages viewers by presenting surprisingly off-kilter, unresolved formal arrangements. Yet McLaughlin's paintings are considerably more austere and self-contained, seldom engaging the wall as an extended field in the way that Kelly's do.

A McLaughlin painting typically presents an unexpected kind of drama. In *D*, 1957 the action centers on the presence of a narrow band of blue in the lower half of a painting organized by a dominant beige H-form. Two horizontal black bands, on either side of the form's central beige bar, seem disturbed by the addition of the blue band. Upsetting the symmetry, the blue provides an unexpected glimpse of horizontal color that disrupts business as usual, opening up a window of light.

McLaughlin frequently uses narrow rectangles as the medium for his formal juggling acts. In *#11-1960*, a centrally placed black horizontal



#4-1969, 1969, oil on canvas, 48 by 60 inches. Orange County Museum of Art.



#13-1974, 1974, oil on canvas, two panels, each 60 by 48 inches. Courtesy John and Phyllis Kleinberg, Villa Park, Calif.

band on an off-white field interrupts the flow of a black vertical column. Surrounded by off-white, the horizontal band seems to float within the open mouth of the vertical. Balancing eerily in the void, this levitating, prone form has a sculptural presence belied by the work's flatter-than-flat paint application. By utilizing the edges of his paintings to cut off shapes and forms, McLaughlin enhances the visual drama.

McLaughlin told interviewers that he espoused the rectangle because it is the most "neutral" and least symbolically loaded form. In #29-1964, for example, a black square is framed by concentric white and black rectangular areas. The equilateral perfection of the square visually fights the stretching effects of its slightly horizontal rectangular frame. This simple, irresolvable conflict fills the canvas with a palpable tension. McLaughlin's forms often inspire interpretations that might be compared to those traditionally offered for the Chinese hexagrams of the I Ching. Here, for example, his "square-framed-by-rectangles" might be said to describe a besieged yet solid core, a utopian essence tugged at by opposing forces.

McLaughlin frequently frames central, windowlike forms. Many of his compositions read as screens or shades, variously opening slivers of light or dark. In his catalogue essay, Peter Selz points out McLaughlin's heretofore unaddressed tie to Japanese architecture, an influence instantly confirmed by accompanying photographs of the sublimely austere 17th-century imperial villa at Katsura. The screens used in Japanese architecture, divided into rectangular sections and framed by black bands, create zones of darkness and light as they are opened and closed. The unadorned, movable screens of a villa such as Katsura were designed to enable the kind of contemplative experience of light and space that McLaughlin was after in his paintings.

McLaughlin's works seem to describe the ineffable nature of form itself. The symmetry of the opposing halves of #5-1961 is disturbed only by their coloration, with white and black rectangles further con-

trasted by sections of an intermediary olive-gray. This tonal mitigator dominates the canvas, establishing a complex kind of peace: the gray embraces the white on the left and is in turn embraced by the black on the right. The painting's resolution imparts a surprising emotional impact, one somehow evoked by the tonal complexity of this olive-gray. The stately opposition of centrally placed rectangles of black and red in #4-1969 has a similarly grand—and likewise enigmatic—effect.

In the late paintings, McLaughlin further pared down his forms. A diptych, #13-1974, consists only of two vertical black bars, each on a field of white. The bars are off-center, seeming to approach each other across the gap dividing the two panels. This apparent communication between two identical forms also animates #16-1974, with its two thick black slabs humbly dominating the lower half of the canvas. The viewer's gaze lowers to these forms, acknowledging their insistent presence.

In McLaughlin's work, the appearance of two black forms on a white field becomes a metaphysical event, loaded with an almost psychological aura. The viewer senses the artist's deliberations about the placement of every element. In his compositions McLaughlin sought to eliminate personal expression in favor of resonant formal truths about the nature of reality. With their Japanese-style predilection for understatement, McLaughlin's paintings are meditative koans honoring the complexities of the visual world. □

"John McLaughlin: Western Modernism/Eastern Thought," curated by Susan C. Larsen, opened at the Laguna Art Museum [July 20-Oct. 6, 1996]. Itinerary: Baltimore Museum of Art [Nov. 6, 1996-Jan. 19, 1997], Museum of Fine Arts, Houston [Feb. 9-Apr. 20], and Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha [July 19-Aug. 31]. The exhibition was accompanied by a 92-page catalogue featuring essays by Larsen and Peter Selz and an appreciation by playwright Edward Albee.

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