

# The New York Times

## Art in Review

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### JOHN MCLAUGHLIN

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery  
730 Fifth Avenue, at 57th Street  
Through Feb. 13

With abstract painting again in the art world's eye, the time is right to renew an acquaintance with the American artist John McLaughlin. We caught a glimpse of him in "The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989" at the Guggenheim last year. But the Greenberg Van Doren show of 14 pristine geometric paintings is the first New York survey in some time.

McLaughlin was born near Boston in 1898; the first art he remembered was the collection of Japanese painting at the Museum of Fine Arts there. He lived in Japan in the 1930s, where he became an art dealer. Fluent in Japanese, he was recruited as a translator by the Army in War World II. He retired to Southern California, where he sold Japanese prints and took up painting. He started painting full-time when he was around 50 and continued until his death in 1976.

He was self-taught in the sense that he had no formal training, though as a practiced examiner and trader of art his education was hands-on and deep. It was also wide-ranging. He claimed as his Asian ideal the 15th-century Japanese artist Sesshu, a Zen painter-priest who, with a brush, ink and plain paper, distilled the natural world to a near-abstract cluster of lines and washes. But at least as important was the example of two early Western modernists, Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian.

The first was a mystic, the second, a utopian. McLaughlin was neither, though he learned from, and added to the example of both. He pushed Malevich's monumentalizing geometric forms off-balance or made them so big that they stopped being forms and started being space. He pulled Mondrian's programmatic primary colors into the ordinary world, mixing the blue and yellow to make a grassy green, fiddling with red until it was a brickish vermilion. After the 1950s McLaughlin stuck pretty much with black, white and ivory-gray, seemingly intent on making his paintings as simple and limitless as possible.

His physical pleasure in painting is evident; his best surfaces are fine-touched like Mondrian's. But his motivation for doing the work was always, it seems, the same: to encourage the passer-by to stop, look and linger. He once wrote, "I want to communicate only to the extent that the painting will serve to induce or intensify the viewer's natural desire for contemplation without the benefit of a guiding principle."

So there it is: he had faith in our "natural desire for contemplation." What a concept. HOLLAND COTTER



Untitled (1952), by John McLaughlin, in a show of 14 paintings.