

JOHN MCLAUGHLIN *Paintings 1947 – 1974*

VAN DOREN WAXTER | FEBRUARY 20 – APRIL 19, 2013

BY ROBERT C. MORGAN

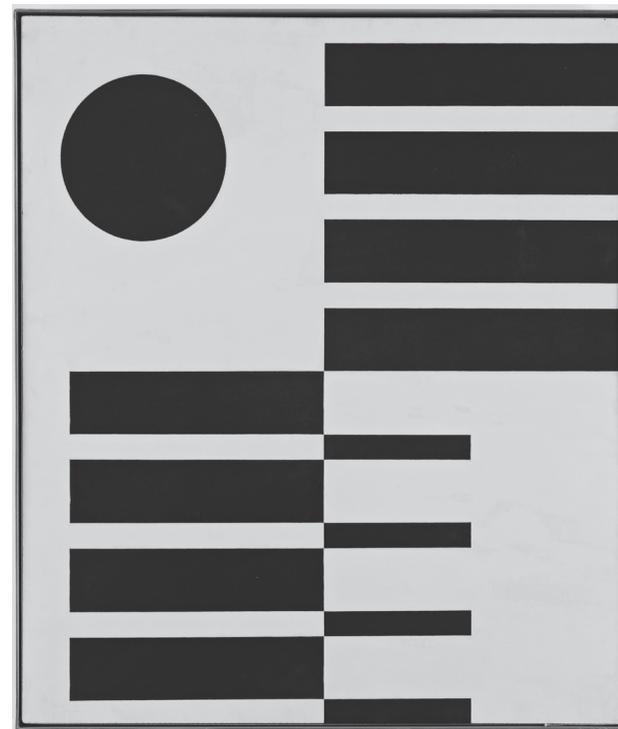
John McLaughlin was a highly influential hard-edge painter who worked in Southern California from the late 1940s through the early '70s. Along with Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, and Frederick Hammersly, his reductive method, attention to craft, and precise ordering of forms helped transform classical painting into an abstract genre that distilled the concept of pictorial space. Having privately studied painting in Japan while serving as an intelligence officer from 1940 to 1945, McLaughlin was immediately taken by the paradoxical simplicity of means found in Zen painting. Taking his influence from the scroll paintings of Sesshu Toyo (1420-1506)—a Rinzaï priest who traveled from Japan to China where he studied Northern Song and Ming Dynasty paintings—McLaughlin sought an alternative to Western painting. Here he acculturated Sesshu's use of the "marvelous void" as a fertile ground for making abstract classical painting.

I was introduced to McLaughlin indirectly through a San Francisco gallerist who saw my work and suggested I write him a letter. This was back in the early 1970s. At the time, I was unaware of McLaughlin's enormous influence on California artists who had emerged a decade earlier, such as Robert Irwin, Larry Bell, and Craig Kaufman, who were founders of the Light and Space movement in Los Angeles. As a result of my introduction to McLaughlin, we began a correspondence on painting that lasted for five years and is now in the collection of the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C. In retrospect, I can say that McLaughlin's letters were generally sparse, intense, and reflectively written. Conversely, mine were more casual in their intonation while at the same time searching for some kind of formal ontology. Although I was familiar with McLaughlin's work, the only complete exhibition I had seen was a selection of his prints at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. In the summer of 1974, two years before his passing, I was invited to visit his home and studio in Dana Point. Here we engaged in lengthy conversation as I joyously combed through the

works in his studio—many of which were the late black and white diptychs, at the time still in progress. Some of these have since been shown in retrospective exhibitions, mostly in California and largely through the efforts of his dealer Nicholas Wilder.

A discreet and elegant exhibition of five paintings in oil and acrylic, *John McLaughlin, Paintings 1947-1974* at the new Van Doren Waxter gallery offers a welcome and predictably emotional experience. Although the former Midtown dealer Andre Emmerich had introduced McLaughlin to the New York audience in the late 1980s, the freshness of the current exhibition—although modest in scale—clarifies the unwavering importance of the artist's work. As the desire to see flashy and exorbitant mannerisms in painting appears quantitatively present, yet qualitatively in decline, McLaughlin's pristine rectangles within rectilinear formats, measuring roughly 48 by 60 inches, hold forth with modesty, even dignity. In any case, it is inconceivable that anyone could grasp a sense of the actual painting through a digital reproduction of the work. McLaughlin's paintings require as much attentiveness to placement as to the space contained by the work itself. Here the artist clarifies the importance of the viewer's relationship to his work in physical space: "as you approach it, [the painting] begs the element of the 'Void' and rightly so. To rationalize its function would invite inner thought peculiar to the individual. That is to say that the Void freed of the oppression of the object invites contemplation suitable to its capacity" (McLaughlin, letter to the author, October 7, 1974).

Two paintings on view were completed the same year this letter was written, within three months after my visit to his studio. Each is designated as *Untitled*, measuring 48 by 60 inches with an acrylic base painted over in oil. They hang on opposite walls in the front gallery on the second floor. In the painting on the right wall, McLaughlin used a mixture of light umber and grey as his ground. Approximately two-thirds of the distance from the bottom edge, a horizontal



John McLaughlin, "Untitled," 1951. Oil on Masonite. 23 3/4 x 27 3/4".
Courtesy of Van Doren Waxter.

black-and-white bar appears to hover exactly in the right place. The painting on the left has an acrylic white ground with a singular horizontal black bar, placed at approximately the same height as the double bar in the adjacent painting.

The emphatic presence of this latter painting offers a kind of summation or reaffirmation of the artist's life work. It transmits an authority as to the purpose of classical painting and its concomitant values, belonging as much to Zen as to Confucius or, for that matter, to the rational audacity of the Enlightenment. As art and culture have recently become increasingly divided from one another, McLaughlin's defiance shows us not only a glimpse of the origins of thought through visual language, but another way to move forward. ☺

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