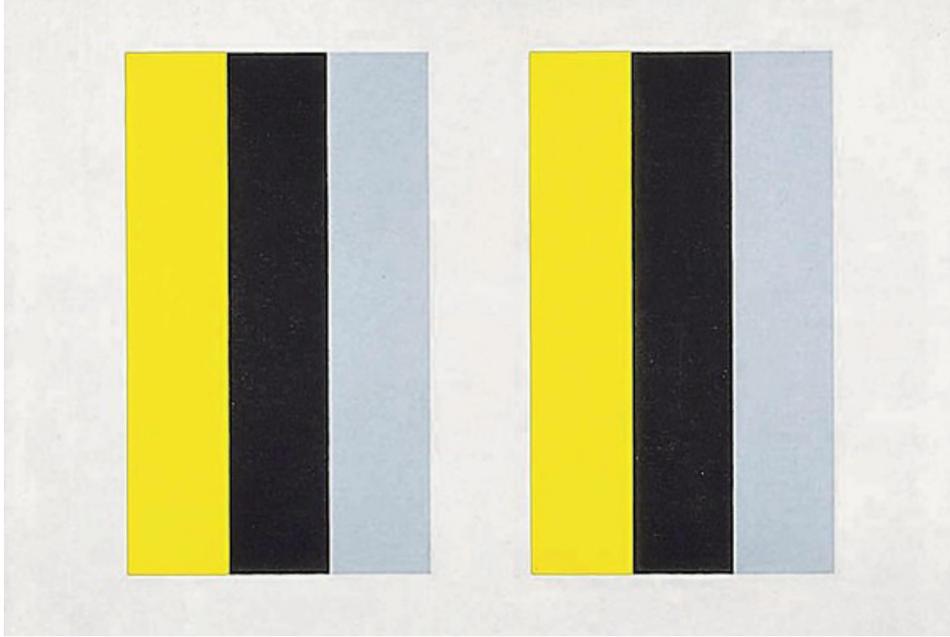


# Los Angeles Times

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## Pacific Standard Time: Open your eyes to John McLaughlin



John McLaughlin's "#26" (1961) works against our natural binocular vision. (John McLaughlin)

Rico Lebrun was probably the most famous Modern American artist working in Los Angeles in the decade following World War II. Yet, when the J. Paul Getty Museum opened "Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970" on Saturday, kicking off the mammoth, region-wide survey of Los Angeles art dubbed Pacific Standard Time, Lebrun's paintings were nowhere to be seen.

Reputations rise and fall. Lebrun arrived in L.A. in 1938, worked at the old Chouinard Art Institute and got a job teaching Disney animators how to draw convincing animal motion for "Bambi." The same year that the movie was released, New York's Museum of Modern Art selected him for "Americans 1942: 18 Artists From 9 States." It was the first of six legendary survey exhibitions organized by Dorothy C. Miller, the nation's most influential curator, to introduce adventurous Modern American art to a cautious public.

But Lebrun turns out not to be the artist who deserves the stellar ranking as L.A.'s first artist of authentically international stature. That accolade goes to John McLaughlin (1898-1976). He was mostly self-taught, but McLaughlin's unprecedented work marks the beginning of great postwar art in Los Angeles.

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Three paintings are in the Getty show. McLaughlin's art is as different from Lebrun's as paintings might possibly be.

Call Lebrun's style Modernist Baroque. An Italian immigrant, born in Naples in 1900, the dashing handsome, charismatic artist crafted darkly adept paintings and drawings on grand historical themes — Judith's revenge against the vicious Assyrian general Holofernes; humanity's epic fall in Genesis; the fresh horrors of the Holocaust. He shrouded Cubism's fractured forms and Expressionism's agitated urgency within the Old Master tones of Spanish painting, especially Goya.

McLaughlin's paintings are pure, clean abstractions. Forget fractured space, tortured figures and portentous gloom.

Shapes are geometric, mostly rectangles like the canvas or paper support. Paint application is smooth, uniform and flat, edges crisply defined. Black, white, gray and neutral taupe are common, but so are limpid hues — especially sky blue, vivid yellow and crimson, plus an occasional green. The colors are a distinctive variation on Mondrian's enthusiasm for the endless possibility available from the primaries.

What McLaughlin did with these stripped-down tools remains one of the great achievements in 20th century American art. Ignoring accepted rules, his sophisticated paintings pry open perceptual space. Almost surreptitiously, they grab hold of your optical apparatus and undermine conventional habits of seeing.

Here's how: The paintings work against the natural tendencies of binocular vision. You've got two eyes and a brain, and they conspire to create depth perception and parallax vision, allowing us to see the world in three-dimensional motion. McLaughlin pulled the plug on that.

A typical McLaughlin canvas chucks established notions of good composition. Most of his paintings are divided right down the middle, forming roughly equal halves. The right-left division is sometimes made by juxtaposing pairs or groups of rectangles. Other times, one or more vertical bars cut the picture in two. Occasionally, the bars are wide horizontals — so wide that your eyes can't take in both ends at once.

Sometimes a square is centered within a horizontally rectangular canvas. Then, the "empty" space at either side functions the way painted vertical rectangles do in other works: Each eye latches onto one, and the natural tendency for vision to converge in the middle is thwarted. It's as if the painting is forcing your two eyes apart, letting light and space rush in to fill the yawning void that opens up.

At least since the Renaissance, artists in the West exploited the binocular inclinations of human perception rather than subverting it. Fixed devices like one- or two-point perspective — the proverbial illusion of train tracks converging as they recede into space, even though the mind knows such a thing can't happen without causing a major train wreck — were developed and elaborated. Transparent color-glazes reflected light, illuminating darkness. The seductive appearance of physicality and mind-boggling spatial depth were created.

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Modern artists changed all that. They went to great lengths to sweep away 400 years' worth of such powerful techniques. Few, however, went quite so far as McLaughlin did.

His paintings craft a perceptual void. The New York School of Abstract Expressionism was similarly obsessed, but the void in a Jackson Pollock drip painting or in Mark Rothko's radiant color-clouds registers as a kind of Romantic terror — a chasm of existential dread, which opened wide in the awful wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

That was the same catastrophic territory that Lebrun's tortured figures called home. For McLaughlin, though, the void was fundamentally different. His is a visionary envelope, an open space of expansive thought, creative energy or the spirit. It's a void that represents the highest aspiration within Japanese aesthetics rather than Western tradition.

McLaughlin had deep admiration for traditional Japanese and Chinese painting. He was inspired by it as much as by Mondrian or Kazimir Malevich, the spiritual Russian Suprematist. In fact, Sesshu Toyo, the 15th century Japanese monk-painter, was his favorite artist.

Eastern painters were aware of Western perspective, but they rejected it. Instead, they designed paintings to draw a viewer into a profound visual excursion through time and space. McLaughlin did too. The modern Western tools of color and shape in geometric abstraction fuse with the Chinese manner of monochrome painting. Solid merges with space, line with shape.

McLaughlin's easel paintings, never more than 4 or 5 feet on a side, also dispense with the public scale of a mural, which New York School painters demanded. His paintings are instead designed for intimacy — for the one-on-one experience of contemplative interaction that describes, say, a single Japanese scroll hanging in a tokonoma alcove. The modest size maneuvers a viewer into an optimal place a few feet away, from which to cogitate in splendid isolation.

"I want to communicate only to the extent that the painting will serve to induce or intensify the viewer's natural desire for contemplation," the artist once said, "without the benefit of a guiding principle."

His work's simplicity, its elements pretty well established by the time of McLaughlin's 1952 solo debut at Felix Landau Gallery, is deceptive. But its acute perceptual sophistication would set the stage for 1960s Light and Space art — for Robert Irwin, Doug Wheeler, Larry Bell and others whose sculptures and installations forged L.A.'s first distinctive contribution to American art. McLaughlin was their forerunner.

How did he get to such a place? It's something of a miracle.

McLaughlin didn't pick up a brush with any seriousness of purpose until he was nearly 50, working in his modest house in the tiny seaside village of Dana Point, down in Orange County.

He was born outside Boston in 1898, the son of a Superior Court judge, and was one of

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seven children. Encouraged by his mother, he spent time in the city's Museum of Fine Arts, with its exceptional Asian art collection. After bouncing around in the Navy and then selling real estate, he and his wife, Florence — a grandniece of Ralph Waldo Emerson — moved to Japan in 1935, staying in Asia for three years.

When they returned, he opened a Boston gallery that sold Japanese prints. (Frank Lloyd Wright was a customer.) During World War II, he used his fluency in Japanese to do Marine Corps intelligence work in China, Burma and India. Like many returning American soldiers, he landed in California and stayed.

McLaughlin enjoyed some success, including the 1956 São Paulo Biennial and solo shows at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1956 and 1963. "Four Abstract Classicists," a 1959 show at the old Los Angeles Museum of History, Art and Science that also included Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson and Frederick Hammersley, was the first dedicated to postwar L.A. abstract art to travel to Europe. (The clumsy title meant to distinguish its sleek L.A. paintings from New York's Abstract Expressionists.) His work is now in two dozen museum collections.

Yet, his reputation isn't nearly as great as his accomplishment, still regularly mischaracterized as a brand of 1960s Minimalism. (He's no more a Minimalist than Mondrian or Malevich were.) The little

Laguna Art Museum did an admirable 1996 survey. In addition to

the Getty show, one lithograph is in the Norton Simon Museum's "Proof: The Rise of Printmaking in Southern California." But Pacific Standard Time offered an ideal platform for a full, corrective retrospective, and no major institution seized the opportunity. That's a shame.

Perhaps it's a matter of age. McLaughlin, who died 35 years ago at 77, was more than a generation older than the artists who created the first big wave of L.A. excitement in the 1960s. Those were gifted, exhilarating twenty- and thirtysomethings, who put the youthful city on the national art-map. McLaughlin was — and is — something else: He's the city's real Modern Old Master. **CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT**