



JOHN McCracken: THRESHOLDS

Robin Clark

OPPOSITE:
John McCracken, Basel, 1995
Photo: Kurt Wyss

All installation views: *John McCracken: Works from 1963–2011*,
David Zwirner, New York, 2013



Fig. 1

Blue Block in Three Parts, 1966 (detail)
Lacquer, fiberglass, and plywood in three parts
33 x 40 x 33 inches (83.8 x 101.6 x 83.8 cm)
Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego;
Museum Purchase with funds from Ansley I. Graham Trust, Los Angeles

I. Introduction

*I would like to inspire people to venture into the unknown.*¹

John McCracken was a leading practitioner of minimal art, a mystic, an idealist, and an accomplished craftsman. His instantly recognizable geometric sculptures (blocks, columns, pyramids, and, in particular, planks) are both hermetic and expansive. Self-contained in their angular compression, McCracken's sculptures are also exquisitely responsive to changes in ambient conditions such as light and movement. Often vibrantly hued or glossy black, these objects appear from some angles to be blunt forms, while from other points of view the polished surfaces mirror their surroundings, causing the sculptures to appear ghostly or transparent (fig. 1 and plate 6). This paradox, and the suggestion of entertaining multiple realities simultaneously, is central to McCracken's practice. McCracken refined his techniques as a craftsman not for the sake of craft itself, but to create works that in their reflective finish contradict their own materiality. "I like to foster work that actually is in the world," he explained, ". . . separate from the world, yet includes the world too."²

The liminal quality of McCracken's polished sculptures is an invitation to intellectual, psychological, and speculative engagement with the viewer; for the artist, these works functioned as metaphorical portals to other dimensions. Early in his career, McCracken wrote that he was searching for the "threshold of believability. . . the point at which a viewer is willing to commit themselves and get involved in the work."³ Alone among artists who achieved great visibility in the 1960s by working in a formally reductive mode, McCracken mined the themes of thresholds and belief throughout his career and in all the media (sculpture, painting, drawing, and writing) in which he worked. On the occasion of *John McCracken: Works from 1963–2011*, the transitional nature of McCracken's visual art will be discussed here for the first time in the wider context of his writings, shining new light on some of the most mysterious and beautiful sculptures of our time.

¹ John McCracken, May 26, 1974, John McCracken Archive, New York (hereafter cited as JMA), Notebooks Collection, notebook 18, p. 128.

² McCracken, "Interview with Neville Wakefield," in *John McCracken: Sketchbook* (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2008), n.p.

³ McCracken, April and May 1968, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 1, p. 14.

II. Biographical Notes

*Art has to be as interesting as eating, making love, flying.*⁴

John Harvey McCracken was born in Berkeley, California on December 9, 1934 to Harvey and Marjorie McCracken. His parents met while studying at the University of California, Berkeley, where his father focused on engineering and his mother trained as an educator. McCracken described his father as “an engineer, an inventor, a cattle rancher, a deer hunter, and a private pilot” and his mother as “a school teacher, a reader, and an astonishing fount of love.”⁵ The family (which included two younger sisters, Pamela and Margaret) moved often during the 1930s and 1940s, until they settled on a cattle ranch near Mount Shasta, close to California’s border with Oregon. After graduating from high school, McCracken enlisted in the United States Navy, where he became a sonar operator on a wooden minesweeping boat named the U.S.S. Force. When his four-year tour of duty came to a close in 1957, McCracken chose to attend art school. With support from the G.I. Bill, McCracken enrolled at the California College of Arts and Crafts (CCAC; now California College of the Arts) in Oakland, where he completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1962.⁶ Over the next several years he did some coursework at Berkeley and enrolled in the MFA program at CCAC. In 1964, a time of intense creativity and ambition for McCracken, his studio was visited by the aspiring art dealer Nicholas Wilder, who was recruiting artists for a new venue in Los Angeles.⁷ Their meeting resulted in McCracken’s first solo exhibition, at Nicholas Wilder Gallery in June 1965. McCracken was then thirty years old and a few months shy of completing his MFA degree. He produced a group of “two- and three-color rectangular and rather anthropomorphic pieces,”⁸ which he also referred to as “slotted works” for the exhibition (fig. 2). Encouraged by the success of the Wilder show, he promptly concluded his graduate studies and moved to Los Angeles.⁹

McCracken initially supported himself in L.A. by teaching at the nearby University of California, Irvine, the first of numerous academic positions that provided him with income, studio space, and a forum for developing his ideas. He lived in greater Los Angeles (including Costa Mesa and Venice) from 1965 to 1968. In 1966, he had his first professional exposure in New York in the seminal *Primary Structures* exhibition at The Jewish Museum and in a solo exhibition at Robert Elkon Gallery. Around this time, McCracken’s work was included in several prominent exhibitions that focused on art from southern California (including *Five Los Angeles Sculptors*

⁴ McCracken, October 31, 1976, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 27, p. 101.

⁵ McCracken, “Interview with Matthew Higgs,” in *Early Sculpture / John McCracken*. Exh. cat. (New York: Zwirner & Wirth, 2005), n.p.

⁶ McCracken in “Oral history interview with John McCracken conducted by Judith Olch Richards, April 19–August 4, 2010,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., n.p.

⁷ Nicholas Wilder in “Oral history interview with Nicholas Wilder conducted by Ruth Bowman, July 18, 1988,” Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., n.p.

⁸ John McCracken, biographical statement written for a Guggenheim Foundation grant, as shared with his parents, October 31, 1985, JMA, Ephemera, p. 473E.

⁹ In an interview, McCracken recalled his ambition for the group of slotted sculptures: “I thought . . . I’ll either use it as my graduate show or I’ll show it in a commercial gallery, whichever comes first. And it was the commercial gallery opportunity that happened first. So I didn’t finish getting a degree, I just went straight into making art and showing it.” “Interview with John McCracken,” in Thomas Kellein, *McCracken*. Exh. cat. (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1995), p. 26.



Fig. 2

Installation view, *John McCracken*, Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles, 1965
Photo: The Elkon Gallery, New York



Fig. 3
Blue Column, 1967
 Polyester resin, fiberglass, and plywood
 180 x 27 x 20 inches (457.2 x 68.58 x 50.8 cm)
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Gift of Friends of Leonard B. Hirsch, Jr. through the Contemporary Art Council
 Digital image © 2014 Museum Associates/LACMA
 Licensed by Art Resource, NY



Fig. 4
Abritaine, 1972
 Oil on canvas
 30 x 30 inches (76.2 x 76.2 cm)
 The Elkon Gallery, New York

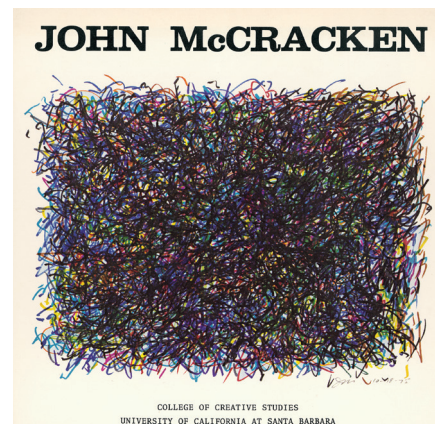


Fig. 5
 Cover of exhibition catalogue for *John McCracken: Paintings, Sculptures, and Notes*, Art Gallery, College of Creative Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1976

at the university art gallery in Irvine and *Ten from Los Angeles* at the Seattle Art Museum Pavilion, both 1966) and also in broader surveys (*American Sculpture of the Sixties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and *A New Aesthetic*, Washington Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, D.C., both 1967). McCracken's contributions to *American Sculpture of the Sixties* included his first monumental sculpture, a 15-foot-tall blue column installed in an outdoor plaza (fig. 3).¹⁰ In 1967, he had solo shows at both Wilder and the Robert Elkon Gallery in New York featuring "board-like forms of polished color that leaned against the wall."¹¹ Known as "plank" sculptures, the leaning works are the format to which McCracken most often returned and constitute the series for which he is best known. In 1968, he reprised the East Coast/West Coast symmetry of exhibitions by showing two versions of the same environmental work—an untitled grid of plywood columns painted white—at both the Wilder and Elkon galleries. That year he also received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and moved to New York, where he taught at the School of Visual Arts. In 1969, he showed another series of planks at Ileana Sonnabend's gallery in Paris, and had his first solo museum exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, which featured the previously shown white-washed columns together with a selection of brightly colored block, plank, and column sculptures.

Following a brief return to Los Angeles, McCracken moved back to New York and taught at Hunter College. Until that point his teaching had focused on sculpture, but the new Hunter course allowed him the flexibility to lecture more broadly on aspects of creativity.¹² In 1972, he showed a group of oil on canvas paintings inspired by Buddhist and Indian mandalas at Robert Elkon Gallery (fig. 4). Seeking relief from the economic and professional pressures of living in New York, he moved to Nevada for three years, teaching first at the University of Nevada in Reno and then at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas.¹³ During this period McCracken spent the majority of his time writing and painting, while occasionally making sculptures. His lectures focused on psychology and spirituality as pathways to inspiration. While in Las Vegas he also pursued a lifelong interest in aviation, earning his pilot's license and renting a former control tower at Sky Harbor Airport as a studio.

In 1975, McCracken joined the faculty at the College of Creative Studies (CCS), an experimental, interdisciplinary division of the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), sometimes described as "a graduate program for undergraduates." During this time McCracken produced more writing than visual art, showing mainly at regional and university venues, including the art gallery at UCSB (fig. 5). The works he made in the 1970s and early 1980s varied in style and approach, from pristine sculptures to paintings and drawings of mandala forms as well as overall patterns that he referred to as "energy fields." The variations in these approaches demonstrate McCracken's conflicting impulses toward rigorous pre-visualization of sculptural works and an inclination toward looser spontaneity possible in the media of painting and drawing.

¹⁰ When this work was acquired by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and installed there, it was untitled, but years later McCracken requested that the name be revised to *Blue Column*. "Several years ago I changed all the non-titles to at least descriptive titles," McCracken wrote in an e-mail to Sonja Cendak in the Rights and Reproductions department at LACMA, October 10, 2005. Curatorial object file for John McCracken's *Blue Column* at LACMA.

¹¹ McCracken, biographical statement written for a Guggenheim Foundation grant, October 31, 1985, JMA, Ephemera, p. 473E.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 473F.

¹³ *Ibid.*

After a decade at CCS, McCracken moved to Los Angeles in January of 1986 to focus exclusively on making his own work. His reentry into the national art world began with a midcareer survey at P.S.1, The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc. (now MoMA PS1) in Long Island City, New York, which opened in October of 1986. The P.S.1 show then traveled to California (where it was split between two venues, the Newport Harbor Art Museum in Newport Beach and the Fine Arts Gallery at the University of California, Irvine) and Texas (where a smaller version of the show was hosted by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston).¹⁴ From 1986 to 1993, McCracken exhibited with a number of galleries in Los Angeles before signing on with L.A. Louver in 1993. McCracken's subsequent solo shows there featured oil paintings, resin works in a range of formats, and stainless steel sculptures, which responded to coastal California's particulate, shimmering light when presented outdoors.

From the late 1980s onward, there was renewed European interest in McCracken's work, resulting in and further stimulated by gallery exhibitions in Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, Belgium, France, and Switzerland; important survey shows of his sculptures were organized by the Kunsthalle Basel and by the Hochschule für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna (both in 1995).¹⁵ McCracken had his first solo show with David Zwirner in New York in 1997; beginning in 2004, Zwirner represented McCracken exclusively.¹⁶ When asked which exhibitions in his long career he considered to be most important, two stood out in particular: his show of slotted sculptures at Nicholas Wilder Gallery in 1965, and his presentation of black resin sculptures at David Zwirner in 2006 (fig. 6). The first show he appreciated for its importance to his early development, and the latter show he prized for its unity. "It did seem extraordinary," McCracken said, recalling his 2006 installation, "everything seemed to click right . . . the pieces themselves and the show as a whole, which includes the space."¹⁷

During the last decade of his life, McCracken's image as a Minimalist was absorbed somewhat into other contexts; international exhibitions including *documenta 12* in Kassel (2007), *Tomorrow Now: when design meets science fiction* at the Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean in Luxembourg (2007), and *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art* at the Barbican Gallery in London (2008) stressed the influences of science fiction and spirituality in his

¹⁴ The exhibition was curated by Edward Leffingwell. See *Heroic Stance: The Sculpture of John McCracken 1965–1986*. Exh. cat. (Long Island City, New York, Newport Beach, California, and Santa Monica, California: P.S.1, The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc., Newport Harbor Art Museum, and HoffmanBorman Gallery, 1987). The Newport Harbor Art Museum is now the Orange County Museum of Art.

¹⁵ See Thomas Kellein, *McCracken*. Exh. cat. (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1995) and Luk Lambrecht, *John McCracken*. Exh. cat. (Vienna: Hochschule für angewandte Kunst, 1995). McCracken's solo gallery shows abroad during this period included those at Galerie Konrad Fischer, Düsseldorf (1989), Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm (1990), Lisson Gallery, London (1990, 1997, 2002), Galerie Xavier Hufkens, Brussels (1993), Galerie Froment & Putman, Paris (1991, 1996), Galerie Art & Public, Geneva (1994, 1998), Galerie Almine Rech, Paris (2000), among others.

¹⁶ McCracken's seven solo showings at David Zwirner and Zwirner & Wirth were followed by his first major posthumous exhibition. These included a survey of resin works from the late 1980s through the late 1990s (1997), new columns and wall-mounted works in stainless steel (2000), new columns, planks, and wall-mounted resin works in color (2004), resin works from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s (2005), new columns, planks, and wall-mounted works in black resin (2006), multi-part resin beam works in color (2008), new planks and columns in bronze and steel (2010), and *John McCracken: Works from 1963–2011* (2013).

¹⁷ McCracken in "Oral history interview with John McCracken conducted by Judith Olch Richards, April 19–August 4, 2010," n.p.



Fig. 6

Installation view, *John McCracken: New Work*, David Zwirner, New York, 2006

work. McCracken's first full-career retrospective exhibition, which illustrated the interlocking minimal and maximal tendencies always at play in his oeuvre, was organized at the Castello di Rivoli near Turin, Italy (2011).¹⁸ Presented in roughly chronological order throughout the museum's *Manica Lunga*, or "Long Sleeve" gallery, the exhibition contrasted textured, exuberant paintings with formally reserved yet chromatically seductive sculptures. The installation in Italy began and ended with twin polished stainless steel columns—*Wonder* and *Fair* (both 2011)—which served as a kind of infinity loop, both reinforcing and transcending a linear narrative of McCracken's development.

¹⁸ See Andrea Bellini and Marianna Vecellio, eds., *John McCracken*. Exh. cat. (Milan: Skira, 2011).

III. Painting into Objects

*The paintings just gradually turned into sculptures.*¹⁹

When McCracken arrived in the Bay Area to study painting in 1957, Abstract Expressionism and its corollary, assemblage sculpture, were the prevailing modernist styles.²⁰ McCracken worked through these accumulative approaches, making both Abstract Expressionist oil paintings (fig. 7) and monumental driftwood sculptures (fig. 8).²¹ During the course of his undergraduate career, rough, organic compositions gradually gave way to crisper elements, and his palette shifted from earth tones to primary and Pop-oriented colors exemplified by paintings such as *Bandolier* (1962; fig. 9). With its exuberant congress of vibrant geometric forms, *Bandolier* seems to function as an index for several sculptural series that McCracken began shortly thereafter, including his slotted sculptures and early planks. Crowded geometric paintings led to more spare arrangements, at which point McCracken took the key step of inserting lacquered Masonite elements into his canvases. Works such as *No. 26* (1964; plate 2) marked a literal and important transition for him, a moment when "the paintings just gradually turned into sculptures." The armature of *No. 26* is a traditional painting—a canvas tacked around stretcher bars supporting a base of white acrylic gesso. McCracken emphasized the object nature of this piece and related works in several ways, however. First, the piece projects nearly three inches from the wall in a painted frame faced with aluminum fillet. Second, it features a central black cross form, made from sprayed acrylic lacquer on Masonite, and four square panels coated in white modeling paste, apparently applied with a palette knife. The variations in the textures of the materials underscore the composite appearance of the piece.²² One could imagine the lacquered components breaking free of the canvas, which in a sense they did with McCracken's next body of work, the slotted sculptures of 1965.

Proceeding in this modular vein, McCracken made the parts of works such as *Rainmaker* (1965; plate 3) separately, applying automotive lacquer to individual plywood forms, then gluing them together with epoxy. As McCracken observed, the slots "made an opening into the work; drawings I made of things without slots were just totally closed and wouldn't admit anything. These for me were kind of figurative, they were like beings . . . for me it was logical for them to have

¹⁹ McCracken, circa 1980–1991, JMA, undated videotaped lecture. He made similar remarks to interviewers over the years; see "John McCracken Audio Recording, Santa Barbara/Goleta, June 4, 1979, C35 side A: John McCracken [Part 1]," in "Phyllis Tuchman Selected Artist Interview Recordings," The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles; as well as "UFO Technology: John McCracken Interviewed by Patricia Bickers," in Patricia Bickers and Andrew Wilson, eds., *Talking Art: Interviews with Artists Since 1976*. (London: Art Monthly and Riding House, 2007), p. 512.

²⁰ Willem de Kooning cast a long shadow from New York, as he had for decades, and younger Bay Area artists such as Jay DeFeo were creating richly textured paintings and collages in dialogue with rambling installations put together by sculptors including Bruce Conner and George Herms.

²¹ McCracken's driftwood sculptures, erected on mud flats visible from the freeway outside of San Francisco, were part of an ongoing tradition in the region. See William Jackson, "Curious Creations from Sea Debris," *San Francisco Chronicle*, *This World* insert (February 7, 1965), pp. 24–25.

²² Closely related works include *No. 23* (1964), collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. and *No. 25* (1964), collection of the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.



Fig. 7
Explosion, 1959
Oil on canvas
50 x 50 inches (127 x 127 cm)

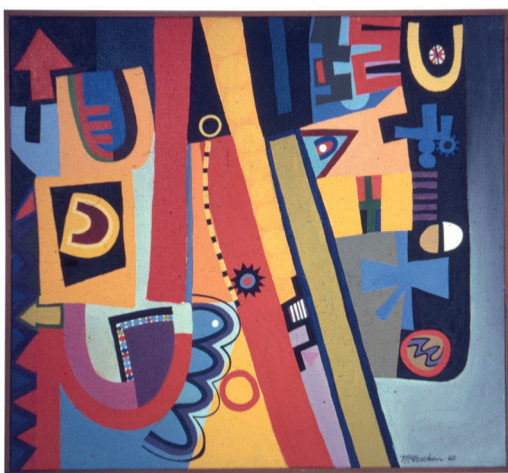


Fig. 9
Bandolier, 1962
Oil on canvas
24 1/2 x 26 3/4 inches (62.2 x 67.9 cm)



Fig. 8
An outdoor driftwood sculpture from 1962, title unknown

names because they seemed like beings or people.²³ In addition to likening them to humans, McCracken described his slotted sculptures prosaically as “two-sided, front and back. Like people, buildings, houses, cabinets, refrigerators, ovens, hi-fi, electrical components, cars & trucks, safes, heaters, display cases, etc.,” and more succinctly as “mystery containers.”²⁴ In one of his most often quoted comments, he wrote, “Interesting idea: these are beings of another world transmitting themselves here through me. Don’t ask me why they’re here.”²⁵

²³ McCracken, circa 1980–1991, JMA, undated videotaped lecture.

²⁴ *John McCracken: Sketchbook*, pp. 22, 25.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

IV. Writing: Sketchbooks and Notebooks

*I have a little typewriter right here when I get up in the morning, so I can get the dreams down and limber up my mind a little, and I also like it out in the evening, which is when I'm more apt to be getting heavier ideas and thoughts.*²⁶

During a career that spanned more than half a century, one of McCracken's most fruitful and prolific activities was writing. Starting in 1964, he made annotated drawings in a large sketchbook that served as an important source of inspiration throughout his career; since the publication of the majority of the sketchbook in a facsimile edition, it has become a key resource for anyone seeking to learn about McCracken's work and thought process.²⁷ He also kept typed and handwritten observations, filed in loose-leaf binders and referred to as "the notes" or "the notebooks," for much of his working life.²⁸ Unlike the manifestos penned by peers whom he admired, including Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, and Claes Oldenburg, McCracken's writings on art were neither polemical nor prescriptive, but rather open and questioning. Other topics included his dreams, imagined encounters with the works of other artists, and ideas for science fiction stories. McCracken appreciated the materiality of writing, once referring to a new typewriter ribbon as "another cloth road to walk and tap along"²⁹ and elsewhere explaining that "writing for me is partly a matter of making pleasing-looking objects . . . I quite often write just enough at one sitting to fill up a page rather neatly and I even choose words occasionally which are just the right length to fill a space at the end of a line."³⁰ One of the most common concerns expressed in the notebooks was confusion over which creative pursuit (sculpture, painting, or writing) deserved the majority of his attention. "An in-studio competition might be a good idea," McCracken wrote, "the strongest form of each idea competing for the 'best in show' award."³¹

In the early 1970s, McCracken began to consider his notes as artworks in themselves rather than as merely journalistic or preparatory materials. When thinking of what to include in a solo show he was planning at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), he decided that presenting the notebook pages could be a good option:

It might be the most honest show I could do—it's the stuff I've been involved in; it's what my life-activities have produced. I've been trying to make paintings and sculptures, but what I have in fact done is make notes . . . maybe I have several

²⁶ McCracken, July 12, 1971, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 7, p. 21.

²⁷ See *John McCracken: Sketchbook* (Santa Fe: Radius Books, 2008).

²⁸ In a letter to his sister Margaret, McCracken wrote, "I'm glad I learned to type on a typewriter a while back there on that bouncing navy ship. (I think I told you: for a code list I typed each day the alphabet in scrambled order 26 times)." McCracken, January 20, 1986, JMA, Notebook Collection, notebook 61, p. 49. In late 1985, McCracken purchased his first personal computer; from that point on the notebooks consist primarily of computer-printed pages, although typewritten and handwritten pages as well as sketches continued to appear. McCracken, November 13, 1985, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 60, p. 79.

²⁹ McCracken, February 24, 1984, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 57, p. 39.

³⁰ McCracken, May 29, 1973, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 14, p. 72.

³¹ McCracken, August 8, 1986, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 62, p. 152.

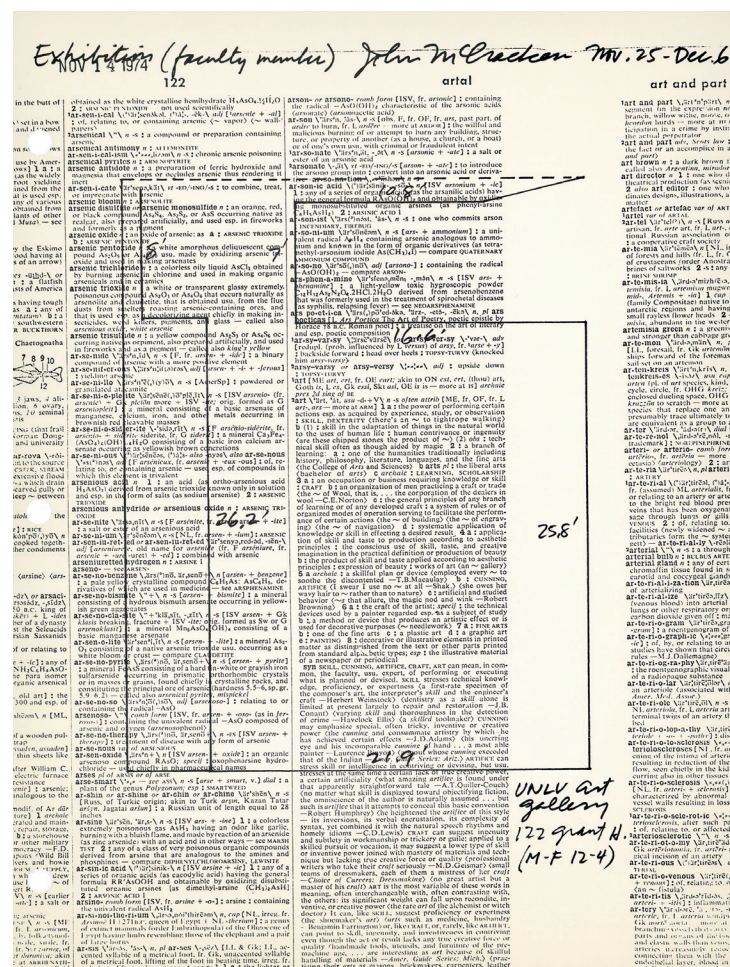


Fig. 10
Exhibition announcement for *John McCracken*,
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1974

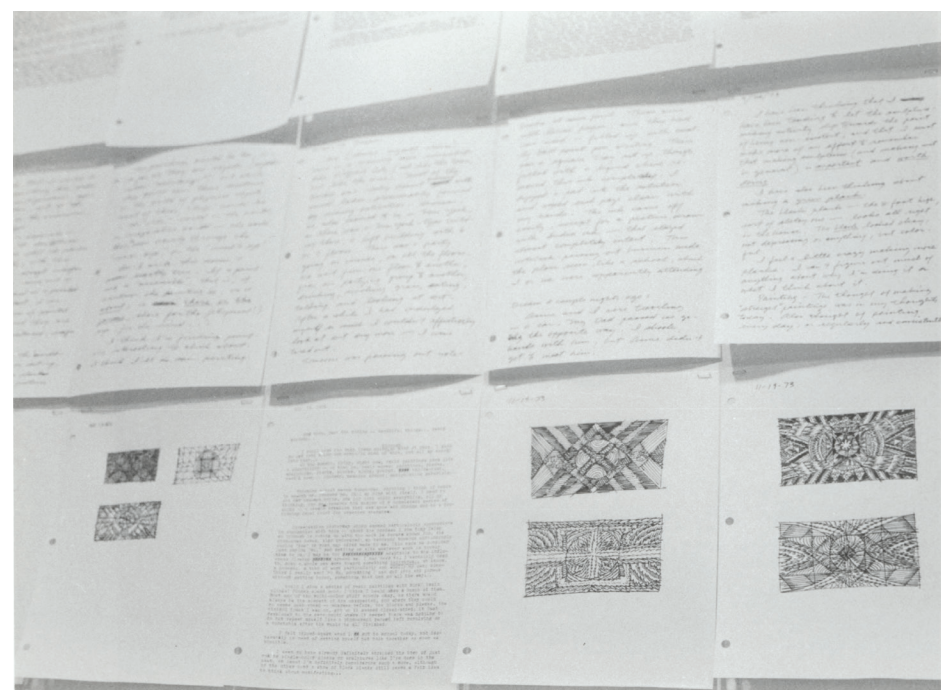


Fig. 11
Detail installation view, *John McCracken*, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1974

shows sitting right here behind me on the bookshelf in thirteen or so binders and a couple of sketchbooks . . .³²

As it happened, McCracken's solo exhibition at the UNLV Art Gallery was in constant flux for the duration of its short run, from November 25 through December 6, 1974. It was perhaps the most explicitly process-oriented of his shows. The announcement for the exhibition featured a line drawing of the gallery floor plan superimposed on a photocopied dictionary page defining the word "art" (fig. 10) and photographs taken by McCracken of the installation reveal a dense presentation of notebook pages (figs. 11 and 12).³³ The documentary focus of the show continued through its dismantling, when McCracken wrote, "now recording ideas, thoughts, re-rememberings as I unstaple the notes from the gallery walls here in Las Vegas."³⁴

Another way that McCracken made his writings public was through exhibition catalogues; excerpts from his notebooks were included in nearly every publication made in conjunction with his solo shows.³⁵ His writings comprise most of the text in an exhibition catalogue created for a show in Paris, which concludes with this characteristically utopian statement:

We live in a cosmologically colossal, ongoing artwork. We have the opportunity to make art out of ourselves and out of our world, and more. Everything we know (and don't know) is involved. (Including the rest of the universe, which does care about what we are doing.) We should realize that we're all actually amazing, fantastical beings who can make our lives and everything more interesting and vital and evolved. We can, if we jump into high art-making, form a great, adventurous, and incredibly fun future.³⁶

From there it was a short step to science fiction, a genre McCracken had enjoyed in his youth and embraced as a way to enhance his visual art beginning in the 1980s.³⁷

³² McCracken, February 9, 1973, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 13, p. 46.

³³ There were apparently no published reviews of the exhibition, but McCracken's UNLV colleague Bill Leaf recently recalled, "Broadly speaking, the works John exhibited were somewhat introspective and the stapled writings were from his diary. I believe the notes reflected his thoughts on life and art . . . he felt there wasn't anything to hide . . . I remember he was very open and conceptual in directing his classes." E-mail correspondence between Bill Leaf and the author, August 21, 2013.

³⁴ McCracken, December 6, 1974, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 21, p. 9.

³⁵ See, for example, *John McCracken*. Exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, 1969), *John McCracken: Sculpture 1965–1969*. Exh. cat. (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1969), and *McCracken*. Exh. cat. (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1995).

³⁶ John McCracken, *Recontres 4: John McCracken*. Exh. cat. (Paris: Almine Rech Éditions, 2000), p. 27.

³⁷ "The science fiction stuff I've been doing: I think that started around the first of last year and I do it mainly for fun, of course, but sometimes it's kinda revelatory," McCracken in a letter to his sister Margaret, February 23, 1983, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 53, p. 175.



Fig. 12
Installation view, *John McCracken*,
University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1974

V. Science Fiction, Space Travel, and Flight

*I use these ideas somewhat symbolically or metaphorically; the work isn't directly about aliens and UFOs, but it is about multiple dimensions of reality and the development of consciousness.*³⁸

McCracken was fascinated by flight in all its forms. After completing his pilot's training in the mid-1970s, he commuted for a time between teaching jobs in Las Vegas and Santa Barbara in his airplane.³⁹ "I've been using a second-hand airport control tower [in Las Vegas] as a studio for several months," he wrote to his dealer, "which has worked best for looking at the landscape and chattering through a typewriter—with occasional breaks to spin around aloft in the plane."⁴⁰ His studio in California was at Devereux Point, only minutes from Santa Barbara Municipal Airport. From there he resumed the note-keeping that had preoccupied him in Las Vegas:

I'm sitting here in my body, in a green chair, tapping on a typewriter that sits on a wiggly, round, white table. I am in my studio, a part of a building that used to be, I think, part of a complex of military buildings. It has wooden walls with metal, crank-open windows, a concrete floor and a peaked composition roof. My space is 23 feet by 25 feet by 13 feet high along the center. It belongs to the university, where I teach. It is in a quiet, semi-woody area sometimes called "the point." About half a mile away is the ocean. I can often hear the surf from here. All my tools are here, all the things I use for making sculptures. I make paintings here, too, and write notes endlessly.⁴¹

McCracken referred to his airplane outings as "air-yoga,"⁴² underscoring their capacity to clear his mind and change his perspective about his work. Similarly, when he wrote about flying, McCracken's airplanes would sometimes morph into spaceships or artworks, or become vehicles for his sculptures.⁴³ The themes of flight and travel are strongly connected to the evolution of McCracken's sculptural forms, particularly his horizontal faceted resin sculptures. These pieces visually torque and capture light so that they appear kinetic, an interpretation encouraged by some of their titles, including *Nightbird* and *Zephyr* (both 1992; plates 15 and 14).

Perhaps the sculptural forms that McCracken connected most with travel, and with science fiction, were his planks. In one notebook entry he described them as "not planks or boards, or doors, but doorways. (Plank-ways, board-ways) . . . things which are ways."⁴⁴ He used them, as he hoped others would, as objects for meditation and as catalysts for imagination.

³⁸ McCracken interview with Frances Colpitt, "Between Two Worlds," *Art in America* (April 1998), p. 93.

³⁹ McCracken completed his first solo flight in May 1975 at Sky Harbor Airport in Las Vegas. McCracken, May 30, 1975, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 22, p. 85.

⁴⁰ Letter from John McCracken to Robert Elkon, February 23, 1976. Courtesy of Dorothea Elkon.

⁴¹ McCracken, March 28, 1982, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 46, p. 172.

⁴² McCracken, June 13, 1975, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 22, p. 95.

⁴³ "During the night [I] thought rather interestedly of making a crystal-shaped sculpture in my new studio, a single-color one—blue. A piece of a size that would fit into the airplane. As soon as it was finished I then could take it to Nick's [Nicholas Wilder's gallery]." McCracken, November 11, 1975, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 23, p. 116.

⁴⁴ McCracken, circa July 1969, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 3, p. 26.

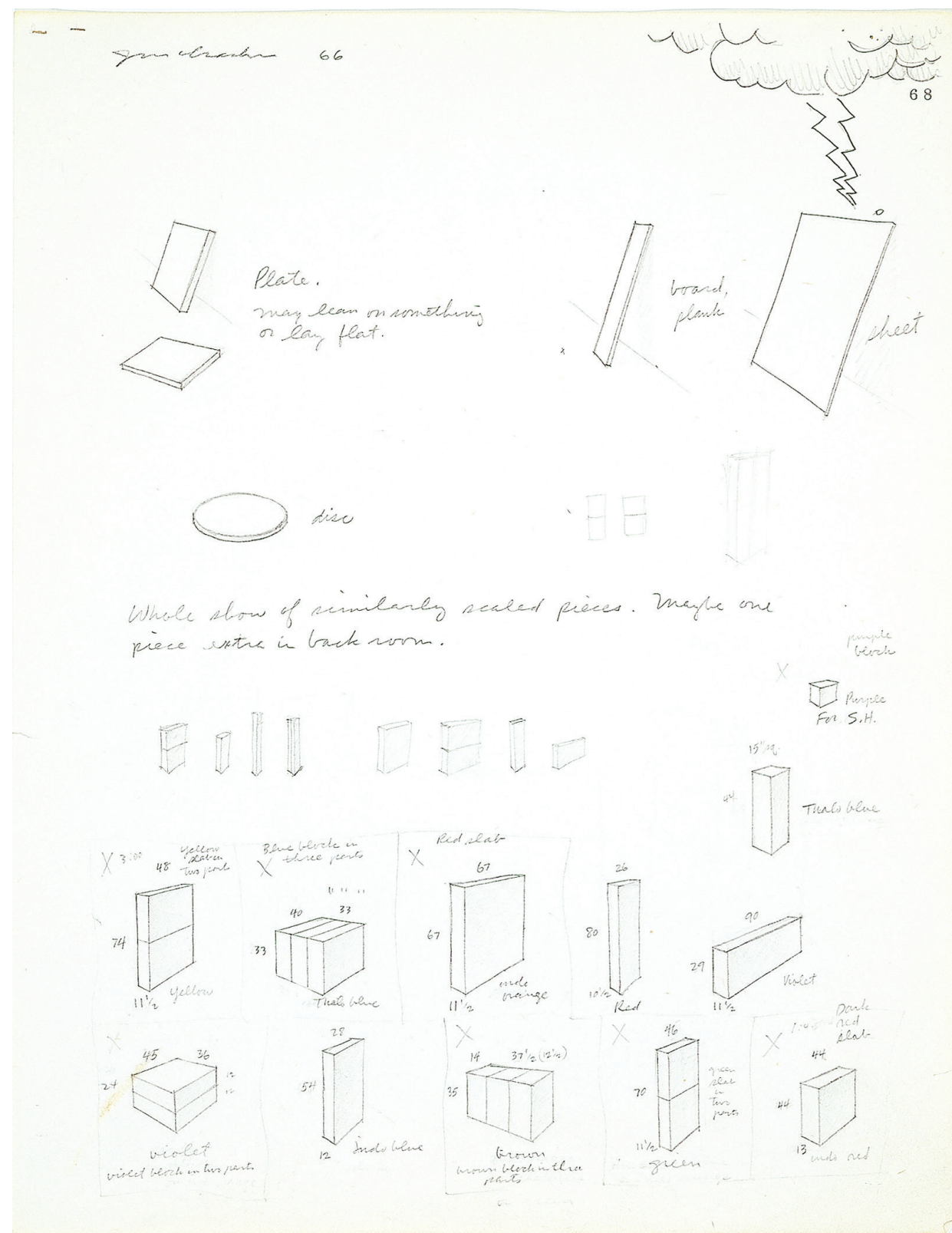


Fig. 13
Page 68 from McCracken's sketchbook, 1966

VI. The Plank

Thinking of these again recently . . .⁴⁵

The planks, begun in 1966 and continued throughout his life, became McCracken's signature works. He was proud of them and identified with them at times almost as spiritual self-portraits, yet he was often frustrated by the difficulty of moving past them, and by their persistence in his thoughts (figs. 13 and 14). McCracken's attitude toward the planks vacillated between pleasure ("the idea of the singular beautiful object . . . a thing that integrates with everything but continues asking questions, opens out to this and that possibility"),⁴⁶ rejection ("and the plank: it is not the last word . . . in fact, it is deficient in some ways"),⁴⁷ and consternation ("the main challenge is that of coming up with . . . something beyond the plank, and part of the confusion of this is that I am not sure it will not be another plank").⁴⁸ These attitudes also included wary acceptance: "And the plank still demands to be done. Ah well, okay then. Funny how insistent that is, and how centrally important to my work and activities it seems."⁴⁹

McCracken's first plank sculptures were glossy monochromes in primary colors: the first was red and the second was blue.⁵⁰ Although the most often exhibited and reproduced planks are solid colors, McCracken also tried them in a wide variety of geometric and painterly patterns, including some with vertical stripes, which in turn relate to the so-called "beam" pieces, which are also tall leaning sculptures but with narrow, equilateral footprints. McCracken produced some of the beams in groups of two or four, but their strongest expression was realized in an exhibition of 2008 at David Zwirner, New York, which featured multiple beam sculptures in both single color and polychromatic groupings (fig. 15). Titles for some of these works—such as *Song*, *Rhythm*, and *Voice*—link the variations in their pigmentation to aural tones, demonstrating McCracken's interest in synesthesia. Like the all-black show of 2006, this exhibition was designed by McCracken as a unified presentation of a harmonious ideal.

McCracken took great time and care in the mixing of his pigments. More than any other aspect in the production of his work, he determined that this was not a task that could be delegated. "Color, in particular, is almost impossible to specify exactly, and so in color pieces (as opposed to, say, metal ones, which have a more predictable surface appearance) I would have to mix the color myself," he explained. "The complexity of that stage is indicated by the fact that it often takes me several hours to mix just one color."⁵¹ An example of an elaborate color recipe for one of McCracken's planks is documented in one of his note-

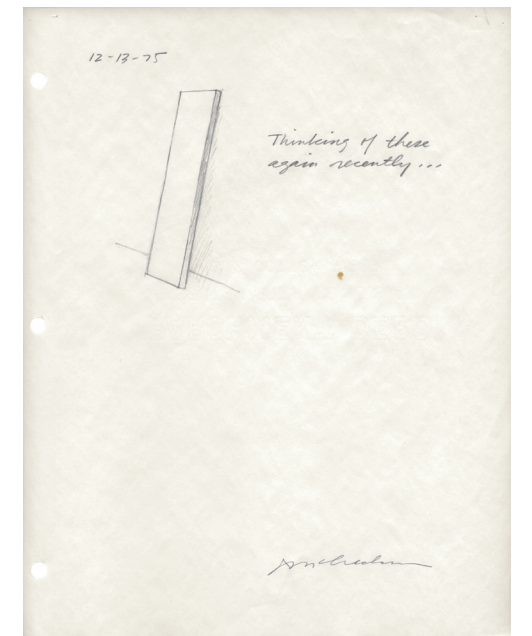


Fig. 14
Page 137 from McCracken's notebook, 1975

⁴⁵ McCracken, December 13, 1975, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 23, p. 137; see figure 14.

⁴⁶ McCracken, December 29, 1975, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 23, p. 158.

⁴⁷ McCracken, July 22, 1986, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 62, p. 108.

⁴⁸ McCracken, July 23, 1986, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 62, p. 110.

⁴⁹ McCracken, August 13, 1981, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 43, p. 30.

⁵⁰ McCracken, circa 1980–1991, JMA, undated videotaped lecture.

⁵¹ Ghislain Mollet-Viéville, "Interview with John McCracken" in *John McCracken*. Exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Froment & Putman, 1991), n.p.

books from 1980. To achieve the shade of “oxblood” or “sang de boeuf” he had in mind, McCracken mixed at least ten different colors, including “alizarin crimson, deep cadmium, burnt sienna, white, black, burnt umber, ochre, ultramarine blue, chrome yellow, and thalo green.”⁵² Another color mix with which he was particularly satisfied was one realized for a plank titled *Earth Speed* (1987; plate 17). “Good white,” McCracken recorded in his notes. “Best I’ve used. Tinge of thalo blue makes it look like snow.”⁵³

52 McCracken, August 11, 1980, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 36, p. 138. “The color is very unique,” McCracken wrote, “the piece looks like it is levitating.” McCracken, September 10, 1980, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 37, p. 106.

53 McCracken, August 11, 1987, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 66, p. 111.

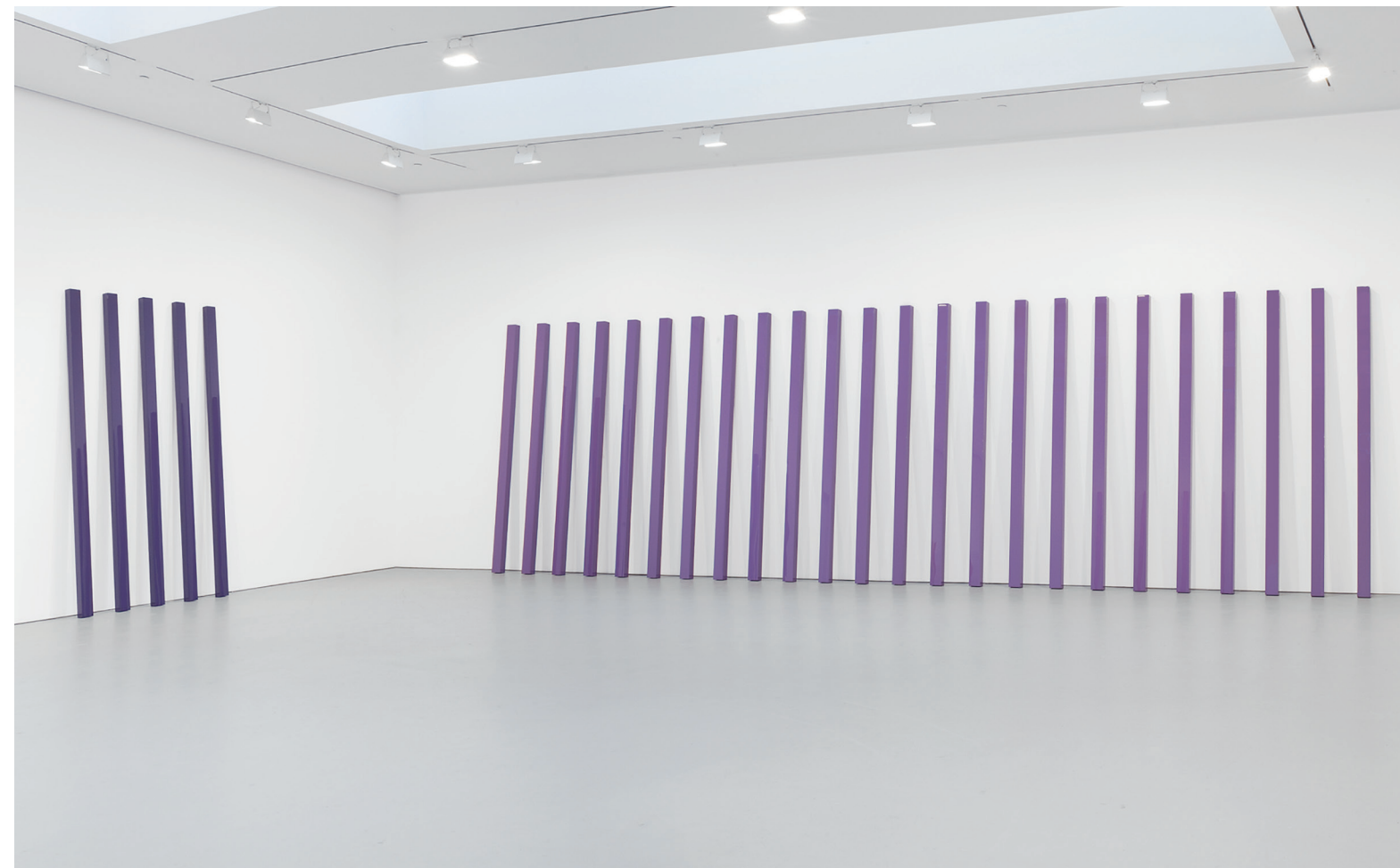


Fig. 15

Installation view, *John McCracken*, David Zwirner, New York, 2008
Photo: Cathy Carver



Fig. 16
Installation view, *John McCracken: New Work*, David Zwirner, New York, 2006, featuring *Six Columns*

VII. The Column

My next show is not a "sculpture." You could more readily call it a "piece" but what is even more appropriate to call it is a "show." "Show" is really the medium rather than "sculpture." Or "gallery and columns" are the materials, not "painted plywood" or even "gallery and painted plywood."⁵⁴

Having spent the middle third of the 1960s creating "singular objects" by coating wooden forms with deeply saturated and finely polished color, McCracken temporarily abandoned that approach, presenting two exhibitions of indifferently whitewashed columns concurrently at Robert Elkon Gallery, New York and Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles in December 1968. A poster in the form of a blueprint diagrams the layouts of both shows; the Elkon presentation comprised fourteen columns arranged in a uniform grid, while the Wilder display included nine columns placed in a staggered grid (fig. 17). The organization and proportions of the columns (roughly a yard square and seven and a half feet tall at Elkon, and somewhat taller at Wilder's loftier space) were developed in response to the layout and dimensions of each venue. The columns were painted to match the white gallery walls and produce a spatial ambiguity. In contrast to the enigmatic charisma of McCracken's lushly pigmented and domestically scaled planks and blocks, the white-painted columns were generic in terms of surface, and monumental (positioned to be both visually and physically obstructive) in terms of scale (fig. 19). For all their lack of affect, however, the shows were critically well-received. A writer for *Artforum* noted that the columns "usurped the space almost stealthily" and concluded that "what was most interesting was how the chalky, tall, white boxes in the room charged the simple occupation of the space of that room with energy."⁵⁵ A reviewer for *Arts Magazine* found the experience of the Elkon show literally vertiginous: "As you look down the line from one end to the other you see a nebulous white space defined only by the dark stained floor silhouetted against the columns' bases. Suddenly the floor becomes the art work—flat, frontal, rising like a steep pyramid."⁵⁶

For his solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in 1969, McCracken brought the plain and polished sculptures together, displaying the whitewashed columns from the Elkon show in the AGO's octagonal rotunda, bracketing this with presentations of resin sculptures in two flanking galleries. A reviewer described the effect of the layout as follows:

Los Angeles sculptor John McCracken has filled [the rotunda] with 12 mammoth white pillars, arranged in three rows of four pillars each.

First result: The room disappears.

Second result: The viewer is under attack. The white pillars, the white walls and the white light make you feel very small and very unreal.

You walk into the second gallery [of resin sculptures] and it is exceedingly restful . . . you pass back through the white forest to reach the final gallery of McCracken's work. The colors are saturated with sunlight . . . people who marvel at the pyra-

⁵⁴ McCracken, November 21, 1968, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 1, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Emily Wasserman, "John McCracken," *Artforum* (February 1969), p. 68.

⁵⁶ "John McCracken," *Arts Magazine* (February 1969), p. 60.

mids and extol the pleasures of ruins should find much to delight them in the cool unadorned sculptures of John McCracken.⁵⁷

The column form was an object of enduring interest for McCracken. As early as 1965, he roughed out a grouping of six blue columns (similar to the one large piece commissioned by LACMA in 1967) in his sketchbook, a drawing that he consulted several times over the years, as indicated by multiple annotations (fig. 18). The column sculptures developed partly from McCracken's preoccupation with ancient Greek and Egyptian architecture, and from his association of strong vertical forms with a combination of optimism and ethical rectitude, or "heroic stance," as he termed it. As was often the case with McCracken, some ideas took decades to be realized. For example, a grouping of six resin-coated sculptures was not produced until his previously mentioned black resin show at David Zwirner in 2006 (fig. 16). Although always conceived as a coherent installation, the 2006 columns were initially envisioned as individual works, each with its own dimensions, color recipe, and title. McCracken admitted to some anxiety about how the columns would work together before they were finished:

You can't tell what you have got with a resin piece until you are finished with it. You can't see the color or anything until it is all polished, all the way to the end. And when that had happened, I saw that all these pieces were different colors. There was a brown one and a blue one and a red one and so forth, instead of all different blacks. They were too different. I thought, oh, my God, I haven't done a black show after all. I have done something else, a near-black show. But when they got to the gallery, and they were put in the configurations they were supposed to be in, they operated perfectly. They were all black. You couldn't tell them apart. So I was really kind of surprised and pleased at the same time at how that worked out.⁵⁸

The group of six columns, which proved to be McCracken's boldest statement in this form, was displayed several ways during his lifetime, including the regular grid and diagonal grid formats explored earlier in the Wilder and Elkon white column shows, and even split into groups of three across two adjacent galleries for a later show at Inverleith House in Scotland.⁵⁹ Like the white plywood columns, the black columns can be obstructive, causing visitors to disappear from the view of their companions. The nuances of black resin also contribute to the particular impact of these columns as an environmental work. "All the colors seem okay," McCracken wrote, "but black is sort of ultimate. It's the strongest color yet it's neutral, and it's the most reflective when polished."⁶⁰ In other words, the forest of black forms was the most simultaneously present and absent tableau that McCracken was able to create with polished resin.

57 Gail Dexter, "Even a Box Can Be Beautiful," *Toronto Daily Star* (February 8, 1969), p. 33.

58 McCracken in "Oral history interview with John McCracken conducted by Judith Olch Richards, April 19–August 4, 2010," n.p.

59 Shows where McCracken presented the group of six columns include *John McCracken: New Work* (2006), David Zwirner, New York; *Tomorrow Now: when design meets science fiction* (2007), Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg; and *John McCracken* (2009), Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

60 McCracken, December 1, 1976, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 27, p. 159.

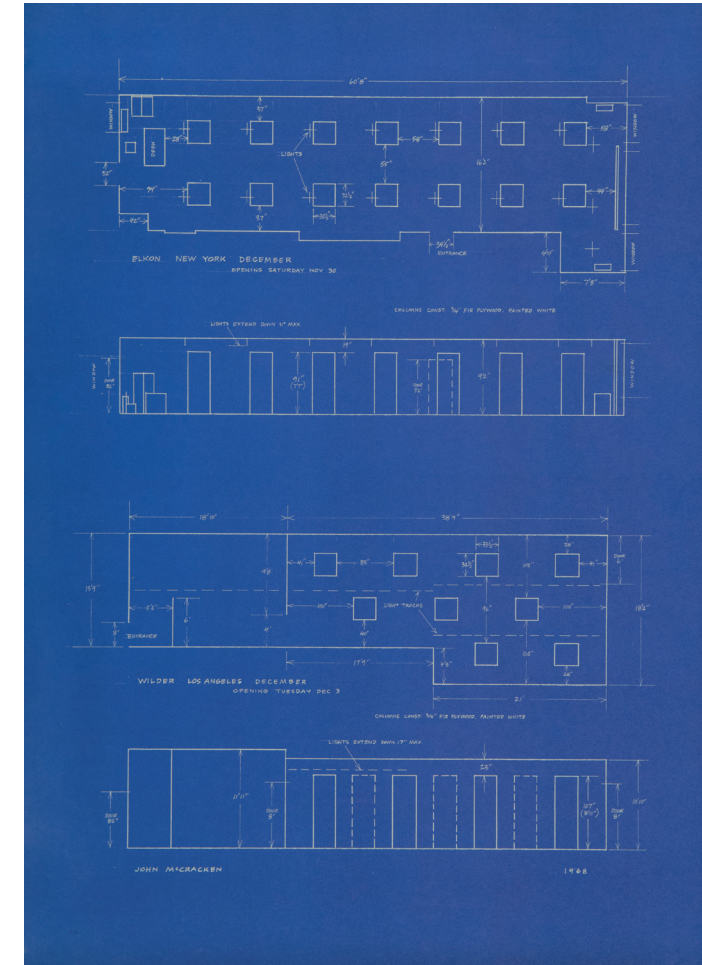


Fig. 17

Joint exhibition announcement for *John McCracken*, Robert Elkon Gallery, New York, and Nicholas Wilder Gallery, Los Angeles, 1968
Courtesy The Elkon Gallery, New York

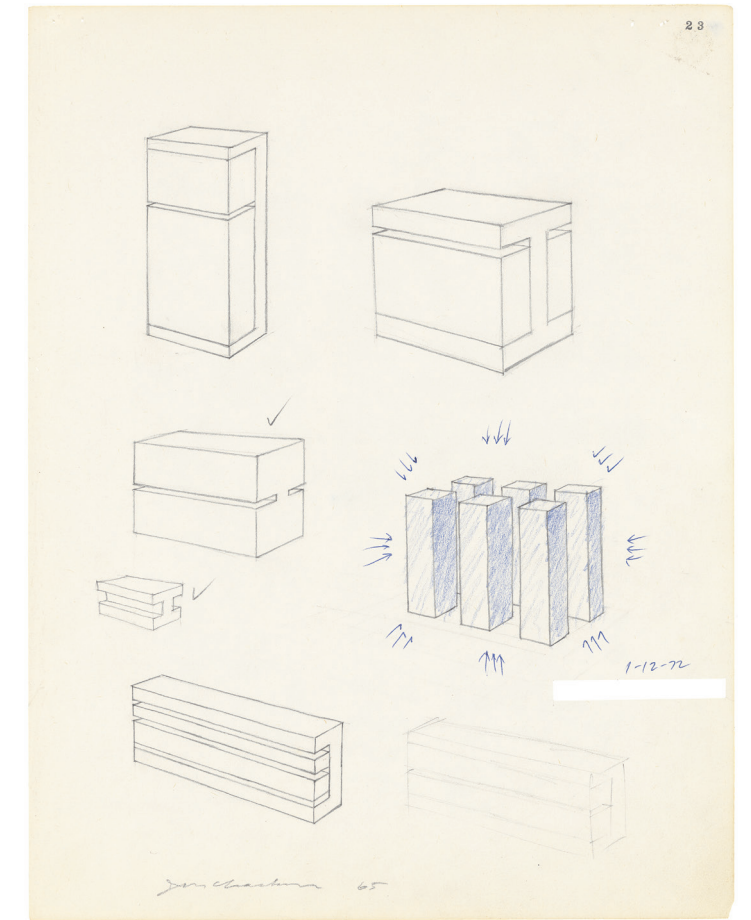


Fig. 18

Page 23 from McCracken's sketchbook, 1965



Fig. 19

Untitled, 1968/1986

Painted plywood

Each: 120 x 48 x 48 inches (304.8 x 121.9 x 121.9 cm)

Installation view, *Heroic Stance: The Sculpture of John McCracken 1965–1986*, P.S.1, The Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc., Long Island City, New York, 1986 (This work was refabricated on the occasion of the exhibition.)



Fig. 20
Bright, 2006
 Stainless steel
 94 x 18 x 12 inches (238.8 x 45.7 x 30.5 cm)
 Private Collection, East Hampton, New York

VIII. On Reflection

*Becoming immersed in work is like becoming immersed in water.*⁶¹

From the moment he embedded reflective elements in his paintings, McCracken began to mine the mirroring effects of these surfaces to both ground and unmoor the viewer, making the work invisible to the extent that the viewer is confronted by disorienting reflections. McCracken weighed the metaphorical and more direct references to mirrors in his consideration of these pieces. When asked whether he wanted people to “see themselves” in the sculptures, he replied, “Yeah, although not altogether literally. In fact . . . it’s kind of dumb to only see that; I will do more of a psychic reflection to where the form, the color, and the surface, everything could add up to a thing that one sees oneself in.”⁶² This effect grew more pronounced in McCracken’s work over time, beginning with his early use of automotive lacquer, becoming more refined in his use of polished polyester resin, and reaching its most pristine expression with the monumental stainless steel pieces. The more reflective McCracken’s sculptures become, the more fully they engage their immediate environment, whether that be a wooded landscape or a modernist gallery. Relating her encounter with a polished metal McCracken sculpture installed in a park (fig. 20), one curator wrote, “the steel reflected the surrounding trees, ground, treetops and fractured forest. It looked like a large broken mirror absorbing fragments and producing the experience of a mirage.”⁶³ Similarly, when presented indoors (plate 25) a stainless work can function like a sliver in space; from one perspective it may isolate the viewer’s reflection in a tall slender facet, while from other points of view it will visually expand to amplify all the angular details of its architectural surround.

Unlike his work in other materials, McCracken always used fabricators to produce his stainless steel sculptures. He was not entirely satisfied with the initial results, and he did not want them to seem mass-produced, but with gradual technical improvements the most successful of these works displayed a liminal duality unachievable by other means. In an interview McCracken explained:

One thing that happens with reflective steel is . . . sometimes they seem to disappear right in front of your face . . . I like that quality, and it kind of pinpoints something I do, or try to do, which is to make things that have a distinct materiality and resistance, but that can seem to have no existence.⁶⁴

⁶¹ McCracken, May 28, 1974, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 18, p. 136.

⁶² “John McCracken Audio Recording, Santa Barbara/Goleta, June 4, 1979, C35 side A: John McCracken [Part 1]. For a nuanced discussion of McCracken’s technical and conceptual use of materials, see Rachel Rivenc, “John McCracken: The Material and the Spiritual,” in *Made in LA: Materials, Processes, and the Birth of West Coast Minimalism* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications; forthcoming).

⁶³ Eva Wittcox, “Variations on the Perfect Form,” in *John McCracken*. Exh. cat (Ghent: Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, 2004), p. 23.

⁶⁴ McCracken in “Oral history interview with John McCracken conducted by Judith Olch Richards, April 19–August 4, 2010,” n.p.

On a pragmatic level, the stainless steel works liberated McCracken from the labor and toxicity of his resin process, while in another sense the metallic surfaces of these sculptures alluded to their roles as the symbolic instruments, or communications devices, he also intended them to be.⁶⁵

John McCracken's recent exhibition at David Zwirner offered visitors a rare opportunity to consider the full sweep of the artist's career. Comprising nearly five decades of work, the show tracked recurring themes of physical and psychological travel and McCracken's pursuit of both aesthetic and spiritual nourishment. "I don't know which is best," he wrote at one point, "art as meditation objects, or art as modern objects. Art that encourages a state of unexcitement or art that excites."⁶⁶ Traversing the show, one encountered a small directional painting of an arrow (plate 1) and multiple occurrences of plank sculptures that suggest both bridges and portals (plates 7, 16–23). Waiting to be discovered along the way were slotted objects (plates 3, 4, and 5) that evolved into fully three-dimensional and extravagantly hued geodes (plates 26–36), sleekly aerodynamic works inspired by the experience of flight (plates 14 and 15), a painterly plank that harkened back to McCracken's days as an Abstract Expressionist provocatively juxtaposed with mandala-inspired canvases (plates 39–42), jet-black columns that occluded vision and hampered direct passage through space (plate 24), and a presentation of annotated sketchbook pages that reinscribed the interplay between McCracken's writing and his visual art (pages 102–103). The show concluded, almost elegiacally, with *Chakra* (2008), a collection of slender white beams flanked by two polished metal planks, one in stainless steel and one in bronze (plates 43–45). In the final gallery, McCracken's dual interests in the modern and the meditative appeared to merge, restaging the exhibition space as an invitation and a threshold to points unknown.

⁶⁵ "Stainless steel continues to be interesting to me . . . one thing prompting this—there are several—is that it seems using resin in this building is almost bound to cause annoyance to others who live here, not to mention us too . . . metal sculptures are going to last a lot longer and stay in better condition than plastic ones, and besides that they are going to be expressive of a lot more definiteness and forcefulness. I think, too, that metal will be apt to be more in line with my predilection for making 'pure' sculpture." McCracken, June 3, 1986, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 62, p. 39.

⁶⁶ McCracken, July 25, 1973, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 14, p. 160.

IX. Epilogue

Direct address was an approach that John McCracken used not only in conversation and in prose but also in his visual art, as a way to lure others into serious yet playful engagement with his ideas. He sent each work out as a message to the universe, in anticipation of a reply:

What do I say? I have to connect more, in a dialogue fashion, with you to whom I'm talking. Turn an inner ear to me, and a corner of your speaking tongue. Enter into just a bit of interactive building—and it is building I am into, building ideas and thought-forms and new understandings that will help form a happier and more interesting world. Now, as you listen, try to listen, wherever you are, to the bits and fragments of me, speaking, and as you speak, speak also a little to me, into the nature through which I listen. And I, hearing you, will try to speak louder so you can hear better, and we will have a rollicking good and fascinating and creative conversation! This is how I can do my work for you.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ McCracken, February 28, 1983, JMA, Notebooks Collection, notebook 54, p. 85.

Acknowledgments

Heartfelt thanks are offered to the following for their generous help with this essay: Gail Barringer, assisted by Sommyr Pochan at the Estate of John McCracken; David Zwirner, Hanna Schouwink, Jaime Schwartz, and Alexandra Whitney, assisted by Gena Beam, Allison Hemler, Julia Mechtler, and Haley Shaw at David Zwirner; Lucinda Barnes, Berkeley Art Museum; Stephanie Barron, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Larry Bell; Gregory Botts; James Corcoran and Tracy Lew, James Corcoran Gallery; Mary Corse; Dorothea Elkon, The Elkon Gallery; Francesca Esmay, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; Miki Garcia, Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara; Wendy and Leonard Goldberg; Peter Goulds, Kimberly Davis, and Virginia Allison, L.A. Louver; William Griffin, Kayne Griffin Corcoran Gallery; James Hayward; Julie Joyce, Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Phyllis and John Kleinberg; Bill Leaf, Department of Fine Arts, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; Edward Leffingwell; Michael McCollum; Marilyn Nazar, Art Gallery of Ontario; Henry Pitcher, College of Creative Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara; Philipp Scholz Rittermann; Rachel Rivenc, Getty Conservation Institute; Jill Sterrett, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Robert Therrien; Jenny Tobias, The Museum of Modern Art; George Waterman III; and Dennis Young.

For invaluable encouragement and support, special debts of gratitude are owed to David Bomford, Tony Ganz, Claire Grandpierre, Birte Kleeman, Mike Kuniavsky and Liz Goodman, Sarah Oppenheimer and Noga Shalev, Jeannette Redensek, Nick Roth, Amy Baker Sandback, and Joan Weinstein.

—Robin Clark