

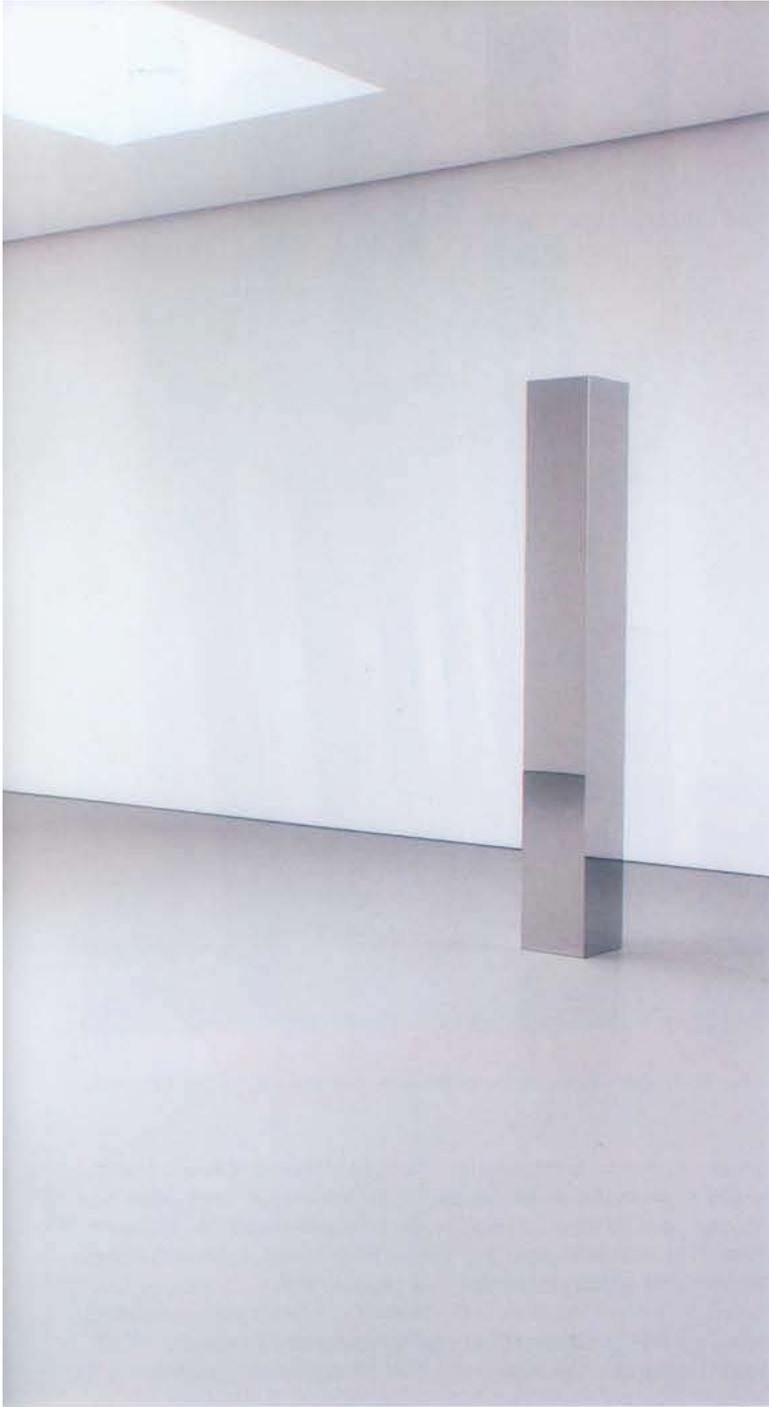
Sculpture : ' John McCracken, Materialist, Transcendentalist, Minimalist ', by Robert C.Morgan,
May 2011, p40 - 43

sculpture



John McCracken

Materialist, Transcendentalist,



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWERNER, NY

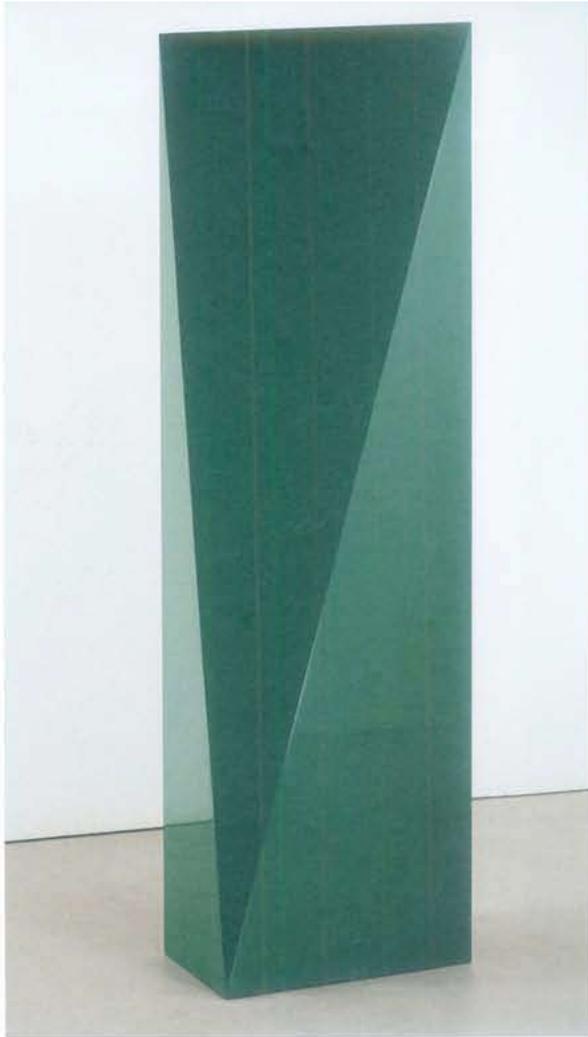


BY ROBERT C. MORGAN

Minimal art and Minimalism imply two different strains within the scope of contemporary American art. For the most part, Minimal art began in New York and was named there (Richard Wolheim, 1965) before it was formalized on the West Coast. Architect Tony Smith, painters Frank Stella and Robert Ryman, dancers Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton, and sculptor Robert Morris (among others) were all on to it by 1961, soon to be followed by Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Tricia Brown, and Carl Andre. (Sol LeWitt chose the term “conceptual” to identify his work in 1967 by emphasizing the “idea” over the object.) The earliest affinity to Minimal art in California came

Left: Installation view with *Star, Infinite, Dimension*, and *Electron*, 2010. Stainless steel, 100–110 x 17.5–22 x 10.5–11.75 in. Above: *Electric*, 2010. Bronze, 100 x 15 x 3 in.

Minimalist



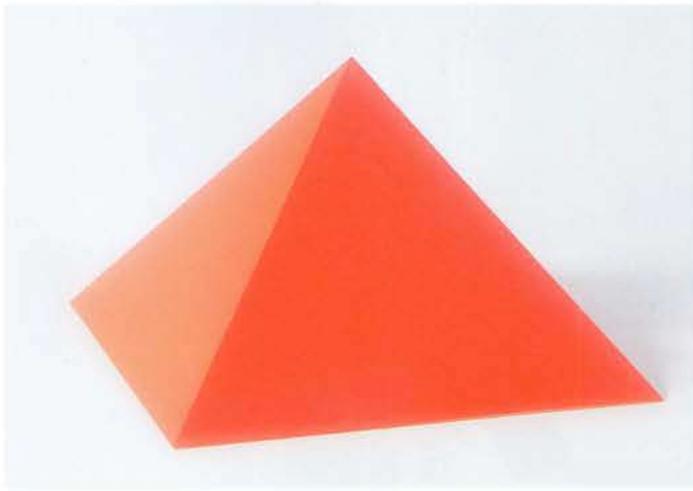
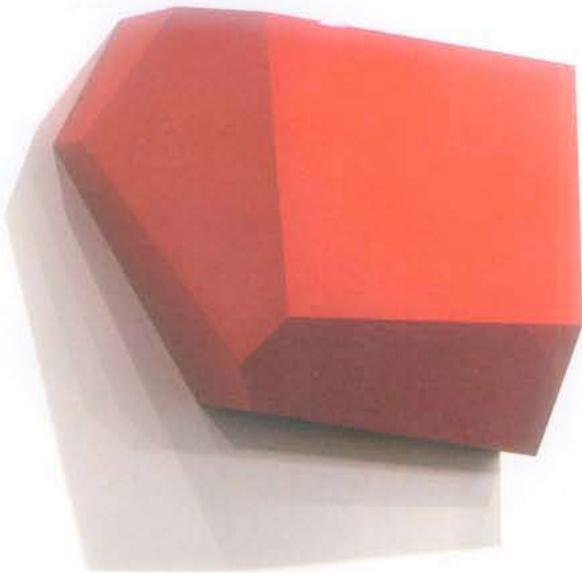
Left: *Minnesota*, 1989. Polyester resin, fiberglass, and plywood, 244 x 69 x 43 cm. Right: *Cosmos*, 2008. Polyester resin, fiberglass, and plywood, 8 elements, 96 x 4.5 x 3 in. each.

from hard-edge painter John McLaughlin, who worked in parallel to New York painters such as Ad Reinhardt, Burgoyne Diller, and Barnett Newman. I would argue that Minimalism offers certain effects previously formalized in concrete terms by artists associated with Minimal art. In most cases, Minimalist artists extended the structural ramparts of Minimal art in original, self-determined, and occasionally idiosyncratic ways. Such artists might include the early Robert Smithson, Robert Irwin, Ronald Bladen, Robert Grosvenor, Larry Bell, Richard Van Buren, and John McCracken. Ironically, these artists—or the work that they did at a particular time—have remained, for the most part, in the parenthesis between Minimal art and Post-minimalism; their work does not appear to have directly impacted artists such as Richard Serra, Keith Sonnier, Bruce Nauman, and Eva Hesse.

This context is important in reconsidering the work of John McCracken—both early and recent—as he embarks on a major retrospective at the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art (on view through June 19). McCracken, who began his career in California and is now based in Santa Fe, appears original in relation to his predecessors, even those artists whom he has cited as

influences, including Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, and Robert Morris. While McCracken continues to carry the tag of “finish fetish”—applied to his early work by former *Artforum* editor John Coplans—he appears to have worn it well. The term implies a quality about the surface, which cannot be easily denied.

When McCracken’s first monochromatic “plank” emerged in 1966—constructed from plywood and covered in polyester resin—it was a mild sensation, at least among critics in Los Angeles. It had a surface “look,” which enticed many youthful groupies to imitate his surfboard aesthetic with far less interesting results. The other problem with an artist who works in a uniquely personal way, which McCracken, much to his credit, did assiduously at the outset, is that the work becomes difficult for others to contextualize. Therefore, his career has continued more or less consistently—with some interesting diversions of painterly decorum in the 1970s—without much in the way of historical analysis. This, of course, is not his problem, and the David Zwirner Gallery is to be credited with bringing McCracken back to public attention in 2010 and finding a suitable context in which to place him, even though that context differs from the Minimalist context that I



Top left: *On the Go*, 1998. Polyester resin, fiberglass, and plywood, 93 x 127.5 x 28 cm. Left: *Red Pyramid*, 1974. Polyester resin and wood, 10 x 16 x 16 in. Above: *Theta-Two*, 1965. Lacquer, fiberglass, and wood, 21 x 22 x 7.5 in.

the concept of the two works is not so vastly different: Morris's consists of four reflective cubes and McCracken's has four reflective columns. I do find a certain elegance in McCracken's installation, though it is standoffish, not truly engaging. Morris's cubes had one advantage. They had a top side whereby one could see the light of the sky in relation to the light reflected by the four sides, and there was a contiguity in which the four cubes were perpetually seen as one. No one cube could be isolated from the others, thus emphasizing the gestalt aspect of the ensemble.

The fact that Morris did a mirrored quartet 45 years before McCracken is not a reason to discount the latter work, if one understands how McCracken's columns operate within the Minimalist paradigm. There is an idiosyncratic aspect to his work with the propensity to operate in favor of these planks, columns, and other assorted forms. This suggests that he is still willing to experiment with new ideas and to offer an indeterminate alternative to earlier solutions. With McCracken, the chronology of form is less important than the method that he applies in transforming his materials into something of value. This absence of chronology is ultimately a romantic approach. In this sense, McCracken's work is strangely revelatory, and encouraging, as a means toward opening a new threshold as to what sculpture might become.

Robert C. Morgan is a writer and artist living in New York. His recent collection of essays, The Artist in the Era of Globalization, has been translated into several languages.

have stated here. Nonetheless, McCracken continues to appear as an artist on his own, as if he and his work simply emerged from the ethereal void. My sense is that he has encouraged this idea by refraining from interpretations about his work in past years and by keeping his intentions as a sculptor as isolated as possible.

The recent works shown at David Zwirner have moved away from the bright colors and sparkling resin surfaces so often associated with McCracken's sculpture. The typically sparse exhibition included three bronze planks positioned against the wall and four freestanding, squarish stainless steel columns—*Star*, *Infinite*, *Dimension*, and *Electron* (all 2010). The highly polished, mirrored surfaces are presumably intended to transport, with the viewer not only perceiving the material forms but also engaging in their dematerialization. One might say that they test the limits between what we see and what is actually there, or, as McCracken has suggested, they are both "materialist and transcendentalist." One cannot deny their relationship to an early Minimalist work by Robert Morris from 1965 in which four mirrored cubes placed in the old Castelli Gallery on East 77th Street did essentially the same thing. Morris's cubes were later shown outdoors in a lush green environment, as if to suggest their disappearance into surrounding natural space. In any case,

TOP LEFT: COURTESY STUDIO LA CITTA, VERONA / RIGHT: CATHY CARVER, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER, NY