



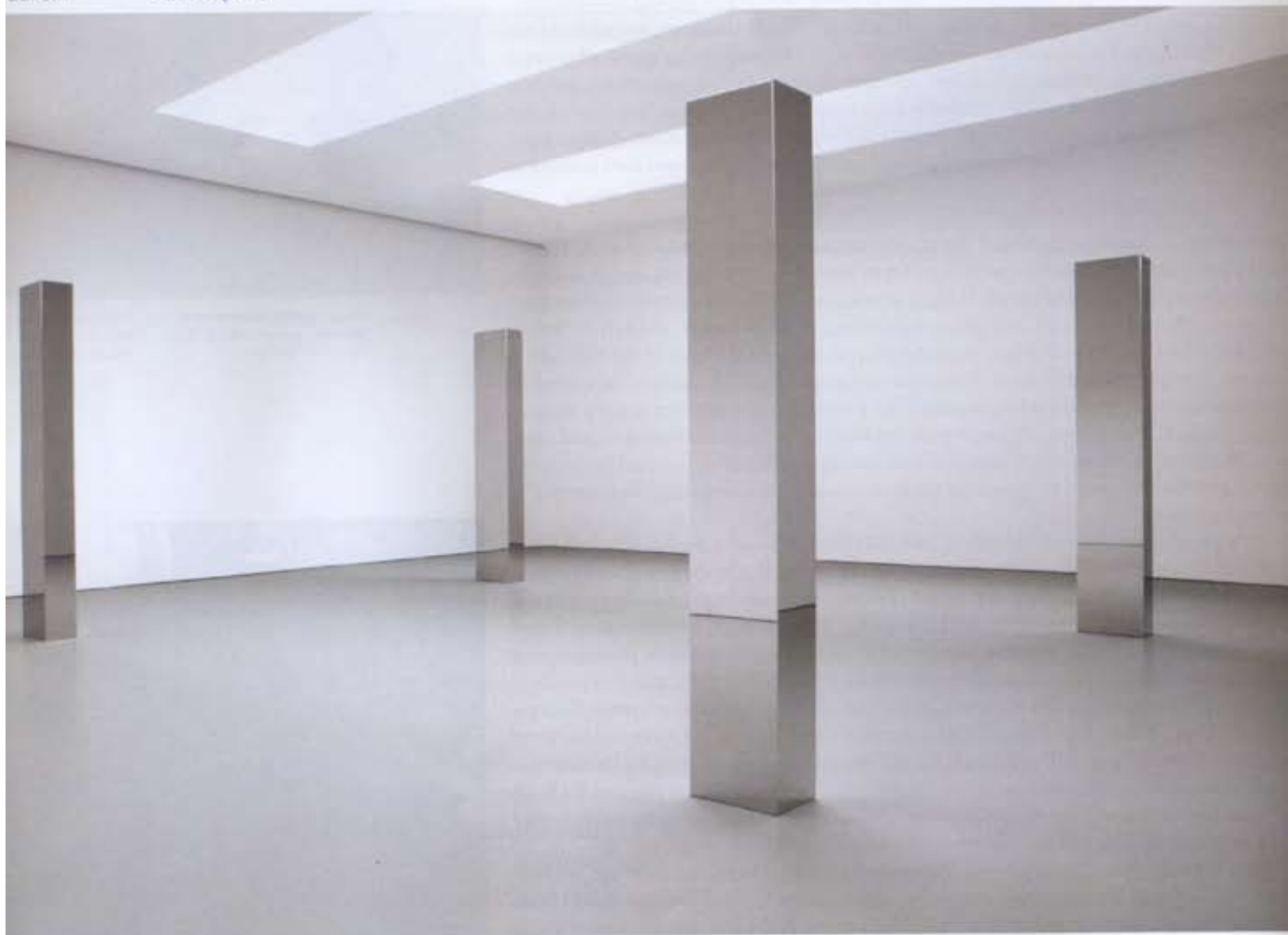
In Search of . . .

LINDA NORDEN ON THE ART OF JOHN MCCRACKEN

John McCracken got filed under “Finish Fetish” and “LA Minimalism” in the first phases of his career, which worked only to his short-term advantage. McCracken’s peers never really found a way to name his paranormal objects and objectives. It took a younger generation, readier to read our world as occupied by multiple intelligences and beings, to appreciate just how possessed and wildly empathetic McCracken was as an artist. And it’s still not clear what McCracken’s extraordinarily concentrated, homemade extra-terrestrials—or the escalating consciousness within which he imagined himself and his art—might represent. To begin assessing the legacy of this singular artist, who passed away in April, *Artforum* asked curator and critic Linda Norden to investigate.

John McCracken, stainless steel, Napa Valley, CA, Grant Delin.

Below: View of “John McCracken: New Work in Bronze and Steel,” 2010, David Zwirner, New York.
From left: *Dimension*, 2010; *Star*, 2010; *Election*, 2010; *Infinite*, 2010.
Photo: Cathy Carver.



"I'd like to see you visually," I say to him.

"You wouldn't make sense of it."

I say, "Try anyway."¹

BY HIS OWN ADMISSION, John McCracken's art is difficult to encapsulate in language. "Words just don't happen to be my tools," he wrote in 1965 in an early sketchbook. It's an odd disclaimer for an artist who filled countless such notebooks and sketchbooks with working drawings—and words. Lots of words. In the mid-'60s, during the first years of a career that took off even before his 1965 graduation from the California College of Arts and Crafts, McCracken's sketchbooks record a relentless barrage of questions, in search of some explanation for the objects that seemed to present themselves to him fully formed, abstract but distinct and powerfully affecting. Whether of his own devising—a radio coated in monochrome paint, say—or a projection from the outside world, such as an Egyptian obelisk, these objects seemed to demand account.

There are untold correlations between McCracken's personal, probing notes to himself and what is operative in his art. Yet while his sculptural forms aimed for something much larger than individual subjective expression, they have stubbornly eluded the theoretical terms that qualified so much Minimalist and post-Minimalist art.² In this sense, McCracken is not wrong when he says words are not his tools; language—or rather critical language—has not served his art well precisely because his art is not conceived in language. "Maybe it's that instead of using words to really build things," he added in the same sketchbook, "I use them in an attempt to approximate my thought patterns." The singular forms McCracken worked so concertedly to develop from 1965 onward, you might say, arose alongside language, not with it; they contain a multitude of competing ideas and beliefs the artist entertained in service of a vision at once attuned to and ranging beyond mid-'60s high-art formulations, pop culture, politics, and techno-explorations. And if his perspective was more Los Angeles than New York, it was also more McCracken than LA. For all the artist's indisputable postwar optimism, McCracken's vision was both more idiosyncratic and more millennial than anyone could have guessed at the time.

"MY WORKS," McCracken announced a year ago, "are minimal and reductive, but also maximal. I try to make them concise, clear statements in three-dimensional form, and also to take them to a breathtaking level of beauty."³ These words came in the unlikely context of the press release for what was to be his last gallery exhibition, in New York in 2010; they were a reminder of McCracken's unorthodox relationship to the critical pieties of the Minimalist mind-set. "I think 'minimalist' work is not always so minimalist," McCracken elaborated on another occasion, "especially when you really see it and think about it—or, say, try to accurately describe it. But my tendency was to make my works more sensuous than most, and more what I thought of as beautiful. I thought that if something was beautiful, one could enjoy looking at it and therefore stand to apprehend the form in a full way—intellectually, emotionally, and experientially."⁴

In the photo accompanying the release, McCracken stands—on a stepladder!—tall, wiry, stiffly erect, as if in metaphysical salute, a human lightning rod in the full glare of a New Mexico afternoon sun. Who but McCracken, I thought to myself, could declare with such emphatic delight that he is trying to take his work to "a breathtaking level of beauty"? And what self-respecting first-generation Minimalist would allow himself to be photographed gazing up and out into the immeasurable expanse of a deep azure desert sky, atop a stepladder?⁵ There are intimations of other maverick American seers in McCracken's pose: Georgia O'Keeffe, Captain Kirk, even Robert Smithson gazing over the Great Salt Lake and his *Spiral Jetty*. But it's hard to picture Donald Judd staring into distant space or invoking the adjective *beautiful*, let alone the breathtaking variety. As with everything McCracken said and did, both the words and the image here conveyed an artist at once deeply earnest, deadpan, and possessed of an imaginatively liberated grasp of what "the '60s" had to offer.

When I saw the press release last fall, McCracken's horizon-scanning squint sent me back to a more bombastic declaration—the opening salvo to Gene Youngblood's groundbreaking book *Expanded Cinema*, inspired by both R. Buckminster Fuller and the philosopher Pierre



Above: John McCracken outside his studio, Santa Fe, NM, ca. 2010. Photo: Gail Barringer.

Below: John McCracken's *Block in Three P* lacquer, wood, 1968.



[The] ubiquity and the shocking emptiness of his adamantine slabs, wedges, and columns led me to suspect that the curators mean to wholly reinvent him, for the purposes of the exhibition, as a goofy character at whom we can all laugh, his ham-fisted, early psychotropic paintings heightening our amusement. For me, he became less and less an artist; his polished sculptures became the ultimate image of banality, doorstops to prop open the portals through which other forms may migrate in a series of color-coded juxtapositions.¹¹

In its own way, Enwezor's criticism is evidence of the affective power McCracken invokes through his sculptures and their perfectionist material presence: Reflection above all. Given Enwezor's commitment to socially and politically engaged art, and minus any investment in McCracken's extraterrestrial, metaphysical channeling or his near-fetishizing embrace of craft, a shiny bronze column can only be a monument to materialism and vanity. Enwezor's pique underscores both the success and the threat that McCracken's sculpture represents now. In the context of 2011, his art may appear to newer skeptics as irrelevant at best, and immorally complicit with global capitalism at worst.

But the context McCracken seemed more intent on retrieving was closer to a religious, not worldly, recognition. His was an art predicated on an acknowledgment of all that remains beyond comprehension. Those same early notebooks include references to Barnett Newman as well as to the vestigial remnants of druid monuments; to painting that eschews the corporeal identification on which Christian art depends and monoliths whose meaning eludes verbal or visual definition—just like the mysterious entities McCracken worked to conjure out of body in his later years, or like Kubrick's black monolith. This explains the earnest appreciation of many who saw McCracken's work as if for the first time at Documenta. But it also explains the anger. I, for one, have experienced both. I have also tried to imagine, à la McCracken, a universe populated by intelligences other than we humans, one premised on distinctions between that which is discernible and that which is comprehensible. I have wondered how McCracken's sculpture might function in such a world, or what kind of belief system would embrace his art as its totems. As it is, McCracken's exquisite objects exist as surreally luminous, haptic manifestations not of a world that was—or even of a world that could be—but of a vision still unclear. McCracken, you might say, made art for an inwardly yearning generation, blinded by the light. □

LINDA NORDEN IS A WRITER AND CURATOR BASED IN NEW YORK.

For notes, see page 340.



John McCracken, *Abrtaine*, 1972, oil on canvas, 30 x 30".

LARRY BELL

I am an inveterate cigar smoker. I cannot pass a cigar store without in to examine the goods. Someone once gave me an old box of brand cigars, and I eventually made a piece by burying this box of cigar bands that I had been collecting for almost five years. In San Fernando Valley, where I grew up, there are cigar stores next to stores. In some areas of LA, there are taco stands next to taco stands, sushi bars next to sushi bars. In Hollywood, there are topless bars next to topless bars and bookstores next to bookstores. We are constantly navigating right angles and blind corners. This peripheral density has a profound effect on my work, and I'm sure it precipitated my desire to keep my sculptures simple.

Since 1959, I've kept a studio in Venice Beach. Many visitors consider it a kooky and weird place, but I consider it home. Venice is a kind of reality, with a large homeless population, many street people, and every shape of person one can imagine (and a few shapes one cannot imagine). In my opinion, this landscape is not weird at all—it's real—as real as the reflections in my glass pieces. The light is quite special, and I suspect that the celebration of the light is part of the reason I do what I do. With my glass cubes, I wanted to shape the surrounding space, passing through the sculptures, compressing the hazy atmosphere in which they were conceived. □



Larry Bell, *Untitled Standing Wall*, 1970-72, glass-coated concrete. Installation at the Pasadena Art Museum, Pasadena, CA, 1972. Photo: Frank J. Thomas.

this was a new material marriage. (The planks on view at Zwirner, for example, were the first he'd cast in bronze.) To the extent that a material object is perfectible, these last metal planks and plinths were perfect—their surfaces flawless. "Craft is there because it has to be," McCracken often said. "If something sticks out, it's a distraction. I aim for a perfection that allows something to be seen; not as an end." Even in the sunnier climes and outdoor settings in which McCracken's earlier metal columns have been sited, however, "perfection" amounts to a perceptual erasure, a *destabilization* at odds with the stark gestalt, the stamped-out shape, usually identified with Minimalist form. The material identity of McCracken's objects is predicated on surfaces so pristine that the objects they define can never be fully apprehended.

These sculptures were indeed simultaneously Minimalist, maximalist, and breathtakingly beautiful. Their surfaces, like McCracken's more subtly reflective colored-epoxy-resin entities, inflected and activated the space around them in good Minimalist fashion, generating effects contingent on the viewer's shifting position and perception. But McCracken had more in mind than these isolated phenomenological attributes. The inherent and affective properties of the metal works introduce another order of association and perfectibility. They facilitate a shift in emphasis from an earlier, more conventional opposition between painting and sculpture in the painted wooden sculptures.

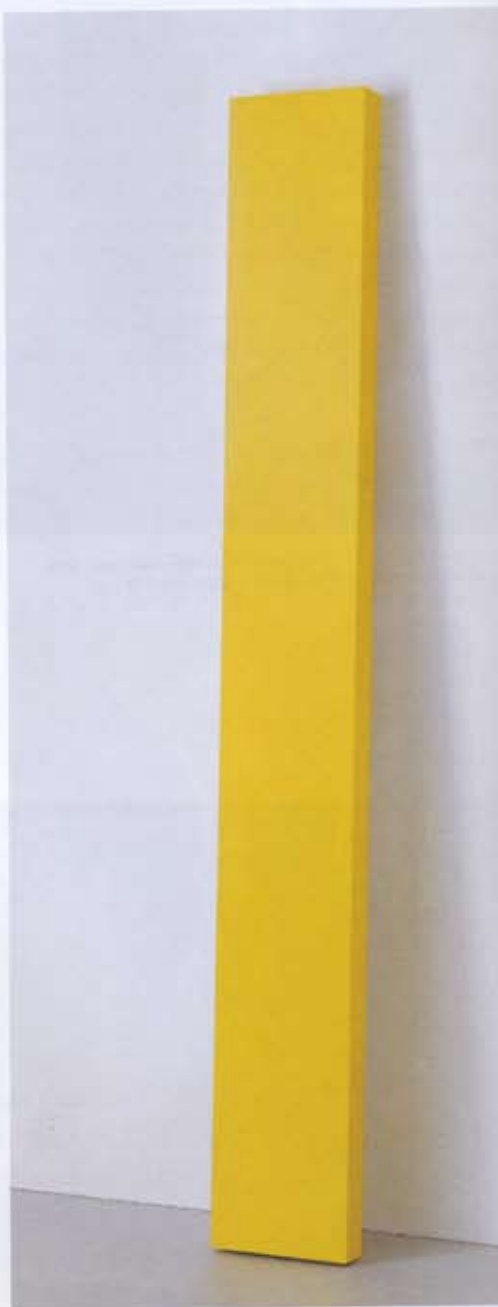
Paradoxically, in the colored sculptures, where the paint is literally on the surface, the effect McCracken worked hard to achieve was one of "solid" color. He spoke of color as an "abstract quality" that he wanted to treat as form, as a quality that thoroughly permeates the surface, so as to "feel like it's color through and through." To achieve this, McCracken applied liquid resin—color as liquid—onto precisely cut, sometimes fantastically faceted, hollow plywood volumes.⁷ The liquid color would cure solid. He then fastidiously sanded and buffed between layers to yield, almost magically, the translucent color-form sheen that functionally obliterates the additive process. ("From liquid to solid and then back to liquid again, in the visual sense," said McCracken.)⁸ The result is a fathomless, mercurial mass. This labor-intensive process was developed early on, in the late '60s, and refined over the years—but never substantively altered, save for a series of planks made in the mid-'70s, to which McCracken applied multiple colors with a brush to more painterly effect.

The extreme opacity and density of the cast-metal sculptures, on the other hand, are sensed but never really observable: Nowhere does McCracken more fully succeed in eliciting a perception of dematerialization than in those last steel and bronze steles. Unlike the solid hue—however miasmic—of the colored planks, in the metal works the combination of hard edge and fully reflective surface leads to a vertiginous transparency, a dissipation of vision. To be in the presence of these cast-metal entities is almost dizzyingly uncanny no matter the site; in the denuded, supremely elegant commercial spaces of a gallery such as Zwirner, the extreme contrast between the perfection McCracken achieves in his sculptures and the spiraling devolution of the profoundly unsettled world in which they hover can be truly terrifying. This kinesthetic thrill hints at the artist's ability to sustain the deep-seated optimism of a child of the new age '60s and project it onto and into the electronically charged spaces of a newer, digital age. Inspired as they are by the imagination of that adventurous decade, McCracken's stubbornly perfect objects now stand as weird witness to a fallen dream in a world that's lost its bearings.

EVEN IN THEIR EARLIEST INCARNATIONS, McCracken's freestanding, upright posts and plinths and pyramids and ziggurats were closer to the matte-black monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* than to the Minimalist cube. They were "singular" and not "specific" objects. In other words, they were never intended as objects in their own right, but as vehicles for something more metaphysical. And McCracken's planks, whose configuration he stumbled on in 1966, did something more. These leaning boards marked his "eureka," as he put it—the accident that revealed the project. This eureka did not simply result from a technical process or a deliberate action. It entailed a recognition: The fact that the board touched wall and floor simultaneously rendered it both thing and bridge. The very contingency of the planks—their tilting, their assent to gravity—introduced a host of possible associations, from anthropomorphism to something profoundly futuristic. The works became at once exotic and problematic, particularly with respect to the Minimalist context to which McCracken's earlier objects could be more easily ascribed. Art historian James Meyer, writing thirty-six years later, proposed that the

As if in lieu of Kubrick's 2001 spaceship, McCracken understood his planks from the get-go as a way to make contact between worlds, from within the confines of his studio space.

John McCracken, Y
1968, polyester resin
wood, 94 x 14 1/2 x



urd de Chardin, and written at the moment of the first US moon landing, as the explosive egued into the sleeper '70s. "As a child of the New Age," wrote Youngblood, making use of that term,

whom "nature" is the solar system and "reality" is an invisible environment of messages, I am urally hypersensitive to the phenomenon of vision. I have come to understand that all language out substitute vision . . . "[t]he history of the living world can be summarized as the elaboration ver more perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always something more to be seen."⁶

gblood's notion that "there is always something more to be seen" (citing Teilhard) posed er-expanding vision—one rooted not in an obdurate body viewing an obdurate object, a kind of scaleless, infinite universe rife with unknown bodies and possible intelligences. as not a full-fledged critical position, but instead offered detailed instances of how a ologically and pharmaceutically augmented vision might lead to a mode of perception ould not predict.

it happens, on the day of the opening for McCracken's last gallery show, New York was almost exactly 6:00 PM by what was later deemed a tornado, if only because of the action it wreaked in a mere ten minutes. On that storm-stressed evening, the weak and ny natural light and looming empty white walls of David Zwirner gallery were a far cry the bright desert glow in the photo outside McCracken's studio, where the seven solid sculptures on exhibit—three bronze "planks" and four rectangular steel columns—were ived. At Zwirner, the metal slabs, each meticulously honed and polished to a mirror y, oscillated between spectacular physical presence and something more eerily spectral. ronse planks, glowing gold, exuded an incandescent aura. Yet their unusually shallow-d prop against the wall meant that the perception of solid mass in these sculptures fully disappeared. The insistently vertical stainless-steel columns, by contrast, icily ted odd vanishing points and corners of the gallery made visible only by the lines where and floor met in reflection, multiplying themselves and the space ad infinitum, to ienting effect.

CRACKEN WORKED IN METAL for more than two decades, beginning with stainless steel in . But he added bronze to his repertoire only in 2005. Relative to the years he spent imenting with and refining his use of colored paint, lacquer, and polyester resin on wood,

John McCracken, *Flash*, 2010,
bronze, 100 x 16 x 2".



In McCracken's work, "perfection" amounts to a perceptual erasure, a *destabilization* at odds with the stark gestalt, the stamped-out shape, usually identified with Minimalist form.

MORGAN FISHER

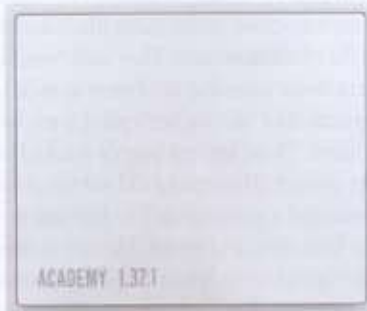
I have lived in Los Angeles for over forty years. One reason is that Los Angeles is an international art capital without also being a capital of the market. Perhaps it is the preeminent such city. The distance from the ma reduces the pressure that it exerts in general and moderates the frenzy that it routinely produces. Los Angeles has its own version of these, but sprawl helps to diffuse them. And the auctions here don't make headlines. The absence of market pressures and the abstractness that the monotony of the sprawl produces give me freedom. Freedom lets me take the long view. I came of age in the 1960s. Some of my work has been in relation to things that happened even longer ago than that, and sometimes on the other side of the world. To me these are as recent and near and available as what I see when I look out the window. I feel Los Angeles has given me the freedom to develop my work in relation to things that are not here and not now, some of which have been important to me from the beginning. I doubt I would have found this freedom elsewhere, although I can't know for certain. □



Morgan Fisher, *Cinemascope 2.35:1*, 2004, sandblasting on mirror, 24 x 56 1/2".



Morgan Fisher, *Silent 1.33:1*, 2004, sandblasting on mirror, 24 x 31 1/4".



Morgan Fisher, *Academy 1.37:1*, 2004, sandblasting on mirror, 24 x 32 1/4".



McCracken points to a dynamic, almost dialectical relationship between an ever-expanding consciousness and an ever-unknowable future vision.

I have often wondered what Smithson might have made of McCracken's monolithic oddities circa 1966, or the uncannily leaning planks that soon followed, had these inspired him to write as he did on Judd's work in the essay "The Crystal Land."¹⁰ Noting the discrepancy between Judd's insistently rational accounts and his eccentrically fabricated specific objects, Smithson allows that "the first time I saw Don Judd's 'pink plexiglas box,' it suggested a giant crystal from another planet." McCracken shares much of Smithson's otherworldly sight, his metaphysical yearning. Yet he diverges from Smithson's recourse to transcendence, from the notion that worldly physical and historical experience might be surpassed by a crystalline entropy. McCracken's metaphysics does not end in eschatology but in empathy.

BY 1986, when the bicoastal curator Edward Leffingwell organized McCracken's first retrospective, for the Institute for Art and Urban Resources, P.S. 1, the variety of works gathered under the title "Heroic Stance: The Sculpture of John McCracken 1965–1986" still seemed bereft of adequate critical assessment. McCracken was hardly unknown at the time, but his presence in the late '70s, especially on the East Coast, had become less conspicuous than a decade earlier. In the context of late-'80s New York, at the height of the AIDS epidemic, McCracken's quasi-Minimalist volumes and quasi-anthropomorphic, quasi-alien planks fell through a different set of critical cracks. The catalogue essays and many of the reviews analyzed the planks in terms of the more narrowly formal opposition of painting versus sculpture, or asserted a broadly earnest plea on behalf of McCracken's "heroic" aspirations.

At the time, critics also suggested that McCracken's best days had come and gone. The exhibition's impact, which in retrospect seems considerable, came belatedly. Indeed, in the decades following the P.S. 1 show, McCracken's reception has both expanded and flourished. The sticking points of an earlier generation's criticism—metaphor, anthropomorphism, anything that smacked of transcendence—no longer stuck. His embrace of the tabloid metaphysics of parallel universes and intelligent others only added to the resonance of his eccentric, not to say crackpot, enterprise.

Today, McCracken's art troubles yet another sort of established orthodoxy, one that remains deeply suspicious not of allusions (or even of romantic transcendence), but of material objects themselves. This suspicion was expressed in an otherwise inexplicably angry response to the extensive representation of McCracken's work at Documenta 12 in 2007. In addition to showcasing the entire range of McCracken's various sculptural and relief objects, the exhibition included a group of his rarely exhibited "Mandala" paintings from the early '70s. For many younger artists unfamiliar with McCracken's project, the show had a revelatory impact. But for curator and critic Okwui Enwezor, this particular presentation of McCracken's work elicited a baffled, deep-seated outrage. In his review, Enwezor wrote:

Left: John McCracken, *Swift*, 2007, bronze. Installation view, Kunsthalle Fridericianum, Kassel. From Documenta 12. Photo: Jens Zieher.

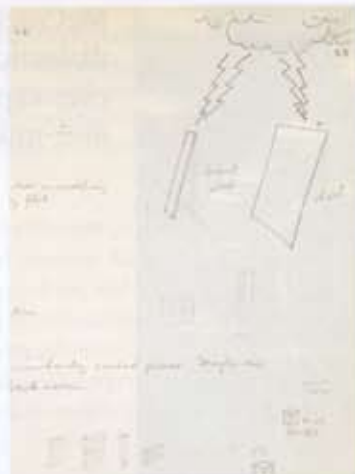
Below: John McCracken, *1974*, lacquer, poly fiberglass, wood, 92





Cracklen,
acrylic and wood.

Right: Detail of a page from a
sketchbook by John McCracken,
1966.



nted beyond Minimalism, toward a post-Minimal interest in physical force and it McCracken himself never limited the planks to such earthly physical properties. 6 drawing in one of his sketchbooks, for example, there are little cartoon lightning eting a pair of planks like electric quotation marks, an indication, perhaps, of n's recognition of the power that this particular placement conferred on a simple ard. As if in lieu of Kubrick's *2001* spaceship—a vehicle that physically transported things between worlds but that, unlike his monolith, ultimately failed—McCracken l his planks from the get-go as a way to make contact between worlds, from within s of his studio space. At some point after his late-'60s eureka, McCracken came to anks as *conduits*—as almost literally electric, I'd like to say. No longer simply link- istinct spaces, they declared and charged a unified "cosmic" field within which n could reaffirm his conviction that alien, as well as more familiar, intelligences are s he said in 1997:

work has puzzled me—especially as it relates to the plank. I kept coming back to making nd I kept wondering if I was being habitual or obsessive or responding to demand, or if s more to this plank form than I consciously realized. I wondered if they were a life form ewhere that was channeling through me and it didn't make any difference if I understood not. It worried me a bit—I believe in being intuitive, but not being unconscious . . . [W]hen hem at an angle then you have something that shifts away from our reality. It's partly in d and partly out of the world. It's like a visit.⁹

boards really did function as banal, material objects *and* as metaphoric conduits is what must have made them so difficult to accommodate within the discourse of m or even post-Minimalism. As with the artist's interest in hand-controlled craft, that McCracken's reductive forms were in the service of something *external* to their n directly counter to both Minimalist and post-Minimalist assertions of material ss and suspicions of "top-down" belief systems. McCracken's relationship to m, in other words, was as only one means toward a more open, "maximal" end. sense, McCracken's precise surfaces and halating color or reflectivity are meta- i that they suggest a realm beyond the literal, the profane, the real. But they do not rd an ideal gestalt, as might be said of East Coast Minimalism, or to the limits of cal perception and material refinement, as in *Finish Fetish*. Nor do they indicate a y sole omniscient God or being. Rather, cast metal, mirror polished, aids and abets tions with extraterrestrial intelligences and communications that increasingly came te McCracken's metaphysical imagination. McCracken points to a dynamic, almost relationship between an ever-expanding consciousness and an ever-unknowable on—the kind that Youngblood sketches, one that is technologically enhanced and tally alien.

PIERO GOLIA

Whether by manifest destiny or on a quest for gold, I set out for what was supposed to be a two-week LA vacation and stayed for ten years. And it didn't take long, driving the never-ending stretches of freeway and boulevards that run back and forth across the City of Angels, to feel its disproportionate, almost inhuman scale. I'm not sure what Mason Williams and Ed Ruscha were thinking when they decided to drive Ruscha's black Ford sedan from Oklahoma to Los Angeles in 1956, but it set into motion what would become an epic future for them. By the time I arrived, the landscape had changed some—the studio that Richard Jackson occupied on Colorado Boulevard had become a *Victoria's Secret*—but just like any actor, LA has weathered its ups and downs.

I remember, early on, meeting Eric Wesley. We were at La Buca on Melrose and started talking about what would become the Mountain School. It was the time of *Black Pussy* and the Dub Club. And then, everything started happening so fast, and with all of the perfect, Hollywood-style tears and joy you might expect. *O brave new world!* □



Piero Golia, *Luminous Sphere*, 2008–10, mixed media, installation view, Standard Hotel, Los Angeles, 2010. Photo: Joshua White.

décor psychologique de cet artiste historique, dont la biographie oscille entre les débuts de l'art minimal et la fascination pour les ovnis.

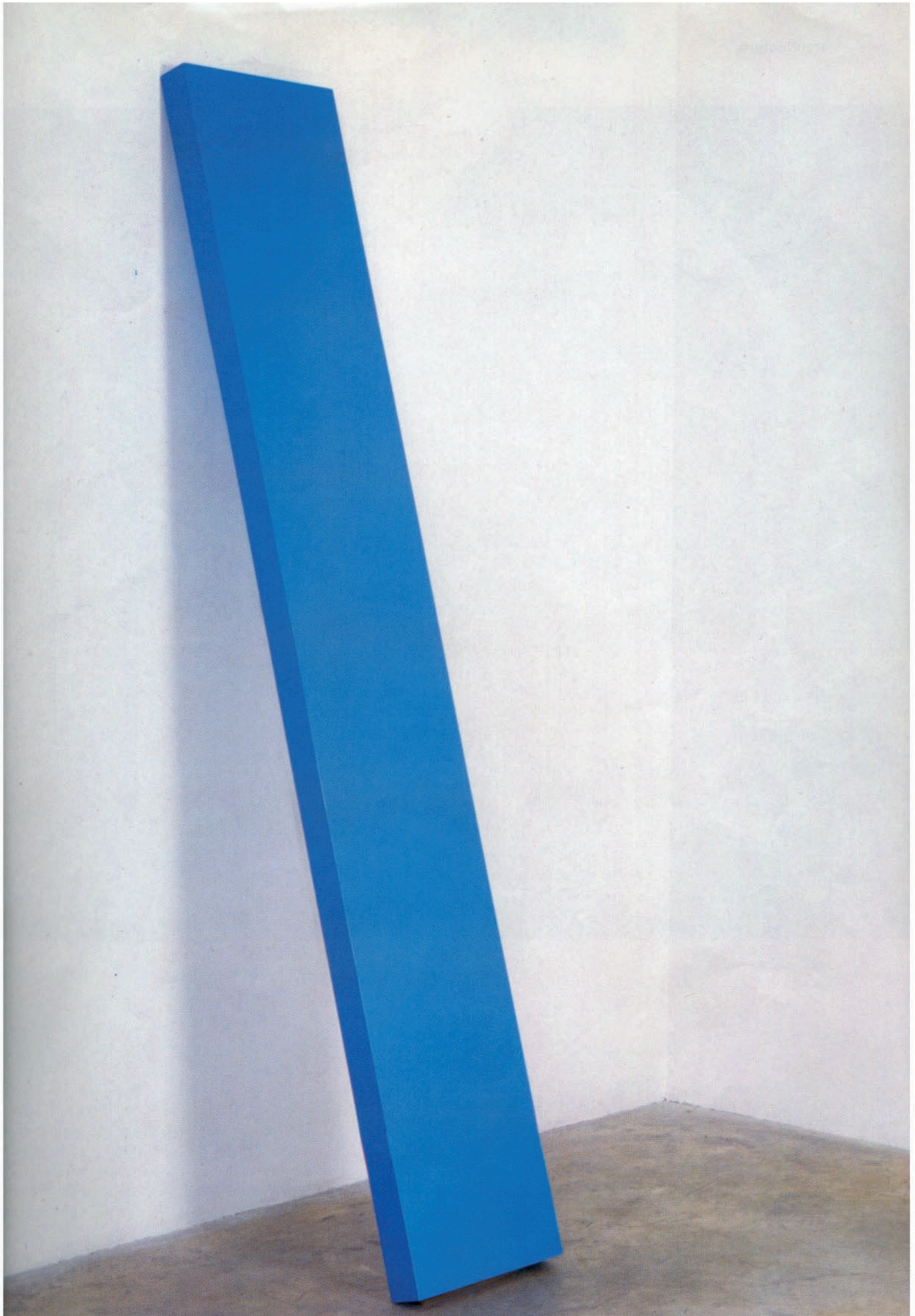
Dans la grande galaxie des artistes ayant, dans les années 60, produit des cubes, rectangles et boîtes de toutes sortes, McCracken reste le plus mystique et le plus fascinant. Né en 1934 à Berkeley en Californie, McCracken étudie les arts appliqués à Oakland jusqu'en 1965, où il devient professeur dans diverses universités à Los Angeles puis à New York. Et c'est en Californie que, dès 1963, il s'intéresse de près à l'art minimal, dont le centre névralgique est à New York : il lit tous les magazines susceptibles de parfaire sa compréhension du sujet. Après s'être essayé à l'expressionnisme abstrait, son œuvre prend donc la forme de volumes parallélépipédiques, blocs posés au sol ou planches adossées au mur : rien n'a changé depuis presque trente-cinq ans – en substance, parce que les détails ont été soigneusement peaufinés. Il commence à travailler des blocs de bois qu'il peint en bleu ou en rouge avant d'expérimenter toutes sortes de résines pour rendre la matière indéchiffrable. Il utilise tout d'abord le spray puis différentes techniques de laques et de ponçages pour donner à la couleur la présence la plus immanente possible. Aujourd'hui, il a atteint ce degré de perfection sensiblement effrayant qui laisse le contemplateur de ses œuvres totalement abasourdi. Il s'en défend presque : *"Je ne suis pas perfectionniste, mais j'essaie de faire des choses parfaites. L'œuvre en elle-même n'est pas parfaite, mais elle procure une expérience qui a à voir avec la perfection"*, explique-t-il.

Hors du temps. Le premier étonnement du spectateur vient pourtant du processus de fabrication : impossible de dire aujourd'hui si ses œuvres sont faites à la main ou de façon mécanique. Elles n'ont l'air ni molles ni solides, gazeuses peut-être, tant est profonde la couleur, des entrailles de laquelle scintillent de petites poussières argentées. Infiniment réfléchissantes, elles renvoient l'image de celui qui la regarde et de la salle qui l'abrite. Elles semblent hors du temps et de nos dimensions. *"Je suis un peu comme un médium : je permets à des œuvres de prendre part à notre monde à travers moi, comme si elles appartenaient à une autre réalité ou à un autre monde. Ça a aussi à voir avec la magie, je fais apparaître des choses. Je pense que c'est ce que font les artistes : ils matérialisent des choses. Mais on peut avoir la vision de quelque chose d'extraordinaire : être capable de la matérialiser est une autre étape"*,

poursuit John McCracken, qui aime se comparer à *"une porte"* que les œuvres empruntent pour partager notre réalité. Si elles sont la plupart du temps adossées contre le mur, comme le seraient des planches banales dans un atelier, ce n'est pas le fait du hasard : McCracken les installe de la sorte pour qu'elles soient à la jonction du sol (le monde en trois dimensions sur lequel sont posés les objets concrets et les hommes de notre planète) et sur le mur (l'espace en deux dimensions de la représentation, de l'illusion et de la virtualité). A la frontière du matérialisme et de la spiritualité, en somme. Et c'est proprement décontenancés que nous nous tenons en face de ces créatures étranges, inertes mais comme chargées d'énergie. Il faut dire que cet artiste, qui a appris à piloter des avions pour comprendre ce que c'est que voler, est un rien obsédé par les mondes parallèles. *"J'aimerais monter à bord d'un ovni et voler. Un ovni qui serait également une machine à remonter le temps, capable de traverser la matière sans blesser quiconque. Il semble qu'on pilote ces engins avec des pensées et des sentiments plutôt que des contrôles mécaniques."* La création même de ses sculptures s'apparente à une sorte d'inspiration mystique : *"Quand je fais une œuvre, je la visualise plus que je ne l'intellectualise. Si elle semble bonne, alors je la réalise"*, explique McCracken, qui, pour autant qu'il joue les "Facteur Cheval", étudie minutieusement sur ordinateur le profil de ses sculptures tout autant que leur inscription dans l'espace qui va les recevoir. Mais ses intentions dépassent, on l'aura compris, le simple désir de faire partager au spectateur l'expérience de la perfection et de la beauté. *"Nous vivons à l'intérieur d'une œuvre d'art cosmiquement colossale et actuelle. Nous pouvons faire – de nous-mêmes et de notre monde – de l'art. Tout ce que nous savons (et ne savons pas) est impliqué. (Le reste de l'univers y compris, car le reste de l'univers n'est pas indifférent à ce que nous faisons.) Nous devrions nous rendre compte que nous sommes tous des êtres fantasques et pouvons rendre nos vies plus intéressantes, vitales et évoluées. Nous le pouvons en accomplissant le saut vers l'art supérieur et la formation d'un futur grand, aventureux et incroyablement ludique."*

A l'heure des œuvres bavardes et compassionnelles, dans la cohue des "jeunes artistes" qui ont tous quelque chose à nous dire sur leur vie ordinaire, les œuvres de John McCracken, qui nous reviennent forcément du passé mais nous invitent à envisager l'avenir, s'imposent à nous aussi comme des havres de paix, et des monuments d'intelligence.

Link, John McCracken (2000).
231 x 38 x 6,5 cm.
Laque, résine, fibre de verre
et contreplaqué.
Collection particulière, Paris.



REVIEWS

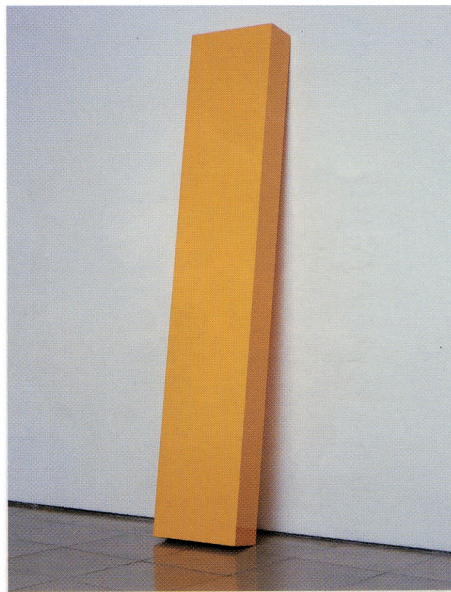
LONDON: LISSON GALLERY

JOHN MCCrackEN

5 July – 24 August 2002

www.lissongallery.com

It is always interesting to revisit art that you thought you knew and to see it in a different cultural climate. So much post Brit-art is filled with the clutter of everyday life: think LA neo-Pop painting, Takahashi-style installations, or the regained interest in 'slacker' artists like Jack Pierson. As the hedonistic glamour of Fischerspooner sends us crashing into an elegantly wasted twenty-first century, the 'coolness' of McCracken's art seems cooler than ever. Despite the lack of any direct cultural reference or critique here, the work can conjure a myriad of associations. The apparent perfection of these highly lacquered objects seems to speak of *grand luxe*. McCracken's vibrant, shimmering planks lend the gallery the air of a Ferrari showroom. The sheen implies superficiality, denying access and offering only dumb reflection. Even the show's private view card aches glamour: it reproduces a luscious sunrise seen from McCracken's New Mexico home. There is also something undeniably phallic about these glistening



erect structures. Their hard surfaces suggest a looming masculine presence and imply a heroic singularity. Like the best of Julian Opie's works, McCracken's slabs present a chic take on existentialism, and have all the gothic exuberance of a *vanitas*.

It is hard to imagine McCracken giving time to such poetic or culturally specific readings of his work. However, more traditional approaches are still useful; the works re-stage the painting/sculpture

dialectic and offer a timely reminder that the Lisson is the 'white cube' *par excellence*, replete with sealed concrete floors and huge plate-glass windows. The windows have once again been pitted, cracked and scratched by playground missiles launched from the adjacent school. What better way to see the immaculate works of McCracken than in a space that attempts, but fails, to transcend the everyday? Maybe McCracken needs to be dirtied up for our new century. Imagine the scratch of a car key down the length of one of those monoliths.

JONATHAN R JONES

JOHN MCCrackEN, installation views at Lisson Gallery, 2002. Photo: Dave Morgan. Courtesy: Lisson Gallery, London

