

**"COLOUR IS EVERYTHING"
"NOWHERE = NOW HERE"**

Luk Lambrecht

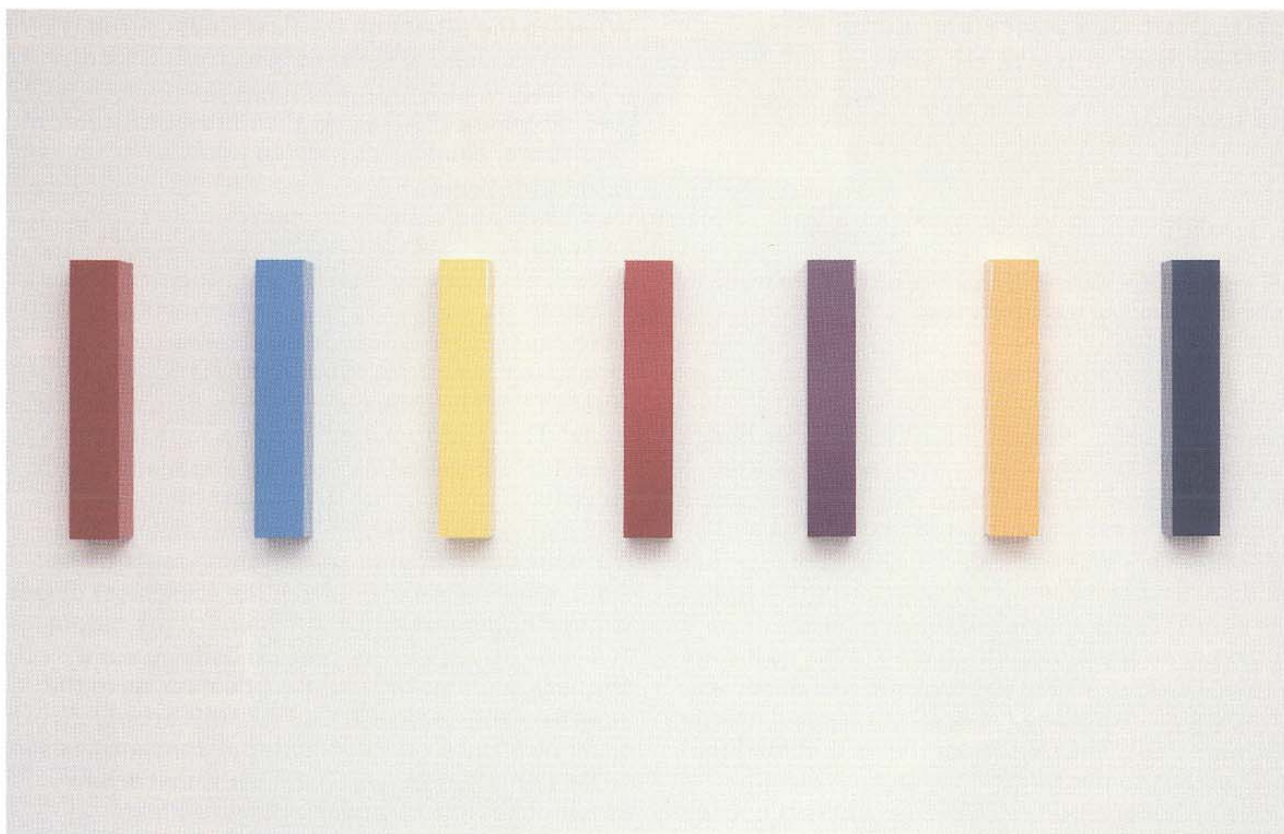
"A successfully abstract sculpture will tend to make the space surrounding it abstract too."

Public interest in art really does seem to be directly proportional to the value ascribed to the artist and his work by the art market. The vague interests shared by the art market and the official art institutes have always resulted in an abrasive relationship but if interest in the valuable is controlled by the consensus principles of the market, then one could speak of counterfeiting the history of the art output. Whichever way you turn you are faced with art which skulks in the crevices of time and creeps between them. The reason for this is that the factors leading to the selection and thus rejection strive to attain a system which is coherent both in its style and reasoning, in which deviation erodes the value system and to an extent prevents verification. A museum is an arena where an imbalanced chronological setting for the art scene can be rectified. John McCracken's work, which alludes to visible reality as if through a rear-view mirror, is insufficiently known and studied. That is to say he does not rank among the powerful United States 'seaboard' and consequently, like others including Ed Ruscha, was never assessed – or assessed too late – on his artistic work and ideas.

America's West Coast is synonymous with paradise on earth and a carefree land of milk and honey. It is perhaps logical that artists from sun-drenched California do not in the first instance create industrially-inspired sculpture, as did Carl Andre, Richard Serra and Robert Morris on the other and rather more drab side of this vast land mass. Heavy industry with smoking chimneys exerts an influence on the direction in which art cuts its path, both in terms of form and content. Steel and concrete steal into the art as signs of 'context in content'. The burning sun over Los Angeles makes the world shimmer into the background – the atmospheric perception of reality trickles through slightly squinting eyes, which filter the light to a point where the quivering concoction of light and object bestows a new dimension on existing reality. The time was ripe in the sixties for an artist to reject the 'traditional' interpretation of colour and mood through, for instance, paint on

Whereas the artists on the East Coast of the US called on industrial, anonymous procedures in order to find a new style which pulled away from the ego-gestural to satisfy their pre-occupation with space, boundaries and the (mobile) behaviour of the observer, the West Coast artists were bent on studying perception through light and colour. Larry Bell and Robert Irwin and especially James Turrell, who was much in demand and celebrated in Europe, knew exactly how to position the intangible aspect of experiencing art in the spotlight through art which could not immediately be incorporated into the tangible and material tactile 'style'. These were the artists who were listed by the art critics under the heading 'Light and Space Movement' and who were, in an art-historical context, just left wavering as little more than a bold footnote within contemporary American art. The 'hard' minimalists did not call the (concrete) object in itself into question within their artistic output and were principally focused on seeking out a physical relationship with the observer, as in the most extreme case with Carl Andre's art which could be walked on. That 'material' tendency existed less or not at all with the West Coast artists who dropped the idea of the object as material derivative of a thought process, together with all the commercial repercussions imaginable as a consequence. What is extremely intriguing and attractive about an artist like John McCracken is that he builds a bridge between the two parallel extreme 'minimal' visions of art production. In an *oeuvre* which spans roughly 40 years, but which in itself evolved very little, John McCracken succeeded in a logical but amazingly subtle way to combine colour and shape.

'The best of both worlds' – that expression typifies John McCracken's work in a few short words: the solid quality in the hard minimal is combined with a controlled illusory colour skin, which draws the sculptural mass away from any heaviness. The conscientious observer finds himself tumbling into an unfathomable depth 'produced' by a patient process of laying down layer upon layer of colour and subsequently the deep-rooted colour skin is polished to give the surface an extremely in-depth sheen. The sheen is the result of diligent craftsmanship, yes even a kind of return to times when the painter's craft involved the so-called 'preparation' of the support, which was an essential and fundamental part of being artistically active. The magnificent polished sheen obliquely reminded me of Caravaggio's splendid painting of Narcissus in which a gracefully crouching youth/Adonis succeeds in recognizing himself in the most profound depth of the paint in the perceived reflection, at once both eternal and yet ephemeral. Introducing

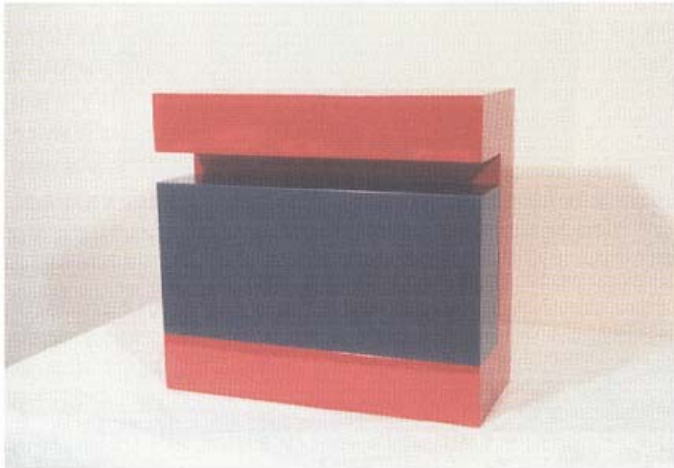


Ascent, 2002

work of art repeatedly generated high-profile controversy. Michael Fried wrote about this very subject in 'Art & Objecthood', clearly expressing an opinion. In this he takes a stand against art which brings reflection into play with the aim of creating an interaction with the observer. The work then pushes him as it were into the role of an actor who, willingly or otherwise, sees and feels himself as one with the work. With works of art employing reflection as an inherent artistic procedure, there lurks the risk of theatricality. What is meant here is that the 'static' work of art becomes a machine of yearning in which the observer sees and feels his consciously experienced time slipping away and that the work of art as such disappears. In that sense much of Robert Morris' early work could be called 'theatrical', in contrast with the famous reflections by the Italian Michelangelo Pistoletto, in which the silk-screen printed figurative illustration on the support does no more than nudge the observer into the role of background 'onlooker' at most. In John McCracken's work, which gleams to perfection, the problem of experiencing time is not immediately at issue. Just as Barbara Rose so sharply described his work as 'containers for colour', the attention is drawn to the sensually

stimulating 'presence' of colour in a form which provides no diffusive distraction towards circumstances/situations recognizable 'in' the world.

John McCracken's work excels in a cunningness of style and does not limp along behind the virtual caperings associated with 'current' art. Ignoring development, evolution and changes in style contradicts the wishes and hankerings of an artistic following which avidly looks for the new and the hype associated with innovation. John McCracken proves with his consistent investigation that he questions and re-formulates the internal logic of his production in the continuation of his pursuit of a perfect symbiosis between surface, structure, light and colour. In artistic circles John McCracken is principally known for the marvellous planks which lean against the usually white walls in galleries and museums. The presence of a red shiny plank between the floor and the wall not only raises the issue of painting and sculpture in sharp profile but also the search for a spatial border area and a style of presentation which thrusts the work of art into a state of temporariness. The leaning plank certainly does appear incongruous in a museum hall or gallery; perhaps the reason it is



Naxos, 1965



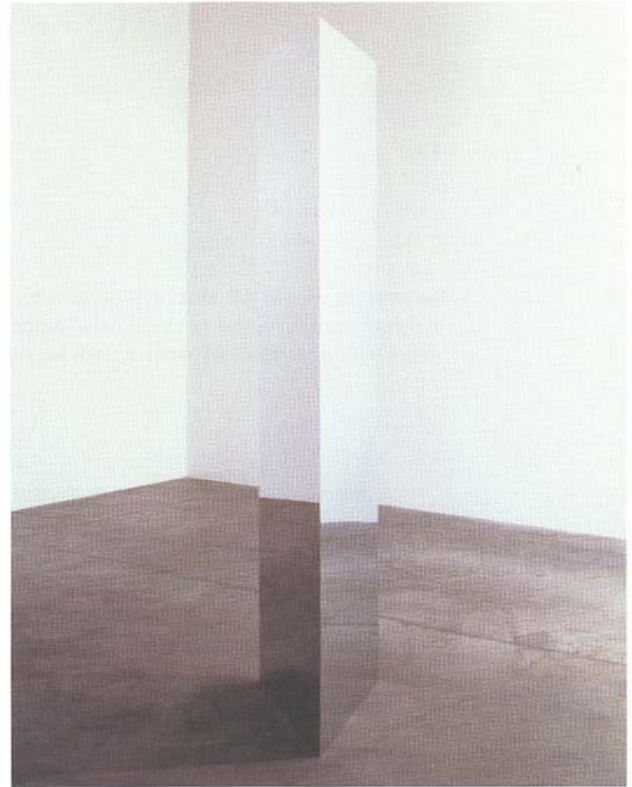
Whiz, 2001

there is because it is intended to move it to a more appropriate location later straight against the wall or quite possibly to be laid simply flat against the floor. In group exhibitions a leaning plank functions as a signal – as an alluring spatial disturbance which as a rule creates a question mark in a 'minimal' art context which has grown out of a dogmatic transformation of rock-hard principles. The leaning plank also evokes and immediately 'incarnates' a reference to a human posture/attitude – the leaning against a wall also indicates a certain form of nonchalance or a relaxed feeling in looking at and examining things. The other sculptures which also assume the shape of an upright volume or a beam fixed to a wall, acquire human proportions in respect of the surrounding space. John McCracken: "The plank is 'out' of the world (or on the edge of it), the column or block-form more 'in' the world."

The sculptures in a clear vivid colour release energy and charge the exhibition as a place of action with an atmosphere which is hard to define but which stimulates a sense of well-being during the observation and 'mobile' experience. A symphony of colour dissolves the shape of the sculpture

which supports and carries the surface and allows the colour freedom to interact with the surrounding reflections, the observer and changes in light. Brilliant pieces from 1994 with 'expressive' titles like 'origin', 'contact', 'centre', 'spirit', 'intent', 'element', 'evoke' ... are like mural sculptures, identical in format, but each of them shows on at least two sides a corner 'cut-off' such that the light play in the sculpture produces numerous shades of colour. This is a sunny dialect form of minimal art in which it is not the rigorous principle of the concept which dominates but rather the evocation and sensation of colour as a potential guide for an alternative spatiality. The human scale in John McCracken's sculptures is another significant constant in his output. The 'columns' appear to be abstract bodies which invite intimate dialogue with the visitor within the space. After all, the perfect state of the sculpture's skin ensures that 'keeping distance' becomes an inherent characteristic of this work. 'Nole me tangere' was the motto used in the mid-eighties as a formal sculptural keynote that was important in innovative sculpture with artists like Lili Dujourie, Niek Kemps, Anish Kapoor and Jean-Marc Bustamante. For McCracken intactility is purely within the shape that his work assumes,

whereas in the work of the artists cited the 'intention' to distance was nurtured by the content-philosophical and (existential) narrative culture medium. Artists like Niek Kempers or Jean-Marc Bustamante filtered reality to a point where the eye is pressed into a maelstrom between a conscious awareness of reality and optical disillusion. John McCracken's imagery is closely related to architecture, to the basic reference of building. His visibly perfect 'columns' rise as architectural signs/totems within the context of an exhibition, not to be interpreted as a model but as an archetypal form, subjected to the mastery of colour. It is evident that John McCracken's work is today very state-of-the-art, seen through the eyes of contemporary design. It is striking that young designers have liberated themselves from the cocoon of the black-and-white aesthetic and are engaged in full-scale experimentation with new synthetic materials and bright colours which change the drab everyday surroundings into one radiating a trendy loungey atmosphere. In this setting John McCracken's work also seems to be completely at home: its simplicity of form and the stimulating influence of the colour are ingredients now freely applied in the world of contemporary design. The seductive magnetism of his work is at odds with the modernistic intention to review a work of art with a rational, detached attitude. Under the alluring surface of the sculptures, however, there lies a latent rational process of mathematical calculation. The technical and isometric concept and computer-aided drawings betray the artist's perfection in terms of thought and creativity. His work is therefore the result of meticulous geometrical pondering of three-dimensional proportions from which John McCracken is able to describe for the craftsmen how they should execute the 'containers for colour'. In that sense there is once again what could be described as a symbiosis between rational thinking and expert execution of the structure of the work. The multi-layered application of colour divulges only very slowly its ideal moment via a protracted artistic process where the artist himself decides with his own subjective eye when the finishing point has been reached. In that sense one can speak of looking as creation; the eye determines what it sees and that is and remains the observer's personal privilege. John McCracken: 'Where is deep space to be found? In a landscape? In a stone? In the world? In outer space? Or is it simply viewable through a crack in the mind?' John McCracken's artistic output is an exercise in balance and perfection, both in terms of execution as in terms of eliciting an oriented sensory interaction between the observer and sculptures which refer to architecture and design. John McCracken's artistic output is undeniably of art-historical importance and for that reason it is unjustly over-



Sagittarius, 1988

shadowed by work produced by the 'hard' minimalists. John McCracken comes up with artistic ideas and designs them in the light of a broader and slightly Utopian reflection on (collective) life and bathes his art in the most beautiful colours imaginable as a deeply respectful homage to light. Surely enough this is a salutary sign.

"In some ways, my aims in art are simple: I try to make beautiful objects. I try to make them so they seem to be from 'out of this world', or so that they reflect the perfection or sophistication I think is possible in the development of mankind. (We humans are brilliant and accomplished, but at the same time we have a long way to go before we are what could be called 'advanced')."

John McCracken in an e-mail dated 3rd July 2004.

Quotations/notes by John McCracken, from the John McCracken catalogue, Galerie Art et Public, Geneva, 1994.