

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



View of
"John McCracken:
A Retrospective,"
2011; at Castello
di Rivoli.

INTERNATIONAL

TURIN

JOHN MCCRACKEN CASTELLO DI RIVOLI MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

■ ON VIEW THROUGH JUNE 19

American artist John McCracken passed away on Apr. 8, just a month after this exhibition—his first major museum survey—opened in Italy. A unique figure in the West Coast scene, McCracken, born in 1934 in Berkeley, is best known for handmade planklike monochrome objects. Often exhibited leaning against the wall, they reflect their environment, thanks to flat, high-gloss surfaces.

The exhibition, curated by the museum's codirector Andrea Bellini, was conceived in close collaboration with the artist. It offers a chronological exploration of McCracken's work. Starting with his early abstract paintings from the 1960s (a stylistic blend of Stuart Davis-inspired American Modernism, archaic patterns and graphic urban signs), the display leads the visitor to the artist's faceted sculptures of the last few years, also characterized by highly polished surfaces and simple geometric forms.

The show examines some major themes that preoccupied the artist for many years: the relationship between painting and the object as established through pure color, ancient architectural forms, mysticism, cosmology and UFOlogy. Two intimate rooms with small early works open the exhibition, dem-

onstrating McCracken's studio-based, introspective practice. Elsewhere, large, immaculate spaces are dedicated to monumental objects of varying shapes from the past 40 years—enigmatic, silent presences with deep and vivid color.

Among a number of masterpieces here was *Blue Post and Lintel I* (1965), a structure made of a block poised on two supports. One might think of wooden sculptures by Carl Andre, whose work had a strong influence on the artist early on. McCracken's synthetic color relates to the culture of customized cars he observed on what he called the "intergalactic" freeways of Los Angeles. The ritual form recalls ancient monuments like Stonehenge. The schematic yet evocative structure alludes to the artist's deep interest in outer space and science fiction: "They're like aliens; in a way, separate beings," McCracken liked to say about his works. By means of the dense color and almost mirrorlike surfaces, the objects reflect their surrounds and thus "dissolve."

The "mandala paintings" from the early 1970s, such as *Tantric* (1972), confirm the mystical aspect of McCracken's practice. His works from the 1980s are even more surprising. *Untitled #V* (1985), for example, is an astounding object. The plank of wood is covered with polished colored resins, as in the "classic" works of the 1960s. Here, yellow, orange and green pigments were mixed directly on the surface, producing a marblelike effect. At first the object appears almost archaic, but the extremely lively and shiny piece conjures a sort of slick decoration geared toward pure surface effect. The work is a "fetish" object, a pure image and a work of Pop art.

Therein lies the historic force and impact of this show. While his appearance in group exhibitions over the years suggested that McCracken's work represents the interaction between abstraction and popular culture, visionary art and the postmodern condition, utopia and a specific form of spirituality, now we have clarification and confirmation of his position. Although rather modest in size (the show includes only 53 works), the presentation constitutes a precise and very clear discourse on the artist's achievement. Accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue featuring important early texts by McCracken, the show highlights a too-often overlooked keystone in the history of American art.

—Yann Chateigné