

# Artist Walk: John McCracken

By Bryant Rousseau

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John McCracken at David Zwirner, Installation View. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York.

NEW YORK— If you're facing a transpacific flight and have left your reading material at home, all may not be lost. **John McCracken** could be your seatmate, and a conversation with this eccentric, brilliant artist—a down-to-earth metaphysicist who will tell you matter-of-factly that he has seen ghosts and time traveled—could make the 14 hours fly by.

The tall, lanky sculptor (b. 1934), a key figure in the history of Minimalist art, who first came to prominence in the mid-1960s with his "Planks"—monochromatic, rectangular slabs placed leaning against walls—aptly describes himself as a "materialist and transcendentalist." He is keenly concerned with the physical properties of his pieces—and will spend hours upon hours mixing colors and sanding surfaces—but also wants his work to suggest other dimensions, alternative realities, the artwork of aliens, a "hallucination become real."

McCracken's third exhibition at **David Zwirner** is one of two shows inaugurating the New York gallery's enormous new space. On opening night, McCracken took us on a guided tour of his new works.

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"Good artwork is like a [good] person: It needs presence, separation and connectedness to everything around it. It needs awareness of infinity, but presence in the now," McCracken says as we stand in the exhibition's first, smaller room, where are displayed an eight-figure wall piece (*Diamond*, 2006) and two new Planks (*Silver* and *Gold*, both from 2006)—all in subtly different shades of black.

McCracken explains that while investing a work with a strong individuality is extremely important to him, he also wants it to have a positive relation to what's around it—an effect achieved, in his view, by the highly reflective surfaces of his work. Gaze at a McCracken and, depending on the angle, you might see your own face, another sculpture—or something completely unexpected. No Clyfford Still, McCracken isn't at all picky about where his works, once sold, are displayed. In fact, he welcomes placements he hadn't thought of. "The work can go anywhere," he says, adding that he especially liked seeing a work of his that a collector had situated amidst foliage and which became all but invisible as it mirrored the leaves around it.

"It just disappeared; it was here, but not here, existed physically, but also in the imagination. [It reminded me] of something out of *Star Trek*."

(It's interesting to note, however, that McCracken does pay a great deal of attention to how his works will be shown at an exhibition, and he uses sophisticated 3-D modeling software to visualize how his work will appear in specific galleries. He gave a big thumbs up to the new Zwirner space: "It's a beautiful gallery; the light is even better than I had hoped." He added that his wife particularly liked how his sculptures can be partially seen from the street: "She said you can see just enough to be intrigued and feel [compelled] to go in to see some more.")

McCracken isn't shy about admitting that he wants his works to be, simply put, beautiful. "I visualize something right, something strong, something beautiful—then try to make it."

But for a work to be judged successful by him, it's not enough that it be lovely to look at. It needs a "spiritual" quality, serving as a physical manifestation of "what's known by the higher self, the intuitive self ... [It should] suggest a more advanced sensibility."

Not surprisingly, McCracken is a firm believer in the paranormal. "I like UFOs and ESP; I think Carlos Castaneda [the author who wrote of his supernatural experiences with Native American shamans] actually did those far-out things he said he did. A thousand years from now, we'll be

used to these concepts, but it's hard for us now to grapple with these off-the-edge realities.”

When we moved into the next, larger room, it was hard not to gasp: A half-dozen slim, black, rectangular towers, roughly eight-feet tall, confront the viewer. One thinks immediately of the World Trade Center.

McCracken, however, seemed a little taken aback by the comparison. “I had no thought of that at all,” he said, but, after a thoughtful pause, added: “Such pieces could be viewed as a beautiful, positive memorial, don't you think? Suggestive of life, the future, infinity.”

Viewers, he said, are always bringing unexpected interpretations of his work to his attention—and he loves hearing what people have to say.

“Seeing art is creative, it's an action. I don't insist that everyone see what I think you're supposed to see. People come up and tell me about all these things they see that I haven't seen before, and it informs me about my own work. We need other people to help us see. I see a UFO, you see your dog, and I like that.”

But true to his Minimalist roots, McCracken is never trying to represent something from the actual world. “I try to avoid all associations so the piece can be by itself. If a work talks too much, you lose the presence of the work; it becomes illustration.”

When asked about the production process for these pieces made of resin, fiberglass and plywood, McCracken emphasized what a laborious, hands-on process it is. To achieve the intense polish, he goes through a dozen or more sessions of sanding to remove the slightest bump or smallest scratch.

“It has taken me years to get as good as I am [with the sanding], and I'm still not as good as I want to be. I tried to [train] an assistant, but he just couldn't do it. It's grueling, exacting work.” When he's close to finishing a work, he'll shine a light on it and place his face up against the surface, searching for any flaws. “I am a perfectionist, but I don't like being one. It drives me crazy,” he laughed.

In talking about what inspires him to continue to create, McCracken seemed to allude to a near contemporary, the Conceptualist Lawrence Weiner, who, as part of his “Declaration of Intent,” famously said, “The [art]work need not be built.”

“Sometimes I think I've thought a work up so clearly, I don't have to make it. Some artists claim that as a feeling, and I can sort of see that, but it just never works for me. I have to go ahead and make the piece real. I can have the most clear visualization, but the actual work is always

different—and always way past the visualization I imagined.

“I have to work my tail off, and sometimes before I start, I think ‘Oh boy, I don’t know if I want to go through this,’ but by the time you get the wax on at the end, it’s well worth it.”