

INTERVIEW / JOHN McCracken and MATTHEW HIGGS

MATTHEW HIGGS: What did your family do? Were they interested in art?

JOHN McCracken: My ancestors came to America about five generations back. My father was an engineer, an inventor, a cattle rancher, a deer hunter, and a private pilot. My mother was a school teacher, a reader, and an astonishing fount of love. My mother's mother was the first woman mayor in the U.S. I have two sisters, both younger than me. No one in the family, as far as I know, was especially interested in art.

What aspects of your youth impacted upon your subsequent development as an artist? Were you a voracious reader?

My imagination, for one, and my interests in psychology, metaphysics (when I was seven I saw my grandfather's ghost, and at seventeen I time-traveled), cosmology (how did all this stuff get made?), and UFOs (seen hints of them here and there, in waking and dreaming). I wasn't exactly a voracious reader, but I read books that involved frontiers—early America, the early West, science fiction, and space travel.

Could you say a little more about your experiences of time travel? Perhaps relating it to your expressed interest in frontiers?

My time-travel experience involved two times and places. First, I'd just graduated from high school in Northern California near Mt. Shasta. I'd gotten off the school bus for the last time and was spending a while standing at the edge of the highway gazing around and thinking. I'd been wondering what I would do with my life, and about "big questions" like "Is there a God?" and so on. As I looked toward the sunset over the western mountains, a feel-

ing came over me. I felt I was being watched by someone or something behind me, in the sky. I turned around and looked in that direction. Nothing notable seemed to be there except a few clouds, but the feeling was still there and persisted for some time. It was a strong experience, but, well, that was that.

Then about fifteen years later, in 1966–67, in my studio in Venice, California, I was thinking and musing one evening, and I happened to remember my earlier experience of being watched. I wondered what it might mean. I visualized that earlier scene. I saw myself standing on the road, I saw the sunset, and so on, and I felt again the odd feeling that I was being watched from the sky.

And then like a brick it hit me: I was seeing that scene *from the same point in the sky where I had earlier felt I was being watched*. I had spontaneously “come in” right there. It bowled me over. There *had* been someone watching me then, and it was *me, from the future!* To the accompaniment of something like bolts of lightning, I banged back and forth between my two selves for awhile, seeing everything from one perspective, then the other. It was a very weird and interesting experience.

As to frontiers, that experience hints at one: inner reality. Physical reality is big, but inner reality, though slippery, is bigger—and it permits time travel, as does the mind.

Was the decision to go to art school a natural one, or more complicated?

After high school I spent four years in the Navy. Before my discharge, I went to the lowest and most isolated compartment on my ship (“Lower Sound”; I was a Sonar operator) and thought about what I would do next. I was logical about it: I had always drawn pictures; I decided to go to art school. I went to the Bay Area because I was more or less familiar with it—my family had lived there for some years. It was an interesting moment—it was more or less “Kerouac time.” Abstract Expressionism and, to an extent, Surrealism were strong currents. I thought of San Francisco and Oakland. The California College of Arts and Crafts [C.C.A.C.] in Oakland seemed interesting and friendly—and a little exotic—so I went there.

During your early years at C.C.A.C. were there significant events, friendships, etc. that informed your relationship with art?

Most of the courses at C.C.A.C. were interesting and informative (even memorizing art history slides seemed handy), but hanging out in the cafeteria, and looking at revelatory New York art magazines that others had brought in, was where I discovered “fine art.” When I started art school I thought I would be a commercial artist; I changed my mind. Several practicing artists who taught at C.C.A.C. were influential—Gordon Onslow-Ford (trusting the self; freedom), Tony DeLap (sheer invention), and

the writer and critic John Coplans (from *Artforum*, where, in a way, I had wanted to have my first show: I'd seen so much art in the pages of *Artforum*, it was almost the same as seeing art in galleries.)

How, specifically, did these art magazines impress you?

The first magazine I saw was called, I think, *It Is*, and it focused mostly on the Abstract Expressionists. The magazine's title kind of said it all: art is; what it's "about" is right there in front of you; the reality art refers to isn't so much something somewhere else, it's right there; it's the work. Then I saw *Artforum* and others. In *It Is* it wasn't an individual artist's work that caught my eye, but the idea of art with its own being. But in the other magazines it was certain artists that I noticed: Barnett Newman first—seeing his work impressed me—and then later Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, Frank Stella, some of the British artists, and so on—kind of a flood of interesting art. I did see a big Newman museum show at about that time, but I was mostly excited by the art I saw in the magazines.

Artforum started out in San Francisco in the early 1960s, concurrent with your time at C.C.A.C. What was it about John Coplans that struck you?

John Coplans exuded a certain serious attitude about art that I was impressed by. I think he had something to do with Nicholas Wilder coming to see my work. During my master's degree studies, I decided to make a body of work that I would either show as my master's show or as a commercial gallery show—which-ever came first. The gallery show happened first. Nicholas Wilder came to see my work in 1964 and we agreed to a show at his Los Angeles gallery the following year. I had already shown some in the Bay Area but I didn't feel that was the place for me to pursue my career. Everything seemed to be happening in Los Angeles and New York. I moved to Los Angeles concurrent with my show there. Later on I taught with John Coplans—and Tony DeLap—at U.C. Irvine. I had a lot of conversations with John at Irvine.

Could you say something about the "shifts" in your practice in the late 1950s and early 1960s? These shifts might be characterized by a move from the gestural abstractions of the late 1950s, through the "patchwork" abstractions of the early 1960s, to the more geometric paintings of 1963 and 1964, to the first relief sculptures of 1964, which anticipated the subsequent monochromatic sculptures such as *Blue Post and Lintel* or *Yellow Pyramid*, both from 1965. Your approaches and working methods were undergoing rapid changes. Was this a period of great personal intensity, experimentation, and excitement? Thinking back on that time, how do you account for such rapid developments?

At the time I thought I was just experimenting with one thing after another, but then I gradually realized that I was working *toward* something—a kind of distilling process aimed at producing distinct materializations. The earliest works were composed of many elements, then the elements coalesced and simplified, and then they got to the point where they turned into different materials, and then what had been paintings became reliefs with hard surfaces, and then the reliefs got deeper, and jumped off the wall in the form of sculptures. The whole development was unconscious and intuitive enough that I was surprised when I fully realized what had been happening.

The first sculptures—which I showed with Nick Wilder—were somewhat anthropomorphic. They were pedestal pieces with slots that could, to an extent, be read as figures or heads—they were frontal, and had sides and a back, etc. Then when I realized further that I was in the realm of sculpture, I let the forms get more purely sculptural—using, to a degree, architecture, and especially ancient architecture, as points of inspiration and reference.

Early on, even before I went to art school, I had been impressed with ancient Egyptian work—some sculpture, but especially architecture; big stone columns, temples, and so on. I remember looking earlier at art history books, and wondering what was what. I'd always done drawings, but I didn't know what I felt or thought about art—I hardly knew what art was. I looked at books to see if anything rang a bell, and at the time I thought nothing really did, except that—somewhat unconsciously—a little bell did ring when I came to the Egyptian stuff. Those people seemed to know something about three-dimensional form that no one else had much of a grasp on.

With works such as *Blue Post and Lintel* and *Yellow Pyramid* and other things at that time, I was trying to find forms that had a certain kind of strength—related, I think, to what I had seen in Egyptian work, but it was more like just taking a cue from some of their things and a few other things and trying in my way to come up with forms that seemed to “make it.”

In that connection, I didn't exactly intellectualize my work into existence, but rather *visualized* it into existence. If it *looked* right, then it *was* right.

You left the Bay Area for Los Angeles in 1965, around the time of your first show at Nick Wilder's Los Angeles gallery. What are the most distinctive memories of the Wilder show?

Just being in Los Angeles and showing there made for indelible experiences, and the show looked good, and it seemed like a “right on” sort of thing. But one thing that impressed me a lot was that the Los Angeles artists I admired came to my opening—Bob Irwin, Craig Kaufmann, Larry Bell, Joe Goode, and a bunch of others.

Did living and working in Los Angeles have any immediate impact on your thinking?

As spread-out as Los Angeles is, there was a sense of community among the artists there. A lot seemed to be going on, and it felt good to be in a place where other artists were tuned in and making interesting things.

California culture did of itself offer some inspiration for art, too. The style of the place was sort of willy-nilly creativity. And the cars, with their sometimes attractive finishes, was one thing I looked at. The car-finish materials were what I was using and learning to use for my work. I wasn't into surfboards—despite what some people have thought—as much as cars. Not that many of them had great finishes—but the light in Los Angeles does something, too, and anyway, there were some “inspiring” glints of things here and there in Los Angeles that I was able to bounce off of in my track toward making what I felt in my intuitions was possible. Los Angeles was kind of an “anything goes” sort of place that also harbored a number of far-seeing, serious, creative people.

Earlier you described your working method during this period as a process of “distillation.” Could you elaborate on this idea of “distillation” and the work's relation to architecture? Were you intentionally heading towards a specific moment of clarity?

I was trying to get clarity, conciseness, and effectiveness in the work. In distilling my ideas I was doing something analogous to making poetry—trying, in a way, to say the most with the least.

I think my work is related to both the human figure and to architecture. The early sculptures were figure- or head-like, the pyramid and post and lintel were more architectural. Then the blocks and slabs were more or less both, and the plank is more figurative, though at the same time like an architectural element.

Thinking about the works' relationship to architecture, and especially to the physical space of the gallery or studio — wall (painting)/ floor (sculpture) — could you say something about how the first “plank” pieces emerged? Did the earliest plank pieces strike you as a radical departure, not just in terms of your own practice, but sculpture more generally?

Thinking up the plank did seem radical. I'd made rectangular forms, and I wondered if I could make a further reductive step beyond those forms. I had in my studio some block sculptures, and leaning against a wall, pieces of plywood that were used for making such forms. It seemed to me that the next step would have to be to make a board, or a sheet—the simplest possible. So I did. The first plank forms were what I considered to be archetypal boards—*i.e.*, something that's “just a board”—eight feet long, a foot wide, and an inch thick. Then I made a

half-inch-thick sheet about seven feet tall and four feet wide. The next ones were thicker, with a little more substance as a “being,” or 3D entity, and were more literally “planks.” (*Webster’s* says a plank is generally 2 to 4 inches thick.)

I think I expected to affect art to some degree. I’d liked some seemingly simple works of art—Egyptian columns, Newman’s paintings, Andre’s row of bricks, Flavin’s single fluorescent tube, etc.—and those things had seemed to me to have gotten something interesting together—they had an energy of their own—and had definitely seemed to have reality-changing potentials.

In many respects your works from this period conceal how they were actually made: That is, their internal structure is fully obscured. Yet the way they are made seems, ultimately, to be very important. For example, these are hand-made, labor-intensive objects, yet their final state seems almost to negate this. What was your relationship with the making of these works?

Generally, I just did what I had to do to make the sculptures like I wanted them. It didn’t matter to me whether I personally did the crafting or someone else did it, as long as they came out right. The truth is, though, that when I did make use of help, I pretty much had to do critical parts of the process myself—things like the rough sanding, which primarily shapes the work, and the final beveling or rounding of the edges, which has to do with the way “energy” flows around the work, giving it the three-dimensional character I wanted. I’ve most often done all the crafting myself—on the lacquer and resin works—and though it gets tedious at times, for the most part I enjoy doing it. Often when I get to the very end, and the piece has gotten its final polish and I’ve just rubbed out the wax, I’m “wowed” by it to the point where all the time and work I’ve gone through to get there disappears from my mind.

A perhaps contradictory-sounding note in relation to personal crafting: I think it does make some difference—even beyond what’s physically perceivable—whether or not I do the work myself. Anything one touches and forms will have subtle reflections of the maker’s energy in it. And besides that, what I try to get is just pretty subtle and exacting, and is usually something I have to make happen myself, with tools I use myself, or else I have to meticulously guide and oversee the people who are doing it.

There’s something a little bit magical in seeing a work first in the mind, and then finally seeing it as a physical object—one that’s as beautiful as possible—in the world.

Unlike many other colored sculptures of the 1960s, where color was often applied to a surface in a painterly manner, your works seem to suggest that they were actually made *from* color. What were your early thoughts about color, as they related to the sculpture?

I did think of my sculptures as being made of color. Which to me is interesting, because color is abstract; it's a quality. So my sculptures were in a way abstract at the outset. That is, slightly in another dimension—that of imagination and idea. I like it when that sort of thing happens—when something straightforward goes sort of weird in a positive way. I think you have real magic then. There are no tricks; the thing is just weird.

Elsewhere you have discussed your sculptures as “representing living beings who have come here from someplace else,” or as “the geometrically expressed thoughts of such beings.” Given your long-standing interest in UFOs and cosmology, did you always think about your art in such terms? Certainly such ideas radically distinguish your work from that of other artists whose work has been categorized as “minimalist.” Did you ever consider that art might not be an ideal vehicle for such thoughts?

They're like aliens, in a way. With the early works I had the almost eerie feeling that something like that was happening. But what I was doing was freely inventing, and that can seem like—and probably is to an extent—going partly outside oneself, interacting with something partly outside oneself.

I was always interested in far-out things, including psychic stuff and UFOs. I think our reality is richer than we usually let on and, well, much weirder. An imagination I've used is to think: what works would I make if I were a visitor from another world? Form is visual language; what would I try to say with it?

I think generally that art is almost the only vehicle for saying really far-out things. By the way, one of the things that interests me about aliens is that they seem to operate in more than one dimension of reality. Comparatively, we operate in one, but they travel in time, and do weird things with space and matter. They do stuff I like. Think, as a mild example, how it would be to see somebody in a spread of time.

I think “minimalist” work is not always so minimalist, 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 felt 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.

With the advantage of hindsight, how would you summarize the work you produced in the mid-to-late 1960s? I was curious as to how the larger social-context of that era impacted upon your thinking?

Ah, yes. Life in the 1960s. A spontaneous eruption of consciousness. Clamped down upon, of course, right after, and also warped into all kinds of odd stuff, but I think it was nevertheless an earthshaking time in terms of mankind's awareness. Some of the

thoughts of that time went way beyond culture as it was, and produced dazzling visions of possible and probable futures. And it was simply a creative time, when artists were making things that were like hitting loud bells. There was quite a bit of good energy going on. I went kind of full tilt with my ideas. I was purely inventing as much as I was thinking, but I was mainly trying to make things that had strong existence. They had to be interesting, beautiful, have the right scale and bearing, and have obvious, convincing *being*. The quality of *being* was the most important thing. If that were achieved, then the sculpture, the work, would be able to speak for itself.