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A maximalist of minimalism

Andrea Bellini

When John McCracken first emerged in the 1960s, he was critically received as part of the Minimalist movement which was then gaining ground in New York and Los Angeles, where he was based. To promote the new movement[1] – whose name was coined by Richard Wollheim in 1965 – critics pointed to the similarities between the various artists rather than to their differences, describing Minimalism in general terms, as sculpture in geometric forms or series, devoid of emotion and allegorical references, and made of industrial materials in factory environments. Minimalism had acquired a definition, and this contributed to the rapid rise of the group even though it ended up marginalising those artists whose works, in the late 1960s, appeared more unorthodox and eccentric than the style of venerated East Coast Minimal sculptors like Carl Andre, Donald Judd and Robert Morris.

McCracken had begun the decade painting abstract canvases that looked like dreamy variations on Pop – mental landscapes marked with arrows, crosses, dotted lines, and other symbols taken from the street. By the end of 1963, however, he had simplified and reduced these signs, isolating them against geometric backdrops. Thus, when McCracken saw the work of Judd and Andre illustrated in the pages of the art magazines of the time, the New York artists' commitment to a reduced geometry struck a chord with his own interests. Even so, in the next few years McCracken turned to minimal forms seeking something very different from his East Coast peers.

While Judd and Andre, along with Dan Flavin, Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Robert Morris and others, published their theories in the pages of *Arts Magazine* and *Artforum*[2]– waging an ideological battle against the previous generation and the gestural art of the Abstract Expressionists – McCracken saved his writing for his sketchbooks, which came in the form of an intimate diary with short texts and queries relating to his own research. He did not think of his art as being opposed to what had gone before: rather, as he moved into sculpture, his work maintained its Pop sensibility and its abstract painterly approach. For McCracken, Minimalism was not a homeland to be defended but a region to be traversed and corrupted. He looked at California street culture, treating the surfaces of his sculptures with coloured resins in the same way that young people in those days customised

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[1] The term "Minimalism", which has never been precisely defined, generically refers to an artistic movement that emerged in New York and Los Angeles during the 1960s. Its leading exponents, including Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, John McCracken and Larry Bell, principally work in sculpture, creating single geometric forms or series of objects with a modular rationale. Usually made with industrial materials, minimalist objects are geometrically defined, literal presences, characterised by rigorous execution techniques and the absence of decoration or any kind of allegorical reference. In spite of these generic attributes, Minimalist artists have never published a true "manifesto" like other historic avant-garde movements. On the contrary, they have always refuted the idea of a coherent movement, considering their practices to be not only very different from each other, but often contradictory.

[2] The first text about Minimalist art is generally considered to be Carl Andre's entry on Frank Stella, *Preface to Stripe Painting*, written for the exhibition catalogue *Sixteen Americans* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1959), 76.

their cars, and he pursued an idea of beauty and sensuality, of transcendence and the absolute, through the use of form and colour.

After participating in the most important Minimalist exhibitions between 1965 and 1971, McCracken gradually entered a kind of limbo where he remained, forgotten, for the next fifteen years. In the mid-1980s his work again began to attract attention[3], thanks to a new found appreciation of the significance of his investigations and of West Coast art in general. A new generation of critics and curators, both in the United States and in Europe, became fascinated by "Finish Fetish"[4], and by these artists' close relationship with the culture and light of Los Angeles, as well as with the 1960s, science fiction, new technology, and also with a kind of Californian utopianism.

In the past few years, McCracken's work has appeared in numerous exhibitions, often outside the context of Minimalist art. In 2007 he took part with several new sculptures as well as older paintings and drawings to documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, and he has participated in a wide range of shows on themes such as psychedelia, Ufos and design. These include *Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art* (2008) at the Barbican Art Gallery, London; *Take Me to Your Leader! The Great Escape Into Space* (2010) at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo; *Tomorrow Now: When Design Meets Science Fiction* (2007) at the Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg; and the large-scale travelling exhibitions *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era* (2005) and *If Everybody Had an Ocean: Brian Wilson, An Art Exhibition* (2007) to name but a few. Why is the art of McCracken – of all the artists once grouped as Minimalists – enjoying this second life? And why now?

The retrospective at Castello di Rivoli is the first comprehensive overview of McCracken's work from 1962 to the present. Building upon the recent critical reassessment of the artist, the show highlights the complexity and depth of his fifty-year career and, together with this catalogue, attempts to interpret his work and the reasons for its revival. The aim is not however to offer an esoteric and unilateral reading of his art, as though it were in conflict with a Minimalist view of his work: McCracken undoubtedly remains one of the leading historic exponents of the American movement, together with Judd, Andre, Flavin, Anne Truitt, Morris, Bell, et al. Instead, the uniqueness of his artistic vision reveals the true complexity of what we generically call "Minimalism".

McCracken is convinced that art can give form to a hidden dimension of matter and the universe, reawakening consciousness and enriching our lives. His works have an allusive, metaphysical content and seem to evoke something else – an idea of beauty, energy, perfection and revelation. This, ultimately, is McCracken's heresy: he shares the Abstract Expressionists' belief that abstraction transcends the material world. Shy and cordial, methodical and profoundly coherent, McCracken in one of the lat great idealists in the art world.[5] He views art as a means of aesthetic and spiritual emancipation, and his works are as prototypes for a world to come, one dominated by pure thought and an absolute form of beauty. While Morris, Andre and Judd think and theorise about Minimalism, McCracken visualises and dreams it, and where they find truth only in the relationships between empirical phenomena, he believes that truth lies in the invisible and

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[3] See D. Cameron, "High-Tech Redux: LA Art of the Sixties Is Being Re-Assessed in Terms of the Art of the Late Eighties," in *Flash Art International* (Summer 1988), 102–8.

[4] Starting in the 1960s, East Coast critics labeled West Coast Minimalism "Finish Fetish" or "The L.A. Look" for its polished and oftentimes coloured sculpture made from non-traditional art materials such as glass, plastic, and polyurethane resin.

[5] Dan Cameron first expressed this idea in "A Perfect World (Notes on the Art of John McCracken)", in *John McCracken: Sculptures* (Geneva: Art & Public, 1994), 6.

transcendent. While their work is marked by ironic and intellectual detachment, McCracken's art is fundamentally linked to a utopian form of modernism.
This visionary dimension is linked to the artist's belief in the existence of extraterrestrial life forms, and this is an important – and authentically felt and experienced – part of his life and artistic production. Many photos depict McCracken at the sites of alleged Ufo sightings or landings, and some of these are reproduced in this catalogue. He claims to have travelled through space and time, to be capable of out-of-body experiences and to have had close encounters with aliens. He moves between the conscious and the subconscious, between sleep and wakefulness, between a place visible to all and another dimension. And his works similarly occupy this middle ground between two worlds. Unlike other Minimalist artists, McCracken does not consider his sculptures to be inexpressive objects but living, autonomous entities – in other words, true "beings". They have a fundamentally anthropomorphic quality, and hence a subjective dimension, in the sense of an absolute "otherness".
The works are all handmade, and he takes great care to obtain surfaces that are sensual and alive, at once serial and unique. Wooden shapes are varnished with multiple layers of high-gloss lacquer to produce warm, sensual objects that reflect and change with the light, which is a fundamental aspect of much of the art of southern California.[6] Whereas the construction method is evident in the work of other Minimalists, in which materials are simply required to represent themselves, McCracken's lacquers disguise the material and the creative process of his work. We thus find ourselves face to face with objects whose nature, constituents and composition we cannot identify. In place of the greys, whites and blacks we find in East Coast works, McCracken chooses a broad chromatic spectrum, ranging from pink to violet, brown to red, lavender to navy blue, sky blue to yellow. Colour becomes the material itself – an iridescent material that quivers and transforms with the light. The work thus changes state, and is no longer just a sculpture or a painting, but both of those things together, becoming a hybrid, a mass of energy. Although he makes use of a wide variety of forms, he always tries to give his works dimensions that directly relate to the human body. The general public is encouraged to establish a physical relationship with his works. Unlike all the other Minimalists, McCracken will even use the classic pedestal if necessary, calculating its height precisely so that viewers of his smaller works are forced to lean towards them, thereby coming into contact with the energy, or the "aura" as he calls it, that these forms emanate into the space around them.

John McCracken: A Retrospective

This exhibition is Castello di Rivoli's third solo show dedicated to a leading Minimalist artist, following those of Carl Andre and Donald Judd in the late 1980s, which were curated by Rudi Fuchs.The retrospective features a wide selection of works spanning McCracken's entire artistic career, beginning with his paintings of 1962–63, which have never previously been exhibited, and some of his earliest sculptures, such as *Mykonos* (1965), the first example of his use of a fiberglass coating on a wooden structure. Many of the works on display have rarely been seen in Europe, and these include the *Pyramids* series and *Blue Post and Lintel I* (1965). These sculptures are inspired by antiquity, particularly by the architecture of ancient Egypt, which McCracken has described as transcending its own matter.[7] In these elementary forms, like the 1989 *Minnesota* "monolith" exhibited here, the artist sees an eternal, spiritual quality capable of surviving far into the future.

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[6] This is seen not just in the sculpture of other so-called "Light and Space artists", such as Larry Bell, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, but also in the work of artists like Ed Ruscha, David Hockney, Billy Al Bengston and Robert Ackerman.

[7] T. Kellein, "Interview with John McCracken August 1995," in *McCracken,* (Basel: Kunsthalle Basel, 1995), 36.

In 1971 McCracken returned to painting on canvas, using small brushstrokes to create esoteric abstract compositions called *Mandalas*. Several of these extraordinary paintings are on view at Castello di Rivoli. But the artist's most iconic works are no doubt his *Planks* – long, thin wooden boards placed on the ground and leaning against the wall. Although devoid of a sense of depth, the works occupy a three-dimensional space, imposing themselves simultaneously as objects and as planes of pictorial exploration. Included here we see an important series of early *Planks* that were produced in 1966 and presented the following year at the Robert Elkon Gallery in New York.

Finally, the retrospective presents a broad selection of sculptures made during the past thirty years, including recent works such as *Cosmos* (2008) and two new works *Fair* and *Wonder*, both from 2010, made expecially for the occasion. These exemplify the coherence and obsessive nature of McCracken's work – aspects which are also underscored by the layout of the exhibition, for although most are organised chronologically, some artworks are placed "out of time," emphasising the circularity and repetition that are features of his career.

This publication, the first in-depth academic monograph dedicated to John McCracken, features scholarly essays as well as primary materials. Alex Farquharson, Director of Nottingham Contemporary in Britain, examines the artist's recent visibility and the wide range of contexts in which his work has appeared; and Marc-Olivier Wahler, Director of the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, looks at how we might discuss McCracken's work outside the confines of Minimalism and the language of art history. Together with these essays there is a discussion between Daniel Baumann, curatorial advisor for the exhibition, and artist John Armleder on McCracken's work. In addition, a large anthology of earlier essays, articles and reviews are reprinted, along with a chronology of solo and group exhibitions, a list of exhibited works and an extensive bibliography. A lavishly illustrated section includes rare archival photos and portraits, material from the sketchbooks and a series of exhibition invitations and posters. Rounding out the catalogue is a recent interview with McCracken by Marianna Vecellio, assistant curator at Castello di Rivoli. Like the exhibition itself, this monograph has been produced in close collaboration with the artist, to whom we extend our warmest thanks.