

Some early paths of West Coast abstraction: John McLaughlin and Emerson Woelffer

By Kathy Zimmerer

Two recent exhibitions, *John McLaughlin: Western Modernism/Eastern Thought and Emerson Woelffer, Selected Works, 1947-Present*, offer insights into the origins—and the current state—of West Coast abstraction. It was always a rare pleasure to leave the hot, raucous beach scene for the cool environs of the old Newport Harbor Art Museum to view the serene, pristine rectangles of John McLaughlin, a resident of Dana Point for more than thirty years; his exquisite paintings are now on view at the newly merged (with the Laguna Art Museum) Orange County Museum of Art in Laguna Beach, beautifully combined with a Zen-style rock garden designed by Kyozan Joshi Roshi. A great admirer of the non-objective works of

Malevich and Mondrian, McLaughlin, in his earliest works, made carefully balanced geometric abstractions notable for their clarity and subtlety. Based upon a monochromatic palette enlivened by olive greens, acidic golds and deep gray-blues, these paintings possess a spare elegance that reveals the artist's quiet passion for Asia and particularly Japan. A scholar of Japanese culture, McLaughlin traveled to the Far East during the thirties and then used his fluency in Japanese as an Intelligence Officer during World War II. After the war, he operated a gallery of Japanese art for a brief time, and has continued to collect and sell Japanese prints and artifacts.

During the fifties and sixties, however, he began to hone his reductivist vision even further, producing such stunning works as #4-1969, composed of two vertical rectangles, one black and one red, surrounded on both



John McLaughlin, 1959.

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sides by creamy white rectangles. These paintings were pure expressions of the contemplative spirit found in Zen Buddhism, wedded to the most austere modernist aesthetic. McLaughlin continued his quest for clarity in the elegant, pristine works of the seventies. In #18-1975, for example, two rectangles float in a deep white void, the negative space becoming an evocative realm of silence. This nonobjective abstraction was respected and revered by the California light and space artists who found an essence of pure form in these glowing rectangles.

Woelffer's expansive painting career is a poetic study in classic Abstract Expressionism. The artist taught under Buckminster Fuller at Black Mountain College and spent time in New York City, where he met the major figures of the New York School. And in his brilliantly hued calligraphic paintings, he has never wavered in his devotion to abstract principles. Many of the early paintings, including *Untitled (Bucky Fuller Series)* (1949), are spiky, totemic visual essays in acidic but vivid primary colors. The lush coral background in *Slot Machine* (1953), meanwhile, serves as a complex jigsaw puzzle for the numbers and letters that have been interwoven into the composition.

Woelffer's keen sense of color and design is clearly evident in his exquisite torn paper collages from the

Expressionism serve as a background from which to consider later West Coast abstraction. Certainly, in the wake of the recent offerings of abstract painting exhibitions, including the shimmering Ed Moses retrospective (at MOCA) and Agnes Pelton's luminous spiritual abstractions (Pepperdine Museum), the time has come for a further, more comprehensive consideration of regional traditions and style. Like the New York School, many early California abstractionists emerged from the Surrealist movement, including Helen Lundeberg and Lorser Feitelson. Karl Benjamin and Frederick Hammersley created dynamic non-objective paintings based on cubism, and, like Feitelson and McLaughlin, they were part of the landmark *Four Abstract Classicists* (LAGMA, 1959), which signaled the debut of California hard-edge painting. The light and space artists of the sixties took the work of these pioneering artists and added the beauty of the California light and the unique culture of Los Angeles. Robert Irwin's paintings and luminous orbs continued to ponder the spiritual nature of abstraction, while Craig Kauffman, Ron

Davis, Billy Al

Bengston and

Joe Goode

were inadvertent

representatives

of the

California "fin-

ish fetish." Two

of the great masters

of West Coast abstraction,

Richard Diebenkorn and

Sam Francis, derived

aspects of their imagery

from the glowing palette

of nature, and spent

considerable portions

of their working careers

in Southern California.

This rich tradition

of abstraction continues

apace, for many younger

artists maintain a lyrical

approach that suggests a

strong future for the

form. Thoughtful young

artists such as Habib

Kheradary, whose elegantly

interwoven dot

paintings reflect the rich

abstract imagery of his

Persian culture, consid-

ers abstraction to be a compelling

issue; to him, "...

pure abstraction is the language

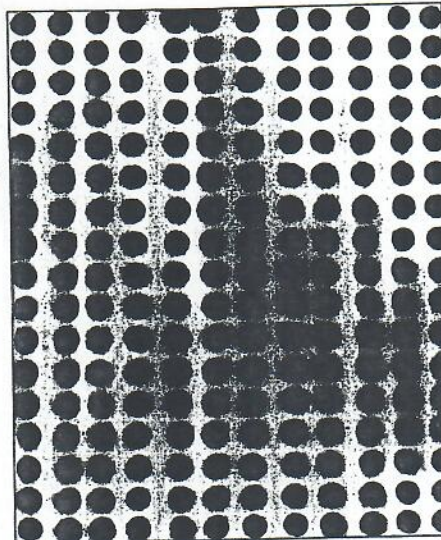
of the mind."



Emerson Woelffer, *Untitled (Bucky Fuller Series)*, 1949, casein on paper, 22" x 29". (Photo courtesy of Manny Silverman Gallery, Los Angeles)

seventies. In *June '78*, royal blue rectangles vibrate on the brilliant gold ground. The sprightly rhythms of the collage are balanced with torn scraps of black paper edged with white. The artist has continued to work through the eighties and nineties with vibrant abstractions that seem like full-frame treatments of his earlier fluid notations, as in *Open Black* (1991). Woelffer has come full circle, although his paintings contain the inherent contradictions of the Los Angeles artist—despite his brief participation in the New York School, he remained in California and pursued his own individualistic style.

McLaughlin's unassuming dedication to reduction and Woelffer's continuing fascination with Abstract



Habib Kheradary, *Replica #1*, 1996, oil enamel and plaster on wood panel, 6" x 5".

John McLaughlin: Western Modernism/Eastern Thought through October 6 at Orange County Museum of Art, 307 Cliff Dr., Laguna Beach. *Emerson Woelffer, Selected Works, 1947-Present* closed August 24 at Manny Silverman Gallery, Los Angeles.

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