

**Exhibition:** *John McLaughlin Paintings: Total Abstraction*

**On View:** November 13, 2016–April 16, 2017

**Location:** BCAM, Level 3



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(Los Angeles, CA—September 8, 2016) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *John McLaughlin Paintings: Total Abstraction*, the artist's first solo retrospective in 20 years. One of the most important Southern California artists of the postwar period, John McLaughlin (1898–1976) created a focused body of geometric paintings that are entirely devoid of any connection to everyday experience and inspired by the Japanese notion of *ma* (the void). Using a technique of layering rectangular bars on adjacent planes of muted color, McLaughlin created works that provoke introspection by making the viewer, not the artist, their subject. The exhibition is organized chronologically and consists of 52 paintings and a selection of collages and drawings that establish McLaughlin as one of the foremost innovators of total abstraction.

*John McLaughlin Paintings* is curated by Stephanie Barron, senior curator and head of modern art, and Lauren Bergman, assistant curator in modern art. McLaughlin was included in the now-landmark 1959 exhibition *Four Abstract Classicists*, organized by the Los Angeles County Museum, alongside Karl Benjamin, Lorser Feitelson, and Frederick Hammersley. He was also the subject of four major museum retrospectives, at the Pasadena Art Museum (1963), the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1968), the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art (1973), and the Laguna Art Museum (mounted posthumously in 1996). Yet, despite this success, he never received widespread attention during his lifetime. He has subsequently become a hero among later generations of Los Angeles artists across a broad range of disciplines and styles.

“John McLaughlin is one of the most important Southern California artists of the postwar period, and the opportunity to share some of his most critical works in this retrospective is both exciting and long overdue,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “Following the Getty’s *Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945*

1980 initiative, it was a natural decision for LACMA return to some of the individual artists whose work elicited the greatest sense of revelation, most recently with Noah Purifoy (*Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada* in 2015) and now John McLaughlin. *John McLaughlin Paintings: Total Abstraction* features the most comprehensive range of his abstract experimentations.”

Stephanie Barron, senior curator and head of modern art at LACMA, states, “John McLaughlin is one of the foremost innovators of total abstraction. In the 40 years since his death, he has remained something of an artist’s artist, held in high esteem by a coterie of artists, critics, collectors, and curators but otherwise virtually unknown. Although he may rank as the first great artist to emerge in Southern California after the war, McLaughlin’s modest, rigorous, and tough abstract paintings are still awaiting discovery.”

The LACMA exhibition is accompanied by the first hardcover monograph on the artist, published by Prestel/Del Monico Books with essays by exhibition curator Stephanie Barron; artist Tony Berlant with curator Lauren Bergman; critic and independent curator Michael Duncan; Ilene Susan Fort, LACMA’s Gail and John Liebes Curator of American Art; and Russell Ferguson, professor of art at University of California, Los Angeles. Unique to the exhibition is a special collaboration with artist Roy McMakin, *Twelve Chairs Made for the Occasion of a John McLaughlin Retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art* (2016), comprising 12 of McMakin’s signature slat-back chairs—created first in the 1980s and inspired by McLaughlin’s work—which will provide seating in the exhibition galleries.

### About the Artist

American artist John McLaughlin was born in Sharon, Massachusetts, in 1898. A self-taught painter who never finished high school, McLaughlin explored literature, aesthetics, philosophy, and Eastern spiritual texts. Inspired by frequent visits to the Asian art collection at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, during his youth, he also developed a deep knowledge of Japanese and Chinese art, and started a collection of Japanese prints. In the 1930s, McLaughlin spent two years traveling in Japan and China, and then opened a gallery in Boston selling Asian art, with a focus on 14th–16th century Japanese prints. Following serving in the military, McLaughlin began painting professionally at age 48 after moving to the seaside town of Dana Point, California. While he often acknowledged the revolutionary influence of abstract European painters Piet Mondrian and Kasimir

Malevich and discussed his interest in New Yorker Ad Reinhardt, his conceptual framework is most directly rooted in Japanese philosophy and 15th-century Japanese painting, particularly the work of Sesshū Tōyō (1420–1506). The Japanese notion of *ma*, or the void—the emptiness that exists between two forms—is central to McLaughlin's practice. As he explained: “Japanese painters of centuries ago found the means to overcome the demands imposed by the object by the use of large areas of empty space...described by Sesshū as the ‘marvelous void.’” For McLaughlin, Asian paintings “made me wonder who I was. Western painters, on the other hand, tried to tell me who they were.” His Japanese-influenced methodology thus uniquely distinguished him from other abstract painters, especially the Abstract Expressionists—whose emotional, physical style dominated the American art scene at that time—because McLaughlin’s abstractions made the viewer the subject of the work. During his lifetime, his works were featured in solo exhibitions at the Pasadena Art Museum (1963); the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (1968); and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (1974), as well as at international galleries. McLaughlin died in 1976 at age 77, just as his paintings were beginning to gain wider recognition.

### **Exhibition Highlights**

*Untitled* (1951): This work exemplifies a shift from the biomorphic forms of McLaughlin’s early paintings of the late 1940s to a simplified, geometric vocabulary devoid of any sense of illusion or depth; the use of the circle illustrates a moment of transition from organic shapes to varyingly sized rectangles, which he believed to be the most neutral form. In addition, while McLaughlin’s early paintings were more neutral in tone, the works from this time period are characterized by more heightened colors: vivid blues, bright yellows, and soft greens painted in relation to black, gray, and white. While later paintings will adhere to a strict symmetry, earlier ones such as this keep the composition slightly asymmetrical: the blue circle does not actually lie in the center of the canvas and the white, black, and green planes are not of equal width.

#15-1958 (1958): As his planes of color stretched to become more spacious and all-encompassing, McLaughlin embarked on a series of vertical, larger-scaled canvases whose compositions comprise diverse proportions of spacious and uninterrupted rectangles. In #15-1958, the serene pale blues and the strip of yellow offset two larger stretches of white that converge on a single side. The clearly defined boundaries of the planes of color stand in contrast to the blurring of whites’ unorthodox edges, yet

McLaughlin still achieves harmony and balance because of his singular understanding of color, proportion, and form.

*Untitled #16* (1962): This work exemplifies the connection between the artist's work and Japanese architecture. McLaughlin's rectangular forms are reminiscent of windows or, given his central focus on Japanese philosophy, domestic shoji screens, composed of geometric sections framed by a border. The alternating red, blue, and white rectangles in this painting resemble windows or doorways that slide horizontally across the canvas. Like McLaughlin's paintings, Japanese residential architecture was often designed to encourage introspection.

#17-1963 (1963): In the early 1960s, McLaughlin embraced more simplified, symmetrical compositions, specifically gravitating toward placing two thin strips of color side by side in the middle of the canvas with equal planes of color on either side. The tallest painting in the exhibition, #17-1963 stretches to six feet, its pristine powder-blue rectangles segmented by two thin rectangles that emphasize the verticality of the painting. Although works such as these seem similar to Barnett Newman's zip paintings, Newman's works have an entirely different conceptual framework that aimed to reduce experiences to essential forms. McLaughlin, by contrast, avoids any form that might suggest experience, emotion, or the outside world, in order to allow the viewer to make him or herself the subject of the painting.

#5 (1974): At the end of his career, McLaughlin developed a strict palette of black and white—with sporadic dashes of color or gray—which he believed most successfully represented the concept of the void, as seen in Japanese painting. Here, rather than consisting of adjacent rectangles, the full canvas becomes one white plane with two black bars equidistant to its right and left edges. The exhibition ends with a room of black-and-white paintings that retain a presence that is both quiet and powerful.

**Credit:**

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### About LACMA

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes more than 130,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art; Latin American art, ranging from masterpieces from the Ancient Americas to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over one million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement. LACMA is located in Hancock Park, 30 acres situated at the center of Los Angeles, which also contains the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum and the forthcoming Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Situated halfway between the ocean and downtown, LACMA is at the heart of Los Angeles.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. lacma.org

#### Image captions:

(Left): John McLaughlin, *Untitled*, 1951, oil on Masonite, Daryl and Robert Offer, © Estate of John McLaughlin, photo courtesy Van Doren Waxter, New York

(Center): John McLaughlin, #15-1958, 1958, oil on canvas, Daniel and Lauren Long, New York, courtesy James Corcoran Gallery, © Estate of John McLaughlin, photo by Adam Reich

(Right): John McLaughlin, #10, 1965, oil on canvas, 48 × 60 in., The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection, © Estate of John McLaughlin, photo courtesy the Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection

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#### Connect with LACMA



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