

Research Paper and Spotlight Presentation 2019
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John McCracken, Mandala VIII, 1972

Artist's Background Information

- *Nationality*: American, born in 1934 in Berkeley, CA, passed away in 2011, New York City, NY.

- *Medium*: Acrylic on canvas

- *Art Movement*: California Light and Space, West Coast Minimalism

- *Ownership*: Gift to PSAM by Robert Elkon in 1975

- *Education/training/experience*: McCracken developed his early sculptural work while studying painting at the California College of Arts and Craft (CCAC) in Oakland, 1957 - 1965. He earned a B.F.A. in 1962 and continued with graduate studies. McCracken taught

at the university level at UC Irvine, UCLA, School of Visual Art in New York, Hunter College, NY; University of Nevada, Reno; University of Nevada, Las Vegas; and UCSB. Recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment of the Art, 1968.

- *Timeline of artwork produced*: Mandala VIII is one of a series of at least 13 drawings and paintings using the same concentric ring motif but with varied ordering of the colors surrounded by a solid colored square background. Figure 1 on page 5 of this paper depicts the first 8 artworks in this series. Mandala V (blue background) and Mandala VI (green background) were paired into a design to create a poster for the Mostly Mozart Festival at the Lincoln Center for Performing Arts, July - August 1972, refer to Figure 2 on page 5. Later in the 1990's the Mozart artwork was produced as a graphic art poster minus the Lincoln Center information and can be found currently for sale online.

- *Influences*: In his Smithsonian interview and Between Two Worlds: Art in America Magazine interview, McCracken discussed his artistic influences - Abstract Expressionist painting: Barnett Newman with his areas of color separated by thin vertical lines, or "zips". Stuart Davis for his jazz-influenced, bold, brash, and colorful paintings of the 1940s and 1950s. Fernand Legar with his freely arranged bands of color juxtaposed with figures and objects outlined in black.

Minimalist sculpture influences: Donald Judd's severe sequences of boxes, Dan Flavin's seminal installations of light fixtures, and Carl Andre with his positioning of raw materials, such as bricks, blocks, ingots, or plates.

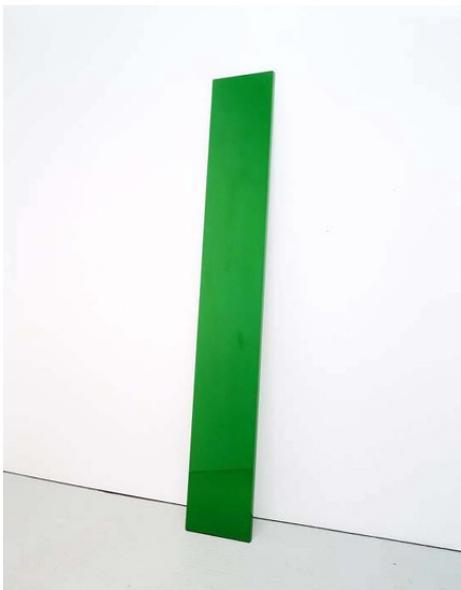
California Light and Space influences: Larry Bell's exploration of the relationship between an art object and its environment through sculptural and reflective properties, and James Turrell's experimentation with light as a medium.

Artist's Impact on the Art World

McCracken is best known for his Minimalist sculpture created from 1963 - 2011. The origin of his unique form of sculpture began while an art student experimenting with insertion of Masonite elements into his canvases which marked a literal and important transition for him, a moment



where McCracken says his “paintings just gradually turned to sculpture.” Despite his career establishing connection to sculpture, he often returned to painting and drawing throughout his life. In the 1960’s McCracken’s artistic vision and experimentation resulted in bright, sleek slabs,



John McCracken, Green Plank, 1968

planks, blocks and columns that were balanced evocatively between painting and sculpture. McCracken’s artistic hallmarks were severe reduction of both form and color, reflection, and the quality of light. He explored the reduction to the simplest three-dimensional point of an exquisitely proportioned wooden rectangle covered in fiberglass, poly-resin and paint, see Green Plank image at left as an example. Many hand applications of a single color of paint, sanded down and repainted resulted in shapes of pure color and high gloss. McCracken’s planks are meant to call the attention to the object occupied by both the viewer and object, to reflect oneself. At times he identified them as spiritual self-portraits. He explained: “I see the plank as existing between two worlds, the floor representing the physical world of standing objects, trees, cars, buildings, human bodies, and everything, and the wall represents the world of imagination, illusionistic painting space, human mental space, and all that.” (Zwirner, David, John McCracken,

Works from 1963-2011, Interview: John McCracken with Anne Reeve). McCracken liked the idea that his sculptures could be seen as an object a UFO traveler brought to Earth and left behind for earthlings to check out, made by laser-perfect alien technologies (Frances Colpitt, Art in America article and interview). Although a urban legend, there has been ample speculation that Stanley Kubrick derived the mysterious monolith in his 2001: a Space Odyssey from the art of John McCracken.

Background

Mandala VIII is a vivid, almost startling painting created by John McCracken in 1972. At the time, he had taken a break from his sculpture work and returned to painting. He was exploring other ideas about art, philosophy, psychology, self-exploration, and mystical thoughts and writings. He had relocated from Los Angeles to New York City and was questioning the art world and his place in it.

McCracken had an intense interest in the paranormal, supernatural, and New Age practices, and was a firm believer in the abilities of painting and drawing to tap into metaphysical, spiritual, and illusionistic realms. This introspective period led him on a personal journey into Hindu and Buddhist mandalas and to the writings and mandala artwork created by the psychologist Carl Jung. McCracken learned that the mandala, the Sanskrit word for “sacred circle”, reveals the total being of a person and is also known as the symbol representing the the Self. Literally speaking, the mandala is a geometrical form, a circle within a square, abstract and static, or a vivid image formed of objects and/or symbolic beings. It is a cosmic diagram, a connection with the infinite. Jung believed that mandalas denoted a unification of opposites,

served as expressions of the self, and represented the sum of who we are. In fact, Jung encouraged his patients to create mandalas as an exploration on self-realization and as a window into their dreams and fantasies. McCracken was stimulated during this time to generate several versions of his own mandalas. His first mandala paintings were highly personal and modest in size, the largest measuring 30 inches by 30 inches, and followed the more classical design of a central intricately detailed circle surrounded by a single color square or multiple patterned squares. His early mandala experimentations were oil studies utilizing many of the intricate, interwoven symbols drawn from Hindu and Buddhist mandalas, see Trebizonoum at right.

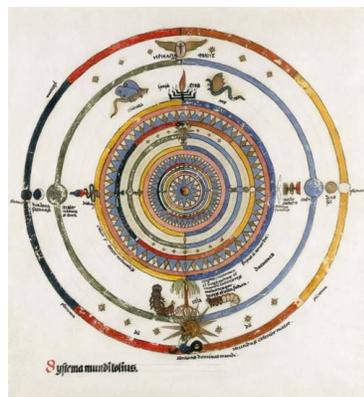


John McCracken, Trebizonoum, 1972

Analysis of Artwork

Mandala VIII

After experimenting with traditional mandala imagery, McCracken leapt back to his California roots, West Coast Minimalism, Light and Space, and his love of pure color creating Mandala VIII. I speculate that he was taken by Jung's first personal mandala, see image at left.



Jung's First Mandala, 1916

Note the well-defined concentric rings and use of red, yellow, green, and blue. McCracken goes further: minimizing, reducing and boiling down the mandala to literal circles in a square. He hit upon the precisely outlined concentric ring within ring motif but varied the colors of the rings, yet always with some connection to the sequence of colors in the visible light spectrum. Mandala VIII starts with the orange background then progresses as a rainbow does to yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, followed by purifying white, bold black, then back around to red, the color at the beginning of the visible spectrum. McCracken describes his mandalas as minimal yet "maximalist" conferring powerful meaning, spiritual exploration, and cosmic connection. We see rainbow colors, but McCracken connected with the spectrum of visible light. Just as traditional mandalas have been used as meditation tools for millennia,

McCracken saw his mandalas and his other art work as objects for concentration or meditative devices, and as portals for universal exploration (Zwirner, David, John McCracken, Works from 1963-2011).

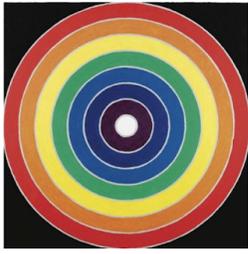
McCracken's Mandala VIII is often referred to as the "bullseye painting". While this description is quite literal, there are other interpretations to consider, especially after studying McCracken's life. The painting could be described as looking like a colorful sonar screen. Interestingly, McCracken served as a sonar operator on a minesweeper in the Navy in the 1950s. McCracken described his artwork as "active in the world" (Frances Colpitt, Art in America article and interview). The concentric rings could also be seen as waves of water, light, or time actively radiating outward from excitation initiated at the vital red center. Another interpretation that comes mind is a colorful carnival tunnel leading into a startling funhouse surprise or shock.

Examining the Mandala Series

McCracken's Mandala VIII is part of a larger numerical series of paintings and sketch drawings, see Figure 1, Mandala Series by John McCracken, 1972, page 5. His Roman numeral mandala paintings departed radically from those he conceived earlier. The series paintings are huge, 6 feet by 6 feet, created using acrylics, with the intricacy of historic and symbolic detail completely gone. What he created was a bold, graphic, challenging New Age mandala arising from reductive Minimalism and his experience with throwing out the inessentials and finding the most basic elemental image or form as seen in his sculpture. Looking at Mandalas III - VIII in the Figure 1, the white rings appear to radiate off the page creating a signal-like sequence as if promoting a landing pattern for one of McCracken's own unearthly sculptures.

It is natural to ask: Why a mandala series? McCracken reworked his graphic mandala design playing with the color sequencing again and again varying the background color and the rings, yet always holding true to the order of colors in the visible light spectrum. Some mandalas he painted and some he drew. Mandala I painting has a black background followed by the rainbow colors in order, red to violet with a white center. Mandala II drawing started with a white background followed by black outer ring then usual colors of the visible spectrum. Mandalas III through VIII are continued variations of the background, colorful hues, and black and white elements.

Close examination of the dates on several of his mandala drawings reveals that the series may have been created for a reason, not just as artistic exploration. I speculate that McCracken may have been approached by or submitted mock-ups to the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center for Performing Arts in late 1971 or early 1972 for their advertising poster. Sketches of Mandala II (white background) and Mandala VII (yellow background) are dated "3-72" by McCracken. A hand drawn mockup on graph paper with measurements entitled, "Mozart Festival poster", was signed by the artist and dated April 9, 1972, see Figure 2, Mostly Mozart Festival Artwork, John McCracken, 1972, page 5. The drawing incorporated Mandala V (blue background) and Mandala VI (green background). The poster was printed soon thereafter for the summer music festival. Research revealed up to 13 versions of the McCracken Mandalas, several of the later ones were pairings of other colorations. I imagine McCracken created the other paired versions as proposed examples for the Mozart poster. The graphic nature of the McCracken's Roman numeral Mandalas was a viable commercial choice for the poster, and likely earned the 38-year old artist additional recognition with a broader East Coast audience.



Mandala I (black)



Mandala II (white)



Mandala III (violet)



Mandala IV (indigo)



Mandala V (blue)
Minneapolis Museum of Art



Mandala VI (green)
Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum



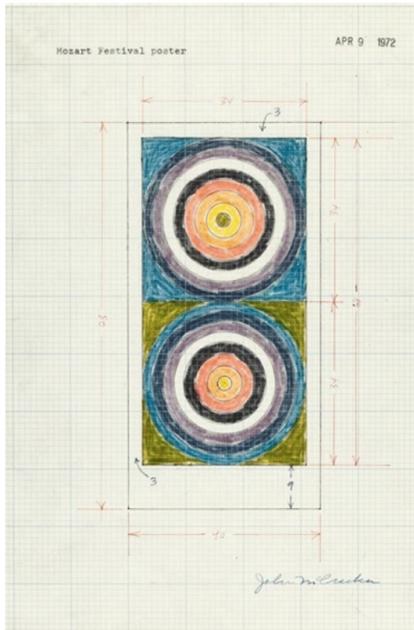
Mandala VII (yellow)



Mandala VIII (orange)
Palm Springs Art Museum

Mandala Series by John McCracken, 1972

Figure 1



Hand Drawn Mock-up, 1972



Mozart Poster, 1972



Silkscreen Poster, 1990s

Mostly Mozart Festival Artwork, John McCracken, 1972

Figure 2

Compare and Contrast with other PSAM Collection Artwork

Comparison: If the spirit of John McCracken could walk into the Palm Springs Art Museum today, it is my belief that he would find Gisela Colon's Hyper Ellipsoid Glo-Pod mesmerizing due to the color effects and otherworldly, transportative nature of the piece. Both Colon and McCracken's work arise from Minimalism and Light and Space. The pod interacts with light and movement to create the rainbow color effect but is a more subtle way than McCracken's Mandala VIII. Colon's work also shares a metaphysical spiritual quality, appearing like a communication conduit to the cosmos. Colon acknowledges John McCracken as one of her artistic influences.

Contrast: Mary Corse was a contemporary of John McCracken in Los Angeles in the 1960's, and both artists are included in the Space and Light and West Coast Minimalist movements. However, Corse's Untitled white on white painting in Lines in the Sand and Mandala VIII could not be more different. Where Mandala VIII is brimming with ring upon ring of vibrant color, Corse's work is completely stripped down to two tones of white, with a glistening larger rectangle framed on both sides by matte bands. While his piece shouts and grabs attention, hers whispers and beckons.

How to Tour Mandala VIII

Below are some questions and ideas for adult and school tours:

Adult Tours	School Tours
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What do you see in this painting?● Would you like this painting in your home?● Look at the order of the colors, does it remind you of anything?● Let's look at the title, does anyone know what a mandala is?● Briefly explain what was going on in society and McCracken's life in 1972.● Explain McCracken's fascination with the cosmos, aliens and his groundbreaking sculpture.● Name that tune! What song would go best with this artwork? (emotional connection)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● How many circles are in this painting?● What colors do you see?● Which color stands out the most?● Which color pushes back into the painting?● Would you be surprised to know that there is a rainbow in this painting?● Walk the children through the highly visual optical illusion this piece creates. Will demonstrate in the gallery presentation.

Concluding Remarks: In McCracken's Own Words

" I try to make things that on one hand are capable of drawing and sustaining one's interest, and on the other hand, of such a nature as to leave one free to enjoy whatever experiencing or dreaming or "tripping" - or integrating - one might be inwardly inclined to do through them."

- John McCracken (Contemporary Artists, 5th Edition)

The Mandala Roman numeral series, in particular our Mandala VIII, offers insight into a unique painterly moment in the life of a visionary, influential, and groundbreaking artist. McCracken

guides us to see his art and beyond his art to perceptually touch the infinite, through a finite painting or sculpture. 2019 Desert X artist, Sterling Ruby, proposed and installed "Specter", a vivid orange, large rectangle sculpture that appeared recently mirage-like and brilliant in our desert making reference to the otherworldly, the unidentified, and to the artistry of John McCracken.

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