

Personal Selection

From the Collection of the National Museum of American Art

A New Kind of Heroism

Charles McLaughlin's #17, 1966

Charles Desmarais

The 1950s was a decade in America of fear and of the bravado with which men sometimes respond to fear. It was an age that longed for a hero; lacking one, it demanded that every man pretend at heroics.

In art, the heroic model was the Abstract Expressionist, flailing bravely against invisible threats both external (nuclear annihilation) and within (the id).

From such an environment, the emergence of a meditative art that sought to eliminate self-reference, personality—all content, in fact—is an inspiration. And *inspiring* may be the most appropriate word to use in connection with the art and life of John McLaughlin (1898–1976).

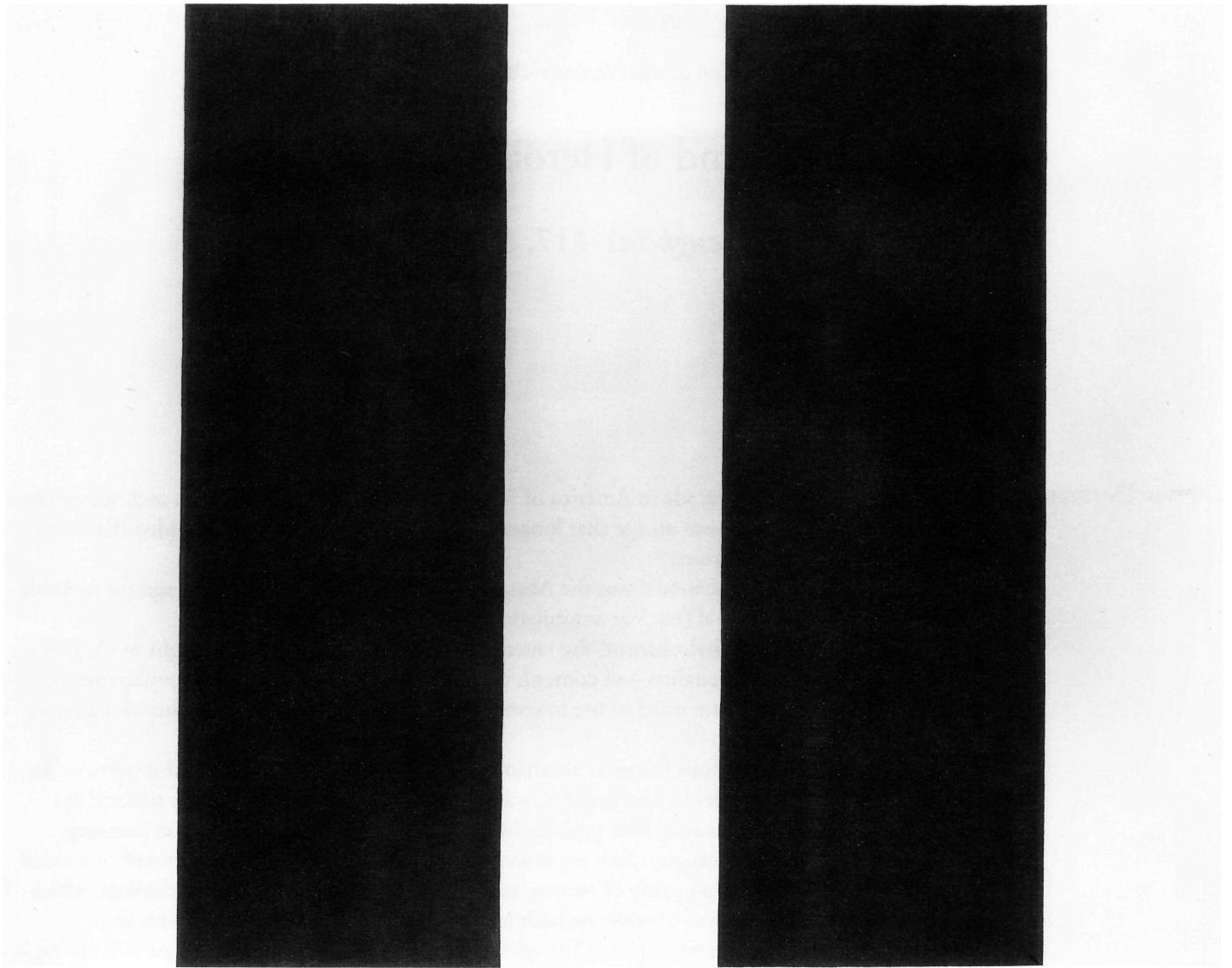
Launching a serious career as an artist at the age of fifty-five (his first exhibition, at the Felix Landau Gallery in Los Angeles, was presented in 1953), McLaughlin adhered for twenty-five years to an ascetic practice of art derived from his study of Asian painting, language, and philosophy. Striving toward “neutral form,” he restricted himself to a visual vocabulary consisting solely of rectangles and an extremely limited range of colors, which always included black or white or both and was often confined to those tones alone.

McLaughlin claimed to be self-taught. Indeed, his paintings have the honest and simple beauty (“something Yankee,” one critic called it) of utilitarian architecture or, perhaps, sign painting.¹

But McLaughlin’s work is not naive so much as it is uncorrupted—a pure, untarnished thought he kept protected from the corrosive atmosphere of theory. He painted *#17, 1966* after he had achieved considerable success, earning high critical praise and a retrospective survey at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1963. Still, he maintained little contact with serious abstract artists, choosing to live in a California beach town, far from the major art centers.

Unaware of (or unconcerned with) accepted painting practices, McLaughlin nonetheless experimented endlessly with minute technical variations. In *#17, 1966* he combined two different paints, a matte black and a glossy white. The paint is applied in different ways: the black with a wide brush in long strokes, the white with a much narrower brush in short strokes, apparently burnished with a palette knife. The effect, subtle as it is, clearly reinforces the sense that the black rectangles recede, becoming slots in a white field.

This painting cannot be understood in any of the contexts normally provided for art of the 1960s. It is not a reduction of a more complex form, or an emotional expression, or a phenomenological investigation. As a design exercise it would be boring beyond measure.



John McLaughlin, #17, 1966.
1966. Oil on canvas, 48 x 59 7/8.
National Museum of American Art,
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Sterling Holloway

It is not an action, or a protest, or a struggle. It is not an image. It is an absence: the occasion of a pair of voids (the black rectangles, unmoored from any edge or horizon, are quite difficult to read as positive forms) piercing an emptiness.

"To paint the object is one thing," McLaughlin once wrote. "To paint in the knowledge that an object exists is quite another."² At the peak of his creative life, John McLaughlin consolidated his claim to a new kind of heroism, different from that which the 1950s had demanded of him and of art—a heroism pacific and essential.

Notes

- 1 William Wilson, "McLaughlin an Overnight Success at 73," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 April 1971, Calendar section.
- 2 John McLaughlin to Jules Langsner, 11 March 1959, Artist File, Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, Calif.