

John McCracken

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LA Louver, Venice, CA 90291

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I wasn't surprised that it was the announcement card that put this John McCracken show at the top of my must-see list. After all, there have been several occasions when my grasp of his work has been pulled apart by the arrival of one of his cards in the mail. The most blatantly provocative ones have been those that point to McCracken's serious interest in UFOs and extra-terrestrial life. For example, the card for his 1997 show at Lisson Gallery presents a snapshot of a sign pointing the way to the 1947 UFO crash site in Roswell, New Mexico. In it he is standing just to the left of the sign, looking in the direction pointed to by its silver arrow. By the end of 1997, the artist had clearly found his way: the card for another show at LA Louver that year features a photograph of McCracken at the 50th anniversary celebration of the infamous crash. In it he has his arms around a couple of silver-clad (wannabe?) aliens, one of whom has his or her hand on McCracken's heart.

The final touch is telling: McCracken is wearing sunglasses that uncannily give him his own set of those big almond-shaped alien eyes that seem to have been engineered to take in all available light, not to mention space. The wonderful conundrum of the gravitational pull and weightless plasticity of these eyes as things made of a deep yet impenetrable, organic yet otherworldly substance is what McCracken ultimately provides us in his work. To that end, this recent exhibition of five wall sculptures (all of which are appropriately celestial in name: *Rigel*, *Pleiades*, *Mercury*, *Sirius*, and *Triton*, all 2003) does not disappoint in the least.

Given the high level of formal continuity of McCracken's work over his nearly 40-year

career, a cynical viewer could assume that such a reference is a mere ploy to infuse what could be read as a kind of safely beautiful minimalism with a referential reach that borders on camp. For me, however, McCracken's contextual clues work wonders precisely because of the manner in which they end up fully substantiated in the visual and physical material that we're always faced with in his work.

This is why the announcement card for this exhibition made such an impression. In this instance, McCracken provides us with a digital rendition of the exhibition, a plan of the gallery's large room with the five wall-based sculptures in the show installed. In it, two of the gallery's walls are missing, enabling two of the sculptures to 'float' in the gravity-free environment of the digital field. Therefore, even before I set foot in the show, I knew not only that I was going to be seeing a set of painting-like wall sculptures rather than his best-known leaning 'planks', but also that I was likely to end up thinking a lot about the significant differences between floating and leaning when it comes

to the distinctions between (among other things) painting and sculpture. Moreover, I walked in very curious to see if the self-reflexive manner in which the depictions of the sculptures could be read like the pixels they were made of in the digital world would be transformed effectively in the flesh.

So, while standing in the gallery I discovered that yes, like pixels, McCracken's sculptures are pieces of information. (The fact that they are all slightly different sizes adds to this reading, as does the hand-brushed quality of the painting that was done before the final clear coats were applied.) And yes, it is possible to completely rethink the lean of his more famous 'plank' sculptures if you think about floating. And finally, yes (despite the documentation and the virtuality), McCracken's work always makes it crystal clear that you really do have to be there.

Terry R Myers

Above: John McCracken, installation view of new works at LA Louver, Venice, 2003. **Below:** *Pleiades*, 2003, lacquer, resin, fibreglass, plywood, 38 x 231 x 8.3cm

