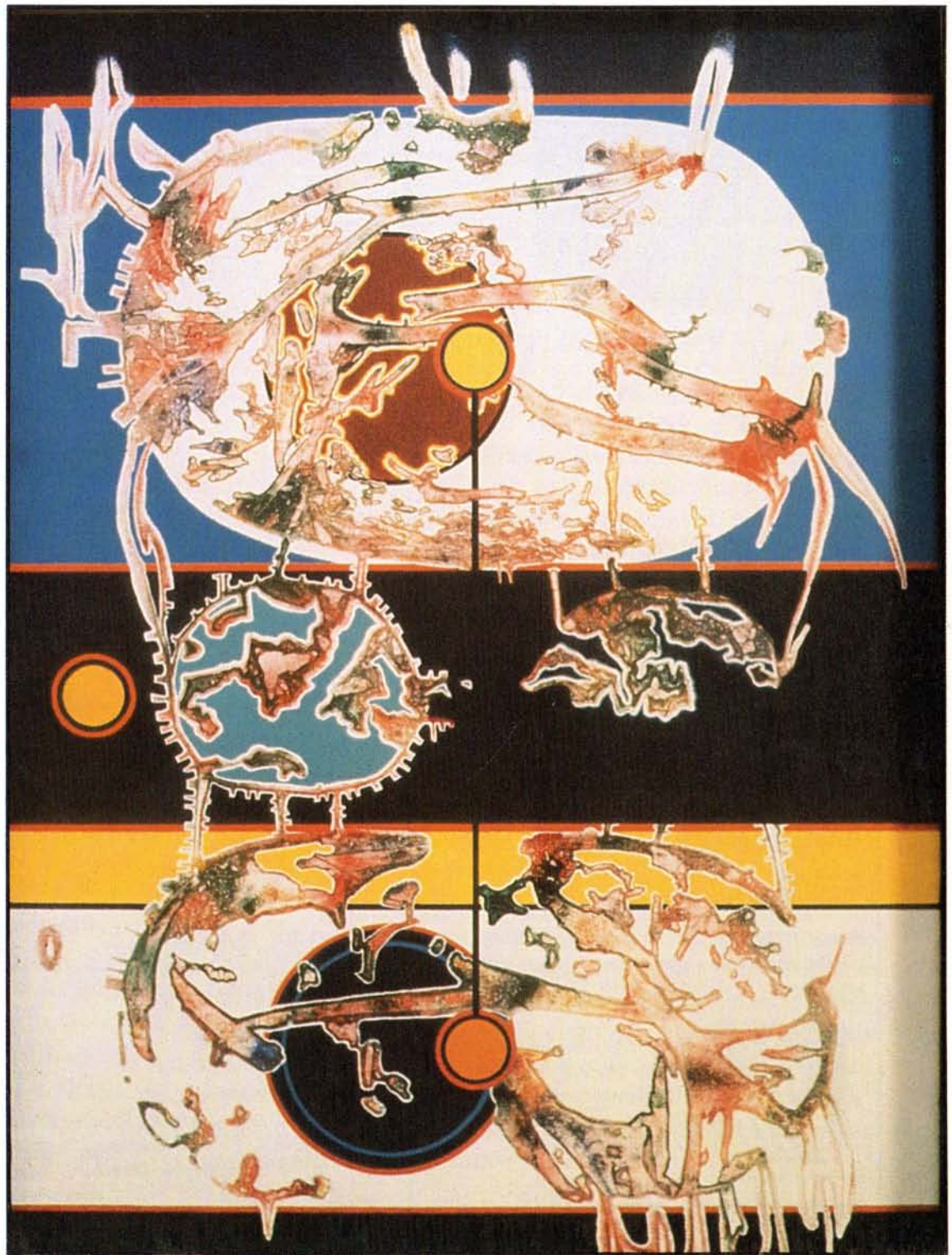


Robert McChesney  
A RETROSPECTIVE

October 21, 1994  
through February 5, 1995

Nevada Museum of Art  
E. L. Wiegand Gallery  
Reno, Nevada





E.L. WIEGAND GALLERY

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Front Cover:

**Estallido #25**, 1982, acrylic. Courtesy of the artist.

Back Cover:

**Canyon Country #27**, 1992, acrylic. Courtesy of the artist.

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Nevada State Council on the Arts

This project has been funded in part, by a grant from the Nevada State Council on the Arts and the Nevada Commission on Tourism, both state agencies.

# Robert McChesney

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Catalog by Howard DaLee Spencer  
Curator of Exhibitions and Collections

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## Acknowledgements

The Nevada Museum of Art is indeed pleased to present this retrospective exhibition of paintings by the California abstract painter, Robert McChesney. Not only is McChesney one of the founding fathers of abstract painting in the San Francisco Bay area, he is also a long time admirer of Nevada and has for many years found inspiration for his paintings in the stark Nevada desert landscape. Though he lives on a mountain near Petaluma, California, it is his visions of Nevada that most dominate his work.

Robert McChesney was born in Marshall, Missouri in 1913. He studied at the Washington University Art School in St. Louis and at the Otis Art School in Los Angeles. Prior to the Second World War he came to San Francisco to work on WPA art projects. Following the War, McChesney was an organizer for the Labor movement and became a participant in the Bohemian art scene that led to the blossoming of abstract painting in the San Francisco Bay Area. He taught silkscreen printing during the late 1940s at the California School of Fine Arts which was then the hot bed of the abstract art revolution on the West Coast. His work has been exhibited widely since that time, and he has enjoyed a loyal patronage and highly revered status in the Bay Area art community. McChesney left the City in the mid-1950s to build a marvelous mountain top home and studio near Petaluma, California that in many aspects successfully captures what one might fantasize as the ideal artist's retreat. Throughout his long and successful career he has remained a highly productive abstractionist, though he has explored different directions in his art with each new series of works.

Robert McChesney first camped at Nevada's famous Pyramid Lake more than 40 years ago after reading about the lake in Walter Van Tilberg Clark's book about Reno, *The City of Trembling Leaves*. He has returned almost every year to that mysterious lake for a sense of aesthetic renewal. McChesney feels that his Nevada desert

experiences have had a deep and profound impact upon his work. McChesney noted in analyzing his art:

*The desert and the wilderness, which I truly love and love to be in as much as possible, has influenced me a great deal. Of course, the artist is no different from anyone else in that he is influenced by everything around him visually and psychologically, but he has the ability to digest this and turn it into art. The great spacial elements of the desert are very important to me and I try to apply those elements in my painting. I think that I have been successful.*

Among McChesney's earliest friends in Nevada was Richard Guy Walton. Walton can justifiably lay claim to the title of Nevada's first abstract painter, and the Nevada Museum of Art has been pleased to exhibit Walton's work in several recent shows. Both men are rugged individualists made in the Western mold as well as fine abstract painters. Over the years, they have often been companions on expeditions to Nevada's remote hinterlands.

McChesney's work is more than just an abstraction of the Nevada landscape. It is more like a personal interpretation of the underlying essence of the Nevada desert experience. Although one might well sense the forms of the desert topography in viewing his work, one can also experience the desert itself in the sand, bone and materials used in the creation of various series of works. Likewise, many viewers see in his paintings a relationship to the polished crystalline form of the desert stones themselves in the translucent colors and shapes of the painting's imagery. Other observers have noted an influence of Native American weaving and ceramic design in McChesney's paintings. In some series of paintings McChesney notes that his works have a personal use of symbolism that is related to his desert experience. What McChesney refers to as his "symbols" are the sharp geometric designs that he uses in contrast to the more "natural" organic and fluid forms in his paintings.



*I use symbols because even in the most deserted sections of the Southwest or the wilderness, you'll find some indication of humankind having been there or lived there - Native American pictographs, cave paintings, that sort of thing. I've introduced these, not only as symbols of man's participation in the wilderness, but as a sort of personal signature in the paintings.*

Included in this retrospective exhibition are 32 paintings from a dozen different series of works that span the decades from 1955 when he first began to visit Nevada to his latest series from 1993. Each series was developed over a period of about two to five years. Though each series focuses on a particular technique or visual approach each series is still very consistent within his entire repertoire of work. The influence of the Nevada desert has given his work a personal vision placing a unique stamp upon all of his paintings that has lasted for five decades.

The Nevada Museum of Art is most grateful to Robert McChesney for all of the kind assistance that he has given to us in the organization of this exhibition. We are also very pleased that we were allowed the privilege of reprinting articles and reviews of McChesney's work by the noted art historians and critics, Lloyd Goodrich, Alfred Frankenstein and Allan Temko. However, I am especially thankful to Mary Fuller McChesney who took a great deal of time from her busy schedule of art projects and commissions to facilitate much of the organization and research with her husband's exhibition. The warmth and hospitality that she and her husband have shown us while visiting their home and studios has been greatly appreciated.

Howard DaLee Spencer  
Curator of Collections and Exhibitions

## Reviews and quotes on the work of Robert McChesney

*Robert McChesney, one of the old masters of modern painting in the Bay Region, has his first one-man show in several years at the Bolles Gallery, 729 Sansome Street. There are about 30 pictures, and McChesney gives them all the same title, "Arena," distinguishing one from another by means of numbers. This title seems to be a kind of bilingual pun. "Arena" is the Spanish word for sand, and nearly all of McChesney's present canvases are covered with that substance. Since sand was spread on the ground during gladiatorial contests in ancient Rome, "arena" also means a place where opposing forces contend. McChesney may have had to fight to bring these works into existence, but there is little contention in them. They are distinguished for poetic and lyrical qualities rather than aggressiveness.*

*McChesney has always liked to trace leisurely flowing black lines across a painting, from side to side or from top to bottom, and he does this often in the present show. You can read this device as a river of life, if you wish; at all events it contributes mightily to the sense of flux and movement which is the sign manual of McChesney at his best. His paintings are not limited by their frames but seem to flow indefinitely in the general direction indicated by the lines. And as they flow, their surfaces seem to open and close, momentarily revealing extraordinary depths of color, light, and countermovement and sealing them off again.*

*The use of sandy surfaces gives these paintings an exceptional richness and luster, and at times a subtle glitter. The grainy surface takes paint in a great variety of ways, but it seems especially to dissolve edges into mistiness, a tendency which the artist usually repels, squaring off his forms far more rigorously than he formally did, as if he did not wish to be seduced into mistiness and evanescence. Once in a while, however, he succumbs. But whether or not he lets the paint run into the sand, his work is uniformly beautiful in its color, in its marshalling of shapes, and its emotional and philosophical implications. The sense of process, which plays so significantly a role in all modern painting, is strong here, but McChesney does not let it run away with him; the process is superbly controlled, the craftsmanship is high, the total effect is mature and considered. Robert McChesney, in short, is one of the men in whom Bay Region modernism has come of age.*

Alfred Frankenstein, *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle*, November 8, 1959





Arena #39, 1960, enamel and sand



*Of the generation of Western artists, who shortly after the last War emerged as a powerful group of abstractionists, McChesney has seemed to me the steadiest and most deliberate, and in some ways the most sensitive and refined. If he was less eager to abandon representationalism than were some of his contemporaries, his eventual commitment to his own abstract vision of the natural world has been no less total or searching than theirs. Moreover, his considerable technical gifts, including meticulous brushwork and remarkable control of palette, only enhance his very personal art. Indeed, it may have been McChesney's technical resourcefulness which led Alfred Frankenstein to describe him as a "master" in a review of his work. Whatever the justice of this encomium, in an age when only a few great men seem incontestable masters, there can be no doubt that certain aspects of McChesney's art, among which I would single out his grasp of composition, may well be described as masterly.*

*McChesney's oils, especially the "Mexican" series of the 1950s, particularly exemplifies McChesney's philosophy of a freely developed natural world, governed by organic --- almost biological --- order, within the strict, arbitrary borders of the rectangle. There is a profound social analogy in such works: line is employed fluidly but not loosely, composition rationally but not dogmatically, in order to free --- rather than to confine or constrict --- the liberal splendor of color.*

*In later works McChesney has further enriched color with original textural effects --- the "sand and enamel" technique. I am confident that the method will take him far if he can pursue it as he intends and explores themes developed over the past year or two. McChesney is not so much a slow developer as he is a periodic blossomer. His work seems to gather force over rather long cycles, rising to crests every two to three years.*

*Partly because of his fine personal modesty and his understandable reluctance to clamor in the crude marketplace that is the contemporary gallery scene, and partly because of his geographical isolation on a mountaintop north of San Francisco, where he lives in great simplicity in a small, beautiful house built with his own hands, McChesney has never enjoyed the financial security which would give him precisely the peace of mind he cherishes and which is expressed in the calm power of his best paintings but he remains a prodigious worker, constantly at the easel.*

**Allan Temko, Artform, vol. 2, no. 5, 1963**

*I selected Robert McChesney's "Arena #29" because it is one of the best works I have seen by this strongly individual artist. Mr. McChesney's style is purely abstract, but by contrast with so much run-of-the-mill abstraction today, his paintings are always definitely and clearly designed. In this picture, the design has evidently been planned thoughtfully and thoroughly. The forms are precisely defined and strong in character, and their relations one to another are well felt. Line plays an important part in the composition, creating an interesting interplay with the large forms. The areas of positive color contrast handsomely with the white areas, and the grays. Differing textures have been skillfully used. Altogether, the painting is well thought out and completely realized. Its style seems to me to have a distinct flavor of the West and the Southwest, in its earthy colors and bold pattern suggesting American Indian art; but this may be entirely subjective on my part.*

**Lloyd Goodrich, Director, Whitney Museum of American Art; a statement by the judge, Prize Winning Paintings, 1962, Allied Publications**

# CATALOG

All of the paintings in this exhibiton are from the collection of the artist.

## SS SERIES

1. SS #11, 1955  
Oil on paper  
21 1/2" x 28"
2. SS #12, 1955  
Oil on paper  
21" x 28"

## MOUNTAIN SERIES

3. Mountain A #2, 1956  
Oil on canvas  
39" x 54"

## ARENA SERIES

4. Arena #39, 1960  
Enamel and sand on canvas  
48" x 69"
5. Arena #46, 1960  
Enamel and sand on canvas  
48" x 69"
6. Arena #49, 1960  
Enamel and sand on canvas  
48" x 69"

## HAIR SUITE SERIES

7. Hair Suite #11, 1963  
Enamel, sand, sisal on canvas  
69" x 48"
8. Hair Suite #14, 1963  
Enamel, sand, sisal on canvas  
48" x 69"

## BONE SERIES

9. Bones #5, 1964  
Bone assemblage, polyester  
resin on panel  
24" x 24" (Box 30" x 24  
1/2" x 7 1/2")
10. Bones #13, 1965  
Bone assemblage, polyester  
resin on panel  
25" x 19" (Box 10" x 26  
1/2" x 23")

## LA NOCHE SERIES

11. La Noche #1, 1965  
Enamel, sisal on panel  
36" x 48"
12. La Noche #7, 1965  
Sisal, sand, enamel on panel  
37" x 48"
13. La Noche #9, 1965  
Sisal, sand, enamel on panel  
48" x 36"

## ESTRELLAS SERIES

14. Estrellas #7, 1967  
Acrylic, polyester, and mixed  
media on panel 37" x 48"
15. Estrellas #9, 1968  
Acrylic, polyester, sisal, sand  
and plastic on panel  
36" x 48"

## ROJO SERIES

16. Rojo #5, 1972  
Acrylic on canvas  
42" x 48"
17. Rojo #11, 1973  
Acrylic on canvas  
42" x 48"
18. Rojo #12, 1974  
Acrylic on canvas  
36" x 48"

## BARRANCA SERIES

19. Barranca #7, 1976  
Acrylic on canvas  
36" x 48"
20. Barranca #9, 1976  
Acrylic on canvas  
48" x 60"

## ESTALLIDO SERIES

21. Estallido #17, 1981  
Acrylic on canvas  
36" x 48"
22. Estallido #25, 1982  
Acrylic on canvas  
48" x 36"
23. Estallido #32, 1984  
Acrylic on canvas  
48" x 60"

## LAHONTAN SERIES

24. Lahontan #27, 1986  
Acrylic on canvas 36" x 42"
25. Lahontan #40, 1987  
Acrylic on canvas 37" x 35"
26. Lahontan #50, 1988  
Acrylic on canvas  
24" x 24"

## CANYON COUNTRY SERIES

27. Canyon Country #6, 1989  
Acrylic on canvas  
38" x 53"
28. Canyon Country #21, 1990  
Acrylic on canvas  
36" x 48"
29. Canyon Country #25, 1991  
Acrylic on canvas  
36" x 48"
30. Canyon Country #27, 1992  
Acrylic on canvas  
36" x 48"
31. Canyon Country #30, 1992  
Acrylic on canvas  
36" x 38"
32. Canyon Country #38, 1993  
Acrylic on canvas  
36" x 48"



