

Canyon Country #30, 1992

ROBERT McCHESNEY

From Arena to Canyon Country

An American Point of View 1960-1996

FRESNO ART MUSEUM
JUNE 7 - AUGUST 18, 1996



Arena #37, 1960

ROBERT McCHESNEY An American Painter

Robert McChesney occupies a unique position within the framework of Bay Region modernism. His work has grown out of a rugged individualism tempered by a contemplative, deliberate examination of the western landscape. Much of his inspiration comes from a direct relationship to the land, most particularly the harsh crystalline forms of the desert and the reflection of sunlight through the oak and bay trees which surround his home and studios built by his own hands on Sonoma Mountain.

McChesney was born in Marshall, Missouri, in 1913. His life has been marked by the mythology of Mark Twain country and the adventure of a Huck Finn time and place - where boys learned to hunt squirrels and rabbits for food, to build rafts on wide rivers, to ride horseback and swim in Salt Fort Creek - growing up to drink bootleg liquor at rural "speakeasies" and to dance at the jazz joints of Kansas City - coming of age, openly identifying with what became the history of this country and, along the way, developing an acute visual sensibility.

After study at the Washington University Art School in Saint Louis, McChesney headed west to Montana, stopping to work at Glacier National Park, testing his skills in the building of Fort Peck Dam before moving on to Los Angeles for more formal study at the Otis Art School and his first encounter with developing American Modernism. Prior to the Second World War McChesney spent two years in San Francisco painting on the Federal Building mural at Treasure Island, along with twenty other artists, under the WPA program. This interlude was followed by four years of shipping out with the Merchant Marine as a part of the South Pacific war theater.

Until 1950 McChesney had worked in a stylized manner influenced by Charles Howard, whose European sources were Klee, Miro, the Surrealists, along with the Synthetic Cubism of Braque and Gris. Another evident influence was the South Sea Islander art with its geometric forms and patterns.

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.

-Robert McChesney

The 1950s were a time of marked transition for McChesney and included a teaching stint at the old California School of Fine Arts under Douglas McAgy's direction. Edward Corbett and Hassel Smith were on the faculty during those years and were part of the group sharing a house with McChesney at Point Richmond. This interaction at the center of the abstract art revolution on the West Coast was pivotal for McChesney. He produced his first expressive, nonobjective works, marking his stylistic retreat from hard-edge abstract Surrealism. Speaking of his work of this period, McChesney said, "Everybody was undergoing a change and you couldn't help but change yourself. Everybody seemed to be changing at the same time."

Returning to San Francisco following a year in Mexico, where he began working on unsized canvas with dry color stains, he continued his work as an abstractionist, gaining the admiration of the *San Francisco Chronicle's* art critic, Alfred Frankenstein. Writing of this series in *Art of America* in 1954, Frankenstein said, "The sharp line of his earlier style remains, but now it flows, contracts and opens out again, making a leisurely, majestic tack for the eye through every part of the canvas. These rivers of line flow through richly glowing clouds and colored forms. The paint is applied with very thin media, and light grounds glow through or open out with an effect of great depth and distance. Everything seems to be slowly, grandly, and at times prismatically in movement, and yet it stays within the frame."

In the mid-1950s, McChesney and his wife, Mary Fuller, the sculptor and writer, moved onto Sonoma Mountain east of Petaluma, where they have remained over the past forty-four years. They built a beautifully crafted home and two studios, and McChesney continued his painting, marked by the exhibition of his work nearly every year.

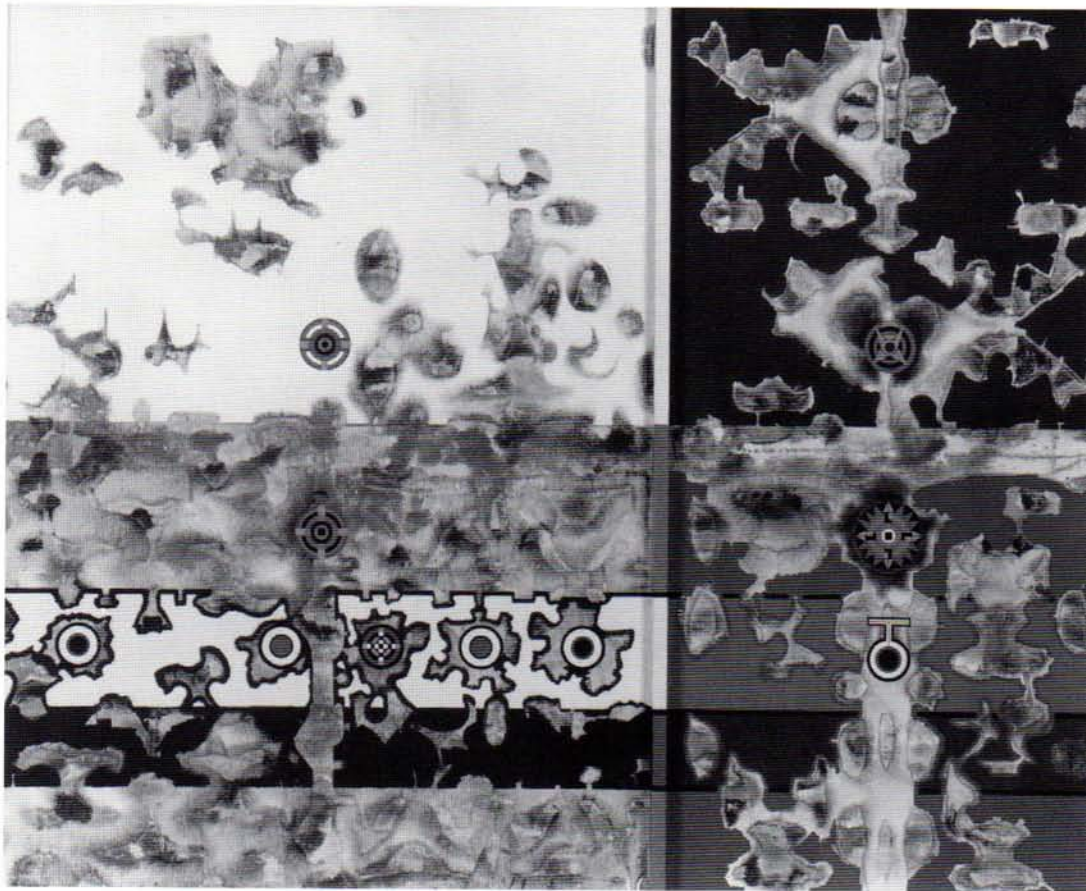
The earliest works in this retrospective of 1996 are the *Arenas*, a series of 79 works, begun in 1958 and completed in 1962. In his description of this vintage series, Alfred Frankenstein wrote, "The use of sandy surfaces gives these paintings an exceptional richness and luster, and at times a subtle 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 marshaling of shapes, and its emotional and philosophical implications. The sense of process, which plays so significant 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."

The *Arena Series* was followed by the *Hair Suite* (#1-20), *Bones* (#1-28), *La Noche* (#1-13), *Estrellas de la Noche* (#1-36), *Desert Series* (#1-28), *Yermo Rojo* (#1-15), *Barranca* (#1-23), *Estallido* (#1-33), and *Lahontan* (#1-53). Culminating in the tour de force, *Canyon Country* (#1-53), his series of paintings give proof that McChesney has continued to emerge as one of the most elegant and refined of the Western abstractionists. Rich, subtle, rigorous, beautiful, controlled - these words apply to the totality of McChesney's oeuvre. His vocabulary reveals its source in the desert landscape of the Southwest and his meticulous brushwork and commitment to his own abstract vision of the natural world have resulted in a prodigious body of richly textured work. Speaking of the landscape

of the Southwest, the artist wrote, "Because of the space and inhospitality of the land, the effect of the natural forces is so much more visible than it is in softer, more humanly compatible landscapes. The leanness, the ferocity, the bone-bare cleanliness of this earth is what moves me and that feeling is the source of this body of work."

This survey reveals the tenacity and integrity characteristic of McChesney's particular American point of view, which is marked by a directness and the simplicity of a contemplative life dedicated to the examination of the complexities of his time on this earth. Already ten paintings anticipate the development of his latest series, *Point of View*. We can look forward to the richness and eloquence of a master American voice in full maturity.

Jacquelin Pilar
Associate Curator



Barranca #9, 1976

The desert and the wilderness, which I truly love and love to be in as much as possible, have 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 paintings. I think that I have been successful.

-Robert McChesney



ROBERT PEARSON McCHESNEY

- Born Marshall, MO, January 16, 1913
- Son of John and Ruby (Pearson) McChesney
- Married Mary Ellen Fuller December 17, 1949

Education:

- Washington University School of Fine Arts, St. Louis, MO, 1931-34
- Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, 1936-37

Teaching Positions:

- California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco, 1949-51
- Santa Rosa Junior College, 1957-58
- Trustee of the San Francisco Art Institute, 1965-67

Represented by:

- Adrienne Fish, San Francisco, CA
- Walter Maibaum Fine Arts, New York, NY
- Annex Galleries, Santa Rosa, CA

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

- San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1949, 1953
- San Francisco Art Institute, 1957
- Todes Art Gallery, Chicago, IL, 1958
- Reed College, Portland, OR, 1959
- Parsons Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, 1960, 1961
- Hobb's Gallery, San Francisco, CA 1959
- Bolles Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1959, 1961, 1962 [New York City], 1970, 1971
- 20th Century West, New York City, 1965
- Both Up Gallery, Berkeley, CA, 1973, 1974
- Galeria Labranza, Freestone, CA, 1974
- Lincoln Art Center, Santa Rosa, CA, 1978
- California State University, Hayward, 1977
- Marin County Civic Center, 1980
- Gallery Space, San Francisco, CA, 1984
- Michaels Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1985
- Adlen Arts, Santa Rosa, CA, 1986
- California Museum of Art, Luther Burbank Center for the Arts, Santa Rosa, CA, 1988
- Curtis Gallery, San Anselmo, CA, 1989
- Carlson Gallery, San Francisco, CA, 1990
- 871 Fine Arts, San Francisco, CA, 1995

Retrospective Exhibitions:

- San Francisco Art Commission, 1974
- Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, NV, 1994
- Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, CA, 1996



Point of View #1, 1995

Selected Group Exhibitions:

- Art Institute of Chicago, 1947, 1954, 1960, 1961
- Corcoran Gallery, Washington, DC, 1957
- Biennial Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1955
- San Francisco Museum of Art Annual, 1945-60
- Nordness Gallery, New York City, 1964
- Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 1962, 1964
- Oakland Museum, 1972, 1973
- Adlen Arts Gallery, Santa Rosa, CA, 1985

Public Collections:

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City
San Francisco Theological Seminary, San Anselmo, CA
San Francisco Museum of Art
Oakland Art Museum
Art Institute of Chicago
Legion of Honor, San Francisco, CA
Muskegon (Michigan) Museum of Art
San Francisco Art Commission
Washington State Arts Commission
Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan
Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, CA
Worcester (Massachusetts) Art Museum
Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, Nevada
Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, CA

Overpage Self-portrait

Robert McChesney in his studio, 1996

ROBERT McCHESNEY
Fresno Art Museum, Fresno, CA
Exhibition Checklist

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| 1. Arena #37, 1960
Enamel, sand
48"h x 69"w | 14. Rojo #7, 1972
Acrylic, flat enamel
48"h x 42"w | 28. Canyon Country #18, 1991
Acrylic
24"h x 24"w |
| 2. Arena #39, 1960
Enamel, sand
48"h x 69"w | 15. Rojo #12, 1974
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w | 29. Canyon Country #27, 1992
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w |
| 3. Arena #46, 1960
Enamel, sand
48"h x 69"w | 16. Barranca #9, 1976
Acrylic
48"h x 60"w | 30. Canyon Country #30, 1992
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w |
| 4. Arena #76, 1962
Enamel, sand (triptych)
85"h x 70"w | 17. Barranca #18, 1978
Acrylic
36"h x 36"w | 31. Canyon Country #43, 1993
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w |
| 5. Hair Suite #7, 1963
Enamel, sand, sisal
48"h x 69"w | 18. Barranca #23, 1979
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w | 32. Point of View #1, 1995
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w |
| 6. Hair Suite #15, 1963
Enamel, sand, sisal
48"h x 69"w | 19. Estallido #15, 1980
Acrylic
36"h x 36"w | 33. Point of View #2, 1995
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w |
| 7. Bones #12, 1965
Glass, polyester, bones, enamel
19"h x 25"w | 20. Estallido #17, 1981
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w | 34. Point of View #4, 1996
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w |
| 8. Bones #13, 1965
Glass, polyester, bones, enamel
19"h x 25"w | 21. Estallido #21, 1981
Acrylic
48"h x 36"w | |
| 9. Bones #28, 1966
Glass, polyester, bones, enamel
37"h x 48"w | 22. Lahontan #7, 1985
Acrylic
24"h x 36"w | |
| 10. La Noche #9, 1965
Enamel, sand
48"h x 37"w | 23. Lahontan #45, 1988
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w | |
| 11. La Noche #11, 1965
Sisal, sand, enamel
37"h x 48"w | 24. Lahontan #50, 1988
Acrylic
24"h x 24"w | |
| 12. Estrellas de la Noche #1, 1967
Bones, polyester, sand, sisal,
enamel
37"h x 48"w | 25. Canyon Country #5, 1989
Acrylic
24"h x 24"w | |
| 13. Estrellas de la Noche #28, 1969
Enamel, sand, sisal, bones,
acrylic, polyester
48"h x 37" | 26. Canyon Country #6, 1989
Acrylic
38"h x 53"w | |
| | 27. Canyon Country #14, 1991
Acrylic
36"h x 48"w | |