

Ma

Issue 7

Ma at Château Shatto

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Across the internet, it's becoming increasingly possible to access high-resolution reproductions of artworks in full, million-pixel color, whose zooming capabilities can give us the sense that we are

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getting a “true” picture of an object. In the mid-20th century, however, most reproductions appeared in grayscale, with tonal shifts cueing viewers to the delineations and definitions of the photographed object. That is how visitors to *Ma*, an exhibition curated by artist Fiona Connor at Château Shatto, in turn first experienced John McLaughlin's mid-century minimalist paintings: through ten black-and-white photographic prints placed near the gallery's entrance.

Shot by Frank J. Thomas, the go-to documentary photographer for Los Angeles' mid-century art spaces, these images served as Connor's own introduction to McLaughlin's work while conducting research in Thomas' archives. Each print focuses on one painting that reflects the artist's characteristic compositions of rectangular forms: usually symmetrical, always resolutely abstract, and designed to induce internal contemplation on the part of the viewer. Yet at the edges of every photograph are inklings of the outside world, meant to be cropped out before reproduction, that situate the photographs in a particular place and time. We witness a quintessentially Californian stucco façade; a potted orange tree; a broom; even a pair of feet—presumably the artist's.

These charged zones and boundaries between world and object, object and reproduction, past and present are what Connor mines in *Ma*, which took its name from the same

Japanese philosophical concept that guided McLaughlin as he structured his paintings. Meaning “void,” *ma* refers not just to the space between things, but rather to the experience of that spatial interval. It serves as an apt description for much of Connor's work, too, for which she frequently re-fabricates common objects, in high fidelity, resituating them within institutional art spaces where they exist uneasily between object, document, and artwork.

As both curator and artist in the exhibition, Connor built upon this notion of conceptual gaps by including not only Thomas' photographs, but also an actual McLaughlin painting—#13 (1964)—and two works of her own that extended the notion of mediated existence yet further. In one of her works, a group of silkscreen-on-foil prints, she recreates newspaper broadsheets with decades-old McLaughlin reviews, and in the gallery's back corner, Connor installed reproductions of two of the bedroom window frames from the artist's longtime home in Dana Point, CA, replete with accumulated dust and stains.

This added context—much like the marginalia surrounding McLaughlin's paintings in Thomas' photographs—gave an aura of mundane reality to their stark internal geometries. Though this reality was (literally) fabricated by Connor, it rings “truer” than many other forms of reproduction, high-res

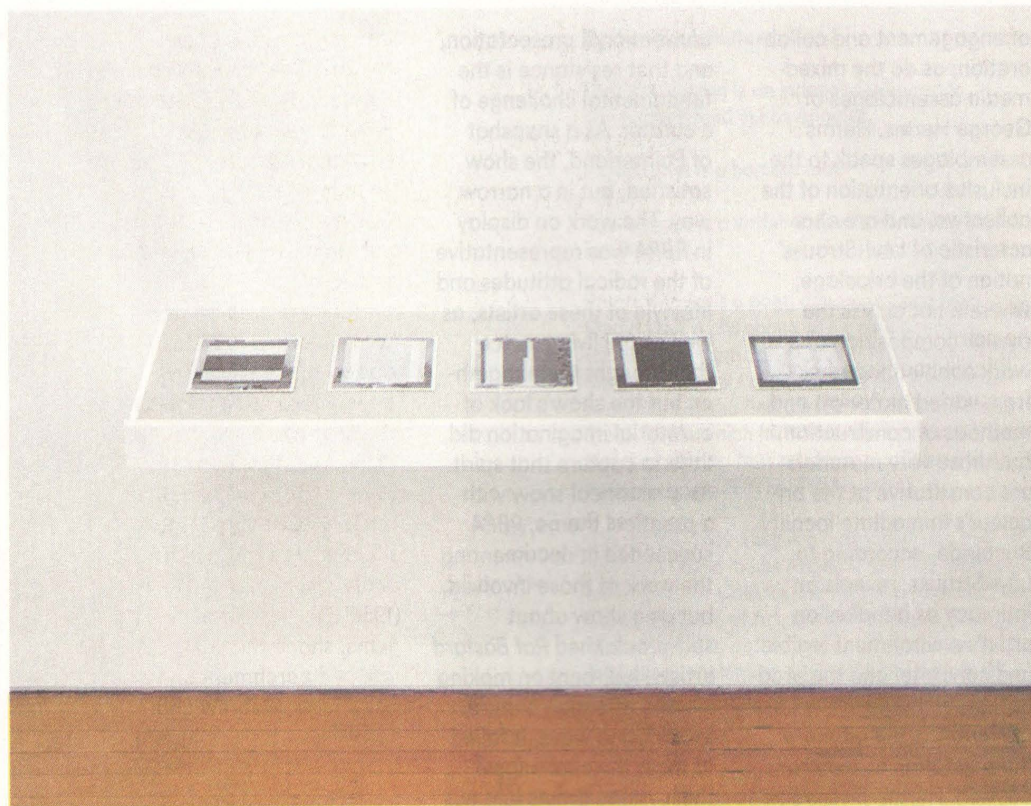
or otherwise, in the care that she took to gather and present both the aspirational and mundane qualities of McLaughlin's life and work. In this way, *Ma* articulated the English meaning of the word, signaling the nurturing of mothering—not necessarily in a feminine sense, but in a feminist one, which places value in nuance and contingency rather than the seemingly objective fact of reproductive processes such as photography.

Connor initiated a similar cross-disciplinary dialogue in her inclusion of Sydney de Jong's earthenware, which she introduced into Château Shatto's daily operations via colorful cups and bowls meant to be used in the gallery's back office-kitchen space by employees and visitors alike. In that same room, a work by Connor replicated de Jong's studio idea board, offering insight into the artist's wide-ranging inspirations at the moment Connor concretized its contents. The varied hues of the ceramic objects in this room contrasted the dominant blacks, whites, and grays in the main gallery, creating a palpable effect of warmth and inclusion within an ostensibly private zone of activity.

Ma also included a clear paperweight by Bedros Yeretzian inscribed with the show's title and date; and photographs by Judy Fiskin, related to the show's thesis in that Fiskin's signature use of distinct, uncropped photographic borders and hyper-diminutive scale emphasizes the gap between her overtly

representational subject matter and its minimalist translation in print. A video by Audrey Wollen, *Objects or Themselves* (2015), projected a still of Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* with voiceover and intermittent text overlay that poetically interwove the painting's history of politically motivated defacement with Wollen's personal history of illness and reconstitution—two sides of an unsettling but cathartic coin that entrenched the exhibition's feminist underpinnings.

Connor and Wollen also presented three performative walkthroughs during the run of the exhibition. It was in fact in those moments—when Connor put her work in direct dialogue with that of others—that the exhibition presented its most poignant questions regarding the values we ascribe to artworks in relation to the details of daily existence. In her replications and curation, Connor pointed convincingly to an alternative understanding in which reality is destabilized, not for the purpose of disruption or disinformation, but instead for deeper consideration and expanded consciousness—aesthetic, social, and political—regarding the everyday. Beyond mere contemplation, Connor presented a blueprint for actively inserting our viewpoints and opinions—and by “our” I mean those of us less accustomed to asserting ourselves—into whatever gaps, voids, and in-between spaces that we may encounter.



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Frank J. Thomas, *Documentation of paintings by John McLaughlin at his home in Laguna Beach (1959-1971)*. Digital reproductions of 4 × 5 transparencies, 8 × 10 inches. Image courtesy of the Frank J. Thomas Archives and Château Shatto.