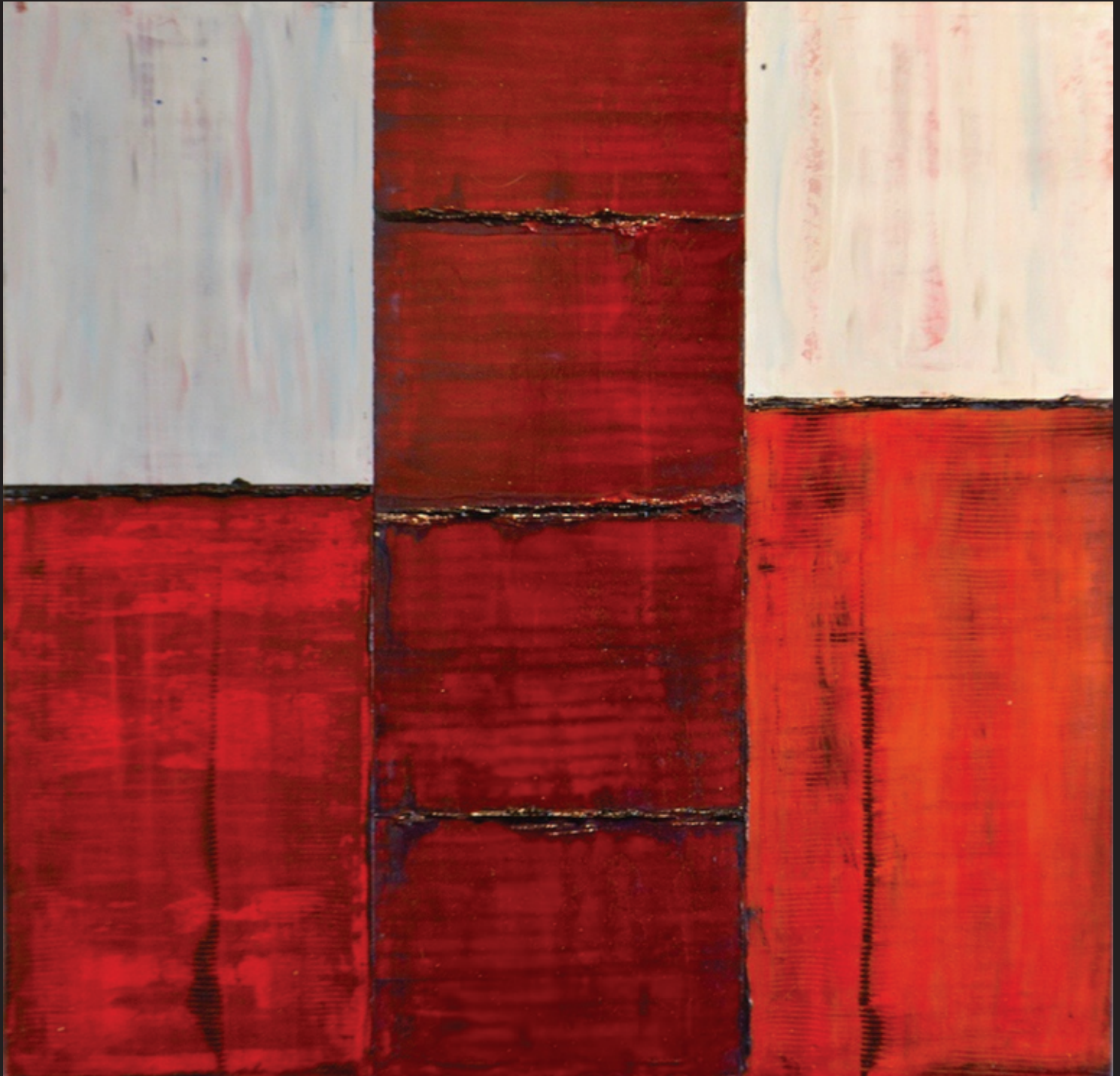


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CELEBRATING THE ARTS | FEBRUARY 2017





ARTIST McCAIN McMURRAY

Minimalist Journeys

OF RECTILINEAR FORMS AND HARD LINES | BY BRIGITTE DAVIS



McCain McMurray

I have a mind that sees dogs chasing rabbits in clouds and a whole Brueghel scene in a Jackson Pollock drip painting. So it was with a sense of wonder that I sat down with McCain McMurray to talk about his minimalist paintings in his large studio facing the Potomac River on the third floor of the Torpedo Factory Art Center in Old Town Alexandria.

"Why minimalism?" I ask him, hoping for a guiding hand to show me the way to the heart of his work. "When I transitioned into painting," McCain replies, "I brought with me 37 years of architectural practice with a strong bent on modernism. A big influence was

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose motto was 'less is more.' So when I visited [minimalist sculptor] Ann Truitt's exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum in 2010, it felt like a breakthrough. Her use of rectilinear forms, hard lines, her clean colors, rectangular columns with thin lines and larger stripes, her sense of order, everything had such a freshness of expression that everything else in the museum paled in comparison."

What matters in minimalist art is to reduce the subject to its essential components so that the viewer can experience the abstract qualities of the invisible, like light and air, and the wind that makes leaves shiver and



“How minimal can I make my painting to still allow the viewer to have an experience?”

—McCain McMurray

water ripple. Simplicity is key, so McCain uses only the basic elements of composition: vertical or horizontal lines, geometric forms, primary colors and a large degree of repetition to instill a sense of order. “It almost becomes a game,” McCain says. “How minimal can I make my painting to still allow the viewer to have an experience?”

I found myself pulled into one of his large paintings titled for a bay on the island of St Barts, “Anse de Marigot.” First I noticed the exquisite blueness of the work, shades and tones of translucent luminous blue glazes layered one over the other. I could feel the profound peaceful rhythm of ocean waves on a calm day, the purity of light reflected in water, the pulsing of life teeming beneath the shimmering surface.

McCain’s passion is for the process of painting and for colors, especially the color blue. He uses it like a magician. Phtalo and cerulean, Prussian, ultramarine and cobalt: he applies them in varying permutations of thin lines on the large trowel he then pulls across his canvas to create, with a part left to chance, a whole new vocabulary of nuances. His blue is his unique vision, just as all our visions of blue are unique. In this way blue becomes an entry point in a conversation between us, our memories and imaginations, our way to share the journey for a while.

Curious to know more about the details of his method, I ask McCain to speak about one painting he particularly enjoyed creating. “Let me show you ‘Golden Gate,’ a commission I did for a client in 2014,” he says, pulling





Page 34: "M10," acrylic on canvas, 74" x 68"

Page 35: "Seattle," oil on board, 36" x 36"

Above: "Polar 5," oil on board, 18" x 18"

Opposite top: "Golden Gate," oil on board, 48" x 108"; and "Anse de Marigot," acrylic on canvas, 65" x 36"

All photographs by McCain McMurray

up images on his computer screen. The painting is large and colorful, pulsating with life and quiet strength. It is his interpretation of the San Francisco icon. To paint it, McCain first designed a series of sketches, each a grid with two red verticals and several rectangular panels of various colors and sizes to represent the sky, the bridge, the water, the fog, the banks. Once his client had selected his favorite, McCain set to work. He developed each elemental part as a painting in its own right before combining them into one coherent whole by working out the relationship between colors and shapes. The sky becomes a speckled luminous orange and the fog takes on a velvety grey, the water a sumptuous blue, the bridge a powerful red. Even as a computer screen image, I

was struck by the rich sensuality of the painting, by the dark lines not quite straight and yet not wavering, simply delineating each component with a gentle solidity.

Treat yourself to a visit to McCain's studio. Stand close to his painting "M10." As you look, stretch with its slow vertical rhythm of brush strokes. Notice the blind work of time and weather in the orange bloom of a rusted door. Move closer still and let the opulent blue wrap itself around you.

It is a remarkable realization to learn that a minimalist painting can be a profound meditative experience. é

McCain McMurray | www.mccainmcmurray.com