

Knight, Christopher. "Worldly, Refined," *Los Angeles Times*, March 21, 2012.

# Los Angeles Times

## Worldly, refined

The Japanese notion of making art from everyday materials, known as Mono-ha, is on view in ways obvious and less so.

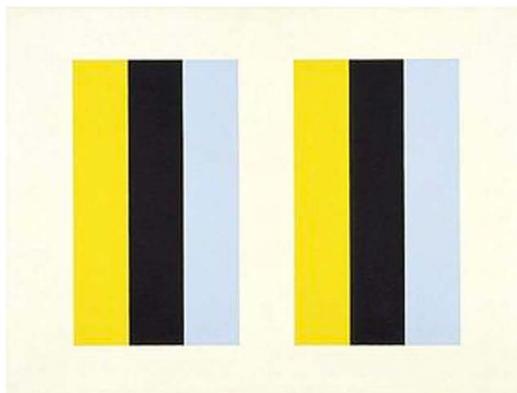


The recent decision at the Orange County Museum of Art to organize the first full retrospective of paintings by John McLaughlin (1898-1976), which is very [good news](#) indeed, happens to coincide with an ambitious exhibition at Blum & Poe chronicling a pivotal revolution in modern Japanese art. Anyone interested in McLaughlin -- among America's great 20th century artists and the first in Southern California -- should make a point of seeing the Culver City gallery's revealing "Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha" ([to April 14](#)). It was organized by independent curator Mika Yoshitake.

Mono-ha, roughly translated as "School of Things," is hardly known in the United States. But the art, which is mostly sculptural, transforms a profound Japanese aesthetic into a contemporary idiom that was also essential to the Californian's earlier work. McLaughlin lived in Japan, China and India for many years before moving to L.A. in 1946 and starting to paint, and he bought and sold Japanese prints for much of his life.

Mono-ha is characterized by artists making worldly refinements rather than withdrawing into tradition's cloistered realm. Materials are ordinary or industrial -- dirt, water, stone, paper; steel, lumber, concrete and glass. Nature and industry often collide. For the generation following World War II's devastating blow to national identity, the friction is unsurprising. By the '60s, the stresses of explosive reconstruction were felt.

Artists used simple systems to establish an equivalency among the art object, the viewer and the site in which the encounter between them happens. Geometry removes personal expressions of gesture. Impermanence is prized - although impermanence often happened to the art merely as a result of general indifference toward the Japanese avant-garde among private and institutional art collectors. Sculptures were either tossed out after a show or disappeared over time.

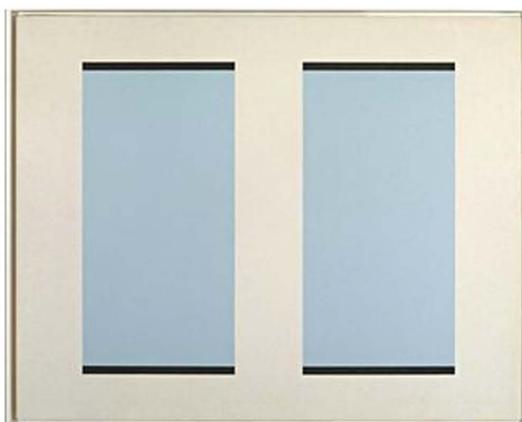


Recently that indifference has been changing -- especially for Lee Ufan, a Korean-born expatriate who moved to Japan in 1956. His philosophically minded art was the subject of a retrospective last summer at New York's Guggenheim Museum.

Still, many Mono-ha works at Blum & Poe now are authorized reconstructions of long-lost sculptures. Ten loosely affiliated artists, many of whom had been students at Tokyo's Tama Art University, made them during the movement's brief, five-year efflorescence.

If there's an Ur-object for the "School of Things," it's probably Nobuo Sekine's 1968 "Phase - Mother Earth," first made in Kobe, Japan. It's usually regarded as launching the genre. Reconstructed in a small garden behind the gallery, a massive and slightly squat cylinder of dirt mixed with cement stands next to the hole in the earth from which the dirt was excavated, before being compacted inside a mold. Both will slowly deteriorate.

This pair of big cylinders, one solid and the other void, exerts unexpected visual and conceptual pressure. Each is nearly 7 feet high (or deep) and 9 feet in diameter. The dense, curved wall of the void embraces emptiness, while the solid's mostly invisible mass is defined by a void visible in its entirety. The object's massive tonnage gets engulfed by the perceived weight of the earth surrounding the void below, which in turn imparts its own evanescence to the object above.



These disarming reversals vivify every object and space, natural and man-made, in proximity to Sekine's sculpture. For it's not the solid or the void that matters most in Mono-ha, nor a conflict between nature's power and culture's grandness. Instead, it's the interval between them that counts. That's the mysterious place where human consciousness resides. As in music, intervals generate breathing space for worldly knowledge, imagination and life experience.

"Thirty spokes meet in the hub," as the ancient Taoist philosopher Lao-Tse once put it, "but the empty space between them is the essence of the

wheel."

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These same principles had guided McLaughlin's purely abstract paintings since 1952. (As the title of a Laguna Art Museum survey once put it: "Western Modernism, Eastern Thought.") Those paintings anticipated some of what would happen with the abstract sculptures of Mono-ha.

OCMA has big ambitions for its McLaughlin retrospective, targeted for spring 2014. They include hopes for an international tour to Europe and Japan.

Europe makes sense, since Holland's Piet Mondrian and Russia's Kazimir Malevich also stirred McLaughlin's spiritual geometries. So does Japan. The Japanese aspect of McLaughlin's work has always been the most difficult for Western eyes to fathom. But if the marvelous "Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha" is any indication, that impediment might be disappearing.