

Midwest Modern: Works by J. Jay McVicker

**Birger Sandzén
Memorial Gallery
Lindsborg, Kansas**

**January 22 through
March 12, 2023**



As contemporary American modernism developed in the 1950s, eclipsing realism as the style of choice in art departments all over the country, the art world coalesced around the bicoastal cities of New York and Los Angeles. As these sites on opposite sides of the country claimed avant-garde status and importance, artists in “fly-over” states all but disappeared from the ranks of experimental progressives. Among those forgotten modernists is Oklahoman J. Jay McVicker (1911-2004). Recent scholarship highlights McVicker’s solitary stand for pure form and color in the middle west region of the country.¹ Postwar abstraction had captured the imaginations of artists throughout the United States, with optimistic dreams of creating a universal, visual lexicon devoid of meaning, bias, and entrenched cultural symbols.

Born near the dawn of the twentieth century, McVicker was first a regionalist as a young man in the 1930s, capturing scenes of Oklahoma rural life and landscape in paintings and prints. Just before World War II, his work began to incorporate dashes

of geometric cubism and biomorphic surrealism. At the war’s end the artist returned home and intentionally pushed the boundaries of what art could look like and communicate. McVicker stubbornly continued to practice in the center of America, gaining recognition from his berth at Oklahoma State University (OSU) as he regularly submitted his work to juried exhibitions all over the country for awards and purchase prizes. McVicker was prolific and passionate about his work over a long career, although he was known to be somewhat introverted and always reluctant to talk about or explain his art.

Jesse Jay McVicker was born October 18, 1911, in the tiny town of Vici, Oklahoma. He attended grade schools in nearby Weatherford, studying art and French, and wrestling with the high school’s team. After graduating he enrolled in Weatherford’s Southwestern State Teachers College (1930-34), continuing art and French language courses and earning intercollegiate accolades for his wrestling skills including a state medal for the 145-lb weight class.

The artist transferred to Oklahoma Agricultural & Mechanical College (now Oklahoma State University, OSU) in Stillwater for studio art and architecture. While a student McVicker met and



Abandoned, 1940, aquatint etching



The Arc Welder, 1943, aquatint etching



The Farm, 1947, aquatint etching



The Road, 1947, aquatint etching

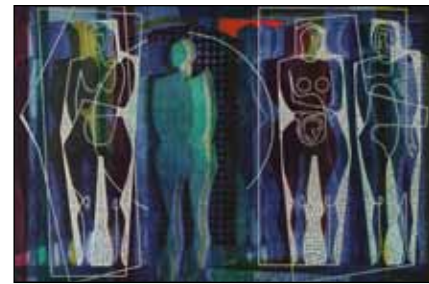
married Laura Beth Paul (1909-1993) in 1938, and then earned his bachelor's degree in 1940.

As the college had no MFA program, he stayed on to complete a master's degree in art history in just a year, graduating in the spring of 1941 by writing a thesis on technical aspects of the development of color pigment use in European painting from the Renaissance to the twentieth century. McVicker was promptly invited to join the faculty by his mentors Doel Reed (1894-1985) and Ella Jack (1890-1972), who both had enormous impact on his evolution as a professional artist. As a master of the medium, Reed taught McVicker the fine points of aquatint etching that the young artist used to great effect in such works as *Abandoned* (1940), *The Arc Welder* (1943), and *The Farm* (postwar 1947). Jack led McVicker in establishing a reputation for watercolor excellence and onto the roster of the prestigious California Water Color Society.

McVicker began as an American scene painter and printmaker in the Great Depression and into the 1940s. His early work echoes Reed's roadways, ruins, and tree construction styles, but McVicker added far more horses and a sense of action into his rural settings. In 1941 he won best print of the Southern States Art League exhibition, and at the Philbrook Art Center's annual in 1943 the printmaker swept first and second places in the graphic arts division. His aquatints *Nocturne* (1941) and *The Arc Welder* (1943) went on to receive purchase prizes to enlarge the Library of Congress's national print



Fishermen, 1948, watercolor



Circumvention, 1950, color aquatint etching, softground, and embossing

collection. McVicker also participated regularly in annual exhibitions of the Northwest Printmakers and the Chicago Society of Etchers.

Having been with the U.S. Naval Reserve for some time, in 1943 Lt. McVicker reported for active duty with the U.S. Navy, arriving at Camp Peary in Virginia for initial training then transferring to the Florida coast. His job as a shipfitter entailed much welding, a skill learned early on from working the family farm. But, the artist managed to sketch constantly during his naval travels and turned

many of those drawings into finished prints and paintings after the war ended. His award-winning aquatint etching *Tropical Wash Day* of 1946 was commissioned by the Associated American Artists (AAA) in New York and was based on sketches done while McVicker was on carrier duty in the Pacific. AAA had been established in 1934, gathering all the well known regionalist artists of the day – such as Thomas Hart Benton, John Steuart Curry, and Grant Wood – to make affordable fine art lithographs for the general public. Even impecunious art students at the University of Oklahoma at Norman in the middle of the country were able to mail order AAA prints for \$5 each and amass respectable collections.²

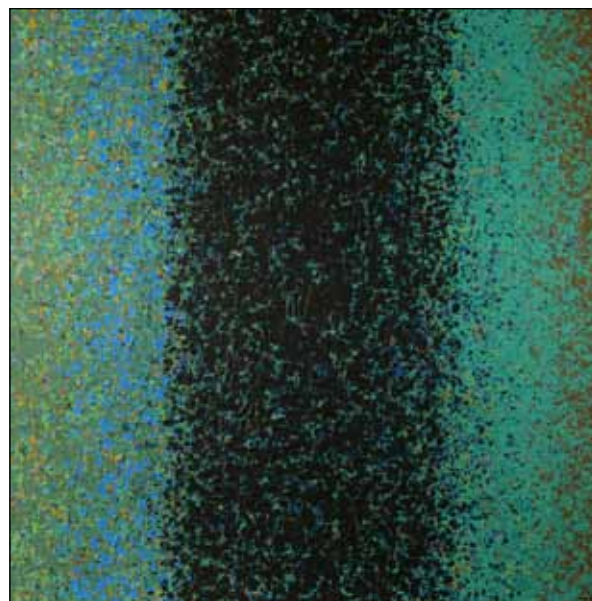
McVicker returned to teaching in Stillwater at OSU the spring semester of 1946, and over the next several decades taught courses in drawing, painting, and etching. Back on campus, the artist quickly resumed participation in exhibition



Painting 52, 1952
oil on Masonite



Dark Structure, 1957
color aquatint



Persistent Black, 1968, acrylic on canvas



Red Obliquity, 1971, acrylic on canvas



Scape Series #10, 1981, acrylic on canvas

circuits. His painting *Payne County Road* won the California Water Color Society's \$200 purchase prize in the 26th annual at the Pasadena Art Institute in 1947. The artist also joined the Prairie Water Color Painters that had been organized in 1933 by the Swedish American artist Birger Sandzén (1871-1954) at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, and whose annual exhibitions were circulated by the Kansas State Federation of Art (KSFA) every academic year. McVicker's *Clouding Over* watercolor circulated in the 1948-49 traveling exhibition that went on to be shown in Derby, England. The artist continued to contribute modernist work to the Kansas organization through the 1960s, with his watercolor *Prairie Incident* known to have been included in the 1952-53 show.

Looking back in later years, McVicker concluded that by 1948 he'd gone nonrepresentational in his work as a natural development, stating simply "I didn't find realism as satisfying as the abstract."³ *The Farm* etching of 1947 and *Fishermen* watercolor of 1948 reveal his transition process. *The Farm* depicts a rural Oklahoma landscape but is constructed of angles and flat planes for an exemplary cubist effect. In the watercolor, the artist utilizes bare minimum lines and color to sketch

boats, banks, and trees, but divides the whole into a rudimentary grid with bold brushstrokes.

In the early 1950s McVicker added screenprint to his printmaking repertoire, and by 1957 was proficient enough to be showing with the National Serigraph Society. The artist enjoyed experimenting and pushing the limits of the stencil technique, which culminated in works of astonishing precision such as *Black Sun Over Pharaohs Garden II* (1978). Observing the small geometric shapes scattered across the flat picture plane of that screenprint, it is not surprising to note

that McVicker considered Paul Klee (1879-1940) to be a significant influence. In the 1950s most of his paintings and prints were composed of geometric shapes and symbols in patterns, such as seen in the 1957 color aquatint *Dark Structure*. At the time, the artist's interests were in streamlined form and skeletal structure, inspired by such architectural elements as electrical towers and satellite dishes.

The 1960s saw McVicker experimenting with free form abstraction, using blobs of color applied in random patterning within larger, simplified forms. The focus on color combinations seem to highlight the artist's earlier study of the beginnings of oil pigment use in thirteenth-century Europe in an interesting contrast with the distillation of form he was achieving in the new age of "pop art" in works such as



Tangency Series #22, 1985, acrylic on canvas



Study, circa 1986, acrylic on Masonite

Persistent Black (1968).

In 1963, the director of the Oklahoma Art Center, Nan Sheets (1885-1976), was asked by Margaret Sandzén Greenough (1909-1993) to organize the "All Oklahoma Exhibition" for the Birger Sandzén Memorial Gallery's "Midwest Art Exhibition," the longest-running annual art exhibition in the central states established at Bethany College in 1899. Sheets was a friend and colleague of Birger Sandzén during his 52 years of teaching and organizing art shows at the Lindsborg college, and continued to stay in close touch with the artist's daughter and spouse Charles Pelham Greenough, 3rd (1909-1983) as they set about running the new art gallery from its opening in 1957. Sheets sent her work from Oklahoma City, along with paintings by the head of the art department at the University of Oklahoma (OU) in Norman, John O'Neil (1915-2004), and McVicker, who was by then the chair of the art department at OSU in Stillwater. Doel Reed was also asked to send paintings for a solo show at the Sandzén Gallery that spring, although he had retired from OSU after 35 years and relocated to Taos by that time. Reed's *Campo Santos* oil was first seen in that 1963 exhibition, sparking an ultimately successful call by Margaret Greenough for donors to keep that painting in Lindsborg.

In 1959 Doel Reed retired from teaching at OSU, having led the art department since 1924. McVicker took his place as Chair and was able to move immediately into much larger quarters and hire three



Monolithic Black, 1988, acrylic on canvas

more art faculty to support an increased student enrollment. McVicker taught seventeen more years before retiring himself, in May of 1977. The artist was freed from administrative duties and focused even more intensely on design problems in series.

During the 1970s and 1980s McVicker's body of work was characterized by large acrylic canvases with op-art stripes and bold color blocks and fractals. *Red Obliquity* of 1971 is an example of McVicker's subtle use of color within hard-edged stripes to create layers of space and visual interest. In the 1980s, the artist moved into warmer color pairings and varying geometries of triangles and diamonds in his *Scape Series* pieces. He completed endless small studies

using color pencil on graph paper to plot out full size pieces such as seen in *Scape Series #10* acrylic of 1981.

The late 1980s into the 1990s saw even more complex planning such as with his *Stiletto Series*. Over several years, dramatically different scale, color use, and medium varied a repeated, basic composition. *Stiletto Series #25-A* (1990) is a much larger rendition of *Stiletto Series #14* (1989) and has cut out windows with painted collage elements mounted behind. Exploring the absolute limits of geometric forms and color combinations fully engaged the artist until his death at age 92 on August 31, 2004.

- Cori Sherman North, Curator



Stiletto Series #14, 1990, monoprint



Stiletto Series #25-A, 1990, monoprint with cut out and collage

NOTES:

1. Louise Siddons, *Centering Modernism: J. Jay McVicker and Postwar American Art* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).
2. Lee Mullican, quoted in *Centering Modernism*, 62
3. Nancy Hermann, "Tulsa Performing Arts Center Profile: J. Jay McVicker," *Intermission: The Official Magazine of the Performing Arts Center* (Feb 1993): 19.



Birger Sandzén
MEMORIAL GALLERY

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The Sandzén Gallery gratefully acknowledges the Oklahoma Collectors that have loaned the works for this exhibition.

Cover image: Detail of *Submerged Squares #1-A*, 1972, acrylic and collage on canvas