

6.

6. *Ideographic Elements #4*, 1953. Screenprint on paper, ed. 15, 22 x 14 3/4 in. Collection of Kelly Knowlton. Photograph by Phil Shockley.

(On the front) *Untitled (Cushing Coaling Tower)*, 1950. Casein on paper, 22 x 15 in. Collection of Jay and Victoria Daniel. Photograph by Tomo Saito.

(On the back) *Smith's Studio (Stillwater, Okla.)*, portrait of J. Jay McVicker, 1938. Gelatin silver print, 9 7/8 x 7 in. Private Collection.

(Inside)

1. *Untitled (White Painting)*, 1963. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 46 in. Oklahoma State University Museum of Art, Gift of Kelly Knowlton, 2013.010.001. Photograph by Phil Shockley.

2. *Small Town Elements*, 1949. Etching and aquatint on paper, ed. 50, 9 x 17 in. Oklahoma State University Museum of Art, Gift of Oklahoma State Senate Historical Preservation Fund, Inc., 2013.015.004. Photograph by Phil Shockley.

3. *Driftwood*, 1943. Etching and aquatint on paper, ed. 50, 12 11/16 x 20 3/4 in. Collection of Kelly Knowlton. Photograph by Phil Shockley.

4. *Reclining Figure*, 1956. Brazed bronze and steel, 9 1/4 x 40 x 7 3/4 in. Collection of Jay and Victoria Daniel. Photograph by Tomo Saito.

5. *Circumvention*, 1950. Color etching, aquatint, soft ground, and embossing on paper, ed. 20 (only 10 impressions printed), 11 5/8 x 17 1/8 in. Collection of M. Lee Stone Fine Prints, Inc., San Jose, California.



HOW DO WE TELL THE STORY OF MODERN AMERICAN ART?

Throughout the twentieth century, artists across the United States participated in modernist movements that explored new ways of interpreting the world and human experience. In Oklahoma at mid-century, artists working at universities across the state were at the forefront of what one critic called “an artistic Renaissance.” Jesse Jay McVicker (1911-2004) was on the faculty at Oklahoma State University (at the time, Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College). As an artist and as a teacher, McVicker was an enthusiastic proponent of artistic innovation.

Ironically, as artists throughout the country expanded their practice in the 1950s and 1960s, art critics began to narrow their vision, focusing on large coastal cities such as New York and Los Angeles. By the end of the century, they were telling a geographically limited story of postwar American art that erased “flyover state” artists like McVicker and his colleagues. Distorting the historical record, such criticism reinforced negative stereotypes of Middle America, undervaluing its contributions to contemporary American culture. This exhibition refutes the coastalization of American art by centering McVicker’s modernism, revealing it to have been just as innovative as that of his more well-known contemporaries.

A painter, printmaker, and sculptor, McVicker was a student, faculty member, and, from 1959-1977, chair of the Department of Art at Oklahoma State. As his career progressed, he experimented with different styles and expanded his professional network, exhibiting his work in major national and international galleries and museums. The artworks in this exhibition reveal McVicker’s development from his early regionalist roots through biomorphic abstraction, hard-edge geometric abstraction, and finally to a style that reflected the shifting boundaries of postmodernism. The first comprehensive survey of McVicker’s career and oeuvre, this exhibition also begins to tell the story of American modernism in all its diversity.



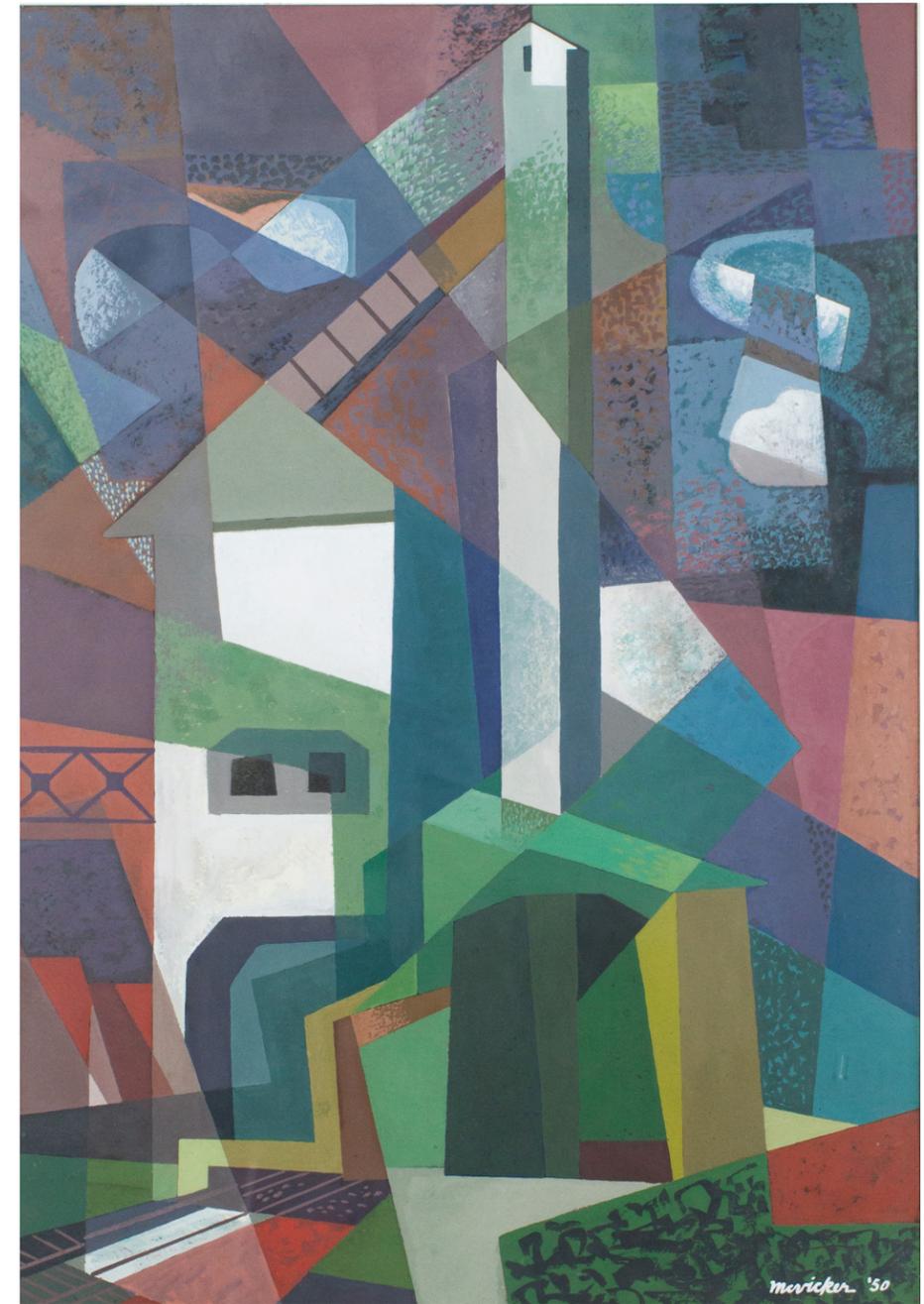
This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional funding comes from Malinda and Dick Fischer, Mary Ann and Ken Ferguson, the OSU Museum of Art Advocates, the Raymond & Bessie Kravis Foundation, and the OSU Museum of Art Founding Patrons and Charter Members.



720 South Husband Street, Stillwater OK, 74074 | 405.744.2780 | museum.okstate.edu

Centering Modernism

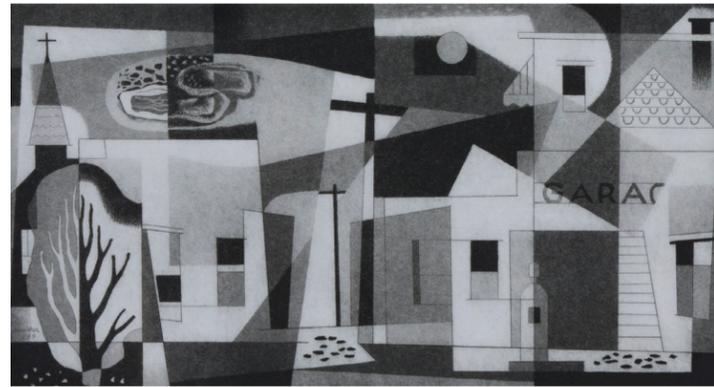
J. Jay McVicker and Postwar American Art



SEPTEMBER 25, 2018 – JANUARY 19, 2019



1.



2.



3.



5.

The exhibition focuses on the work McVicker made between 1935 and 1970, beginning with prints and watercolors of his local environs, from Stillwater to the training camps at which he was stationed during his Navy service. McVicker was already attuned to contemporary trends in American art, but the Second World War expanded his horizons in terms of both subject matter and style. Experiments with the dreamlike, distorted natural forms of Surrealism followed. At the same time, McVicker's passion for order—encouraged by his military service as well as his rigorous approach to personal improvement—expressed itself in his idiosyncratic take on geometric abstraction, equally informed by European Cubism and American Precisionism.

McVicker married Laura Beth Paul in 1938, and soon thereafter the artist began to depict the human figure in his art. Although the couple never had children of their own, McVicker was a father figure and inspiration to his sister-in-law's young son, and the McVickers also looked out for the artist's much younger sibling, Marjorye, after their father's death. In order to explore human relationships, McVicker developed a linear style that combined geometric and biomorphic abstraction in stylized human forms. The family group appears repeatedly in his work from this period, along with pregnant women.

His linear figurative style led McVicker to the rich field of signs, symbols, and pictographs that increasingly interested artists around the world after the Second World War. Appropriating writing systems from around the world and

throughout time, modern artists focused on the formal elements they shared rather than their history or content. Most written language, for example, is organized in rows and columns; alphabets and syllabaries repeat arbitrary symbols in patterns that can be recognized even when the letters and words cannot be read. In much of McVicker's work from this period, the letterforms within his grids echo the biomorphic forms of his figurative work.

Artists' ideas about shared patterns and universal imagery were rooted in emerging social science. Anthropologists and linguists at mid-century hypothesized that shared structures underpinned diverse social systems and languages, linking them all together despite their apparent difference. Scientists suggested that if they could understand the underlying structures of human society and communication, they might eliminate the conflicts that arose out of xenophobia and misunderstanding. It was a widely shared goal after the Second World War, and one that seemed increasingly possible thanks to scientific and technological leaps forward in the ensuing two decades.



4.

As a visual artist, McVicker was eager to discover the structure that underpinned his image-making. From his master's thesis, which analyzed the development of color theory from the Renaissance through modernism, to his explorations of geometric and biomorphic abstract forms, his work focused on this search for the fundamental building blocks of visual communication. For McVicker this was a spiritual as well as an intellectual exercise. He had considered becoming ordained as a minister in his youth, and although his religious beliefs had broadened beyond a specific denomination by the time he was on the A&M faculty, he continued to pursue spiritual enlightenment through a holistic practice that included exercise and meditation alongside art-making.

Throughout his career, McVicker was relentlessly experimental. The 1960s saw the artist refining and winnowing down his imagery to its barest essentials, but by the 1980s he was using that core language to create exuberant and elaborate work, combining painting, printmaking, and collage. More than fifty years after he first won an award for his work, McVicker was still receiving prizes for his technically brilliant, visually stunning prints — and he was still drawing his inspiration from Oklahoma.

For more information about J. Jay McVicker, see *Centering Modernism: J. Jay McVicker and Postwar American Art*, written by exhibition curator Louise Siddons and published by the University of Oklahoma Press.