Centering Modernism
J. Jay McVicker and Postwar 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.

HOW DO WE TELL THE STORY OF MODERN AMERICAN ART?
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.

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.