

Fiona Connor:

Object Classrooms

Fiona Connor's exhibition, *Object Classrooms*, tracks the movement and eventual disappearance of an artwork as it was moved around New Zealand in the mid-1970s. Tracking its mysterious path – through galleries, art institutions, and conservation departments – Connor allows the absent painting and its related documentation to create a series of counterpoints between objects, words and architectures.

The painting in question was created by Los Angeles artist John McLaughlin, a pioneer of minimalism and hard-edge painting, and a leading United States West Coast post-war artist. It was included in the 1972 exhibition *State of California Painting* which toured New Zealand, organised by the American director of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Robert Ballard. The exhibition had a substantial impact on New Zealand artists at the time, many of whom found inspiration in McLaughlin's approach to contemporary painting.

Connor's film, *Object Classrooms #1 (Finding John McLaughlin)*, commissioned by the Govett-Brewster, follows in the footsteps of the exhibition's tour and includes footage of the New Zealand art institutions that hosted *State of California Painting*. The film is presented alongside other new works and historical material drawn from the Govett-Brewster's archives. It forms an investigation into the life of the painting and considers the impact that an artwork and a place can have on one another.

Object Classrooms is accompanied by *Abstractions: Works from the Govett-Brewster Collection*, in Galleries 2, 3 and 4 (Sat 10 Mar – Sun 29 Apr), which focuses on the history and influence of geometric abstraction (particularly from the West Coast of the United States) on artists in New Zealand.

Curated by Sophie O'Brien, with Assistant Curator Tendai John Mutambu

Ko tā Fiona Connor whakaaturanga, e kīia ana ko *Object Classrooms*, he haurapa i ngā nekehanga me te ngaromanga o tētahi o ngā mahi toi ā John McLaughlin, i kātoro i te motu i ngā tau 1970. I whakatairangahia te mahi toi nei me tōna ara haere mā roto i ngā whare whakairi toi, ngā whare wānanga toi me ngā whare tiaki taonga – ko tā Connor he tūhonohono i te taonga matangaro ki hōna tuhituhinga e puta ai tētahi kohikohinga e hānga ai ngā āhua, ngā kupu me ngā tāreitanga.

I tāreingia te mahi toi e kōrerohia ana e te ringa toi o Ngā Ānahera, e John McLaughlin. He kaikōkiri āhuahanga peita tūrehurehu mārō me te ringa toi arahi i ngā tānga o muri mai i ngā pakanga o Amerika ki te Uru. I tāpirihia hāna mahi ki te whakaaturanga e kīia ana ko *State of California Painting*, he mea whakarite e te ringa tohu o te whare whakairi toi o Govett-Brewster nō Amerika, ko Robert Ballard, ā, i āmio i te motu. Kua titia te whakaaturanga nei ki te whatumanawa o ngā ringa toi o Aotearoa i mātai atu i ngā hua a McLaughlin nō te ao hōu nei.

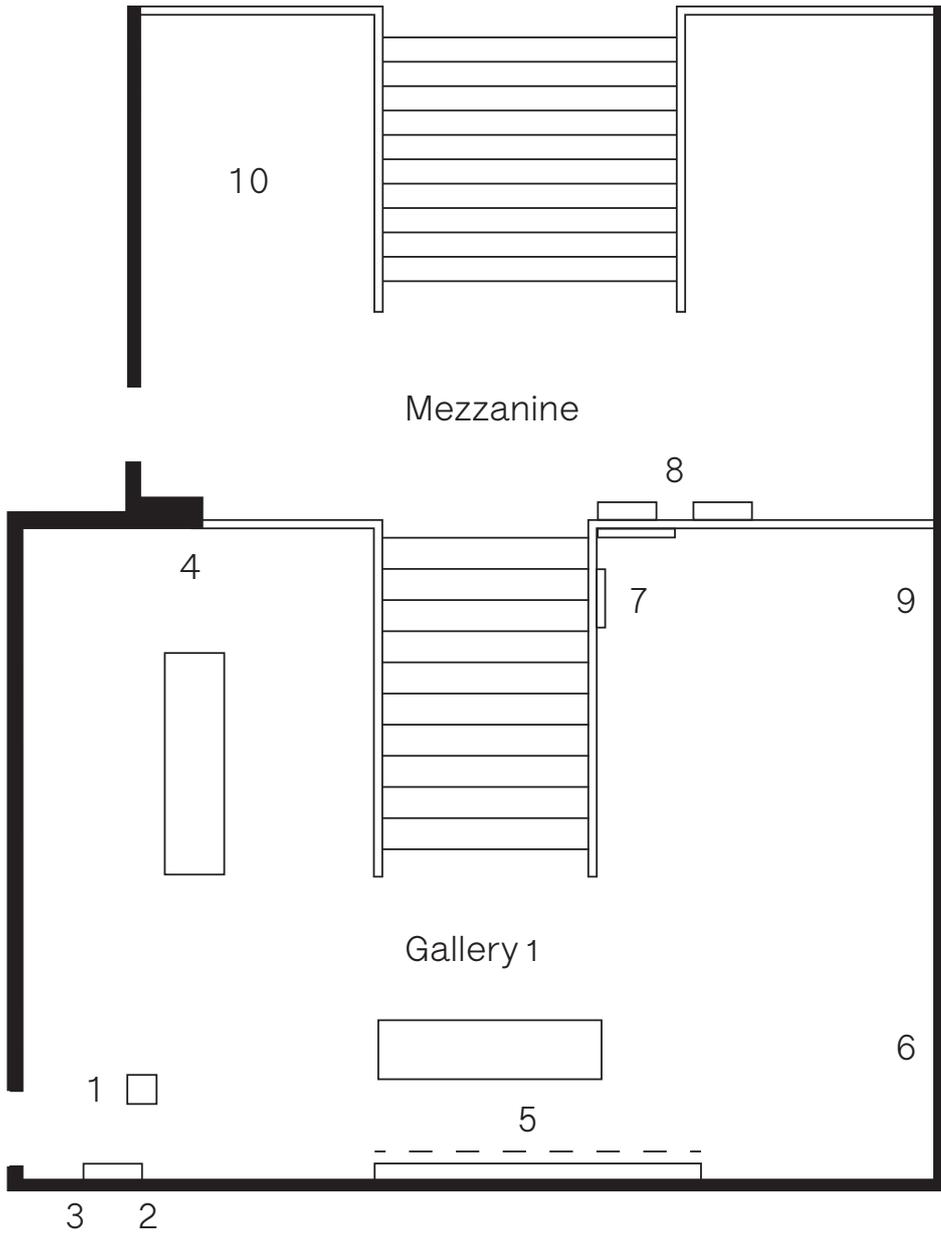
Ka whāia ngā tapuae o te terenga o *State of California Painting* i te whakaaturanga nei a Connor, e kīia ana ko *Object Classrooms #1 (Finding John McLaughlin)*, arā, he kiriata hōu i whai taunakitanga pūtea, i raua hoki ngā kaponga o tēnā, o tēnā whare i tatū atu ai a *State of California Painting*. Ka puta te rangahau i te oranga o te mahinga peita me te aro anō hoki ki te papātanga o te taonga nei me tōna takiwā ki a rāua anō.

Hei hoa a *Object Classrooms* ki a *Abstractions: Works from the Govett-Brewster Collection*, i te Kopa Whakairi Toi 2, 3, me te 4 (Rāhoroi 10 o Poutūterangi - Rātapu 29 o Poutūterangi), e aro ana ki te hītori me te hiranga o ngā āhuahanga peita tūrehurehu (nō te tai hauāuru o Amerika), e ai ki ngā ringa toi o Aotearoa mā hō mātou kohikohinga tāreitanga.

Nā Sophie O'Brien rāua ko Tendai John Mutambu i takatū

Works list

1. Audio guide and exhibition furniture 2018
6 devices, audio file and stand
Courtesy the artist and Sebastian Clough
2. *State of California Painting* catalogue
spiral bound book
Courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
3. Charters and Guthrie photographic documentation
of John McLaughlin, No. 4 1972
photographic print, tape
Courtesy New Plymouth District Council
4. Fiona Connor
Object Classrooms #1 (Finding John McLaughlin)
2017-2018
super 16mm transferred to digital video
7:03 minutes
Courtesy the artist and Hopkinson Mossman
5. Fiona Connor
Object Classrooms #2 (Correspondence) 2018
silkscreen on foil and digital print on paper
each piece approx A4
Courtesy John McLaughlin Papers Louis Stern
Fine Art and New Plymouth District Council
6. Fiona Connor
Object Classrooms #3 (Untitled) 2018
wood block print
Courtesy the artist and Hopkinson Mossman
7. Fiona Connor *Ma #1 & Ma #2 (Bedroom window of
John McLaughlin at his home in Dana Point)* 2016
acrylic on timber, glass, vinyl sliding window,
mesh screen, silkscreen on aluminium, fixtures
Courtesy the artist and Hopkinson Mossman
8. Fredrik Nilsen
Documentation of Ma at Chateau Shatto 2016–2017
digital prints
Courtesy the artist and Fredrik Nilsen
9. Fiona Connor
*Object Classrooms #4 (The State of California
Painting posters)* 2018
silkscreen on paper and digital print on paper
Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa
Archives; New Plymouth District Council;
Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato
10. Exhibition copies of the *State of California Painting*
catalogue 2018
spiral bound books
Courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



Audio-guide transcription

This exhibition, called *Object Classrooms*, is the latest iteration in a multi-site project that is engaged with the work and archives of artist John McLaughlin.

To the right of the stand, where you have collected your audio guide, you will see a photograph of *No. 4* – an oil painting by John McLaughlin which he produced at his Laguna Beach studio in 1971.

The photograph was taken by Charters and Guthrie, a New Plymouth-based commercial photography studio, in 1972, for the catalogue of a touring exhibition entitled *The State of California Painting*, organised by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

On the photographic print you will see tape that marked where the image was to be cropped for its reproduction in the catalogue that sits next to it. In this photograph you can hardly make out that it is a painting.

This got me interested, what was that painting really like?

John McLaughlin was born in Sharon, Massachusetts in 1898. After serving in World War II he settled with his wife, Florence, in Dana Point near Laguna Beach, where he devoted his time to painting.

In his words:

“My purpose is to achieve the totally abstract. I want to communicate only to the extent that the painting will serve to induce or intensify the viewer’s natural desire for contemplation without benefit of a guiding principle. I must therefore free the viewer from the demands or special qualities imposed by the particular by omitting the image (object). This I manage by the use of neutral forms.”

For John McLaughlin this meant rectangles.

In the first bay of Gallery 1, you will see a film called, *Object Classrooms #1 (Finding John McLaughlin)*.

In the search of the painting *No. 4*, I retraced its movements around New Zealand and filmed the spaces that I knew it once occupied.

No. 4 first arrived in New Plymouth in March 1972 where it was placed in storage until its exhibition at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery a couple months later. From here it travelled on to what was then the Auckland City Art Gallery, the Waikato Museum (previously the Waikato Winter Show Hall), and the National Art Gallery in Wellington, then it travelled back to the Auckland City Art Gallery for restoration, then to the Govett-Brewster before its last known sighting at Gow Langsford – a private gallery in Auckland. But by this stage it was no longer an artwork.

This piece was shot on Super 16mm film and transferred to digital video.

Opposite the staircase, on the leaning wall, you will see a series of correspondence between the Govett-Brewster and associated parties about the damage and attempted restoration of *No. 4*.

This project began after I found some letters in the John McLaughlin Papers held at Louis Stern Fine Art in West Hollywood. I could not believe my eyes.

In a letter dated the 21st of June, 1972, from Robert Ballard, the Director of the Govett-Brewster, to Peter Webb at the Auckland City Art Gallery, on the pink paper in the first group of correspondence:

“The classic protest has been rendered to one of the works in the exhibition: it has been spat upon. What I would like to know is could your restoration department do something about it?”

Then in a letter dated the 13th of April, 1973, from Ballard to Michael Walls, the artist liaison in Los Angeles, on the yellow paper in the second group of correspondence:

“Enclosed please find photographs of John McLaughlin’s painting which has been damaged in transit. It was being sent via air for some minor surface cleaning (spit removal) and was damaged between the airport and arrival at the Auckland City Art Gallery.”

This letter found its way to John McLaughlin himself and motivated him to try and find the words to express the physical parameters of his work. In a letter stamped September 10th, in the third group of correspondence, he writes:

“As to the restoration of the painting it appears that the nature of the work demands unusual attention to the uniformity of its surfaces . . . repairing the canvas itself by weaving together the separation and repainting all areas of that particular color. To quote Cocteau; Reproductions and worked over art objects are exactly the same as the original except in all respects.”

In other words, I think he was nervous that the damaged area would be distracting to the viewer’s experience of the work.

After some back and forth, and failed negotiations with insurance companies, the artist agreed to donate the work to the museum on condition that it would be repaired.

Its present whereabouts are unknown.

Here the ephemera has been taken from the archives and silkscreened on foil.

You can sit down.

These benches are a work in the show, and also not a work. They are an affordance, part of the exhibition program along with the audio guide stand, paint colour, leaning wall and layout, all designed by Sebastian Clough.

Do you see the black circle on the wall? If you get closer you can see more detail.

This work is called *Object Classrooms #3 (Untitled)*. It is a woodblock print of the chopping board from the gallery’s kitchen.

In the second bay of Gallery 1, *Ma #1 & Ma #2 (Bedroom window of John McLaughlin at his home in Dana Point)* is installed.

In an attempt to get closer to John McLaughlin, I visited the house and studio that he built with his wife Florence, in Dana Point. Here you can see his windows are punched into the gallery walls revealing their insides and traces of past shows.

Rectangles framing more rectangles. Layers of construction and institutional memory. I hope I have not confused you – let’s take a walk and look at it from a different angle.

When you can, please climb the stairs.

In these vitrines, on the right as you walk up the stairs, is the photographic documentation of a previous exhibition in this cycle, a group show at Chateau Shatto in Los Angeles. This show was called *Ma*. I invited Los Angeles-based photographer Fredrik Nilsen to document it. You can see the work of Sydney De Jong, Judy Fiskin, Audrey Wollen, Bedros Yeretjian, John McLaughlin and Frank J. Thomas.

Frank J. Thomas has photographs in this show too. Over the bannister you can see a row of posters featuring the documented artwork of Ron Davis. In his photographs, Frank J. Thomas told the story of many artworks and exhibitions in Los Angeles in the 1970s, as Sam Hartnett will do for the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery for this show.

In his introduction in *The State of California Painting* catalogue, the then Govett-Brewster director, Robert Ballard, claimed that the “*exhibition included a cross section or survey of the most important work being done in California*”.

On the other side of the mezzanine you will find some exhibition copies of the catalogue you can look through.

For the catalogue, each artist had a spread which included a portrait, and a reproduction of the work included in the show.

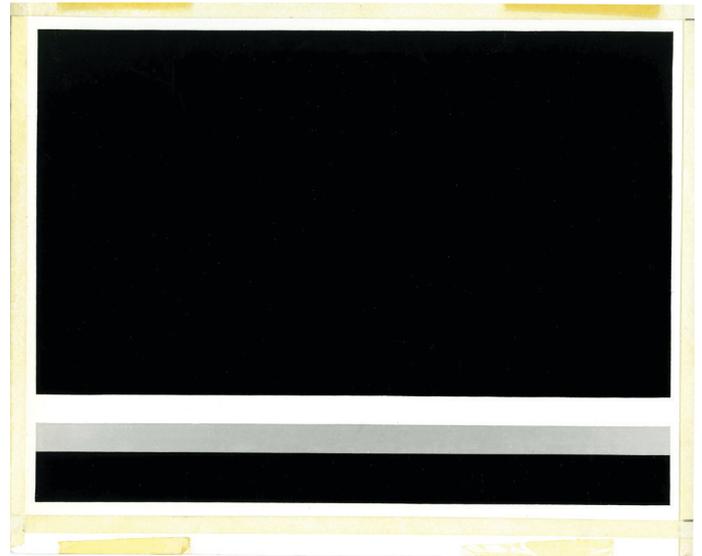
Looking through you may notice Robert Irwin’s page.

In place of a photograph of his work, *Untitled 1965-66*, a small text was printed in the middle of the page –

For several years, Mr Irwin has asked that his work not be reproduced in photographs. We are complying with this request.

But all is not lost –

Thank you
Fiona Connor, 2018



Photographic documentation of John McLaughlin’s No.4 for *State of California Painting* catalogue 1972. Photo Charters and Guthrie
Courtesy of New Plymouth District Council

Production

Sebastian Clough, exhibition design; Hannah Kirby, editing;
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Access Radio Taranaki; Imagezone Camera Rentals;
Transformer Film; Interrogate

Fiona Connor is represented in New Zealand by
Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland/Wellington

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