

## **Interview with WALTER HOPPS**

Los Angeles, California September 23, 2004

*This discussion was recorded at a Best Western hotel room in Eagle Rock, California. The dialogue between Michael McCall and Walter Hopps, occurred a few days after Walter had curated a show of McCall's new work that was shown at the Ota House in West Los Angeles, one of the last he curated. At the time he was employed by the Guggenheim Art Museum, as an adjunct curator. He passed away on May 21, 2005 in Los Angeles at St. John's Hospital, due to congenital heart failure.*

Hopps: I first met Michael McCall in Washington, D.C. around 1978 when I produced one of the more unusual art exhibitions of my life. At the time I was a 20<sup>th</sup> century curator at the National Collection of Fine Arts, which is now known as the Smithsonian American Art museum, both historical and modern. It is part of the Smithsonian Institution. But I was also affiliated with two special artist's spaces where I could curate more contemporary activities... one was the WPA, or the Washington Project for the Arts, where I was a trustee and occasionally did some exhibits, and the other was called the Museum of Temporary Art, and it was being run by one of the staff members from NCFCA, Deborah Jensen, and a very interesting associate of hers, Janet Schmuckle. They invited me to do a show there and I wanted to do something rather experimental that related to what I had done a long time before at my first commercial gallery in the early '50's. The title of the show was "Thirty Six Hours", and the concept was simple; I would be available in the gallery, hopefully with a helper or two, and install anything that could come through the door, one item per artist, for 36 hours straight. Fortunately in those days we could go without a lot of sleep. I got an amazing range of artists to show up during those thirty-six hours...some were the best know contemporary artists in the Washington, D.C. area. It was December, heading into the holidays, and the wife of Joseph Hirschorn, whom the Hirschorn Museum is named for, arrived in a limousine, bringing a steel welded Christmas tree made up of metal rods. We set it right in the middle of the gallery.

Many interesting artists I had never heard of showed up... bringing a couple of outrageous items, and there were also a few pornographic items. The artists lined up, starting near midnight, and filed through the night and into the next day. A street bum saw all of this, heard the story, brought in a Hustler magazine and ripped out the raunchiest, double-paged spread, signed it and presented it to me. I had billed this exhibition as one that I would present anything that went through the door...so this piece of art was stapled to the wall right next to some of the more refined drawings. One of the artists that I had never heard of was Michael McCall. Although he has described his piece to me since, throughout the event I was so blurry, I can't remember it... we received so many pieces the Museum of Temporary Art building filled floor to ceiling, top to bottom, clear down into a basement near the furnace. We ran out of space and had to put some work across the street at the Washington Project for the Arts. It's energetic director, Al Nodal, was glad to grant us the extra space to exhibit all the art.

Later I came to know Michael McCall in the company of Al Nodal at the WPA, where I occasionally guested a show. I couldn't really exhibit brand new contemporary work at the American Art Division of the Smithsonian, so one of the shows I did at the WPA did include Michael McCall. I would visit his studio on the fifth floor of an old Washington building above an infamous rock and roll club called the Atlantic club, later to be known as the 940 club.

MMc: It was called the 930 club, Walter. Previously it had been known as the Atlantis Club, a place where up and coming bands played, including the Police, Grandmaster Flash, and Buster Poindexter.

Hopps: That club became the main outlet for punk rock in the Washington, D.C. area, and it was a rather notorious place for a great deal of drug use. In this building, you had a very intriguing studio where I saw some very interesting and abstract work, especially a very large fabric piece that was not stretched like a normal canvas. It was ephemeral in appearance, and very beautiful... the only other artist I have seen work in that way was also located in Washington D.C....the artist, Sam Gillian. Sam's finest work is probably the draped and suspended, unstretched canvases he created in the 70's. Your work was much wilder, more lyric, with a subtle pallet. Also in the studio, you had a set piece of decorations that had a function, a kind of a curious artwork in it's own right...it was called the Tentacle Room, and all sorts of people from the art world would hang out there... the more adventurous ones, that is.

What is the date you go west?

MMc: 1982

Hopps: In 1982 you leave for my native area of Southern California, eventually taking up residence in a very curious studio building in the southern section of Los Angeles, in an independent city called Vernon...it's one of the island towns that surround L.A. It's similar to Glendale, Beverly Hills, or Culver City, but it is an exclusively industrial city. The studio was in a solid building, complete with a vault, a good studio space, and storage space. The one catch was people were not supposed to live in these buildings in Vernon. You were somehow able to convince the inspectors that it was only an artist's studio, so you could live there clandestinely.

In this new studio many paintings came... small, abstract, and often emblematic paintings using abstract and recognizable symbols.... they were paintings on roofing tar paper.... and the concept was to put tar or some cement on their backs and attach them out in the world, all over the city. They became an extension of the studio, and this is one of the more inventive and radical approaches of having art out in the world, and not in a gallery or a museum. They appeared all over the city: on phone poles, mailboxes, on structures, anywhere and everywhere. I loved them, and McCall tarred them up as far east as Chicago, and in his home state, North Carolina. He also installed them on and near my house in Houston. At one point I convinced McCall to put some of these things in frames so they could be shown as more conventional artworks. A number of those exist. What is the time the change begins and you started using the symbols?

MMc: I started using symbols right when I opened my L.A. Studio, in the Dacron paintings. The dacrons were large, very abstract, gestural pieces, but I would lace little symbols into the painting almost like they were road signs in this big, abstract landscape. A lot of those symbols were from the research I was doing on ideographs, pictographs, and the development of forms and symbols that latter would develop into our written language.

Hopps: So they begin to phase in...what is the date of the one you call "Symbols?"

Mmc: That painting is called "Alpha Omega", the black and gold one?

Hopps: Yeah, the big one.

MMc: 1989.

Hopps: By 1986, you began using representational symbols, and the symbols appeared in and were

surrounded by your abstract, painterly brushwork. I don't think these paintings have been widely seen but they foreshadow an important change in the work.

By 1989, a whole new direction of your painting focuses on emblematic symbols. The first ones were individual, small panels, diagrammatically painted, using specific emblems such as a dollar sign, an aerial bomb, or a skull. A large number of these were created, as were many drawings using pencil or charcoal.

MMc: I was using charcoal and gold paint. Some of the drawings were simply lead pencil on vellum paper.

Hopps: A whole series of these works were created on paper, scaled smaller than the canvas paintings. McCall early on produced abstract work, small and large, and then he painted his Tarbabies, all along producing his ephemeral work on the beach using sand and found objects. These he often photographs until they ultimately wash away. The three aforementioned symbol paintings by McCall were include in a group show at the Menil Collection in Houston, in a national review. The show included painting, sculpture, and photography... the work of Lew Thomas, Cindy Sherman, John McIntosh... and they were all good. What's interesting in this area of art, which has been going on since the late 70's, is there are a great many more women artist working than ever before in history. More women were turning up, and we will see how this continues to pan out. Previously there were some very strong women working as abstract artists, which is really a part of the whole modernists world.

This all relates to the major 20<sup>th</sup> century traditions of abstraction. McCall's work is reflective of Modernist history. Perhaps the greatest American artist of the Modernist tradition would be Jackson Pollack, but there are other great artists from his generation. The second and co-equal tradition that began early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not abstract and not realism. That mode I call "Imagists." The Americans worked in painting, sculpture, drawing, and some in photography. It is an area of art where masterpieces have been done in the last century, by what is called "outsider artists". The major figures would include certain early, so-called "Dadaists", and then a little later, the "Surrealists" works by Man Ray, who was a great master. There were the works of Georgia O'Keefe, full of recognizable images, but which defy actual logic... then there are the realistic, strange paintings by Ivan Albright, from Chicago. Also included in this genre would be the masterpieces by the other great, American surrealist, Joseph Cornell. Then closer to our time would be the works of Gretchen Bender, Ann Durand, Robert Longo, and David Salle. Of the more recent major artists working in this mode in Southern California...we find Michael McMillan, Steven Galloway, Margaret Nielsen, and Michael McCall.

McCall's most recent series of symbol paintings have been based on images from the ancient Chinese book of changes, or the I Ching. This is a philosophy and spiritual practice most simply put to gain enlightenment. In the Book of Changes there are procedures for tossing coins in a ritual that leads the practitioner to view certain symbols, emblems, and text which carry special meaning. This area of spiritual philosophy has been especially meaningful and important for several major American artists that have emerged since the Second World War, all using this crucial philosophy and practice... the great western artist, Sam Francis being one. This philosophy was also important to the Avant Garde composer John Cage, and is known to be an important element in the practice of the major American poets of the beat era, Philip Waylon, Gary Snyder, and Ginsberg himself.

McCall has been the first artist I know of to make beautiful image paintings of the I Ching symbols themselves. I don't know another artist who has done that.

