

Petzel

William Corwin, "Allan McCollum: *Early Works*," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June, 2020.

 **BROOKLYN RAIL**

ArtSeen

Allan McCollum: *Early Works*

By **William Corwin**



Allan McCollum, *Beauty is as Beauty Does*, 1972. Canvas squares, lacquer stain, varnish, silicone adhesive caulking, 70 x 135 inches. Courtesy Petzel Gallery, New York.

I was first introduced to the work of Allan McCollum in college, in Peter Eisenman's seminar on the "Formless" for which I received a C+. (I think

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the problem was that I thought I actually had figured out what the "Formless" was, and to this day I'm still not convinced I hadn't.) We looked at McCollum's *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah* (1994–95), presented in the exhibition *Formless: A User's Guide* at the Pompidou in 1996, curated by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois. This work is a series of cast and enameled dinosaur footprints each placed on its own plinth, in groupings of different colors. *Allan McCollum: Early Works* is an online viewing platform presented by Petzel Gallery on the occasion of McCollum's 50-year retrospective at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, and presents McCollum working in the medium of painting, which for him meant dyed swatches of canvas assembled into series. While McCollum's later works explore the ideas of endless repetition of infinitely varying forms, and copies with no original set the post-structuralist's hearts aflame; these works on display on Petzel's website explore a transitional, or even originating period that embodies the indefinable term "formless" on a messy and uncontrollable level that the artist was soon to forsake.

The dinosaur footprints in *Natural Copies from the Coal Mines of Central Utah* I saw in Peter's class immediately captivated me, as would most of McCollum's projects that I came into contact with later on. Like a carefully and thoughtfully laid out textbook chart of genetic diversity in the pea plant or the gorgeous blown-glass microbe display at the American Museum of Natural History, McCollum approaches multiplicity and diversity with a gentle omniscient hand that both demands that we examine each and every object with a fresh eye, but also, through his presentation, quells the

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Allan McCollum, *Susan Holtz*, 1971. Canvas, dye, boat caulking, 90 x 90 inches. Courtesy Petzel Gallery, New York.

inevitable rising panic of the human psyche in the presence of infinity. There's a nihilism in his "Surrogate Painting" series (started in 1978) and his numerous arrays of almost identical objects: an acceptance of the fact that over time, everything happens again and again, but the cleanness of the execution makes the banality of history look good. This is in stark contrast to the early works. The online viewing room begins with the bleached painting series, followed by the constructed paintings. *Susan Holtz* (1971) is a painting composed of stained strips of canvas which are

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arranged like brickwork on the wall. McCollum places the swatches so that their varying densities of dye form large horizontally oriented chevrons of different shades of grey. While he's working in units, and these are arranged on a matrix (as with his later works), the dying process offers a different kind of variety and multiplicity. In the empty frames, or the 10,000 indeterminate objects, composed of parts taken from industrially produced packaging and toys we are always aware of the artist's hand—he is



Allan McCollum, *Object Lesson*, 1973. Canvas, silicone adhesive, glitter, acrylic paint, 39 x 133 inches. Courtesy Petzel Gallery, New York.

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in control. But with the staining on the fixed base of canvas, he's just holding on to his agency.

In the works *Canto III* and *Beauty is as Beauty Does*, (both 1972) McCollum moves from strips to squares, and dyes each piece of fabric along a diagonal. The gallery provides close-ups of all the works, which is helpful as I always like to get my nose right up against the art. We can see the blossoming fingers of the stain as it expands down the weave of the fabric, different on every patch. Quite a few archival photographs are included on the site as well, but none is more telling than *Constructed Painting in process, Venice, California, 1971*. Orthogonally piled in neat stacks are hundreds of canvas squares. On the one hand, these piles take on a sculptural quality—the sheer number creates rectilinear towers of cotton, and may or may not have been a catalyst/inspiration in moving towards sculpture. But even more alarming in terms of McCollum's aesthetic is the infinitude of fuzzy fibers emerging from the untrimmed sides of the swatches. They dangle, they weave randomly: this is more the sticky, raw unpredictability of Eva Hesse. The fibrous edges are visible as well in the finished works. McCollum doesn't shy away from this formlessness that emerges from the proclivities of the medium itself—an embodiment of the dirty, base material origins of art that was highlighted in *Formless: A User's Guide* in '96. In fact, if anything, he embraces it by amplifying the gesture of the frayed edges of the cruciform canvas units by texturing the striated brush marks in the black paint with a thick irregular impasto, as in *Deep Connections* (1973). In later work, when McCollum faces messiness, he

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reins it in, either by coating the works with a shimmering layer of paint, or making very clear that despite the jagged edges and bumps, as in his seminal *The Dog of Pompei* (1991), the plastic material is cool, hard, and smooth, and the artist is in the driver’s seat. *Early Works* on the Petzel website is a welcome return to a dangerous but brief episode in Allan McCollum’s trajectory. Neither a false-start nor a dead-end, the edginess of the bleached and constructed paintings was re-directed towards a more philosophical realization of the artist’s interpretation of the world, or as Rosalind Krauss formlessly put it the “undifferentiated, entropic continuum.”

<https://brooklynrail.org/2020/06/artseen/Allan-McCollum-Early-Works>