

# JOHN MCALLISTER

**Selected Press**

# ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

ART + AUCTION

## How a Former Museum Night Guard Has Become the Toast of the Art World—and the Talk of Miami

Artist John McAllister, who worked as a night guard at New York's Metropolitan Museum for years, will be featured at two major galleries this December

TEXT BY [VICKY LOWRY](#) · PHOTOGRAPHY BY [CHRISTOPHER CHURCHILL](#) · Posted November 21, 2016



Artist John McAllister in his new, 1,400-square-foot studio which overlooks the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains in Massachusetts.



John McAllister studied photojournalism in college, but you'd never know it from his paintings—radiant works featuring fantastical flowers and patterns in sun-drenched hues. “I can’t remember a time in my life I wasn’t painting, but I had this idea that you couldn’t be taught to paint,” he recalls thinking as an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin. “Then I realized I was missing out by not studying it. I also realized I was a terrible photographer.” While his early pieces relied on real-life events (fires, for instance), McAllister soon found even more captivating inspiration in the early-modernist still lifes and landscapes he admired in museums—especially New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, where, as a night guard from 2000 to 2004, after college, he had plenty of time to look at masterpieces. His favorite works, by Post-Impressionists such as Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, and Édouard Vuillard, captured “frivolity, hedonism, and pleasure,” he explains. “Instead of making pretty pictures about something serious, I realized I could be serious about making pretty pictures.”



McAllister learned from the masters while working as a night guard at New York’s Metropolitan Museum.



A native of Louisiana, McAllister has lived a fairly itinerant life, hopscotching from Austin to Manhattan to Los Angeles and back to Brooklyn. Two years ago he and his family put down real roots in Florence, Massachusetts, a faded industrial town near the artsy enclave of Northampton. Now in his largest studio to date, a 1,400-square-foot factory space overlooking the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains, he is able to create his sybaritic scenes of botanicals and interiors on an increasingly grand scale, sometimes on canvases as large as 14 by six feet. His new paintings are on view, from December 1–4, in a solo booth for *James Fuentes Gallery* at the New Art Dealers Alliance (NADA) fair in Miami Beach, as well as in a solo show, through December, at *Berlin's Wentrup Gallery*.



A closer look at one of McAllister's radiant paintings.



These exhibitions speak to McAllister's growing international appeal. His paintings are in the collections of German princess Gloria von Thurn und Taxis, Puerto Rican psychiatrist/art patron César Reyes, and Canadian fashion maven Joe Mimran (of Club Monaco and Joe Fresh fame). Mimran was instantly attracted to the way McAllister combines decorative patterns with electrifying colors. "There's an old-world, romantic style to him," Mimran says. "It's just charming."



ARTSEEN

APRIL 4TH, 2018

WEBEXCLUSIVE

# JOHN McALLISTER: *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night*

by Alex A. Jones

JAMES FUENTES | MARCH 4 – APRIL 15, 2018



John McAllister, *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night*, 2018. Oil on canvas over panel, wood panels and burlap on the front only, 72 1/2 × 254 × 84 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes.

Since around 2008, when he began showing work at James Fuentes, John McAllister has been steadfastly painting gardens. In the current exhibition, trees, shrubs, and flowers gather in three mid-sized canvases; and in a 20-foot-long panorama comprised of eight hinged panels, a sunset unfolds across an early spring garden. Despite the humming palettes of pink, orange, violet, and indigo, it feels chilly in these paintings. Maybe it's because now, in late March, we enter the gallery from the frosty street with ever-more impatience for the turn of season that these images predict. In the

paneled piece, *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night* (2018), I see trillium and narcissus, early reanimators breaking the blank dirt. Buds cluster promisingly on spindly twigs. A few of the soft-looking white pods remind me of magnolias; though, maybe they're forsythias, ready to burst with sulfur-yellow blooms by morning.

The rich specificity of plant life that enables this dreamy taxonomy is mostly new for McAllister. Each subject is differentiated, such as the leafless river birch that bends languorously across one canvas. Much of the detail throughout lies in the colors. McAllister's earlier work in this vein was often limited in palette, dominated by just two or three electric hues that created a psychedelic, graphic effect. The nuance here speaks to the artist's maturing skill and is especially strong in the nocturnal scenes; *sings darksome silvery* (2018) appears uniformly inky from across the room, but close-up the night sky is actually lavender, the ground a clarified icy-blue; the snowdrops drooping over it are unadulterated magenta.

This wealth of color information means the paintings can't be savored in one shot. They ask for close-up examination, especially the largest one, which invites us to shuffle along it from left to right, following the passage of the sunset like 18th century gawkers of panoramic history paintings. This sweeping format, depicting not only a pan across space but the passage of time, has me thinking of the popular, pre-cinematic spectacles of pano- and diorama painting that once captivated crowds in Europe and America with scenes of historical battles, picturesque landscapes, and urban vistas. They offered an experience rooted in illusion, and were reviled by critics for their distasteful, even dangerous deceptiveness. Wordsworth objected that it cheapened the transportive qualities of the sublime, while handbills and press coverage of such exhibits asserted—with variously condescending and sensationalizing tones—how spectators might be so convinced by the illusion as to temporarily lose their grip on reality.

In McAllister's panorama, there is no sense of deception. I do not feel transported to these Technicolor landscapes. This has a lot to do with the decorative framing edges of the paintings that break off the scenery across one side. Their function here is distinct from his earlier works in which pattern has served as an illusionistic device, often resembling decorative wallpaper upon which scenes of nature appear to "hang," simulating paintings within paintings. Those works mostly evoke the belle époque of French post-impressionism from which the artist drew heavily; their stripes and dry-brushed patterns sometimes explicitly referencing Matisse and Vuillard. In the new paintings, aggressively perpendicular triangles and patchwork hatches are *anti-illusionistic*. They sit on top of the scenes themselves, emphasizing the border-zone between the painting and the gallery wall. They block an immersive view, beaming "*noli me tangere*."





John McAllister, *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night*, installation view. Courtesy James Fuentes.

They reflect a contemporary reality in which painting has shed its illusionism. Today, the proposition that one might be legitimately disoriented by a painting to the point of questioning one's position in time and space is, at best, unlikely. In a present where the "painting-as-window" is a theoretical artifact, what purpose remains in painting a garden?

Here, the flora constitute a plane of immanence that fills up the canvases to the brim, saturating them with ample, buttery paint. It's all rendered flat, with no pretension of atmosphere or perspective, but the abundance of interlocked surfaces and planes creates an immanent sense of space like that found in some tapestries, or in some works by Matisse, to whom the artist has often been tethered by critics. But McAllister is no longer directly quoting from the teacher, which makes these paintings his strongest yet. Untied from their heavy references to post-impressionism, they exist fully in the present. Rather than feeling transported, I feel rooted in space with these reticent plants, anchored by the certain fade from day to night, winter to spring.

**CONTRIBUTOR**

**Alex A. Jones**

Alex A. Jones is a contributor to the *Brooklyn Rail*.

# ARTFORUM

**John McAllister**

CARL FREEDMAN GALLERY

29 Charlotte Road March 30–May 6, 2017



John McAllister, *bestir duskbright*, 2017, oil on canvas, 72 x 61".

Looking fairly flat in reproduction, John McAllister's paintings reveal, in person, a delicate concern with spatial conventions. Recurrent motifs include linear, Matissean still lifes, landscapes, *mise en abymes*, and striped or hatched patterns, often merging into an implied surface as wallpaper or parquet flooring. But these are not merely reframed Matisse, or neon Nabis. Slackening the tight calibration and push-pull dynamics of The Red Studio-era Matisse, McAllister often situates the main compositional tension in the relations between the rectangular framing devices. A shallow illusionistic depth is established between two or three layers of pictured reality. Detail is then freed up, the component objects becoming less anchored within the overall play of compositional forces. Fronds, palms, and flowers cluster in loose tangles, decorative yet alive (*bestir duskbright*, all works 2017).

McAllister's limited palette also acts as a unifying principle. In a number of images, a narrow range of violets, mauves, and grays on a fluorescent-pink ground describe a crepuscular nature that's both distanced and artificial—a sort of Kenneth Anger pastoral. Within the paintings' shallow plastic depth, minor tonal shifts take on greater significance, as do such subtle touches as the reality effect created by the softening or refraction of an object seen through water in a vase (amidst bliss be, for instance, and among spectral sounds).

In the panoramic burst into dazzling daze, the background pattern of repeated triangles is pushed out to the edge of the canvas, a floral idyll filling the viewer's field of vision. In these larger landscapes, reticence and sophistication give way to an enveloping painterly generosity.

— Patrick Price

# ARTFORUM

John McAllister

RICHARD TELLES FINE ART

7380 Beverly Boulevard

September 12, 2015–October 17, 2015

By Mariko Munro

Inspired by its creator's recent trip to Japan, a large-scale, freestanding painted screen (or byobu) embraces the decorative nature of John McAllister's work by joining canvases to form an ornamental centerpiece. On one side, a flat interior scene stretches across all six panels—a suave living room with a slender table, vase of shapely flowers, two paintings, and lounging cat. Opulent oils in rose, cerise, and carnation pink dominate the composition, offset by the colors of the depicted paintings—a landscape with muddy olive foliage, a sea-foam stream, and cerulean sky; a coral and peach-hued still life. The screen's reverse features a shifting patterned “wallpaper” in muted mauve and taffy pink with two potted plants painted low as if set on the floor, and several depictions of postcard-size pictures seemingly affixed to the screen's surface. The final panel departs with a leaf-and-branch motif set against a dark plum ground, favoring a more graphic effect.



Within this single work McAllister incites a playful conversation addressing multiple layers of representation, continuing beyond the patrician setting (paintings within paintings) to the incorporation of frames within the canvases of the wall-hung works. Even the verbiage of his titles—the exhibition's, for example, “Sultry Spells Rapture”—employs homonyms, multiplying possibilities of interpretation with poetic effect. The byobu contributes to an elegant and fitting development in McAllister's work: He continues to utilize the dandyish language and technique of nineteenth-century French painting, a period which itself was influenced by the super-flat aesthetic of Japanese painting. He simultaneously luxuriates in a narrowed and sumptuous palette to a shimmering, immersive effect—color negatives set against a light box, or black light Matisse.



# The New York Times

## ART IN REVIEW

### John McAllister: 'Damned Sparkling Pomp'

By ROBERTA SMITH October 20, 2011

With increasing optical intensity John McAllister's smart, wryly elegant new paintings continue to negotiate a path between past and present, painting and photography, decoration and documentation, and modernism and postmodernism. In his fourth New York gallery solo Mr. McAllister's briskly painted images seem once more inspired by photographs. Each depicts an early modernist still life or landscape painting evocative of Matisse, Bonnard or the Fauvist Braque against backgrounds of geometric or foliate patterns that suggest exotic textiles, ersatz wallpaper or other artworks (including the early stripe paintings of Frank Stella). Sometimes additional paintings and tiled floors are part of the composition, evoking the between-the-wars studio of some School of Paris painter (O.K., Matisse).



In contrast the works' assorted patterns and paintings are tightly layered, alluding, it would seem, to postwar modernism's infatuation with flatness. This concern is wittily reiterated by the fact that Mr. McAllister's own stretchers are quite shallow, so that his canvases sit abnormally close to the wall. In the best paintings the palette takes a farther step toward the present by concentrating on a close range of colors (often lavenders, reds and purples) that have a monochromatic, irradiated and even, if vaguely, Op Art effect. Works like "Darksome Almost Dawn," "Under Spells Spelled Vital," "When Runs Silence" and "X and Province" especially might almost be hand-colored negatives, lighted from within. But they are in fact paintings, made by someone unafraid to embrace the medium or its history, or to toy with the ratios of hedonism and skepticism therein.

## John McAllister

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY | NORTH HARVEY AVENUE



John McAllister, *once were wild*, 2017, oil on canvas, 72 × 61".

The ten works (all 2017) that constituted John McAllister's exhibition "botanic haunting soft-static" were systematically built out of visual vocabularies that bridge the pictorial and the decorative, comprising organic contours and geometric patterns, tonal atmospheres and linear perspectives, thick outlines and full-spectrum transitions, distant horizons and shallow window frames. McAllister calls upon still-life and landscape traditions to host these seemingly contrary structural languages. The influence of modernists such as Henri Matisse, Odilon Redon, Édouard Vuillard, and Gustav Klimt was as distinct as the highlighter quality of the bright pinks and purples that imbued this selection of paintings. This was particularly evident in the canvas *hymns hubbub heard*, in which a unifying expanse of salmon pigment binds a flat and diagrammatic interior space to a lyrical bouquet of spherical blooms. A window (or perhaps a picture hanging on the wall?) behind the floral arrangement displays a nocturnal landscape with a long-leafed purple plant.

Installed on the wall opposite *hymns hubbub heard* was the painting *once were wild*, a florid garden scene populated by highly stylized ferns and flowering plants emerging from a dry-brushed purple ground littered with small sticks and flat, frontally oriented leaves. The silhouette of a black cat with dull brown eyes occupies the center of the painting, its vertical tail visually mimicking the upward gestures of the exotic vegetation around it. Outlined in glowing orange and lacking any definitive modeling, the feline functions as an anomalous cutout shape within a field of graphic inventions—resisting participation in any sort of pictorial narrative. The scene is framed on three sides by narrow, chalky-pink bands interrupted with diagonal lines. Whereas the decorative borders in *hymns hubbub heard* serve to gild the lily, they do little to enhance the already fantastical landscape in *once were wild*. Nor do the borders spatially reposition the scenery as a window-framed vista or a painting on an interior wall.

In the center of the gallery McAllister erected an architectural folly (titled *clouds sugared silence*) constructed from three curved, freestanding canvas- and burlap-covered folding panels. The outside surfaces of the panels are embellished with vertical pink and purple stripes, while the inside walls depict landscapes with horizons broken up by dangling, blossoming willow boughs and erect conifers. Each of the interior landscapes boasts hot-pink edges. The positioning of these panels also operated as a framing conceit; as the viewer circled around the outside of the structure, the bowed walls cropped views of the paintings adorning the inside of the folly. When one stands inside the volume, the gaps between the panels function as viewfinders, recontextualizing the paintings hanging on the gallery's perimeter walls. While each work in the exhibition earnestly strove to balance the visual seduction of color and pattern with spatial intelligence, McAllister's compositional formula is too dependent on framing devices that yield to a visual lexicon of ornament. Any nods to the psychological complexity of the genres invoked were ultimately outmaneuvered by the commingling of vivid pinks and purples, flattened organic motifs, and geometric patterns.

—Michelle Grabner





# HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

## Everybody Likes “Like Art”

“Like Art,” a type of bright, attention-grabbing work that aims for easy acceptance by servicing screen-tap culture, is everywhere.

Rob Colvin | March 1, 2017

You’ve seen it before. It caught your eye. You smiled. Maybe at Frieze, Art Basel, the Armory Show, or NADA. Or it wasn’t there. It was at a gallery on the Lower East Side, or maybe in Chelsea. But it could’ve been on your computer. No, actually it was on your phone. Facebook? Wait, it was Instagram.

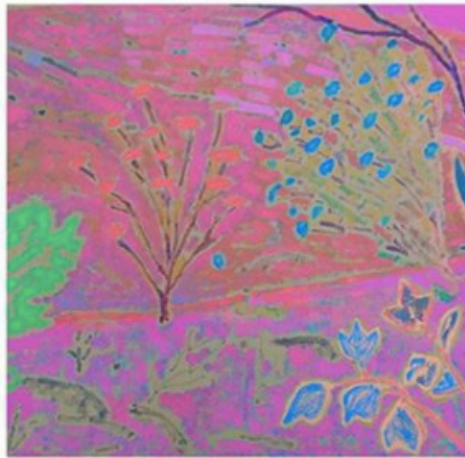
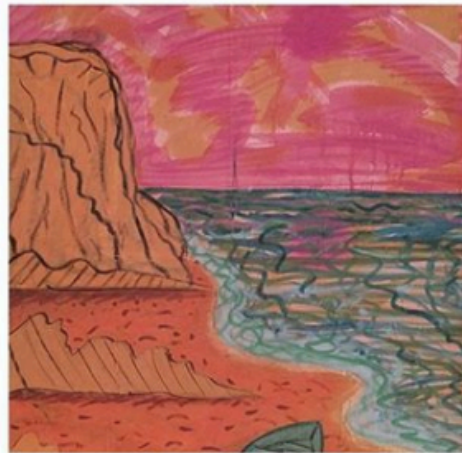
It’s everywhere, actually, and it’s called “Like Art.” It is art that looks very much like art you’ve already seen, that you know very well, and that you already like. Who doesn’t like [Henri Matisse](#)? Those sensuous curves and colorful overlaps of otherwise flattened planes. [Pablo Picasso](#), too, and his architectonic forms and bold exaggerations. There are also the elegant anthropomorphisms of [Georgia O’Keeffe](#). Run through 20th-century art and hit the high points, especially the most chromatic ones — like [Judy Chicago’s](#) work, or [Ellsworth Kelly’s](#). If it’s a recognizable style, motif, or gesture, it’s probably in the database from which Like Art — or work that merely looks “like” art — is generated. It gets shipped from a Brooklyn studio to an art fair booth in Miami Beach, possibly still wet, but priced just right. That price is two digits shorter than the secondary market painting the work is derived from and gets curated next to. It’s “the look for less,” with no greater aesthetic aspirations. It lives for heart taps, thumbs-up clicks, and space on people’s walls — digital or brick-and-mortar.

But before we look at rainbow vaginas and pretend Picassos, let's exhume Zombie Formalism. That was the line of recycled abstraction out of your budget; it was monotone and pretentiously boring. Critics killed it. John Yau's "[What Happens When We Run Out of Styles?](#)" woke the art world from its dogmatic slumber. Martin Mugar coined "[Zombie Formalism](#)" and framed the phenomenon philosophically. Walter Robinson, who may have used the term independently, outlined the target in "[Flipping and the Rise of Zombie Formalism](#)." Jerry Saltz then brought down the house with "[Zombies on the Walls](#)." Artists including Jacob Kassay, Wade Guyton, Dan Colen, Josh Smith, Oscar Murillo, Charline von Heyl, and Lucien Smith hit the floor.

Like Art is Zombie Formalism resurrected. It's a market transfiguration. It's a "simulacrum of originality" (Robinson) to "look like paintings, act like paintings" (Mugar) and to be sold as "a good-looking product" (Yau). It's "decorator-friendly" but "offers no insight into anything at all" (Saltz). If Zombie Formalism tended toward minimalism, Like Art is maximalist: bright colors, attention-grabbing, and romanticizing. Zombie Formalism was self-serious and mumbled about the death of painting. It appropriated appropriators. Like Art, by contrast, texts with its friends, orders shots, dances to remixes, and stays upbeat.

What does Like Art look like? There are a variety of forms, but most are in painting, the medium most distributed in galleries and fairs, and sometimes sculpture. Take, for example, [Justin Adian](#), [Daniel Boccato](#), [Austin Eddy](#), and [Genieve Figgis](#). These artists infantilize other art. Adian makes marshmallow versions of Ellsworth Kelly, [Frank Stella](#), and [Robert Mangold](#). The colors are more confectioned and his pastel pieces appear seasonal, like Easter candy. Boccato also makes puffy pieces pulling from post-Minimalism. Eddy endlessly [rejiggers](#) jigsaw puzzle pieces made out of Hans Arp's and Picasso's shapes. Art can be a game — just ask Wittgenstein — but there are no unexpected moves here. Figgis chooses famous works or iconic subjects and remakes them. Her fluidic paint makes the scenes appear melted, a childlike kind of reverence gone awry. In December, I gave a presentation titled "Crapstraction to Like Art" to students at the New York Academy of Art, and they defended Figgis, persuasively, for having a vision beyond her application style. Maybe this type of work is more than likable after all.

Respectable Like Art exists. [John McAllister](#) and [Loie Hollowell](#) make paintings that, however blunt (or seemingly gendered) their influences are, hold their own as self-contained, compositionally solid works. They embody sensibilities unique to their makers. McAllister doesn't seem interested in walking very far out of Matisse's shadow. But his reduced color palette, pleasing still, is both a compliment and complement to Matisse's, rather than being the same. Hollowell is happy to sit between Georgia O'Keeffe and Judy Chicago, taking motifs from both. (There are, incidentally, [lots of vaginas in Like Art](#).) Yet, by virtue of her formal rigor and compositional efforts, Hollowell's work is appreciably more than the sum of its parts.



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It is very difficult for an artist to make work dissimilar to that of the artists who inspire them. To make a work that is truly one's own there must be several layers of transformation from the initial inspiration. For instance, Donald Judd cites Lee Bontecou as important to Minimalism, but her work doesn't leap to mind when seeing his. Like Art is different. It has no pretension of moving past its own influences, better seen as appropriations. Doing so would risk its likability, its dependency on pre-established tastes. It would take on the very challenges the art it borrows from once took.

The art of [Shara Hughes](#), [Alex Chaves](#), [Alexander Herzog](#), [Denise Kupferschmidt](#), [Daniel Heidkamp](#), [Max Maslansky](#), [Scott Olson](#), and [Adrian Ghenie](#) is up front about its influences and impulses. Hughes likes [David Hockney](#) and [Edvard Munch](#), whipping them into pictures that are hard to not like. Chaves goes full Crayola with his palette, a recurring feature in Like Art, but can't he do more with his interest in Picasso? Herzog hearts [Jonathan Lasker](#), as Kupferschmidt does Matisse. Heidkamp likes [Fairfield Porter](#) as much as I do. Maslansky likes [Ed Paschke's faces](#), especially that signature [bright red nose](#). Olson manages to synthesize Picasso, [Joan Miró](#), and Robert Delaunay. Ghenie makes pricey omelettes out of Francis Bacon and Vincent van Gogh. Add more names to the list of influencers and the influenced at [this week's art fairs](#). If you're staying home, tally a few on Instagram with [@whos\\_\\_\\_who](#).

One reason to be critical of Like Art is its unwillingness to take artistic risks. It aims instead for easy acceptance by servicing screen-tap culture. Quick affirmations run counter to the treacherous work of self-reflexivity and the uncomfortable experiences — even failures — that generate art worth holding onto. “What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity,” Matisse said, “something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.” Like Art isn't dreaming, it's sitting in other artists' chairs.

# artnet<sup>®</sup> news

## On View

## John McAllister Shows His Vibrant Landscapes at Berlin's WENTRUP Gallery

See images of the artist's first solo show in Germany.

Henri Neuendorf, October 25, 2016



John McAllister *Cymbals Without Sound* (2016). Photo: Trevor Good, courtesy of the artist and WENTRUP, Berlin.

Showcasing their latest recruit, Berlin's WENTRUP Gallery will show a solo exhibition dedicated to the American painter John McAllister.

In his first exhibition with the gallery and his first exhibition in Germany, McAllister continues his exploration of vibrantly colored landscape painting within the tradition of *mise-en-abyme*—the picture within a picture.

In his new paintings the artist maintains his unique palette of fluorescent orange, deep purple, and tranquil turquoise, which at once appear familiar and foreign. Strongly influenced by photography, the works resemble the coloration of negative film, while the canvasses also incorporate multiple images overlapped, like layered postcards or photographs.

By framing multiple pictures laid over the top of other surfaces—lying on the carpet or hanging over wallpaper—McAllister depicts his landscapes not only as the subject, but also as an object.

Stylistically McAllister's influences are strongly linked to modernism, reinterpreting the legacy of Impressionist painters. The interplay between landscapes and interiors evoke Matisse's seminal work *The Open Window* (1905), as well as the painting of Georges Braque or, more recently, the work of pop artist David Hockney.

While the bushy trees, leaves, and grasses of his earlier work reflect the Californian vegetation of the artist's former workplace in Los Angeles, his recent relocation to Northampton, Massachusetts, is reflected in his latest paintings, which depict more luscious greenery typified by his new home in New England on the East Coast.

*"John McAllister: CHORUS CLAMORS SULTRY" runs from October 28 – December 31, 2016 at WENTRUP, Berlin.*





*John McAllister at James Fuentes*



“I was the shadow of the waxwing slain, by the false azure in the window pane,” the character John Shade writes in Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire*. It’s from Shade’s fictional poem recounting the crash of a bird into a window, that John McAllister finds the title of his current exhibition, *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night*.

McAllister’s flat, neon-Fauvist landscapes beckon us to look through a figurative window pane. The artist also asks the viewer to step outside the window, by toying with the illusion of three-dimensionality in his eight-panelled, panoramic landscape. *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night* is a slight tongue-in-cheek play at the panorama painting genre of the 19th & 20th centuries, as it does not attempt an illusion of a continuous environment. Instead, McAllister’s radiant landscape is removed from the walls and, standing in the middle of the space, is broken up into eight conjoined panels, thus actually encompassing the viewer. It’s hard not to feel a surge of emotion when looking at this monumental blue-and-pink-sunset, as the artist also adds a dimension of temporality to the stagnant panoramas of the past.



McAllister's game of perspectives corresponds to the prank-like style of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, a book that tricks the reader into thinking they're reading a poem with academic commentary, only to realize they've read a fictional novel. McAllister's fantastical paintings are on view at [James Fuentes](#) until April 15th. – Claire Milbrath











# The New York Times

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# LAWEEKLY

## AFTERSCHOOL ART

**By Tom Christie and Holly Myers**

John McAllister's story has an appealing air of American romanticism, evoking the likes of Pollack and de Kooning. He grew up in Louisiana, where his exposure to art was limited to books and magazines. He studied photojournalism at the University of Texas at Austin, then struck out for the big city, picking up an education in art history while working as a night watchman at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Casper David Friedrich made a lasting impression, as did Frederic Church and Winslow Homer. In 2001, McAllister traveled to Italy, encountering Caravaggio, Bernini, Tintoretto, Veronese, and Titian. The trip cemented his resolve. "I came back from Italy," he says, "feeling I needed to do more in every way to make paintings that carried the same force as those I had seen."

So he returned to the books and clippings he'd accumulated in his photojournalism days, looking for a subject that would give his works presence and drama. He became captivated with a photograph of a house being consumed by lava, and that led him to images of fire and explosions. "I noticed how the effects of fire in a landscape were similar to those in Impressionist painting," he says. "In Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral, the light is eroding the stone edifice. When there is a fire, the erosion of solid structures is both visual and physical."

The subject of the paintings, he says now, is not fire per se but force: not just the image but the sensation of a momentous occurrence. "Force is a challenging and wonderful topic for painting," he says. "It emphasizes the incredible capacity of oil paint to describe and present movement and light. The paintings are large, beautifully rendered and unapologetically ambitious. "I want my artworks to be invested with intensity and grandeur," he says, "to carry with them the dynamic sensations of the events they depict."