

DEVALS

Biography

Every project I've done has been an inquiry into what it is we look for in an artwork.

— Allan McCollum

Since the late 1960s, Allan McCollum has developed a body of work that shifts attention from the isolated object to the collective conditions through which objects become recognizable, desirable, exchangeable, and memorable. His ensembles of image-less paintings, casts, drawings, and individualized forms examine how a culture can produce standardized objects while simultaneously sustaining the desire for certain objects to be regarded as singular. In McCollum's work, repetition allows a broad investigation on institutions, habits of perception, systems of value, and the narratives through which individuals understand themselves.

This inquiry has unfolded over more than five decades, from early experiments in California to community-based collaborations and systems of forms conceived on a potentially planetary scale. Its coherence in a specific method: reduce a category of object to its most conventional signs, reproduce it serially, and observe the social and affective meanings that emerge from this operation.



Fig. 1 Allan McCollum at IVAM, Valencia, 1990.
Courtesy IVAM & Allan McCollum

Born in Los Angeles in 1944, McCollum began exhibiting in California in the late 1960s. During the early 1970s, he was represented in Los Angeles by the Nicholas Wilder Gallery and later by the Claire S. Copley Gallery. His work appeared in group exhibitions at the Pasadena Art Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. In 1972 he showed at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, and his inclusion in the Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial in 1975 preceded his move to New York later that year.



Fig. 2 Allan McCollum, *If love had wings: a perpetual canon*, 1972.
Courtesy Allan McCollum

This geographical transition coincided with a change in the intellectual and institutional environment of his work. McCollum's early Californian investigations remained connected to abstract painting and modular systems, but he gradually moved away from the premise that an artwork's meaning could be located in its autonomous formal qualities. Instead, he became interested in the conventions that allow an object to be classified as a painting, sculpture, or work of art, and in the learned gestures through which viewers adopt particular attitudes before it. Minimalism's concerns with repetition, modularity, and reduction, together with conceptual art's interest in signs, rules, and protocols, provide useful contexts for this development, though neither fully defines his position.

Theatre is another important interpretive key. McCollum explained that he wanted to make the artwork function as a prop: an element whose meaning depends on the situation in which it appears—the gallery, the museum, the furniture, the audience's behaviour, and the art world itself. McCollum wanted to interrogate the situation the object makes possible, the roles it distributes, and the collective narrative that unfolds around it.

In 1978, Allan McCollum began the *Surrogate Paintings*, the first major series to establish his artistic approach. Initially constructed from wood and mat board, these objects reproduce the basic structure of a framed painting: a border, a margin, and a dark, often black, central field. Although they retain the familiar appearance and scale of paintings, they contain no image or depicted scene. This deliberate absence shifts attention from pictorial representation to the conventions through which an object is identified and valued as art.



Fig. 3 Allan McCollum, *Plaster Surrogate*, 1983.
Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, United-States
Courtesy the National Gallery of Art, Washington & Allan McCollum

Hanging on a gallery wall, each *Surrogate* occupies the place ordinarily reserved for a painting and activates familiar habits of viewing. Yet, deprived of recognizable imagery, it resists conventional interpretation and raises a fundamental question: what makes an object count as a painting? Is it its material construction, its appearance, its attribution to an artist, or the institutional context in which it is displayed?

The series gained visibility through exhibitions in New York in 1979, including presentations at Julian Prento & Co., Artists Space, and 112 Workshop, later known as White Columns. McCollum's first European solo exhibition followed at Galerie Yvon Lambert in Paris in 1980. These early presentations established the *Surrogates* as an investigation into the social and institutional conditions of art. By reproducing the outward form of painting while withholding its expected content, McCollum foregrounded the exhibition practices, critical discourses, and commercial transactions through which artworks acquire meaning and value.

From 1982 onward, he developed this approach through the *Plaster Surrogates*. Made from Hydrostone and painted with enamel, these works imitate the layered appearance of a frame, a mat, and a black pictorial field, although each is cast as a single object. The casting process enables the production of multiple examples, while hand-painting and variations in dimensions or colour preserve differences between individual pieces. The series thus brings industrial reproducibility into tension with manual labour and individual variation.

This tension became especially apparent in McCollum's 1983 exhibition at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, where hundreds of Surrogates covered the walls. Their sheer number transformed the gallery into a study of painting's place in everyday and institutional life. Paintings can function as decoration, expressions of taste, markers of status, investments, or prompts for social interaction. By removing pictorial content, McCollum made these functions more visible, showing that an artwork's significance depends not only on what it depicts but also on how it is displayed, circulated, and used.



Fig. 4 Allan McCollum, *Collection of Sixty Plaster Surrogates*, 1982-1990.
Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, United-States
Courtesy The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles & Allan McCollum

From the late 1980s, McCollum extended his inquiry to other categories of objects and other modes of collecting. *Over Ten Thousand Individual Works* (1987–) pushes serial logic toward a scale that exceeds the capacity of an individual gaze. Its title brings two regimes into tension: the 'work' as an autonomous unit and number as a principle of organization. As the collection expands, attention shifts from the singular piece to the system that makes its production, classification, and presentation possible.

The Perfect Vehicles (begun in 1985) evoke vessels or urns while withholding an immediate practical function. Their familiar yet not strictly utilitarian profiles hover between domestic object, sculpture, and ceremonial artefact. They ask us to consider objects that contain, preserve, or transport something—and, more broadly, the capacity of forms to suggest a function without performing it. Like the *Surrogates*, they can be understood as generic signs: they resemble categories of objects before they refer to any particular example.

The Drawings, initiated in the late 1980s and developed from 1988–1989, deepen the relationship between unit, variation, and collective production. Simple black forms on white grounds are repeated and distorted through successive operations, producing a large ensemble of distinct drawings. The work relies on a limited repertoire of rules, but the result is not a mechanical repetition of a single motif. Small differences are sufficient to individualize each sheet without erasing the family resemblance that connects the whole.

In the early 1990s, McCollum's research expanded toward objects drawn from natural history, archaeology, and local collections. Among others entities, fossils interested him because they are at once material traces, objects of scientific inquiry, and powerful symbols of an irrecoverable past. *Lost Objects* (1991–), a series of casts of dinosaur fossils, gives this reflection a particularly precise form. Reproducing an object that is already a trace of disappearance creates a complex layering of time. McCollum explicitly connects casting to memory, mourning, and the human attempt to make present what can no longer be recovered.



Fig. 5 Allan McCollum, *Lost Objects*, 1991, installation view, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh.
Courtesy Carnegie Museum of Art & Allan McCollum

Conceived in 2005, *The Shapes Project* is among the broadest formulations of McCollum's method. The artist devised a system capable of generating a vast number of unique two-dimensional shapes and recording those already produced so that no shape is repeated. In his project statement, he describes a system designed to generate more than 31 billion forms, a quantity intended to exceed the highest population estimates considered at the time. The artist designs the conditions for an ensemble in which each element is unique and uniqueness can be verified, archived, and distributed.

Solo retrospectives of Allan McCollum's work have been mounted at ICA Miami (2020); Mary Boone Gallery, New York (2017); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2015); Michele Didier Gallery, Paris (2016); Galerie Mitterand, Paris (2016); the Musée d'art Moderne et Contemporain, Geneva (2006); Musée d'Art Moderne, Villeneuve d'Ascq, Lille, France (1998); the Sprengel Museum, Hannover, Germany (1995-96); Serpentine Gallery, London (1990); the Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö, Sweden (1990); IVAM Centre del Carme, Valencia, Spain (1990); Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (1989), and Portikus, Frankfurt, Germany (1988), among many others. He has produced public art projects in both the United States and Europe, and his works are held in over 70 art museum collections around the world.

McCollum's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including: *Shapes/Colors*, Galerie des Bains, Geneva (2019); *Art & Entertainment*, MAMCO, Geneva (2018); *Exo Emo* at Greene Naftali Gallery, New York (2017); *In Place Of*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York; *Fade In: Int. Art Gallery—Day*, Swiss Institute / Contemporary Art, New York (2016); *Art for a Nation: Inspiration from the Great Depression*, High Desert Museum, Bend, Oregon (2016); *The Art of Our Time*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, curated by Helen Molesworth (2015-2016); *New York in the 1980s: Urban Theater*, Modern Art Museum, Fort Worth (2015); *Take It or Leave It: Institution, Image, Ideology*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2014); 9th Bienal do Mercosul, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2013); *This Will Have Been: Art, Love, & Politics in the 1980s*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2012-2013); *The Pictures Generation: 1974-1984*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (2009); *Singular Forms*, The Guggenheim Museum, New York (2004); *The Museum as Muse*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1999); *L'Informe: Mode d'Emploi*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (1996); *Objects of Desire: The Modern Still Life*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1996); *Allegories of Modernism*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1992); The 1991 Sydney Biennale, Sydney, Australia (1991); *Image World: Art and Media Culture*, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1989); *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation*, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1989); *Aperto*, the 43rd Biennale di Venezia, Venice, Italy (1988); *Implosion: et postmodernt perspektiv*, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden; and *Ailleurs et Autrement*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France (1984), and many more.



Fig. 6. Allan McCollum, *Collection of Eight Small Plaster Surrogates*, 1982–1993, installation view, 'Bouche-trous. De l'ironie au pastiche', 1–31 December 2022. Courtesy of DEVALS and Allan McCollum.

COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS DONE WITH MUSEUMS OTHER THAN ART MUSEUMS

Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh (USA)
Museo Vesuviano (Vesuvius Museum), Pompei (IT)
College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum, Price (USA)
Hillsborough County Museum of Science and Industry, Tampa (USA)
Imperial Valley Historical Society Pioneers Museum, Imperial (USA)
Museo Universitario, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexicali (MEX)

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Museum of Modern Art (USA)
Whitney Museum of American Art (USA)
Metropolitan Museum of Art (USA)
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (USA)
The New Museum of Contemporary Art (USA)
The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (USA)
The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford (USA)
Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco (USA)
Los Angeles County Museum of Art (USA)
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (USA)
The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (USA)
Denver Art Museum (USA)
Art Institute of Chicago (USA)
Detroit Institute of the Arts (USA)
High Museum of Art, Atlanta (USA)
Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (USA)
Hirshhorn Museum, Washington D.C. (USA)
Seattle Art Museum, Washington (USA)
Newark Museum, Newark (USA)
Grey Art Gallery, New York University (USA)
Tang Museum, Saratoga Springs (USA)
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover (USA)
Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio (USA)
University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa (USA)
Hillsborough County Museum of Science and Industry, Tampa (USA)
John & Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota (USA)
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach (USA)
Long Beach Museum of Art (USA)
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara (USA)
Springfield Museum of Fine Art (USA)
Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach (USA)
Nelson Gallery of Art, Kansas City (USA)
Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines (USA)
Santa Fe Museum of Art (USA)
Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati (USA)

Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland (USA)
Weatherspoon Art Gallery, Greensboro (USA)
Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia (USA)
Imperial County Pioneers Museum, Imperial (USA)
Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan (USA)
National Gallery of Canada, Ontario (CA)
Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia (CA)
Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven (NL)
Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (NL)
Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek (DK)
Rooseum, Malmö, Sweden Wanås Foundation, Knislinge (SE)
City of Malmö (SE)
City of Montpellier (FR)
Musée National d'Art Moderne (FR)
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (FR)
Musée d'Art Moderne-Villeneuve d'Ascq (FR)
Musée de Grenoble (FR)
Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain (FR)
Le Consortium, Dijon (FR)
Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain, Bourgogne (FR)
Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain, Dunkerque (FR)
Musée de la Roche-sur-Yon (FR)
Castello di Rivoli : Museo d'Arte Contemporanea (IT)
Museum of Modern Art, Vienna (AT)
Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Mhka, Antwerp (BE)
Sprengel-Museum, Hannover (DE)
KunstMuseum Wolfsburg, Wolfsburg (DE)
Museum Ludwig, Rheinhallen der Kölner Messe, Cologne (DE)
Centre d'art Contemporain, Geneva (CH)
Musée d'art Contemporain et Moderne, Geneva (CH)
Instituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno, Valencia (SP)
Fundació «la Caixa», Centre Cultural, Barcelona (SP)
Fundación Arco, Santiago (SP)
Israel Museum, Jerusalem (IR)
New Tokyo Metropolitan Museum (JP)
National Museum of Contemporary Art, Seoul (KOR)