

Real Clear Arts

Judith H. Dobrzynski on Culture

At Long Last: A Retrospective For Dorothea Rockburne

Unlike other countries, Japan in particular, America is not known for respecting the aged. But I can't resist writing about an exhibition that opened on Sunday at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton: a retrospective of the work of Dorothea Rockburne. Though she was born in 1932, it's her first career retrospective.



Good for the Parrish; congratulations to her.

Works by Rockburne are part of many permanent collections, including those of MoMA, the Whitney, the Met and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and she has won many awards. But though she studied at the famous Black Mountain College with Raushenberg, Chamberlain, and Twombly, palled around with them and others later in New York, and has produced work consistently for decades, her art has never caught the attention theirs did.

Discrimination against women of her era, or a true difference on the merits of the work? I don't know.

But I think the Parrish's title is perfect: Dorothea Rockburne: In My Mind's Eye, for like another woman of her time, Alice Neel (also not recognized during many of her years), Rockburne has gone her own way. During more than 40 years of working, she's been influenced by "such wide-ranging sources as mathematics, Renaissance art, astronomy, archeology, and philosophy," says the press release -- and "mathematics has been an especially persistent component of her work."

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery
NEW YORK



Was that a barrier? Did it seem too high-falutin'? Scholar David Anfam, in his essay "The Harmony of the World" in the exhibition catalogue, said:

Underpinning Rockburne's early maneuvers and continuing as a leitmotif through her output to the present is a fixation, sparked by Max Dehn at Black Mountain, on an array of mathematical systems and theories, ranging from topology and set theory to the golden ratio and Fibonacci numbers and other, more esoteric scientific fields of inquiry. Although these suggest a daunting obstacle to the non-specialist viewer, Rockburne stresses that scientific expertise is unnecessary to appreciate what she attains: "The work is a visual experience. You don't have to know the composition of water to swim in water."

In any case, she has hewed to her vision, come what may, and for that she deserves credit, appreciation, and probably criticism as well. I'd bet she can take it.

I met Rockburne a couple of times in the late '90s, at parties, where art was not necessarily the topic of conversation. She was full of life, charming, and definitely not one to shrink into the background. Maybe the Parrish's show will push her more into the art foreground.

It runs on Long Island until Aug. 14, after which it will travel to the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Montréal, where it will be on view from September 20, 2011 through January 15, 2012. **JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI**

Photo Credits: Capernaum Gate (top); Geometry of Stardust: 2.5 Ratio / Jupiter and Saturn (bottom), Courtesy of the Parrish Art Museum