

# ARTFORUM

July 6, 2011

500 Words: Dorothea Rockburne



Left: Dorothea Rockburne, *Geometry of Stardust: Curvature*, 2009–2010, Aquacryl, Perlacryl, titanium acrylic, and gold leaf on watercolor paper, 14 1/2 x 11". From the series "Stardust," 2009–. Right: Dorothea Rockburne, *Sphere*, 1991, colored pencil and watercolor on rag paper, 30 x 22".

Dorothea Rockburne's first retrospective is on view at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York, until August 14. Rockburne is well known for her commitment to painting, which has carried her career from her intricate geometric studies of the late 1960s to more recent abstractions that explore the solar system. The exhibition also tracks her lifelong interests in ancient knowledge, topology, and astronomy.

**VIEWERS SHOULDN'T HAVE TO KNOW** a lot about math and science to understand what's going on in my work. Art communicates on an emotional level. While a novice might not understand that Matisse, for instance, was dealing with Byzantine space and not with Cubism, they can still stand in front of a Matisse and fall in love with the work and know nothing about art. However, I think if one understands the basis for an artists' work then it just makes it that much fuller. I can't be responsible for other people's responses; all I can do is paint my heart out and hope that it reaches them, which I think it does.

It's wonderful to have many works in the retrospective that I haven't seen since they were made. For instance, there's a painting from the "Pascal" series, *The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness is Not Understood*, and it belongs to a museum in Texas. I haven't seen it since it was shown in 1967. All of the works look very alive and have the same presence as when they were made, and it's revealing to me to see the constant thread through it all. I don't have a master plan for my art or life, but as I went through the work and my diaries, I realized that besides having a geometric base for the work, there is also a philosophical base that is continuous.

# Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

NEW YORK

Usually when I begin to see work in my mind's eye, I envision the kind of material that it needs. The thought, emotion, and the material aren't separate. I am always following this vision that I have, and it has a lot to do with understanding nature, but from the point of view of topology. One of the quotes that I use in the retrospective's catalogue is from Max Dehn, my math teacher at Black Mountain College. He said, "Nature is written in numbers." It's important to understand those numbers.

Max was so completely seductive in the way he taught. He had to talk me into taking his class. He must have been in his early 80s. I thought I was not trained properly, since people were coming from all over just to study with him. I did not have much of a math background, but he taught me so much about the mathematics of nature, and it all just sank in and made everything understandable in a way that it hadn't been before.

My work has been based on the golden mean for a long time now and it is something that, when you use it, just lends itself to rhythms and vibrations and magic—force, form, divisions, and so on. It's more obscure in my recent work, but I still begin with that proportion. It's there in the ten latest pieces in the retrospective, which are all from the "Stardust" series. With these, I'm using some pretty complex geometry, but of course I am trying to simplify it. They are based on topological premises, which I learned from Max, who was also a topologist. Topology is a form of geometry that I am really interested in, and I like that it lends itself to astronomy. I had wanted to make these works for the past twenty years but more recently some understanding of how to do it developed. When utilizing topology, it's always a matter of trying to put a four-dimensional construct on a two-dimensional surface, and that's very hard to do.

I began to become interested in stardust after someone sent me photograph of a perfect hexagon over Saturn in 2007. I began to think about how the hexagon got there, and I realized that there must have been an explosion that released particles, and that some electromagnetic current in space pushed on those particles and turned it into this shape. But how that happened remains so mysterious. Of course, when stars explode there are particles, and right now we're really seeing these things through sophisticated telescopes. As time goes on, I'm looking forward to our abilities to be able to see further into the earlier universe. Perhaps we will discover not only how but also *why* this all happened.

— As told to Lauren O'Neill-Butler