

## When Art And Math Collide, In A Good Way

The East Hampton Press & The Southampton Press

June 27, 2011



"Narcissus" by Dorothea Rockburne

Although often perceived as diametrically oppositional practices, art and mathematics have actually been intrinsically intertwined ever since the ancient Egyptians and Greeks first recognized the Golden Mean as the dominant aesthetic formula in determining pleasing geometric ratios.

Later, during the Renaissance, this understanding of mathematics became a dominant principle in art. Because, beyond the necessity to develop scientific perspective to properly frame and create a scene, artists and philosophers recognized that mathematics represented the factual quintessence of the corporeal world and that the entire universe, including the arts, could be explained in geometric terms.

For Dorothea Rockburne—whose career-first retrospective, "In My Mind's Eye," is currently on exhibit at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton—this relationship between art, mathematics and the universe itself has been a central theme throughout her career. Featuring more than 50 works, including seminal pieces such as "Tropical Tan" and "Intersection" from the late 1960s, as well as the more recent series, "Geometry of Stardust," the paintings, works on paper and installations illustrate that an artist can identify structure in the cosmos as being equally derived from the yin and yang of both order and disarray.

As the essayist Gilbert Keith Chesterton once observed, "you can only find truth with logic if you have already found truth without it."

Ms. Rockburne first gained an interest in this crossroads between nature, mathematics and art while she was an art student at the famed Black Mountain College in North Carolina. There, in addition to studying with Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Merce Cunningham and John Cage, she also took classes with the mathematician Max Dehn, a one-time colleague of Albert Einstein.

A leading figure in the study of topology (the area of math relating to spatial properties), Mr. Dehn's work in conceptual mathematics and his impact on Ms. Rockburne's cognizance of the intersection of art and math was reflected in his comment, "As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain, and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality."

For Ms. Rockburne, this use of spatial techniques drawn from the mathematician's influence is particularly effective in her series of shaped canvas paintings, which powerfully blur the distinctions between two- and three-dimensional approaches in painting and sculpture. This is notable in works such as "Capernum Gate" (oil and gold leaf on gessoed linen, 1984), "Interior Perspective: Discordant Harmony" (oil on gessoed linen, 1985) and "Extasie" (oil on gessoed linen, 1983-1984).

# Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

NEW YORK

In her other series, "Memory of Light in Egypt," the artist uses negative space within the composition to create depth and to allow a light and airy interplay of color and shape.

Perhaps the most effective aspect of the exhibition, however, is the manner in which the curators have created an installation that, rather than depending upon chronological order in displaying the works, instead uses a non-linear path that underscores and emphasizes the thematic and aesthetic continuity in Ms. Rockburne's oeuvre throughout her career. This allows the viewer to gain an understanding and appreciation of her affinity for the exploration of the transformation of the surface of things as manifestations of deeper meanings that are merely hinted at and which become apparent through her emphasis on simplicity and transformation.

Further, in painting the walls of the middle gallery the same indigo blue as the artist's own studio, the curators have managed to conjure an atmosphere that evokes the reverence of a cathedral in which the works seem to float in an inky darkness that holds just enough light to become an element of physicality in and of itself. **ERIC ERNST**

Dorothea Rockburne's "In My Mind's Eye" retrospective will be on view at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton through August 14. For exhibit information, visit [parrishart.org](http://parrishart.org).