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The Art of Mathematics



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Dorothea Rockburne's 'Three Point Manifold' (2008) is on view at the Parrish Art Museum.

What if mathematical theories could be expressed using artworks instead of plus signs and pi symbols? Dorothea Rockburne has devoted four decades to the attempt, and the results are on view at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, N.Y., through Aug. 14.

Take disjunction, the logical argument that if A is true and B is true, their combination must also be true. Math textbooks usually illustrate this idea with a pair of slightly overlapping circles. In the 1970s, Ms. Rockburne began exploring this idea by soaking long sheets of paper in crude oil, a substance that permeated the paper without breaking it down into pulp. Instead, both materials could co-exist.

In one of her best-known works, 1971's "Scalar," she arranged a group of these oily, rust-colored sheets on a wall so that they slightly overlapped. Other series involved folding or layering linen or painted sheets into kaleidoscopes.

In 1972, conceptual artist Mel Bochner praised her in an art magazine for doing "some of the most advanced thinking in art," and museums like the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston have since collected her work.

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

NEW YORK

Earlier this week, Ms. Rockburne, age 78, sitting in her airy SoHo studio, said her artistic focus wasn't always so cerebral. Growing up in Montreal, she drew nudes like every other academically trained student in the city's School of Art and Design. When she arrived at North Carolina's Black Mountain College in 1950, she said her classmates were mostly copying the messy abstractions of Willem de Kooning— except for a pair of "handsome" friends in her photography class, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly.



Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY
'I Am Pascal' (1986-87)

Like them, she had wearied of Abstract Expressionism, and they encouraged her to toy with other styles. But as years passed and their work won fame, she found herself working as a New York waitress, a single mother who spent her evenings in an apartment with too little room left to paint. Then she remembered Max Dehn, a math professor at Black Mountain whom she had admired in part because he seemed to revel in the rigor of hard thinking. She started reading math texts like Henri Poincaré's "Science and Method" and hit upon an epiphany: "I wanted to see the math I was reading about."

She eventually showed a few pieces to Mr. Rauschenberg, who put her work in a benefit group show at Leo Castelli's gallery in 1966. Within a few years, her career began to take off.

Some of the newest works in the Parrish show, "Dorothea Rockburne: In My Mind's Eye," depict blue and gold swirls, a nod to the theories that she's been reading lately about what happens to star dust after neutron stars explode. "I never wanted to be a mathematician," she said, "but I love the magic of it." **KELLY CROW**