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IN CONVERSATION

DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE with David Levi Strauss and Christopher Bamford

by David Levi Strauss and Christopher Bamford

Shortly after attending the opening of *Dorothea Rockburne: In My Mind's Eye*, curated by Alicia Longwell, at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton (June 19 – August 14, 2011), which will travel to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (November 2, 2011 – January 29, 2012), *Rail* Consulting Editor David Levi Strauss and Christopher Bamford went to Dorothea Rockburne's studio in SoHo to discuss the show.

DAVID LEVI STRAUSS: This is billed as the first major solo exhibition of your work in an American museum and the first career retrospective of your work. Do you think of this as a retrospective?

DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE: Well, yes and no, because it doesn't include much of the early installation work, which visualizes both "Set" and "Group Theory," and there are a lot of other works that aren't there. You know the big carbon paper wall drawings? And the watercolor angels? We were limited by the size of the museum and also by time, since it takes so long to install many of these early works. But I think it gives a pretty good overview, and yes, I do consider it the first real retrospective I've ever had.

LEVI STRAUSS: What is the significance, for you, of the show being at the Parrish? Because I know that you've had a connection to the Hamptons, to the East End, for a long time. You had a house in Bridgehampton for 15 years, beginning in the mid-1970s. Who are some of the other artists that you were close to there? A number of artists who migrated to the Hamptons early on attended or taught at Black Mountain College:



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Esteban Vicente, Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, John Chamberlain, Franz Kline, Helen Frankenthaler.

ROCKBURNE: Yes, but I didn't see a lot of them, because I don't tend to hang out, in the Hamptons or anywhere else [*laughs*]. The architect James Ingo Freed (New Bauhaus, worked with Mies van der Rohe and I.M. Pei, designed the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.) and his wife, Hermine Fried, were very good friends of mine. And I saw a lot of Keith Sonnier, who was a neighbor, as were Kathy and Jim Goodman. The publisher George Braziller was also a neighbor. I rented a very small two-bedroom house near the beach, and I turned one of the bedrooms into a studio.

LEVI STRAUSS: How did this show come about?

ROCKBURNE: In 1974, I was in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art called *Eight Contemporary Artists*, curated by Jennifer Licht and featuring Vito Acconci, Alighiero e Boetti, Daniel Buren, Hanne Darboven, Jan Dibbets, Robert Hunter, Brice Marden, and me. For this show, I made the "Golden Section Paintings," a sequence of specific geometric configurations following the tenets of topology but based on the Greek proportion of the Golden Mean that had been borrowed by the Greeks from the Egyptians. I was trying to think of a way to do a painting that wasn't on a stretcher, really, and I was very involved with the Golden Mean, and it just seemed to naturally come together. However, when it came time to transport the work, we had to design a special crate to put the work in so I could attach it with Velcro inside the crate. And Alicia Longwell came from the Modern to my studio during that time, in 1974, to try to figure out how in the hell we could possibly transport the works. She had to design a case, because they couldn't be handled in the normal way. And we met and began a conversation, and now, all these years later, she's the curator of my show! Doing this retrospective had clearly been on her mind for a long time.

LEVI STRAUSS: In the fall, this retrospective exhibition travels to Montreal, and that's also significant, because that's where you started. You didn't hear Fernand Léger's lectures there in 1943 and '45 on "the liberation of color," did you?

ROCKBURNE: No, I was a child then [*laughs*]. But I wish I had been there! I did, however, hear Edith Piaf sing, on several occasions!

LEVI STRAUSS: Talk a little about your beginnings in Montreal. I'm especially curious about your connection with Gordon Webber, who was a protégé of László Moholy-Nagy and came out of the New Bauhaus in Chicago, so all of this Bauhaus and Russian



"Inner Voice," 1983. Oil on gessoed linen. 92 × 59 × 4". Private Collection, New York. © 2011 Dorothea

Constructivist influence came into your life *very* early.

Rockburne/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Photo: Billy Jim.

Webber was interested in abstraction as a way of understanding the dynamic structures of the universe. Was it Webber who told you about Black Mountain?

ROCKBURNE: Webber did tell me about Black Mountain, but previous to that, at the École des Beaux-Arts, Paul-Émile Borduas had spoken to me about Black Mountain, and so did Jean-Paul Riopelle.

LEVI STRAUSS: So at age 18, you left Montreal and went to Black Mountain, and there you made this strong connection with the German mathematician Max Dehn. But you were saying earlier that although he taught mathematics, he was really concerned with the creative, in all its forms. Talk about how things worked at Black Mountain and how that influenced your approach to art and to other areas of knowledge.

ROCKBURNE: Well, as you know I went to Black Mountain to study painting. But I actually found that one of the least interesting classes. I mean, I was close to Vicente and Jack Tworikov, and Franz Kline gave me special attention (and Twombly and Rauschenberg and John Chamberlain were there), but when I look back, I think all of the painting I was seeing seemed *stylized*, in some way, to me. I really wanted to understand the genesis of creative thinking. And I found much more of that elsewhere—in dance, music, theater, anthropology, philosophy, poetry, linguistics, and certainly in Dehn's mathematics. Also, the different teachers were friends, so Charles Olson attended Max Dehn's classes. That must have been humbling for Olson, and he wasn't good at humility [*laughs*].

CHRISTOPHER BAMFORD: I suspect that your experiences at Black Mountain, where you were presented with so many different possibilities and people—in a sense with the whole range of artistic and intellectual disciplines—without any pressure to focus on any one but being able to move freely between them—that all this must have encouraged the great independence of thought and action that one sees throughout your career.

ROCKBURNE: Yes, it did. All of the teachers were very, very good. And as both of you well know, most really good teachers don't exactly do anything except point you in the right direction. When I told Max Dehn that I didn't have any background to study the mathematics he was teaching, he took me on walks every day, and showed me how mathematics works in nature. He made an adjustment to the student, and when I began to teach, that's what I always tried to do.

BAMFORD: Wasn't another aspect of your Black Mountain experience the discovery of the body through dance and performance? I think you were in a Cage performance, weren't you?

ROCKBURNE: Yes. And I was in various writhing-on-the-floor performances. We learned to writhe very well [*laughs*]. But yes, because I had studied ballet in Montreal from a very early age, when I saw these very different ways of using the body, and the emotions of dance, that was very

liberating, and I took that into my work.

LEVI STRAUSS: How did it come into the work, first?

ROCKBURNE: Well, it didn't come in for a long time, you know. I worked a lot at Black Mountain, but I have reports from school where some of the lesser teachers, you know, thought I was all over the place and not focused [*laughs*]. They didn't understand. *They* weren't focused—I was really focused [*laughs*].

LEVI STRAUSS: You discovered that you had a talent for math. You knew that you weren't a mathematician, you were a painter always, but you found math useful as a basis for structure.

BAMFORD: And as a way of thinking the big questions.

ROCKBURNE: Yes, Max was thinking the big questions. He really wasn't teaching mathematics, I realized later. He was teaching cosmology. But he never called it that. And again, it would seem that he was jumping all over the place, at least in the classes that I took, not the advanced classes. Because Max he taught Pythagoras and Plato and topology and Poincaré, and—I mean, he jumped around.

LEVI STRAUSS: So at age 33, you had this realization that, as you said, "I felt sure making art that employed mathematics could never be shown." There have obviously been many artists who have employed mathematics as a basis for understanding nature before, and they've shown. Why did you think, at that time, that it was not going to be accepted practice or it was not going to fit in to the way things were?

ROCKBURNE: Well, first of all, it was a double whammy, you know, because I'm a woman [*laughs*]. When I was working for Rauschenberg, I met various people and they would say "What do you do?" and I would say "Well, I'm using math as a basis for structure in painting," and in a heartbeat, you know, you could see a visible yawn occurring [*laughs*]. So, I just thought, I really want to do what I want to do and I don't give a damn.



"Three Point Manifold," 2008. Watercolor on Dura-Lar. 60 × 36". Collection of the artist, New York. © 2011 Dorothea Rockburne/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Kevin Ryan



"Scalar," 1971. Chipboard, crude oil, paper and nails. 80 × 114 1/2 × 31 1/2 overall. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder and Estée Lauder, Inc., in honor of J. Frederic Byers III, 1992. © 2011 Dorothea Rockburne/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

BAMFORD: But I think the point was that the mathematics wasn't just any mathematics. What Max Dehn was teaching you was leading you into a new sense of continuity, of topology—of the background of a kind of relational wholeness and unity.

ROCKBURNE: Max was very down to earth, in a certain way. He was very approachable and you know, he was warm and friendly—but [*laughs*] he always indicated there was a mystery beyond even where he was and that I should reach for that mystery.

LEVI STRAUSS: So, Chris and I were both lucky enough to be there at the opening of your show and we were talking together earlier about some of the things that struck us about seeing it, because this is the first time either of us has seen that much of the work together. It's not arranged chronologically, but according to different kinds of engagement, and one of the things that struck me most was how coherent the engagements are. Although the work is quite various, one always knows that the inquiry is consistent. And the other thing that stood out for me, very strongly, was the primacy of color and light. As you know, some people have tried to divide your work into two main periods: before 1982 and after, with drawing and earthy substances and “minimalism” before 1982, and color and light and the celestial after. It will be very hard to defend that split after this exhibition.

ROCKBURNE: Yes, but Alicia is very smart. She's been following it all along and she knew. Another artist whose work I admire asked me a question at the opening that's often been asked of me. This person asked, “When did you start using color?” [*Laughs.*] I mean, by now don't we know that white is a color? After all of Ryman's work, don't we know that it's a color? But I said to him, in Beaux-Arts, we had to grind our own pigments. We were grinding lapis lazuli and we were grinding cadmiums, and so on, real cadmiums. I learned that every material has its own color and light.

LEVI STRAUSS: At one point in the interview that Jennifer Licht did with you for *Artforum* in 1972, she says, “You don't seem interested in color.” And you say, “My work deals with color very clearly. I'm interested in color but in such a way that what the color *does* in terms of *identity* and what it physically is, are not separate.” I



"Narcissus," 1985. Oil on gessoed linen. 921/2 × 123 × 6". Private Collection, New York. © 2011 Dorothea Rockburne/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Billy Jim.



"Arena V," 1978. French vellum, Mylar tape, varnish, and colored pencil collage mounted on rag board. 58 7/8 × 47". The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Museum purchase with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, Mr. and Mrs. Fox Benton, and Charles Ulrick and Josephine Bay Foundation. © Dorothea Rockburne/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New

think that states it very succinctly.

York.

BAMFORD: It strikes me that this experience of grinding pigments at Beaux-Arts tells us a lot about your work. It is so clear that everything you do—that what you do—is hands-on. You make it with your hands; in fact, with your whole body. You're a “maker.”

ROCKBURNE: Yes. When I got to Black Mountain, I didn't know what to paint but I knew how to paint. Everybody else knew what to paint, but didn't know how. Because they were doing abstract expressionism. But, you know, when I'm working I'm not going through intellectual processes. Once one begins to work, you're in the zone.

BAMFORD: The remarkable thing for me about the way the show is hung—which as we said is not chronological or retrospective in that sense, but is actually always moving forwards and backwards in time—is the way that as you wander through it repeatedly, each piece comes to have a precise relationship to every other piece. You get the strong sense that each piece as such, as well as the whole show itself, at one level at least, is really about entering an internally constituted and internally coherent set of relationships, interactions, permeations, and so on. In other words, you feel you are entering a whole self-contained but deeply meaningful world. But not in a denotative way. Because neither the whole show nor each piece really refers outside itself. Each work seems layered in a self-referential way just as the show is too.

LEVI STRAUSS: One of the other things that came through very strongly was a transparency that operates spatially. You've had this lifelong attraction to Egypt from childhood on, and you finally got to go to Egypt first in 1981, and at the time, you said, “the way Egyptian light illuminates the curved surfaces touches my innermost being.” And after Egypt you were exploring a different kind of perspective wherein one can imagine the transparency through the layers of painted canvases. You can really see that here, where you have a painting that looks through itself, at itself—“Narcissus” is the title of one—and you saw that in Egypt, where the Egyptians could actually make transparency move space, with perspective.

ROCKBURNE: One thing that became very clear to me in Egypt was that the way you see space there is different, because of the light. The sun is almost always directly overhead, so there are no long shadows cast. And the way this light strikes the bas-reliefs, depending on the material, was for me an unusual experience because, particularly when, I guess it was white granite, there seems to be a plane of white and then the dark line, and then another plane of white, but in between, there is almost—because of the way the light shines—there is almost a pink. This is very unusual; I have never seen that anywhere else. But I also think there is just something in me that was attracted to transparency, otherwise I wouldn't have done the “Arena” series, and the “Copal” series. I mean I was always fooling around with seeing through something. I think partly that came from studying three-point perspective at Beaux-Arts and knowing I did not want to employ that kind of perspective, because I didn't see it. I mean I didn't live in that world where I was seeing three-point perspective and I wanted to make up a different kind of perspective that I felt made more sense to

me.

LEVI STRAUSS: And this transparency that you're describing certainly influenced your approach to color. There is a strong relation between what you were just describing and glazing and getting luminosity inside the surface of the painting. And this idea of the white surface and what the light does to it to turn it into another color, you also did with gold leaf in works like "Capernaum Gate," 1984, and "The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Understood It," 1987, and the whole "Memory of the Light in Egypt" series where the gold leaf actually illuminates the darker colors. It brings them up.

I wanted you to talk a little bit about copper too, your use of copper. You say, "copper is one of the original elements of the universe and as such it displaces time and space. The copper will change; space displacement." I can see the spatial displacement in "The Twins: Castor and Pollux," from 2002, but I wanted you to talk a little more about using copper as a time displacement. You also say you use it to disrupt the surface tension.

ROCKBURNE: Well, in "Castor and Pollux," the copper ellipse is actually being pushed in so that it's not a continuous surface, it's a surface with an indentation, the way planets indent the surface in the universe.

LEVI STRAUSS: Copper is also Venus.

ROCKBURNE: I didn't know that.

BAMFORD: I think there's also some connection or transparency between how you were describing your experience in Egypt and the interaction between light and dark through which color seems to emerge in some of your works through a kind of layering. In the Pascal paintings, for instance, this becomes a different kind of topological color experience.

ROCKBURNE: I think that has to do with reflective light and absorptive light. And it's kind of challenging to do reflective light in painting alongside reflective light in gold leaf and make it work. That was just one of the technical difficulties that took a long time to overcome.

In painting, one is taught composition—at least, that's how it used to be. More or less it was "put a little more red on the bottom and it'll look better." That kind of thing. And I didn't like that because, again, that's stylization. But I really found out about real emotional beauty by doing mathematics and finding those elegant solutions.

LEVI STRAUSS: Here's a quote I just came upon because I was working on Pierre Bonnard and his still lives. It's by Henri Cartier-Bresson: "If there were a God, it would be Pi, the golden number...God is number, structure. This is true for Bonnard, but with him, sensuality is beyond mathematics." I thought that was pretty close to where you're at.

ROCKBURNE: Yes, yes.

LEVI STRAUSS: So, in the Parrish, in the entire middle section of the show, where the big Pascal paintings, and “Mozart,” and “Oxymoron,” and “Black and White” are hung, the walls are painted indigo blue. You did that before, first at Andre Emmerich, maybe in 1988. Why?

ROCKBURNE: I was thinking very much about mannerist devices and to key colors off of indigo blue instead of off of white seemed pretty radical. My whole studio was painted indigo blue during this period, but there was more to it than that. It came out of my experience in churches in Europe and in Canada (not so much in America, but I don’t think I’ve been to church very much in America). It always seemed to me that, when you’re sitting in a church like Chartres, the light seems blue. The light through the stained glass windows, the primary color is blue; it’s not the red, it’s the blue. And, especially in Chartres, it seems so thick you could cut it with a knife. And I felt that presence in those windows, that presence of the light made my being feel both at rest and very good somehow. Very elevated.

LEVI STRAUSS: I don’t know if this is where the title of the exhibition comes from, but in your “Notes on the Nature of Creativity” for the Rose Art Museum show in 1989, which was a ten-year painting retrospective, you said, “throughout my life I have been able to see, *in my mind’s eye*, the painting I want to paint and the path I need to take to get there. I believe that a part of my memory is, in fact, part of a larger collective memory.” Has that always been the case, or is that something that you came to gradually?

ROCKBURNE: No, it’s always been the case. It’s why I start to paint: the vision, emotion, concept, simply becomes more and more demanding, because it won’t leave my head until I’ve got it done—until I’ve done it—until it’s on the outside.

LEVI STRAUSS: But you can always see ahead, you can always see the end.

ROCKBURNE: Yes.

LEVI STRAUSS: Is it true that you always title the painting first?

ROCKBURNE: Yes, I always title work first, so that I stay concentrated on what I’m doing, because a painting can take over and wander [*laughs*]. And for me that would change the experience.

LEVI STRAUSS: And bring in the stylish.

ROCKBURNE: Yes, it would. It’s just not the way my mind is. I have to know what I’m doing.

BAMFORD: I get the sense that although the show is entitled *In My Mind’s Eye*, intuition, thinking, feeling, will are also involved and fully engaged—all of them working in a way through the

whole body. I mean that a work, what you do, seems to have come through the whole body and that when one stands before a work, one feels that the making, the actual making, is palpable.

ROCKBURNE: Yes.

BAMFORD: I mean one senses and feels how the work has been made by submitting different materials to certain fundamental functional operations like folding, tearing, creasing, layering, dividing, uniting, knotting, going under, going over, and so on—and that these operations in some sense are cosmological or even cosmogenic. The brushwork too is very explicit and physical, and likewise the drawing of lines, the geometry. All of which means that one experiences the making of the pieces almost bodily.

LEVI STRAUSS: The making is not concealed.

BAMFORD: It's never concealed. And there's a sense that these operations are self-referential. They are what they are. They don't refer to anything else. But then at the same time there's also always the mystery that you mentioned Max Dehn spoke of.

ROCKBURNE: Well, to go back to the indigo blue room and the Pascal paintings, I was handed Pascal—*Les Pensées*—in the fourth grade and I bitterly rejected it [*laughs*]. However, it wouldn't leave me, and I kept picking it up, and when I went to Black Mountain I took it with me and eventually I came across Pascal's mathematics and somehow, I don't know why that fit together in my mind's eye, that the indigo blue, and Pascal, and the experience of *Les Pensées*, and the experience of Pascal's rebelliousness, his intellectual thinking and rebelliousness, and mannerism, all seemed to be a piece for me, that I wanted to *see*. But, to address what you're saying a bit, Chris, you know, there are events that happen. Sometimes it's a book, sometimes it's a conversation, but usually, very often, it's visual, but something starts itching in my soul. For a long time now I've been watching programs on television about what's going on in cosmology and particularly the Morgan Freeman programs are just stunning, especially now that there are so many ways of photographing cosmology. And I started to understand more and more about the process of a star exploding and neutron stars and what's left over, the fact that we are star dust from that, which made me think about, what is the celestial sequence, what could it be, visually, as a painting, not scientifically. I've been looking at this stuff for a long time, but now I'm just beginning these little baby pictures of celestial sequences. What I know so far is, about black holes being in the center of every one of those pinwheels you're seeing on TV [*laughs*] and they say that our sun is too small to become a neutron star when it explodes, which makes me think, exactly what is a neutron star and what is the black hole in the middle of our galaxy? And I'm interested to know the possibilities for the geometric and topological sequence of what is happening.

LEVI STRAUSS: In his essay for the catalogue, Robert Lawlor says, "The universal theme of harmonic inversion is a constant in Rockburne's work...Rockburne portrays the cosmos as a harmonic inversion. Between the interiority of faculties and forces of mind and soul, with the

dynamic yet measured activity of the orbs and orbitings of infinite space.” Does that make sense to you?

ROCKBURNE: Yes.

LEVI STRAUSS: We should say that concurrent with the Parrish show is a show of your drawings at the Drawing Room Gallery in East Hampton (June 30 – July, 25) Can you say something about the relation between your drawings and paintings?

ROCKBURNE: I’ve never considered drawing separate from painting. I can’t separate it out, you know, it’s just different materials.

LEVI STRAUSS: As you know, I appreciate your clarity about the lack of progress in art. I don’t understand how anyone can look at the paintings in Chauvet or Lascaux and still believe there is progress in art.

ROCKBURNE: I think that this is a great disservice to art, because that is where the feeding frenzy of the market comes from. You know, out with the old, in with the new, out with the old—and that turns it into fashion, and it’s not that. The work that the Egyptians did, not all of it but most of the work the Egyptians did, is just as relevant today. In fact, in many cases, it’s more relevant than any art being done today. They set a very high bar. But what I mean by relevant is that when you look at it you feel more than before you looked at it.

BAMFORD: Doesn’t that have something to do with the fact that it’s only recently that we’ve reduced works of art to things that are seen rather than as I believe they were experienced in earlier times and as I experience with your work that they are also—and perhaps primarily—ways of seeing, ways of experiencing the world?

ROCKBURNE: Well, one of the things that I found to be true throughout all of art is that if there’s any change in art it’s the spatial concept. The subject matter never changes, whether it’s abstract, figures, or landscape. There are figure paintings in Egypt, landscape and still lives, and so on but the spatial concept changes over time. On the way to this retrospective, when I looked at my life’s work and wrote about it, I realized that even from early childhood on, I had a subconscious attraction to the Hermetic study of nature. And that is one of the things that binds the work together. So it’s not a case of I did this and I did that and then I did this. There’s this thread of the study of nature coming from Egypt, going to Greece, crossing over to Italy. As I say in the catalogue somewhere, at the age of 13, I was reading Nicholas of Cusa, but I never put it all together. Even when I read Goethe’s color theory and later when I knew that Newton was involved with alchemy I didn’t put it together that there was this thread, certainly through all art of an alchemical point of view which is that one thing changes into another through nature.

BAMFORD: And alchemy, in fact, you might say, is the empirical realization of that experience.

LEVI STRAUSS: The alchemist Michael Maier's motto was "to reach the intellect via the senses." That's painting.

ROCKBURNE: Well the reason that I've never gone near any of that too much is that I don't want a leader [*laughs*]. I don't like the idea of priests and acolytes and so on.

BAMFORD: But I think you discovered it for yourself. Each work made was a particular experience, an empirical realization of something. Duchamp, when asked if he was an alchemist, said "I'm an alchemist in the only way that's possible today; that is, by not knowing that I am."

ROCKBURNE: Yes, but most often there's another way, too, and that is, I'm always reading science. I've been reading science since I was a child and I always had scientific books around usually as well as art. And of course scientifically, the whole concept of vibrations and waves and the way energy works is exactly the same as the Hermetic view. But I didn't put that together for a very long time. I didn't know that. I mean I didn't know that five thousand years ago in Egyptians they were speaking of the same science—the same scientific principles. Egypt knew that it was a heliocentric universe and they also talked of many universes.

LEVI STRAUSS: This gets back to the idea of progress in art. It applies as well to science, where contemporaries think that modern science replaced this old science, which is really not the case. It's a convenient fiction to keep us from dealing with our real position in history, and the real work we have to do, now.

BAMFORD: Dorothea, in the catalogue, with reference to the "Conservation Drawings," you suggest that there are processes of transformation or growth that create something new while somehow conserving what went before. In sacred geometry I think this is what is called gnomonic growth; namely, a kind of development or evolution, which unfolds through the Golden Section, and in which nothing is ever left behind but everything is always carried forward into the new. The past is constantly carried into the new, the present, so that nothing's ever left behind.

LEVI STRAUSS: Because it's in proportion, it remains in proportion. Certain relationships remain stable.

BAMFORD: Yes. That's the older view of historicity.