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From Theorems and Numbers, the Geometry of a Diverse Career



Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

The Dorothea Rockburne retrospective at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, N.Y., delves into her Minimalist and mathematical influences.

SOUTHAMPTON, N.Y. — “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,” the artist Dorothea Rockburne has said. At 78, she is having her first full-dress retrospective, “Dorothea Rockburne: In My Mind’s Eye,” at the Parrish Art Museum here.

As befits a lifelong student of mathematics, the show celebrates the rational, the schematic and the cerebral. But the exceptional clarity of Ms. Rockburne’s mind’s eye is not much in evidence.

Her career arc, as traced by the Parrish, might stymie a calculus expert. Ms. Rockburne came of age with the Minimalists but never really identified with them; her later works look like post-painterly abstractions, but are deeply referential.

At heart she is a Classicist — in love with the golden section, Egyptian antiquities and Renaissance frescoes. Yet unlike her former classmate Cy Twombly, another idiosyncratic admirer of ancient civilizations, she has rarely translated that obsession into an immediate and sensual experience.

Organized by the Parrish’s chief curator, Alicia Longwell, the exhibition travels this fall to the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Ms. Rockburne’s hometown, Montreal. It was while studying plein-air painting at an academy there that she experienced a kind of mathematical revelation, seeing the landscape as a set of universal principles.

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

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She left Canada in the early 1950s to attend Black Mountain College in North Carolina; her fellow students included Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg and John Chamberlain. After graduation she joined Rauschenberg and other classmates in New York, where she became part of the avant-garde dance and performance scene at Judson Memorial Church.

But her peers had less of an impact on her than one of her professors from Black Mountain, the German mathematician Max Dehn. He taught her geometry, group theory, topology, harmonic intervals.

All of these branches of math run through the Parrish show, sometimes applied to less rational fields (as when Ms. Rockburne uses set and group theory to analyze the hierarchies of angels in religious art). But unless you are already fluent in these areas, or have read the exhibition catalog in advance, the numerical insights will be lost on you. You'll be left with paintings that yearn to be theorems and therefore disappoint.

The eclectic installation doesn't help, and the architecture can't be blamed for it entirely. (The museum will be moving to a new Herzog & de Meuron-designed home in Water Mill, N.Y., next summer, but for now it's stuck with a stuffy Italianate building that dates to 1897).

The front and back galleries skip around in time from the late 1960s to the present, with early Minimalist-influenced wall and floor constructions — some of which date back to her breakout 1971 solo at the Bykert Gallery in Manhattan — adjoining the exuberantly colored later works. In the first room you will find the 1971 "Scalar," a Tetris-like arrangement of chipboard rectangles soaked in crude oil, next to 1985's painterly "Narcissus." And in the last room the 1967 "Tropical Tan" — four steel plates coated in wrinkle-finish paint — makes a puzzling lead-in to Ms. Rockburne's recent "Astronomy Drawings."

The smaller central gallery looks more cohesive. It has been transformed into a sort of chapel for works from the late-'80s, shaped and stacked canvases in brilliant jewel tones that glow against indigo blue walls. Their titles refer to Mannerism and to the 17th-century philosopher-mathematician Blaise Pascal — subjects chosen by Ms. Rockburne to convey her "deep sense of institutional rebellion."

You can sense some of that rebelliousness in her jarring palette — tomato red next to lime green is a favorite combination — but the overall impression is dogmatic. Ms. Rockburne's work diary from this period, quoted in the catalog, bears this out. One entry reads, "Think of the gallery as a church, a space empowered."

Also here is a two-part work from 2002, made after Ms. Rockburne had turned from topology to astronomy. Titled "The Twins: Castor & Pollux," it features a copper-coated celestial body and defines a regrettably New-Agey period of her art.

Again, the mix of old and new is a problem. Ms. Rockburne's 2009-10 "Geometry of Stardust" series, with its swirls of watercolor, acrylic and gold leaf, looks dippy when placed close to a group of 1972 drawings made with tar and crude oil. (It's hard to overestimate the impact of the oil, which has a material and political reality without a mathematical equivalent.) You might leave this show yearning to see more of the early work, which has somehow been overlooked in the continuing early-'70s revival, and thinking that nothing Ms. Rockburne has done since quite measures up.

Disproving that last thought, though, is a group of very recent abstractions made with watercolor on Dura-Lar (a kind of plastic sheeting), in which trails of thinned-out paint streak down the faces of overlapping circles. In these works axiomatic conviction gives way to optical pleasure — which is another way of saying that the eye in Ms. Rockburne's mind makes contact with the ones on our faces. **KAREN ROSENBERG**

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