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## Too Restless for the Rules



Dorothea Rockburne/ARS

'Inner Voice' (1983) by Dorothea Rockburne.

The wall texts and catalog essays for "In My Mind's Eye," the Dorothea Rockburne retrospective now at the Parrish Art Museum, have an intimidating air. With their references to topology, Kurt Gödel, Blaise Pascal, Gnosticism and ancient Egyptian metaphysics, they imply that visitors should (at the very least) know a few theorems of set theory to have any hope of fully appreciating the bright, colorful things in these rooms.

The source for this needless obfuscation is, perhaps not surprisingly, the artist herself. Ms. Rockburne has often claimed that studying in the early 1950s at Black Mountain College with Max Dehn, the German mathematician and friend of Albert Einstein, formed the basis for her thinking about art.

If so, I want a peek at her grades. Rigorous step-by-step procedures are nowhere apparent in the art-making of this intuitive and undoctrinaire 79-year-old. Notwithstanding her fondness for loopy titles like "Mozart and Mozart Upsidedown and Backwards" and "Einander Group," Ms. Rockburne (unlike Dehn) has always worked within the boundaries of a Euclidean universe.

That's not a put-down. The paintings, sculptures and drawings on display in the three main rooms here—more than 50 examples chosen by the Parrish's chief curator, Alicia G. Longwell—reveal the satisfying variety that Ms. Rockburne has discovered over 43 years of playing with lines, circles, squares, ellipses and triangles.

Born in Montreal, where she was introduced in art school to Constructivism, Ms. Rockburne has been a New York artist since 1954. Her association in the 1960s with the downtown Minimalists

# Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

NEW YORK

was decisive. Sculptural wall pieces from her first maturity in the late '60s and early '70s, such as "Tropical Tan" and "Scalar," show her adherence to some of Minimalism's core beliefs in a muted palette (shades of brown, or just simple black and white) while she experimented with materials (mottling of paper with crude oil) and form (wrinkled and raised surfaces on rectangular canvases).

But what has characterized Ms. Rockburne's art since she became prominent in MoMA's 1974 "Eight Contemporary Artists" exhibition is its stubborn individuality. Her sympathies for Minimalist principles extended only so far. Along with Vito Acconci, Jan Dibbets, Brice Marden and others in that show, she could never be as disciplined and methodical in executing ideas as her contemporaries Sol Lewitt and Carl Andre.

Whatever rule-making and rule-following there may have been in the planning of "Copal VIII," a large serpentine piece from 1977, the final assembly looks as if it were dictated by hunch and improvisation. The series of overlapping triangles in four grades of brown spill across the wall, folding in and across themselves like an origami diagram or a pleated scarf by Issey Miyake. Color is ingeniously determined by form.

"Arena V" from 1978, on the right as you enter the show, has a similar restlessness. Across five rectangles and squares and a pair of triangles cut from translucent white vellum Ms. Rockburne has drawn red, yellow, blue and green arcs with mylar tape. To this elementary geometry exercise she has imparted the sense of crystals stacked on crystals, and wheels within wheels. Amid this confusion of lines is a yellow wishbone shape: two arcs joined at the top. Standing like a pair of legs, it holds a central position that seems more than accidental. (Sure enough, the catalog entry declares that her inspiration was Giotto and the Arena Chapel in Padua, one of the landmarks of Renaissance humanism.)

My previous inclination to favor this 1970s work over what came after has not been altered by the selection in this show. But the Parrish's attempt to give wider exposure to a lesser-known phase of Ms. Rockburne's career is commendable, even if her work as a painter seems less assured. Like her slightly younger colleague Frank Stella, she rejected the strictures of Minimalism in the 1980s and began a series of shaped canvases brushed in exuberant colors—cherry, raspberry, lemon and aubergine. Even her blacks had a new sensuality, as though she were giving herself permission to indulge in previously forbidden pleasures.

"Inner Voice" from 1983 and "Oxymoron" from 1987 are recognizable as Rockburne-ian. The interest in a tumbling, unstable geometry is still there. What's different is the works' spikiness. Ms. Rockburne has never cared much for closed and self-contained forms. Her triangles always seems to be jutting out from the wall toward the ceiling and floor, and fitting together not altogether comfortably with their cousins, the square. A few works from this time, such as "Two Angels, 100 Years" and "Capurnaum Gate," both from 1984, look as if they will never enjoy a night of rest.

The curatorial decision to mount a number of pieces from this later period against an indigo-blue background—the color of the walls in her studio—doesn't enhance their stature. The conjunction of plush colors gives everything in the room a supersaturated Day-Glo kitchiness. The smaller works in the last room, many of them on paper, don't measure up to Ms. Rockburne's earlier achievements either. The series "Memory of the Light in Egypt" from 1989—geometric shapes, some layered in gold leaf, on sheets of papyrus—seems to hold meanings for her that others may have trouble deciphering. (In the catalog entry, she speaks cryptically about their "explicit references" to Pontormo and Matisse, allusions that baffled me.)

A pair of works from the early 1990s, however, prove that Ms. Rockburne still has a lovely touch. "Piero's Sky," a pastel from 1991-92, has a set of swirling egglike shapes that call to mind the birth of galaxies and the harmonies of Renaissance painting. "Tearful Sisters," a group of overlapping circles divided by the thin lines of a grid, is like a dozen flashbulbs going off to record the birth of angels.

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If Ms. Rockburne's habit of citing famous names in her titles and explanatory notes can be irritating, she has illustrious company. Abstract artists, from Wassily Kandinsky to Barnett Newman, have claimed that their work was grounded in religion and philosophy, as if their colored lines wouldn't sufficiently impress us unless inspired by quantum physics or St. Thomas Aquinas. But just because artists believe that arcane thought stands behind what they did by hand does not mean we have to buy their defensive line of patter.

Ms. Rockburne's rhetorical weakness for New Age mooniness is, thankfully, one of the strengths of her art. Unhampered by arid academic theory and full of unpredictable buoyancy, it can't be easily pigeon-holed, and neither can she. **RICHARD B. WOODWARD**

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