

ARTnews

September 22, 2011

Geometry of Stardust

Dorothea Rockburne at the Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York

The Montreal-born artist Dorothea Rockburne made a great splash in the mid-1960s and '70s with her mathematics-derived folded-paper, linen, and canvas works. That success came less than a decade after she arrived in New York, in 1954, fresh out of Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the bastion of Appalachian progressivism that included figures like Rauschenberg, Twombly, Chamberlain, and Cage. More than 40 years later, after a long and distinguished career—with her work in the collections of such institutions as MoMA, the Whitney, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art—Rockburne was given her first, shamefully overdue career retrospective.

Curated by the Parrish's Alicia G. Longwell, this was the last one-person show at the museum before it moves to its new building in 2012. Generous in scope, the exhibition, "Dorothea Rockburne: In My Mind's Eye," showcased the range of this gifted artist who has always insisted on doing things her own way.

The works in the show merged topology and set theory, golden means and Fibonacci numbers, astronomy, cosmology, philosophy, mythology, Mannerism, and Renaissance and Baroque art into a potent, idiosyncratic brew of art and science. The artist cites, just to begin with, Pythagoras, Henri Poincaré, Max Dehn, Richard Feynman, and Pascal as sources, and she continues to research new territory, which is evident in her latest works.

Rockburne's life project is a thrilling, ongoing visual theory of everything, warmed by artistic intuition and by a bold and brilliant use of color, often enhanced by gold leaf, copper sheet, and luminous pigments. The more than 50 works here, in an array of compositions and dimensions, included paintings, drawings, prints, and installations. There was the determinedly unsexed but nonetheless compelling floor installation *Intersection* (1971), made of crude oil, paper, plastic, and chipboard. And *Tropical Tan* (1967–68), a stunning, high-contrast four-panel construction, with its velvety, flesh-colored wrinkle-finish paint suggestive of skin stretched tautly across a dark steel support, was unsettlingly visceral. Two of the exhibition's highlights were examples of Rockburne's signature folded-paper works, the white *Locus* (1972) and the brown kraft-paper *Copal VIII* (1977), but the bulk of the show focused on work from the '80s.

During that period, Rockburne had begun to rely increasingly on color, with her complex, geometrically shaped paintings of the time sparkling like jewels here in a darkened gallery. From the '90s to the present, her subjects have become increasingly cosmological, and the scale, in many instances, has gotten smaller. The drawings, prints, and watercolors of recent series, such as "Geometry of Stardust," seemed here like radiant windows into the fathomless spaces of the universe—stained glass for a spaceship. While the artist's astronomical works have not received the same acclaim as her mathematical ones, the gathering for "In My Mind's Eye" offered audiences a welcome opportunity to experience their aggregate power—and to reconsider. **LILY WEI**