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Dorothea Rockburne

Parrish Art Museum



View of Dorothea Rockburne's exhibition "In the Mind's Eye," at the Parrish Art Museum

By the time Dorothea Rockburne had her first solo exhibition, in 1970, she had already contributed to critical developments in the postwar avant-garde. As a student at Black Mountain College in the early 1950s, she performed in John Cage's legendary *Theater Piece #1*. She gave Robert Rauschenberg the quilt he painted on for his famous Combine *Bed* (1955). She danced for Merce Cunningham at Judson Memorial Church and performed in Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964).

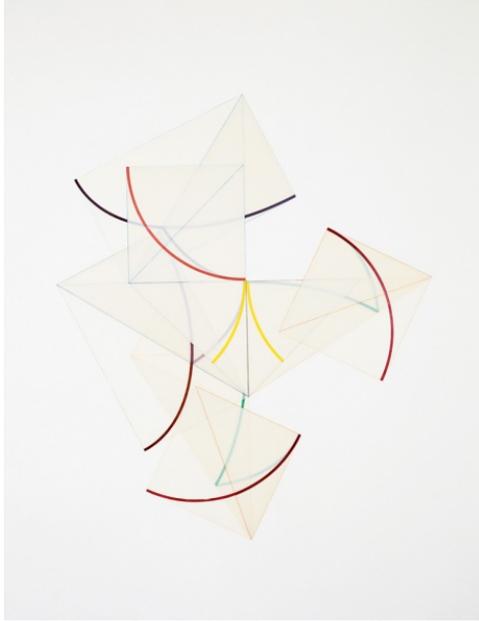
She emerged as an artist in her own right during the late 1960s, and her subsequent career followed a path out of Minimalism and process art toward spiritual abstraction. A recent retrospective at the Parrish Art Museum, curated by Alicia Longwell, offered a glimpse into this little-discussed passage in postwar abstraction.

The exhibition, titled "In my Mind's Eye," encompassed over 50 works and ranged from the late '60s to the present. Among the earliest works included were several of Rockburne's early process-based assemblages. In *Intersection* and *Scalar* (both 1971), for example, Rockburne combined vernacular materials such as plastic wrap, chipboard and crude oil with craft paper in elegant arrangements that play off the physical space of the gallery and expose their methods of construction—folding, rolling, staining. Despite the "impoverished" sensibility, however, these assemblages often follow a rigorous formal logic. Inspired by mathematician Max Dehn, her professor at Black Mountain, Rockburne arranged the pieces using principles of geometry and set theory. At the time, a number of artists relied on similar schemata (the time span in Cage's *4' 33"*, for instance) in an effort to diminish the authority of the artist, but Rockburne increasingly looked to mathematics for metaphysical content.

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Arena V, 1978, mixed mediums on rag board, 58 7/8 by 47 inches

At the Parrish, these process-oriented pieces were dominated by later, more esoteric works, and the exhibition followed her preoccupation with mathematics as it led her toward the idealized proportions sought during the Italian Renaissance and the spiritual properties of geometry. In 1973-74, she created a series of shaped paintings (unfortunately not represented in this exhibition) based on the “golden rectangle” that signaled a growing interest in “divine” measurements. Toward the end of the decade, in a series inspired by Giotto’s Arena Chapel (several works were on view here), she traced the contours of early Renaissance arches onto sheets of translucent vellum in colored pencil before folding and assembling them into densely layered collages. Rendered using Giotto’s luminous colors, these arcs intersect and overlap in complex patterns that both structure and reflect the arrangements of the folded vellum. The “Arena” series marks a shift toward mysticism in her work.

Much of the show consisted of multipaneled, shaped paintings on linen or ragboard, which Rockburne began making during the 1980s. In these works, she carefully coordinated the layered, relieflike constructions with their colorful surfaces. Forms from one panel extend onto the next in carefully balanced arrangements that are based, again, on the golden rectangle (“an open sesame to successful work,” she’s called it). These pieces often make reference to religious painting, particularly in her applications of gold leaf, and during the late 1980s, she began painting the walls of her studio and exhibition spaces (as she did in a number of galleries at the Parrish) indigo blue (long believed to be a spiritual color). In her more recent paintings, she has applied Jackson Pollock’s drip technique to spiraling nebula-like forms.

Throughout the exhibition, the organizers highlighted Rockburne’s own accounts of her work. The wall labels, for example, were almost entirely quotations. A stronger curatorial voice might have bolstered historical context. Rockburne is not, after all, unique in aligning abstraction and mysticism. Her art follows a tradition of nonobjective painting that began with Kandinsky and Malevich. The show would have benefited from attention to her efforts to recover this spiritualist tradition from the literalism and materialism of the 1960s, even if it had shown how her pursuits often domesticated the postwar avant-gardes rather than redeeming them. **TOM WILLIAMS**