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ART REVIEW

## Mathematical Ratios, Papered, Folded and Cut

Dorothea Rockburne's Drawings at the Museum of Modern Art

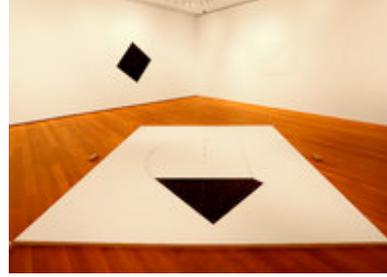


**Dorothea Rockburne: Drawing Which Makes Itself** "Guardian Angel, II" (1982), center, is part of this  
Museum of Modern Art show.

By KAREN ROSENBERG

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Spend an afternoon dipping in and out of galleries on the Lower East Side, and you are likely to encounter many examples of geometric abstraction — much of it offhand and whimsical. But if you want to see the work of an artist who cares deeply about geometry, pay a visit to Dorothea Rockburne's austere, bracing exhibition of drawings at the Museum of Modern Art. The difference is instructive.



Ms. Rockburne, 81, studied with the German mathematician Max Dehn at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the early 1950s. He taught her “mathematics for artists,” with an emphasis on forms found in nature; ideas from group theory, topology and non-Euclidean geometry drive her art, as do ratios like the Golden Mean, that staple of Renaissance art and architecture that used to determine pleasing proportioning within an artwork.

But Ms. Rockburne’s work can be as physical as it is heady, turning math into a kind of dance or a form of Process Art; the examples at MoMA involve wrestling with large sheets of paper and pinning them to walls and floors in a series of sweeping movements.

Titled “Drawing Which Makes Itself,” the show reunites works from Ms. Rockburne’s 1973 show at the Bykert Gallery in New York. There, the artist developed a rigorous and strenuous method of drawing; she folded and scored large sheets of carbon paper as she moved them around the gallery, leaving a succession of marks — lines and thumbprints — on the wall and floor. Her goal, she said at the time, was to figure out “how drawing could be of itself and not about something else.”

The current installation — which was organized by Esther Adler, an assistant curator in the museum’s department of prints and drawings and includes drawings executed by MoMA art handlers under Ms. Rockburne’s supervision — loses a little bit of that directness in the museum’s sterile environment. The use of platforms for the floor pieces keeps viewers from tracking carbon dust around the room, a process that was, as Ms. Rockburne recalls in the introductory video, integral to the 1973 exhibition.

Still, the works, which seem to float against extra-bright white backgrounds, are bracing. They’re a brain tease, especially if you try to follow the diagrams Ms. Rockburne has provided, but they also have a kind of poetry of movement; they make you think of professors scrawling equations on chalkboards, hands racing to keep up with mental calculations.

The idea that mathematically derived art need not be sterile — that it can even be a gooey mess — also animates the wall relief “Scalar,” from 1971. The building blocks of this fortresslike piece (inspired by stacked-stone ruins in Peru) are rectangles of chipboard soaked in crude oil, a decidedly nonprecious substance that leaves shimmering, dimensional splotches of an ugly greenish-brown hue.

Much neater in appearance, but still irresistibly tactile, are the prints in Ms. Rockburne’s 1972 relief etching and aquatint series “Locus.” Made by running folded paper through the printing press, they’re monochromatic but have sculptural-looking facets accentuated by glossy and matte areas (glossy where the paper was exposed to the press, matte where it was protected by a fold).

Later fold-based works, from the mid-to-late 1970s, are on view in the next gallery. Most of them are made with Kraft paper that’s been coated with Copal oil (a varnish that comes from tree resin), turning it a rich, woody auburn. (Ms. Rockburne compares the color to the “golden-brown hue” of medieval Italian churches.)

The origami-like manipulations of paper become increasingly hard to follow, especially in a related series made with sheets of transparent vellum. In these works, Ms. Rockburne uses colored pencil to draw circles and ellipses on the vellum before it is folded, further complicating the topology.

After a while, these works start to feel esoteric and a little repetitive. Fortunately, a later piece — “Guardian Angel, II,” from 1982 — introduces a new variable, watercolor. Applied to vellum as an unmixed, undiluted pigment, it produces bright yet streaky passages that look almost like marble.

This piece reminds you that, from “Scalar” on, Ms. Rockburne has used wild experiments with materials and color to make math seem more exciting. Most recently, she has been playing with watercolor on Dura-Lar, a kind of polyester film, seen in two paintings from the past decade that hang at the entrance to the exhibition.

The best of this show, though, is the set of early drawings: the ones that “make themselves,” with a little help from an artist who understands that all art, abstract or not, boils down to geometry.

*“Dorothea Rockburne: Drawing Which Makes Itself” runs through Feb. 2 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400, [moma.org](http://moma.org).*