

VAN DOREN WAXTER



Below the Fold: Dorothea Rockburne's Subtle Marvels

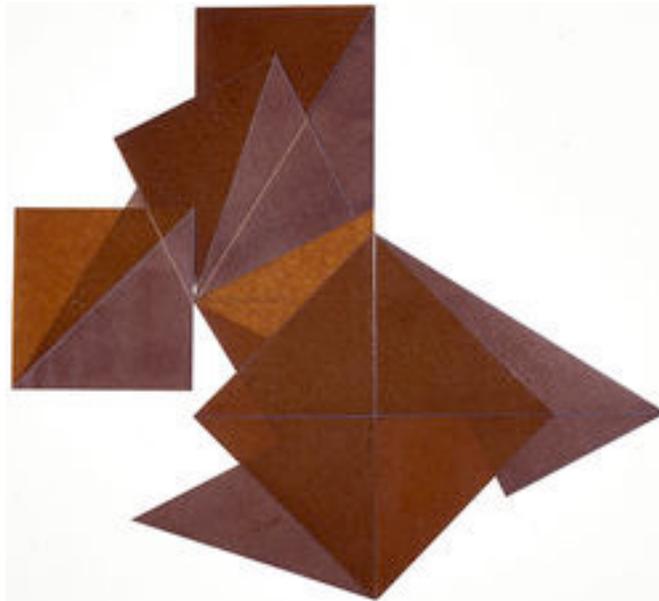
By Emily Warner Wednesday, Dec 18 2013

"Drawing," Dorothea Rockburne says in an interview installed at the front of her Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "is the bones of thought." And indeed, "bones," with its dual structural and material connotations, is a good starting point for this small, focused show. Based on mathematical premises like set theory and the Golden Section, Rockburne's wall drawings and folded paper works operate within a field of systematic logic. They also abound in the lushness of material: the slick, molasses gleam of butcher paper coated in resin; crude-oil stains on chipboard; the way a square of vellum fuzzily obscures the ink-drawn line passing beneath it. Rockburne's compositions are sparse and linear, but they never veer into the ascetic. "Drawing Which Makes Itself" reveals a conceptually rigorous practice that uses line — drawn, folded, imprinted — to plunge the paradoxical depths of surface.

The exhibition centers on a number of works from the 1970s, when Rockburne was gaining widespread success with shows at the Bykert Gallery and MOMA. Like other of her minimalist and conceptual-art peers, she was preoccupied with drawing as a means of mapping larger structures — or even itself. "How," she wrote in 1973, "could drawing be of itself and not about something else?" Rockburne's answer was to make drawing into its own generator. In the 1973-'74 series *Drawing Which Makes Itself*, a sheet of carbon paper acts as a stencil, put through a set of folds to dictate the drawing (or carbon-transferring) of lines onto the wall or floor below. The results are balletic arrangements of diagonal and parallel lines, punctuated by the carbon sheet — nested against the floor's edge, perhaps, or sitting just off-center — that affected the entire scaffolding around it. *Drawing Which Makes Itself* is thrilling as much for its structural logic (the viewer is tempted to rewind the process mentally, step by step) as for the failure of that logic to be total. The individual works don't cover the entire floor, or scale up to infinite, repeating patterns. Rather, they perch on and inhabit their surfaces — *our* surfaces, the walls and floors around us — in more perplexing and contingent ways. Unlike, say, the expansive

grid of a Sol LeWitt structure, Rockburne gives us parcels and sections of drawing, recursive but finite.

If *Drawing Which Makes Itself* disperses drawing across wider fields, other works contract it in upon itself. In the *Golden Section* paintings, swaths of sized linen are pleated, cut, and doubled over, bent into great triangular and diamond-shaped sails. Blue pencil lines bisect them, but drawing is transformed most powerfully here through edges and creases: "Lines" appear at the sharp intersection between two flaps, or where a hidden layer of fabric is folded over, subtly puckering the upper stratum. This kind of working confounds notions of outside and inside, as any sheet may be splayed front or back, or tucked beneath itself, at different places along its length. That two radically different planes might inhabit either side of the same, micro-thin plane is a source of endless fascination. In the *Copal* works, butcher paper is coated in copal resin on one side only, so the resulting works — like the baroque, wheeling *Copal VIII* — switch from resinous to matte with each folded corner.



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Dorothea Rockburne, **Roman VI** (1977).

Surface is revealed in this show as the real building block of drawing. Surface is drawing's receptacle and motor (as in the wall and floor works), but also its active, pliable membrane, flexed and grooved and compressed into accordion-like layers. Rockburne's adept handling of texture and composition makes these measured, mathematical works a perceptual feast for the patient viewer.