

HYPERALLERGIC

The Originality of Joanna Pousette-Dart

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October 17, 2020

Pousette-Dart embraces the world without representing it.

The paintings in Joanna Pousette-Dart's current exhibition at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia typically deploy a band of color, gently arced along most of its length and curving sharply at both ends. Often, there are several bands, a few of which curve only at one end; some run parallel to the curved edges of the panels where they appear, others do not. The recurrence of this quietly striking form gives her works a strong family resemblance, yet each is independent. She does not produce series. In fact, she returns to first premises every time she launches a new painting, though it would be a mistake to look for these premises in her distinctive imagery. Prior to the curving forms and lush palette of Pousette-Dart's paintings is her sense of the world.



Joanna Pousette-Dart, "Floating World #1" (2019), acrylic on canvas on shaped wood panels, 61 1/2 x 94 1/4 inches
(image © the artist, courtesy Locks Gallery, photo by Tom Powel Imaging)

In the 1970s, Pousette-Dart not only accepted the straight edges and right angles of the traditional canvas but reinforced them with juxtaposed rectangles and bars. These early works have an architectural stability uncontested by her colors, which fill with luminous ease their assigned compartments. These are modernist paintings, flat and mindful of the medium's formal basics. Yet her colors sometimes open onto deep space, and the

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Joanna Pousette-Dart, “3 Part Variation, Black, White, Blue” (2019), acrylic on canvas on shaped wood panels, 68 3/4 x 86 inches (image © the artist, courtesy Locks Gallery, photo by Tom Powel Imaging)

surfaces of these canvases have textures — traces of her hand — that became, in the 1980s, discrete forms. Most are vertical and totemic, evoking human presences in sprawling landscapes. Early in the following decade, they disappeared, taking with them painting’s traditional outline; Pousette-Dart had become a maker of shaped canvases.

Among the earliest is “Untitled: Dark Edge” (1993), a two-paneled painting that looks like a not-so-distant ancestor of her recent works. Each panel approximates a half circle; both are mounted with their curved edges facing downward. They touch, but just barely, at the point where the lower edge of the upper panel, which

is curved, meets the straight line that defines the lower panel’s upper edge. Now the panels are nested, though the physical breaks between them are still salient, marked as they are by color shifts. It is remarkable how unified a Pousette-Dart painting feels, given each of its panels has an independent set of serenely harmonized hues.

The five colors in the upper panel of “Floating World # 2” (2019) are keyed to a near-cobalt blue; in the lower panel, a brownish green strikes the keynote. No affinity links these colors, yet the artist’s further color choices mediate between them with surprising finesse. The effect is of a landscape with its foreground in warm light and its depths in another, cooler one — though the analogy soon breaks down, in part because all the panels in Pousette-Dart’s paintings confront the viewer with the same quiet verve. There is no recession, no equivalent to perspective. The idea of landscape hovers near all the works in this exhibition — for example, the alternation of light and dark in “Last Light” (2019) makes it tempting to say that the upper panel is the sky and its lower edge marks the horizon or, possibly, the silhouette of distant hills. But such readings are never convincing. Pousette-Dart embraces the world without representing it.

From a distance, her artworks have a sharp-edged clarity. Up close, they reveal themselves as the work of a painterly painter. Often, a brushy mix of colors glides along the edges of her larger forms; sometimes she lets her pigments drip, albeit discreetly. Equally discreet are traces of the large gestures inflecting the wide areas of color that give her paintings their expansive scale. And she creates the feeling, if not the fact, of gesture in the curving outlines of her panels.

Noting how seamlessly all these gestural energies merge, one might conclude for a moment that Pousette-Dart is a “pure” painter whose art refers only to itself. Such moments do not last long because her presence in each of her works is so strong. They are not about her, but she has made subject matter of the unique sense of light and space



that led to her unique format. Her paintings of the past quarter-century are like no one else's. Still, their singular formats rest as securely within the modernist tradition as the rectangular canvases she made in the 1970s.

In the early 1920s, the Hungarian Constructivist Peter Laszlo Peri made flat, geometric wall pieces with irregular outlines that suggest the angled forms of buildings rendered in perspective. These early modernist works count as shaped paintings, as do some of the painting-sculpture hybrids built by Peri's colleague El Lissitzky. The flattest of these Prouns, as the artist called them, hugged the walls where they were mounted; the more sculptural ones reached far into gallery space. Experiments by other Constructivists, as well as artists of the Bauhaus, led to further departures from painting's traditional format.

The shaped canvas reentered the history of modernism toward the end of the 1950s. First came Frank Stella's Black Paintings, with their notched edges and corners, then Ellsworth Kelly's arcs, Kenneth Noland's Bullseyes, and non-standard canvases by many others. Though these paintings discarded the medium's rectangular format, they preserved two of its underlying premises: the angle and the uninflected line. An angle defining the shape of a canvas might not sweep through 90 degrees, yet it still had a place in the repertory of Euclidean geometry. If an edge was curved rather than straight, it nonetheless maintained regularity along its entire length. These shaped canvases claimed credibility by alluding to the structure of the four-cornered canvas even as they dispensed with it.

Pousette-Dart's paintings do not depend on these or any other precedents. From the time of its first appearance, the shaped canvas served as a sign of originality. Owing nothing to the tradition that began with the Constructivists Peri and El Lissitzky, Pousette-Dart has found an original way to be original.

She is not, of course, a proponent of originality for originality's sake. Her art begins with her vision of the world, which she sees as a place of stark contrasts and ultimate unities. Landscape is immense; by comparison, the human form is minuscule. Yet Pousette-Dart reconciles them with images that make pictorial sense at two scales: that of the painter's gesturing hand and that of a sky ascending above wide-open spaces. Her paintings can be read at either scale or at both simultaneously, for she has found her way to a oneness with the geographies she reimagines. From that oneness follows a grandeur that is also intimate.

Joanna Pousette-Dart continues at Locks Gallery (600 Washington Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) through October 17.