

Joanna Pousette-Dart

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The Etruscan Tomb of the Leopards at Tarquinia is rife with playful paradoxes: a spacious entombment celebrating the cheerfully deceased, the wall paintings are alive with brilliant color and twitchy patterning, although they repose in a dark enclosure. It doesn't surprise me at all that Joanna Pousette-Dart mentioned Etruscan tomb paintings in an interview in the Brooklyn Rail's June 2019 issue as part of a list of art experiences that have "particularly affected" her, as her work exhibits its own intriguing contradictions, rewarding viewers for their attempts to "unlock" the paintings' "logic."¹



Installation view: Joanna Pousette-Dart, Lisson Gallery, New York, 2020. © Joanna Pousette-Dart. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

In her first solo exhibition at Lisson Gallery, Pousette-Dart has included larger-scale paintings alongside vivid 12-inch square gouache and acrylic studies that at first glance look like they mimic the paintings, before going their own ways, and similarly-sized fuzzy sumi ink sketches that have seeped into the weave of their rice paper grounds. These last are spontaneous and responsive to happenstance, especially when compared to the studies, which feature disciplined application of color in the artist's signature blade shapes. In contrast, Pousette-Dart's recent paintings seem hard-edged when seen from a distance, but reveal her hand in drips, brushstrokes, and in the case of *2 Part Variation #3 (After Pierrrot)* (2015), frenetic squiggles filling in the space between a complex blue and blushing salmon pink. *Plateau* (2019) looks flat until our eyes adjust to the subtle gradient of a cerulean blue that travels from dark to light, right to left, in the lower half of the painting,



following yellow-orange arcs that undulate from the right-hand corner. The brown hue in the lower left of 3 Part Variation #12 (2017) almost appears to be developed by combining an orange outline painted over it with the green shape the orange circumscribes. It is entropically blended, like the colors in a wonderfully expensive faux-fur coat.

Such is the intricacy of Pousette-Dart's paintings that even when they are not internally contradictory, they seem nearly so. 3 Part Variation #12's color feels like a crisp day that is, implausibly, also humid. Contour lines do not contain volume so much as open up fields to space; I suspect this is because they do not always close and even when they do, they thicken and thin elegantly. The paintings are both allusive and singular. The artist's swoops somehow manage to remind me simultaneously of the graphic assuredness of a Haida thunderbird as well as the loping sinuousness of pulled taffy.

The paintings included here are constructed of multiple parts, and these offer the most surprising revelations. They are painted on canvas that has been stretched over panel. Though deep, their beveled edges slant inward, covering most cast shadows and causing them to appear as though they are hovering over the walls on which they are hung. The stretching is pristine and permits the panels to snuggle up to each other without necessarily touching. The two panels comprising 2 Part Variation #3 fit so neatly together that I am tempted to compare them to nestling spoons. The gravity of spoons isn't quite right, though, because the panels do not rest on top of one another. Instead, maybe they are like a skate and ice, incising and resisting simultaneously. In 3 Part Variation #6 (2013), the charcoal black of the topmost panel looks like it respects this division, but when we draw close, we see that its lower painted edge dips into the middle panel, just overlapping by a few centimeters and pressing into its partner's space. As a result, the middle seems to compress and bulge, a light blue parabola that swells in response. The panels themselves, though, remain discrete. They are physically distinct even as they visually touch, their intermittence quietly suggestive, Pousette-Dart's intelligently intimate paintings excitingly defying initial expectations.²

Endnotes

1. Barbara Rose, "Joanna Pousette-Dart with Barbara Rose," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2019, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/06/art/JOANNA-POUSETTE-DART-with-Barbara-Rose>.
2. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 9-10.