

Joanna Pousette-Dart

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By Barbara A. MacAdam

Joanna Pousette-Dart's work is a visceral experience. Organic and warm forms embrace one another just as they do the viewer. Similarly, the paintings' colors are sweet and seductive and actively engage one another in often indefinable and unexpected contrasts. Ultimately, and together, the shapes and colors give form to feeling and emotion, but they are never overwrought. And when large, the scale of the canvases is not ungainly. Pousette-Dart knows when to stop. Compensating for the beauty of the paintings is their complexity. They are cerebral and widely allusive.



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

The four large (including 2 Part Variation #3 [After Pierrot] (2015), measuring 87 1/2" x 120") multi-part, shaped paintings in this show could be viewed as alluding to landscape—desert, sea, sky, the curvature of the earth—but, actually, they don't describe any specific place or figure. Pousette-Dart creates and lays claim to her own particular territory—or "location"—as she would have it. Inhabiting that territory is 2 Part Variation #3—two acrylic-on wood crescent-shaped panels stacked one atop the other, a pink panel below and a yellow one above. Navy-bluish limning on the pink one and a turquoise-ish intervention across the yellow renders the components lively and playful. At the same time, each element can be viewed as in an altarpiece, with the sections offering different commentaries on the color relations.



Therein lies her serene originality. Despite Pousette-Dart's time in Mexico and New Mexico as well as Europe, and the Far East, with stops in the ancient and modern worlds—all of which inspired her and are deeply embedded in her paintings—the cultural references are in no way identifiable. The shapes and hues are not only her own, but are, remarkably, always in transition. The paintings' curves lead to an open-endedness, a nondeclarative quality. And, although the paintings look computer-screen flat with unmodulated hues, we readily perceive their depth of tone. We could view this in relation to some works by Kenneth Noland from the early to mid '90s, where the segments, many of them also crescent-shaped, are predominantly vertical: the colors are darker, cooler, and almost uncomfortable together and connected by a Plexiglas band of contrasting tone. Noland's forms are definitively measured and hard-edged with more graphic finality. Could we call it guy stuff?

These works are conversational. We might read them from east to west before being led around and back again. Not, however, without pausing at a few Brechtian links, such as an improvisational squiggle atop the segments or a narrow snake-like shape with a pointed tip stretching downward and connecting the panels as an interlude. At the same time, colors have been extensively tinkered with and layered, creating an atmosphere in which light and space shift expression.

Also in the show are six watercolors (actually gouache and acrylic on paper) and a suite of four sumi-ink-on-rice-paper drawings. The watercolors, consisting of stacked shapes in a vertical format have a different attitude and affect from the large shaped and composite works. The richly colored passages are very compact, and almost squashed together, claiming their turf, and unlike the horizontal works, they have an architectural quality. The small drawings take another direction. They call to mind Brice Marden and automatic writing, which leads us into the realm of poetry, where we can follow Pousette-Dart's imagining and lines of thought. In that sense, the works are direct and refer to the venerable Eastern and Western traditions of writing as drawing and vice versa. Following these lines forces a different kind of reading, a closer, more internal one. That's where we step in. As with animation, Pousette-Dart's shapes segue into one another, regularly conveying motion and pulling our eyes off the canvas. There is the inescapable allusion to boat shapes, which adds to the perception of movement as the horizontality of the canvases suggests progression. And, more to that point, there is an overriding appearance of liquidity and, by extension, shape-shifting.