

Art & Object

In the Studio with Painter Joanna Pousette-Dart

By Barbara MacAdam
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Joanna Pousette-Dart's studio, with paintings and works on paper in progress for her recent exhibition *Centering* at Lisson Gallery in New York.

Joanna Pousette-Dart has deep art-world credentials. Her husband is abstract painter David Novros, her father was iconic Abstract Expressionist painter Richard Pousette-Dart, and her mother, the poet Evelyn Gracey. Her home and studio are on Broome Street in lower Manhattan, accessible by street buzzer in a landmarked cast-iron building. Up a flight of stairs is her husband's studio on the second floor, then the living-dining-cooking area, and finally Pousette-Dart's bright, spacious studio, neatly filled with works in progress and tacked-up images of inspiration—a photo of a dancing Shiva, another of stacked blocks from an Eduardo Chillida stone sculpture, and then a book of miniature Mozarabic manuscript pages and Islamic and American Indian ceramic bowls.



One wonders where to begin excavating the 77-year-old artist's universe. The neat and proto-modernist appearance of her paintings belies a complexity that takes the viewer into a rich personal history embracing Pousette-Dart's time, place, and cultural history. She studied at Bennington College in Vermont with the likes of Kenneth Noland and Larry Poons; traveled widely through the American Southwest, Europe, Asia, and Latin America; and took in the landscapes and art histories of those regions, merging them with 20th-century modernist art practice as well as a 21st-century sense of artistic freedom. Pousette-Dart is a remarkably direct communicator in her work, which is at once seductive and elusive. She takes us back to ancient Mayan ceramic works and then to the shapes and jewel tones of Italian Primitive paintings. As a surprise, she mentions the perception studies in the perspective distortions of Japanese conceptual/surrealist painter Jiro Takamatsu, who died in the 1970s.

All of her works are iterations of curved formats, although in the 1970s and '80s she relied on the rectangle and the grid. Her earliest works were unstretched strips of canvas woven to form a loose grid with irregular edges that she covered with layers of sand and pigment. The paintings floated on the wall attached by hidden grommets on the back and had a distinct physicality.

But after visiting New Mexico in the early '70s, she became transfixed by the space and light of the place and began stretching the sand grids and infusing them with complex color relationships. She frequently joined multiple panels to increase size and scale and affect the way the viewer moved through them. In the late '70s and '80s she traveled extensively in Europe, and one can see the effect that fresco cycles and altarpiece paintings had on her work as she began assembling rectangular panels in ways that consciously or unconsciously alluded to predella panels and fresco schema.



Joanna Pousette-Dart, Courtesy of the artist.

All this changed in the '90s when she and her husband took up residence in Galisteo, NM, and the dramatic elements of that particular landscape made her rethink how she was approaching her work. Fascinated by the place but at a loss to express what she was seeing, she began using disposable cameras to take 360-degree snapshots of the Galisteo basin over and over again and taping them together to form panoramas. In an interview with *The Brooklyn Rail* she recounted how "the photos were a record of the way the passage of light changed the relationships of everything from shot to shot. From these I began making drawings



and cutting them up. When I got back to New York I had the first [shaped] panels made by a furniture maker.”

She recalls today, “In Galisteo I came to realize that it’s all about what you feel is important enough to remember. Your gaze is a form of editing, and that’s what I wanted to determine the shape of my paintings.” She hangs one of the taped-together panoramas on the wall for us to photograph. It’s an image in small format of a vast scene. You sense in the curvature of the landscape and the way in which the shapes keep transforming into something else, the formal interchange between earth and sky. As we talk about various connections between these and the images tacked to her walls of Arabic manuscript paintings, an Anasazi pot from the 11th century, a white, domed monastery ceiling with surrounding arched pediments, our conversation touches on the never-ending pathway toward becoming in which nature, art, and experience are intertwined in ways that Pousette-Dart points out are spiritual and sensual rather than literal. All the arts appear to be at play in Pousette-Dart’s paintings. Certainly, and most naturally, dance, and, of course, poetry. There are rhyming segments and natural rhythms, as well as connections with music and architecture. The paintings are built structures, actually and conceptually. Snaking across the segments are ribbons of color that play in concert with the compositional shapes. They consist of panels of beveled wood covered with portrait linen and then paint. The beveling creates a sense of buoyancy.



Joanna Pousette-Dart, photographs of New Mexico landscape from 1990, taped together to form a panorama. Courtesy of the artist.



Pousette-Dart works in stages, making large and small changes that gradually reveal what she calls “the visual logic” of the painting. In the course of working, she might find herself shifting the position of a line, which might change the motion of a form, which might entail the repainting of its coloration, each component inextricably bound with the other. “People like to say it takes an artist to tell one when to stop, but I don’t buy that,” she says, “Someone else can tell you when a painting looks good, but only you know what your ultimate intention for it is.”

She recalls a quotation from the novelist William Faulkner that was particularly striking to her: “The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.”

Perceiving Pousette-Dart’s art involves walking around the works, as when we view them in a gallery. In her recent “Centering” series of paintings, she says, “I wanted to concentrate on cycles—the transiting from one kind of light or substance, or state of being, to another. I wanted the paintings in the gallery space to function as a cycle of cycles, and I wanted each painting to reflect my vantage point and to absorb the viewer into it so they could move through the space of the painting. In other words, the shapes respond to the body of the observer.” She adds, “Everything is in motion; you always feel things are about to change; it’s the gaze that freezes it.” What becomes obvious is how important the scale of the works is to this experience. Toward the back of the studio, there is a large table covered with stacks of small works on paper together with jars, tubes, and trays of paint and a captivating, bright-colored watercolor that, unlike what we see in the shifting tones of the shaped paintings, appears unexpectedly stable and even graphic, remarkably fresh-seeming. Nearby, leaning against the wall are a couple of bare wood panels that await being dressed in linen and then gessoed. The recent works are painted in a more fluid manner than the earlier paintings. “I wanted to bring the immediacy of my watercolors and works on paper into the larger works, so I used a variety of brushes in them rather than the painting pads I had used in the past, and they allowed me to work the color in a more immediate way, often painting wet into wet,” the artist says. One large, completed painting is in surprisingly pale, almost translucent blue and yellow tones reflecting light from the windows and charmingly playing off against the gridded architecture of the buildings directly across the street, their shadows appearing through white window shades. Clearly, the artist’s environment is unavoidably a part of her art.

Pousette-Dart is in many ways a product of her time and place, connecting intellectually with the attitudes, tastes, and cross-fertilizations of the late 20th century and bringing it all to bear with a 21st-century approach to material experimentation. Lately she even incorporates electronic technology into her production process. “I used to produce the shapes for my panels in a very exhausting and labor-intensive way by hand-drawing the templates to scale. But now I’m working with an assistant who enters whatever drawing I would like into a computer program where I further refine it. Then I project it on the wall to determine the right scale, and then she sends the finished program to the fabricator,” Pousette-Dart explains. “Most of my paintings are unique forms, but this process makes it possible for me to duplicate if I need to.” It’s a whole new modern.