

Joanna Pousette-Dart

June 2019

By Barbara Rose

"To be uncompromising in developing and following your own vision is a radical act in itself"

I first wrote about Joanna Pousette-Dart's work in 1985 in an article titled "Rule Breaker's" published in VOGUE. I have followed her work from the very beginning. Her paintings always fascinated me because of their uniqueness and originality, but I could not figure out exactly how she made them or what her inspirations were. I did this interview to make her processes and intentions clearer. I asked the questions to which I wanted the answers myself.

Barbara Rose (Rail): You've recently returned from Germany where you had a major exhibition at the Wiesbaden museum. Why do you think there is interest in American art in Germany? Is there more support for painting there?

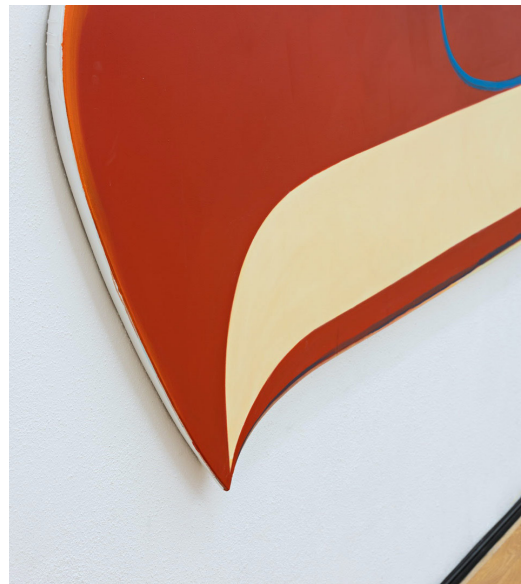
Joanna Pousette-Dart: It seems perhaps they're more open, more idealistic, and less market driven. Museums there seem to have a creative latitude—maybe because they're funded differently—commercial issues don't drive them.

Rail: Do the Wiesbaden paintings constitute an installation or are they discrete individual works?

Pousette-Dart: They're individual works done over a period of 10-12 years. In the studio, the paintings begin to speak to one another. I wanted to set up a similar situation in the museum. I didn't want it to be strictly chronological. Jörg Daur who is a brilliant curator, was very open to this idea. He gave each room its own logic, its own sense of light and drama. The beauty of the museum is that there are clear vantage points from one room to another. This allowed us to amplify the conversation between works.

Rail: When did you begin to use shaped wood panels and how did you arrive at the shapes?

Pousette-Dart: I began in the late 1990s. I traveled to New Mexico in the mid-70s. It was a huge turning point in my work. But it wasn't until I returned in the '80s that I conceived of abandoning the rectangle and developing curved panels to achieving the sense of scale I was after. At the time I was staying in the Galisteo Basin in New Mexico. Being in this enormous expanse surrounded by distant mountain ranges in each direction makes you aware of the



Joanna Pousette-Dart, Two Part Variation #2 (red, yellow, blue) (Detail), diptych, 2012 - 2013, 81 x 123 inches. Photo: Bernd Fickert. Courtesy the artist.



primal relationship of figure to horizon and earth to sky. In the mornings and evenings I'd take snapshots with throw-away cameras and tape them together to create 360 degree panoramas. They 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 I had the first panels made by a furniture maker.

Rail: What did the first shaped paintings look like?

Pousette-Dart: One of the best examples of the early shaped paintings is in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It was made in 1993 and is composed of two roughly half circular shapes that rested one on top of the other with the curved sides down. The drawing in the painting unraveled from the point where they met. These early paintings were all quite large, 9' x 12' or so. I hadn't begun to bevel the edges so they were about two inches thick. They were more limited in color because I was concentrating more on how the drawing within the panel was going to interact with the shape.



Joanna Pousette-Dart, Three Part Variation #1, 2010, 68.5 x 125 inches. Photo: Bernd Fickert. Courtesy the artist.

Rail: Why do you think people often see the image of boat or canoe or the forms of Native Americans of the Northwest Coast in your work?

Pousette-Dart: That's not my intention. The shapes are based loosely on parts of hemispheres. As time went on these forms got flattened, elongating the areas where they came together so the forms may resemble forms that people associate with canoes or boats. I think it becomes a way to associate or describe them. The configurations, their balance, and the way they're painted all suggest motion and this may be another factor. I think the correspondence with Northwest Coast art has to do with a sort of animist quality they have. The painting morphs between being an object and also a way of seeing. To me the power of abstraction is that people find their own way to connect with a painting. The particular use of line, form, color set off a certain sensory connection that transcends a single meaning. I'm not interested in telling people how to see what I make. This is one reason I don't generally title



things except in the most open ended way.

Rail: You draw a lot in a free, one might say “automatic,” style that does not depict things. How would you describe the relationship of your drawing to your painting?

Pousette-Dart: I do two types of drawing. Drawings that start as studies for paintings and drawings which are totally improvisational. The first deal with shape and line in a way that’s similar to the paintings, although they rarely end up having a one to one relationship to a painting. The improvisational drawings are relating to the rectangle of the page and they are freewheeling and associative, like dreaming. The physical kinesthetic motion of making them somehow stays with me and ends up in paintings.

Rail: You paint large and small paintings. How do you create a sense of monumentality in small paintings? Is there a reason you make small works?

Pousette-Dart: The small paintings are, for some reason, harder for me to make. But I like making them because I can cut them and alter the shape as I’m working so they can undergo either massive changes or a kind of fine tuning which isn’t possible on the large pieces. What gives something scale is a mystery. You know when something has it but there’s no formula for achieving it. People always wonder if the small paintings are studies. If anything, I would say they’re exploratory because I have never made a larger painting based on a smaller one. If they work, their rightness and their scale seem inseparable.

Rail: Your work takes a long time to make and a long time to experience visually because it’s complex and detailed.

Pousette-Dart: The initial stages are time consuming. To arrive at the shape I make a drawing in actual size on paper mounted to the wall. This wall drawing usually begins from non-specific watercolors or notebook drawings. When I feel it’s right I give it to the fabricator to be cut. Then the panels are stretched and gessoed in the studio. Once I’m actually painting on them they develop at their own rate: some faster, others more slowly.



Joanna Pousette-Dart, all Untitled, 2019, 16 1/2” x 16 1/2”.
Photo: Bernd Fickert. Courtesy the artist.

The process of finding the image feels like unlocking the painting’s logic. Ideally, I let things sit for periods of time and go back to them or consider them finished. I spend a lot of time sitting and ruminating.... I want to make something that is absorbing enough to draw you in and keep you there.

Rail: Who are the contemporary artists who’ve worked with shape that have most interested you?

Pousette-Dart: The artists I’m interested in were first dealing with the sense of painting as wall or as object. Many who showed at Park Place Gallery were important to me and to my thinking about what a painting could be. But my work is less programmatic. Many of the artists who showed with Bykert Gallery in the ‘70s and ‘80s continue to interest me: Paul Mogenson, David Novros, Brice Marden. There are others like Robert Mangold and Elizabeth



Murray. Frank Stella's work has also affected my thinking. But I think my use of shape is uniquely about movement and creates a kind of spatial continuum in a novel way.

Rail: Did Monet's or other Abstract Expressionist artists' horizontal extension of the canvas—so that the viewer is lost inside the pictorial field—impress you?

Pousette-Dart: Yes but I'm inclined to go back to earlier sources—the caves and Giotto's Arena Chapel for example. There's just nothing comparable to the experience of a painted place. The sad reality is that few artists—even if they're actively pursuing it—get a chance to paint on that scale. I think the experience of these places has absolutely affected what I make. I've tried to bring some of the resonance and complexity of this experience into my own work.

Rail: You've spoken of the sense of peripheral vision in your work. What do you mean by that?

Pousette-Dart: I think of the shape of the painting as a space being edited by my peripheral vision. So while the painting is meant to be whole within itself, I would like it to feel as though it's part of a larger whole extending beyond the frame. I'd like the rhythm and the light of the painting to reverberate beyond its edges.

Rail: You and Larry Poons have both told me the most important element in painting is light. Many old masters believed that as well. Color, through which light filtered, is definitely a primary concern in your work. It's obvious to me that the law of simultaneous color contrast that launched Impressionism is at work in your choice of tints and shades. Why do you use a more extensive palette than the primary colors of Constructivism?

Pousette-Dart: I think one of the primary jobs of a painter is to transform color into light. The kind of light is different for different artists. Since I'm interested in a certain relationship between light and form which I associate with the natural world, flat, planar use of color doesn't work for me. I use whatever colors I need to in order to create the quality of light or the placement in space I'm looking for. I try to establish color relationships that feel somehow believable or "real" in an ambient way. I don't have a fixed or identifiable palette, but I think my paintings have an identifiable quality of light.

Rail: What was it like to grow up surrounded by a world of art? Your father and grandfather were both painters and your mother and grandmother were writers. How has being surrounded by artists affected your own practice?

Pousette-Dart: You have no way of knowing how different it is until you go out into the world. I grew up completely steeped in music and art. I learned a tremendous amount through osmosis. But then ultimately you have to find a way to own it, which is a challenge in itself. There's not much to rebel against so you have to invent yourself from another place. I feel incredibly fortunate for having grown up with the sense that painting is something you do for the love of it—that making something is its own reward. This idea made me very resilient and aesthetically self-reliant, but also a bit of a perfectionist.

Rail: As a Bennington graduate, you were surrounded by Color Field painters like Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski who taught there. How did you avoid becoming a Clement Greenberg follower? Did anything at Bennington influence you?

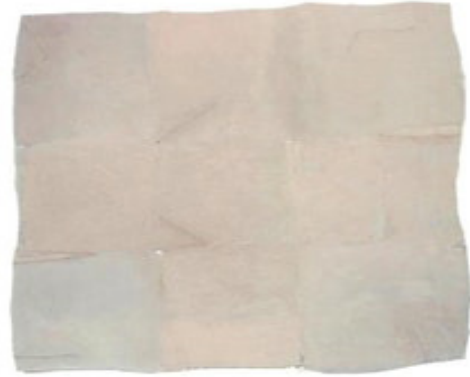
Pousette-Dart: I felt completely at odds with the whole Greenbergian Formalist thing, but there weren't many alternative points of view. I thrashed around not being able to find any



real direction, just knowing what I didn't want to do. It was kind of depressing. I took a lot of literature courses because Bennington also had a really stellar literature department and at the time and I thought I might be interested in writing. I figured out a schedule that would allow me to escape to New York for extended weekends.

Rail: Your early paintings were done off the stretcher in a manner that parallels the aesthetic of the Support/Surface group who came into prominence in Paris in the '70's and '80's. Do you know their work? They were heavily influenced by theory. Is theory or conceptual concerns important to you?

Pousette-Dart: I consider the paintings you're talking about to be my first serious paintings. I wasn't aware of the Support/Surface group at the time but there were many people in New York in the '60s and '70s who were challenging the notion of the traditional painting support. Artists who were showing at Park Place who were interested in painting as an object interacting with the wall and others like Alan Shields, Sam Gilliam, Elizabeth Murray so these precedents were important for me at the time.



Joanna Pousette-Dart, *Anashuya*, 1972, 72 x 72 inches.
Courtesy the artist.

My paintings from this period weren't driven by theory. They were much more intuitive in origin. I had been drawn to indigenous art of all kinds so I came up with this approach of making something that could acquire shape organically the way you might weave a basket or make a painting in the sand. The paintings were not stretched. They were woven together from six irregularly cut strips which created a very loose grid and then coated with multiple layers of rhoplex, sand, and pigment. They were relatively rigid and hung by hidden grommets on the back. I showed one in the Whitney Biennial in 1972. I maybe made 15 or 20 of these in all. Then I went to New Mexico and I began to stretch the paintings and they became more rectilinear and colorful.

Rail: You spent years traveling. What specific art works particularly affected you?

Pousette-Dart: The Alhambra in Granada, Spain; wall paintings in Taül, Catalonia; Giotto's Arena Chapel; the tomb of Galla Placidia in Ravenna; the Etruscan tomb paintings; the caves... I could go on, and I haven't mentioned Mexico. Painted places that meld art with architecture have always been a huge source of inspiration for me. The experience of being in these places made me want to try to build some of the feeling of encompassing space into my own work and to make the paintings interact with the wall to create their own sense of place.

Rail: You are a woman, a wife, and a mother as well as a painter. How do you feel about Feminism? You seem to shy away from groups to stand on your own. Is that difficult?

Pousette-Dart: I'm a committed feminist and can't believe how fast things are sliding backward. My grandmother was a suffragette and refused to adopt my grandfather's name, hence the hyphen in Pousette-Dart. It's still harder for women in every field. But I've never been drawn to making overtly political art. I think to be uncompromising in developing and

following your own vision is a radical act in itself. Painting well is the best revenge! I realize this isn't going to move abortion rights forward but I actively support women's issues in whatever other ways I can.

Rail: What is your objective as a painter? How do you understand the role of art in life?

Pousette-Dart: I always think, wouldn't it be great to be able to make something that moved people like Aretha Franklin or Bob Marley, that immediate, visceral, emotional, sensual hit. Obviously music is its own communication, but there is a visual equivalent.... People feel it in the prehistoric caves or in Chartres in front of certain works of art that just seem to be ineffable. So I'm in search of that. I'm an idealist and believe painting can be transporting.

I found this quote by William Faulkner on a book jacket a couple of years ago and I think it's spare but says it all. "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."



Installation shot. Joanna Pousette-Dart at Wiesbaden Museum 2019. Photo: Bernd Fickert. Courtesy the artist.