

DAVID NOLAN GALLERY

Expect the Unexpected

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Dorothea Rockburne has been at the top of her game for half a century. Ever since her first solo show at the Bykert Gallery in 1970, she's made art that's inventive, provocative, confident, seductive, imaginative. She's worked with materials as disparate as crude oil and gold leaf, chipboard and vellum, secco fresco and sign painters enamel paint. She's created shaped canvases; constructed lines with colored pencil and copper wire and folded paper; and made work in sizes that are as small as 4-inches-by-6-inches and as grand as 35-square-feet overall. Just when you become captivated by her sense of color, you discover an exquisite group of all-white works. Her versatility is astounding. In the end, there is no such thing as a typical Rockburne. When you say her name, it evokes different examples of her art to different people.

Now, for her debut solo show at David Nolan Gallery, Rockburne has confounded her admirers yet again. As she turns 89, you would expect her paintings and works on paper to express an old master style. Instead, she has introduced four new bodies of work that reveal, deep down, she's still young at heart. *Trefoil*, *Giotto Drawings*, *Blue Collages*, and two freestanding sculptures are every bit as adventuresome, exploratory, and surprising, if not more so, than earlier series.

The *Trefoil* group continues Rockburne's interest in knot theory, which was first sparked when she was a student at Black Mountain College. "It is," she points out, "the way some astronomers see the universe." "The stuff you study in high school is boring," she explains. "This is higher mathematics." Google trefoil knots. Understanding what they are isn't as difficult as you might assume.

As an artist, Rockburne transforms the research she does into works of astonishing elegance. Her trefoil knots—essentially, knots whose ends are joined so that they cannot be undone—are composed from thin copper wires. They exist in these pieces, which average 20-inches-by-30-inches, as either two or three circles. Behind the metal elements, on board, the artist applied layers of reflective enamel paint (red, blue, yellow, brown, black) that create an interesting dynamic. There's a fascinating visual exchange among the abstract components of this series: the attenuated circumferences, the horizontal blocks of color, and the vertical passages on either end of these works. If you're a mathematician, I imagine you can admire the simplicity of her resolution. If you're an art lover, there's a fascinating give-and-take among blocks of color, glowing lines, and the arrangement of horizontal and vertical elements.

The *Giotto Drawings*, another new series, is also engaged with a theme that has long interested Rockburne: Giotto's narrative murals at the Arena Chapel in Padua. This time she has focused her attention on night and day as well as the angels hovering in the sky who are lamenting the death of Christ. Since she is not a storyteller, she's never thought about duplicating the figures or their actions. Instead Rockburne chose to respond to the heart of the stories: their emotional tenor.

To create a sense of place, she introduced luminous celestial orbs radiating light and dark. With Lascaux Aquacryl paint and Winsor and Newton gouache, this octogenarian has expressed our shared wonderment at the mysteries of our firmament. As for the angels, she has conveyed their flight and levitation, the anguish of their facial expressions, their feathery wings, and the gestures of their arms and hands with hard-edged geometries. What could be more unexpected!

The *Blue Collages* also relate to Giotto's extraordinary chapel. Their small size belies their ambition to express the passing of time. With hard edge discs and semi-circles, these miniature action paintings are mounted on boards and framed in a panoply of colors that are hung on painted walls at the gallery. How does anyone respond to the ineffable? It's a big topic that Rockburne addresses with an all-encompassing environment.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of this solo show is that after decades making artworks, Rockburne has executed her first sculptures. The materials could not be more unorthodox: thick ropes, a galvanized steel bucket filled to its brim with water, another topped with a mirror, two bentwood chairs, automobile tires, clamps, and castors. They are found objects, the sort of things, though, that can, for the most part, be ordered from Amazon. They are hardly the type of cumbersome items you expect Rockburne to use to make art. But that's part of the power of her corpus. She has put together in all sorts of combinations, stuff you might never associate with the practice of fine art. Before you put down this catalogue, look again at the ropes. They are trefoil knots.

When you hear the name Dorothea Rockburne, expect the unexpected.