

# The Enduring Ephemeral: Dorothea Rockburne at Dia:Beacon

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Dorothea Rockburne, installation view, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York. © DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE/ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK. PHOTO: BILL JACOBSON STUDIO, NEW YORK. COURTESY DIA ART FOUNDATION, NEW YORK

The confidence to direct, as if choreographing, five tall young men to interpret and execute her precise esthetic instructions embodies the way Dorothea Rockburne coordinates mind and body—hers and others'. She tells one of the preparators how to tinker with a torn edge of paper so that the tear is only slightly more ragged—that is, neatly ragged. At Dia:Beacon in Upstate New York in July, the small but strong 85-year-old artist was masterfully installing the first phase of her expansive show, consisting of six works from the 1960s and '70s. (Phase two opens in the fall.) The process was arduous, since many of the pieces had to be re-created using new materials that differ from the originals in appearance, durability, and their reaction to their environment.

But Rockburne has insisted that she's not particularly concerned about the properties of the original materials. The works are intended to be both ephemeral and

reproducible. Termed “perennials” by her, they provide a subtle source of welcome tension, uncertainty, and variability. They are the same but not identical to what they were.

For her dramatic two-part piece *Domain of the Variable* (1973)—dominating the first room of the show—Rockburne had to come up with a new petroleum-based material for the long horizontal segment, called *Domain Z*. The material would have to yield the greasiness and depth of the original pigment, leaking a pernicious-looking yellowish undertone. The wide expanse of torn and folded paper, with areas stained a bloody red, sprawls across a wall and seems to erase itself in sections as it progresses, leaving a trail of horizontal streaks before emerging in an intense burst and then stopping at its torn edge. Viewing the work is an erotic, rhythmic experience.

As if contradicting *Z*, on a perpendicular wall, is *Domain Y*, composed of various rectangular shapes, visually connected by a horizontal line. A smooth bright sheet of white paper extends from high on the wall onto the floor. Included is a tan chipboard surface that had been glued, and pulled, and peeled to produce a pattern strangely sensual in its roughness and unpredictability that is accidentally reminiscent of Clyfford Still in its effect. Rockburne spoke of the work’s “reflectivity”—an enigmatic word choice, because the surface is obviously not shiny but “reflective” in that it relates to other forms nearby, yielding a complex, ever-expanding composition.

Nearby, Rockburne’s famous crude oil installation, *Intersection* (1971), extends out onto the floor of this room. Its thick, crackly black surface releases tendrils off the sides of the paper, creating a linear abstract pattern at its sides. To read the work is almost to be pulled along by its momentum. It’s like a gestalt movie screen that we inevitably fill in as we watch and wonder at the material progression.

This work is based on set theory—the area between two forms—in this case, the overlap between two earlier works *Group* and *Disjunction*. First shown at Bykert Gallery in New York in 1971, *Intersection* demonstrates Rockburne’s fascination with mathematical concepts. The piece consists of a sheet of plastic attached to the wall and then rolled out onto the floor, where a sheet of paper and a small rectangle of cardboard were placed on top of it. These were covered with oil and another sheet of plastic, causing the oil to cling to the plastic and sink into the paper

For this work, Heidie Giannotti, the unflappable and highly inventive exhibition designer, substituted heating oil for the more volatile crude oil.

Rockburne's *Locus Series Etchings* (1972), hanging nearby, is a group of five constructions—four on one wall, one on another, separated by a doorway with a gridded drawing, the locus. These constructions appear to be at once two- and three-dimensional, featuring lines drawn in the form of sharp folds. The lines initially seem flat and precise but are more ambiguous the longer one gazes, and as light hits the creases, they open up and soften.



Dorothea Rockburne, *Intersection*, 1971/2018. © DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE/ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/PHOTO: BILL JACOBSON STUDIO, NEW YORK/COURTESY DIA ART FOUNDATION, NEW

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One senses here the expression of a personal architectural system, one that evokes ancient Egyptian pyramids in their form and stunning whiteness. In fact, Egypt is a recurring allusion in her works—its architecture and geometry and the idea of the Golden Mean. In one room, an incised line runs along all of the walls. “The carved line is 40 inches above the ground . . . about where your pelvis is,” Rockburne said. It has something of an erotic corollary. “It’s visceral and subliminal,” she pointed out. In this way observers engage with the works and activate them.

It’s almost similar to the way the folded lines set in motion the clothing Rockburne inspired for the clothing company COS, marked by clean geometric lines that surprisingly intersect and follow the wearer’s movements. This is geometry as conceived by a dancer.

The Montreal-born artist’s most formative moments occurred in the early 1950s at Black Mountain College in Ashville, North Carolina, where she was cross-educated in the arts. She studied painting with Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Jack Tworkov, and Esteban Vicente and dance with Merce Cunningham, worked alongside Robert Rauschenberg (she later ran his studio), and became a math addict after studying with German-born mathematician Max Dehn. But out of this heady hodgepodge emerged her distinctive minimalist-conceptual style.



Dorothea Rockburne, *Set*, 1970/2018. © DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE/ARTIST RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK/PHOTO: BILL JACOBSON STUDIO, NEW YORK/COURTESY DIA ART FOUNDATION, NEW YORK

She came to New York in 1954, becoming instantly entranced with the city, performed with the Judson Dance Theater between 1962 and '64, along with experimental dancers Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, and fell in with a bunch of art-world luminaries, such as cutting-edge dealer Richard Bellamy and artists Carl Andre and Brice Marden, among many others. She was young and bowled over.

Her space- and body-engaging installations of the '60s and '70s demonstrate an introspective turning in on themselves—peeling, tearing, and copying, with materials like carbon paper recording the artist's presence and activity. The works are at once physical and conceptual. They suggest athleticism and a particular women's perspective (not feminism). Rockburne was once a competitive ski jumper and won jumping competitions. Her brother trained the Canadian Olympic ski team, and she believes her parents thought she might become an Olympian one day. "I competed a lot against boys," she said. "None of the girls jumped. So I understood competition. I knew I was good from the get go." The long unraveling roll of paper extending to the

floor in *Set* could be viewed as a ski jump or a developing narrative—the trajectory of a relationship.



Dorothea Rockburne, installation view, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York.  
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Inevitably, the physical nature of her work prods Rockburne into talking about sexuality. “My sexuality is different from that of a man. . . . It’s a whole different thing. I have a whole set of different emotions,” she said, pointing out, “I had a baby in my belly.”

The connection of her body with the work made her sensitive to her relationship with nature as well. “From the start, she said, “I wanted to make work that was ecological—that didn’t pollute or require storage.” It could be easily transported. Unlike the massive Corten steel sculptures that the Minimalist men were creating, Rockburne’s works could be assertive yet gentle, filled with implications but not force. “The work affects people emotionally,” she said.

In contrast to muscularity, she said, she aims for “multiplicity and complexity,” characteristics she finds in higher mathematics.

She has also remarked that she doesn’t read fiction. “I’m dyslexic,” she said; “I can’t understand what’s happening.” But she can read math and comprehend it. She has argued that fiction “requires some empathy with the people who are being

portrayed” and she felt women were often demeaned and as a result she couldn’t identify with the subject matter.



Dorothea Rockburne, installation view, Dia:Beacon, Beacon, New York.  
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“I didn’t want to be a man,” she said. “And the work reflects that.” In considering the creative differences between the work of men and women, she cited Robert Ryman and Agnes Martin: “Agnes Martin is different from Bob Ryman, and yet some early Rymans were, in my opinion, influenced by Martin.”

As for “women’s work,” she noted, Mary Corse’s work—also on view at Dia—“is not the work of a man. I don’t know how it’s different. Her works are big and thoughtful, beautifully structured; it’s different from the impact you get from a John Chamberlain, for instance.”

But as Rockburne considered that difference, she said, “Corse’s work is more precise, although Chamberlain, too, is precise—he took sculpture off the pedestal. But it’s a different muscularity.”

Rockburne's own work is beyond categorization. Her torn pieces in the show are like a diary written in nature—like bark being unpeeled to reveal an evolving life. She has more recently turned her attention to the celestial sphere and knot theory.

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