

*Dorothea Rockburne at the Dia:Beacon*

September 2019

Now in her mid-80s, Montreal-born Dorothea Rockburne lives and works in a very large studio on Grand Street, on the edge of New York's Chinatown. She has been part of the New York art scene for decades. Educated primarily at Black Mountain College, an alternative school in North Carolina that started in the 1930s and produced more than a few outstanding artists and writers during the middle years of the last century, the artist also takes an active interest in literature, poetry especially. Her work, which came to the fore of our attention in the 1970s, most often demonstrates a precision that demonstrates a mathematical regard--many of her pieces occur as the solutions to mathematical problems. Thus, while Rockburne's art is thoroughly abstract, it also conveys some origins of particularity that have begun *outside* art. At the same time, of course, the work belongs to the minimal style and to the hard-edged abstraction being made at the time. In the five rooms of her work on exhibit at Dia:Beacon, the contemporary art museum an hour north of New York City, we see her convey a formal intelligence unusual for its poise and achievement.

What is there that can be said about art as relentlessly nonobjective as we encounter in Rockburne? This is a useful question. Minimalism, the movement to which the artist partially belongs, delivers no cultural materials beyond the work itself. In such deliberate abstraction, formal problem-solving holds sway. Fine art such as Rockburne's turns on the experience of entirely formal properties--at least it seems so in the beginning. This is a consequence of art-historical development, in the sense that minimalism was one of the very last general movements in art. It is also the result of the artist's own proclivity for analytic insight in painting, a strength very little art presents today. Rockburne comes from a time when formalism was very much alive, even it was in its last throes of development; she was able to complete a body of work that should be considered as among the best of American art in recent times.

Formally, the individual pieces and installations at the Dia:Beacon demonstrate considerable intellectual resolve and intelligence. The cumulative experience of the five rooms conveys not only Rockburne's own penchant for nonobjective formal relations, but also the notion, dominant at the time, that less is more. We have come a long way from Renaissance perspective to work like Rockburne's. Yet the problem in abstract art is that it offers properties only about itself, the innate characteristics of painting. For a while this presented a great freedom; as time has gone on, we have come close to exhausting the interest found in making art about itself. But Rockburne's work seems to have evaded the problem, not only because the kind of work she was making can be seen as a part of a very late development in abstraction, but also because her art offers evidence of an independence not easily found--this exists, at least in part, because Rockburne is an ambitious woman artist who was working mostly among men. While it is important not to assign the influence of gender on nonobjective work, it is also necessary to recognize that this work has been done by a female artist, at a time when the constraints of being one were being challenged and transcended.

More than likely, the large carbon paper installation on show, originated by Rockburne in 1970 but recreated for Dia: Beacon last year, can be seen as the most major statement in the five-room group. Consisting of geometrically shaped sheets of carbon paper, placed on the walls and white floor, the environment looks very much now like the culmination of an abstract art perception, fusing with the interest in installational art that was beginning at the time (visitors to the museum can enter into the large space). Rockburne understands how hard-edge abstract carbon paper offers viewers both a continuation of and a respite from certain kinds of painting traditions, as well as being a demonstration of the strong pictorial interest geometric art can generate through hue and shape alone. The fact that the room can be gone into adds an element of physical interaction--of time-based experience. This contemporizes the installation even more, in ways that engage

Rockburne's audience even now, despite the fact that this environment was first created half a century ago.

As I indicated, the forms of the installation are quite simple: two carbon paper rectangles, only a foot or two above the floor, occur on the left; in the middle wall, there is a diamond-shaped piece of carbon paper. Beneath it, on the floor, we see a thin triangle pointing to the wall. On the right wall, there are three pieces, all of them divided by a thin line some four feet high. This line, like all the rest in the installation, is transferred via pressure to the carbon paper against the wall in various transmutations. Each of the carbon sheet's corners serve as pivotal points, resulting in linear formations on the wall that are geometrically self-referential. Within the entirety of the installation *Domain of the Variable*, the first set titled *Y from Domain of the Variable* (1971-72), consists of three-components, within which we find on the left two pieces of chipboard, next to which is a work that presents a surface of yellow and brown glue. The glue pieces adhering the chipboard to the wall--the result of pulling the chipboard off the wall's surface--produce a jaggedly abstract group of shapes. The third part of the work, on the right of the other two, consists of a long sheet of paper hanging over the wall. In front of this, there exist two pieces of brown chipboard, where the top edge of the first chipboard reaches the line etched into the wall at a height of four feet. The white paper continues to weave under and between the chipboards, and flows over the second. The simplicity of the site should not be underemphasized, although the visual experience resulting from it is highly complex. Any room-size work of art is going to take time to move through it, producing something whose experience exists in duration, in addition to being instantaneously perceived. So the work exists, as well, as a three-dimensional space, made active by the audience's passage across it. Just as our perception animates a dormant painting, so does our sight and movement generate the open energies of the space. As a result, we find that the forms and volumes of the installation create a physical exchange, as well as the sighted reply to the imagery. So Rockburne here is demonstrating extreme skill as an artist, presenting the chance for her audience to

discover how an environment determined by the transposition of carbon paper can work its visual effects so compellingly.

The individual works, regularly the consequence of mathematical equations, can occur as folded paper or other highly simplified planar forms. These works usually present as flat surfaces, so simple as to be thought *too* simple. But this is not the case. Instead, the planes shift from simplicity into complexity over time. One senses that the intelligence behind their creation has to do with a rational perception in addition to a creative engendering. But the experience is primarily for the initiated; people without subtlety will not be engaged by the work. (This is a problem in contemporary creative life--much of it is lost to the general public.) But, even so, very good art such as Rockburne's needs to be viewed not as an elitist object but as the consequence of increasing insight into and sophistication about the penchant for self-supporting form in abstraction. Why is this so? It is because we go on to whatever is next in visual development, almost always without consideration of the audience's needs. Indeed, it may be said that, at least in part, our current obsession with politics in art is an (inevitable) result of visual innovation's exhaustion. It is starting to look like Rockburne is among the last practitioners of an abstract art that may be read as genuinely innovatory; minimalism, likely because its penchant for form that cannot be seen as visibly offering cultural references, now comes across as a final chapter in the history of modernist formalism.

But the movement survives as much as a critique of modernism as it is its last manifestation. This means that our endeavors are now so historically aware as to be deliberately learned. Rockburne's art presupposes a knowledge of abstraction that makes it nearly scholarly in its approach, although it is more than probable that when she was making the work in the show, she was not thinking of the past--either immediate or venerable. Her work illustrates her independence of mind, but it also suggests that culture has been on the edge of an abyss, a situation brought about by a long, perhaps overly long, art history. Good art now inevitably takes on distinction when one's gifts are

historically aware--at least in hindsight! Rockburne surely did not set out to critique modernism, but we read her work that way now. Her creativity also evolved from the mindset of the early Seventies, which was highly politicized; while not openly feminist in her work, Rockburne certainly has profited from the spirit of that time.

In *Set* (1970/2018), Rockburne again sets up work of extreme simplicity that results in highly complex implications. On the left is a ceiling-high relief work that consists of a chipboard rectangle, from which a long piece of paper, equal in width to the paper, runs to the floor. Next to it is a large plus symbol, placed about five or six feet in height from the floor. And next to that is a large horizontal panel that comes to the floor line; it is embellished with two black triangular polygons on either edge, as well as a chipboard rectangle set between the two, in the middle of the composition. Together the three units provide, as the plus sign indicates to us, an abstract presence that feels it has been generated as much by math as it has been by intuition. The precision of the work, as well as the mathematical implications of the piece's title, determines this hunch. Most of the time our feeling for art is emotional, but Rockburne's focus as an artist also takes an approach determined by reason. We sense this regularly in her work.

A later work, done in 1980, called *Egyptian Painting Stele*, consists of three sets of folded white linen canvas--two on the top and one below. They are formally connected, on the edge of either side, by straight black lines drawn on the wall. The word "stela" refers to a monument forwarding some sort of design or writing; Rockburne's title indicates it comes from Egypt. Here the neatness of the folded canvas and black lines underscores her rational approach, in this case an illustration of the Golden Ratio. The artist's folded-linen work is exquisite. We can understand this piece as historically determined, yet its form examples highly recent abstraction. Rockburne, who grew up not in America but in Montreal, demonstrates an awareness of form as a lucid decision--not an emotional outburst. So her work shows a restraint we don't find much in American abstraction, whose underpinnings have usually been expressionist. This distinguishes her

art from that of other artists, then and now. As time goes on, it seems to me that Rockburne's analytic orientation will place her high in the roster of the best artists of that time.

The final portion of *Domain of the Variable* to be discussed—*Z from Domain of the Variable*--(1971-72)--rises just above the line incised four feet above the floor. The entire work, ostensibly composed of four sections, is structured of a single piece of greased paper, starting after the first section, in which we see the wall and the drawn line on the wall. The second section occurs as a piece of greased chipboard placed on top of the greased paper and nailed to the wall, while the paper the third section is composed of can be said to spill over the chipboard painted white, with the grease scraped over the paper, which remains a pinkish red. The fourth and final section is simply paper and wall, with grease left on the surfaces, along with a torn edge. So the greased paper weaves under and over the sections of chipboard. Rockburne sees the work as a substantive response to the equation.

Toward the end of the right of *Z from Domain of the Variable*, there is a piece of greased chipboard, whose right edge is very slightly uneven. Next to it there is a thin maroon rectangle, whose end forms the end on the composition's right. The red expanse of the middle component is handled in a deliberately painterly manner, with a deep red framing a lighter, nearly pink red in the middle of the piece. The hues are handled in an expressionist manner, representing a comment on earlier generations of abstraction, whose nature was more effusive. Even so, *Z from Domain of the Variable* is a model of moderation and restraint; its properties are fully in synchrony with the artist's general production. Its more painterly aspect indicates a willingness on Rockburne's part to include American painting history in her work. Interestingly, like a lot of other work in the five rooms, the piece occurs on a very low plane, rising up from the floor. Rockburne's intelligence is such that the decision to place the work where it is looks like a visionary tactic, in which its location becomes part of the larger view.

These works, done about two generations ago, indicate that Rockburne was ahead of her time. Her meticulousness is evident in all the art we see in the show. The determination of an artist's achievement becomes more possible two generations after the work has been made. So we can start to think about this body of work's real accomplishment. One senses that Rockburne, working during the high period of minimalism, profited from that movement's artistic rigor. At the same time, by deriving some of her work from mathematical thinking, she looks to an aesthetic quite a bit different from her American counterparts' perception. The art in this show carries on into the present with real force. Its achievement, the result of measurement and installational placement, produces an experience slightly different from the minimal art others were making at the time. This is because the particular strength of Rockburne's work lies in its description of a scientific imagination on a par with her visual insights. This means, then, that the work finds major consequence in a numeric order found in the foundations of her pieces. Most very good art today exists in the interstices between cultures and genres--Rockburne's efforts are no exception. In her pursuit of science as a precursor to her art, she gives us the chance to see something remarkably new.

Jonathan Goodman