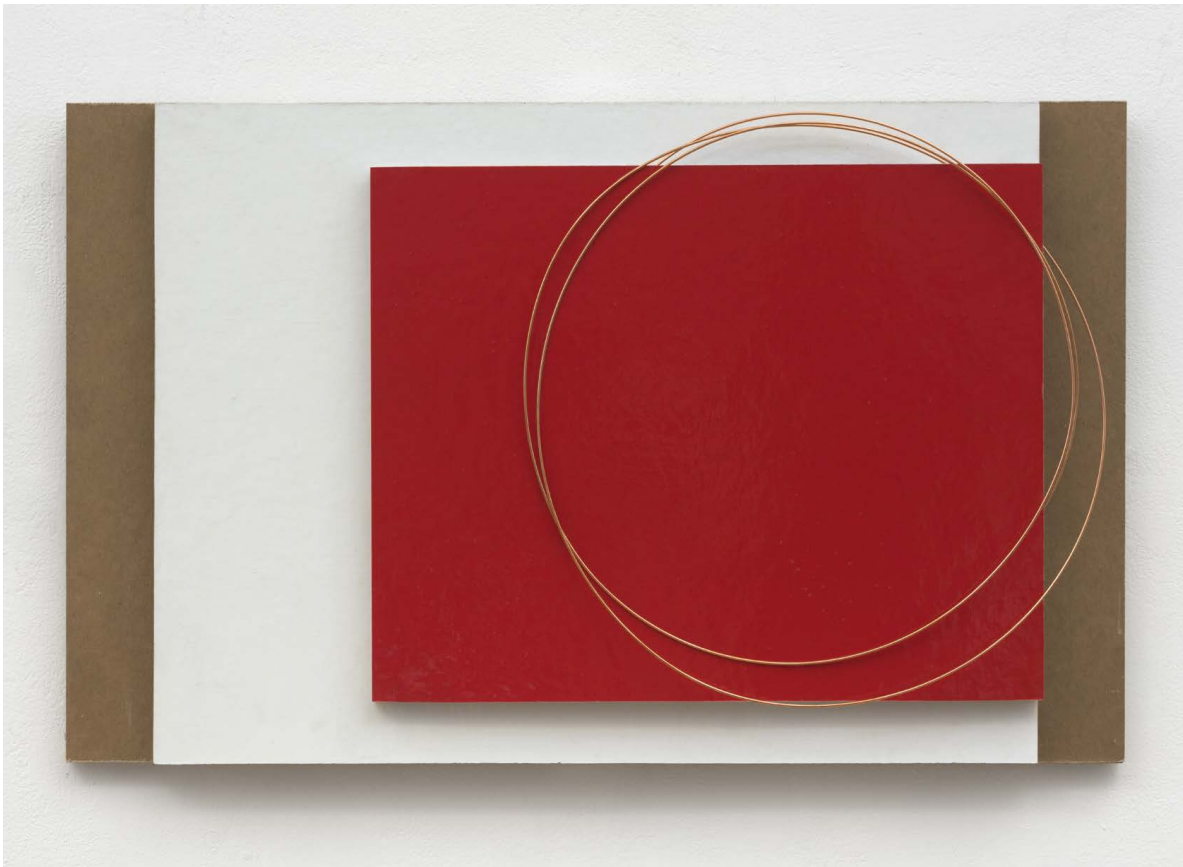




"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"
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Dorothea Rockburne at David Nolan Gallery



Dorothea Rockburne: *Giotto's Angels & Knots*

By **JONATHAN GOODMAN**, November 2021

Dorothea Rockburne's show, "Giotto's Angels and Knots," brilliantly reprises her long interest in Giotto, the painter active in the late Middle Ages, and, equally important, her work with mathematics, as exemplified by trefoil knots (knot theory was something the artist took an interest in while studying at Black Mountain College). The mathematical influence is major; indeed, instead of making preparatory drawings for her art, she solves equations. Living and working downtown, on the edge of Chinatown, Rockburne has been a mainstay of the New York art world for decades.

She brings a precision and rigor to her work, which is not an example of minimalism, a movement mistakenly applied to her art, but rather a decision to connect with the Italian tradition that means so much to her. Thus, her work takes on a spiritual clarity, in alignment with the past, capable of resonating with a contemporary audience. The combination of the old and the new enables Rockburne to cover a lot of ground, historical, esthetic, even devotional. This show, in the gallery's small spaces, makes the successful argument that analytic theory can align with high intuition.

In the "Trefoil" series, Rockburne works with two basic elements: flat panels of color both matte and reflective, and circles of thin copper wire, usually hidden in part by the geometric planes. Trefoil knots occur as knotted loops without dangling ends, and can be seen as an assertion of a simple, universal form. In *Trefoil 2* (2019), two copper wire circles front layered boards--a black square directly behind them, and behind that a white rectangle, its height greater than its width, bookended by brown paperboard. Elegance is a by-word for this work and the others in the series, achieved with an extreme simplicity of means, likely the consequence of Rockburne's mathematical research. *Trefoil 2* exists not only as a continuation of the modernist past, but also as a presentation of a contemporaneity marked by considerable craft. *Trefoil 7* (1921) has four panels, covered with matte, water-based paint that has been sanded: up front, on the left, we see a flat yellow plane; behind it are two orange panels, one diagonally placed, and as a background, a large plane of dark blue. Copper wire circles front the presentation. Color and line are equally important in this work, which convey measure and restraint in equal weight.



Lamenting Angels (2021), a striking work on paper, pays homage to Giotto's *Lamentation (The Mourning of Christ)* (c. 1305) in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. The forms, a series of blue, sharply angled, linear cuts of paper (an exact copy of a handmade paper made in the Renaissance), exists in alignment with Giotto's work. Yet *Lamenting Angels* is abstract, its components seemingly about to fit into place like the parts of a puzzle. This is where Rockburne is original; taking devotional feeling, based on a great painting made long ago, while rendering her experience in a nonobjective fashion, she recreates the emotion associated with the earlier work. This is done without losing any sense of the time she now works in. Such an approach happens often in her art. One of the rooms in the show has been painted a very dark blue; it serves as a spiritual backdrop to a series of small painting/collages. *Blue Collage, Arcane Light 1* (2018-19) consists of handmade gray paper with a circular opening. The circle has a white halo around it; half the open circle is filled with gray paper bearing a curving orange line, while the other half is nearly filled with a dark blue circle extending beyond the cut. It moves onto the brown board on which the paper has been mounted.

Strikingly, sculptures occur in the show, too, One, *Interchange* (2021), consist of two galvanized steel buckets; the larger one sits on coasters, while the smaller one is filled with water. The two buckets are tied together by a thick, corded rope that crosses over itself in between the metal containers. It is an unusual piece, especially from someone who has regularly worked as a painter, but it succeeds as an object of industrial presence. This is new terrain for Rockburne, yet it indicates her willingness, late in her career, to address innovation outside her usual practice. In summary, “Giotto’s Angels and Knots” is memorable because the artist wonderfully continues to address themes she has worked with for decades. Her explorations, over time, have become declarations of belief--in art, in the legacy of Western painting, especially its devotional aspect. These are accomplishments that are lasting. We look expectantly for more of the same.