

Dorothea Rockburne: *Giotto's Angels and Knots*

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By Charles Schultz



Dorothea Rockburne, *Trefoil 5*, 2021. Aquacryl paint, glue, graphite, and copper wire on layered boards, 30 x 47 x 1 1/2 inches. Courtesy David Nolan Gallery

On View

David Nolan Gallery

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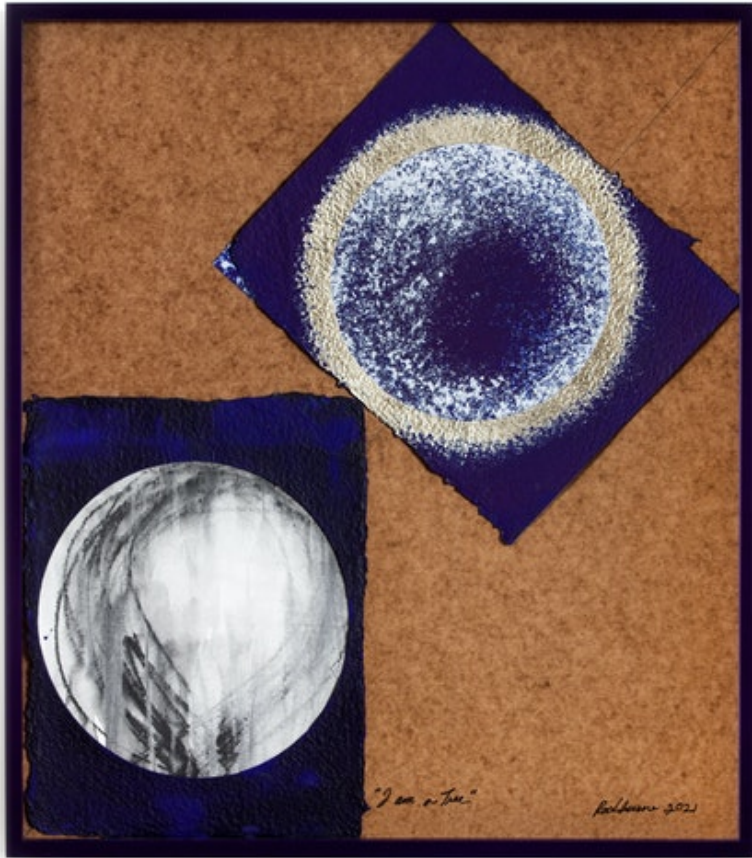
In the 1970s Dorothea Rockburne traveled to Italy and visited the Scrovegni chapel in Padua. From books she learned about the chapel's history and its numinous frescoes painted by Giotto, but to be in the room is a higher order of experience. Nearly half a century later, Rockburne has created a chapel of her own in a townhouse on the Upper East Side of Manhattan that draws from her experience in Padua. To sit in her dark blue chamber and gaze upon the artist's dramatically lit paper collages is to take part in a reenactment of a certain kind, a doubling of experience, where the audience has an opportunity to be in two places simultaneously. You are in a townhouse gallery—a place of business—but you are also in a chapel, one that only exists for a few weeks. Rockburne's blue room thus comes to function as a coupling device, binding metaphors of permanence with ephemerality; the sacred with the secular.



Dorothea Rockburne, *Lamenting Angels #2*, 2021. Aquacryl paint and gouache on paper 30 x 22 1/2 inches. Courtesy David Nolan Gallery.

Rockburne's new series of paper collages, "The Giotto Drawings," hangs on all four walls of the small room. The works share a common process of assemblage and for the most part reference scientific themes in their titles: *The Geometry of Time*; *Linear Alignment*; *Hello Galileo*; *Archimedes' Leaver* (all 2019). The standout piece is *I am a Tree*, the only work in the chapel made in 2021. Unlike its companion pieces, the composition for *I am a Tree* departs from the pattern of center-orientation and instead locates the paper collage elements on the periphery so that what is centered is the connection between the two elements. The other works possess a satisfying stability that *I am a Tree* does not have. Its arrangement almost feels temporary, more like a moment of transformation that has been arrested than a force of creation coming naturally to rest. Its subtle plum frame wants to disappear into the darkness that surrounds it.

Rockburne's trio of "Lamenting Angels" hang in a row in the narrow passageway that leads to the luminous gallery on the building's north end. These collage works draw upon the grieving angels that hover and flit in the sky above the Christ figure in Giotto's frescoes. Rockburne selected blue paint and gouache on paper for these pieces, and she's allowed the wet stuff to puddle and run, seemingly pulled by gravity towards the bottom of her vertical arrangements. The downward movement begets a certain pathos, a signaling of something coming down, like leaves or tears. For Giotto's angels, their savior has come down from the cross and is about to be entombed in a mountain. They rent their robes and twist their faces. For Rockburne, tension builds from the contrast between the slop of paint she's applied and the precision of the cuts she's made to the paper. The works feel carefully ordered and essentially messy at the same time.



Dorothea Rockburne, *Blue Collage, I Am A Tree*, 2021. enamel paint, Aquacryl, gold leaf, and watercolor wax crayon on paper mounted on board in artist's frame, 24 x 21 inches. Courtesy David Nolan Gallery.

All references to Italian masters withdraw in the light-soaked gallery where Rockburne's newest knots are on display. Based on the "trefoil" knot, a foundation of knot theory, Rockburne executes variations on the theme through a set of six mixed-media works and a fabulous sculpture. (A companion sculpture awaits visitors stepping off the elevator in the gallery's entryway.) What makes the trefoil a unique knot is that it enables a single length of cord to be enjoined at its ends forming a set of loops that are self-contained; think of a figure eight with one additional loop. In Rockburne's wall-based works a band of copper wire curls above and beneath layers of lacquered panels. The place where the wires' ends meet is obscured by the boards, the moment of connection evidently contained within the work. By contrast the sculpture, *Interchange* (2021), obscures no part of the knot, which is made from thick rope. The rope winds around a set of three steel buckets, two stacked and one resting on the floor filled to the brim with water. A car tire is sandwiched between the stacked buckets, its matte black surface rhyming with the plastic jacket that secures the connection where the two ends of the rope meet. The emotional energy of the work emerges through the resolution of form and the peculiar relationships established between the material components. You may gaze into the bucket of water and catch your reflection, finding your visual double contained, briefly, within Rockburne's work. As I do, I think about Rockburne surrounded by Giotto's frescoes and how the echo of experience travels ever onwards.