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Photographed by James Hardiker, Vogue, June 1971. © 2020 Estate Irina Ackermann / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York.

At 95, Artist Dorothea Rockburne Is Still Using Math to Explore the Sublime

BY ANNA KEMPF
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"Every material has its own voice," Dorothea Rockburne tells me. It's a sunny afternoon in August, and we're sitting in the Sofia hall where the artist has lived and worked for the past 50 years. I feel asked Rockburne to explain what the phrase could in material meant to her, as I'd heard the term a big fan of the Barbara concept. "If you have a sheet of paper, it will fold, it will tear, it will essentially," the quietly 95-year-old explains. But you can't force it to do something against its nature—a blessing disguised as a limitation.

It makes sense that someone with such reverence for materials has experimented with the wide variety Rockburne has paper, vellum, grease, graphite, tape, linen, ice, diaphanol, or any number of things she might find in the hardware store. Her work has been exhibited at institutions around the world, from the Whitney Museum of American Art to the Venice Biennale. Her interest in mathematics, picked up during her years at the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina, was not nearly de rigueur in the 1960s, when she was getting a foothold in the New York art world. And beyond her earlier achievers, Rockburne was a single mother in a male-dominated scene. But the geometric and the paintings, sculptures, and installations she has produced over the last seven decades have cemented her status as a leading, if enduring, figure of postmoderne American art.

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What is known by Rockburne's fans, then, first her work should come to date (in, Lee with Rockburne gallery London and Hauser & Wirth in New York) is a mathematical exploration of the sublime. Her work has been in the world for a number of years that once drawn of Rockburne's works created by Lola Kamen. The show means the can convention Rockburne's secrets from her early works with wrinkle-finish paper to her elegant folded-form Equitone Paintings to her vibrant line pieces inspired by cosmology.

Pace & Hauser&Wirth London and Hauser & Wirth New York, Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Rockburne New York, Hauser&Wirth London, Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Rockburne London, © 2020 Dorothea Rockburne / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The show is Rockburne's first European survey in decades, much of the art on display has never been shown outside the US at all, partially because Rockburne's work does not make for easy installation. "It's all based on mathematical theorem, formulas, or philosophy, so the key room has to be exact," Kamen says.

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Rockburne's Clemata of the Variable, a seminal sculpture made originally from 1971 that graced the pages of Artforum's March issue that year, is one piece that inspired particular awe in its existence. The Rockburne installation includes a line cut into the wall that stretches through the whole first floor of the gallery's main house—a nod to Rockburne's interest in cosmology, and the work of Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler, and Nicolaus Copernicus. Made in 2020 by Pace that museum, some material had to be substituted because the 1970s original were either no longer available (like cup grease) or had been discarded decades prior during its installation. To the artist, both the 2018 and 2020 is a creation on different manifestations of the same mathematical theory. "It's almost like a time recording artwork," Kamen says.

Rockburne's Clemata of the Variable, © 2020 Dorothea Rockburne / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Rockburne, born in Montreal in 1932, studied painting and philosophy in Canada before moving to the US to attend Black Mountain College at age 26. "When I was in Montreal, I knew that if I were in Sol LeWitt I would go to Dorothea and come out as a dilettante. I wasn't looking for a job. I was looking for an education," she tells me.

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At Black Mountain, she got one. "You were only allowed to take three classes, but you were allowed to do as many independent studies as you wanted," she recalls. There, she was taught by Josef Albers, Ben Nicholson, and Buckminster Fuller, alongside a Bauhaus-through modern studio manager—while continuing to make her own art at night. Dance was scarce, but she made it work. "It was either that or not be an artist, and I was always an artist."

Rockburne quit musical and gave birth to a daughter at Black Mountain before moving to New York City in 1964. Her husband was a professor at Pratt Institute, and she was "the wife of a professor," she recalls. Her work was in the various jobs—including at Bauhaus-through studio manager—while continuing to make her own art at night. Dance was scarce, but she made it work. "It was either that or not be an artist, and I was always an artist."

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I asked how her experience was working for Bauhaus-through. "Hilarity," she says. "Well-meant, well-meant, well-meant, being around him was a great pleasure." But it was also the time of the studio-wide artist. Rauschenberg and his crew didn't understand her interest in math, nor the obligations of parenthood, much less single motherhood. "When I first started a credit card, I was sending her Bob and he had to sign for me."

Installation view of "The Light Years in the Gardens and the Gardens Are Not Underdeveloped: Dorothea Rockburne," Photo by Eric Hong, Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Rockburne London/Zurich, © 2020 Dorothea Rockburne / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Movement has always been important to Rockburne. She started taking ballet at age four. In New York she joined the Italian Dance Theater, the revolutionary group that was known for incorporating non-trained dancers. Rockburne calls it "a school of the heart." Rockburne's dance training underpinned her conceptual work in the 1960s. "I was interested in how art could be a kind of physical experience," she says. Her work "Dancing Line" (1969) was a dance from one wall to the other. Lough dancing, I wouldn't let anyone in there. You have to walk from one whole body," she says.

Before the late 1960s, Rockburne didn't show her work much, besides to close friends. But by 1970 she was in a bunch of group shows, including at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, and Paula Cooper Gallery. Her first solo show was at Leo Castelli in 1973, and she was included in the Whitney Biennial that year, and in Kynaston McShine's landmark 1974 exhibition Information. The critical response to her work was positive, especially the recognition of her unique vision. A 1977 article in Vogue by an early critic Barbara Rose praised "the cool lucid geometry of Dorothea Rockburne."

"Our attention arrists like Rockburne and [Sonia] Gomes," Rose wrote, "who have strongly convictions to go through the long and painful process of trying to make original art that will stand up to criticism and judgment in the future as well as to attract attention in the present."

Installation view of "The Light Years in the Gardens and the Gardens Are Not Underdeveloped: Dorothea Rockburne," Photo by Eric Hong, Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Rockburne London/Zurich, © 2020 Dorothea Rockburne / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

In the 1980s, Rockburne started making vivid geometric works with oil paint—like the Key Inset Slice (1983) and Sash Interior Projection (November Dishes) (1984), pictured above), both on view at Rockburne in London. These are some of the best examples of Rockburne's signature blend of fine-art technique, acquired during her classical training at Montreal's Ecole des Beaux-Arts, with the more avant-garde approach of Black Mountain College.

Rockburne similarly blended her interest in mathematical and scientific theories with her more ineffable influences: ancient Greek mythology, Egyptian art, the Renaissance, and the work of philosopher Ibn Pacal. "She's very interested in the sublime. The idea of mathematics is the means of getting there," says Kamen.

Despite her success in gallery and group shows, and with commissions for the lobby of Philip Johnson's 550 Madison Avenue and the Dallas Museum of Art, Rockburne felt she was never a part of mainstream and high society, the Museum of Art. A monographic show in MOMA followed in 2013, and then the 70s survey a few years later. Finally, it seems wider recognition has arrived.

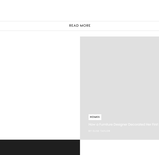
Rockburne working in Italy, c. 1972. Photo Courtesy of the artist and Hauser and Rockburne London/Zurich.

Sitting in Rockburne's bedroom, I ask her what she thinks about all this history, and her legacy. "I don't really have a recognition of time the way normal people do," she says. It's always been like that for her—she's more focused on the work. "When I walk into the studio, I transform. Something happens, and I'm different."

It's a transformation one can pick up on in her eyes. Yes, there's a high level of brash conceptual and mathematical thinking the years turn to. But the owner doesn't need to know a thing about art theory to find her organization of form and angles beautiful. The repetition, the layering, the use of light and shadow—it all adds up to much more than the computational parts.

Rockburne points at a stack magazines on her coffee table, encouraging me to pick it up. "It doesn't matter if you don't understand it," she says, correctly chiding that my mind probably wasn't equipped for high school. "You could just look at the pictures and still get something out of it."

"The Light Years in the Gardens and the Gardens Are Not Underdeveloped" is on view at Rockburne gallery in London through January 23, 2021.



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