

ARTSEEN DEC/JAN 2024–25

Dorothea Rockburne: *The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Understood It*

By Mark Hudson



Dorothea Rockburne, *Domain of the Variable (Y), (Z)*, 1972/2018/2024. Chipboard, contact cement, paper, grease, charcoal, and wall incision, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Bernheim.

The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Understood It
Bernheim Gallery
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London

Despite the recent surge of interest in undersung women artists of every cultural stamp—and not least a strong showing for American abstract painters in British galleries—the name Dorothea Rockburne remains remarkably little known in London. The ninety-five-year-old Canadian-born, New York-based artist is celebrated for starkly geometric, but sumptuously colored shaped canvases and for her life-long preoccupation with mathematics. So it's disconcerting that my initial glimpse of this expansive survey exhibition is of a large, empty room with a black line running around its perimeter at waist height and what looks like cardboard packaging leaning against the rear wall. My first thought is that I've arrived at the gallery before the show's even up. That isn't the case. But then things often aren't what they appear in Rockburne's art.

Born in Montreal in 1929, Rockburne studied painting before moving to the US in 1950 to attend Black Mountain College, arriving at the hallowed institution at a pivotal moment when contemporaries such as Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly were reacting against the bombastic subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism. So while Rockburne is barely younger than some of the key female Ab Exers—including Joan Mitchell, currently the subject of substantial display at Tate Modern—she belongs to a younger, more conceptually oriented generation whose move away from gestural abstraction marks one of the seismic shifts in twentieth-century art. At the same time her interests in mathematics and astronomy, in giving visual form to complex equations and numerical theories, suggest a feel for the universal that goes way beyond the artworld-oriented head-games of her Pop art contemporaries.

Rockburne's "packaging" turns out to be four tall, black steel panels moulded into an extremely shallow pyramid form, and painted in beige wrinkle-finish paint across the middle sections, so that they appear to be partially covered in extremely worn leather until close inspection reveals densely complex relief patterns in the surface of the paint. The title of this work *Tropical Tan* (1967–68), refers to the color of paint Rockburne used.

That line circuiting the room in black charcoal runs parallel with a roughly scored line in the surface of the plaster, all part of Rockburne's 1972 installation *Domain of the Variable*. It leads us around the walls to the rear gallery, and the heart of the work which comprises three artfully staged attempts to fix board and paper works to the wall.

In the first, a five-foot high piece of chipboard has been glued to the lower wall, then roughly pulled off so that the chance tears in the wallpaper and on the surface of the board lying on the floor comprise the content of the work. In the second, two ceiling-high pieces of paper have been pinned to the wall with the outer one having partially collapsed onto the floor, as though the pins couldn't take its weight. I'm still trying to piece together the resonances of the work's third play on form and surface which coats the materials in red grease—a signature Rockburne material.

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While the curator's texts invoke brain-achingly complex notions of set theory—a particular interest of Rockburne's—these elegant and witty plays on the construction of form and meaning lie within canonical realms of conceptual art that are now so widely understood they feel almost classical.

The two dozen plus works dating from 1967 to 2013 are ranged through the gallery's four floors, with my favorite piece *Egyptian Painting, Scribe* (1979) facing us at the entrance to the first. It comprises a large, near wall-height diamond shape formed from four smaller diamond shapes created from pieces of meticulously folded white gessoed canvas. Their shadowing edges form an elegantly sculptural relief pattern enhanced by the stark lighting. If there's nothing obviously Egyptian about the work, its uncompromising symmetry hints at a timeless sacred geometry.

Dorothea Rockburne, *Egyptian Painting, Scribe*, 1979. Gesso, oil paint on linen, glue, pencil, 93 x 56 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and Bernheim.

On the second floor, the play with intersecting folding forms continues in layered shaped canvases, with the painted surfaces and chunkily three-dimensional canvases, pursuing contrasting narratives in brilliant colour. In *Interior Perspective, Discordant Harmony* (1985), a green-tinged lozenge-shaped canvas seems to slip behind a square canvas, its form continuing on the upper canvas in vertical green bands. These are intersected by liquidescence red strokes that surge from the bottom left corner to be cut short mid-canvas by a dead straight horizontal line. While Rockburne's interest in the intersection of forms is understood to be underpinned by mathematical theory that could only, we assume, be explained at considerable length, the visual tricks on offer here are for the most part self-evident, and all the more satisfying for it.

Installation view: Dorothea Rockburne: *The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Understood It*, Bernheim, London, 2024–25. Courtesy Bernheim.

Les Pensées De Pascal (1987–88) fits perfectly with its architectural position: its ground is the near perfect square of the gallery wall, painted a deep ultramarine, with a trapezoidal canvas standing on the floor where the fireplace would have been. Its gold-leafed upper edge creates a mantel-piece effect on which sits a turquoise triangle, its gilt edge seemingly drawn on the wall, with a multi-coloured rectangle seeming to float out of its all too material surface. The clouding textures and huge-scale brush marks are at once exquisitely hand-hewn and so meticulously applied I found myself going in close to make sure there wasn't some photographic sleight of hand at play.

On this showing Rockburne is an intriguing one-off figure who veers between forms and styles that feel all too familiar—Conceptualism, post-painterly abstraction—with an idiosyncratic undertow of metaphysical questing. The intense color seen in the last two paintings described, which might feel decorative, even frivolous in the light of her loftier intellectual ambition, has a joyous rapture in its singing full-bodied hues. If making reference to the seventeenth-century French philosopher's magnum opus could be seen as a shade pretentious, the great thinker's core belief that God is better approached through the heart than the mind feels highly relevant to these paintings. Decades of mathematical and astronomical research may have gone into them, but they aren't at heart theoretical works. As visual experiences they can be enjoyed by anyone with an open mind and a discerning and curious eye.

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