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ARTS | ART REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW; Joanna Pousette-Dart

By KEN JOHNSON
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Charles Cowles
537 West 24th Street, Chelsea
Through June 26

Joanna Pousette-Dart has been making high-quality, nonironic abstract paintings for more than 30 years. But in the last 20 she has had only three solo exhibitions, counting this one, and her last was nine years ago. So this excellent show is something to savor.

Why Ms. Pousette-Dart waits so long between shows is hard to say. The paintings here -- compositions of flat, curvy shapes and fat, swooping lines on two-part canvases shaped like shields, boat hulls or billowing square sails -- give the impression of having been made with effortless grace. (Late Willem de Kooning and recent Brice Marden come to mind.) But maybe that is crucial: in art as in sport, it is hard to make it look easy.

Ms. Pousette-Dart is serious about Modernist abstraction, but there is nothing too sober or sanctimonious about what she does. Her paintings have lovely, slightly dry eggshell surfaces and a colorful, slightly muted palette with pastel tendencies. They have been made with a caressing touch that suggests thoughtful spontaneity. While the compositions of loopy shapes and lines fit tightly into the eccentrically shaped panels -- in some cases evoking Northwest Indian design -- they don't feel cramped; they convey a buoyant, free feeling. There is a mutually responsive relationship between the container and the contained -- or between body and soul -- that is a pleasure to behold.

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