

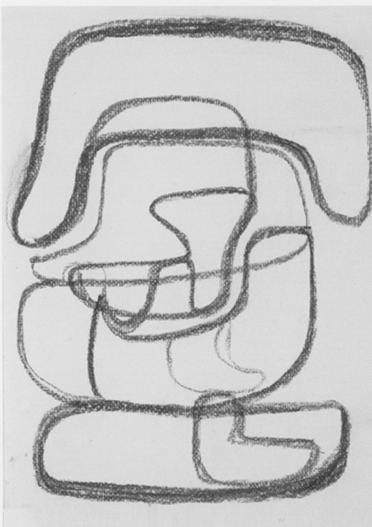
## John Yau: The Curve of The World

*“The circle as a bounding holds its content destroys it circling boundless content”*

*Theodore Enslin<sup>1</sup>*

Joanna Pousette-Dart’s combination of line drawing and curved planes of color is unlike anyone else’s. She has taken hard-edged elements that we think of as basic to a modernist vocabulary, made them fresh and, more importantly, extended them into new territory. Her use of shaped canvases explores the meeting place between abstraction and landscape, quietly expanding upon the work of her predecessors, particularly Ellsworth Kelly, whose irreducible forms are often derived from architectural details or man-made structures in relationship to their environment. In contrast to Kelly’s shaped paintings of a single monochromatic plane or the juxtaposition of monochromatic planes, Pousette-Dart adds an overlay of lyrical, linear structures—both open and closed forms—and a sense of constant and latent movement. Made up of interlocking convex and concave planes, her personal geometry offers a highly considered alternative to the high modernist domain of straight lines and idealized shapes, such as squares, triangles, trapezoids, and parallelograms, all of which reiterate flatness. Her concave and convex planes bend space as they move through it, implying a permanent bond between gravity and buoyancy, containment and expansiveness. This does not strike me as a purely formal concern, but a philosophical stance toward landscape that is informed by formal mastery.

In her carefully calibrated stacking of two or three gently rounded, physical shapes, Pousette-Dart achieves a dynamic balance ranging from the



*charcoal drawing from notebook, 2007*

slightly precarious to the loosely wedged. In the former, a vessel-like shape (it exists somewhere between an oblong and a cross section of a circle) rests on top of a similarly rounded form. The balance feels momentary—on the verge of rocking—and there is a vertiginous upward and downward sensation both echoed and contradicted by the interior shapes and linear structures. This dynamic engenders numerous pressures, inversions, and reversals, particularly along the seams where the physical shapes meet. In the wedged shapes, the uppermost form clings to its counterpart at the bottom by means of a faint, downward curve. The placement of these shapes doesn’t feel fixed, and they can seemingly slip into a new rapport. The possibility of tilting and slipping conveys a world never fully at rest—one that holds a constant potentiality for movement and reconfiguration—while the curved and nesting forms infuse an erotic current and add a feminine intonation.

The internal divisions that reinforce and subvert the movement of the stacked shapes (and their implicit sensitivity to external forces) consist of curving bands of color—slightly modulated—stretching across their entire length, and/or concave and convex planes nestled tightly against each other. Both the physical shapes and interlocking planes reverberate with an overlay of linear structures that are slightly tauter and sharper than the shaped supports, nestled forms, and bands of color. Embodied in these paintings are states of continuous if at times languid motion, and in that regard the work is quite different from much contemporary abstraction.

The linear structures are no more fixed than the shapes. Swelling and thinning, with modulating color, they transform from line into shape and back again. In some cases, they are both contour and self-sufficient structure. Whether they are dividing the curved planes into distinct but related shapes or forming a barrier that modulates or changes the color from one side to the other, the linear structures seem distinct yet inextricable from the ground. Line can also imply volume, inscribing a flat plane of color to transform it into a curled plane. The paintings are concurrently vivid and reserved, lyrical and geometric.

The containing and interior shapes alike evoke windshields, bowls, canoes, and arches, while their curves also suggest stones rounded smooth by time. This confluence of the manmade and natural reminds us that, even though modern civilization vainly separates itself from nature, often ignoring the consequences, we finally cannot exist outside of it. And, if this is the case, how do we frame our experience of a reality that exceeds our field of vision, compelling us to continually fine-tune our focus? How do we look at what is in front of our eyes when it is constantly changing, with no apparent destination? Rather than settle for the obvious paradigm, which is all-over painting, Pousette-Dart developed a vocabulary that establishes its own conventions, and they show no sign of becoming formulaic.

The curved planes assert that nothing is absolutely flat in nature; that it is the painting's surface that is flat. By working with interlocking rounded planes within curved shapes, Pousette-Dart is determined to make painting's flat surface responsive to nature without resorting to such historical means as perspective and pictorialism. The stacking of curved planes and shapes, as well as the

overlaying of a changing linear structure, applies a constant, pleasurable pressure against the canvas's surface plane. Are things curling away or forward, rising or descending? For Pousette-Dart nature is a continuum that, at any point, can only be partially witnessed. Thus, whether inverted or upright, the arch-like planes evoke distance while framing interior shapes—are we glimpsing something solid or limitless? Through contrasts and modulations of color and shifts in scale, the planes advance, recede, and reconfigure. Compelled to recalibrate our focus, we realize that there is no ideal distance for viewing these paintings (or nature, for that matter, particularly in its expansiveness).

The curved shapes and nestling pairs suggest that we should embrace what embraces us, while the physical edge shared by the shaped canvas with its interior planes is strong evidence that we will fall short in our attempt to do so. And this is one of the deepest paradoxes of these paradoxical paintings. For one thing, she brings our physical presence into play; we have to see and feel our way into, through, and around these paintings in which planes and linear structures meet and overlap. There is an ever-present sense that sight can embrace only a part of something larger, and that the artist does not believe she can pin her content down. The curved forms want to stretch out further, to be completed into circles, but cannot, which infuses these paintings with longing.



charcoal & ink drawing from notebook, 2007

Pousette-Dart's seamless synthesis of the manmade and the natural is further nuanced by the artist's palette, which consists of warm reds, blues, and yellows, rich and earthen greens, and browns and brownish pinks. These colors are found in both nature and culture. For all their

warmth, there is an arid light to the palette, a sense that we are in a bright, dry climate. This feeling is further enhanced by the matte surfaces, and the combination of strong and muted colors. The structure of her muted palette doesn't owe anything to Impressionism and never becomes mushy. In every painting, there are places where color shifts between light and solidity with effortless fluency. Figure and ground, or, in Pousette-Dart's paintings, light and form, keep changing roles.

The dynamic configuration of stacked forms, planes, and bands, in tandem with the range of her palette, advances the likelihood that the primary sources for these paintings can be found in the vistas of the American Southwest, where the artist lived for a number of years. Their physical stacking and piled planes call to mind that area's panoramic views in which everything seems to sit on top of something else (and this includes the cultures that have settled there)—variegated strata of clouds piled up in a sky that's sitting on top of a mesa, which rises up from the desert plain, while the linear structures bring to mind both meteorological turbulence and the petroglyphs made by the region's earliest settlers. However, Pousette-Dart's glyphs are neither depictive nor symbolic; they seem to have been generated by the painting's physical and visual shapes. Yet, the resonance of the landscape is such that it's possible to imagine the artist intuitively tracking wind currents as she responds to the rounded planes of color.

Formally, the paintings consist of continuities, shifts, changes, reversals, inversions, and disruptions. Often, a plane's counterpart on the other side of the physical seam partially or obliquely mirrors it. The reversals and inversions add a topsy-turvy element that makes us ever more aware of the instability of our vantage point. It's not simply that one thing is mirroring another; it's that the mirroring subtly extends in all different directions until there is no originating form. The changes occur largely in terms of color. Do we break down the artist's groupings according to the curved planes or the physical forms? In terms of color and shape, how do the planes and forms join, invert, and separate?

What about the linear elements, which may, hug, bump against, or echo sides of the forms, as well as define planes within planes? Are the curved planes surfaces changed by light? One can even choose to see these paintings as celebrations of color (though they are much more than this), with all the many associations that interpretation brings to mind.

Instead of a reductive unity or a collage of disparate styles, Pousette-Dart arrives at a manifold abstraction. Using a vocabulary (at once personal and impersonal) of curved forms and looping, linear structures in conjunction with a warm palette inspired by nature, she achieves an inclusiveness that is open-ended, and which offers the viewer many access points. There is a generosity to these paintings that is rare in contemporary abstraction. Their staying power is the direct consequence of their logic, which arises out of the work, and the choices the artist made throughout; it is not something imposed. The sinuous lines change tempo, while the planes of color shift, modulate, or transform laterally and vertically. Every painting is specific without naming its subject. Our attention zooms in and out, noticing that the line does one thing in a lower panel, and quite another in the panel above. A contoured shape might mirror what is on the panel above, or shift the parameters enough to ignite an unexpected connection. Distance is suggested through the scale of the shapes from panel to panel, an effect that defies our expectations. Our attention is held by the rigorous way in which Pousette-Dart denies us our viewing habits while arriving at paintings that are full and restrained; her visual paradoxes provoke us to consider how we might begin to grasp what shall always elude us. This is the inconsistency of existence, particularly for an individual who doesn't seek sanctuary in orthodoxy and the idea that everything can be made to fit together. And this, of course, is what theorists can't stand—an artist who demonstrates that painting can be open to flights of imagination and the tug of memory without privileging either. Such painting is both itself and a set of possibilities, a dream of freedom.

1) Theodore Enslin, "O," *Nine* (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 2004), p.241.