

## Joanna Pousette-Dart: Floating World

Artseen

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Installation view: Joanna Pousette-Dart, Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, 2020. Courtesy Locks Gallery.

In 1938, the Austrian Surrealist painter Wolfgang Paalen embarked on a Canadian tour to collect indigenous Northwest Coast art for the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. He conjectured the totem pole carvings that he presently observed (as opposed to the aged ones he was after) might be devolving into mere “coats of arms” and in danger of losing what he considered their deeper mystical significance in shape-shifting allegories of human and animal nature. Although to contemporary ears this smacks of European cultural projection, Paalen was not altogether a “man of his age.” He also warned of a faulty misreading of “the animistic theory which (the West) has not understood because it seeks to homologize pre-individualistic thought with occidental dualism.” Paalen would go on to publish such thoughts in an essay entitled “Totem Art” in the journal DYN (1943) which was avidly read by painters of the New York School such as Jackson Pollock, Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. Echoes of indigenous Northwest Coast art schema (and other non-Western imagery) would show up in most of these painters’ formative works, in which they were grappling to explore compositional solutions not irrevocably wedded to Cubism. They were after a new form of abstract symbolism rather than a lateral rejiggering of the Golden Section. And they too were anxious to avoid making of this cross-cultural schemata de-spiritualized representations or merely “heraldic devices.” This admittedly long prologue is essential for a consideration of Joanna Pousette-Dart’s recent show of paintings because she is an undoubtable heir to this painterly



tradition. And this fact does not cast her achievement as determinist or derivative. She is a strong poet<sup>1</sup> in her own right. Her leap into this history is one made with an invention that forcefully expands upon that thread of abstract symbolism ever latent in American art.

Pousette-Dart's painting, in general, is decidedly uncool in that its aggressively-shaped, chromatically bold canvases adumbrate the liminal space between painting and sculpture with an irrepressible jouissance. It's interesting to note that the artist's father, the influential Abstract Expressionist painter and teacher Richard Pousette-Dart, started his career with ambitions to become a sculptor influenced by the chunky, directly-carved forms of the French artist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. Similar to Gaudier-Brzeska's stylized figuration (an epigenetic circuit arc?) Joanna Pousette-Dart's built canvases billow out in muscular, almost pneumatic expansions. The first thing one notices when entering the gallery is their looming presence. There is a humane, welcoming aspect to the phenomenal grasp with which the works initially take hold, not unlike first impressions of the decidedly more antic assemblage in Elizabeth Murray's works. On the second floor of the Locks Gallery, an austere palazzo-like building in downtown Philadelphia, a selection of the artist's medium to large works emerge in interrupted sequence behind a number of stout columns supporting the building's roof. The gallery's architectural influence almost parallels Pousette-Dart's gallery statement that she thinks of "the shape of (her) painting as space being edited by (her) peripheral vision." In this particular venue her various paintings' shapes are initially discovered as fragmentary (peripheral) incidents due to the hide-and-seek aspect of the central columns. Yet rather than breaking up a total, symphonic effect of the works revealed in unison, the installation's arrangement allows you to better consider each painting's individual aspects and details—from part to whole. There occurs in real time a "resultant space"<sup>2</sup> in the gallery that wonderfully echoes such graphically virtual spaces in the artist's paintings. And whereas the ambition of the "one shot" gestalt valued by such painters as Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis implies a will toward formal unity, Pousette-Dart offers shifting multiplicities in each of her paintings. This aspect of her work can be seen most particularly in *Banded Painting #3* (2013–14) in which two upwardly-arching shapes sandwich an elongated teardrop form. Each physically sculpted, stacked form contains a specific echoing motif, yet from top to bottom that echo starts to multiply and reverberate with a Doppler effect overlay. The stretched and attenuated forms of each panel are therefore held in tension with a downward visual reiteration of increasingly articulated form. But Pousette-Dart never lets this fugal effect get out of hand. She carefully orchestrates and isolates this play of echoes as if contained within a curvature of aeolian sandstone so that their reverberations ultimately unify and then diminish into one phenomenal sound. The panels' descending color harmonic from light cadmium yellow to dark ochre to deep warm burgundy is offset midway by a swipe of cerulean blue to seemingly superficial, decorative effect, but this color array is essential to the contrapuntal movement this work embodies and expresses.

What is most interesting in this grouping of work whose forms are stylistically repetitive is that between each work one finds oneself happily relinquishing any irrevocable memory of such repetition. This is important especially since Pousette-Dart has gambled with the odds that pattern can result in disinterest over time. As an example, in comparing two works that have approximately the same canvas shape format such as *Floating World #*



1 (2019) and Untitled (Blue and Gold) (2018–19) one finds nuance of color and gesture between that make of them singular works. The medium gray, Naples yellow, light blue, and dark red that band the two tangent, canoe-shaped canvases of Floating World #1 from top to bottom present flattened and logo-like while the different value and saturation of Untitled (Blue and Gold)'s blues and golds feel more related to the dawn array of a Chihuahuan desert landscape. In reference to the latter, the artist did actually reside for a time in the Galisteo Basin in New Mexico, an experience to which she attributes a sense of the tension between spatial fullness and attenuation which the valley and its sharply delineated, peripheral horizons evinced. It becomes evident as one moves between each of her paintings that Pousette-Dart can jump between the potential pitfalls of painting mere “heraldic devices” (logos) and cliché representations of natural (mystical) vision (ie. sunrises) with aplomb. It is this light-footedness that lends her work an elegant wit. One painting in the show that raised its voice slightly above this kind of reverberating color and form conversation is titled, appropriately enough, 3 Part Variation# 2 (three reds) (2015). It is the most stylistically strident in the exhibition because its shapes ascend in orderly rank from lower left to upper right so that together they imply a single gesture. The contingent, touching edges of each form also line up to the right. The piece is painted an analogous array of saturated and under-saturated oranges and reds offset by mellow whites and a very diminished yellow band. The certitude of the rectified forms and limited palette retain a declarative grandeur that some of the more complex compositions in the exhibition seem to leave more playfully interrogative.

A series of smaller drawings/paintings on paper was displayed in an intimate anteroom just behind the main gallery. Here one could discover some of the bones of the artist's graphic ruminations: an understanding, perhaps, of the morphology of the linear gestures that serve as piquant focal points in her larger works. I was taken by one drawing in particular, Untitled Red #3 (2008), as its looping, oxide-red composition offered a glimpse into an armature that might eventually scaffold and combine the range of Pousette-Dart's shaped inventions into a kind of magnum opus of recursive form. It is a vicarious pleasure to think that an artist carefully assembling the unique elements of their alphabet might speak with them in grand paragraphs one day.

1. Harold Bloom's term, in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* for the artist who so fully subsumes the tradition they address as to make of their aesthetic progenitors followers.
2. Bill Holm, naming how two positive form edges influence the spaces between in *Northwest Coast Indian Art; An Analysis of Form* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965) 57.