

Joanna Pousette-Dart with Joan Waltemath

October 2008

On the occasion of the painter's recent exhibit at Moti Hasson Gallery, which will be on view until November 1, Joanna Pousette-Dart welcomed Rail Editor-at-Large Joan Waltemath to her Broome Street studio to talk about her life and work.

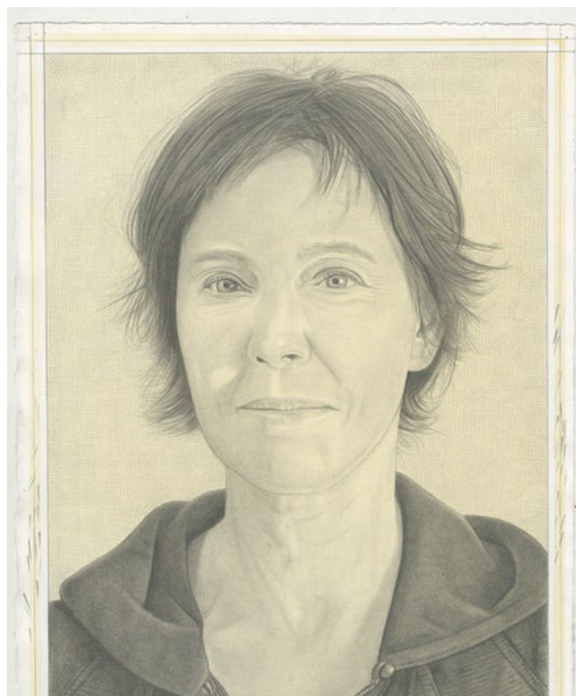
Joan Waltemath (Rail): I'm sure you've been asked many times before what it was like for you to grow up with a father who was well known as a painter?

Joanna Pousette-Dart: Well, there is the obvious difficulty of being taken on your own merits, but overall I think it was a tremendous advantage. I was able to absorb so much organically. I was lucky that my father was very generous with his time and his ideas—he didn't retreat to a studio and shut everybody out. I spent a lot of time working there, drawing, watching his processes, listening to music, talking. He was a great collector so the studio was filled with all sorts of wonderful objects and things from other cultures. It was an organized chaos and very rich. Also he passed on the belief that one's work is its own reward.

Rail: After having grown up working in your father's studio, how did you find school in Bennington?

Pousette-Dart: There were a lot of interesting people teaching at Bennington at the time I was there but the art department was heavily tilted toward a Greenbergian philosophy. [Jules] Olitsky, [Kenneth] Noland, [Larry] Poons were there, so were Isaac Witkin, Phillip King, as well as Vincent Longo, who I taught with years later at Hunter College. But, I found the whole formalist line difficult to swallow. To a large extent the other art students there were compliant and there was little Art History, so, I felt kind of embattled and aloof. The way I dealt with it was to take a lot of literature courses and to find ways to escape to New York.

Rail: It seems now that there's a paradigm for younger artists to go directly from school into a residency program, or into graduate school, and really start building their resumes right away, but when I graduated from school in the seventies that paradigm did not exist. And I cannot imagine



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.



Joanna Pousette-Dart, *Untitled (Dark Edge)*, 1993 - 1996, 9 x 12 feet. Boston Museum of Fine Art.

you experienced that either. So what did you do when you left school?

Pousette-Dart: I worked for a law clerk, I worked as a photo-stylist, I worked in the welfare department, and I painted at night or on weekends. I finally landed a teaching job at Ramapo College, which gave me a bit more time to paint. But at the time I really didn't think about running out and getting a gallery. I loved the activity of painting, planned to be doing it for the long haul, and was prepared to do other stuff to pay the way. The people I hung out with were doing the same kinds of jobs, and I think most of us were just trying to survive and concentrating on our work. It was

actually very liberating.

Rail: When I was at your opening, David Levi Strauss mentioned the Northwest Coast Indians, and the relationship between the shapes of your shaped canvases and those works. I'm wondering if that is coincidental, or if you have investigated those particular tribes and what they were doing shape-wise? Or the group of painters called Indian Space Painters, including Steve Wheeler, Peter Busa, Will Barnet, and few others, who very consciously referred to the Northwest Coast Indian artists in creating a kind of language of abstraction.

Pousette-Dart: I love the Native American art of the Northwest Coast. I'm very drawn to it and have been aware of it from the time I was very young. That said, I haven't set out to make work that specifically identifies with it or looks like it. But my work is about a kind of visceral interchange with nature and I want it to transport the viewer and I think it's this connection that people feel.

I actually began experimenting with shaped paintings when I was living in the Southwest. At the time I was making very large rectangular paintings composed of multiple panels. I was interested in the way Greek and Russian icons and early Italian painting made use of multiple panels to compress different aspects of a story into one painting, and I was intrigued with the way the artists moved you through this complex experience with color and form. It was almost a form of animation. Anyway, I was staying in Gallisteo, New Mexico, which is a very strange landscape. The Gallisteo Basin is a vast flat expanse and it's surrounded by four mountain ranges. The main sensation I felt there was the curvature of the earth, and painting within a rectangle seemed increasingly arbitrary—it seemed to turn the experience into a picture. I was taking 360 degree photographs, which I stuck together with tape to create a continuous flattened landscape. In taking the photographs I could see the light changing the interrelationship of all the elements from frame to frame as I was shooting. I began making drawings with the photos in mind, cutting shapes and putting them together and these drawings ultimately led to the shaped panels.

Rail: When I was looking at your drawings and then looking at the paintings I became aware of the movement between them. One can see from the outside that there's a very complex relationship



“Untitled (Cañones #2)” (2007-2008). Acrylic on canvas over wood panels. 79 x 121 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Moti Hasson Gallery, New York.

between the drawings and the paintings. I’m wondering if you could elaborate on that a little.

Pousette-Dart: Drawing is about a very different kind of focus for me and I find it hard to do when I’m in the middle of paintings. I tend to draw when I’m between things or have hit a snag. It’s a bit like dreaming to me, freewheeling, unedited.

The first shaped paintings I did consisted of two curved shapes that met on a tangent and the place where they met didn’t allow for a lot of drawing. They met at

a point and everything expanded or unraveled from that point. The kind of drawing that formed out of that juncture was very different from the drawn forms in the more recent work, because there is a longer expanse where the panels meet. I wanted to change the nature of the shift between the interior forms and the exterior shape.

Rail: What you’re describing about the line on the outside of the shape and the line on the inside of the shape suggests, like your drawing itself, a very complex relationship between the part and the whole. I wonder if you have any conscious thoughts about that part/whole relationship or if you could even say that your pieces are wholes, in and of themselves? Once you go beyond the relationship of that interior line to that exterior line, which creates a part/whole relationship, it throws into question whether or not the whole of the painting isn’t itself a fragment of some larger whole.

Pousette-Dart: Well, that’s all very true. You know, it’s a kind of conundrum because I think the whole painting is formed in a sense from a certain feeling of peripheral vision. It’s like what I can see and make sense of or what my memory has taken in—because really, these are remembered light-space situations. In a sense I feel the observer becomes present in the painting; the paintings are like a mask you look through.

Rail: I’m reminded of Carl Andre’s quote about sculpture as a thing being “a whole and a thing it is not.” You really turn that around in your work. It’s not a whole and a thing it is not, in that sense; rather, it’s a whole and a thing that it’s part of, and that’s a radically different position. That brings me to what I find really compelling about your work: you seem to be able to very easily and clearly set up metaphoric structures that allow for philosophical ruminations that make your position about things clear. For me, that’s the real key to what abstraction can do—its optimum possibility.

Pousette-Dart: I think I do this through a largely alchemical process—I start with these elements that in and of themselves have no meaning and in putting them together in a particular way, I come up with a third thing, and how I got there is a kind of mystery.



Rail: I also notice that within those contours or lines (it's hard to categorize them since they have very ambiguous and different functions in the drawings as opposed to in the paintings), there are subtle changes in colors especially in the paintings. Could you tell us a bit about that?

Pousette-Dart: In both the drawings and the paintings I try to suggest line moving through light, but I rely heavily on transparency and gesture in the drawings. In the paintings I want light to appear as though it's constantly readjusting as it does in nature. I layer the surfaces to create variations in temperature and tonality to make the ground feel as if it's moving. The lines are built up out of thin layers of colors, which can change incrementally according to their relationship with the ground.

Rail: One can see the different tonalities of green, for instance, in "Untitled (Cañones #3)." Likewise with the subtle changes of red in "Untitled (Cañones # 4)."

Pousette-Dart: Right. It's a way of creating depth without resorting to illusionistic space.

Rail: Are they painted in slow or quick pace?

Pousette-Dart: It depends. There are different stages. In the beginning I use tape and move it around to get a sense of various possibilities. This can go on for days or weeks. Then I get rid of the tape and begin to draw freehand. An image can appear very quickly but it's always subject to change at any given moment. I move from line to concentrate on the ground, and vice versa. The painting process is a continual adjustment back and forth between the two.

Rail: Is there a special kind of brush you use for that function?

Pousette-Dart: I have a pathetic brush collection. I buy wonderful brushes that end up sitting in water or full of caked paint and ink. Occasionally this makes them better. I use watercolor brushes, house paint brushes, calligraphy brushes, foam brushes, and frequently use wood extensions so I can work from a distance.

Rail: Your paintings are very buoyant and I could almost say lyrical, especially the color. Do you see yourself related to Lyrical Abstraction?

Pousette-Dart: Whether or not it's true, the word lyrical always has the connotation of romanticism to me. I don't really see the paintings as being romantic. But I dislike categorizations in general. The paintings are very much about sensation and how the act of perceiving becomes conscious. I would like them to be visceral and animate, like seeing a thing for the first time. I don't go about trying to put colors together in a nice way, I'm not trying to soothe or idealize. I don't ever think about color or shape for that matter, in a "what would look good with this" way.

Rail: One thing I was thinking about, in terms of your painting, and this is something I consider with nearly every work, is the idea that either form or color must predominate. When I look at your paintings I see that there's this very interesting balance between form and color, and that, you'd be hard pressed to say that one is dominating. The first thing that hits you is the outline of the shaped canvases, so you're seeing the form. But then the space of the canvas is really determined, to a large degree in my eye, by the color. So you have this tension working between these two things,



which gives your work a great deal of dynamism.

Pousette-Dart: Yes, I think my work involves the disparate elements being brought into momentary balance. I would be hard pressed to really say whether I thought line or color predominated. For me, the originating impulse for a work is light. But then that light is always wedded to place, wedded to a particular event. And that is where the drawing comes in. I found that in order for the painting to satisfy me I have to interweave those two elements in some way in which they can't be separated.

Rail: That brings me back to something you said earlier when we were talking about the resemblance between some of your forms and the Northwest Coast Indians. You clarified how your forms evolved out of landscape, which speaks to the idea that there's a language of form operating here to speak about the land, the mountains, and the sky. Have you ever thought about what you're doing in any sense as a language? Do you feel that you've developed, within abstraction, your own language of form?

Pousette-Dart: All I know is that every painting creates a new set of problems. I arrive at the shape by making an actual scale drawing on paper stapled to the wall. Sometimes I have drawings in the notebook which suggest this configuration, and sometimes not. When the panels are fabricated and arrive in my studio, it's always a shock and a surprise. It's as though I've never seen them before and everything that I've previously thought about doing goes out the window.

Rail: After I spent some time with your work and I could see how they started breathing, in a sense—opening up or unfolding might be a better way to say it—so what one might initially perceive as flatness really becomes a spatial experience. I started to see the shapes almost like barques. And I started to think of the Egyptian barques, which were conceived of as carrying the bodies into the other world. It's a beautiful metaphor for what you said earlier about wanting your works to transport the viewer.

Pousette-Dart: Yes, that's interesting. I think that's something that people see and feel in many of the paintings, that boat-like form.

Rail: Is that alien to you or is that something that you could embrace?

Pousette-Dart: If you're dealing with circular forms, that shape can be arrived at without consciously thinking: "boat." But that's okay, I like that reference. Though I sometimes attach a name to a group of paintings just to identify them; I resist titling work because I don't want to close down people's interpretations, or suggest how the paintings should be looked at. Ideally I'd like people to arrive at them fresh with nothing but their own experiences. When I first showed paintings related to these about four years ago, people saw sails and boats and all sorts of things and these were paintings that I had made in the desert!

Rail: There's a real performative aspect to what you're doing—I mean as a painter one can just look at these long curvaceous lines on your canvas and see how they're done with such a seeming ease. It makes the scale of the larger paintings seem exactly right. When I first came in and I saw the smaller paintings, I questioned the scale of those paintings and it made me want to ask you how you determine the scale of these larger pieces. Do you feel them in a particular relationship to your



body, your gesture? I noticed in your catalogue that all of the smaller ones were labeled studies.

Pousette-Dart: Yes, perhaps this is misleading. It suggests that one day they might be bigger, but that's not the way I work. I almost never "blow up" the smaller work. The smaller ones I cut out of board by myself rather than having them fabricated. I'm able to adjust the shape as I work which makes the process quite different. You could say that I tune the shape to the drawing in these and the drawing to the shape in the larger ones. I arrive at the scale of the larger paintings through working and reworking the initial drawing, the one given to the fabricator until it feels right and I think that sense of rightness is definitely related to my body, my field of vision, and my reach.

Rail: It seems like the smaller ones are scaled down.

Pousette-Dart: I don't intend them to be smaller versions of larger paintings. I would like each to have its own sense of rightness, to use your word.

Rail: Have you been bothered at all by discussions about the irrelevance of painting?

Pousette-Dart: I don't think painting will ever be irrelevant. I think it's a very human thing to do. I am concerned though, that people's attention spans are getting shorter and shorter. I think painting depends on people being able to spend time with a work, to be intimate with it, and to want to make the effort to meet it halfway. My one worry is that people don't have the time or the interest to look at something complex. I think the museums are complicit in this. They've become increasingly mall-like and moving crowds seems the dominant concern. It's hard to feel you can stop and be alone with a work. The insistence on telling people what they should be seeing through wall texts and audio machines doesn't help.

Rail: What do you look at to nourish yourself on the kind of complexity that you're creating in your work? Or do you look at simple things?

Pousette-Dart: My idea of a good time is to wonder around the Met. I have very broad tastes, though I've been so into the studio lately, I haven't seen much in the last several months. My paintings have been inspired by many things—Mozarabic manuscripts, Romanesque painting (particularly from Catalonia), Mayan art, especially those exquisite vases, Islamic art, Chinese landscape painting, Chinese calligraphy to wall paintings, De Kooning, Mondrian...I could go on.

Rail: I think it's interesting what you remember that you saw.

Pousette-Dart: Yes, we have a very beautiful big red spiral painting by Paul Mogenson, who I think is a terrific and underexposed painter. For years it had been just outside my studio, at the top of the stairway. We took it down when we did some renovation and I realized, when it was no longer there, how big a part it had played in the development of this work. I loved that it had such impact and seemed so much larger than its size. I realized these were criteria I was after in my own work and every time I left the studio and went down the stairs I was unconsciously sizing up my own work in relation to this painting to see if it passed muster.

Rail: Other painters have reconfigured the shape of the canvas in the seventies, such as [Ron]



Gorchov and [Ralph] Humphrey, not to mention [Ellsworth] Kelly. Have those artists been important to your work during that time?

Pousette-Dart: I was certainly influenced by looking at all this work. I also thought a lot about David Novros's work, his shaped paintings that bring the wall into the painting, as well as his frescos and painted rooms.

Rail: As you spoke I was thinking, one could take a long time to consider the way that you are dealing with boundaries—the boundaries between a line and a form that also struck me as a very powerful subject of exploration in your drawing. In looking for that moment when you could say where line becomes form, I see, in some cases, you seem to say that it's impossible to demarcate. There are other cases where you see the boundaries between two shapes running along a tangent and it is clear. There are boundaries made from voids, lines and the place where the edges of colors meet; all of these subtle shifts have significance in terms of how one moves forward with thought.

Pousette-Dart: That makes me think of the sculptures of New Ireland, which have always intrigued me. They are intricately, three dimensionally carved out of a single piece of wood. All the surfaces are then painted with delicate patterns. They are so complicated you never feel like you're able to see the whole at once and part of that is because the painting seems to dematerialize the object. You have two worlds perfectly interlocked and so complicated that you really can only take them in intuitively.

Rail: Do you aim to achieve this kind of balance in your own work between the object and the painted surface or could you see yourself moving further into the third-dimension, akin to Elizabeth Murray?

Pousette-Dart: I prefer the power of suggestion.