

HYPERALLERGIC

Joanna Pousette-Dart's Landscape

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Pousette-Dart's career is proof that the art world hardly ever embraces single-minded women in the middle of their careers, whereas with men it is different.

I went to Joanna Pousette-Dart's studio in mid-February of this year. I have gone there a number of times over the years, starting around 2007, when I first wrote a catalog essay for her show at Moti Hasson in 2008, which was the last time that she had a solo exhibition in New York. In 2017, she was included in a four-person show, *Aspects of Abstraction*, at Lisson Gallery, which I reviewed.

The reason I went to her studio was to see a group of paintings and drawings that were about to be shipped off to Germany, where she was having a show, *Joanna Pousette-Dart*, at the Wiesbaden Museum (March 29–June 30, 2019). Since I wouldn't be able to see the show, I decided I would write about my experience of her work around the time that it would be on view in Wiesbaden.

The fact that Pousette-Dart has not shown regularly in New York throughout this century but now has a solo museum show in Germany is – to my mind – just further proof of how obliged many institutions are to their trustees; they prefer to exhibit their board members' assets rather than art.

From the mid-1970s to the early '80s, Pousette-Dart was represented by the Susan Caldwell Gallery in New York. After that gallery closed, she stopped showing regularly in the city, but, more importantly, her work changed. These paintings, which are among the strongest she has ever made, offer us a chance to stop and think about the assortment of inspiration she has drawn upon over the past 30 years.

In the late 1980s, Pousette-Dart lived in Galisteo, New Mexico, which is on a desert plain surrounded by mountains. Other artists associated with that particular geography were Agnes Martin, Bruce Nauman and Susan Rothenberg, and Allan and Gloria Graham. This is how Pousette-Dart described the landscape to Joan Waltemath in *The Brooklyn Rail* (October 2008):

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



Joanna Pousette-Dart at Museum Wiesbaden, installation view: "3 Part Variation #10" (2014–15), acrylic on canvas on shaped wood panel, 60 x 81 inches (left); "3 Part Variation #6" (2013), acrylic on canvas on shaped wood panels, 60 x 81 inches (right); with a painting by Morris Louis visible through the doorway (all photos by the artist for Hyperallergic)



Joanna Pousette-Dart at Museum Wiesbaden: installing "Untitled (Blue, Black, Red)" (2011/13), acrylic on canvas on shaped panels, triptych, 9 panels, approximately 8 x 25 feet

putting them together and these drawings ultimately led to the shaped panels.

As her statement suggests, she was interested in a state of constant motion, as underscored by the light and sky. The first shaped paintings consisted of two boat-like shapes, with their curved sides facing down, stacked one on top of the other. While some critics have seen these works as being influenced by Northwest Coast Indian art and the Indian Space Painters, such as Steve Wheeler and Peter Busa, this is not the case. They were inspired by a terrain in which the changing light is often dramatically embodied by its interactions with the landscape.

Pousette-Dart was educated at Bennington College when the faculty included Kenneth

Noland and Jules Olitski, artists who were aligned with Clement Greenberg. Early in her life, she chose not to connect herself to this or any other club and pursued an independent path, which, as I see it, is one reason why recognition came late, as it has to other self-determining women (Louise Bourgeois, Alice Neel, Joyce Scott, and Maria Lassnig). The art world hardly ever embraces single-minded women in the middle of their careers, whereas with men it is different.

If Pousette-Dart were going to make a shaped canvas, it had to be for a personal reason rather than a formal one. The sloping forms evoked the earth's curvature and mountains of the New Mexican landscape: it gave her a format in which to establish a relationship between the outer shape and the inner forms, explore shifts in hue and value, as well as overlay the stacked forms with an arabesque line. Sequence, disruption, panorama, and alteration — all ways of perceiving an immense, elemental landscape — became central to her paintings.

In the work that she was sending to Wiesbaden, she vertically stacked between two and three of the curving shapes. The bottommost section could be either the widest of the group or the smallest, which means that the compositional balance struck by the work ran the gamut from secure to precarious. The curved sides can extend down or up. The succession of internal shapes can be read vertically as well as horizontally, with the seams between the shapes conveying both disruption and sequencing. In three blue, slightly different shaped canvases, which have been vertically stacked from the smallest up to the largest, Pousette-Dart has painted a cropped, circular, tan-colored shape inside each of the panels, its top defined by the panel's physical edge. It is as if we are watching an animated progression of the moon rising up from the horizon.

In another painting, the interplay of reds, browns, and oranges, along with two different dark blues (each confined to its panel) becomes a carefully orchestrated sequence of changes and shifts, with no particular relationship dominating the others. While we might notice at first the internal color relationships in a single panel, other correspondences come into play once we enlarge our



Joanna Pousette-Dart at Museum Wiesbaden, installation view: “3 Part Variation #2 (3 reds)” (2015), acrylic on canvas on shaped wooden panels, 77 x 91 inches (left); “Untitled (Blue, Black, Red)” (2011/13), acrylic on canvas on shaped panels, triptych, 9 panels, approximately 8 x 25 feet (center); “Banded Painting #5” (2015–16), acrylic on canvas on shaped wood panels, 82 x 78 inches (right)

focus to take in the whole work. This connectivity is further enhanced by the relationship of the interior elements to each other. The shapes and lines within one panel are variations on those in another. And yet, even as we cue into these harmonic convergences, Pousette-Dart is likely to introduce a different kind of

shape or line into the panel that prevents us from viewing the connections reductively.

Her boat-like shapes can evoke the earth’s curvatures, or mesas rising in the distance, or the changing sky, which we can never see in its entirety — the rounded forms thereby also invoke the limits of our sight. These forms feel simultaneously expansive and compressed. Some are elongated and narrow, while others are squat and compacted. She seems to never repeat a particular configuration.

Pousette-Dart’s use of yellows, umbers, blues, reds, oranges, and greens is connected to the landscape and sky above, but the logic of each painting is internal, as it moves from dark to light, and from warm to cool. Moreover, for all their evocation of the interaction of light and desert landscape, they elude any geographic name or phenomenological concept we might apply to it. This is one of the many deep strengths of Pousette-Dart’s work: you cannot simply say what you are looking at. You have to open yourself up and discover just what the colors, forms, and lines are doing.

Pousette-Dart arrived at these paintings through her experience of the landscape. To do so, she had to internalize a vastness that is both awe-inspiring and deeply unsettling. In other words, she had to embrace her subjectivity and recognize that she did not experience the world the same way everyone else did. There is persistent myth that all experience is secondhand. It is a way to influence people to conform. Thankfully, Pousette-Dart did not buy into this art world fairy tale.

Joanna Pousette-Dart continues at the Museum Wiesbaden (Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 2, Wiesbaden, Germany) through June 30.