Joanna Pousette-Dart’s work is a visceral experience. Organic and warm forms embrace one another just as they do the viewer. Similarly, the paintings’ colors are sweet and seductive and actively engage one another in often indefinable and unexpected contrasts. Ultimately, and together, the shapes and colors give form to feeling and emotion, but they are never overwrought. And when large, the scale of the canvases is not ungainly. Pousette-Dart knows when to stop. Compensating for the beauty of the paintings is their complexity. They are cerebral and widely allusive.

The four large (including 2 Part Variation #3 [After Pierrot] (2015), measuring 87 1/2” x 120””) multi-part, shaped paintings in this show could be viewed as alluding to landscape—desert, sea, sky, the curvature of the earth—but, actually, they don’t describe any specific place or figure. Pousette-Dart creates and lays claim to her own particular territory—or “location”—as she would have it. Inhabiting that territory is 2 Part Variation #3—two acrylic-on wood crescent-shaped panels stacked one atop the other, a pink panel below and a yellow one above. Navy-bluish limning on the pink one and a turquoise-ish intervention across the yellow renders the components lively and playful. At the same time, each element can be viewed as in an altarpiece, with the sections offering different commentaries on the color relations.
Therein lies her serene originality. Despite Pousett-Dart’s time in Mexico and New Mexico as well as Europe, and the Far East, with stops in the ancient and modern worlds—all of which inspired her and are deeply embedded in her paintings—the cultural references are in no way identifiable. The shapes and hues are not only her own, but are, remarkably, always in transition. The paintings’ curves lead to an open-endedness, a nondeclarative quality. And, although the paintings look computer-screen flat with unmodulated hues, we readily perceive their depth of tone. We could view this in relation to some works by Kenneth Noland from the early to mid ’90s, where the segments, many of them also crescent-shaped, are predominantly vertical: the colors are darker, cooler, and almost uncomfortable together and connected by a Plexiglas band of contrasting tone. Noland’s forms are definitively measured and hard-edged with more graphic finality. Could we call it guy stuff?

As with animation, Pousett-Dart’s shapes segue into one another, regularly conveying motion and pulling our eyes off the canvas. There is the inescapable allusion to boat shapes, which adds to the perception of movement as the horizontality of the canvases suggests progression. And, more to that point, there is an overriding appearance of liquidity and, by extension, shape-shifting.
These works are conversational. We might read them from east to west before being led around and back again. Not, however, without pausing at a few Brechtian links, such as an improvisational squiggle atop the segments or a narrow snake-like shape with a pointed tip stretching downward and connecting the panels as an interlude. At the same time, colors have been extensively tinkered with and layered, creating an atmosphere in which light and space shift expression.

Also in the show are six watercolors (actually gouache and acrylic on paper) and a suite of four sumi-ink-on-rice-paper drawings. The watercolors, consisting of stacked shapes in a vertical format have a different attitude and affect from the large shaped and composite works. The richly colored passages are very compact, and almost squashed together, claiming their turf, and unlike the horizontal works, they have an architectural quality. The small drawings take another direction. They call to mind Brice Marden and automatic writing, which leads us into the realm of poetry, where we can follow Pousette-Dart’s imagining and lines of thought. In that sense, the works are direct and refer to the venerable Eastern and Western traditions of writing as drawing and vice versa. Following these lines forces a different kind of reading, a closer, more internal one. That’s where we step in.

Contributor

Barbara A. MacAdam

Barbara A. MacAdam is a freelance writer and former long-time editor at ARTnews.
The Etruscan Tomb of the Leopards at Tarquinia is rife with playful paradoxes: a spacious entombment celebrating the cheerfully deceased, the wall paintings are alive with brilliant color and twitchy patterning, although they repose in a dark enclosure. It doesn’t surprise me at all that Joanna Pousette-Dart mentioned Etruscan tomb paintings in an interview in the *Brooklyn Rail’s* June 2019 issue as part of a list of art experiences that have “particularly affected” her, as her work exhibits its own intriguing contradictions, rewarding viewers for their attempts to “unlock” the paintings’ “logic.”¹
In her first solo exhibition at Lisson Gallery, Pousette-Dart has included larger-scale paintings alongside vivid 12-inch square gouache and acrylic studies that at first glance look like they mimic the paintings, before going their own ways, and similarly-sized fuzzy sumi ink sketches that have seeped into the weave of their rice paper grounds. These last are spontaneous and responsive to happenstance, especially when compared to the studies, which feature disciplined application of color in the artist’s signature blade shapes. In contrast, Pousette-Dart’s recent paintings seem hard-edged when seen from a distance, but reveal her hand in drips, brushstrokes, and in the case of 2 Part Variation #3 (After Pierrot) (2015), frenetic squiggles filling in the space between a complex blue and blushing salmon pink. Plateau (2019) looks flat until our eyes adjust to the subtle gradient of a cerulean blue that travels from dark to light, right to left, in the lower half of the painting, following yellow-orange arcs that undulate from the right-hand corner. The brown hue in the lower left of 3 Part Variation #12 (2017) almost appears to be developed by combining an orange outline painted over it with the green shape the orange circumscribes. It is entropically blended, like the colors in a wonderfully expensive faux-fur coat.

Joanna Pousette-Dart, 3 Part Variation #12, 2017. Acrylic on canvas on shaped wood panels, 66 1/2 x 90 x 1 1/2 inches. © Joanna Pousette-Dart. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.
Such is the intricacy of Pousette-Dart’s paintings that even when they are not internally contradictory, they seem nearly so. *3 Part Variation #12*’s color feels like a crisp day that is, implausibly, also humid. Contour lines do not contain volume so much as open up fields to space; I suspect this is because they do not always close and even when they do, they thicken and thin elegantly. The paintings are both allusive and singular. The artist’s swoops somehow manage to remind me simultaneously of the graphic assuredness of a Haida thunderbird as well as the loping sinuosity of pulled taffy.


The paintings included here are constructed of multiple parts, and these offer the most surprising revelations. They are painted on canvas that has been stretched over panel. Though deep, their beveled edges slant inward, covering most cast shadows and causing them to appear as though they are hovering over the walls on which they are hung. The stretching is pristine and permits the panels to snuggle up to each other without necessarily touching. The two panels comprising *2 Part Variation #3* fit so neatly together that I am tempted to compare them to nesting spoons. The gravity of spoons isn’t quite right, though, because the panels do not rest on top of one another. Instead, maybe they are like a skate and ice, incising and resisting simultaneously. In *3 Part Variation #6* (2013), the charcoal black of the topmost panel looks like it respects this division, but when we draw close, we
topmost panel looks like it respects this division, but when we draw close, we see that its lower painted edge dips into the middle panel, just overlapping by a few centimeters and pressing into its partner’s space. As a result, the middle seems to compress and bulge, a light blue parabola that swells in response. The panels themselves, though, remain discrete. They are physically distinct even as they visually touch, their intermittence quietly suggestive, Pousette-Dart’s intelligently intimate paintings excitingly defying initial expectations.\(^2\)

**Endnotes**


**Contributor**

Amanda Gluibizzi

Amanda Gluibizzi is an art editor at the *Rail*. An art historian, she is the Co-Director of The New Foundation for Art History.
Art | In Conversation

JOANNA POUSETTE-DART with Barbara Rose

“To be uncompromising in developing and following your own vision is a radical act in itself”

I first wrote about Joanna Pousette-Dart’s work in 1985 in an article titled “Rule Breaker’s” published in VOGUE. I have followed her work from the very beginning. Her paintings always fascinated me because of their uniqueness and originality, but I could not figure out exactly how she made them or what her inspirations were. I did this interview to make her processes and intentions clearer. I asked the questions to which I wanted the answers myself.

Barbara Rose (Rail): You’ve recently returned from Germany where you had a major exhibition at the Wiesbaden museum. Why do you think there is interest in American art in Germany? Is there more support for painting there?

Joanna Pousette-Dart: It seems perhaps they’re more open, more idealistic, and less market driven. Museums there seem to have a creative latitude—maybe because they’re funded differently—commercial issues don’t drive them.

Rail: Do the Wiesbaden paintings constitute an installation or are they discrete individual works?

Pousette-Dart: They’re individual works done over a period of 10-12 years. In the studio, the paintings begin to speak to one another. I wanted to set up a similar situation in the museum. I didn’t want it to be strictly chronological. Jörg Daur who is a brilliant curator, was very open to this idea. He gave each room it’s own logic, it’s own sense of light and drama. The beauty of the

Joanna Pousette-Dart, Two Part Variation #2 (red, yellow, blue) (Detail), diptych, 2012 - 2013, 81 x 123 inches. Photo: Bernd Fickert. Courtesy the artist.
museum is that there are clear vantage points from one room to another. This allowed us to amplify the conversation between works.

**Rail:** When did you begin to use shaped wood panels and how did you arrive at the shapes?

**Pousette-Dart:** I began in the late 1990s. I traveled to New Mexico in the mid-70s. It was a huge turning point in my work. But it wasn't until I returned in the '80s that I conceived of abandoning the rectangle and developing curved panels to achieving the sense of scale I was after. At the time I was staying in the Galisteo Basin in New Mexico. Being in this enormous expanse surrounded by distant mountain ranges in each direction makes you aware of the primal relationship of figure to horizon and earth to sky. In the mornings and evenings I'd take snapshots with throw-away cameras and tape them together to create 360 degree panoramas. They were a record of the way the passage of light changed the relationships of everything from shot to shot. From these I began making drawings and cutting them up. When I got back I had the first panels made by a furniture maker.

**Rail:** What did the first shaped paintings look like?

**Pousette-Dart:** One of the best examples of the early shaped paintings is in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It was made in 1993 and is composed of two roughly half circular shapes that rested one on top of the other with the curved sides down. The drawing in the painting unraveled from the point where they met. These early paintings were all quite large, 9’ x 12’ or so. I hadn’t begun to bevel the edges so they were about two inches thick. They were more limited in color because I was concentrating more on how the drawing within the panel was going to interact with the shape.

**Rail:** Why do you think people often see the image of boat or canoe or the forms of Native Americans of the Northwest Coast in your work?
**Pousette-Dart:** That’s not my intention. The shapes are based loosely on parts of hemispheres. As time went on these forms got flattened, elongating the areas where they came together so the forms may resemble forms that people associate with canoes or boats. I think it becomes a way to associate or describe them. The configurations, their balance, and the way they’re painted all suggest motion and this may be another factor. I think the correspondence with Northwest Coast art has to do with a sort of animist quality they have. The painting morphs between being an object and also a way of seeing. To me the power of abstraction is that people find their own way to connect with a painting. The particular use of line, form, color set off a certain sensory connection that transcends a single meaning. I’m not interested in telling people how to see what I make. This is one reason I don’t generally title things except in the most open ended way.

**Rail:** You draw a lot in a free, one might say “automatic,” style that does not depict things. How would you describe the relationship of your drawing to your painting?

![Joanna Pousette-Dart, all Untitled, 2019, 18 3/4 x 16. Photo: Bernd Fickert. Courtesy the artist.](image)

**Pousette-Dart:** I do two types of drawing. Drawings that start as studies for paintings and drawings which are totally improvisational. The first deal with shape and line in a way that’s similar to the paintings, although they rarely end up having a one to one relationship to a painting. The improvisational drawings are relating to the rectangle of the page and they are freewheeling and associative, like dreaming. The physical kinesthetic motion of making them somehow stays with me and ends up in paintings.

**Rail:** You paint large and small paintings. How do you create a sense of monumentality in small paintings? Is there a reason you make small works?
**Pousette-Dart:** The small paintings are, for some reason, harder for me to make. But I like making them because I can cut them and alter the shape as I’m working so they can undergo either massive changes or a kind of fine tuning which isn’t possible on the large pieces. What gives something scale is a mystery. You know when something has it but there’s no formula for achieving it. People always wonder if the small paintings are studies. If anything, I would say they’re exploratory because I have never made a larger painting based on a smaller one. If they work, their rightness and their scale seem inseparable.

**Rail:** Your work takes a long time to make and a long time to experience visually because it’s complex and detailed.

**Pousette-Dart:** The initial stages are time consuming. To arrive at the shape I make a drawing in actual size on paper mounted to the wall. This wall drawing usually begins from non-specific watercolors or notebook drawings. When I feel it’s right I give it to the fabricator to be cut. Then the panels are stretched and gessoed in the studio. Once I’m actually painting on them they develop at their own rate: some faster, others more slowly.

The process of finding the image feels like unlocking the painting’s logic. Ideally, I let things sit for periods of time and go back to them or consider them finished. I spend a lot of time sitting and ruminating.... I want to make something that is absorbing enough to draw you in and keep you there.

**Rail:** Who are the contemporary artists who’ve worked with shape that have most interested you?

**Pousette-Dart:** The artists I’m interested in were first dealing with the sense of painting as wall or as object. Many who showed at Park Place Gallery were important to me and to my thinking about what a painting could be. But my work is less programmatic. Many of the artists who showed with Bykert Gallery in the ’70s and ’80s continue to interest me: Paul Mogenson, David Novros, Brice Marden. There are others like Robert Mangold and Elizabeth Murray. Frank Stella’s work has also affected my thinking. But I think my use of shape is uniquely about movement and creates a kind of spatial continuum in a novel way.

**Rail:** Did Monet’s or other Abstract Expressionist artists’ horizontal extension of the canvas—so that the viewer is lost inside the pictorial field—impress you?

**Pousette-Dart:** Yes but I’m inclined to go back to earlier sources—the caves and Giotto’s Arena Chapel for example. There’s just nothing comparable to the experience of a painted place. The sad reality is that few artists—even if they’re actively pursuing it—get a chance to paint on that scale. I think the experience of these places has absolutely affected what I make. I’ve tried to bring some of the resonance and complexity of this experience into my own work.
**Rial:** You've spoken of the sense of peripheral vision in your work. What do you mean by that?

**Pousette-Dart:** I think of the shape of the painting as a space being edited by my peripheral vision. So while the painting is meant to be whole within itself, I would like it to feel as though it's part of a larger whole extending beyond the frame. I'd like the rhythm and the light of the painting to reverberate beyond its edges.

**Rial:** You and Larry Poons have both told me the most important element in painting is light. Many old masters believed that as well. Color, through which light filtered, is definitely a primary concern in your work. It's obvious to me that the law of simultaneous color contrast that launched Impressionism is at work in your choice of tints and shades. Why do you use a more extensive palette than the primary colors of Constructivism?

**Pousette-Dart:** I think one of the primary jobs of a painter is to transform color into light. The kind of light is different for different artists. Since I'm interested in a certain relationship between light and form which I associate with the natural world, flat, planar use of color doesn't work for me. I use whatever colors I need to in order to create the quality of light or the placement in space I'm looking for. I try to establish color relationships that feel somehow believable or "real" in an ambient way. I don't have a fixed or identifiable palette, but I think my paintings have an identifiable quality of light.

**Rial:** What was it like to grow up surrounded by a world of art? Your father and grandfather were both painters and your mother and grandmother were writers. How has being surrounded by artists affected your own practice?

**Pousette-Dart:** You have no way of knowing how different it is until you go out into the world. I grew up completely steeped in music and art. I learned a tremendous amount through osmosis. But then ultimately you have to find a way to own it, which is a challenge in itself. There's not much to rebel against so you have to invent yourself from another place. I feel incredibly fortunate for having grown up with the sense that painting is something you do for the love of it—that making something is its own reward. This idea made me very resilient and aesthetically self-reliant, but also a bit of a perfectionist.

**Rial:** As a Bennington graduate, you were surrounded by Color Field painters like Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski who taught there. How did you avoid becoming a Clement Greenberg follower? Did anything at Bennington influence you?

**Pousette-Dart:** I felt completely at odds with the whole Greenbergian Formalist thing, but there weren't many alternative points of view. I thrashed around not being able to find any real direction, just knowing what I didn't want to do. It was kind of depressing. I took a lot of literature courses because Bennington also had a really stellar literature department and at the time and I thought I might be interested in writing. I figured out a schedule that would allow me to escape to New York for extended weekends.
Rail: Your early paintings were done off the stretcher in a manner that parallels the aesthetic of the Support/Surface group who came into prominence in Paris in the '70s and '80s. Do you know their work? They were heavily influenced by theory. Is theory or conceptual concerns important to you?

Pousette-Dart: I consider the paintings you’re talking about to be my first serious paintings. I wasn’t aware of the Support/Surface group at the time but there were many people in New York in the ’60s and ’70s who were challenging the notion of the traditional painting support. Artists who were showing at Park Place who were interested in painting as an object interacting with the wall and others like Alan Shields, Sam Gilliam, Elizabeth Murray so these precedents were important for me at the time.

My paintings from this period weren’t driven by theory. They were much more intuitive in origin. I had been drawn to indigenous art of all kinds so I came up with this approach of making something that could acquire shape organically the way you might weave a basket or make a painting in the sand. The paintings were not stretched. They were woven together from six irregularly cut strips which created a very loose grid and then coated with multiple layers of rhoplex, sand, and pigment. They were relatively rigid and hung by hidden grommets on the back. I showed one in the Whitney Biennial in 1972. I maybe made 15 or 20 of these in all. Then I went to New Mexico and I began to stretch the paintings and they became more rectilinear and colorful.

Rail: You spent years traveling. What specific art works particularly affected you?

Pousette-Dart: The Alhambra in Granada, Spain; wall paintings in Taüll, Catalonia; Giotto’s Arena Chapel; the tomb of Galla Placidia in Ravenna; the Etruscan tomb paintings; the caves... I could go on, and I haven’t mentioned Mexico. Painted places that meld art with architecture have always been a huge source of inspiration for me. The experience of being in these places made me want to try to build some of the feeling of encompassing space into my own work and to make the paintings interact with the wall to create their own sense of place.

Rail: You are a woman, a wife, and a mother as well as a painter. How do you feel about Feminism? You seem to shy away from groups to stand on your own. Is that difficult?

Pousette-Dart: I’m a committed feminist and can’t believe how fast things are sliding backward. My grandmother was a suffragette and refused to adopt my grandfather’s name, hence the hyphen in Pousette-Dart. It’s still harder for women in every field. But I’ve never been drawn to making overtly political art. I think to be uncompromising in developing and following your own vision is a radical act in itself. Painting well is the best revenge! I realize this isn’t going to move abortion rights forward but I actively support women’s issues in whatever other ways I can.
**Rail:** What is your objective as a painter? How do you understand the role of art in life?

**Pousette-Dart:** I always think, wouldn’t it be great to be able to make something that moved people like Aretha Franklin or Bob Marley, that immediate, visceral, emotional, sensual hit. Obviously music is its own communication, but there is a visual equivalent.... People feel it in the prehistoric caves or in Chartres in front of certain works of art that just seem to be ineffable. So I’m in search of that. I’m an idealist and believe painting can be transporting.

I found this quote by William Faulkner on a book jacket a couple of years ago and I think it’s spare but says it all. “The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.”

*Portfolio of Installation shots from Weisbaden Museum*


Contributor

Barbara Rose

BARBARA ROSE is an art historian and curator who lives in New York and Madrid, Spain.
Joanna Pousette-Dart’s Landscape

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.

John Yau  April 14, 2019

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 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 Poussette-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, Poussette-Dart has a 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 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.

*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)

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.
Joanna Pousette-Dart with Joan Waltemath

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 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 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 (Caliones #3).” Likewise with the subtle changes of red in “Untitled (Caliones #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.
Rain: 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.

Rain: 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.

Rain: 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.

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

Rain: 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.

Rain: 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.

CONTRIBUTOR
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JOAN WALTENMATH is an artist who lives and works in New York City. She writes on art and has served as an editor-at-large of the Brooklyn Rail since 2001. She has shown extensively and her work is in the collections of the Harvard University Art Museums, the National Gallery of Art, the Hammer Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. She is currently the Director of the LeRoy E. Hoffberger School of Painting at MICA.
ART IN REVIEW

ART IN REVIEW;
Joanna Pousette-Dart

By Ken Johnson

June 18, 2004

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. KEN JOHNSON