DORSKY GALLERY

SIX ABSTRACT ARTISTS AT THE MILLENNIUM
RICHARD ANUSZKIEWICZ, THOM COONEY CRAWFORD, LYDIA DONA, FABIAN MARCACCIO, DAVID REED, DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE

Curated by Robert Saltonstall Mattison
January 11 – March 4, 2000

Opening reception: Tuesday, January 11th, 6:00–8:00 p.m.
When the history of twentieth century art is written from the perspective of the twenty-second century, it is likely that abstraction will be seen as a major contribution to the world of the visual arts. Abstraction aligns itself with the conceptual modes of thinking that dominate the twentieth century. While the nineteenth century was marked by the growth of industry and such physical sciences as botany, meteorology and geology, the twentieth century saw the inventions of the Special Theory of Relativity, psychology, quantum mechanics, and molecular biology—speculative modes of thinking that attempt to explain forces underlying our actions and our universe. Abstract art also delves into areas of speculative and symbolic thought. For the purposes of this exhibition, it is best to consider abstraction, not in the parochial sense of whether a recognizable object is visible, but as a means of getting beneath the surface of reality. One should remember that the word "abstract" means "to take from."

The artists chosen for this exhibition certainly do not represent a school, and in several cases they are only minimally aware of each other's work. The selections made in this exhibition were based primarily on the high quality of the art and the dynamism of the ideas. The intent is to expand the definition of abstraction and to give some indication of a variety of approaches among artists of several generations.

Richard Anuszkiewicz's art is structured in response to perceptual phenomena. The linear patterns, vibrant colors, and spatial relationships in his paintings and constructions lead us to question the physiological and psychological characteristics of sight and thus to speculate about the manner in which we understand our environment. Anuszkiewicz would argue that our common responses to visual phenomena provide a connecting link among humans in the context of our ever-more fragmented world. Anuszkiewicz's artistic roots may be traced to the German Bauhaus and to such figures as Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich, artists who believed that rational inquiry through abstract art was fundamental to our understanding of the human condition. In fact, Anuszkiewicz studied at Yale University with Josef Albers, who had previously taught at the Bauhaus. While Anuszkiewicz's art is based on optical investigations, the dazzling effects of his art often transcend rational explanation.

Anuszkiewicz's painting Temple of Radiant Yellow (1985) epitomizes the intense perceptual experiences fundamental to his art. He intuitively calculated the black and yellow bands so that not only do we read his geometric designs as columns surrounded by space, but we also view them as alternately projecting and receding. In addition, the width of the yellow bars and the particular choice of yellow hue is such that the color radiates beyond its edges and creates an almost hallucinatory degree of optical stimulation. Temple of Radiant Yellow was inspired by a 1981 trip that Anuszkiewicz made to Egypt. Struck by the combination of science and religion in ancient Egyptian culture and its worship of the sun, Anuszkiewicz created a series of paintings that suggested his experiences of...
viewing nearly blinding desert light from within Egyptian temples—logic and mystery combined.

Like Anuszkiewicz, Dorothea Rockburne relates abstract art to issues of conceptual thought and to science. Rockburne commented recently, “I think of my art as the visualization of ideas.” Yet, as opposed to Anuszkiewicz’s interest in purely optical occurrences, Rockburne’s interests center around mathematical theory and set theory. During the 1970s and early 1980s, her folded paper works, which were manipulated according to proportional systems related to the Golden Section, were intended to demonstrate that paper had three dimensions. Rockburne also speculated about the fourth-dimensional element of time by revealing her creative process. In addition to mathematicians, Rockburne looked to such individuals as Giotto, Masaccio, Pascal, Mozart, and the acclaimed pianist Alfred Brendel as models for her activity.

Rockburne’s mathematically motivated works are far from dry, because she regards science and mathematics as rich, ever-changing, evocations of the cosmos. She is intimately involved with the character of her materials, and her art features lush coloration and sensuous surfaces as found in Dark Angel: Memory (1982). This work consists of one continuous surface, folded over and under and judiciously cut, so both sides simultaneously are visible. All of the forms in Dark Angel: Memory are based on the square and Golden Section rectangle so that Rockburne’s complex process resolves itself into a wholly unified composition. The material for Dark Angel: Memory is vellum to which Rockburne has applied graphite and gold-toned watercolor on both sides. Rockburne’s use of vellum and her folding techniques make one think of Medieval illuminated manuscripts. Her graphite on vellum drawing method gives the appearance of a moon-lit night sky, and the softly volumetric forms fold around one another in an atmospheric manner. The mood is one of enigmatic and inexplicable relationships that lead to a moment of reverence. Allusions to ethereal subjects are not misplaced in Dark Angel: Memory because the work was inspired by the angels who float along the edge of Fra Angelico’s other-worldly Linauoli Tabernacle (1433, Florence). While Dark Angel: Memory predates Rockburne’s astronomical works, its intimation of euphoria through viewing the heavens makes it their predecessor.

While Dorothea Rockburne seeks poetry in her works through her deep knowledge of mathematics and science, Thom Cooney Crawford’s art is more unabashedly spiritual. Crawford believes that archetypal symbols leading to sacred experiences are still possible in the modern world. Crawford, who was raised as a Roman Catholic, has studied intensively both Western and Eastern religions and has traveled regularly to India to explore Buddhist and Hindu beliefs. Other touchstones for his art include the enigmatic paintings of Mark Rothko and Constantin Brancusi’s sculptural ensembles. For the past decade, Crawford has worked alternately in painting and sculpture, but recently he has begun to combine the media into unified environments.

An Earth Seeing (1999) consists of three paintings and seven sculptural forms organized into a chapel-like complex. A triptych of paintings hangs above a low table resembling an altar that is surrounded by three bowls. In both Eastern and Western cultures, the circle and the number three are emblems of unity. The surfaces of Crawford’s paintings are activated by rich layers of impasto over rough burlap, and their hot cores of bright pigment are surrounded by curving trajectories which allude simultaneously to the eye, atomic structures, and the paths of the planets. Crawford’s references are not based on the type of scientific analysis conducted by Rockburne but rather on loosely conceived metaphors—the altar and bowls below are more passive forms whose concavities suggest a receptive area for ideas and feelings. The spatial configuration of An Earth Seeing urges us to sit before the piece in quiet contemplation. Crawford seeks a harmony that results from a balance of dynamic and passive forces. For Crawford, humans imaginatively shape the earth just as it patterns our existence.

David Reed has had a career-long interest in states of illusion and reality as communicated in abstract art. His work bridges the traditional communicative power of paintings and a late twentieth century sensibility informed by the media age. As such, Reed’s sources range from old master paintings, especially those of the Italian Mannerist and Baroque periods, to such modern idioms as photography, cinema, and computer technology. Reed’s paintings, like #403 (1997–98), immediately attract us with the seductive-ness of their surfaces. Painted wet into wet with both palette knives and brushes and meticulously sanded and repainted in multiple layers, the brush strokes appear like tumbling ocean waves or translucent vapor patterns. Reed intends
to attract us on a visceral level, because he wants the viewer to be totally and intimately involved with the paintings. Once we are engaged with Reed’s art, questions that are essential to any viewing experience arise: How do we respond to ambiguous spatial illusions? Do we view a painting as a frozen moment or as an unfolding sequence of events? Can feelings be aroused by different types of brushwork? Reed intends the answers to these questions and others to be ambiguous and thus to engage us in a dialogue with the painting.

In #403 such a colloquy occurs. Like many of Reed’s works, the painting is horizontally oriented to encourage reading the surface as abstract drama, and #403 is large enough to fill peripheral vision so that it becomes an entire world for the viewer. The left side of #403 is emotionally charged by densely layered, vertical brush strokes, while the right side engenders a more fluid and amorphous experience through thin smoke-like marks set against paler hues. The transition between these two experiences is effected by the organic forms to the lower left which consist of a black comma shape surrounded by similar configurations in blue, yellow, and white hues. Such forms often begin as accidental paint drips on the canvas upon which Reed elaborates, and those shapes in turn suggest his next step in the painting process. #403 sets forth a tale of transition: surface clarity becomes fanciful spatial illusion, assertiveness becomes dream-like visual experiences, and accident becomes conscious intent—all essential features in Reed’s abstract narrative.

Lydia Dona inhabits a world of information overload that dominates all our lives as we enter the twenty-first century. It is a slippery existence in which we absorb vast amounts of data, but in which there are few certainties. Since 1989, Dona has been investigating paradoxical states of knowledge in her paintings, which she once described as “ruptures in their molecular fields.” As such, Dona’s sources include such seemingly irreconcilable artists as the Abstract Expressionists, Marcel Duchamp, and Piet Mondrian; she also reads extensively in deconstruction theory. While conflicting information systems had been investigated as far back as the Cubist, the single most important feature in Dona’s art is her delight with and even sensual attraction to such a world. Dona’s paintings meld, mutate, and collapse conflicting visual structures as if in the midst of a painterly love affair.

Machines Of Paradox And The Panic Of Perception (1999) exemplifies Dona’s attitude. Near its center, the painting features schematic drawing by Dona based on automobile carburetors from a repair manual. Such
design normally represents dry functionality, engineering certainty, and a man's concerns; it does none of these in Dona's art. Partly lost amid rich washes of green blue pigment (as if seen underwater), the drawing appears complex, sensual, and evocative. These machines immediately call to mind Marcel Duchamp; even the title of Dona's painting refers to his famous *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-23, Philadelphia Museum of Art). But whereas Duchamp's machines are theoretical and deliberately non-aesthetic, Dona's are involving and attractive. Surrounding the paint washes at the center of Dona's work are areas of splattered and dripped pigment. Rills of paint run in all directions, and the flecks alternately meld and refuse to conjoin with the pigment washes. Here one thinks of the Abstract Expressionists, but Dona will have none of their absolute adherence to either one style of paint application or to non-representation. *Machines Of Paradox And The Panic Of Perception* also features horizontal and vertical bands which remind us of geometric painting and also of the stretcher bars behind the canvas. Yet, the grid freely disappears behind layer of paint, and in other areas it is actually formed by splashed pigment—no system is absolute. Despite the playful title of Dona's painting, there is no "panic." Dona is lyrically at home in her world of rupture, motion, and fluidity.

**Fabian Marcaccio** pushes the abstract narratives of Reed and the sensual mutations of Dona into a more aggressive form of discontinuity. Marcaccio intends to throw into question nearly every assumption we have made about painting and to break down our preconceptions. In Marcaccio's works, marks that look like brush strokes are almost never made with brushes; canvases often seem to be on top of pigment; stretchers fracture and reveal their under-sides; works heave out from the wall on contorted metal frames so that they become part of the surrounding architecture and partly envelope the viewer; and wide varieties of materials including polymers, silicones, and traditional oil paint interrupt each other and collide with fragments of photographic imagery. Marcaccio's sources include experiments with non-art objects in Arte Povera, the inclusive imagery of Robert Rauschenberg, and the free paint handling of *l'art informel*, but he thrusts the investigations of these artists toward new limits.

*Street Paintant* (1999) shows Marcaccio tearing apart and re-configuring reality. Consisting of ten panels, the work begins with a digitally produced photograph of an accidental paint smear on the sidewalk next to a blue truck. (The famous story is told of Willem de Kooning commenting on the accidental beauty of oil blotches on the New York streets.) In Marcaccio's work, however, even the first photo might be a contrivance. Did he deliberately spill the paint or is the whole photograph, perhaps, digitally manipulated? In Marcaccio's artistic trope, the second panel seems to show a detail of the first. Marcaccio encourages us to move forward and back, becoming progressively more involved. But the detail has been clearly altered; the paint spill is a much more complicated and interesting pattern than the one in the first image. In panels to the right, complex layers of brush work are added in oil paint, acrylic, and silicone as well as digitally reproduced photographs of brush strokes. Are we seeing whole new works or viewing the original on a microscopic level? Canvas weave now appears as a dynamic pattern, but it's a photo-reproduction of the canvas. In the final three panels, the brush marks increasingly become less dense until we are left with only a single blue mark and the ragged edge of the canvas. Is it our most microscopic view yet, or is this a satellite view where the blue truck is reduced to a dot on the landscape? Of course, this discussion is based on illusions entirely created by the artist.

While Marcaccio's art is a battlefield of ideas, styles, and techniques, the result is, nevertheless, positive. In contrast to the cynicism and eclecticism of postmodern theory, Marcaccio is, in his words, a "total believer" in the power of art, and his work reveals a myriad of new expressive possibilities.

All the artists in this exhibition seek expansive definitions. For each, art is a symbolic language with which to mirror broadly conceived world views. In a variety of manners, each artist investigates new modes of perception and thought and poses significant questions about our existence. The challenge for each one of them is to suggest essential aspects of humanity at the millennium.

—Robert Saltonstall Mattison
CHECKLIST

RICHARD ANUSZKIEWICZ
Born 1930, Erie, PA
Lives Engelwood, NJ
TEMPLE OF RADIANT YELLOW, 1985
Acrylic on canvas
60 x 48 inches
Collection of the artist
RAINBOW-RED TO BLUE, 1988
Painted wood
48 x 72 inches
Collection of the artist

THOM COONEY CRAWFORD
Born 1944, Boston, MA
Lives Easton, PA
AN EARTH SEEING, 1999
Oil, wood, paper, plaster, and wax
96 x 152 x 74 1/2 inches
Collection of the artist

LYDIA DONA
Born 1955, Romania
Lives New York, NY
MACHINES OF PARADOX AND THE PANIC OF PERCEPTION, 1999
Oil, acrylic, and sign paint on canvas
66 x 60 inches
Collection of Max Protetch

DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE
Born Montreal, Canada
Lives New York, NY
DARK ANGEL: ELEPHANT, 1982
Watercolor and pencil on vellum
31 x 32 3/4 inches
Collection of the artist
DARK ANGEL: MEMORY, 1982
Watercolor and pencil on vellum
36 3/4 x 29 3/4 inches
Collection of the artist
STILL BLUE CIRCLE, 1990
Oil paint, varnish, and Golden high load white on gessoed linen
66 x 66 inches
Collection of the artist

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