

# A Little Abstract, A Little Eccentric, And More

The achievement of the American abstract painter Richard Pousette-Dart is like the Flying Dutchman. For decades it has roamed the vast seas of 20th-century American art, frequently sighting land but never making it to shore.

**ROBERTA SMITH**  
ART REVIEW

The 50-year survey of Pousette-Dart's work at the Guggenheim Museum will not end its quest. With only 48 works, it gives little indication of the scope of his painting, drawing and photography and doesn't begin to sort it out. Nonetheless, this beautiful show, organized by Philip Rylands, director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, illuminates some of the reasons for the shape-shifting nature of Pousette-Dart's reputation.

Surprisingly, his achievement has never secured landfall among the Abstract Expressionists, even though he was present at the movement's inception. He used totemic motifs and large canvases before even Jackson Pollock, who was four years older. Yet Pousette-Dart's work is absent from some of the major histories of the movement. In an essay in the exhibition's catalog Lowery Sims lays out the convolutions of his status in fascinating detail: He's not abstract. He's not expressionist. He's a Symbolist. He's a solitary seer.

Pousette-Dart's work fits in all over the map of American art. At the Guggenheim he comes across foremost as the patron saint of American painting's wide-ranging visionaries and eccentrics. With their bold colors, encrusted surfaces and luminous orbs, his paintings don't so much hang on the wall as float in front of it, where they look alternately like planes of granular light and slabs of jeweled stucco. His affinities range through a host of texture-mad stipplers, dotters and checkerboarders who came both before and after, from Charles Burchfield to Alfred Jensen and Jess to Ralph Humphrey and Robert Irwin.

Pousette-Dart's art exemplifies the exultation of material that courses through much American painting. In this approach paint is used robustly, often in a workmanlike if not obsessive fashion, with the hope of ascending to another realm. Sometimes his fusion of flesh and spirit is so ostentatious that it descends to kitsch. At other times it has a hallucinatory force.

Born in St. Paul in 1916 and raised on art by a painter-writer (his father) and a poet-musician (his

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mother), Pousette-Dart found his focus early. With almost no formal training he was in New York and working by his early 20s, his art spurred by his friendship with the artistic gadfly John Graham and his absorption of Freud and Jung, Northwest Indian and Oceanic art and European modernism.

Throughout the 1940s he was one of the youngest artists of the burgeoning New York School, attending meetings at the Club, the famous Ab-Ex hangout in Greenwich Village, showing at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery and the Betty Parsons Gallery and appearing in postwar American art's most famous anointment-by-photograph, "The Irascibles." This group portrait of 15 Abstract Expressionists introduced the American public to the country's first international art movement via *Life* magazine in January 1951. By then Pousette-Dart, the tall young man at the group's left edge, was on the verge of moving to upstate New York, where he would work until his death, at 76, in 1992.

The show begins with the impressively assured paintings of his youth, although judging by an exhibition at Knoe-

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**Richard Pousette-Dart is still looking for his genre.**

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dler & Company in 2003 this section could have been even stronger. In "Bird Woman" of 1939-40 the abstract tumble of forms conveys a shamanistic hybrid but lacks Pollock's hurtling energy. The standout here is "Untitled (Flora)," a stylized head of a woman, in black, white and olive, that is full of excitingly asymmetrical details. It synthesizes Northwest Indian art's geometric dissections, suggests attention to Hopi kachinas and presages Graham's hypnotic women of the 1940s.



PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE ESTATE OF RICHARD POUSETTE-DART/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY

"Night Landscape" (1969-71), an oil on linen in the Pousette-Dart exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, suggests another night, painted by van Gogh.

Just after 1940 — the year the Museum of Modern Art acquired its first Pousette-Dart — abstraction takes hold in his work. Paint is attacked with something close to vehemence, built up, scratched away, layered, tortured almost into a form of relief. These works contain the seeds of graffiti art as well as Cy Twombly's distinctive scrawl.

Sometimes the surface goes dark and muddy, with lighter patches functioning as paintings in their own right, as they do in the blue and white scribbles inside one of the bulbous shapes of "Undulation." "The Atom, One World," 1947-48, is a vigorously worked mushroom cloud that, while lauded for its social concern, seems almost comical — an offspring of Picasso's plaster sculptures of the fabulously protuberant Marie-Thérèse.

In the early 1950s Pousette-Dart took a break from heavy texture in a series of paintings dominated by needling thatches of graphite lines giving way to orbs and cylinders of white. Brittle, they look a bit like store window displays of modern lighting. The best one, "The Web" (1950), is the most physical, with a patchy background of gold and scratches that bring out the white. It may have been the first time that Pousette-Dart realized his paintings could shimmer.

By 1958, when Abstract Expressionism is on the wane, he was just hitting

his stride. He returned to the thick and the bright with new control, as evidenced by "Illumination Gothic," a cluster of spires and cabochon dots; they emerge from a surface that is thick at the top and then drizzles, like fringe, toward the bottom. It's an almost magical transmutation of matter.

From here on, Pousette-Dart looks ever less like an Abstract Expressionist, but he is synthesizing as actively as at the beginning of his career. His best work comes after 1960 or perhaps even '70, when he starts making slightly loopy, overtly tactile versions of Op Art, Minimal Art and Color Field Painting, moving in his own parallel universe. His paintings seem strung with lights.

A few, like "Night Landscape," resemble slightly abstracted views of carnivals, glistening through the mist (van Gogh's "Starry Night" on acid). In contrast the delicately rosy "Hieroglyph No. 4" of 1973-4 suggests a transparent curtain muffling fields strewn with symbols and hints of script. In "Fragment of a Poem," the script comes through, thick black cursive nestling in a haze of white-on-black dots. One line — "recede come forward intrude" — seems to instruct both the painting and the viewer.

"Spirals by the Sea" of 1978 presented eight boxed spirals in black, white and gray to gently dizzying effect. And in the triptych "Byzantine Cathedral I, II

"Richard Pousette-Dart" is at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, at 89th Street, (212) 423-3500, through Sept. 25.



"Untitled (Flora)," an oil from 1939-40, shows Indian influences.

and III," where cerulean blue, light blue and white dots are marshaled into fields that suggest big, textured bandannas, we are inside the carnival, surrounded by lights.

Is Pousette-Dart an Abstract Expressionist? It doesn't seem to matter. He may have been a greater catalyst than artist at that point, but he helped make the 1940s happen. Then, with years to spare, he went on his way, along a trajectory where his light only got brighter. This show suggests that in the end Pousette-Dart's work is actually at home in many ports of call.



"The Atom, One World" (1947-8), a stylized mushroom cloud in oil.

#### ONLINE: DOTS AND LIGHTS

Additional images from "Richard Pousette-Dart" at the Guggenheim: [nytimes.com/design](http://nytimes.com/design)