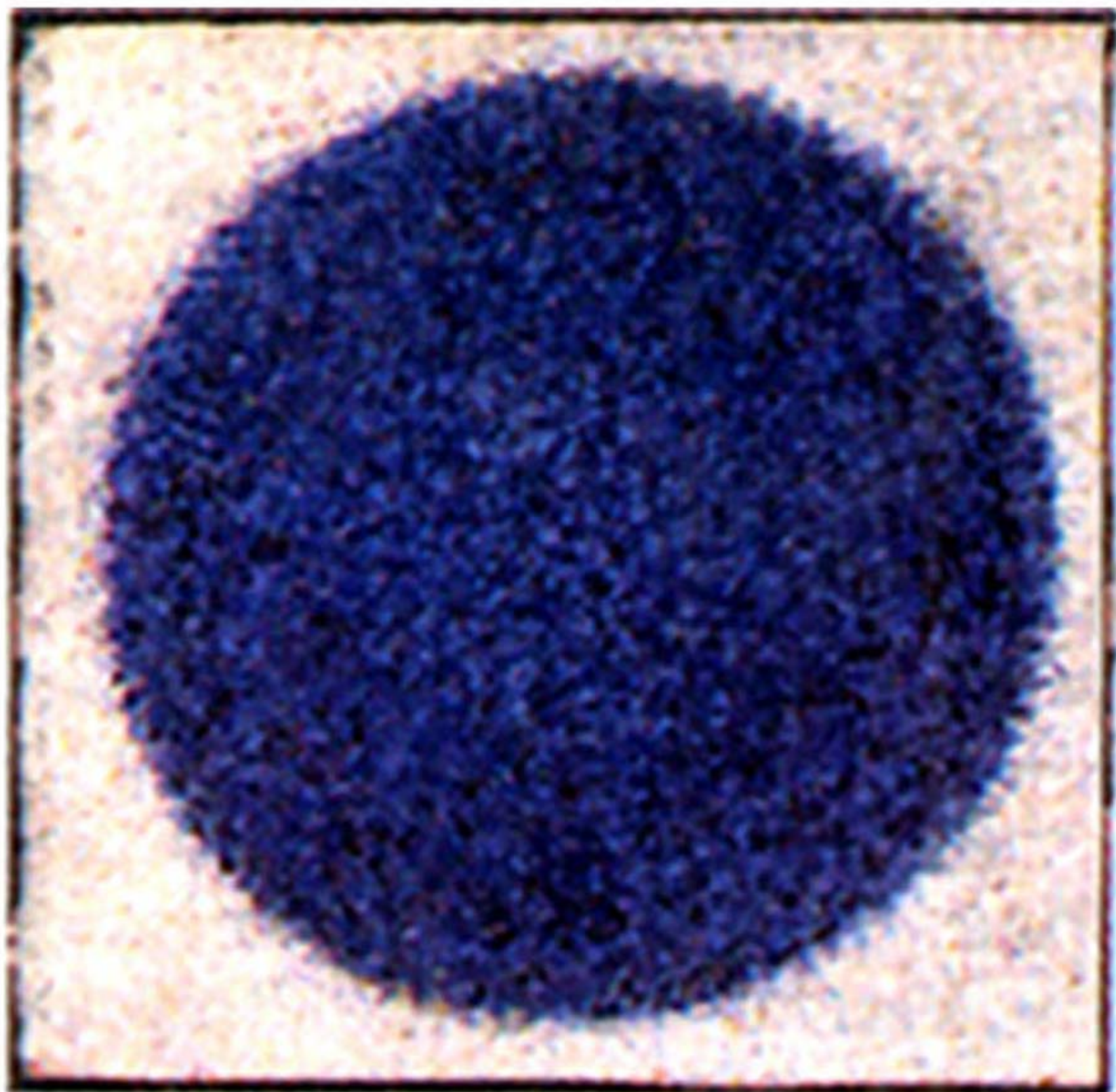


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## ART REVIEW

# Elusive shimmers on paper

Ideas ripple through the intuitive works of Richard Pousette-Dart at LACMA's show.

By **CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT**  
*Times Staff Writer*

Last fall, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art presented a succinct survey of paintings by the late Lee Mullican, a gifted L.A. artist who stood just to the side of the mainstream Abstract Expressionist art that dominated the late 1940s and the 1950s. The question of how spirituality could be effectively represented in art drove his work, as it did countless other American painters of his generation.

For Mullican the potent answer was found in an internalized dialogue with nature. Now LACMA has opened another exhibition of another such painter — Richard Pousette-Dart — a New York artist just three years Mullican's senior (he was born in 1916 and died in 1992). A concise and often beautiful show, this time focused on works on paper, it is similarly satisfying.

Pousette-Dart, in an exploration — [See *Pousette-Dart*, Page E19]

# Ideas shimmer in LACMA show

[Pousette-Dart, from Page E1]  
tory postwar search for an art whose example might lead civilization to destinations other than Auschwitz and the Soviet gulag, likewise turned for inspiration to non-Western forms of visual representation. Prehistoric rock art, Oceanic carving, Native American totems — these and other sources fueled many artists of the period. As the U.S. revved its industrial engines and extolled material wealth for an expanding middle class, art with spiritual aspirations excised some of the culture's brittleness.

Robert Flynn Johnson, curator at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, where the show travels next (it concludes in Cincinnati in the spring), has assembled 47 works on paper in a wide range of mediums — graphite, charcoal, gesso, crayon, oil, ink, gouache and acrylic. (Pousette-Dart was among the first American artists to use the synthetic resin of acrylic paint.) Often, more than one medium is employed in a single drawing, so the heavily worked surface is rich and luxuriant. Jewel-tone colors on the tactile plane create chromatic friction.

Supplemented by two early paintings, which together establish Pousette-Dart's Surrealist bona fides in the early 1940s, the exhibition shows an artist for whom freewheeling intuition and rigorous order are held in tension. Mark-making is elemental yet seductive.

The duality of intuition and order is present from the start. "Night Flower," "White Undulation," "Blue Transition" and "Sea World" all date from 1940 to 1943, and they all hang abstract, or-

## 'Transparent Reflections: Richard Pousette-Dart, Works on Paper 1940-1992'

**Where:** Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd.

**When:** Noon to 8 p.m. Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays; noon to 9 p.m. Fridays; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; closed Wednesdays

**Ends:** Sept. 17

**Price:** \$5 to \$9; free for 16 and younger

**Contact:** (323) 857-6000; [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)

ganic shapes and swirls of loopy color on a surface armature composed from a tidy grid.

The grid helps to disperse the pictorial elements from one edge to the other and from corner to corner. These all-over compositions refuse a centralized focus, and everything sits on the surface. At the same time, without resorting to traditional perspective devices, the dense layering of mediums, marks and colors creates an illusion of deep space. Pousette-Dart, who was in his mid-20s and among the youngest of those who would later be dubbed the New York School, seems to have been taking cues

from artists such as Arshile Gorky, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. Your eye moves laterally across his drawings' surfaces, which simultaneously seem aqueous or atmospheric.

The visual analogy might be to looking into a pond or stream. You see the ripples and the skittering fish below.

Indeed, a heavily worked 1955 pencil-grid inflected with graphite arcs and starbursts and spotted with dabs of white gouache is titled "Reflections in a Pond." The curator has named the exhibition "Transparent Reflections," and the visual and philosophical implications — elusive, fugitive, incandescent and numinous — are apt.

Nearly a quarter-century later, Pousette-Dart was still rendering the organic delicacy of shifting atmosphere — by different means but with compelling skill. Exquisite all-over marks of pale or dramatic color characterize "Within a Grove" and "Untitled (Garden Mist)," both from 1978. Neither work describes nature, but both materialize its operation. Each drawing is composed from a welter of short strokes or daubs, one in wispy graphite and faint acrylic and the other in rich ink and colorful acrylic; the marks cover the sheet like a carpet of grasses.

Occasionally a drawing gets away from him. "Calligraphic Apotheosis," an undated work from sometime in the 1940s, is frankly a mess. Swirls and squiggles of white and yellow crayon dart through a Pollock-like thicket of dark ink and gouache, but the muddy surface is inert.

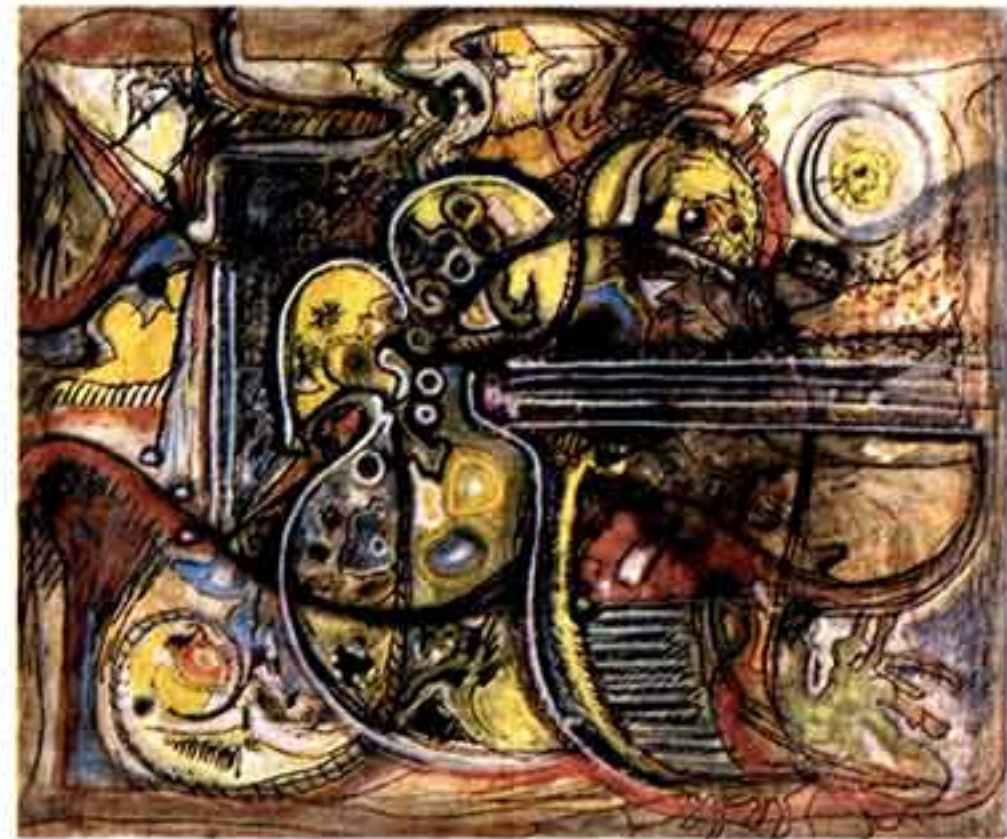
The show proposes that Pousette-Dart's drawings are experi-

mental because works on paper are commonly where a painter works out initial ideas that will be elaborated on canvas. It's a reasonable assumption, even though testing the thesis would require close comparison with his paintings over five decades. But the two early paintings included here — both strong and both from LACMA's own collection, as are four of the show's drawings — don't seem especially different from the 1940s works on paper.

Instead, what's most interesting is how drawings that might seem radically different from one another can actually be reconciled. Take the nearly Minimalist "Moon Meditation" from the 1960s and "Golden Eye" from 1945-46, with its Surrealist diffusion and interpenetration of organic shapes — a primordial stew rendered in the deep colors of medieval stained glass.

"Moon Meditation" is a sapphire orb suspended in the center of a white field. Or it can also be seen as a blue void carved from a field of white. Pousette-Dart creates a remarkable sensation of flux — like the intake and exhalation of breath — through thousands of short, feathered strokes of oil paint, especially at the zone between blue and white. The drawing slips silently back and forth from solid form to flat surface through empty space.

What is the connection between "Golden Eye" and "Moon Meditation"? Think of it in totemic terms. A totem is an arbitrarily chosen animal or other naturalistic figure that spiritually represents a person, family or clan. It is selected in an effort



Museum Associates / Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
**RICH:** "Golden Eye," from 1945-46, is a primordial stew of organic shapes, rendered in the deep colors of medieval stained glass.

to make the mysteries of the physical world coherent.

Pousette-Dart — like Mulligan, Pollock, Rothko and countless other American artists working through European Surrealism in the 1940s and 1950s — embraced totemic forms. "Golden Eye," as even its name implies, is filled with them.

By the 1960s, the artist had fully internalized the idea of spiritual representation. "Moon Meditation" might well have been generated by long contemplation of the actual lunar orb aloft in the midnight sky. (The artist moved out of Manhattan in 1951 and was living in rural Rockland County, N.Y.) But the totem is no longer a representation of a person.

Now the totem is art — not an object that the eye sees but what the artist's mind conjures and his hand makes into an object. Painting, embodied by handmade marks on a surface, has be-



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Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

**WATERY:** A teeming "Sea World," from 1943.

come the coherent system of physical classification with which Pousette-Dart makes sense of the world's mystery.