

THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

Pousette-Dart's Light: Recollections at the 100th Anniversary of His Birth



Richard Pousette-Dart's "Yellow Amorphous," oil on canvas, 1950 (detail).

Pace Gallery

By Gail Levin

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"Richard Pousette-Dart: The Centennial" has just opened and will be on view through Oct. 15 at the Pace Gallery in Manhattan. It is an opportunity to recall the art and career of Pousette-Dart, who died in 1992 at the age of 76. He was one of 18 artists who became known as "the Irascibles" when they came together to sign a letter of protest to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, rejecting as too conservative the museum's exhibition "American Painting Today — 1950." The protesters posed for what became an iconic photograph, appearing in Life magazine. This image canonized Pousette-Dart as an Abstract Expressionist of the first generation.

Yet Pousette-Dart stood apart from many of the other painters who came to be known as Abstract Expressionists. For example, he did not frequent the Cedar Tavern, where Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and others mingled and got drunk and into fights. Pousette-Dart, I learned, was a pacifist, a vegetarian before it was fashionable, and a conscientious objector during World War II. As early as high school in 1935, he published an essay urging the end of militarism in education and doing away with war.

Some veterans of the combat at the Cedar Tavern, such as Pollock or de Kooning, decamped to East Hampton, where they fostered a community of Abstract Expressionists. Pousette-Dart and his wife, however, retreated, in 1951, northwest across the Hudson, eventually settling in Suffern, N.Y., less than two dozen miles from Valhalla, the town where he grew up. Both his similarity to the other Abstract Expressionists and his uniqueness stand out at the Pace Gallery.

The current show features a catalog with a brief essay by Martica Sawin, an art historian and longtime friend of the artist, and paintings from the late 1940s to the early 1980s. Among them, my favorite is “Blue Image” (1950), a vertical canvas stained with thin blue pigment under an overlay of black lines, some of which outline characteristic Pousette-Dart forms. He sometimes cut out similar shapes in brass as wearable objects or small sculptures meant to be held in one’s hands.

Other pictures, such as “Hieroglyph of Light” (1966-67) or “Soft Edges of Time” (1976-82), are the type he made by using paint right out of the tube and piling it on to create a very thick layer of pigment in different contrasting colors. I recall talking with Richard in his Suffern studio when he would pick up a tube of paint and continue to add on daubs of pigment directly from it. He produced many of these exuberant canvases that seemed to grow organically — like a coral reef, or encrusted like barnacles on a shell in tidal waters.

Light for Pousette-Dart — as here evident in his wide canvas “Yellow Amorphous,” of 1950 — was as important as it was for Turner or Monet. Like them, as he once told the Guggenheim Foundation in applying for a grant, he, too, was inspired by nature. But instead of painting light based on direct observations of nature, his light was spiritual, as it had been for earlier artists like Rembrandt or Blake, both of whom he admired.

Bright light to suggest the sacred also features in the work of his friend and contemporary Mark Rothko, who painted many of his classic canvases in an intense palette of yellows, oranges, and reds, evoking for many observers both fire and light. Pousette-Dart’s canvases now on view suggest his mystical thinking, about which I used to hear from him in casual conversation.

I first met Richard Pousette-Dart while working with Robert Hobbs on a show called “Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years,” which opened in Ithaca on March 30, 1978, at Cornell University’s Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, where Robert was curator. After a stop at a venue in Tokyo, this show came that fall to the Whitney Museum, where I was curator of the Edward Hopper Collection.

I got to work on this show after another curator dropped off the project and the Whitney’s director wanted someone else to collaborate. I had recently written on a number of Abstract

Expressionist artists in my dissertation, “Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950.” So when Robert and I divided up the monographic essays, his list included Pousette-Dart, on whom I had not yet written. At the same time, I was curating another show, “Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925,” which opened at the Whitney on Jan. 24, 1978. Its book-length catalog was my first book ever, so time was too short to do much further research beyond collaborating on choosing works to be included and writing essays on the Abstract Expressionists whose work I had already researched.

By the time that I met Richard, I had already taken an interest in his father, Nathaniel, a painter and an art writer from Minnesota, who, like Edward Hopper, my main focus at the Whitney, had studied with Robert Henri. In 1915, when Richard was just a year old, his father had commissioned illustrations from the struggling Hopper for a magazine published in Minnesota called *The Farmer’s Wife*. In 1922, Richard’s father, then the art director for the George L. Dyer Company, had visited Hopper’s studio and been unimpressed, dismissing his canvases as in “the Henri tradition.” Even after Hopper was recognized with his first retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and just as the show left for its Chicago run, Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, in *Art of Today* in January 1935, disparaged Hopper, writing that he found his “direction and bent when he saw the work of Charles Burchfield.”

His accusation provoked Hopper to dispute the allegation that his work derived from Burchfield, his friend. Hopper’s response turned out to be one of the taciturn artist’s most acute statements ever: “In every artist’s development the germ of the later work is always found in the earlier. The nucleus around which the artist’s intellect builds his work is himself; the central ego, personality, or whatever it may be called, and this changes little from birth to death. What he was once, he always is, with slight modifications. Changing fashions in methods or subject matter alter him little or not at all.”

Hopper’s statement, I suspect, had a profound impact on me, not yet a biographer of artists but fascinated by their early development. I soon learned that Richard, Nathaniel’s son, who was 18 at the time his father accused Hopper of following Burchfield, was already becoming an artist in his own right and had published an essay in his high school magazine called “I have been called a dreamer.” Here, in 1935, years before World War II began in Europe, was the first hint of the developing character that would turn him into an Abstract Expressionist and a conscientious objector.

Richard’s paintings in our 1978 show stood out both for their distinctiveness and for their strength. I enjoyed meeting him and his wife, Evelyn. Some few months after the show closed, Richard called and asked if I would deliver a paper on his work for a conference called “Abstract Expressionism: Idea and Symbol,” organized at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville by the art historian Elizabeth Langhorne. I agreed and made several trips to the Suffern studio.

My investigative instincts and the questions I asked prompted Richard to climb up to his studio’s attic loft and pull down his early, illustrated notebooks, which he had not opened in decades. I was quite excited by what I found, particularly the thought processes behind his early imagery, his unpublished poetry, and his responses to World War II.

On Oct. 13, 1979, I spoke on “Richard Pousette-Dart’s Painting and Sculpture: Form, Poetry, and Significance.” Richard as well as Lee Krasner also attended the conference and participated in an artists’ panel that was intended to respond to the scholars’ papers. A third participant, Robert Motherwell, had been announced but did not attend. Richard loved my talk and asked me to publish it, which I did in March 1980 in *Arts Magazine*, as “Richard Pousette-Dart’s Emergence as an Abstract Expressionist.”

My discoveries in this article stimulated others to take a new look at his art and his development, which has framed subsequent writing about him. In conclusion, I distinguished between Surrealist-inspired Abstract Expressionists and Pousette-Dart, who looked directly at the art of primitive peoples, finding common ground in their spirituality: “Unlike Rothko, Pousette-Dart eventually abandoned his tragic world view and accompanying preoccupation with death in favor of a personal mysticism through which he could view the world in a more optimistic light — a light that would often manifest itself as a presence in his paintings.”

Some who read my 1980 article on Richard found it groundbreaking and may have wondered why I abandoned my research on his art and never again wrote about his work. This strange and abrupt retreat from my discoveries reveals something about that era — and not only in the art world.

Over the course of my research, which I conducted in my time off from curatorial work at the museum, I had many Saturday lunches in Suffern with Evelyn and Richard. He had shown me his photographs and repeatedly asked me to sit for a portrait, telling me that he liked the shape of my head and neck. Some of his other subjects had been Rothko, John D. Graham, Barnett Newman, Betty Parsons, and Esta Kramer (the art critic Hilton Kramer’s wife).

One day I posed for him, sitting on a stool in his second-floor studio in the old stone house. He worked slowly and took several shots. To fight off the chill in that studio, I wore a thick Irish wool turtleneck sweater over a thinner turtleneck, obscuring the long neck that Richard had said that he wanted to capture. He did not complain. He took frontal and profile shots. He then had me pose holding up one of his small brass sculptures of a dancing female figure that he made and gave to me. A fern in the background suggests a primitive theme, but he skillfully blurred it, contrasting it to my hands, which were in sharper focus. A lot of what made his black-and-white photographs so distinctive came out in the printing process, which he did himself and which I did not observe. As in his paintings, Richard paid careful attention to light.

Not long after those sittings, when I needed a photograph for the book jacket of my catalog for a 1980 Whitney show, “Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist,” I asked Richard if he had one that I could use. He sent me one large original black-and-white print of a view of my profile, which I foolishly forwarded to the publisher, who returned it with a small tear. After 1996, when the Metropolitan Museum acquired and showed his large, imposing early canvas, “Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental” (1941-42), which we had featured in our 1978 show, I retrieved the photograph from its envelope, framed it, and put it on display.

“Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental” is 10 feet wide. Richard told me that Rothko asked him why he painted so large and who would buy such works. It was too big to show at his dealer

Marian Willard's gallery. It was not until March 1947 that he was finally able to show this work with Peggy Guggenheim at her New York gallery, Art of This Century. In the catalog for this show, he wrote: "I strive to express the spiritual nature of the universe."

As much as I admired this painting and other works by Pousette-Dart, during the years following my 1980 article, the Whitney Museum director expressed impatience that I had not yet completed work on the Hopper catalogue raisonné. I had to focus on the demands of that complex project. Meanwhile, I had pages of notes and photocopies from Richard's notebooks. I expected to pursue my discovery and to write further about his work.

Not long after I left the Whitney, in 1984, Richard asked me to write an essay on his work for a show of his art that the art historian Sam Hunter was organizing for the museum in Fort Lauderdale in 1986. This request was not long after I had declined a publisher's offer that I serve as an unacknowledged ghostwriter for Hunter's textbook on American art, but I decided to accept this assignment to work with him in order to honor Richard's request and pursue my discoveries about his art and life. I heard immediately from the museum, which sent me a contract for a lecture during the show, which I signed and returned. I gave that lecture on April 17, 1986.

As for the essay, I was amazed when Sam Hunter told me that I could not write anything further about my discoveries. He had given my published article and the assignment to write on Richard's development to his Princeton graduate student Paul Kruty. I took this in without comment, but was rather taken aback. Then, not long afterward, one summer day, Hunter, who was several decades my senior, called me at home with the request, more like a command, that in order to discuss the essay that I would write on Pousette-Dart's latest work, I should come out to his home in New Jersey and meet with him by his swimming pool.

The thought of traveling to New Jersey to meet by a swimming pool made me uncomfortable, especially since I had no car and no way to depart once I got dropped off. Thus, I politely declined and suggested that we meet in the city. Hunter soon notified me that he had dropped my essay from the project. It was, however, too late to cancel my lecture. This turn of events so distressed me that I never pursued my discoveries or wrote on Richard's work again.

With so many stories of women facing similar situations around employment in the news recently, I cannot help but recall how I had to walk away from this situation and then had to suffer in silence. I knew that I could not "play ball" or hang out by a lonely swimming pool in New Jersey. I had in fact invested my very best time, energy, and intellect into researching and framing Richard Pousette-Dart's artistic development. Hunter disrupted that process, making it untenable for me to continue it, even as he handed off my discoveries to his male graduate student (who became an architectural historian). Mindful of women who still encounter such inappropriate behavior as I endured, I think that it's time to shine some light on such treatment.

Another essay in Hunter's catalog quotes Richard: "Everything is really infinitely good. What is important is to go far enough in whatever you do so that you come to everything; you burst through the particular to the universal."

Gail Levin is the guest curator for “Connie Fox and William King: An Artist Couple,” opening at Guild Hall on Oct. 23. She has lived part time on the East End since 1989.

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