

# Dorothea Rockburne

Every surface in Dorothea Rockburne's work has a distinct presence, whether it is the luster of densely applied graphite, the varnished folds of linen, the paint baked on with heat lamps, or the corporeal sheen of grease. Her practice incorporates an analysis of form and a bodily relationship to the work, where the inherent dynamics of specific materials form the locus of the art. Rockburne's attention to materiality and intersection speaks to a varied background, spanning academic training at Montreal's *École des Beaux-Arts*, interdisciplinary experimentation at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, and radical approaches to performance at New York City's Judson Dance Theater. Rockburne's mathematical studies with Max Dehn at Black Mountain, for example, deeply influenced her practice. Like logic or geometry, her oeuvre aims to describe the most far-reaching forces of the world in elegant yet deceptively simple terms.

By the 1960s, Rockburne had grown dissatisfied with her painterly work. She began to integrate thought and emotion with freely available industrial materials "to form a new and forceful motivating engine," and further educated herself about geometry, topology, and set theory—a mathematic concept wherein a collection of elements is conceived as a whole. In *Tropical Tan* (1967–68), four adjoined pig-iron panels are painted across the center, leaving a steel border exposed. The crimped panels magnify the interplay of these materials, particularly when light hits the surface. The cross formed within the bend of each panel is a unifying structural motif—prefiguring the artist's ongoing fascination with the potential of the fold—inspired by the air ducts seen from her studio window.

Even when she returned to materials linked to drawing and painting, Rockburne eschewed normative approaches, choosing instead to innovate form using the fluid logic of relief. In *Set* (1970/2018), she hangs, manipulates, overlaps, and spaces paper and chipboard into units suspended from the wall. For *Intersection* (1971/2018), the artist placed sheets of partially rolled plastic and paper perpendicular to the wall beneath a line marked in charcoal. Unfurled on the floor, paper is soaked in oil until translucent and then affixed to another sheet of plastic. While the

oil (originally crude oil) evokes the industrial materials used by peers such as Carl Andre and Donald Judd, Rockburne offers a unique combination of sculptural procedure and visceral matter, marked by the influence of set theory.

Although *Domain of the Variable* (1972/2018) asserts a relation to conceptual math in both title and organization, it also forces a physical reading of the work. Paper board glued to the wall is stripped, leaving a painterly trace. Red grease is smeared on paper and board to stain the gallery wall. For the Golden Section Paintings (1974–76) Rockburne follows their titular geometric proportions, yet articulates them by stapling linen to the wall, lining surfaces in varnish and gesso, and then measuring, cutting, and folding various planes. Folding, a key process in the Egyptian Paintings (1979–81) and *Locus* (1972), addresses how forms can modify their shape while holding their physical integrity when their material is altered.

The Carbon Paper Installation elucidates the social, even participatory, aspects of Rockburne's process. Based on a 1973 presentation at the Bykert Gallery in New York, the work offers a model for collective mark making. Residue accrues not only from the artist's manipulation, but also from the materials' impressions on one another, and viewers' contact with the installation. For this iteration, Rockburne painted the walls and floors of the gallery in a brilliant white not intended to remain immaculate: fingerprints linger from the installation of the paper works, while the footprints of museum visitors will accumulate over time.

