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Gallery chronicle

by [James Panero](#)

On "Richard Pousette-Dart: Drawing, Form Is Verb" at Knoedler & Company; "Group Exhibition: Abstractions" at Charles Cowles Gallery; "Barry Le Va: Voltage" at David Nolan Gallery & "El Anatsui: Zebra Crossing" at Jack Shainman Gallery.

What a year it has been for the legacy of Richard Pousette-Dart (1916–1992). Over three decades ago, Hilton Kramer called this mystical painter the “odd man out of the New York School.” The youngest of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, Pousette-Dart came on the scene untainted by social realism and the art politics of the 1930s. There was “no suggestion of rebellion,” Kramer remarked of his early work, “nothing of the ethos of the revolté.” Pousette-Dart was a painter without a fight, a pacifist in a generation of prize-fighters. As such he never embraced the brutish side of Abstract Expressionism or its macho posturing. In 1951, at the height of his career, he removed himself from the garrets of Tenth Street, relocating with his wife, Evelyn, to the suburbs of Rockland County, New York. He lived and worked there for the rest of his life. These were the facts for which the black-and-blue world of the avant-garde never forgave him.

Throughout his life, Pousette-Dart was often drowned out by louder voices. But in recent years, as the heavy hand of action painting has come in for reappraisal, the light touch of Pousette-Dart has started to get its due. Last August, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum featured Pousette-Dart in a critically acclaimed five-week retrospective that came to New York at the last moment from Philip Rylands and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice. Now, Knoedler & Company has brought together a selection of Pousette-Dart drawings.^[1] With works that are “cherry picked,” as the guest curator Robert Hobbs says, from a 2001–2002 exhibition of Pousette-Dart drawings in Frankfurt, Knoedler offers New Yorkers a chance to consider first-hand this painter’s accomplishments on paper. If you missed the short-lived Guggenheim exhibition, the show also provides another opportunity to see an unsung modernist master—here working in a medium that seems especially well-suited to his strengths.

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, Pousette-Dart spent his formative years in Valhalla, New York. His father, Nathaniel Pousette, was an artist; his mother, Flora Louise Dart, a poet. He learned the craft of painting at his father’s easel and spent only one year studying art, at Bard College, before moving to New York City to pursue a career as an artist, supporting himself by working as an assistant to the sculptor Paul Manship, a family friend. Pousette-Dart was only twenty-five when he painted *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental* in 1941 and 1942, now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This epic assembly of spiritual symbols borrowed from African, Oceanic, and American Indian art became the first Abstract Expressionist painting on a mural-sized canvas.

Pousette-Dart's facility and his retiring disposition comes through in the art he produced. His deeply articulated paintings rarely seem labored. Sometimes he built up his surfaces in daubs of oil. Other times he filled huge compositions with thousands of hairline marks. At his best, he allowed his work to come together through what would appear to be an arbitrary accretion of gestures. When allowed to collect in sufficient number, like metal filings arranged by a magnetic field, the tiny marks reveal form, symbols that come into focus on the verge of their own creation, as though recorded in the first few seconds of their life. "While not in the least representational in any ordinary sense," Kramer said of such forms, Pousette-Dart's work "seems nonetheless to apostrophize the heavens as a sacred subject."

At Knoedler, works on paper such as *Center of the Seraph* (1979), *Vague Paths* (1979), and *Breath of White Motion* (1990) best convey these heavenly aspirations, where the marks of the artist seem to give way to an invisible hand revealing sacred subjects. The single best work, meant as the culmination of the show, is *White Cathedral* (1984–1989), a monumental canvas of thousands of pencil lines where the triangular peaks of gothic architecture are shown at the very instant of our comprehension—one pencil mark less, and the image would disappear; one more, and it would have already become too real. Here is form at the moment of recognition. It is at a similar moment that we now find the legacy of Richard Pousette-Dart.

As the main currents of the avant-garde flowed to pop and minimalism in the 1960s and 1970s, some of the most interesting artists of the period went against the grain. Rather than breaking with the artistic developments of the 1950s, they chose to update and deepen the practice of abstract painting. Through February 2, Charles Cowles Gallery features a selection of artists who came to represent the second and third generations of Abstract Expressionists. [2] Last year, an exhibition at the National Academy Museum called "High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967–1975" brought renewed attention to this milieu, even as the selection of artists in the show, conceived by the painter David Reed, was widely criticized for its unevenness. "High Times" was far from the last word on the subject.

While the exhibition at Cowles includes only a handful of artists who appeared at the National Academy show, the selection here—Charles Arnoldi, Dennis Ashbaugh, David Budd, Gene Davis, John Divola, James De France, Michael Goldberg, Joe Goode, Ronnie Landfield, David Paul, Andrew Spence, and Peter Young—seems more comprehensive and accomplished.

The show begins with Landfield's *Open Road* (1971–72), an archway of mottled color that serves as an appropriate metaphor for painting in the 1970s—less exuberant, more constrained than the abstraction of an earlier generation, but in certain ways more grounded in our own time and place. David Budd's *Anti-Sender* (1969) likewise conveys the negative energy its title suggests. Far from a pretty picture, this Van Gogh swirl in brown and black finds its own elegance in the systematic waves of the surface treatment, which resembles pressed clay as much as oil on canvas.

This Cowles exhibition is just the start. Whether it be Thornton Willis at both Elizabeth Harris and Sideshow Gallery, or Alan Saret at The Drawing Center with his first exhibition in seventeen years (on view through February 7), many of the painters who came of age in the 1970s are producing the most interesting abstract work today.

Barry Le Va might himself qualify as a third-generation Abstract Expressionist if he had spent his formative years in New York instead of California. Born in Long Beach in 1941 and educated at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, Le Va arrives at abstract art through reference points that seem far removed from the legacy of the New York School. For his sixth exhibition at David Nolan, Le Va abstracts electrical diagrams into freehand drawings. [3]

Nolan has an eye for attracting artists who create serious painting and drawing through rigorous but

unconventional means. Here Le Va has stripped form away from its original, practical meaning. He uses the utilitarian language of electrical engineering for expressive ends. *Voltage 5 (group of two drawings)* (2007), a diptych of graphite on paper, best illustrates Le Va's use of such a system. On the left is a wide, rectangular shape—a resistor. On the right a network of arrows flows together—a conductor. The eye engages these shapes much as an electrical current would follow the same circuitry in a diagram: on the left the shape is motionless; on the right the eye speeds through the arrows; one side complacent; the other, manic.

Le Va intensifies the effect of voltage with his free-drawn diagrams, made up of sketchy, “charged” lines in graphite. He also works with etching, in a series of related diagrams, and through an interconnected array of sixteen ink drawings. Le Va mines the relationship of abstract forms and the force that can be conveyed between them. His work overcomes its potential theatricality through a close attention to execution and the sensuality of his drawing.

Abstract art can appear when you least expect it. At last year's Venice Biennale, the abstract tapestries of El Anatsui proved to be a rare standout and a critical favorite. In January, the Metropolitan Museum installed a monumental work by Anatsui, *Between Heaven and Earth*, which became the institution's first major piece by a contemporary African sculptor in its collection. It was only a matter of time before a New York gallery show materialized as well, and Jack Shainman now features Anatsui in his first solo exhibition in Chelsea. [\[4\]](#)

“Tapestries” is not quite the right word to describe Anatsui's work. His creations are stitched together from copper wire and the caps and metal foil of liquor bottles. Beyond deploying a unique process, Anatsui brings an assured sense of composition to his work. A professor of sculpture at the University of Nigeria since 1975, this native of Ghana (born 1944) combines African designs with a modernist sensibility for found objects and large-scale abstraction. The man-hours alone stored up in his work can be staggering. I suspect his extensive production owes something to the ready availability and economy of studio assistants particular to contemporary art in Africa. With waste products remade into shimmering skins, the work can recall a localized struggle for renewal—at times never letting you forget it. *Bleeding Takari II* (2007) is far too literal, with drips of red bottle caps pouring onto the floor in pools that hammer away at the message.

Thankfully, Anatsui largely avoids overt sentimentality in the remaining work at Shainman, letting us marvel at the delicacy and ingenuity of his creations, playing with the issues of texture and figure-ground that are the hallmarks of serious abstraction.

Whether Anatsui will exhaust his particular medium of foil wrappers is yet to be determined. At Shainman he is the virtuoso of the bottle cap, a sculptor at the top of his abilities who can even find numerous applications for the break-away foil ring that seals a twist cap in place. *Oga Cavorting in Lace* (2007) is Anatsui at his best, with the pleats of the suspended fabric transforming the ugliness of cast-off materials into an expression of artistic form and possibility—abstract art for the twenty-first century.

Notes

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1. “Richard Pousette-Dart: Drawing, Form Is Verb” opened at Knoedler & Company, New York, on January 19 and remains on view through March 8, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. “Group Exhibition: Abstractions” opened at Charles Cowles Gallery, New York, on January 8 and remains on view through February 2, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. “Barry Le Va: Voltage” opened at David Nolan Gallery, New York, on January 11 and remains on view through February 9, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)

4. “El Anatsui: Zebra Crossing” opened at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, on January 4 and remains on view through February 2, 2008. [Go back to the text.](#)

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