

For more than 50 years, Dorothea Rockburne has combined her studies of mathematics, astronomy, and topology with material experimentation in the studio

BY SARA ROFFINO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTINE LARSEN

Space



Reconsidered

Dorothea Rockburne
in the SoHo studio
where she has lived
and worked for more
than four decades.

63

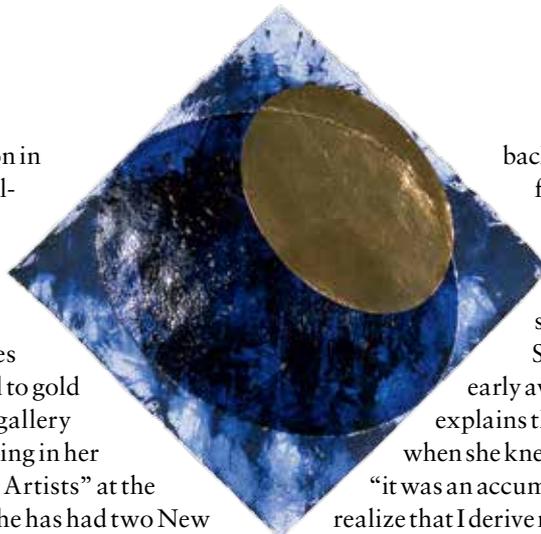
pEOPLE UNDERSTAND what I'm doing aesthetically, but the spatial concepts and inventions I'm working with are generally not recognized or therefore understood," says Dorothea Rockburne as she shows me around the sprawling second-floor SoHo loft where she has lived and worked for the past four decades. "The imagined space, which we now understand in our souls, has radically changed since man walked on the moon and NASA began to record planets and cosmic phenomena.

"We no longer experience Renaissance perspective in our everyday lives, yet much of the art being made today still uses either a grid or Cubist space as the underlying structure," she says, holding up works on paper one by one in order to present them vertically, as she insists they must be viewed. "I'm interested in conceiving a new visual space—one that coordinates in a better way with our present understanding of the cosmos." On a table next to the works is a blue notebook filled with mathematical equations completed in pencil. "I practice topological geometry in my painting and drawing," she says.

Rockburne, 83, is petite, but her presence is commanding. Energetic and cheerful with luminous blue eyes, she has a sense of urgency about her—and a fierce determination that has spurred her intellectual and creative life. Despite being a central figure in the New York art world since arriving in the city in 1955, Rockburne—described by her gallerist, Dorsey Waxter, as "an artist's artist"—has never been a joiner or a follower. "She's walked a line between being a very minimal artist and a very maximal artist," Waxter says.

Ever since her 1966 participation in an Experiments in Art and Technology outing at Leo Castelli, critics and curators have recognized the significance of her work—which includes everything from post-card-size pieces on paper to frescoes in materials ranging from crude oil to gold leaf. After Castelli came a spate of gallery shows in the early 1970s, culminating in her inclusion in “Eight Contemporary Artists” at the Museum of Modern Art in 1974. She has had two New York-area retrospectives this decade. Yet Rockburne’s presence among the great artists—and she has been surrounded by many since her early years—has been marked by an individuality and an uncompromising commitment to pursuing her practice on her own terms. She is unafraid to seek out greater understanding and representation of the cosmos, and her world is as much one of mathematics and distant art history as it is of such common postwar concerns as the investigation of materials, color, and abstract form.

On a frigid winter day, Rockburne welcomes me into her space, immediately offering me a brandy to warm up. In the



back area are her extensive archives, desks for her assistants, and the studio where she paints. Her sun-drenched drawing studio is in the front part of the loft, which includes a kitchen, an office, a sitting area, and large, lush plants. Settling in to discuss her career and her early awareness of herself as an artist she explains that there wasn’t one particular moment when she knew she was a painter. Rather, she says, “it was an accumulation of small decisions that made me realize that I derive more from painting and drawing and making objects than any other thing.” Already at the age of 13, Rockburne felt the need to focus and chose to give up skiing in order to concentrate on drawing lessons. At the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Montreal, where she grew up, the teenage Rockburne studied under the artists Paul-Emile Borduas and Jean-Paul Riopelle at the time they published *Le Refus global*, a radical antireligious manifesto that challenged Québécois values and is now considered a contributing factor to the socially and politically progressive 1960s movement known as Canada’s Quiet Revolution. A sense of radicalism has stayed with Rockburne throughout her life.



Magnetic Field Force

Rockburne 99/100



Installation view of *Folded Sky, Homage to Colin Powell*, 2009–13, at the United States Embassy in Kingston, Jamaica. Opposite, from top: *Gravitational Pull #2*, 2002, from the series “Copper Works,” and *Magnetic-Field Force*, 1999–2000, from the “Astronomy Drawings” series.



Works on paper in the artist's studio. Opposite, from top: Installation view of "In My Mind's Eye," Rockburne's 2011 retrospective at the Parrish Art Museum; and *Northern Sky* and *Southern Sky*, 1993, installed in the former Sony Building in New York.

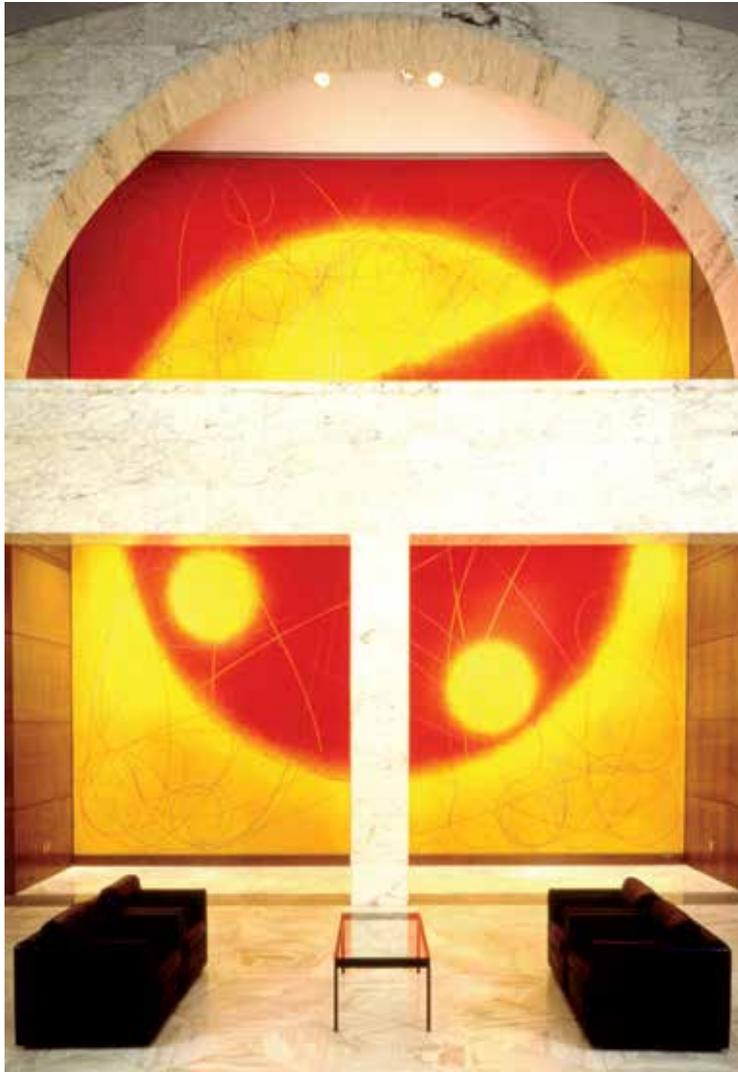
“My escape from Montreal was very cloak-and-dagger,” Rockburne says, recalling the bank account her sister secretly helped her set up to save money as she set off for Black Mountain College.

Following the guidance of her art teachers, Rockburne, who describes standard education for women at the time she was planning for her studies as “dreadful” and “sexist,” set off for Black Mountain College in North Carolina in 1950. “My escape from Montreal was very cloak-and-dagger,” she says, recalling the bank account her sister secretly helped her set up to save money, knowing their parents wouldn’t approve of her decision. On the train ride to Asheville, the 18-year-old artist spent a night in New York. It was enough time for her to decide she would live there one day.

Arriving at Black Mountain with a classical arts education already behind her, Rockburne was younger than many of the other students and unusual both because she was a woman and because she was Canadian. Rather than falling in with the Abstract Expressionists whose presence loomed large at the school, Rockburne forged her own path as a painter. Among those she befriended were John Cage, John Chamberlain, Cy Twombly, and Merce Cunningham. She also developed a lifelong friendship with Robert Rauschenberg, for whom she would later work in New York. “He was one of the

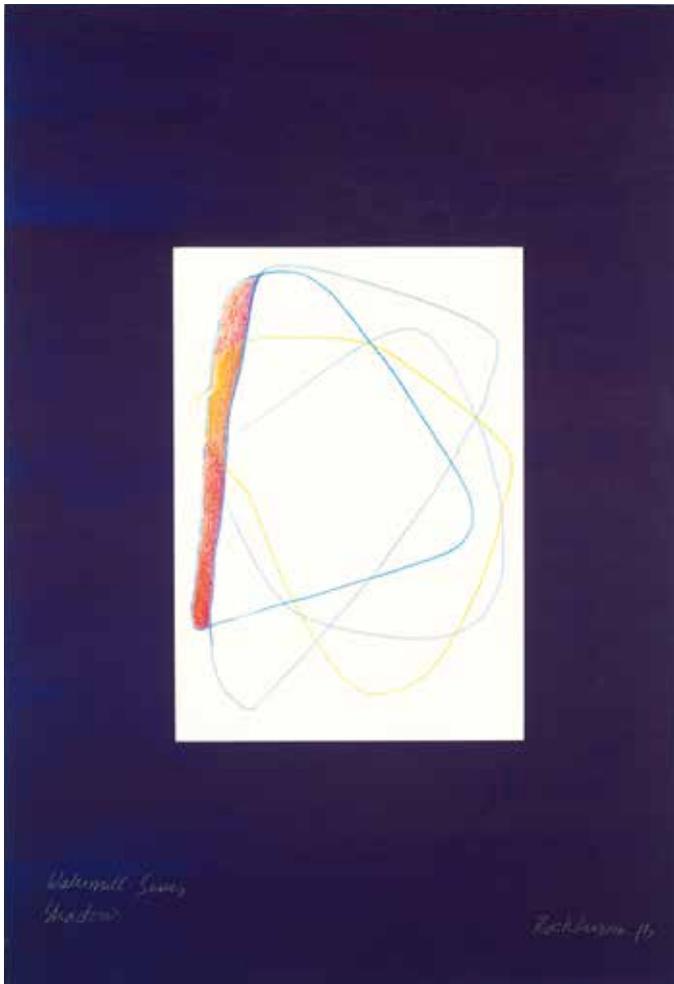
most intelligent people I've ever known. His creativity and courage were a sheer joy to experience throughout our friendship," she says. "He could dance, and he was a superb cook." Because Black Mountain offered an interdisciplinary education, Rockburne also studied mathematics. Her teacher, Max Dehn, was a close friend of Albert Einstein, and his lessons would eventually come to form much of Rockburne's practice as an artist. While at the school, she participated in the first Happening—Cage's *Theater Piece #1*, which occurred in 1952—and also got married, gave birth to a daughter, and continued the entire time studying voraciously and making work.

Within a year of arriving in New York from North Carolina, Rockburne divorced her husband, who had moved with other former students from the school to Rockland County, New York. "Going to live in the country sounded to me like a way to shelve the wife while you go screw around," she says of her decision to stay in the city, becoming the sole caregiver of her daughter.



FROM TOP: GARY MAMAY; TWO IMAGES: JIM SALZANO

Shadow, 2013–15, from the “Watermill Series.” Below, an installation view of “In My Mind’s Eye,” including, from left: *Scalar*, 1971; *Locus*, 1972; and *Extasie*, 1983–84. Opposite, from left: *Three Point Manifold*, 2008, and *Radius and Period*, 1994–2011.



Rockburne describes her early years in New York, living on Chambers Street: “There were no school buses, so I took my daughter on the subway up to the Dalton School every day, at 89th and Lexington. I went to a job waitressing and then picked her up, and I did things with her, like homework, or took her for visits and shopped and cooked—there was no food on Chambers Street, there was no Tribeca, it was a no-man’s-land—and then I read to my daughter and lay down with her to fall asleep from 9 or so until 10, and then I got up and painted all night.”

Throughout the early 1960s, Rockburne experimented significantly outside the studio—dancing at the Judson Dance Theater and participating in Happenings. It wasn’t until 1970—15 years after she moved to New York—that the artist had her first solo show at the influential Bykert Gallery, which also represented Brice Marden and Chuck Close. By 1973, Rockburne had received a Guggenheim Fellowship and her work had been acquired by MOMA and the Guggenheim.

It was also in the early ’70s that the painter Carroll Dunham came to New York and was set up by his professor to work as a studio assistant to Rockburne (who worked with many young artists, including Mel Kendrick and, briefly, Robert Storr). “Working with Dorothea was hugely formative for me. It was my introduction to what the life of an artist is like on a day-to-day basis both socially and intellectually,” Dunham recalls. “She taught me how to work. She taught me what it’s like to organize a room and have your act together when you’re by yourself, which is hard.”

Because Rockburne was working alongside the Minimalists and employed a similarly experimental approach to material—

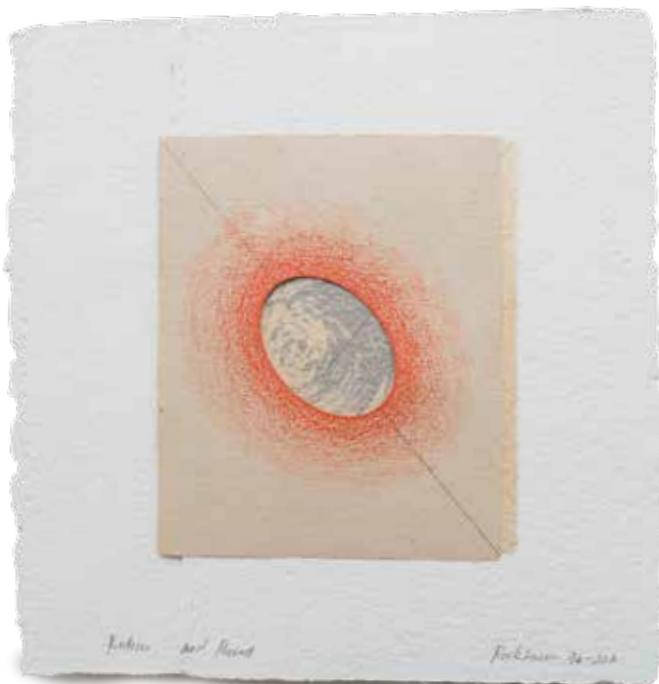
and she has the ability to see varying depths of color where others see only black or white—she is often grouped among these artists. Yet her work is distinct in several ways. “Dorothea’s work really speaks to the interest in drawing, process, and nontraditional materials that the artists from her generation were working with, but it has a real element of her hand,” explains Esther Adler, co-curator of “Drawing Which Makes Itself,” Rockburne’s 2013 MOMA exhibition. “She came from a very traditional arts upbringing and she considers herself a painter, and that touch of the hand and an incredible commitment to craft really comes through.”

Further distinguishing



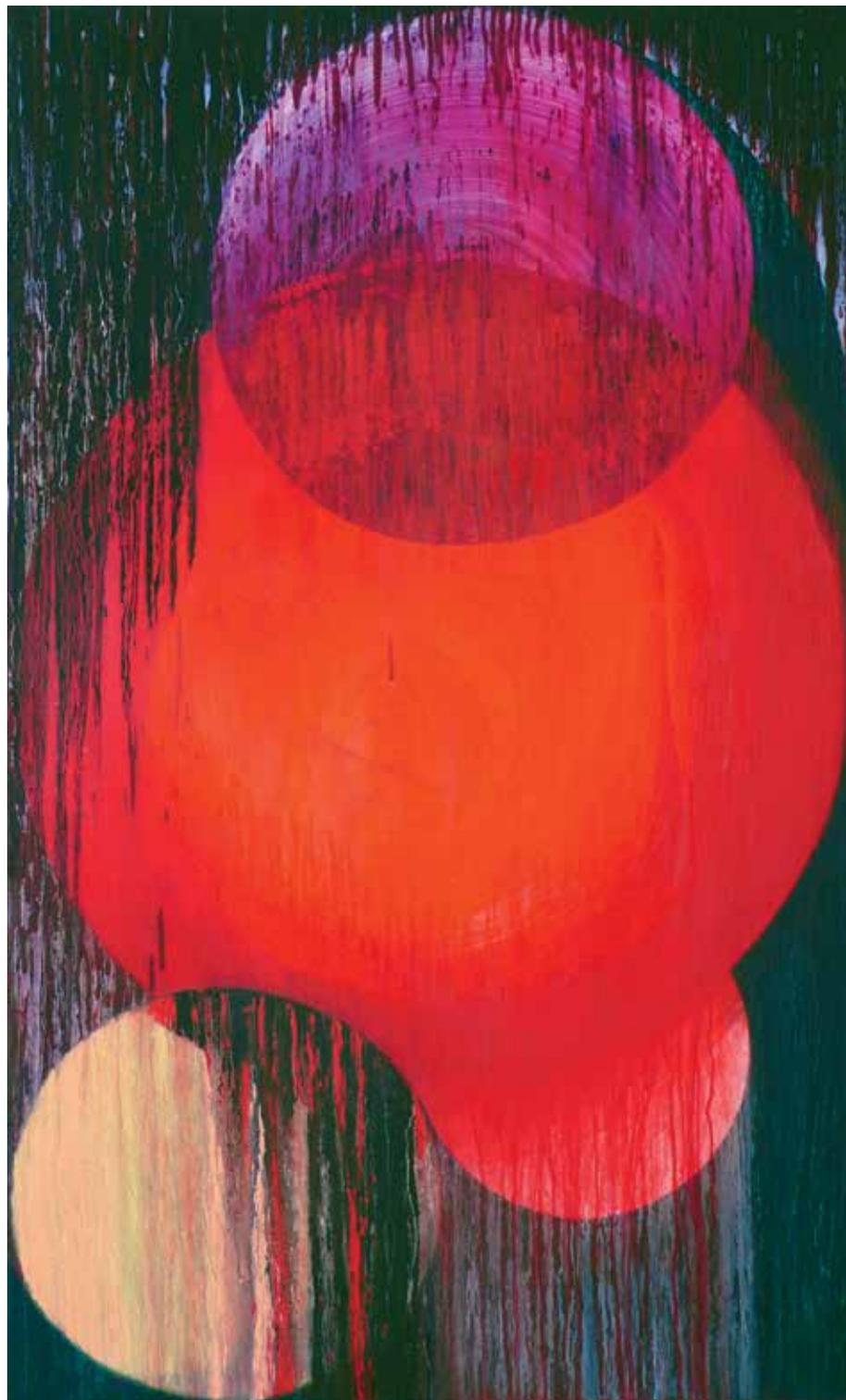
Rockburne from both the Expressionists and the Minimalists is the convergence, within her practice, of astronomy, mathematics, and painting. Her employment of set theory and the Golden Mean, combined with her studies of topology and the cosmos, make her more akin to ancient Greek or Renaissance artists than to her peers. Rockburne's frames of reference are extensive, transcending the contemporary art historical context; she frequently mentions thinkers like Plato, Euclid, Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, and David Hilbert. While in residence at the American Academy in Rome in 1985, she made a trip to view Galileo's papers in the Vatican. In the studio, Rockburne has looked especially to Piero della Francesca and Mannerist artists as well as to the art of ancient Egypt and to early Byzantine depictions of space.

Marking Rockburne's 50th year exhibiting in New York were outings in two group shows earlier this year, "Drawing Then: Innovation and Influence in American Drawings of the Sixties" at Dominique Lévy and "In the Making: Artists, Assistants, and Influence" at Luxembourg & Dayan. A range



of her works are held in permanent collections and on permanent display around the city. This makes it all the more surprising, and devastating, that she is currently embroiled in a battle with developers over the fate of two of her major works, the frescoes *Northern Sky* and *Southern Sky*. Commissioned by Sony in 1993, the 30-by-30-foot works are installed at 550 Madison Avenue, a building sold in 2013 to the Chetrit Group, which plans to turn the lower floors into a luxury hotel and the upper floors into condos. After two years of inquiries by the artist, the developers finally agreed to meet with Rockburne in February of this year, but they refused to make any commitment to save the works and have since gone silent.

Rockburne, however, is committed to seeing the paintings preserved in perpetuity. Alicia Longwell, curator of the artist's 2011 retrospective at the Parrish Art Museum recalls: "The impossible has never stopped Dorothea." ▣



“Dorothea’s work really speaks to the interest in drawing, process, and nontraditional materials that the artists from her generation were working with, but it has a real element of her hand.”