Richard Pousette-Dart: The Body of Painting

Richard Pousette-Dart’s paintings seem to belong to a realm of spiritual harmony detached from the strife and ugliness of contemporary life. This impression of effortless tranquility is misleading. Pousette-Dart’s work emerges from a prolonged struggle with the symbols and materials of modern art. But his victory is so complete that it requires an effort to intuit the struggle behind it. It is also difficult, if not impossible, for twenty-first-century viewers to respond to the intense materiality of his canvases. Accustomed to the flat skin of printed reproductions, the dematerialized veil of slides, or the glowing phosphors of the internet, we do not know how to respond to the density of his paint, the multiplicity of layers, and the almost sculptural relief of his pictures. Like human beings, they are not mere images, but living bodies. To experience their full power, it helps to understand how he constructs them, adding layer after layer of pigment until, like the eyes in The Tempest, they “suffer a sea-change, into something rich and strange.”

From his first work of the 1930s to his last paintings of the 1990s, there is a remarkable continuity to Pousette-Dart’s career. Instead of rushing from style to style, he explored certain problems for year after year, decade after decade. There were profound changes in his work, but they were never sudden or violent. He sometimes seemed like a man beyond time: a key artist of Abstract Expressionism, yet always remaining a determined individualist whose paintings evolved out of a continuing dialogue between himself and the canvas. Focusing on formal issues and working procedures, this essay will attempt to demonstrate both the internal coherence of Pousette-Dart’s career and his profound links to the art of his era.

Totems

Looking at Pousette-Dart’s drawings of the 1930s, two things are immediately apparent: the sculptural character of the forms, and the intense emotion invested in them.1 Agony, a drawing from the 1930s (fig. 1), depicts a masculine figure whose stark features recall the mask-like face found in another drawing that the artist entitled Head of Antiochus, apparently referring to the arrogant Hellenistic king who desecrated the Temple of Jerusalem in 169 B.C. However, the closest model for the figure in Agony is not Hellenistic but modern. Pousette-Dart seems to have been inspired by Jacob Epstein’s powerful sculpture known as The Rock Drill (fig. 2). Here, a construction worker and his pneumatic drill have become fused into a single, mecanomorphic entity. The bit of the rock drill is fastened to the elbow of his left arm, while his other limb has shivered away. His ribs have hardened into a series of metallic baffles, and his mask-like head is bent forward in acquiescence to his fate.

The asymmetric figure in Pousette-Dart’s drawing has lowered his head in a similar gesture of resignation. One arm is truncated, while the other points straight downward as if about to plunge into the earth. The contours of the figure are drawn with heavy black lines, dividing it into a series of flat geometric shapes, except in the neck, where a series of heavy bands suggests a flexible metallic stem. Unlike the French Purists or the American Precisionists, Pousette-Dart is not using mechanical forms to celebrate industry and technology. Rather, he seems to be suggesting that technology may crush the human soul, turning us into slaves of the machine.
This style of large flat shapes bounded by thick black borders reached its climax in paintings of the late 1930s such as *Bird Woman* (pl. 3). From a strictly formal point of view, they derived from Picasso’s work of the late 1920s and the early 1930s, which often combined line and color in a manner recalling stained glass or *cloisonné* jewelry. In the mid-1930s, other artists, such as John Graham and Arshile Gorky, were also drawn to this aspect of Picasso’s style. In *Bird Woman*, this formal model is combined with totemic imagery derived from Native American culture—specifically, the art of the Pacific Northwest.

Such totemic imagery played an important role in liberating the American avant-garde from the stranglehold of geometric abstraction, which seemed by the end of the 1930s to have declined into a formalist exercise. Instead of going back to conventional realism, avant-garde artists turned to the Surrealist idea of the “fetish,” borrowed from anthropology. The fetishistic object might be realistic or it might be abstract. What mattered, in either case, were its magical powers, which promised to shatter the conventions of bourgeois existence. The purpose of the fetish was not to seduce viewers by its beauty but to disturb them—to induce a kind of spiritual rebirth. It provided the model for a new kind of art, aspiring to psychic power rather than formal perfection.

American artists evolved their own distinctive, homegrown version of Surrealism, centering on the idea of the totem—a kind of fetish rooted in Native American rather than African culture. Such ideas inspired the work of “Indian Space Painters” such as Steve Wheeler, Gertrude Barrer, and Peter Busa, and other artists, such as Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, and Pousette-Dart, who would become known as Abstract Expressionists. As Robert Hobbs has noted, Pollock’s *Birth* (fig. 3), painted around the same time as Pousette-Dart’s *Bird Woman*, 1939–40 (pl. 3), utilizes a similar vocabulary of circular forms, contained within heavy dark borders. Like Pousette-Dart, Pollock carefully studied the totem poles in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. The mask-like faces in *Birth* are painted with reds, blues, yellows, and whites derived from Northwest Indian sculpture, and the ovoid shapes are stacked one on top of the other like the faces on a totem pole. Pousette-Dart’s *Bird Woman* includes a similar mask (near top center), but the composition as a whole moves away from its tribal prototype. The multiple forms coalesce into two large ovoids, which seem to correspond to the upper and lower halves of the woman’s body. At left, she grasps a white bird with an open beak (hence the painting’s title). Although the composition as a whole is formed from interlocking curved and angular
comes apparent that Picasso changed his mind repeatedly about what colors to use: the picture has a dense, tactile surface, built up from layer upon layer of pigment.

This dense, layered skin of paint, typical of Picasso's work from the late 1920s through the early 1930s, was widely imitated by avant-garde painters in New York. Arshile Gorky, for instance, was famous for the density of his canvases. Poussette-Dart's canvases of the late 1930s have the same density, layer upon layer of paint coagulating into a thick, pebbled surface, parting here and there to reveal glimpses of different colors below. In the course of this repainting, the paint of the background is usually brought up to—and even over—the shapes in the foreground. One result is to simplify and unify the contours of these shapes, smoothing out any irregularities. Another result is to make it seem as if the "background" is actually in front of the other planes of the picture. Here too, Poussette-Dart's technique is typical of his generation.

Thomas Hess commented on this aspect of Willem de Kooning's paintings of the late 1940s, writing that "background and foreground ... blend

shapes, it is punctuated by self-contained egg-like shapes, each enclosing an "eye" of concentric circles painted in contrasting colors. When you look at the painting, it seems to stare back, with more-than-human intensity. Like a totem or fetish, it has its own uncanny life. The "eyes" are simultaneously breasts, symbols of sustenance and desire.5

As Hobbs observes, Poussette-Dart's technique in this and other works of the late 1930s is indebted to Picasso's 1932 canvas Girl Before a Mirror which New York artists could study firsthand in the Museum of Modern Art from 1938 onward (fig. 5).6 In reproduction, the palette of Girl Before a Mirror seems notable for the purity and intensity of Picasso's colors: the primary reds and yellows accented with purple, lavender, and green. When the painting is seen firsthand, however, it be-
into one concept; the painting is unified as an organism is a unity—parts do not exist."

The curved contours of Pousette-Dart’s early paintings evoke a strong sensation of three-dimensional form. The sculptural conception of drawings like *The Dancer* I and *Agony* (fig. 1) remains evident in paintings like *Bird Woman* (fig. 4), despite the integration of figure and ground. In 1941–43, however, there is a radical change in his paint handling. His 1943 gouache, *Azure Celebration*, displays an extraordinary freedom in mark-making (fig. 7). The hard contours of Pousette-Dart’s earlier work have disappeared, replaced by independent lines that float in an open, transparent space. This transformation in his facture is not an isolated phenomenon. A similar openness and transparency, and a similar vocabulary of smeared and spattered marks, appear in Jackson Pollock’s *Burning Landscape*, also executed in 1943.

Younger painters such as Pousette-Dart and Pollock soon looked for ways to combine this new freedom and energy of paint handling with a more solid pictorial structure. Pousette-Dart’s oil paintings of the period, such as *Abstract Eye* (pl. 14), are built around a Cubist framework of vertical and horizontal lines. In contrast to the thick skin of Pousette-Dart’s earlier work, the paint here is laid on thinly but in many layers, so that the viewer seems to be looking through a series of scints. Each mark is repeated several times: a black line, for instance, will be accompanied by parallel lines of olive green, mustard yellow, and white. In a brilliant display of visual syncopation, the underlying rhythm of the painting is simultaneously amplified and diffused by the profusion of secondary beats.

*Abstract Eye* testifies to Pousette-Dart’s new interest in texture and pattern. Instead of a centered, sculptural motif, there is a multiplication of marks and patterns that extend with equal intensity from top to bottom and from one side to the other of the picture. It is an early example of what Clement Greenberg referred to as a "polyphonic" composition, "a surface knit together of a multiplicity of identical or similar elements." There is a
baroque character to the curves and volutes of Abstract Eye, some of which appear as independent shapes in Pousette-Dart’s notebooks. He also used them as models for flat brass sculptures. Even the overall structure of painting, a grid ornamented with curvilinear elements, is echoed in a magnificent wrought-iron gateway that Pousette-Dart acquired during his travels, and incorporated into his house in Suffern, New York.

The insistence on pattern in Pousette-Dart’s new pictures does not exclude the presence of figuration. The concentric eye (or breast) shapes of Bird Woman (pl. 3) return in Abstract Eye, accompanied by a more literal eye that stares out at the viewer from the right side of the canvas. The long, undulating line that traverses the canvas near the top, together with the narrow knob emerging from it, suggests the presence of an abstract figure hidden within the orthogonal grid. This hidden figure becomes visible in paintings of the mid-1940s such as Figure, where the central axis of the composition serves as a fixed spine, surrounded by mobile shapes suggesting head, torso, arms, and legs. The facture of these canvases is far more painterly than that of Pousette-Dart’s earlier work; they are built up from ridges of white paint, squeezed from the tube, scraped, smeared, and sometimes over-painted with other colors.

In these pictures, we are once again looking at a period style, which can be found in the work of several painters in the mid-1940s. Jackson Pollock’s canvases from the Sounds in the Grass series, done in 1946, such as Croaking Movement (fig. 6) show a similar sequence of layers: thin bright colors covered with thicker neutral tones (white and black), reworked by gouging and scraping. The violence of the paint handling in these canvases helps explain why painters such as Pousette-Dart and Pollock were called “Expressionists” even though their subject matter had little in common with that of the early twentieth-century Expressionists. The facture of Figure recalls the squeezed and scraped paint in pictures by Oskar Kokoschka, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Chaim Soutine.

Between their complex formal vocabulary and their Expressionist handling, Pousette-Dart’s canvases of the mid-1940s seem like the antithesis of the more linear, sculptural pictures he had been making in the late 1930s. Their broken forms and shimmering Cubist spaces approach the condition of weightless opticality that critics such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried considered a defining feature of the new American painting. It would be a mistake to conclude from this, however, that Pousette-Dart’s paintings no longer referred to a sculptural conception of the figure, as they had in the 1930s. What had changed, rather, was the nature of his sculptural model.

We can get some idea of this from a sculpture consisting of pieces of wire and copper encircling a cross-shaped wooden armature, Figure Number 5, 1948–49 (fig. 9). Here, Pousette-Dart has left behind the totemic, monolithic figures of the 1930s in favor of a quintessentially modern kind of open-work construction. In purely formal terms, the figure is a “drawing in space,” but Pousette-Dart’s figure has less to do with the contemporary work of David Smith (the artist usually associated with this term) than with earlier sculptures by Picasso. Instead of seeking geometric clarity, Pousette-Dart seems to be responding to a series of sculptures that Picasso made in the 1930s using wire or twine, gnarled and twisted around various found objects (fig. 8). Like Picasso’s, Pousette-Dart’s assembled sculptures do not suggest the mass of the body, but present a series of planes and filaments evoking the contours of the human body.

Presents

Many New York painters of the 1940s and ’50s were drawn to the example of Byzantine mosaic with its simplified contours, its hieratic composition, its flatness, and its glittering presence. Artists such as Jackson Pollock and Jeanne Reynal experimented with the medium of mosaic, or found ways to achieve similar effects using oil paint or enamel or acrylic. In 1958, discussing the work of Pollock,
Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko, Clement Greenberg wrote that:

"This new kind of modernist picture, like the Byzantine gold and glass mosaic, comes forward to fill the space between itself and the spectator with its radiance. And it combines in similar fashion the monumentally decorative with the pictorially emphatic, at the same time that it uses the most self-evidently corporeal means to deny its own corporeality."

The parallel between contemporary abstraction and Byzantine art was not merely visual. Rather, the two schools of art were seen to have fulfilled similar social functions. Just as Byzantine art provided an image of stasis and redemption to compensate for the insecurity and anxiety of life in Late Antiquity, so too modern abstraction provided a compensation for the insecurity and anxiety of life during the Cold War.

As early as 1908, the German critic Wilhelm Worringen noted the way that the simplification of form in Byzantine art anticipated the geometric language of modern art. The modernist fascination with Byzantine art also found expression in William Butler Yeats’ 1927 poem, “Sailing to Byzantium.” The poet begins by expressing his discontent with the human condition: he is “sick with desire and fastened to a dying animal.” Longing to escape from the frustrations of mortal existence, he dreams of being gathered “into the artifice of eternity” by assuming “such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make” or by merging into the “gold mosaic of a wall.” The medium of mosaic provided a vivid symbol of art as a timeless, perfected version of human life. It seems to have attracted modern painters well before Yeats wrote “Sailing to Byzantium.” Modernist Byzantinism received a new impetus after World War II, when anxiety and insecurity emerged as defining features of Cold War America. One critic wrote that, “The beginning of the Atomic Age has brought less hope than fear. It is a primitive fear; the fear of the unknown, the fear of forces man can neither channel nor comprehend.”

For New York painters of the 1940s, the influence of Byzantine art mingled with that of metaphysical Painting and Surrealism to produce an emphasis on isolated figures, frieze-like compositions, and empty, beach-like settings. Mark Rothko’s Primordial Landscape of 1945, for instance, reduces the landscape to parallel bands of sky, sea, and sand (fig. 11). The foreground figures float as weightlessly as the Empress Theodora and her attendants. The frieze-like composition simultaneously echoes the Ravenna mosaics and Picasso’s Demoiselles d’Avignon, which had arrived in New York in 1939. In contrast, the distorted anatomies of Rothko’s figures, halfway between animal and vege-
tal, manifest the influence of Surrealist exiles such as Matta and André Masson. The figure at left offers a streamlined version of a classical nude, swelling at the top to represent breasts and torso, shrinking to a narrow waist, and then swelling again to suggest hips and thighs. At right, however, the female body has metamorphosed into a long stem punctuated by a swelling shape with labial stria-
tions, equating the sexual organ of the human female with the seed-bearing pod of a plant.  

Similar metamorphic imagery emerges in some of Pousette-Dart’s pictures of the 1940s and ’50s, such as the 1955 drawing, Room of Mirrors (fig. 12). Seeds, eggs, and pods recur throughout the composition, punctuated by a large striated form closely recalling the vaginal pod in Rothko’s Primeval Landscape. Here, as in Pousette-Dart’s work of the 1940s, the individual motifs of the composition are arranged within a lattice of vertical and horizontal lines. In Room of Mirrors, the individual motifs remain relatively isolated from one another. In other pictures, such as the magisterial 1950 canvas Path of the Hero (fig. 15), the shapes in each column of the grid seem to coalesce into vertical figures. One consists of a torus, a large diamond, and a small sphere. Another, more complex figure has a fish for a head, followed by a small ball, a large ball, a small diamond, and a triangular base. The figures’ arrangement in columns, and the contrast between the white shapes and the gold-and-brown background, recall the Ravenna mosaics (fig. 10), with their towering figures facing outwards side-by-side in a single plane, against a ground of shimmering gold.

Nothing, one thinks, could be less sculptural. And yet, the columnar figures of Path of the Hero correspond to an elaborate sculpture executed by
Fig. 11. Mark Rothko
Primordial Landscape, 1945
Oil on canvas
54 3/4 x 35 inches (138 x 89 cm)
Collection of Peter G. Peterson

Fig. 12. Richard Pousette-Dart
Room of Mirrors, 1955
Gouache and graphite on paper
10 3/4 x 13 3/4 inches (27 x 35 cm)
Private Collection

Pousette-Dart, perhaps in the late 1940s. Here, rounded and conical forms, carved from plaster, are stacked in a series of connected columns: abstract figures standing in a row, confronting the viewer. This kind of additive composition was an important tendency in American sculpture of the 1950s. Between 1950 and 1955, Louise Bourgeois made numerous sculptures consisting of stacked wooden elements. Later in the same decade, Louise Nevelson began to combine pieces of wood—sometimes raw, sometimes taken from pieces of furniture—into columnar or grid-like assemblages. Indeed, the carved plaster shapes of Pousette-Dart’s untitled sculpture resemble the turned finials and brackets used by Nevelson in Dawn’s Wedding Cake, 1959 (fig. 14).  

Two sculptural traditions came together in such works. On the one hand, there was the Surrealist tradition inspired by African, Oceanic, and Northwest Indian art, in which quasi-abstract forms functioned as surrogates for the human body, reconfigured to express the unconscious or mythic imagination. On the other hand, there was the collage tradition deriving from Picasso, which explored the way that everyday objects could be transformed into symbols for parts of the body; such collage sculpture tended toward a purely aesthetic pleasure in the play of the imagination. By combining these traditions, American sculptors imbued collage sculpture with the expressive and emotional power of the Surrealist tradition. Conversely, the new emphasis on found elements and additive composition freed American sculpture from Surrealism’s dependence on a problematic model of “primitive” art.

In effect, the idea of the totem gave way to a new sense of sculpture or painting as “presence,” a term that frequently appears in Pousette-Dart’s titles from the mid-1950s onwards. The usefulness of the term “presence” lay precisely in its vagueness, in the way that it alluded to a sense of human or spiritual animation without invoking the outdated concepts of “primitivism.” However abstract or reductive Pousette-Dart’s compositions, they were always haunted by a tangible sense of human presence, as vivid as the faces in the Ravenna mosaics or the encaustic portraits from El Fayyum.

It should be noted that the term “presence” also played an important role in the critical discussion of American sculpture of the 1960s. Talking about his black, cube-like sculptures of 1962, Tony Smith commented that, “I certainly never thought of the boxes as sculpture. I just thought of them
being there, which is how the word ‘presence’ came into existence."25 In 1967, discussing the recent sculpture of Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Carl Andre, and Ronald Bladen, Clement Greenberg argued that their work shared a phenomenological sensation of “presence.”26

In Poussette-Dart’s paintings, the sense of a mute human presence, concealed behind the stacks of abstract forms, co-exists with an obsessive attention to the traditional problems of painting, as a craft and an art. Intensely reworking his canvases, he added layer upon layer of paint, sometimes rubbed down until the pigment yielded the translucency of stained glass, sometimes built up until it achieved the density of colored tiles. Pillars of Odysseus, executed in 1949 (pl. 68), is populated by a series of white figures, similar to the personages of his plaster sculpture (fig. 13) but more elongated. These are painted in white, glossy and opaque. The background, however, is painted with overlapping strokes of blue and green, orange and brown. The glowing colors of the background seem to be visible
cut into geometric shapes, while the overloaded pigments drip in wavering lines down the face of the canvas, setting the composition into motion. As he advanced into the 1950s, Poussette-Dart's tendency was to build up thicker and thicker layers of paint. The translucency of stained glass gave way to opaque density. Already in 1951, the painter and critic Manny Farber described a typical picture by Poussette-Dart as "a field of gems built to ponderous thickness by every means of application except water pistol."

The underlying composition of Poussette-Dart's 1958 canvas Blood Wedding (pl. 63) is similar to that of Path of the Hero, painted in 1950 (fig. 15). Both present a frieze of abstract figures composed of diamonds, circles, and other geometric shapes. But the two canvases are dramatically different in terms of visual effect. Where Path of the Hero is spare and weathered, Blood Wedding glitters magnificently with encrusted colors. It is not just that the canvas carries many layers of paint, as in Poussette-Dart's work of the late 1930s. Instead of being applied in flat, opaque layers, the paint is built up into ridges; additional layers of paint are then scumbled over these ridges, forming veils that seem to waver and shimmer in front of the drawn figures.

Here, Poussette-Dart draws on a different aspect of medieval art: not the disembodied brilliance of stained glass, but the fabulous materiality of reliquaries and book-bindings, with their hammered gold reliefs, pearls, and precious stones. In

through a lattice of darker lines, like the window of a Gothic cathedral. Poussette-Dart made this analogy explicit in a 1955 gouache entitled Presence, Cathedral Window (fig. 16). Here, a grid of heavy black lines divides sections of translucent red, blue, and yellow—the traditional colors of medieval church windows.27

Numerous artists of the 1940s and '50s experimented with versions of this style, combining Picasso's Cubist grid and Matisse's brilliant colors into a modern equivalent of stained glass. The immediate model for this synthesis was probably a 1931 still life by Picasso, Pitcher and Bowl of Fruit (fig. 17), which belonged to Nelson Rockefeller but seems to have been exhibited periodically at the Museum of Modern Art.28 The heavy black bands of Pitcher and Bowl of Fruit resemble the lead strips that define structure and contour in medieval windows, while the constant shift between tinted and shaded pigments suggests the play of sunlight across colored glass.

The stained-glass effect of the background in Pillars of Odysseus is subverted and enriched, however, by the details of Poussette-Dart's facture. The painted lattice is punctuated with bits of cardboard
Pousette-Dart’s *Blood Wedding*, the underlying drama of the image, with its “brutal” reds and raucous yellows, is simultaneously enhanced and transcended by the glittering superficies of the canvas. The title was suggested, post-facto, by the artist’s wife, Evelyn Pousette-Dart, for whom the picture suggested the romance and tragedy of Federico García Lorca’s 1933 play, a Spanish variation on *Romeo and Juliet.*\(^{30}\) Beyond the literary reference, the picture recalls the Churrigueresque style of Spanish architecture, which cloaks the severe geometry of classicism beneath a layer of fantastical ornament.

Around 1960, there is a shift in Pousette-Dart’s working procedure. Increasingly, he applies paint in shorter strokes of a consistent size and shape, alternating colors, so that the pictorial field takes on the Pointillist texture of a Neo-Impressionist painting by Georges Seurat or Paul Signac. Pousette-Dart attributed this development in his work to his experience of making photographic prints, where he could see the “grain” of the image.\(^{31}\) There is a significant difference, however. In photographs, as in the canvases of Seurat and Signac, the individual dots of silver or paint tend to dissolve into the shimmer of the visual field as a whole. Pousette-Dart, in contrast, stresses the materiality of his pigments. Although the under-layers of paint may be rubbed and thinned, the surface layer is built up from countless “mounds” of paint, so that it feels like a pebble mosaic, upended from floor to wall.

We can see the beginnings of this process in *Fountains of Penelope* (fig. 18), painted in 1960–62. As the title suggests, the figuration here is similar to that of *Pillars of Odysseus* (pl. 68) executed a decade earlier: a frieze of geometric, frontal “presences,” painted in white, which seem to float in front of a colored ground. However, the relationship between figure and ground is more complicated than it first appears. The contours of the figures were drawn with dark or light paint on the actual ground of the painting, which was white. In a process of deliberate layering, the artist built up multiple coats of paint over both the figures and the shaped spaces between them. What appears at first glance to be “background” turns out to be physically—and visually—just as close to the viewer as are the figures set against it. Indeed, the figures have begun to diminish in importance, compared to the density and brilliance of the field that surrounds them.

*The Peacock Has Not Asked Me* (fig. 19), painted twenty-five years later, shows the culmina-
tion of this process. Vestigial figures survive, rising like puffs of reddish smoke from the bottom to the top of the canvas. But they are overwhelmed by the brilliant mosaic of white, blue, and yellow accumulations of paint that surround them, accented by small white circles and rectangles enclosing areas of blue, green, or red. (These floating forms seem to be the heirs of the collaged pieces of cardboard in *Pillars of Odysseus.* ) In a large painting like *The Peacock Has Not Asked Me,* which is a full six feet tall, there is no way for viewers to take in all aspects of the picture at the same time. They must step back to see the painting as a whole, and then advance to study its texture at close range. *The Peacock Has Not Asked Me* exemplifies the qualities that Clement Greenberg saw as shared by Byzantine mosaic and modern painting: decorative pat-

terning, material presence, and sheer radiance.

All of these come together in one of the crowning achievements of Pousette-Dart's later career, the four-panel, mural-scale painting *Presence, Byzantium,* where the imperial figures of the Ravenna mosaics are translated into a rhythmic but varied arrangement of geometric forms, while tiny flecks of yellow paint are scattered across the red and black composition like light playing over tiles of glass and gold.

**Fields**

The shift in technique in Pousette-Dart's paintings of the early 1960s was accompanied by the emergence of new kinds of compositions, devoid of the columnar "presences" that had populated his work since 1940. Not that he stopped painting such pictures—but they were now accompanied by canvases that seemed completely non-figurative. In some, the composition was reduced to a single geometric shape—a circle or a square—either centered on the canvas or shifted to one side. In others, composition vanished altogether, replaced by a seemingly monochrome field of color. These new, seemingly non-figurative compositions seemed comparable to the work of younger contemporaries such as Kenneth Noland, Robert Ryman, and Agnes Martin.

A tendency toward monochromy had emerged in Pousette-Dart's work in the early 1950s, when he executed a series of pictures using only pencil and white paint. In part, the minimal facture of these paintings reflects his straitened economic circumstances at the time—it was hard for him to afford oil paints—but it also seems to express a sense of visual and spiritual purification.\textsuperscript{32} Canvases such as *Chavade* (pl. 56) utilize the same figuration found in other contemporary canvases, such as *Path of the Hero* (fig. 15) but the geometric forms are lost in a white fog.

Not until the 1960s do we find canvases such as *Radiance, White Center* that lack any visible figuration. It is somewhat misleading to describe such a picture as non-figurative or monochrome, however. For one thing, there may well be figurative imagery buried beneath the multiple layers of paint. In
some cases we can, in effect, catch Pousette-Dart in the act of concealing his original figuration. For instance, in his *White Awakening* of 1980 (fig. 20), the underlying etching seems to depict the artist’s familiar repertory of abstract presences. However, he has reworked the paper with touches of white paint falling densely on the drawings and less densely on the spaces between them, so that the original composition is virtually submerged. It seems fair to conclude that, if he had continued this reworking, the result would have been a “pure” monochrome resembling *Radiance, White Center*. (This kind of cancellation-by-rewriting was in fact typical of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s and ’50s.)

The apparent monochromy of *Radiance, White Center* is also deceptive. Viewed from close at hand, the canvas reveals a multitude of light colors—predominantly pink and orange—beneath the open mesh of the white surface layer. Another masterpiece in this genre is *Lavendre de Senanque*, inspired by fields of lavender that the artist drove through in Provence. At first glance, this seems like an enormous slab of purple paint, but on closer inspection it reveals unexpected complexities. The paint is applied in a mobile net of brushstrokes, suggesting an underlying grid without falling into any definable geometric pattern. Borrowing a device from traditional French gardens, the purple is punctuated and emphasized by flecks of contrasting colors, such as green and white. There is an extraordinary luminosity to the paint, produced by Pousette-Dart’s method of building up color in countless successive layers, each one applied, rubbed down to translucent thinness, and then painted over.

These seemingly blank canvases co-exist, in Pousette-Dart’s later work, with paintings containing a single geometric motif such as a circle or a square. *Radiance, White Center*, a small study painted in the 1960s, seems to be one of the earliest of these (fig. 21). Much of the image consists of a “monochrome” field—which is not really monochrome but consists of overlapping strokes of yellow, orange, and brown, flecked here and there with contrasting dabs of violet. At the center of the composition appears a white disk, overlapped on all sides by yellow strokes. It looks like a glowing sphere floating somewhere behind the brownish field of the painting. It seems almost as though the emptiness of the pictorial field has caused the sphere to come into being, like a star igniting from gas and dust in the void between galaxies.

*Radiance, White Center* seems characteristic of 1960s art, with its emphasis on simple, bold compositions. In these years, artists such as Josef Albers, Jasper Johns, Kenneth Noland, and Frank Stella were experimenting with simplified compositions of parallel stripes and concentric circles and squares.

By the end of the decade, Pousette-Dart was exploring monumental versions of the “orb” motif in paintings such as *Presence Number 3, Black* (pl. 109). Similarly, the brutal dark rectangle in the foreground of *Round Earth, Imagined Corners*, 1951 (fig. 22) evokes a power of more-than-human proportions, like the pyramids of the Egyptian pharaohs or the terrifying slab of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001.
orb of Presence Number 3, it seems to glow with black light, intensified by the contrast with its mottled white ground. To find an adequate comparison for such pictures, we need to go beyond painting and look at the installations of contemporary artists such as James Turrell or Douglas Wheeler (fig. 23), where the traditional use of light as a symbol for divinity is deployed in abstract, just-barely-secular terms.

Throughout his career—from the totemic figures of the late 1930s, through the enigmatic presences of the 1940 and ‘50s, down to the awesome fields of the 1960s and succeeding decades—Richard Pousette-Dart drew together diverse strands of ancient and modern civilizations to create symbols of remarkable potency. But what brought these symbols to life was his mastery of materials, his ability to transform the colored pigment of paint and the mute fabric of canvas into living presences—presences that continue to speak to us today.

2 Introducing a 1946 exhibition of “Northwest Coast Indian Painting,” Barnett Newman noted that the “dominant aesthetic tradition” of this area was “abstract.” The local peoples “depicted their mythological gods and totemic monsters in abstract symbols, using organic shapes.” The function of these totemic paintings, like the totem poles of the same culture, was “ritualistic.” Newman saw in this art a model for “our modern American abstract artists who, working with the pure plastic language we call abstract, are infusing it with intellectual and emotional content ... creating a living myth for our time.” Barnett Newman, “Northwest Coast Indian Painting,” text for the catalogue of an exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, September 30 to October 19, 1946; reprinted in John P. O’Neill, ed., Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), pp. 103–107.
berg comments: "The parallels between Byzantine and modernist art cannot be extended indefinitely, but—as David Talbot Rice has suggested in a different context—they may help us discern at least part of the extra-artistic significance of modernism. The Byzantines dematerialized first-hand reality by invoking a transcendent one. We seem to be doing something similar in our science as well as art."

Worringer drew a broad distinction between cultures that enjoyed a pleasurable and empathetic relation to the world around them and cultures that responded to the exterior world with dread and rejection. The former, he argued, evolved naturalistic styles of art, while the latter tended toward geometric abstraction. Byzantine art represented a kind of synthesis between the naturalistic tendencies of the Hellenistic-Roman tradition and the abstraction imposed by the "Oriental-Semitic" spirit of early Christianity. See Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style, 1908, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: International Universities Press, 1953), passim, and esp. pp. 96–101.

As early as 1900, the painter Paul Signac had rejected the spontaneity of Impressionist brushwork in favor of an orderly arrangement of strokes recalling tiles arranged in a grid. Signac's widespread influence is visible in pre-Cubist works such as Jean Metzinger's Two Nudes in a Garden of 1906 (Iowa City, University of Iowa Museum) and Piet Mondrian's Dune III of 1909 (The Hague, Gemeentemuseum). His handling was also imitated by Matisse and the Fauves, and by Picasso and the Cubists. See Pepe Karmel, Picasso and the Invention of Cubism (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 75. Conversely, the abstracted figures and objects of Cubism may have inspired Year's statement, in "Sailing to Byzantium," that, "Once out of nature I shall never take/My bodily form from any natural thing."


The influence of Picasso's Demoiselles is also evident in Winslow Lamb's The Jungle of 1943 (New York, MoMA), and in many of Willem de Kooning's Women paintings of the early 1950s.

This equation between human and vegetal anatomy seems to be inspired by one of the drawings in André Masson's book, Anatomy of My Universe, published by Curt Valentin in New York in 1943; see specifically chapter I, "The Demon of Analog," plate II, The Unity of the Cosmos, which depicts a series of figures demonstrating the kabalistic correspondence between "minerals, plants, stars, and animal bodies."


It might be argued that certain elements of Picasso's sculpture, such as the metal claws of his 1935 Figure (fig. 8), anticipate this synthesis of Surrealist expressiveness and collage play.

Discussing the artist's work of the late 1970s, Lawrence Campbell wrote that: "Inside these paintings there is a 'presence,' a being as real as anything we can conceive. Of course, he must work to find this 'presence': he works endlessly, and finally if all goes well, he finds it, diamond clear ... It is this need to find a 'presence' that explains his affinity for magical and archaic art.

There were no 'abstract' denominations in the thinking of those early times. Every word, every thing had the power to summon into being a concrete, mythical figure, a god, a demon." Lawrence Campbell, introduction to Richard Pousette-Dart, Presences: Black and White 1978–1980, exh. cat. (New York: Marisa del Re Gallery, 1981), n.p.


See the discussion of this work in Robert Hobbs, "Confronting the Unknown Within," in Hobbs and Kuebler, Richard Pousette-Dart, p. 110.

Picasso's Pitcher and Bowl of Fruit of 1931 (fig. 17) is listed as a promised gift from Nelson Rockefeller to the Museum of Modern Art in William Rubin's Picasso in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), pp. 135 and 225. After entering MoMA's collection, it was transferred to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1982 as part of an exchange permitting MoMA to reunite Kandinsky's 1914 series of paintings on the theme of the four seasons, originally in the collection of Edgar R. Campbell. (I am grateful to Ted Mann, Collections Curatorial Assistant at the Guggenheim, for providing this information.)


Robert Hobbs, in "Confronting the Unknown Within," describes Blood Wedding as "a brutal work in which the red paint looks like blood and the personas specters," and explains that "the painting was given its title by the artist's wife, Evelyn, a poet who frequently collaborates with him on titling his works." Hobbs and Kuebler, Richard Pousette-Dart, p. 122.

See the discussion of this issue in David A. Miller, "Genesis and Metamorphosis," in Hobbs and Kuebler, Richard Pousette-Dart, p. 170.

See the discussion of these paintings, and their links to the contemporary "white writings" of Mark Tobey, in Joanne Kuebler, "Concerning Richard Pousette-Dart," in Hobbs and Kuebler, Richard Pousette-Dart, p. 4.