

BERNHEIM

DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE

The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Understood It

Curated by Lola Kramer

BERNHEIM, London

November 21, 2024 – January 25, 2025

Bernheim is honoured to present the first European survey exhibition of Dorothea Rockburne, curated by Lola Kramer, on view at the gallery's London location. This historical exhibition comprises over two dozen artworks dating from 1967 to 2013, most of which will be on display in Europe for the first time. *The Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness Has Not Understood It* traces the evolution of Rockburne's momentous and groundbreaking practice in New York from her seminal early experiments with wrinkle-finish paint to her rigorously folded works in vellum and linen to luxuriant geometric paintings exploring spatial dynamics and topology. By reconstituting many of her most iconic works and significant series in a chronological narrative, the exhibition will allow visitors to understand Rockburne's remarkably diverse output as a multifaceted whole and the pivotal figure she has been for nearly seven decades.

The exhibition takes its title from the Latin phrase "*Lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt*," one which appears in John:5 and which Rockburne has referenced in various ways throughout the late 80s. Having interpreted a new translation for herself, the phrase initiates one of many dichotomies – along with "surface and light, structure and plane, nuanced color and transparency, and shadow and lustre," all of which Rockburne has continually pulled into her expansive formal language and that engage the viewer.¹ As critic John Yau has put it, "Her interlocking, contradictory combinations of light and dark, transparency and shadow, form and bodilessness supersede the social foundations of perception with something far more elemental."²

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rockburne had repurposed her painting studies in Montréal, along with her training in mathematics and dance in the early 1950s at Black Mountain College to influence her approaches to art-making. At Black Mountain, she studied with painters associated with Abstract Expressionism, including Franz Kline and Jack Tworkov, as well as classmates Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, who later counted among the ranks of the neo-avant-garde.

Rockburne developed a procedural form of working; she manipulated unconventional materials according to mathematical logic, evoking a realm that lies beyond physical boundaries. She explored new structural possibilities for expressing discrete mathematics in physical space. From simple geometry, she turned to set theory—the study of how objects and information are organised symbolically—to arrange groups of materials and actions, making the notions of belonging—conceptually, materially, or physically—unsubtly pronounced. She applied experimental materials like crude oil, grease, and tar, creating surfaces encoded with their production methods and processes. These works feature richly textured and lush materials, which index the artist's labor and viscerally affect the viewer.

Following the earliest work in the exhibition, *Tropical Tan*, 1967-68, Rockburne's large-scale installation titled *Domain of the Variable 1972*—a work in the collection of Dia, and which graced the cover of *Artforum* in March 1972—will expand throughout the entire ground floor to rest in its occupation of a single gallery room. The exhibition features a selection of other artworks recently presented in her 2018 Dia Beacon survey, including the *Golden Section Paintings* (1974-76) and the *Egyptian Paintings* (1979-80), among others. We are honoured to have the chance to present these groundbreaking works to a new audience, most of which have only been shown in public institutions. The layout and architecture of the gallery will allow for an intimacy between the viewer and the materials that will give new dimensions to these works.

The exhibition also follows *Dorothea Rockburne*, the first in-depth monograph of the artist's seven-decade career, edited by art historian and critic Eva Diaz and published by Dia Art Foundation and Yale University Press in September 2024.

¹ John Yau, "Light and Dark" in *Dorothea Rockburne: New Work: Cut-Ins*, (New York: Andrew Emmerich Gallery, 1990).

² Ibid.

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About the Artist

Dorothea Rockburne was born in 1929 in Montréal, Canada, where she studied art and philosophy before attending Black Mountain College near Asheville, North Carolina, from 1950 to 1954. While at Black Mountain, Rockburne met the mathematician Max Dehn, whose tutelage in concepts including harmonic intervals, topology, and set theory deeply influenced her art practice. After moving to New York City in 1954, she became involved with the nascent Judson Dance Theater and later participated in Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964), among other notable performances. In the late 1960s, Rockburne began exhibiting paintings made with industrial materials and creating drawings from crude oil and graphite that were applied to paper and chipboard. Her works, based on set theory, which the artist calls "visual equations," were first exhibited in New York in 1970. Later phases of Rockburne's painting practice draw on ancient systems of proportion and astronomical phenomena. From 2018 to 2022, Dia Beacon staged a presentation of Dorothea Rockburne's large-scale works from the late 1960s and early 1970s, followed by an expanded exhibition focusing on works produced in the early 1970s through the early 1980s. Her work has also been featured in two solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1981 and 2013–14) and a major retrospective at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York (2011), which traveled to the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal. Rockburne resides in New York.

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