

Dorothea Rockburne

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné

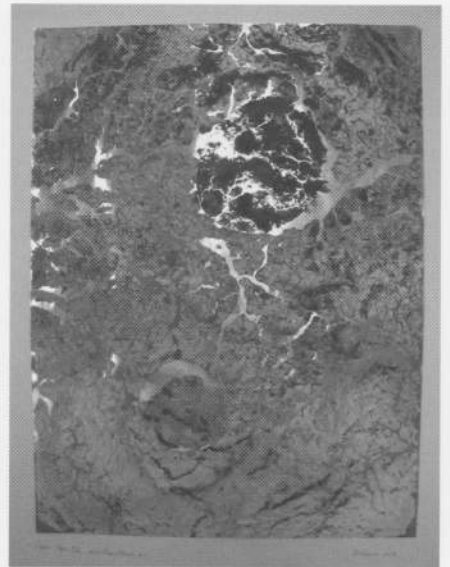


Dieu Donné Lab Grant Program: Dorothea Rockburne
Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné
February 19 – April 12, 2003

The following interview took place during a studio visit at Dieu Donn  on Saturday, January 25, 2003, by Arthur Danto with Dorothea Rockburne. As articulated by Rockburne, Danto brings to the art dialogue a lifetime engagement with philosophy. In this interview he addresses the paramount question: what is the art object, what does it look like, and how does it exist.

Arthur Danto (AD): The first work I ever saw of yours were those folded paper pieces back in the 70s –

Dorothea Rockburne (DR): The folded paper pieces partly came out of the fact that I was making my work at the time by creasing metal. I was living in a fifth-floor walk-up loft. To paint these panels – having them fabricated in Long Island City, getting them upstairs, and then moving them downstairs – left me working behind my thinking. Working with paper, I realized I could use some of the same principles and work in step with my thinking. It also seemed like a way to resolve the weight issue.



AD What led you to creasing metal?

DR When I looked out of my kitchen window on Chambers Street, there was a large air-conditioning unit. To make those units stand up, they creased them with an X to give more structure to the metal. My work at that time was categorized with Minimal Art and Conceptual Art, but somehow I knew that I wasn't that. I knew that I was being grouped that way, but I also knew that there was a difference. Although it was great being with all of those guys – LeWitt, Ryman, Mangold, Judd, Bochner, Smithson, Dan Graham, etc. – the only women were Eva Hesse, Jo Baer, and me. It was and still is a very prejudiced world. I loved their attitude about art. They lived, breathed, ate it, slept it, chewed it – it was very inspiring to be in their company. Nevertheless, they had a different emotional position than I did. My feelings have always been *sensuous*, visceral and giving. I always felt that my art should be – "juicy." For one thing, I grew up French – Montreal, partly French – there was all this cooking and the aroma and the extremes of climate, and the way things went together which I think affected my soul. As a child, I went to the L'Ecole des Beaux Arts on Saturdays. After a while I switched to the Montreal Museum School because I thought that it would be more "modern," but in fact it wasn't. However I had some good teachers, and the thing that several teachers said to me was to get the hell out of Montreal, so my sister and I – my parents would not have been in favor of this – plotted how to get me to the U.S., and to Black Mountain College...I am telling you a little about my background because I don't think you really know it, do you?

AD No...

DR Recently, Ryman gave a lecture at the Studio School and he said, "I'm an intuitive artist." I immediately questioned, "Well, what is a non-intuitive artist?" I can't say I'm intuitive; I think *everybody's* intuitive. When I work, I can't say I really know what the hell I'm doing!

AD I think that's what Ryman means.

DR But in the same sense, I *do* know exactly what I'm doing. I've had to recognize that my intuition has an inner voice which on the first level does not have a verbal language.

AD For your Lab Grant residency, did you know what you would be doing in a papermaking studio? You came in here, and what happened first?

DR (chuckles) Well, what happens with me is that I work from the general to the specific, so what happens first is a series of disasters!

AD Alright, let's start with the disasters!

DR When I'm working alone, I know I need to work through disasters. This is the inventive, creative process. But when I'm working with other people, they're wondering why the hell the thing isn't happening (laughter). The first days at Dieu Donn  were with Pat Almonrode as my studio collaborator. It gave me a lot, but that was two years ago. Then my life became Sloan-Kettering – we had to take a two-year break. During that time, I read a small book named "Newton's Gift." It was inspiring. Some of that inspiration is in this work.

AD You've worked on Dieu Donn  paper but you had never worked with paper pulp before – so you must have had to rethink the way you work with paper almost entirely, right? I mean, you don't use a brush on this; you don't brush it on, do you?

DR One can, but I didn't.

AD So you do it with your hands?

DR I actually threw it, poured paint on it, removed some pulp with the water spray, then added more pulp and paint.

AD You threw it! You talked about your sensuousness . . . you took lumps of it and threw it?

DR I threw it. But I was also working with some copper shapes that I'd been trying to understand and internalize for a long time, through sacred geometry, and Isaac Newton, and looking at NASA satellite film from the internet –

AD But what was the idea of putting together the paper pulp and copper?

DR Copper as a material contains meaning. It is one of the elements. Our bodies contain copper from the time of the Big Bang. Copper conducts electricity. Copper was used by the Egyptians to make blue and green pigments. Copper was also used to paint on in the Renaissance. I was somehow thinking, "Well, if I have copper and the universe is in part made from copper and Egyptian blue..."

AD So, the ground here is copper. But the ground is something that, really, interacts with what's on it, both physically and from the perspective of content, I suppose. Or, from the perspective of aesthetics. The aesthetics of copper is fairly important.

DR I see material as having energy. And I found that after I began to work with it, that copper has an energy – and

I don't mean the light – it has an energy in and of itself which I can feel – and that it is a completely different energy than paper pulp.

AD Okay.

DR The energy of paper pulp seems to me much more earth-bound, like a tree. I don't mean that it's dead – it's a very lively thing. But the copper, again, is a very different energy than the paint. Paint permeates the surface or sits on top of it. One of the big challenges in working with some notions of astronomy is to not use perspective, which is an earth-bound thing.

AD Sure.

DR So rather than to think perspectively, I think of how the energy of the paint could influence the liveliness but earth-boundness of the paper pulp in terms of the much more electric quality of the copper, and also how the shapes would fall back, as it does in this work (pointing), or come forward, as it does in this work –

AD Where it looks like it's cracked, the way lava would crack?

DR I also became aware of how the papermaking press affected the paper pulp – you know, to me, one of the interesting things in life is to see how things that don't want to interact, must interact. Take my co-op, for instance (laughter). In a way, I find life experience and art experience not dissimilar.

AD Well, how does the paper pulp bond to the copper?

DR The dried paper pulp is glued to the copper.

AD It doesn't, of its own nature, stick? It's not like putty or plaster?

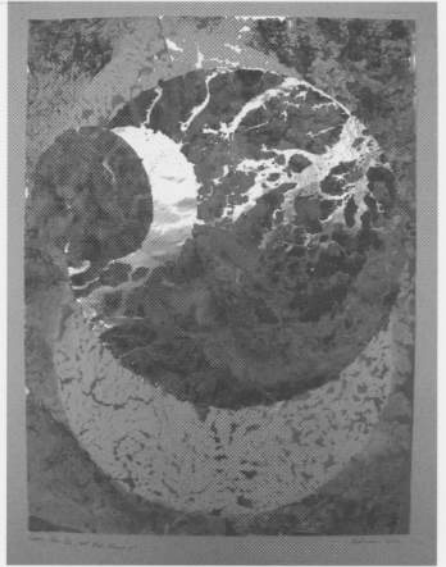
DR No, gluing is another step. I pressed the paper pulp first onto aluminum metal sheets – we didn't do this directly on the copper because I didn't want the copper to oxidize from all the contact with water.

AD I see. So the aluminum is dropping out of the equation; there won't be any aluminum in the final piece –

DR No. After drying, the paper pulp is transferred from the aluminum to the copper surface using a clear mylar pattern that Megan – my studio collaborator after Pat – drew from the original pulp pours.

AD Like crepes! (laughter)

DR Well, for instance, this is a copper ellipse that I laid down, and then it went through the press. On the other side of that white shape is copper. And then I reversed it, because I wanted the white quality and that particular pattern in it to interact with this kind of dulled though pigmented, quality of the other copper shapes which



had gone through the press. Then, we ran it through the press once I had reversed it. There's been a lot of process –

AD I see. Because that's not obvious. It looks like it's on this piece of copper –

DR When we were going through the work the other day, Mina said, "Your work looks so simple, but –" (general laughter). It looks so immediate, but there's nothing immediate about any of my work.

AD So this is also a round piece of copper, which is then put onto this piece – I'm trying to figure out – so this is like the bottom of a river when all the water has gone out of it and it's dried out and it's cracked –

DR Well, you know, you're asking me how they were made, but since I really don't think that way, I can't track it that way.

AD Well, tell me how you think.

DR Well, after a certain amount of working, I knew that if this ellipse went through the press, even if it were covered by another shape, it would be all murky. And I also knew that it would get all, kind of "used" the way Mars is cratered. It would get kind of that flinty look to it which I wanted. So, over here (points) when this copper circle was put down on the aluminum, very little paper pulp was thrown on there. I was putting the paper pulp on white and then throwing the blue paint on it.

AD That makes a lot of sense. It's all aiming toward a certain effect.

DR No – a feeling, my inner voice. I've never been able to distinguish the word "effect" from the word "affect" – do you know what I mean (chuckles)? Because I never think about effect. I'm working from some different place.

AD You know, like the Impressionists used to name paintings *L'Effet de Neige*, for example: The Effect of Snow, and so forth. So this is *L'Effet de Papier*?

DR No. As a matter of fact, I was trying to think about how to title these, because we're going to come to signing pretty soon, and I thought about calling it *Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné*: the materials used and the place where I worked, but it's also a gift from God. Not the "man in the sky" but (laughter) . . .

AD Right, I know what you mean. As a gift, as something that comes from another direction than paper and copper.

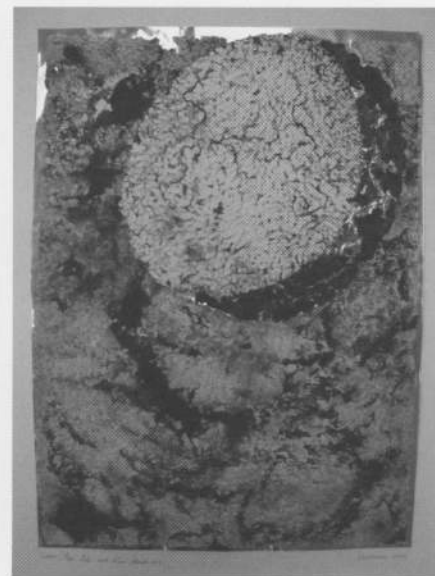
DR I think that, when I work – and I've talked to other artists about this but they never admit to it except in private – one has a gift, and it's a driving force, and it doesn't matter if you're any good or not, but one has a gift, and the whole thing about working is not for effect, but to tap into that gift. To find something that you didn't know what it looked like before you did it. It's not pre-conception of any sort.

AD But the work does seem to speak of the same motif – there's an impulse to read that disc as the moon, or a planet, something celestial, astronomical –

DR If you didn't know my other work, would you be thinking that?

AD I think if I'd met you for the first time today, and you brought me in and you said, "I want to show you what I've been doing," then I'd look at these and I would say that it is in some way inspired by the formation of a celestial body –

DR But it's not that simple (laughter). When one is in a kind of trance, for lack of a better word, when working – the motion of the paper pulp, and the paint that's saturating it, is circular here, and not here. And that's not so easy to get to. I am working from this inner place that is sensuous – I'm a "dot in the universe" and I'm also in touch with a lot of art history. I'm trying to have that come together in some way. I am not "illustrating the universe," or "demonstrating how it might work."



AD The sensuousness has to do with the procedure of making it, but when you look at it visually, it really is an image of some kind – people are going to see it that way.

DR (chuckles) Okay. But that's not my responsibility. My responsibility is to tap into this thing which I think is a universal thing.

AD But it's a work of art, and, presumably, it's about something. I don't want to say it's an illustration, but it is cosmological in feeling, and you really do feel some form is being condensed out of a general whirl of matter. That's the overall feeling of it. And the fact that you've got it repeated; within the series – it has that feeling of cosmogony, you know what I mean?

DR Yes, I think it does. I know what you're saying. Nevertheless, I agree and I disagree simultaneously, because these are the things I look at all the time and consider. When I read Brian Greene's superstring theory book I could see the big holes in it right away; and yet, the idea that you have to find some "in-between place" in how to think about what the world is made of, is fascinating. And I like to see how all that's working mathematically; I like to see what other artists are doing about it . . .

AD But that's all "background noise." These really are images and here they are, they're in front of us, and people are going to come in and they don't want to say, "It's all about everything all the time, forever." This really is bounded, and shaped, and it's got content, and it's got a kind of energy.

DR But Arthur, I have a background here. The first large wall painting show that I did of work that was based, to a degree, on cosmology had the title: "Painting from Nature." That was the 1994 show at Andre Emmerich.

AD Oh, I remember that show.

DR It was "Painting from Nature." And there's also a background before that, when I did the Pascal paintings, and

the whole gallery was painted indigo blue. The paintings were layered, so that the perspective in the painting was not a perspective that dealt with the outside world, but it was a painting looking through itself for its own perspective. More recently I produced a small series of postcards which was the first work I did after I got better. The title of that is *Copper, Isaac Newton, and Egyptian Blue*.



AD Well Dorothea, you might work a certain way but the human mind works a certain way, too; and when you look at certain things you're going to see certain things – that's the way we're built –

DR Based on who you are and –

AD -- Yes, who we are and what we know about the world. And when we see this, we're going to see that as a sea, we're going to see that as a continent, or we're going to see this as water and we're going to see this as something floating on the water – we've got to organize it in terms that we can understand. That's what it is to be a human being. And you can't just hold that at bay –

DR I never saw or felt like that for a second.

AD Well, but here it is. So you say, "Okay, that's not the way to see it" – then what is the way to see it?

DR Interacting energies...

AD That may be an explanation of what you see, but that's not what you see –

DR No no no; that's what I see; that's how I work. And how I make something.

AD Go over there: that's a crescent. Now the question is, is it a shadow cast by that thing that's superimposed there, or does it have an identity of its own?

DR That gets into a whole other area for me: four-dimensional space. I'm interested in twelve-dimensional space, but I can't really understand it – I can't even understand four-dimensional space, but in my work I'm trying to set up the reference of time without using perspective; when I shift it all around, there's going to be this funny interaction of time, visual time. And that is something that I've been fiddling with for a long time now. You know, I don't think you can do four-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface without perspective in some way. But that's what I keep working toward. I'm interested in the journey as much as I am in the fact. So I think that the shininess of the copper here (points) compared to the dullness there is already setting up a kind of tension that sort of moves things around, you know?...I understand what you're saying and where you're coming from. And I'm certainly working with astronomy in my heart. But it's also an overall thing – about Renaissance painting and spatial considerations and what is the next step for me that is as radical as I can make it, at this point in my art-life – how do I do that?

AD With all the swirling activity something is going to coalesce in the middle of it.

DR Well, you're talking about the subject of the artist. For instance, the Ryder painting of the sailboat in the moonlit night that the Brooklyn Museum owns – the subject of that is not a sailboat in the moonlight.

AD I have no idea what the subject of it is, but in some way the choice of a sailboat in the moonlight is central to achieving whatever else has to be achieved.

DR Yes. But the thing is, some things in my visual experience stay with me a lot. There's a Giovanni di Paolo at the Met...

AD That's just what I was thinking of! Giovanni di Paolo – right at the beginning, those concentric discs, and . . .

DR Exactly. And that's up in my studio.

AD It's always been a powerful stimulation, that piece.

DR I can never put it together; it's not that big, but I can't remember it. Each time I look at it, I just feel like I know more about myself than I did before I looked at it. Klaus Kertess said a remarkable thing during his lecture at the Studio School. I asked him what it was that made him focus his whole life on art. And he said "Because when I look at some art, it is a kind of mirror that I see myself in that I can't see any other way." And that's what I mean about the Ryder or the di Paolo and that's certainly my experience in looking at work, though I never verbalized it the way he did. Does that make any sense?

AD Well, it narrows it down in a certain kind of way, because you don't feel that way about everything. Those pieces come off – the Ryder and the Giovanni di Paolo – and I can see them both in this work. So that's the tradition and those are the anchors. I feel that these paper on copper pieces are images of anchoring something that's swirling around, and that may have an instance in a certain picture of how the planets got formed, but it could also have echoes somewhere else. But I think it's just a condition of life in general that there's a lot of static and then a signal comes out somewhere and there's a connection. And these are pictures of that connection.

DR Yes. Yes. Arthur, it's really fun to knock it around with you because I know you're asking these questions to play something of a devil's advocate, I know – but really, all it is, is copper and paper – and some time!



LIST OF WORKS PRODUCED

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné #1, 2003, paper pulp and paint on copper mounted on museum board, 37 x 29-1/4 inches

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné #2, 2002, paper pulp and paint on copper mounted on museum board, 35 x 27 inches

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné #3, 2003, paper pulp and paint on copper mounted on museum board, 35 x 27 inches

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné #4, 2003, paper pulp and paint on copper mounted on museum board, 37 x 29-1/4 inches

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné #5, 2003, paper pulp and paint on copper mounted on museum board, 37 x 29-1/4 inches

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné #6, 2003, paper pulp and paint on copper mounted on museum board, 35 x 27 inches

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné #7 (panels), 2002, paper pulp and paint on two 24-inch square copper panels, joined

Copper, Paper Pulp, and Dieu Donné #8 (panels), 2002, paper pulp and paint on two 24-inch square copper panels, joined

DOROTHEA ROCKBURNE was born in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Trained at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts, she then attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1950-1955) arriving in New York City in 1955. She began exhibiting in the late 60s, and by the early 70s she was showing extensively both here and in Europe. Her work is represented in many private collections as well as in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum, and Guggenheim Museum in New York City; the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, MA, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Ludwig Museum in Aachen, Germany, among many others. Rockburne's *Northern Sky/Southern Sky* large secco fresco murals are on permanent public installation at Sony's headquarters on Madison Avenue in New York City. She has been the recipient of the Witowsky Painting Award from The Art Institute of Chicago, the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, the Jimmy Ernst Lifetime Achievement Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and most recently in 2003, the Frances Greenberger Award in recognition of lifetime achievement. Utilizing different mediums – oil painting, wall installations, and frescos – Rockburne has also worked extensively with various kinds of paper. The Lab Grant residency however marks the first time she has worked directly with paper pulp, choosing to make each work a singular work and not an edition. Rockburne is represented by Artemis, Greenberg, Van Doren Gallery in New York City.

Founded in 1976, Dieu Donn  Papermill, Inc. is a non-profit artist workspace dedicated to the creation, promotion, and preservation of contemporary art using the hand papermaking process. In support of this mission, Dieu Donn  collaborates with artists and other partners, presents exhibitions, conducts educational programs, and maintains an archive of paper art.

The Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program, initiated in 2000, provides mid-career artists with a twelve-day residency to collaborate in hand papermaking at Dieu Donn  Papermill. Through this program, Dieu Donn  intends to produce exciting new work with artists who have a mature vision and long-standing commitment to artistic practice, thereby raising the profile of hand papermaking as an artmaking process and breaking new ground in the field. Past participants in the program include Melvin Edwards, Jane Hammond, and Jim Hodges.

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This is issue number 4 of the Dieu Donn  Lab Grant Program publication series documenting Dieu Donn 's residency program for mid-career artists.

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