

Dorothea Rockburne

Every surface in Dorothea Rockburne's work has a distinct presence, whether it is the luster of densely applied graphite, the translucency of paper soaked in oil, or the corporeal sheen of grease. Her practice incorporates an analysis of form and a bodily relationship to the work. Abandoning the materials of her academic training at the École des Beaux-Arts in Montreal and building on her experimental background in the 1950s at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, Rockburne pursues her chosen media and approach with scrupulous attention.

By the 1960s, the artist had grown dissatisfied with her painterly work. She began to integrate thought and emotion with freely available industrial materials “to form a new and forceful motivating engine,” and further educated herself about geometry, set theory, and topology, concepts that she studied with Max Dehn at Black Mountain College. In *Tropical Tan* (1967–68), four adjoined pig-iron panels are painted across the center, leaving a steel border exposed. The crimped panels magnify the interplay of these materials, particularly when light hits the surface. The cross formed within the bend of each panel is a unifying structural motif—prefiguring the artist's ongoing fascination with the potential of the fold—inspired by the air ducts seen from her studio window.

The use of paper in *Tropical Tan* piqued Rockburne's interest in its ability to absorb substances. Paper served as “a sheet, but not with tensile strength, it was a permeating sheet.” To make *Ineinander Group* (1971), Rockburne applied crude oil and cup grease onto folded pieces of paper. She would leave these for the summer months to “cook” in her studio: a process that left a role for chance, but was largely the result of extensive tests and experimentation. Although paper could serve as a foundation for additional materials, Rockburne understood its versatility. To create *Locus* (1972), she folded pieces of paper in various ways, maintaining a central point that was marked by an etched gray “x.” The pieces of paper were then run through a printing press in their folded state, such that the opened sheet has print on both sides. *Locus* speaks to Rockburne's topological or three-dimensional thinking even when addressing a two-dimensional form.

While performing at the Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s, Rockburne recognized the connections between art, body, mathematics, and space, and started making larger works that increasingly emerged into the room. One of such installations, *Intersection* (1971) consists of sheets of partially rolled plastic and paper that are placed perpendicular to the wall beneath a level line marked in charcoal. Unfurled on the floor, oil is applied to the paper followed by another sheet of plastic. The suggestion of a scroll-like immensity or industrial “painting by the yard” style is belied by the exquisite layering and material interaction as the oil sucks the plastic into a crinkled surface and the absorbent paper is saturated.

In a 1972 interview Rockburne asserted: “The place and the work should be an integrated thing that presents a point of change. To turn the place in which I work into the object.” In *Set* (1970) Rockburne hangs, overlaps, manipulates, and spaces sheets of paper and chipboard into units suspended from the wall. While each element is unique, the inclusion of a graphite “+” sign between them indicates that this collection of distinct forms should be seen as a cohesive and singular object.

Re-created for the first time in almost fifty years, *Domain of the Variable* (1972) exemplifies Rockburne's intuitive response to math. The work, which refers to the set of all possible values of the variables, unites four walls of a room with a line. Unlike in the first manifestation of this work that was rendered with a drawn charcoal line, Rockburne has subtly excavated the line from the gallery's walls, a process influenced by her affinity for ancient Egyptian art and architecture and the use of such negative lines to create deeper shadows within stone. Once the space has been unified by this linear form, different materials are applied to two areas of perpendicular walls through a series of actions, which are visible in these more “worked” sections. In all, the work reads as a painting in the round. Forcing a physical reading of the work, the viewer turns and moves to trace the actions and examine the different colors, geometry, scale, surfaces, and textures of elements held in place by the continuous linear movement.

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Dorothea Rockburne was born in 1932 in Montreal, 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 were deeply influential to 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 applied to paper and chipboard. Her works based on set theory, what the artist refers to as "visual equations," were first exhibited in New York in 1970. Later phases of Rockburne's painting practice draw on ancient systems of proportion as well as astronomical phenomena. Her work has been featured in two solo exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (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 City.

1. *Intersection*, 1971/2018

No. 4 heating oil, plastic, paper, chipboard, and charcoal

Edition 2/3

Dia Art Foundation

2. *Ineinander Group*, 1971

Crude oil and tar on folded paper

Courtesy Rockburne Studios

3. *Set*, 1970/2018

Paper, chipboard, graphite, and nails

Edition 2/3

Dia Art Foundation

4. *Domain of the Variable*, 1972/2018

Chipboard, contact cement, paper, grease, and charcoal

Edition 2/3

Dia Art Foundation

5. *Locus*, 1972

Etching, aquatints, and pencil and oil paint on folded paper

Edition 5/42

Courtesy Rockburne Studios

6. *Tropical Tan*, 1967–68

Wrinkle-finish paint on steel

Courtesy Rockburne Studios

