

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Roy Dowell

By Hearne Pardee | March 2024

In the catalogue for Roy Dowell's current show at Miles McEnery, a photo from the artist's studio shows a work table populated by ethnographic objects, ceramics, books, reproductions, and stacks of brilliantly colored jars of Flashe—resources for the modest but vibrant works on view. Smaller than those in his 2022 show at the gallery, these works profit from the compression, enhancing the confrontational tension of their juxtapositions and creating more complicated formal play. Uniform in proportion and vertical orientation on seventeen by twelve inch illustration boards, they address the viewer with repetitive regularity in the brightly illuminated gallery, generating an architectural grid within which each image asserts a surprising, subversive character. Dowell is adept at catching our eyes as they graze across the visual field, scanning his layered surfaces in search of hints as to their orientation and grasp. He appeals to our interpretive impulse. As though inspired by the limitations of his standardized vertical fields, Dowell plays with the implications of their internal architecture, activating a response to deviations from symmetry or unexpected irregularities in patterns.



untitled #1255, 2023, Acrylic on illustration board,
17 x 12 inches, 43.2 x 30.5 cm

As though to further challenge our interpretive impulse, Dowell identifies his works only by number. Many of his “objects” are purely geometrical, but are lent complexity by internal subdivisions and overlapping patterns. Often partially occluded by other overlapping or emerging shapes, they require the viewer to complete them. Suggestions of facial features inspire the most immediate and powerful recognition response, like the face implied in *untitled #1265* (2023), obstructed by a gridded cross: the face is present but visible only in disjointed fragments that don't enact the expected symmetry. More abstract and confrontational, the blue disc of *untitled #1215* (2022), set beneath the tilted “gaze” of an arched brow and two black circles, demands consideration of its layered color quadrants. Dowell is a master of what art historian Meyer Schapiro defined as “discoordinate composition” referring to such denials of expected correspondence in his account of Romanesque stone carvers' avoidance of centralized, symmetrical arrangements in response to multicultural influences within the expanding artistic realm of medieval Spain.

Writers have interpreted Dowell's centralized but constantly varied works in terms of Jungian archetypes or as objects for meditative contemplation, but they seem more based in specific situations, confrontations which we must learn to see. To “see” these allusively layered compositions requires time to accomplish what philosopher Alva Noë has termed “achieving the object.” For Noë, to experience each work in its fullness, even those that resist full recognition, is the work of aesthetics. Inspired by his collections of objects, Dowell often works from memory or from dream images, lending the gestural improvisations of *untitled #1221* (2022)—apparently based



Installation view: Roy Dowell, Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, 2024

on a Mexican mask—a surrealist undertone. Like the off-kilter chain of circles in *untitled #1255* (2023), with its suggestions of a license plate and QR code above suspended headlights, it engages the frame even as it undercuts its imposed logic. Dowell calls to mind Eva Hesse’s “metronomic irregularity,” among her other transgressive evasions of minimalist order. The overlapping patterns of *untitled #1212* (2022) seem to appropriate memories of a familiar rug, or of decorations on a bowl, nonverbal things that lodge obsessively in the mind. The Greek column that morphs into a section of plumbing in *untitled #1238* (2023), on the other hand, juxtaposed to a multi-eyed Argus-like head evoke the realm of Robert Gober, while the cartoonish sausage forms in *untitled #1225* (2022) suggest that of Philip Guston.

However perplexing, Dowell’s works deliver, along with their playful transgressions of established order, the sovereign pleasure of color. Dowell favors the matte finish and intense hues of vinyl-based Flashe pigments, which endow both his layered washes and flat, opaque surfaces with exceptional brilliance, lending his works a consistent grounding in craft. The material richness of the irregularly centered circle of *untitled #1232* (2022), with its contrasts of lush, atmospheric depth and sharp geometric shapes, heightened by the complementary contrast of blue and orange, offers an imperfect but satisfying image of completion.

The gallery calls to mind the nave of a Romanesque cathedral, with columns adorned by capitals in carved relief, some in decorative response to the architectural frame and others bearing narrative motifs, including hybridized human forms like those of Dowell’s Mexican votive figures. His brand of ethnographic surrealism arouses a “curiosity” akin to that condemned by St. Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century for distracting unlettered congregants, as well as contemplative monks, from their religious discipline. It remains to be seen if Dowell will expand his own concentrated, hybrid compositions into larger fields, or if he will—like Paul Klee or Tom Nozkowski—further enrich the home he’s established at the more intimate scale of this show.