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Roy Dowell's Mixed Bag of Tricks

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By Kristine McKenna



GENARO MOLINA / Los Angeles Times

A DASH OF COLOR: Roy Dowell's current show, at the Margo Leavin Gallery, includes four of the largest paintings he's done.

Stuart Davis, the great American painter who served as a bridge between Synthetic Cubism and Abstraction, once offered this definition of an artist: "He's a cool Spectator-Reporter at an arena of Hot Events."

The Hot Event central to work by L.A. artist Roy Dowell is the whole, cacophonous symphony of Modernism itself. "My work embraces all the styles that preceded me, particularly the modern ones," says Dowell, in an interview at Margo Leavin Gallery, where his latest body of paintings and collages is on view through Nov. 1.

Mind you, Dowell won't grab just anything on the Modernist style shelf—he's a discriminating shopper. From the Fauves, he borrows Henri Matisse's bold way with color; from Pop, he takes Roy Lichtenstein's Benday dots; from the Cubists, he filches the discretion central to work by Georges Braque. It's all there, plus a lot more, in raucous compositions that exist in a state of perfect tension.

Dowell has spent the last 24 years developing this visual vocabulary, and he employs it with unprecedented assurance in his current show, which includes four of the largest paintings he's done to date. An exquisitely mannered person who's self-effacing to a fault, Dowell is justifiably proud of the new work, and is uncharacteristically willing to blow his own horn about it. "It's more open, and I didn't fuss over things quite so much," he says of the series, which is indeed marked by a confidence that hasn't always been so apparent in his art.

Dowell was born in 1951 in New York, but spent most of his childhood packing to go somewhere else. "My father had a job with the Kaiser Corporation that involved lots of transfers, and that suited my parents because they liked to move," says Dowell, who has a brother 10 years older who's a retired military officer. "I found it unsettling, though, because it made it hard to develop lasting friendships, and growing up that way left me longing for stability.

"My parents were very conservative and my mother was a devout Christian Scientist. She'd gone to art school before marrying, so she was a Sunday painter, and my grandmother and great aunt also studied art, so there was an awareness of it in the family. Basically, though, I wasn't exposed to much culture."

That began to change when Dowell was 14 and his family moved to La Cañada.

"I began to visit the [late] Pasadena Art Museum. Then, when I was 16, I took classes there," he recalls. "I saw a Joseph Cornell show there that made a big impression on me, and a piece in Pasadena's permanent collection—Paul Klee's 'Refuge'—also knocked me out. It's an aerial view of a round face looking up, and somehow this figure seems exposed to an uncomfortable degree—I think I saw myself in it."

Being a teenager in the '60s, Dowell had no choice but to rebel, and he confirms with a laugh that "yes, I had hair down to the middle of my back and lived the hippie lifestyle. When I was 18, I moved to Berkeley, which provided a freedom I needed at that point in trying to come to terms with the discomfort I'd felt growing up."

Attending the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland from 1969 to 1971, Dowell spent those years exploring experimental forms.

"As a young artist I wanted to be involved with young forms—and painting,

of course, is not a young form," he says. "I did take painting classes in Oakland, and for a while I did meticulous renderings of things like parakeets and clouds, but I got more response to the experimental things I was doing."

After two years of study, Dowell realized "if I stayed there much longer I'd never leave. It was so comfortable that I knew I'd stop growing. I wanted to transfer to UC Davis and study with Roy De Forest, but CalArts had just opened and was considered the cutting-edge art school of the early '70s, so that seemed like the place to be.

"Emerson Woelffer was teaching there then, and I saw him as a direct link to the Modernist tradition," says Dowell, who transferred to CalArts as an undergraduate in 1972. "Allan Kaprow was there, too, and I took several classes with him. I was doing self-involved performances—Matt Mulligan, Jim Welling and I did a collaboration where we videotaped ourselves talking about the scars on our bodies—and I did several performances of repetitive actions, like cutting things up.

"David Salle and Eric Fischl were at CalArts then, so I wouldn't say painting was frowned upon, but there were definitely warring camps and I kept to myself," adds Dowell, who met his companion of the last 23 years, artist Lari Pittman, at CalArts in 1974.

With the support of Kaprow, Dowell continued on to CalArts' graduate program. It was then, he says, "that I began edging into painting through the back door. I kept a notebook that I used to do collages in, and one day someone saw them and asked why I hadn't shown them. That had never occurred to me, but his interest gave me permission to regard them differently.

"Color was there for me in a big way as soon as I started painting," he adds. "I'm a quintessential WASP in that I tend to be guarded and reserved, and I think I use color as an antidote to how I see myself. I'm not a terribly flamboyant character and in the work I can be who I'm not—and that's where the color and aggression come from. The work has a spirit that's in me, but that

I don't always know how to express."

Graduating with a master's degree in 1975, Dowell found himself adrift in the L.A. art scene of the time.

"When I got out of school there were few galleries here and the Beach guys [Billy Al Bengston, Peter Alexander, Chuck Arnoldi, etc.], were what was happening. I didn't fit into that scene and considered moving to New York, but neither Lari nor I wanted to do that. Those were lean times financially and I had a series of jobs, then in 1977 I got a teaching job at L.A. Valley College in Van Nuys that lasted seven years. Since 1983 I've been able to support myself with my work and teaching," says Dowell, who's chaired the graduate studies department at Otis College of Art and Design since 1990.

For the past 22 years Dowell has regularly visited Mexico, and the vibrant, chaotic culture there has left its mark on his work. "I love the visual complexity of Mexico, and the sense of invention I see everywhere there," he enthuses. "The basic need to get information across that's reflected in the simple, hand-painted signs is very beautiful to me."

Signs and images taken from

advertising are motifs Dowell returns to repeatedly; included in various compositions in his current show, for instance, are images of wheels, cogs, buttons, four-leaf clovers, tires and the logo for Lucky Strike cigarettes. This all suggests Dowell to be a child of Pop, and while he acknowledges it as an influence, he has reservations about the school.

"I like the immediate grab of Pop, but I want intimacy in my work as well, and that's what I love about someone like Cornell," he says. "He created his own private world, but he made it public and invites you to enter by making his work so beautifully inviting."

As to precisely how he goes about working, Dowell says, "I have a hard time making a piece without at least 12 components—somehow anything less doesn't seem like enough. I go back and forth between collage and paint, and I usually work on one piece at a time. Occasionally I'll give myself a set of parameters and force myself to work within them—I use lots of orange and yellow, for instance, so sometimes I'll forbid myself to use those colors."

Since 1974 Dowell has shared a house in Echo Park with Pittman, and they also have adjoining studios in downtown L.A. Assuming the subject of painting must come up frequently in their conversa-

tions, one wonders how they go about dividing up turf?

"We're interested in the same things, and there's lots of shared information, but that's never been an issue because Lari's work is narrative and mine is not," says Dowell. "We often take inspiration from the same place, but we interpret things differently; I tend to respond to formal qualities, and Lari deals with things in a more psychological way."

Asked if he feels there's anything recognizably West Coast in his work, Dowell responds: "I didn't used to think so, but the more familiar I become with the rest of the world, the more I see that there is. The thing that ties it to California is generosity. When Lari and I have work in progress, we often go into each others' studio and say, 'If you were in New York you'd stop now'—and this is when the piece is maybe a quarter of the way finished!

"There's a lot of information in work that comes out of L.A., and it tends to be quite democratic in that it takes disparate sources and says, 'this can exist together.' The union may not always be harmonious, but it's all there, and there's no hierarchy of value that places one thing above or below another. That's very much how I've always seen my own work." □

Kristine McKenna is a regular contributor to Calendar.