

Rich, Sarah K. *Couples Discourse* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), p. 108.

ROY DOWELL LARI PITTMAN

THE LEGACY OF MODERNIST COLLAGE is a rich one and is indebted to the pioneering examples of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who nearly a century ago began applying newspaper and other unorthodox materials to traditional supports. Like the Cubists before him, Dowell has found that there is much to love in the ephemeral detritus and visual culture of his own time. In the early 1970s, while a student at the California Institute of the Arts, he kept a small notebook of collages and realized that this might be the direction his work should head when a friend showed an interest in them. A self-avowed heir to modernist formalism, Dowell has been "painting in a state of collage"¹ for well over two decades, producing, in the words of one critic, "a cut-and-paste version of Pop Art."²

Dowell acknowledges that his approach is essentially democratic, likening his process to his adopted, multicultural home of Los Angeles, which, he claims, "takes disparate sources and says, 'this can exist together.'" ³ Many of the artist's vibrant, large-scale canvases indeed literally incorporate disparate materials—snippets of signs, posters, advertisements, fabric—and call as well on a rich range of artistic influences, from Japanese art and Mexican billboards to the clangorous compositions of Stuart Davis and James Rosenquist. The painting-collages are generally untitled and numbered (a sure indication of his formalist bent) and typically pulsate with a kind of Dionysian exuberance and complexity. For this artist who claims that he has difficulty producing work "without at least twelve components," *Untitled* (#894) is unexpectedly restrained, elegant—even Apollonian—in its minimalism.⁴ The fan or shell-like shape, partially enframed by cobalt blue, is borrowed from a hat in a Japanese print, yet Dowell notes that the particular source is not critical to the work's meaning. "As is the case with most of my work," he notes, "the sources are derived from a diverse collection of cultural references chosen primarily for their formal qualities and secondarily for what they may 'mean' or invoke."⁵ Dowell's use of burlap, a nod to modernism's radical democratization of materials, adds

a textural element and a coarse counterbalance to the fugue of circles floating weightlessly across the mottled white surface of the canvas. In this beautifully understated piece, Dowell moves away from the visual chaos of his declamatory "Pop" mode in search of the subtle, laconic poetry of the ordinary.

Dowell lives and works in Los Angeles, where he chairs the graduate studies department at the Otis College of Art and Design. He received both a B.F.A. and M.F.A. from CalArts and has exhibited his work in numerous one- and two-person exhibitions. His work can be found in the permanent collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Hammer Museum, Portland Art Museum, and Phoenix Art Museum.

BK/JR

- 1 See Christopher Miles, "Roy Dowell: Painting in a State of Collage," in *Roy Dowell: A Survey Exhibition 1981–2005* (Los Angeles: Margo Leavin Gallery, 2006).
- 2 Holland Cotter, "Roy Dowell," *The New York Times*, February 26, 1999, B37.
- 3 As quoted in Kristine McKenna, "Roy Dowell's Mixed Bag of Tricks," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 1997, 61–62.
- 4 As quoted in McKenna.
- 5 E-mail to authors, April 19, 2006.