

Melrod, George. "Artist profile: Roy Dowell," *art ltd.* (November/December 2009) p. 68-69.

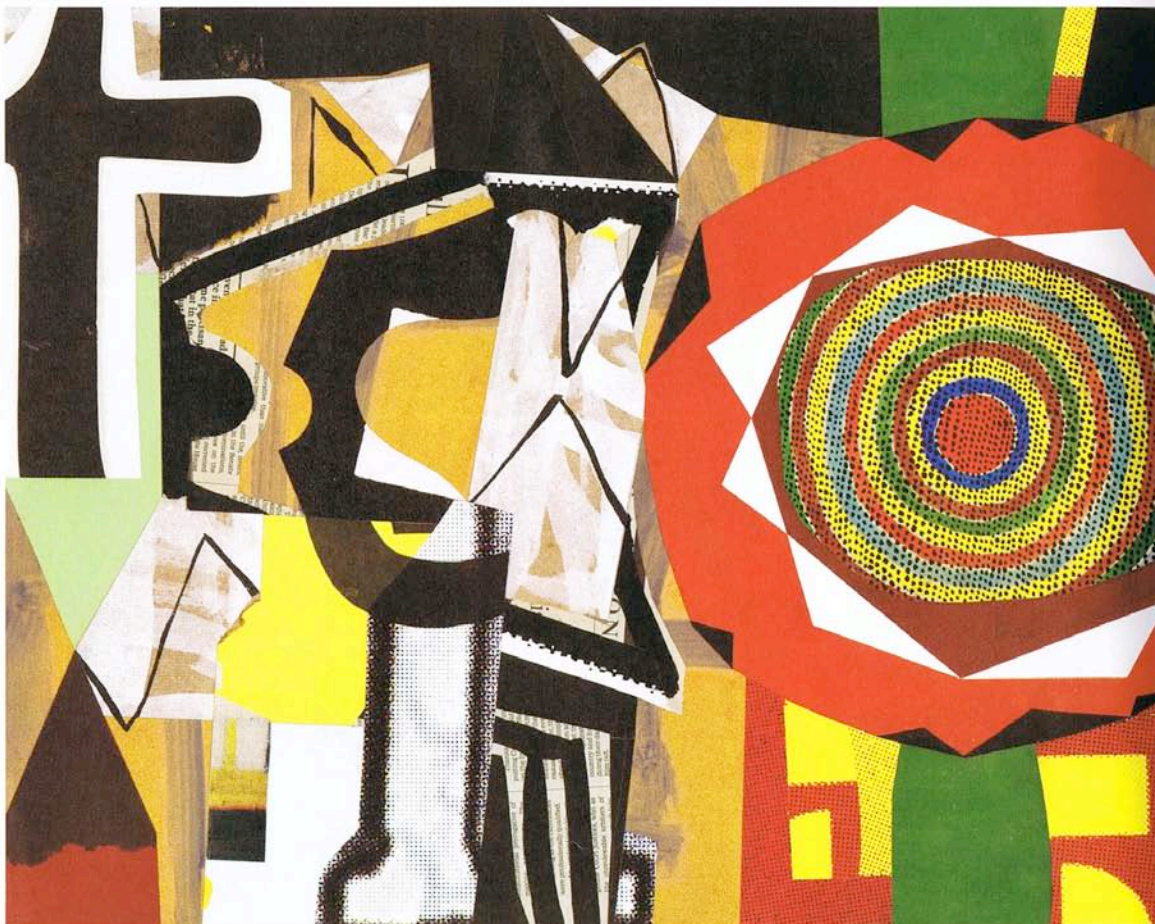
: artist profile

roy dowell



Roy Dowell's vibrant painted collages deftly juggle scraps of color, form, and design then fuse it together like a riff of optic jazz. Encountering one of them, one finds oneself tracing a tacit map of modernist art history, from Kurt Schwitters and early Cubism, through the jaunty mid-century Americana of Stuart Davis and the skewed Pop billboards of Rosenquist. Yet there is nothing glib or ironic about Dowell's gleanings; sifting through a sprawling array of references with a canny eye for detail, he splices them together to create his own elegant, eclectic, deeply intuitive synthesis. "A lot of the work starts with a reproduction of something: a little snippet of somebody else's work, or a decorative element off a piece of textile or ceramics. It's not important that people know it, but it's there," he explains, in the back room of the Margo Leavin Gallery, on the event of his first solo show in three years. In fact, Dowell's work engages a wide spectrum of multi-cultural and design sources beyond its formal roots in European modernism and mid-century abstraction.

"Certainly, there are those things, but it also comes from an interest in ethnographic art, from my interests in Mexico, Latin America, Africa ..." As we converse, he points to numerous examples from among his new works. One features a pictogram of a shrimp or lobster from Indian Kalighat painting, another, a pattern from a plate



in central Mexico. "I'm not interested in the symbology, but the aesthetics of it," he explains. "I'm not using them for their meaning. I'm aware that it's there, but it comes along for the ride."

Raised in Northern California, Dowell attended high school in L.A. An exhibition of works by Joseph Cornell at the Pasadena Museum of Art, where he took classes, piqued his imagination when he was young. While hanging around the bookstore, he saw a book on L.A. abstractionist Emerson Woelffer, which also made a big impact. Dowell and Woelffer later became friends, and eventually Dowell became co-executor of his estate. In 1975, Dowell got his MFA at Cal Arts, where he studied with some of the least object-oriented artists of the era, such as Allan Kaprow and Yvonne Rainer. But even then he understood that "at my core, I was a maker."

For the past twenty years, Dowell has been the chair (and founder) of the graduate department at the Otis College of Art. Today Dowell maintains his studio in Los Feliz, near that of his partner of 35 years, painter Lari Pittman, with whom he shares a home in La Crescenta. "We discuss [art] constantly," he says. "We usually have pretty similar taste in what we like. Also, we both collect, primarily works on paper, and a lot of ethnographic material."

At first, Dowell actively gathered printed matter to create his compositions, visiting billboard companies to garner scraps. "They wouldn't let me pick and choose, they'd give me twenty pounds of folded paper," which he'd then take home and sort into a 'yes' pile and a 'no' pile. While his works have always mixed painting with collage, Dowell's newest works on paper emphasize painted elements of his own creation. "In some ways, using the found object became a little too easy. But I didn't want to give up the construction process," he explains. Yet even though his newest works use largely invented forms and elements, they retain a collageur's approach to composition, and a magpie's instinct for collecting—and savoring—fragmentary visual tidbits from disparate wellsprings. "I'm not interested in any kind of hierarchy of sources," he states. "If someone makes something that I like, I'll use it. That's part of the reason I make the work: there's so much out there that's beautiful."

—GEORGE MELROD

*Roy Dowell's work can be seen at Margo Leavin Gallery in West Hollywood, from October 10 – November 14, 2009. His work will also be on view at Lennon, Weinberg Inc., in New York from January 14 – February 13, 2010.*

LEFT:  
"UNTITLED (#982)"  
2009  
ACRYLIC AND COLLAGE ON ILLUSTRATION BOARD  
16" x 20"  
PHOTO: BRIAN FORREST  
COURTESY OF MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES