

2020 Docent Study Group

Unveiling American Genius

Section 3: Abstraction

Report by Bridget Fox

Richard Pousette-Dart, *By the Sea*, 1958, oil on canvas

“Every work of art is a different kind of mirror that gives back to you, amplification and variety of what you bring of yourself to it.”
Richard Pousette-Dart



Richard Warren Pousette-Dart (June 8, 1916 - October 25, 1992) was an American artist originally from Saint Paul, Minnesota. He was born into an artistic family. His mother was a poet and a musician and his father was a painter and an art director as well as a writer and educator of art. In 1918, his family relocated to New York. His early interest in art was strongly encouraged by his parents and he began painting at age 8. By 1941, he had his first solo exhibition at The Artists' Gallery in New York. He married poet, Evelyn Gracey in 1946. Their daughter, Joanna Pousette-Dart also became an abstract painter living in New York and their son, Jon Pousette-Dart is a musician who founded the Pousette-Dart soft rock band in the 1970's.

Always a visionary, art is the question and the answer. By his teens, Richard Pousette-Dart had a passion for abstract art and well-formed views in abstraction. In a quote he notes: “The greater the work of art, the more abstract and impersonal it is; the more it embodies universal experience, and the fewer specific personality traits it reveals.”

Abstract art by definition is art that does not attempt to represent external reality. It seeks to achieve its impact by using shapes, forms, colors and textures. Pousette-Dart was the youngest member of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, which was a movement that arose in America after World War II. Pousette-Dart is also well known as one of the founders of the New York School of Painting. His body of work includes painting, drawing, sculpture and fine-art photography. His early work in the late 1930's and early 40's was primitive in nature but full of dynamic and artistic growth. Throughout his career, he always maintained a transcendent and positive quality to his work, focusing on spiritual ideals in paint and color. There is power in his paintings and his work evolved naturally into formal explorations of textural handling, built-up surfaces and intense color by the 50's and 60's. To him, every painting was a new birth and experience. Some of his paintings have 20 or more layers beneath what we actually see. Despite his success in New York, he wanted to isolate himself from his peers and the commercialism of the city. Choosing to leave in 1951 to live upstate, he continued his artist journey in seclusion. He maintained his triumphantly independent position throughout his career and painted until his death in the early 1990's.

As a mature artist he also taught art on and off for 30+ years. He wanted his students to feel illuminated and express their experiences. He was focused on teaching people to be

themselves. *By the Sea* is a mural size canvas oil painting that is part of the permanent artwork collection of the KIA. It was gifted from the Pfizer Corporation and was originally part of their own corporate collection. This piece, painted in 1958, is a prime example of what has been called pointillism in abstract art. During the 1950's, Pousette-Dart experimented by using small dabs of color squeezed from the tubes of paint directly onto the canvas to create a three-dimensional surface. Thick layers and intense colors were done on large-scale heroic works. His objective for the viewer was to initiate the active experience of looking and deciphering underlying shapes and colors. As quoted by Pousette-Dart: "Art is not a matter of perfect technique; it is life of the soul." We begin by observing this painting from a distance, noticing the bold and vibrant blue hue dominating the canvas. As we are invited to gradually get closer, we begin to see how it manifests. The surface is encrusted with tiny textures of color that appear to change as the viewers perception and engagement is altered by differing vantage points. His use of art materials and the act of creating was his way of communicating with his viewers. By doing so, he gives us a not only a direct experience with his materials but also a visual space that offers the opportunity for contemplation.

"Creative people are the real saviors and the heroes of the world. It's a dynamic balance and edge between the conscious and the unconscious. The artist being the creative person is the hope of the world." RP-D

Questions to ask: What grabs your attention about this artwork; from far away and what do you see upon closer inspection? How do you think the artist applied the paint? How does this painting make you feel, what is your mood? How do you feel about the scale of this artwork? Is it too big, not big enough or just right? Would you hang this artwork in your home? Do you think you could create something like it and if so, what color would you choose? Does this remind you of anything found in nature? If you could pick a title, what would you call this piece? If this painting could sing, what song would you hear? How would you dance to it? Other abstract works to compare and contrast: "Blue Silence" by Richard Koppe could be used to compare and contrast colors, shapes and texture. Another great large-scale example of abstract art to show would be "Code Blue" by Helen Frankenthaler. The colors are similar but the application of paint is very different.

<https://www.theartstory.org/artist/pousette-dart-richard>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Pousette-Dart [https://www.pousette-](https://www.pousette-dartfoundation.org/foundation)

[dartfoundation.org/foundation](https://www.pousette-dartfoundation.org/foundation) <https://kiadocents.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/pousette-dart-by-the-sea.pdf>

Report by Phil Vander Weg

Object 1: Kirk Newman (1926-2017), *Abstract with Oranges*, 1955, duco enamel on canvas



Perhaps the most striking thing about *Abstract with Oranges* is not what it is, but what it is not. This artwork is not consistent with the large body of abstracted figurative work we normally associate with this artist. All the Kirk Newman pieces of art we have located in many places in the community and on the grounds of the Kalamazoo Institute of Art are three-dimensional sculpture, abstractions of some degree of the human figure. Newman's later works become increasingly more exaggerated characterizations of personage stereotypes. Many are cast metal. They vary in size as well as degrees of abstraction. There are also drawings done before and after the sculpture that explore these forms for the artist and viewer alike.

Abstract with Oranges is two-dimensional, a painting on canvas. It was done about 6 years after Kirk Newman came to Kalamazoo and had begun the extended educational component of the KIA. It appears in 1955 Newman was still searching, experimenting and exploring personal creative options that would more fully meet his own needs and ambitions. There are examples of Kirk Newman's three-dimensional work done about the same time as this painting. *White Action '54* is one, a sculpture that shows a similar exploration of the shapes, forms and themes found in *Abstract with Oranges*.

We find no direct visual references to specific objects in *Abstract with Oranges*. The work seems to be entirely composed of blocky rectangular shapes of about the same size. They are mostly white, off-white, grey toned, or black shapes. The exception are a few bright red/orange shapes and a couple blue and blue/green shapes on the right side of the painting. These shapes are not precisely arranged or ordered in a grid system, nor do they seem to make a reference to the edges of the canvas. Rather they are more fluidly arranged, tilted in various degrees to one another. It does not seem possible to determine a single relationship to color shape and placement. Black is on top of white at times, then not so, and the grey tones move about. The notion of front and back spatially is difficult to determine; rather they pulsate. The painting seems to accomplish the goal of creating a sense of "push-pull" that was the mantra of Hans Hoffman, an important American art teacher, artist and founder of what became known as abstract expressionism. The orange and brightly colored shapes on the right certainly become a focal point to the work.

This painting falls within the definition of non-objective abstraction. It is not based upon the direct observation of real things, rather it is focused on the building blocks of the visual language. Shapes and color are used here to create a sense of limited movement and space. The sculptural piece, *White Action '54* explored similar elements and considerations. It is reported that when Kirk Newman was asked why he dropped these investigations and did not continue to make more work in keeping with these pieces, he responded "this isn't going

anywhere". Shortly thereafter he began working with the figure and over time became more interested in exaggerated abstractions of figurative forms.

Object 2: Richard Hunt, b. 1935-, *Wall Piece*, 1969

Hunt was born and grew up on the South Side of Chicago. His mother was a librarian and his father owned a barbershop. His early interests in art and classical music were acquired from his mother while he came to understand politics and more common everyday concerns from his time around the barbershop with his father. He was a strong and avid student, taking classes in a variety of subjects at the University of Chicago before he became an art student at the School of the Art Institute. He excelled as an art student, earning a number of prestigious awards and recognitions that allowed him to travel more widely and expand his horizons. He was the first black artist to be recognized with a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1969. Over the years he has undertaken many Visiting Artist Professorships across the country, has held many one-man exhibitions, and has been awarded numerous honorary degrees. He has completed more public art commissions in this country than any other contemporary black sculptor. Richard Hunt is no stranger to West Michigan and Kalamazoo in particular. In addition to pieces in the collection of the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, there are also important pieces in the collections of Meijer Sculpture Park and Gardens, Western Michigan University and Kalamazoo College. Richard remains a frequent visitor to our area and has been exceptionally generous with his time, talents, and even his collections of African Art to our community.



Wall Piece is an excellent example of how Richard Hunt's creative energies for many decades are defined and structured as he explores materials, shapes, relationships and themes present throughout his career. The ever-present theme of nature, the use of abstracted natural forms, the direct method of working with welded metal all are present at a smaller scale than his larger outdoor public art pieces, but this work is every bit as dynamic in its presence. Hunt frequently uses somewhat rounded off geometric forms as the launchpad for his three-dimensional creations. In this case, it is a pyramid like base form mounted on the wall, not a tabletop or floor. The shapes are full and organic, leaf-like shapes with attenuated extensions that turn in space and introduce an energetic dynamic. The planes of the shape turn and twist in space as they seem to stretch and emerge from the base form. The goal for Hunt in these abstract creations is to attempt to initiate an emotional connection with the viewer. At times the intended emotional target is derived from classical literature and themes. At other times his motivations are directly reflective of current political events and conditions.

It has been said that the art of Richard Hunt bridges the gap between abstraction and the black experience. It might be interesting to compare and contrast the shapes, apparent fluidity and surface qualities of *Wall Piece*, done in 1969 to *Seeming Confrontation* completed in 1973. The latter is cast bronze, done first with direct wax. Both works are in the KIA collection. It might also be instructive to examine some of the many lithographic prints in the KIA collection done by Richard Hunt. He actually started out as a printmaker before moving on to sculpture and has consistently used drawing and printmaking as part of his creative process. The print examples

quickly establish his manner of investigating shape, emotional dynamics and spatial relationships within a limited vocabulary. There seems to be a very similar process of creative expression and investigation found in the classical chamber music Hunt was fond of early on; define a theme, then explore slight modifications of the components in a variety of ways. Most importantly Richard Hunt enjoys the process of working directly with materials and experimenting with creative possibilities, "what if I did this and then this"?

Report by Marilyn Garry

Gretna Campbell (1923-1987), *Garden (Maine)*, 1962, oil on canvas

Gretna Campbell was born in the Bronx, New York at a time when the shoreline and windswept nature had not yet been swallowed up by the city, now just a memory in the minds of a very few. When asked about why she painted landscapes, her daughter Martha reports that she responded logically "Well, because I love the outdoors"! She had a rigorous schedule of painting consisting of 4-5 hours in the morning, again in the afternoon and also evening until dark. In cold weather, she would bake a potato, leave it in her pocket for finger warmth and then eat it for lunch!



The Garden, at 53 by 57 inches, painted in 1962, in her early years somewhere around her home in the five Cranberry Isles off the coast of Maine, is a work that draws us in as though we were in the midst of this verdant scene and not merely observing. She believed, and wanted to impart through her work, that nature must be experienced -not viewed from a distance. She credits her early childhood in the Bronx as the beginning of her fascination and affinity with the natural world. *Garden* is completely saturated in colors that reflect an autumn landscape: intense reds, oranges, gold, green and blue. She worked with a palette using bold pigments; also used loose brushstrokes creating a lively dynamism.

Curators speculate that Gretna wanted the energy of the coastal winds recorded in these brushstrokes. Gretna would draw a scene that she came upon after viewing it from many angles and distances; she would then return to her studio and make a grid of where she wanted various objects placed, before applying paint. Gretna came of age with artists who were aware of cubism and abstraction as well as the "pure form" of the Bauhaus, yet she was also grounded in figurative expression. In contrast to say, a Renaissance artist, who may stand in one place and give that view over to the painting, Gretna's multi-level views, synthesized and brought together in a completed work reflect her training, school experience and took notice of the paths of artists of her time.

Gretna would have an idea sparked by nature, but would not know where she "was going" with it until at some moment she discovered something new; she described feeling "completely alive" upon this discovery. On Cranberry Island, she and her husband welcomed other artists who came to live there as sources of support in encouraging each to live their vision, and not engage in pressure to conform to any school or method.

In introducing tour members to this work, it might be beneficial to use Gretna's own prescription for immersion to experiencing nature: real flower petals, sprigs or a branch to handle. It may even set the tone to use essential oils of grass or floral. Another activity would be to provide postcards: Blank for younger children who feel confident to draw! - and maybe leafy cards for adults. Have them write a note to send to someone about their experience of being in the Garden painting, and actually mail it. Children may want to sketch general shapes observed., or if they seem willing to ask "what growing thing would you be in this garden"? If middle, HS, or adult groups wanted, they may write haiku or cinquain -very appropriate to nature- to encourage the feeling of being with nature. Comparing and contrasting *Garden* to other KIA works would include: (if they are on display) several of Nora Drapce's landscapes: *Green Hills*, *Moonrise* or *Black and White Landscape*. Other works to consider would be *The Finding of a Creature from the Sea* by Robert Birmelin, *Landscape 74-117* by Chuang Chu, or *Sunset Provincetown* painted in 1929 Oliver Chaffee. For any of these activities we may further pay tribute to the artist by encouraging, with kindness, all tour members in their efforts. Gretna's students referred to their beloved teacher as being defined by these characteristics in her interpersonal communication.



Report by Faye Brewer

Karl Knaths, *Wounded Tree*, 1952, oil on canvas

Karl Knaths was born October 21 1891 in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Passed in 1971, Hyannis Massachusetts. Karl Knaths, a person of German descent, was a kind and studious, compassionate person who loved studying art, color, philosophy, music and theater. His father died when he was young and his uncle stepped in and taught him the trade of running a bakery. As a young boy he also sketched, but never had a lesson. A family friend noticed his art skills and introduced him to the Milwaukee Art Institute. Zona Gale also introduced him to Laura Sherry, the director of the Wisconsin Players. He worked as a set designer.



After that he attended the Art Institute of Chicago with encouragement from his mentors. He worked as a janitor while enrolled from 1911 to 1913. The Armory show came to town and he landed a job as one of the guards. He was introduced to European Modernism at that point. Cezanne especially intrigued him with the muted colors he used to build his compositions. Upon returning to the Wisconsin Players as the group scenery painter during a tour to the East Coast, he found the great nature and peacefulness of Provincetown, Massachusetts. Then WW1 came and he went into the service for two years. For a short time, he studied in NY then went back to Provincetown, which became his forever home.

Knaths fell in love with Provincetown. It was then an artist colony and fishing port. He was quite an outdoor person; he loved nature, the town, and the people. I imagine it to be kind of a Greenwich Village type place. He met his wife and her sister there. Helen Weinrich was a conservatory pianist and her sister Agnes was also a painter of cubism and modernism. He and

Helen married and all of them lived together in Provincetown; families living together wasn't that unusual at that time in 1922. He traveled to NY to sell his work or find galleries to display them. He met Duncan Phillips, a man who bought many of his paintings. Later, Karl displayed his works Phillips' Washington DC Gallery. Also, he painted office murals with the WPA Federal Art Project during that time. Knaths continued to have success with gallery shows after a twenty-year dry spell. He taught at the Phillips Gallery from 1938-1950. He was also an instructor at Bennington College from 1943-1950.

Wounded Tree is a wonderful painting. It is very thought provoking. There is a lot of meaning and substance to a wounded tree. The colors are interesting being very muted and strong contour lines define the composition. There are many values of green and if one squints their eyes even less will be observed, just dark and light. There are many triangles in the picture plane. One being the light ground, the other being the placement of the tree trunks; each give emphasis to the *Wounded Tree* for it directs your eye to it. The white and orange colors provide the direction of light in one instance or where the wound is itself on the tree. The sky is kind of grayish; not a nice sunny day, overcast or after a storm. One can see the light direction from the left shining light, white on the ground and parts of the tree. Its branches are broken. The composition and muted colors are quite familiar to the style of Cezanne.

Karl Knaths is a Modernist or an Abstract Painter but I don't think an Abstract Expressionist like William DeKooning and Jackson Pollock. For although the work is an abstraction, a glimpse of the image exists. To me, this tree is in a yard with hedges behind making a point of a triage, like a corner of the backyard. The trees are not in a forest and there are a couple that stand alone. They are not positioned in the middle of the picture plane, adding more interest. It reminds me of what trees are to us and why we need to keep them healthy. Their leaves through photosynthesis take in CO₂ and provide O₂ which we breathe. Their roots keep them grounded. They are aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Sometimes they live in forests like big cities, with people and families. Their leaves can also be used as medicine, like aloe and many others. When they wear out like our bodies, their wood provides warmth. How just a wounded tree, painted or living can mean so much.

The Phillips Gallery in Washington has 45 major Knaths works. He is also represented in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, Kalamazoo Institute of Arts and in numerous private collections. He was the recipient of many awards, among them the Norman Wait Harris silver medal of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1928, The Art Institute of Chicago's gold medal, The Boston Tercentenary Fine Arts Medal in 1930 and the Audubon Art Award in 1964. References: Ostwald Color System Bauhaus Design Theory <https://americanart.si.edu/artist/karl-knaths-2668>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Knaths
https://www.phillipscollection.org/research/american_art/bios/knaths-bio.htm
<https://www.moma.org/artists/3159#works>

Report by Pat MacQueen

Frank Bowling (1936-) *Man Overboard*, Acrylic and acrylic gel on collaged and stitched cotton canvas, 2000, 36 1/2 inches X 47 inches

Richard Sheridan Franklin Bowling was born in Guyana, South America. He moved to England at age 19 and completed his education. He studied at the Chelsea School of Art and won a scholarship to London's Royal College of Art where he studied with David Hockney and was awarded a silver medal of honor. He moved to New York in the mid 60's and was closely engaged with Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis. In the 70's, he began to consider visual aspects increasingly more important than narrative content and



moved away from figurative painting with social and political issues and personal narratives and began more abstract painting. He has been shown in numerous exhibitions in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, including the Harlem Renaissance in 1997. He has received numerous awards and honors, among them being the first Black Artist to be elected as a Royal Academician in the history of the Royal Academy of the Arts in 2005. Currently he spends time between London and New York where he has studios, and at age 85 continues to paint every day, mostly now from a seated position. In 2019, the Tate Britain hosted his first major retrospective showcasing his 60-year career.

His early works demonstrated figuration and some personal narratives. Over time he experimented with silk screening and used stencils of continent-like shapes, often referred to as his 'map paintings'. He began poured paintings in the 70's using a tilting platform and spilled paint from heights up to two meters. Flicking or blobbing paint were other techniques he used for punctuation by building textures on the surface. He began an interest in geometry, using bold planes of color and exploring the unpredictable nature of paint. He still continues to explore ideas of fluidity and spontaneity. He fuses abstraction with personal memories and continues to experiment with new materials and techniques such as staining, pouring, and layering using a variety of materials and found objects. He embraces accidental and chance creations. Once a bucket imprint was left on a painting and created a design. Later this became a recurring device in other works. Most often he names his works when he finishes, attempting to reconnect with what took place in his daily life during the making of it or people important to him at the time.

Most of his works are on a very large scale and he often uses the principles of geometry to shape the canvas and structure the composition. In the 90's he began to stitch, staple, and glue canvases together using acrylic paint and gel, using various principles of angular geometry. He also began to work on a smaller format of works which presented new challenges for him. His work relies on technical skill and he continues to establish and break his ever-changing set of self-imposed rules.

TOURING IDEAS Stand in different places and check this painting out from different angles. Do the colors affect the mood of this painting? (Bold, vibrant, diverse, warm tones, soft pastel hues) How did the artist use color to make something in particular stand out? Are different shades of the same color used? How was paint applied? (Thickly, evenly) Do you see texture? What

materials were used to create this? (staples, glue, needle and thread, torn canvases) Is movement conveyed in this art? What kind of lines are used, geometric or organic and curved? Are most lines vertical, horizontal, or diagonal? Is one shape repeated more than others? Do you like the way he balanced or arranged the colors? Do the thinner horizontal lines at the top and bottom add interest and balance? Imagine the painting without them? Which way do you like better? Would the painting be as interesting to you if the two painted blobs were not there? Imagine what it might look like without them. Would you like this better if black lines outlined the colors? Do you see anything that you think ties in with the title, *Man Overboard*? What would you name this artwork?

BEST RESOURCE: The Exhibition Guide for the Frank Bowling exhibit (May-August 2019) at Tate Britain gave the best information on his art and personal history. Excellent links to information and videos of him at work there also.