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Art's quiet American: Richard Pousette-Dart, the forgotten man of abstract expressionism



Richard Pousette-Dart's *Within the Room* (1942) CREDIT: ROBERT GERHARDT AND DENIS Y. SU

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By **Alastair Sooke**, CRITIC AT LARGE

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In 1951, Life magazine published a photograph of 14 men – and one woman – in a studio, staring solemnly at the camera. They were, as the headline put it, the “Irascibles”: the principal players in abstract expressionism, united in their anger about a recent survey of contemporary painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which they felt was too reactionary.

There they all are, the big beasts of 20th-century American art: Mark Rothko, smoking on a stool in the front row; slick-haired Willem de Kooning, glaring from the back; and at the centre, the eye of this artistic storm, Jackson Pollock, hunched in a chalk-stripe suit.

But who is the figure standing at the far left? Wearing a dark shirt and tie and a baggy, double-breasted jacket, he looks like a movie mobster. In fact, he was a brilliant painter and now the subject of an exhibition at Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge, the first devoted to him in this country. His name was Richard Pousette-Dart (1916-92), and he is the forgotten man of abstract expressionism.

“He was a deeply private, shy, and extremely peaceful person,” says his 71-year-old daughter, Joanna, speaking by phone from New York. Not very “irascible”, then? She laughs. “No, he was a vegetarian from the time he was 17. And a pacifist during the war.”

The elder of Pousette-Dart’s two children, Joanna was born in 1947, six years after her father’s first solo exhibition. By then, he had embarked on his third marriage – to Joanna’s mother, the poet Evelyn Gracey – and they were living in a cold-water apartment on 56th Street in Manhattan. Barely into his 30s, Pousette-Dart was already at the forefront of the city’s avant-garde.



The Irascibles, in 1950 CREDIT: GETTY

The son of a writer and painter who also enjoyed success as an art director for a New York advertising agency, Pousette-Dart started out in the Thirties, working as assistant to the sculptor Paul Manship. By 1939 he had begun producing pocket-sized biomorphic brass

pendants, were inspired in part by the art of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. Pousette-Dart's admiration for the "primitivist" French sculptor drew him to his British biographer, Jim Ede – the collector, former Tate curator, and future founder of Kettle's Yard – who visited him in Manhattan in 1940.

The pair struck up a lifelong friendship and their correspondence, amounting to more than 200 letters written over five decades, inspired the show at Kettle's Yard, which concentrates on the early years of the American's career.

By the start of the Forties, Pousette-Dart had left Manship and was concentrating on painting. His breakthrough work was *Symphony No. 1, The Transcendental* (1941-42), now in The Met. Thickly painted and almost 12ft wide, this vast, predominantly black-and-white canvas, full of circles, axe-heads and teardrop-like forms, is often cited as the first work of abstract expressionism on a truly monumental scale, and an influence on Pollock.

I ask Joanna if she believes that her father shaped Pollock's decision to work on a "heroic" scale? "All I can say is they were both working at the same time, and showing in the same gallery," she says. "They admired each other's work, and, if you look at their paintings from the Forties, you can see this fluid exchange of ideas."



Richard Pousette-Dart's brass sculptures CREDIT: THE RICHARD POUSETTE-DART ESTATE

In the year of the "Irascibles" photograph Pousette-Dart received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a grant recognising his "exceptional" creativity. He was by then known as ab-ex's wunderkind, ensconced in the New York scene. That same year, though, he and

Evelyn decided to move out of the city, to a farmhouse in mountainous Rockland County, 40 miles upstate.

Joanna recalls growing up there, as well as on another property with an orchard, to where the family moved permanently in 1958. “We led a very bohemian existence,” she says. In the countryside, Pousette-Dart – who, says Joanna, “spent all his time painting” – had two studios: one where he would paint, up a ladder in a barn, and another, larger space, where he stored photographic equipment (Pousette-Dart was also an accomplished photographer, accepting commissions for magazines including *Vogue*) and objects he found interesting: fossils, an old washing-machine part resembling an African mask, and a disco ball.

At first, his artist friends including Barnett Newman and Rothko came to visit. Yet gradually, says Joanna, “those relationships petered out. At a certain point, he was swimming in different water.”



Richard Pousette-Dart Page from Notebook B-114 (Knights of Pythias) c. 1940s CREDIT: THE RICHARD POUSETTE-DART ESTATE

Pousette-Dart kept working, and taught at various art colleges (at one, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei was among his students). After his death, he was honoured with retrospectives at the Whitney and The Met.

Yet today, his work fetches considerably less than that of his ab-ex peers. In 2015, for

could expect to fetch 20 or 30 times more. Why has Pousette-Dart been overlooked? The move to the countryside didn't help. Nor did his experimental way of working, encompassing various styles. "There was never one image consistent all the way through, like Rothko or Pollock," says Joanna. "And that's a harder thing to sell."

Perhaps the biggest factor, though, was the artist's quiet personality. Unlike his hard-drinking fellow abstract expressionists, who gathered and brawled in the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village, Pousette-Dart rarely touched alcohol. "A lot of the camaraderie between the artists of that generation took place in bars," says Joanna. "That just wasn't who he was." As his position in the "Irascibles" photograph suggests, he was always, somehow, on the edges of the group.

"We live in a time of celebrity," adds Joanna, "and it's easier to talk about prices and personalities than the work. But all the way through, my father was a purist. He was an artist of intricacy, not grand gesture, who was obsessed with making things that he felt were living – and, in a sense, transcendent." She pauses. "He really believed that pursuing art was one of the highest things you could do."

Richard Pousette-Dart: Beginnings is at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (01223 748100), until Jan 6

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