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The Dream Life of Forms: Paintings and Drawings by Deborah Remington

by John Mendelson, Art Critical
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Deborah Remington 1963-1983 at WallSpace
June 26 to August 7, 2015
619 West 27th Street, between 11th and 12th avenues
New York City, (212) 594-9478



Deborah Remington, Dorset, 1972.
Oil on canvas, 91 x 87 inches.
Courtesy of the artist's estate and WallSpace, New York

A combination of absolute clarity and poetic weirdness has had me intrigued by Deborah Remington's strange and beautiful paintings ever since I first saw them in the late 1960s. When I ask artists whose paintings seem related to hers if they know the work, usually they reply "no", and I wondered when the paintings would be exhibited again.

A rare opportunity presented itself at WallSpace this summer, in an exhibition curated by Jay Gorney. This terrific show gathered three large paintings and twelve drawings from 1963 to 1983, serving as an introduction to this artist's classic style. Remington (1930-2010) was an inventor of imaginal domains

1326 S. Boyle Avenue | Los Angeles, CA, 90023 | +1 323.943.9373 | www.parraschheijnen.com

whose purely visual elements feel both tangible and psychologically compelling. She paints hieratic forms that suggest machined devices, architectural diagrams, interiors of the body, shields, and emblems. In their ambiguity, the possibilities inherent in the imagery keep opening up multiple readings of exposed cross-sections, places of refuge, routes of escape, and at times, majestic flowerings.



Deborah Remington, Memphis, 1969.
Oil on linen, 60 x 53 inches.
Courtesy of the artist's estate and Wallspace, New York

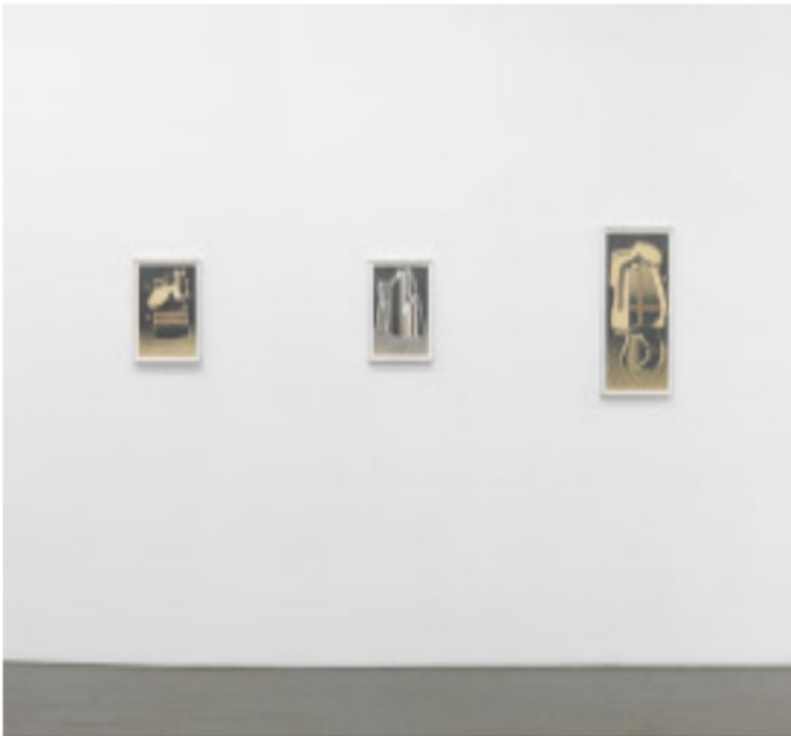
The paintings begin with March (1964) a surreal mash-up of folded forms emblazoned with abstract insignia and floating in indeterminate space, somehow reminiscent of de Chirico. Memphis (1969) is like the heart of an engine or the cavities of a skull. An interior vertical shaft glows red against a cool gray gradation, all surrounded by a segmented structure, itself encased in dark space. Strongly symmetrical, the complex, isolated form incorporates wavering contour lines and gives off a kind of mutant, robotic heat.

Dorset (1973) is a painting structured around emptiness, an oval that is an orifice, mirror, or space, simultaneously. Its carapace is animated by a radiance emanating from the sheer surfaces of cadmium red and cobalt blue that grade into black. The forms are echoed by lines in the same colors that pulse like hot, forged steel. Two small, errant forms float across the surface, beginning to occlude the hard perfection of this locked-in world.

In all of Remington's work we are confronted by the mystery of a psychic urgency charged with myriad impulses: the mechanistic, the sexual, the claustrophobic, along with the display of beauty and power.

She conjures a dream life of forms, an alternate reality that is weightless, yet one that we can almost taste. In her work we can see links to the art and design of the Machine Age, to Duchamp and his merging of the erotic and the mechanical, and to our own virtual lives amidst illuminated electronic screens. And we can see connections to the art of Japan, an early inspiration for Remington who studied calligraphy there for two years in the 1950s.

These and other influences can be divined in Remington's deft, strong, and delicate drawings. The drawings in this exhibition came from three bodies of work, affording wonderful insights into her visual thinking. The drawings from the Soot Series from the 1960s are done in carbon black, with accents of red oxide, on cream-colored muslin. The centralized image appears to be suspended in a tight aura of light, in a field of granular darkness. The forms resemble grills of cars from the 1950's, air vents, or ritual devices from traditional cultures.



Installation shot, Deborah Remington: 1963-83 at Wallspace, with works from the Adelphi series of pencil & crayon on paper. Courtesy of the artist's estate and Wallspace, New York

The Adelphi Series of drawings from the 1960s were done in pencil and crayon on paper in soft tonalities of black, with accents of orange or ox-blood. They are complex and inventive works, which evince the same sense of hard-edged, graphic precision found in the paintings. In the drawings there is an organic feeling, with jostling forms resembling rocks or organs, tunneled through by passageways that arrive at interior repositories or galleries. In the two drawing from the 1980s, the third group tapped by this show, the elegant bunkers that Remington describes begin to lose parts of themselves that float free in space.

Deborah Remington started out as an art student and young artist in the Bay Area, and moved to New York in 1965. Her work was integral to the development of abstract painting during the 1960s and 1970s, and beyond, was exhibited extensively, and entered major American collections. Remington's paintings have been widely recognized for their originality and invention. This exhibition rightly refocused the spotlight on the cryptically expressive side of her work.

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Deborah Remington, March, 1964.
Oil on canvas, 57.25 x 49.25 inches.
Courtesy of the artist's estate and Wallspace, New York