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# Art in America

Deborah Remington

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by [Becca Rothfeld](#)



Deborah Remington: *Memphis*, 1969, oil on linen, 60 by 53 inches; at WallSpace.

Deborah Remington's paintings and drawings mystify by design. Made between 1963 and 1983, the works displayed in this exhibition (which turned out to be Wallspace's final show) are coquettish, withholding as much as they divulge. They present viewers with a series of eerie evocations vaguely reminiscent of objects and landscapes.

The works in "Soot Series" (1963-69), hung at the gallery's entrance and composed with their namesake material, portray figures recalling machines. Compact, austere affairs hovering in the upper halves of darkened canvases, the figures are framed by a cold glow, apparently lit from behind. Their forms are industrial, their tint metallic, but they do not correspond to any recognizable article. The works on paper in "Adelphi Series" (1963-74) feature lopsided, chaotic shapes that resemble crumbling buildings. Rendered in dull grays and browns, the forms seem less menacing than those in "Soot," but their effect is far from comforting. Their lines waver, as if the configurations they support could collapse at any moment. Two other works on view, the paintings *Memphis* (1969) and *Dorset* (1972), favor theatrical constructions in blaring blues and reds. Suggesting frames or windows, these constructions invite us to peer through outer scaffoldings and into inner wells of moody grays.

The exhibition paid homage to a fiercely original artist. Born in 1930 in Haddonfield, N.J., Remington took classes at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art (now the University of the Arts) as a precocious child and enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute as a young adult. In California, where she became involved in the nascent Beat movement, she was exposed to the influence of Abstract Expressionism while studying under Clyfford Still, Hassel Smith and Richard Diebenkorn.

But Remington diverged from her expressionist mentors on one key point. Unlike Still and his ilk, she retained a well-developed sense of three-dimensional space. Much of Still's work creates its own geometry, flattening forms onto canvases that become events or environments in themselves. In contrast, Remington's dark dreamscapes gesture at a world and a spatiality beyond their own aesthetics. Although abstract, they appear to obey the laws of physics. Their central figures, for instance, often seem to interact realistically with light, presenting gradated shadows across their surfaces.

In this regard, Remington takes after Surrealists like Max Ernst. But she ventures one step further: rather than imagining variations on known bodies, she opts for jarringly alien forms. The figures in her paintings disorient us because they are simultaneously contextualized and decontextualized: they are beholden to the spatial conventions of our world, but they also appear to be from beyond it. We find ourselves compelled to seek the outlines of familiar forms in shapes that drift by like half-forgotten memories, just recognizable enough to entice us with the promise of legibility and just foreign enough to confound us. The artist has stated that her work "seems to refer to something in reality, but then the reference is denied"—a broken visual promise.