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Dowell's Drive-By Abstraction

California artist Roy Dowell is best known for hybrid compositions that mix collage and painting. A recent gallery survey of 25 years of his art, which draws frequently on billboard ads and textile design, highlighted his positive response to image overload.

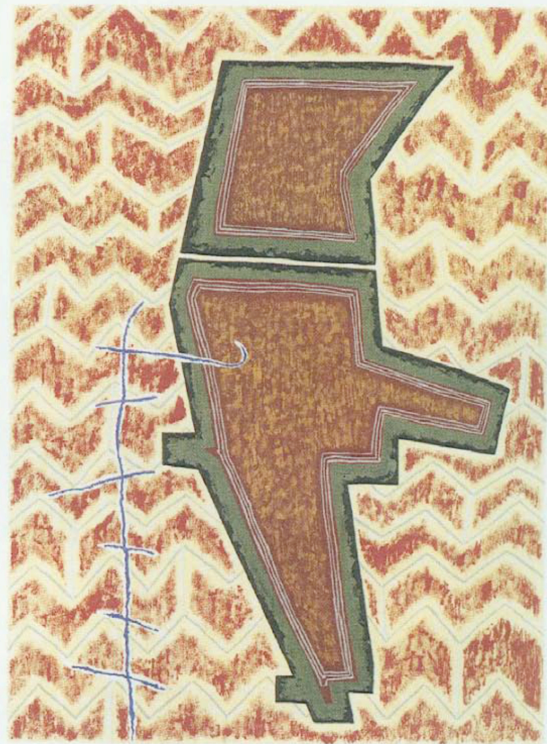
BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

In the last century the formal breakthroughs of the avant-garde were quickly incorporated into the realms of advertising and design. For product logos, typefaces and magazine layouts, sophisticated graphic designers developed styles influenced by the biomorphic and geometric forms of artists such as Mondrian, Malevich, Arp, Miró, Moholy-Nagy, Calder and many others. Graphic designs in this modernist mode—think of logos such as the CBS "eye," the Toyota "T" and the General Mills "G"—are identifiable symbols calculated to inspire positive feelings in the consumer. Effective graphic designs, and most good abstractions for that matter, appeal to viewers on a psychological level; their well-balanced or off-kilter forms have evocative relationships to objects in nature and the quotidian world. After many decades of mass-media advertising, we have all become connoisseurs of signage and visual tropes, aware of the eye-catching punch of a fresh logo or layout.

In his amalgamations of painted geometric forms and collaged fragments from billboard advertising, Los Angeles artist Roy Dowell offers a cunning response to this history by subtly reappropriating, reconstituting and remixing advertising's appropriations from modernist art. Hence, the ubiquitous presence of fragments of lettering, design shapes and product photography. Now in midcareer and part of a generation largely skipped over in the current L.A. youth-cult gold rush, Dowell (b. 1951) is chiefly known for his mixed-medium works of the past decade. Combining collage and hand-painted sections, these exuberant, densely organized works juggle startling combinations of forms and colors. Their wildly divergent elements seem resolved in the buzz of stimulating social activity.

But advertising tropes and collage techniques are merely ingredients in Dowell's sophisticated abstract compositions. A succinct exhibition of 30 paintings and works on paper at Margo Leavin Gallery in Los Angeles looked at the trajectory of his 25-year career, with particular attention paid to early works on paper that feature bold, oddly shaped forms on patterned grounds. Dowell began using cutout images from advertising in 1990. His earlier works—not unlike those by New York-based abstract painters Thomas

Nozkowski, Jonathan Lasker and Andrew Masullo—tweak conventional notions of push-pull and formal resolution, offering pungent combinations of lines, colors, shapes and notations that spark our interest and stimulate a refined sense of "right" design.



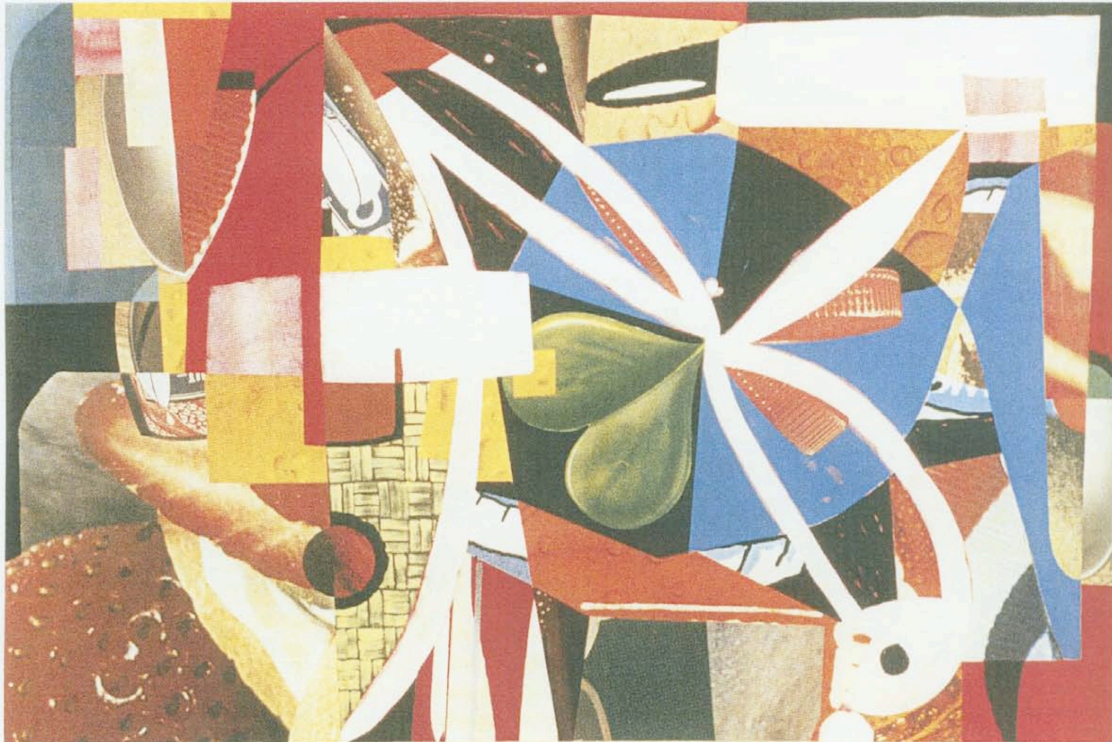
Untitled (#267), 1982, gouache on paper, 27½ by 19¼ inches.
All photos this article courtesy Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles.

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stop-and-go glimpses of billboards,
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For example, in the gouache on paper *Untitled #267*, 1982, (Dowell designates each of his untitled works by a number), a pinched, block-headed, vertical oblong outlined with Jim Nutt-like precision seems to hobble across a loose zigzag pattern. It stays erect thanks to an extraneous, cross-hatched blue line that acts as a kind of wob-

(1987) incorporates sections of painted sand in a bright patchwork scheme commandeered by the black outline of a single leaf frond, itself patterned in semitransparent swirls of gray. Dowell here juxtaposes patterns and colors with the insouciance of Pattern and Decoration masters such as Kim MacConnel and Robert Kushner, juggling patches of brickwork grids, deconstructed plaids and diamond-shaped gingham.

Formal relationships elicit content in Dowell's work. Although bisected halfway down by an ominous, sharp-angled emblem, the vase shape of *The Gates of Heaven* (1986) features between its



Untitled (#753), 1998, acrylic and collage on panel, 60 by 90 inches.

bly cane. Against the faux wood-grain ground of another gouache on paper, *Untitled #255* (1982), a queue of red discs, overlapping like the segments of a meandering caterpillar, is pursued by erratic vectors whose long arrow-shaped ends resemble darting umbrellas.

The conflux is heightened in several '80s canvases by the addition of sections of fine-grained sand glued to the support and painted. In *Untitled #351* (1986), the two circular peepholes in a crisp rectangular template of tan sand offset a funky painted grid and dominate a teal blue line that forms a broken ellipse. *The Grand Order of Things*

curved handles a stunning robin's-egg-blue portal, chevron-shaped in the style of 1950s signage and graphic design. Colored in the traditional mottled yellow, brown and green of Tang pottery, the sacred vessel seems to protect its piece of the sky from a nervously etched, gray-black ground that threatens to dull its unexpected emanation. A curling red arabesque at the top of the vase further restrains the business below and lets the blue shine forth.

Textile design provides a fertile field that Dowell can pillage. An untitled acrylic work from 1989 mixes and layers motifs that seem

taken from 1940s floral fabrics. Over a ground of cartoonish four-petal flowers, he arrays starbursts, chrysanthemum orbs, two mottled discs and a big red Matissean flower outlined in thick swirling white paint.

A canvas from Dowell's first body of work employing cutout collaged images, *Balanced on the Head of a Pin* (1990) features a centrally positioned Cubist figure composed of geometric shapes taken from billboard advertisements. The background field mixes collaged fragments with loosely patched swathes of brushy paint to resemble the dense, shredded layering in billboard works by Mimmo Rotella and Jacques de la Villeglé. Flanking the discom-bolulated geometric figure are painted black silhouettes of two hands and two feet, marking the surface of the work and inviting viewers to dive in.

In the hybrid collage works, Dowell proceeds methodically, seamlessly painting addenda to found forms to suit compositional needs. One collage on panel, *Untitled #753* (1998), depicts a kind of tipsy picnic, including sections of painted basket-weave patterning, parts of found images of a strawberry and a croissant, and details from a coffee ad. Painted pink loops emulate the curves of a collaged billboard image of a green clover, while patches of citrus-colored ads contrast with painted blotches of blue and red. Scissors and paint enable visual rhymes to be adjusted and rescanned. Throughout Dowell's work, visual harmonies sing alongside atonal dissonances.

Also included in the show are several recent paintings with sparser imagery and a more comic eccentricity. *Untitled #915* (2005) features a small black hourglass shape isolated on a field of brown bordered with a daisy-chain of red lollipop shapes that are covered with egg-yolk colored discs. Dowell plays with texture and framing in the stunning small work *Untitled #879* (2003), layering pieces of variously painted burlap onto three borders of a painting of a wobbly sunburst of vermilion beams. A large backwards "F" in matte black flanks the remaining side of the work.

Ellsworth Kelly has extracted the clean-lined, beautifully resolved forms of his paintings from shapes and outlines found in nature and architecture. Dowell turns such reductive processes on their heads, augmenting and reconfiguring found shapes to create chattering formal confabs that reflect the hectic visual stimulation of urban life. Apt products of L.A. car culture, Dowell's works seem predicated on stop-and-go glimpses of billboards, store signage and bus-shelter posters. Fragments from mass media are simply part of the mix, as he resynthesizes images to add to his hyperconnected, busy network of visual activity.

Eschewing postmodern critique, Dowell offers a positive spin on the image glut of consumer society. Like the hyperactive paintings of his longtime partner, Lari Pittman, Dowell's abstractions devour with playful glee a vast array of signs and images in their reconstitutions of the world. Reshaping mass media to suit his needs, Dowell, with his DIY esthetic, promotes an idealism that is regenerative and slyly empowering. □

"Roy Dowell: A Survey Exhibition 1981-2005" appeared at Margo Leavin Gallery, Los Angeles [Mar. 18-Apr. 15, 2006]. The accompanying catalogue includes an essay by Christopher Miles. Work by Dowell was recently on view in "Couples Discourse" at the Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, University Park [Oct. 10-Dec. 22, 2006].

Author: Michael Duncan is a freelance writer and curator based in Los Angeles.



The Grand Order of Things, 1987, acrylic and sand on canvas, 64 by 24 inches.