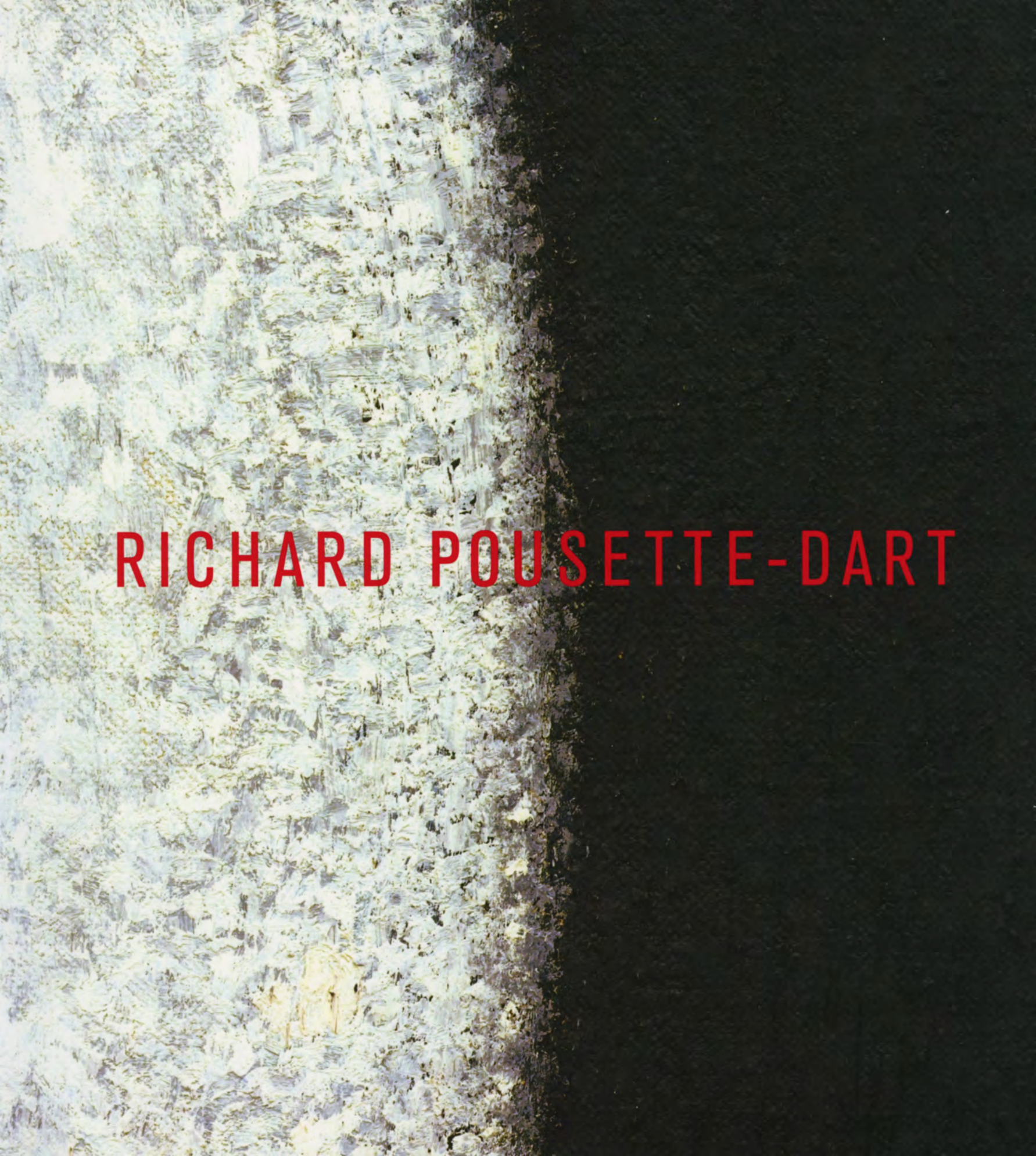




RICHARD POUSSETTE-DART

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PACE

RICHARD POUSETTE-DART'S LUMINOUS GEOMETRY

Alex Bacon

In 1951, Richard Pousette-Dart moved upstate with his family, from New York City to rural and mountainous Rockland County. He did so not only because the building he lived in was set to be demolished, but also because he had grown weary of art world politics and wanted to live a more solitary existence amidst nature. Consequently, Pousette-Dart is often positioned as a loner, both by himself and by many who have written about him. What is remarkable, then, is that, even as he sequestered himself away from the mainstream of the art world, he kept pace with it. He did so not by tracking the latest trends, but in his own highly individual and intuitive way.

Pousette-Dart's career began with his synthesis of European and non-Western traditions, which he first became aware of through his father, an artist, art director, and art writer, and which evolved further through his friendship with John Graham—artist, collector, and mentor to the New York School. The working methods and formal vocabulary that resulted led to large-scale, all-over abstract paintings. The pinnacle of these works is Pousette-Dart's seminal *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental*, 1941–42 (fig. 1), considered the first mural-scale, post-easel Abstract Expressionist work.¹ Pousette-Dart's tendency toward innovation, despite his geographic and psychological distance from New York, continued far past the classic years of Abstract Expressionism. Even as he worked in the isolation of the country, many of his painterly concerns aligned him in interesting ways with the work of other artists drawn to exploring the nature of color and light and their spatial ramifications. Pousette-Dart's abiding engagement with, in his words, “both inner and outer light,” as well as with “edges, their definition and non-definition,”

suggests that, independently and in his own way, he tackled some of the same concerns as a diverse group of artists, from Robert Irwin, with the optical haze of his dot and disc paintings, to Yayoi Kusama's dense impastoed net paintings, to Brice Marden's subtly changing encaustic monochromes, and James Turrell's and Doug Wheeler's installations, where light is treated as a kind of malleable material.²

Christopher Wool, who studied with Pousette-Dart at Sarah Lawrence College in the early 1970s, called the artist "a painter more interested in questions than answers."³ His manner of working was more circular than linear, and for him process was endlessly elastic so long as it served his aesthetic goals. He sometimes worked on several groups of paintings simultaneously in a parallel fashion, taking up themes that were of consistent interest, using different methods and materials, and allowing various series of paintings to diverge and cross-pollinate. He seems to have kept all possibilities open, introducing new approaches, expanding his vocabulary, and then at times backtracking to revisit earlier ways of working as new angles into them opened up.⁴ "My own painting," Pousette-Dart wrote,

is a direct experience with my materials. I never make preliminary sketches or plans but approach the canvas directly, usually with whatever I happen to feel at the moment...I work over and over paintings, some of my paintings today have twenty or thirty paintings beneath, some more, sometimes it seems as if I paint just one painting always, from a white canvas through an experience of colors and lines and then back to white again, yet always enriched, nothing is ever lost. Everything that is achieved, even though it does not appear to be present, remains, and some of my canvases are just this, a final experience of white on white, having traveled thru and thru, like an area of ground where much dancing has occurred.



fig. 1
Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental
1941–42
oil on canvas, 86 x 140 1/2"
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift

In the late fifties and early sixties, Pousette-Dart arrived at an approach to gesture and light that had its beginnings in the 1930s, when he worked as a secretary in the studio of the photographer Lynn T. Morgan, a close colleague of his father. Morgan specialized in retouching black-and-white and color photographs, and as a result Pousette-Dart came into contact with the granular structure of film, which the artist said revealed to him that “all form is made up of so many points of light and that everything has a molecular structure,” and going so far as to say, “photography was how I got to the point....I am concerned with form and the nature of light, and I find that I can achieve variations in form through many touches of the brush in a way that I can’t with a single stroke of the brush.”⁵

Pousette-Dart’s method of building up dense, coloristic fields through “points” of color was also a result of his penchant for working directly with the tube of paint, at times without a brush as intermediary. Squeezing out paint into impastoed points of pigment was just a way of refining, or at least of focusing, in some paintings, the more eclectic ways of applying paint that he had earlier been exploring.⁶ This was reflected in his process of working, which was, as Martica Sawin describes it, one of tuning: “the process used to make all parts of the canvas vibrate in harmony....It is a matter of adding more and more touches of color [or removing touches of color] until the painting reaches the right pitch and of keeping them distributed in such a way that no portion has greater intensity than any other and that no dissonance jars the union of color vibration.”⁷ Generally speaking, Pousette-Dart always built up a painting with many layers of paint, telling Judith Higgins that this was because “layering is an analogy to life itself.”⁸ Technically, he often operated at diametric extremes simultaneously. In a painting like *Black Circle Time*, 1979–80 (p. 47), for instance, he utilized both the impasto of directly deposited paint in the white field, as well as thinner layerings of brushstrokes in the titular black circle.

The role that the materiality of paint played in suggesting a certain experience of light and color was simultaneously earthbound and otherworldly. Pousette-Dart built up many layers of different colors via raised points of pigment, which are organized in a non-hierarchical, all-over fashion, and result in what appears to be a field of a single color. In this way, he yokes the physical nature of paint to the optical effects engendered by color, so that the paintings shimmer, the values of their colors shifting subtly with prolonged viewing as different hues variously emerge and recede to alter one’s perception of the overall color field. As with Marden’s

contemporaneous encaustic paintings, this effect is a result of the process by which the painting is created. Pousette-Dart speaks of typically having to “go back and forth thru many gradations and shades of different colors before I settle into one color, that is if I decide to settle there and there one can find many particles of other colors showing thru. So you might say all colors make every color, or you might say all colors are in black and white, or you might say I find everything the hard way.”⁹

This catholic understanding of color is perhaps why Pousette-Dart’s interest in chroma extended all the way to the outer limits of the spectrum, black and white. For the painter, black and white were primal and elemental, not only containing or excluding, respectively, all the other colors, but also expressing the dialectical nature of existence, of contradictions and opposites brought into harmony. He spoke of truth as “light pooled in darkness/ darkness filled with light.”¹⁰ Further, Pousette-Dart wrote in a notebook from the period, “I’ve gone to black and white because of my need for a kind of intensity, the most intense light and the most intense darkness and the instantaneous balance between opposites.”¹¹ If we can understand the artist’s paintings of this period as pitting two seeming contradictions against one another—the obdurate materiality of paint, on the one hand, and effervescent optical effects, on the other—then black and white, and all the oppositions they both contain and resolve, represent the furthest limits of this exploration.

In terms of iconography, Pousette-Dart explored the form of the circle and the rectangle repeatedly throughout his career, even as far back as some of his childhood school assignments, from which the artist saved numerous biological drawings of cellular organisms notable for their adroit handling of circular and rectangular forms (fig. 2). For Pousette-Dart, the circle and rectangle were not static, *a priori* forms, but rather charged, evocative symbols, more in line with the sacred geometry



fig. 2
Pousette-Dart's Biology Homework
ca. 1932



fig. 3
Black Intervals
1949-50
oil on linen, 56 x 49"

favored by pioneering abstractionists like Kandinsky and Kupka. He consistently displayed an attention to organically geometric ways of organizing a composition through circular and rectangular devices that are as referential to crystalline forms, and to the molecular compositions of plant and animal bodies, as they are to the theorems of Euclid.¹² Further, organic and geometric versions of the same motif can often be found alongside one another. For example, in *Black Intervals*, 1949-50 (fig. 3), circles and rectangles are arrayed, via the organizing logic of the grid, into different configurations that together comprise a symbolic rebus akin to Adolph Gottlieb's contemporaneous pictographs. That these motifs remained significant to the artist is attested by a symbolic chart, found in a 1982 notebook, which operates like a linguistic analogue to the sequence of imagery presented in *Black Intervals*.¹³

From the late 1950s onward Pousette-Dart's works often suggest cosmic imagery. Lucy Lippard, reviewing a 1965 exhibition at Betty Parsons, suggests some of these associations: "the repeated Max Ernstian image of sun or moon over land, or of galaxies dotting a limitless night sky.... The whirling circular forms are directly descended from Van Gogh's meteoric stars or café lights."¹⁴ In some works, this is suggested quite directly, as in the triptych *Radiance*, 1973-74 (fig. 4), with its glowing nimbuses, swirling forms, and predominantly blue and yellow palette. *Radiance* represents a shift in subject matter from Pousette-Dart's earlier focus on

fig. 4
Radiance
1973-74
acrylic on linen
72 x 324"





fig. 5
Illumination Gothic
1955
oil on linen, 72 x 53 1/2"

totemic and biomorphic forms, exemplified in a work like *Illumination Gothic*, 1955 (fig. 5), with a series of sinuous white poles that run down its length, delimiting shapes reminiscent of bodily curves, such as thighs and hips, and interspersed with bright, jewel-like circular encrustations. In Hilton Kramer's words, "where in the past [Pousette-Dart's work] was more earthbound, it has now become almost literally focused on the heavens, with a kind of sensuous, celestial light as its principal concern."¹⁵ For his own part, Pousette-Dart pointed out to Judith Higgins that "he has never been *consciously* painting celestial bodies in space; in fact, it is through his paintings that he has now become interested in astronomy."¹⁶ These galactic analogies can perhaps best be understood in terms of American culture's fascination, especially in 1960s, with space travel, and the notions of weightless, limitless spatial experience it suggested.¹⁷

From the 1960s onward, Pousette-Dart displayed a steadily growing interest in seeing what happens when forms emerge from, or dissolve into ground. Compare, for example, *The Fountain*, 1960 to *Blood Wedding*, 1958 of just two years earlier and you find the same kinds of vertical, vaguely organic pole-like forms steadily dematerializing and blending into an increasingly atmospheric background (figs. 6 and 7). By the early 1960s, in works like *Meditation on the Drifting Stars* and



fig. 6
The Fountain
1960
oil on canvas, 75 1/2 x 56"



fig. 7
Blood Wedding
1958
oil on linen, 72 x 112"



fig. 8
*Meditation
on the Drifting Stars*
1962-63
oil on linen, 95 1/2 x 79"



fig. 9
Awakening Earth
1962-63
oil on canvas, 43 1/2 x 57 1/2"

Awakening Earth (both 1962-63), slight variations in coloristic emphasis are the only way to differentiate otherwise all-over carpets of pigment that seem to have taken on a greater degree of literal dimensionality in inverse proportion to the amount of recognizable imagery suggested (figs. 8 and 9).

In works like these, subject matter and drawing are put through an all-over pulverizing of form via color and repetitive, atomic brushstrokes. But, as we have seen, in Pousette-Dart's work this is only one half of the story. As often as he produced paintings in this mode, in other works he allowed form to assert itself in relation to the field. A juxtaposition of the subtle, imploding center of *Presence Number 3*, 1969 (p. 17) with the heraldic, oscillating, centralized form of *White Circle, Time*, 1979-80 (p. 45), to give just one example, demonstrates these two sides of Pousette-Dart's concerns.

In the mid-1960s, the painter Frank Stella was also thinking about changes in the conception of painterly space in art of the fifties and sixties. During a 1965 conversation with his wife, the critic Barbara Rose, and Donald Judd, Stella attempted to articulate the difference between traditional illusionism and this new form of what he calls abstract illusionism, which Judd and Rose both considered "just one thing...the same sort of phenomenon." He tells them:

Abstract illusionistic space even though it's the same kind of depth is really not the same kind...when you don't have the implication of a horizon line, you have a different kind of illusionistic space. The difference is that classic illusionism in the West is like looking out the window....But when you look up, say, you don't look out the window. Say, you're standing in the middle of a meadow, and you look straight ahead, you have the same

kind of illusionism. But if you look straight up and the problem of the horizon is not there on the picture plane if you're looking straight up then you have the infinite, but it's still not naturalistic illusionistic space, or the way we see....There is a new abstract illusionistic space...oriented to a kind of star gazing and that, which you have to say is different from the classic illusionistic space in the West that has to do with the horizon.¹⁸

It is in line with this conception of pictorial space that we might understand the seemingly infinite and unlocatable nature of such space in paintings like Pousette-Dart's as a tactical displacement and compensation for those spaces—visual and otherwise—where knowledge and mastery cannot be seamlessly generated or unconsciously assumed. This can perhaps be considered the birth of the virtual, where the “actual” and the “simulated” are increasingly difficult to distinguish. It is this kind of space that Pousette-Dart's paintings address.¹⁹

By the early 1960s, when he was producing all-over fields of impastoed color, his relation to broader currents in artistic production, wittingly or not, lay in his joining of two disparate modes. On the one hand, the physical presence and qualities of paint, also evident in certain contemporaneous proto-minimal work such as Yayoi Kusama's dense net paintings. And, on the other, the subtle optical effects of works concerned with luminosity, such as Robert Irwin's dot paintings. With the conjunction of these two modes, Pousette-Dart ended up somewhere all his own. It is as if light is paradoxically the result of material accretion, which is understandable as the logical extension of Pousette-Dart's consideration of art as “a dynamic balance between all opposites.”²⁰ It is likely that, because his works did not quite fit in the accepted modes of the time, while nonetheless seeming to make reference to them, Pousette-Dart's critics had a hard time classifying these categorically slippery paintings. Most often they found a context for them in the superficial correspondences between the pointillist technique of Post-Impressionism and Pousette-Dart's palette, iconography, and his method of working with points of paint.

It is tempting to follow certain contemporaneous commentators on Pousette-Dart's work and dub his paintings “pointillist.” After all, Pousette-Dart himself used the word “point” to describe the kind of mark he was making, as in this notebook entry: “Being able to build up or break down forms from the point is my way to light.”²¹ He

also understood the point as “color in its smallest bit.” But unlike Seurat and Signac, his Post-Impressionist forebears, who applied paint in a thin, stippled manner, Pousette-Dart’s gestures constituted a series of impastoed deposits that resulted in an emphatically physical surface out of which form could emerge or dissolve.

Pousette-Dart’s technique is thus not a recapitulation of Post-Impressionist style but a superficially similar formal means arrived at from very different perspective, one that was painterly and intuitive and directed toward spiritual, transcendental ends.²² It is perhaps more accurate to say that the artist inverts the Post-Impressionists’ central concerns. The point of color becomes a material presence in Pousette-Dart’s painting, and it is the layering of color, and the repetitive organization of the picture’s surface via these points that generate a coloristic experience. The experience of his more reductive paintings is not akin to the disembodied, supremely imagistic presences of those other artists; rather, his work conjures what Lippard has aptly and elegantly described as a seemingly paradoxical experience: “The way these grand abstractions are compressed into two-dimensional space is conveyed through the obsessive textures...tight, weighty, guttural in the darker, impastoed ones. In [these], there are times when one experiences a real vertigo. The mounds of pigment expand into mountains, and an inch of literal space becomes a binocular view from great height.”²³

Consider, for example, *Transcendental Red*, 1982 (p. 39), where one notices that what at first appears to be a dense, red monochrome central field turns out, upon close inspection, to in fact be made up of underpainting in numerous different colors, from white and black, to blue and yellow, parts of which come through as flecks in the painting’s top layer. That the painting opens up into a vertiginous optical splendor only from up close, and through the literal buildup of paint, effectively reverses our expectation: normally such optical experience primarily occurs from a distance, while up close we expect to confront only the tactility of materials and surfaces. In works like this, and also the contemporaneous *Time, Space, Window*, 1982–83 (p. 33), where the paint is so heavily built up in places that it falls over onto itself, Pousette-Dart effectively marries the tactile and the optical by inverting our expectation of where they might be located.

This is not the only example of the kinds of paradoxical experiences generated by Pousette-Dart’s paintings. In *Mirror of Space*, 1979–80 (p. 35), for instance, it is as

if the center is comprised of molecules gently swarming together, while we have the sense of the outer edge being intensely pushed, even shooting out. This work exemplifies the way in which Pousette-Dart often modulates his use of gesture, juxtaposing thinner, more factually painted areas, as in the centralized black square, with the more varied and complexly impastoed passages inside and outside of it. Different sensations of movement are also brought together in *White Circle, Time*, 1979–80 (p. 45), where we feel as if the circular form is rotating counterclockwise in a dense atmospheric haze. Its pendant, *Black Circle, Time* (p. 47) displays perhaps the most complex formal activity I have seen in a Pousette-Dart painting, with methods of execution varying from one part of the painting to the next. In some places, there is a slight buildup of impasto, while in others the white is as slight as a thin layer of snow. All this contributes to the sensation that some parts of the circle seem to rotate more quickly than others, and also in different directions. And yet everything is so subtle that, even if these different rotations seem contradictory at times, the picture always holds together.

* * *

All of the oppositions that I have been tracking in Pousette-Dart's work, and their parallels in his personal philosophy, can be understood to engage the medium of painting as both endlessly mutable and contingent in its relationship to the world it circulates through, as well as specific in its evocation of phenomena linked to the perception of color and the physicality of paint. The very fact of painting's storied history in the West as a purveyor of illusionism becomes productively juxtaposed with the more specific terms of both materials and the phenomenal effects of light, so that we become aware of both in new ways. Since painting subverts everything in its frame into something of an image, it engenders a constructive distance from experiences that we might otherwise take for granted. The curious factuality of painterly accretion, for example, or the glimmer of light from a surface, might otherwise go unnoticed. But, when presented on a painting support, we are able to consider them more objectively. Standing before Pousette-Dart's paintings, we are captivated by an experience of color and material whose intellectual ramifications can only be parsed after leaving their presence.

Many thanks are due to Charles Duncan at the Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation, and to Joanna and Evelyn Pousette-Dart for their help supplying materials, as well as for their generous and insightful conversations about the work.

- 1 *Symphony Number 1, The Transcendental* was painted at a time when others in the New York School were still working on a small scale. Pousette-Dart remembers Rothko wondering why someone would paint a work too large for the available exhibition spaces and, indeed, it was a galvanizing reason behind Pousette-Dart leaving his first gallerist, Marian Willard for Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century.
- 2 Pousette-Dart, cited in Lucy Lippard, "Richard Pousette-Dart: Toward an Invisible Center," *Artforum* (January 1975).
- 3 Christopher Wool in conversation with Joanna Pousette-Dart, in *Richard Pousette-Dart: East River Studio* (New York: Luhring Augustine, 2011).
- 4 As Lucy Lippard has written: "The fashionable critical concept of 'advance' within a narrow history of modern styles makes no sense when confronted by his kind of visionary eclecticism"; Lippard, "Richard Pousette-Dart: In One Light," *Richard Pousette-Dart: Presences*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1969), typescript courtesy of the Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation. Hilton Kramer concurs, writing in 1967 that, "Among the painters who came to form the New York School in the late nineteen forties and early fifties, Richard Pousette-Dart has proved the most difficult to place. Unlike Willem de Kooning, say, or Barnett Newman, or the late Ad Reinhardt, Mr. Pousette-Dart has never had a large following among younger artists looking for a queue to join. No myth or scandal has attached to his name, nor is his art of a sort that can easily be enlisted in the service of grandiose historical programs"; Kramer, "Art: Spirit and Substance," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1967.
- 5 Charles Duncan was helpful with every aspect of the research for this essay, and he was especially generous on this point, sharing his essay on Pousette-Dart's photography, which this passage paraphrases. The quotation can be found in Higgins, "To the Point of Vision," p. 20.

Out of fascination with the photographic process Pousette-Dart began his own investigation of the medium, producing a body of work that exploiting its technological tools—lenses, paper, methods of developing—to achieve painterly qualities, in which forms were abstracted by light. But Pousette-Dart ultimately gave up photography in favor of painting because he found that at a certain point he reached the limit of what he wanted to achieve with the camera, while painting continued to suggest new avenues of investigation.
- 6 This was true to some degree of earlier work as well. As John Gordon writes, "pigment is brushed or troweled on, or squeezed onto the canvas directly from the tube," which lead one reviewer in 1951 to write of Pousette-Dart's work that, "A typical picture shows a field of gems built to ponderous thickness by every means of application except water pistol." John Gordon, *Richard Pousette-Dart*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1963), as cited in David A. Miller, "Genesis and Metamorphosis: Materials and Techniques," in Robert Hobbs and Joanne Kuebler, eds., *Richard Pousette-Dart*, exh. cat. (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1990), p. 174. Also Manny Farber, *The Nation*, October 13, 1951, as cited in Miller, "Genesis and Metamorphosis," p. 174.
- 7 Martica Sawin, quoted in Miller, "Genesis and Metamorphosis," p. 169.
- 8 Pousette-Dart in Higgins, "Pousette-Dart's Windows in the Unknowing," *ARTnews* (January 1987), p. 112.
- 9 Pousette-Dart, Notebook B-134, 1980s, p. 127. Courtesy of the Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation.
- 10 This is a paraphrase of Evelyn Pousette-Dart's letter to Mr. Burghard, February 13, 2012; courtesy Evelyn Pousette-Dart. The quotation is from Pousette-Dart, Notebook B-156, 1980s, p. 125. As cited in Ingrid Ehrhardt and Katja Hilbig, eds. *The Living Edge: Richard Pousette-Dart, 1916–1992: Works on Paper* (Frankfurt: Shirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2001), p. 63.
- 11 Pousette-Dart, as cited in David Anfam, *Richard Pousette-Dart: The East River Studio Paintings, 1948–1953* (Los Angeles: Manny Silverman Gallery, 2006), p. 10.
- 12 Pousette-Dart's interest in geometry was "not only [in] the proportions of geometrical figures obtained in the classical manner by straightedge and compass, but [in] the harmonic relations of the parts of a

human being with one another: the structure of plants and animals: the forms of crystals and natural objects, all of which are manifestations of the universal continuum;" quoted in Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986), p. 20.

- 13 Pousette-Dart, Notebook B-132, 1982, p. 6. Courtesy of the Pousette-Dart Foundation.
- 14 Lucy Lippard, "New York Letter," *Art International*, 9, no. 1 (February 1965).
- 15 Kramer, "Art: Spirit and Substance."
- 16 Judith Higgins, "To the Point of Vision: A Profile of Richard Pousette-Dart," in *Transcending Abstraction: Richard-Pousette Dart, Paintings 1939–1985*, exh. cat. (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, 1986), p. 20.
- 17 Many critics have noticed the cosmic imagery in the painter's work and, some have connected it to contemporaneous interest in outer space. As the critic Robert Hughes writes, "one can see them as part of the same (now utterly defunct) fixation on the 'spiritual' possibilities of outer space that tinged the culture of the day, whose big expression in film was Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*." Hughes, "Seeing the Far in the Near: A Midwest show reassesses the underknown Richard Pousette-Dart," *Time* 136:21 (November 12, 1990): 100. Another, anonymous example is the review of the artist's 1963 Whitney Retrospective, which ends with "his new work...tries for nothing less than to transport human love to outer space." Anonymous, *Newsweek* (May 20, 1963), p. 98.
- 18 Frank Stella in Barbara Rose, "Tape-Recorded Interview with Don Judd and Frank Stella," Fall 1965, transcript in Barbara Rose Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, pp. 10–11. Judd is not convinced by Stella's argument, replying: "It's somewhat different but I don't think it's essentially different. It's another emphasis. It's just a decreased amount of illusionism on one end of the scale where it's dying out. But I don't think it's essentially different if there's any illusionism at all. That discovery was very important to me."
- 19 Given this pictorial address, it is not surprising that Pousette-Dart's example resonates with artists of the digital age. His relevance can be seen in the work of certain younger artists, such as Jean-Baptiste Bernadet and Israel Lund, who continue to investigate the renewable possibilities of working from the painted point of light, often, like Pousette-Dart, in seemingly paradoxical ways.
- 20 Pousette-Dart, Notebook B-156, p. 11.
- 21 Higgins, "To the Point of Vision," p. 20.
- 22 To better understand why Pousette-Dart's painting's were regarded as pointillist, it is perhaps useful to consider not only his contemporaries who were working more explicitly in that fashion, but also what art historian Michael Leja has called a "Monet revival," which swept New York when Pousette-Dart was beginning to paint with impastoed points. Leja, "The Monet Revival and New York School Abstraction" *Claude Monet...up to digital Impressionism* (Riehen and London: Foundation Beyler and Prestel, 2002), 133–57.

It was Abstract Expressionists, like Pousette-Dart, whose work was credited in the late 1950s as having paved the way for the re-examination and appreciation of Monet's late, more resolutely abstract water lily paintings. MoMA curator Dorothy Miller, and director Alfred Barr based their 1955 purchase of a large late water lily panel on this context, an acquisition that spurred great interest among collectors and museums for Monet's late work. However, Leja is careful to stress that, while curators and writers may have been emphasizing the significance of Monet's precedent for modernist abstraction, this was not a context that the artists claimed for themselves.

Pousette-Dart would likely have agreed with Barnett Newman, who hoped that the museum's belated recognition of Impressionism represented, "a true change in the policy that has denied to the American people the experience of art as an act of the spirit." But he nonetheless had no "wish to supplant Cézanne with Monet or with anyone else in the promulgation of any theory of art or in a struggle over influences." (Leja, 140).

- 23 Lippard, "In One Light," n.p.

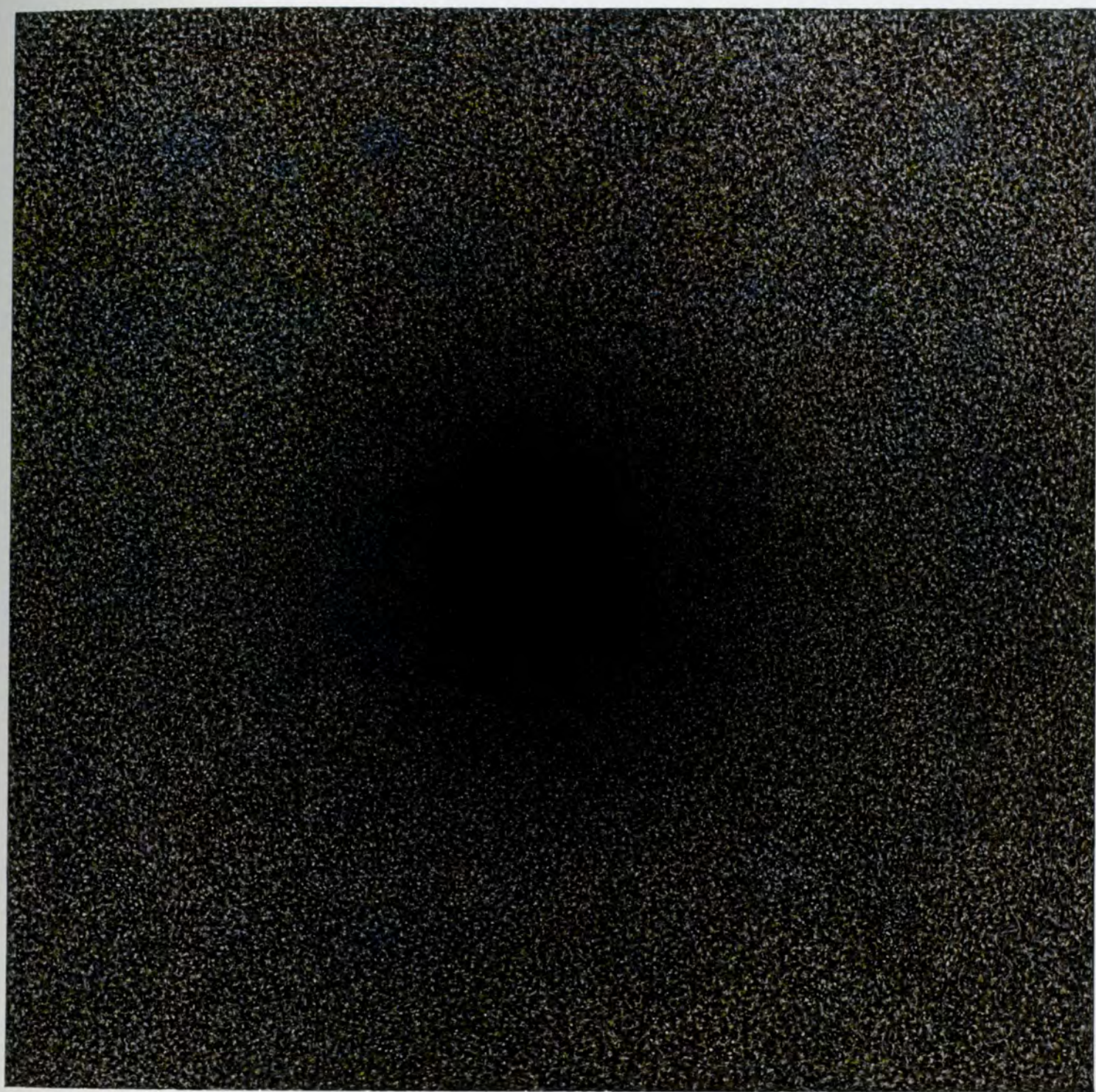
"Richard Pousette-Dart's art testifies to the fecundity of the unconscious mind. A founding member of the New York School that came into being in the 1940s and was generally known as Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, Pousette-Dart has evolved a complex imagery of unicellular life, religious symbols, and overlapping skeins of color to suggest the dense interconnected web of forms and ideas that lie beyond the threshold of consciousness. While he shares with his fellow Abstract Expressionists an interest in human values and spiritual truths, he goes far beyond most other painters of his generation in emphasizing creation as a primal act of self-definition. For over half a century he has worked to 'express the spiritual nature of the universe' by getting people 'onto the thread of their own creative being.'"

—Robert Hobbs

Presence Number 3, Black

1969

oil on linen, 80 x 80"



"A work of art for me is a window, a touchstone,
or
a doorway to every other human being. It is
my contact and
union with the universe.

Art is not a mirror reflecting nature,
but is the very essence of man's aesthetic,
imaginative, experience.

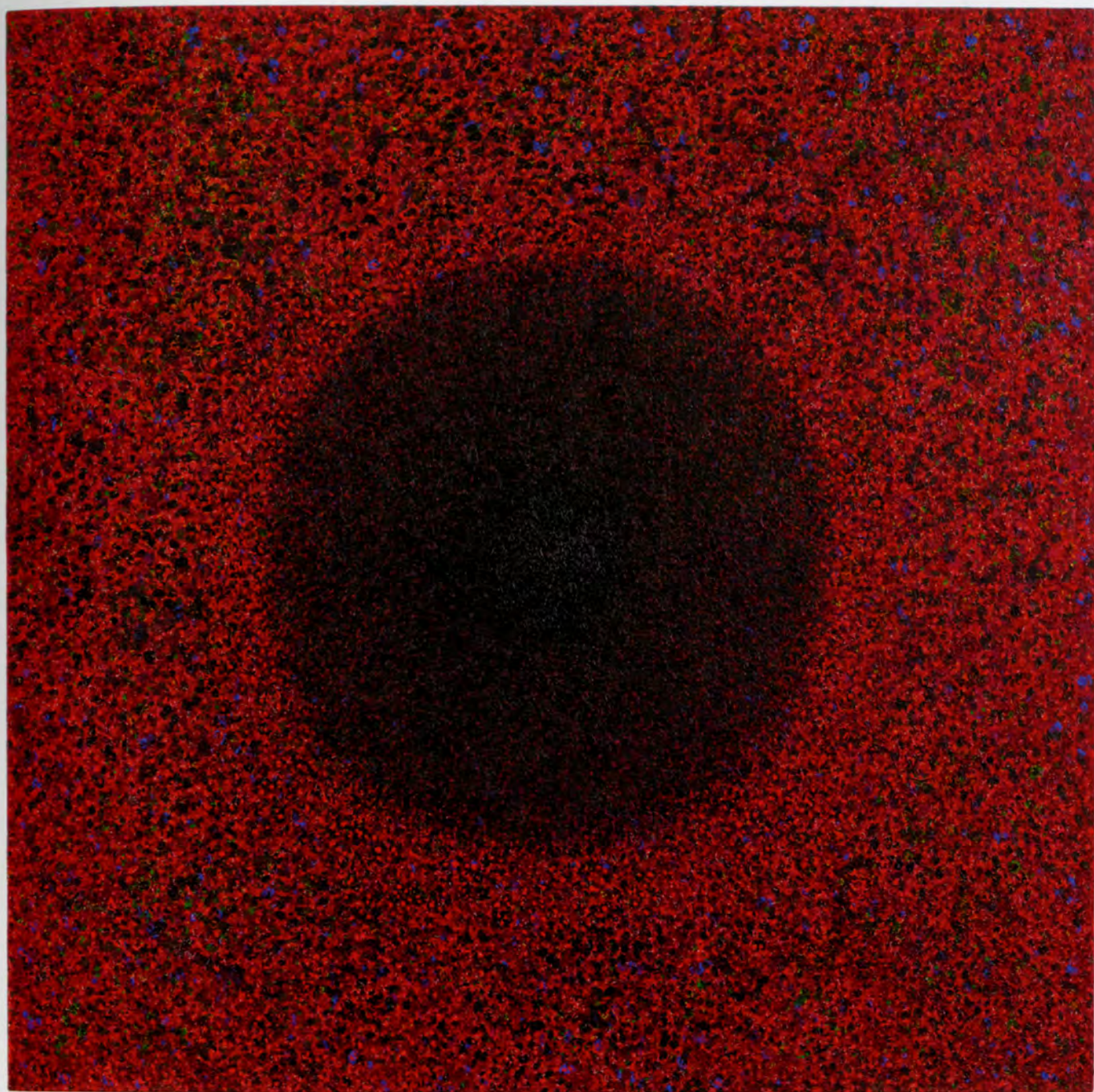
Art transcends, transforms nature, creates
a nature
beyond nature, a supranature, a thing in
itself—its own
nature, answering the deep need of man's
imaginative and aesthetic being."

—*Richard Pousette-Dart*

Cerchio Di Dante

1986

acrylic on linen, 72 x 72"



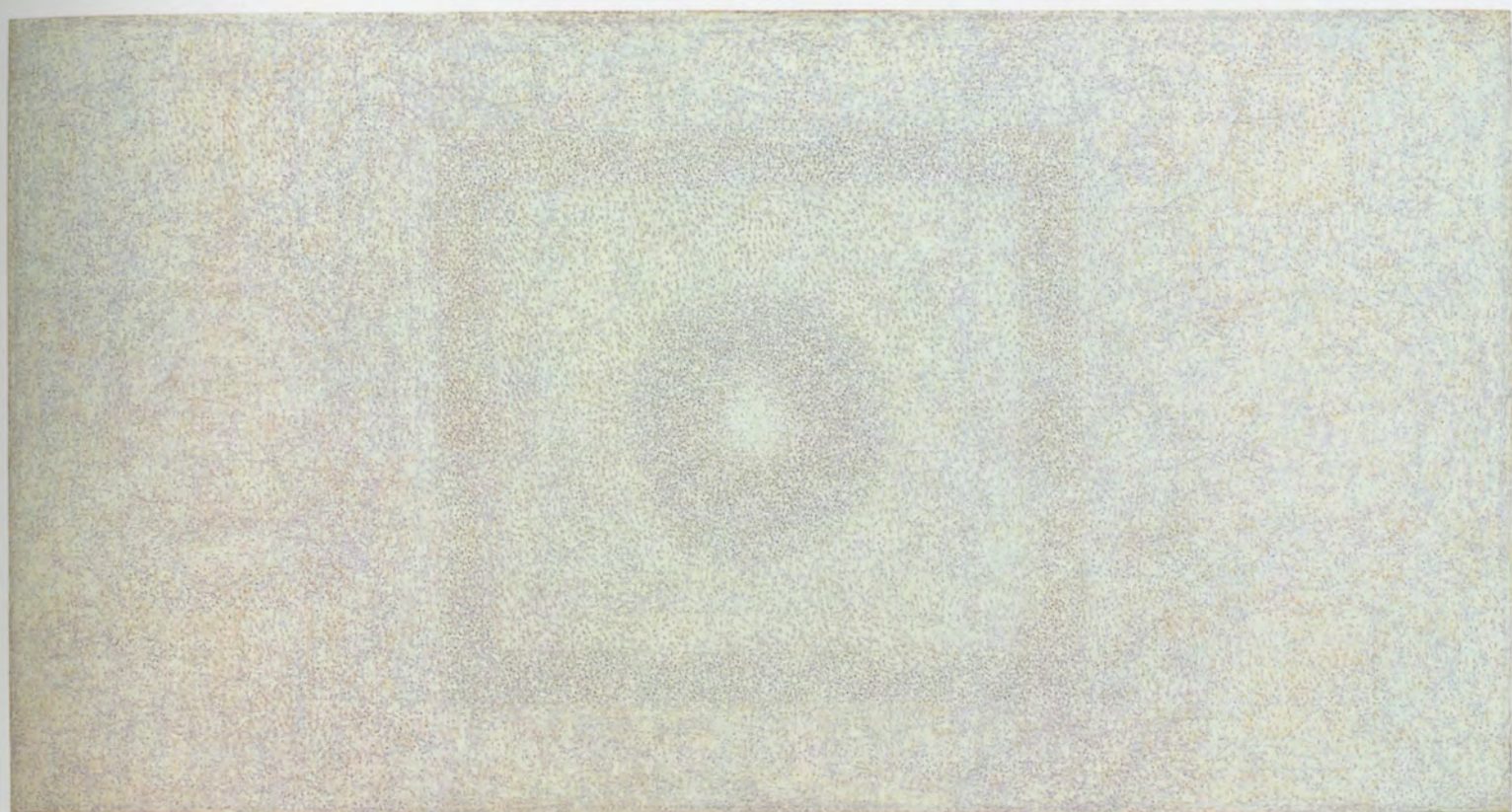
"[Pousette-Dart] saw himself as the heir to an international tradition dominated by such figures as Paul Cézanne and Pablo Picasso. And he was. However, as Pousette-Dart's white paintings show, he reinvented this tradition, giving it a scale and an optimistic grandeur consonant with all that was—and still is—promising about the New World. Yet these paintings are approachable, and that too is an American trait."

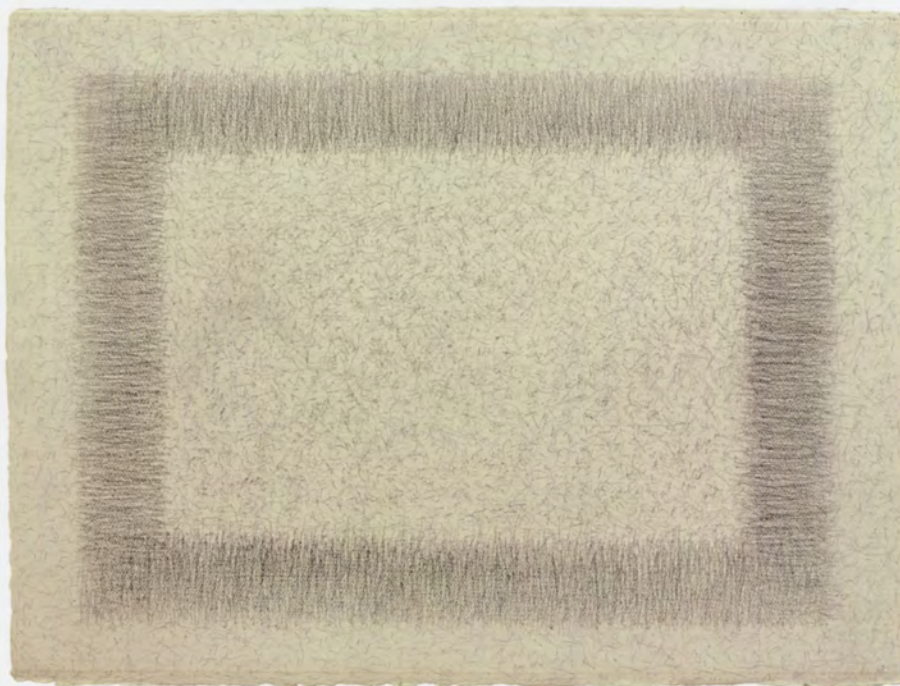
—Carter Ratcliff

Eye of the Circle

1975

oil on linen, 44 1/2 x 83"

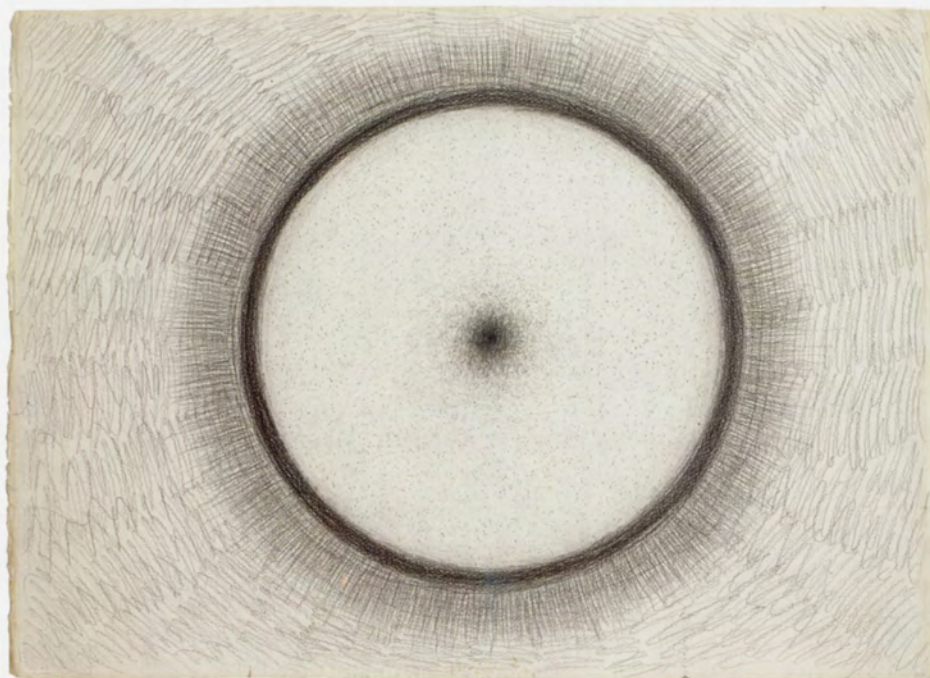




Celestial Rectangle

1976

graphite on paper, 22 ¹/₂ x 29 ⁷/₈"



October Circle Sacred

1978

graphite on paper, 22 x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

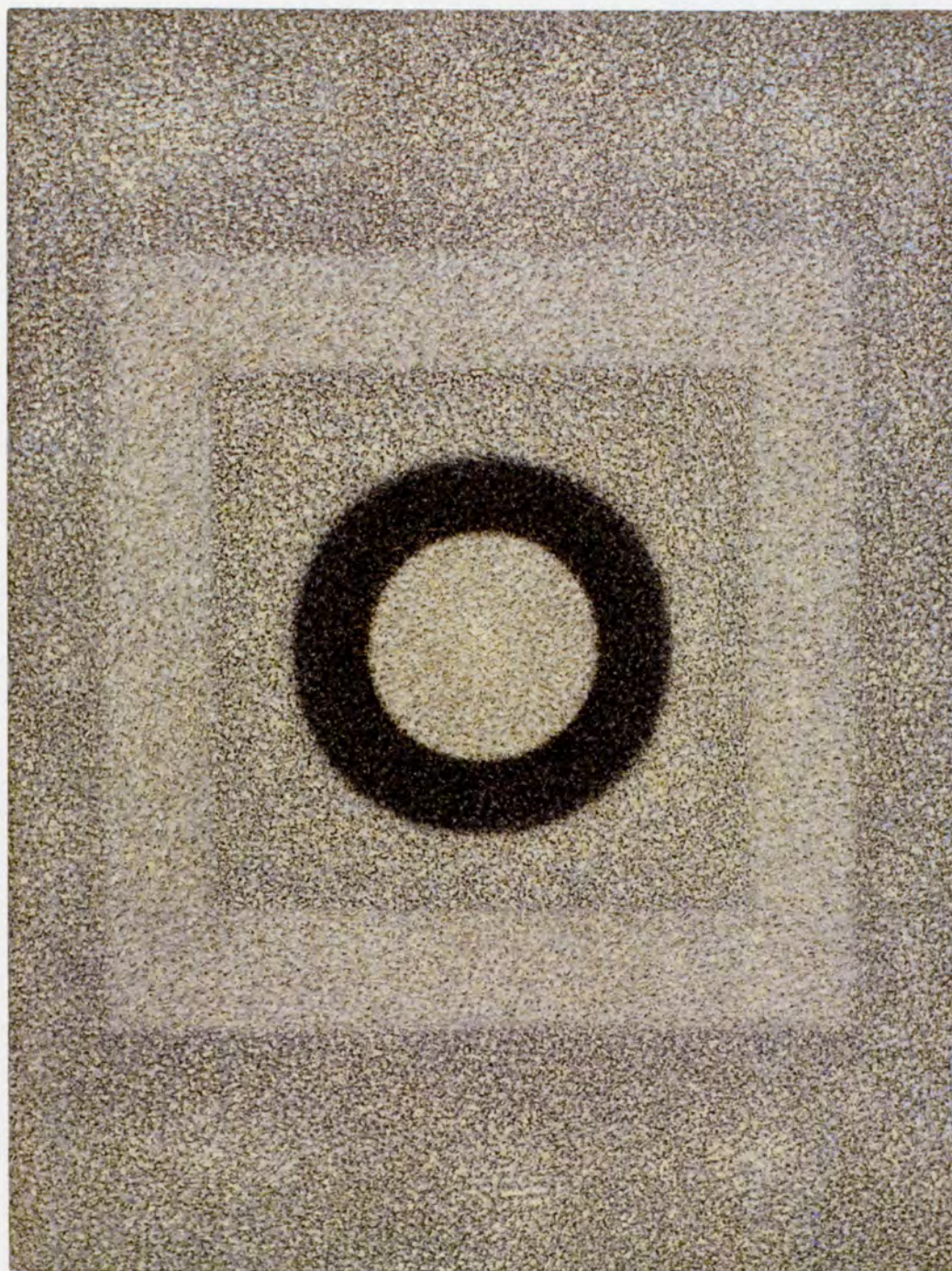
"Pousette-Dart was a pivotal figure in the development of Abstract Expressionism. The procrustean bed of that movement has tended to obscure the unique visionary nature of his work from its beginnings in the latter 1930s....The interest of other Abstract Expressionists in Pousette-Dart's work is evidenced by Jackson Pollock's statement in 1946 to Louis Bunce that, along with Rothko and Gottlieb, Pousette-Dart was 'doing interesting stuff.'"

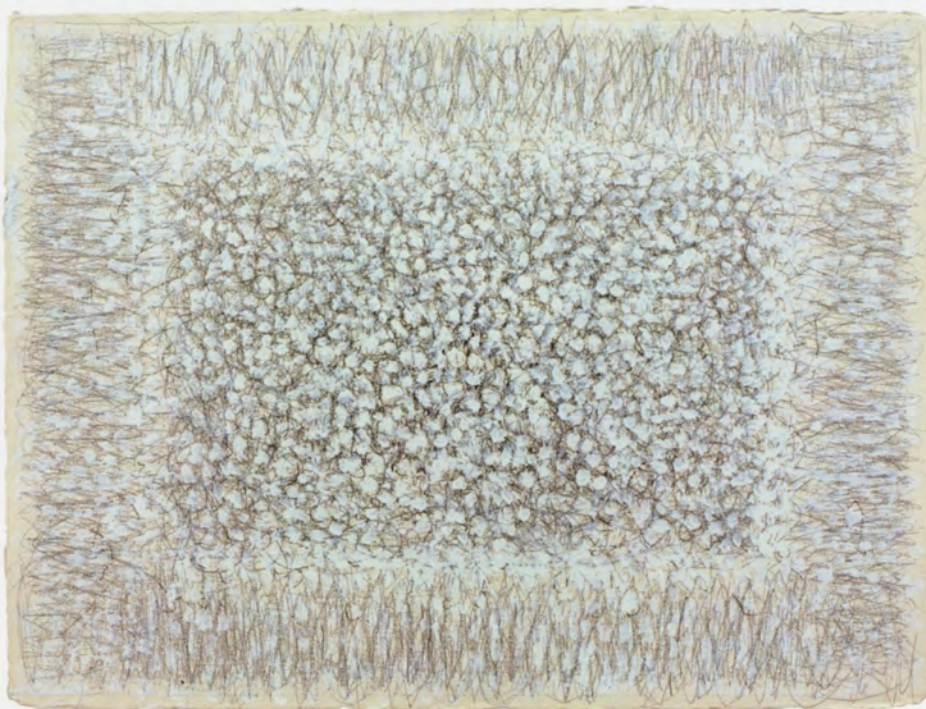
—*Martica Sawin*

Square of Meditation #2

1979

oil on linen, 72 x 54"

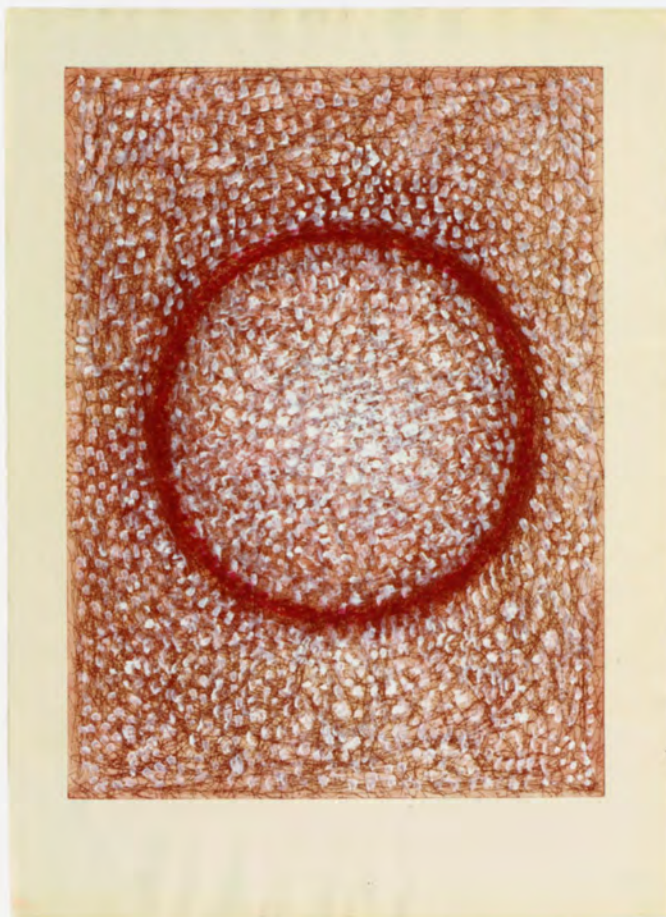




Ramapo Forest

1976

acrylic and graphite on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "



Indian Circle

1980

etching with gouache and acrylic, 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

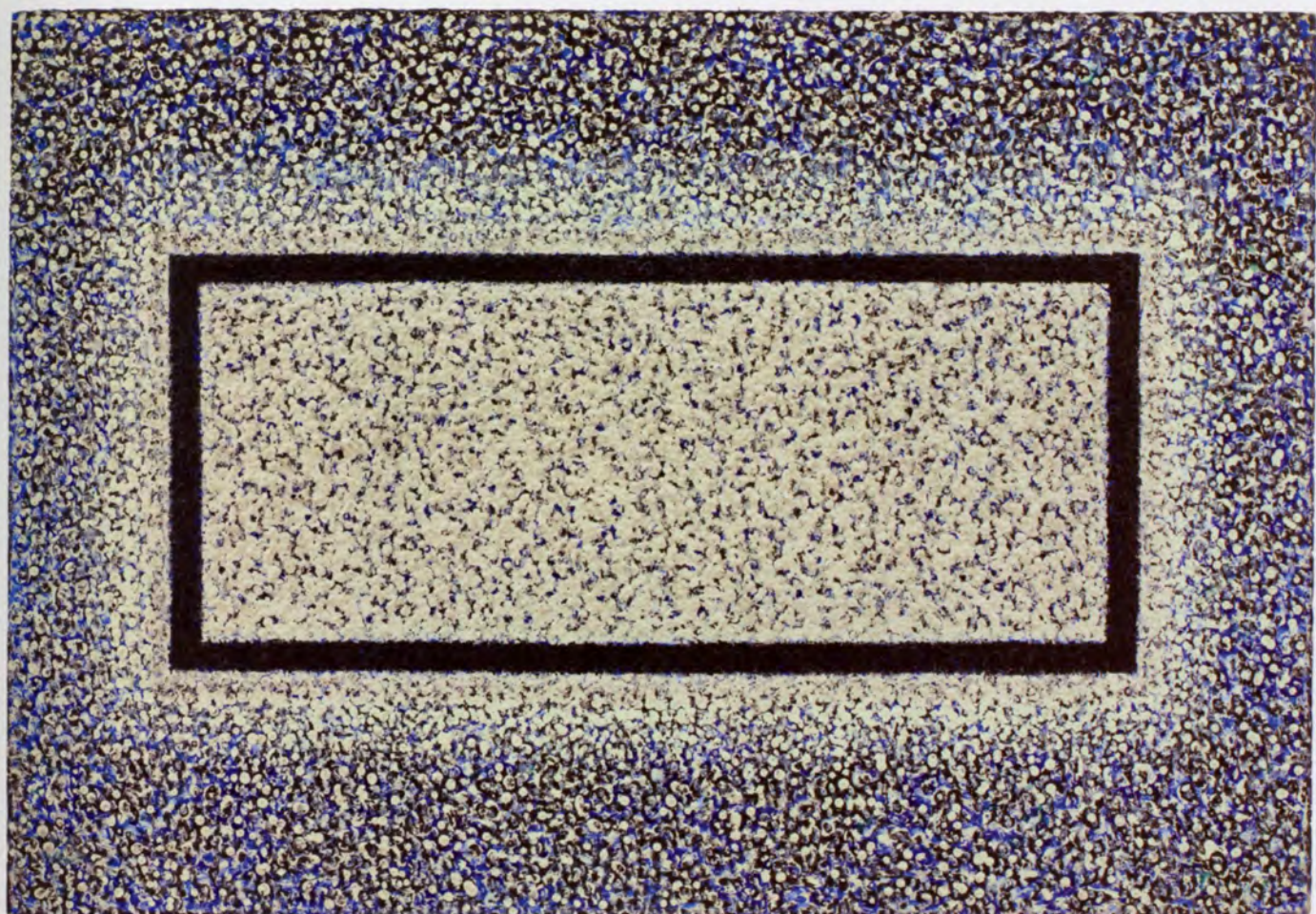
"Within his wide range of pictorial methods, Pousette-Dart explored and synthesized the tensions of polar opposites: distinctness and ambiguity, vagueness and precision, concentration and diffusion. In the works themselves, those dichotomies coalesced, until they took on the character of statements about the essential ambiguities of experience itself. It was his singular accomplishment to build from a rich, though ever unpredictable texture of brushstrokes, cursive lines, and evocative forms, a pictorial space of persuasive rigor and tangible material reality."

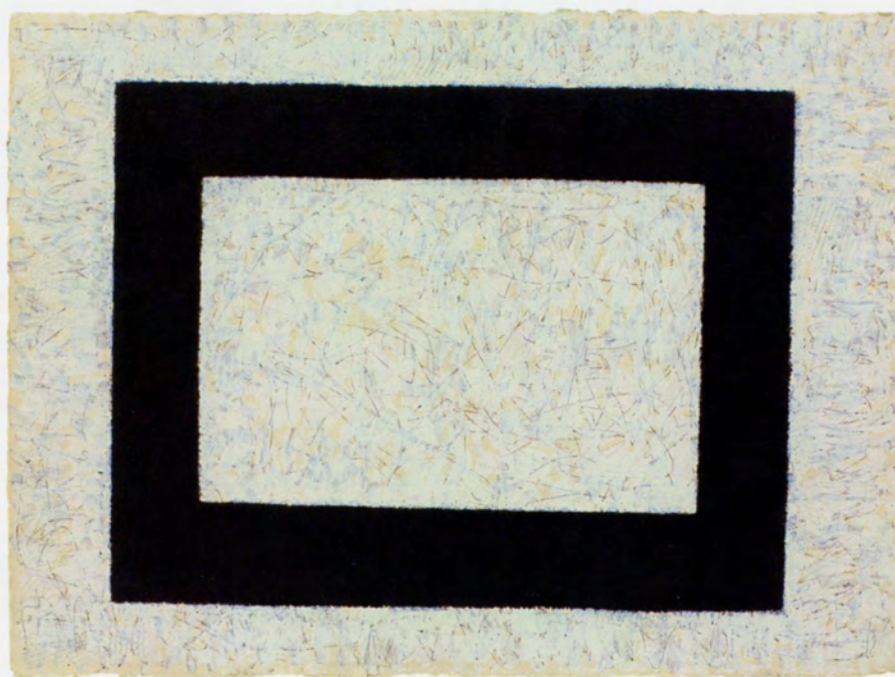
—*Sam Hunter*

Radiance Black Square

1978–80

oil on linen, 50 x 72"

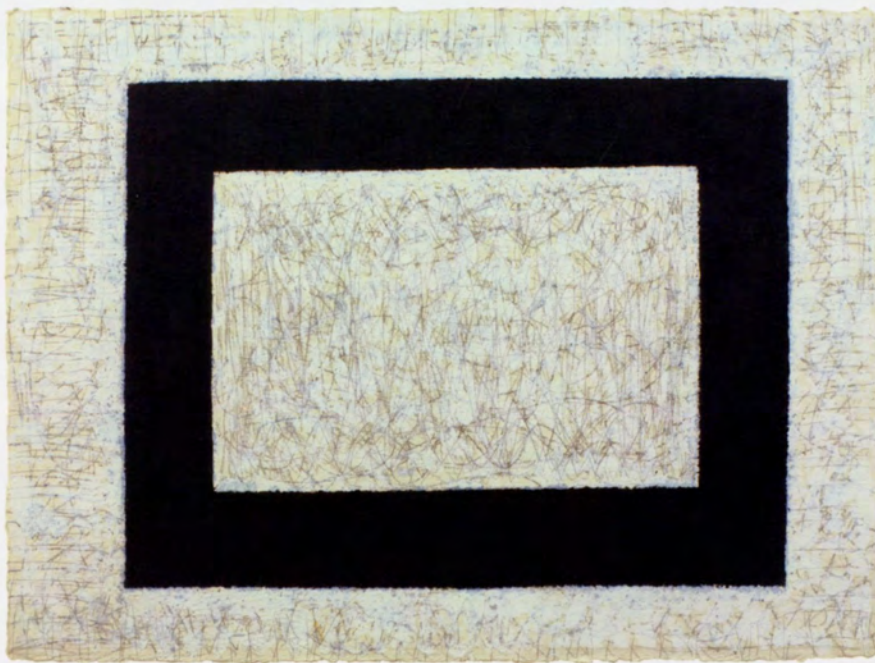




Black Square

1978

acrylic, graphite, and gesso on paper, 22 ¹/₈ x 30 ¹/₄"



The Round Earth, Imagined Corners

1981

acrylic and graphite on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

"It was in the pursuit of that celestial light, which gave expression to the artist's mystical beliefs, that Pouesette-Dart's pictorial imagination was most deeply engaged through his long career. Lest it be thought peculiar that painting of this abstract persuasion should owe so much to mystical belief, it is worth recalling that the principal pioneers of abstract painting—Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich—were all similarly disposed to identify their pictorial innovations with a variety of mystical ideas. Far from being an eccentric in this respect, Pouesette-Dart may be said to have carried forward one of the central traditions of modernist painting in allying his art with the realm of mystical thought."

—Hilton Kramer

Time, Space, Window

1982–83

acrylic on linen, 62 1/4 x 89 1/2"



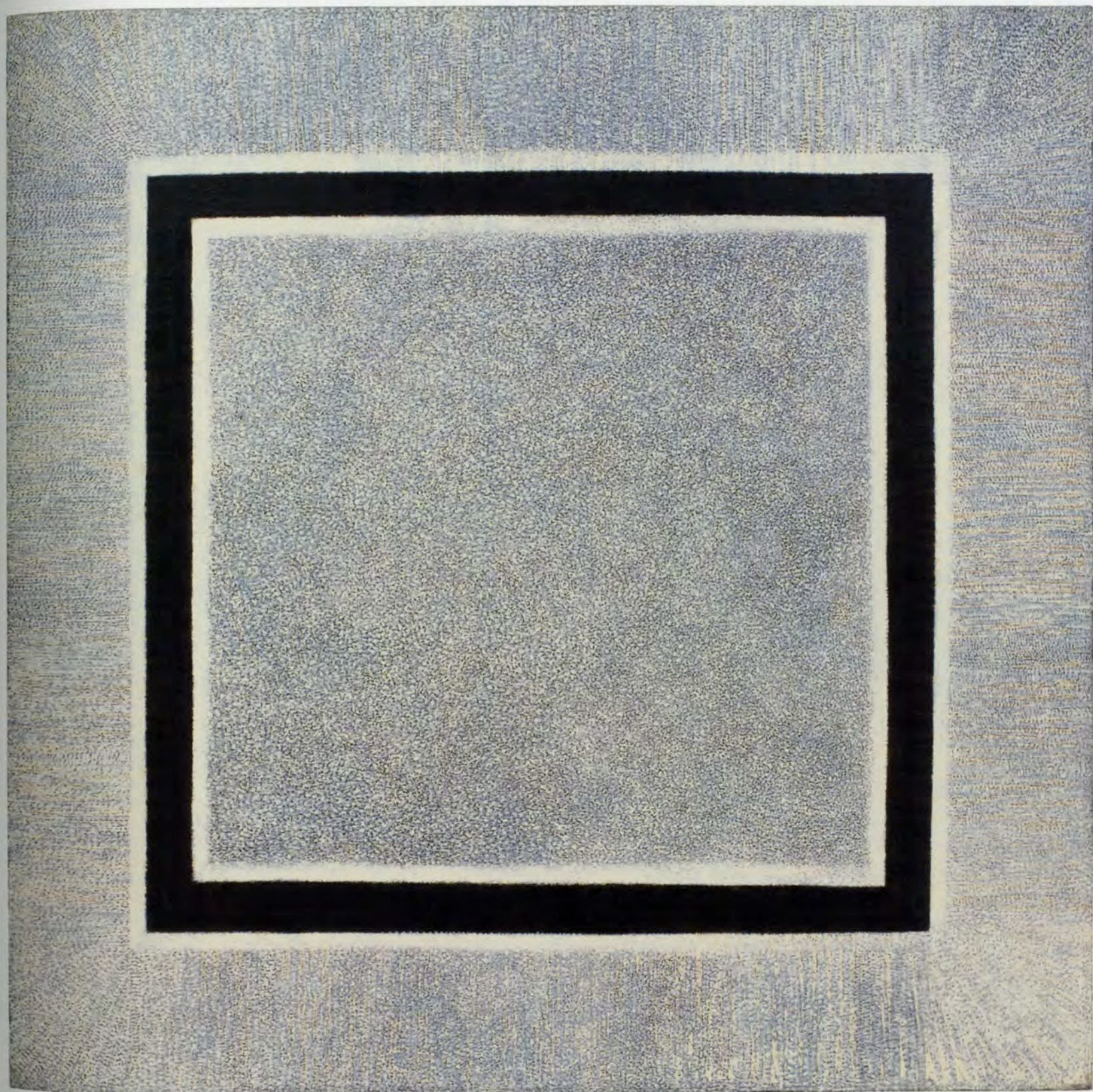
"not the hard edge nor the soft edge
but the living edge of awareness
the trembling edge of awareness
dynamic edge of creation
quiet edge of silence and all sound
still edge of all motion contained
edge of mutation and transformation
edge of eternal birth & genesis of all forms
edge of joy and enduring satisfaction
edge of true happiness edge of living reality...
edge of creative definition defining nothing..."

—Richard Pousette-Dart

Mirror of Space

1979–80

acrylic on linen, 90 x 90"



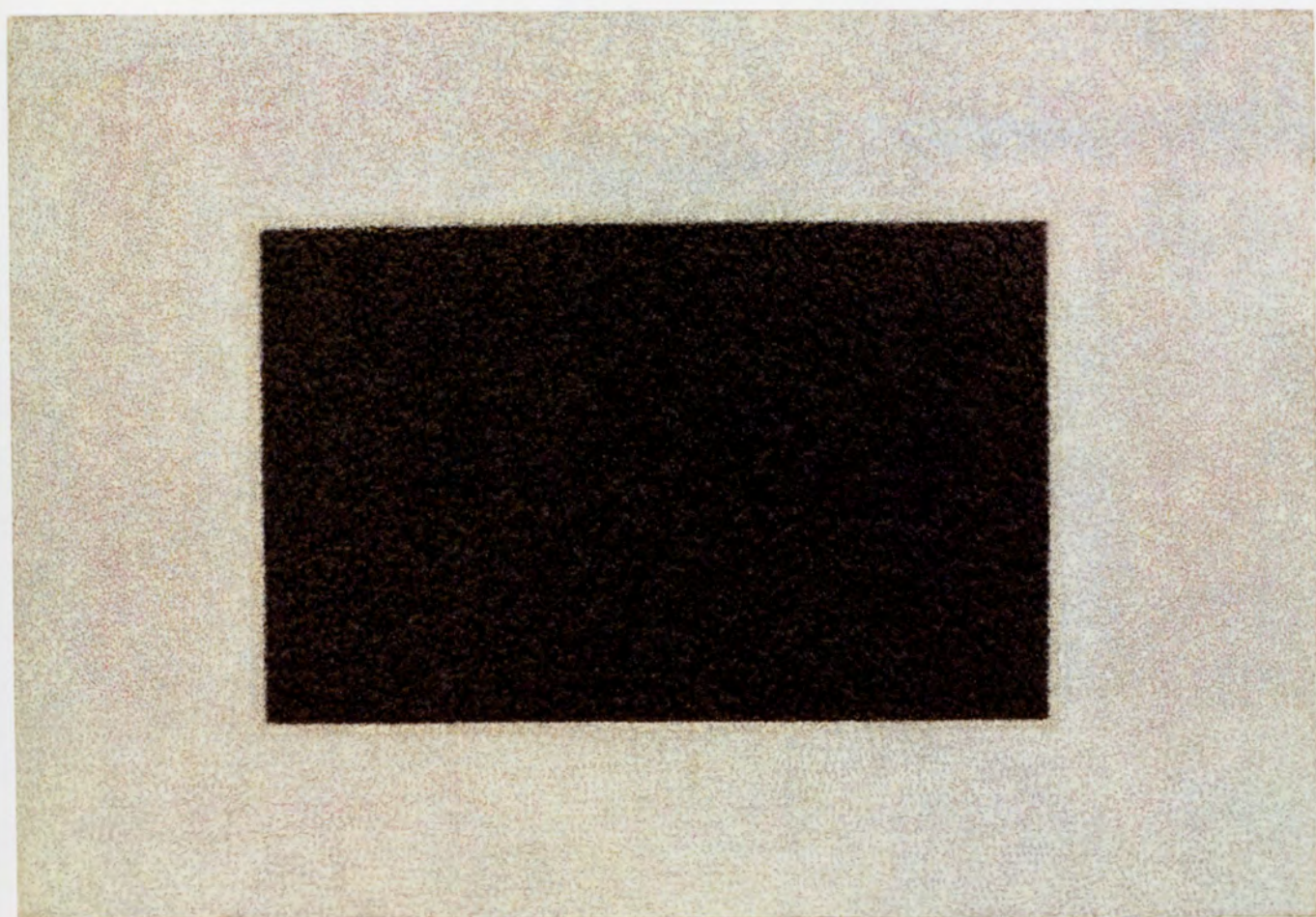
"Art reveals the significant life, beauty of
all forms—it uplifts, transforms it into
the exalted realm of reality wherein its
pure contemplative poetic being takes
place—wherein art's transcendental language
of form, spirit, harmony means one universal
eternal presence."

—*Richard Pousette-Dart*

Square of Meditation #1

1978–79

oil on linen, 50 x 72"



"Over the last forty years, by skillful manipulation of scale, color and texture, the artist has isolated a simple geometric shape and transformed it into an image of unique meditation....

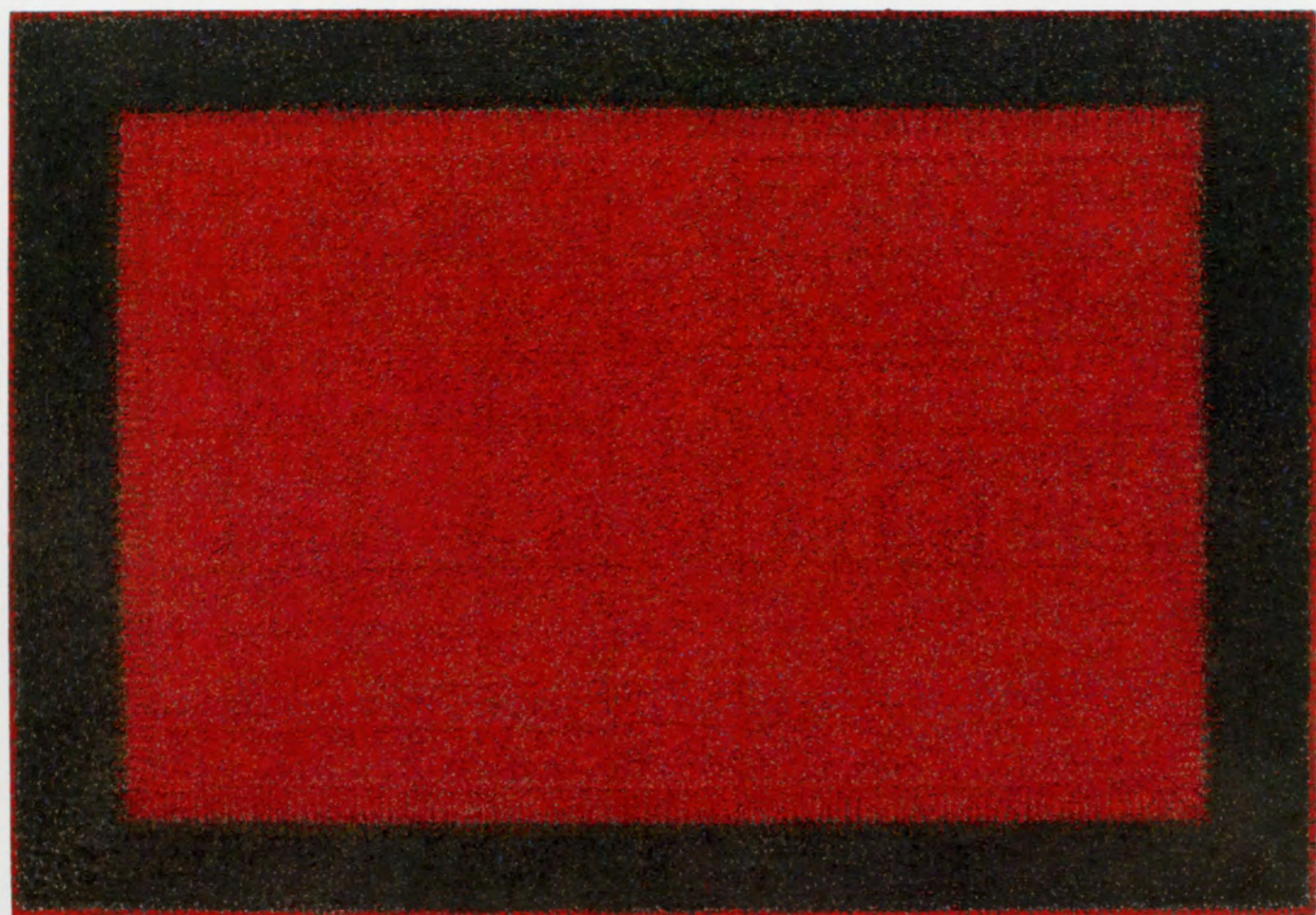
Pousette-Dart's work seems to reaffirm the visionary capacities of the human being. A young man at the threshold of the atomic and space era, Richard Pousette-Dart seems not to have lost his wonder at the metaphysical arenas that were opened as man expanded his knowledge of mental and physical space. It is that wonder which has continued to guide his creativity."

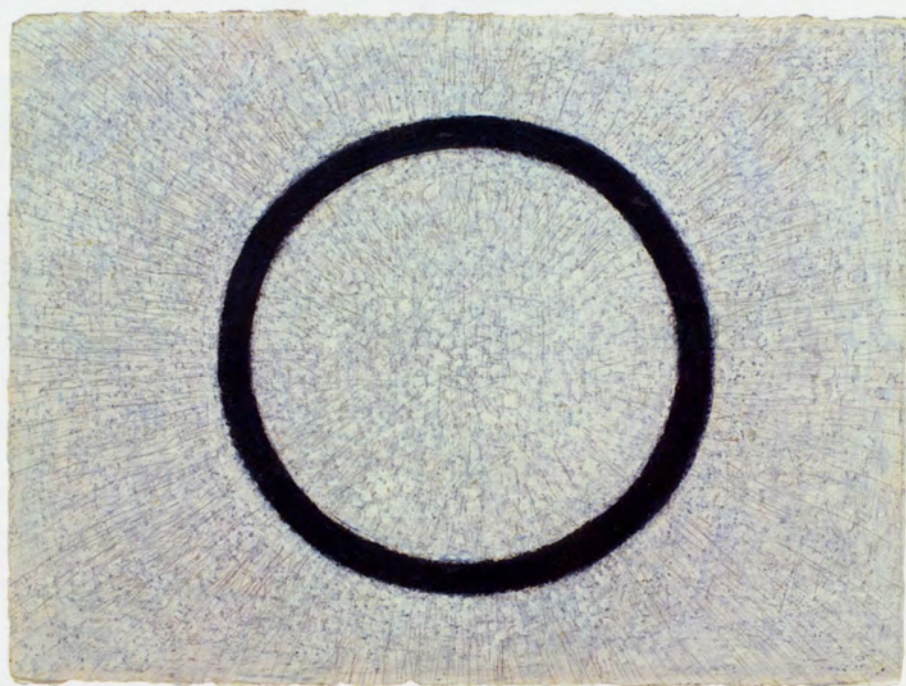
—Lower S. Sims

Transcendental Red

1982

oil on linen, 50 x 72"

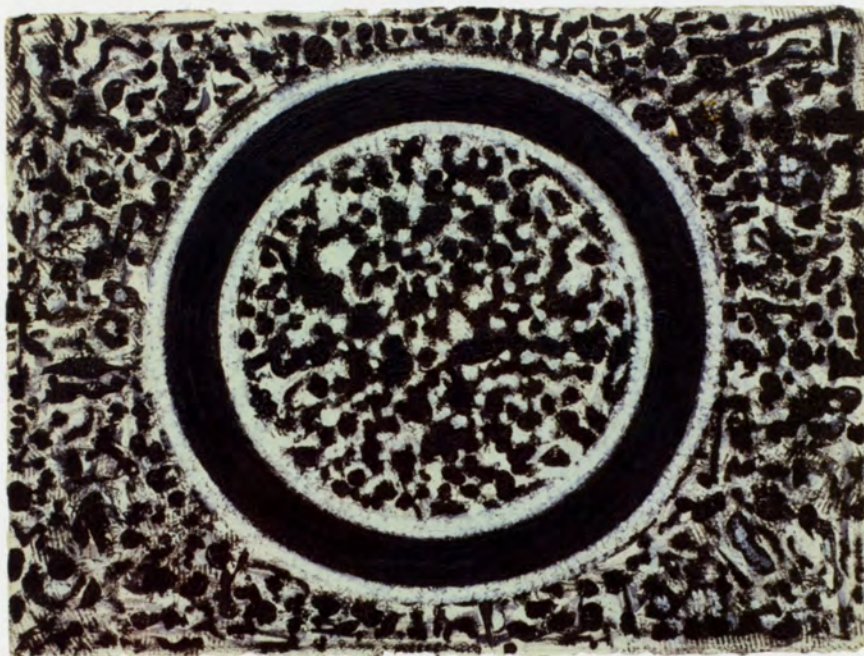




Untitled

1979

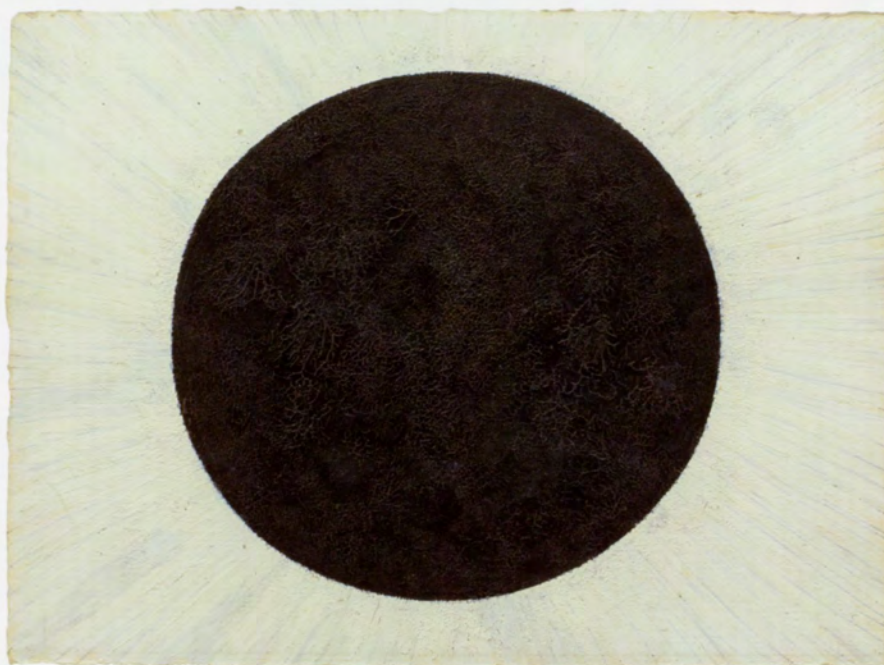
acrylic and graphite on paper, 22 ⁵/₈ x 30"



Always the Center

1978

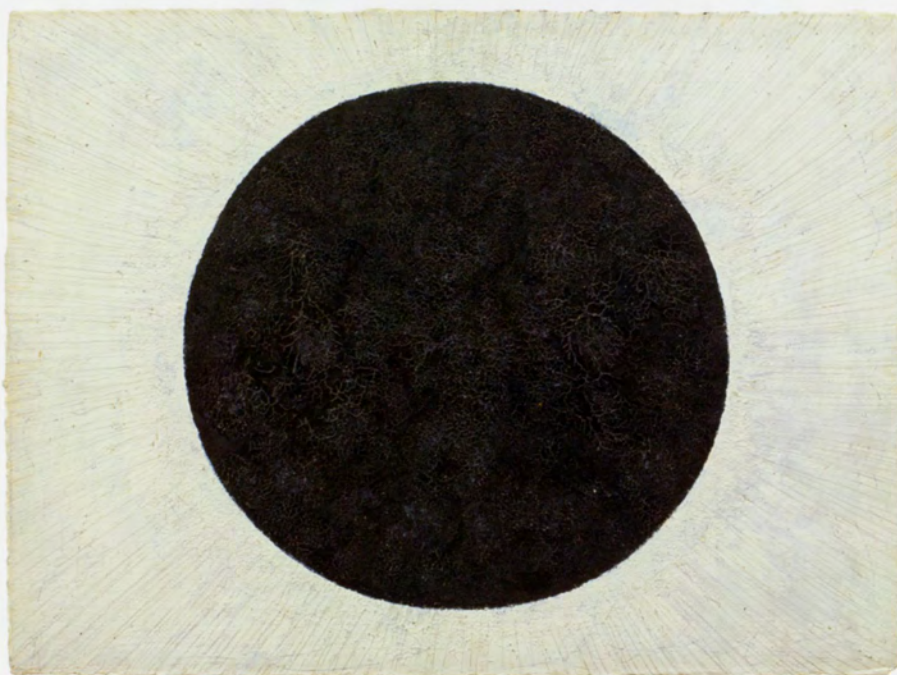
acrylic on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "



Circles of Dark Light, A

1978

acrylic on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "



Circles of Dark Light, B

1978

acrylic on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "

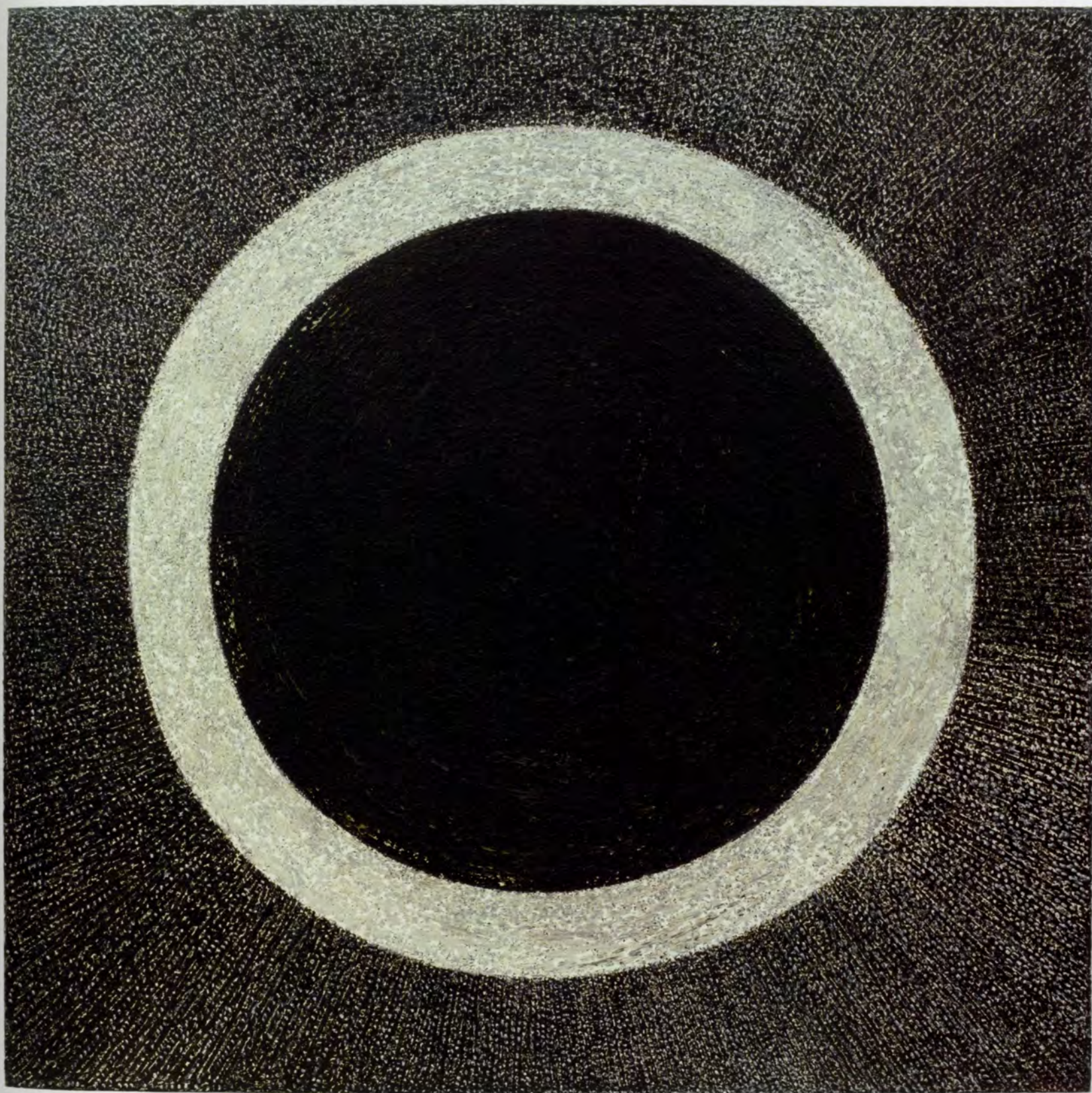
"To evoke radiance with paint was the main problem for the metaphysical painters of the New York School such as Newman, Gottlieb, Rothko, Reinhardt and Pollock. Like them, Pousette-Dart was never interested in abstracting from nature in the manner of Cubism. Painting was and remains for him a pure creation parallel to but not imitative of the natural world. In that sense, he belongs to the Transcendentalist strain in American art which springs from the mystery of Ryder's moonlit nocturnes, and continues in the abstract, cosmic imagery of Dove."

—*Barbara Rose*

White Circle, Time

1979–80

oil on linen, 90 x 90"



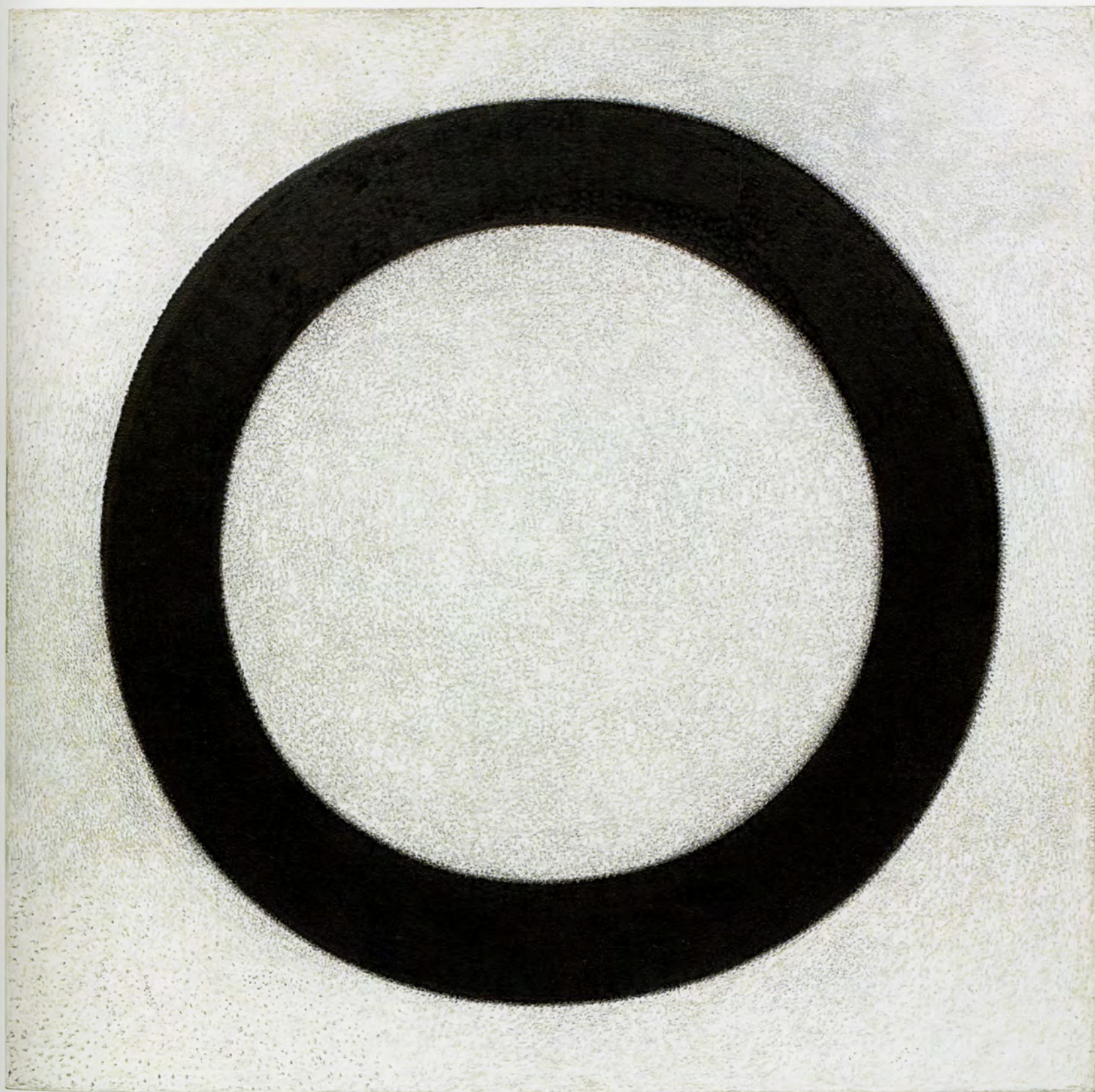
"...it would be a mistake to suppose that Pousette-Dart's paintings were solely content-driven. Anchored, motivated, justified as they are by his aspirations to an iconography of spiritual revelation, they also come from the joy of painting. The paintings themselves, when they are present in front of our eyes and not in printed reproductions, make this manifest."

—Philip Rylands

Black Circle, Time

1979–80

oil on linen, 90 x 90"



“Richard Pousette-Dart was nothing if not a painter of depths. The surfaces of his paintings adamantly rebuffed the concept of superficiality in every conventional sense of the term. The products of a bold and incessant building-up and manipulation of pigment, they were instead zones of poetic exploration to be physically excavated and imaginatively mined for symbolic significance. As much as any of his Abstract Expressionist contemporaries—Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, or Ad Reinhardt, to cite those with a comparable attraction to the hermetic—Pousette-Dart was committed to his medium because of a belief that painting could actually serve as a ‘medium’ in the mystical meaning of that word. Better said, painting was a meditational practice made manifest by a bodily discipline, or in the artist’s own turn of phrase, a ‘creative prayer.’ Along the same lines he wrote,

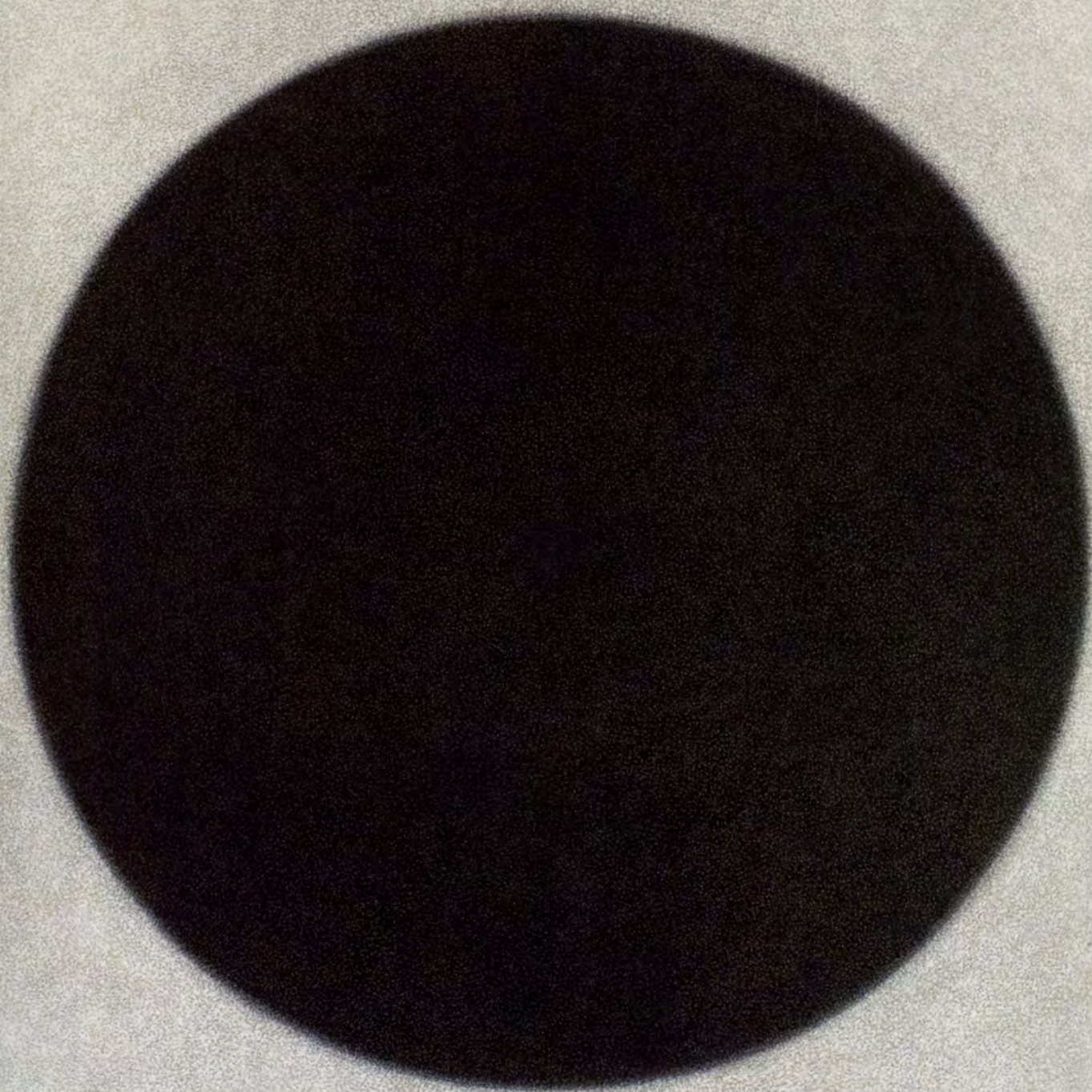
the greater the art the more religious
by religious I mean the most creative
by most creative I mean the most penetrating,
bursting somehow
through the particular to the universal.”

—Robert Storr

Presence, Circle of Night

1975–76

oil on linen, 90 x 90"



16	<i>Presence Number 3, Black</i>	1969	oil on linen, 80 x 80"
18	<i>Cerchio Di Dante</i>	1986	acrylic on linen, 72 x 72"
20	<i>Eye of the Circle</i>	1975	oil on linen, 44 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 83"
22	<i>Celestial Rectangle</i>	1976	graphite on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 29 $\frac{7}{8}$ "
23	<i>October Circle Sacred</i>	1978	graphite on paper, 22 x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
24	<i>Square of Meditation #2</i>	1979	oil on linen, 72 x 54"
26	<i>Ramapo Forest</i>	1976	acrylic and graphite on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
27	<i>Indian Circle</i>	1980	etching with gouache and acrylic, 29 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
28	<i>Radiance Black Square</i>	1978-80	oil on linen, 50 x 72"
30	<i>Black Square</i>	1978	acrylic, graphite, and gesso on paper 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
31	<i>The Round Earth, Imagined Corners</i>	1981	acrylic and graphite on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
32	<i>Time, Space, Window</i>	1982-83	acrylic on linen, 62 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 89 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
34	<i>Mirror of Space</i>	1979-80	acrylic on linen, 90 x 90"
36	<i>Square of Meditation #1</i>	1978-79	oil on linen, 50 x 72"
38	<i>Transcendental Red</i>	1982	oil on linen, 50 x 72"
40	<i>Untitled</i>	1979	acrylic and graphite on paper, 22 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 30"
41	<i>Always the Center</i>	1978	acrylic on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
42	<i>Circles of Dark Light, A</i>	1978	acrylic on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
43	<i>Circles of Dark Light, B</i>	1978	acrylic on paper, 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
44	<i>White Circle, Time</i>	1979-80	oil on linen, 90 x 90"
46	<i>Black Circle, Time</i>	1979-80	oil on linen, 90 x 90"
48	<i>Presence, Circle of Night</i>	1975-76	oil on linen, 90 x 90"

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Page 20: Carter Ratcliff, "The White Paintings of Pousette-Dart," in *Pousette-Dart: Predominantly White Paintings*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 2010), 10.

Page 24: Martica Sawin, "An Opaque Transparency: The Studio Notebooks," in *Richard Pousette-Dart: The New York School and Beyond* (Milan: Skira, 2005), 42.

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Page 32: Hilton Kramer, "Met Finally Recognizes Radiant Pousette-Dart," *The New York Observer* (November 17, 1997), 13.

Page 34: Richard Pousette-Dart, Notebook B 152, dated 1973–74.

Page 36: Richard Pousette-Dart, Notebook B 158, dated 1960. This entry is dated February 1964.

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