

TOM DOWLING: THE ROAD LESS TAKEN

By Peter Frank

Art has not come to an end; but perhaps its history has. Especially with the advent of the Information Age, we (can) know seemingly anything we need to know about a work, a maker, a movement, a genre, or a culture of art. The encyclopedias not only seem complete, they seem habitable. All what we might call “art” – the result of non-practical human invention (i.e., creativity) – is available literally at our fingertips. Not only is writing now a form of knowing, but knowing is a form of writing.

What this means is that no manner of creativity, no artistic invention, is out of reach. All forms and styles and artefactures present themselves as equally available. All aesthetic experience, it would seem, occurs at once, that is, continually (time being but one dimension among many). The studio is no longer just a node in a discourse; it is a crossroads in a universe, a site where we no longer convince ourselves of our newness, but where we have access only to the past – and everything new is old again.

How do you make yourself comfortable in this omni-historical context? By finding your sensibility within the infinite selection of forms, effects, and attitudes the Internet provides. That doesn't make you a priori a digital artist (or any kind of artist). It is not the Internet itself that places an artist like Tom Dowling in the Internet age. Dowling was doing what he does before the Digital Age caught up with him (and us). He belongs to the first generation of American artists whose comfort with the eclectic has allowed them to think digitally, whether or not they work digitally, and to employ their forms and their imageries in eccentric, discontinuous, obliquely narrative yet graceful and even witty approaches. For all the classic balance his canvases and constructions evince, Dowling fools our eyes and surprises our logic. Why? In part, at least, because it's necessary, even urgent, to do so in the middle of our shared chaos – a gentle reminder that what we see may not be what we see.

Not everyone can make such recondite yet appealing art. But the issue isn't Dowling's aesthetic prowess. Rather, it concerns how his artwork operates in the world. Increasingly, his compositions and fabrications seem not only comfortable in their interaction of forms and their eccentric palette, but somehow necessary and appropriate, at once strange (if elegant) in shape and comfortably, even comfortingly familiar. Dowling's self-contained, self-referential objects still display hints of furniture design and patterned textures, all the result of Dowling allowing himself to engage in the visual equivalent of jokes, puns, meditations, cartoon-like doubletakes, verbal-corporeal exercises, and the like. Dowling's practice is nothing less than an embrace of the world – and, resultingly, a world of embrace.

Dowling has a clear and informed sense of who he is as an artist and where he has come from. The abstract artists of the early 20th century, the painters and sculptors who were working all over Europe and the Americas before mid-century, are his chosen forebears. But he coaxes something else from their style besides the bold geometric formations for which they are most

readily known. Like other constructivist – re-constructivist? --artists of his own generation, actively drawing from their predecessors, Dowling sees cosmic delineations where too many casual viewers see only planes and circles. The harmony of aligned geometric structures is the harmony of the universe, not just of earthly forms. The beauty is in the logic of the macro- as well as micro-natural. Dowling has inherited not simply a formal language from the constructivists, but an entire perceptual belief system; with this he invites us to find a galaxy in a cipher.

Dowling does not work with actual scientific tools. Practicing a more poised and modest art in the face of – well, these days, human folly – he wants to restore our awareness of terrestrial harmony and that also of the universe. he has refined his approach over several decades, incorporating various forms, formations, and formulations into something that points us to the exact midpoint between insignia and architecture. He has done so with a sense of vast possibility. Such a sense requires Dowling to present his understanding of things to an audience itself immersed in an inexhaustible web of information.

A painting of Dowling's, say, a panel belonging to the Baroque Minimalism series (itself proposing a condition of internal, and risible, contradiction) presents us with the dissonance of classical poise and formal – including coloristic – wit. Typically, a Dowling painting confronts us with a combination of factors just unlikely enough to challenge the standards we think we bear when we look at art – but not so unlikely as to prevent visual rhyme or resolution. The twinkle in Dowling's eye gives an effervescence to his formal decisions. A Dowling work can wink at you, without surrendering the gravitas of its constructivist inheritance.

The humor that enlivens Dowling's art comes naturally to him. But its prominence bespeaks the influence of the artist's mentor, the late Tony De Lap. The playful undercurrent that courses, with increasing confidence and subtlety, through Dowling's art is an almost familial characteristic, recurring as it does among so many of De Lap's students, studio assistants, and acolytes. It manifests an aspect of the "perceptualist" tendency particular to California – not Light & Space exactly, but a parallel phenomenon in which compositional dynamics, assertive colors, sly manipulations and variations of form, and a heady grasp of art-historical context allow austerity and extravagance, rectitude and surprise to interfunction. De Lap's art, and Dowling's, is designed to reward contemplation and curiosity in equal measure.

Notably, though, Dowling's work is uniquely impacted by another creative factor close to home, the poetry of his wife Lisa. Responsive to the resonance of Lisa Dowling's sheer but lyric verse, even to its graphic set on the page, Dowling stresses the relationship between part and whole as he generates and positions his elements. Here, too, Dowling conjures the experimental nature of historic constructivism, futurism, even cubism. (Accordingly, the couple has collaborated on several poem-objects.)

Tom Dowling is, by his own admission, a self-aware product of art history. All art is such a product, of course, but in Dowling's case art history is not a subject for his work so much as an ineluctable presence in and around it. Those who recognize Dowling's constructivist bona fides

have added insight into his aesthetic strategies. Those who don't may well be prompted to gain such insight. The history is there, after all, waiting to be discovered. Art history, Dowling helps demonstrate, lives in the present as well as the past.

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