

ARTFORUM

HARD DRIVES

Suzanne Hudson on the art of Deborah Remington



Deborah Remington, *Haddonfield*, 1965, oil on canvas, 74 1/8 × 69". © Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

IN 1965, Deborah Remington returned to the East Coast after nearly two decades in California, memorializing her homecoming with the painting *Haddonfield*, named for the New Jersey town where she was born. Below a skewed butterfly shape, a steely abstract form is bisected and from there stutters into a pictorial void as it fans out toward the edges. Centered in its vertical frame like a Cubist figure in a studio portrait, the complex shape self-differentiates from the ground, which features a subtly modulating gradient shading from total opacity at the top to the lighter if still penumbral glow that appears to emanate from the form's base. Dore Ashton, in a catalogue for Remington's first retrospective, in 1983—curated by Paul Schimmel at the Newport Harbor Art Museum (now the Orange County Museum of Art) in Santa Ana, California, and at the Bay Area's Oakland Museum—retrieved from the painting's abyss an infinitely morphing cipher: “an

ancient trumpet; a modern thermometer; an insect; a skull; a mask rendered with anamorphic cunning.”

The year Remington painted *Haddonfield*, she was included in the exhibition “Art ’65: Lesser Known and Unknown Painters: Young American Sculpture—East to West” in the American Express Pavilion at New York’s World’s Fair. In the show’s catalogue, she reflected on the scope of her work: “I am concerned with expressing an intense and personal vision through an imagery which is particularly my own. While I do not completely understand the sources of this imagery, my work contains elements, which by simultaneously attracting and repelling one another, create a tense balance which has emotional and spiritual meaning for me.” Before leaving the Bay Area, she was already sketching ideas for what would become her iconic hard-edge paintings, around which curator Nancy Lim’s show “Deborah Remington: Kaleidoscopic Vision,” was to stake her legacy. (The exhibition, now canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was originally slated to open in May 2020 at the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art in Napa, California.)



Deborah Remington, San Francisco Art Institute, April 1955. © Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Remington had studied with Clyfford Still and Elmer Bischoff at the California School of Fine Arts (later the San Francisco Art Institute); she also cofounded, with five other artists, the 6 Gallery, the fabled venue on Fillmore Street in San Francisco, where Allen Ginsberg first publicly recited “Howl” in 1955. In 1956, Remington left for Japan—where she studied calligraphy and sumi-e painting, among other subjects, while gamely acting in B movies—and subsequently spent two years traveling through China and Southeast Asia. The Beat culture in which she was immersed shape-shifted in the meantime, its romance with experiential immediacy and catharsis fructifying into a full-throated erotics of the liberated body, its stylized anti-academic pretensions jelling into a candid licentiousness, even as its emphasis on social engagement remained. But her statement of “personal vision,” proclaimed a decade after her time with the Beats, is nevertheless continuous with the modernist vision quest, to say nothing of the almost generational predilection for anti-narrative ideation that gained significance relative to the psychologized self (understood as paradoxically both circumscribed and boundless).



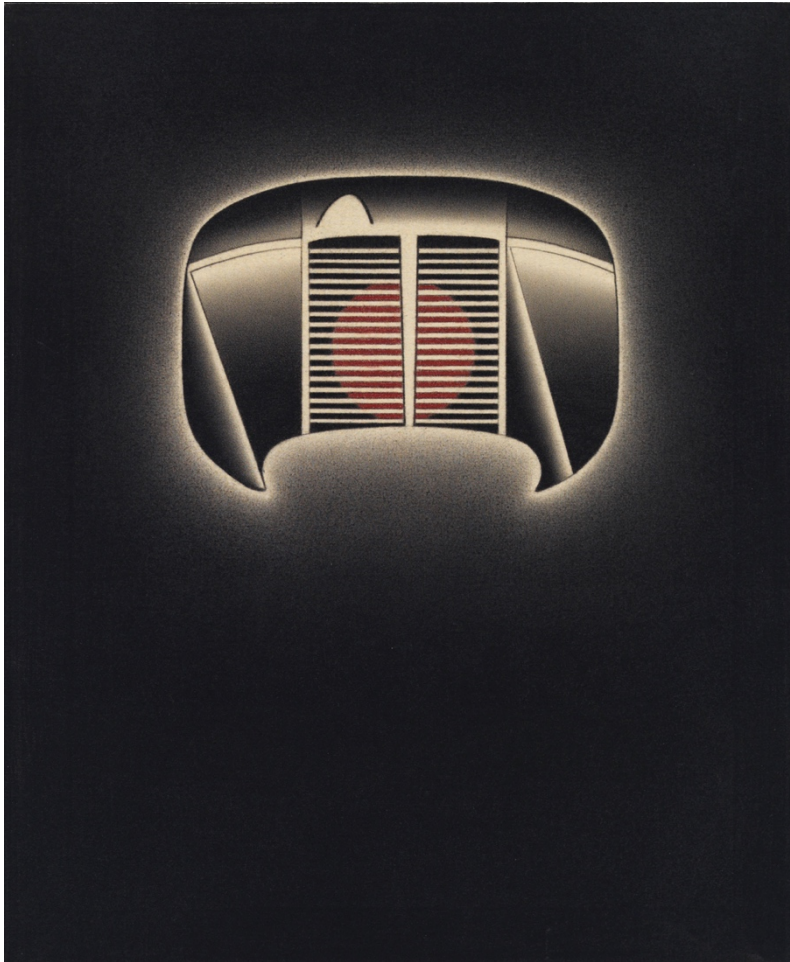
Deborah Remington, Jack Spicer, Hayward King, John Ryan, and Wally Hedrick at 6 Gallery, San Francisco, 1955. © Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Remington’s canvases of this period are willfully gnostic emblems of the impenetrability of meaning—or transmissible meaning, anyhow. In some ways, they formalize what is typically understood to be a self-expressive mode of nonobjective painting (what Ad Reinhardt would snarkily dub “therapy” in the work of his AbEx peers, disapprovingly indicating that their facture-heavy, unreachable oversymbolic canvases served their maker, first and maybe only). Remington’s cool, crystalline work thwarts recognition even more efficiently than her gestural

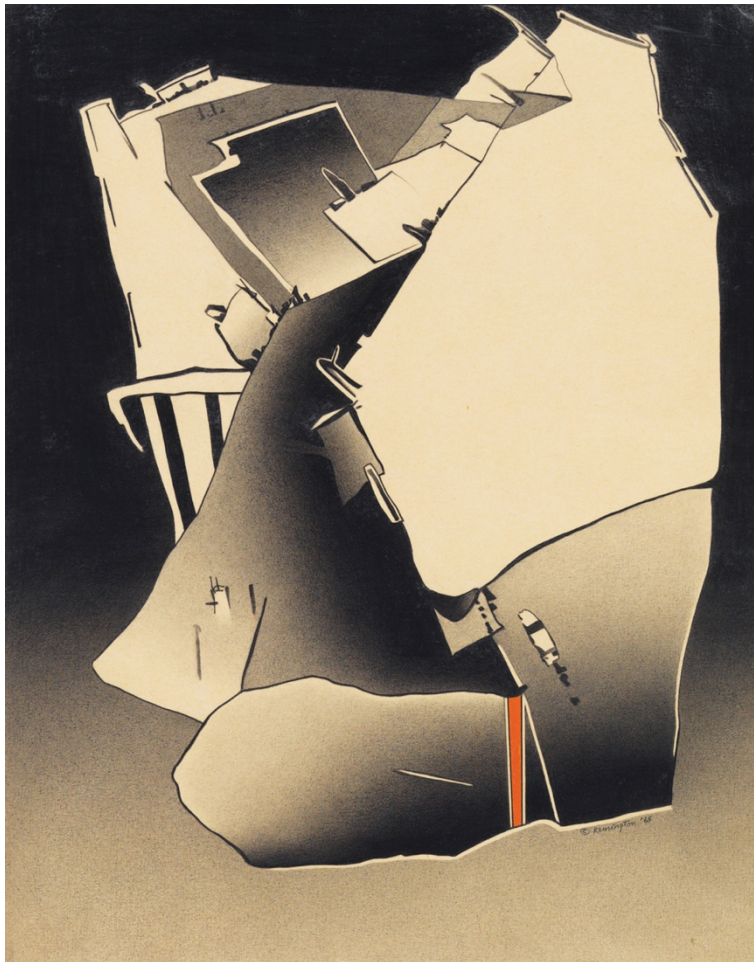
exploits that bracketed it, first in the 1950s and again in the '80s. In between, Remington painted fields of thin, evanescent layers that cohered into meticulous, painstakingly achieved surfaces. References to the aesthetic of historical Precisionism and more contemporary, technology-assisted design—what Leo Steinberg called “machine-tooled precision” in a critique of Kenneth Noland in particular and of the co-opting of abstraction’s ostensibly autonomous forms into corporate logos and supermarket packaging more broadly—would come to seem apposite of the cybernetic effect of Remington’s work, if not explanatory of its cause.

Glowing as if from backlit monitors, Remington’s acheiropoietic shapes are prescient of a later media landscape and its extension into contemporary painting.

For her part, Remington once told a dealer that her imagery was sourced from *Scientific American*, planting a red herring she relished until it overdetermined the early reception of her paintings and the totally weird and exquisite drawing she made alongside them: e.g., the “Soot” series, 1963–76, with lattices resembling car grilles and unnameable Cubism-meets-sci-fi configurations modeled out of a grisaille palette broken with primaries, and the “Adelphi” series, 1963–74, plotless scenes starring axonometric and oddly dimensional shapes. She later and less disingenuously described herself as being like a “great IBM machine of some sort, a great computer, because all the stuff just gets fed in,” thus redoubling the emphasis on input—the prodigious quantity of aggregated data—rather than output.



Deborah Remington, *Soot Series #4*, 1969, soot and red crayon on muslin, 22 x 18". From the "Soot" series, 1963–76. © Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Deborah Remington, Early Adelphi Series #11, 1965, graphite and wax crayon on paper, 14 x 10 7/8". From the "Adelphi" series, 1963–74. © Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

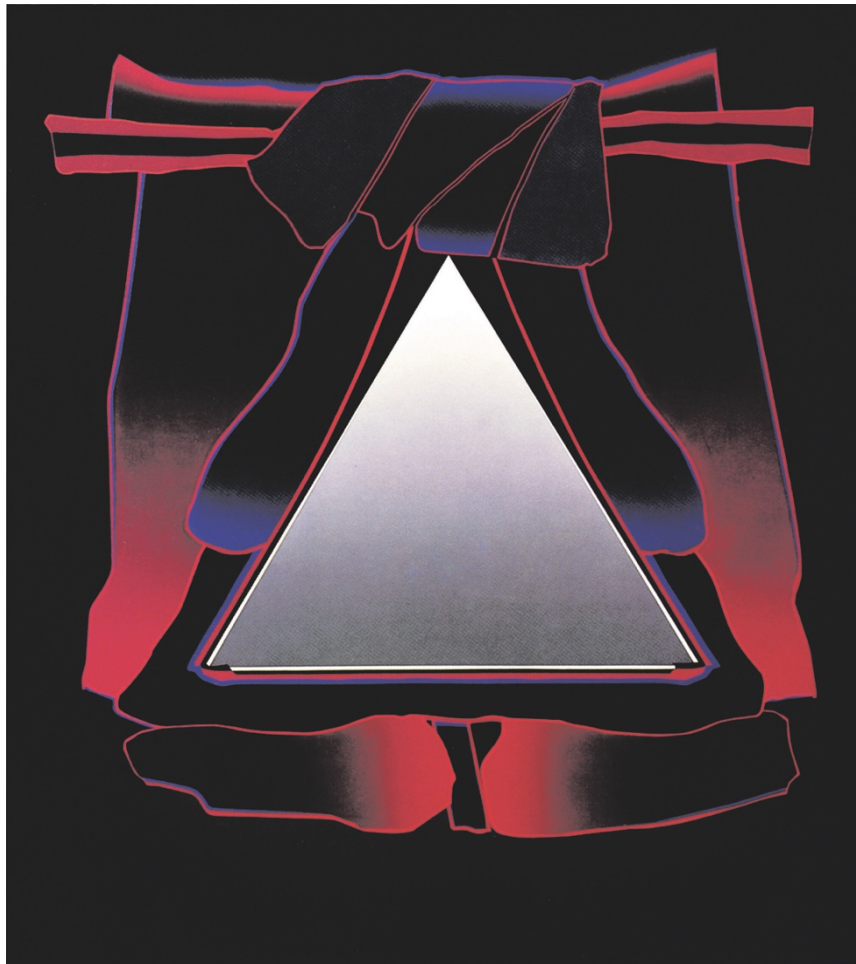
These paintings from the mid-'60s through the '70s are some of Remington's best. The images hover apart from the backdrops, which look, but also uncannily feel, like darkness. (It is in this aspect that she comes closest to Frederic Remington—her first cousin, twice removed—who turned out evocations of an American West that never was, and who left behind, from the years just after the very real closing of the frontier, a lesser-known corpus of nocturnes exploring the colors of night.) Glowing as if from backlit monitors, their acheiropoietic shapes are prescient of a later media landscape and its extension into contemporary painting, with its ubiquitous lexicon of design tropes appropriated from in-program sketching: drop shadows and tidy outlines, simulated airbrushing, scaling, illusionistic plays of advancing or receding space—the updated version of Zeuxis's magic trick of conjuring the semblance of convexity where there is only material flatness. Indeed, the unwitting correspondence of Remington's work with the visual culture of computer screens served as the frame for a show curated by Jay Gorney in 2015 for Wallspace gallery in New York in what proved to be the artist's justifiably feted reintroduction and, unfortunately, the gallery's finale.

Remington's shapes—the triangle in *Tacony*, 1971; the undulating vertical rectangle in *Essex*, 1972; the shield in *Tanis*, 1974—radicalize apartness: from their backgrounds (despite the coat of surface varnish that would otherwise suture them), and from any external references or fixed meanings. But they also carry the potential for unwelcome impositions. They evoke nothing so much as blank mirrors, targets for psychic projection apparently unfettered by internal messaging; here, autonomy becomes absolute, if paradoxically far from hermetic.

Like *Haddonfield*, several of her works from the mid-'60s reveal near-bilateral symmetry, a splitting down the middle that, by the time of *Memphis*, 1969, registers as little more than a residual line cleaving something from itself. It is tempting to read these as latter-day Rorschachs in the pop-vernacular sense that writer and translator Damion Searls has in mind when he calls the test a “metaphor for freedom of interpretation”—a fantasia of imagination apart from its strict guidelines in clinical use, in which what and how one sees (the whole of the image versus a detail, the form versus its color) are in fact precisely coded.



Deborah Remington, *Dorset*, 1972, oil on canvas, 91 × 87". © Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Deborah Remington, *Tacony*, 1971, oil on linen, 56 1/4 × 50". © Deborah Remington Charitable Trust for the Visual Arts/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

I don't mean to imply that Remington understood her art instrumentally as a psychometric tool, but rather that Ashton's cataloguing of possible correlates in *Haddonfield* (the trumpet, the thermometer, etc.) indicates the generative axis of the artist's insistence on connotation—more immediately in this instance, with the title registering a place with clear biographical significance—together with her refusal to manifest it through supportive iconography. And in slightly later pieces, she theatricalizes her compositions, multiplying the valences of the extant portals so that many serve as frames, mirrors, and windows (trimmed, in *Dover*, 1975, with proscenium-worthy curtains). The oval at the center of *Dorset*, 1972, which might be a lens in a larger apparatus that could be a camera, reveals nothing as its argentine expanse fades to white. Looming and physically enveloping, this picture, from the right vantage, also reminds me, more sentimentally, of a landscape crossed with mountains along a low horizon, the orb now a moon sealing the envelope-like flap of the sky. Maybe the title gives this one away: *Dorset* is on the English Channel's Jurassic Coast, where stone arches forged through geologic time ceaselessly bear witness to the perpetual revolution that the painting eschews. *Dorset* is preternaturally still; change happens outside and before it. A flood of overinterpretation, of mutable, contingent response, fills its silence—hardening, at last, if still provisionally, in the confirmation bias of reception.