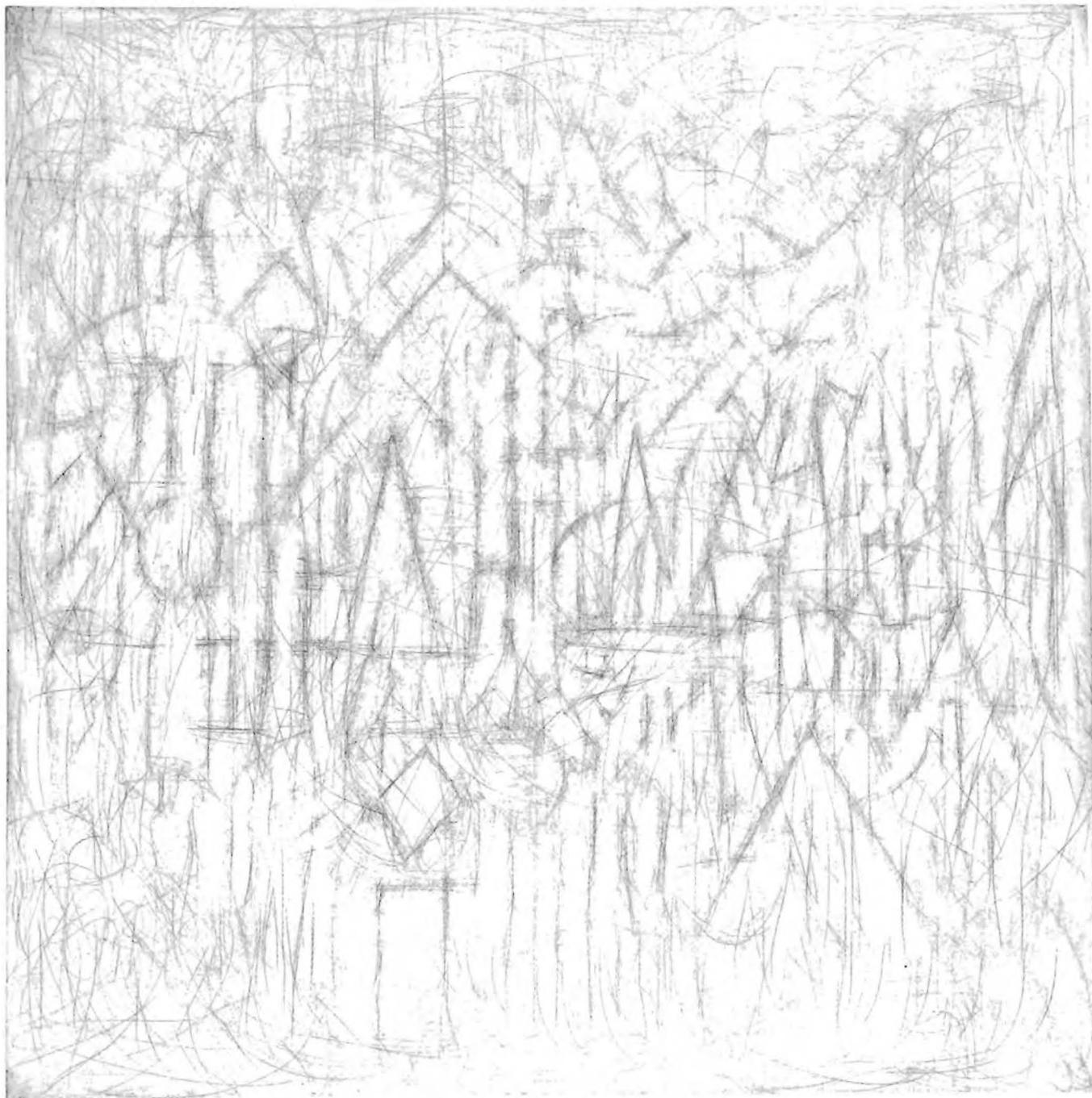


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FORM IS A VERB: POUSETTE-DART AND VORTICISM

Robert Hobbs

RICHARD POUSETTE-DART's early focus on the work of French expatriate sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska has become the standard art historical way to look at his early development. This approach, which is exemplified by such works as his drawing *Agonisties* (1936-37) [figure 1], was initiated by Gail Levin's groundbreaking 1980 *Arts Magazine* article and Joanne Kuebler's extended essay, published a decade later in the catalogue for the first full-scale Richard Pousette-Dart retrospective, which she and I co-curated for the Indianapolis Museum of Art.¹ According to Levin and Kuebler, Pousette-Dart first read H. S. Ede's 1931 biography on Gaudier-Brzeska, *Savage Messiah*,² which was largely based on Sophia Brzeska's diary. After becoming aware of this book, Pousette-Dart acquired Ezra Pound's text on this artist. Following this connection between the two artists with historical analyses and formal comparisons, both Levin and Kuebler discerned Pousette-Dart's interest in Gaudier-Brzeska's emphasis on direct carving, close study of tribal artifacts, and desire at the end of his brief life to work directly in brass in order to create small sculptures. Both art historians also elucidated connections between Gaudier-Brzeska's and Pousette-Dart's brasses. In addition to being influenced by this artist's brasses, Pousette-Dart acquired one of Gaudier-Brzeska's drawings, made a number of observations about both him and Pound in his notebooks of the late 1930s, and even created a series of drawings in watercolor of this sculptor in the late 1930s, such as *Brzeska's Head* [figure 2], as well as constructed a large abstract three-dimensional head of this same sculptor in plaster in the early 1940s.



Figure 1. *Agonisties*, 1936–37, watercolor and conté on paper, 18 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches

White Cathedral, 1984–89, pencil, gesso, and oil on linen, 90 x 90 inches

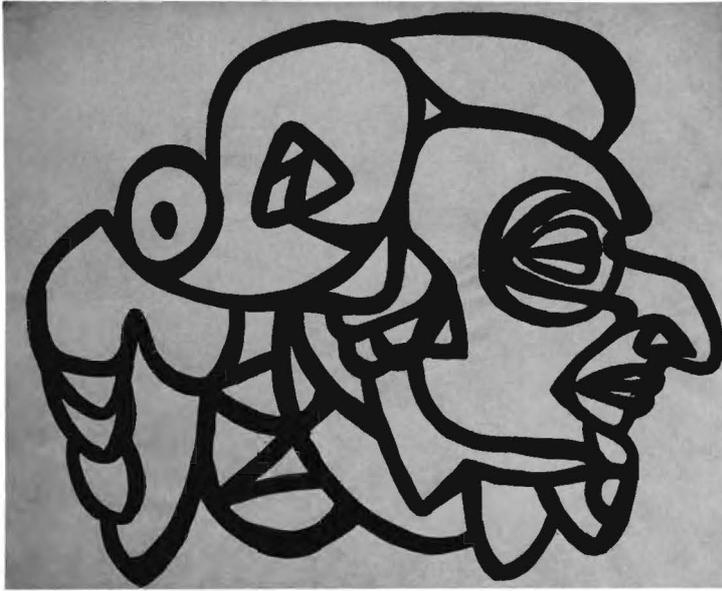


Figure 2. *Brzeska Head*, 1936–37, watercolor on paper, 13 3/4 x 16 3/4 inches

Although the Gaudier-Brzeska connection was certainly important for Pousette-Dart, as both Levin and Kuebler have amply documented, I would like to extend these two artists' shared assumptions regarding the generative force and metaphysical power of artistic form by looking at the impact that both Ezra Pound's book and his definition of Vorticism had on Pousette-Dart's work. This departure from previous research on Pousette-Dart is based not only on his great interest in Pound's monograph on Gaudier-Brzeska but also on his and his parents' ongoing fascination with Pound's poetry, which they singly and in tandem read and discussed over the course of many years. The reason why past research has not moved beyond establishing formal connections between Gaudier-Brzeska's work and Pousette-Dart's is probably because the

commonly accepted view of Vorticism has seemed inimical to the latter's art. With the exception of Gaudier-Brzeska's more organic approach, Vorticist art—as opposed to Vorticist poetry and criticism—aimed to achieve a type of technological primitivism and engineered Cubism predicated on the massing of flat planes. Both urban and industrial in its subject matter, Vorticism in the visual arts was Great Britain's pre-World War I response to Marinetti's Futurism, making it a historical codicil to twentieth-century modernism rather than a major movement. In its visual manifestation—as opposed to Pound's poetic and critical developments of it—Vorticism's dynamic movement was realized through kaleidoscopic repetitions of motifs that were intended to represent energy and force. Between Vorticist art and Pousette-Dart's work there are thus few stylistic affinities. In addition, there is the fundamental difference between their attitudes toward war. Similar to the Futurists, several Vorticists espoused the cleansing power of war and enlisted at the outset of World War I, which claimed the lives of both Gaudier-Brzeska and the poet-theorist T. E. Hume. Since Pousette-Dart, a life-long pacifist, was even willing in the early 1940s to go to prison for his deep belief in pacifism, and was also concerned in his work with universal meanings that joined rather than separated human beings, Vorticist art with its militant subtext was antithetical to his view of the world.

Precisely because of the obstacles that Vorticist formal stylistics presents to understanding Pousette-Dart's connection with it, I wish to take a new tack. In this essay I will contend that an understanding of Ezra Pound's critical and literary view of Vorticism, which Pousette-Dart studied as he familiarized himself with this writer's book on Gaudier-Brzeska, provides a new and particularly useful underlying perspective for looking at his art from the late 1930s to the end of his life. This connection with Pound's

Vorticism also provides a foundation for understanding Pousette-Dart's emphasis on generating form, which is a key aspect of his drawings and paintings, beginning with such an early example as *Bending Figure* (1937) [figure 3]. By looking at Pound's approach to Vorticist theory and criticism—as opposed to this style of art—we can begin to appreciate how Pousette-Dart, the youngest member of the Abstract Expressionists, was able to arrive at a mature

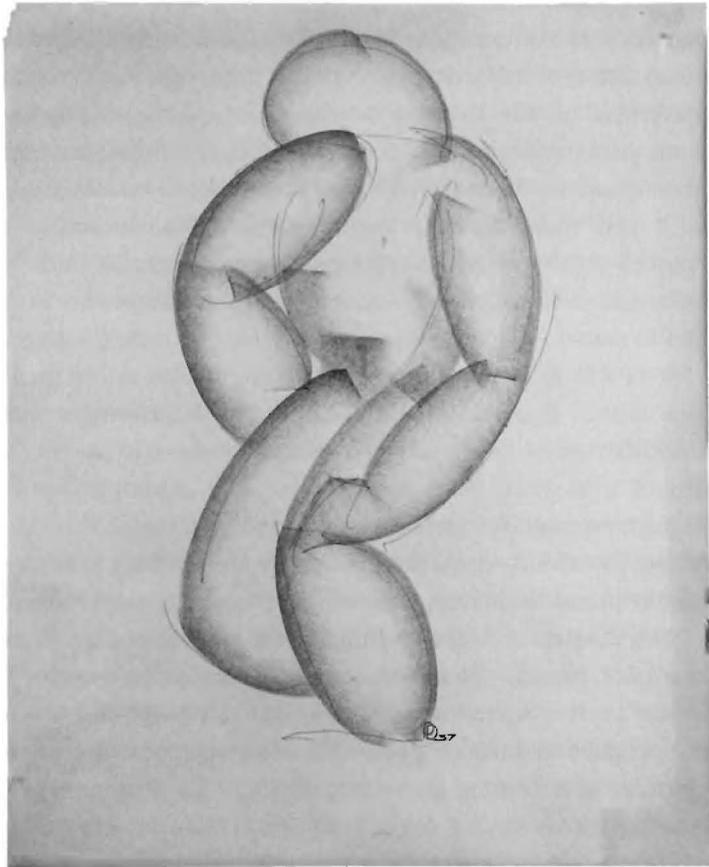


Figure 3. *Bending Figure*, 1937, graphite and pen on paper, 17 x 14 inches

style in the early 1940s before most of the other members of this New York School.

In order to establish a critical assessment of Pound's impact on Pousette-Dart's thinking and his work, it is necessary to begin by noting that Pound was an integral member of the Vorticist group, even providing it with its name. Second, it is imperative to distance Pound's Vorticism from Italian Futurism, which he relegates to the level of "accelerated impressionism."³ In the 1920s the English/American painter Wyndham Lewis retrospectively concurred with Pound's estimation of Vorticism when he pointed out, "At the heart of the whirlpool is a great silent place where all the energy is concentrated. And there at the point of concentration is The Vorticist,"⁴ even though Lewis's statement runs counter to his earlier hyped graphic designs that were intended to portend the dynamisms of a new Futurist-oriented reality. Continuing with this metaphysical view of the vortex as the origin of movement but not necessarily motion itself is Pound's observation, no doubt intended as a compliment, that Gaudier-Brzeska's "stillness seemed an action, such was the daemon of energy that possessed him or served him."⁵ Reflecting on his own shift from Imagism to Vorticism, Pound analyzed the vortex in his Gaudier-Brzeska monograph so that it superintends and channels specific contents while remaining separate from them:

*The Image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a Vortex, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing . . . from this necessity came the name "Vorticism."*⁶

Later, Pound characterizes the city of London as a vortex or channel open to vital traditions and ideas. He writes:

*These new masses of unexplored arts and facts are pouring into the vortex of London. They cannot help bringing about changes as great as the Renaissance changes . . .*⁷

In this same volume he cites in full Gaudier-Brzeska's three-page summation of thousands of years of sculptural art and his origination of the terms "Paleolithic Vortex" and "Hamite Vortex," as well as later ones established since the Renaissance that he qualifies according to solid, liquid, and gaseous states.⁸

Pound views the vortex in terms of London's ability to funnel tradition into the present, imbuing it with new life or, more simply, allowing its original force full play, while his close friend Gaudier-Brzeska analyzes the vortex in the Hegelian manner of finding overarching historical rubrics capable of summarizing entire epochs. Considered in these ways, the vortex assumes a generative force that has its earliest and fullest philosophical antecedent in Aristotle's definition of form as both an activator and a potentiality on a par with his understanding of the unmoved mover at the center of existence, which medieval theologians equated with God. This generative aspect is a particularly significant consideration for Pousette-Dart, who repeatedly affirmed a belief in this unmoved mover as the basis for his art. On one of his early drawings he appropriately inscribed the words, "each form / approaches / geometric / each form / refers / to life." Since the concept of form as both a verb and an inherent capacity, as seen in his late 1930s drawing of body parts arrayed around a void, is central to the development of Pousette-Dart's Abstract Expressionism, it is imperative for us to bear in mind when investigating the impact of a Vorticist theoretical perspective on this artist's work. On a drawing reflecting Pousette-Dart's combined interest in Gaudier-Brzeska's brand of Vorticism and both artists' interest in machine-like form, Pousette-Dart noted, "The ability to appreciate form / for its sake alone / is a noble thing / form in its *emotive power meaning* / not in its representation or referential."

It is not surprising that Pound would be interested in Aristotle,

when one realizes that such words as "energy," "dynamic," "induction," "substance," "essence," and "universal" all come from Aristotle's Greek terms or their Latinized counterparts. A number of these words, in addition to such Aristotelian terms as "substance" and "form," are basic building blocks of Pound's critical theory. No doubt, Pound found Aristotle a sympathetic writer since this Greek philosopher, in his *Poetics*, regarded poetry as being more on a par with philosophy than history. Distinguishing form from a static noun such as composition, Pound equated it with energy and praised the type of artist who refrains from merely "receiving impressions" in order to direct "a certain fluid force against circumstance, as *conceiving* instead of merely reflecting and observing."⁹ This emphasis on form as a verb that "arrange[s] . . . masses in relation"¹⁰ and energizes mere matter has its ultimate source in Aristotle's theory of hylomorphism, which appears in both his *Physics* and his *Metaphysics*. Hylomorphism, a compound word, refers to matter (*hylō*) and form (*morphē*), thereby calling attention to form's role as a transitive verb activating matter rather than a noun merely equated with it. This theory is consistent with Aristotle's view in his *Physics* that motion (*kinesis*) is "the fulfillment of what exists potentially, insofar as it exists potentially." Although potentiality inheres in a thing and gives rise to Aristotle's ontological views, it represents the capacity for this thing to be actualized or placed in motion, even though this ability might be realized only in terms of fruit changing color as it ripens and not in any discernable motion. Pound discerned a similar potentiality in Vorticist poetry, "where music . . . seems as if it were just bursting into speech," and in some "painting or sculpture [which] seems as if it were 'just coming over into speech.'"¹¹ This approach to potentiality also readily lends itself to Pousette-Dart's iconographic references to burgeoning life, energy, light, and darkness,

and various spiritual images that constitute part of an extended metaphor pertaining to the preconscious intuitions that his art intends to mine.

Similar to both Pound and Aristotle, Pousette-Dart regarded form dynamically as the multi-faceted power activating his work, and even experimented in several collages made in the late 1930s with newspaper images of football players. In addition, as a beginning sculptor in the 1930s, he connected the vortex with Henry Moore's hollowed out forms in a drawing of a silhouette-like personage. The following is a sampling of statements from his notebooks of late 1930s and early 1940s in which he equates form with art and regards both as active forces rather than passive repositories:

*Spirit is pure form movement—better the more absolute—
art is fascinating music—purpose is inner conviction.*

I strive to satisfy my soul through expression, creating structures which have . . . a life which goes onward and onward in its feeling.

Art is . . . unknown experience reacting upon known experience creating a superhuman mystic body.

Mine is an abstract vision fired by mystic shapes not by description.

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 supra nature, a thing in itself—its own nature, answering the deep need of man's imaginative and aesthetic being.

As a summation of this type of thinking, Pousette-Dart concluded in a statement for his 1945 Willard Gallery exhibition, *Seven Paintings*, "Painting is a feeling thinking, a material awareness of spirit, a sense of direct experience which transcends any intellectual method." Although these statements can be taken as evidence of

this artist's affinities with Romantic sensibility, they also bespeak the following philosophic analogy: just as form energizes matter and the soul animates the body, so does the unconscious provide motivations for the conscious mind.

This basically hylomorphic attitude that Pousette-Dart embraced in such statements as those cited above played into a contemporary view of the vortex—or "radiant node or cluster" of attitudes, to use Pound's terminology¹²—that was predicated on an understanding of the unconscious as the bedrock of human existence. This view of the unconscious as the humanities' fecund well-spring was reinforced by (1) C. G. Jung's theory of archetypes as genetically encoded human predispositions to mythic images; (2) the importance of comparative mythology studies that searched for origins of myths and commonalities between those of different cultures; and (3) Pousette-Dart's mother's subscription to theosophy as a non-theistic universal community of humanity in which interdisciplinary studies of religion, philosophy, and science emphasized the process by which spirit/matter was involved in a continuous state of becoming. Agreeing with his one-time mentor and friend, the expatriate Russian artist John Graham, who thought that art offered "almost unlimited access to one's unconscious,"¹³ Pousette-Dart wrote in one of his notebooks, "Art is only significant as it takes us to the whole man and gives us new insights and opens secrets toward the unknown heart of our total mystical awareness."

This awareness was predicated on a new understanding of tradition that has affinities with Pound's belief that "the aim of civilization is to keep alive . . . the intellectually-inventive-creative spirit and ability in man," as well as his respect for Gaudier-Brzeska's "ability for historical synthesis, an ability for bringing order into things apparently remote from the technique of his art."¹⁴ In Pousette-Dart's work a similar respect for tradition, coupled with

an understanding of the vortex as the artistic potential to give form to matter, has assumed over the course of his life a number of different approaches. A brief analysis of a few Pousette-Dart drawings from the last three decades of his life indicates ways that he has reinvigorated tradition to create new clusters of meaning. In these works he has relied on Pound's vortex and its connections with Aristotle's hylomorphic theory of form's effect on matter.

The 2001 major traveling exhibition of Pousette-Dart's works on paper, subtitled *The Living Edge*, which Victoria Martino and Konrad Oberhuber curated for the Shirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, represented the first opportunity to assess the overall importance that both drawings and paintings on paper play in this artist's work, where they are modes for generating new concepts and also complete and finished works in themselves.¹⁵ Seven years later, many notable post-1950s works included in that prescient exhibition are being shown at Knoedler & Company.

Although Ezra Pound rejected Futurism as merely "accelerated impressionism," Pousette-Dart began in the late 1950s to find a way to reinvigorate Impressionism while animating the entire field comprising his work. He personalized Abstract Impressionism, a variant of Abstract Expressionism, important to a number of New York painters in the 1950s and 1960s, including Philip Guston and Joan Mitchell. In *Garden Light* (ca. 1960s) [figure 4], he dissolves paint into a quivering field of light, gesture, and paint: the light is ephemeral; the gesture is staccato-like, dynamic, and insistent; and the paint is dense, yet penetrable. The scene appears to quiver with a life-giving force, analogized in terms of particles of paint. It calls to mind both a sunlit landscape and fields of pulsating energy.

A similar transitional state of form, which is being manifested even as it appears to be deliquescing, is the subject of the work from the series *Cloud of Unknowing* from the 1970s. The chimerical

nature of floating and subtly different white forms resembling cumulus clouds serves as one important focus for this drawing. A similar operative is at work in *White Awakening* (1980).

Serving as a vortex and a virtual mandala of becoming, *Light Gathers to the Question of No* (1979), with its competing centripetal and centrifugal forces, oscillates between a centered and an all-over composition. The work reflects the artist's thoughts, registered in one of his many notebooks, on the effects of light and darkness:

*Black holes penetrate deep into the abyss of darkness centers
[, a] spiral whirl twis[ts] and suck[s] us down into endless
depths but also jut[s] out reversals[,] pierce[s] through us[,]
exploding and imploding light and darkness intertwined [,]
a language needing opposites.*

Individual elements in this work on paper look as if they are being seen either under a microscope or through a powerful telescope. The microcosm thereby becomes equivalent to the

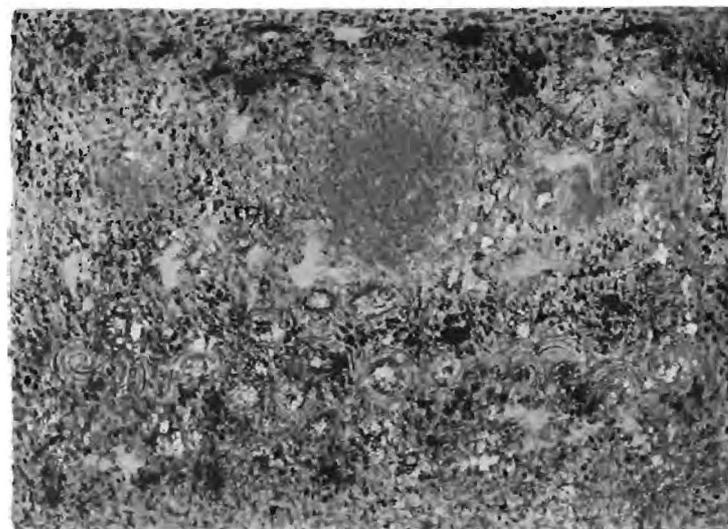
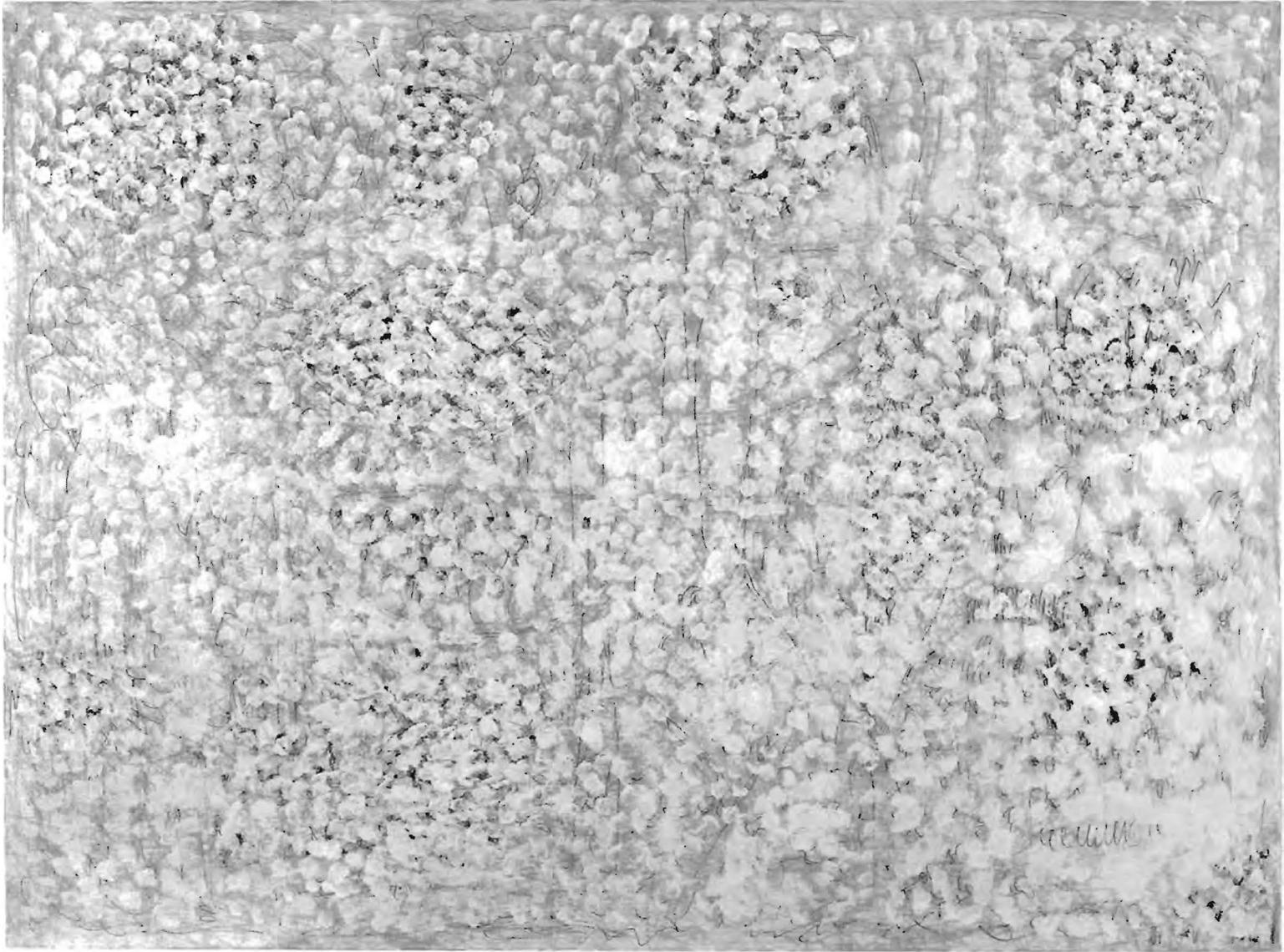


Figure 4. *Garden Light*, 1960s, oil, gouache, and ink on paper, 22 1/4 x 30 1/4



White Awakening, 1980, hand-colored etching, 18 x 23 inches

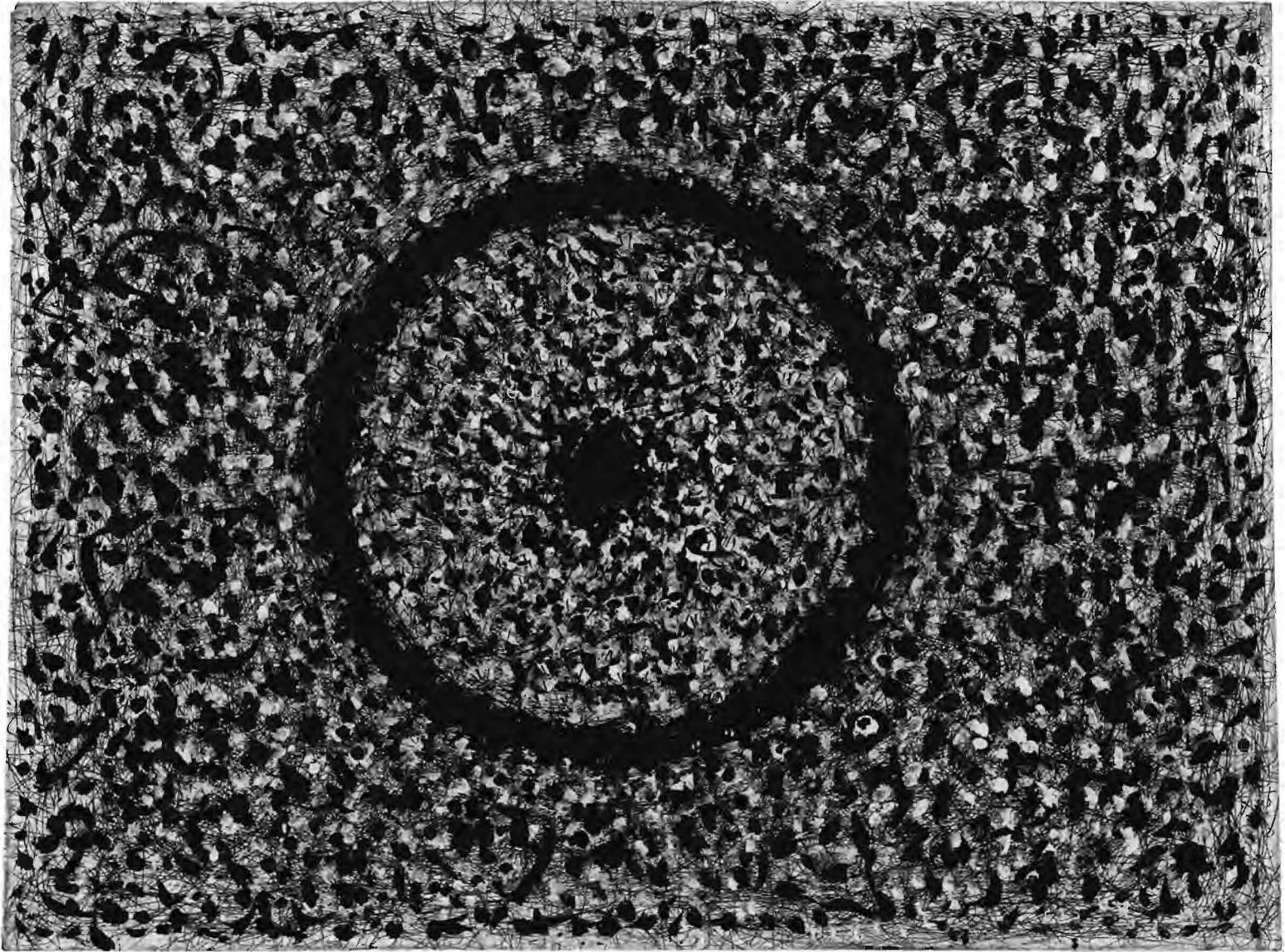
macrocosm, and this double perspective, which is informed by Big Bang theories, invites viewers to become aware of a pervading energy linking the inner world with outer space.

In works like *Black Circle* (1981), Pousette-Dart similarly chooses to work in the gap between botany and physics. In these works he alludes to nature's germinative strength and at the same time the cosmos' dynamic force fields, so that the earth's fecund crust is equated with the power of outer space elements.

As this brief synoptic view of Pousette-Dart's post-1960s drawings suggests, Ezra Pound's definition of Vorticism, which correlates with the Aristotelian terms of an animating form invigorating inert matter and even finds in it the potentiality for an ongoing dynamism, continued to be an important *modus operandi* for Pousette-Dart's work throughout his life. Personalizing this theoretical approach to creativity that emphasizes the active principal of the vortex as a force above and beyond any specific contents flowing through it, Pousette-Dart found a *raison d'être* for the teeming surfaces and energized fields comprising his art. Although the term "energy made visible" was used by biographer B. H. Friedman as the subtitle for his 1972 book on Jackson Pollock,¹⁶ the conceptualization and visualization of form as energy was a lifelong pursuit of Richard Pousette-Dart's work that preceded Pollock's drips and continued to be a subject of exploration almost four decades after those works were made. Thus, Ezra Pound's conception of a superintending vortex or channel, and Aristotle's concept of form as activator and potentiality (the unmoved mover at the core of existence) characterize the metaphoric conjunction of the unconscious mind and vortex as form's generators in the art of Richard Pousette-Dart.

1. Gail Levin, "Richard Pousette-Dart's Emergence as an Abstract Expressionist," *Arts Magazine* 54, no. 6 (March 1980): 125–129. Joanne Kuebler, "Concerning Pousette-Dart" in Robert Hobbs and Joanne Kuebler, *Richard Pousette-Dart* (Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indianapolis Museum of Art in cooperation with Indiana University Press, 1990), 12–79.
2. H. S. Ede, *Savage Messiah: Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: Literary Guild, 1931).
3. Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (Hessle, East Yorkshire: Marvell Press, 1916, reprint, 1960), 82.
4. Wyndham Lewis, cited in William C. Wees, "Ezra Pound as a Vorticist," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 6, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1965): 63.
5. Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 39
6. *Ibid.*, 92.
7. *Ibid.*, 117.
8. *Ibid.*, 21–22.
9. *Ibid.*, 120, 110, 89, respectively.
10. *Ibid.*, 110.
11. *Ibid.*, 82.
12. *Ibid.*, 92.
13. John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art*, Marcia Epstein Allentuck, ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1971). Graham gave Pousette-Dart a copy of this book in 1937 when it was first published and dedicated the copy with an inscription including the date, 1937.
14. Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 109, 105.
15. The exhibition was organized in cooperation with The Estate of Richard Pousette-Dart; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Boca Raton Museum of Art. It opened in August 2001 and closed in 2002.
16. B. H. Friedman, *Jackson Pollock: Energy Made Visible* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

Robert Hobbs holds the Rhoda Thalheimer Endowed Chair of Art History, Virginia Commonwealth University; he is a regular visiting professor at Yale University; and is a co-director of The Estate of Richard Pousette-Dart.



Black Circle, 1981, hand-colored etching, 18 x 23 5/8 inches