

BROOKLYN RAIL

Deborah Remington: Five Decades



Deborah Remington, *Big Red*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 75 x 69 inches. Courtesy The Deborah Remington Trust and Bortolami Gallery, New York.

You'd be forgiven for walking past *Big Red*, a 1962 oil on canvas by Deborah Remington in the front office of Bortolami. True to its title, this big, red painting maps Remington's path of the prior decade, from the Bay Area action painting scene (she co-founded the Beat-adjacent Six Gallery) to an extended stay in Japan (her vigorous handling summons Gutai more than Pollock). You'd be forgiven not just because of the work's peripheral placement, but also because the next piece you encounter, in the main gallery of this mini-retrospective, looks like the work of a different artist. Indeed, *March* (1964) shares little with its predecessor despite the mere two-year gap between them. Gone are *Big Red's* gestural strokes and interpenetrating colors, swapped for precise lines and flat unmodulated or gradated forms. Rather than Ab Ex—démodé by the mid-1960s—Remington flirts with hard-edge and Pop without submitting to either. "Where this imagery came from, I really can't say," she said of her beguiling new work. "I really felt I was out in left field ... where did this come from?"

Good question. *March* presents a bottle-like figure, outlined in orange, receding into vaporous space; a red line, top-left, leads nowhere, as if vacuumed all the way in. These elements form part of an assemblage, like a flattened John Chamberlain: wrecked but balanced, inviting but out-of-reach.

Neither anti-pictorial, like modernist paintings, nor citational, like Pop, Remington's work of this period suggests virtuality—part-dream (some have called her art "surreal"), part-digital (befitting the era of McLuhan). *Five Decades* proceeds chronologically to two large paintings of 1972, *Dorset* and *Saratoga*, which display Remington's best-known approach, by this point undertaken in New York. Each sets a silvery centerpiece—one ovoid, one irregular—amid a glowing carapace. Articulated by thin red or blue lines, the exterior forms seem to pulse against black backgrounds. In 1973 Remington insisted that her "imagery is, in fact, non-objective." Still, if mid-century critics could recognize emblems of the new machine age in the most abstract or minimal artworks, one can't help but compare the dynamic components of *Dorset* to objects in the world, namely mirrors and automobile parts.



Deborah Remington, *March*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 57 1/4 x 49 1/2 inches. Courtesy The Deborah Remington Trust and Bortolami Gallery, New York.

For Pop artists, the car represented a structure of desire: "a dream world," wrote Richard Hamilton, "but the dream is deep and true."² In the late '50s Hamilton painted diaphanous automobiles and women, mingling fetishized bodies which, in a newly materialized "dream world," stimulated desire through similar aesthetic conduits of curves and color. Neither cars nor women appear as such for Remington, yet paintings like *Dorset* seem to prod Hamilton's logic. Barbara Rose argued in 1974 that certain women artists, Remington among them, abetted a "vaginal iconology ... designed to arouse women, but not sexually." Genital symbols could thematize—and subvert—conceptions of the vagina as "mysterious, hidden, unknown, and ergo threatening."³ Remington's central apertures confirm Rose's thesis to the extent that, contra Hamilton, they imply bodies and cars as objects less of desire than disorientation: untouchable due not to social etiquette but the laws of physics, their planes shot both forward and away into other dimensions. If at times they invoke body parts, then, *Dorset* and *Saratoga* seem more to reject human presence. For Remington, after all, "non-objectivity" meant that the image "does not relate," and her "mirrors"—matte, opaque—thwart the expected social experience of reflection. "It was not a mirror image," she affirmed. But she relished the resemblance. "I like any kind of perversity."

n J.G. Ballard's *Crash* (1973) the characters—one of whom is named Remington—seek what he called “a new sexuality born from a perverse technology.” Throughout the novel, rear-view mirrors token entry into their psyches, prefacing erotic entanglements with both humans and cars. Contemporary life had become a “metallized dream,” Ballard once said; rather than the “external world,” now it was the “inner worlds of our minds” that “represented reality.” Remington's paintings of the era might provide apt illustrations for *Crash*, as would three late-1990s drawings in a side room, their slatted forms declaring similitude between rib cages and engines. But the artist ultimately cancels Ballard's transposition. Dorset seems rather to absorb external and inner worlds, transporting them somewhere else—less mirror than black hole. Remington likened herself to a black box—a “great IBM machine of some sort ... all the stuff just gets fed in,” a metaphor that aligns her stylistic shift with that of the Bay Area counterculture from freewheeling bohemia to cybernetic utopia.⁴ One wonders, however, if the technoid flatness of these paintings—always hand-painted—thrust Remington's inner and outer worlds too deep into this non-relational virtuality.



Deborah Remington, *Dorset*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 91 x 87 inches. Courtesy The Deborah Remington Trust and Bortolami Gallery, New York.

In turn, *Penrith* (1989) and *Mechelen* (1991) rehash the Expressionist idiom: a painterly code that translates psychic experience into abstract strokes. Remington's colors remain the same as before—black, white, primaries, secondaries—as if, under pressure, *Dorset* had exploded to reveal the worlds it stole. Three final compositions from the 2000s congeal back into images, alien and anthropoid at once, crystallizing Remington's development. *Encounters* (2007) seems to blur the edges of *Saratoga*, with flecks of paint spackling a “mirror,” growing wilder underneath. If *Big Red* displayed pictorial flatness and real (impasto) depth and, *March*, real flatness and ambiguous pictorial depth, *Encounters* traverses all these dimensions together, forwarding an image that reanimates Remington's question: where did this come from? A lifelong maverick, she passed away three years later, back where she came from—New Jersey—a state in which, per Robert Smithson's resonant phrase, “a sense of the crystalline prevails.”



Deborah Remington, *Mechelen*, 1991. Oil on canvas, 64 x 47 inches. Courtesy The Deborah Remington Trust and Bortolami Gallery, New York.