

HYPERALLERGIC

Deborah Remington's Singular Place in Art



Deborah Remington, "March" (1964), oil on canvas, 57 1/4 x 49 1/2 inches
(Photo courtesy The Deborah Remington Trust and Bortolami Gallery, New York)

I have long had an interest in three women artists who were connected to the midcentury San Francisco Renaissance, and the generation of artists and poets that emerged in and around San Francisco in the postwar years: Sonia Gechtoff (1926–2018), Jay DeFeo (1929–1989), and Deborah Remington (1930-2010).

While DeFeo has come to be regarded as a major artist, Gechtoff and Remington have not yet received their due. The fact that they have been marginalized in the art world is sadly predictable. They were independent women who had to make their way in a male-dominated art world, where their autonomy was regarded as a threat by their male peers. Though they all initially fit in with Bay Area Abstract Expressionism, particularly Clyfford Still, with whom Remington studied, they reinvented themselves and set out on radically independent paths. They have never been associated with Minimalism, Pop Art, Conceptual Art, Painterly Realism, or Color Field painting. When you don't have a genre, you might as well be invisible.

There are signs that this is about to change for Remington, who is currently the subject of two solo exhibitions, *Deborah Remington: Five Decades* at Bortolami (May 1–June 12, 2021) and *Deborah Remington: Early Drawings* at Craig F. Starr Gallery (May 4–July 30, 2021). Together, these shows give New York viewers the first in-depth survey of her singular paintings, done over five decades, as well as offer a selection of her early, masterful drawings.

In addition to the painting retrospective that Remington has long deserved, Bortolami's presentation of three of the five drawings from the *Beinen* series convinces me it is high time that a museum showcase drawings from across her entire career.

Created between 1997 and 2006, the *Beinen* drawings, which are done in graphite and red crayon, measure 72 by 42 inches — far larger than the early drawings, which I had previously seen (most of them no larger than 24 by 18 inches). The human scale of these drawings suggests the height and width of Remington's reach. They are emblematic self-portraits, focused on her internal body, eventually stricken with cancer, and a prolonged encounter with her mortality.

The three *Beinen* drawings are in Bortolami's smaller gallery space, which is separate from the large, sky-lit main gallery space, where paintings dated between 1964 and 2007 are exhibited. No one came into the room while I was looking at the drawings and I was very happy to be alone with them, as they are not works to be looked at, but rather to be seen slowly and deliberately.

Remington started the *Beinen* drawings after she was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1993 and completed them after she had one lung partially removed in 2004. She had previously been diagnosed with breast cancer, in 1980; 36 years earlier, when she was a teenager living in New Jersey, her father died from leukemia after fighting it for four years.

The subject of the drawings seems to be the body, specifically the rib cage and spine. Although I have not seen all five drawings, the three in the exhibition suggest a narrative of collapse: "Beinen III" (1998) depicts an intact, enclosed form composed of shifting, misaligned parts; "Beinen V" (2006) shows a rib cage-like form partially hidden by a gray plane that transitions from solid to transparent and recalls X-rays and lead sheets.

In the *Beinen* drawings, Remington's incredibly meticulous renderings of a vulnerable skeletal structure under attack start with subtle tonal gradations, from black at the top of the paper to gray along the bottom third, defining an atmospheric abstract space in which the clearly delineated form is floating. This display of control over line and tonality seems to empower Remington to contemplate her own failing body. By employing a slow, deliberate process in which control is paramount, she shapes her passage in time, while examining the granular density of her materials, and their capacity to generate light and dark. Without denying her illness, she wants to see the flawed mortal interior body differently, not as an invulnerable or perfected form, but as art.

In "Beinen IV" (1998), a white, outlined form descends from the orderly jumble of the curving, horizontal gray bands. The white slowly darkens into deep gray that concludes in a hoof-like shape that rests on the granular gray abstract ground. This shape — unique in Remington's vocabulary — resembles a horse's rear leg, and could be read as as both a spine and an oblique allusion to the Western artist Frederic Remington, of whom she is a descendant.

The 12 paintings in the exhibition were done between 1962 and 2007, and include "Encounters" (2007), the last oil painting that she completed before succumbing to cancer, as her father had more than six decades earlier.

The show documents pivotal changes and unexpected returns, as well as highlights the unique direction that Remington pursued throughout her career. "Big Red" (1962), which she made after studying calligraphy and *sumi-e* painting in Japan (1956–58), is a turbulent jumble of thick black strokes with yellow, orange, and blue peeking through, against a searing red ground.

At this point, it might seem as if Remington was still working her way through Abstract Expressionist gestures and her lessons with Clyfford Still, but a closer look suggests that light comes from the paint itself, marking a move away from paint-as-paint. In 1963, working with a chiaroscuro palette and different shades of red, she began to reinvent herself in the *Soot* and *Adelphi* series, both of which depict emblematic forms floating in an atmospheric space permeated by a mute light. These drawings, which are included in *Deborah Remington: Early Drawings* at Craig F. Starr Gallery, show how central drawing was to her practice. It forms a distinct body of work alongside her paintings.

"March" (1964), in the Bortolami show, marks Remington's transformation into an altogether different and unique abstract painter. She has gone from thick paint to thin layers and tightly controlled gradation from white to dark gray. A slightly diminishing planar form painted a cold white leans back in space, on a right-to-left diagonal. Its edges are abutted by broad, gradient, charcoal-gray planes, with smaller planes edged in precise, flat red lines. The image strongly alludes to a kimono, especially because a black, attenuated triangle outlined in red seems to reference a sash.

In a 1973 interview with curator Paul Cummings, Remington stated that her thick, gestural paintings and her incredibly flat, thinly painted, hard-edged abstractions were "incompatible." As Rachel Churner describes in her insightful essay, included in an exhibition brochure for Bortolami, this was a "significant understatement," because Remington had remade herself into a completely different artist.

As she riffs on a planar form that was likely inspired by a kimono, she becomes preoccupied with luminosity, with free-floating forms, radiant portals, and backlit presences.

In the painting "Dorset" (1972), Remington's use of black punctuated by dazzling red and blue lines, and gradients of glowing red, may have been inspired by her familiarity with Japanese lacquer painting, but the result is unlike anything we have seen in painting before. Is the floating form, which is outlined in red, a camera or an oval mirror or both? What are the two floating forms? At once lava hot and icily cool, impenetrably dark and softly glowing, inviting and aloof, the painting is a diamond-hard compression of contradictions.

Between 1972 and 2007, Remington would change her style twice more, while always hewing to a similar palette of hot red and coal black, gradients of gray and white, and cold blue, with the addition of emerald green and deep purples. There is something mineral-like about her colors. They evoke not the earth, but the underworld.

In "Encounters" (2007), her final painting, Remington depicts two irregular floating forms, in the gray spectrum on the left and in a gradation of feverish red on the right. A spine-like structure both joins and separates the forms. In this and the Beinen drawings, Remington confronts her mortality without requiring the viewer's sympathy. The same determination, single-mindedness, and courage that propelled her down an untrammelled path appears as steadfast as ever.

Deborah Remington: Five Decades continues at Bortolami (39 Walker Street, Manhattan) through June 12. Deborah Remington: Early Drawings continues at Craig F. Starr Gallery (5 East 73rd Street, Manhattan) through July 30.