

Art in America

COLD LIGHT: DEBORAH REMINGTON AT BORTOLAMI AND CRAIG F. STARR



View of "Deborah Remington: Five Decades" at Bortolami, New York, 2021.
PHOTO KRISTIAN LAUDRUP

A pair of exhibitions at the New York galleries Bortolami and Craig F. Starr, organized independently but serendipitously, showcased the enigmatic paintings and drawings of the late American artist Deborah Remington (1930–2010), best known for asymmetric, high-contrast compositions populated by luminous floating forms. Born in Haddonfield, New Jersey, Remington earned a BFA in 1955 from the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute), where she studied alongside artists including Elmer Bischoff, Joan Brown, Clyfford Still, and Paul Wonner. Later that year, Remington and a cadre of Bay-Area artists and poets cofounded Six Gallery, a vibrant cultural forum for the city's Beat scene. In 1957, Remington decamped San Francisco for Japan and spent the next two years traveling throughout the country studying calligraphy and sumi-e painting. "If you write a certain character and a stroke is the slightest bit off," as she told critic Dore Ashton, "you correct it and you do it until you get it down visually perfect." That approach toward control and exactness defines Remington's signature style of the 1960s and '70s, in which the artist's hand is hidden under meticulously flat layers of paint.

Craig F. Starr's presentation, on view through July 30, is dedicated to the artist's works on paper and comprises eighteen crisp, futuristic drawings made between 1963 and 1983. The works suggest a combination of Charles Sheeler's industrial architectural abstractions and Agnes Pelton's luminous, suspended forms, all set to a black and white palette with occasional pops of orange and red. A trio of drawings made with soot and red crayon on muslin evoke machined objects, each illuminated by radiant internal light. Similar to chalk pastel, which lacks any light reflective quality, soot (here collected from the artist's fireplace) creates a sense of infinite depth in each of the drawings. Soot #11 (1976) has a framed ovoid shape at its center, in which brilliant white shards recede into an abyss. This suspended mirror-like form, encircled in bands of white, black, and orange hovers a field of black and suggests a portal into another dimension. The large oil painting *Dorset* (1972), at Bortolami, employs a similar visual strategy. Here, a central sharply defined oval is inset into a jagged, envelope-like shape painted in gradations of Cadmium red to black and punctuated by splinters of cobalt. Both works are intensely strange; Remington's forms seem to pulse cold light, and it's never clear if they are advancing out of or receding into some dark unknown space.

In the mid-1980s, the artist traded flatness for more expressive mark-making. Divided in half by a spine of fluted columns, Bortolami's exhibition highlighted Remington's paintings, with early hard-edged works installed on one side of the gallery and later, more gestural paintings on the other. Remington's work from the mid-1980s onward embodies an energetic spirit that feels like a reaction to the sleekness of that produced beforehand. In paintings such as *Penrith* (1989) and *Mechelen* (1991), at Bortolami, Remington maintained the limited palettes, luminosity, and interest in gradients typical of her previous work, but the central forms are set against complex backgrounds that recall crumpled aluminum foil or broken mercury glass instead of nebulous black.

Remington died in 2010, at age seventy-nine, after a long battle with cancer. Her final painting *Encounters* (2007), included in the Bortolami show, is dominated by two abutting irregular planes of gradient gray-to-white and cherry-to-dark red; the composition evokes a pair of disembodied lungs set atop shards of red, white, and blue paint, all underlit by a phosphorescent green haze. *Encounters* seems to reflect Remington's recognition of her illness and mortality, especially when considered alongside three figurative drawings (also at Bortolami) whose compositions resemble compressed and broken ribcages (*Beinen III*, 1998; *Beinen IV*, 2000–01; and *Beinen V*, 2006).

Remington's last institutional solo show was a 1983 survey at the Newport Harbor Art Museum in Santa Ana, California (now the Orange County Museum of Art). A planned 2020 retrospective at the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art in Napa, California, was canceled due to the pandemic. Read as one survey spanning two locations, the Bortolami and Craig F. Starr shows form the most comprehensive presentation of Remington's work in nearly four decades. That's both unfortunate and surprising given the breadth, complexity, and visual richness of her practice, which these exhibitions so clearly elucidate.