

# MUSEUM FRIEDER BURDA

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Press Release

### **POETRY OF LIGHT. RICHARD POUSETTE-DART**

17. MAY - 14. SEPTEMBER 2025



Richard Pousette-Dart, *Celebration Birth*, 1975/76, acrylic on linen, 183.2 x 305.1 cm, private collection © The Richard Pousette-Dart Estate / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025

With the exhibition *Poetry of Light* the Museum Frieder Burda is celebrating one of the great pioneers of Abstract Expressionism: the painter, sculptor, and photographer Richard Pousette-Dart (1916–1992). To date, the exhibition is the largest and most extensive show dedicated to this key player of American post-war abstraction at a museum outside the United States. On display are paintings, sculptures, objects, drawings, and photographs from more than six decades of creative activity – amongst them numerous works from private collections, which are not usually accessible to the general public. Amongst the 137 loans culled from 17 international collections are large-scale masterpieces of Abstract Expressionism, which have been made available by the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

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*“Art for me is the heavens forever opening up, like asymmetrical, unpredictable, spontaneous kaleidoscopes. It is magic; it is joy; it is gardens of surprise and miracle. It is energy, impulse. It is question and answer. It is transcendental reason. It is total in its spirit.”*

- Richard Pousette-Dart, 1951

Alongside colleagues such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko, Pousette-Dart played a prominent role in the formation of the New York School, which ushered in the international triumph of free abstraction in the 1940s. Like many artists in the wider orbit of Abstract Expressionism, he extensively dealt with themes such as myth, archaism, and spirituality. Early works bear witness to his keen interest in European painting of the interwar period. From the 1960s onwards, he turned to large-format all-over compositions – colorful and often highly textured compositions, which typically confront their viewers with the immersive power of an environment.

A key influence on Pousette-Dart's early development was the progressive cultural and intellectual environment facilitated by his parents. His mother, Flora, was a poet and writer who was a vociferous champion of feminism and whose political activism reached from fierce advocacy for equality of the sexes to an engagement for welfare and socialism. Meanwhile, Pousette-Dart's father, Nathaniel, was himself an artist and encouraged his son's experimentation with drawing and painting at an early age. As editor of the journal *Art and Artists of Today*, Nathaniel was a staunch champion of the freedom of artistic expression at a time when totalitarian systems in Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union increasingly sought to relegate the role of art to that of a propagandist instrument. Nathaniel's insistence on the artistic need for self-expression chimed with the cultural climate of late 1930s and early 1940s New York – a time of radical change, which would soon witness the burgeoning formation of the Abstract Expressionist avant-garde.

Pousette-Dart's connection to this influential movement in American post-war painting was underpinned by his participation at the groundbreaking *9th Street Art Exhibition*, which took place in New York in 1951. That same year, Pousette-Dart appeared in Nina Leen's now iconic portrait photograph *The Irascibles*, which was published in *Life* magazine and immortalized the first generation of Abstract Expressionist painters. Although Pousette-Dart's contribution to post-war painting is primarily seen in terms of his early and important role in the early history of Abstract Expressionism, the artist categorically rejected any thinking in terms of “isms”. He regularly recorded his ideas on art in countless small notebooks and summarized many of these in a speech, he gave for students at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1951.

In this major artist's statement, Pousette-Dart emphasized the importance of creative self-expression and spoke of painting as a field that is intimately connected to an intuitive exploration of the invisible and unknown:

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“The artist must beware of all schools, isms, creeds, or entanglements which would tend to make him other than himself,” he maintained, further noting, “He must stand alone, free and open in all directions for exits and entrances, and yet with all freedom, he must be solid and real in the substance of his form.”

While many of Pousette-Dart’s colleagues became known for immediately recognizable signature styles – Barnett Newman for his “zip” paintings or Jackson Pollock for his “drippings” – Pousette-Dart’s career was marked by constant experimentation with diverse modes of pictorial expression and spilled from painting toward media including sculpture, drawing, printmaking, and photography. A constancy in Pousette-Dart’s oeuvre was his life-long fascination with the expressive qualities of light: light as glimmer and sheen, light as iridescent reflection, or light as a cosmic force related to the release of unbounded energy and the power of illumination. Such an interest particularly comes to the fore in the numerous late compositions, in which he seemed to mirror the awe-inspiring beauty of the night sky – but also in compositions, for which he drew inspiration from the magnificent sheen of medieval meta work or Gothic stained-glass windows. The visual appeal of reflective surfaces also underpins the many brass objects, he created throughout his lengthy career: handcrafted items that blur the distinction between avant-garde sculpture and modern jewelry design and which further provide a lexicon of elemental forms that frequently reappear in the artist’s painted compositions.

An exhibition of the Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden, in collaboration with the Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation, New York

### **Curators**

Charles H. Duncan  
Director, The Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation, Suffern

Dr. Daniel Zamani  
Artistic Director, Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden

### **Project manager**

Judith Irrgang  
Head of Collections, Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden

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### Collection context

Abstract Expressionism plays a prominent role in the world-class collection, which has been assembled by the museum's founder, Frieder Burda. It's extensive holdings include major works by Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko. To give a focussed insight into this aspect of the collection, Gottlieb's *Black, Blue, and Red* (1956) as well as De Kooning's *Torso* (1974) and *Untitled X* (1976) will be on display concurrently to the exhibition *Poetry of Light*.

### Catalog & audio guide

A richly illustrated 232-page exhibition catalog has been published by Hirmer Verlag in German and English and is distributed internationally as a trade-store edition. The book can also be purchased at the museum's Concept Store at a special discount price of 39 Euros. A one-hour audio guide (fee: 5 euros) is available in German, English, and French.

### Events & formats

The extensive program accompanying the exhibition is available at [museum-frieder-burda.de/en/kalender](http://museum-frieder-burda.de/en/kalender).

### Press images & room texts

A selection of high-resolution press images can be found at [museum-frieder-burda.de/press](http://museum-frieder-burda.de/press). The room texts for the exhibition can be found in the appendix overleaf on pp. 5–11.

### Our media partner



### Press contact

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### Opening hours

Tuesday to Sunday, 10am - 6pm

Open on all public holidays, closed December 24 and 31.

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### 1) Abstract Expressionism

*"I believe a renaissance exists today which is shared and felt by all. There is the birth of a new spirit and a new significance of form."*

For the burgeoning New York artists, who would soon become known as the Abstract Expressionists, the 1940s marked the decade of breakthrough. One of the youngest in this group, Pousette-Dart first exhibited at the Artists' Gallery in New York in 1941, when he was just 25 years old. By the end of the decade, he was represented by the Betty Parsons Gallery, the leading venue for the display of Abstract Expressionist painting. From the outset, Pousette-Dart's painting was recognized for its spiritual orientation, embracing Transcendentalist themes of universality, wholeness, and an emphatically intuitive approach to creation.

Pousette-Dart's paintings of the 1940s are characterized by complex compositions of intertwined line and forms – birds, fish, spirals, circles –, often derived from the visual vocabulary of his small brass sculptures, layered into interlocking arrangements. The artist experimented widely with different materials and techniques, including mixing sand with oil paint, creating imagery through heavy accretions of pigment, or scoring surfaces by scraping and incising. He often referred to his canvases as "spontaneous kaleidoscopes", emphasizing that each work evolved intuitively rather than through a preconceived plan.

This approach chimed with the ethos of other Abstract Expressionist painters at a time, when the New York School emphasized the importance of the individual and increasingly foregrounded the role of the unconscious and the intuitive as key to unlocking creative energies.

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### 2) White Paintings

*"Paintings are a presence; they are best known by the spirit they leave with us after we have left them."*

In December 1950, facing the impending demolition of his New York City apartment building, Pousette-Dart relocated to a farmhouse in the rural community of Sloatsburg, New York. The following spring he was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship, allowing him to focus on a body of work now referred to as "White Paintings". Examples including *Descending Bird Forms* (1950/51), *Chavade* (1951) and *White Etude* (1952) employ graphite on subtly variegated white titanium grounds to create diaphanous, light-filled compositions that accentuate calligraphic impulses.

Throughout his career Pousette-Dart intermittently reduced his use of color, introducing and then diffusing highly saturated hues through scraping and layering to arrive at overall neutral effects. Observable in his White Paintings are traces of organic forms derived from his brasses, but emphasis instead is afforded to the accumulation of interwoven line. Concurrently, Pousette-Dart crafted a series of freestanding sculptures from steel and found objects, including *Creature of Clouds* (1951), whose striations of wire suggest a three-dimensional mode of drawing directly related to his White Paintings.

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### 3) Gothic and Byzantine Paintings

*"I strive for penetration, illumination, a significance of form according to my own changing experience in the universe. I love the instantaneous balance of opposites and differences."*

During the mid-1950s Pousette-Dart created colorfully saturated canvases now referred to as "Gothic Paintings", in reference to the magnificent stained-glass windows of medieval cathedrals, illuminated manuscripts, and jewel-encrusted reliquaries. These works offer a rich celebration of color, light, and vertical form realized through painterly approaches that include palette-knife work as well as drips and runs of pigment commonly associated with the aleatory practices of Abstract Expressionism.

The label "Byzantine" additionally identifies works such *Amaranth* (1958) and *Fountains of Penelope* (1960–62), linking effects of light achieved on canvas through numerous small accretions of paint to the shimmering qualities of mosaics. Metaphorically, the brilliant Gothic and Byzantine Paintings offer a harmonious mediation between disparate forces. In the artist's words, "I want to keep a balance just on the edge of awareness, the narrow rim between the conscious and subconscious; a balance between expanding and contracting; between silence and sound."

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#### 4) A Family of Artists

*"I strive to express the spiritual nature of the universe. Painting for me is a dynamic balance and wholeness of life; it is mysterious and transcending, yet solid and real."*

Richard Pousette-Dart was born into a family of artists, writers, and musicians. His grandfather, Algot Pousette, was a silversmith and painter of French Huguenot origin who emigrated to Minnesota during the nineteenth century. His parents, originally Nathaniel Pousette and Flora Dart, were highly progressive thinkers who, in 1913, hyphenated their names at marriage in an "act of mutual esteem" – a radical gesture at the time. Nathaniel trained as a painter at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and traveled abroad to study art and to sketch. Flora published poems and essays in Minnesota newspapers on socialism, ethics, and gender equality, and taught piano lessons.

The Pousette-Dart family moved to Valhalla, New York, in 1918, when Richard was 2 years old. In New York, Nathaniel balanced a career as a commercial art director with fine art pursuits that included editing volumes on prominent American painters; publishing art magazines, and founding the Art Adventure League, a correspondence course in art instruction – all as he advanced his own career as a painter. Flora was active within an intimate community of poets and musicians. She instilled in her children a deep appreciation for the poetry of John Keats, Ezra Pound, and the Transcendentalists, as well as the music of Bach. Throughout Richard's childhood, Nathaniel welcomed his children into his attic studio and Richard's mother encouraged his poetic musings and philosophical leanings, including his pacifist convictions.

Richard's familial grounding would later prove key to his constitution as an artist. Unlike the majority of his Abstract Expressionist peers, he was introduced to abstraction early in his development and supported in his aspirations to be an artist. Additionally, Nathaniel imparted in his son a reverence for seriously minded art as opposed to simple visual formulas. This viewpoint was later echoed in Richard's 1951 Boston address: "I do not admire facility nor easy effects ... I like what is sincerely won from the central core of character." In turn, Richard and Evelyn Pousette-Dart (married for nearly 50 years) would encourage their own children to discover creative individual paths. Today, Joanna Pousette-Dart is an accomplished abstract painter and Jonathan Pousette-Dart records and performs as a popular musician.



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### 5) Black and White Paintings

*"Black and white is the guts of all color. The structure, base, body, bottom line."*

Between 1978 and 1980, Pousette-Dart created a diverse body of paintings in a limited tonal range. These works are ostensibly black and white. However, upon closer examination traces of colored pigment can be discovered in works such as *Black and White Fugue* (1979/80). Working with a reduced palette has been a strategy used by painters and even stained-glass artists since the Renaissance. The choice to paint in black and white by Abstract Expressionist artists has been ascribed to many factors, ranging from expressions of personal angst to evidence that struggling artists could not afford expensive, colorful hues of paint.

For Pousette-Dart, working in black and white was by no means a reductive exercise or compromise. Instead, the artist fully understood that the two extremes of the spectrum, in fact, contain all color values at once. Paintings and works on paper in this room offer an oscillating viewing experience: forms that at first appear as black on white suddenly appear as white emerging from black. Pousette-Dart called the transition between positive and negative forms "the living edge;" a state analogous to the zone between the conscious and unconscious, where intuition freely guides the art making process.

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### 6) The Painter as Photographer

*"I feel everything is a wonderful photographic subject if one has the patience, perseverance and experience to reveal it in its own way . . . Love is the eye of photography or anything else."*

Pousette-Dart practiced photography throughout his life, beginning with experiments with pinhole cameras as a child. During the mid-1940s he became extremely active with the medium, setting up his own darkroom where he experimented with techniques such as combining multiple images and applying pigments directly to prints. In 1948, his photographs were exhibited in a groundbreaking exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, and in 1953 he received recognition in *Photography* magazine's International Picture Contest and became a sought-after magazine photographer.

Through photography, Pousette-Dart explored the spiritual and transcendent possibilities of light, form, layering, and line that are at the heart of his abstract paintings. Addressing the mechanical nature of the medium, he noted, "Photographs are reflections through light and mechanics, processes, machines and if they are to be more they must be altered, distorted, extended, rearranged, transformed and in so doing we may find a work of art." Pousette-Dart was equally fascinated by photographic equipment itself and avidly collected vintage cameras. On view in this room is a 1920s large-format Ansco view camera that he playfully hand-painted sometime after 1960.

Pousette-Dart's nature studies record forms similar to those of his brass sculptures as well as the organic arrangements of line and light that inform his paintings and drawings. His alluring portraits present leading artistic and cultural figures within his diverse intellectual circle, especially during the dynamic decades of the 1940s and 1950s when Abstract Expressionism gained international renown. Within his sensitive portraits, sitters often are paired through multiple exposure with artistic attributes such as musical instruments and works of art. Many compositions are allegories of seeing: subjects gaze contemplatively; eyes are featured prominently; some peer through circles that mimic the aperture of the camera.

All photographs in this room are vintage examples printed by Richard Pousette-Dart himself. Many are shown for the very first time in this exhibition.

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### 7) Facing the Starry Sky

*“Art for me is the heavens forever opening up, like asymmetrical, unpredictable, spontaneous kaleidoscopes.”*

In 1960, Pousette-Dart's painting followed a radically new direction toward all-over fields of color achieved through layers of multitudinous, small dabs of paint. Traces of forms from his brassy remain, but the canvases now concentrate on light-filled optical effects. Pousette-Dart's late work erroneously has been tied to Pointillism (his paintings are entirely intuitive, rather than system-based), and the artist noted that his training with photographic prints and negatives allowed him to scrutinize the granular structure of film, revealing that “all form is made up of so many points of light and that everything has a molecular structure. Photography was how I got to the point . . . I'm concerned with form and the nature of light, and I find that I can achieve variations in form through many touches of the brush in a way that I can't with a single stroke of the brush.”

Paintings titled “Hieroglyphs”, “Implosions”, and “Presences” innovatively employ abstraction to offer vantages on the idea of space, including expanding and converging recessionary depth and sweeping cross-sections of seeming infinitude. A number of these works invoke stellar and celestial imagery with no fixed horizon point, suggesting a macroscopic view of the universe, although the artist noted that he never consciously set out to record the heavens. Rather, he sought universal form and structure present in multiple scales, whether observable through a microscope or telescope.