

# Iconoclastic Fervor: Sally Hazelet Drummond's Road to Abstraction

By Ricki Morse

Sally Hazelet Drummond's search for an artistic vocabulary to express her vision is one she shares with many modern artists. Characterized by an individualistic temperament, rigorous training in the arts and boundless creative energy, Drummond began her studies at Rollins College in Florida and as a junior transferred to Columbia University in New York City where she received her B.A. in 1948, beginning her lifelong love of the city. She often attended openings in the East Village, at the 10th Street galleries. Abstract expressionism was flourishing, relieving the artist of representation, and requiring a personal interior vision to give life and meaning to the painted surface.



Sally Hazelet Drummond  
in NYC, 1959

After a year at the Institute of Design in Chicago, she joined her family in Louisville and received her master's degree in art at the Hite Art Institute of the University of Louisville in 1952, where she was the first woman graduate. The following year she accepted a Fulbright grant to study in Venice. It was in Louisville that she met her future husband, Wick Drummond. Upon returning to New York, she found an apartment on East 10th Street and was invited to join the Tanager Gallery, an artist-run cooperative. Though her work was becoming less representational, often cubistic, sometimes linear, she was seeing ground-breaking work all around her, particularly that of Willem de Kooning, whom she knew and admired. She told an interviewer that she always wanted to be good. To others, queried the interviewer?



Drummond, *Girl Sitting*, 1940, oil  
on Masonite

No, for myself, she answered. Drummond was clear that she had not yet found a way to reflect on the canvas the experiential moment she wanted to embody. She found herself painting out the image of a vase of flowers she had begun, leaving finally a heavily overpainted white surface. Something about the imageless surface felt right. She began to explore French pointillism, the neo-impressionist application of paint in small dabs, most famously employed by Paul Seurat, who was given a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1958. Drummond spent days soaking up the sketches, prints and paintings.

In 1962 Wick and Sally's son Craig was born and the family left New York City, settling in Germantown, NY, about 100 miles up the Hudson

River from the city. Drummond received a Guggenheim to study in France in 1967-68 where she spent time with many pointillist artists, particularly Seurat and his colleague and fellow pointillist, Paul Signac. Though usually referred to as dots, the application of paint seems to me much more complexly varied, while dots describe what Roy Lichtenstein painted in his pop/comic image canvases



Drummond, *Magician*, 1951, Lacquer on gessoed Masonite.

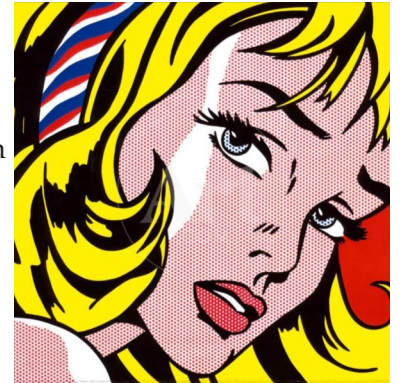


.Paul Signac (1863-1935), *Harbor of Marseilles*, 1906, oil on canvas. Hermitage Museum

*Girl with Hair Ribbon*. Drummond describes the process of choosing the colors of the dabs as dictated by the painting process itself, as each dab dictates the color and placement of the next, the spacing and brightness or darkness determined by her internal image of the whole.

In 1972 the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. mounted a retrospective of Drummond’s work, which had previously been shown in galleries in the East Village, particularly at the now-defunct Tanager.

The New York Times reviewer, Hilton Kramer, wrote, “The direc-



Roy Lichtenstein, *Girl with Hair Ribbon*

tion chosen by Mrs. Drummond seemed particularly radical, not only in its rejection of all expressionist facture in painting, but also in its revival of a delicate pointillist technique for the purpose of a very abstract imagery. This imagery consisted of a finely worked painted surface composed of myriad dots or touches of color, in which an abstract field of light— very subtly conceived but very rigorously controlled—formed a single, over-all pictorial structure. The application of the paint was remarkably even, remarkably cerebral—or so, at the time, it seemed—



Drummond, *Unified Field*, 1980 (detail), oil on canvas.

yet the effect was lyrical, even joyous.” At about this time Drummond shifted the overall visual center of her work to light, emanating subtly from the center of the canvas, as opposed to the dark center of the above painting. This shift seems to express a glowing presence which many associate with Drummond’s interest in Buddhism, but I have been unable to find any statements from Drummond on Buddhism. Certainly these later canvases, which she has continued to paint, feel contemplative, meditative, quieting—not a little awesome!

Drummond’s work was included in a group show at P.S. 1, the Museum of Modern Art’s Long Island City gallery, entitled “Underknown:

Twelve Artists Re-Seen in 1984.” New York Times re-

viewer Michael Brensen remarked, “In each of Drummond’s dotted fields of color, a light at the center has just begun to glimmer.” Sally Drummond is also a skilled writer, and I find her descriptions of her philosophy and her artistic vision compelling. Her most recent exhibition was hung at the Hite Art Institute in Louisville in 2015. She and her son Craig participated in the planning of the show, and she gave interviews and wrote essays for the catalogue, the title of which I used as the title of this article. Sally Hazelet Drummond’s



Drummond, *Heart of Iron*, 1960, oil on canvas

statements for the Iconoclastic Fervor catalogue:

### **On philosophy**

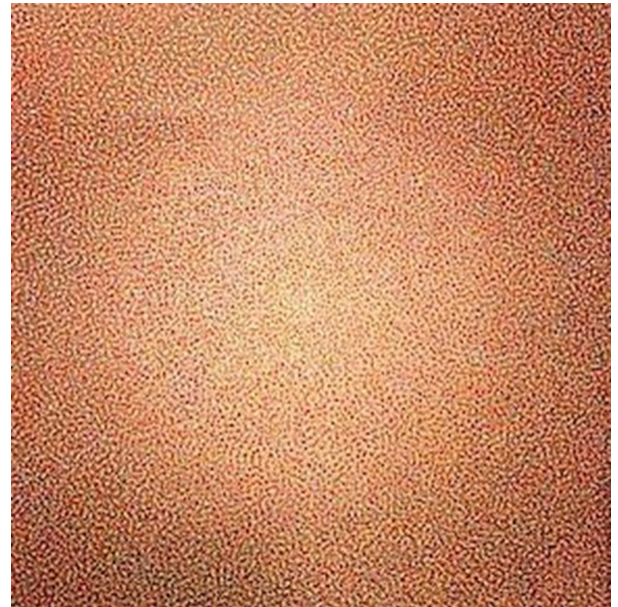
I believe that all great art is an attempt on the part of the artist to express his faith in the unseen, but intuitively felt, structured but infinite beauty lying inherent in the visible world. This faith and concern, I believe, is what binds together all the highest forms of artistic expression of man down through the ages.

### **On the challenge of modern art**

For me, the challenge and significance of 20th Century art, from the time of Cezanne has been the attempt to simplify and to reduce the complexities of the visual world to essential and meaningful forms. This search for essences has been a thread which to me distinguishes art of this century from most Western art since the Italian Renaissance.

### **On her own painting**

For me, color is the basic ingredient of painting, and it is with color that I try to express my feelings. The outer form of my painting is the shape of the canvas. The inner form is striven for through the depth and richness of the color. Cezanne said, "When the color is at its richest, the form is at its plenitude." My ultimate goal is to create a single radiant field of contemplation where form and content have become one.



Drummond, *Untitled (gold leaf)*, 2010, oil on canvas.



The Hite Institute of Art exhibition *Iconoclastic Fervor: Sally Hazelet Drummond's Road to Abstraction*, 2015