



Lydia Dona
1989-1995

Post-Void

by Al Harris E.

IN THE 1950S MOVIE CLASSIC, *REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE*, THE MOVIE'S protagonists are told at the end of a planetarium lecture (in which they have witnessed the end of the earth in a fiery explosion) that humanity is inconsequential since the universe will continue long after it is gone. After the lecture, one rebel challenges the other to a game of "chicken." Before the race, in which the two will speed stolen cars off a cliff in order to see who jumps first, they gaze down from the cliff into the dark void below. After a pause, one asks: "Why do we do these things?" The other answers, sublimely, "You got to do something."

Compared to that one-way sense of grandiose heroism, Lydia Dona's paintings reflect a world more similar to Robert Altman's in his 1993 film *Short Cuts*. While the characters in *Rebel Without a Cause* were able to dramatize their confusion against the backdrop of the sublime, Dona holds that, today, the sublime is no longer an option.¹ A sense of the sublime is notably absent in Altman's movie, in which the characters, whose lives overlap without actually connecting, appear as directionless as the urban sprawl they inhabit. Similarly, instead of a void beyond the cliff exiting onto the eternal, Dona's void functions more as a sponge, bogged down with a seemingly indiscriminate selection of the high and the low, the here and now.

This is made apparent in Dona's work through her choice of colors, the painting vocabularies she references, and her compositions. Instead of using the somber hues traditionally associated with a semi-conscious '50s-styled sublime, Dona reflects the all-too-familiar colors of institutional lunchrooms, lines of cosmetics, or photochemical processes that we see reflected around us every day. Her overtly mediated drips subvert abstract expressionism's vocabulary of "authenticity": the drips and splatters that bore witness to the individuality of the artist. These associations and more are packed with a fragmented sense of information overload into her compositions.



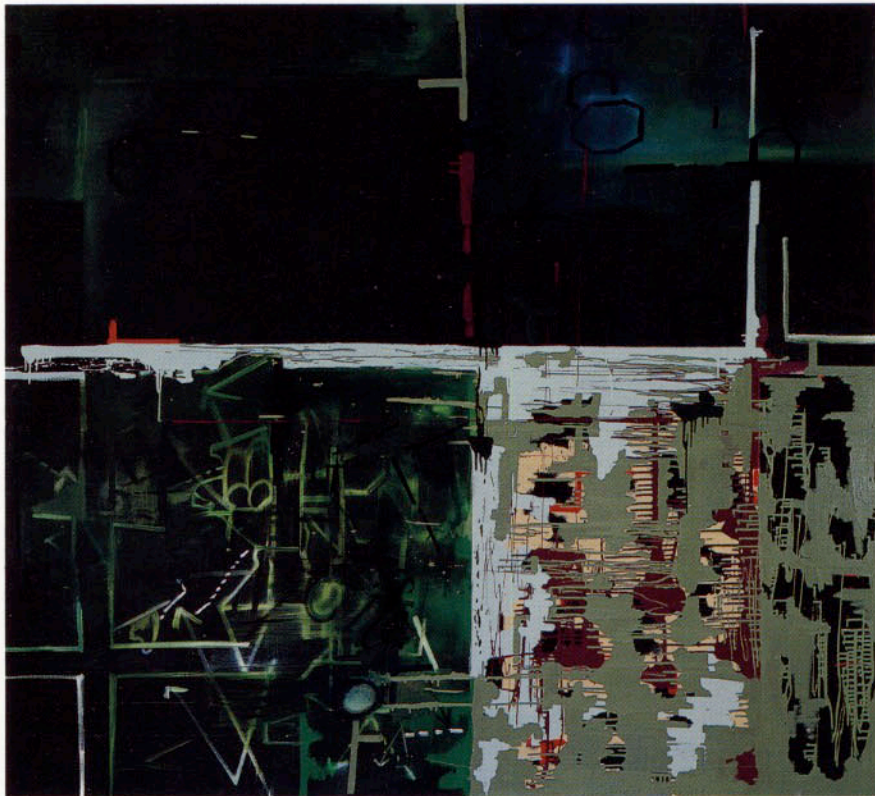
THE TOPOGRAPHIC ORIENTATION WE ARE SUPPOSED TO PROJECT INTO THE FABRIC OF CORAL DEPENDS UPON PARTICLES AND CODES OF DESIRE, 1987

Dona's work initially began moving in this direction in 1989, after her paintings underwent a dramatic change which she describes as a "rupture in their molecular field." The change was described by one art critic as Dona having gone from taking Larry Poons' paintings as a departure point and then "investigating the possibilities of all-over composition" to a "visual realm in which everything contends with, interrupts, and invades everything else."²

This sort of rupture is, of course, in marked contrast to late modernism's goal to purge itself of impure thoughts, as it were, by methodically reducing its vocabulary to a set of universally self-referential terms such as "flatness" and "all-over composition." Dona's paintings, however, revel in those rejected impurities, soaking them up, reflecting them in a seemingly random and unselective way. In this manner, Dona's paintings reflect a visual realm characterized by disruption rather than order, a realm equated with time and its constant state of becoming, rather than the timeless.

Dona's images reflect this understanding of the time-based nature of culture because they emphasize continually changing sets of relationships rather than static ones. She accomplishes this by coupling traditional oppositions to additional oppositions until the initial dualism is replaced by what Dona describes as a triangulation.

For example, in her 1990 painting *Desire Is A Machine, And The Object Of Desire Is Another Machine Connected To It*, Dona begins by dividing the canvas in two, using signifiers from opposite ends of painting: abstraction and representation. Dona then divides these categories into additional opposing categories. On the abstract side she contrasts expressive drips with controlled areas of masked monochromatic color. She then subdivides her drips into those which flow across the canvas and those which make sudden right angle turns, while at the same time subdividing



DESIRE IS A MACHINE, AND THE OBJECT OF DESIRE IS ANOTHER MACHINE CONNECTED TO
It, 1990

her areas of masked color into those which are opaque and lie flat on the surface of the canvas and those which are transparent and offer the illusion of depth.

On the representational side, in addition to contrasting the opposing vernaculars of the diagrammatic and the naturalistic, Dona couples “opposing” technological imagery: automobile engine manuals next to biological diagrams of molecules.

In addition to Dona’s coupled opposites, her use of color also serves to disrupt any possibility that the elements in her paintings will gel into the familiar hierarchies of modernist painting. Dona’s drips are painted in queasily institutional colors—pastel yellows, blues and greens—that are more likely to be used to keep one from lingering in the lavatory than to articulate the personal angst previously indexed by expressionistic drippery.

While Dona primarily creates her triangulated visual realm by preventing the individual elements within her paintings from conforming into familiar hierarchies, she reinforces this goal by capitalizing each word in her titles. In so doing she loads the conjunctives in her titles, such as “And” or “Of,” with the same weight we normally reserve for nouns and verbs. This practice has the same effect as her visual combinations in that they subvert the grammatical structure and meaning that relies on key and subordinate concepts. The somewhat unnerving result is both a visual and linguistic equivalent of an anarchistic free-for-all.

Dona occasionally reverses this practice in the presentation of her work. Since 1990, she has exhibited her work four times in an installation format. In each of these installations the paintings were arranged to force a narrative reading in time, like a series of film stills, that served to disrupt the privileged reading of the individual painting. Reinforcing the filmic association, the 1992 installation at the Tom Cugliani Gallery included three chairs set in front of five horizontal paintings on one wall, flanked by a single vertical format painting on each of the two adjoining walls. Each of the two vertical end paintings were dominated by a large oval “void” of monochromatic color.

The effect of the five horizontal paintings was a feeling of

movement that, together, implied that the two ovals might function as passageways—except, of course, that one was painted in an obtuse pea-green and the other in a dull pink; the colors emphasizing their materiality rather than hinting at any possibility of transcendence. The installation's filmic format, complete with chairs, also served to reinforce the theatrical status of the void today: its timelessness a romantic fiction in a time-based culture.

In contrast to the planetarium's static view of humankind in relation to the timeless void, Lydia Dona's post-void paintings reflect a subject who constantly has to reinvent him or herself, as does the cultural body in which he or she exists.

NOTES

1. From conversations with the artist during the fall of 1995.
2. "Lydia Dona, Tom Cugliani Gallery," John Yau, *Artforum*, February, 1990: 137.



INSTALLATION VIEW. TOM CUGLIANI GALLERY, NEW YORK. 1992