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Black is the new black in Dallas art

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By Rick Brettell

When Gavin Delahunty called in every chip he had to secure global loans for the extraordinary "Jackson Pollock: Blind Spots" at the Dallas Museum of Art last spring, the exhibition was like a bolt of lightning in Dallas.

Collectors, critics, historians and just plain cultural tourists flocked to Dallas from all over the world. Lectures were given. Artists opined in studios and at a dinner parties. And the city reveled in the world's recognition of the brilliance not only of Pollock, but of the power of Dallas and the DMA in the new world of art.

One Dallas cultural leader, Joan Davidow, paid special attention, and mounted an exhibition at the superb art space she has created with her son Seth: Site 131 or, in her own chic terms, Site 1-111-1, in the Dallas Design District. The exhibition focuses on the work of five living artists from Europe (2), Texas (2) and (get this!) Kentucky (1) who use black almost exclusively in their work.

At first thought, this seems a bit obvious — like, so what, that artists use black — or even derivative: artists now inspired by the long-dead Jackson Pollock. But it is neither.

When we first enter the beautiful spaces created by architect David Droese, it seems as if we are looking at paintings and drawings made of black ink or paint that have, at best, a distant relationship with Pollock's furiously energetic masterpieces of the late 1940s and early 1950s.

But our first assumptions prove incorrect as we confront the works carefully and try to figure out how they were made.

What transpires is that, like Pollock, who poured and pushed around liquid black paint on unprimed canvas rather than paint pictures with a brush in the tried-and-true manner, these artists reinvented the very act of painting.

One of them, our own James Buss, casts the paintings in plaster, into which he suspends various black-pigmented compounds that create almost arbitrary or unforeseen compositions as the plaster dries.

At first these look like standard paintings, but, when we see five of them sitting on the floor and leaning on the wall and see that they are too thin to be stretched canvas, we realize we are looking at something that is hard and relatively heavy. So much for painting with black on canvas.

On an adjacent wall, the German artist Maximilian Prüfer covers large sheets of paper with a compound he calls "naturantypie" and then sets them out in the rain, the drops of which interact with the compound to record the rainfall.

Another European, Phoebe Collings-James of London, covered herself in black paint and, with her entire body as the brush, moved across, gestured on, stood on and interacted with a piece of canvas on the floor. She subsequently cut it into three compositions and had it stretched.

The other two, Luke Harnden from Dallas and the obsessive Beverly Baker from Kentucky, use equally inventive and personal techniques, one with black ink and the other with black ballpoint pens, to make works that look like conventional paintings and drawings, but which have their own material logic.

Delahunty — indeed any museum curator — should be happy that a scholarly art exhibition has produced such ripples in its own community. And Davidow's exhibition proves that large-scale expensive art exhibitions actually matter to the creative community of an important city.

I recall Rene Prieto's brilliant lectures on black in Spanish art and literature at the Meadows Museum, which ran during the course of the Pollock exhibition, and of Sarah Kozlowski's and Benjamin Lima's two-part installation of the diptychs, triptychs and polyptychs of the late John Wilcox in the eponymous space on Exposition devoted to his work.

I also recall the bracing dissertation by Steve Halla, a graduate student who came to the University of Texas at Dallas from the Dallas Theological Seminary to do a creative dissertation on black.

And, had we an important fashion museum in the city, or if the DMA had displayed and collected fashion as many hoped, there could have been a delightful exhibition of "The Little Black Dress" like the one I saw years ago in Marseille, France.

I regret that I missed the opening at Site 131, because so many of the art set wear little else than black, and the ultimate accident of timing occurred during the run of Davidow's exhibition — the tragedy of the Dallas police shootings.

Even [Yoko Ono's response](#) to that was — you guessed it — black and white. Indeed, one can imagine a stimulating exhibition called "The Color of Mourning" with white mourning clothing from India and black from Europe and North America.

Rarely has an exhibition crystallized so many disparate interests and projects in its own city. One could say that it was a happy accident, but it is really proof that we live in a culturally vibrant metropolis.

Plan your life: "Black Paintings: A Response to Jackson Pollock," Site 131, 131 Payne St. 214-678-0101. site131.com. Fridays and Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m. and by appointment. The exhibition closes Sept. 10.

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