



Noël Dolla

November 4, 2011
by Raphael Rubinstein

Would you believe me if I told you that some of the most significant statements in and about painting have been made with dishtowels, handkerchiefs, fishing lures, pillowcases and rolls of 14-centimeter wide muslin? Would you believe me if I told you that one of the most important contemporary artists has spent his entire working life on a single street in a sleepy Mediterranean city? Whether you believe me or not matters little to the person I'm talking about: Noël Dolla, a French artist who was born in Nice in 1945 and currently lives and works a mere two blocks from the building where he grew up.

Although he is defiantly local in his daily life, Dolla has been totally committed to an artistic practice of widest import ever since he first emerged in the late 1960s as the youngest and most artistically radical member of the Supports/Surfaces movement. While contemporaneous with Arte Povera and American Post-Minimalism, and similarly concerned to reject the business-as-usual of the postwar Western art establishment, Supports/Surface was surprisingly attached to the medium of painting. Drawing on Greenbergian formalism, French Maoism, post-structuralist philosophy and the legacy of Matisse, Supports/Surfaces artists such as Dolla, Claude Viallat, Daniel Dezeuze, Patrick Saytour and others embarked on a literal and ideological deconstruction of painting.



Noël Dolla, *Tarlatans*, Fabric dye on tarlatan, studio view, 1970. Photograph by the artist.



Noël Dolla, *Structure à la tente d'indien*, Dyed cloth, towel rack, 160 by 140 by 80 cm, 1968.

Dolla's early breakdowns of abstraction included works such as *Structure à la tente d'indien* (Indian Tent Structure), a multi-pronged towel rack from which hung several pieces of color-stained cloth, including one patterned like a Native American teepee, and *Etendoir aux mouchoirs* (Drying Rack with Handkerchiefs) in which 10 handkerchiefs, partly dyed pink and yellow, are suspended from a store-bought rack. The handkerchiefs are sewn together to form two strips of unequal length, each of which hangs free in space. These flimsy, boldly domestic inventions sneak up on the heritage of artists such as Vladimir Tatlin, Barnett Newman and Morris Louis, and set the stage for Dolla's subsequent practice of repurposing everyday items to make raids into (and out of) abstract painting.

NOËL DOLLA

Restlessness has marked Dolla's entire career, at least from the mid 1970s when he stopped making the "Cross" paintings that galleries around Europe were clamouring for. This refusal to frame his critique of formalist abstraction with an infinitely repeatable trademark motif dramatically set Dolla apart from the BMPT painters (Buren, Mosset, Parmentier and Toroni), as well as from many of his Supports/Surfaces companions. The freedom that Dolla claimed in the 1970s came at a price: very few people knew what to do with this artist who could move from finger-painted monochromes to land-art (large colored dots on beaches and snow-capped mountains) to tiny fishing-lure sculptures, to large sulfurous paintings made with smoking tapers, to hilarious combine paintings that featured window shutters, to labyrinthine installations created with yards of unrolled muslin fabric. Among Dolla's most challenging series are the "Chernobyl Paintings," canvases he painted in 1986-87 with only his right hand (he is left-handed) while wearing a patch over one eye. Atypically figurative and expressionist, these works were the artist's response to simultaneous tragedies: the nuclear accident in the USSR and Dolla's two brothers being diagnosed with AIDS. In his recent paintings Dolla has again departed from his generally abstract/conceptual practice to create a series of large-scale, boldly decorative allegorical canvases that pair process-oriented technique and a Constructivist visual style.



Noël Dolla, *Leurre de Noël*, Fishhook, tinsel, feathers, 1998.
Photograph by the artist.

Fascinated by domestic readymades and also by pure color, passionately committed to painting and intelligently irreverent towards its pretensions, equally ready to uphold the legacy of Malevich and Barnett Newman (his two greatest influences) and to pursue what he has called "humiliated abstraction," Dolla presents us with a bouillabaisse of seemingly contradictory positions. It's only when you pause to consider his entire career—as was possible most recently in an ambitious 2009 survey of his work at the MAC/VAL Musée d'art contemporaine outside of Paris—that his underlying fidelity to himself, and to the old modernist dream of socially transformative painting, comes through.