

Two Coats of Paint

Roy Dowell's alchemic formulations

16 September 2026 | By Jacob Cartwright



New York, NY: Miles McEnery Gallery, "Roy Dowell: Evidence to the Contrary" 10 September - 31 October 2026.
Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York.

This is Roy Dowell's fourth solo exhibition at Miles McEnery Gallery since 2020, so it's not arriving out of the blue. That said, while all his previous shows have been satisfying, this one strikes me as particularly successful, leaving a lasting impression. It's the tumbled stone dropped into the pocket: pleasing to turn over and reexamine days and weeks later.

In previous shows, Dowell's paintings on linen varied in size and generally topped out around five feet on the longer side. Here, he's consistently used a 24-by-18-inch support and has achieved a more intimate result. The uniformity in size yields a crisp installation in which the paintings feel like parts of a greater whole – chapters in a book or plates in a folio. There's a pleasing *ratatat* to the array. You're aware of going from one individuated viewing experience to the next, ticking like a clock hand around the room.

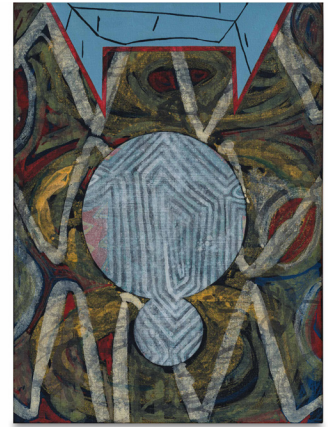
Dowell's paintings have a handmade pizzazz that, at the larger scale, felt a bit like hand-painted 19th-century carnival posters – meant to catch the eye and then intrigue with a whiff of the arcane. "Step behind the curtain and see!" Compressed into a smaller size, the language of pinwheels, checkers, arrows, dots, and dashes resembles the idiosyncratic homemade gameboards that preceded mass-produced entertainment. Indeed, an infectious sense of play permeates the work.

This linkage to the vernacular gives the work a homespun affability. Dowell's choice of materials lays the foundations for this. He's used Flashe ("vinyl emulsion paint") on linen, and the matte paint gives his surfaces the feeling of waxed fabric. In fact, passages in which relatively aqueous paint is lyrically applied over a darker background layer call to mind the wax-resist technique of batik cloth, where loosely painted wax designs stand out against surrounding dye-infused fabric. The mark-making suggests how drawing and pattern design intersect in painted textiles, and how depictions of flora and fauna can go beyond the decorative and serve as a visual structure. Here that quality of drawing is unmoored, so that it's more free-roaming than descriptive.

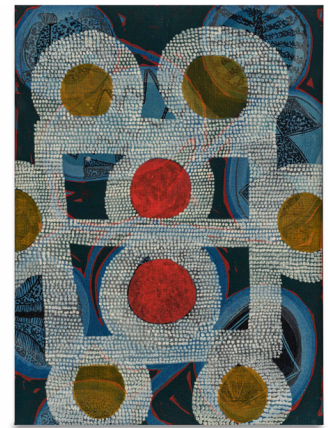
Dowell's motifs no doubt draw inspiration from myriad sources – he has exhibited closely related collage work in the past – but in its gestalt, this body of work feels like a treatise on folk forms. A large part of that is down to his application, which is a pleasing combination of the deliberate and offhand. Visual structures built through repetitive mark-making feel akin to the improvisational space-filling patterns associated with outsider artists. The paintings bring to mind other notable alchemic formulations, such as Marsden Hartley's embrace of indigenous iconography and abstracted heraldry during his Berlin period and R.E.M.'s transmutation of Howard Finster's self-taught art into record sleeves in the 1980s. The common quality here is the way that artists go through the world with their senses wide open, welcoming affinities that aren't in the expected places.

These qualities – a finely tuned sensibility for materials, the ability to be evocative while resisting the referential – are well established in Dowell's work. The recent paintings are striking in the way that they identify increasingly fruitful ways to deploy these methods. The compact size is working for him here. He seems to be putting more ideas and information into each painting, and in this smaller format those ideas crowd up into a kind of visual jamboree. Without a lot of deep space or "push and pull," everything is cozied up in the frontal part of the picture plane. The resulting pictures are upfront and all right there, yet also a little inscrutable, thanks to the way motifs interrupt and overlay one another.

Roy Dowell is a distinguished artist and educator – he initiated the graduate fine arts department at Otis in 1990 – so he's not coming out of nowhere. Among the great rewards of this show is the opportunity to witness an artist taking his skillset fully to the bank. We've all seen good paintings that suggest the possibility of a show that probes even more deeply. This is that show.



Roy Dowell, *untitled #1278*, 2024,
Vinyl emulsion on linen over panel, 24 x 18 in
Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery,
New York.



Roy Dowell, *carried into battle*, 2025,
Vinyl emulsion on linen over panel, 24 x 18 in
Courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery,
New York.