

By Hunter Drohojowska

Denise Domergue has repainted a mural by Raoul Dufy, restored the fading glamour of San Simeon, the mansion of William Randolph Hearst, and traveled around the French countryside compiling condition reports on the frescoes adorning 16th-century churches. None of this, however, accounts for her unique reputation in the field of art conservation. Domergue (pronounced "do-mayerg") is renowned internationally as a specialist in the restoration of contemporary art.

In a profession traditionally associated with decaying antiquities, over 75 percent of Domergue's clientele brings in artwork that is less than 40 years old. Based in Los Angeles, Domergue's schedule is crowded with paintings submitted by such prestigious galleries as Flow Ace, L.A. Louver and Margo Leavin, collectors such as Stanley and Elyse Grinstein and Marcia Weisman, and, of course, the artists themselves, who consider her one of the city's most valuable resources.

Since the advent of the Modern Era, artists have imposed few restrictions on the shape and substance of their art. Mark Rothko's enormous fragile surfaces of a single color or Frank Stella's painted Day-Glo cardboard constructions introduce a brand-new set of problems to the venerable occupation of conservation. "Conservators today are confronted with things that have never been done before," Domergue points out. As a person who clearly feels passionately about contemporary art, she saw a need and was inspired to respond.

Domergue, 34, is a lithe beauty. A tassel of glossy, dark hair skewed atop her head, lips limned in dramatic crimson, even in a lab coat she looks more like a fashion model than one's expected image of an art conservator. Her infectious enthusiasm, however, leaves little doubt about her commitment to the profession. Seated at a meticulously ordered desk, Domergue animatedly explains some of the problems common to modern art. "Inherent vulnerability: Paintings are bigger than ever and they're awkward to handle. In a home, they're likely to be put in a vulnerable position, so they can be bumped or spilled upon more easily than a smaller painting protected by a frame and hanging at eye level. Surface is another problem. In a painting where the surface is everything — like a Mark Rothko or a Brice Marden — even a fingerprint is a disaster. Every minor thing becomes a major problem. A small oil isn't as vulnerable."

Domergue pauses, lightly appraising more than a dozen big, vulnerable canvases leaning against the walls of her studio. A small sigh escapes and she continues. "Then there is inherent vice. That could be one kind of paint applied over another, cheap materials or oil paint on paper or unprimed canvas. In recent decades, artists have been using anything and everything to achieve an effect. Jackson Pollock put his cigarette butts in his paintings. That wasn't a problem, but the results of a lot of experiments are just starting to show up now. The work self-destructs, and all we do as conservators is slow the process."

The storefront entrance to Domergue's mid-Wilshire studio opens to a pair of cavernous white rooms housing heating tables and easels, pegboards armed with tools, shelves of paints, brushes and wax. The resemblance to an artist's studio is striking. On one wall hangs a pale blue geometric Robert Moskowitz on which someone had dripped

Hunter Drohojowska is a Los Angeles free-lance writer.

DOMERGUE'S DOMAIN

Conservator Denise Domergue combats the specialized problems of contemporary art



Denise Domergue at work at her mid-Wilshire studio.

some white paint. An Ed Ruscha sunset, which, upon arrival, was damaged in shipping, is wrapped in plastic and ready to go back to the gallery. An easel holds a Ned Evans abstraction, slashed by the collector's angry lover. Inherent vulnerability has many guises.

Domergue leans back in a director's chair and narrates the path of her career. A native of San Francisco, Domergue attended the University of California, Berkeley, but became bored with her studies in art history and French literature. "I had been struggling with the remoteness of art history," she recalls, "yet I didn't feel I had the calling to be an artist." Domergue happened to read about the restoration of the old quarter in Paris. Inquiries and luck led to an apprenticeship in painting conservation at the Musee Nationale d'Art Moderne in Paris.

"That was my introduction, the Dufy mural," glows Domergue. "I was this starry-eyed, 19-year-old art history student laying hands on these pieces I had just read about in books. I was admitted to the temple of art in a very privileged way — an opportunity to study how these great people painted, to look at their canvases, stretchers, nails..." Domergue lifts both hands in a gesture of appreciation and adds, "It was more palpable contact with art than I'd ever had before. I fell in love with the profession... and its possibilities."

To enter the profession, however, Domergue had to return to Berkeley, where she graduated with an honors degree in French and art history in 1968. There were no programs in conservation, so it was after school that her studies really began. The following year, Domergue went to New York,

knocking on doors at every museum until she was accepted as an apprentice to Jean Volkmer at the Museum of Modern Art. Through the museum, she was awarded a grant to study the materials of art and archaeology at New York University.

"Jean Volkmer was an inspiration," says Domergue. "I had tremendous respect for her knowledge. One of her mottos was 'patience and persistence.' You learn that the work you're doing imposes the pace. You can't force anything. You have to proceed with caution."

While in New York, she also worked for three months for Pop sculptor Claes Oldenburg. "It was great — my first glimpse of art stardom. He'd have meetings with biographers every day, it seemed. I was amazed at his organization. He had everything cataloged, almost. It blew my theory of the unorganized artist-type," she remembers.

In spite of these successes, Domergue eventually tired of the East Coast and returned to San Francisco in 1971. She was doing free-lance work there when Oldenburg came to Los Angeles to work on an edition for the prominent print workshop Gemini G.E.L. Domergue came south for a visit and stayed. "I just wanted to try L.A. It was a fateful decision. I fell in love with it."

A kind word from Oldenburg, and Domergue was employed as an assistant curator at Gemini. There she met many of her future clients — including such figures as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Sam Francis. It was not until 1976, however, that she opened her private practice in Los Angeles. During the intervening four years she traveled, studied and improved her techniques: free-lance assistant conservator at the San Francisco Museum of Art; staff research associate at the Laboratory for Research in Fine Arts and Museology at the University of California, Davis; a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to spend six months working and studying in Europe; then back to Davis until 1976, when the conservation lab closed for lack of funding. "It was perfect timing," confesses Domergue. "I'd been building a clientele in Los Angeles. I saw a need and was sure I'd have work, since I'd been flying down on weekends to work for Nick Wilder and Sam Francis."

In fact, it was Francis who required her services just three months after the official Los Angeles opening of "Denise Domergue, Conservation of Paintings." In November 1976, Francis sent Domergue to Paris to restore "In Lovely Blueness," a large 1950s composition bought by the Centre George Pompidou. It had been in storage for years and needed to be cleaned and restretched. According to Francis, "It was a tremendous amount of work. The painting was 7 meters wide by 4 meters high. She went over acres of color with one of those tiny things you use to clean your ears — a cotton swab. It took her months. She got into every crevice and corner of that thing, as if it were a skin. I almost felt that she'd cleaned me up."

Francis was pleased with the results and has remained a faithful supporter. He flatly states, "I've only known intimately two restorers — both women — and both have the same quality that Domergue has. They are interested in the object almost as if it were a human body. It is that kind of a tension. She doesn't want to change it or restore it into something new, pretty and fresh. She wants to stabilize it, so it's aging gracefully. That's why she's so unique."

It was Francis' recommendation, and a pair of his fragile canvases, that led Domergue in 1980 on her most bizarre of salvation expeditions, one that proved that even the profession of conservation can be inherently vulnerable.

Weinstock's built a new department store in Sacramento, and the percentage of the building cost that was mandated to the purchase of art was used for two of Francis' paintings. Each is 23 by 19 feet, untitled white canvases patterned with loose grids of splatter-and-drip color. In order to be ready for opening day, the works were hastily hung on cables from third-floor ledges, facing one another, divided only by a pair of "up" and "down" escalators. About nine months later, it was noticed that the careless installation was damaging the paintings. As Domergue describes, "Being hung by cables, the wind was whipping them around, actually flapping them in the breeze. The stretchers had warped away from the wall. . . . It was a mess." The saga of restoration that Domergue recounts sounds like a segment of "Mission Impossible."

The paintings had to be cleaned, restretched and rehung in five days, complicated by the fact that Domergue and her three-person crew could only work from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m., entering the store from the skylights in the roof. There were other setbacks. The store had intended to build scaffolding so that the conservators could safely work 38 feet above the ground floor, but immovable jewelry cases thwarted that plan. Domergue had winches installed on the ledges at the top of the third-floor walls, the paintings were hooked up and lowered slowly down. There the canvases were unstretched and wound onto 24-inch industrial cardboard tubes. That was the first evening. During the next two evenings, the canvases were unwound from the tubes and the four conservators cleaned them inch by inch, using cotton swabs moistened with a solution of ammonium hydroxide and distilled water.

It was becoming increasingly apparent, however, that there was no way to get the paintings back up to the third floor. "The Weinstock's engineers couldn't build a tower high enough," Domergue explains. "They tried dropping scaffolding from the side over the ledge, but they couldn't figure out how to do it. They brought in a 40-foot I-beam, which didn't fit in the store. They sawed it in half and tried to put it back together with a metal plate, but it wouldn't hold any weight. We would all have ended up dead on the jewelry cases. Then there was talk of unbolting the jewelry cases, but that would have caused a loss of retail. Still, the job had to be done by a certain time." Domergue concludes this tale with a mischievous expression. "That's when we agreed to try the mountaineering equipment!"

The crew of conservators decided to treat the walls of Weinstock's like the sheer cliffs of Mt. Shasta, but first they needed help. A crew promised by the store never materialized, and Domergue was short of personnel. "The third night," she recalls, "I called my friend, an artist named Darcy Olsen at U.C. Davis, and asked him to round up his most able, quick-thinking friends. They were all artists and they knew the pressure of the situation. We had only two days!"

Domergue wanted to install specially designed steel brackets on the walls, which fit complementary hooks on the backs of the stretchers, so the painting would be virtually locked to the wall. "By this time," she says, "it really felt like we were working 24 hours a day, because we were always shopping for helmets, harnesses, special ropes, grappling hooks, all this unexpected mountaineering stuff." Fortunately, two of Weinstock's security

guards were weekend mountaineers and they showed Domergue's team a variety of suitable knots.

Domergue remembers the fourth night as lots of drilling and restretching the canvases on reinforced stretchers backed with heavy cotton duck. The fifth night, Domergue's assistant, Glenn Rubesamen, was tied to a heavy rope and lowered by winch to affix the paintings to the brackets. His tools were lowered on strings, and other crew members held safety ropes that maneuvered him to the left or right. The rest of the crew on the ground floor lifted the paintings upward, and they were finally attached to the walls in what Domergue describes as an "earthquake-proof solution."

The artists all celebrated with champagne. The reaction from Weinstock's? "I think they were relieved it was all over with," Domergue recalls. "I think they were impressed with our tenaciousness. There was no grumbling at all when the price for the job went from four to five figures."

Domergue doesn't like to discuss the economics of her profession. When she quotes \$40 an hour — not unusual for private conservation work — it is always approximate. The discrepancies are rarely as extreme as the Weinstock's incident, but Domergue maintains it is difficult to estimate the length of time a job might take. Admittedly, restoration of art is a costly affair. With the escalating values of contemporary art, however, it is a cost that many collectors and galleries undertake to protect their investments. Inevitably, an alternative thought occurs. If these works were done by living artists, why not send them back to the creator for repair? "I think that once an artist has finished a painting, and it's years old or something," Domergue comments, "they don't want much to do with it." Yet, she adds, many artists make provisions for the future, and she cites Ellsworth Kelly, Ed Moses and Ed Ruscha as artists who save paint samples and keep detailed records for the restoration of their works. Other artists are simply not concerned with an artwork's longevity. Interestingly enough, Domergue defends this attitude. "It hampers spontaneity to think that a painting will last forever. Anyway, it's impossible to tell artists that they shouldn't do something."

Domergue may make a living as a conservator, but she clearly identifies with the artists. Legions of local artists call her for consultation, and she talks to almost all of them, free. Ron Cooper asked her about mounting photographs on aluminum; Laddie John Dill needed to know about working with cement and glass; Ed Moses sought advice about protecting the edges of his resin paintings.

"Most conservators have to talk to curators. I talk to artists," Domergue says with pride. "I like having a dialogue with the creators of these things. I talk to them and ask them how they feel about the process. Also, I've been compiling a body of knowledge about the artists and their techniques. It provides them with an opportunity to state what they feel about the conservation of their art."

Domergue reflects on the question of responsibility. "How long a painting will survive often depends as much on its care as its materials." She lists a few of the infinite variations of inherent vulnerability and inherent vice: direct sunlight, humidity, excessive dryness, and the proximity of pets and small children with crayons.

"I interact with art in a way that hopefully prolongs its existence. But it is also like having an exhibition in my studio — my own private collection for short periods of time." Domergue smiles broadly as she concludes. "It's a mutually beneficial relationship." ■