

Press Release

Carmen Herrera, The 1970s: Part I

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504 West 24th Street, New York

The 1970s marked an important moment in Carmen Herrera's evolution, wherein she concluded her widely celebrated *Blanco y Verde* series, made her triumphant return to sculpture, and opened new forays into her painting practice. Bringing together 15 crucial paintings and *Estructuras*, the artist's tenth solo exhibition with the gallery demonstrates the breadth of Herrera's achievements during this transformative decade. The exhibition in New York is the first of a two-part presentation that focuses on Carmen Herrera's work from the 1970s. Following this is a special presentation of Herrera's influential and rarely exhibited *Days of the Week* series – seven paintings that evoke the distinctive character of each day – that will inaugurate Lisson Gallery's new permanent Los Angeles gallery.

Carmen Herrera's work in the 1970s, one of the least-explored decades of the artist's career, can be characterized by her reluctance to follow any principal art movements of the time, such as the prevalent, male-dominated Minimalism of the era. Instead, the artist continued to sharpen the geometric lyricism and vibrant abstractions for which she is now known, while working in relative obscurity amongst the New York art world. Her early fascination with architecture became increasingly evident during this era as her shapes became harder and more formal. Bold colors articulated by structures, allow the color and linear forms to pop from the surface of the canvas. *Carmen Herrera, The 1970s: Part I* is the first posthumous exhibition following the artist's passing in February of this year, at the age of 106.

Organized chronologically, the presentation begins with four early-decade paintings. Each work in the first section features a variation of an "L" shape – a dominant form for the artist during this period. Herrera used this form to both initiate and interfere with the surface of her paintings, embracing a simultaneous sense of instability and order. In *Yellow & Blue*, 1970, two bold shapes in contrasting color nestle into one another. *Counter*, 1970, sets a thin, backwards "L" against the blue ground. Both surfaces are divided completely, while *Untitled*, 1970 features the forms floating in space. Herrera meticulously planned each shape, their respective lengths and density, according to the relationship between each coupling of colors.

Two *Estructuras* (Structures) headline the second section, along with Herrera's last *Blanco y Verde* works and three additional paintings from 1971. The relationship between color and form that is emphasized in Herrera's painting is continued in her three-dimensional works, however the monochromatic structures are in dialogue with the surrounding walls as part of their composition. *Amarillo "Uno"*, 1971, creates negative space and enters into a relationship with the white wall behind it. The physical manifestation of her forms breathe life into the tenacity of her sharp edges.

Across the room, *Blanco y Verde*, 1971, illustrates the way in which Herrera visualized her paintings as objects. Herrera maintained her interest in architecture in this series that began in 1959. Using the same color combination throughout, the artist experimented with the shapes that small amounts of green interventions would construct out of the white space on the canvas. Here, an imposing "T" is created from two slender, green stems. Nine of these works were featured in a room together in a 2016-2017 survey of Carmen Herrera at The Whitney Museum of American Art.

The exhibition concludes with five paintings from the mid to late 1970s in the last room. Two diptychs of green and black highlight another important color combination in Herrera's body of work. The wide forms suggest an expansion beyond the surface, as does the artist's use of paint on the sides of the canvas. This constructive sensibility continues in *Escorial*, 1974. Loosely referencing the blueprint for the Escorial Palace in Spain, it is one of Herrera's most architectural paintings. Two black

squares on the surface run to the edge of the canvas, obfuscating any sense of foreground and promoting the unique spatial experience Herrera's work defined during this decade.

A new essay by art historian Briony Fer accompanies the exhibition. Fer has written extensively on modern and contemporary art. Her research interests have consistently moved between the history of the avant-gardes and the work of contemporary artists, including Zoe Leonard, Gabriel Orozco, Roni Horn, Vija Celmins and Tacita Dean. She is Professor of History of Art at University College London and a Fellow of the British Academy.

About the artist

Core to Carmen Herrera's (1915 - 2022) painting is a drive for formal simplicity and a striking sense of colour: "My quest", she said, "is for the simplest of pictorial resolutions" (2012). A master of crisp lines and contrasting chromatic planes, Herrera created symmetry, asymmetry and an infinite variety of movement, rhythm and spatial tension across the canvas with the most unobtrusive application of paint. As she moved towards pure, geometric abstraction in the post-war years in Paris, she exhibited alongside Theo van Doesburg, Max Bill and Piet Mondrian and a younger generation of Latin American artists, such as members of the Venezuelan Los Disidentes, Brazilian Concretists and the Argentinian Grupo Madi. Her work also chimes with her peers from the U.S. school such as Barnett Newman and Leon Polk Smith. Reflecting on this period, she said, "I began a lifelong process of purification, a process of taking away what isn't essential" (2005). While allied with Latin American non-representational concrete painting, Herrera's body of work established, quietly but steadily, a cross-cultural dialogue within the international history of modernist abstraction.

Carmen Herrera was born in Havana, Cuba in 1915. She moved frequently between France and Cuba throughout the 1930s and 1940s; having started studying architecture at the Universidad de La Habana, Havana, Cuba (1938–39), she trained at the Art Students League, New York, NY, USA (1942–43), before exhibiting five times at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France (1949–53). She settled in New York in 1954, where she lived and worked until her death in 2022. Herrera's work was the subject of a large-scale survey at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (2017), which traveled to the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio (2017) and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (K20) in Düsseldorf, Germany (2017–2018). A selection of Herrera's recent paintings and *Estructuras* inaugurated Lisson Gallery New York's 24th Street exhibition space in May 2016. The last two years were marked by two major mural commissions for the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, TX and the Publicolor Community Museum for the Manhattan East School of Arts in Harlem, NY. Herrera has also had significant solo exhibitions at the Museum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern, Kaiserslautern, Germany (2010); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK (2009); and Museo del Barrio, New York, NY, USA (1998). She has been included in the group shows at Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2021); Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan (2021); Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain (2019); Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, France (2018); The Underground Museum, Los Angeles, CA, USA (2017); Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2016); Phoenix Museum of Art, AZ, USA (2013); and Sheldon Museum of Art, NE, USA (2012), among others. Her work was recently featured in the exhibition *Epic Abstraction: Pollock to Herrera* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (17 December 2018 – 4 February 2020). In the past year, two major solo presentations were exhibited in Houston, Texas — *Carmen Herrera: Structuring Surfaces* at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (21 October 2020 – 25 April 2021) and *Estructuras Monumentales* at Buffalo Bayou Park (22 October 2020 – 23 April 2021). Herrera premiered her *Estructuras Monumentales*, massive aluminium structures largely conceived in the 1960s and 1970s, at City Hall Park in New York City in 2019, organised by the Public Art Fund (11 July – 8 November 2019).

Herrera was awarded two fellowships from the Cintas Foundation, New York, NY, USA (1966–68) and a grant by the Creative Artists Public Service, New York, NY, USA (1977). Her work is in numerous public and private collections including the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, USA; the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, USA; El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY, USA; the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington DC, USA; The Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, USA; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA; the Pérez Art Museum, Miami, FL, USA; the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA, USA; Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, Bentonville, AR, USA; the Tate Collection, London, UK; Museum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern, Kaiserslautern, Germany; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (K20), Düsseldorf, Germany; and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

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About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 60 international artists across two spaces in London, three in New York City and East Hampton, and one in Shanghai. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists, such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists as well as others of that generation from Carmen Herrera to the renowned estates of Leon Polk Smith, Ted Stamm and Roy Colmer.

In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Susan Hiller, Tatsuo Miyajima and Sean Scully. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists led by Hugh Hayden, Van Hanos, Cheyney Thompson, Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes and Wael Shawky.

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