

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Carmen Herrera: Paintings on Paper

7 March – 13 April 2024
504 West 24th Street, New York

Opening: 7 March, 6 – 8pm

Lisson Gallery is pleased to present an exhibition of paintings on paper by Carmen Herrera (1915–2022), all made within the last ten years of her life. These hard-edge geometric compositions rendered in two or three bold hues reveal the late artist's mastery of color and form. Originally trained as an architect at Universidad de la Habana in 1938–39, Herrera considered drawing an essential element of her practice. By the final decade of her creative output, she had refined her painting practice into a rigorous three-part process. First, Herrera would draft rough sketches with rulers, pencils and colored marker pens on gridded paper. She then translated these preliminary drawings into more formal paintings of acrylic on paper, adjusting the forms and colors such that they became fixed compositions. Finally, some of these works on paper would be copied into scaled-up paintings on canvas, while others would undergo further modifications of color, structure, and orientation.

The works here on view represent the most comprehensive survey to date of Herrera's paintings on paper, offering a window onto some of the core themes and formal devices of a career which spanned seven decades. Two works of particular note for their use of three colors, rather than two, are *Untitled* (2017) and *Untitled* (2018). While Herrera's more iconic dichromatic paintings predominated from the late 1950s onwards, the use of three colors notes a return to her Paris years (1948–53), a formative period in the artist's development. Also included are a number of works which make use of her signature pairings of white and green (*blanco y verde*) or white and black (*blanco y negro*). One such white and black work, *Untitled* (2012), consists of two slender, horizontal black rectangles which mirror each other along the bias of the painting, their opposite corners meeting at the center point of the picture plane. The work is an almost exact replica, rotated 90 degrees to the left, of a larger, vertically-oriented painting on canvas, *Untitled* (1970). This slight variation of the same formal configuration and color scheme employed four decades prior highlights Herrera's approach to her practice as a process of continual iteration and refinement.

This selection of works speak to another ongoing preoccupation in Herrera's oeuvre: the persistent tension between symmetry and asymmetry as two distinct modes of her geometric abstraction. While some achieve perfectly balanced, stable arrangements, others convey a dynamic sense of movement and imbalance with sharp zigzags and wedges, oblique slants or rectilinear forms placed askew. Both modes of composition display Herrera's keen attunement to the interplay of positive and negative space through opposing planes of color. As records of the moment when a composition first becomes "fixed," the paintings on paper testify to the mature artist's deftness of hand and eye – her ability to distill the infinite potentials of color, shape and structure down to their essence. As Herrera says of her own work, "I began a lifelong process of purification, of taking away what isn't essential."

This presentation coincides with the exhibition *Carmen Herrera: I am Nobody! Who are you?* at SITE Santa Fe (1 March – 16 September 2024), which will also focus on works from the final decade of Herrera's practice. From 20 April, work by Herrera will also feature in 'Stranieri Ovunque – Foreigners Everywhere', curated by Adriano Pedroso, at the 60th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia.

About the artist

Core to Carmen Herrera's (1915 – 2022) painting is a drive for formal simplicity and a striking sense of color: "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, *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, USA (2016), which travelled to the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, USA (2017) and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (K20), Düsseldorf, Germany (2017–2018). Herrera has also had significant solo exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX, USA (2020); Museum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern, Germany (2010); Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK (2009); and El Museo del Barrio, New York, NY, USA (1998). From 2018–2020, her work was featured in the exhibition *Epic Abstraction: Pollock to Herrera* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Herrera premiered her *Estructuras Monumentales*, massive aluminum structures largely conceived in the 1960s and 1970s, at City Hall Park in New York City in 2019, organized by the Public Art Fund. Herrera’s large-scale mural, *Verde, que te quiero verde* (2020) was unveiled at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas in May of 2023 as part of the museum’s grounds redesign.

Herrera’s 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; the Tate Collection, London, UK; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (K20), Düsseldorf, Germany; the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; 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 Museum of Fine Arts Boston, MA, USA; the Pérez Art Museum, Miami, FL, USA; Crystal Bridges Museum of Art, Bentonville, AR, USA; the Cleveland Museum of Art, OH, USA; the Blanton Museum of Art, University of Austin, TX, USA; and the Morgan Library & Museum, New York, NY, USA.

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 spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. 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 estate of Leon Polk Smith. 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 Cory Arcangel, Ryan Gander, Van Hanos, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost, Pedro Reyes, Wael Shawky and Cheyney Thompson.

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