

# Carmen Herrera: Of Process

Nigel Prince

Carmen Herrera first studied architecture at Universidad de La Habana in Cuba from 1938 to 1939. While short, it proved pivotal, and she often credits this training as where she learned to draw and to think abstractly, qualities present in her understanding of the discipline that are key to comprehending her work.

As such, this period of time, so early in her formative years, marks an important moment not only in her thinking, but in the process of identifying the means of her decision making. It also informed the ways in which she determines the structure, color and composition of her hard-edge paintings, towards the line of rigorous, intellectual and practical investigation which she has pursued throughout her career.

In the development of her work, Herrera embarks on a three-part journey, a sequence of stages that each allow modification and refinement to occur, whereby the clarity of her intent becomes distilled to the fundamental essence of what she has consistently engaged with as an artist. That is to say, her ongoing preoccupation with the potential of geometry, color, structure and surface to extend beyond any external referent has become a complex, tense and harmonious interplay between opposing chromatic planes, positive-negative shape and optical rhythm.

If we go back to the start then, and consider drawing, and in Herrera's case, the initial sketch often made on gridded paper, it can be seen as an expression of this intent, as a gesture through which the mechanics of hand to eye couple with the imagination and intelligence, to reach beyond mere technique or facility and engage with a thing yet to be known.

For Herrera, this very act of drawing – not as a record or documentation of something that already exists, but as a process to reach toward – is crucial as an unfolding of her careful, meticulous approach. It becomes a means, a guiding principle, that might in some way result in achieving that which is memorable or beautiful, or evokes in us the viewer, a moment of perceptual change. Her paintings stand apart from other things in the world while simultaneously becoming part of that world. And at every stage the distillation of choice remains key.

I remember visiting her in New York during the planning stage leading toward what would become her 2009 retrospective survey at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, discussing my interest in including a room of drawings within the overall show. She was curious as to my curatorial intent, and a discussion concerning the status of these works, their place within her practice and the narrative of the exhibition, became a turning point in our conversations. While a number of these drawings could be seen to relate with varying degrees of directness to paintings selected, there were others that existed as things within their own right, as initial, tentative descriptions toward compositions that are yet to be returned to, expanded upon or translated through to larger-scale works.

A sequence of four interrelated pencil on paper drawings, *Untitled* from 1970, each show a triangular form at the center of the ground, the baseline of the shape interrupted in four possible ways by a vertical line in four differing positions. While these drawings have a relationship to a number of paintings made around the mid- to late-1960s onward, they remain a



*Untitled*, 1970



Untitled, 1966

distinct work and a clear expression of the fundamental pursuit and process with which Herrera engages: an investigation toward attaining some form of definitive moment.

Similarly, a sequence of small-scale paintings on paper from 1966, produced when Herrera was awarded the Cintas Foundation Fellowship, show for the first time her thinking toward what would be produced several years later as the first of her *Estructuras*, an artistic development in her practice of significant thought and role, arguably establishing a clear lineage back to her architectural training.

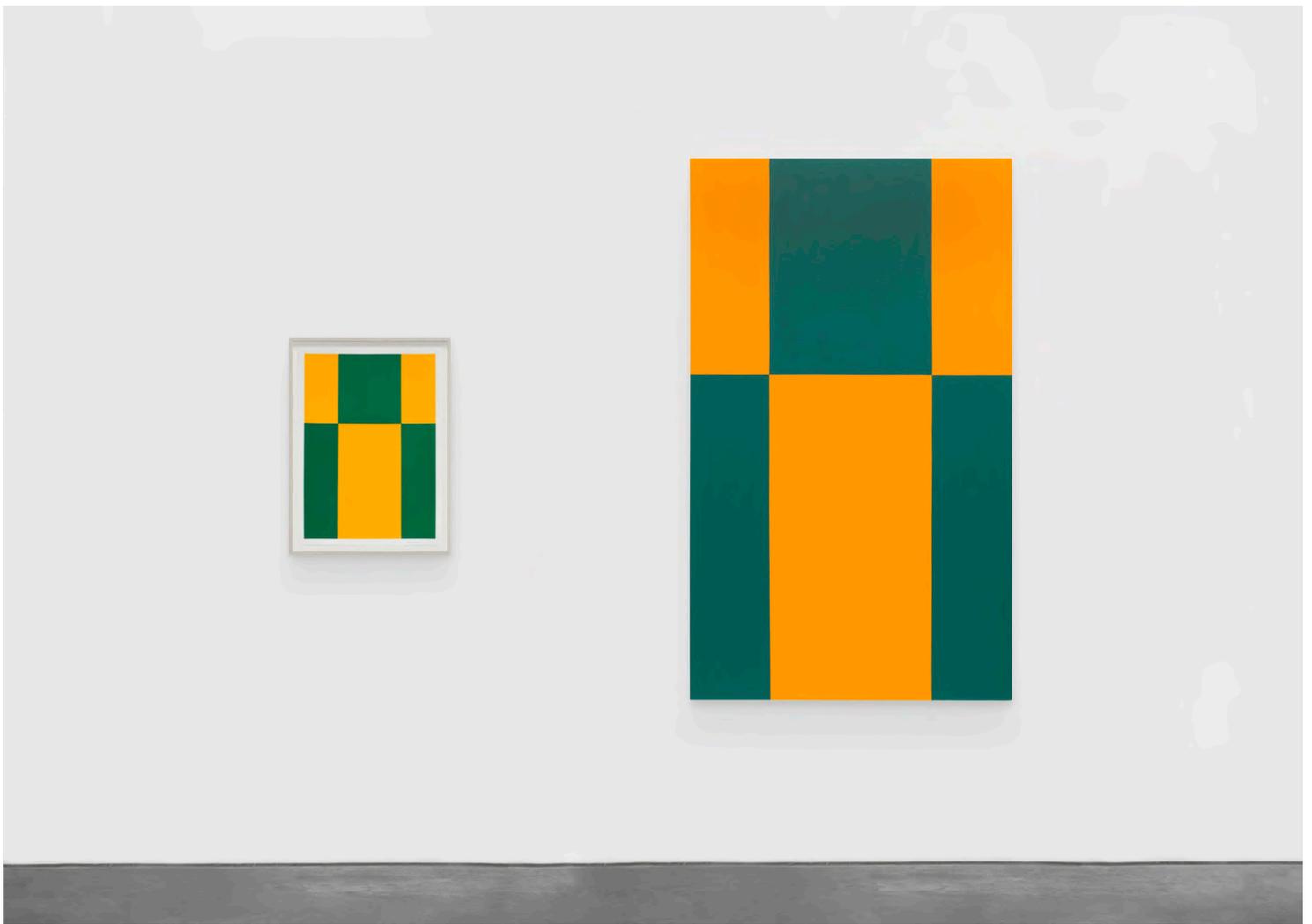
Herrera begins by making sketches, this being the first stage at which she seeks to visually articulate that which has become her signature, authoritative means of expression and her quintessential, distinctive visual language. Using pencil, rulers and marker pens, they become a first iteration of her goal. Some may contain annotations beyond the visual, written comments on possible titles, dimensions, colors to be considered. Others contain traces of visible change, the angle of an altered line here, an erasure or area of modifying color there.

Each stage should be understood not as mere rehearsals for what is to come, but more an uncovering of limitless possibilities and discovery, a process of revealing her profound means of enquiry.

From this point, these sketches may remain in her studio to be developed further at a time to be determined in the future. Others are taken up more urgently, undergoing further refinement and deliberation through the second stage of her approach, working up the sketches into distinct works, as more formal paintings on paper. It is in this moment when additional shifts may occur. The overall composition may be modified, color relationships may become nuanced and consequently more fixed in her mind, just as the scale of a larger painting yet to be made may be further determined and considered. However, these works on paper should be considered as works in their own right, a resolution at that moment in time of Herrera's intellectual process.

Even at this point however, Herrera continually revisits these works as ideas to be taken on or interrogated more. While the paintings on paper may "fix" a composition momentarily, that does not mean that it will not undergo further revision, evincing a restless focus that Herrera brings to her ongoing investigations. Compare for example, the painting *San Antonio* (2016) with its related work on paper from the same year. While they share a clear kinship, the overall proportions of the individual, rectangular forms differ considerably between the works, further exemplified by the nuanced shift Herrera makes in both the hue and tonality of the green and yellow colors between the works. *Desierto Rojo* in contrast with its sister work, *Untitled*, both from 2017, makes a shift of orientation – the painting undergoing a 90 degree, anti-clockwise rotation that alters the relationship and dialogue between the orange and red forms.

Such decision-making is even more pronounced in looking at the large-scale painting and its related work on paper, both titled *Victoria* (2017). While in this instance, the color shift is less marked, here a more radical change is



Left: *Untitled*, 2016, Right: *San Antonio*, 2016

enacted in the move from a rectangular format in the work on paper to that of a square in the larger painting, creating a subtle change in our reading of the co-dependency between the yellow and blue triangles.

The progressive modifications that occur across each of these three stages then—from sketch to large-scale painting—opens out a space of potential for Herrera that sits at the core of her practice. To build, to examine, to re-evaluate, to continually refine. This is the key proposition to our understanding of her work, as Herrera herself has described, “I began a lifelong process of purification, a process of taking away what isn’t essential.”

*Nigel Prince is Director of Artes Mundi, the international biennial exhibition and prize, based in Wales, UK. In 2009, he curated the retrospective survey of work by Carmen Herrera at Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, UK, touring to Museum Pfalzgalerie Kaiserslautern, Germany in 2010.*



Carmen Herrera in her studio  
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