

LISSON GALLERY

*Brooklyn Rail*  
June 2025

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# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE · INDEPENDENT AND FREE

ARTSEEN | JUNE 2025  
Carmen Herrera: *The Paris Years, 1948–1953*

By Barbara A. MacAdam



Carmen Herrera, *Way*, 1950. Acrylic on Burlap, 39 1/8 x 33 1/8 x 1 1/8 inches. © Carmen Herrera. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

While working and excelling in the most elegant and formal styles of international modernism, the Cuban-born high-abstract artist Carmen Herrera distinguished herself by demonstrating the weight and strength of drawing as a device for building two-dimensional structures as well as for showing the power of the line as a means of connection. We see her in this expansive show as a striking geometric colorist, an architectural painter, a consummate theoretician, as well as a designer. She was trained first as an architect at the Universidad de la Habana in 1938–39.

As is apparent in this gathering, Herrera works across many abstract disciplines, calling to mind artists ranging from the Uruguayan master constructor Joaquín Torres-García whose symbol and color-packed paintings and box-like compositions call to mind Vasily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian at one end of the spectrum as well as Kenneth Noland at the other. The surprise here is discovering the flamboyance of Jackson Pollock's gesturing together with the softer warmth of Willem de Kooning's coloring. Most charming in this mix are the acrylic-on-canvas paintings from Herrera's "Habana Series," created in the early 1960s. In these works, the sense of spontaneity and experimentation are strikingly progressive and characteristic of Herrera's moment. The line is freed up to explore and chase itself. What is particularly apparent is Herrera's distinct worldliness—open yet guarded, it seems. There are her dynamic triangular shapes calling to mind the art of the Southwest—Navajo patterns—as well as the rhythms of jazz, French and American style, as triangles zig and zag into one another evoking the cadences of both cultures.



Installation view: *Carmen Herrera: The Paris Years, 1948–1953*, Lisson Gallery, New York, 2025. © Carmen Herrera. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

At the same time, she constructed with paint—her own architecture—built to mirror her sculpture and design on paper in shapes and colors that equate with those of her three-dimensional objects. And somehow that includes, in an unlikely way, nature as it is built, the sense of landscape, in the natural geometry of hills and trees. The finest example of this, although not included in this exhibition, is *Blanco y Verde* from 1959, which, captivatingly, arrests the eye with the smallest geometric form—a green triangle set atop a slight hill in a vast field of white. The strikingly subtle image is a kind of star turn.

All of this is being evoked in this show, *Carmen Herrera: The Paris Years 1948–1953*, a fertile period of great diversity when the artist often traveled between Paris and New York, along with other stops along the way.

Here, in these works, mostly made using solvent-based acrylic paints, are the perfectionism and flatness of Concrete art, the reduced bodies of color that seamlessly establish a minimal if impenetrable surface in her paintings. One might associate Herrera's sophisticated, smooth style with ballroom dancing in contrast to the frenzy of jazz, which she engaged in drawings such as her excited *Conquete de l'air*, from 1950, taking us into her Paris mind. She could move from biomorphism to agitation. In other words, she was a creature engaged in the sensibility of her own very long times.



Carmen Herrera, *Realites Nouvelles*, 1948. Acrylic on canvas, 31 x 39 1/4 inches. © Carmen Herrera. Courtesy Lisson Gallery.

Her art exudes both a coldness through her use of powerful colors and sleek, uncompromising hard-edged forms. In red, black, and slices of green, she demands we pay close attention to geometric structures and the spaces between them, and then, elsewhere, in fine strands of brown and orange and blue, she takes us through a kind of interior landscape. She shows us the product of a disciplined mind allied to a romantic sensibility.

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**Barbara A. MacAdam** is a New York-based freelance arts writer.



## THE ART NEWSPAPER

### White House art collection adds Carmen Herrera painting

The acquisition, announced by former first lady Jill Biden, makes Herrera the first Latin American woman to have work in the White House collection



Carmen Herrera, the late Cuban American painter, has joined the rarified group of artists whose work is held in the White House's collection. Herrera is being lauded as the first woman of Latin American descent whose work is among the permanent holdings of the US presidential residence in Washington, DC.

The work in question, *Dia Feriado*—a teal and tangerine geometric color block painting produced in 2011—is now installed in the East Wing of the White House. According to the White House Historical Association, the East Wing has been traditionally designated for the US First Lady [↗](#), and is “therefore intertwined with the story of women in political life more broadly...reflecting the wider social changes related to gender and women’s status in the mid-20th century”.

“On behalf of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, I am grateful to the Estate of Carmen Herrera for their contribution of Herrera’s piece to the White House permanent collection,” former US first lady Jill Biden said in a statement. “Having her piece in the People’s House is an incredible recognition of the more than seven decades she spent living and working as an artist in the United States.”

Biden, alongside White House curator Donna Hayashi Smith, Tony Bechara, executive director of Herrera’s estate, and others involved in the acquisition were jointly responsible for securing the work shortly after it was featured in the artist’s exhibition at Site Santa Fe [↗](#). Louis Grachos, Site Santa Fe’s director, added in a statement: “We are thrilled to see such a historically significant artist acknowledged for her contributions to contemporary art.”

The White House is home to over 500 paintings [↗](#), including one set of presidential portraits—though the more famous portraits of US presidents and their spouses reside in the National Portrait Gallery [↗](#). According to the White House Historical Association, the collection’s goals were significantly refined and expanded during former president John F. Kennedy’s administration, and has since aimed to select works for their “historical and cultural significance [↗](#)”. According to a recent report [↗](#) citing a now-broken government website link, the White House’s collection-at-large includes around 65,000 individual objects, from art pieces to decorative items such as utensils and other objects.

Herrera's painting joins a select group of paintings contributed by American luminaries. In 2015, the Obama administration acquired the late Washington Colour School painter Alma Thomas's [Resurrection](#) (1966). According to a statement published by the White House Historical Association, the acquisition made Thomas as the "first African-American woman to have her work added" to the collection. In 1995, then-president and first lady Bill and Hillary Clinton acquired [Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City](#) (1885), a landscape painting by Henry Ossawa Tanner, the first work "created by an African American" to be included in the collection.

Herrera [died in 2022 at the age of 106](#) and is widely remembered for her illustrious career as a prolific and influential Minimalist artist known for her hard-edged abstractions. Herrera's most expensive work at auction, *Blanco y Verde (White & Green)* (1966-67), [fetched \\$2.9m](#) in 2019 at a Sotheby's charity auction in New York. Her work has been the subject of a number of exhibitions in the past year, including *Paintings on Paper* at Lisson Gallery in New York, which has represented the artist (and now the artist's estate) since 2010.

Kaeli Deane, the senior director of the Lisson Gallery and vice president of the Carmen Herrera Foundation, tells *The Art Newspaper* that "it's an honour for Carmen's work to have been acquired by the White House Collection", adding that "Carmen would have been touched to be a part of our national legacy".

News of Herrera's work being acquired by and going on view at the White House as the current presidential administration walks back federal initiatives on diversity, equity and inclusion, among a range of other seismic changes. Last week, the Smithsonian Institution and the National Gallery of Art [shuttered their diversity offices](#) following executive orders signed by president Donald Trump. Notably, the confirmation of Trump's Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who is also of Cuban descent, made him the [highest ranking Hispanic American official](#) in US history.

# LISSON GALLERY

*ArtForum*  
September 2024

## ARTFORUM

### VENICE BIENNALE 2024

By Sara Raza



Dana Awartani, *Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones, 2024*, darned on medicinally dyed silk. Installation view, Arsenale, Venice. From "Foreigners Everywhere." Photo: Marco Zorzanello.

**ADRIANO PEDROSA'S EXHIBITION** "*Stranieri Ovunque*" (Foreigners Everywhere) is his curatorial manifesto for the twenty-first century, building on his 2009 curatorial project *Mamõyguara opá mamõ pupé* for the Thirty-First Panorama da Arte Brasileira, organized by the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (full disclosure, I contributed four brief artist bios to the current show's catalogue). *Mamõyguara opá mamõ pupé* means "Foreigners Everywhere" in Old Tupi, an extinct Brazilian language and a repository for precolonial Indigenous culture and history, and was borrowed from a neon sculptural work made for the exhibition by the British Italian artist collective Claire Fontaine. The exhibition was a critical inquiry into the arbitrary nature of borders and the designation of "natives" and "foreigners" within a postcolonial Brazilian context. It comprised only works by foreign artists influenced by Brazilian culture, with the exception of one Brazilian artist, Tamar Guimarães, who lived abroad.

Pedrosa's Venice iteration of "Foreigners Everywhere" is a progression of his curatorial vision at a larger scale (both horizontally and vertically, in terms of geography and art history), encompassing 331 artists and foregrounding artists and artistic practices that exist within the frameworks of folk, Indigenous, outsider, and queer art. Pedrosa has created an exhibition that is decisively focused on artists who belong to the People of the Global Majority. Notably, this expansion of the concept of the "foreigner" to include that of the "other" also opens up conversations about class, ability, gender, and sexuality that exist in relation to and independent of racial identities. Pedrosa's curatorial intent is clear: to upend binary conversations and spotlight artists for whom existing in multitudes is a deliberate form of resistance against "belonging."



View of “*Mamõyguara opá mamõ pupé*” (*Foreigners Everywhere*), 2009, Museu de Arte Moderna, São Paulo. Right: Claire Fontaine, *Foreigners Everywhere (Portuguese)*, 2009. From the 31st Panorama da Arte Brasileira (Panorama of Brazilian Art).

In Venice, Claire Fontaine’s poetic translation of *Foreigners Everywhere* into multiple global and Indigenous languages—sixty to be exact—positively subverts the negative associations of the words commonly associated with foreigners, such as *invasion*, *swarm*, and *influx*. The repetition of the phrase in different scripts, presented in neon lights in both the Arsenale and the Giardini, rejects the agenda of linguistic imperialism and assumed superiority over peoples and cultures. The diverse combination of fonts forms a deliberate political portrait of disrupted communication that investigates the power and limits of language. Interlacing ideas on art, language, and space, the three-dimensional sculptures are metaphors for migratory journeys and multiplicity that seek to unsettle the site-specific political context of an increasingly conservative, right-wing Italy.\*

Although language is one theme, Pedrosa's new mapping of the globe centers also on abstraction and figuration. The story of the former includes the work of Moroccan artists from the highly influential and experimental twentieth-century Casablanca Art School, which emerged in the 1960s and '70s and was concerned with breaking away from the divide between fine arts and craft, which had been instilled by Western arts academies, such as those established in the 1920s during the French colonial period. Pioneers who led the school include the artists Mohammed Chebaa (1935–2013) and Mohamed Melehi (1936–2020). Their distinctive style of painting incorporated the abstracted use of Arabic letters, motifs, symbols, and optical illusions into experiments in Arabic script in painting known as *hurufiyah*. This experimental approach involved morphing and interweaving letters into mass shapes, investigating both geometric forms and spatiality through painting. Their works appear here in concert with those by other modernist global artists, such as the Guatemalan Margarita Azurdia (1931–1998) and the Cuban Carmen Herrera (1915–2022). By creating horizontal connections across cultures, Pedrosa emphasizes alternative modernisms outside of the boundaries of the Euro-American canon.

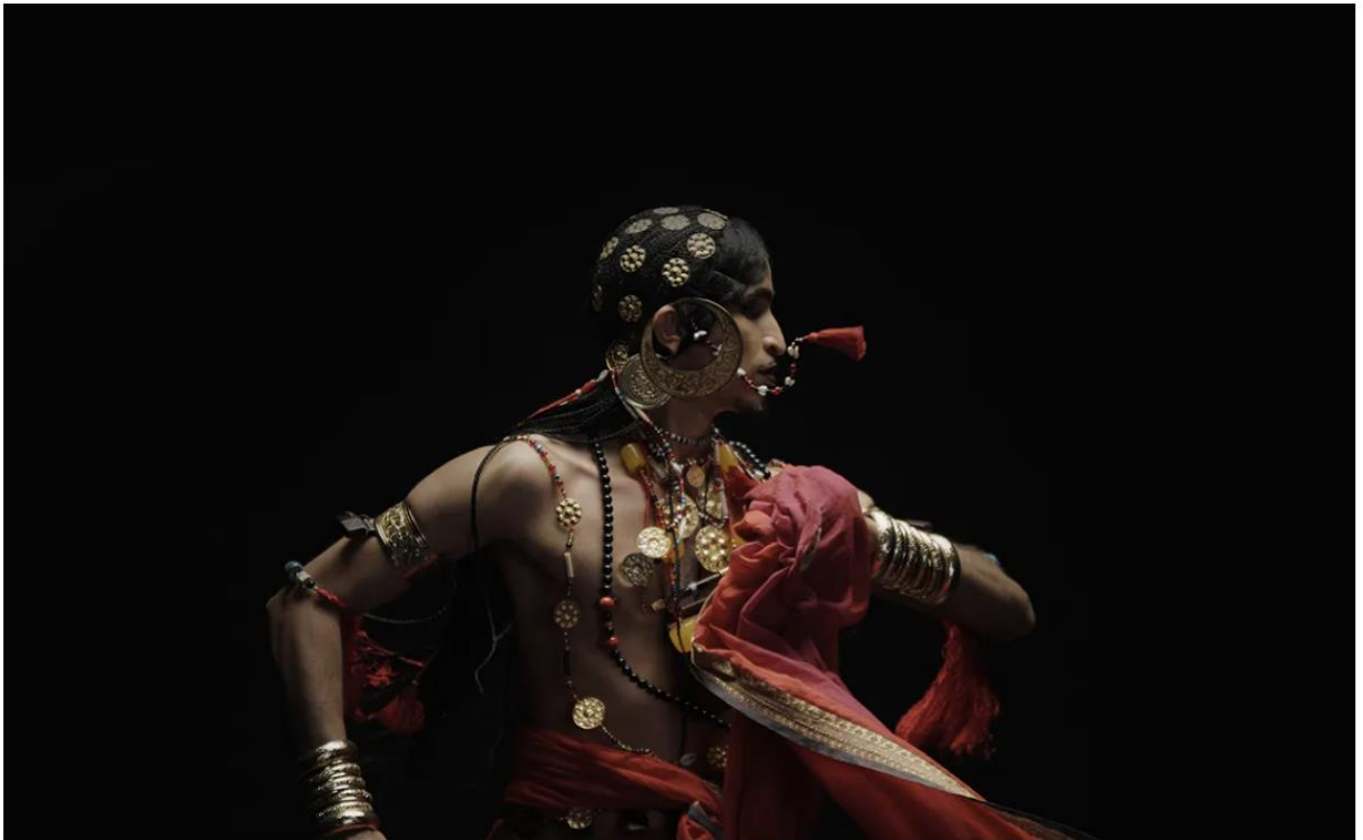


View of "Nucleo Storico: Italians Everywhere," 2024, Arsenale, Venice. From "Foreigners Everywhere." Photo: Marco Zorzanello.

These frameworks are further brought into direct contact in both productive and critical ways through the rearranging, remixing, and reordering of transcultural and transhistorical visual idioms, as in Lauren Halsey's utopian-inspired architectural artwork *keepers of the crown*, 2024. This epic installation consists of a series of Egyptian-style Hathoric-emblem capital columns, each displaying the head of the goddess Hathor on all four sides. The work includes African American emblems celebrating Pan-African diasporic identity (such as the Egyptian ankh) and features the likenesses of people drawn from the artist's life in Los Angeles, where they live and work, as well as textual carvings from African American vernacular speech. A previous iteration of the work was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for its Rooftop Commission; following its unveiling, the artwork stirred a local Egyptian debate on questions of origins and nationalism. As reported in the *Arab News* in April 2023, Egyptian archaeologist Zahi Hawass described Halsey's work as "a distortion of history," missing the point of the conceptually driven artwork, which was to poetically offer a critique of the legacies of colonialism. Tracing the remnants of Egypt's foreign imperial Ottoman and colonial European past, when lighter complexions and more European features were equated with status and privilege, reveals the unsettling and lingering aftereffects of colorism and internalized colonialism that still exist inside the country.

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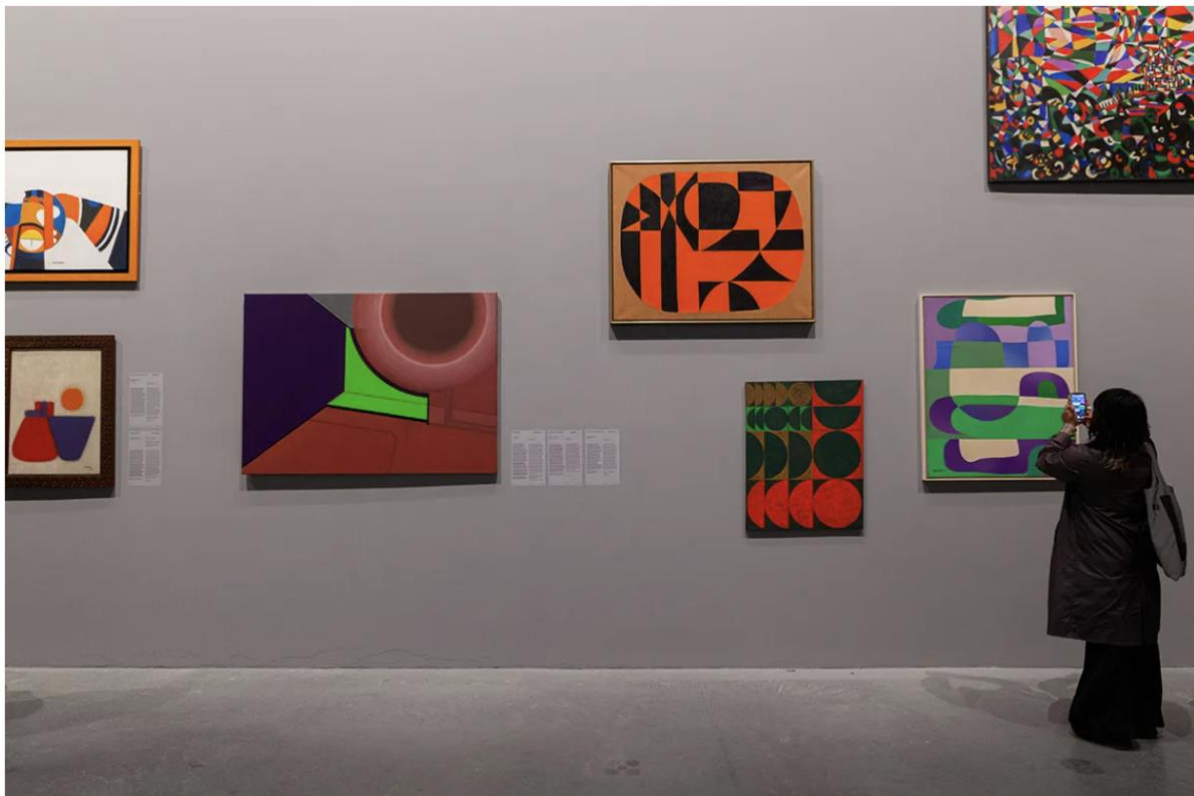
Pedrosa's curatorial intent is clear: to upend binary conversations and spotlight artists for whom existing in multitudes is a deliberate form of resistance against "belonging."



Ahmed Umar, *Talitin* تاليتين *The Third*, 2023–24, 4K video, color, sound, 25 minutes 37 seconds. From “Foreigners Everywhere.”

The need to repair the ongoing traumas of colonial histories is a theme taken up by Palestinian Saudi artist Dana Awartani in her textile-based installation *Come, let me heal your wounds. Let me mend your broken bones*, 2024. Composed of horizontal and vertical silk textile panels in sunset hues, the work conjures the landscape of the Arab world: The panels bear the scars of rips that have been meticulously darned with the precision of a surgeon, evoking the visible and invisible rupturing and suturing of geopolitical boundaries in places such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Yet the work is also hopeful: It is a result of shared labor and cultural exchange with craftspeople from the Arab world and India, where the materials are imbued with medicinal dyes via traditional techniques that metaphorically seek to heal, repair, and repatriate.

Another radical method of addressing the effects of colonialism is rebellion, which is the foundation for curator and academic Marco Scotini's ongoing mobile *Disobedience Archive*, a manifesto within Pedrosa's own manifesto. The archive is an important modular video index documenting rebellious artistic thinking that Scotini has been developing since 2005. It includes works made between 1975 and 2023 by artists and collectives exploring displacement, diaspora, hybridity, nomadism, globalization, and capitalism. For the Biennale, the archive has presented forty films in two sections: "Diaspora Activism," focusing on migratory aesthetics, and "Gender Disobedience," exploring decentralized subjectivities related to the global LGBTQ+ movement and critiques of capitalism.



View of "*Nucleo Storico: Abstraction*," 2024, Central Pavilion, Venice. Center, from left: Nil Yalter, *Pink Tension*, 1969; Carmen Herrera, *Halloween #5*, 1948; Anwar Jalal Shemza, *Composition in Red, Green and Yellow*, 1963; Marco Ospina, *Abstracto*, date unknown. From "Foreigners Everywhere." Photo: Giuseppe Anello/Alamy.

Independent of the archive, though sharing similar concerns, Oslo-based Sudanese artist Ahmed Umar's rebellious semiautobiographical investigation of queer Muslim migration examines the cultural codes of obedience that he experienced while growing up between Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan. The title of his video performance, *Talitin* **تَالِيتِن** *The Third*, 2023–24, derives from the derogatory Sudanese term to describe a boy who takes an avid interest in girls' hobbies and pursuits. In the piece, Umar defiantly reenacts a popular Sudanese bridal dance he witnessed as a child but was denied access to once he reached puberty. In Islam, the term *third* is used to refer to the third gender, which includes individuals who are nonbinary. Members of this group were an active part of Muslim society prior to the advent of European colonialism, playing an important role in government and culture across various Islamic dynasties such as the Persian, Mughal, and Ottoman. But under British influence, increasingly conservative laws intertwined with conservative forms of local dogmatic expressions of religion, resulting in the strict separation of the genders. The assertion of Western superiority over Eastern cultures, which postcolonial scholar Edward Said identifies as the basis of Orientalism, extends also to the policing of gender norms of Muslim societies, in which queer and femme-presenting individuals were deemed a threat, discriminated against, and othered. Akin to many of the works on view, Umar's video offers a nuanced viewpoint on the racializing and patriarchal mission of colonization, as part of a broader narrative of artistic forms that offer testimony, representation, knowledge, and experience.

In Pedrosa's "Foreigners Everywhere," marginality is positioned as a critical tool for refusal, which is not the same thing as nonparticipation. Here, centering otherness is about intentionally dissolving the idea of the imaginary center, which can no longer hold. The old belonging is dead; long live unbelonging!

*Sara Raza is a curator and writer specializing in postcolonial and post-Soviet perspectives.*

\*Pedrosa also takes on Italy's present politics by turning to its recent past: There is an exhibition inside an exhibition, titled "*Nucleo Storico: Italians Everywhere*," that is dedicated to Italian artists who established themselves across the globe in the twentieth century as part of the Italian diaspora. These are not to be confused with those artists afflicted with a modern-day "Marco Polo syndrome," to use a term coined by art historian Gerhard Haupt in 1995 to describe the nostalgia for colonial-era global discoveries in Asia and elsewhere expressed by neocolonial Western artists and curators.

# LISSON GALLERY

*The New York Times*  
12 January 2021

**The New York Times**

## Blanton Museum Redesign Aims to Raise Its Profile

The \$35 million initiative at the University of Texas museum, led by the firm Snohetta, features a Carmen Herrera mural commission.



A rendering of the planned mural of green squares by Carmen Herrera, as it would appear through the archways at the Blanton Museum. Rendering, courtesy Blanton Museum of Art, the University of Texas at Austin

The [Blanton Museum of Art](#) at the University of Texas at Austin is planning a \$35 million campus redesign led by the firm [Snohetta](#). It will feature architectural and landscaping improvements throughout the museum's 200,000-square-foot grounds like a dramatic biomorphic canopy redefining the entrance plaza as well as a public mural commission by the Cuban-American painter [Carmen Herrera](#).

“People have had a hard time finding our front door at times and identifying us driving by,” said the Blanton's director, Simone Wicha, who is looking to enhance the sense of arrival for the museum's two facing Spanish revival-style buildings, which blend in with the overall architectural look of the university.

With more than \$33 million raised, the museum will break ground in February and expects to complete the project in late 2022.

Snohetta has designed 15 tall, flowering structures to bridge the patio between the two buildings, to give the museum a more distinctive visual identity. Rising on slender columns and fanning into broad petals, these canopies will meet to form archways and provide shade over new seating. This ensemble will also frame views of the Texas Capitol in one direction and [Ellsworth Kelly's nondemoninational chapel](#), which was realized in 2018 on the Blanton campus.

The Blanton invited Herrera, now 105, to create a mural prominently visible through the arches of the gallery building's facade — the first of several public artworks it will commission. The museum is looking to build on the interest in Kelly's chapel, which, Wicha said, has put the museum on the international art-world map and helped increase attendance to 200,000 visitors annually before the pandemic set in, up from about 135,000.

Herrera's bold composition of 14 monumental green squares, each animated with four white diagonal spears that meet to define a smaller tumbling green square, will be titled “Green How I Desire You Green” after a refrain in [Federico García Lorca's poem “Sleepwalking Ballad.”](#)

“The opportunity to do something in such a grand scale and in a site of such importance was very appealing, especially to the hidden architect in me,” Herrera, who trained as an architect in her 20s before leaving Cuba, wrote in an email. She noted that the [Blanton was a pioneer in collecting Latin American art](#).

Although she and Kelly were both in Paris from 1948 to 1954 and thereafter in New York, they did not know each other. “I worked mainly in solitude for many years,” wrote Herrera, whose art-world recognition has come in the last two decades, including a [retrospective at the Whitney Museum](#) in 2016. “I am proud that at this stage in my life our large-scale projects will be shown together at the Blanton.”

# LISSON GALLERY

*The Art Newspaper*  
12 January 2021



THE ART NEWSPAPER

## **Carmen Herrera commissioned to create a colossal mural as part of \$35m Blanton Museum redesign**

The 105-year-old artist says she has long admired the museum's focus on Latin American art

**GABRIELLA ANGELETI**

**12th January 2021 16:00 GMT**



Rendering of the view from Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard looking northeast toward the Faulkner Gateway, showing the museum café outdoor seating at left and Carmen Herrera's mural on the right

Courtesy Blanton Museum of Art, the University of Texas at Austin

The Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, will unveil a monumental mural by the 105-year-old Cuban-American artist Carmen Herrera as part of a \$35m redesign of its campus at the University of Texas.

The mural is inspired by the hard-edge painter's 1956 painting *Green and White*, which featured in Herrera's long-overdue retrospective *Lines of Sight* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2016. The painting marked a "period of intense experimentation as Herrera developed her signature style", says the museum's director, Simone Wicha.

The New York-based painter, whose career has been revalued in recent years as the art world increasingly seeks to champion the work of overlooked women and BIPOC artists, says she has long "admired and respected" the Blanton for their efforts in supporting Latin American art and their holdings of more 2,000 Latin American artworks.

The museum is the "perfect place" to celebrate the legacy of the artist, and will "forever commemorate a painter who revolutionised the practice of Geometric Abstraction in Havana, New York, and beyond—albeit quietly—for decades", Wicha says. "Her bold geometries will [also] add dynamism to the space, enlivening it with bright colour and rhythmic forms."

The commission follows the debut of Herrera's first public artworks last year in New York's City Hall Park, which were shown in an [exhibition](#) [↗](#) commissioned by the Public Art Fund that also aimed to illuminate the artist's little-known background in architecture, consisting of several monochromatic aluminum sculptures called *Estructuras Monumentales*.

The approximately 200,000 square-foot museum campus contains two buildings as well as Ellsworth Kelly's [final work \*Austin\*](#) [↗](#) (conceived 1986; completed 2018)—a meditative limestone building featuring luminous stained glass windows, which the artist donated to the museum shortly before he died in 2015.

The renovation, which is being spearheaded by the international design firm Snøhetta, will also include an expansive outdoor gathering space between the two main buildings featuring petal-shaped structures that will aim to emphasise views of both *Austin* and the nearby Texas State Capitol.

The museum plans to remain open throughout construction, which is slated to start early this year and conclude by late 2022 if there are no disruptions due to the coronavirus pandemic. Organisers have raised \$33.1m of the \$35m goal with significant donations from the Moody Foundation, the Still Water Foundation and other donors.

# LISSON GALLERY

*Avenue*

28 October 2020

## AVENUE

### At 105, Carmen Herrera is Inspiring a New Generation of Artists in Harlem

Bringing art to the public

BY HORACIO SILVA

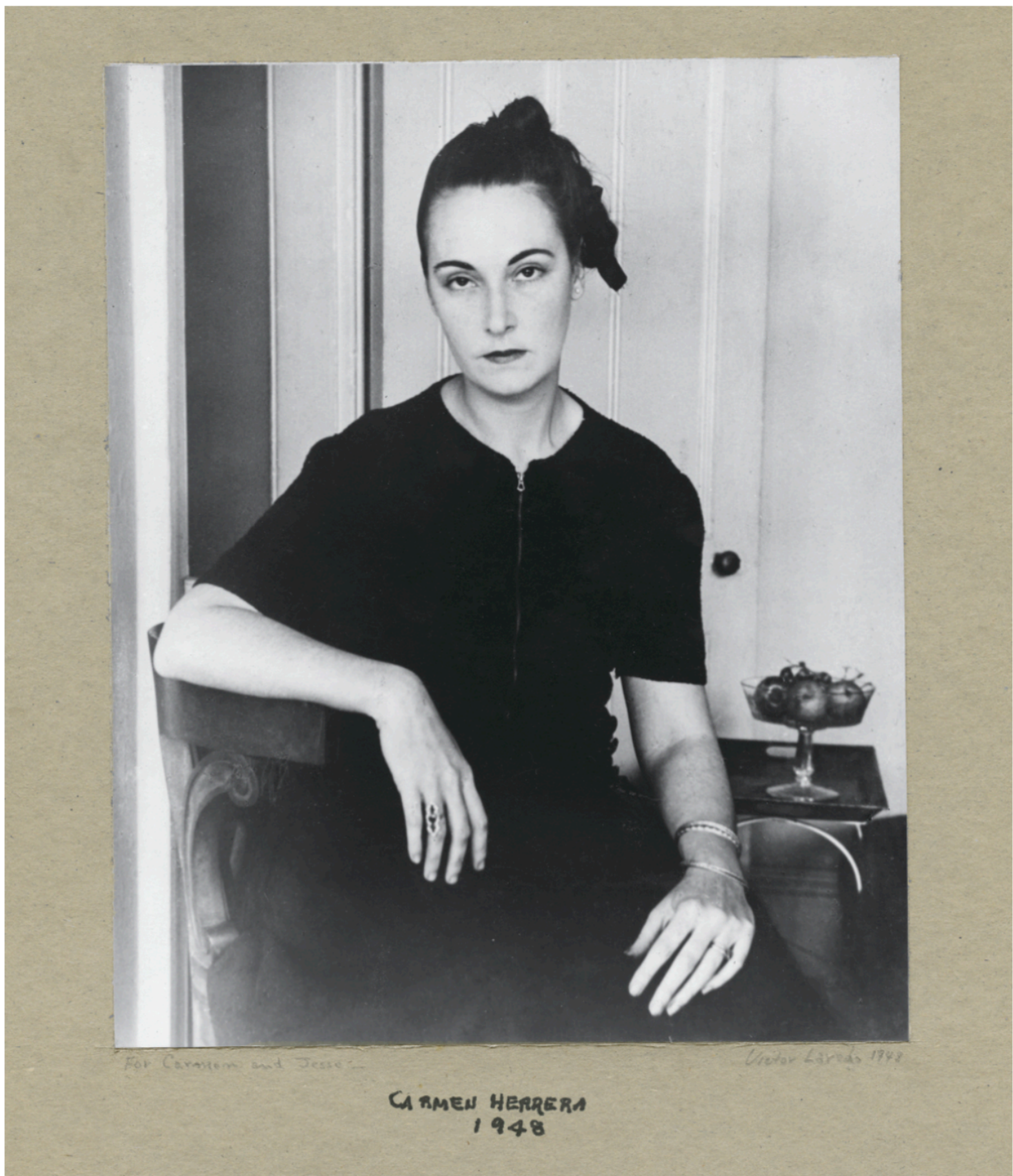
OCTOBER 28, 2020



DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER: Carmen Herrera, in her apartment  
Photo by Jason Schmidt, courtesy of Lisson Gallery

**O**n a recent afternoon, Carmen Herrera, the 105-year-old Cuban American minimalist painter who became an international art star in her 90s, sat with her friend and fellow artist Tony Bechara, the chairman emeritus of El Museo del Barrio, at her Gramercy Park apartment.

The two were discussing Herrera's latest work of art, unveiled this fall. A hypnotic black and white mural on the eastern-facing wall of Manhattan East School for Arts and Academics, formerly known as Junior High School 99, it is visible from the FDR Drive.



Herrera in 1948

Photo by Victor Laredo, courtesy of Lisson Gallery

The new landmark, a geometric abstraction titled *Uno, Dos, Tres*, based on an existing work of hers from 1987, was painted in collaboration with middle and high school students at Publicolor — a youth development program that engages high-risk, low-income students by teaching them the marketable skill of commercial painting and design.

“All children are precious, but these have limited opportunities because of circumstances not of their making,” said Herrera. “They could be my own grandchildren or great-grandchildren.”



*Diagonal* by Carmen Herrera, upon which the new mural is based  
Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery

Meanwhile, a few dozen blocks uptown on Park Avenue, Ruth Lande Shuman, the founder of Publicolor, was singing hosannas to the artist and her new work.

“There’s just so little public art in East Harlem,” she said, “and I love the idea that here is this amazing Cuban American female artist whose work is going to be a shot in the arm to the Hispanic community in East Harlem and will be there for God knows how long.”

“It’s so uplifting for the spirit of New York City,” said Beth Rudin DeWoody, the art collector and philanthropist who has underwritten the project with her brother, William Rudin. “It’s perfect timing, and that’s why we got involved.”

For the past 25 years, Publicolor has been energizing and engaging mostly disaffected students. The initiative began by going into public schools and painting vibrant colors in all the public spaces as a way to galvanize the students and convey respect for education and the joy of learning, and has since branched out to the community at large with the transformation of community centers, health clinics, homeless shelters, and daycare centers.



Young artists creating an earlier Publicolor work  
Photo by Jonathan Marder, courtesy of Pulicolor

Asked if she was concerned about the mural being graffitied, Shuman expressed little concern. She recalled how at the first school that Publicolor painted, the principal made a deliberate effort to reach out to those students who were known to do graffiti all over East New York.

“They joined us,” she said, “and what was gorgeous is that they became my anti-graffiti posse. No one was going to touch their work.”

Herrera was equally sanguine. “There has to be more art in public schools,” she said, “especially in those from the neediest parts of the city.”

After all, she added, “Art heals.”

# LISSON GALLERY

*Houston Chronicle*  
26 October 2020

**HOUSTON**★**CHRONICLE**

## Shows by two powerhouse Latinas lead Houston's art scene this fall

Exhibits at the Menil Collection, Buffalo Bayou Park and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston shine a light on two long-overlooked masters of geometric abstraction.



An untitled 2018 acrylic painting on paper from "Carmen Herrera: Structuring Surfaces" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery / Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery



“Eat your heart out, Ellsworth Kelly,” Gary Tinterow said.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston director was only half joking when he saw me viewing his institution’s show of objects by Carmen Herrera.

Not many people outside her circle knew about Herrera 20 years ago, including the curators of the world’s largest museums. Now she’s revered as a groundbreaker of contemporary art. The MFAH show “Structuring Surfaces” complements “Estructuras Monumentales,” a new public display of four large Herrera sculptures at Buffalo Bayou Park.

Still working at 105, Herrera may be the ultimate survivor among the many women and artists of color whose stories have emerged recently as curators rethink 20th-century art history through broader lenses.

Virginia Jaramillo, who is 81, is another. After decades of sporadic attention in group shows, she has finally landed the first solo museum show of her career, “The Curvilinear Paintings, 1969-1974,” at the Menil Collection.

These shows are modest and focused presentations, not big retrospectives. Jaramillo said she and Herrera have never met. Only coincidence brings their works to Houston simultaneously this fall, but it creates a fine opportunity to consider them together as masters of abstract art driven by the power of simple lines.

Their personal stories have many things in common. There's of course the Latina factor. Herrera is from Cuba. Jaramillo was born in El Paso and grew up in east Los Angeles. Both spent formative time in Paris before settling in New York and had long, supportive marriages. Jaramillo's husband of 57 years, the pioneering artist Daniel LaRue Johnson, died in 2017. Herrera's husband of about 61 years, the English teacher and actor Jesse Loewenthal, died in 2000.

They also have outlived most of the white titans of abstraction they knew. Herrera didn't much care for Kelly but ate weekly with Barnett Newman. Jaramillo's circle included Kenneth Noland and Mark Di Suvero, who is 87.

Even important female dealers who could have championed their work and changed their career trajectories presented obstacles. In the recent film "The 100 Years Show," Herrera tells the story of one who told her, "You can paint circles around the guys, but I'm not going to show your work."

Jaramillo tells a similar rejection story. "I was never part of the boys club," she said. "People would say, 'Oh, your work is great.' And then nothing would happen. I never let that stop me."

More important, especially now, are the differences in their minimalist work. Herrera's bold architectural forms play with depth perception, often literally jutting into space or begging to become three-dimensional structures. Jaramillo focuses on the structure of things, too, but her thin lines are more intentionally poetic and inwardly focused, confined to the picture plane and influenced by Japanese aesthetics.

## Herrera: gutsy and heroic

The two Herrera shows reveal the intense process behind works that look deceptively simple.

The MFAH exhibition, on the lower mezzanine wall of the Law Building, holds 30 works from the 1960s to the present, including drawings, paintings, wall structures and small maquettes that illustrate Herrera's three-dimensional thinking. The Buffalo Bayou Park show brings it all full circle with four of her recently made, monumental painted aluminum structures.

For Herrera, "everything starts with the line," said Rachel Mohl, the MFAH's assistant curator of Latin American and Latino art. "But many of her lines are actually formed by color. She's not drawing a line and filling it in. She's using blocks of color to create lines and thinking about how to turn paintings into objects."

Herrera actually started with the study of architecture in Cuba in the late 1930s. Her earliest art was figurative. Then, living in Paris from 1948 to 1953, she distilled her ideas as she exhibited with the abstract art group known as the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. She eventually reduced her palette dramatically, limiting her works to two colors each – and assigning specific colors to specific shapes because of how the form and color interact with light.

In Paris, she also began working with acrylic paint before artists in New York had access to it. The quick-drying material lies flat on surfaces, enabling her to capture straight lines.

“My quest is for the simplest of pictorial resolutions,” Herrera has said. The MFAH show suggests how all-consuming that quest has been, and still is.

It includes a painting from the breakout “Blanco y Verde” series, when Herrera began to extend color around the sides of her canvases.

“These paintings are crying out to be objects,” Mohl said. Herrera works the process both ways, she added: She might start with an isometric drawing that she renders as a painting or flatten a three-dimensional idea into a plane, always thinking about how the perception of colored forms can recede and advance.

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The drawings for the large “Estructuras” at Buffalo Bayou Park sat in a drawer for about 60 years. Lisson Gallery, which has helped to orchestrate Herrera’s late-career success, helped her realize that dream by introducing her to Peter Ballantine, who was Donald Judd’s fabricator; and working with New York’s Public Art Fund, which organized the exhibition.

Sharp sunlight on the big structures creates arrow patterns in the shadows of negative spaces that also open up narrow lenses to the landscape surrounding the structures. That, too, is important, Mohl said. “She is thinking about how these works change the way viewers experience their surrounding space.”

Judy Nyquist, who co-chairs the park’s public art committee and has been in talks with the Public Art Fund for several years about Houston collaborations, is awed by the four “Estructuras.” “Sculpture begs you to walk around it,” she said. “There’s no question how architectural these are. And this is about color and line and shape, all these formal qualities of art we talk about.”

She noted the importance of the negative spaces, too, and she loves how Herrera's works create a yin-yang conversation between Henry Moore's curvaceous "Spindle Piece" and the geometry of the downtown skyline. "To have access to this blue-chip art is a real gift," she said. "Especially now, when the park is saturated with people who need to be outside."

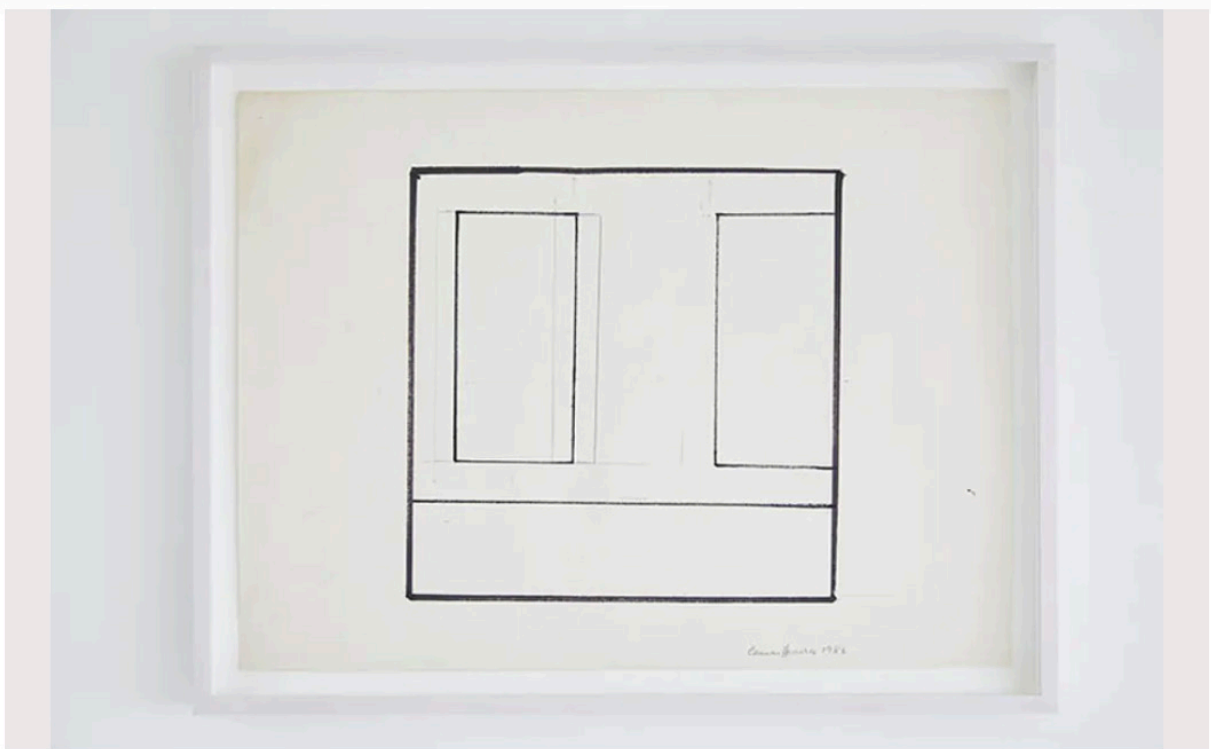
And of course, she loves Herrera's story. "This is a gutsy, 105-year-old woman who's got the balls to keep working, and her work is phenomenal. It's heroic," Nyquist said. "All these things are a perfect storm for Houston."



and bolstered by the same certainties. Unlike them, she took what now seems the retrograde step of leaving, in 1948, for Paris, thus deserting the new world capital of modern art for the old.

Central to the debates of that decade was the question of just what, and how desirable, automatism was. The method of working automatically had been brought to America by Parisian Surrealists – Andrés Masson and Breton among them – fleeing the Nazi invasion of France. The technique was at first greedily taken up by young local artists, although such were the times that an animus soon sprang up against it as a European import. To work automatically *tout court*, wrote Motherwell, was to be enslaved. What was needed was a new, American automatism, in which the fruits of direct access to the psyche might be shaped to a conscious end. Seven decades later, this negotiation between instinct and control is still at the heart of Herrera's art.

This provenance is, I think, often overlooked because of her great age. Like Louise Bourgeois, Herrera has, in the past 20 years, tended to be considered an artefact as much as an artist – a backhanded honour largely reserved for women, and one unlikely to be accorded to Motherwell were he still working. In fact, she is more simply an artist with an unusually long career, whose roots lie in a historicised time. The Carmen Herrera of 2020 is the Carmen Herrera of 1945, the outcome not of revolution but evolution.



*Untitled* (1986), Carmen Herrera. Photo: George Darrell. Courtesy Lisson Gallery; © Carmen Herrera

It is worth keeping this in mind as you walk to the top floor of a small but excellent show of her work at the Perimeter, a private exhibition space in Bloomsbury. On the three floors below are a relatively small number of her paintings, eight in all, from the '80s and '90s. In this top room, though, are contemporaneous drawings. Among the critical red herrings foisted upon her – age, gender, Latin birth – is the fact that she had trained as an architect before leaving Cuba in 1939. Herrera's work is thus, predictably, often analysed as architectonic. The drawings in this exhibition show it to be anything but.

Architects work in stable increments, Herrera the opposite. The drawing *Untitled* (1986), of rectangles within rectangles, shows evident signs of rethinking. The first line – the spontaneous and unmediated one – was clearly found to be unsatisfactory. It was overruled by a firmer, conscious line, describing a rectangle behind which the earlier pentimento sits as a ghost. As Josef Albers was pleased when one of his endlessly repeated *Homages to the Square* caught him out – when it was, as he said, a *Schwindel* – so Herrera sees failure as central to her story.

Thus a painting such as *Black & Orange* (1989), built of meandered shapes. At first sight, these seem stable, tightly chamfered. As often in Herrera's paintings, though, colour and form work against each other. A slow look at the picture – Herrera's canvases benefit from slow looking – and the two strong colours begin to pull apart. One of the triumphs of the Abstract Expressionists was to do away with the figure-ground conundrum, Rothko making his ground the figure, Pollock his all-over figures the ground. By contrast, Herrera exploits doubts about which is which – orange on black or black on orange? – and breeds uncertainty from certainty.

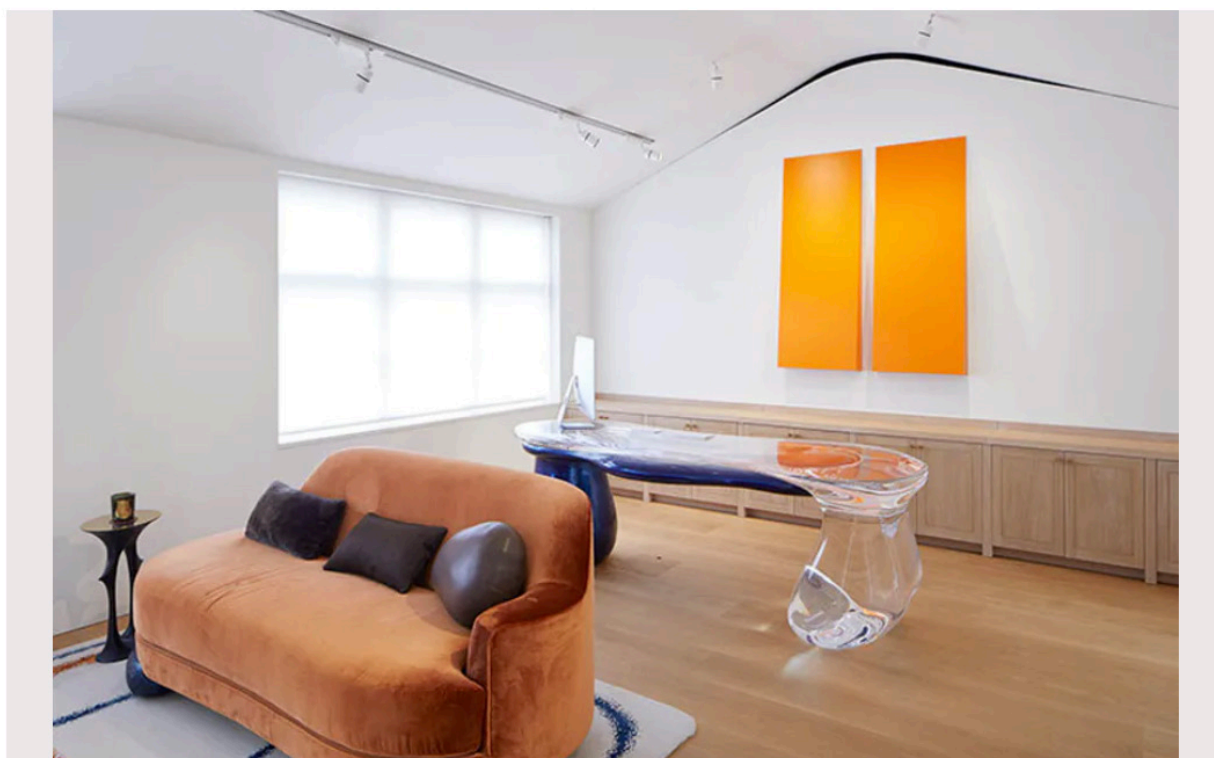


*Verticals #2* (1989), Carmen Herrera. Photo: Andy Stagg. Courtesy Lisson Gallery; © Carmen Herrera

So, too, with the titular forms in *Verticals #2* (1989), which read as gradated either by height or, in perspectival recession, by depth. In *Blue Angle on Orange* (1982–83), hung by itself as in a chapel, the inherent instability of a lozenge canvas is at first mitigated by the cobalt blue zigzag running down it, and then exaggerated by the insistence of that same zigzag on being read as travelling from left to right.

Hanging on the wall behind the gallery owner's desk, visible through a doorway, is another work. This is one of Herrera's recent sculptures, cantilevered from the wall, made of orange-lacquered aluminium. Until recently, the artist could not afford to make sculpture, other than the

occasional piece in plywood. Now, she has used the indignities of her transformation into a phenomenon, a Wonderful Old Thing, by ploughing the resultant financial benefits into her art. The sculpture feels like a fulfilment, the place where the drawings had always been leading. On paper or canvas, the anxiety in Herrera's work has so far been restricted to two dimensions, its tensions vertical or lateral. Now, at last, her drama can push forward into space. Her work has always been about breakage, and now it has broken through. This might have happened at any time in the past 75 years. It is chance that has allowed it to happen now.



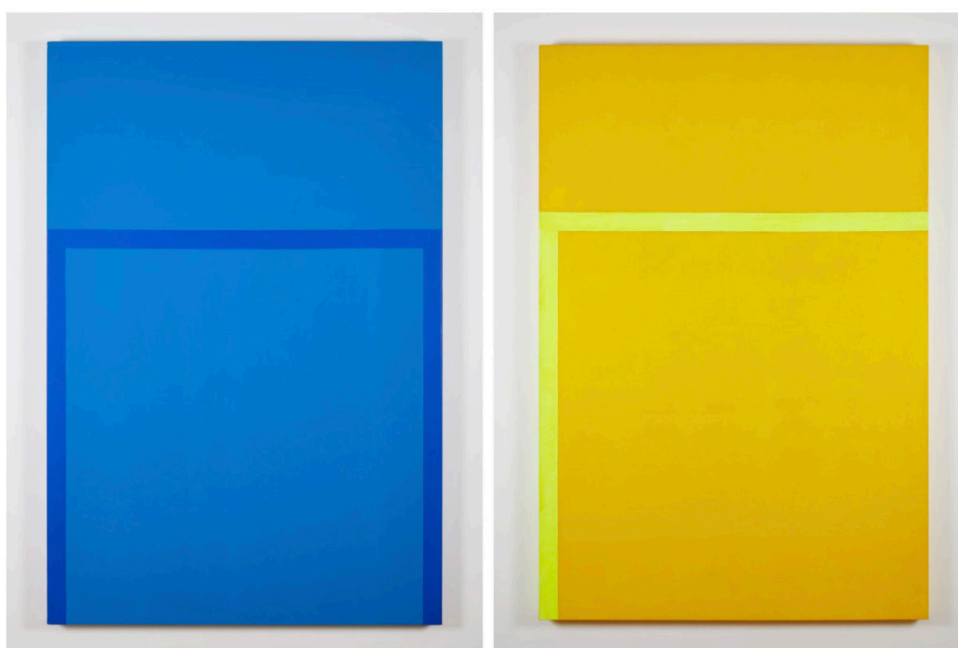
Installation view of Carmen Herrera's *Untitled Estructura (Orange)* (2007/2016) at The Perimeter, London, 2020. Photo: Andy Stagg. Courtesy Lisson Gallery; © Carmen Herrera

**'Carmen Herrera: Colour Me In' is at The Perimeter, London, until 8 January 2021.**

## The T List: Five Things We Recommend This Week

Carmen Herrera's new show, serums for your skin — and more.

### Carmen Herrera's New Exhibition in London



Carmen Herrera's "Blues" (1991) and "Two Yellows" (1992). Photography by Andy Stagg. Courtesy of the artist and Lisson Gallery.

By Nancy Coleman

Four years ago, at the age of 101, the Cuban-American abstract artist Carmen Herrera had one of her first major [solo exhibitions](#), at the Whitney Museum of American Art. “There’s a saying that you wait for the bus and it will come,” Herrera [told T Magazine in 2015](#). The show brought critical acclaim to the pioneering minimalist whose oeuvre is defined by crisp lines, bold colors and geometric abstraction. Now, at 105, the artist has a new show at the private exhibition space the Perimeter in London. “Carmen Herrera: Colour Me In” features pieces — eight paintings, four works on paper and two wall-based relief sculptures — made between the mid-1980s and the early ’90s, picking up from where the Whitney exhibition left off. While the Whitney focused on Herrera’s development from her time in Paris to her first decades in New York City, where she moved in 1954 and still lives and works, the Perimeter show — as its title suggests — delves into her later experimentation with color, when Herrera shifted from more dissonant palettes to varying shades of blues or yellows layered on top of one another. “Carmen Herrera: Colour Me In” is free with a [pre-booked appointment through Jan. 8, 2021, at the Perimeter, 20 Brownlow Mews, London, WC1N 2LE](#).

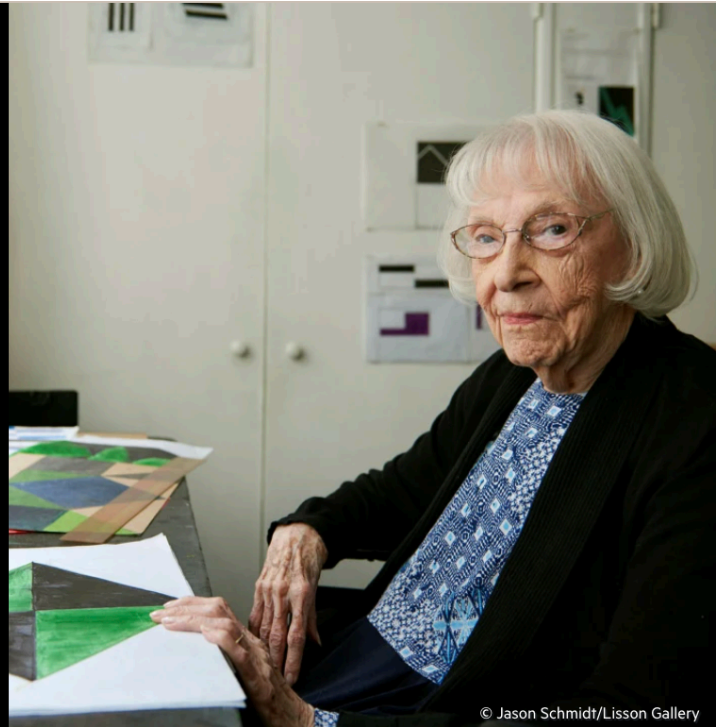
## FINANCIAL TIMES

Visual Arts ✓ Added

### Carmen Herrera: the 105-year-old artist on late-life fame

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The Cuban-American painter and sculptor talks about colour, feminism — and why being ignored is ‘a form of freedom’

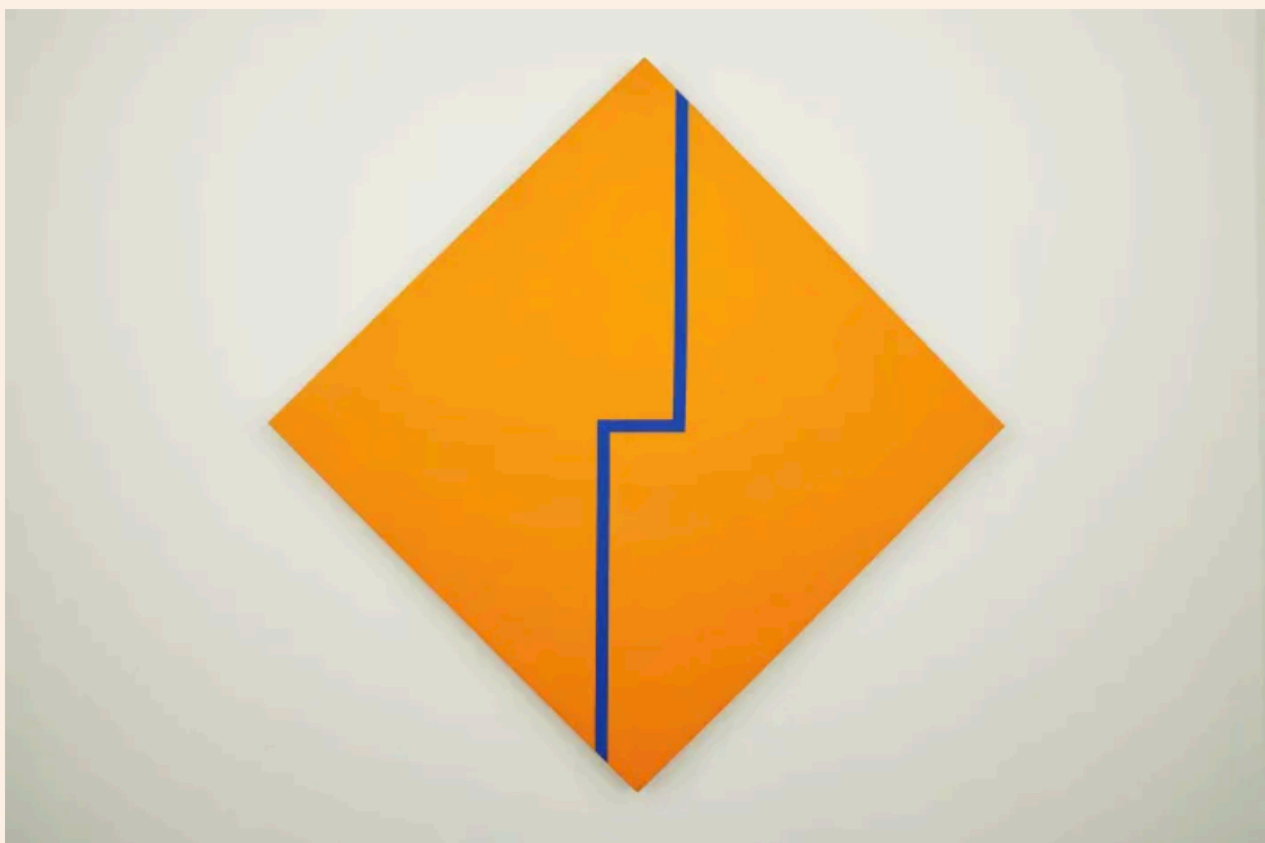


The Cuban-American artist Carmen Herrera celebrated her 105th birthday this year, and email was her medium of choice for our interview. Forty-eight hours after sending my questions, I received replies whose vivacious, intimate tone and occasionally whimsical syntax showed that the elderly artist was still firmly in control of her own voice.

That is cosmic justice, given how long it has taken for her to be heard. Like so many female artists of her generation, Herrera remained largely invisible throughout the 20th century.

An exponent of geometric abstraction, working in bold, tangy colours and crisp lines, there was no reason for her not to have been classed as a groundbreaking minimalist alongside the likes of Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella. But this was an era when a gallerist — female, as it happened — had no qualms in telling Herrera that, however good she was, she couldn't be shown “because I was a woman”, as the artist recounted in the insightful 2015 documentary about her life, *The 100 Years Show*.

Other than participating in a sprinkling of New York shows devoted to Latin American artists, Herrera remained in the shadows. In the late 1990s, a solo show at El Museo del Barrio won critical acclaim. But it still took another 10 years before, in 2009, Ikon Gallery in Birmingham invited her to show for the first time in Europe, when one critic called her “the discovery of the year — of the decade”. A year later she joined Lisson Gallery and in 2016, when she was 100 years old, New York’s Whitney Museum gave her a solo show that catapulted her to art-world stardom.



'Blue Angle on Orange' (1982-83) ©

Herrera is equanimous about the neglect. “Being ignored is a form of freedom,” she writes. “I truly used that all my life. I felt liberated from having to constantly please anyone.”

Our conversation is triggered by the decision of collector Alexander Petalas to show Herrera’s work at [The Perimeter](#), his not-for-profit space in London’s Bloomsbury. Working in collaboration with Lisson, Petalas has put together a rare display of Herrera’s paintings and sculptures from the 1980s and ’90s.

“I just thought it was really special and beautiful,” Petalas tells me, when I ask why he was drawn to Herrera’s vision. “There’s something incredible about the simplicity [of the work] without being simple.” He was impressed by her “commitment to working in two colours since the ’50s, early ’60s. She’s never veered off course.”

“

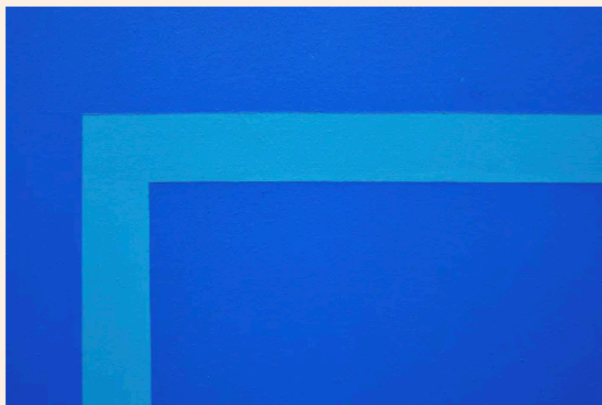
**Being ignored is a form of freedom. I used that all my life. I felt liberated from having to please anyone**

Colour, Herrera says, is always about “a dialogue”. She has always been “curious about two colours reacting or dancing with each other”, she continues, before admitting that “all colours are quite the same to my liking . . . including black and white. But put two of them together in the context of minimal forms and

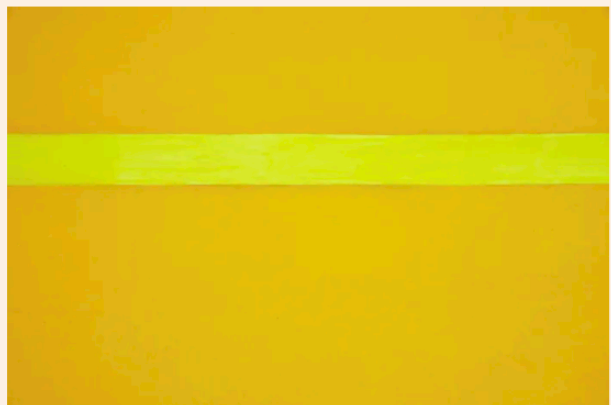
divisions, with a straight line, and you have a unique sensation.”

The paintings at The Perimeter testify to her words. In a trio of panels — “Blues” (1991), “Two Yellows” (1992) and “Horizontal” (1992) — Herrera paints the surface in one colour, fizzing lemon or intense cobalt, then disturbs it with a right angle or rectangle whose narrow border contrasts a shade of the same hue. The result illuminates the background colour in such a way as to evoke its essence. Blue has never looked “bluer” than in a Herrera painting.

Many critics assume her effervescent palette stems from her Latin youth. But although she admits her “sense of colour must have Cuban roots”, she stresses that colour “is a most intuitive thing”: the time she has spent in New York and Paris is a key influence, as are artists from “Giotto to Zurbarán to Malevich and Mondrian”.



‘Blues’ (1991) ©



‘Two Yellows’ (1992) ©

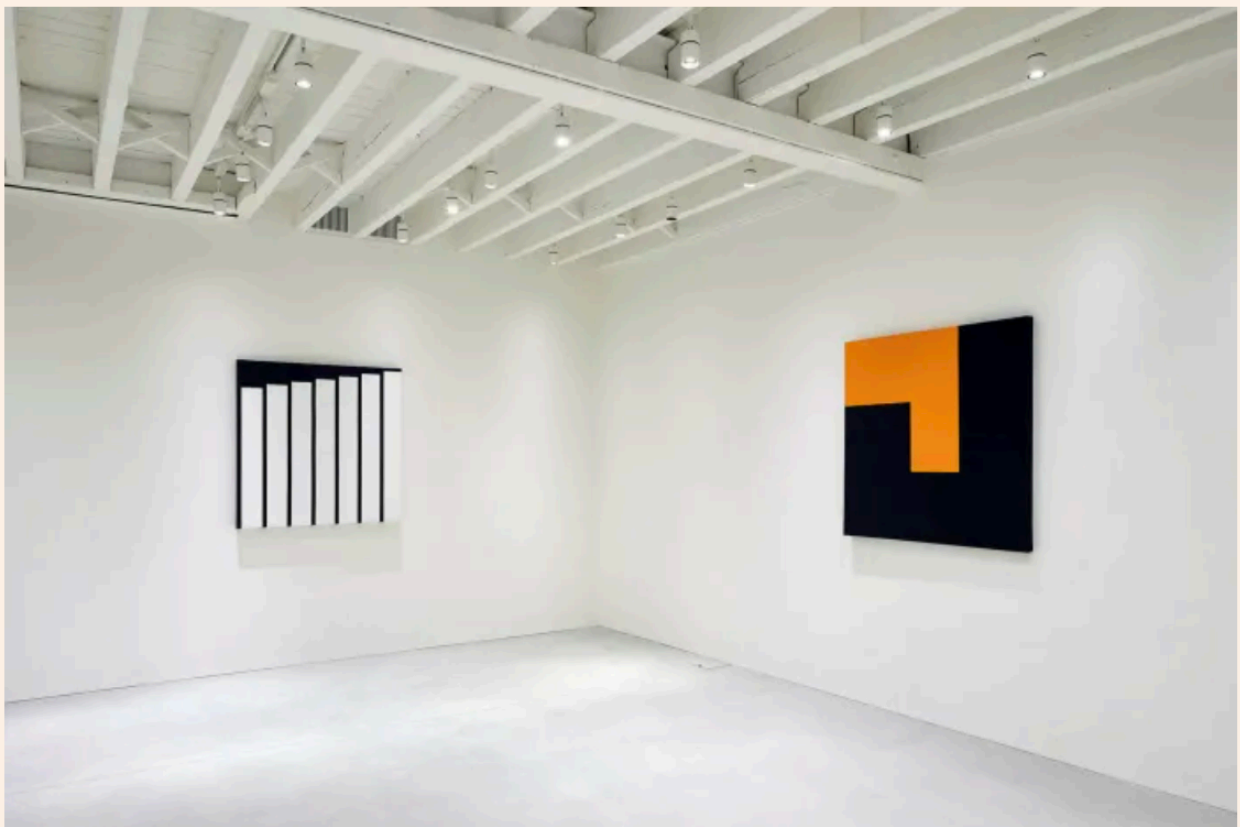
If that sounds as if she’s lived life to the full, it’s no lie. Born in Cuba in 1915 to a father who founded the newspaper El Mundo and a mother who was a reporter, Herrera took drawing lessons as a child before travelling to Paris, where she studied art, and visited Rome and Berlin. She returned to Cuba in 1931, just before the president, Gerardo Machado, was forced to step down and Herrera’s own brothers were arrested.

The “political turmoil” put paid to her chance to study architecture, though she did manage a year at the University of Havana. Yet, “fascinated by space and lines”, she studied architecture on her own and considers that research crucial to her later painting practice.

Asked if she is a feminist, Herrera is scornful. “My mother was the first feminist in Cuba!” she exclaims. “She was a working journalist. It was always part and parcel of the parlour and dinner discussion of my home. Of course I am a feminist. What a question to a woman!”

Yet she makes no bones that her husband, Jesse Lowenthal, was also a cornerstone of her career. The pair met in 1937 when Lowenthal, a poet and English teacher, visited Havana. After their marriage in 1939, the couple moved to New York. “He truly believed in my work and would not allow me to leave my studio to earn extra income,” Herrera writes, as she recalls life with someone she describes as “quite a man, a literature teacher, a linguist [he spoke six languages]. At the age of 95 he taught himself ancient Greek so he could read Homer in the original.”

Her only regret, she says, is that Lowenthal did not live to see her success. (That he died at the age of 98 tells us how overdue that success was.)



Carmen Herrera's work is on show at The Perimeter in London's Bloomsbury ©

Nevertheless, the couple clearly had a blast. In 1948, they moved to Paris for six years and became part of a charmed circle that included the artist Marie Raymond (the mother of Yves Klein), Jean Genet and fellow Cuban painter Wifredo Lam. “Such interesting people!” writes Herrera, the exclamation mark underscoring her excitement at a world where she saw “the first production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* . . . what a shock!” and participated, in 1949, at the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, which championed abstract art and included Robert Delaunay and Jean Arp among its stable.

In New York, she had her first solo show in 1956 at the Galeria Sudamericana (her very first solo had taken place in Havana in 1950). Living on Central Park West, she and Lowenthal hosted *tertulias* (social gatherings) with bohemian friends. Every Sunday, she recalls, they enjoyed brunch with Barnett Newman and his wife Annalee. “Barney was . . . a source of wisdom and an incredible intellect.”

When success finally came, it gave Herrera “a lift and a major surprise”. With paintings selling for seven-figure sums, she was at last able to “afford to do my sculpture!” Explaining that her paintings had been “begging to become sculptures” since the 1960s, she enthuses over the “beautifully metallic surfaces” she can now create.

Two of her sculptures — in aluminium, painted in acrylic and exuding her signature tension between passionate colour and restrained form — are included in The Perimeter show, while an exhibition of large-scale outdoor sculptures is due to be unveiled in Houston, Texas, later this month.

An “avid reader” all her life, Herrera has recently become devoted to the poetry of Emily Dickinson and quotes the following lines: “I’m nobody! Who are you?/Are you — Nobody — too?”

Carmen Herrera, however, is somebody at last.

*Until January 8*

LISSON GALLERY

*Widewalls*

24 September 2020

**WIDEWALLS**

## A Lifelong Experimentation with Abstraction – Carmen Herrera at The Perimeter



At first glance, the 20th-century abstract art is marked by the presence of great male artists that challenged the very notion of art-making. However, at the same time, there are many women who stood shoulder to shoulder with their male peers but their contribution to art history has been ignored to favor the men.

Despite all the stereotypes and the constraints of patriarchy, Carmen Herrera climbed her way to the top and became one of the most prolific female practitioners of abstraction. She started her fruitful career in the 1940s post-war Paris, moved to New York in the 1950s, and ultimately came to prominence during the 1980s. Throughout the following decades, Herrera managed to be equally productive and even today at the age of one hundred and five she remains active in the art world.

To honor her lasting practice and focus on the peak of her maturity as an artist, The Perimeter decided to organize Herrera's solo exhibition, the first in London outside of the Lisson Gallery which has been representing the artist for decades.



Carmen Herrera - Green's Way, 1988. Acrylic on canvas, 106.7 x 106.7 cm, 42 x 42 in. Collection of Tony Bechara

## The Goddess of Abstraction

Carmen Herrera is very well known for her unique pictorial language infused by the reductionism and other formal issues empowered her contemporaries gathered around the Color Field movement, such as Barnett Newman and Ellsworth Kelly, to disseminate abstraction further. Vibrant pallet, contrasting planes, and outstanding compositional quality and rhythm of pictorial elements made Herrera one of the most promising painters of her generation.

Although recognized for her groundbreaking achievements much later, she sure left quite a mark and cleared the path for the following generation of artists around Minimalism.



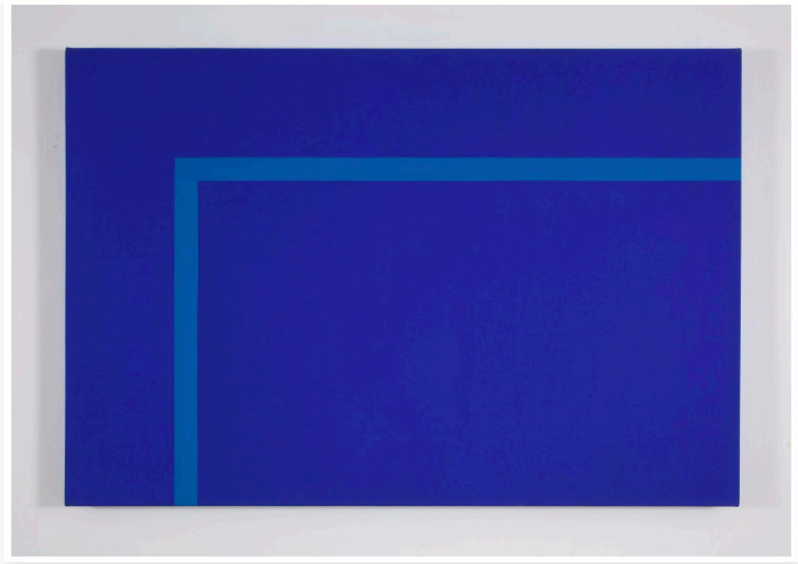
**Left:** Carmen Herrera - Black & orange, 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 106.7 x 106.7 cm, 42 x 42 in / **Right:** Carmen Herrera - Blue Angle on Orange, 1982-83. Acrylic on canvas, h. 150.9 x w. 150.9 cm, h 59.4 x w 59.4 in. Collection of Alexander Petalas

## The Installment

The upcoming exhibition will feature rarely seen works (eight paintings, four works on paper, and two wall-based reliefs) made by the artists between the mid-1980s and early 1990s installed across the four stories of the readapted Bloomsbury warehouse.

The works produced in the mid-1980s feature the artist's focus on depicting forms suspended within the frame under a specific rhythm and spatial tension.

On the other hand, later works depict how swiftly Herrera turned to shades of colors that were gradually layered one after another to create a new form of pictorial intensity.



Carmen Herrera - Horizontal, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 106.7 x 157.5 cm, 42 x 62 in. Private Collection

## Carmen Herrera at The Perimeter

A new illustrative catalog featuring text written by Flavia Frigeri, art historian and curator, will illuminate Herrera's process and the exhibited works.

This presentation was supported by Lisson Gallery that currently hosts the artist's works in New York within the exhibition [\*Painting in Process\*](#).

*Carmen Herrera: Colour Me In* will be on display at [The Perimeter](#) in London from 25 September 2020 until 8 January 2021.

Featured image: Carmen Herrera - Composition Blue & White, 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 106.7 x 106.7 cm, 42 x 42 in. Collection of Tony Bechara. Courtesy The Perimeter.

## 'Because it was a vocation': Celebrating Carmen Herrera's 105th birthday

Jul 6, 2020



"Estructura Roja," by Carmen Herrera, 1966/2012, automobile paint on plywood (Courtesy of Carmen Herrera)

On May 30 this year (according to her Cuban passport) or May 31 (according to her American passport), the revered painter Carmen Herrera turned 105. To celebrate the birthday, El Museo del Barrio in East Harlem, New York, organized a Zoom celebration May 27 that Herrera had hoped to join — but finally decided to watch at home.

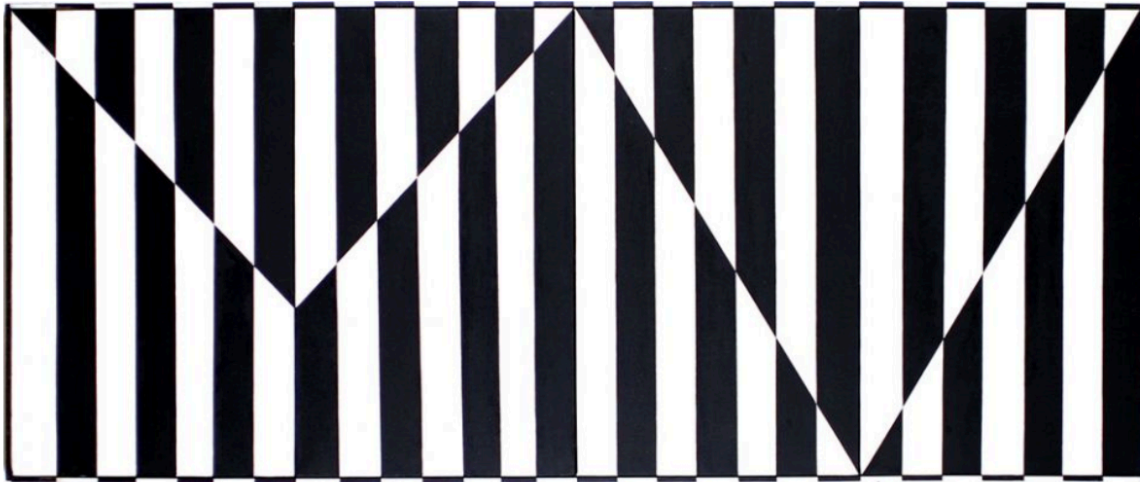
El Museo was a perfect host, with curator Susanna Temkin leading the conversation among Carolina Ponce de León, who had curated a major exhibition of Herrera's work at El Museo in 1998; Monica Espinel, who contributed the chronology to the catalogue of the Whitney Museum of American Art's [landmark survey of her work in 2016](#); and Tony Bechara, an artist who has been a friend of Herrera's for decades.

Herrera was born in 1915 in Havana, the youngest of the seven children of Antonio and Carmela Herrera, who were both members of the city's intellectual elite. Although she studied architecture at the University of Havana for only one academic year in 1938, she was deeply influenced by the experience. ("I wouldn't paint the way I do if I hadn't gone to architecture school," [she later said](#). "That's where I learned to think abstractly and to draw like an architect.")

But her previous study at the Lyceum, a cosmopolitan women's club in Havana, where she became close to the intrepid painter Amelia Peláez (her senior by almost 20 years), drew her back to painting and sculpture. In 1937, through her brother Addison, she met an American tourist, Jesse Loewenthal, whom she married in 1939 and with whom she moved to New York that year.

Loewenthal was a remarkably gifted and cultured man and with him Herrera became friendly with a wide range of New Yorkers, including Barnett Newman and his wife Annalee. She frequented the Whitney (where only Stuart Davis and Georgia O'Keeffe really appealed to her) and took classes at the Art Students League.

But she felt culturally adrift and was only too glad to move with Jesse to Paris in 1948, where she quickly set up a studio in their apartment. Socializing with the likes of Jean Genet and delighting in a city filled in the postwar years with other American artists, she happened on the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, exhibited with it, and through it discovered the Bauhaus and Russian Suprematism. Thrilled, she began to move beyond experiments based on her academic training in Havana and New York and toward serious abstraction — at first organic or gestural but then increasingly geometric (a prominent example being "Black and White," from 1952). Finding acrylic more manageable than oil, she used it from then on.



"Untitled," by Carmen Herrera, 1952, acrylic on canvas (Courtesy of Carmen Herrera)

Returning to New York with Jesse in early 1954 for financial reasons, she continued the black and white paintings she had begun in 1952 — not so much a series as such but rather occasional step-backs from color to a purified simplicity she called "depuración" (purification). ("I had to forget about trimmings and go to the core of things," [she said](#).) In the important exhibition many years later in 1998 at El Museo del Barrio, "The Black and White Paintings: 1951-1989," curator Carolina Ponce de León showed them in all their stunning originality. The earlier paintings were variations on a theme of primal tri-angular black forms emerging from (not *in*) a field of white that was inspired by the Neo-Plasticism of Piet Mondrian but risked unmooring his elegant harmonies with slashing diagonal lines. Later came formidable structures of black and white such as "Ávila" and "Escorial" (both 1974) inspired by the great Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán and the letters of Teresa of Ávila in the first case and by the architect of the Escorial, Juan de Herrera, in the second. (That show, she has said, was her favorite.)

In the 1950s in New York Herrera had her first solo exhibition but due to the political turmoil in Cuba she did not exhibit between 1958 and 1962. Always politically conscious (though keeping politics out of her painting), she and Jesse became seriously committed to the cause of refugees fleeing Cuba. Nevertheless, she produced major works such as "Green and Orange" (1958), a large, angular interlocking of the two colors that looks more and more like a masterpiece, and "Equation" (1958), two large white triangles crowding four slender black ones almost out of the frame — one of her own personal favorites. Perhaps most important was her first painting in 1959 in the "Blanco y Verde" series that would continue for 12 years and for all their apparent minimalism reveal the sculptural instinct of her work. (The New York Times art critic Hilton Kramer called one work in the series, "Blanco y Verde" from 1967, "[the best picture she has yet exhibited](#).")



[Click for full-size graphic](#)

Supported by a fellowship from the CINTAS Foundation in 1968, Herrera began her series of "Estructuras," monumental structures — first made with fiberboard, Styrofoam and epoxy and later with wood — that included the biplanar, blue "Untitled" (1971) and the handsome, Chinese red "Estructura Roja" (1966/2012). (They were later shown in a solo exhibition in 1979.)



[Click for full-size graphic](#)

During the same period she continued to produce elegantly simple paintings such as "The Way" (1970), another masterwork of tensive, simplified precision in which two red-brown, thin angular forms attract and repel each other with seemingly boundless energy and balance. A final marvelous series on the days of the week — it would be the artist's last full series--was completed between 1975 and 1978, each painting with a large, irregular black form encroached on by vibrant dark blue, golden yellow, green, pale yellow, salmon and red forms, respectively.

In 1984 Herrera had her first retrospective at the Alternative Museum in New York. She was one of the artists responding to the AIDS crisis and painted "La Hora" and "Yesterday" in 1987 in honor of two friends who died of the disease. (Each is a black painting with a white line electrically zig-zagging through it.)

In 1988 one critic [described](#) her work in a solo exhibition at the Rastovski Gallery in New York as "a particularly sexy sort of geometric symmetry." (As with similar comments about her "Blanco y Verde" series, she was not impressed.) In the same

year she was included in a survey exhibition on Latin American art, and a critic wrote in the journal "Contemporanea.": "Nothing can prepare one for the power and authority of Carmen Herrera's 'Green and Orange (1958).' ...This spectacular work challenges one to imagine it in its proper context three decades ago."

With the 1998 exhibition at El Museo, the artist's slowly emerging reputation took a decided step forward. ("She occupies an honorable place in postwar geometric painting," [wrote](#) Holland Cotter in The New York Times, "and this fine show should help to secure it.")

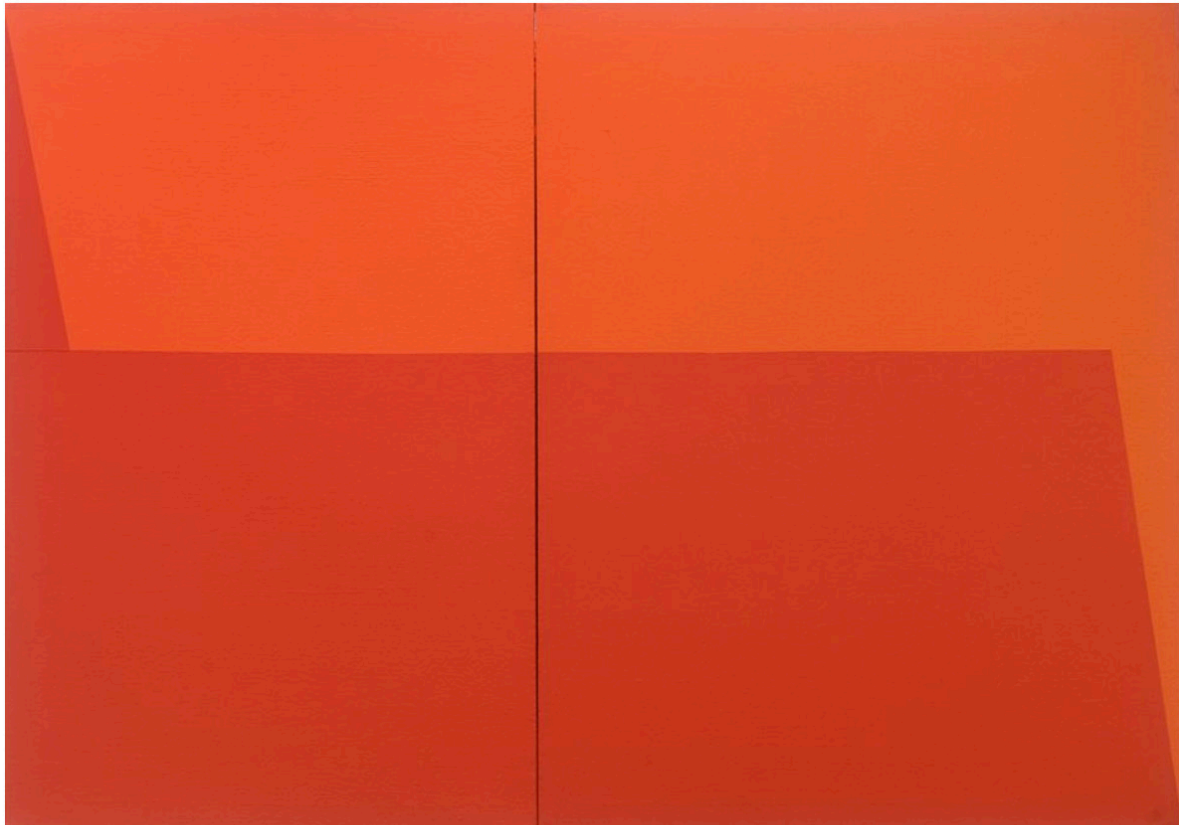
In 2000, however, Jesse Loewenthal died at the age of 98, and Herrera was deeply stricken. Then in 2005 "Carmen Herrera: Five Decades of Painting" was held at LatinCollector in Tribeca and glowingly reviewed in the Times by Grace Glueck, whose appreciation for the architectural character of the work was, Herrera thought, the best she had read. She began to paint seriously again.

A video and a documentary had just been made about her, and her work began to enter the collections of major museums — the Tate in London, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. In 2015 Alison Klayman directed a short, widely seen documentary about her, "The 100 Years Show," and in 2016 the Whitney presented the landmark "Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight." Organized to explore the origins and development of her signature style of dichromatic, strictly geometric canvases between 1948 and 1978, it was brilliantly curated by Dana Miller, who also edited the handsome catalogue. (Included there is a fine chronology by Monica Espinel.) The exhibition placed Herrera, [in Miller's words](#), "firmly in the pantheon of great postwar abstract painters alongside the likes of Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt and Frank Stella."

And now, at 105, she continues to draw each morning in the apartment on East 19th Street where she has lived since 1967, not far from her beloved Church of the Epiphany. In 2019 the Public Art Fund presented her "Estructuras Monumentales," now rendered in aluminum, at City Hall Park in New York — outdoors and stunning. According to [reporting by ARTnews](#), this year, working with the firm Publicolor, a not-for-profit that works with more disadvantaged public schools, she designed another outdoor artwork in East Harlem; more recently, again with Publicolor, she designed a 54-foot-wide mural entitled "Uno Dos Tres," based on her 1987 painting "Diagonal." As ARTnews reports, "The piece will go on view at Manhattan East School for Arts and Academics in New York, whose students helped complete the project."



[Click for full-size graphic](#)



"Red on Red (Rojo sobre Rojo)," by Carmen Herrera, 1959, oil and acrylic on canvas (Courtesy of Carmen Herrera)

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For years the story was told that Herrera did not sell her first painting [until she was 89](#). (In her chronology for the Whitney Show, [Monica Espinel tells us](#) that she actually sold three paintings to American tourists in Cuba when she was 20.) But at Sotheby's on March 1, 2019, her "Blanco y Verde" (1966-67) fetched \$2.9 million.

Still, in her introduction to the [catalogue for the Whitney show](#), Dana Miller quotes Herrera: "People keep saying, 'How do you work all these years without any reward, no money, and few exhibitions?' Because it was a vocation," she said. "Why would anyone go to a hospital to take care of the lepers if they do not have the vocation of being nuns? It's the same."

"Herrera has said that she did not choose to become an artist," Miller continued, "rather that she was chosen; she likened it to falling in love or being struck by lightning. And on more than one occasion she has even remarked, usually with a sly smile, that she herself should have been a nun."

The artist was marvelously independent from the start. When her friend Tony Bechara asked her how she had lived to be 100 and yet keep working, as we heard at the El Museo celebration, she told him: "For 100 years, you drink scotch and eat red meat. Then when you hit 100, you become a vegetarian and you drink champagne."

Felicidades, Sra. Herrera!

LISSON GALLERY

*Art in America*  
01 December 2016

# Art in America



CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW  
"Carmen Herrera:  
Lines of Sight," at the  
Whitney Museum of  
American Art,  
New York, through  
Jan. 2, 2017.

## WORLDLY ABSTRACTION

**Trained as an architect, Carmen Herrera makes  
paintings that reconfigure the vertiginous perspectives and  
lean shapes of modern city life.**

**by Carter Ratcliff**

CARTER  
RATCLIFF is a poet,  
critic, and author of  
the novel *Topaila*  
*Mockingbird* (Station  
Hill Press, 2015).



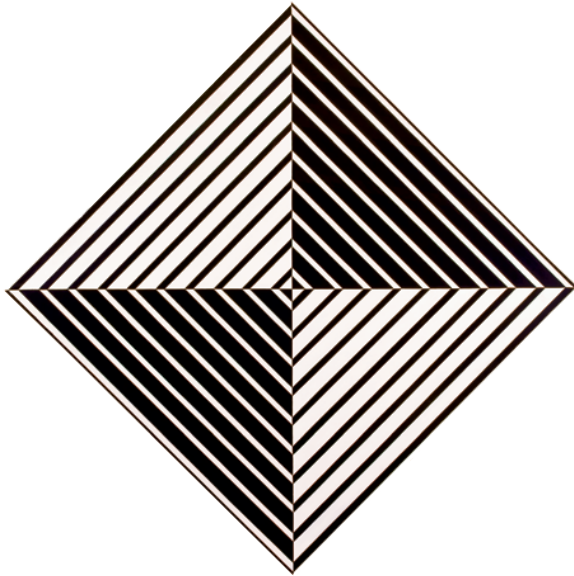
THE CRISPLY GEOMETRIC paintings of Carmen Herrera draw us into a “world of straight lines,” to borrow a phrase from one of her interviews.<sup>1</sup> Hers is a world where the relations between shapes are clear and the shapes themselves are even clearer. Yet this unflagging clarity has the power to surprise. In the “Blanco y Verde” series, which occupied Herrera from 1959 to 1971, she punctuates fields of white with elongated triangles of emerald green. There are usually just two of these slivery shapes to a canvas, though sometimes there are as many as three or as few as one. With these limited means she turns blank white fields into specific environments. Herrera has never disclosed much about her process, though she did say in 2010, at the age of ninety-five, that “every painting is a fight between the painting and me. I tend to win.”<sup>2</sup> Because the results of these struggles are so consistently successful, one assumes that each of her paintings is the product of an intense, even obsessive process of trial and error.

The “Blanco y Verde” canvases appear just after the midpoint in “Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight,” an exhibition now on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The earliest works feature

flexible grids dividing the surface into lively, nested shapes. An array of greens and browns give the curving forms of *Green Garden* (1950) an oblique resemblance to tropical fronds and shadows. Within two years, Herrera had banished all traces of identifiable subject matter. *Black and White* (1952) is a sixty-eight-inch square divided into quadrants, articulated by patterns of black and white stripes. Hung not as a square but as a diamond, this painting seems at once precarious and locked into its symmetries.

For the rest of the 1950s, Herrera played stability off instability, often giving the latter a slight edge. Though the layout of a Herrera canvas can be grasped in a single glance, further looking complicates matters. As the viewer tries to determine which shape in a painting is figure and which is ground, the forms come together in a single plane. The image stabilizes, but only for a moment. Herrera’s color-shapes are always on the move. A hue advances, it retreats; a dynamic form seems to push the right-angled frame slightly out of kilter, then rectilinearity reasserts itself. These subtleties bring her paintings to life and give each one a vibrantly distinctive presence, if not a personality.

View of the exhibition “Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight,” 2016–17, showing (left to right) *Horizontal*, 1965; *Rondo*, 1958; *A City*, 1948; and *Untitled*, 1949. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Photo Ronald Amstutz.



*Black and White*, 1952, acrylic on canvas with painted frame, 68 inches square. Collection Estrellita and David Brodsky.

Among the Whitney exhibition's most striking paintings is *Green and Orange* (1958), in which the two titular colors interlock in a pattern of cantilevered bars. The green bars reach to the right, the orange ones to the left, and Herrera has extended them all precisely to the point beyond which they would make the picture rickety. Next come variations on the narrow shapes of the "Blanco y Verde" series in blue and white, then black and white. By the mid-1960s she was centering diamond shapes on circular canvases, a return to symmetry that accompanied a diminishment in scale. These are intimate paintings. Shape takes on more visual heft in a cluster of paintings from the 1970s. Here, blunt rectilinear shapes in red dominate fields of white. One is reminded, if only obliquely, of buildings massive enough to block out much of the sky. Having turned toward monumentality, Herrera embraced it fully in a series of black-and-white paintings that would qualify as Brutalist if their internal proportions were not so grandly refined. From here it was a short step to the series of seven canvases that bring the Whitney exhibition to its finale.

Painted in 1975 and 1978, the works are named after the days of the week. In each, one or two large, angular black forms share the surface with one other hue: a luminous yellow in *Tuesday* (1978), a smoldering orange in *Friday* (1978). Aside from the blue of *Blue Monday* (1975), the choice of colors seems arbitrary, or dictated by associations so thoroughly personal that we have no way of knowing what they might be. So we bring our own associations to bear—or not. These paintings need no extravizual buttressing. Appealing to our sense of shape and space, they endow their expanses of black and bright color with a levitating weightiness. Here and throughout Herrera's oeuvre, line measures off the surface with a precision so economical that it counts as pictorial wit.

View of "Lines of Sight," showing (left to right, on wall) *Epiphany*, 1971; *Red and White*, 1976; and *Amarillo "Día,"* 1971; and (left to right, on platform) *Untitled*, 1971, and *Estructura Roja*, 1966/2012. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo Ronald Amstutz.

HERRERA'S STORY is now well-known in the art world, but it still amazes. Although she has been painting seriously for more than seven decades, "Lines of Sight" is her first exhibition at a major museum. Herrera was marginalized in large part because of her gender. A Manhattan dealer named Rose Fried told her that she could paint circles around the men in her stable, but refused to give a show to a woman.<sup>3</sup>

Born in Havana in 1915, Herrera grew up as one of seven siblings in a milieu devoted to art and literature. Her mother, Carmela, was a journalist and author. Her father, Antonio, served in the war of independence from Spain and afterward founded the newspaper *El Mundo*. The family's art collection included paintings by Spanish old masters as well as contemporary Cubans. Drawing lessons were almost a matter of course for Herrera and her brother Addison. At fourteen, she moved to Paris, where she studied French and art history at the Marymount International School and became familiar with the city's museums. Before returning to Havana two years later, she traveled in Germany and Italy with her mother and one of her sisters. While still in high school, Herrera became a painter accomplished enough to be included in group exhibitions at Havana's Lyceum and Circulo de Bellas Artes alongside established artists. Nonetheless, she chose to major in architecture at the University of Havana.

It was then that she learned something about herself. "There is nothing I love more than to make a straight line," she said years later. "How can I explain it? It's the beginning of all structures, really."<sup>4</sup> Though Herrera passed her exams with honors, she never received her architect's license. This was not a cause for deep regret. As much as she loved straight lines and right angles, she was reluctant to deal with clients and their demands. She did not, however, completely abandon the third dimension. The Whitney exhibition includes several of the "Estructuras" (Structures) that





*Blanco y Verde*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 40 by 70 inches. Private collection.

Herrera began to build in the mid-1960s. Some are wall pieces; others stand on the floor. All are composed of two monochrome slabs that almost fit together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, but not quite, because Herrera has adjusted the position of the slabs to produce narrow wedge-shaped openings where they meet. In the “Blanco y Verde” paintings, these wedges are made of green pigment. In the “Estructuras,” they are empty space.

In 1939 Herrera married Jesse Loewenthal, a *New Yorker* she had met while he was traveling in Cuba. Soon afterward, Cuba’s political turmoil prompted the couple to leave for the United States. Once they had settled into an apartment in downtown Manhattan, Loewenthal returned to his teaching post at Stuyvesant High School. Herrera painted, occasionally studying at the Art Students League or the Brooklyn Museum Art School. In 1948, with the war in Europe over, Loewenthal took a sabbatical and they moved to Paris. The center of Herrera’s artistic life was the Salon Réalités Nouvelles, which had been founded two years earlier by Sonia Delaunay, Jean Arp, and other veterans of the prewar avant-garde. With a sensibility tilted strongly toward geometric abstraction, the Salon fostered Herrera’s pictorial predilections. In 1949 her work was sufficiently geometric to qualify her for membership in the group, and she was included in its fourth annual exhibition, held at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

As Herrera became a regular in the Salon’s yearly shows, her paintings appeared at L’Institute Endoplastique, Galerie Olga Bogroff, and other Parisian venues. Immersed in a steady round of concerts, plays, and literary events, she and Loewenthal acquired a large circle of friends and colleagues. Loewenthal extended his sabbatical, enabling them to stay abroad for five years. Obligated to return to New York in 1954, the couple took up residence in Greenwich Village. Paris, she later said, had been “like heaven.”<sup>5</sup> New York was far from that. Abstract Expressionism was in the

ascendant, and Herrera found her work welcomed only at galleries and institutions that specialized in art from Latin America. She exhibited very little during the next three decades, but continued to paint, strengthening her command of the “world of straight lines.”

In 1984 “Carmen Herrera: A Retrospective, 1951–1984” opened at the Alternative Museum in downtown Manhattan. The dominant art at the time went by the name Neo-Expressionism—a development as thoroughly at odds with Herrera’s sensibility as Abstract Expressionism, if not more so. After her retrospective, she was included in group shows with increasing frequency. El Museo del Barrio in New York presented a large selection of Herrera’s black-and-white paintings in 1998. She had stopped painting two years earlier to take care of Loewenthal, whose health was deteriorating. He died in 2000. Herrera did not return to painting until 2006, encouraged by the favorable response to a retrospective exhibition of her work presented the year before at Latincollector, a gallery on West Fifty-Seventh Street.

In the last decade, Herrera has had solo shows in Madrid, Milan, London, and New York. Now the Whitney is celebrating the first half of her career with a major exhibition, and one hopes that it will be followed by another devoted to the second half, either at this or some other museum. Having been discovered at long last, Herrera’s place in the durable tradition of geometric abstraction is assured. But this raises a question: where in that tradition does she belong?

AMONG THE ORIGINATORS of geometric abstraction are two avant-gardists with metaphysical leanings: Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian. Malevich claimed that with his *Black Square* (1915) he had made painting the vehicle of “pure feeling”—not his or any other individual’s feeling but “the spirit of non-objective sensation that pervades everything.”<sup>6</sup> Several years later, Mondrian arrived at the pared-down repertory of straight lines and “rectangular color planes”

Following spread, view of “Lines of Sight,” showing (left to right) *Wednesday*, 1978; *Tuesday*, 1978; *Sunday*, 1978; *Friday*, 1978; and *Thursday*, 1975. Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art. Photo Ronald Anstutz.

**Line measures off the surface with a precision so economical that it counts as pictorial wit.**



that expressed “the immutable.”<sup>77</sup> Like Malevich, Mondrian wanted to reveal the ultimate and imperishable realities hidden by the contingencies of the everyday world, as well as by artists’ representations of such fleeting and metaphysically negligible things as trees and clouds and the faces of individual people. Despite their shared beliefs, the two painters disagreed on a crucial point.

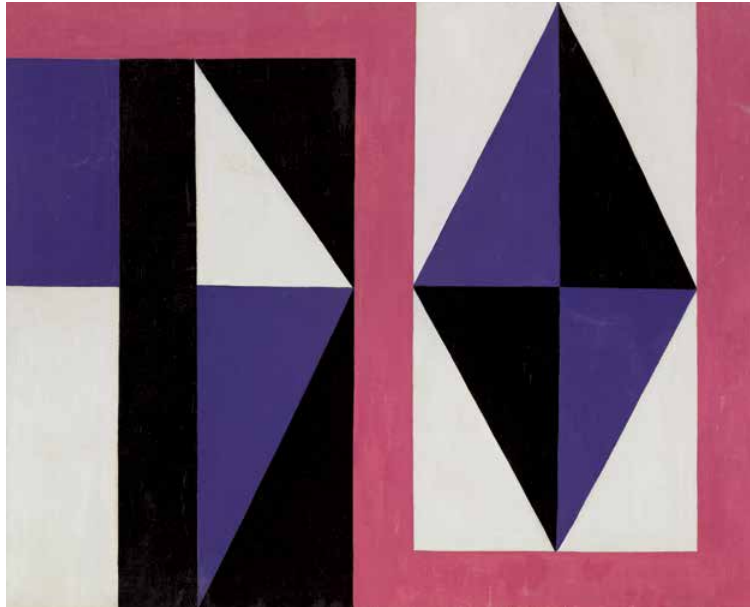
Malevich rejected all utilitarian applications of art. The abstract paintings that followed *Black Square* make no utopian proposals for the betterment of ordinary life. True art, Malevich declared, provides “the longed-for tranquility of an absolute order.”<sup>78</sup> Mondrian, on the other hand, believed in the practical benefit of pictorial order. In 1919 he declared that the “equilibrated relationships” of a properly composed painting “signify what is just” in society.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, it was his expectation that, as geometric painting became sculptural and sculpture became architectural, the way would be open to city planning capable, by such formal means, of creating a utopia. Mondrian and Malevich established the two poles defining the nature of geometric abstraction. At one extreme stood self-sufficient purity—transcendence for transcendence’s sake. The other held a purity that promised to redeem the world.

Herrera’s art finds no comfortable place between these options, perhaps because her “world of straight lines” has no need for metaphysical absolutes. Of course, the unrelenting straightness of her lines brings with it an air of idealism, yet this quality does

not completely remove her art from everyday experience. Since the advent of International Style architecture, certain buildings have presented us with crisply rectilinear forms, and the triangles in several of the “Blanco y Verde” canvases evoke razor-straight highways in extreme perspective. Whereas Mondrian presented his paintings as concise blueprints for a new world, Herrera’s feel as if they are grounded in this one. Furthermore, her colors seem to originate in the immediacies of observation, rather than in a theorized system.

One of the earliest paintings in the Whitney show is *Shocking Pink* (1949), a complex arrangement of bars and diamond shapes. The prevailing colors are black, white, and purple. Pink appears in the band that runs along the edges of the canvas, simultaneously cutting the surface into two not quite equal parts and uniting what it divides. The most prevalent colors in geometric abstraction from the 1920s to the ’60s are the bright red, blue, and yellow introduced early on by Mondrian. Pink is rare, though one sees it in canvases by Auguste Herbin, a founder of the Salon Réalités Nouvelles and one of the painters Herrera got to know when she lived in Paris. Like his greens and oranges, Herbin’s pinks have the look of systematic variations on Mondrian’s primary colors. Herrera has never been constrained by the precedents that have regulated most geometric abstraction over the decades. So she was free to charge the color pink with meanings undreamt of in the universe created by the geometers of Mondrian’s generation and sustained by their many heirs.

*Shocking Pink*, 1949,  
acrylic on canvas,  
32 by 40 inches.  
Private collection.





*Green Garden*, 1950, acrylic on canvas, 18 by 24 inches. Courtesy Lisson Gallery, London and New York.

Shocking pink made its debut in the late 1930s, in the package design for a perfume by Elsa Schiaparelli. So there is no denying that Herrera made a theme of femininity by turning the name of this color into the name of a painting. Yet her shocking pink is not to be mistaken for Schiaparelli's. The fashion designer used it as an emblem, however ironic, of unbridled sensuality. In Herrera's painting, pink has a silvery cast that renders it a touch austere without denying its fleshly warmth. There is nothing in the theories and precedents of geometric abstraction to prepare us for *Shocking Pink*. Standing face to face with this painting, we sense that its palette originates not in Euclidean absolutes but in nuances of a self-possessed individual's experience of gender and sexuality, and her attendant thoughts and feelings about them.

Georges Vantongerloo and Theo van Doesburg, who cofounded De Stijl with Mondrian, admitted green into the company of the three primary colors.<sup>10</sup> Mondrian did not. When he left behind his early, Symbolist work, he came to detest the color. It reminded him of nature, the mundane realm his utopia was meant to transcend. Herrera often deploys green, but not in shades that evoke trees and shrubbery. In *Green Garden* it has a sharp, nearly acidic quality, and the green of the "Blanco y Verde" series has a crystalline luminosity befitting its role in structuring wide expanses of white. Elsewhere, as in *Green and Orange*, green hovers between structural solidity and atmospheric permeability, much as the form this green defines can be seen as figure or as ground. Mondrian standardized colors. Herrera does not. Every time green appears in her paintings, it reinvents itself.

Offering neither to loft us above ordinary life nor propel us into a perfected future, Herrera's abstractions are not programmatic, much less didactic. As important as Mondrian was to her—she dedicated not one but two of her paintings to him—she is something of an outlier in the history that he did so much to

launch. It is of course undeniable that Herrera would not have become the painter she is without the example of geometric abstraction, in all its theory-driven yearning for transcendent order. In Herrera's art order has the tone—one might say the feel—of life on the plane where it is actually lived. Her paintings deflect pictorial logic with the impulses of physical gesture and the demands of fully felt emotion. Her oeuvre prompts a strong intuition of an uncompromisingly individual presence.

Yet the straight lines and smooth surfaces of her images ensure that she will never be taken for an expressionist. The elements of her style are those of modern architecture compressed into two dimensions, as if to suggest that her presence is indistinguishable from the settings it builds for itself. A Herrera painting invites us to meet her on grounds emphatically her own. There is a challenge in the invitation extended by her works, for they require rigorous, even scrupulous looking. There is generosity, as well, for Herrera's challenge is attuned to the pleasure we take in making sense of what we see, even—or especially—when we focus on subtleties as demanding as hers. ○

1. Dana Miller, "Carmen Herrera: Sometimes I Win," *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016, p. 15.

2. Hermione Holy, "Carmen Herrera: 'Every painting has been a fight between the painting and me. I tend to win,'" *Guardian*, Nov. 20, 2010, theguardian.com.

3. Miller, p. 22.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Carmen Herrera, "Backstory: Heavenly Paris," *Art in America*, Nov. 2015, p. 73.

6. Kasimir Malevich, "Suprematism" (1927), *Modern Artists on Art*, ed. Robert L. Herbert, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1964, p. 94.

7. Piet Mondrian, "A Dialogue on Neoplasticism" (1919), in Hans L. C. Jaffe, *De Stijl*, New York, Harry N. Abrams, 1971, p. 122.

8. Malevich, p. 101.

9. Mondrian, pp. 121, 123.

10. John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, p. 260.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Fortune Comes to Those Who Wait

**Carmen Herrera:  
Lines of Sight**  
Whitney Museum of American Art  
Through Jan. 2, 2017

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD

**W**hen the Whitney Museum of American Art reopened downtown last year with its historical survey exhibition, “America Is Hard to See,” one of the stand-outs in the crowd was a spare, dichromatic painting in acrylic by an artist, Carmen Herrera, few critics knew much about.

“Blanco y Verde”—a wide, flattened green triangle on a white field—was clustered with other abstract works from the post-World War II era, by Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, Jo Baer, Agnes Martin, John McLaughlin and Ad Reinhardt. Not only did this hard-edged canvas by a relative unknown display the confidence to affiliate with artworks squarely in the canon, it also bore a date—1959—surprisingly early for a painting of such aggressive Minimalism.

“Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight,” the exhilarating show now on the museum’s eighth floor, is proof that the assurance of the painting was no fluke. Each of the roughly 50 works here from the middle of her career confirms the maker’s systematically intuitive mind, one that is still engaged with her art at the age of 101. Would that more shows were this succinct and high in quality.

The curator, Dana Miller, has concentrated on 1948-78, the years when Ms. Herrera, independently but at the same time as some of the more renowned artists above, developed a rigorous abstract style—exemplified by the “Blanco y Verde” series—in which images of flat, unmodulated color could have the impact of solid objects.

How the artist reached this point is examined by Ms. Miller in her essential catalog essay and in the first third of the show. Born in Cuba in 1915 to intellectual parents, Ms. Herrera was educated in Havana, studying sculpture and

architecture as well as painting. She achieved some critical success there before moving with her husband, Jesse Loewenthal, to New York in 1939.

Her attempt at a career in Manhattan was a struggle, although the couple socialized with Barnett Newman and his wife. The conservative teaching at the Art Students League disappointed her, and she was left out of the Museum of Modern Art in its 1944 group show “Modern Cuban Painters.” In 1948 she and her husband moved to Paris.

The first works in the show date from these years, when Ms. Herrera spurned figuration and became a member of the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles. She began to paint with acrylic, then newly available, sometimes on burlap, part of which she left exposed. The tight, interlocking forms of her compositions recall those of her Cuban compatriot Wilfredo Lam, while her palette, especially her yellows and greens, has a tropical vibrancy.

Abstract painting from the early decades of the 20th century always had a strain that was cogent and planned, not whirling and improvisational, and Ms. Herrera pursued this more rational approach, as did a group of Americans who reacted in the postwar era against the dominance of Jackson Pollock and his Action-Painter followers.

She and Kelly, also in Paris in those years, claimed not to have been aware of each other, although both were then trying to clarify their work by simplifying color and form.

Two remarkable canvases of hers from 1952 in black-and-white—Ms. Herrera regards each as a color—not only resemble some of Kelly’s monochrome paintings from around

the same time, but also anticipate Op Art of the 1960s.

Her return to New York in 1954 was at first no happier than her earlier visit. She did not even exhibit between 1958 and 1962. The period nonetheless produced what may be her most lasting body of work.

In the center room of the show are nine paintings (of the 15 extant) from the “Blanco y Verde” series



Clockwise from top: installation shot; the artist in front of ‘Blue Monday’ (1975); ‘Friday’ (1978)

(1959-71). Ms. Miller compares Ms. Herrera’s precise eye to that of a “jeweler cutting facets in a stone.” The variations have a deliberate as well as a

floating character, like the steel needles of magnetic compasses. In some of the canvases, the sharp ends of the green triangles almost touch,

as if attracted, while in others the figures are kept rigidly apart, as if repelled.

The side edges of the canvases are also sometimes painted green, emphasizing its quality as an object distinct from the wall, not a picture to fall into. In the 1960s and ’70s, she further elaborated this idea, making monochrome paintings on thick sections of wood, which could hang on the wall or stand on the floor—her “Estructura” series.

The last works here are the seven paintings titled “The Days of the Week” (1975-78). They occupy their own wall outside the rooms of the exhibition, and like everything else here their geometric profile is strong, reductionist and slightly irregular.

Why did most American museums ignore Ms. Herrera until recently? Because she was a woman? Latin American and born in Cuba, an enemy country during much of her adult life? Too old? In need of a sympathetic curator/editor? All of the above?

Whatever reasons for the myopia—and the Whitney suffered from it, too, not buying a painting until 2014—this make-up call proves that happy endings are possible. Artists this good are typically discovered only posthumously. It’s to everyone’s benefit that Ms. Herrera is still around to enjoy her belated and deserved acclaim.

Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: RONALD PAUSITZ; WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART; MATTHEW GARSELLO. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND LISSON GALLERY

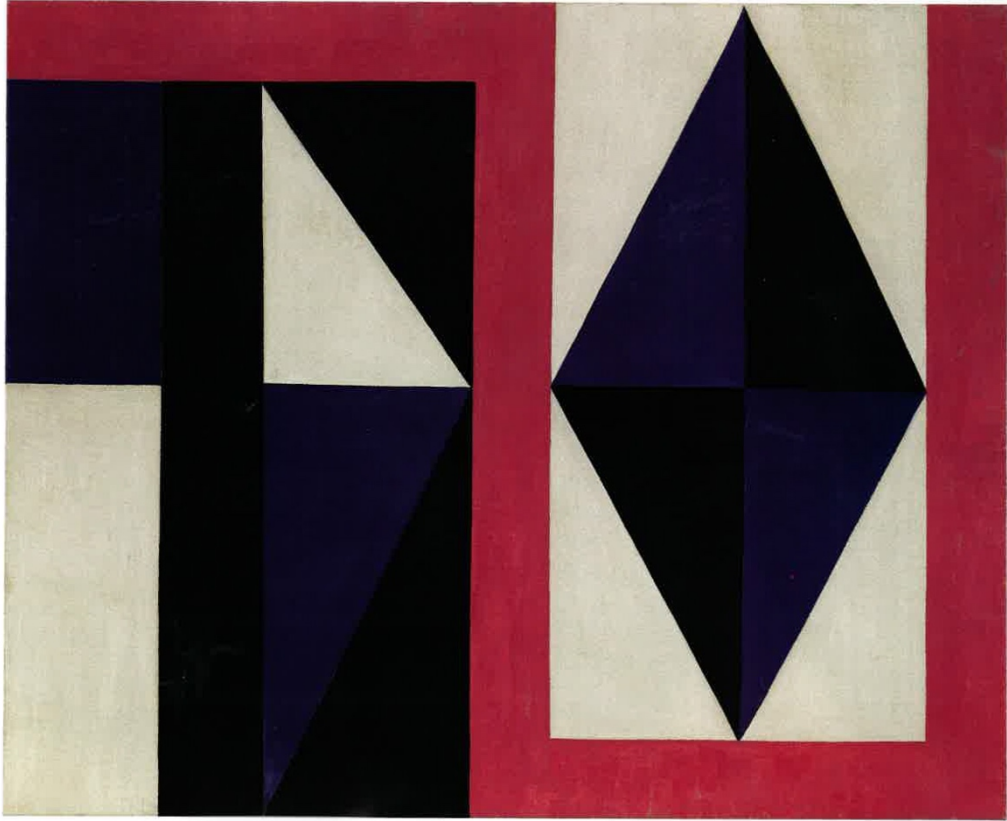
LISSON GALLERY

*Artforum*  
01 October 2016

# ARTFORUM

## **PORTFOLIO: CARMEN HERRERA**

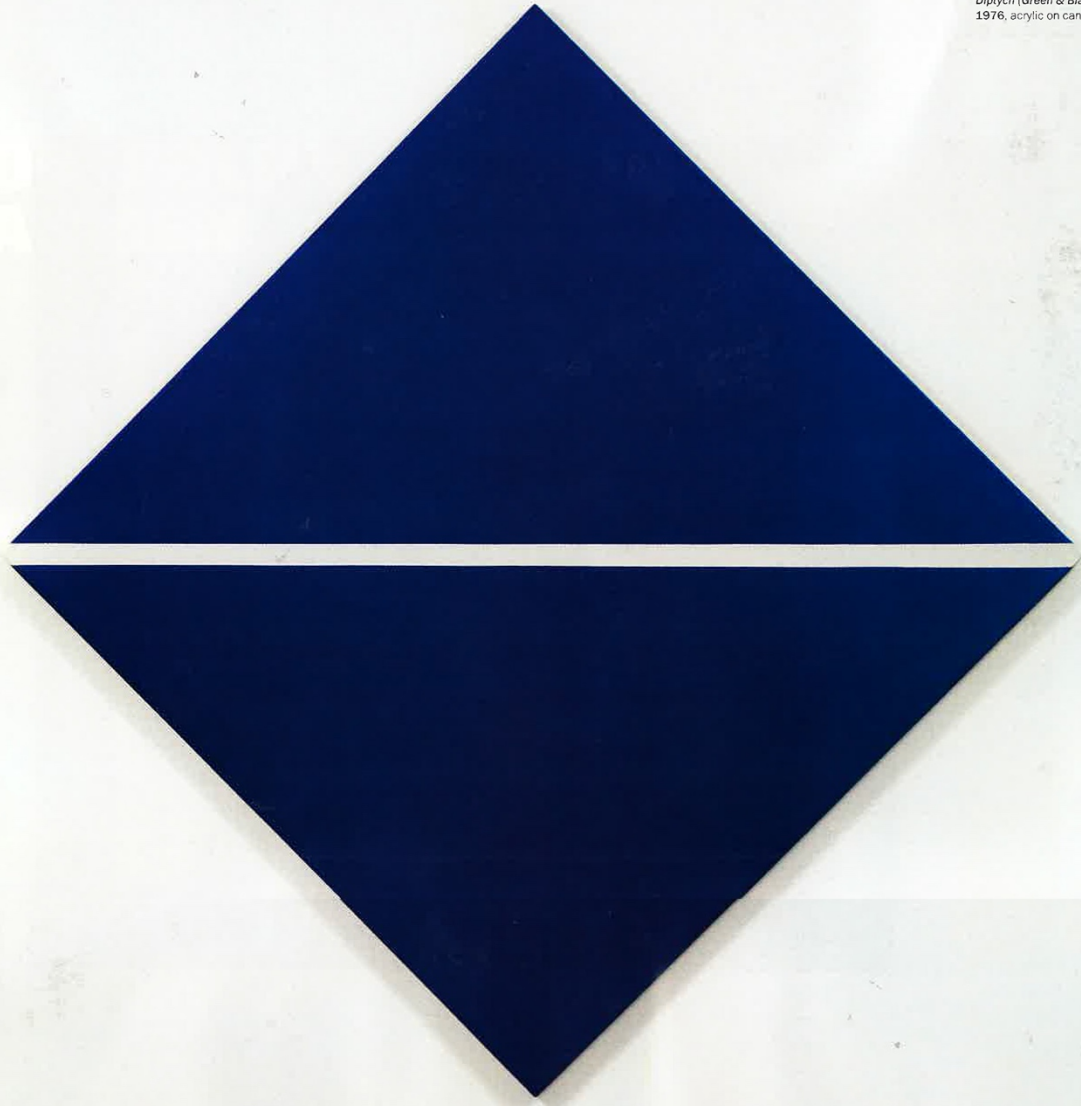
INTRODUCTION BY SARAH K. RICH



Carmen Herrera, *Shocking Pink #20*, 1949, acrylic on canvas, 32 x 40".

This page: Carmen Herrera. *Blue with White Line*, 1964, acrylic on canvas, 67 1/2 x 67 1/2".

Opposite page: Carmen Herrera. *Dptych (Green & Black)* (detail), 1976, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 84".



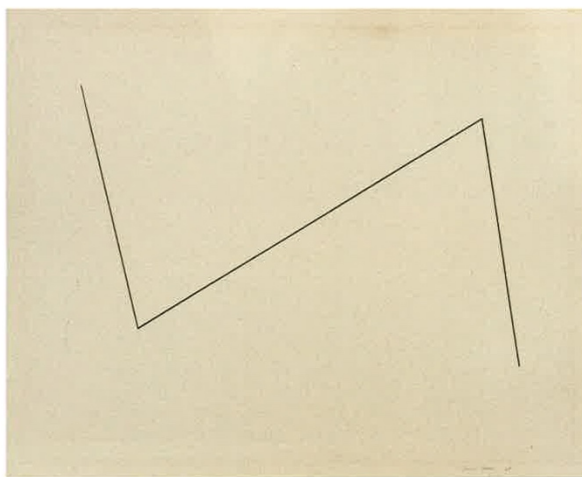




Left: Carmen Herrera, *Oublyth (Over & Back)*, 1976, acrylic on canvas, 45 x 84".  
Above: Carmen Herrera, *Flight of Colors #6*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 28 1/2 x 46".

This page: Carmen Herrera, *Untitled*, 1969, graphite and felt-tip pen on paper, 23¼ × 29".

Opposite page: Carmen Herrera, *Iberic*, 1949, acrylic on canvas on board, 40 × 40".



CARMEN HERRERA is finally, at the age of 101, gaining the attention she deserves. With a major survey of her paintings, sculptures, and drawings now on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and having inaugurated Lisson Gallery's New York space in May with her most recent work, key examples from her seven decades of extraordinary output are available as never before.

To understand what makes Herrera's art significant, it helps to consider two major influences on her early artistic life: her friendship with Barnett Newman and her exposure to debates regarding abstraction in postwar Paris. Newman, who was a frequent interlocutor with Herrera after she moved from her native Cuba, where she studied architecture, to New York in 1939, would likely have impressed on her the capacity of abstract painting to address a viewer's phenomenological experience as it is grounded in an upright, symmetrical body. When Herrera and her husband then moved to Paris a decade later (returning to live in New York after five years), she exhibited and published with the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, the legion of international veterans including Jean Arp, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Theo van Doesburg, Auguste Herbin, Antoine Pevsner, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, many of whom preserved the earlier avant-garde interest in painting's properties as an object in real space even as they loosened abstract painting from its prewar politics. This Parisian context also gave rise to Ellsworth Kelly's early monochrome panels, which turned the white walls of gallery spaces into the ground against which his black, white, and colored compositions would operate as figures. Never close to Newman, though, Kelly remained relatively uninterested in the conditions of viewers' perceptual experience. Herrera, with her unique combination of postwar, transatlantic influences, was better equipped to produce work that explored art's engagement with the viewer *and* its relationship to the literal space around it.

Some of the earliest paintings Herrera made during her time in Paris attend to the problem of orientation, as distinctive arrow motifs in the compositions work

in concert with canvas shape. Though some of those motifs simply operate as abstracted depictions of swords and totemic elements (such as *Flight of Colors* #16, 1949, or *Field of Combat*, 1952), on other tondi, arrows situate the painted object on the wall with respect to gravity (and, by extension, the upright viewer). Thus, an arrow shape on *Iberic*, 1949, seems to indicate THIS WAY UP—a helpful directive to anyone wanting to hang a circular canvas for proper viewing. Arrows on other works (such as on the red, black, and white *Untitled* of 1948) head for the circumference and point clockwise, as if to remind the viewer that round things are not merely passive vignettes: Circles, in the real world, want to *roll*.

From such arrow shapes, Herrera developed her use of the triangle—which is a lot trickier than it sounds. If you keep a triangle close to equilateral and make sure its corners extend all the ways to the edges of the canvas, you generate a static geometry that counteracts representational or literal effects in an abstract work (Herrera does this in some of her later tondo paintings, like *Rondo*, 1958, when she protects a circular canvas from its literal capacity to roll, or its virtual tendency to bulge out into a sphere, by locking it down with a triangle). Make a triangle acute enough, however, and it gains semiotic energy, detouring attention from the shape's own formal attributes in order to point at something else (such is the case with many paintings from the series "*Blanco y Verde*" [White and Green], 1959–71, in which long, thin triangles indicate the center or sides of her paintings, rooting the signifying gesture in the physical attributes of the canvas). Of course, the greatest danger that triangles pose for abstract painting is that they evoke perspective; Herrera cleverly manipulates this effect with works like the Whitney's two-panel *Blanco y Verde*, 1959, where the base of a receding, perspectival triangle is perched on top of the literally receding gap between the panels. If you look closely at that gap, you will see that the base of the triangle even bends around the stretcher bar and travels into that wafer-thin space.





This attention to the stretcher bar is not unusual for Herrera, but one might be led to believe otherwise by publishers' habits of reproducing works from the front and cropping reproductions down to the edges of a painting's perimeter. Such habits (which enforce Greenbergian fantasies that paintings truly are nothing but two-dimensional surfaces) ensure that any action taking place along the z axis of a painting's sides will remain unknown to those who don't have direct access to the object. This has been particularly unfortunate for Herrera, whose work is only now appearing in exhibitions with any regularity, and has often been photographed with painted sides cropped off. These days, some of the most helpful photographers of abstract painting are the anonymous folks on social media who, unencumbered by either tripods or concerns with medium specificity, provide oblique views of canvases in abundance.

Herrera got to the frame early in her career, and she discovered it from the inside out. On the aptly named *Shocking Pink #20* of 1949, for example, kite shapes with quadrants of purple, black, and white nestle amid the bends of a meandering pink band, which, in turn, locks the composition to fundamental structures of the canvas's rectangle: The band of the eponymous color (a palette choice likely prompted by the 1949 Matisse exhibition at the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris) highlights the top edge, turns right to declare the middle axis of the painting, then proceeds to hug the bottom edge before turning left to define the rightmost edge. However, as the kite shapes on the left are slightly longer on the bottom, this painting subtly suggests that the bottom of the painting as a whole weighs a bit more than the top—the work feels the pull of gravity. Which is to say that, no matter how abstract this painting is, no matter how rigorously the composition follows a graph-like logic, it is also a composition that depends on reference to the world out there, and will be viewed by a standing person whose perceptual experience depends on knowing which way is down.

Starting in the early '50s, Herrera would often paint her stretcher edges as a way of mediating the relationship between the internal composition and the

surrounding space, and on her return to the United States, where Color Field and Minimalist painting would soon develop, her attentions to painting's periphery intensified. In the lozenge *Blue with White Line*, 1964, for example, a white equator extends around the east and west corners. If one looks at the painting from the side, one will see the white line taper to a point as it heads toward the wall, as if the line were speeding off into the distance, making its getaway from the frontal plane.

Occasionally, Herrera manages to evoke viewer experience and real three-dimensional space in a manner that subtly evokes art-historical traditions. Consider *Red with White Triangle*, 1961, which consists of two red canvas panels juxtaposed with their sides touching. Two white triangles, each painted on the inner edge of a panel, meet to form what looks to be a single white triangle at their point of contact. In its relatively modest size and diptych structure, the work invites associations with portable altarpieces, and so it encourages a certain quiet, intimate contemplation. The composition even hints at the hinged opening and closing of the altarpiece, since the triangles look as if they may have been produced when they folded in toward the viewer and pressed against each other. But the imbalance of the panels (one canvas is wider than the other) destabilizes that compositional mirroring to stimulate an even more fundamental consideration of the binary oppositions that govern both paintings and perceiving bodies: the opposition of left and right, of symmetry and asymmetry, of things that are open and things that are closed.

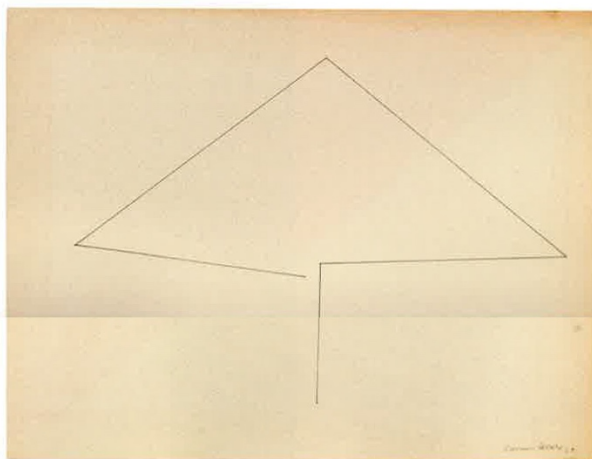
In these pages, *Artforum* presents an exclusive portfolio of Herrera's works—all further examples of her bold invitation for us to consider painting both on its terms and on her own. □

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"Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight," curated by Dana Miller, is currently on view (through Jan. 2, 2017) at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; travels to the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, OH, Feb. 4–Apr. 16, 2017. Visit our website at [Artforum.com/words](http://Artforum.com/words) to read an interview with Carmen Herrera published this month.

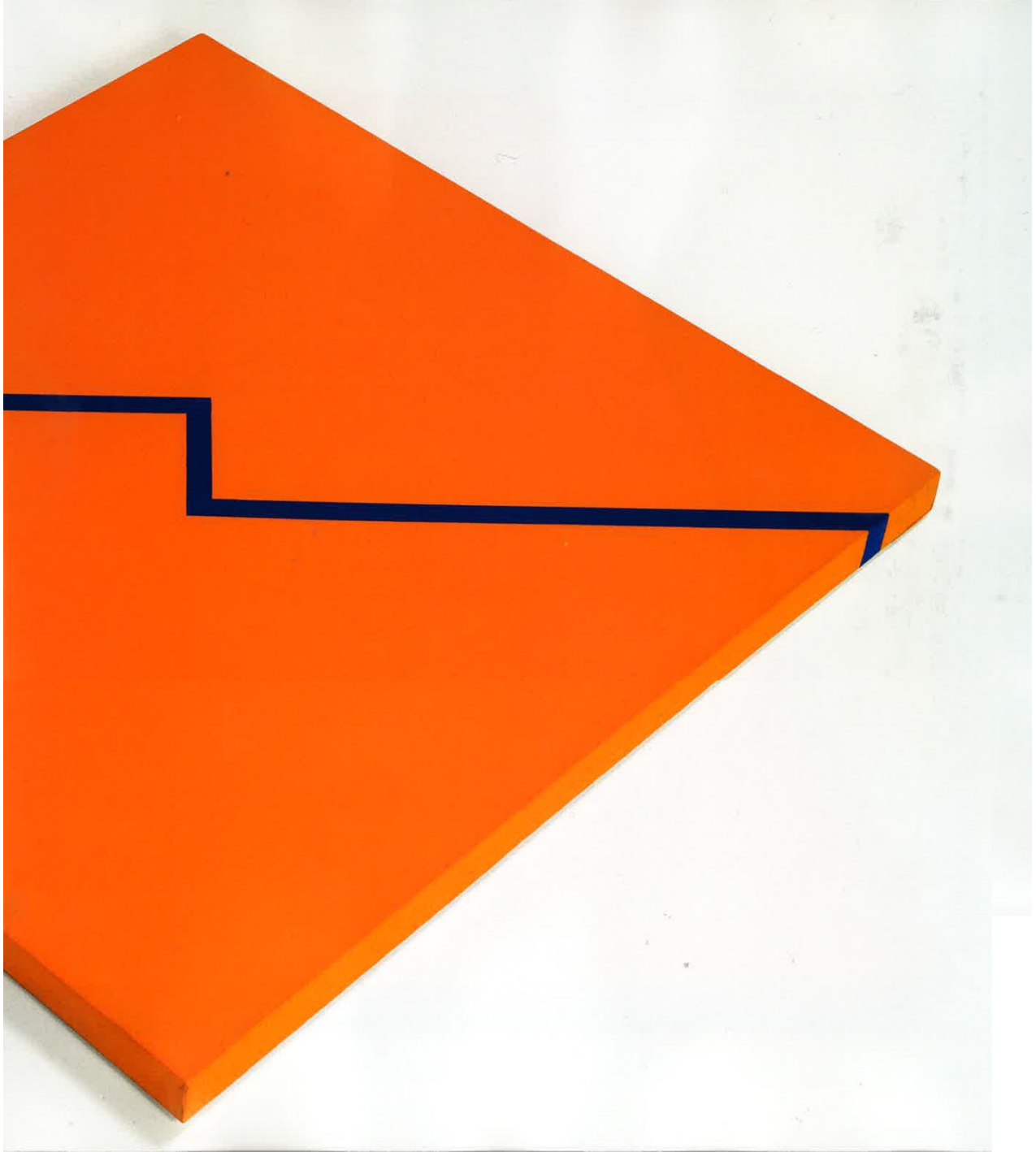
Opposite page: Carmen Herrera, *Untitled Estructura (Green)*, 1966/2015, acrylic on aluminum, 44 7/8 x 59 7/8 x 5 7/8".

This page: Carmen Herrera, *Untitled*, 1970, graphite and felt-tip pen on paper, 16 1/2 x 23 3/4".





Carmen Herrera, *Blue Angle on Orange*, 1982-83, acrylic on canvas, 59 1/2 x 59 1/2"





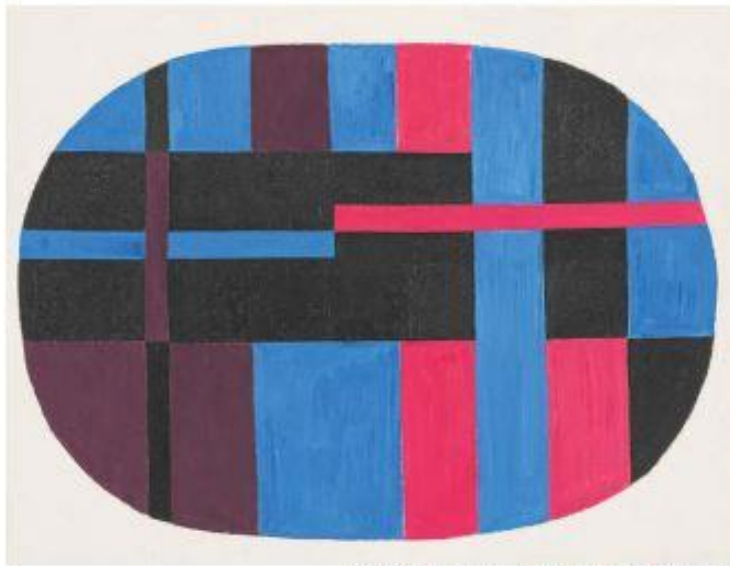
Carmen Herrera, *Red with White Triangle*, 1961, acrylic on canvas, 48 x 66".



# LISSON GALLERY

*The New York Times*  
16 September 2016

## The New York Times



CARMEN HERRERA, COLLECTION OF YOLANDA SANTOS ART

### A 101-Year-Old Artist Finally Gets Her Due

At 101, the artist Carmen Herrera is finally getting the show the art world should have given her 40 or 50 years ago: a solo exhibition at a major museum in New York,

**KAREN  
ROSENBERG**

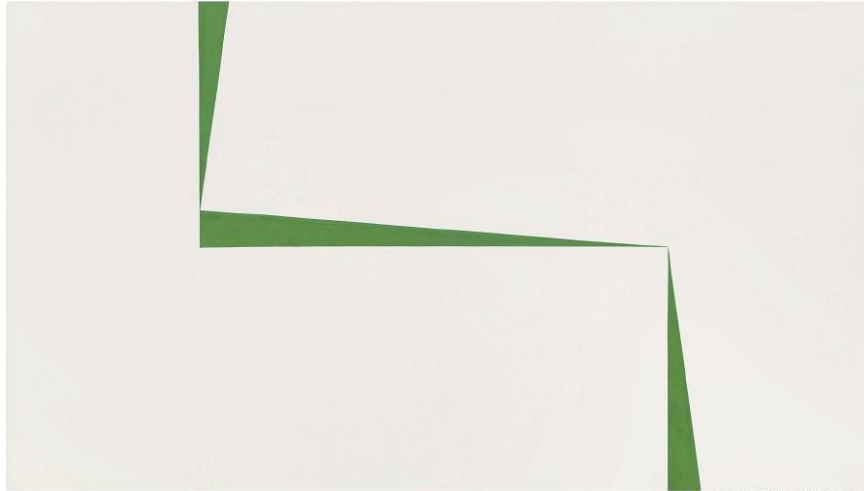
**ART  
REVIEW**

where she has been living and working since 1954. The show, "Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight," caps off several years of festivities, many of which have focused on the artist's centenarian status, including a documentary film, "The 100 Years Show, Starring Carmen Herrera"; a spring exhibition of recent paintings at the Lisson Gallery in Chelsea; and numerous profiles hailing Ms. Herrera as a living treasure and praising her acerbic wit.

**Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight** This retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art includes signature paintings from 1948-78.

There's more to marvel at in the Whitney Museum of American Art's compact but ravishing exhibition of about 50 works, which focuses on the pivotal period of 1948-78 — years in which Ms. Herrera developed her signature geometric abstractions, pared-down paintings of just two colors but seemingly infinite spatial complications. Installed with appropriate precision on the Whitney's eighth floor, the show presents her as an artist of formidable discipline, consistency and clarity of purpose,

*Continued on Page 22*



A painting from Carmen Herrera's 12-year series "Blanco y Verde." The Whitney has included nine paintings from the group, an installation that forms the core of the show. CARMEN HERRERA, PRIVATE COLLECTION, NEW YORK

## A 101-Year-Old Artist Gets Her Due at the Whitney

*From Weekend Page 17*

and a key player in any history of post-war art.

There is so much to celebrate within the close-set parameters of "Lines of Sight," in fact, that you have to wonder: Why didn't the Whitney give Ms. Herrera not just the show she ought to have received some decades ago, but also the show that she deserves today? Meaning a full retrospective on the big stage of the fifth floor, like those the museum bestowed on Frank Stella last fall, or even a slightly more focused look at her oeuvre from maturity on, as in the Stuart Davis survey that's now in its final weeks. Well-intentioned as it is, "Lines of Sight" gives us just a narrow slice of a career that's seven decades strong and still going.

Ms. Herrera's only museum retrospective, before this one, was in 1984 at the Alternative Museum, now defunct. More frequently, this Havana-born artist's work has been exhibited in a Cuban or Latin American context, at institutions like El Museo del Barrio and in group shows like "9 Cuban Artists," even though she has not lived in Cuba since the 1930s and has a complicated relationship with Latin American art. She has been compared to Brazilian artists of the Neo-Concrete movement, such as Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, but she had little direct contact with those circles; the lines of influence run through 1940s Paris, and the international gathering of abstract-art enthusiasts known as the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles.

That is where the Whitney show begins, in postwar Paris in 1948, the

*"Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight" runs through Jan. 2 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; 212-570-3600, whitney.org.*



CARMEN HERRERA, HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, WASHINGTON

At right, "Green and Orange" (1958), and above, "Blue and Yellow" (1965).

same time and place that shaped Ellsworth Kelly's entree into abstraction. Ms. Herrera spent six years in this richly intellectual expatriate scene, where she encountered, for the first time, canonical works by Malevich, Mondrian and other artists of Suprematism and De Stijl.

The first gallery finds Ms. Herrera gradually simplifying and intensifying her compositions of flat, interlocking forms, almost as if she were zooming in on them. Some of the hallmarks of her mature work are already there: backgammon-like motifs of elongated triangles, in "A City" (1948), and a gravitation to shades of deep green, in "Green Garden" (1950).

Returning to New York in the mid-1950s, she spent a decade making bracing, rigidly geometric works in black and white and in straight-from-the-tube colors, some of them on shaped and multipanel canvases. Ms.



CARMEN HERRERA, COLLECTION OF PAUL AND TRUDY CEJAS

Herrera had plenty of encouragement from friends like Barnett Newman and Leon Polk Smith, but little from galleries and the critics who frequented them. Deteriorating relations with Cuba had something to do with this tepid reception, but so did her gender; Ms. Herrera recalls that the dealer Rose Fried told her, you can paint circles around the male artists that I have, but I'm not going to give you a show because you're a woman.

She continued to paint circles around the men, even when she was painting squares (as in a black-and-white work from 1952 that anticipates Stella's 1959 "Black Paintings") and triangles, as in "Green and White" (1956), where four

sharp white spikes induce vertigo as they direct our gaze from corners of an emerald green field to the center.

In 1959, working with those same colors and shapes, she embarked on her 12-year series "Blanco y Verde." The Whitney has assembled nine paintings from that group of 15, in an installation that forms the core of the show and is a powerful argument for viewing Ms. Herrera's work in serial form. It's a room that would not look out of place at Dia: Beacon or some other temple of Minimalism, although there are other entry points for its elegant, iterative integration of painting and architecture.

Ms. Herrera's studies in architecture at the Universidad de La Habana,

where she said she learned "to think abstractly and draw like an architect," emerge forcefully in works from the late 1960s through the '70s, especially in a monochromatic series called "Estructuras," which moves from drawing to painting to sculpture. Some of these pieces take up a motif from a particular "Blanco y Verde" painting and turn its green triangles into negative space, creating a fault line between two L-shaped blocks: Picture two Tetris pieces that don't quite fit together.

And in two assertively architectonic black-and-white paintings from 1974, Ms. Herrera alludes to Spanish cultural masterpieces: in "Escorial," to the royal monastery near Madrid, and in "Ávila," to a historic site (the hometown of St. Teresa) and to a butterflyed composition seen in paintings by Francisco de Zurbarán, the 17th-century Spanish painter whom Ms. Herrera has described as a "minimalist."

The Whitney pointedly paired one of Ms. Herrera's "Blanco y Verde" paintings with a sculpture by Ellsworth Kelly in the inaugural exhibition for its new building. And the comparison comes up again and again in "Lines of Sight" and its catalog, organized by Dana Miller (a former director of the Whitney collection). It's indicative of what the Whitney is trying to do, here and in rehangings of the permanent collection: to pry open the canon and make space for marginalized artists.

That strategy may be one explanation for the emphasis on just a portion of Ms. Herrera's oeuvre, the part that corresponds to a particularly well-trodden stretch of art history, from Abstract Expressionism to Minimalism. MoMA and the Whitney each own just one canvas by Ms. Herrera, but after visiting "Lines of Sight," you will not be able to walk through either museum's painting galleries without seeing her work in your head, if not on the wall.