

Carmen Herrera**29 July – 13 September 2009****First and Second Floor Galleries**

This is the first retrospective of work by Carmen Herrera in Europe and her most comprehensive to date. Despite the strong visionary nature of her practice and close association with artists of great reputation and influence, including Barnett Newman, she has had relatively few exhibitions. This is a story familiar to many women artists of her generation emerging in the post-war years. However, recent acquisitions of her work by MoMA, New York; Tate Modern, London and the Hirshhorn, Washington DC, make this exhibition exceedingly timely. Now in her 94th year, Carmen Herrera is finally receiving the attention she deserves.

Born in Havana, Cuba in 1915, Carmen Herrera finally settled in New York in 1954 where she has been resident ever since. Prior to this she studied in Paris in the early 1930s before returning to Cuba around 1935 where she studied architecture. This experience is key to our understanding of her lifelong dedication to abstraction.

Moving to New York for the first time in 1938, Herrera then returned to Paris where she lived from 1948 to 1953. There she participated in a number of key exhibitions of the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*. The Salon aimed to present the latest developments in abstract art, both organic and geometric, and gathered together some of the most prominent artists working in Europe at that time, including Jean Arp, Barbara Hepworth and Francis Picabia. It became a stage for radical non-objective abstraction, presenting work by a younger generation of artists reflecting the impact of Constructivism, the Bauhaus and De Stijl. Around this time Ellsworth Kelly, who made his first hard-edge works in 1951, was also resident in Paris.

This exhibition encompasses Herrera's output since 1948 through to the present day, comprising paintings and works on paper. Early pieces such as *Composition with Pink #34*, *Chromatic Discourse* (both 1948) or *Venetian Red, White and Black* (1949) are organised using a rational structure altered through occasional intuitive decisions. Angular, architectonic forms in part resemble the formal qualities evident in Synthetic Cubism, where shapes become more distinctly defined. These are typical

of the artist's work during this period, introducing rhythmic compositions through the combination of two colours with black. Such dynamic arrangements relate closely to Matisse's juxtapositions of planes of colour. Other paintings from this time such as *Iberic* (1948–52) show Herrera playing with different shaped canvases. The move to a more gestural abstraction seen in *Les Lieux #29* (1949), *Havana Painting #21* (1950) and related *Coquette de l'Air #10* (1950) recall the lyrical spirit of Surrealism, and yet these were soon to be rejected by Herrera in favour of a more concise formal vocabulary. Dealing only with essentials, shape and colour, she turned to repetitive geometric sequences. The precision of these paintings, the simplicity of their structure and the austerity of her palette – for example, in *Black and White* (1952) – prefigure and anticipate the optical and hard-edge minimalism of 1960s New York, developed by artists such as Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland. She has returned to black and white as a means of working at other times in her career, in a process of “deuration from colour”, exemplified here by pieces such as *Avila* (1974) or *Verticals #2* (1989). *Escorial* (1974) is particularly important. Prompted by the minimalist ground plan of the Royal Palace of the Escorial in Madrid it eschews convention by representing empty space as black. The ‘walls’, painted white, dissolve into the architecture of the gallery.

Herrera in part subscribes to the principles of abstraction as articulated by critic Clement Greenberg, the dominant voice in post-war America, but also she was an exponent of ideas emerging from Latin America during this period. Greenberg argued for a predominantly rational process whereby illusion is rejected and the actual qualities of painting are formulated from within painting itself. Since the early 1950s her focus on pure geometry – line, colour and space, eliminating all referential aspects – asserts the autonomy of the pictorial elements as a valid reality in itself and gives structure to the surface. Negative/positive shape and optical rhythm of great complexity is created via the most economic of means. Works are organised around the harmony and tension of opposing chromatic planes, optically divided by subtle geometric patterns combining symmetry and asymmetry, with paint applied in flat, solid areas, for example *Green and Orange* (1958), *Red with White Triangle* (1961) or *Blues* (1991). However, at the time when New York and the art world at large was still working through the legacy of Abstract Expressionism, her work was considered too minimal and out of place.

During the late 1950s and 1960s Herrera embarked on a series of works entitled *Blanco y Verde*. The predominantly white paintings dissolve into the white gallery walls, optically extending the physical limits of the canvas and leaving coloured shapes floating in space. Here she departs from the strictures of Greenberg – for to consider a painting in relation to its environment is to accept it as an object. This is one of the far-reaching implications of minimalism, the pictorial version of which

Herrera's work anticipates. It is taken further by a series of 'estructuras', *Amarillo* (1971) or *Untitled* (2007), based on drawings made in 1966. These are painted plywood. The inclusion of real space through 'cutting' into their rectilinear blocks introduces a new component (the white of the gallery walls) into the composition, while adding a three-dimensional volume to the painting. An extension of this, Herrera's concern with the physical presence of colour and her overall proposition per se, is revealed most radically in *Untitled* (1971). Here the painting leaves the gallery wall to stand in space. Yet crucially she perceives these works not as sculpture but as paintings, stretching the traditional art form to its limit.