

CARMEN HERRERA

in Paris: 1949 - 1953



DICKINSON

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With an introduction by Dr. Abigail McEwen

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INTRODUCTION

“I don’t know why I was born in Cuba,” Herrera once mused. “I should have been born in Paris.” She had become enamored with the city during her finishing school days—memorably taking in performances by Carlos Gardel and a banana-clad Josephine Baker—and it was there, amid the city’s Postwar recovery twenty years later, that she embarked upon an extraordinary journey into abstraction. “That was the beginning of the awakening process,” Herrera acknowledges, and her works from this period betray the sundry origins of her iconic, hard-edged geometry. Thwarted for years following her return to New York—“a Cuban? a woman?” she shrugs; “they wouldn’t look at your work”—Herrera found recognition very late in her career.¹ Today the doyenne of geometric abstraction, she has doubtless claimed her place within the history of Postwar painting, her work featured in major museum collections and celebrated in an acclaimed retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2016. The works gathered in *Carmen Herrera in Paris: 1949-1953* trace the transatlantic evolution of her practice, illuminating early visual and cultural sources that shaped her abiding, architectonic approach to line and color.

Herrera’s seminal years in Paris followed periods of study in Havana and then, beginning in 1939, in New York. “There were

a lot of revolutions—and I mean bloody revolutions,” she recalls of her adolescence in Cuba. “The universities and high schools were closed, but I went to a place called the Lyceum, which was a kind of club that a couple of women had started.”² The institutional haven of Cuba’s historical *vanguardia*, the Lyceum promoted culture and the arts, offering academic lectures and classes alongside social services and vocational training. Herrera studied sculpture there, under María Teresa Ginerés, in the early 1930s following her return from Paris and before beginning to train as an architect, at the University of Havana, in 1937. “There,



Fig. 1: Carmen Herrera, 1948, photograph by Victor Laredo, courtesy of Carmen Herrera

an extraordinary world opened up to me that never closed,” she recounts of the two years she spent studying architecture. “The world of straight lines, which has interested me until this very day.”³ Her education was interrupted by political upheaval as well as her marriage to Jesse Loewenthal, an English teacher at Manhattan’s Stuyvesant High School, and their subsequent departure for New York. Herrera made rounds at the city’s museums and galleries and enrolled at the Art Students League, but she lacked for opportunities—pointedly, she was excluded from the landmark exhibition *Modern Cuban Painters* (Museum of Modern Art, 1944)—and missed the receptive community of artists that she had known in Havana.



Fig. 2: Serge Poliakoff, *Composition Abstrait*, 1966, oil on burlap, 96.7 x 130.2 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York

“We went to Paris as soon as we could after the war,” Herrera reminisces. “It was a very happy time in my life—I was young, I had a wonderful husband whom I loved. . . . Paris at that time was like heaven.”⁴ Arriving in June 1948, they soon moved into a studio in Montparnasse—in the same building, on rue Campagne-Première, as Yves Klein’s parents—and immersed themselves in the incandescent café culture of the Left Bank, circulating among artists (Arman, Serge Poliakoff, Jean Tinguely) (fig. 2) and writers (Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet). Herrera participated in a number of group exhibitions, including *Art cubain contemporain* (Musée National d’Art Moderne, 1951), organized by the Cuban Concretist Loló Soldevilla, and the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, a bastion of Postwar geometric abstraction founded

in 1946. “The exhibition was a response to the Nazi’s anti-modern stance, and here you had the many voices that the Third Reich tried to silence; it was powerful,” Herrera explains. “Everything that was in the exhibition was abstract, geometric, even pre-minimal. Albers’ paintings touched me. I was able to see more work by the Bauhaus. I felt that this was the kind of painting that I wanted to do. I had found my path as a painter.”⁵ The Salon championed a diverse roster of abstract artists,

and Herrera encountered the legacy of the

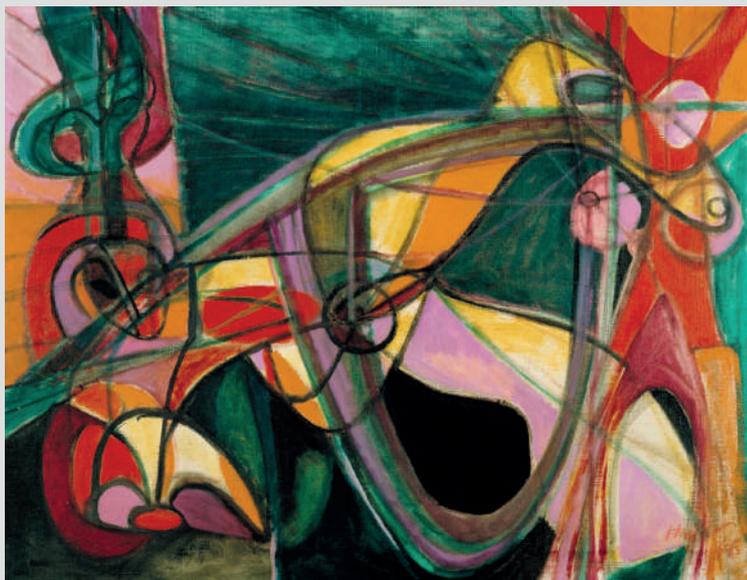


Fig. 3: Stanley William Hayter, *Untitled*, 1946, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127 cm., Tate, London

School of Paris—represented by her teacher and the Salon’s creative force, Auguste Herbin, as well as Jean Arp and Sonia Delaunay—in addition to an international field that included Jesús Rafael Soto, Alejandro Otero, Victor Vasarely, and Ellsworth Kelly. “You would go in and show your painting, and they’d either accept it or not,” Herrera recounts of the Salon. “One of the founders of the group [Fredo Sidès] said to me, ‘Madame, but you know you have so many things in that painting,’ and I felt very good about the compliment. But then I realized that he was trying to tell me that I was putting *too much* in the painting.”⁶

The early critique accelerated the minimalist direction of her work, which began to shed the biomorphic and gestural lyricism best seen in the *Havana Series* (1950-51), made

during holiday visits to the island. An emotional response to the tropical climate (and overheating politics) of Havana, and reportedly to her mother’s domineering presence, the series reveals a rare expressionist agita in vortices of scribbled color (#14) and sweeping contour lines that crisscross the canvas (#35). Herrera evokes an island atmospherics through a brilliant intensity of color, ruddy (#14 and #35) and darkly verdant (#19), and a telluric feeling redolent of the Caribbean land and sea. The linear scaffolding of #35 further suggests Herrera’s familiarity with the automatist line of the British printmaker Stanley William Hayter (fig. 3), whose influential atelier she may have encountered back in New York, where it operated for a decade before reopening in Paris in 1950. She and Hayter had become friends by 1951, when they joined a new artist’s colony in Albalá-Romaine, in the Ardèche countryside, acquiring (at little cost) abandoned homes to which they decamped in the summers. The series also bears similarities to the contemporary abstraction of the Cuban artist Sandú Darié (fig. 4), whom Herrera met during this time; his early *Compositions*, described as “mists of rainbow color...seen through zig-zag bars of black,” preceded his own geometric turn.⁷ In December 1950, Herrera exhibited paintings from the *Havana Series* at Havana’s Lyceum, marking not only the artist’s first solo show but one of the first manifestations of abstract expressionism in Cuba, as well.

“I began painting by adhering to academic standards, but I have felt the aesthetic need to represent something unknown,” Herrera explained at the time to the local paper. “It has been a slow process.”⁸

That process unfolded by fits and starts across Herrera’s paintings and drawings of the early 1950s as her work progressed toward harder-edged geometries and structures of color. In *Lignes guidés* and *Éléments clairs*, both from 1951, an unusually subdued palette privileges the expression of line, animated in squiggles and spirals. Mobile and kinetic, the lines describe a raft of interpenetrating shapes, organic and irregularly geometric, and a shallow topology of space around them. Red, mixed to varying shades of pink, permeates the ocher field of *Red dot* (1953); high-keyed highlights in pale blue give added dimension and texture to the shapes that emerge within a suggestive matrix of point, line, and plane. Herrera experimented with concrete geometries as early as *Castilla la Vieja [Venetian Red, White and Black]* (1949), reducing her palette to three austere colors and exploring the interplay of figure and ground. She reprised this progression in the dramatic *Field of Combat* (1952), in which the white blocks acquire angles—arrows—and allusive meaning. As in contemporary work by Wifredo Lam (fig. 5), Mario Carreño, Luis Martínez Pedro, Herrera’s triangles and crescent shapes have a source in Afro-Cuban ritual and symbology; marshaled dynamically here, they may

also acknowledge the gravity of Fulgencio Batista’s coup d’état in March 1952 and the beginning of the dictatorship that would end in the Cuban Revolution. *Field of Combat* numbered among the paintings that she showed at Galeria Sudamericana in 1956, her first solo exhibition in New York. Noting Herrera’s relationship to “the French concrete school” and praising her “high, original color,” Dore Ashton declared her “one of Cuba’s best nonobjective painters.”⁹

“There’s a saying that you wait for the bus and it will come,” Herrera recently observed. “I waited almost a hundred years!”¹⁰ Increasingly recognized as one of the best nonobjective painters the world over, she continues to work from the Gramercy loft where she has lived since 1967, her practice still building upon principles first articulated in Paris. “I do it because I have to do it; it’s a compulsion that also gives me pleasure,”



Fig. 4: Sandú Darié, *Composition in Red*, 1946, gouache, ink, and wax on paper, 28.6 x 36.2 cm., Museum of Modern Art, New York

Herrera reflects these days of painting. “I never in my life had any idea of money and I thought fame was a very vulgar thing. So I just worked and waited. And at the end of my life, I’m getting a lot of recognition, to my amazement and my pleasure, actually. . . . Only my love of the straight line keeps me going.”¹¹

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1 Carmen Herrera, quoted in Julie Baumgardner, “A Woman for the Ages,” *Art + Auction* (June 2014): 78, 82.

2 Herrera, quoted in Ann Landi, “Shaping Up,” *ARTnews* 109, no. 1 (January 2010): 66, 68.

3 Herrera, quoted in Gustavo Valdés, Jr., “El color de la palabra: 32 artistas cubanos,” *Stet Magazine* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 21.

4 Herrera, “Heavenly Paris,” *Art in America* (November 2015): 73.

5 Herrera, quoted in Alejandro Anreus, “Carmen Herrera in the Context of Modern Painting in Cuba,” in Carolina Ponce de León, *Carmen Herrera: The Black and White Paintings, 1951-1989* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 1998), 18.

6 Herrera, “Heavenly Paris,” 73.

7 Stuart Preston, “Currently on View,” *New York Times*, October 30, 1949.

8 Herrera, quoted in Rosa Oliva [*El Mundo*], in Dana Miller, *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2016), 201.

9 Dore Ashton, “About Art and Artists,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1956.

10 Herrera, quoted in Phoebe Hoban, “Works in Progress: One Hundred Years of Fortitude,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2015.

11 Herrera, quoted in Deborah Sontag, “At 94, She’s the Hot New Thing in Painting,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2009.

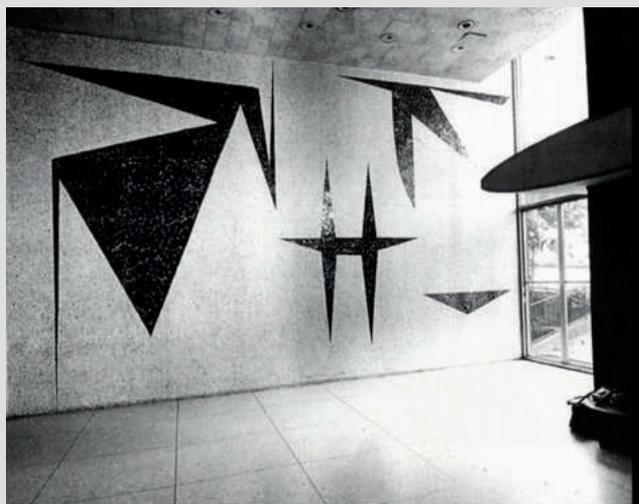


Fig. 5: Wifredo Lam, *Mosaic Mural*, 1956, Centro Médico, Vedado, Havana



Fig. 6: Carmen Herrera in Paris, c. late 1940s, photograph by Alison Klayman, courtesy of Carmen Herrera



CASTILLA LA VIEJA [VENETIAN RED, WHITE AND BLACK], 1949

signed, inscribed and dated verso *Herrera = 1949.* / *Castilla la Vieja #22*
acrylic on burlap
35.6 x 45.7 cm. (14 x 18 in.)

Provenance:

Latincollector Gallery, New York.
Private Collection, acquired from the above c. 2010.

Literature:

Carmen Herrera, exh. cat., Ikon Gallery, Birmingham (UK), 2009, p. 27 (illus.)

Exhibited:

New York, NY, Galeria Sudamericana, *Carmen Herrera*, 30 Jan. – 18 Feb. 1956, no. 30.
Birmingham (UK), Ikon Gallery, *Carmen Herrera*, 29 July – 19 Sept. 2009; the exhibition then travelled
to Kaiserslautern, Museum Pfalzgalerie, 23 Jan. – 2 May 2010.



UNTITLED (HAVANA SERIES #19), 1950-51

signed and inscribed verso *Herrera. / Habana #19*
acrylic on canvas
39.4 x 50.8 cm. (15 ½ x 20 in.)

Provenance:

Latincollector Gallery, New York.
Private Collection, acquired from the above c. 2010.

Literature:

D. Miller et al., *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017, p. 102, no. 16 (illus.)

Exhibited:

(Possibly) Havana, Lyceum y Lawn Tennis Club, *Carmen Herrera. Pinturas*, 23 Dec. 1950 – 3 Jan. 1951.
New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, 16 Sept. 2017 – 9 Jan. 2018, no. 16.





UNTITLED (HAVANA SERIES #35), 1950-51

signed and inscribed verso *Herrera. / Hab 35*
acrylic on canvas
50.8 x 66 cm. (20 x 26 in.)

Provenance:

Latincollector Gallery, New York.
Private Collection, acquired from the above c. 2010.

Literature:

D. Miller et al., *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017, p. 67, note 29.

Exhibited:

(Possibly) Havana, Lyceum y Lawn Tennis Club, *Carmen Herrera. Pinturas*, 23 Dec. 1950 – 3 Jan. 1951.
(Possibly) Paris, Palais de Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, *6ème Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, 8 June – 16 July 1951, part of no. 248.



UNTITLED (HAVANA SERIES #14), 1951

signed, inscribed and dated verso *Herrera. 1951. / Habana 14*
acrylic on canvas
61 x 96.5 cm. (24 x 38 in.)

Provenance:

Latincollector Gallery, New York.

Private Collection, acquired from the above c. 2010.





ÉLÉMENTS CLAIRS, 1951

signed and dated lower right *Herrera. - /51-*
acrylic on canvas
66 x 121 cm. (26 x 47 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Latincollector Gallery, New York.
Private Collection, acquired from the above c. 2010.

Literature:

D. Miller et al., *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017, pp. 19, 67, note 29, and p. 104, no. 18 (illus.)

Exhibited:

Paris, Palais de Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, *6ème Salon des Réalités Nouvelles*, 8 June – 16 July 1951,
part of no. 248.

New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, 16 Sept. 2017 – 9 Jan. 2018, no. 18.



LIGNES GUIDÉS, 1951

signed and dated upper right *Herrera./ 51.*

acrylic on canvas

50.8 x 66 cm. (20 x 26 in.)

Provenance:

Latincollector Gallery, New York.

Private Collection, acquired from the above c. 2010.

Literature:

D. Miller et al., *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2017, p. 105, no. 19 (illus.)

Exhibited:

New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, 16 Sept. 2017 – 9 Jan. 2018, no. 19.





FIELD OF COMBAT, 1952

signed upper right *Herrera.*; signed, inscribed and dated verso *Herrera. 1952. / Field of Combat*
acrylic on canvas
81.3 x 100.3 cm. (32 x 39 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Latincollector Gallery, New York.
Private Collection, acquired from the above c. 2010.

Literature:

D. Miller et al., *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, 2017, pp. 10 and 48, p. 100, no. 14 (illus.)

Exhibited:

New York, Galeria Sudamericana, *Carmen Herrera*, 30 Jan. – 18 Feb. 1956, no. 24.
New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, *Carmen Herrera: Lines of Sight*, 16 Sept. 2017 – 9 Jan. 2018, no. 14.



RED DOT, 1953

signed and dated lower left *Herrera/ 53*

acrylic on canvas

39.4 x 44.5 cm. (15 ½ x 17 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Latincollector Gallery, New York.

Private Collection, acquired from the above c. 2010.



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