Contributor: Lisandra Estevez

**Herrera, Carmen**

b. Havana, 1915; currently resides in New York, New York

Carmen Herrera is known for her pure geometric abstraction that emphasizes a stark rational order. In each work, she generally restricts her palette to a few contrasting colours or values to create a powerful sense of emphasis and order. In works such as *Two Worlds* (2011, private collection) and *Yellow and Black* (2010, private collection), she uses pure, unmixed pigments to accentuate solid shapes. She often paints variegated fields and crisp stripes of bold, flat colour to arrange her compositions methodically. While her art has been understandably compared to that of American abstract artists such as **Barnett Newman** (who was, in fact, a close friend of Herrera’s) and **Ellsworth Kelly**, Herrera herself has stated that she owes her vibrant sense of colour to the Cuban painter Amelia Peláez who was known for her ebullient hues. In her own words, Herrera sees her own art as “…a continuation of that of … **Peláez,** especially where color is concerned.” One cannot discount the impact of Herrera’s early training as an architect on her varied yet precise representation of shapes and structured arrangement of forms. The highly disciplined, almost ascetic nature of her compositions captures a concrete geometric order that emphasizes a rational sense of symmetry, asymmetry, and unity. According to Herrera herself, her optical and minimalist approach to form lies in her “[…] quest […] for the simplest of pictorial resolutions.”

Carmen Herrera was born in Havana, Cuba on 31 May 1915. Widely travelled, she received her early training in Havana, Paris, and New York. From 1925 to 1927, she studied drawing and painting with J.F. Edelmann in Havana. She enrolled at Marymount College from 1928 to 1929. She took courses in painting and sculpture with Isabel Chapottín Jimenéz and María Teresa Ginerés de Villageliú at the Havana Lyceum. She studied architecture from 1937 to 1938 at the University of Havana and subsequently studied at the Art Students League in New York from 1943 to 1945. From 1949 to 1953, she exhibited her work four times in Paris at the Salon des Reálités Nouvelles, Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. She immigrated to New York in 1954 and continues to live and work there. Her paintings have been widely exhibited in a number of one-person and retrospective exhibitions in Europe and the United States and are in renowned public and private collections including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Tate Collection, London; the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington, DC; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Throughout her long career, Herrera has steadily created an extensive body of work that began to receive critical attention in the 1980s and 1990s. Her *Untitled* (1952, acrylic on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York) is part of an on-going series of black and white paintings that she has made for decades. In this example, the crisply painted bands of alternating black and white are interrupted by the superimposition of two triangles of varying size that subvert the relative logic and equilibrium of the composition.

[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Untitled*

1952

25” x 60”

Synthetic polymer paint on canvas

Credit Line: Gift of Agnes Gund and Tony Bechara

Object Number: 972.2005

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A30075&page\_number=1&template\_id=1&sort\_order=1

**References and further reading:**

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**List of Works:**

*Untitled*, 1952, The Museum of Modern Art, New York

*White and Green*, 1960, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

*Rondo (Blue and Yellow),* 1965, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.

*Untitled*, 1966, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN

*PM*, 1990, Federico Sève Gallery, New York

1. (<http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/carmen-herrera>) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)