Stephen Ongpin Fine Art



Gillian AYRES (Barnes 1930 - North Devon 2018)

Untitled, 1993

Acrylic on paper.

Signed and dated Gillian Ayres 93 in pencil at the lower right.

402 x 565 mm. (15 7/8 x 22 1/4 in.)

Although Gillian Ayres developed a parallel reputation as a printmaker, producing graphic works that were as radiant as her paintings, it is interesting to note that she never seems to have produced drawings, either as preparatory studies for larger works or as independent exercises, preferring instead to compose her pictures directly on the canvas. One writer has noted of Ayres that 'the major element of [her] paintings is a passion for colour, for paint and the modelling of paint. This is a vision of the world as flesh as paint. Both the colour and materiality of paint are emphasised, placing the evidence of the physical process of painting continually before us – the smears and twists of arm and hand.'

In the 1990s, Ayres began to incorporate more geometric shapes and patterns into her work, creating a series of paintings that explored anew the relationship between form and colour. The present work, dating from 1993, was inspired by a visit to Provence, where Ayres stayed with the painter Frederick Gore. She had met Gore while studying at the Camberwell School of Art in the early 1950s, and Gore later hired her as a teacher during his time as head of the painting department at the Saint Martin's School of Art, a post to which she eventually succeeded. Despite their considerably different approaches to painting - Gore was very much a figurative and landscape painter - they remained close friends throughout their lives, and Ayres wrote the foreword to the catalogue of a retrospective exhibition of Gore's work at the Royal Academy in 1989.

In works such as this, Ayres celebrates the sheer physicality of paint, using thick coatings of colour and large brushstrokes to create progressively distinct yet never wholly figurative shapes. (As the artist remarked in 1995, 'Shapes. Spaces. It's the way I see the world.') As Gooding has commented, 'It hardly needs saying that Ayres has an extraordinary technical mastery of her art. She works in diverse media and with perfect decorative control at every scale, from the miniature…to the mural…she is a supremely gifted colourist, able to work with the brightest and most intense chromatic primaries and the most subtle of soft tonalities, with the drama of black and white, the sonorous minor keys of magenta, blue, purple and maroon and the most acidly sharp yellows, greens and oranges, and to deploy them

together with a seemingly effortless bravura; she has an inexhaustible repertoire of stroke, shape, form and motif.'

Among stylistically comparable works by Gillian Ayres of the same date and technique is a painting in the Jerwood Collection.

Artist description:

One of the leading English abstract artists of her generation, the painter and printmaker Gillian Ayres was accepted into the Slade School of Fine Art in 1946 but, aged sixteen, was too young to be admitted. She therefore studied at the Camberwell School of Art between 1946 and 1950, where she was taught by William Coldstream, Victor Pasmore and Claude Rogers, all of whom had been part of the pre-war group of realist painters known as the Euston Road School. Ayres rejected the representational painting style and techniques that dominated at Camberwell, opting instead to pursue non-figurative modernism, at much the same time as the work of one of her teachers, Victor Pasmore, was also undergoing a shift from realism to abstraction. Ayres left Camberwell before her final exam, and soon began working part-time at the AIA (Artist's International Association) Gallery in London, together with Henry Mundy, a painter she had met at Camberwell. The couple were married in 1951 and, despite divorcing in 1976, lived together for the most of their lives. At the AIA Gallery, Ayres became friendly with such artists as Adrian Heath, William Scott and Roger Hilton, who was a particular influence on her work.

Already committed to abstract painting as her preferred mode of expression, in the second half of the 1950s Ayres was struck by her first exposure to Abstract Expressionism in the form of exhibitions of recent American painting at the Tate Gallery and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London, which inspired her to produce abstract compositions on a much larger scale. She had her first solo exhibition in 1956, and a year later was commissioned to paint a monumental mural, some eighty feet in length, for the dining hall of a girl's school in north London. (Not long afterwards, however, the work was covered with wallpaper, and it was only rediscovered in 1983.) In 1960 Ayres had three of her paintings included in the seminal 'Situation' exhibition at the Royal Society of British Artists; the only woman to be represented.

In 1959 Ayres embarked on a teaching career which was to last for over two decades, throughout the 1960s and 1970s. She taught for seven years at the Bath Academy of Art in Corsham, then at the Saint Martin's School of Art in London between 1986 and 1978, and finally at the Winchester School of Art of the University of Southampton. Her teaching commitments left her little time to focus on her own work, although she continued to paint bold abstract paintings. Apart from three gallery exhibitions in the 1960s, her work was not seen in public during this period, as she devoted herself to teaching and to raising her two sons. It was not until 1981 that Ayres gave up teaching and moved to Wales to work full-time as an artist. From then onwards, she had regular solo exhibitions at galleries and museums in London and throughout Britain, notably shows at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford in 1981 and the Serpentine Gallery in London in 1983. Her massive canvases were widely admired by critics and collectors, and the artist was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1989.

Awarded an OBE in 1986 (and later appointed CBE in 2011), Ayres left Wales in 1987 and settled in a remote 15th century cottage on the border between Devon and Cornwall, where she lived and worked for the remainder of her career. She was elected to the Royal Academy of Arts in 1991 and became a Senior Fellow at the Royal College of Art in 1996. In 1997 a retrospective exhibition of her work was held at the Royal Academy, and the following year she began to be represented by the Alan Cristea Gallery in London, who hosted several solo shows of her paintings and prints and also helped to organize museum exhibitions in the United Kingdom and abroad. Towards the end of the 1990s the scale of her paintings began to be reduced, though there was never any equivalent lessening of their vibrant colours. In 2004 fourteen of Ayres's major paintings, dating from different periods of her career, were destroyed in a warehouse fire. Ayres continued to work until a year or so before her death, when illness prevented her from painting. Nevertheless, in the last year of her life she was honoured with major retrospective exhibitions at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff and at the CAFA Art

Museum in Beijing, as well as the publication of a five hundred-page monograph devoted to her work. Recently, Ayres was one of the artists included in the 2023 exhibition Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940-1970 at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. Paintings and prints by Ayres are today in the collections of numerous museums in Britain, America and Australia, including the Tate, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Throughout the six decades of her career, Ayres pushed the boundaries of abstraction, creating complex compositions that seem both playful and intense. Her use of colour was a defining feature of her work, and she often used vivid and contrasting colours to create a sense of movement and dynamism in her paintings. As the artist once said, 'To me, art - colour in art - is wonderfully indulging… All the painting I've liked has always been colour painting. I've found that I respond to colour more than anything.' Indeed, Ayres's paintings and prints are often described as a celebration of colour, and she saw her role as an artist to bring the life of colour to the surface and let it speak for itself. Her exuberant works are characterized by vibrant colour, thick impasto and textural, painterly richness, with the artist sometimes applying the pigment with her hands. As the Ayres scholar Mel Gooding has written of her oeuvre as a painter and printmaker, 'though she delights as an artist in finding marvellous analogies, of colour, shape, form and texture, to aspects of the world as given, these visual and tactile correspondences are always embedded in the materiality of paint…embedded in the physical facts of swirling viscosity and vigorous impasto, in the stroke and smudge and stain of ink. These paintings and prints are, before and after any exercise of the playful mind, thrilling objects occupying real space.'