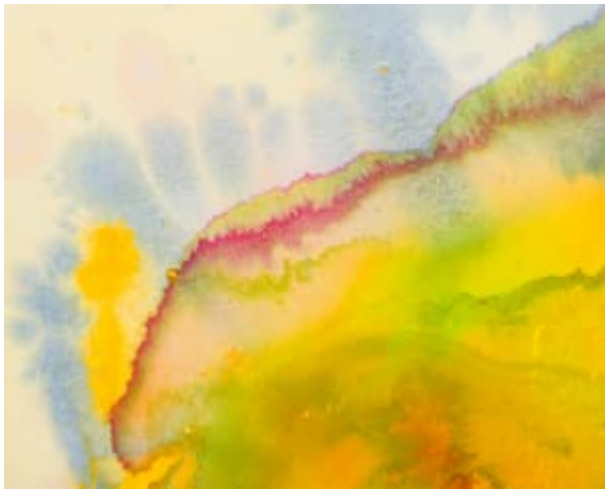


Vivian SPRINGFORD (Milwaukee 1913 - New York 2003)

Untitled (Expansionist Series)

Acrylic on paper, laid down on board.

203 x 251 mm. (8 x 9 7/8 in.)

The present sheet, which is datable to c.1976, is part of Vivian Springford's Expansionist series of vivid abstract works, which were, for the most part, painted on high-quality Arches paper rather than canvas. As has been noted of the series, 'The Expansionist works are divided between treatments of what [the artist] saw during the eruption of the Soufrière volcano on the island of Guadalupe in 1976 – intense reds, oranges and blues flow in every direction – and lunar studies, cool blues of the moon and clouds. The Expansionist works are denser in color than the Cosmos paintings. Often they feature a curved bar of dark color, a high tide mark which resolves the composition into a form resembling a horizon, or wave top, that invokes the line of energy found in the composition of traditional Chinese painting.'

Another writer has added that 'Springford's Expansionist series…references the ever expanding universe. We can almost see this movement as Springford's colors seem to seep outward, drawn out by the paper's absorbent pulp…The Expansionist series reveals Springford's remarkable dexterity with her chosen medium.' Indeed, this small but luminous sheet attests to the fact that, as a third writer has pointed out, '[Springford's] works on paper, though modest in size, reveal a sophisticated balance of control and freedom.'

Artist description:

The American abstract painter Vivian Springford was born in Wisconsin and lived in Detroit before settling with her family in New York in 1930. After graduating from the Spence School she studied at the Art Students League in New York between 1932 and 1946, during which time she worked as a commercial illustrator and portraitist. By the middle of the next decade, however, Springford's own work was tending toward abstraction, and she became loosely associated with Abstract Expressionism, the dominant style in New York in the late 1950s. What set her paintings apart from her contemporaries was her particular interest in Eastern forms of thought and expression, in particular Chinese calligraphy, and its profound effect on her visual language. At this time the artist was sharing a studio on West 25th Street with the expatriate Chinese artist Walasse Ting, who introduced her to Asian art and, although much younger than her, may have been an influence on her technique.

Springford's early 'Calligraphy' series of paintings employed acrylic paints on rice or mulberry paper, which she would then mount onto canvas. As she noted at the time, 'I liked the direct approach of the early Chinese painters…Whatever they put down on paper stayed there; they didn't edit. They didn't copy nature, either; they interpreted it. Some of the older Chinese drawings are much more abstract than anything done today. I adapted their rhythm and free motion to my own abstract paintings.'1 These largely monochromatic abstract works were first shown at the National Academy of Design in 1959 and were also the subject of her inaugural solo gallery exhibition the following year, when the artist was forty-seven years old. Indeed, it should be noted that, having worked for many years as a commercial illustrator before turning to abstract art, Springford was considerably older than many of her like-minded peers; Helen Frankenthaler, for example, was fifteen years her junior.

By the early 1960s Springford's work was becoming more colourful, though still painted in a highly calligraphic style on bright white rice paper. These paintings were exhibited in a second solo show at a gallery in New York in 1963, which, like her first exhibition in 1960, garnered relatively little critical comment. Soon afterwards, the artist, who was now aged fifty, suffered a back injury that left her unable to paint on a large scale for some time, and she turned towards a series of drawings in pen and crayon. She also began travelling widely, and it was on one of these trips that a new inspiration arrived. On a visit to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming in 1965, the artist became captivated by the park's hot springs; oval-shaped pools made up of mineral deposits, characterized by intensely bright colours of blues, greens and yellows, from which bubbled up steaming waters from deep underground. Springford was inspired by these geological formations to create a group of vibrant concentric compositions of pool-like forms, using poured, diluted acrylics on rice paper, that became known as the Morning Glory series, named after one of the thermal springs at Yellowstone. Later abstract paintings were the result of photographs taken during further travels in the 1970s; to Tanzania, Martinique and the Himalayas.

The 1970s also found the artist working on several other sequences of very colourful abstract paintings, including the Cosmos series, the assemblages known as the Star Stuff and Scuba series, and the Expansionist series, all of which were based on natural phenomena. As Springford wrote in 1976, 'Painting is my attempt to identify with the universal whole. I want to find my own small plot or pattern of energy that will express the inner me in terms of rhythmic movement and color. The expansive center of the universe, of the stars, and of nature is my constant challenge in abstract terms.'2 These works were characterized by diaphanous washes of brilliant colour and overlapping layers of forms.

Although a few of her works were included in group shows, as well as in the exhibition Women Artists: Works on Paper at the Brooklyn Museum in 1975 and two small solo shows in 1975 and 1979, Springford tried in vain to interest art galleries, curators and collectors in her paintings. Between 1970 and 1986 she sent dozens of colour slides of her work to museums, artists and critics, with little success. By the end of the decade, her failing eyesight had been diagnosed as macular dystrophy, and after around 1986 she ceased to paint at all. She did, however, produce a series of small, three-dimensional sculptures made of bones which she photographed before disassembling and re-forming the materials into other shapes. These sculptural objects no longer survive and are only recorded in photographs.

Eventually becoming almost completely blind, Springford was, for the last two decades of her life, largely confined to the small apartment in New York where she lived for seventy years. Her oeuvre as an artist remained mired in obscurity, and almost her entire extant body of mature abstract work - numbering perhaps two hundred chromatic paintings executed over a period of two decades - was kept in a storage unit in New York City. It was not until the early 1990s that Springford's work was rediscovered and she began to be represented by the art dealer Gary Snyder. In 1998 an exhibition of her paintings at Snyder's gallery in New York was a revelation to collectors and critics alike, and was almost completely sold out before it even opened. Although Springford was gratified by this long-awaited recognition, her health continued to decline, and she died in January 2003, just shy of her ninetieth birthday.

Since her death, Springford's paintings have been exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, as well as in galleries in New York, Chicago, Wyoming, New Mexico and Tokyo, while a biographical essay devoted to her was included in the catalogue of the important exhibition Women of Abstract Expressionism at the Denver Art Museum in 2016. Works by the artist have lately entered the

collections of the Guggenheim Museum in New York and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Most recently, Springford's work was included, alongside that of Gillian Ayres, Helen Frankenthaler, Grace Hartigan, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell and many others, in the exhibition Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940-1970, held at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 2023.