

ALMINE RECH GALLERY

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

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By David Rhodes



Vivian Springford, *Untitled (Martinique Series)*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas, 89 × 88 1/8 inches.  
Courtesy Almine Rech Gallery. Photo: Matt Kroening.

Thirteen paintings comprise this exhibition of Vivian Springford's work, dating from 1968 through 1984. All are stained with thin layers of luminous color, and there is a great deal of subtlety and variety in the process of realizing the repeated disc-like form that appears as a

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consistent motif in each. The typically squarish format of each canvas emphasizes the off-centered focus of this motif and enhances the inherent dynamism of Springford's painting process. I would hesitate to call these paintings "color fields," because they aspire to different ends than those of the genre Clement Greenberg promoted. They are not concerned with advancing a formalist agenda; rather they are experimental and particular, pursuing, with total commitment, specific desires and interests—to communicate direct emotion, sensuality, and an almost-Tantric meditative quality. These thirteen works expand the possibilities for painting or abstraction, even as we understand those terms today.

Springford, born 1913 in Milwaukee, moved with her family to Detroit after her father became a vice president at Dodge. The family moved again in 1930, this time to New York City, when her Father became president of the refrigerator manufacturer Servel. From Upper East Side high-society life, Springford made a detour to attend the Art Students League, where she studied from 1932 until 1946. During the 1930s and 1940s Springford worked as an illustrator and exhibited portrait paintings. However, during the 1950s, due to an interest in Asian art and culture and after exposure to the Abstract Expressionist New York painters, she grew increasingly interested in abstraction. In 1957 she met the Chinese-American artist and poet Walasse Ting (1929–2010), with whom she shared a studio from 1958 until the mid 1960s and the end of their relationship. During this time, Springford's interest in both Chinese calligraphy and the philosophies of Taoism and Confucianism deepened. The impact of these interests on Springford's process was profound: Calligraphy, with its immediacy, spontaneity and willingness to express something in the moment that is not later modified, is close in approach to the fluid stain painting that we see here in this exhibition—a relationship to the body moving through space, its actions leaving traces, and passing rhythms in material form, are clear. Springford worked with Chinese ink on rice paper, and acrylic or oil on thinly primed canvas.

Take, for example, the earliest painting here. In *Untitled* (1968), loose quadrants of green, yellow, and pink are dissolved toward the middle of the canvas by an expanding circle that leaves a fine and irregular edge of darker pink, like waves advancing and retreating across sand. The colors of the painting mix in the central area, making an amorphous and complex shape. As no documentary images or written accounts exist for how these paintings were technically produced, we have to speculate. Some facts seem evident: the canvas was painted unstretched, then mounted on stretcher bars; the canvas was wet

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when the paint was poured or brushed over it; other tools seem to have been used to apply paint; and it is possible a platform could have been used to spin the painting forcing the paint out from the center. Acrylic paint was only available from 1963 so Springford and other artists, such as Sam Gilliam, who also worked with acrylic on unstretched canvas, were in uncharted technical territory. Untitled (Martinique Series) (1974), at 89 × 88 1/4 inches, is among the larger paintings presented. Indigo, cerulean, orange, and lime- yellow contrast in both hue and tone, generating a saturated chromatic light, its concentric halos moving out like opening petals. The center, and darkest area, has a thickly resonant quality different to the pale, airy outer sections. Between 1971 and 1976 Springford travelled frequently, visiting Asia, Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and South



Vivian Springford, Untitled, 1968. Acrylic on canvas, 61 3/4 × 51 3/4 inches. Courtesy Almine Rech Gallery. Photo: Matt Kroening.

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America, returning with many photographs. Colors seen and remembered influenced the range and intensity of her palette.

Failing eyesight caused by macular dystrophy eventually resulted in blindness for Springford, and her last paintings were completed in 1986. After a long period of not exhibiting, Gary Snyder represented Springford through the late 1990s and 2000s, until the artist died in January 2003. With this current exhibition at Almine Rech Gallery (who now represents her estate), I can only imagine that Springford's reputation will increase as a wider audience continues to give her the recognition that is very overdue.