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Vivian Springford's Hypnotic Paintings Are Making a Splash in the Art Market

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Portrait of Vivian Springford, ca. late 1920s – early 1930s. Courtesy of Almine Rech and The Vivian Springford Administration.

Vivian Springford had been friends with Kirk McAfee for years before she felt comfortable sharing with him her biggest fear: She was worried about her kids. McAfee was confused at first. To the best of his knowledge, Springford was childless and had lived in the same one-bedroom Manhattan apartment since she was a teenaged art student. Then he realized that his octogenarian friend was referring to decades' worth of human-scale paintings, wedged into a Chelsea storage space and shrouded in plastic sheets.

“Vivian feared that if she ever stopped paying the storage rent, her work, her children, would be tossed away,” recalled McAfee, who met Springford in the early 1990s when he began volunteering to visit elderly shut-ins. By then she had lost her eyesight due to macular degeneration, and barely left her home. “It was a legitimate fear.”

McAfee contacted New York gallerist Gary Snyder, who visited the storage space and was immediately intrigued. He began representing Springford and held an exhibition focused on her mid-career black-and-white paintings at his gallery in 1998—a show that nearly sold out. It was her first exhibition in years and she enjoyed the opening from a chair where she could overhear the bubbly chatter.

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When Springford died in 2003, Snyder bought her entire estate. But when he shuttered his gallery shortly afterwards, it effectively capped interest in Springford's work right as it was gathering steam. Springford's name has been buzzing again over the last few years after Snyder sold a significant portion of the artist's estate to Almine Rech gallery, which has been consistently promoting her paintings at art fairs and in solo shows.

A one-person exhibition of her paintings, "Vivian Springford," opened at the gallery's New York location this month. And at auctions over the past year, her works have repeatedly exceeded their high estimates and sold in the \$80,000 to \$110,000 range.

There are a few reasons why collectors are now noticing Springford. "There's been a shift in tastes, and there's a sensuous beauty to her work that's appealing," Snyder explained of her stain paintings, which he said were dismissed as overly decorative and light in the 1990s. Springford also belongs to a cohort of mid-century female artists who are the focus of more scholarly and market attention amid ongoing efforts to correct the male-dominated art historical record.

"She's kind of a sleeper, and I truly believe that these works will have staying power," said Montana Alexander, a New York partner at Heather James Fine Art, who also noted renewed excitement surrounding Springford's work. "She was developing her own manner of stain painting in the 1970s; she came from that Abstract Expressionist thing but really made it her own. And not unlike Sam Francis, had that East Asian calligraphic influence as well. And then later in life she unfortunately became really private."

Springford was born into a wealthy family and grew up in the sort of New York social circles that expected her to participate in a debutante ball (which she ultimately did, in 1932). She didn't follow a debutante's path, though, and that same year she enrolled at the Art Students League. Springford didn't take the typical artist's track either, since her family's money meant she didn't need to hustle to sell paintings in order to make rent.

During the 1930s and '40s she worked as a commercial illustrator, and by the late 1950s she was painting abstractly and sharing a studio with Chinese American artist Walasse Ting. Ting introduced her to friends in his circle like Sam Francis, Pierre Alechinsky, and Karel Appel, and also got Springford interested in Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese calligraphy.

"I liked the direct approach of the early Chinese painters," Springford explained in the press materials for her 1960 solo exhibition at Great Jones Gallery. "They didn't edit. They didn't copy nature, either; they interpreted it. In fact, 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."

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Springford used black in these calligraphic paintings, sometimes letting pigment soak into barely primed canvases. That process foreshadowed the stained artworks she made later, bridging her idiosyncratic path from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field painting. “Vivian’s Ab-Ex paintings were also kind of stain paintings, but they were more gestural,” Snyder noted. “Later on, her work became more field paintings. It’s a fascinating progression.”

From the late 1960s, Springford was staining colorful circles onto large square canvases. These look like they’re related to the paintings of other Color Field artists, but unlike Helen Frankenthaler or Morris Louis, Springford’s colors don’t drip towards the edges of the frame. They mushroom from the center in a tie-dye-like burst.

No one really knows how Springford painted these mesmerizing circles, since she didn’t leave behind any photographs that could give away her technique. Maybe a turntable helped her pour the paint with even, centrifugal movement. Given the size of her canvases, some of which were 90 inches square, she must have painted on the floor.

“Painting is my attempt to identify with the universal whole,” Springford said in 1975. “The expansive center of the universe and of nature as in blossoming flowers of the ripples radiating from a stone thrown in a pool of water are my constant challenge in abstract terms.”

Whatever instrument she used to make these radiating blossoms remains a mystery. But her medium was acrylic paint, then still a relatively new material, which she diluted with water and mineral spirits and poured onto the canvas, sometimes using brushes to guide the paint. After the paint dried, she occasionally went back in to add accents with a paintbrush.

“Because Springford’s techniques shared much in common with those of the Color Field painters, it is tempting to include her in that group, but this would not really be accurate,” wrote art historian Alexandra Schwartz in a 2018 Springford monograph published by Almine Rech. “With her stain paintings, Springford came into her own as an independent creative voice.” Her Color Field works are gestural because she tilted the canvas to manipulate the paint, and her use of both staining and brushwork on the same painting created a rare hybrid.

It’s hard to fit Springford’s circular works squarely within the borderlines of a particular movement. “She definitely falls between the cracks,” said Ethan Buchsbaum, senior director at Almine Rech. “That combination of both those movements certainly makes her a bit of a chameleon.”

Springford kept painting in circles into the 1980s, even as she was losing her eyesight and interest in her work diminished. By 1986, she could no longer paint and made some sculptures instead. Despite all the difficulties, Springford kept making art.

Those sculptures don’t seem to have made it into her Chelsea storage space, and so they weren’t there on the day that McAfee went to see what he could do about keeping her life’s work out of the trash. Yet Springford’s paintings survived to be dusted off, with curiosity about her distinctive brand of abstraction now spreading like a polychromatic ripple.

- Karen Chernick