

ALMINE RECH

ArtSeen: Vivian Springford
By Barbara A. MacAdam
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BROOKLYN RAIL



Vivian Springford, *Untitled*, 1973. Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 48 x 1 3/8 inches. Courtesy Almine Rech, New York. Photo: Dan Bradica.

Abstract painter Vivian Springford (1913–2003) has come a long way, from both her early black Abstract Expressionist paintings and her work as illustrator of Albert Carr’s book *Juggernaut: the Path of Dictatorship*, for which she portrayed 20 political dictators from the Napoleonic era to the early 20th century. Springford’s career followed a circuitous route, eventually finding the point where, as she explained, “My painting is my own small plot of energy, in terms of color and movement, in the universal whole.” From Franz Kline-like gestural paintings to the stain-soaked canvases that became her signature works, Springford found her place in an ever-shifting abstract art world. The 18 paintings in this delightful show attest to her success.

A 1932 debutante, the Milwaukee-born, New York City-raised artist eschewed her privileged private-school upbringing and attended the Art Students League instead of college, moving in bohemian circles at a fertile moment in the city’s cultural life. Her work captured the eye of New York Times critic Howard Devree and the prominent critic-scholar and Ab Ex proponent Harold Rosenberg, who helped her land her first show in 1960 at the Great Jones Gallery in New York. This was followed by a second solo show, at the Preston Gallery, in 1963. The opening at the Great Jones Gallery appears in the short 1961 movie *Bowl of Cherries*, written and directed by William Kronick.

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As backdrop to Springford's work and artistic milieu, the wry and funky silent film, which can be viewed on YouTube, captures a complicated time and spirit. Near the beginning, it presents a large vivid-pink painted outburst by Springford filling the screen in a cameo role. The star is a cowboy artist who arrives in New York with a roll of horse paintings. He is wide-eyed and stunned by the world of abstraction but quickly finds camaraderie among an impromptu cadre of inventive friends, eating, playing, having sex, and so on. Our hero sells nothing at his first gallery show, but it's OK because he soon learns that there has been a fire at the gallery, and he gets a big check from the insurance company—cause for celebration. The artworld is spontaneous and abuzz.

Like the work of most artists who enjoy repeated revivals, Vivian Springford's intense abstract paintings have resonated at different moments amid an ever-changing landscape of styles. Almost like hemlines, they find their place in our visual expectations. Forgotten for a while, and then resuscitated when their spirit strikes a nerve, we find that what fits at one time seems dated at another. The hearty, extroverted gestures of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism's contained, suppressed emotions, or even Pop, with its flatness and mock realism—all these tendencies have endured periods of neglect as well as dominance. Likewise, Color Field staining and concentration on process may not necessarily suit one moment, but then again, it suddenly, unexpectedly, and unaccountably may.

Indeed, Springford's paintings, with their spiritual meanderings and discomfiting vivid colors that appear to congeal and darken toward the center of the canvas, seem to strike a cultural nerve today. We are drawn into circular dark voids—evoking sexual orifices, pockets of the cosmos, the eye of a hurricane, and the caverns of dream and memory in the mind. Springford's work was influenced by her relationship with the Chinese artist Walasse Ting, with whom she shared a studio and a relationship over the course of 10 years. Pinks and oranges and citrus greens along with reds and blues animate both artists' works, but although they use a similar vocabulary, their results differ considerably. Springford's paintings are marked by delicacy and restraint: a watery soft blend of pastels with an underlying hint of darkness. Viewing them can be like stealing a glimpse into an emotional diary. Ting's paintings are more Pop-inflected and exuberant, occupying the other end of a spectrum that included work by their friends Pierre Alechinsky, Asger Jorn, and Arman—all members of the CoBrA group.

Her works reveal many other subtle and timely artistic associations, including, most obviously, echoes of Sam Francis, Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, and Morris Louis. Springford's acrylic paintings on raw canvas seem to ooze out of the surface, shaping themselves and forming organic, and vaguely calligraphic, edges that bleed into the soft ground. Exemplifying this approach are *Untitled* (1977), which stages blotches of pink and pale green against a yellow ground with a surprising dark green edge at one side, and *Untitled (Tanzania Series)* (1972), with its seductive reddish center contained by a fibrous green line.

Springford eventually withdrew from the art scene because of progressive macular degeneration. In the 1990s, a volunteer working with the elderly found her work in a storage facility and brought it to the attention of Gary Snyder, the gallerist devoted to modern American art. He befriended the artist and restored her work to visibility, showing it first in 1998, and again in 2003, after Springford's death. The works gathered here at Almine Rech continue the project of illuminating her legacy, and are a fitting tribute to a complex career.