



Olive Green Squares on Vermillion

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham

On display

Title/Description: Olive Green Squares on Vermillion

Artist/Maker: Wilhelmina Barns-Graham (Artist)

Born: 1968

Measurements: Support: h. 907 x w. 1210 mm Framed: h. 1078 x 1391 x 57 mm

Accession Number: 31714

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Wilhelmina Barns-Graham CBE was one of the foremost British abstract artists. She developed an abstract language that begun with a close observation of landscape, but which increasingly emphasised geometric forms. In the 1960s she moved further away from observed landscape and focused much of her art on geometric arrangements of squares or circles. The painting, *Olive Green Squares on Vermillion*, 1968, is a major work from this period and was painted at a time when Barns-Graham's work was most closely aligned with Constructivist tendencies.

The painting was exhibited at her one-person exhibition at the Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh in the summer of 1968. The series of paintings she called, *Things of a Kind in Order and Disorder*. [1] The show gained critical support for this change divergence in her painting and noting this new intense emotional engagement. The Times Educational Supplement (TES) quotes the artist's own assertion, the violence in the background of the painting, the two green blocks askew in a band of them might be, say, a broken marriage, altering the position and relationships of all the others. [2] This and reviews in the Guardian and The Scotsman were all full of praise for the new series. When describing a similar work in a series of works (*Pilgrimage*, 1967), Barns-Graham described rows of card squares placed on the floor and then disturbed with her foot, the resulting 'disorder' would form the basis of her thinking for the entire series. [3]

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, known as Willie, painter, printmaker and draughtsman, was born in St Andrews. She studied at Edinburgh College of Art from 1931. Barns-Graham is best known through her association with St Ives, where she arrived in in March 1940 and retained a studio until her death. She had followed her fellow Edinburgh student, the artist Margaret Mellis and her husband,

Adrian Stokes, who were already there. She was introduced to the artists Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo, who had all settled in the town during wartime. [4]

In 1960, Barns-Graham inherited a family house, *Balmungo*, near St Andrews. She now began to divide her time between St Ives and St Andrews. The move coincided with this new phase in her work, now employing hard-edged geometric and linear forms. Barns Graham moved away from an abstraction of nature (associated with the St Ives School) and Taschism, the dominant abstract painting movement in Europe of the 1950s which had been challenged by Abstract Expressionism. In 1956, the exhibition, *Modern Art in the United States* came to the Tate Gallery. The Jackson Pollock exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1958 and the much-celebrated exhibition, *The New American Painting* opened in 1959. The influence of America was in its ascendancy. As the 1960s progressed the wider forms of Abstraction and constructed art would with expanding variations in International abstract painting. For example. Barns-Graham's painting has formal similarities with elements of the Neo-concrete movement that emerged in Brazil, with a greater sensuality, colour and poetic feeling in abstract art.

Calvin Winner, March 2022

[1] Lynne Green, W. Barns-Graham: a studio life, Lund Humphries, 2011, p.200

[2] Lynne Green, p.200

[3] https://artuk.org/discover/curations/wilhelmina-barns-graham-squares-circles-1960-80/view_as/grid/search/artist:wilhelmina-barns-graham-19122004/page/1 Accessed on 07/03/22

[4] <https://www.barns-grahamtrust.org.uk/The-Artist/Profile.html> Accessed on 07/03/22

Exhibitions

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Sainsbury Centre, UK, 02/10/2021 - 17/07/2022

'Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951', Djanogly Art Gallery, UK, 07/03/2023 - 23/07/2023

Further Reading

Tania Moore and Calvin Winner (eds.), *Rhythm and Geometry: Constructivist art in Britain since 1951* (Norwich: Sainsbury Centre, 2021), p.12.

Virginia Button, *Wilhelmina Barns-Graham* (Sansom and Company, 2020)

Lynne Green, *W. Barns-Graham: a studio life* (Lund Humphries, 2011)
