

VIRGINIA JARAMILLO



THE CURVILINEAR PAINTINGS 1969-1974

THE MENIL COLLECTION

This focused presentation of paintings from the late 1960s through the early 1970s is the first solo museum exhibition of the work of Virginia Jaramillo. Characterized by razor-thin undulating lines that dance across monochrome fields of bright and flat color—oxblood, saturated greens, and deep purples—the paintings situate the artist within the most important developments taking place in American abstraction at the time.

According to Jaramillo, these Curvilinear Paintings are spatial terrains that invite reflection and intend to translate “the structure of our physical, spiritual, and mental worlds” into the space and geometry of art. “I lay out the groundwork and the viewer projects onto the space” to fill the “arena with their own feelings and experiences,” the artist has remarked.

Jaramillo custom mixed her acrylic pigments to create the vivid and bright hues that play with the viewer’s understanding of light, space, and depth. When the curving and slender lines cross these solid and smooth fields of color, there is a dramatic shift in scale that provides a sense of disorientation. Both on and in the monochrome passages, they also eschew a clear distinction between the color and the forms and between the foreground and the background. The lines are interwoven with the palette to create the composition.

Artist Frank Bowling aptly described these enlivening spatial structures—based on the width of a pencil mark—as “lightning whips” that shatter the picture plane like a thin stick of dynamite. This sense of electrification is indicated by the title of her work *Morning Becomes Electra*, 1973, which comes from the 1931 Eugene O’Neill play cycle *Mourning Becomes Electra*. This modern Greek tragedy is about how environmental forces, like sunlight, shape the human condition. The chartreuse and blue lines that glide across the

bottom corners of this work's ink-black surface read like a glimmer of sun at daybreak, a reference to a hopeful moment in the day that is also found in *Green Dawn*, 1970.

These works were indeed a breakthrough for the artist. They set the stage for her career-long approach to experimentation with the vocabulary of form, line, and color, which continues to inform her most recent work. She began making this series in New York City, following a period in Paris, where she was deeply impacted by the color and quality of the city's light with the atmospheric and hazy illumination off of the River Seine. Jaramillo's lines also are a nod to the work of Barnett Newman and this modern painter's renowned "zips," or straight, thin verticals that slice through swaths of color. In her animated version, the linear elements jump, vibrate, and bend across the composition.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Jaramillo and her contemporaries took what has been described as a cool and minimal approach to painting. These bold works, defined with descriptive terms such as "post-painterly," "hard-edge," and "non-gestural," essentially mark a break from previous painting traditions. Artists such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, who were affiliated with Abstract Expressionism, were interested in the gestural potential of paint and believed that splatters and drips and the indication of a body pushing a brush or flinging pigment across a canvas revealed the inner psyche of an artist.

In contrast, Jaramillo and others questioned this exuberant approach to mark-making and invented ways to eliminate entirely the indication of a brush or the hand of the artist. For example, graphic contours and precise and neat modes of paint application—intended to be expressionless—were some of the techniques artists were turning towards as a means to emphasize the viewer's physical or optical experience of the work of art, rather than the subjectivity of an individual artist. Jaramillo, for example, wanted to reduce art to its most essential components and asked: how can I elicit a powerful response from the viewer through the intersection of just a few colors and one or two lines?

The Menil's presentation of Virginia Jaramillo's Curvilinear Paintings is timed to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *The De Luxe Show*, one of the first racially integrated exhibitions of contemporary art held in this country. Organized by the Menil Foundation in 1971, *The De Luxe Show* was installed in a shuttered movie theater rehabilitated for the purpose in Houston's Fifth Ward. The trailblazing exhibition, curated by Peter Bradley, included works by Sam Gilliam, Al Loving, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and others who were exploring new approaches to "hard-edge abstraction." Jaramillo was the only woman included and exhibited the painting *Green Dawn, 1970*, which is featured again in this exhibition.

Virginia Jaramillo was born in El Paso, Texas, in 1939 and raised in Los Angeles, where she attended the Manual Arts High School and then studied at Otis Art Institute. Beginning at the age of 18, she repeatedly participated in the annual exhibition of what is now the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and, in 1965, she relocated to Paris before settling in New York City in 1967. There, her painting evolved as she became a part of the artistic community in which she worked, alongside figures such as Jack Whitten, Kenneth Noland, and Mark Di Suvero, and where she became affiliated with the Black Arts Movement that was active in the 1960s and 1970s. The artist currently works daily in her Long Island studio. Her most recent series of paintings are based on forms of sacred geometry in ancient architecture and her artistic interpretation of the linear structures found in the disciplines of neuroscience and astrophysics.

Curated by Michelle White, Senior Curator

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