The background is a monochromatic blue with various textures and patterns. On the left side, there are several concentric white circles of varying thicknesses, resembling ripples or a target. The rest of the background is filled with subtle, organic patterns and textures, including what looks like a faint, larger-scale circular pattern on the right side, and some lighter, almost white, brushstrokes or splatters scattered throughout, particularly in the lower right quadrant.

# Wilhelmina Barns-Graham

A SURVEY OF WORKS FROM 1945—1995 + IN PERSPECTIVE: THE LATE PAINTINGS

# Willhelmina Barns-Graham

**A survey of important works 1945—1995**

Presented by Art First at the The London Art Fair, 2014

**In Perspective: the late paintings**

An exhibition at Art First, 26 March—17th May, 2014

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In conjunction with the Barns-Graham Charitable Trust

## Introduction

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2012 was Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's centenary year. She had died in January 2004 aged 91, while she was in the midst of working on an exhibition of new work for Art First, a show which indeed took place that April. Not only did it celebrate her life, and her lifelong commitment to her art, it also brought to a close the happy and stimulating final decade of her life as a painter.

In the ten years that have followed, high profile exhibitions have taken place, presenting the grand historical sweep of her development from early years in St Ives in 1940s when she worked amongst a group of artists that included Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth, Naum Gabo (during his influential seven year residence in St Ives), Alfred Wallis, Margaret Mellis, John Wells, Denis Mitchell, Bryan Wynter, Bernard Leach, and continued alongside the next group of painters to settle in St Ives, Peter Lanyon, Roger Hilton, Patrick Heron and Terry Frost, all of whom she outlived.

To date there has been only one exhibition that attempted to provide a serious overview of the 50 years of Barns-Graham's achievements, held in Scotland in 1989 at the Edinburgh City Art Centre (and tour) with a thoughtful and considered critique written by Douglas Hall. Tate's two revelatory survey exhibitions, *An Enduring Image* in 1999 and posthumously, *Movement and Light Imag(in)ing Time* in 2005, with its illuminating catalogue essay by Mel Gooding, updated and broadened a new critical audience. For her Centenary year, the Fleming Collection and Edinburgh City Art Centre hosted the exhibition *Wilhelmina Barns-Graham: A Scottish artist in St Ives*, curated by Lynne Green. Simultaneously, Green's monograph *W. Barns-Graham: a studio life* (2001) was updated and reprinted and remains the most comprehensive account of the artist's life and work.

Smaller exhibitions arranged by Art First have presented particular aspects of her achievement, notably the *Elemental Energies* exhibition curated and with its catalogue essay by Mel Gooding for Trinity Hall, Cambridge in 2007. Gooding was also the author and curator of *A Discipline of the Mind: The Drawings of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham*, with the exhibition opening at the Pier Arts Centre, Orkney in 2009 and touring nationally. A parallel exhibition of drawings took place at Art First as part of the Centenary celebrations, introducing collectors to a rich seam of historic drawings for the first time.

The reassessment of Barns-Graham's position within the development of British modern art is rapidly gaining ground with a new generation of curators, art historians and critics. Fuelling this is the remarkable achievement of the Barns-Graham Charitable Trust established in 1987 during the artist's lifetime, which is in the safe hands of Geoffrey Bertram, Chairman of the Trust. He has overseen the restoration of Balmungo House, Barns-Graham's family home in St Andrews, providing a base for the study, the conservation and the storage of the artist's work. An important activity is the Trust's programme of financial support to students of art and art history in selected art colleges and universities in Scotland and England. All works sold by the Trust, and on its behalf, ensure the continuation of this funding and fulfill the wishes and intentions Barns-Graham expressed when establishing the Trust at the outset.

### **Clare Cooper**

DIRECTOR, ART FIRST

## A survey of important works 1945–1995

The exhibition *Order and Disorder*, which Art First presented in 2009, outlined key developments in Barns-Graham's painting between 1965 and 1980. The statement in an accompanying brochure referred to that particular group of pictures as exemplifying a distinctive thread weaving its way through her career. The focus was on Barns-Graham's dynamic use of colour and its interaction with two simple geometric forms—the square and the circle. The selection of pictures presented on this occasion in 2014, expands and furthers the 2009 thesis in both directions.

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham arrived in St Ives in 1940 after graduating from Edinburgh College of Art in 1937, where she was one of a minority of women students, and counted Denis Peplow and William Gear amongst her friends. Much of her painting and drawing from the 1940s reflects the formal training she had received at college in Scotland. An early drawing *Old Mill* (1938) (shown right) for example reveals how Barns-Graham looked at structures and organised forms and shapes from the start. The buildings are considered for their mass, with generalised, rather than specific architectural detail, where the fall of light and shade alternates across the picture surface.

In a striking gouache painted seven years later, *Back Road West* (1945), a similar interest in building shapes is evident, especially the description of the stone wall of the house on the right where the main focus is on the visual movement in the pattern of the stonework. The apparent randomness to the lay of stones belies their carefully manipulated positioning in the painting; a particularly relevant intervention when considering the floating and tumbling shapes which characterise the *Order and Disorder* series of the 1960s.



**Back Road West**, 1945, gouache, 52 x 63.4 cm



**Old Mill**, 1938  
oil, pen and ink and pencil on paper, 27 x 38 cm



In 1949 Barns-Graham made her renowned journey to Switzerland's Grindelwald Glacier. The resulting drawings, offsets and paintings that evolved from this formative experience established her as one of St Ives' most significant artists, and her glacier pictures are still highly sought after. The ice forms in the glacier paintings gradually developed into rock forms, while the underlying structure of her compositions became increasingly reliant on the Golden Section, a method of division in a mathematically determined rectangle. Such divisions are often seen in the underlying structure of the compositions, as an inherent component of the image.

The diagonal lines in the depths of *Geoff and Scruffy Series—Red Line* (1953) serve here to illustrate her use of the Golden Section, underpinning the design of the linocut over which she has painted. The *Geoff and Scruffy* pictures, which recur through the 1960s to the 1980s, consist of two main forms, one oblong, the other half-moon, linked by two lines and deriving originally from drawings done during World War II of men painting buoys (a point made by Lynne Green in *A studio life*). The shape was simplified, with the half moon echoing the shape of Porthmeor beach, cut by the sea.

Barns-Graham's circumstances changed significantly in 1963, which stimulated an important shift in her art. Her marriage to David Lewis was annulled (they had been apart since 1957) bringing a sense of closure to the separation, and she purchased a new studio residence in St Ives, No.1 Barnaloft in the same year. The security and independence this provided was exactly what she needed to continue with her work. Now she was free to embark on a completely new series of paintings that 'represented an engagement with the science of painting: with colour theory (the balance and dynamic interaction of hue against hue), and with the interaction of simple geometric form (the square and the circle) in replication and in evolving relationship'. (Lynne Green, *op cit.*, p.183) This is the start of the *Order and Disorder* theme that constituted her main output for over a decade.

In her own words from a statement made in 1989, Barns-Graham wrote:

'I tend to work in themes, some of them lasting me for years as I can return to a theme again and again; for instance the abstracted glaciers, rock forms, line motifs, abstract reliefs, squares and circles, and painted constructions.'

**Geoff and Scruffy Series—Red Line**, 1953, gouache on linocut print, 14.6 x 21.6 cm

And with reference to working as an abstract painter, she asserted:

‘the positive aspect of working in an abstract way for me, is the freedom of choice of medium, space, texture, colour. The challenge of feeling out the truth of an idea, a process of inner perception and harmony of thought on a high level. Abstraction is a wide field and is not all necessarily “abstract”. Abstraction is a refinement and greater discipline to the idea; truth to the medium perfects the idea.’

The squares and cubes, carefully balanced or tumbling into space, either large in form or clustered in small multiples, comprise in large part the *Order and Disorder* works of the 1960s. In *Cork and Sand Series* (1963,) we see the tumbling arrangement of blocks derived from pieces of card cast randomly and then nudged as desired into the finished pattern. The image is made by painting the side of a physical block (wood or perhaps lino) which is then pressed to the support. When lifted, the paint rises with it, giving the surfaces their tacky, grainy texture. *Dance of Spring* (1965) develops this theme, with a sharper definition of the shapes and a more colourful palette. *Family Series* (1967), and *Lilac Edge* (1970), show how in the later 60s the organisation of the shapes play off each other to create a myriad of movements and changing atmospheres.

Simultaneously Barns-Graham started to work with circles or discs, extending the potential for visual play by using whole discs alongside those divided into two hues. Some of the titles of this period—*Wind on Wave Series*, *Bird in Flight Series* for instance—allude to the closeness Barns-Graham felt with the landscape at large and the titles hint at things directly observed in nature. Whilst her experience of her surroundings was inspirational, it was always transformed in the studio by the rigour of her practice. Seeing them now, it becomes ever more evident that Barns-Graham was interested in scientific processes, in the behavior of elemental energies within the natural world, and in depicting visual equivalents.

Throughout the 1960s, and beyond, the illusion of space between background and foreground provided the support for the forms that lie closer to the picture surface. In the main, the background spaces are not flat, dead spaces but are enlivened through the careful modulation of paint layers. A sense of aerial perspective is further enhanced when the back space is divided, a panel of one hue juxtaposed against another. *Lilac Edge* (1970), *Emerald and Cadmium Green* (1971) and *Green and White Discs on Turquoise—Wind on Wave Series* (1971) all illustrate this feature.



**Bridal Party 2 (Family Series)**  
1987, oil on hardboard, 39 x 53 cm

During the 1970s Barns-Graham’s variations continued to evolve. *Family Series* (1967), demonstrates an idea visited briefly but not developed until a decade later. This particular gouache on paper is the direct antecedent of the extended *Family Series* that Barns-Graham took up in earnest in 1981 (example shown left). Here we see a preference for rectangular shapes rather than squares and the elongated, oblong forms eventually turned into the thick, single brushstrokes of pure colour which ignited the surfaces of her celebrated *Scorpio Series* of the 1990s. The movement of more softly brushed coloured forms over a single coloured background first seen in the rare canvas *Untitled (Passing Forms Series)* of 1958 is another recurring characteristic in her very late works, to be seen in the exhibition *In Perspective*.

*Expanding Red, Orange and Green on Black* (1980) introduces yet another element, in which oblong and rhomboid shapes are given the hard edge treatment of paper cutouts. The strident colour and the determinedly modernist conception reminds us of the historical context in which Barns-Graham had been working for decades. The rich black background is divided into two areas of subtly differentiated blacks over which the forms jig. This approach to making upright forms dance across the picture plane was another theme to which Barns-Graham returned and reinvented twenty years later in the *Scorpio Series*.

Barns-Graham was absolutely consistent in the way she progressed in her painting. Not only did she have a remarkable ability to invent and re-invent ideas in an innovative fashion, but the discipline ‘of the mind’, as Mel Gooding described it, and the dedication she brought to her practice over six decades were also critical to her sustained artistic evolution and her distinguished position in the development of British modern art.

**Geoffrey Bertram**

CHAIRMAN, BARNs-GRAHAM CHARITABLE TRUST



**Untitled (Passing Form Series)**, 1958, oil on canvas, 63 x 75.5 cm





**Cork and Sand Series**, 1963, oil on board, 58.1 x 91 cm



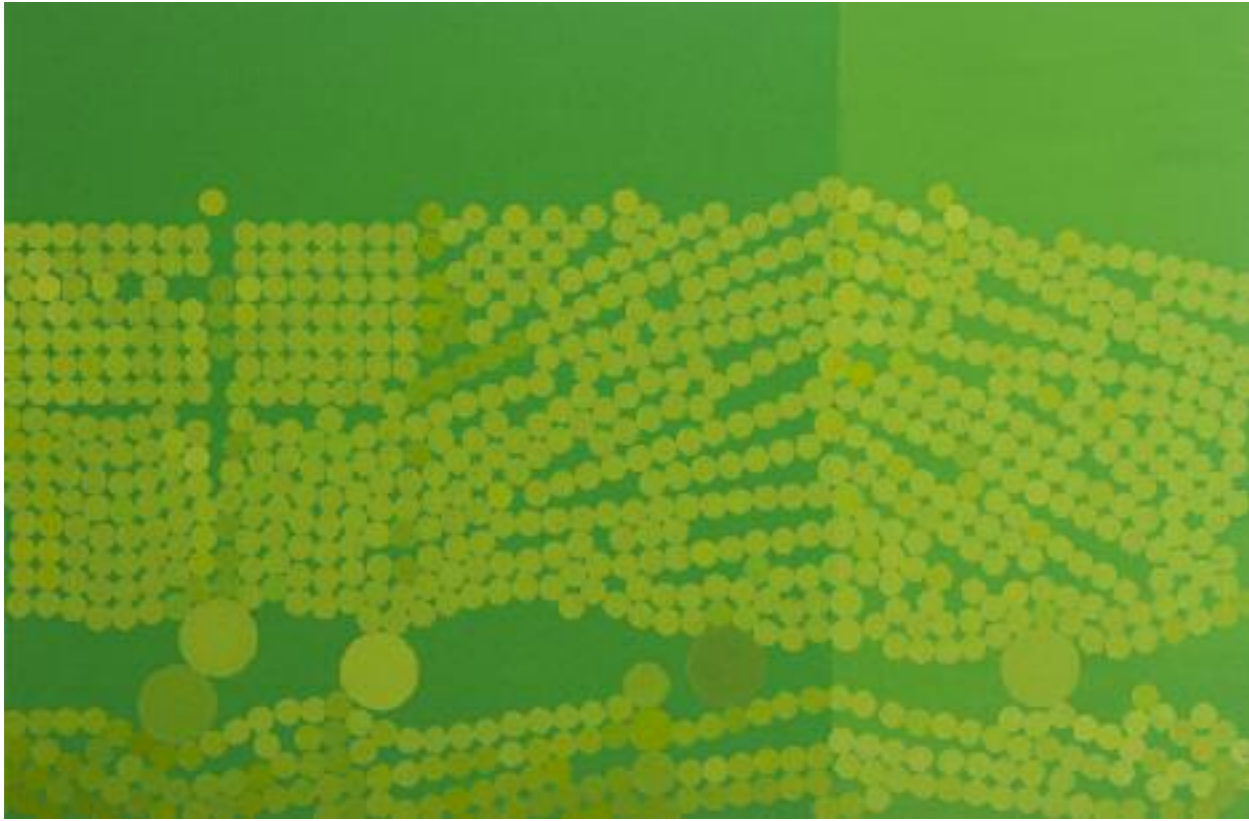
**Dance of Spring**, 1965, oil on hardboard, 27.5 x 35 cm



**Family Series**, 1967, gouache, 57.7 x 78.6 cm



**Lilac Edge**, 1970, gouache, 52.6 x 52.8 cm



**Emerald and Cadmium Green**, 1971, oil on hardboard, 40.5 x 61 cm



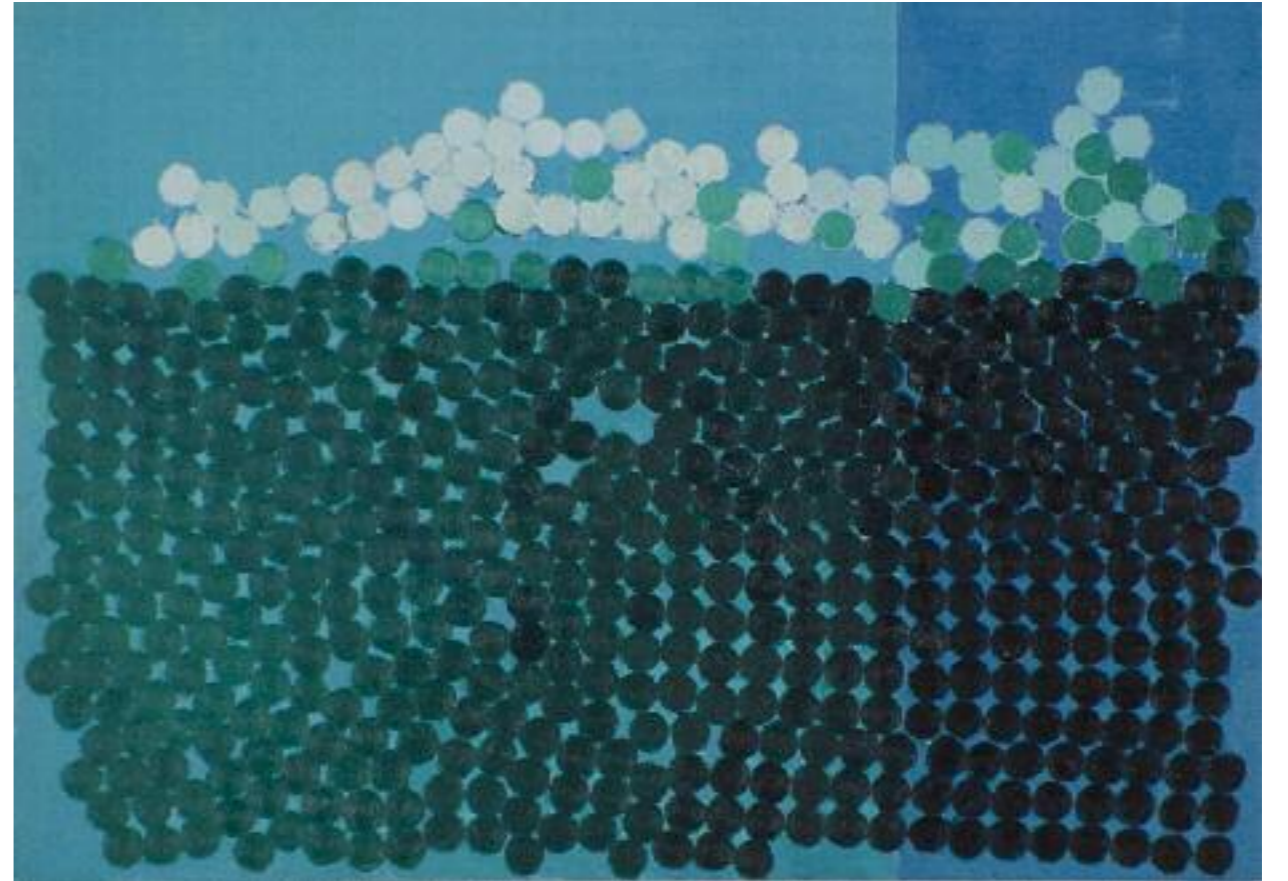
**Windblown Green**, 1976, oil on hardboard, 35.4 x 35.4 cm



**Birthday Celebration 2**, 1971, acrylic on paper, 30 x 24.4 cm



**Sea Bed, Birthday Celebration**, 1971, acrylic on paper, 28.5 x 22.1 cm



**Green and White Discs on Turquoise—Wind on Wave Series**, 1971, oil on board, 17.6 x 25 cm



**Expanding Red, Orange and Green on Black**, 1980, oil on hardboard, 65.5 x 88.5 cm



**Scorpio Series No. 13**, 1995, acrylic on paper, 56.5 x 76.3 cm



**Untitled 02.95**, 1995, oil on canvas, 76.7 x 101 cm



**Untitled (Strung Forms)**, c. 1959, oil on canvas, 50.5 x 60.5 cm

## In perspective: the late paintings

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Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's career and reputation was boosted by an outpouring of paintings and prints made in her final decade. *The Scorpio Series* notably introduced a new dynamic to her art that was to lead to further experimentation and in her own words, 'letting rip'. In a conversation with John McEwen, art critic for *The Daily Telegraph*, in 2001, her response on being asked to provide an artistic credo was the following:

'Now I am at the stage of urgency. My theme is celebration of life, joy, the importance of colour, form, space and texture. Brushstrokes that can be happy, risky, thin, fat, fluid and textured. Having a positive mind and constantly being aware and hopefully being allowed to live longer to increase this celebration.'

The collection of paintings presented here fully supports her statement, and traces some of the earlier roots that led to this 'celebration' of the last ten years of her productive life.

The importance of the *Scorpio Series* cannot be underestimated. Anecdotally they are a direct result of punishing a sheet of paper with a flailing brush after a failed interview with a journalist, when suddenly Barns-Graham recognized the potential of the raw material within those furious slashes. Under disciplined guidance the initial experiments became more coherent as she brought proper structure to the forms. The energy explodes through the apparent spontaneity and the mobility of the strokes, coupled with a lifetime's experience and knowledge of colour. There are visible risks taken in her juxtapositions, for her palette utilized the entire colour spectrum. Only an artist with remarkable skill can carry off some of the unlikely combinations she created. Indeed not all of them did succeed and she destroyed the failures at once. Working on paper and using the best acrylic paints available (Lascaux), allowed her to express her individuality at full tilt, without tensing up or being precious about what she was making.

There is a real sense of improvisation in the late works, where a carefree effortlessness prevails. Barns-Graham was wont to work simultaneously on several sheets of paper, allowing each to evolve in its own way. The challenge for her was to recognize the moment when the work was finished, when the image received the final mark that made it 'sing'. Working in this manner encouraged groups of paintings to become series.





This aspect of her art is detectable throughout her career; 'I tend to work in themes,' as she said. Barns-Graham fully explored ideas, letting them take her where they would, gradually re-shaping them, pushing them, in new directions.

By far the majority of Barns-Graham's late paintings were made on Arches paper with relatively few works done on canvas. Those canvases she did paint tended to be of a similar size to that of the works on paper, as with *Untitled* (2003). Nonetheless, on occasion she indicated an ambition to paint on a bigger scale that sat well beside the art of her peers—Terry Frost and John Hoyland in particular. Large works do impress, and there is a general tendency to believe that a large canvas is more important than a small one, and that as a rule, work on canvas is more significant than work on paper. However, during the 1990s, when Barns-Graham was in her eighties, the physical strength required to make big paintings on canvas was all but beyond her diminutive frame and fragile health. Despite these disadvantages,

**Untitled**, 2003, acrylic on canvas, 60.5 x 91 cm

her competitive and feisty resolve did lead her to paint the giant single and double sweeping brushstrokes in the upscale *Easter Series* canvases (2000–1) that includes *Easter Series, Two Brushstrokes* (2000) presented here. The bold simplicities of these masterful, minimalist canvases are also found in paintings on paper, and are taken up again in the powerful *Two Brushstrokes* silkscreen prints. Two other millennial triumphs on canvas, both painted in 2000, are *Gaia Series (Mars) I*, 123 x 168.5 cm, exhibited at Tate St Ives in 2005, and *Yellow and Blue*, 122 x 152.5 cm, presented in her exhibition of paintings at Art First in 2001.

Where the late works evoke themes from previous decades, they lend a convincing consistency to her artistic credo when seen in its entirety. Evolutions take place over a period of years, not months, and it was never out of the question to re-visit past motifs. The *Passing Forms Series* and *Strung Forms* from the late 1950s, for example, could be seen as precursors for the *Scorpio Series* and other groups from the 1990s such as the *Gaia Series*, the *Porthmeor Walk Series*, to name a few. There is no way of being absolutely sure that at the time she happened to look afresh at her earlier paintings though. It is known on the other hand, that *Black Oval* (1959) sparked her imagination when brought out for the 1989 City Art Centre exhibition. Nonetheless *Untitled (Passing Form Series)* and *Strung Forms* deserve closer attention. The manner in which the upright forms move and float across the canvas surface is strikingly prophetic when placed beside works made 40 years later.

Whether or not visitations to her past rekindled something new, Barns-Graham's late paintings reveal the same, fundamental dedication to resolving the timeless problems of combining colour, shape and form that informs her entire practice. But in her final decade, while in her eighties, the diversity of her creativity is truly astounding.

The late flourish of experimentation came from her abiding resolve, her sense of urgency, to make the very most of each day that remained.

**Geoffrey Bertram**

CHAIRMAN, BARNS-GRAHAM CHARITABLE TRUST



**Easter Series, Two Brushstrokes**, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 121.7 x 91.3 cm



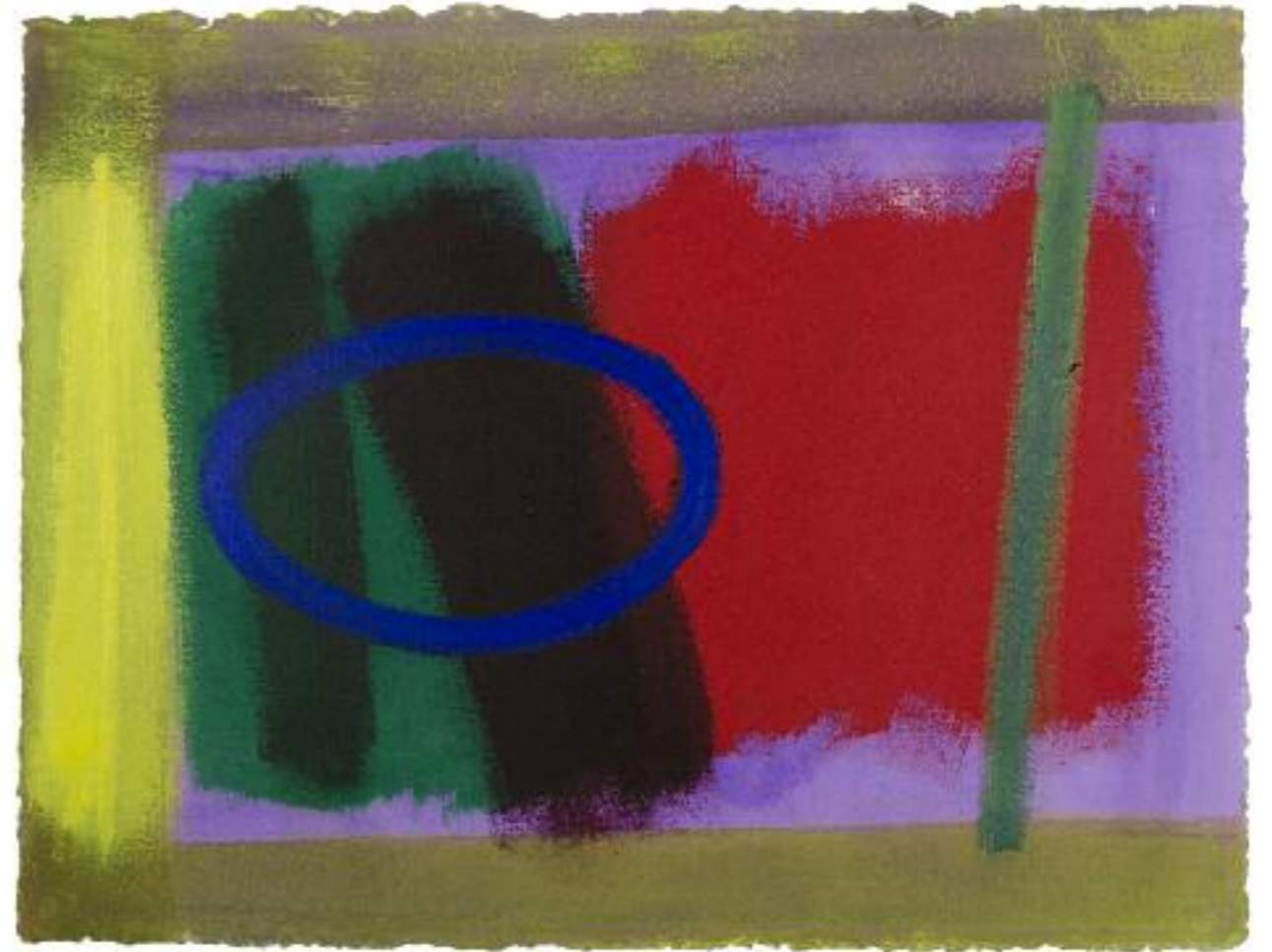
**March (Spiral)**, 2001, acrylic on paper, 57 x 76.5 cm



**Scorpio Series 2, No. 4**, 1996, acrylic on paper, 56 x 75 cm



**Inside Outside No.2**, 2000, acrylic on paper, 57.5 x 76.4cm



**Scorpio Series 3, No. 2**, 1997, acrylic on paper, 58 x 76.5 cm



Scorpio Series 1, No. 16, 1996, acrylic on paper, 57.5 x 76.3 cm



**Untitled**, circa 2001, acrylic on paper, 31.6 x 40 cm



**Untitled**, 1998, acrylic on paper, 29.9 x 38.6 cm



**Travel Memory**, 2001, acrylic on paper, 29.5 x 31.1 cm



**Untitled**, 1998, acrylic on paper, 25.4 x 37.6 cm



## Biography

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, known as Willie, was born in St Andrews, Fife, on 8th June 1912. Determining while at school that she wanted to be an artist she set her sights on Edinburgh College of Art where she enrolled in 1932 and graduated with her diploma in 1937.

At the suggestion of the College's principal, Hubert Wellington, she moved to St Ives in 1940. Early on she met Borlase Smart, Alfred Wallis and Bernard Leach, as well as Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo who were living locally at Carbis Bay. She became a member of the Newlyn Society of Artists and St Ives Society of Artists but was to leave the latter in 1949 when she became one of the founding members of the breakaway Penwith Society of Artists. She was an early exhibitor of the significant Crypt Group. Her peers in St Ives include, among others, Patrick Heron, Terry Frost, Roger Hilton, and John Wells.

Barns-Graham's history is bound up with St Ives where she lived throughout her life, and it is the place where she experienced her first great successes as an artist. Following her travels to the Grindelwald Glacier, Switzerland, in 1949 she embarked on a series of paintings and drawings which caught the attention of some of the most significant critics and curators of the day. In 1951 she won the Painting Prize in the Penwith Society of Arts in Cornwall Festival of Britain Exhibition and went on to have her first London solo exhibition at the Redfern Gallery in 1952. She was

included in many of the important exhibitions on pioneering British abstract art that took place in the 1950s.

In 1960 Barns-Graham inherited Balmungo House which initiated a new phase in her life. From this moment she divided her time between the two coastal communities, establishing herself as much as a Scottish artist as a St Ives one. Balmungo House was to become the heart of her professional life.

Barns-Graham exhibited consistently throughout her career, in private and public galleries. Though not short of exposure throughout the 1960s and 1970s, her next greatest successes did not come until the 1990s. Important exhibitions of her work at the Tate St Ives in 1999/2000 and 2005 and the publication of the first monograph on her life and work, Lynne Green's *W. Barns-Graham: a studio life*, 2001 (new extended edition, 2012), confirmed her as one of the key contributors of the St Ives School, and as a significant British modernist.

She was made a CBE in 2001, and received four honorary doctorates (St Andrews, 1992; Plymouth, 2000; Exeter 2001; and Heriot Watt Universities, 2003). Her work is found in all major public collections within the UK.

She died in St Andrews on 26 January 2004.

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham has been represented by Art First since January 1994.



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