ABOUT CARMEN HERRERA (1915-2022)

Herrera was born in 1915 in Havana, Cuba. She took private art lessons as a child and studied art, art history, and architecture in Paris, Havana, and New York City. New York City became her permanent home in 1954.

Image: ©Estate of Carmen Herrera, 1977, Photography by Kathleen King

ABOUT LEON POLK SMITH (1906-1996)

Smith was born in 1906 in Chickasha, Indian Territory, which became the state of Oklahoma in 1907. He studied art and educational psychology in New York City. In 1944, he moved to Manhattan and devoted himself to being an artist.

Image: © Leon Polk Smith Foundation, circa 1952, Photography by Gene Pyle

ABOUT THEIR FRIENDSHIP

Smith and Herrera first met in 1964, when Herrera moved a block away from Smith. As neighbors, the two "always had a lot to talk about" given their connections to the NYC art scene, and became friends through shared holidays, studio visits, and a similar artistic vision.

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SELF-GUIDED GALLERY ACTIVITY

# BOTH SIDES OF THE LINE: CARMEN HERRERA & LEON POLK SMITH

AUG 30, 2025
— JAN 4, 2026

MATH

Carmen Herrera used mathematical calculations as well as rulers, graph paper, and triangles to transfer her drawings to canvas.

Try to find the following math ideas around the gallery.

- Scale
- Shapes
- Ratio
- Symmetry
- Angles
- Parallel
- Perpendicular
- Lines
- Curves

Carmen Herrera, *Further*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 42 x 42 inches, Estate of Carmen Herrera. Image courtesy of Lisson Gallery, © Estate of Carmen Herrera.
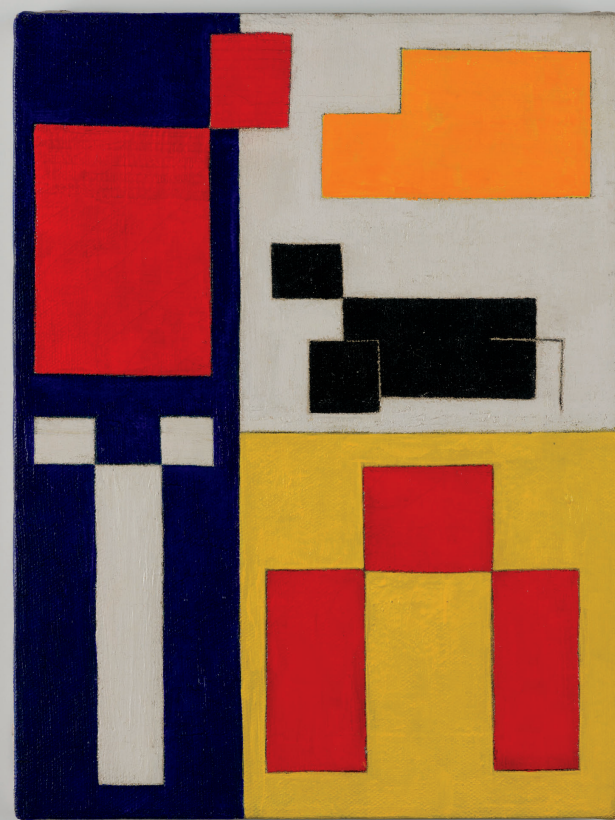
ARCHITECTURE / LANDSCAPE

Leon Polk Smith saw the mountains and canyons of the Southwest in the buildings and geometry of New York City. Carmen Herrera also used landscape and city environments as a starting point.

? How do you see *the city* represented in these artworks?

? How do you see *nature* represented in these artworks?

Leon Polk Smith, *OK Territory*, 1943, oil on canvas, 16 × 12 inches, Brooklyn Museum, Bequest of Leon Polk Smith, 2011.12.1. Image courtesy Brooklyn Museum, © Leon Polk Smith Foundation

COLOR

Hue is the term for the color families commonly referred to by the "color names" - red, orange, yellow, blue, green, violet. **Saturation** describes the intensity of the color. High saturation produces vibrant colors.

Both Herrera and Polk Smith used just a few vibrant colors in their artwork.

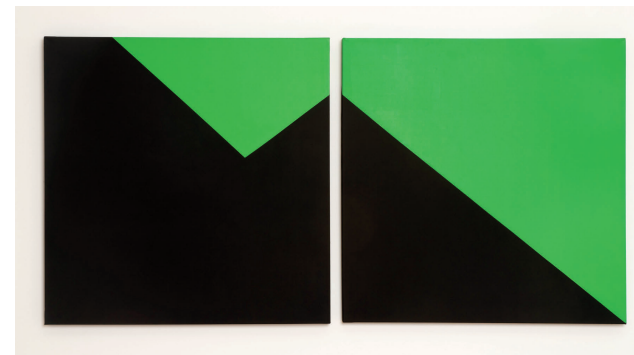**?** What hues do you notice throughout the gallery?

? How are black and white used with the other colors?

Carmen Herrera, *Cadmium #4*, 1965, acrylic on canvas, 48 × 48 inches, Collection of The Newark Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Feiwel, 1970, 70.87. Image courtesy The Newark Museum of Art, © Estate of Carmen Herrera

WHAT IS ABSTRACT ART?

Abstract art starts with a realistic image and simplifies it to its essentials using colors, lines, and shapes. Polk Smith and Herrera are **geometric abstractionists**, which means they boil down ideas and compositions to their most basic shapes.

Abstract art gives viewers the gift of many ways of seeing the same artwork. It requires two things: an open mind and a wandering imagination. Look closely and see where it takes you.

? What do you see when you look at this painting? (*some ideas: a mountain, a graph, a skateboarding ramp)

? What do the colors and shapes make you feel?

Carmen Herrera, *Diptych*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 50 1/4 × 102 1/2 × 2 1/4 inches overall, Collection of El Museo del Barrio, New York, Gift of Tony Bechara, 1996.P96.9.1a–b. Image courtesy El Museo del Barrio, New York, photo: Martin Seck, © Estate of Carmen Herrera