

FS Colour Series: PURPLE HEART Inspired by Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's Ambient Glow

Description



November II, 1991, image courtesy of Tate

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham made her name in the mid-20th century as a leading figure of the radical St Ives School in postwar Cornwall. But her long and varied career extended well beyond this timeframe, lasting up until her passing in 2004. She continued to be an innovator in her later years, delving into new territory that moved beyond her icy, spiritual landscapes into a bold new language of pure abstraction. Intense, dark shades of purple like that of PURPLE HEART Linen often featured in her late drawings, paintings and prints, providing glowing, ambient backdrops where dramatic, energised marks charge through space, or float as if caught mid-air.

Barns-Graham was born in St Andrews, Fife in 1912, and she remained in

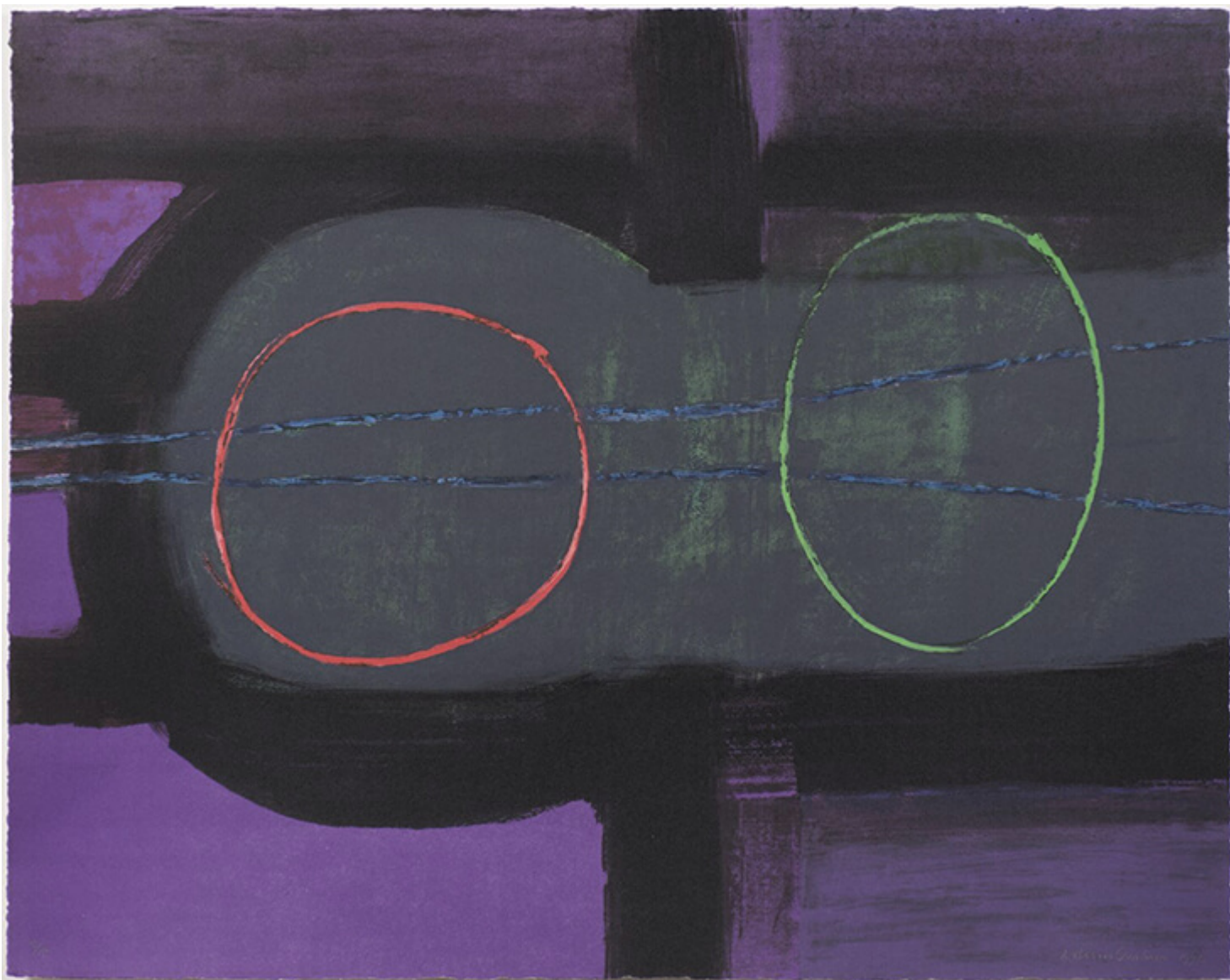
Scotland to train as an artist. It wasn't until she was in her late 20s that she would relocate to St Ives in Cornwall. Moving here was fundamental to the development of her career; being in amongst the breathtaking scenery and lively artistic scene allowed Barns-Graham to find her signature breakthrough style of craggy, calligraphic line, freezing cold colour and lyrical abstraction that seemed to capture the undefinable atmosphere of Cornwall.



FS PURPLE HEART FS Softened Linen

In 1960, Barns-Graham hit a stroke of luck, inheriting a house near St Andrews from her aunt Mary Neish. From this moment on she began dividing her time between St Ives and St Andrews, travelling back and forth across the UK for the rest of her career. Her art inevitably changed course too,

shifting from shivering lines and icy palettes to hard-edge abstraction made from clean, geometric shapes and bold, striking colours. From the 1980s onwards, Barns-Graham made another shift, this time introducing a greater freedom, energy and movement into her work. Her colours became electrifyingly bright, applied with great swipes and strokes that seem suspended mid-action, caught forever in the snapshot moment of their making. Primarily a painter in her early years, Barns-Graham later took up screenprinting from the 1990s onwards, often working with Graal Press just outside Edinburgh, and in her prints we see this same layered approach to abstraction.



Two Circles on Purple, 1992, image courtesy of Tate

In the screenprint *November II*, 1991, iridescent deep purple colours the background with radiant light, suggesting the cool glow of a winter evening. Drama is created on this simple stage set with the boldest of means: a black blot of darkness splattered in the centre, surrounded by a sweeping crimson crescent to the left, and a pillar of beige hiding on the right. In the slightly later screenprint *Two Circles on Purple*, 1992, the same deep shade of dark violet fills the entire background, once again casting its glowing light across the scene. Black, calligraphic lines form a structural framework over its surface like the bare bones of an old, worn-out building, while two slim

circles in red and green are drawn on its surface as if floating in the air of its brooding atmosphere.

In the painting on paper work *Scorpio Series*, 1997, Barns-Graham takes a different approach, this time building up layers of colour over one another in angular, expressive strokes, their gestural, directional lines creating the sensation of constantly moving energy. Purple is one of many colours here, but when seen against eye-catching shades of white, crimson and canary yellow, it becomes shadowy recesses of darkness, weighted pockets of dramatic tension that seeps outwards into the edges of the scene. This work is one of a series named after the star-sign Scorpio, and its connection to the angry winter months which, Barns-Graham once noted, hold a sharp sting in their tail.



Scorpio Series, 1997, image courtesy of the Scottish Gallery

Wind Dance Series III, 2004 was one of the last artworks Barns-Graham would ever make. Ever daring and experimental, the artwork demonstrates her confident and assured ease with creating simple, striking imagery filled with theatrical suspense. The purple we see in so much of the artist's later work is applied here as a thin veil stretched wide over vivid blue, leaving holes peeking through here and there. Its inclusion here is more subdued than in earlier works, adding a soft, misty haze. In the centre of the image, calligraphic scrawls form a kind of rudimentary hand-writing, their upbeat, vibrant energy conveying the artist's brilliant, restless mind.

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CATEGORY

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2. TEXTILES

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