

MARIA HELENA VIEIRA DA SILVA

Le Jeu de cartes. 1937. Oil and pencil on canvas, 72.9 by 92.2 cm
(28¾ by 36¼ in.)

Di Donna Galleries is pleased to announce *Maria Helena Vieira da Silva*, the gallery's inaugural online viewing room, which explores the career of Vieira da Silva, a key member of Paris's post-war art community. *Maria Helena Vieira da Silva* launches on didonna.com on April 2, 2020. While the physical exhibition at Di Donna's New York gallery has been postponed due to the current health crisis, the online viewing room dynamically presents the works intended for the exhibition, including loans from distinguished international collections. The exhibition travels to Di Donna as part of a landmark tour in collaboration with Jeanne Bucher Jaeger, Paris, and Waddington Custot, London, which hosted the exhibition in autumn 2019 and winter 2020.

In a first-of-its-kind collaboration between the three international galleries, the exhibition spans the entire career of Maria Helena Vieira da Silva (b. 1908, Lisbon; d. 1992, Paris), a key member of Paris's post-war art community, known for paintings that reflect her keen sense of rhythm and pattern. Vieira da Silva's works are held in important collections throughout the world, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Tate, London; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

The exhibition brings together key paintings and works on paper from throughout Vieira da Silva's career to explore her unique approach to depicting space through poetic, semi-abstract compositions. The labyrinthine quality of her paintings' structures plays with space and perspective, inviting the viewer to roam within the multidirectional spaces and penetrate a system that reveals a complex and revolutionary type of representation.

As one of many émigré artists living in Paris in the years leading up to and following World War II, Vieira da Silva studied and assimilated the early modern styles of Cubism, Geometric Abstraction, and Futurism, while becoming an integral part of the group of artists in the city at that time. Her iconic *Le Jeu de cartes*, 1937, was painted two years before the artist would return to her native Lisbon after her exile from Paris

at the outbreak of World War II. Vibrantly colored hearts, spades, kings, and queens reach out toward the viewer in a shuffling motion, traversing the canvas and its inherent two-dimensionality. The recurrence of games in Vieira da Silva's work functions as a metaphor for the playful exchange between viewer and canvas, spectator and artist.



Les Joueurs de cartes. 1947-48. Oil on canvas, 81 by 100 cm (31 $\frac{1}{8}$ by 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.)



Figure de ballet. 1948. Oil and pencil on canvas, 26.7 by 46 cm (10 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 18 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.)

Les Joueurs de cartes, 1947-48, continues the artist's investigation of the grid through a systematic structure of small square and rhomboidal shapes. Upon her return to Paris in 1947 after her wartime exile to Rio de Janeiro, Vieira da Silva further explored the theme of card games in her paintings but focused explicitly on the interaction between players. Aligned in a diamond shape and composed of playing cards, the four figures in the center of *Les Joueurs de cartes* become one with the game itself. This work exemplifies Vieira da Silva's commitment to her post-Cubist structures and proves her ability to make the Cubist grid malleable and capable of inspiring movement.

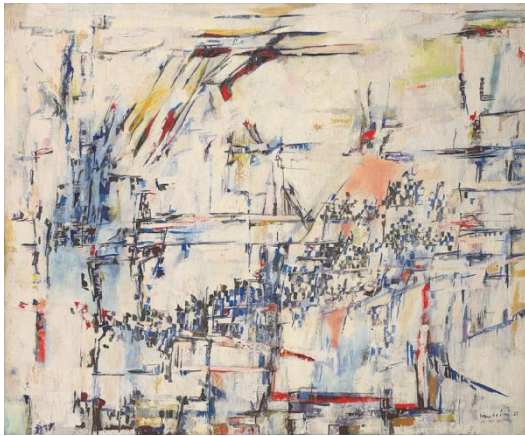
Having traveled extensively with her father as a child, Vieira da Silva became familiar with the avant-garde circles of the theater and dance world, and in particular, the Ballets Russes. Returning to the narrative of audience-artist interaction, Vieira da Silva painted several compositions of ballets in the 1940s. In *Figure de ballet*, 1948, for instance, she abandoned the architectural container of her earlier interiors, melding the performers and performance space into a singular symphony of color and shape.

In the late 1940s, Vieira da Silva further distanced herself from geometric rigidity and integrated a type of shadowing into her shapes. The squares and rectangles in *Composition aux damiers bleus*, produced in 1949, fade into the cream-colored background, negotiating their presence on the pictorial surface with their backwards recession. In this work, Vieira da Silva entirely reformed the cubist grid of her earlier paintings by abandoning empirical reality, describing neither a place nor time in any discernible manner.



Composition aux damiers bleus. 1949. Gouache on paper, 49.6 by 65 cm (19 $\frac{1}{2}$ by 25 $\frac{3}{8}$ in.)

In *Sans Titre*, 1955, Vieira da Silva focused on the gesture of the brushstroke while maintaining her



Sans Titre. 1955. Oil on canvas, 60 by 73 cm (23¾ by 28¾ in.)

intimate or distant. Setting down a loose convergence of lines, without any preconceived subject in mind, Vieira da Silva worked to coax the eye to identify emergent images, based on her memories and an intuitive sense of rhythm and pattern. This fractured representation of reality creates a psychological space that captures how the mind recalls and restructures memory, referring to not only her life in Paris, but to the sensory experiences of her youth in Lisbon, famous for its streets of captivating tiles. In *Le Jardin d'ipoméé*, c. 1974, Vieira da Silva depicted a garden of cobalt morning glories, a flower native to Portugal. Using the texture of the handwoven paper to guide her brushstrokes, Vieira da Silva blended pops of lilac and emerald into the concentration of blue buds.

While there is an underlying structure and order beneath Vieira da Silva's compositions, her oeuvre blurs the lines between representation and abstraction. Spaces reminiscent of familiar rooms or aerial city views never fully describe a single location or view, but a convolution of visited places. Historically, scholarship has emphasized the role of American artists in the development of post-World War II abstraction with the emergence of movements such as Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting. Artists active in Europe following the war, however, played an equally central role in the progression of abstraction, practicing gestural forms of expression across movements including *art informel* and *tachisme*. Working in a pivotal moment within the modernist canon, Vieira da Silva forged a unique path forward for the legacy of abstraction in Europe and globally—one in which abstract forms and structures unite with lived experience in the creation of a new form of subjective vision.



Le Jardin d'ipoméé. C. 1974. Tempera on handmade paper, 30 by 33 cm (11¾ by 13 in.)

signature matrix. The geometry of squares and floating lines is challenged by the freedom and abstraction of her peach, maroon, and navy brushstrokes. The floating lines in *Sans Titre* resemble a network of paths—a recurring motif in the artist's oeuvre. In this instance, the paths in *Sans Titre* disorient and prohibit the viewer from fixating on any individual point in her labyrinth. *Sans Titre* is among several compositions Vieira da Silva painted during the 1950s that recall urban landscapes and the harrowing reality of post-war Europe.

The infinite perspective of her compositions could be understood as revealing Vieira da Silva's fundamental exploration of space's recesses and connections, be they

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

Maria Helena Vieira da Silva (b. 1908, Lisbon, Portugal; d. 1992, Paris, France) enrolled at the Academia Nacional de Belas Artes, Lisbon, in 1919 to study drawing with Emilia Santos Braga. She moved to Paris from Lisbon in 1928 to study sculpture under Antoine Bourdelle and Charles Despiau at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. There she met her future husband, Hungarian painter Árpád Szenes, and in 1929 gave up sculpture for painting. Living in Paris, she absorbed a variety of influences, from the geometric abstraction of the group Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square, 1929–33) and Joaquín Torres-García, to avant-garde Cubism. Vieira da Silva began to paint rectangular patches of color to recall the Hispano-Arabic Azulejo tiles, undulating cobbled pavements and tiered architecture of Lisbon. In 1933, Vieira da Silva had her first solo exhibition at Galerie Jeanne Bucher, Paris; the gallery remained her main dealer throughout her career.



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva in her studio at rue de l'Abbé-Carton in Paris

After the war, Vieira da Silva's paintings echoed the realities of post-war Europe. Works from this period reflect the flooded and razed cities, claustrophobic corridors and altered landscapes after the unprecedented violence. Vieira da Silva became a French citizen in 1956 and was awarded the Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 1962. In 1966, she was the first woman to receive the French Grand Prix Nationale des Arts.

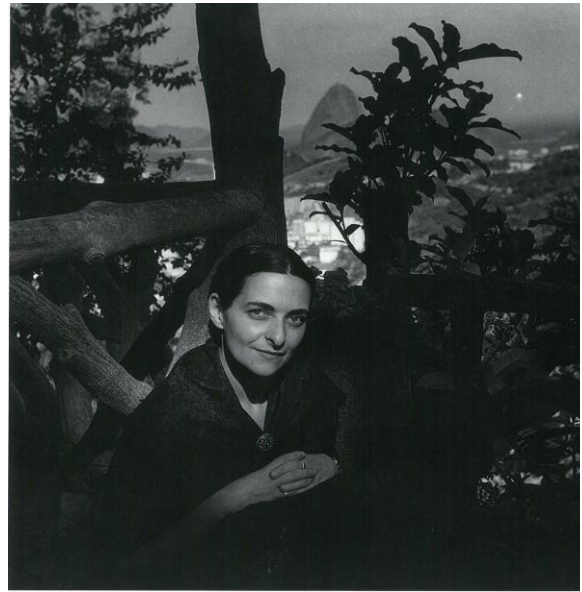
Throughout Vieira da Silva's career, major institutions have recognized her as an important figure within the modernist canon. In 1937, Hilla Rebay acquired *Composition* (1936) for the collection of the future Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. In 1954, *Dance* (1938) entered the collection of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, following its inclusion in the museum's group show *XXVth Anniversary*. The French State acquired several of her paintings during the course of her career, three of which hang in the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. Vieira da Silva's work is held in other distinguished collections throughout the world, including San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Art Institute of Chicago, Tate, London; Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Retrospectives of Vieira da Silva's work have been mounted at Kestner Gesellschaft, Hannover, in 1958, traveling to Kunsthalle Bremen, and the Kunst- und Museumsverein Wuppertal; Musée de Grenoble, France, in 1964; Museo Civico, Turin, in 1964; Musée national d'art moderne, Paris, in 1969–70; Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France, in 1971; Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, in 1977; Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon, in 1988, traveling to Grand Palais, Paris; and Fundación Juan March, Madrid, in 1991. Important exhibitions were presented at Fundação Árpád Szenes – Vieira da Silva, Lisbon in 2015, and at Musée d'Art moderne de Céret, in 2016. In 1994, Guy Weelen and Jean-François Jaeger's two volume catalogue raisonné and monograph of Vieira da Silva's work was published by Skira.

Exhibition Information:

A *Vieira da Silva* online viewing room will be made available on didonna.com Thursday, April 2, 2020.

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Maria Helena Vieira da Silva in Rio de Janeiro

Image Caption and Credit Information:

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