

ROWNTREE CLARK



Gillian AYRES
1930 -2018

Abstract 1956

mixed media on board
70 by 65.5cm
framed: 95 x 90 cm

signed and dated 56 lower left; further signed on the reverse

PROVENANCE

The New Art Centre, London, 1976;
Belgrave Gallery, London;
Messum's, London, where acquired 27th February 2001;
Tim Ellis, until 2014;
Private Collection, London until 2021

EXHIBITED

London, Artists' International Association (details untraced).

ROWNTREE CLARK

Gillian Ayres was one of a few trailblazing female artists working in London in the 1950s and is now widely acknowledged as one of Britain's foremost abstract painters.

Painted in 1956, this is one of a small group of rare early works that first brought Ayres to the public attention and established her as one of the most dynamic artists of her generation. Painted a year before she went on to exhibit in the seminal "Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract" exhibition held at the Redfern Gallery in 1957 and before, later that year, gained her first major public commission at South Hampstead School for Girls in London.

Painted in oil, ripolin and plaster the construction of the work echoes the refined abstracts of Ben Nicholson at the time, yet counters this with the influence of the 'art brutal' through her use of plaster and the technique of scrapping back the layers of paint. Like Sandra Blow - another truly innovative female artist working in London at this time - in her early work, Ayres shows the influence of Alberto Burri where she began to explore the reality of abstract art through the formal and physical properties of her materials, and nothing more.

A major retrospective of her early work was held at the Jerwood Gallery in Hastings in 2012 and was a revelation. Her estate is now represented by Marlborough, who currently have an exhibition of her later work.

Whilst attending St Paul's Girls' School, London, Ayres taught art at weekends to the children of blitzed Stepney. In 1946, at the age of sixteen, she enrolled at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts. Ayres exhibited with Young Contemporaries in 1949 and with the London Group in 1951. Her first solo show was at Gallery One, London, in 1956. The following year she was commissioned to create a large-scale mural for South Hampstead High School for Girls. In 1963 her paintings were included in the Whitechapel Art Gallery's ground-breaking exhibition British Painting in the 60s.

Ayres held a number of teaching posts in various art schools, including Bath Academy of Art, Corsham; St Martin's School of Art, London, and Winchester School of Art. She left teaching in 1981, and moved to an old rectory in North Wales to become a full-time painter. In 1987 she relocated to the North Devon-Cornwall border where she remained for the rest of her life. In 1989 she was shortlisted for the Turner Prize, and in 1991 was elected Royal Academician. Ayres was appointed a CBE in 2011.