

MARK BORGHI

NEW YORK | BRIDGEHAMPTON

Mercedes Matter (1913-2001)

Tabletop Still Life (version 1), ca. 1941-1943

Oil on canvas board

19 ¾ x 24 inches (50.2 x 70 cm)

Ex-collection

The Estate of the Artist

Private collection

Exhibitions

"Mercedes Matter: A Retrospective Exhibition"

Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, New York, Oct. 29-Dec. 14, 2009; Weisman Gallery, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA, Jan. 23-Apr. 4, 2010; the Guild Hall, East Hampton, N.Y., June 18-Aug. 1, 2010; the Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa, Sept. 4, 2010- Jan. 4, 2011.

Includes essays by Ellen G. Landau, Sandra Kraskin, Phyllis Braff, and Michael Zakian.



Most known for her leadership as the founder of the New York Studio School in 1964, Mercedes Matter's firm belief in observation as means to finding form through drawing and painting is evidenced in her work and her methodology of teaching. Her educational background, family life and exposure to and relationships with a rich assortment of modernists and Abstract Expressionists, varied circle of colleagues, friends and mentors, together culminated in her distinctive identity as an artist and mentor.

Born in New York in 1913, Matter grew up in Philadelphia, New York and Europe. Her father, the American modernist Arthur B. Carles, had studied with Matisse and her mother, Mercedes de Cordoba, was a model for Edward Steichen. She began painting under her father's supervision at age 6, and studied art at Bennett College in Millbrook, N.Y., and then in New York City with Maurice Sterne, Alexander Archipenko and Hans Hofmann. She was the first of few women accepted into the Artists' Club and participated as an artist in the Works Progress Administration during the depression. It was during the WPA that she assisted Fernand Léger on his mural for the French Line passenger ship company. Léger introduced her to Herbert Matter, the Swiss graphic designer and photographer, whom she married in 1939. The Matters were active in the emerging New York art scene and traveled frequently to Europe. Their closest friends included Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Alexander Calder and Willem de Kooning.

Based on her teaching experiences she wrote an article for Art News in 1963 titled "What's Wrong with U.S. Art Schools?" In it, she lamented the phasing out of the extended studio classes required to initiate "that painfully slow education of the senses," which she considered an artist's life work. The article prompted a group of Pratt students to ask her to form a school based on her ideas, which led, in 1964, to the founding of the New York Studio School. The school gained almost immediate support from the Kaplan Fund, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Ford Foundation. It granted no degrees, had only studio classes and emphasized drawing from life. Its teachers, chosen by the students, included the artists Phillip Guston, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Charles Cajori, Louis Finkelstein and Sidney Geist; the art historian Meyer Schapiro; and the composer Morton Feldman.

Matter's observational based abstraction and evolution of her still life genre is noticeable in her fondness of drawing. She would spend months and sometimes years on drawings that usually began as still lives that gradually evolved into near-abstraction. Her works often displays an exquisite balance between abstraction and representation, animated by her signature thatched lines that attested to her high regards of works by Giacometti and Cezanne.

In this eloquent early career still life painting, Matter explores and what will become something she returns to again and again, a table top still life. Often using green, red and violet pigments Matter's still lives come to life and unravel into abstraction while rooted in observation. Matter's persistence and precision of mark making bound to a color palette not divorced from its fauvist lineage. Color takes control as an arrangement of fruit and table cloth folds dissolve into a harmonious and vibrant abstract composition.