

MARK BORGHI

NEW YORK | BRIDGEHAMPTON | SAG HARBOR

Michael Corinne West (1908-1991)

Untitled, 1971

Oil on canvas

50 x 32 inches (127 x 81.28 cm)

Signed lower left

Ex-collection:

The Artist and her estate

Private collection until 2017



Born in 1908 as Corrine West, she spent most of her formative years in Ohio, first in Columbus and later in Cincinnati. There she attended the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music before enrolling the Cincinnati Art Academy in 1925, after opting for a career in the fine arts. Allured by the promise of the big city, West relocated to New York in 1932, continuing her art education the following year at the Art Students League. A member of Hans Hofmann's first class at the League, West credits her instructor as a lasting influence on her art. Hofmann's emphasis on the "inner eye," the ability to apprehend the essence of things, guided the artist in her spiritual approach to abstraction, long after she had sought out other teachers and mentors.

Another prominent figure in her life, and one with whom she would develop an intimate, romantic relationship, was the artist Arshile Gorky, whom she met through a class monitor at the League, Lorenzo Santillo. West and Gorky spent countless hours visiting local museums, in particular the Metropolitan, and discussing art. Gorky introduced the younger artist to important sources for West's work, such as European Surrealism. West avidly read the work of Surrealist writers such as André Breton and Isidore Ducasse, and drew on their celebration of the operations of the unconscious mind in her art. In the mid-1930s, West, like her contemporaries Lee Krasner and George (Grace) Hartigan, adopted a masculine *nom de brosse*. Perhaps encouraged by Arshile Gorky's name change, she initially chose the Russian-sounding, Mikael, but later anglicized the spelling. Fiercely independent and driven, West sought respect based on the merit of her work, free from the bias of gender. Gorky's emphasis on drawing remained an important model for West's work.

As frequent host to a number of Surrealist exiles in New York, Lee forged connections to artists such as Joan Miró and Robert Motherwell, as well as to influential critics like Harold Rosenberg. Possibility as a result of such soirees, West made the acquaintance of fellow artists Jackson Pollock and Richard Pousette-Dart, with whom she shared an emphasis on the painterly process as well as the affirmation of a spiritual essence within the universal language of abstraction. Like Pousette-Dart, eight years her junior, West sought to convey "'the Door to a Spiritual World' through the 'Creative fire' of art." [1] Inspired by the philosopher Henri Bergson's belief in the interconnected nature of all living things, West developed an aesthetic philosophy she termed "new mysticism in painting." In a 1946 essay, she described her negotiation of the surface world of appearances and the immutable core essences of being: "The outer world changes as our thoughts change although our thought is usually ahead or in advance of the world viewed materially. To disintegrate visual unity...to break up and change outer appearance is necessary if the individual can penetrate the nature of our mystic universe." [2]

West's understanding of compositional space flourishes in this grand 50 by 32 inch painting, *Untitled* from 1971. Dominating black brush strokes notate dimensionality and poetic landscape. This strength of expression gains reference through horses in the photographs collaged into the work. With a sophisticated eye, West eloquently composes a bold and curious painting.

Endnote

[1] Quoted in *Michael West: Painter-Poet* (East Hampton, N.Y.: Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, 1996), p. 9.

[2] Michael West, "Notes on Art—The New Mysticism in Painting," *Michael West: Painter-Poet* (c. 1946), p. 4.