

MARK BORGHI

NEW YORK | BRIDGEHAMPTON | SAG HARBOR

Mercedes Matter (1913 - 2001)

Untitled (number 11), 1933

Oil on paper laid down on canvas

20 x 17 inches (50.8 x 43.18 cm)

Ex-collection

Private collection



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. 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.

In the late 1930's, she was an original member of the American Abstract Artists organization and worked for the federal Works Progress Administration, assisting 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 also traveled frequently to Europe. Their closest friends included Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Alexander Calder and Willem de Kooning. They were also close to Alberto Giacometti, who was an important artistic role model for Mercedes and a frequent photographic subject for her husband. 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.

"Untitled (number 11)" reveals Hans Hofmann's influence on Matter's early work. Painted in 1933, the first year that Matter began taking Hofmann's evening painting course at the Art Students League, this work exhibits the principles of Hofmann's "push/pull" theory, a method of combining opposing forces in color and shape in order to create the illusion of space, depth and movement on a two-dimensional plane. Matter uses earthy tones of red, green, yellow, purple and white, some more vivid or more muted than others, in the rectangle and square shapes that fill this paper that has been laid down on canvas. While these shapes exhibit a quadrilateral form, a closer look can tell that some are rigid and geometric, while others are more biomorphic in form. Playing with complimentary colors with a range of values, Matter layers one shape on top of another to make some appear closer, and others farther away, some even extending off the canvas. She continues to enhance this effect through shading, as well as a calculated, though seemingly ununiformed, spacing between the shapes. Each mark is deliberate so as to not break the illusion of three-dimensionality.