Fine Paintings (316)
2nd June 2011, Edinburgh

Lot 219

Estimate: £10000 - £15000 +Fees


Signed, inscribed and dated 1954 verso, oil on canvas
55.5cm x 40cm (21.75in x 15.75in)

Provenance: The Barnes-Graham Trust

Born in St Andrews in 1912, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's artistic career would span over seven decades, constantly driven by fresh inspiration and an overwhelming creative impulse. During her lifetime she would struggle with the critical eclipse of her work in favour of fellow members of the St Ives School with which her name has become inextricably linked. Undaunted, however, she would continue to produce work of astounding beauty until the last months of her long and full life, and is now recognised as one of the greatest British artists of the 21st century.

Barns-Graham divided her time between Cornwall and Fife, and so too her artistic influences and training were fed both by her training at Edinburgh School of Art, and by the fertile creative atmosphere of St Ives. Here from 1940 she would meet and befriend the leaders of the new School; Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Naum Gabo. Artistic osmosis was inevitable in this small Cornish town which would become renowned internationally as the seat of Modernism in Britain, yet Barns-Graham would soon develop her own clear pictorial vocabulary in such works as Pink. Part of her 1954 'Geoff and Scruffy' series, this strongly structural work (in which the artist combines rich colour with firmly-modelled geometric shapes) demonstrates the bold steps into abstraction which would lead critics to label the artist in this decade as Britain's foremost female abstract painter. A trip to the Balearic Islands, combined with her first encounter with American Abstract Expressionism, however, ensured that 1958 would mark a turning point in Barns-Graham's pictorial approach. At this time her work became freer, and more painterly; hard geometric edges softening as brushwork itself came to play a role as important as colour and line in her canvases, as in the rich green-hued Untitled.

Alongside her more abstract work, Wilhelmina found constant inspiration in landscape, such as the golden patchwork tints of rolling Scottish hills in her work of 1987, September in Orkney. Barns-Graham visited Orkney several times throughout the 1980's, and indeed on an earlier trip she had delighted in the natural geological slab patterns of Warbeth's beach, recreating them in the fine acrylic Warbeth No. 4, (1985), in which they attain the clarity and deep tone of stained glass. Quite different in atmosphere is the bright gouache of 1986, Summer Painting Series (No. 4). While illustrating the artist's continuing attraction to strong geometric forms, in this vibrant and playful depiction of a sun-drenched afternoon on St Ives' Porthmeor Beach we see Barns-Graham returning to the figurative style of her early work.
Art historians have seen 1988 as the beginning of a final phase in Barns-Graham's development, a late burst of creativity that would last until the end of her life. Having been reminded of her own mortality by a period of severe illness, her work would attain a higher pitch of urgency and freedom of expression. In Eight Lines- Wave Rhythms, we see the masterly draughtsmanship and skilful manipulation of line for which Barns-Graham had first garnered critical praise in her 1950 chef-d'oeuvre, Glacier Crystal, Grindenwald. In this later work, the fluid lines of waves hum with all the latent energy of the ocean, flooded, in their ogilvie forms, with a synaesthetic evocation of music.

Proceeds from the sale of these works will help fund the Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's vital work from their headquarters, the artist's Scottish studio, Balmungo, which will be reopening in June following extensive refurbishment. It will serve as a centre of research for the artist's life and work, housing her art collection and archive, and will host residencies of both artists and writers. In addition, the Trust will continue to offer scholarships to art students from around the UK, equally crucial to their development as the travelling scholarship which allowed the young Willie to first settle in St Ives.