
Alan Cristea Gallery

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Gillian Ayres

Song Beneath the Stars

4 April - 11 May 2019

Gillian Ayres: Song Beneath the Stars will celebrate the extraordinary career of the late Gillian Ayres (1930 - 2018), one of Britain's best-loved artists. The exhibition, which runs from 4 April to 11 May 2019, coincides with the first anniversary of Ayres's death (11 April 2018). Spanning fifty years, and charting her passion for printmaking, *Song Beneath the Stars* includes early prints dating from the 1960s to the last works Ayres ever made in 2017.

"It was always Gillian Ayres's ambition to be a printmaker, and she consistently made prints in numerous techniques over the years," says David Cleaton-Roberts, co-director of the gallery. *"By her own admission, in the summer she preferred the warmth and light of the painting studio, but in the winter, she relished the intensity and vigour of the print workshop. Ayres's last prints, completed a year before her death, are exuberant, vigorous and full of colour and energy. These works, including Dendera and Thuban, 2017, were produced by an artist at the height of her powers."*

The exhibition is named after *Song Beneath the Stars*, a hand-painted carborundum print made in 2009-10 (pictured). Ayres's paintings and prints were often titled evocatively, inviting poetic and sometimes musical interpretation, but the public's interpretation of titles was never important to Ayres, who once stated; *"I don't always name them myself, but the titles are usually paying homage. Often they are very romantic. They've got nothing to do with the works; they are like christenings."*

In 1951, Ayres began working at AIA Gallery, and used her salary to enrol in a printmaking course at Hammersmith School of Art. Here, for the cost of £3 per term, she experimented with printmaking with the then tutor, Alistair Grant, who also taught Howard Hodgkin. She went on to make several prints in the 1960s; one for the ICA Screenprint Project, at the request of Richard Hamilton in 1964, and a print commissioned by Editions Alecto, entitled *Crivelli's Room*, in 1967 which will be displayed in the exhibition. Over the next few decades Ayres continued to experiment with printmaking but lacked an outlet to distribute her prints, meaning she was unable to fund future projects.

In 1997 on a trip back from her fellowship at the British School at Rome, her gallery said that a London print publisher had requested a meeting. *"When I came back they told me that Alan Cristea would like to see me. I didn't go for six months because I was terrified of him. Now I am not in the least bit scared to him,"* she said of this first meeting. The first prints by Ayres published by Alan Cristea were a group of three etchings, *Limelight*, *Sound of Silence* and *Myrrh of Marib*, 1998, all of which will be included in the exhibition.

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Gillian Ayres; *Song Beneath the Stars*, 2009 -10.

This new partnership meant Ayres was now afforded complete freedom to experiment in the studio. As a result, she went on to create ever increasingly ambitious prints in a variety of techniques including etching, woodcut and monoprint. She also developed new methods and began to hand-paint at either end of the printing process. The boundaries of print and painting were blurred as never before, producing works that were so far from being prints that it would have been impossible to edition them. These unique mixed media works on paper, such as *Lacoste No 2*, 2000, *Blueberry Hill No 1*, 2001, will be included in the exhibition.

In this same period, Ayres worked with a master printmaker, Jack Shirreff, to make prints using carborundum. This was an innovative method which allowed the artist to apply colour directly to the plate with a brush. Carborundum allowed Ayres, along with other artists who pioneered this medium such as Joe Tilson and Howard Hodgkin, to make spectacular, physical and tactile prints. In the late 2000's Ayres began to work with woodblock to reflect the sparser application of colour in her painting. Working with printmaker, Pete Kosowicz at Thumbprint Editions in London, she delicately layered inked woodblocks onto textured Japanese paper. These new prints, very different from earlier reliefs, were defined by overlapping shapes and areas of exposed, un-inked paper. Examples include *Fiesole*, 2013 and *Karkalla*, 2014.

Ayres's devotion to making original prints was unremitting, and increased with every year that passed, culminating in a large body of graphic work in her final years which rivalled the magnitude and vividness of her abstract paintings, for which she was so celebrated.

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About the artist

Gillian Ayres was one of the leading abstract painters of her generation, and a central figure in British art for over sixty years. She was born in London on 3 February 1930. Whilst attending St Paul's Girls' School 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*.

Major solo exhibitions of Ayres' work have taken place at Arnolfini, Bristol (1964); Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (1978); Museum of Modern Art Oxford, Oxford (1981); Serpentine Gallery, London (1983); Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester (1993); Royal Academy of Arts, London (1997); Southampton City Art Gallery (2005); Jerwood Gallery (2010); National Museum Wales, Cardiff (2017) and CAFA Art Museum, Beijing (2017). She held a number teaching posts including at the Bath Academy of Art, Corsham; St Martin's School of Art, London, and at Winchester School of Art. Ayres 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 until her death.

Her paintings and prints are held by major museums and galleries around the world including Tate, London; British Museum, London; British Council, London; Arts Council, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; Ulster Museum, Belfast; National Museum of Wales, Cardiff; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Fine Art, Boston; Yale Center for British Art, New Haven; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Museum of Modern Art, Brasilia. In 1987 she was elected Royal Academician and in 1989 was shortlisted for the Turner Prize. Ayres was appointed a CBE in 2011.

Gillian Ayres died aged 88 on 11 April, 2018 in North Devon, England.

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About Alan Cristea Gallery

The Alan Cristea Gallery, established in 1995, is one of the world's largest publishers of original contemporary prints and editions, and the primary representative for a number of renowned contemporary artists, artists' estates and emerging artists.

The gallery's ethos is artist-led and its principle objective is to assist artists in bringing new bodies of work to fruition, including editions, works on paper, paintings, sculpture and installations, which are presented in a continuous programme of public exhibitions, events and art fairs.

Visitor information:

Mon - Fri 10am - 5.30pm

Sat 11am - 2pm

Closed on Sundays and public holidays

Closed Friday 19 - Monday 22 April 2019

Travel: Piccadilly or Green Park underground station

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#GillianAyres