



Betty Blayton

In Search of Grace

CURATED BY SUKANYA RAJARATNAM

SEPTEMBER 8–OCTOBER 16, 2021

Mnuchin Gallery is proud to announce *In Search of Grace*, a solo exhibition of the work of Betty Blayton (1937–2016). The exhibition will feature paintings and works on paper from five decades of the artist's career, spanning from the late 1960s until just before her passing in 2016. On view from September 8 until October 16, 2021, this presentation will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue authored by her close friend and art historian, Lowery Stokes Sims.

Betty Blayton was a native of Williamsburg, Virginia born in 1937. She expressed her desire to be an artist from the age of four, and with her father's encouragement, went on to earn a degree in Painting and Illustration from Syracuse University, New York in 1959. As a Black woman, Blayton was unable to pursue an artistic education in Virginia, as the state's higher institutions remained segregated following the historic Brown vs. Board of Education ruling. Instead, Virginia opted to pay for Black students to attend schools in other states that offered their chosen majors. Following her graduation, Blayton spent time in Washington DC and St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, before moving to New York City in 1960. At the time, a fervent debate was already underway regarding how to best depict the Black experience in art. Some believed this could only truly be achieved through figuration. Blayton, along with numerous other now-revered artists, upheld that abstraction could be used as a vehicle not only to discuss those experiences, but to transcend them and speak about both the personal and the universal.

A pioneering figure of abstraction, Blayton's phantasmal, ethereal canvases defy easy categorization. In the late 1960s, she experimented with her style and technique by flirting with pure abstraction while remaining loosely tethered to figuration. Works such as *Roots* (1969) illustrate this balance between elongated, sensual forms that are faintly recognizable as figures yet entirely otherworldly. She likewise experimented with the hard-edge abstraction pioneered by artists such as Sam Gilliam and Al Loving, using bright, bold colors and crisp lines to create paintings such as *Hard Edge #3 – Intermezzo* (1969). The color and composition of works from this period nod to the influences of Impressionists like van Gogh and spiritualists such as Paul Klee.

By the 1970s, Blayton had found her unique vocabulary and method. Her aesthetic intentions became two-fold: first, through self-reflection, the artist hoped to reach a transcendental state where her moods and mindset were laid bare on the canvas; second, she intended this act of internal meditation to produce a similar experience of spiritual self-reflection in the viewer. This shift in conceptual focus led to what would be her mature style — a kaleidoscopic merging of bright colors and organic forms. In works like *Tarot* (1970), Blayton utilized warm hues of yellows, oranges, and reds to capture the depth and fluidity of a spiritual awakening. Her use of the circular canvas, or tondo format, was similarly used as a symbol of the cyclical nature of life's many stages and the continuity between man and nature. The metaphysical, mythological, and mystical themes that have come to define Blayton's art stemmed from conversations she had begun with her father as early as age ten. Her discovery of the 17th century spiritual movement, Rosicrucianism, gave way to wider interests in Eastern religions and the Bhagavad Gita. She also drew inspiration from New Age practices popularized by figures such as Edgar Cayce, Shakti Gawain, Wayne Dyer, and Michael Newton.

In the service of this practice, Blayton developed a highly stylized and specific technique. She began each painting with a sketch, and working from this outline, she began blocking out the primary forms with chalk. This was followed by thin washes of color that ground the composition, on top of which she placed thin layers of rice paper. Going

over these with further layers of wash, she completed each painting by adding the heavier accents of color that lend a vibrancy to the finished painting. She was thus able to create veil-like compositions of indeterminate depth that yield to an almost trance-like experience in the viewer.

While maintaining an avid painting practice and showing regularly in New York City and elsewhere throughout the United States, Blayton was also a pioneer in the Harlem art scene and in the realm of arts education. Today, she is best known as a co-founder of The Studio Museum in Harlem where she served as Board Secretary from 1965–1977. She also served as co-founder and Executive Director of the Children’s Art Carnival in Harlem from 1968–1998, an outgrowth of the initiative begun by the Museum of Modern Art’s Education Department that aimed to foster creative thinking through visual arts and instill a love of learning in the children of Harlem — even teaching a young Jean-Michel Basquiat. In addition to these major achievements, Blayton acted as a consultant for the Board of Education of the City of New York (1968–1994), served on the board of The Arts & Business Council of New York City (1975–1996), and was a member of the New York City Commission for Cultural Affairs (1979–1988).

Blayton has been the subject of solo exhibitions at Elizabeth Dee Gallery, New York (2017); and William Burgess Fine Arts, New York (2010); as well as important group exhibitions such as *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today* at the Kemper Museum of Art, Kansas City (2017); *Surface Work* at Victoria Miro Gallery, London (2018); and *She Persists: A Century of Women Artists in New York* at Gracie Mansion, New York (2019). Her work can be found in the permanent collections of The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Spelman College, Atlanta, among other institutions. She was the recipient of such awards as the Eugene Grigsby Award for Excellent Contributions in Art Education from the National Arts Education Association (1990), the CBS Martin Luther King Jr., Fulfilling the Dream Award (1995), and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Women’s Caucus for the Arts (2005).

Image: Betty Blayton, *In Search of Grace*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 30 × 30 inches (76.2 × 76.2 cm) © The Estate of Betty Blayton.
Photography: Timothy Doyon