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LONG NIGHT'S JOURNEY INTO DAY  
By Julia Morton

Painter Carmen Herrera remembers when nobody knew her name. Last year, the Museum of Modern Art and London's Tate Museum both acquired Cuban-born painter Carmen Herrera's work. Since then, collectors have been swarming all over her geometric abstractions, although the 93-year-old painter has toiled for decades in near obscurity. Currently the Latin Collector Gallery is presenting *Estructuras*, a survey of her work from the 1970s to the present, which is an incredible opportunity to view the artist's distinct visual vocabulary.

Flatly painted in vivid two-color combinations, Herrera uses graphic tension to harness the power of color and geometry in her spare, elegant compositions and wooden sculptures, or "structures" as she calls them.

Many artists would be jealous of her apparent overnight success, except for the fact that it took close to six decades her efforts to be prized by the art market. For her latest solo she's created three new structures, which are featured alongside two others done in the '70s. Still enjoying fine whiskey, she bakes a mean strawberry shortcake and is happy to recount the difficult, dark road to art stardom.

Born in Havana in 1915, Herrera's liberally minded mother sent her to study art in Paris. She was too young to associate with Picasso and his band of Bohemians, but she did absorb the classics and Modernist currents. In 1939, as WWII began, she married Jesse Lowenthal and came to live in New York where she befriended other avant-garde artists, including Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko. Herrera remembers countless evenings spent debating art. "Barney felt strongly that abstraction needed a mythological, a religious basis," says Herrera. "I, on the other hand, wanted something clearer, less romantic and dark."

In 1948, Herrera returned to Paris and began showing in the *Salon des Réalités Nouvelles* exhibitions. The event promoted geometric and pre-minimal abstraction, art forms the Nazis had outlawed. As supplies were hard to find in post-war France, Herrera worked on horse blankets. She began to question every aspect of painting, slowly stripping away distractions in order to explore the essence of color and line. American Ellsworth Kelly was also in Paris at this time experimenting with his first hard-edged paintings.

In the late '50s she returned to New York. Despite her Parisian success and her bold ideas, Herrera was told that because she was a woman and didn't "paint like a Latin," even female dealers would not exhibit her. Her male friends also refused to help and some even ended their friendship with her as they became famous. She was left to work in obscurity. "Letting go," Herrera sighs, "of the old

realities, the old baggage, is very difficult.”

Feminists rediscovered Herrera along with artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Frida Kahlo in the 1970s, but Herrera took the renewed attention in stride; her art, after all, was never dependent on fame or money. For contemporary artists who live impatiently, Herrera offers useful advice: “I feel art is a calling. To be an artist, you have to be strong.”

Through Jan. 19, 2008 at Latin Collector, 37 W. 57th St., 4th fl.