

eric firestone gallery

For Immediate Release:

ADAA **THE ART SHOW**

Eric Firestone Gallery — Booth D8

Park Avenue Armory | New York, NY

Benefit Preview: October 29, 2024

Public Days: October 30 – November 2, 2024

Jeanne Reynal and Thomas Sills

Eric Firestone Gallery is pleased to announce its participation in the 2024 edition of The Art Show at the Park Avenue Armory, organized by the Art Dealers Association of America. The presentation explores the work and relationship of an artist-couple: Jeanne Reynal (1903–1983) and Thomas Sills (1914–2000). Both artists were central figures in the post-war New York art world. The presentation will foreground dialogues about light, color, and abstraction across the two artists' oeuvres in their chosen mediums. Alongside other recent interventions to dominant narratives of the New York School, this presentation highlights the contributions of an interracial couple, both with minoritized identities (a Black man and a white woman), to the American avant-garde.



Reynal and Sills in their apartment, West 11th Street, New York City, 1958.

Photo by Juster-Cook.

Reynal was a mosaicist who worked at the intersection of Surrealism and Abstract

Expressionism. Her work radically applied their philosophies to an ancient medium through an intuitive, process-based approach. Sills, who was Black and Southern, began painting in his 30s, inspired by his wife's work and encouraged by Willem de Kooning to continue without formal study. He was a colorist who applied paint with cloths and rags, giving his work a unique softness and inner light. He went on to have four well-received solo exhibitions with Betty Parsons. Reynal was the subject of early exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Art, and went on to exhibit in New York at Iolas Gallery and Betty Parsons. Major examples by both artists can be found in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of

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Jeanne Reynal | *Mother and Children Between Sun and Moon* | 1966
smalti and Japanese shell on pigmented cement
48.0h x 61.0w x 2.0d in

Modern Art, NY, among many other institutions.

Eric Firestone Gallery has represented the respective estates of Reynal and Sills since 2020; this presentation will be the gallery's first dedicated two-person exhibition of the artist-couple, following years of scholarly stewardship of these important artists' legacies. The gallery hosted the first major retrospective of Reynal's work, which included significant museum loans to the gallery, in New York in 2021. In 2022, the gallery presented a survey of Thomas Sills's work from the 1950s–70s.

Born in White Plains, NY, Reynal apprenticed from 1930–38 with Boris Anrep, a Russian mosaicist working in Paris. In Paris, Reynal

met and began to develop important friendships with Marcel Duchamp and André Breton, among other Surrealist poets and painters. This milieu formed the basis of how Reynal would conceptualize her work. Breton advocated using free association and automatism to draw upon dreams and the private world of the mind. The resulting unexpected imagery served as a rejection of tradition and a shedding of societal constructs. The tenets of Surrealism must have resonated with Reynal, whose personal life was informed by her bold rebellion from these very societal expectations.

In 1938, Reynal returned to the United States, making a home for herself in San Francisco where she began to develop her early work. She was resolved to create “a new art of mosaic, a contemporary and fresh look for this ancient medium.” She let go of the traditional “reverse method” of creating mosaics in which stones were first glued to paper in a specific formation before being transferred. Reynal would work directly, by adding stones into the wet cement she mixed with powdered pigment. Extemporaneity, freedom, and intuition were hallmarks of Reynal's process.

Reynal's father died in 1939, allowing her resources with which to build an art collection. She acquired a 1941 Jackson Pollock painting from Peggy Guggenheim's gallery—one of the first ever sales of a Pollock. At this time, Reynal developed a friendship with the first director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: Grace McCann Morley. Reynal introduced Morley to the work of Pollock and other first-generation New York School artists and helped to set the course of acquisitions and exhibitions at the museum. Reynal's closest artist friend was Arshile Gorky, and she also became close with his wife Agnes (known as Mougouch). Reynal met and collaborated with Isamu Noguchi, a Japanese-American artist who would become one of the most influential artist-designers of American modernism. Noguchi stayed in Reynal's San Francisco home during a period when Noguchi was involved in efforts to quell racism towards Americans of Japanese descent.

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In 1946, Reynal returned to New York, where she would live and work in a brownstone on West 11th Street for the rest of her life. Reynal hand-cut all of her tesserae, or mosaic tiles, which were a mix of traditional Venetian glass, semi-precious stones, and pieces of shell. Next, she prepared a surface of pigmented cement and then scattered or “seeded” the tiles loosely, before using a leather hammer to embed them. Hand-cutting the tesserae would result in leftover dust from the cutting of the glass. She incorporated this dust by spreading it over the work, capturing form as glittering lights and shadows. The shapes are associative but open-ended, evoking figures, flora, animals, or motion. The surfaces themselves, often with open areas of pigmented cement, are suggestive of topographies.

By 1959, fields of primary monochromes replaced the somber earth tones of her earlier work. Reynal’s work became about the overall field, the shape of the support, and the play of light across these surfaces. Her contributions to the New York School have recently gained more recognition; the Museum of Modern Art, NY currently has a Reynal mosaic on view beside a work by Willem de Kooning.

Sills, who grew up in Castalia, North Carolina in a large family, was not exposed to art in his youth or

young adulthood. At age 9 he worked after school in a greenhouse—an experience he enjoyed and which he credits as influencing the color and light of his paintings. His boss encouraged him to move north, and at age 11, Sills arrived in Brooklyn to stay with an older brother. He spent the next twenty years working various jobs and starting a family with his first wife. While working as a superintendent for a church in Greenwich Village and doing delivery for a neighborhood liquor shop, Sills met Reynal. They married in 1953 in Mexico, where Reynal noted the couple felt “most at home.”

Sills and Reynal traveled the world together: first to Russia, Turkey, Greece, and Italy in 1959, to study the art of mosaic. Between 1959–63, they traveled extensively throughout Central and South America: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Peru. Reynal was influenced by indigenous art throughout her travels. Meanwhile, the couple’s home on West 11th Street was filled with an art collection that included work by Duchamp, Roberto Matta, de Kooning, Wilfredo Lam, and Gorky.

In 1956, Reynal met Dord Fitz, a West Texas art dealer who would grow the market for Reynal’s art. In 1960, Fitz and Elaine de Kooning recruited her to take over the organization of a show of Abstract Expressionist women artists held at his Amarillo Gallery. Fitz’s clients and students also acquired Sills’s work. However, Sills did not accompany Reynal on the trips to West Texas, likely because Amarillo and its surrounding rural areas remained strictly segregated at the time, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. During an



Thomas Sills | *Untitled* | 1967
oil on canvas
54.0h x 43.0w in

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address to students at a Tennessee College, Reynal expressed apprehension about spending time in the South as an interracial couple. Reynal and Sills together became active supporters of the NAACP. They additionally supported the spread of access to modern art for young Black students in the American South, serving on the board developing an art collection at Tougaloo College in Mississippi and donating a large number of works of their own and from their collection to the school.

In the late 1960s, following a trip to West Africa—where they visited Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda—Reynal began making freestanding totemic “Personnage” sculptures utilizing mosaic tesserae and pieces of shell. These monumental works were exhibited at Betty Parsons Gallery.

In his first forays into painting, Sills applied magnesite plaster from Reynal’s studio to discarded wood panels. By the mid-1950s he had developed a cohesive body of paintings with central forms suggesting birds, nests, apertures, nebulae, and eyes. These formed his first solo show at Betty Parsons. Over the late 1950s, these allusions dissolved into abstraction. Still, the paintings have an energy at their center which generates movement and radiates outwards. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. recently acquired a Sills painting from 1961 that typifies this energy and demonstrates a revived interest in the artist’s work.

As his work developed, Sills frequently employed a balance of two or three main colors in each painting. The main forms became bigger, and more jagged and earthy. In the mid-1970s, he made a series of “White Paintings”—composed of forms and shapes painted in beige, cream tones, light gray, and white. Eric Firestone Gallery’s presentation at The Art Show will include a selection of work by both artists that epitomizes their breadth and these important stylistic evolutions.

Thomas Sills’s work can be found in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, all New York; along with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, CA. Reynal’s work is included in the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, both New York; the Menil Collection, Houston; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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