

Haroun Hayward finds a kindred spirit in Barns-Graham's refusal to be confined to a single style

THE ART WORLD HAS NEVER SEEMED TO APPROVE when an artist resists neat categorisation. Looking across the breadth of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham's career, one senses a restless spirit. Her work reflects a desire to be free and to explore – to not be hemmed in by just one form of expression. The artist frequently worked in series, understanding the power of sticking at an idea and developing it, but she also moved between many different styles over her lifetime. Many artists will recognise in themselves this sense of curiosity. Barns-Graham's conviction in the power of continued experimentation is inspiring, and part of what makes her a true painter's painter.

I'm struck by the 40-year gap between her foundational glacier works of the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the dynamic drawings – created using a mix of chalk, pastel, gouache and acrylic – that she made on her annual trips to Lanzarote in the Canary Islands from 1989 to 1993. In the interim, she played with different visual languages: from her depictions of the Cornish coast using a style of semi-abstractness synonymous with the St Ives painters in the mid-20th century, to a hard edge aesthetic which, in its angular geometry, feels akin to the work of modernist artists in the tradition of the Bauhaus in Germany.

Barns-Graham's return to nature and observational drawing after this period of more abstract work speaks to her continual drive to experiment, but there is also something poignant about this loop back to the landscape towards the end of her life. While there is a stylistic progression between these two bodies of work created almost half a century apart, they share a dynamic relationship. This is perhaps not surprising given the subject matter. Barns-Graham's experiences on the glaciers at Grindelwald revealed the nature of these giant, ever-changing entities: to her, they seemed alive. Lanzarote, conversely, is a static, volcanic landscape, but one that, at one point, would also have been alive and flowing.

There is a similar tension at play in both series of works. In the glacier paintings, Barns-Graham's line is fluid but used in the service of building solid, crystalline and mountainous forms. The Lanzarote works have a more graphic quality that bears the trace of her abstract experiments of the 1960s to 1980s, but at the same time they reflect a greater sense of freedom. I'm drawn to the mixture of styles often seen in a single work, such as *Lava Movement*, *La Geria* 1993 or *Volcanic Island (Near Montana del Fuego II)* 1989, where strong graphic lines meld into and over painterly sfumato blends.



Wilhelmina
Barns-Graham
*Volcanic Island (Near
Montana del Fuego II)*
1989
Gouache and chalk
on paper
56 x 75.5 cm

Like Barns-Graham, I make work that is born of a desire not to stick to any one style. My collage paintings have become identifiably my own, but the crux of them is my magpie nature and a rejection of the constriction that comes with following only one path.

I own an acrylic painting on paper by Barns-Graham titled *Lanzarote* 1989 – the first serious piece of art I bought. A black hill rises from the dark green and black volcanic landscape. In the foreground are white impressions of rocks and striations. A touch of red appears like a flame in the distance. I was drawn to this work instantly. While graphic and bold in its composition, up close, a soft painterly quality prevails in application and tone. This sums up a lot of what Barns-Graham means to me, and what I draw from her approach to apply in my own practice: a conflation of styles that sounds as one harmonious note.

TATE ST IVES

Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, 24 October 2026 – 3 May 2027

Emii Alrai is a Scottish-Iraqi artist who works in the UK. She was the 2025 Aspetto Fellow at the Warburg Institute, and her work will be shown at Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate and in *Listening to the earth* at the Drawing Room, London this autumn.

Haroun Hayward is an artist based in London. His first solo institutional show, *Haroun Hayward: Path through Trees* is at Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, until 1 November. An exhibition pairing the work of Wilhelmina Barns-Graham and new work by Haroun Hayward will open at Hales London later in the autumn.

Supported by the Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Exhibition Supporters Circle and Tate Members.