

## Karen Wilkin

### ANDREW FORGE: THE LIMITS OF SIGHT

**A**ndrew Forge (1923–2002), inventive painter, perceptive critic, and revered teacher, was trained in the perceptual realist tradition of the Camberwell School of Art in London, studying with William Coldstream. His early works, for which he received a fair amount of attention, were expressive, lushly painted landscapes and human figures, often nude, but by 1963, Forge recalled in an interview that he had lost faith in what he was doing. Change came after a stimulating trip to the United States that year. Forge described experiencing in New York “a physical openness and beyondness, a structure of unstructuredness, a certain different way of being in the world.” The effect of that awareness was dramatic. Forge recalled that, back in his London studio, he put the largest canvas he had on the easel “without any thought,” picked up the smallest brush he had, and made a single mark on the untouched expanse. “It was a fantastic moment,” he said, “because two things happened: that point looked back at me like an eye . . . but also it and the canvas were talking to each other . . . I felt it was the most real thing I had ever done.”

After he moved permanently to the United States in 1973, these abstract embodiments of his responses to the world around him—the “dot paintings”—established and sustained Forge’s American reputation, making him something of a cult figure, an “artists’ artist.” The vibrating expanses of color, slowly constructed with repeated delicate touches of a loaded brush, are distinguished by a contradictory coexistence of energy and stillness, intense life and reserve. And yet another contradiction: they are essentially non-representational meditations on the act of painting itself, yet they also seem uncannily evocative of the

natural world and, occasionally, the built environment, without ceasing to be abstract.

As Forge described the evolution of his work:

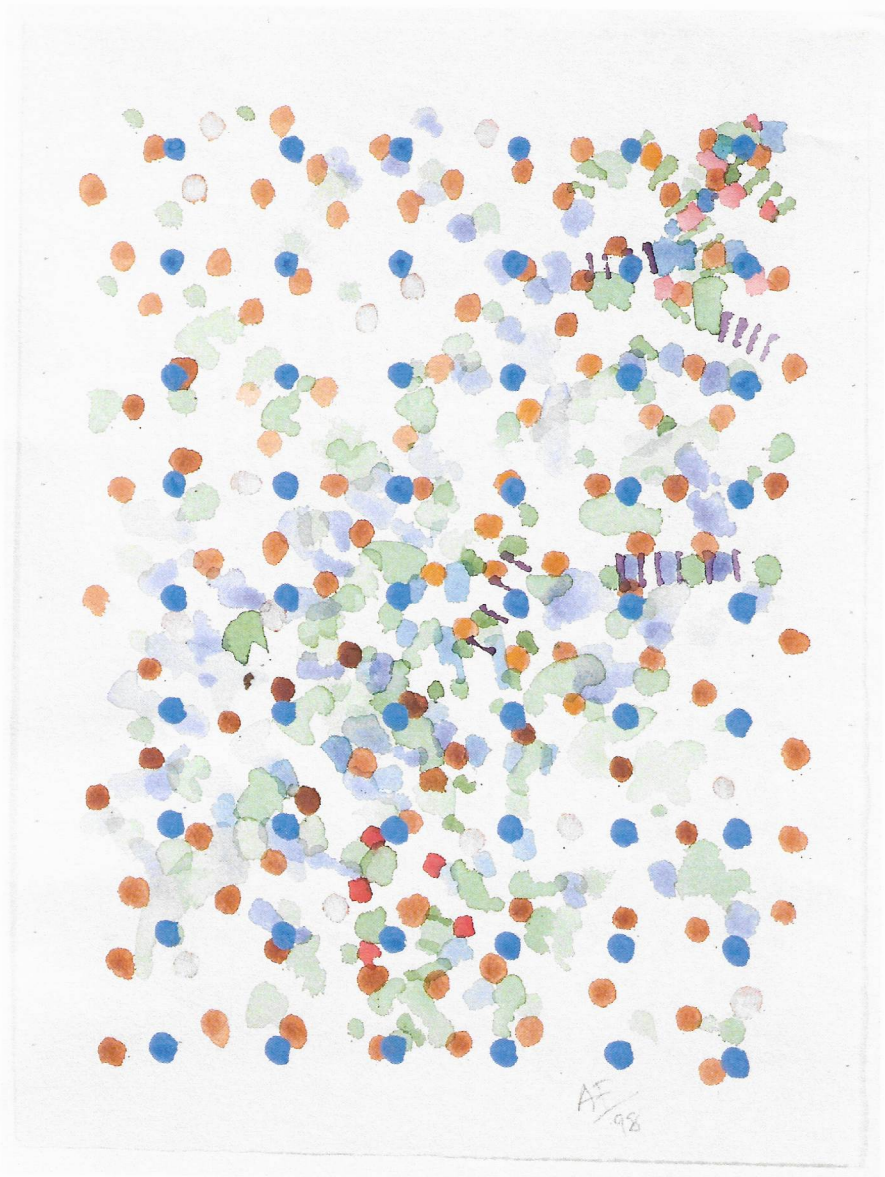
Each painting starts with a single dot, and it grows as dots accrue over the field of the canvas. During the early stages, the formative principle is simply the vibration of the dots, whether in ordered constellations or randomly dispersed. As the white field of the canvas is covered dot by dot, color reveals itself; the light of the canvas must be rediscovered and reconstructed out of the interaction of the dots. Slowly, ways of reading the painting come up. Areas press forward or drop back. There are alternatives of substance and transparency.

Forge's dots have nothing to do with pointillism. The dotting is an end in itself, not a means of description. From a close viewpoint, the fact of the touches. As we read across the surface, we are absorbed by the shimmer of the deliberately placed spots of pigment, captivated by the varied rhythms created by the dispersal of particular colors, and intrigued by the chords, harmonious or dissonant, created by groups of related or opposing hues. But we are always aware of the repetitive action of the artist's hand making each mark. Words and reproductions, however, are wholly inadequate to coming to terms with Forge's work. His paintings must be *seen*, in actuality. No reproduction, no matter how technologically advanced, can capture their essential and distinctive qualities. And they must be studied for extended periods. Yet even when we look long and carefully at these complex sheets of multiple, intermingled hues, according them the time and close attention they insist upon if we are to grasp their subtlety and richness, we always feel that something has escaped us. The spatial mobility and the sense of pulsing light, driven by color, combine to make the dot paintings both irresistible and elusive. They appear to test the limits of sight. We yield to the allure of their atmospheric orchestrations of color at the same time that we are not quite certain that we are really perceiving them. Pools and pathways of chromatic harmonies become visible

with prolonged looking and then subside into the all-over fabric of dots. When we view the paintings from a distance, hints of imagery—architecture, landscape forms—suggest themselves, but elude us when we come close to the surface of the picture. It's as if we need a different kind of visual acuity than we have normally been provided with.

All of these subtle characteristics are present in Forge's varied and inventive works on paper, both at the same time, as in the canvases, and separately. Some watercolors and gouaches are as layered and rich as the most achieved canvas, while others, while in no way seeming incomplete or tentative, can be read as dissections of the components of the paintings. In the paper works, we can easily study the relationship of relatively large dots and the straight lines Forge called "sticks," often so sparsely distributed that they seem to invite consideration as independent events, or we can savor the unexpected sequences of hues arranged in stacked bars, in a kind of elongated grid. The structure of Forge's works on paper is usually more pared down, less dependent on accumulation, and more direct than the dotted fields of the canvases and, as a group, the paper works are notably more varied. While they are obviously self-sufficient and complete, seeing a group of them is also like being allowed to watch Forge think, as he tested possibilities and explored alternatives that would inform the canvases. Occasionally, too, I suspect the configurations of works on paper were extracted from the canvases, as if being isolated for further study or to save them from being engulfed by the drifting dots.

Like Forge's canvases, his works on paper remain endlessly fascinating and demanding, at once fiercely intelligent and sensuous.



*Untitled* (1998), watercolor on paper, 22 x 18 inches. © Andrew Forge

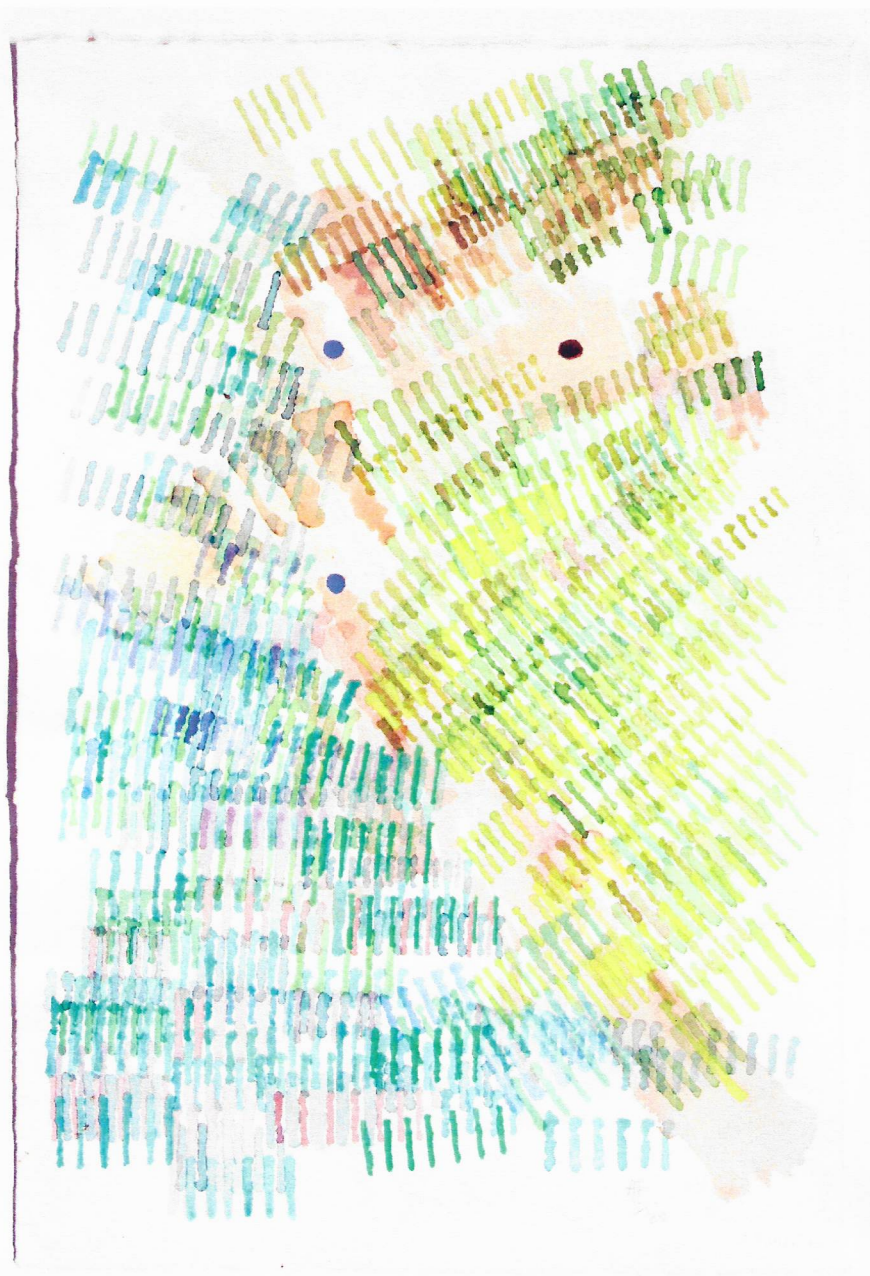


*Untitled* (1996), watercolor and gouache on paper, 22 1/4 x 15 inches.

© Andrew Forge



*Untitled* (1996), watercolor on paper, 21 3/4 x 14 1/2 inches. Collection of John Meditz. © Andrew Forge

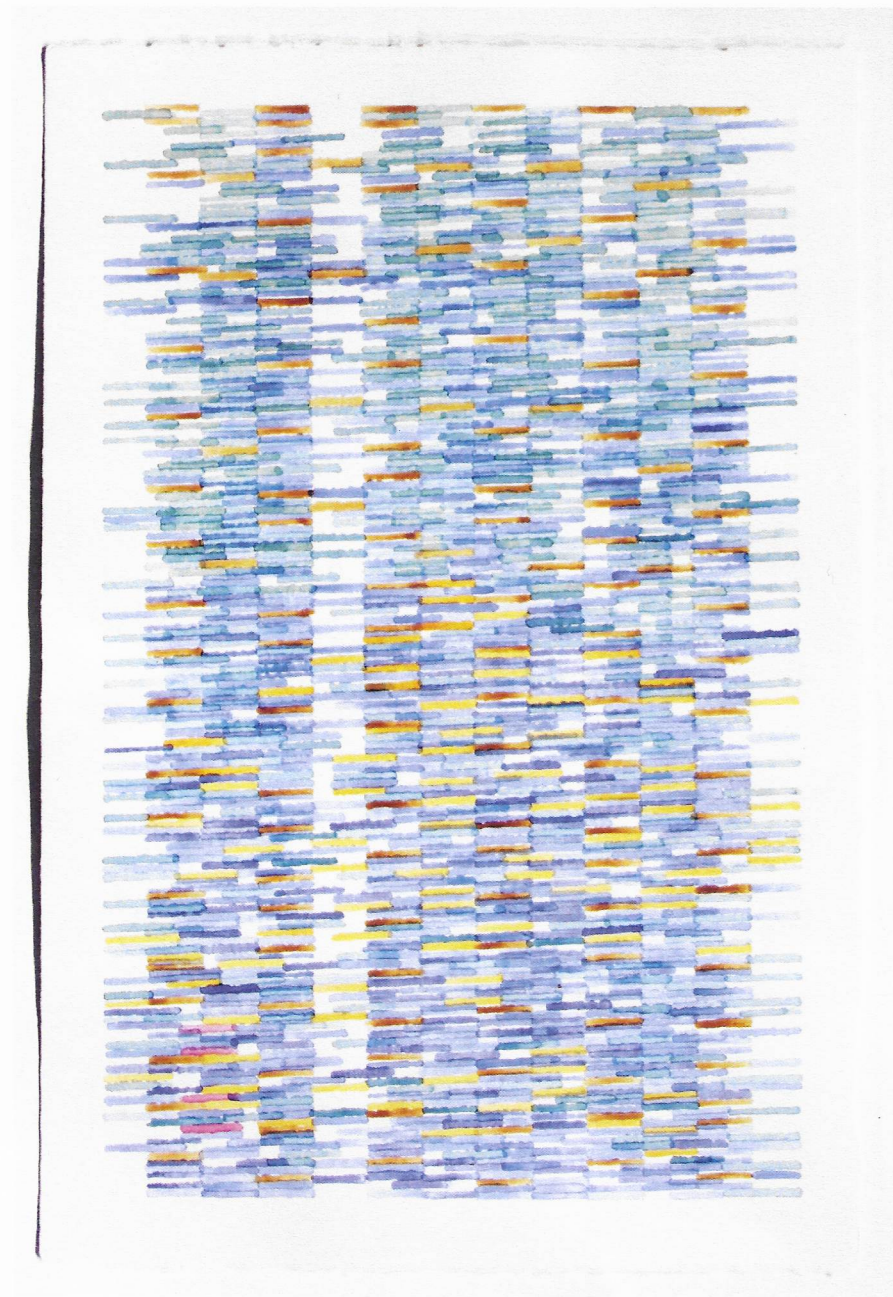


*Untitled* (2000), watercolor on paper, 22 1/2 x 15 1/8 inches. © Andrew Forge

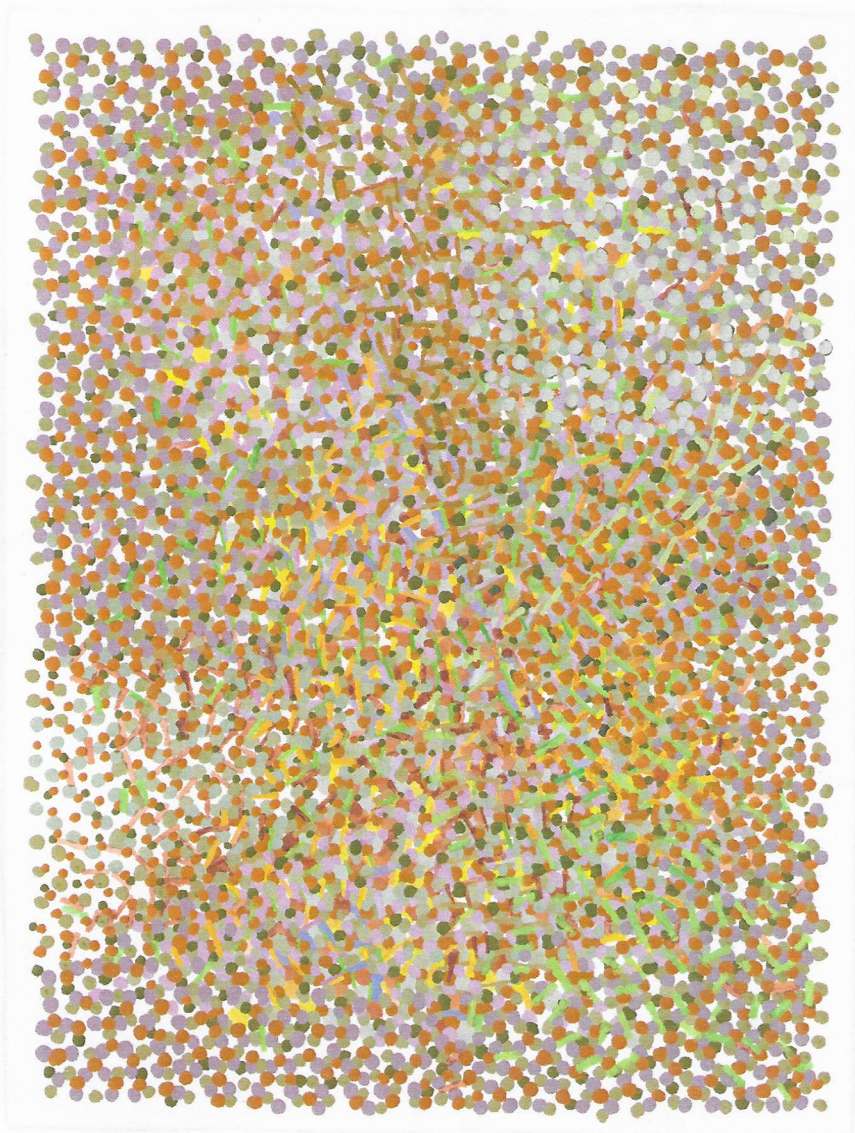


*Untitled* (1999), watercolor on paper, 22 1/2 x 15 inches. © Andrew Forge

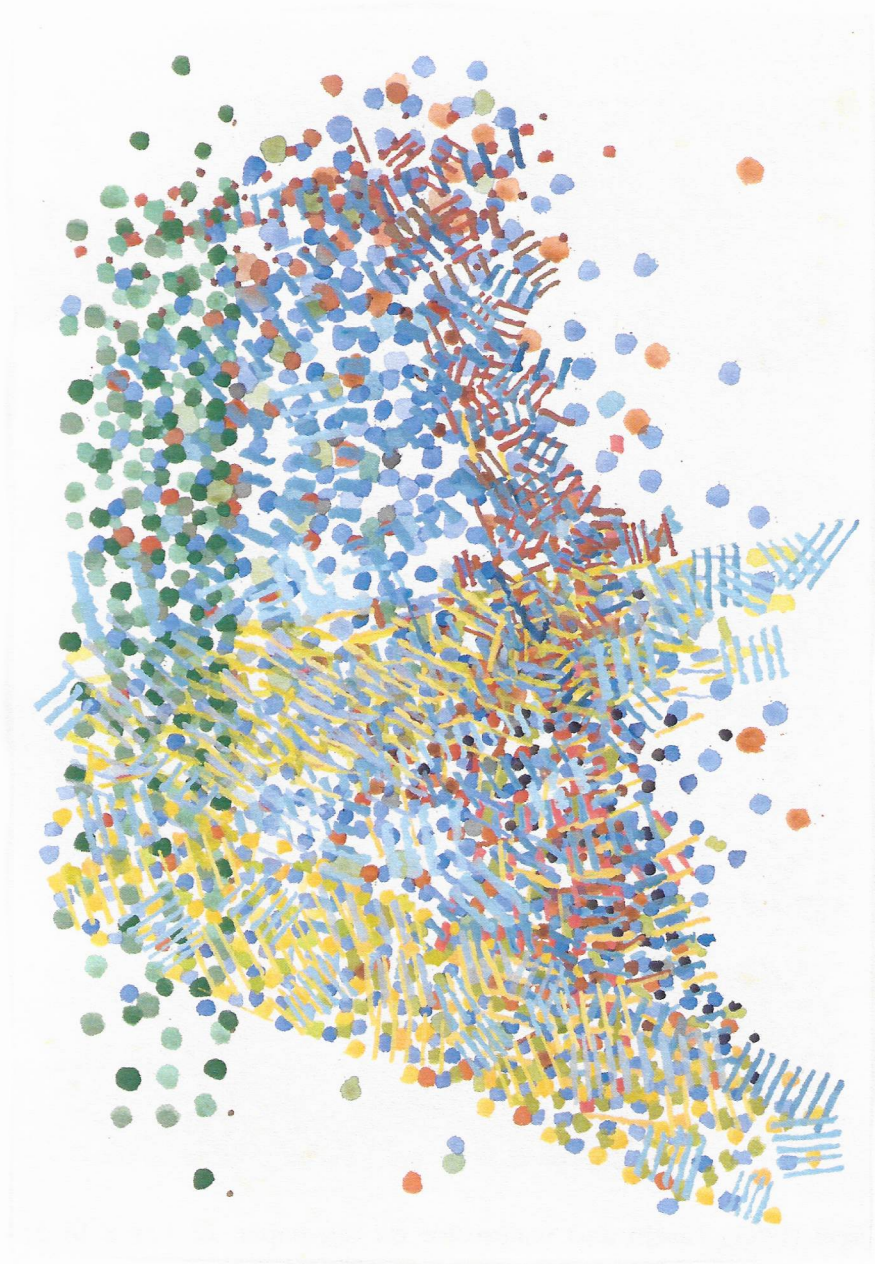




*Untitled* (no date), watercolor on paper, 22 1/2 x 15 inches. © Andrew Forge



*Gleam* (1993), casein and watercolor on rag paper, 22 1/4 x 18 3/4 inches. Yale University Art Gallery. © Andrew Forge



*Shadow II* (1993), casein and watercolor on rag paper, 23 x 15 1/4 inches.  
Yale University Art Gallery. © Andrew Forge