

Conduits of the Unseen: Women Artists Imagine Other Worlds

Curated by Susan L. Aberth

From the late 19th century onwards, a number of pioneering women artists have felt emboldened and compelled to visualize alternate realities. *Conduits of the Unseen: Women Artists Imagine Other Worlds* is an exhibition that brings together artists from different time periods, nations, socio-economic backgrounds and spiritual belief systems who are unified in their desire to give form to their inner visions. Stylistically diverse, the works range through landscapes, portraits, and narratives, as well as the purely abstract –all emanating an aura of the uncanny, the mysterious and the numinous.

With the advent of the Spiritualist movement in the United States and Europe, female mediums began to “channel” written and visual messages from the so-called “spirit world.” By a mysterious process, these women, largely untrained artists, had their hands guided by unseen entities to record words and images. Interestingly, the products of these experiments were often abstract compositions and sometimes texts in alien and undecipherable languages. The American artist Paulina Peavy is a spectacular example of a medium/artist, and her paintings, drawings, and mixed media are central to this exhibition. Peavy claimed that a spirit called Lacamo communicated with her and guided her brush, and she sometimes wore ornate masks she created to facilitate their connection, one of which is on display. The resulting multi-dimensional abstract depictions reveal an alternate universe full of cosmic symbols, energy beams, and biomorphic bodily references. What makes her work so relevant today is that her work reflected her and Lacamo’s belief that humanity was evolving into an androgynous species, which they called “one-gender perfection.”

Conduits of the Unseen also contains works by another important medium, Agatha Wojciechowsky (1896-1986), a German immigrant who conducted séances in New York City for many decades. An ardent Spiritualist, she practiced psychic readings and spiritual healing and developed a strange language as well as ink drawings with densely packed faces. Another fascinating aspect of her visual production were watercolors of her sitter’s hands, again full of faces said to be recognizable to her clients. A selection of her black and white ink works on paper, brightly colored watercolors, and notebooks with channeled alien languages will be on view.

Adele Watson (1873-1947) lived and worked in Pasadena, California, inspired by the spiritual dimension of nature, a topic also of interest to her friend, the poet Kahlil Gibran. Two of her symbolist paintings are included in the show, featuring ghostly female nudes floating above idyllic landscapes – otherworldly dream images evoking spiritual states of mind. Another American artist who incorporated landscape into her work, Agnes Pelton (1881-1961), was a visionary symbolist who painted semi-abstract images she obtained while

meditating. A Theosophist who practiced Agni Yoga, a meditation practice as taught by Helena and Nicholas Roerich, her paintings display vivid planes of vibrant and pastel colors meant to inspire spiritual states of mind. One such work at the gallery, *The Being: A Transcendental Vision*, was created when she moved to Palm Springs, California, where she became a great influence on the Transcendentalist Group in Santa Fe, New Mexico, who adopted her as their pioneering forebearer.

Hilla Rebay (1890-1967), known as the co-founder of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, was also an abstract artist. Studying art in Germany and then Paris, she was introduced through Hans Arp to the non-objective modern works of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and others that she later promoted at what she referred to as the “museum temple,” the Guggenheim Museum as designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. An untitled abstract watercolor featuring floating geometric forms represents Rebay in this exhibition. Another abstract painter Rebay championed was Helen L. Kendall, an American who studied under Arthur Wesley Dow and who became involved, like Pelton, with the spiritual movements of theosophy and Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy. An elegant watercolor study included in the exhibition includes floating geometric shapes through an ambiguous space, an abstract expression of esoteric ideas of time and consciousness.

The Surrealists are strongly represented in *Conduits of the Unseen*, especially since the women associated with the movement identified with powerful magical archetypes like the “witch”. Written in 1970, the notebook for Leonora Carrington’s (1917-2011) fantastical play about an old woman battling patriarchy, *Opus Sinistrus*, will be on display and includes notes and drawings for characters. A magical tragi-comedy, the play circles around the last surviving human egg, a highly relevant warning about impending ecological disaster. A significant selection of paintings by Carrington’s friend and fellow surrealist Leonor Fini (1907-1996) reveal the artist’s interest in portraiture, symbolist literature, the theater and depictions of powerful women.

Works by lesser-known but increasingly appreciated American women artists associated with some form of surrealism are also included in this exhibition. There is Marie Wilson (1922-2017), often associated with the Dynaton group founded by Wolfgang Paalen, whose lyrical abstractions are mosaic-like explosions incorporating mythic content and esoteric energies. Juanita Guccione (1904-1999) worked in New York in a surrealist vein, her paintings often featuring amazon-esque women in mysterious settings. Later in life, she gravitated towards more abstract depictions of otherworldly spaces and landscapes reflecting her New Age interests, such as those promoted by her American psychic friend, the artist and author Ingo Swann. *Conduits of the Unseen* contains examples of both of these trends by Guccione. Two dreamy landscapes by Sylvia Fein (1919-2020), a Wisconsin artist who later moved to California, reveal a surrealist approach to landscape. A small but

powerful Gertrude Abercrombie (1909-1977) painting depicts a macabre assortment of cat heads and clouds arranged in a hieroglyphic manner.

Works by the infamous occultist and artist Marjorie Cameron (1922-1995) are also featured in this exhibition, as perhaps the ultimate expression of an artist who depicted the unseen world of telluric forces and magic. Self-portraits, fairies, animal/human spirits and other conjurations created by this legendary witch (and former wife of Jack Parsons) present a world of wild feminine power fueled by eroticism and the forces of nature. Other artists represented in this show include the French Surrealist Aline Gagnaire, whose painting *La transformation* (1945) is a haunting and menacing vision of thorny vines and insects. Rare drawings by the illustrator Marguerite Charlotte Lebaubier, whose husband, the poet Louis de Gonzague Frick, nicknamed her La Phalérinienne, are colorful assortments of shapes and colors that flow across the page in an utterly strange manner.

Taken together, the works in *Conduits of the Unseen: Women Artists Imagine Other Worlds* offer a wide-ranging and multi-faceted presentation of visionary realms imaged by women artists often pushed to the periphery of the art world. They make their debut now to a more open society, ready to more fully understand and appreciate their visionary views of more evolved states of consciousness and of art and artists' role in implementing that process of spiritual expansion.

- Susan L. Aberth

Dr. Susan L. Aberth is the Edith C. Blum Professor in the Art History and Visual Culture Program at Bard College, and the Director of the Theology program where she teaches courses on Surrealism, Spiritualism, Freemasonry, Alchemy, Latin American and Outsider Art. Her book publications include *The Tarot of Leonora Carrington* (2020, reissued in an expanded edition 2022) co-authored with Mexican curator Tere Arcq; *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (2004, Lund Humphries & Turner, Spain, in its 11th edition). She has contributed to numerous books and exhibition catalogues, including *Tarot!* (Morgan Library, 2026); *Surrealism and Magic*, Guggenheim Venice (2022); *Hilma af Klint* (Zwirner Gallery, 2022), *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* (Phoenix Art Museum, 2019), *Juanita Guccione: Otherwhere* (Napa Valley Museum, 2019), *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvelous* (Routledge Press, 2018), *Leonora Carrington: Cuentos Magicos* (Museo de Arte Moderno & INBA, Mexico City, 2018), *Unpacking: The Marciano Collection* (Delmonico Books, Prestel, 2017), and *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde* (Manchester University Press, 2017). Aberth is a founding member of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism (ISSS) and has lectured extensively at a variety of venues such as the Venice Biennale, Whitney Museum of American Art, Columbia University School of Journalism, and Princeton University.