

Museums

'A Message to Paulina' shines a beam on an undersung artist who believed in UFOs

By Mark Jenkins **January 11**



An artwork by Paulina Peavy, who was once considered among mainstream mid-20th-century American artists and is now the subject of an exhibition in Reston.
(Andrew Edlin Gallery and Katharine Armstrong Artist Management)

The paintings in “A Message to Paulina,” Greater Reston Arts Center’s retrospective of long-neglected artist Paulina Peavy, are exuberant, kaleidoscopic and beckoning. If they suggest magical realms of refuge, that’s probably how Peavy saw them, too. Both her art and her biography indicate that she was eager to escape.

Born in Colorado in 1901, Peavy didn’t live a conspicuously unusual life. She studied at the Chouinard School of Fine Art in Los Angeles, an institution that

produced many Hollywood animators, but she didn't pursue commercial illustration. After a moment of prominence in California, she moved to New York and became a teacher. She lived in Manhattan for more than 50 years, and died in 1999 in Bethesda, after a brief period in an assisted-living facility near the home of one of her two sons.

If that sounds ordinary, the universe inside Peavy's head was more exotic. She believed in UFOs, by which she meant beings that were as much mystical as extraterrestrial. She also insisted that humanity was about to reach the end of the 3,000-year "summer age." In its next phase, people would be androgynous, and the messy business of sexual procreation would cease. "Self-pollination" would be the new means of fertilization of people termed "androgyns," eliminating the need for sperm, which she called "nature's most lethal virus."

Such notions may have been inspired by her marriage to a man who was reportedly alcoholic and abusive. But Peavy never presented her art as autobiographical. It was all channeled from "Lacamo," a UFO she said she encountered in 1932 at a seance in Long Beach. Lacamo worked through her, Peavy claimed, and she often wore elaborately festooned masks when painting to disguise her self and vanish more completely into her muse's consciousness.



One of the fantastical canvases painted by Peavy, an undersung artist who believed in mystical and extraterrestrial beings. (Andrew Edlin Gallery and Katharine Armstrong Artist Management)

Peavy's singular worldview is not apparent from her paintings, which usually combine geometric and biomorphic forms in vivid hues and crisp lines on black backgrounds. They display the influence of cubism and surrealism, and in places resemble the work of such contemporaries as Georgia O'Keefe and Diego Rivera. The canvases also seem to anticipate the Hubble Space Telescope's photographs of a brilliantly colorful cosmos, yet they feel as much Tex-Mex as intergalactic.

In fact, Peavy and Rivera painted murals at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition. Peavy's 14-foot effort, "Eternal Supper," was among her most prominent works; she later painted over it. She is now classed as an "outsider" artist, but she didn't start that way. Her undated canvases are not outside the mainstream of mid-20th-century American art.

There's much more than painting, though, here. It may be the most extensive Peavy show ever mounted, and is certainly the broadest since 2014, when items were pulled from the cache Andrew Peavy had preserved of his grandmother's artwork.

In 2016, a New York gallery displayed a few drawings and masks. "A Message to Paulina" offers paintings, drawings and a whole wall of fanciful masks, ornamented with tassels and costume jewelry. There also are films, poems (one of them the source of the show's title) and a recording of a 1958 appearance on a WOR radio talk show. Gallery visitors will hear the masked Peavy, supposedly in a trance, declaim wisdom from outer (or perhaps inner) space.

In New York, Peavy's neighbors included TV professionals who helped her make several short films. In Reston, four roughly half-hour ones play on a video monitor. They superimpose Peavy's art over pictures of Stonehenge, Angkor Wat, Hindu temples, ancient Egyptian artifacts and, at one point, footage of a cat. New-agey music underpins voice-over commentary (much of it delivered by a male voice, although Peavy does speak) whose message is antiwar as well as anti-sex.

These video curiosities help explain the vision Peavy intended to capture and convey. But they seem quaint next to the paintings, whose energy and invention transcend their maker's now-musty ideas of an ideal tomorrow. Paulina Peavy never escaped her life, but the best of her pictures do.

IF YOU GO

A Message to Paulina

Greater Reston Arts Center, 12001 Market St., Reston. 703-471-9242. restonarts.org.

Dates: Through Feb. 17. On Saturday at 3 p.m., GRACE executive director Lily Siegel will discuss the show, which she curated. On Jan. 25 and Feb. 13 at 7 p.m., artists Zoe Charlton and Rahne Alexander, respectively, will offer responses to Peavy's work.

Admission: Free.