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Worlds Inside Worlds Inside Drawings

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Worlds Inside Worlds Inside Drawings

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

by
E Marshall

BFA Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design, 2011

May, 2020

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Abstract

I make drawings about memory and identity.

I make drawings about drawings.

I sew because I love sewing.

I paint because I have to.

I explore the parallel universes and realities that exist in me alongside reality.

I make marks intuitively and leave the analysis for later.

I wonder if magic is real.

I wonder if everyone has something like a religion that they cling to.

I like truth in my work.

I never want to trick anybody.

I like to say it simply.

Keywords: drawing, memory, binary, horses, contrast, painting, color, art, religion, mysticism, spirituality, tarot, channeling, sewing, intuition, environment, art history

INTRODUCTION

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Pretty Horses consists of three years of work that I made during my time as a graduate candidate at the University of New Orleans. I will be referencing some work from my thesis exhibition and exploring the work of Ben Miller, Susan Rothenberg and Hilma Af Klint. I draw connections with their work through art as a meditative process, the effect of environment and space on practices and psyche and how my work connects with my spiritual needs. I touch on my study of Tarot as a contemplative and inspirational practice. I am exploring memory and its effect on identity and mental well-being. Art has always been my main therapeutic outlet. I am beginning to appreciate its significance and reapply that to my studio time. I am revealing worlds that live in my head through intuitive mark making and developing a personal visual language.



Installation view, "Pretty Horses", 2020

Scaling up my work in size was a challenge. Previously, my marks had been sketchbook sized, travel-sized. With time and space, the sky opened up to me. I started considering the atmosphere. Arches, rainbows, and domes came into play as borders and containing elements. Each element created optical pressure by bordering and dividing planes to delegate space. I was mirroring an internal psychic space, creating visual tension and illustrating parallel worlds or alternate tunnels of thinking.

My Drawing of the Sky is one of the first things I started making when I entered the program. I was a teacher's assistant for an intro level art class and collected discarded materials from my students. I also had an accidentally large collection of crappy ball point pens from years of service industry work. I carried a folder of Bristol paper scraps from my students in envelopes everywhere I went so any free time I had could be spent drawing. I love scribbling with ball point pens. I love filling large surface areas with thin, frantic lines. Pens are a readily available material and I enjoy the tactile sensation of the ball tip cutting into paper fiber with its sticky, sweet, iron smell. I drew everywhere, bars, picnics, class or in bed. A puzzled friend saw me scribbling, blacking out some paper and asked what I was drawing. "The Sky!" I fired off and realized that was actually a good answer. I would attempt to make a drawing of the sky. My materials and subject matter are endless, so the drawing will grow and never be finished. This was the third time the drawing had been installed and measured approximately 8' x 10'.



"Drawing of the Sky", 2020



"Drawing of the Sky" detail, 2020

Multiple realms can exist simultaneously in one consciousness. In “Arches, Red” I gave form to mindscapes by manipulating space and bending perspective. There are two tunnel openings in the drawing. They are like doors on a television game show. What’s behind the doors is invisible and there is a decision to be made; choose, and life unfolds accordingly. If “real” time is linear it keeps chugging along one thing after another: decision, event, accident, decision, event, event, tragedy, decision, and so on.

“What would have happened if I chose differently?”

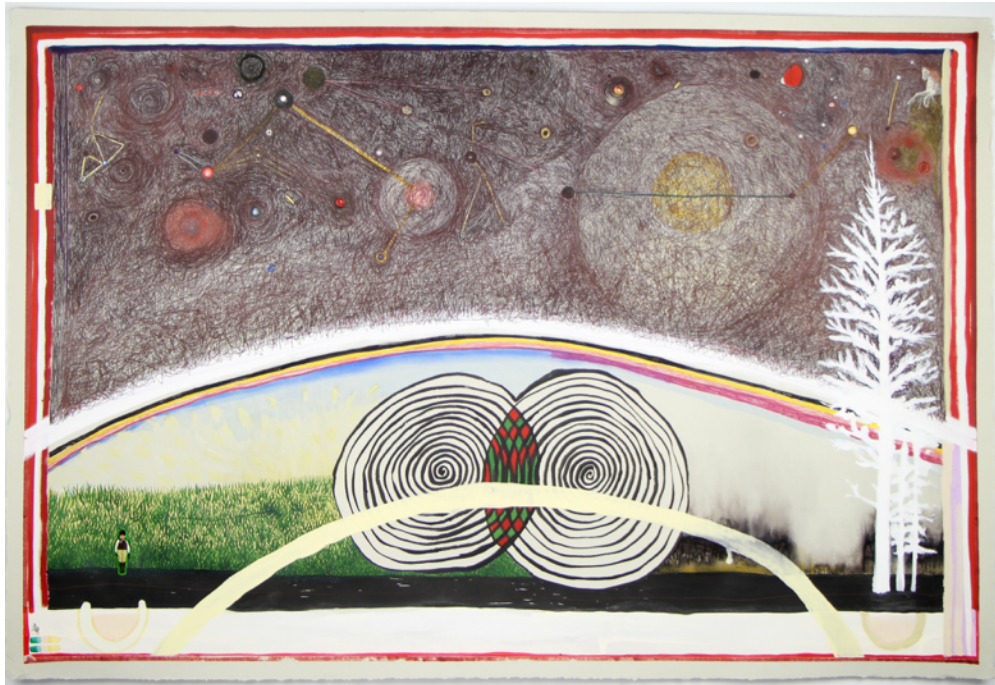
This question exists infinitely. This second doorway, the one you didn’t choose, to this second path, to this second reality, is a ghost. It doesn’t seem to have form, flesh, or substance. It trails your consciousness in a spotty way. All of those ghost decisions and outcomes and near misses explode the linear, factual reality we live into an intricate, atmospheric, ballooning, billowing \]fragmented myriad of millions of realities. The other answers to all of the other questions.

In “Arches Red” the space is more confusing than a simple two door option. It is hard to tell if the beings are coming or going. There is gaping blackness flanked by fire red and grassy green.



“Arches, Red” 2020

The viewer could be standing on the either side of the two game show doors. I didn’t realize it while I was drawing but I was beginning to illustrate a fragmented reality that exists internally. Mental space, like the space in Arches, Red is complicated and ephemeral. Everything I have ever seen, smelled, thought or experienced is stored in my brain curls. When I draw, I am tuning into the tide of my underwater brain. The tip of my consciousness isn’t as important in the process. It is there to keep me rooted in time and place but the more interesting things are happening below the surface. I let the undertow move the forms making connections and stringing shapes and colors together.



"Tiny Equestrian" 2020



Gallery Installation view, "Pretty Horses" 2020



“Fairgrounds” installation view with bottles, 2020

As the viewer moved through the gallery I meant to evoke a constant voice through “Pretty Horses.” One large story told through many pieces that are visually connected through drawing style and color. I also used painted bottles to line the floor under pieces that were unframed. Horse imagery and references to non-human animals were a defining motif. They showed up often but what I came to realize as the work hung in the gallery was that it wasn’t about horses at all. The bottles on the floor numbered around 250. I started the bottles as a mindless exercise, using leftover paint on soda water bottles that littered my studio. I loved the way they became a modular painting when I lined them up. I used them as a framing element on the floor of the exhibition and allowed them to have color conversations to the pieces they sat under.

Images and forms sneak into my work. I have had an affinity for horses my whole life. I have been training myself to meditate and really tune in to the act of drawing. I have had to learn how to not let my conscious self get in the way of my work. I let the art happen and trust

that the things I've learned from the millions of marks I have made before will come together and inform a cohesive drawing.

People ask me over and over... "What's with the horses?" "What's the significance behind using the horse?" "Do you love horses?" The answer is complicated and simple at once. We can go in two directions explaining it.

One: I have always loved horses. It is a basic simple thing to have a favorite non-human animal. Especially kids. The gendered cliché of a "horse girl" is culturally significant to the region and time I grew up. There's a chance you knew one growing up or that you have heard of the term. I am not making art about horse girls. I'm making art about my pure love of horses and fighting off some cliché notions about that. I prefer the term "neigh they" as a gender-neutral expression.

Horses are beautiful and powerful and they have evolved alongside humans for thousands of years. Their evolution was manipulated by the human species. They were vehicles that bore the weight of building human civilizations. They were shipped from their native lands and origin points all over the world to become the indispensable beast of burden of many people. There are numerous breeds and styles and the intervention of man has made monsters and toys out of them. All of those things are interesting. How they came to America is interesting. How Native Americans adopted them and made them their own is interesting. Bucking Broncos and cowboys and Arabian mares and wildlands where horses run free is interesting. But I am resting my work on the subtle idea of a childlike love for a strong beautiful non-human animal. All of those things are true and wonderful and interesting to research, but I knew very little about that when I was four and tried to draw my first horse. The urge to love something and try to possess them is impossible to describe but a lovely thing to make artwork about. Fertile ground for colors and rainbows and arches and visual manipulation. Stitch them onto my heart and tattoo them onto my body forever and I would still never be able to tell you why I love them so much.

Two: "Pretty Horses" are just my Jasper Johns flag, my Kelley blue, my "muse". They almost mean nothing. They are a subject I keep returning to. With "Pretty Horses," I always know what I'm going to make work about. Obsessive subjects in the past have been trucks, guns, flags and



Horse embroidery, 2018

Mickey, and Minnie mouse. The images already carry so much cultural and collective meaning. If I have a cute little obsession going, it drives the work and overcoming perceptions of cliché subject matter is a welcome challenge. Susan Rothenberg made art about horses for 20 years. without really caring about the animal itself. They were a subject she could play with and manipulate.

I connect with Rothenberg's work beyond horses. She makes work intuitively. There doesn't have to be a grand idea to start. An idea for a painting could come from a fleeting moment in her daily life or a feeling.

"I'm not really a 'less is more' person but I figure a hand on a table suggests a human being. I don't want to get too literal about things. I want the viewer to be able to do some of the work too. And I find a dragonfly beautiful and a snake beautiful. Yeah, and many things beautiful. But it's not a... a... a goal to try for it in my own work. I'm trying for, let's take... TRUTH. (laughs) Some kind of truth about some kind of thing." Susan Rothenberg, Art 21



"Wishbone" Susan Rothenberg , 1979

I want to make a true thing. That meaning changes constantly. With horse imagery Rothenberg was breaking all the formal rules of painting she possibly could. She used them as a vehicle to get the paintings made. I often use my subject matter in the same way. The horse appears the reasons than being a horse. I use the horse imagery figuratively to stand in for me, or to connect to a version of myself I want to communicate with. I have an idea that if I could go back in time and show 8 year old me a drawing of a horse that 31 year old me did that would bring some hope or affirmation to my small, confused and angry brain. In a way I am using the horses as a catalyst to heal myself. I am taking a mental portal to find my young self and soothe them.

When Rothenburg moved to New Mexico to be with her new husband in 1990 the artist began painting a myriad of other animals that were part of her new life on a ranch. Rothenburg's colors changed. They got richer. Red dirt, verdant green growth, and a new landscape epically altered her palette. Even her brush strokes became more lush. Her run of horse paintings had ended and now her work reflected the new landscape and her new life.

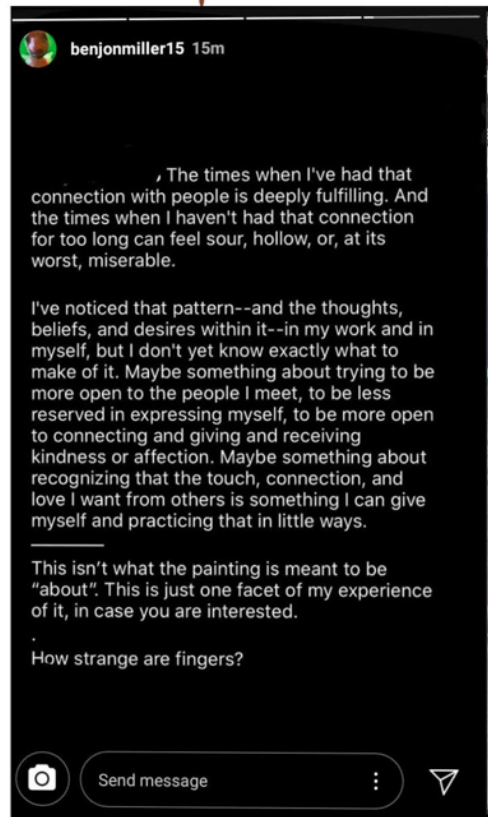
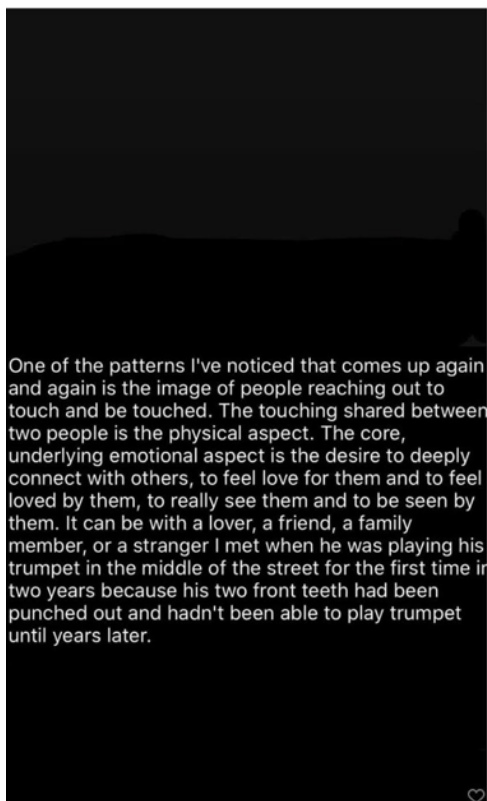
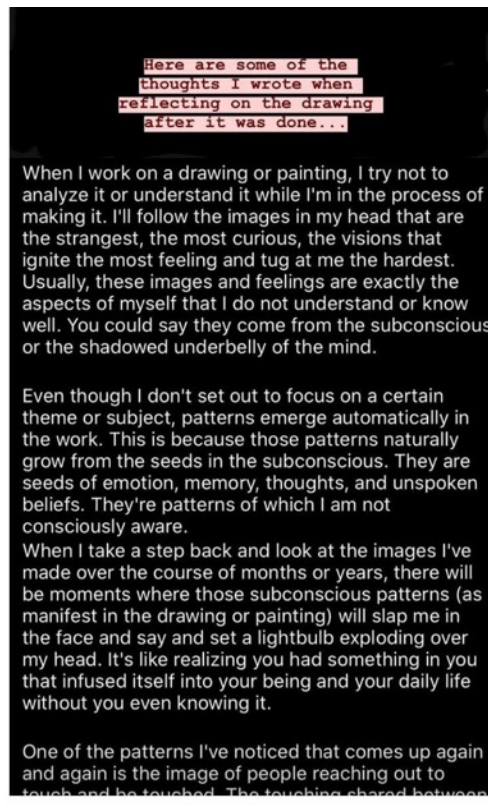


Accident, 1992, Susan Rothenberg

My drawings are psychic projections. I am a naive, sensitive instrument that reads changes in mood, light, air, timing, personality, and movement. I am not making work about places; but I am responding to my environment as it changes. My output changes in accordance with the incoming stimulus, but I don't think I'll ever pin down why or how. Making work intuitively may always be a mystery. If I change my location or studio space, my work changes. I find it difficult when the initial change happens in my work, I am lost and I feel like I have to continuously start fresh. Of course nothing is really fresh, I am still operating based on everything that has come before, it just has to fit into a new container.

Everything about the work I am setting out to make has a center of gravity. The pressure is taken off. I start making a drawing of a horse and other things that are on my mind come to the surface not full sentences, not smart anecdotes. More like: what would a green horse next to a red horse do? What if I stacked them in a pile? What if I make them the most beautiful? What if I make them barely visible? A cipher. A guide.

Horses became the sentinels of my drawings. They watched over my paintings. They meant everything and nothing. I let myself become comfortable with the fact that I was drawing them because I liked them. Meaning and analysis come later.



Making room for deeper spiritual currents.

"What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself."

Blaise Pascal, Pensées VII(425)



It Came at Me Like an Elephant in the Twilight
Ben Jon Miller, 2017

I was raised as a fundamentalist Christian and all of my early beliefs were based around an unseen realm filled with demons and angels. We spoke in tongues and the Holy Spirit filled us and made us writhe on the floor. We screamed for our people to repent and we sobbed when delivering prophecies to the congregation. Jesus and the pastor were the shepherds and we were sheep. The human mind's capacity for imagination and creation is deep and powerful and when I was young I really believed that there was a heaven and a hell. All the adults around me

believed it too. I eventually came to my senses and escaped that world of controlling patriarchal fundamentalism. I condemn and am disgusted by every single hateful thing my cult stood for. In my condemnation, I tried to throw out spiritualism and the idea of god as a whole. Any hint of faith or devotion made me nervous but I never fully could run away from the notion that there are things I can't see which motivate me in my everyday life. Even if it is the mystery of human consciousness creating them, those other worlds still exist for me, or at the least, those worlds still exist within me. The idea that there is a "God-shaped hole" in my center has stuck.

Ben Miller is an artist based in Santa Fe, New Mexico, who blends meditative practices and therapeutic art making to explore deep, base truths about himself as a conscious being and an animal. He creates beautifully grotesque figures with vibrant colors, blending loose rendering with sophisticated spatial conundrums.

Through meditation and resourcing all levels of his mind to make work, Miller often reveals very vulnerable parts of himself, even the sour and repulsive urges.

I find Ben's work really exciting and am continually encouraged that another artist is exploring elusive questions about self and how to draw invisible worlds. I have a screenshot that I lifted off of Ben's Instagram story last year. I printed it out and kept it close, rereading it often.

Screenshots from Instagram, Ben Jon Miller, 2019

The spiritual void still flavors my thinking. I search for meaning and solace in spiritual matters. I am able to exorcise my demons by scribbling and painting; spiritual solace is connected to the act of making. Through drawing-meditation, I connect to my inner being. I was hesitant to trust any spiritual practice because it brought up feelings about what had burned me before in Christianity. I have slowly worked my way into a more trusting relationship with my spiritual inclinations. I am learning I don't have to subscribe to blind faith or controlling charismatics to nurture my spiritual being. My art practice as meditation has rooted me. I have an undying urge to create and I have been able to start marrying that with other realms. I have become a student of tarot. This ancient form of divination offers a structure to facilitate self reflection and growth. I began, timidly, using the imagery in my work and exploring the numerology and symbolism in the cards. My automatic drawing style melded with these new concepts. I compared them to symbols and motifs I had already been using and was delighted to play with the similarities and tease out ancient collective ideas that exist in many religions and spiritual practices simultaneously. It became a ritual to ask questions of myself and guide the reasoning through the structure of the deck. Judgement was my first shameless tarot painting. I explored the card through my own ideas of duality and birth of an androgynous consciousness.

The bottom half of the piece is divided into hemispheres, not unlike a human brain. Feminine horizontal matter meet the vertical masculine and create a new androgynous consciousness. This new consciousness is called from on high by an angel represented by all-seeing eyes. A red rainbow evokes a protective womb for this new spirit who has been called to action. While I was making this piece I would not have been able to tell you any of this. I was intrigued by the card and set to remake it in my own image.

"I come from an inconceivable golden egg in which Being and nonbeing are only undifferentiated light. I am the highest realization of your psyche, your thought that has finally become androgynous. I free you from the boundaries of male and female. The circle of celestial clouds surrounding me is nothing other than your exploded azure brain. I erase the frontiers

forever. From incarnation to incarnation, transformation to transformation, with certainty and constant joy, I allow you to be what you have always been: an angel, emissary of God."

Alejandro Jodorowsky, *The way of the Tarot*, If Judgment spoke.

Ben Miller also uses tarot as a practical tool in his everyday life. He conducts online tarot readings where the participants are encouraged to look at the imagery on the card and vocalize what they see and what they think the pictures mean. Even the most uninformed tarot participant is successful in pulling meaning from the cards. The reading is guided by their thoughts and feelings and less by traditional interpretation of tarot. The participant projects their mind onto the cards and reflects their honest selves.

In many kinds of initiation, it is said that through language, human beings can approach the truth but never grasp it; and that, conversely, it is possible for them to know the truth through its reflection in beauty. The study of the Tarot can therefore be undertaken as a study of beauty. It is through looking, through placing our trust in what we see, that its meanings will gradually reveal themselves to us.

Alejandro Jodorowsky, *The way of the Tarot*

Orbs, atmospheres, horses, childhood and archways emerge from pen, marker, paint, needle, and thread. My work is meticulous and loose simultaneously. Anxiety and tranquility sit side by side. I am interested in binaries, duos, comparing extremes. I favor contrasting ideas that coexist. Black and white, red and green, male and female. I am a queer, non-binary human animal that was raised in a dual, binary culture. Choosing teams and picking sides. Clear answers to clear questions are favored over duality and androgyny. My work is exploring binaries that are baked into society and myself. I am finding the truth by looking inward, walking Pentacles, 2020

ghostly worlds. I am sorting out complicated internal realities and birthing their existence on paper, imposing structure.

Formally, the arches and rainbows and borders help me tell that story with weight and visual containment. All of the energy I have gets funneled into the work and becomes meaningful. It is chaos and I continually strive to corral it and understand it for my own sanity. It never sticks! The chase keeps me going. I work both frenetically and meticulously. Loose broad strokes live alongside tight claustrophobic scribbles. Reigning the energy in with lassos and fenced-in areas on the page is relieving. It is comforting to display the wild and the controlled. To be a master of both. All of the energy I have gets funneled into the work and becomes meaningful.

I love sewing. I have always loved sewing.

It felt powerful the first time my mother showed me how to thread a needle and stitch. I felt ushered into an enlightened club of ones who could solve textile problems. Fixing rips, sewing on buttons, and making large beautiful quilts out of scraps, sewers are menders, problem solvers, beautifiers.

Sewing has been considered "women's work", relegated to the home and domestic duties and therefore ignored. However, textile artists have been making a comeback since the mid 20th century and their ranks are diverse and strong. Sewing was one of the first mediums I felt I excelled in and it holds a special place in my heart. I am honored to feel part of a stitched tradition. Many of the marks I make are informed by cloth and stitching. It is another way to make a mark, very portable like a sketchbook. In my exhibition I had a few stitched works as nods to my first love of the stitched mark.

Untitled, Hilma Af Klint, 1908. A drawing made with the five through spiritual guides.

Pentacles, represents the receptive suits of Tarot. Like playing cards, Tarot has four



Judgement, 2019

suits. Swords, wands, cups and pentacles. Swords and wands are active suits, masculine, while cups and pentacles are receptive, feminine. Everyone is a mix of masculine and feminine energy. The binary of receptive and active suits does not belong to one gender expression or another. Cups deal with the emotional aspects of life and Pentacles can be seen as having to do with practical matters. When I made Pentacles I was deep in thought about the receptive nature

of myself, reconciling my attachment to “women’s work” and sisterhood. The suit of pentacles



Pentacles, 2020

kept revealing itself in my readings and I unearthed them in my work dating back to long before I was interested in the study of tarot. I was connected before I knew it.

“By searching for essential individuality, we reach universal collective consciousness. This is where the secret of the Ace of Pentacles resides: a humble coin, treasure from the depths of the Earth, it is raised through meditation to the Heavens where it becomes the halo that illuminates the heads of the saints. “ - Alejandro Jodorowsky, The way of the Tarot.



Untitled, Hilma Af Klint, 1908. A drawing made with the five through spiritual guides
 Af Klint's solo show at the Guggenheim was a legendary event. The show was up for 6 months and closed April 2019. From a young age Hilma was interested in spiritual matters. She was making art in the early 1900's. Contemporaries and predecessors such as Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian were credited as the founders of abstract painting, while Hilma Af Klint's work was ignored by art history and belittled her peers, including many other femme people and women.

Hilma's spiritual guides advised her to lock away her paintings and drawings, to be appreciated many years after her death. The artist believed that a future audience would take her work seriously and envisioned a grand circular, spiral exhibition space to house an artistic journey through her paintings. Walking the ramp of the Guggenheim 75 years after her death was profound.



"Group IX/SUW, The Swan, No. 17" Hilma Af Klint, 1915.

I have never been so moved by paintings before in my life. Hilma was making work in the early 1900's and died in 1944 and the Guggenheim wasn't built till 1959. Her dream of a spiral exhibition was prophetic.

I felt a spiritual connection when I viewed the work. Af Klint had her own visual language that she employed when painting that differed from mine, but the places where they overlapped left me breathless. I felt like I could read what she was saying. It felt like reading a sign. I really can't explain it, but the paintings felt like they were part of me or that I was part of them, or that we were tapping into the same spiritual wellspring.

Hilma held spiritual meetings with a group of women known as The Five. She made her work through seance and intercession with beings of a higher consciousness. Several spiritual guides introduced themselves to The Five and they worked together. The Five were willing vessels to be filled with knowledge that came from another dimension. A wisdom that was beyond earthly.

Af Klint was in a relatively privileged place. Her artwork was ignored by critics and her contemporaries but she was able to make it. She was able to have it stored and I was able to see it over 100 years after it was made. It is overwhelming to think about the number of artists' work that never will be visible or known to us. Ones who were silenced by poverty or prejudice. I would like to dream of a world where we have the whole picture. A dimension or parallel universe where all the voices are heard.



"Group IX / SUW, The Swan, No. 16" Hilma Af Klint, 1915

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E Marshall lives and works in New Orleans Louisiana.

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