

The secret paintings of Hilma af Klint, a Swedish pioneer.

7 March - 30 May 2010, Het Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem (MMKA), the Netherlands

The Secret Painter: Hilma af Klint

With esotericism, Theosophy and Madame Blavatsky all the rage at the end of the nineteenth century, the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint (1862-1944), generally known then for her landscapes and portraits, began to participate in small séances. These eventually led to a body of secret paintings. Whilst having received the spirit "Ananda" in a state of trance, in 1904, af Klint, agrees to follow orders and starts a body of mainly abstract works, incorporating a heavy symbolic language. These works; about 1000 paintings and 124 notebooks, were not to be made public until 20 years after her death, fearing they would not be understood.

"The Spiritual in Art. Abstract Painting 1890-1985", shown in Los Angeles, Chicago and The Hague, 1986, has led to Af Klint's work becoming entangled in discussions about the correlation between esotericism and the developments of abstract art. MMKA's showcasing of the works, under guest-curator of Roel Arkesteijn, allows us to revisit the discussions, started in the 80's.

It is a perplexing exhibition. Despite her clumsy figurations, some of Af Klint's works are convincing in their own right. 'The Ten Largest', a series of ten paintings, the soft sheen of tempera on rather crumpled paper, each measuring 3.28m by 2.4m, is perhaps the most confounding series on display. These are the largest abstract paintings made at the time, surprisingly as early as 1907: the year Picasso painted his first cubist painting. It seems, that regardless of her severe isolation, Af Klint was in fact a few years ahead of many of her (male) colleagues: Mondrian, Kandinsky, Malevich and Kupka. To add to the obscurity, it appears she was unaware of the avant-garde movement happening in the rest of Europe, though I believe there is some mumbled dispute around this matter. And she was certainly not an outsider artist by definition, having at some point shown her landscapes in the same exhibition as Kandinsky.

A confident carelessness coupled with a fixed control, the works harbour associations of creation, intuition, universe, harmony, balance, Christianity and the occult. The 'snail' motif, for example, symbolises the journey to a cosmic balance and the, often repeated, word WU signifies the joining of matter and spirit. Visually, it is near impossible not to recollect the work of Beatriz Milhazes with her colour palette and references to Modernist painting. Gazing longer at these bright, breezy pre-hippy, quasi-mathematical patterns and floral forms, it soon dawns that something very unusual is happening here.

Later works of 1915, consist of incredibly clean colour fields, reminiscent of 1960's American Abstract painting, a target uncannily indicative of Johns. Yet Af Klint's works retain strong occult and alchemical symbolism, which is hard to ignore. Her Theosophical beliefs remain central in her painterly motivations.

Spirituality and Theosophy played a major role in the thinking of the grandfathers of abstract art. They shared a common belief that through transcending the empirical, it was possible to attain a higher spiritual knowledge. Kandinsky referred to it as the 'Innerer Klang', (inner sounding), an unmediated mystical vision of a higher spiritual reality: an experience of one of the non-physical planes of the self. It was a journey towards, in Kandinsky's words, 'the nonnaturalistic, the abstract, toward inner nature'¹. In his Supremicist works, Malevich was also seeking a way to move from the physical to the abstract metaphysical, uncovering a new kind of non-objective logic. Mondrian's spiritual pursuit was one closely related to nature, fusing Theosophical theories with his art in order to break away from the representational.

¹ Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Kandinsky, 1911

Yet, somehow Af Klint's esoteric way of life is problematic in the history of art. Given the time and place these works were conceived, their radical aesthetic ingenuity is astounding. Our 21st century eyes may find it tempting to simply gloss over her extreme beliefs in order to fix our view on the sensuous, mellow-ness of these paintings. Exchanging the kooky gibberish for the purely visual. We might wish to tidily package "Ananda" as a conscious artistic persona necessary for the rapture of making. A concept, which let's face it, is far easier to swallow.

There is no denying that her eccentric belief system, her apparent mediumistic gifts and her later acquaintance with Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Anthroposophy, were integral to Af Klint's visualisation of invisible forces of the inner and outer worlds and secret, astral planes. Yet were these works not made in 1907, we probably wouldn't be discussing them at all. With the exhibition catalogue delayed, I have to wait with curiosity to see whether the accompanying essays offer another insight into our perception of the early developments of abstract art, and their Theosophical roots.