

Nancy Princenthal, "The Pleasures of Refraction," *Art in America*, January 2019

# Art in America

## THE PLEASURES OF REFRACTION

**Austere new paintings by R.H. Quaytman serve as an addendum to Hilma af Klint's current retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum, suggesting a deep connection between artists separated by a century.**

by Nancy Princenthal

Hilma af Klint:  
*Tree of Knowledge*,  
No. 5, 1915, from  
"The W Series,"  
watercolor, gouache,  
graphite, and  
metallic paint on  
paper, 18 by 11 1/2  
inches. Hilma af  
Klint Foundation,  
Stockholm.

CURRENTLY  
ON VIEW  
"Hilma af Klint:  
Paintings for  
the Future" and  
"R.H. Quaytman:  
+ +, Chapter 34,"  
at the Solomon  
R. Guggenheim  
Museum, New York,  
through Apr. 23.

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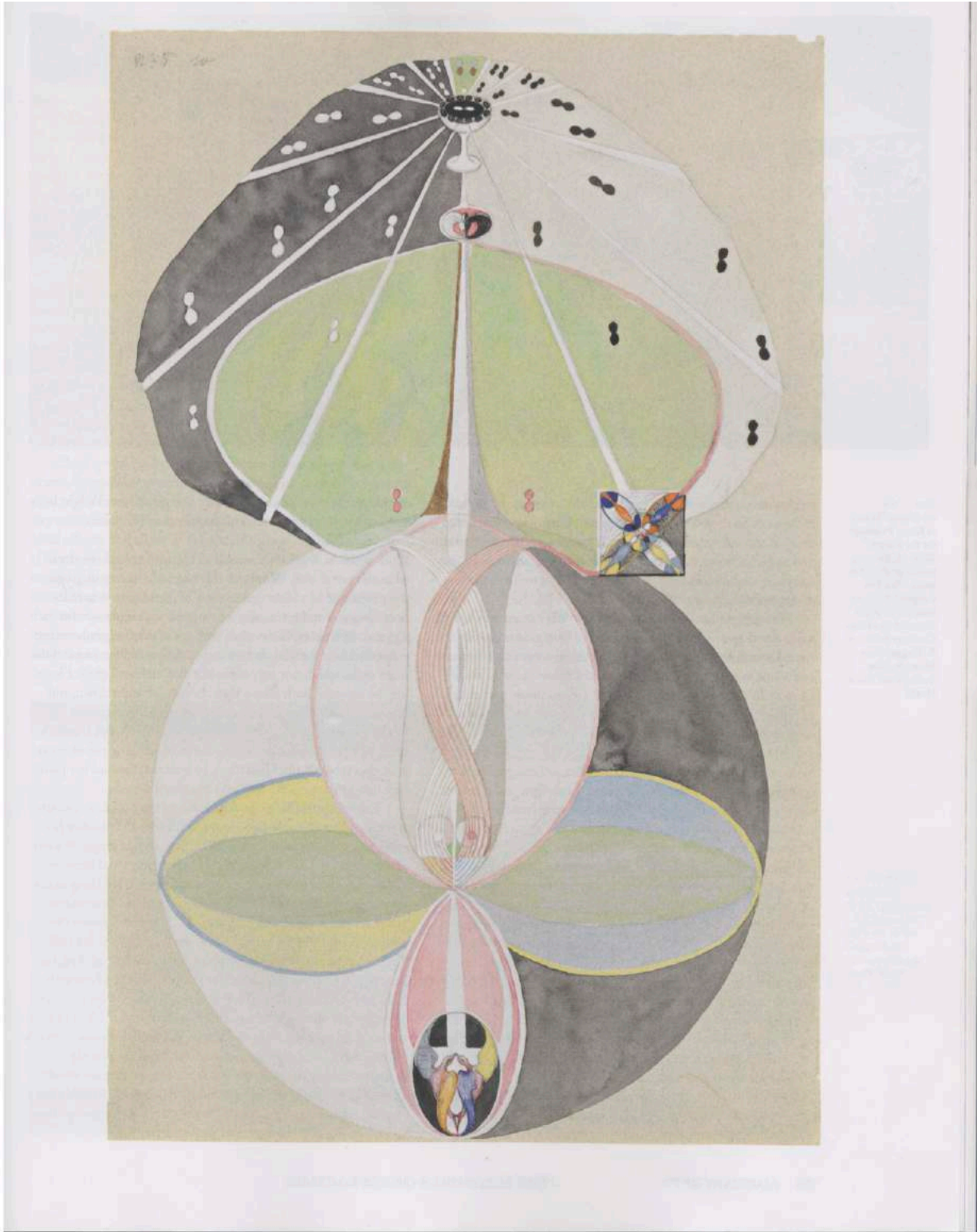
AT THE VERY END of the Guggenheim Museum's big, revelatory exhibition of work by Hilma af Klint is a single stretch of the museum's spiraling ramp devoted to luminous and perplexing new paintings by R.H. Quaytman. Looked at another way, which as it happens is the one Quaytman recommends, the unusual joint exhibition starts there, at the top, where it is introduced by her lucid, thought-provoking wall text. "To 'obey intuition' and 'understand only in part' were two commands that Hilma af Klint received and I chose to follow," Quaytman begins, laying out a strand of the tangle of interests she and the curly modernist af Klint share, before admitting that such half-blind submission is, "after all, for better or worse, what artists do." Calling intuition "a harsh master" that encourages work that can seem "childish, vain, fleeting, and subject to bad aging," she cites hazards for abstract painters—for artists of any kind—that have seldom been named more candidly. Unimpeachably humble, undeniably mature, and convincing in their promise of lasting intellectual interest and sensual appeal, Quaytman's paintings easily defy those risks.

The museum has placed its own introductory text near the lobby where you'd encounter it first when starting from the bottom. Signed by senior curator Tracey Bashkoff and curatorial assistant David Horowitz, who together organized both shows, the statement nimbly outlines the basis of Quaytman's work and its relationship to af Klint. The two artists were born a century apart—af Klint in 1862 just outside Stockholm, Quaytman in 1961 in Boston—and both found their stride at forty. Introduced

to af Klint's work by her father, the painter Harvey Quaytman, the younger artist organized the first solo US exhibition devoted to af Klint, in 1989, at PS1 in New York. It was momentous for Quaytman, catalyzing an ongoing research project of uncommon depth and stimulating a marked change in her own work. Writing in 2013 for a book that accompanied an exhibition of af Klint's work at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Quaytman proclaimed, "Hilma af Klint's work, reception, ambition, and life reflect absolutely everything I think about when it comes to painting."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, both artists let it be known that they were speaking for others. In her wall text Quaytman writes of af Klint: "She was able to deploy visual ideas by asserting that they were not her own. I, too, occasionally use this technique of finding a way to paint through another artist's authority."

Quaytman is referring to the spirit guides that contacted af Klint during a series of séances conducted with four other women. These spirits "commissioned" her to produce a cycle of works that became "Paintings for the Temple" (1906–15) and suggested the design for a spiraling chapel they were to adorn. The earliest of the ambitious works in this series are said to be af Klint's first fully nonobjective paintings, which puts her a few years ahead of Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, Kupka, and other contenders for the title of first modern abstractionist. But the abstractions of these first Temple paintings can itself be contested. Giant, swirly, soft-colored canvases, animated by arabesques and petals, ova and spermatozoa, and further adorned with legible if cryptic cursive

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View of the exhibition "Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future," 2018–19, showing paintings from her series "The Ten Largest," 1907, all tempera on paper mounted on canvas. Courtesy Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo David Heald.

writing, they refer, wall labels explain, to the stages of the human life span (Childhood, Youth, Old Age). In subsequent work generated without the help of commissioning spirits, af Klint rendered helixes and concentric circles alongside ascending stairways, golden mandalas, and spheres with Saturn-like rings, as well as angels, doves, and swans.

The designation of first abstractionist does not interest Quaytman. Nor does af Klint's painterly touch. Having meticulously copied many of the Swedish artist's paintings—a practice she recommends as the best way to understand a fellow painter's work—Quaytman is struck by their occasional awkwardness, particularly in the facture of the largest ones, executed in tempera. What she admires heartily is their "ecstatic lawlessness, sci-fi contemporaneity, gendered identity mash-ups and revolt from art-historical demands,"<sup>2</sup> not to mention their explorations of temporality and seriality, botany and geometry, language, symbolism and diagrams, the unconscious and sexuality. Quaytman appreciates, too, the frank femininity on display: the curlicues, the Florine Stettheimer-like palette, the floral motifs.

Many of these attributes can be found in Quaytman's paintings, spare and cerebral though they are. In fact, Minimalist orthodoxy notwithstanding—and it begins to look odder and odder, as it recedes into history—content is pretty much impossible to expunge from art. Nearly every early modernist subscribed to one or another pan-spiritual system. Most popular was the Theosophy favored by af Klint, a "scientific" synthesis of Buddhism and Hinduism dreamed up by the intrepid and learned Helena Blavatsky (who was generally dismissed as a crank by midcentury art historians). Blavatsky's system was also embraced by Kandinsky, Malevich, Mondrian, and countless others. Among Theosophy's enthusiasts was the formidable (and similarly sidelined) Hilla Rebay, who was responsible for assembling Solomon Guggenheim's collection, and also for cajoling Frank Lloyd Wright to design the museum that would show it. Spirals were key for all; the

temple af Klint envisioned was eerily close to the one Wright built in New York (though he couldn't have known her plans).

BUT SPIRALS DON'T appeal to Quaytman, and she does what she can to defy Wright's.<sup>3</sup> She begins by dispensing with the sleights of hand that generations of the museum's installation designers and art handlers have used to compensate for its singular difficulties. Generally, paintings at the Guggenheim are supported from behind such that they float a little in front of the main walls, which not only curve but also incline slightly. Floating the canvases both allows them to hang straight down, and brings them (fractionally) closer to viewers, who are distanced by the deep aprons that join floor to walls. Finally, the museum often compensates for its sloping floors by hanging paintings at a subtle, eyeballed tilt. Quaytman, by contrast, has had her paintings hung smack on the wall and dead level.

The principal challenge she makes to the building, though, is with a series of circle-in-a-square paintings that anchor her exhibition. Similar but not identical, they appear, singly, in each of the eight bays her show occupies. All are centered between their bay's edges and—perplexingly, at first—all are hung at the same height with respect to sea level, but not to the museum's ramp. So while the first (at the top) touches down where the pesky apron meets the wall, the last drifts up toward the ceiling. Turning around to view the ramp as a whole is like getting your bearings in a listing ship. It's a delightful moment of recognition, both conceptually and kinesthetically. The circles in these paintings are all bright white, on grounds of nearly black indigo, some mixed with graphite to sparkle slightly. They evoke, serially, a rising full moon; they also refer to the small circular skylights, secondary to the museum's main oculus, that are usually concealed. A couple of upholstered stools, also round, and also original to the museum, punctuate the ramp. Recognizing these visual echoes offers moments of pleasure, too.

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One or two on each side, the paintings that flank the recurring lunar compositions in every bay, wander, like af Klint's, between pure abstraction—the primary mode—and allusive figuration. There is an introductory image that can be read as a hazy landscape, and others with floral motifs. A ghostly face in profile peers from the bottom corner of one composition. Many are divided by crossed lines both perpendicular and diagonal; some paintings are tipped to hang as diamonds, in one case making an X into a disconcertingly lopsided cross. Often the dividing lines change color midstream, scintillating shifts that are not always evident at first viewing. But the main concern is the paintings' rich, subtle surface patterns and textures, which are screen-printed and often embellished by hand. A fine-grain basket weave, borrowed from an Indigenous South American tradition, recurs, as does a snakeskin texture that in one case involves an actual molted skin embedded, nearly invisibly, as a circling band. There are bold, fanned lines of gold glitter, and surface incidents that hover at the threshold of legibility: the pale, swirled, ectoplasmic imprint of fabric pressed against the surface of several paintings; the nearly invisible line of gold beneath a stroke of blue at the horizon of another.

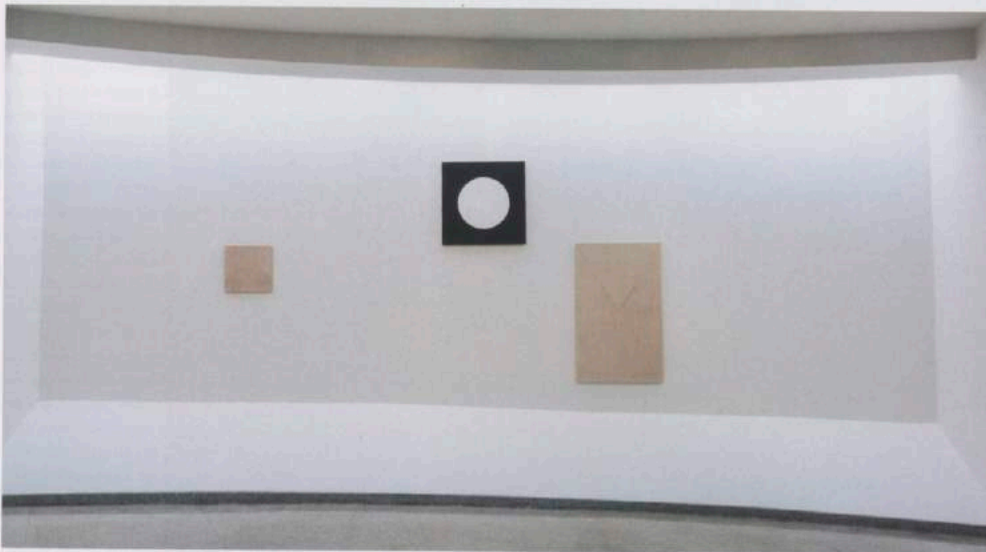
Deep spatial recession is suggested by some compositions; in others, flatness is emphasized. One painting is collaged with a small print of the Swedish flag and the title page of a book on trigonometry authored by af Klint's father. He and her grandfather were both naval officers, and allusions to nautical signage can be seen in both af Klint's work and Quaytman's. It is one of many testaments to the research Quaytman undertook for this project, which was drawn from a close study of one af Klint's many notebooks (she left more than twenty-six thousand pages of text and sketches in widely varying formats). A vitrine in the little library midway up the museum's ramp displays some of Quaytman's own sketches of the notebook



R.H. Quaytman:  
+ x (*Trigonometry*),  
Chapter 34, 2018,  
oil, paper collage,  
gouache, graphite  
pencil, and gesso on  
wood 12 $\frac{1}{2}$  by 12 $\frac{1}{2}$   
inches.

she chose to scrutinize. Hung beside Quaytman's wall text at the top of the ramp—at a glance, it looks like an illustration for it—is a photo-silkscreened image of the worn blue cover of the notebook in question, labeled with af Klint's fine hand and tied with twine.

MOST OF QUAYTMAN'S paintings, though, are far from didactic. Screened and shaded, hooded and moody, they are seductive but also baffling. Puzzles have run throughout her oeuvre, in references that range from collegial and familial to



View of the  
exhibition  
"R.H. Quaytman:  
+ x, Chapter 34,"  
2018–19, at the  
Guggenheim  
Museum. Photo  
David Heald.



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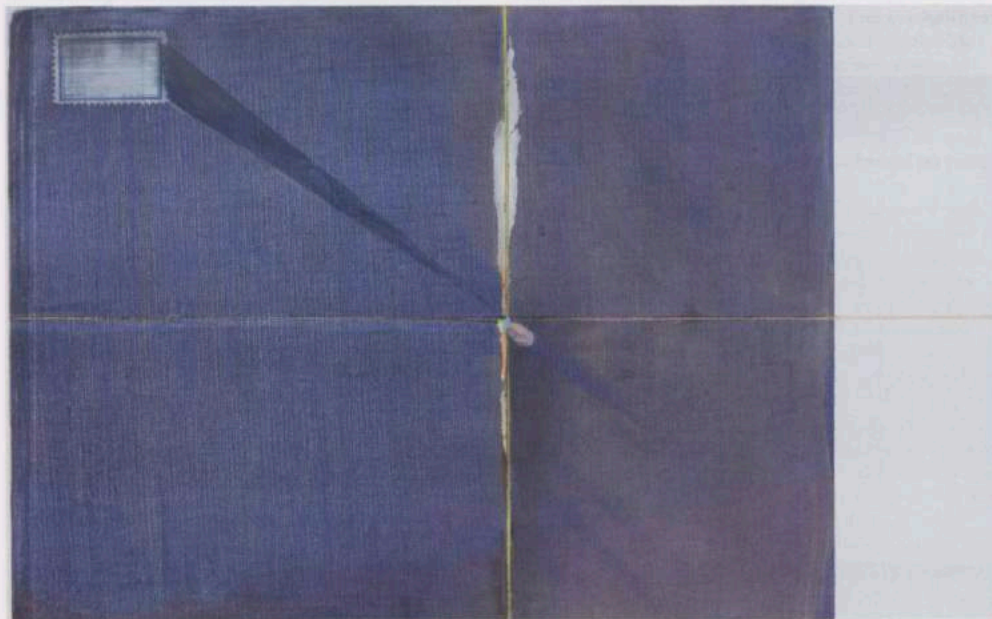
frankly esoteric. Quaytman's mother is the poet Susan Howe, her stepfather the sculptor David von Schlegell. Among the artists with whom she has been associated are Moyra Davey, Andrea Fraser, and Jason Simon, who shared her directorship of the collective New York gallery Orchard from 2005 to '08. Orchard also presented work by an older generation, including Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Adrian Piper, and Lawrence Weiner. Quaytman's paintings sometimes offer glimpses of her sources, but they are oblique. "Dan Graham's use of mirrors to problematize our conception of transparency and identity served as a source for some of the ideas I apply to painting,"<sup>74</sup> she wrote in the catalogue for a 2011 exhibition, referring to an artist for whom she was a studio assistant in the 1990s, and whose photograph has appeared in her earlier work, including that shown at Orchard.

In other words, if we seek windows in Quaytman's paintings, we instead find reflections and refractions. For an age of inescapable oversharing, it can feel tonic: a form of healthy self-protection. It could also be called a kind of social realism, a commitment to telling the truth about how art is generally made and understood—which is to say, privately. What is readily on offer in Quaytman's work is an expression of intimacy, and of art's obliquities. In a text accompanying a show at the Institute

of Contemporary Art in Boston, in 2009, Quaytman quoted founder Nelson Aldrich's 1948 statement on the new abstraction, in which he inveighed against its "cult of bewilderment."<sup>75</sup> Aldrich's rant is infamous. Yet by citing it, Quaytman suggests that among cults, a reverence for bewilderment—close cousin to wonder—has uncommon and lasting value.

Not that Quaytman keeps her references secret. As she told Steel Stillman in an interview published in this magazine in 2010, "I want to make paintings that can be read on their own terms, without footnotes. But if, as a viewer, you persist in asking questions, you'll find answers."<sup>76</sup> Quaytman has discussed some of the self-imposed rules governing the production of her paintings. Among them: all the paintings are executed on wood boards, their size constrained by a system of ten nesting dimensions determined by the "golden ratio" (which is closely related to the Fibonacci sequence). Significantly, these ratios also partly determine intervals between the works in any given installation. In fact, relations among Quaytman's paintings are as important as what goes on within them. She is keenly interested in pacing, and in meaning that accrues across images. At the Guggenheim, the teasing references to af Klint's image bank, the ghostly passages, the hints of gold, and the spheres are some of the motifs that gather significance as they recur.

**Quaytman suggests that among cults, a reverence for bewilderment—close cousin to wonder—has uncommon and lasting value.**



Quaytman: • •  
*(Blue Book), Chapter 34, 2018, oil, silkscreen ink, gouache, and gesso on wood, 12 1/4 by 20 inches.*

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In earlier paintings, there were sometimes directional signs urging such connections—arrows, for instance. Acknowledging that paintings are often seen with a sideways glance by viewers hastening past, Quaytman has drawn attention to their edges, placing depictions of their laminated layers smack in the middle of some of her compositions, as in a final painting at the Guggenheim. The similarity of these striped bars to the spines of books is intentional. In fact since 2001, when she introduced bibliophilic terms for her work, Quaytman's entire output has constituted, she says, an evolving archive. Each exhibition contributes a chapter (although its individual components can afterward be dispersed), and the Guggenheim show is titled "+ x, Chapter 34." The first two characters in the title are borrowed from af Klint—who included them in nearly all her notebooks—as a signal to posterity, as art historian Julia Voss argues in her catalogue essay.<sup>7</sup>

The archival project had germinated a decade earlier. As Quaytman recalled in the interview with Stillman, while in Rome in 1991 on a fellowship, she had an epiphany: "The stance of the painting is the profile." It was like a riddle; I wasn't sure what it meant, but I knew it was important . . . it seemed to refer to the viewer's movement past a painting.<sup>8</sup> In a subsequent interview with curator Antonio Sergio Bessa, she added, "Originally my idea was to shift the most intense focus off the individual painting and into the situation of the painting—to its neighbors and context." While depth is traditionally associated with narrative in painting, she further explained, "the lateral also can be a narrative, and that might be a way to tie abstraction back in."<sup>9</sup> Her project, a quixotic one, would be to buttress abstract painting with the structures of narrative history and academic research.

Quaytman thereby distinguishes her idea-based work from that of such founding Conceptualists as Sol LeWitt or On Kawara. Unlike their art, for which materiality is secondary, Quaytman's work is "a protest in favor of a medium—specifically painting," a way to "graft subject matter onto a foundation of abstraction,"<sup>10</sup> as she told David Joselit in 2011. Further, she said, "I came to the literary principle of collection because I envied how a book is both put away and still displayed."<sup>11</sup> It was a realization spurred in part by the specter of her father's and stepfather's posthumously warehoused works. "I thought," she wrote in 2010, "if I could make a mental switch from paintings wrapped up in dirty plastic hidden in dusty old storage racks to something more like books organized and indexed on shelves in a home, this traumatic fear could, at best, be avoided or, at worst, postponed. If you don't have a book, make one."<sup>12</sup> Painting-as-archive would be a defense against oblivion and the vagaries of critical and commercial reception that determine it.

Quaytman's commitments both to research and to considering a career-spanning corpus of painting as a unified project are additional links to af Klint, whom Quaytman credits for "her radical concept that all the works (over 1,000 paintings and many notebooks) were one entity."<sup>13</sup> While acknowledging the prestige of books, Quaytman's chapter-based organizational system affirms the authority of abstract painting as an information delivery system. "Language wins all the time over image," she has written. "I want to delay or suppress this phenomenon through optical manipulation."<sup>14</sup>



Quaytman: + x,  
Chapter 34, 2018.  
silkscreen ink, silver  
glitter, gouache, and  
acrylic on wood,  
52¼ by 32¼ inches.

FOR AF KLINT, a similarly rule-governed abstraction was underwritten by a host of new ways to visualize rapidly developing theories about the physical world. During a symposium accompanying the Guggenheim exhibition,<sup>15</sup> there was discussion of a range of phenomena that were being organized, in the early years of the twentieth century, into charts and diagrams. Sometimes the spiritual and the scientific were hard to distinguish. Along with Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater's spirit-guided color charts, there were Wilhelm Roentgen's diagrams of X-rays, Marie Curie's study of radioactivity, and Charles Darwin's taxonomy of evolution. Art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson explored how the borderline-occult concept of a fourth dimension became a touchstone for scientific research, including Einstein's work on relativity, Hertz's experiments with radio waves (whence the new machine called the "wireless"), analysis of the electromagnetic spectrum, and above all concepts surrounding "ether." Henderson also cited Charles Howard Hinton's development of a visual model of the fourth dimension he named the "tesseract." Af Klint, it was noted by several speakers, worked early in her career as a botanical and medical illustrator. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, art historian Briony Fer called her a "diagrammer," arguing that she worked closely with technical images. "To focus only on the occult symbolic meanings of her work," Fer argued, "leads inevitably to an interpretive dead end."<sup>16</sup>



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Af Klint: *Group IX/SUW: The Swan*, No. 9, 1915, from "The SUW/UW Series," oil on canvas, 58 7/8 by 58 3/4 inches. Hilma af Klint Foundation, Stockholm.



The advent of an age of diagrams has been heralded more than once and ascribed to several causes. In a 1987 essay, Vilém Flusser declared it an outcome of the rise of digital media. "Where once writing stabilized language," Flusser argued, "we are just about to leave notation (writing as such) to apparatuses and focus our attention on making and looking at images. We are about to emigrate into the 'universe of technical images.'"<sup>17</sup> More recently, fellow philosopher Brian Rotman proclaimed that the "displacement of the written text's hold on the self" has yielded "a post-literate self." It is "patterned not on the word—stable, integral, fixed, discrete, enclosing a unique, interior meaning, ordered, sequential—but on the fluid and unordered multiplicities of the visual image." Paradoxically, Rotman believes the imagery taking shape within the new media will be of "information-bearing, instructional, explicatory and otherwise instrumentally oriented images—maps, diagrams, tables, charts, graphs."<sup>18</sup>

While it may be true that the digital era has served as a technological spur to the dominion of informational imagery, the current celebration of af Klint's paintings suggests the primacy of visual communication should be backdated. The retrospective also underscores the important role that women played in its emer-

gence. David Max Horowitz, writing in the exhibition catalogue, and Patricia Berman, speaking at the symposium, both noted that women were prominent among the spiritualists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. "The majority of mediums during the period were women," Horowitz notes. "The practice allowed them to overcome the marginalization of their voices and disregard social sanctions by claiming direct access to an absolute authority."<sup>19</sup> Needless to say, they met resistance. Notoriously, when af Klint sought confirmation of her art's value from Anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, she was rebuffed. Quaytman believes his attitude "was that this huge body of work was the product of a crazy woman who had nothing to do with anything." And, she reflected, this "contempt has formed me."<sup>20</sup> Af Klint abandoned spirit guides shortly after her encounter with Steiner, relying thereafter on inner resources and producing more commandingly geometric work. In doing so, Horowitz writes, she joined a lively cohort of women who turned from channeling spiritual authority to assert themselves in other ways, including as pioneering feminists.<sup>21</sup>

In her 2013 homage to af Klint, Quaytman asked, "Am I ignoring the central dilemma—that she believed in the paranormal and

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Quayman:  
+ v. Chapter 34,  
2018, oil, acrylic,  
snakeskin, and  
gesso on wood, 20  
inches square.

accessed creativity as if her mind was a radio picking up static and signals?" She answers her own question by declaring, "What she believed seems so inconsequential compared to how the paintings themselves stir me."<sup>22</sup> When it was Quayman's turn to speak at the Guggenheim symposium, at its conclusion, she was brief. When she reiterated her reluctance to dwell on spirit guides, a scholar took issue with her, arguing that we couldn't understand af Klint without accepting the importance of spiritualism. Quayman responded that understanding af Klint mattered less than appreciating her achievement as a painter. The audience erupted in laughter and applause. ○

1. R.H. Quayman, "de Fern," in Daniel Birbaumer and Ann-Sofi Noring, eds., *The Legacy of Hilma af Klint: Nine Contemporary Responses*, London, Koenig Books and Stockholm, the Moderna Museet, 2013, unpaginated.
2. Ibid.
3. Quayman told me in an interview conducted in New York in October 2018 that she does value the museum's spiral for serving as a memory palace; she finds that she remembers exhibitions there particularly vividly.
4. R.H. Quayman, *Spine*, Berlin, Sternberg Press and Basel, Kunsthalle Basel and Sequence Press, 2011, p. 165.
5. Ibid., p. 251.
6. Steed Stillman, "In the Studio: R.H. Quayman," *Art in America*, June/July 2010, p. 92.
7. Julia Voss, "The Traveling Hilma af Klint," in Tracey Bashkoff, ed., *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2018, p. 51.

8. Stillman, p. 88.
9. Antonio Sergio Bessa, "Interview: R.H. Quayman," *Bomb*, Dec. 10, 2014, [bombmagazine.org](http://bombmagazine.org).
10. Quayman quoted in David Jovell, "I Modi," *Mousse*, Summer 2011, [mousse-magazine.it](http://mousse-magazine.it).
11. Ibid.
12. Quayman quoted in Bennett Simpson, *R.H. Quayman, Morning: Chapter 30*, Los Angeles, The Museum of Contemporary Art, and New York, DelMonico Books, 2017, p. 34.
13. Quayman, "de Fern."
14. Quayman, *Spine*, p. 325.
15. "Visionary: On Hilma af Klint and the Spirit of Her Time," Oct. 12, 2018, at the Guggenheim Museum, with Tracey Bashkoff, Patricia Berman, Daniel Birbaumer, Linda Dalrymple Henderson, Isaac Lubelsky, Marco Pasi, R.H. Quayman, and Julia Voss.
16. Briony Fer, "Hilma af Klint, Diagrammer," in *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, p. 164.
17. Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, Nancy Ann Roth, trans., Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 21.
18. Brian Rotman, *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*, Durham, NC, and London, Duke University Press, 2008, p. 95.
19. David Max Horowitz, "The World Keeps You in Fetters; Cast Them Aside: Hilma af Klint, Spiritualism, and Agency," in *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future*, p. 130.
20. Quayman, "de Fern."
21. Horowitz, p. 130. He cites Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1989.
22. Quayman, "de Fern."