Nancy Princenthal, “The Pleasures of Refraction,” Art in America, January 2019

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

AT THE VERY END of the Guggenheim Museum’s big retrospective exhibition of works by Hilma af Klint is a single section of the museum’s upstairs, devoted to her paintings and prints of new paintings by R.H. Quaytman. Looked at another way, which is what happens in the one Quaytman exhibition there, at the top, where it is introduced by her bald, thought-provoking wall text, “To obey intuition and understood only in part were two commandments that Hilma af Klint received and that were to Klint’s Quaytman’s paintings begin, bring out a mood of the tingle of interest abroad and the early modernist at Klint’s share—before admitting that rich call! Mind estimation is, after all, far better or worse, what are done!” Cutting intonation is hard to say that’s seems “childish, vain, fleeting, and subject to bad aging,” she cites also for abstract patterns—of series of any kind—that have, seldom been named more mundely. Unassuming but humble, unassumingly serious, and convincing in their promise of lasting intellectual interest and sensual appeal, Quaytman’s paintings may defy those rules. The museum has placed its own introductory text near the lobby where you encounter it first when entering the bottom floor: "To obey intuition and understood only in part were two commandments that Hilma af Klint received and that were Klint’s share—before admitting that rich call! Mind estimation is, after all, far better or worse, what are done!" Cutting intonation is hard to say that’s seems “childish, vain, fleeting, and subject to bad aging,” she cites also for abstract patterns—of series of any kind—that have, seldom been named more mundely. Unassuming but humble, unassumingly serious, and convincing in their promise of lasting intellectual interest and sensual appeal, Quaytman’s paintings may defy those rules.

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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, clover, and suns.

The designation of first abstractionist does not interest Quayman. Nor does at 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—Quayman is struck by their occasional awkwardness, particularly in the matter of the largest ones, executed in temperas. What she admires heartily is their “ecstatic looseness, sci-fi contemporaneity, gendered identity mash-ups and revolts from art-historical demands,” not to mention their explorations of temporality and sexuality, botany and geometry, language, symbolism and diagrams, the unconscious and sexuality. Quayman appreciates, too, the frank feminism on display: the cuticles, the Florentine Steinhöffer-like patterns, the floral motifs.

Many of these attributes can be found in Quayman’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; of the two, the former was dominated by the intellectual 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 co-opting Frank Lloyd Wright to design the museum that would house it. Spirals were key for all; the temple of 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 belong to Quayman, and she does what she can to deflect Wright’s. She begins by dispensing with the slightness 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 solves 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. Quayman, by contrast, has had her paintings hang 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 pedestrian 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 evolve, serially, a rising full moon; they also refer to the small circular skylights, secondary to the museum’s main ocular, 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.
One or two on each side; the paintings that think the recurring
linear compositions in every box, wunder, like af Klint's, between
pure abstraction—the primary mode—and allusive figuration.
There is an introductory image that can be read as a lazy land-
scape, and others with floral motifs. A ghostly face in profile pees
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
disconceivably disiplad cross. Often the dividing lines change
color midstream, incantating skills 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 snake skin
texture that in one case involves an actual molted skin embedded,
nearly invisibly, as a cladding band. There are bold, furred lines of
gold glitter, and surface incidents that hover at the threshold of
legibility: the pale, swirled, eolithased 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, harness is emphasized. One painting is collaged with a small
print of the Swedish flag and the title page of a book on trigono-
metry authored by af Klint's father. He and his grandfather were both
naval officers, and allusion 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 of af Klint's many notebooks (she left more
than twenty-six thousand pages of text and sketches in widely vary-
ing formats). A vitrine in the little library midway up the museum's
ramp displays some of Quaytman's own sketches of the notebook
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—a
photo-silkscreened image of the woven 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 familiar to

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frankly esoteric. Quaytman’s mother is the poet Susan Howe, her stepfather the sculptor David vonSchlagell. Among the artists with whom she has been associated are Maya Deren, 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,” 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 obligations. 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.” 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筹建 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.” 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 of Kline’s image bank, the ghostly passages, the hints of gold, and the spheres are some of the motifs that gather significance as they recur.

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Quaytman: +
[Blue Road]. Chapter 34, 2018, oil, ink, pencil, and text on wood, 125 by 20 inches.
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 constitutes 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 Klitz—who included them in nearly all her notebooks—as a signal to postcriticism, as art historian Julia Vois argues in her catalogue essay.

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.” 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 onto the situation of the painting—to its neighbors and context.” While depth is traditionally associated with narrative in painting, she further explained, “the lateral can also be a narrative, and that might be a way to tie abstraction back in.” Her project, a quasianthropological 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, in a way to ‘groom subject matter onto a foundation of abstraction’,” 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. 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 dusty 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.’”

Painting-as-archive would be a defense against extinction 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 Klitz, whom Quaytman credits for her radical concept that all the works (over 1,000 paintings and many notebooks) were one entity. While acknowledging the prestige of books, Quaytman’s chandelier-based organizational system affirms the authority of abstract painting as an information delivery system. “Language wins all the time over imagery,” she has written. “I want to delay or suppress this phenomenon through optical manipulation.”

HILMA AF KLINT & R.H. QUAYTMAN

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, 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-scientific concept of a fourth dimension became a touchstone for scientific research, including Einstein’s work on relativity. Herta’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 Klitz, it was noted by several speakers, worked early in her career as a botanist and medical illustrator. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, art historian Briony Fer called her a “diagrammatist,” 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.”
The advent of an age of diagrams has been heralded more than once and ascribed to several causes. In a 1987 essay, Wiliam Flascher declared it an outcome of the rise of digital media. “Where once writing and drawing were entwined, now they are just about to be replaced by computer software.” Flascher argued, “we are just about to lose reason (writing as such) to images and to shift our attention from meaning and reasoning to meaning-making and looking at images. We are about to migrate into the ‘universe of technical images.’” 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.” He “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. Perversely, Rotman believes the imagery taking shape within the new media will be of “information-bearing, instructable, evocative and otherwise instrumentally oriented images—maps, diagrams, tables, charts, graphs.”

While it may be true that the digital era has served as a technological spur to the domination of informational imagery, the current celebration of A. Klint's paintings suggests the primacy of visual communication should be buckled. The retrospective also underscores the important role that women played in its emergence. David Levey 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 disregarded social sanctions by claiming direct access to an absolute authority.” Needless to say, they were not the sole voice. Notwithstanding, when Klint sought confirmation of her art’s value from Anthroposophist Rudolph Steiner, she was rebuffed. Quixotic 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.” A. Klint abandoned spirit guides shortly after her encounter with Steiner, relying thereafter on inner resources and producing more and more soulfully 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. In her 2013 homage to A. Klint, Quixotic asked, “Am I ignoring the central dilemma—that she believed in the paranormal and...
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