

FINANCIAL TIMES

Loie Hollowell: "The cosmic heirs of Hilma af Klint"

By Victoria Woodcock

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Infinite Regress CLXXXVIII, 2021, by Eamon Ore-Giron © Charles White/JWPictures.com/ Eamon Ore-Giron 2023, Courtesy of the artist, James Cohan, New York and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia

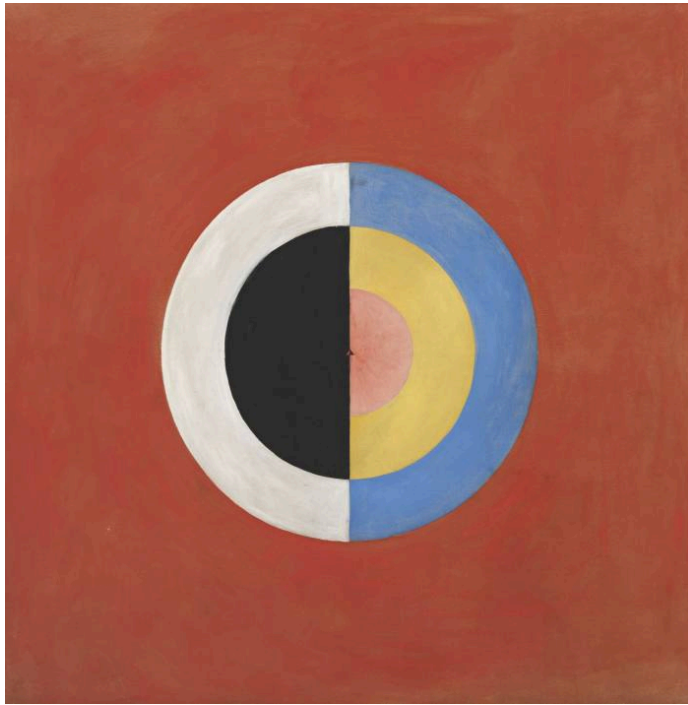
The spiritual Swedish painter is being channelled by a constellation of contemporary artists

In 1906, the Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint was "contacted" about a large and ambitious project. Af Klint was part of a small occult group that conducted seances and communed with spiritual beings, and *The Paintings for the Temple* was "assigned" by one of the artist's spirit guides. By the time of its completion in 1915, it totalled 193 works. "The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and with great force," said af Klint of one series. Colourful, geometric and symbolic, her other-worldly abstract compositions were wildly radical.

Once the project was finished, af Klint continued painting, but her work from 1917 until her death in 1944 was no longer guided by spirits. In 1932, she decreed that many of her paintings and drawings should be kept secret for 20 years after her death. Even then, the art world was slow to appreciate her oeuvre. In 1970, a leading modern art museum in Sweden turned down the af Klint estate. Only in the 21st century did her work begin to resonate.

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The Swan, The SUW Series, Group IX, No 17, 1914-1915, by Hilma af Klint © Courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation. Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian at The Tate Modern



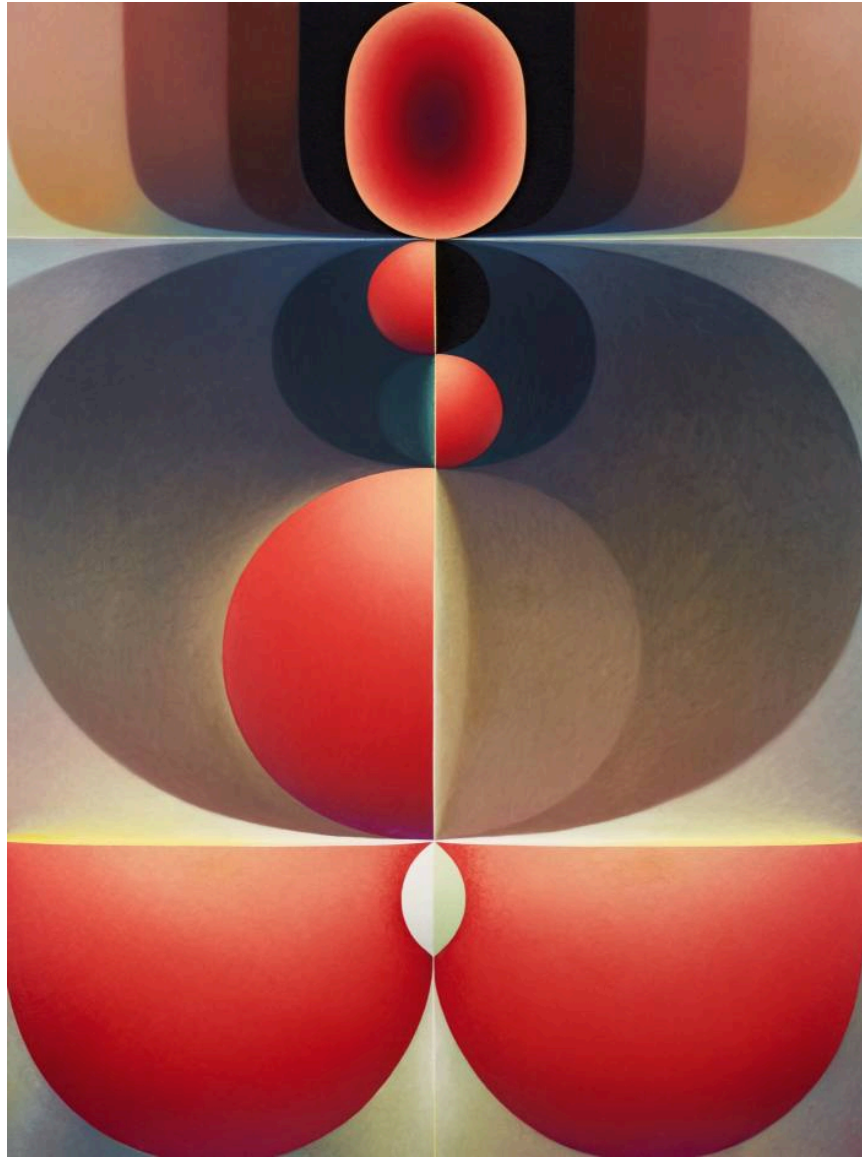
The Ten Largest, Group IV, No 7, Adulthood, 1907, by Hilma af Klint © Courtesy of The Hilma af Klint Foundation. Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian at The Tate Modern

Following a profile-raising exhibition in Sweden in 2013, New York's Guggenheim opened an af Klint retrospective in 2018, and the furore around the mysterious artist and her radical, spiritual paintings reached fever pitch. The reason? "She upended everything that we thought about the history of abstraction," says Tate Modern international-art curator Nabila Abdel Nabi.

Today, the fascination around af Klint continues to grow, fuelled by a flurry of new books and the current blockbuster exhibition at Tate Modern until 3 September. Meanwhile, the influence of her lyrical abstraction, and the tale of mysticism and mediumship behind it, is palpable among a constellation of artists working today.

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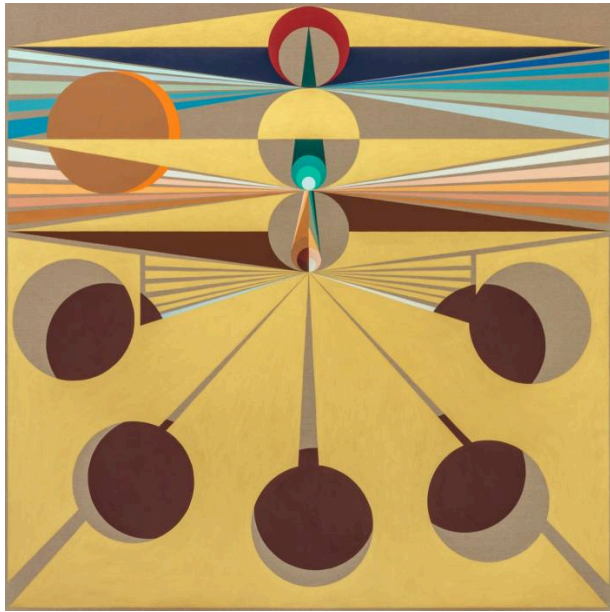


Pregnant Red, 2019, by Loie Hollowell © Loie Hollowell, courtesy of Pace Gallery/Melissa Goodwin

"I'm particularly drawn to the way she was able to integrate figuration, abstraction and diagrammatic organisation on the same canvas," says Los Angeles-based artist Molly Greene, whose surreal configurations are meticulously painted and exude a pastel-hued, crystal-tinted glow. "Af Klint solidified my comfort with making symmetrical images," adds New York-based Loie Hollowell, whose pulsating abstracts are hotly sought-after (auction prices are upwards of \$1m). "I also really like the relationship of her work to the body, the way the large works encompass you and bring you in." Hollowell's body-based works are also autobiographical. "During my first pregnancy, I started making paintings with big semi-circles; I'd compose them in geometric layouts, thinking about the breasts, belly, head and butt," she says. The painted surface is also built upon in foam, creating a 3D element that she recently pushed further, "bringing the actual physical cast of the pregnant belly into the work".

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Infinite Regress CLXXXIV, 2021, by Eamon Ore-Giron © Charles White/JWPictures.com. © Eamon Ore-Giron, 2023. Courtesy of the artist, James Cohan, New York and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia



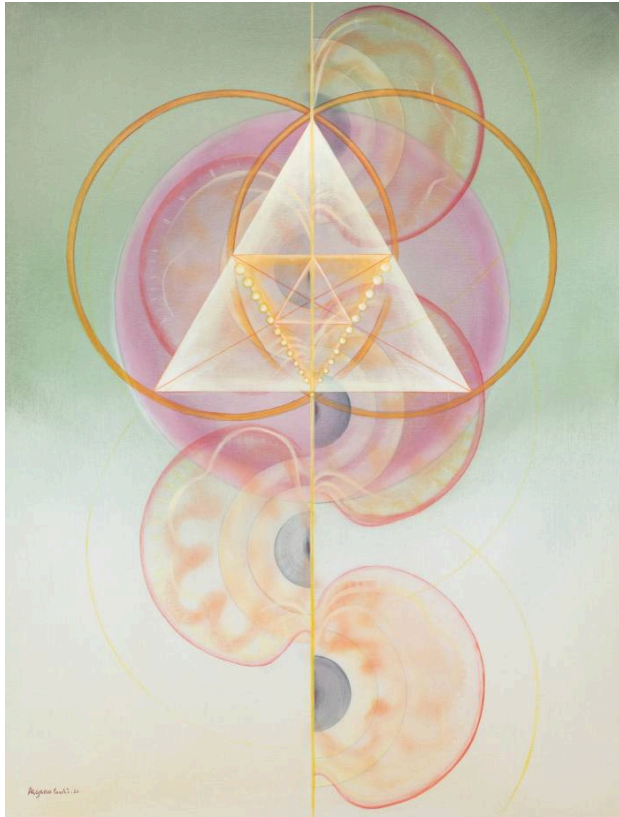
Pearly, 2023, by Angela Heisch © Courtesy of Angela Heisch and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London/Matthew Herrmann

Hollowell doesn't refer to herself or her work as "spiritual". Nor does fellow New-Yorker Angela Heisch, whose dynamic abstract work was recently exhibited at Pippy Houldsworth Gallery in London (the show sold out before opening, with half of the works going to institutions). The New Zealand-born painter does, however, mention "vibrational force" as a common theme in these latest works, which draw the viewer into central spherical forms, reminiscent of pearls or planets. She also admits an interest in "that unknown component that ties us all together - in trying to get across feelings and emotions".

In her book *The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World*, Jennifer Higgie writes that "the very air throbbed with unseen energies" for af Klint. "The question was how to interpret them? How to give them shape?" For artists today, the nature of these "energies" is interpreted in different ways. "I feel like I'm channelling something," says Kazakhstan-born artist Aigana Gali, whose recent show at Kristin Hjellegjerde's London gallery featured light-filled canvases of mystical, organic symbols and spectrums that she says began with dreams: "I would become a colour. I have no explanation why. But in the beginning I would dream myself as the colour orange."

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Ornek, 2022 by Aigana Gali © BJ Deakin Photography.
 Courtesy of the artist/Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery



November 2017, January 2018 NY, 2018, by Johanna Unzueta © Johanna Unzueta, courtesy of the artist, Casey Kaplan, New York, and Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City/Timo Ohler

Chilean artist Johanna Unzueta sees af Klint as one of a number of artists who "understood geometry and abstraction as a means to connect to something metaphysical", she says. Unzueta's watercolour and pastel patterns strive to make the same connection; punctuated with pinholes, they are often presented as freestanding forms that let light shine through. Los Angeles-based artist Eamon Ore-Giron agrees. His geometric constellations are inspired by "an abstraction born in the Americas", but he also feels a "simpatico relationship towards [af Klint's] approach - not just as formalist exercises, but as a means to express personal philosophical ideas".

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Rooted in Motion, 2023, by Tiffanie Delune. © Courtesy of Tiffanie Delune and Gallery 1957

But the spiritual and the self are not separate forces in the mind of French, Belgo-Congolese artist Tiffanie Delune: "What guides my practice is something already inside me," she says. "It's hard to explain, but maybe it's a mix of your ancestors, your soul, and all of your other influences and travels." Her latest body of work was made in Accra and shown at the city's Gallery 1957, with floral motifs at the fore of an ultra-bright palette.

"What really comes through in af Klint's work today is the interconnectedness of things," Abdel Nabi concludes. "The ecological perspective that structures her work, asking questions about the very fragile and delicate relationships that form our universe, is something we've never been more aware of. She thought about her work as being for future generations - and I think we are that generation."

Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian: Forms of Life is at Tate Modern until 3 September

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