

HYPERALLERGIC

Art Reviews

Paulina Peavy, the Spiritualist Artist Who Channeled a UFO

A show at Beyond Baroque is Peavy's first on the West Coast in 75 years.

by Natalie Haddad

LOS ANGELES — In 1932 Paulina Peavy attended a séance at the home of spiritualist Ida L. Ewing in Santa Ana, California. There,



she channeled Lacamo, an extraterrestrial spirit, or UFO in her words, who revealed to her the secrets of the universe. The encounter was a defining moment for Peavy; then 31, she continued to channel Lacamo, whom she claimed as her artistic collaborator, until her death in 1999.

Paulina Peavy, "Untitled" (circa 1930s to 1980s), oil paint on board, 16 x 16 inches
(all images courtesy the Paulina Peavy Estate and Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York)

Paulina Peavy: An Etherian Channeler at Beyond Baroque reintroduces Peavy to Southern California, where she lived from 1923 to '43, first studying art at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles (now part of the California Institute of the Arts) and then teaching art and exhibiting her own work and that of others in her Peavy Art Gallery. The show at Beyond Baroque, curated by Laura Whitcomb, is the artist's first on the West Coast in 75 years. Rare esoteric and hermetic literature presented in vitrines, and Peavy's own writings, reflect her life and beliefs, which merged spiritualist and theosophical concepts and astroculture. (Peavy also made films about her work that are screened in an adjoining theater.)



Paulina Peavy in her studio (photographer unknown, 1939)

During her time in Los Angeles, Peavy attended séances and became a member of Ewing's Spiritual Science church, though she was acquainted with members of other theosophical societies in Southern California and overlapping art scenes. These included William Levington Comfort's theosophical salon in Highland Park, which was attended by artists such as Mabel Alvarez, Agnes Pelton, and Dane Rudhyar (the latter two were both involved with the Transcendental Painting Group).

Absorbing these influences and through her encounters with Lacamo, Peavy developed a cosmology based on 12,000-year cycles of evolution, divided into four 3,000-year "seasons."

At its highest point, in “summer,” reincarnated human beings transcend bodily and earthly constraints to become spirits, or UFOs, and sexual binaries to achieve what she described as “one-gender perfection” and single-sex reproduction.

Near the entrance, watercolor and ink paintings on paper convey what Peavy called “the electronic structure of the universe.” Crisscrossing lines and geometric forms animate colorful amorphous shapes in works that are rife with symbols of conception and higher life forms. The shard-like triangles that proliferate in the works represent pyramids and ancient Egypt, the height of intelligent life in her cosmology.



Paulina Peavy, “Untitled” (circa 1980), mixed media on paper, 24 x 18 inches

In “Untitled” (circa 1980), a starburst-like form stretching out to the paper’s edges frames a diamond shape at the center. A web of lines

radiating in from the edges suggests simultaneous expansion and contraction, while alternating areas of black and white create a sense of dimensionality. At the center, a blue vortex threatens to unsettle the tension between chaos and containment.

The works on paper continue up a stairwell to the second-floor gallery, where Peavy's cosmology finds its strongest expression. Seven oil paintings line the walls, five installed in a pyramidal formation. Glass cases display elaborate, beaded masks that Peavy made and often wore while painting, in order to enter trance states and channel Lacamo; a photo shows her in an evening gown wearing one and holding two others.



The oil paintings are Peavy at her most radical. Swirls of paint applied in thin, luminous washes on a dark, undefined ground cohere into a face pierced by wide, riveting eyes. The paintings' dates — circa 1930s to 1980s — indicate her repeated reworkings, based on new revelations from Lacamo. The radiant wisps and whorls that surround the faces like tendrils or rising smoke signify energy waves. Geometric shapes that resemble faceted gems, in bright pinks and blues, are later additions that seem to float on the surface.

Paulina Peavy holding masks (photo by Sam Vandivert)

Singular and strange, the oils are less easily integrated into a modernist canon than the graphic abstractions on paper. In a 1981 documentary film that Peavy made about her work, *Paulina Artist-Philosopher: An Artist of Vision*, a narrator states that Peavy sought “wisdom beyond our world.” The faces in these paintings suggest it lay just beyond their Delphic gaze.



Installation view, *Paulina Peavy: An Etherian Channeler* at Beyond Baroque (photo by Narin Dickerson)

Paulina Peavy: An Etherian Channeler continues at Beyond Baroque (681 North Venice Boulevard, Venice, California) through July 31.



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Natalie Haddad is a co-editor of Hyperallergic Weekend. She received her PhD in Art History, Theory and Criticism at the University of California San Diego. Her research focuses on World War I and Weimar-era German art. She has written extensively... **More by Natalie Haddad**