

# Sight and Insight: “Paulina Peavy: An Etherian Channeler”

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*All images Courtesy of Paulina Peavy Estate and Andrew Edlin Gallery.*

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ENIGMATIC ARTIST Paulina Peavy’s work, which was [on view](#) by appointment from June 1 to July 31 at Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center in Venice, California, combines intellectual precision and painterly voluptuousness. In this gem of an exhibit, smartly curated by Laura Whitcomb, the art on the walls is complemented by multiple cases of print publications and costume items (e.g., handmade beaded leather masks) relevant to this recently “rediscovered” artist. Though small in scale, the show’s focus and substance are resonant and

inspiring. Whitcomb situates Peavy’s imagery in the worlds of spiritualism and esoteric knowledge. The exhibit provides a rich introduction to the mix of ideas absorbed by this fascinating figure, who began her career in Southern California in the early 20th century.

Born in 1901, Peavy was drawn to spiritualism in the 1920s when she attended a séance at the then-flourishing National Federation of Spiritual Science in Santa Ana. Almost immediately, she became acquainted with a spirit guide, Lacamo, whose presence directed her work throughout her life. Peavy had an ongoing relation to the occult as well as an interest in alien life-forms. Her autobiography, a 194-page

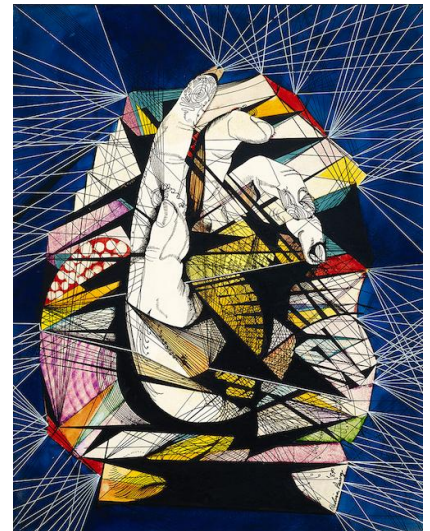
manuscript written in the 1980s, is entitled *The Story of My Life with a “UFO”* — though she used the acronym to stand for “unidentified *foreign* object.” Alternative systems of thought drove her systematic investigations.

The exhibit contains works on paper, collages, and jewel-dense oil paintings. Peavy tended to return to the canvases over time, so dating is difficult, but the highly intellectual graphic works in the entry lobby are attributed to the 1980s. Soft washes depict the organic shapes of living energy, overlaid with a carefully structured fretwork of lines that expresses an analytic system. The lines were produced using Letraset press-tape or were drawn with a ruling pen, now obsolete but once an essential tool of drafting. Considerable discipline is required for using the double-bladed, ink-dipped ruling pen — and its line makes a vivid contrast with, for instance, the ink-marks of André Masson or the suggestive scrawls of Joan Miró, both contemporaries of Peavy with whom substantive comparisons are worth making. Delicate and precise, Peavy’s linear structures show a sharp aesthetic intelligence, creating a vibrant counterpoint between the soft biomorphic forms and the geometric overlays. The contrast makes us aware of the distinction between the living world and the intellectual systems by which it is apprehended — and not. The delicate geometric scaffolding is not equivalent to the organic forms, nor is it meant to be, but offers an alternative expression of tensions and forces at work in the living world.



By the 1980s, minimalism had peaked, to be superseded by postmodern appropriation and various multicultural agendas; surrealism was by then ancient history. Spiritualism was also long gone from whatever small claim it had been able to make on a role in the visual arts. Revivals of third-eye depictions and sacred geometry that had crept into view in the 1960s had been relegated to subculture poster art and album covers. But Peavy’s works from the 1980s show that an extension of early esoteric practice retained a visual vitality that was neither kitsch nor clichéd, but fresh and contemporary in its graphical forms. That said, the only way to really appreciate and explicate Peavy’s work is in relation to 20th-century engagements with the occult.

The display cases in the lobby that contain books and publications are divided into two main themes: the spiritualist movement and the study of alien life-forms. In the first, works from the turn of the last century predominate, and names of those prominent in the study of human magnetism, the occult, and related fields of research feature among the authors. Manly Hall, Annie Besant, and others — some associated with Rosicrucianism, some with Theosophy or forms of Eastern religion — are present, but so are texts that arose within a scientific community. From the 1890s to the early decades of the 20th century, the study of electricity, magnetism, and other natural phenomena were taken seriously for their potential to inform human communication and perception. Systematic treatises, akin to Peavy's graphic investigations, sought to link the laws of physics to those of psychic experience. The features of the books themselves are also informative. The early occult texts are in gold-stamped printers' bindings and often contain chromolithographic images; meant to be authoritative, they were issued in sufficient numbers to reach wide audiences. Books like Rudolf Steiner's *Cosmic Memory* (1904), Manly Hall's *Unseen Forces* (1924), and Edmund Shaftesbury's *Instantaneous Personal Magnetism* (1926) — issued by the Magnetism Club of American — provide eloquent evidence of the popular pseudoscientific views in which Peavy was immersed.



The documentation of aliens and UFOs takes us into midcentury, dominated by another cast of characters, including media personality Long John Nebel, whose broadcasts featured individuals who had had encounters with the paranormal. Peavy appeared twice on his show, in 1958 and 1960, and promotional photos from those events are in the current exhibit. The typography on the [dust jacket](#) of Nebel's 1961 book, *The Way Out World*, is enough to tempt anyone toward close encounters of their own. The shift from occult to off-world phenomena might seem abrupt, but Peavy's concept of aliens was aligned with the beings of the spirit world. Her spirit guide Lacamo was not a ghost from among the dead but a figure from "another world," familiar with spaceships and other such phenomena.

The upstairs gallery contains canvases painted in jeweled tones, layered with luminous paint, swirling forms, eyes, and sometimes mystical phrases ("I am the Alpha and Omega"). In these works, the



swarming shapes and the analytic geometry are more integrated, the two systems moving fluidly from one to the other, intersecting and binding. Less rational than the works on paper, the paintings are lush with suggestive energies but feel more familiar in their visual language, recognizable within a particular spiritual tradition (e.g., eyes floating in swirling clouds of color). But they also show considerable skill and maturity in their luminous finishes, suggesting stained glass in their richly faceted composition and highly polished surfaces. While Peavy's rational systematicity is more evident in the works on paper, her paintings have their own seductive power, particularly for certain audiences.

The display cases in the upper gallery are full of artifacts from Peavy's trance performances. These consist of the beaded masks and accessories the artist created as an essential part of her practice. She used them for self-hypnosis, perhaps finding the distance they produced beneficial in freeing her imaginative process from the more banal aspects of the world around her.

In recent years, interest in the visual work of figures who drew inspiration from spiritualist practice has increased. The 2019 Guggenheim Museum [exhibit](#) of Hilma af Klint's elaborate canvases, with their organized symmetries and mystical geometry, was a revelation to many, even those with expertise in modern art of the period. The long-term disdain for the spiritual dimensions of such work arose from narrow definitions of modernism as a fully rational aesthetic. Critical art history dismissed much of Piet Mondrian's spiritual beliefs, for instance, in favor of a focus on his canvases dominated by structuralist and poststructuralist concepts. In its perverse provincialism, academic art theory had no use for the historical conditions informing the imagination of many of its prize artists — unless, of course, these suited a particular argument about the politics of form. Peavy's reputation has benefited from a recent revival of interest in the work by women artists for whom spiritual practices such as channeling often conferred an authority denied them in common circumstances.

Peavy's biographical narrative includes escape from a bad marriage, training as a draftsman and cartographer, work as an instructor in an art school, relocation to New York, and many substantive encounters with individuals and communities who shared her interests. Spiritualist investigation was not marginalized or stigmatized in the 1920s. And when the interest in alternative thought was boosted again in the 1960s, themes that had been pushed aside or downplayed in mainstream modern art found ready reception among the counterculture. Though Peavy's individual vision was not driven by trends or fashion, appreciation of her work fell and rose periodically. Like af Klint, Peavy offers an example of an artist whose entire career was nurtured by the study of esoteric thought.

Peavy's beliefs were informed by the Theosophy of Helena Blavatsky, but they were also, of course, the outcome of personal experience and conviction (though Lacamo told her to dismiss Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* — actually to throw it across the room). Peavy did not believe that discarnate spirits were voices of the dead but rather figures from unseen dimensions. Among her more prescient ideas was that the evolution of humankind would result in single-gendered hermaphrodite individuals; the messy (and spiritually unnecessary) binary between male and female would disappear. Though the canvases do not explicitly depict such beings, and the works on paper are not blueprints for their development, her clarity of vision feels free of gendered inflection. Peavy's art works thought into form, showing its contours and, in the process, providing insight into her private vision of spiritual forces. Her intellectual and visual conviction is palpable in the works.

Whitcomb has researched Peavy's life and work extensively, and her forthcoming publication on the artist — *Paulina Peavy: Those Sky Visitors* (a term used in Peavy's stationery) — contains a carefully documented profile of the artist's connections, influences, and social circles. Whitcomb, who has worked closely with Narin Dickerson of Label Curatorial, was kind enough to share some of the rich detail of her research with me, describing the way Peavy's interest in alchemical language connects her with such canonical figures as Salvador Dalí and Marcel Duchamp, whose surrealism and idiosyncratic esotericism are part of a broader aesthetic flirtation with spiritualism. The idea of "channeled" work was hardly a novelty in the period, and many philosophers and artists were interested in trance practices. The intellectual influence of Henri Bergson, Pyotr Ouspensky, George Gurdjieff, and Helena Blavatsky was felt throughout artistic and spiritualist communities. Closer to home, Peavy was acquainted with Mabel Alvarez, a Southern California painter whose approach to modernism also included spiritualist influences. An autonomous surrealist movement, known as "conscious surrealism," arose with Lorser Feitelson and Helen Lundberg, who were associated with a gallery Peavy ran in the late 1920s. Works from Los Angeles publishers, such as *Dweller on Two Planets* by "Phylos the Tibetan" (a.k.a. Frederick Spencer Oliver), issued by the Borden Publishing Company in 1942 (the first edition was 1905), were readily available. Meanwhile, Mount Shasta was becoming identified as a [portal to another world](#), situated on top of an ancient underground city. These are fascinating byways of popular belief, even if they conflate the possible with the probable and engage in sometimes dubious speculation.

Whitcomb notes that Peavy suffered from tuberculosis in her 30s, an experience that may have affected the size of her pineal gland, associated in spiritualist circles with higher consciousness. The rhetoric of "preparing the mind to be a receiver" and fostering intuition through an exploration of shamanic traditions persists throughout Peavy's work. Whitcomb's study connects these concerns with the specific moments in Peavy's life when she made deft use of her training as a cartographer to create the elegant schematic language through which she expressed her spiritual beliefs. Whitcomb reminds us of the important role played by the so-called San Pedro Renaissance in fostering a receptive atmosphere for these ideas by connecting Theosophy, New Age spiritualism, and occult practices in a distributed network of communities from Ojai to Shasta.

Peavy died in 1999, her life neatly bracketing the century. The subject of a successful 2018 [exhibit](#) at the Andrew Edlin Gallery in New York, her art is much more than an occult-inspired curiosity. Her themes and topics may have more currency now than they did in the early 20th century, dominated as it was by an analytic philosophy and an ideology of modernism that banished metaphysics, astral planes, and the beyond of thought. Peavy's work, which embodies a systematic approach to insight, is not a negation of modernism's abstract formalism but rather a parallel investigation of the universe. A faith in aliens, spirits, and the power of the Ouija board is not needed to accept and embrace the capacity of the artistic imagination to offer insight into the forces and energies that drive our world.