

ART REVIEW

Spirits Against the Patriarchy

An exceptional exhibition that brings together 17 women artists whose work emerges through spirit communication.



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Paulina Peavy, "Untitled" (c. 1930s–80s), oil and acrylic on board (photo courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery)

As you enter Andrew Edlin Gallery in Tribeca, Paulina Peavy's jewel-like visions command your attention. Gleaming against cobalt-blue walls, their vivid, almost embryonic folds hold droplets, petals, and eyes, while reds, blues, and yellows overlap like stained glass. Peavy attributed her work to Lacamo, a nonbinary spirit who began communicating with her in the 1930s, envisioning that humanity was evolving toward "one-gender perfection."

This work is featured in *Conduits of the Unseen: Women Artists Imagine Other Worlds*, an exhibition that brings together 17 women artists whose work emerges through spirit communication. Amid the growing popularity of occult-themed exhibitions, this one

stands out by asking what esoteric art can make possible, foregrounding its power to challenge entrenched social hierarchies.

In a lecture on the exhibition, curator Susan Aberth connects Peavy's work to a pattern she saw with all of the artists in the exhibition: "Their messages are specifically meant to better the world. And how do you better the world? All of the spirits say, 'Get rid of patriarchy.'"

André Breton appropriated the Surrealist concept of "psychic automatism" — an art practice wherein the artist suppresses conscious control to allow their unconscious thoughts to run free — from mediums. But as Aberth explains, "He took it directly from spiritualist women, but he purged the metaphysical content completely from it," recasting their practices as expressions of the individual psyche.

Conduits of the Unseen restores mediumistic work's social responsibility, emphasizing its aim to serve something beyond the self. These practices foster nonhierarchical relationships among humans, spirits, animals, and plants, challenging the ideal of the autonomous artistic "genius" — a word originally referring to a guardian spirit — and recasting the artist's role beyond sole authorship or commodity production. For example, Madge Gill's drawings were attributed to the guiding spirit, Myrninerest. Gill refused to sell them because she didn't consider herself the author, and believed that deciphering these channeled drawings could yield knowledge that could contribute to the world's progress.



Emma Kunz, "Radiating Stone" (n.d.), cast stone relief (photo courtesy Eliza Swann/*Hyperallergic*)



Installation view of Paulina Peavy's work in *Conduits of the Unseen: Women Artists Imagine Other Worlds*
(photo courtesy Eliza Swann/Hyperallergic)

Easy to overlook, Emma Kunz's *Radiating Stone* (undated) is one of the show's most powerful works: a small rectangular stone carved with a cross. It once hung in the AION A quarry in Switzerland, where Kunz discovered a mineral with healing properties in 1942. She devoted her life to investigating healing energies through radiesthesia, a practice of exploring invisible forces with a pendulum. Like many artists in the exhibition, Kunz understood her work as a magical object capable of transforming viewers. The mineral's healing associations, paired with the cross's symbolic charge, seem to anchor the entire space with a gravitational pull.

Hilla Rebay's *Dark Circles* (1962) stands out as a spiritual abstraction in the exhibition, with singing, wavering, and electric lines that are both rapturous and disturbing. A German-born artist and mystic, Rebay introduced Solomon R. Guggenheim to European abstraction and, with him, co-founded the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (a precursor to what would eventually become the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum) in 1939, envisioning it as a "temple of spirit" capable of elevating viewers beyond materialism. Her story echoes a broader concern running through the exhibition, one that calls for continued inquiry: Whose voices are heard, whose contributions are recognized, and whose forms of knowledge are deemed legitimate?

Conduits of the Unseen: Women Artists Imagine Other Worlds continues at Andrew Edlin Gallery (392 Broadway, 2nd Floor, Tribeca, Manhattan) through October 31. The exhibition was curated by Susan L. Aberth.