

Agatha Wojciechowsky: Spirits Among Us

Curated by Aurélie Bernard Wortsman

September 8 – October 23, 2021

Andrew Edlin Gallery is pleased to present a solo exhibition of works by Agatha Wojciechowsky (1896-1986), the first held in New York since 1972. *Spirits Among Us* reveals the enigmatic and rarely seen world of this renowned artist and medium healer in a wide range of works on paper created from 1951 to 1978, along with a selection of automatic writings and artifacts from her life.

Born in Steinach, Germany, the artist reported experiencing her first visions at the age of four. She emigrated to the United States in 1923, where she was employed as a governess, and later as a seamstress and laundress. She married Polish immigrant Leo Wojciechowsky, settled in New York, where they raised two children. Sometime after World War II, Wojciechowsky was introduced to psychic Bertha Marks. Propelled by Mona, Marks' young Native American spirit guide, and by her own spiritual gatekeeper Morning Glory, the artist began to draw by strapping a small pencil to her hands with a rubber band. This marked the onset of her automatic writings and her artistic development.

Sitting at her kitchen table, Wojciechowsky would work in a trance-like state filling notebooks with jottings that recall Surrealist automatic writings. Like other mediumistic artists, she believed that spirits created the art and she was their instrument. Her initially unintelligible markings turned into letters, and at times, the letters turned into faces. An avid storyteller, she wrote fables and taught herself to write in English with her right hand and in German with her left. The majority of her notebooks, however, were brimming with an imagined language that she believed would be understood in the future.

Utilizing her automatic writings, Wojciechowsky developed her practice as a medium and artist, creating pencil portraits of spirits and abstracted landscapes embedded with floating faces. Her earliest drawings, rendered in graphite or charcoal on paper, are portraits of Native American spirits. One small work depicts what appears to be an anthropomorphic figure that is reminiscent of the spiders made by Louise Bourgeois. Wojciechowsky's portraits from 1952 incorporated vivid colors, such as pastels on bright pink or blue colored paper. Like self-taught Ukrainian-American artist Janet Sobel, who invented a drip technique believed to have inspired Jackson Pollock, Wojciechowsky blended figurative elements—mostly faces—into abstract backgrounds.

“I was seated for hours at a time staring out the window on Lexington Avenue. And there across the street was [...] a plain wall and I kept seeing thousands of faces and heads. Nothing but faces. Nothing but heads.” With this recalled vision in mind, in a graphite on paper work made in 1969, the artist inserted floating faces inside a larger profile of a head that could be construed as a self-portrait. The flurry of faces in this drawing bring to mind the ink and gouache renderings of faces by German Surrealist artist Unica Zürn, who also practiced automatic drawing.

Like the spiritualist artist Georgiana Houghton, Wojciechowsky turned increasingly to abstract compositions. Over time, the worlds she depicted became more and more complex, filled with imagined landscapes in which each level is divided by Fauvist-like color fields, and spirit writings with unknown

letters and shapes. Her last series from 1974 to 1978 is filled with drips and expressive splashes of watercolor, and ever more hidden faces added with pencil.

By 1961, Wojciechowsky became an established presence in the New York Spiritualist community. She was named an ordained minister by the Universal Spiritualist Church and traveled throughout the world practicing her craft. On view in the gallery foyer are works which were once a part of the artist's own seance room. A trumpet used to channel 'spirit voices' is included in the exhibition along with pamphlets from Spiritualist summer camps, where she served as an instructor.

Wojciechowsky did receive recognition from the art world during her lifetime. In 1963, her first solo exhibition, *The Spirits*, was held at Cordier and Ekstrom (New York), which had introduced Jean Dubuffet's collection of Art Brut to the American public a year earlier. In 1966, Wojciechowsky's works were included in the group show *Soloists*, featured alongside those by Romare Bearden, Jean Dubuffet, Marcel Duchamp, Isamu Noguchi, Francis Picabia and Man Ray. In 1964, art dealer Rudolf Zwirner happened upon her work at MoMA and later presented shows with the artist and in 1978 produced a catalog. Recent seminal exhibitions like *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2018-2019) and *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2020) have showered new attention on groundbreaking visionary female artists. Current exhibitions like *Women in Abstraction* (The Centre Pompidou, Paris, Guggenheim Bilbao, traveling 2021-22) and *Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art* (Toledo Museum of Art, Speed Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of the Arts, traveling 2021-22), which includes Wojciechowsky's work— point to continued interest in women artists dealing with the occult.

Agatha Wojciechowsky's works are held in the collections of numerous institutions including the American Folk Art Museum (New York), the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), the Art Institute of Chicago, the Menil Collection (Houston), the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art (Ridgefield, CT), the Museo del Prado (Madrid) and the Collection de l'Art Brut (Lausanne).