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Wolfgang Paalen

GALLERY WENDI NORRIS



Les Cosmogones, 1944 oil on canvas, 96 x 93 inches

We have, of late, witnessed a surge of scholarship on the Surrealist artists who gathered in Mexico City during World War II, and several recent exhibitions in California have interested a larger public in this group's multitudinous activities. In 2012, after the Los Angeles County Museum of Art presented "In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women in Mexico and the United States," the Getty Research Institute's exhibition "Farewell to Surrealism: The *Dyn* Circle in Mexico" concentrated on a small group of émigrés who broke with André Breton to establish a "post-Surrealist" practice that combined elements of abstraction, physics, the extraterrestrial, and the artworks of native American peoples. Foremost among this group was the Austrian artist Wolfgang Paalen, who was born in Vienna in 1905 and died by his own hand in Taxco, Mexico, in 1959. This past winter, Gallery Wendi Norris's show, "Philosopher of the Possible" ratcheted up the focus on this painter, sculptor, and provocateur who's best work now seems significantly ahead of its time. While the exhibition spanned Paalen's career, featuring works made between 1932 and 1954 in France, Mexico and San Francisco, it was his pre-Columbian-inflected work, produced after 1940, that felt like a genuine breakthrough.

In 1939, shortly after leaving Europe, Paalen traveled to Vancouver with artists Alice Rahon and Eva Sulzer and proceeded to journey inland in search of totem poles, longhouse doors, and other American Indian artifacts. Indigenous art fascinated the trio, and in 1942, after moving to Mexico, they amassed an international network of photographers, poets, philosophers, and scientists and began to publish a journal. Its name adapted from *dynaton*, Greek for “the possible,” *Dyn* ran for six issues in French and English between 1942 and 1944. For *Dyn*’s first issue, Paalen wrote an essay titled “Farewell to Surrealism,” in which he disparaged the movement as a blind alley – a system of mirrors capable only of replicating existing mental states and nightmares rather than pointing toward new futures.

Paalen’s Prospero-like exile in Mexico—where he was alone but for a creative entourage of Mirandas and Ariels—was played up in “Philosopher of the Possible” as his arrival at artistic maturity. And indeed, Paalen’s best work of this period—for example, his largest painting, *Les Cosmogones*, 1944—makes his earlier output, including the oils *Untitled (Paysage cassis II)* (*Untitled [Cassis Landscape II]*), 1932, and *La balance – rêve interprété, vue gothique* (*The Balance – Interpreted Dream, Gothic Sight*), 1937, look like trifles: Dalí on Necco Wafers. *Les Cosmogones* offers a complex, sinuous, and fluttery vision of inner psychology and outer space. Forms that resemble totemic creatures push and pull at a globe (perhaps our earth) like huge cats batting at a ball of yarn in a jungly night. Paalen’s swelling lines and angles, his blips borrowed from the marks made by an oscilloscope, and his continual breaking down of the figure into clusters of embedded triangles induce vertigo and seem to anticipate the effects of Op art. During these years of exile, even Paalen’s signature was transmuted into a calligraphic logo of initials, one atop the other, like a pair of slugs throbbing with life.

The show made it clear that a larger survey of Paalen’s work is in order—if only to explore the pure Pop energy he summoned from the beginning of his career. His postwar works exude the showbiz pizzazz one might associate with 1940s Disney animations—they recall, for example, Mary Blair’s sketches of the wacky character José Carioca in the execrable *Three Caballeros* of 1944—and *Planetary Face*, 1947, offers the aesthetic of 1980s video games *Frogger* and *Centipede* forty years *avant la letter*. In both Martica Sawin’s *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (1995) and Dawn Ades’s introduction to *Farewell to Surrealism: The Dyn Circle in Mexico* (2012), Paalen’s essays and paintings are described as a missing link between Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, but his work is not merely a Darwinian plank in art history’s staircase: Paalen is a destination unto himself.

– Kevin Killian