

► CRITICISM

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Desert Rose: Agnes Pelton at the Whitney

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by David Brody

Editor's note: Due to the danger of coronavirus, the Whitney, like many institutions and galleries, is currently closed, with the disposition of this and other shows currently unknown. Please note that the excellent exhibition catalogue is currently available for sale. Listed below are the current official dates for the show, according to the museum's website.

Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist at the Whitney Museum of American Art

March 13 – June 28, 2020

99 Gansevoort Street, between Washington St. and 10th Ave

New York City, whitney.org

The exhibition of Agnes Pelton's inwardly inspired paintings at the Whitney, "Desert Transcendentalist," will inevitably be compared to the Guggenheim's record-breaking Hilma af Klint show of last year. Both feminist pioneers were trained landscapists whose calling was mystical abstraction; both were neglected until Maurice Tuchman's legendary 1986 exhibition "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art – although the show included only one Pelton, and the fuse of her fame has been, like her paintings, a very slow burn. If you take af Klint at her word, she is simply the medium of the works she is celebrated for, a conundrum of authorship which only adds to her contemporaneity, her *moment*. Pelton is another matter. Her symbolic abstractions are hard-won and timeless, as impeccably composed and crafted as Renaissance nativities. Georgia O'Keeffe's equally impeccable paintings have been the usual comparison – to the point of being an eclipsing doppelgänger. Indeed, O'Keeffe trained, a quarter century after Pelton, with the same modestly enlightened American landscapist, Arthur Wesley Dow; both were introduced to the Southwest by Mabel Dodge Luhan and her fabulous entourage, and both thereafter spent their lives painting in the desert – the one to immense popular and critical acclaim, the other in near anonymity.



Agnes Pelton, *Alchemy*, 1937-39. Oil on canvas, 36.25 x 26 inches. The Buck Collection at the UCI Institute and Museum for California Art

After seeing the LACMA exhibition, I'd been intrigued by the occasional Pelton sighting in regional museums in the West, often in connection with the Transcendental Painting Group, founded in New Mexico in 1938 (Pelton was by then living in remote Cathedral City, CA, east of Palm Springs). She has been virtually unknown in New York, where she grew up and studied, and where she exhibited in the watershed 1913 Armory Show. The current show and its beautifully designed catalogue originated at the Phoenix Art Museum, where I happened to see it in 2019, increasing my knowledge of Pelton's corpus by dozens of astonishing works, not a few of them rescued from thrift shops and garages.

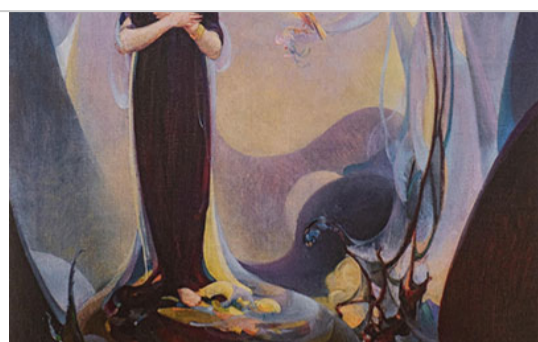
Pelton, like many artists of her time (as the LACMA show reminded us), explored every alternative belief system that came her way, chief among them Theosophy, a kind of gateway drug to eastern mysticism and western hermeticism. She copied passages from esoteric texts into her journals and set up a proper meditation room in her studio, in which she seems to have contemplated her own paintings while summoning new visions. Perhaps some of these visions bog down in diagrammatic information, taking occult symbolism almost too literally.

The urn which runneth over of *Even Song* (1934), for example, strikes me as received wisdom rather than firsthand insight, although the ethereal Deco calm of the overflow is transfixing.

Memory (1937) has an even more complex schema to work through, albeit a more cryptic one;

moreover, as with a number of Pelton's works, it is almost too skillfully sweet, even cute. With its soft theatrical lighting and choreographic charm, the painting approximates a Disney storyboard. Of course, these qualms are, all the same, full-fledged fascinations.

The earliest and most sugary painting in the exhibition, *Room Decoration in Purple and Gray* (1917), is the epitome of a transitional work. For a decade, Pelton had been making what she called "imaginative paintings," inspired by the enervated fin-de-siècle



Agnes Pelton, Room Decoration in Purple and Gray, 1917
Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 53.38 inches. The Wolfsonian-FIU, The Mitchell Wolfson, Jr. Collection:

In 1921, after her mother's death, Pelton retreated to a lonely Long Island winery and painted her first abstractions, dispensing with the waifs while digging deeper into curving, overlapping constructions. With *Radiance* in 1929 Pelton perfected a fluid, biomorphic shell game in which light and space change places as you look. But with *Star Gazer* and *Divinity Lotus*, painted that same year, Pelton found her true voice: serene, tuned in, and heraldic.

The artist was exhibiting in New York and elsewhere when, in 1931, she chose to move permanently to a village in the California desert, in near isolation from the art world, although closer to West Coast centers of eclecticism like Pasadena and Ojai. Her life among the locals in Cathedral City seems to have been about as passably sociable as O'Keeffe's in Abiquiu, NM, although in more scorched and humble surroundings. As the last of her family money dried up, she sold landscapes and portraits to support herself (mostly uninspired, even dull, it must be said), while continuing to work on her soaring inward visions.

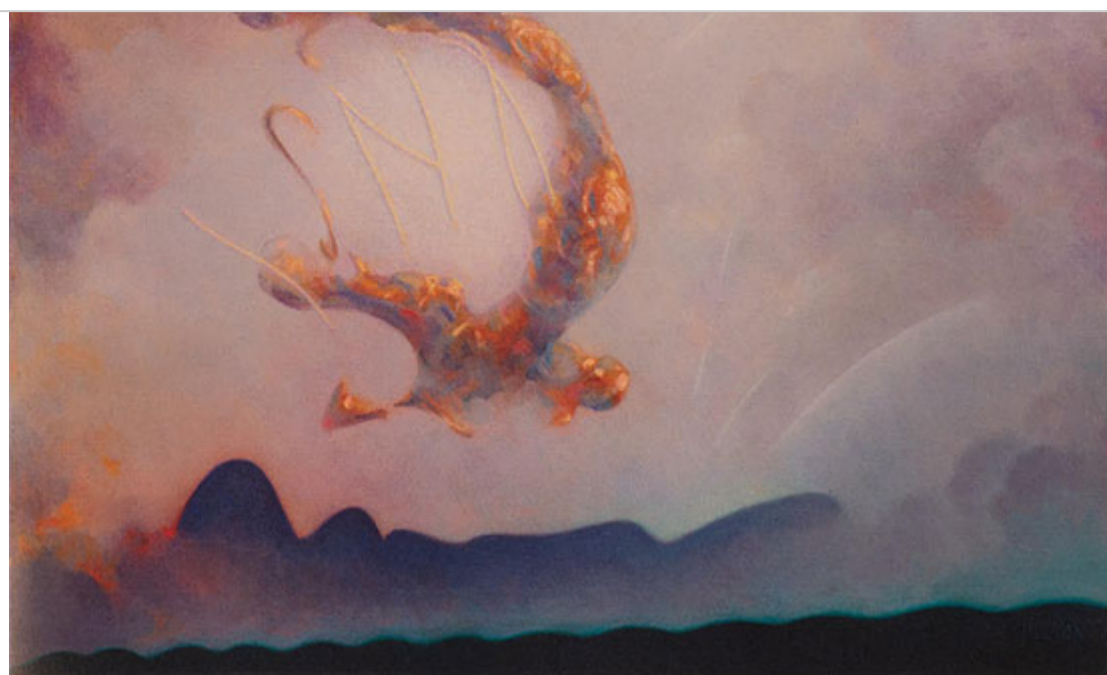


Agnes Pelton, The Voice, 1930. Oil on canvas, 26 x 21 inches. Raymond Jonson Collection, University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque

As for that family money, it leads us to events before Pelton's birth – a sensational prologue that might have been scripted by Orson Welles or Paul Thomas Anderson. In prosperous, 1855 Brooklyn Heights, Agnes's grandparents, the Tiltons, were joined in wedlock by the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher. Theodore Tilton was an editor and worked closely with Beecher, a spellbinding orator of national prominence, in the abolitionist cause, and after the Civil War in support of women's suffrage. In 1870, Elizabeth Tilton confirmed to her spouse that she had been having an affair with the charismatic Beecher. Theodore reported the confession to the "free love" Presidential candidate Victoria Woodhull, with whom he had been having his own affair, and she publicized the behavior to call attention to Beecher's hypocritical support of traditional marriage, with its legal and financial bondage of women. The scandal detonated in the burgeoning national press and burned continuously for years with endless claims and counterclaims.

Pelton's grandparents got much the worst of it. Theodore lost a suit of adultery and exiled himself to Paris (eventually, he was buried next to the painter Jean-François Millet), while Elizabeth, shunned by society, raised their daughter, Florence, in genteel poverty. Florence, who had betrayed her mother's affair to her father, was later sent to Germany to study music, where she married Mr. William Pelton. After moving around the continent for some years, the couple split, Florence rejoining her mother in Brooklyn with young Agnes in order to support the family by opening a music school. Mr. Pelton remained behind and died of a morphine overdose. Agnes was then nine.

At age 14, Agnes, always described as quiet, enrolled in the study of art at Pratt Institute. The silent, solitary vocation she fixed upon and followed thereafter was a refuge from the whirlpool of politics, religion, and sex that had swallowed up her ancestors — among whom we should reckon Beecher and Woodhull. His was an ecstatic, Transcendentalist version of Christianity; she was a practicing clairvoyant who summoned the dead. Thus, spirituality and spiritualism, forces writ large in the era, were particularly mingled in Pelton's cultural DNA (and perhaps not just cultural, considering that Beecher was rumored to have fathered more than one of his congregants' children). One last vignette from this prologue: in 1875, the same year as the adultery trial, Madame Helena Blavatsky founded, in New York, a mystical, post-Christian sect she called Theosophy, or divine knowledge. It was a syncretic, inward road map past the gross matter of the here and now, beyond mental shackles like Heaven and Hell, and it was destined to preside at the birth of modernist abstraction.



Agnes Pelton, *Lost Music II*, 1950. Oil on canvas, 22 x 24 inches. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Pelton's deeply moving 1933 painting *The Primal Wing* seems intended to answer the call of one indispensable Theosophist text, *Thought-Forms*. An illustrated tract by Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater first published in 1901, the book asserts that thoughts can be seen by trained clairvoyants. Despite some silly and prudish moments, *Thought-Forms* opens the door for synesthetic speculations – especially with an epilogue of clouds visualizing the music of Richard Wagner and Felix Mendelssohn. (Pelton's 1950 premonition of a Lisa Yuskavage painting, *Lost Music II*, not on view but reproduced in the catalogue, is surely up this alley.) The pamphlet includes a color chart of auras, as well as illustrations of particular thought vibrations. *Greed for drink* is a grasping brown blob with cartoonish claws wrapping around an absent bottle – and fledgling Theosophists are warned to imagine how *lustful* thoughts would appear to advanced lodge members.

With perhaps equal credulity, *peace and protection* appears as a pair of rose-colored wings, and Pelton's *The Primal Wing* must have been suggested by this image – keeping in mind that the authors of *Thought-Forms* openly invited artistic license by acknowledging their illustrations' limits. In Pelton's unforgettable interpretation, *peace and protection* is a single incandescent rosy wing hovering over a slumbering gray landscape with the tragic grace of a Fra Angelico angel at a Crucifixion.



Agnes Pelton, *Orbits*, 1934. Oil on canvas, 36.25 x 30 inches. Oakland Museum of California

Pelton consulted many doctrines, from the Agni Yoga promoted by Nicholas Roerich (whose phantasmal Tibetan landscapes seem to have influenced her dawn-and-dusk palette), to the aphorisms of Carl Jung (who might have noticed Pelton's early paintings when he attended the Armory Show). Most of Pelton's symbolism was so fundamental as to be beyond dogma; of stars, vessels, luminous orbs, and fire she was a seer on her own terms. *Messengers* (1932), with its buoyant, precision-tooled mystery can contend with any O'Keeffe steer skull or af Klint temple painting, any Kazimir Malevich or Piet Mondrian, any Arthur Dove or Charles Burchfield or Marsden Hartley, or indeed any other spiritualist Twentieth Century work of art. I can say the same for *Orbits* (1934), *Alchemy* (1937-1939) and *The Blest* (1941) – as well as *The Voice* (1930) and *White Fire* (1930), two incredible paintings that are sorely missed in the exhibition (again, consult the catalogue). In each of these centered, delicately refined compositions Pelton presents us with something very like an icon for a new religion.

This religion has a distinctly feminist lineage – mysticism in the West being re-introduced by lionhearts like Woodhull, Madame Blavatsky and Besant, and patronized by trend-setters like Luhan. The feminine principle, as a Theosophist might say, had long been suppressed but was now re-emerging, and Pelton, for one, perfectly captures and distills it in works of devotion such as *Messengers* and *Orbits*. What makes these softly radiant visions unique is that they are actually chipped from diamond-hard philosopher's stone. Her painterly sleight-of-hand transforms colored earth into sheer light and space. A gossamer 1931 work, *Translation*, is in every way the antipode of Jess's alchemical *Translations* of the 1960s – those impossibly thick, yet precise paintings that seem imprinted by occult, perhaps demonic dimensions. But if Pelton's beatific vision is not as literally thick as Jess's, it is, in all its passionate naiveté, equally potent. The two artists might be halves of a whole, yin and yang, the good cop/bad cop of American visionaries.



Agnes Pelton, Messengers, 1932. Oil on canvas, 28 x 20 inches. Collection Phoenix Art Museum; Gift of the Melody S. Robidoux Foundation

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I loved reading this article and am hoping there's an opportunity to see the paintings in the flesh before too long. Thank you.

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