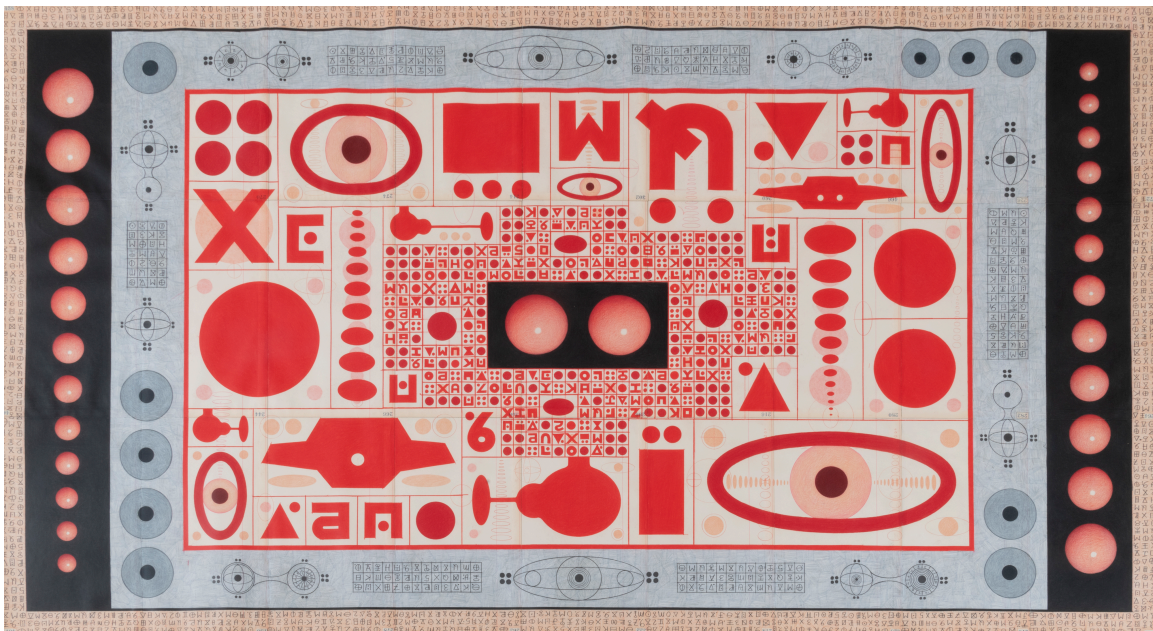




Art, Contemporary art
Andrew Edlin Gallery, Nolita
Until Saturday January 19 2019
4 out of 5 stars

“April 14, 1561”



This show's title marks the date when swarms of spheres invaded the skies above 16th-century Nuremberg, Germany, suggesting that UFO visitations have been with us since time immemorial. Indeed, if you believe the so-called “ancient astronaut theorists” on the History Channel, extraterrestrials have regularly descended on our planet over the centuries to erect the marvels—Khufu's Pyramid, Machu Picchu and so on—that we were apparently too stupid to build ourselves. That may be the case (at least the part about mankind being stupid), but if nothing else, tales of otherworldly intrusions, including abductions by little gray men wielding anal probes, represent a kind of redemption narrative in saucer form. That background informs this lively exhibition of four artists—Ionel Talpazan, Karla Knight, Paulina Peavy and Esther Pearl Watson—whose works relay close encounters of varying kinds.

Ionel Talpazan (1955–2015) was an eight-year-old in rural Romania when he snuck out his bedroom window in the middle of the night and ran into a UFO that transfixed him with “radiating blue energy,” as he later claimed. The incident inspired a fascination with alien technology, which Talpazan detailed in scores of colorful spaceship schematics, annotated in Romanian. One example, *Silver UFO*, depicts a flying hubcap whose center dome oddly recalls the U.S. Capitol.

Talpazan was self-taught, but the other artists, like Esther Pearl Watson, went to art school. Her scenes of funky spacecraft hovering over recycling centers or pastures dotted with indifferent cows illustrate episodes in the life of her father, a man who spent years struggling to build a working flying saucer that he had hoped to sell to NASA. Similarly, Karla Knight draws upon a childhood populated by eccentric relatives, including a dad who wrote obsessively about UFOs. Like Talpazan, she creates spaceship diagrams, though they resemble glyphs left behind by galactic travelers. Small, abstract canvases by Paulina Peavy (1901–1999) may seem out of place, but their softly gradated, ovoid shapes were guided by an extraterrestrial “spirit muse” that revealed itself to her during a séance.

Ultimately, it’s easy to dismiss UFO encounters as fantasy, but they’re real enough for the people who have them, perhaps reflecting an underlying need to seek out the divine. You could say the works here share a certain religiosity or maybe a recognition of something Carl Sagan once said about us as a species: We are a way for the cosmos to know itself.

BY: HOWARD HALLE

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