

Cosmic Energy Beings Descend on Greater Reston Arts Center in Paulina Peavy's Outsider Art

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PAULINA PEAVY

When **Paulina Peavy** appeared on **Long John Nebel's** late-night radio talk show in New York in 1958, she wore a decorative mask. It was part of her art-making process, but that wasn't what she was there to discuss.

“When did you first realize you could go into a trance?” the host asks. By that point in her life, Peavy had built a legitimate art practice, with a few different

Manhattan solo shows under her belt. But Nebel wanted to talk about the beings that had been visiting her for nearly two decades: aliens, supernatural entities, who hailed from another realm. Nebel's show, which ran from midnight to 5:30 a.m. five nights a week, ran the paranormal gamut, from ghost sightings to conspiracy theories to close encounters—the stuff that insomniacs live for.

Peavey claimed to know this otherworld intimately: She served as a medium for beings of pure energy, in particular one frequent interdimensional flyer known as **Lacamo**. Peavey wore one of her hand-made masks to her radio appearance in hopes of a channeling Lacamo or one of his cohort. Her masks worked like a conduit for UFO energy. Listeners were in luck: That night, Peavey was a hot mic.

Twenty-five years ago, she explains to Nebel, she began to hear voices coming through her. At that very moment in the program, Peavey cries out. “YOU SEE PAULINA SQUIRMING ABOUT BECAUSE WE ARE HOOKING INTO HER BEING HIGH VOLTAGE,” she intones, in a convenient establishment shot for radio listeners. Peavey (or somebody) continues on in an imperious voice. “THIS IS NOT THE VOICE OF PAULINA, FOR WE HAVE NOT RELEASED HER.”

Paulina Peavy: A Message to Paulina, on view at the Greater Reston Arts Center, is an effort to suss out what Peavey could not fully explain to Nebel that night. Or through a series of woowoo films, like 1987's *UFO Identified*, which she produced herself. Over a career spanning decades and periods on both coasts, Peavey pursued a detailed vision of universal enlightenment, one that would culminate in a unified gender for all humankind. Along the way, she made hippie artworks and even found a modicum of commercial success. Peavey died in Bethesda in 1999, at the age of 98 and in the grips of dementia, and she otherwise has no claim to the D.C. area.

Yet it's hard to imagine seeing this show anywhere else. Or any time else: *A Message to Paulina* arrives at a time when **Steve Bannon** ascended the ziggurat of power (however briefly) as a harbinger of an epochal cataclysm known as the Fourth Turning. The Pentagon confirmed the existence of footage recorded by a Navy F/A-18 Super Hornet that appears to depict an honest-to-goodness flying saucer. Throw in some theremin and a week's worth of headlines from *The New York Times* might not sound all that different from the message Lacamo spent Peavey's life trying to tell us.

What we know about that life is short and sweet: Born in 1901 in Colorado, she spent her formative years bouncing around the West Coast before settling in Los Angeles. She claims to have studied at the Chouinard School of Art (now the California Institute of Technology), one of the premiere institutions funneling illustrators into the Walt Disney Co. at the time. Her studies might explain her precise approach to work that attempts to evoke formlessness. Things changed for Peavey in 1932, when she began attending a weekly séance in Long Beach. Shortly after, on the eve of her greatest artistic accomplishment—while she was

exhibiting a 14-foot mural at the Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco—she was first visited by Lacamo.

A Message to Paulina tells this story through Peavy's drawings and paintings, her masks, a bit of ephemera from her life, and a loop of her loopy films. (The radio program is also playing in the gallery.) The paintings are the place to start: almost all untitled and undated, Peavy's dark, dense atmospheric abstractions feature geometric forms on their surface, like a crystalline net trying to reign in the ocean. The drawings especially are too refined to fit the not-so-neat idea that most of us have of outsider or visionary art. The Greater Reston Arts Center show explodes that simplistic box.

Peavy co-credits Lacamo for much of the artworks, and to the extent that it's tempting to trace her hand (to pick a pronoun for a gender-defying being of pure harmonic energy) in this show, it's gotta be in the masks. Covered in costume jewels and patterned fabric, they evoke the overbearing decorative sensibility of Hollywood Regency—era designer **Dorothy Draper**. The artist used tassels and seashells in ways that sometimes obstructed the eyelets. Seeing them did not summon for me a vision of Lacamo, but it's easy to imagine the faceless Peavy donning a mask to convey alien messages in her baritone register—summoning all the exotic drama of **Yma Sumac**.

A Message to Paulina is ultimately too thin, as a historical record, to make much of a claim about her status in the art scenes she inhabited at various points in her life. For example, there are two untitled, undated smoke drawings, a complete departure from the orderly graphic style in her paintings. They resemble some works that the late D.C. artist **Rockne Krebs** made using candle smoke and airbrush in the 1970s. Peavy's drawings with smoke are also ghostly yet precious, but with no context to understand them, they are mysteries. (To the credit of Greater Reston Arts Center curator and executive director **Lily Siegel**, there wasn't much work by Peavy to be found.)

Instead, *A Message* is a challenge to the conventional wisdom that there is a particular look or feel to outsider art, a notion that is anyway rooted in a limited vision of neurodiversity. Too often, outsider means other. Outsider artists are seen as exiles from a normal way of doing things, less often as challengers at the gates. By all signs, Peavy was traditionally educated and commercially embraced. This show ought to upset the comfortable categories of inside and outside.

No doubt, Peavy's work is out there. Her art is the kind of out there, however, that feels affirming and sensual and performative, not constricting or hallucinatory or eschatological. These days, Peavy's world offers the kind of escape that the rest of us, masks off, might gladly entertain.

At the Greater Reston Arts Center to Feb. 17. 12001 Market Street, Suite #103, Reston, Va. Free. (703) 471-9242. restonarts.org.