

JULY 19, 2021 KRISTINE SCHOMAKER

Paulina Peavy at Mike Kelley Gallery



Paulina Peavy, Untitled, Etherian Channeler, Mike Kelley Gallery, Beyond Baroque; Image courtesy of the gallery

Paulina Peavy: An Etherian Channeler

MIKE KELLEY GALLERY AT BEYOND BAROQUE, VENICE
THROUGH JULY 31

Written by Shana Nys Dambrot

Layering is many things. Literally, it is by definition an accumulation — of garments for warmth, of soils in geological time, of flavors or of sounds for aesthetic depth, of meanings in successive contexts, of thick paint on fences, of translucent gossamer veneers on canvas. In the paintings of Paulina Peavy (1901–1999), layering is all those things and, naturally, more. Her constructive image-making speaks to the veils of mystery at the heart of the cosmos, and embodies this structure in the application of layer after layer of pigment and glaze over the course of five decades; her layers are also a form of marking time's passage. And finally, these works symbolize layered consciousness, as she conceived them as guided-hand collaborations between herself and her channeled spirit guide.



The channeled paintings on view in the exhibition, begun in the 1930's and completed in the 1980's, are not at all heavy or muddled, in the way one might expect of a canvas worked on for 50 years. Instead each one is a limpid, luminous protean apparition with waves and undulations, chakras and tendrils, all-seeing eyes and sensual lips, crystalline gemstones, cosmological, prismatic penumbras, and drifting and gathering waves of ocher and goldenrod, indigo and the most glorious fuschia, turquoise, emerald, icy lavender. Although the figures in their clear-eyed, seductive beauty and tapestries of mystique present themselves as, if not female then decidedly feminine in their essential energy, the philosophy they investigate and embody specifically has to do with the promise of a post-gender planetary utopia.

Several examples of Peavy's elaborate works on paper speak to a more architectural abstraction, a kind of map-making of the underlying fractal structures of the invisible universe. Their lines and organic patterns seem to reference and even chart out territories of consciousness; their cartographic sectors and color schemes seem informational rather than esoteric. Compared to the endless patience of the paintings, the drawings have an urgency and a expository energy that compliments the visionary ambiguity of the paintings. Strong color-blocking and rougher modeling contrast with the mirror-like smoothness of the paintings. Ultimately, both of these aspects of Peavy's visual art practice — as marvelous and strange as they are — are still grounded in a powerful awareness of art history, especially the west coast abstractionists and surrealists of her circle in 1930's California. It is easy to see her in conversation with the abstract surrealist Lorser Feitelson whom she knew, and with the legendary Hans Hofmann with whom she studied at Chouinard.

Peavy also wrote — treatises and poetry — performed, made films about her practice and teachings, and most particularly, she made masks. She constructed them according to spiritualist rituals and conventions of contemporaneous avant-garde theater, and wore them when it was necessary to access the unseen world where her entity-collaborator, Lacamo, dwelled. Curator Laura Whitcomb has made sure to

include plentiful examples of these masks on display along with the paintings and drawings, the better to reinforce the idea that while Peavy was an accomplished painter whose art remains as full of life and revolutionary ideas as ever, for the artist herself, the paintings were but the most tangible manifestation of ideas that deepen and extend beyond the studio, beyond even one woman's exceptional creativity and her place in art history, to touch on the nature of reality itself. "Time underwrites its mysteries," she wrote, "as grandeur led in fathomed shores of splendedred recriminations."



On view by appointment through July 31 at Beyond Baroque in Venice.

Mike Kelly Gallery, Beyond Baroque