

ArtSeen

Ann McCoy, Paulina Peavy, and Olga Spiegel

By Christine Davis



Ann McCoy, *Dream of the invisible College*, 2018. Colored pencil on paper on canvas, 108 x 168 inches. Courtesy the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery.

The Guggenheim's Hilma af Klint exhibition and the art world's increasing drive for diversity and inclusion have opened the gates for dialogue with the non-material realm. Modernism's distaste for the mystical, the heretical, the spiritual and divine is perhaps no longer the ruling sentiment. In this stunning exhibition, we see the work of three women whose visionary practices show us lives lived in service of reflection upon the immaterial. Although their philosophical explorations are different, McCoy, Peavy, and Spiegel all work through personal cosmologies guided by forms of knowledge outside mainstream critical discourse. Peavy was in contact with entities on the astral plane, channeling an alien being; Olga Spiegel, also a believer in astro-culture, is part of a movement of visionary artists, and Ann McCoy is a fifty-year student of alchemy (she worked with Jung's heir Dr. C.A. Meier for decades) whose art originates in dreams and visions. Critical support for these practices is an exciting prospect. Paulina Peavy (1901–1999) has only recently been rediscovered by curators and scholars, and her

2021 *Beyond Baroque* show was her first California exhibition in seventy-five years. Although both McCoy and Spiegel are in their seventies, their work has seldom been seen in New York since the nineties. This long-overdue exhibition is a breathtaking discovery and necessary rediscovery.

Ann McCoy's large-scale, coloured pencil drawing, *Dream of the Invisible College* (2018), fills an end wall. In the drawing we see the artist asleep, surrounded by spirits, with the Invisible College presented as a church-like structure one enters through the imagination. The Invisible College was mentioned in Rosicrucian manifestos and is linked to alchemists like Robert Fludd, Michael Meier, Francis Bacon, and John Dee. It represents a body of learning acquired through dreams rather than books. The artist feels alchemical transformation has its origins in the unconscious, and that alchemical processes describe psychological stages of development. McCoy's work radiates a rare blend of devotion to craft and scholarship. In this way, she resembles another Irish artist and student of alchemy, Leonora Carrington. The level of detail in McCoy's drawing is significant, the passage of time felt by each repetition of the pencil's mark, yet the work floats ethereally in immeasurable dream time. This physical grounding and immaterial pull guide the spectator, seemingly unmoored, on a journey of reverie.



Paulina Peavy, *Phantasma 44*, c. 1980. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 30 inches.

In the second gallery we see some of Paulina Peavy's later cartographic works, *Untitled* (1984) and a *Phantasma* from ca. 1980. Like McCoy, Peavy (1901–1999) was a student of esoteric teachings ranging from Rudolf Steiner to theosophical writers like Annie Besant and Mrs. Alice A. Bailey and was involved with Los Angeles theosophical study groups that included painter Agnes Pelton. At the home of Ida L. Ewing in Santa Ana, California, she

attended a séance during which she channeled an alien presence named Lacamo. From that time on, Lacamo guided her hand and painted her works to create a complex cosmology of four-seasonal, three-thousand-year cycles. In its final Winter phase, the cosmology included hermaphroditic beings. Mixing abstract and natural forms Peavy channeled the otherworldly in flickering, luminous color in order to convey poignant messages to humanity.



Olga Spiegel, *Watching the Light*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 62 x 86 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Andrew Edlin Gallery.

Olga Spiegel was born in Europe and trained in old master painting techniques with Ernst Fuchs, one of the founders of fantastic realism. She came to New York in the sixties and was influenced by Surrealism, psychedelic art, and science fiction, as well as astro-culture and space travel. Spiegel uses the word pareidolia—a psychological phenomenon involving a stimulus (an image or a sound) wherein the mind perceives a familiar pattern of something where none actually exists—to describe her process. Her canvases thus function like a crystal ball into which one gazes as forms emerge. Bordering on Surrealist techniques like blotting and frottage, her work merges abstract layers, organic forms, and symbolic imagery. In the painting *Watching the Light* (1985), figures sit with their backs to the viewer, gazing attentively into a world bathed with light, as if a softly glowing spirit of the future were offering respite from the world of darkness.

Spiegel's paintings feel intuitive rather than engaged with complex systems promoting a philosophical worldview like those of Peavy and McCoy. In the former case, cosmology ventures into the future, into a realm of ufology and in the latter, an alchemical worldview spans medieval metaphysics and modern physics. What is remarkable about this exhibition is the unique dedication of each artist. Involving years of deeply personal, sometimes solitary exploration, these women bring us work that vividly explores the invisible life of life. As in Edwin Abbott's Victorian sci-fi novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), these works question the limits of dimensional prejudice, offering instead a speculative journey through active enlargement of the imaginary. Simply put, it feels *marvelous*.