

SUPERNATURAL AMERICA

THE PARANORMAL IN AMERICAN ART

Have you ever experienced something you can't quite explain? Have you ever wondered, "are we alone in the universe?" The unexplained has always been with us, and it remains a source of creative inspiration, sacred rituals, and entertainment. Film, TV, podcasts, and books spill over with supernatural and paranormal content. Tales of otherworldly contact, hauntings, alien visitations, mysterious creatures, and the unseen have captivated us through the ages.

While some consider the supernatural to be a fiction, most of the artists included in this exhibition assert that the *supernatural is natural*. It has been part of their lived experience; what's more, it is essential to their art.

This exhibition considers how and why many generations of artists working in the United States have explored otherworldly subjects. Their artwork reveals several intertwined reasons to find meaning in the supernatural, including the need to make contact with loved ones in the spirit realm, the human impulse to look for life beyond the visible realm, and the sharing of personal experiences with unexplained phenomena. To make tangible what might seem impossible, artists consistently invented new visual vocabularies, developed new techniques, and embraced unconventional materials. These artists share an unshakable conviction in their pursuits to make visible their experiences with the supernatural world.

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"Supernatural America: The Paranormal in American Art" is organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

**GALLERY 0:
ENTRANCE**

John Jota Leaños

American (Xicano-Mestizo), born 1969

Destinies Manifest, 2017

Digital animation, installation, 7 minutes

Commissioned by the Denver Art Museum

Courtesy of the artist

In *Destinies Manifest*, Leaños responds to one of the most famous and pervasive images of colonialism and violence to Indigenous people on the land we call the United States. His animated film centers on artist John Gast's 1872 painting *American Progress* (see below). This popular image illustrates the doctrine of "Manifest Destiny" in human form as an allegory. In Gast's painting, white European settlers bring progress as they invade North America. In Leaños's transformation, this is flipped to consider what was lost. Instead of a benevolent angel, the figure is an exterminating demon bringing death and destroying the land.

Destinies Manifest counters the White Settler assumption that the land was empty and available for conquest. Instead, Leaños presents "the complexities, subjectivities, continuance, and dignity of Indigenous life. The animation also pays homage to nonhuman ancestors who have kept the land for generations, as well as to the network of Native communities who continue to inspire decolonial movements globally, such as Idle No More, the Defenders of the Land, and the Zapatistas."



John Gast
American, b. Prussia, 1842–1896

American Progress, 1872
Oil on canvas, 11½ × 15¾ in.

Autry Museum, Los Angeles, CA 92.126.1

Tom Friedman

American, born 1965

Wall, 2017

Silent video projection

A bare wall. Silence. Then a ghostly hand slowly appears to push forward from within the wall itself, feel around, and then recede into nothingness. Friedman's video projection is part of a series the artist made "to create an exhibition not using any material, only video projections. . . . I see these projections as hallucinations, apparitions and ambient objects." The pieces are meant to be seen in light, not in darkened theaters, so the phenomena seem as real as the viewer's own body and breathing. The series came from the artist's noticing of "sunlight shining through windows illuminating various walls at different times" in his home. Their movement, flitting out of the corner of the eye, inspired his investigation into their potential as apparitions.

AMERICA AS A HAUNTED PLACE

Our landscape is haunted by the ghosts of those who lived here before us. For centuries, tales of restless spirits, both comforting and terrifying, have populated family lore and literature. Individuals who claimed contact with the spirit world, whether by choice or through accusation, were often condemned as witches or celebrated as healers. The artworks in this gallery illustrate some of the ways in which artists have explored the relationship of haunting to physical place. They consider how the unsettled ghosts of the past linger, return, and alter the environment. What happened in that old house that never quite feels warm, where you always sense you are being watched? Why does the wind seem to kick up when you pass that place in the woods? Can you feel the presence of the unseen? Do you approach it—or do you flee?

Charles E. Burchfield

American, 1893–1967

Haunted Evening in Spring, 1947

Conté crayon on paper

Burchfield Penney Art Center, Gift of Charles Rand Penney 1994

Burchfield created numerous images of abandoned homes and coalmines in and around Salem, Ohio. Their histories, and later abandonment, made them appear as though transformed by spirits. Soaking up the eerie atmosphere, he thrilled in the danger his adventures posed. He said, “The chances I took were idiotic—it really is a wonder I escaped without serious injury or death—However, it was fun at the time.” Even modest drawings like this one were inspired by these mystical experiences and evocative places.

Charles E. Burchfield

American, 1893–1967

Haunted Twilight (also known as *The Haunted House*), 1954–62

Watercolor and charcoal on joined paper

Burchfield Penney Art Center, Gift of Charles Rand Penney 1994

Some places feel so charged with the spirits of the past, the whole environment seems to writhe with energy. Burchfield returned to this scene in Teegarden, Ohio, many times, riveted by how the landscape and abandoned buildings seemed alive with ghosts and unseen forces. Here, a group of trees on the left joins shivering branches to form a menacing shape, like a devilish head. The farmhouse windows display jagged shards of glass like broken teeth that guard the mystery beyond. Burchfield believed that particular shapes could evoke specific emotions, and he developed “conventions for abstract thoughts” as a way to suggest those emotions in his paintings.

Edwin W. Dickinson

American, 1891–1978

Woodland Scene, 1929–35

Oil on canvas

Gift of Esther Hoyt Sawyer in memory of her father, William Ballard Hoyt, Class of 1881 and trustee of Cornell, 1895–1900;

54.033

Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University,
Ithaca, N.Y.

Haunted by the loss of close friends and family members, Dickinson faithfully marked the death anniversaries of loved ones throughout his life. For example, after his best friend, Herbert Groesbeck, Jr., was killed at the Battle of Verdun during World War I, the artist traveled to France to hold a solitary moonlit vigil at his grave.

Dickinson struggled for years to complete this painting. Its subject matter remains mysterious, in part due to his method of composing figures in floating fragments amid landscapes as if made of mist and shadows. The smoky miasma and haze that stirs in *Woodland Scene* suggest spirits emerging to make contact with the artist as he seeks to connect with them.

Martin Johnson Heade

American, 1819–1904

Gremlin in the Studio II, about 1871–75

Oil on canvas

The Dorothy Clark Archibald and Thomas L. Archibald Fund
1997.29.1

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn.

Heade excelled at creating crisp, clear landscapes notable for their sensitive attention to weather and atmosphere. Here, he plays with his audience's expectations by depicting the kind of marsh scene for which he was known. However, if you look closely, you see that the artist has made a painting *of a painting*. The canvas rests on a makeshift easel, a pair of crude sawhorses on a rough studio floor. A tiny creature—the “gremlin” of the title—appears below, seeming to magically puncture the illusion of the painting. Real water drips from the edge of the painted wetlands onto the floor. Heade's trickster spirit mischievously questions reality and urges viewers to notice what might be lurking just beneath the surface.

Walter McEwen

American, 1860–1943

The Ghost Story, 1887

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mrs. Edward S. Harkness 1923.416

The Cleveland Museum of Art

Telling and hearing supernatural tales is a communal thrill. McEwen's dramatic staging of women sharing ghost stories illustrates the power of storytelling. All eyes and ears sharpen, a little girl clutches her doll, and the listeners lean toward the woman at the spinning wheel as she conveys her hair-raising account. Fascinated by the paranormal, the artist made several compositions relating to ghosts and the afterlife. An American, he fell in love with Holland and established a studio in the Dutch town of Hattern around 1883. This painting epitomizes his careful observation of local customs, interiors, dress, and the personalities of his neighbors in Holland, all details that make for good storytelling.

John Quidor

American, 1801–1881

The Headless Horseman Pursuing Ichabod Crane,

1858

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase made possible in part by the Catherine Walden Myer Endowment, the Julia D. Strong Endowment, and the Director's Discretionary Fund 1994.120
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

A fearful man clinging low on his terrified horse tears around a bend in the woods. Their pursuer and his wild-eyed horse rear up to hurl a pumpkin at his target. You can almost hear the trees shiver and groan around the confrontation. A clearing in the distance at right reveals a churchyard and cemetery. This dramatic painting depicts the climactic scene from Washington Irving's 1820 story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." It shows the moment in which a headless horseman chases Ichabod Crane through a spooky forest. Quidor frequently painted supernatural and terrifying scenes set on the rural edge of towns, ranging from grave robbers at work to scenes from recent American literature like this one.

Rachel Rose

American, born 1986

Wil-o-Wisp, 2018

Single-channel video; 10 minutes and 6 seconds

Courtesy of the Artist, Pilar Corrias Gallery London, and Gavin Brown's Enterprise, New York, N.Y./Rome, Italy

Wil-o-Wisp follows the fictional character of Elspeth Blake and her experiences as a mother, mystic, healer, and woman persecuted for her connection to the spirit world. Weaving together the harsh realities of rural England of the 1600s with ghosts and magic, the artist considers how our perceptions of the world change as society experiences upheavals and a realignment of values.

The film's narrative emerged while Rose was experiencing "an unusual amount of coincidences," which made her wonder about magical thinking in the past. She wanted to explore a time and place in which all things were perceived to be animate and alive, linking "the largest and smallest events." For Rose, this exploration of meaningful coincidences could be helpfully illuminating, or sinister.

Alison Saar

American, born 1956

Acheron, 2016

Charcoal and chalk on found trunk drawer and sugar sacks

Private collection

The woman standing in deep floodwater holds a full basket upon her head. She gazes out beyond the edge at something out of our sight. Her reflection in the river reveals something dark, even horrific: skulls jostle in her basket, and her face is an impassive mask, devoid of its soft beauty. Saar has identified her as a Mami Wata figure wading through Acheron, the river through which souls were ferried to the underworld in Greek mythology. Mami Wata is a water spirit venerated in many parts of Africa and the African diaspora. Saar has integrated two powerful images connected to the transition to a spirit world. Though Mami Wata and Acheron are associated with healing, each also plays a role in the transformation from life to death.

Grant Wood

American, 1891–1942

Death on the Ridge Road, 1935

Oil on fiberboard panel

Gift of Cole Porter 47.1.3

Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Mass.

Grant Wood made only one painting in 1935—this rare dramatic image of imminent death. It was a year of great personal loss. His beloved mother, Hattie, with whom he lived, died first, and his younger brother, Jack, died later of tuberculosis. Also, a close friend, writer Jay Sigmund, was in a car accident that mangled his hand. Wood sets an ominous chain reaction into motion in the Iowa landscape. With long creeping shadows, a foreboding sky, and a bird's-eye view of the road, the painting impends disaster in clear focus and slow motion. Which is an angel of death: the black sedan, or the red truck? The sense of mourning for a soon-to-be-lost soul is heightened by the telephone poles that conjure up the Christian cross, a funerary last rights rising to a crescendo before the gathering storm.

Andrew Wyeth

American, 1917–2009

Christmas Morning, 1944

Egg tempera on gessoed board

Myron Kunin Collection of American Art

A woman lies in bed, head bandaged and turned away from us, her hands a pale gray. The walls of her room appear to have merged with the landscape and the atmosphere around her home in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. Following the death of family friend Hanna Sanderson on Christmas morning in 1943, Wyeth painted this picture. Sanderson's wake was at her home, and the experience of seeing her body lying in state inspired Wyeth to sketch. From memory the rest of the picture grew, with Sanderson seeming to become spirit among a mysterious landscape stretching deep to a horizon, the sky punctuated with a single glittering star. If you follow her gaze, a ghost image can be seen at the place where the snow trails turn before the woods. Originally, Wyeth included an image of her son, Christian, coming up the hill. However, the artist painted him out, leaving the suggestion of a spirit coming to meet Hanna as she departs earth.

NATIONAL AND PERSONAL HAUNTING

We live in a nation where forgetting the traumas of its origins—enslavement, genocide, violence from the battleground to the family home—is a daily way of life. But forgetting is a form of denial, even unconsciously, and it only delays our reckoning. Ghosts of this traumatic past persist and inevitably resurface as a kind of haunting, often manifested in spirits and the appearance of otherworldly visitors. They can signal unresolved conflicts and societal injustices from the unburied past that demand our tending. To remember is to confront ghosts, ask what they want, make amends, and learn to live with them. Acknowledging these beliefs, some artists often intentionally court otherworldly contact as a way to move forward.

Charles Alston

American, 1907–1977

Midnight Vigil, 1936

Gouache on paper

The Harriet and Harmon Kelley Collection

In a small room lit by oil lamp and warmed by a potbellied stove, 12 friends and family members gather around their loved one, who breathes a final breath. An oval portrait above the bed denotes the presence of an ancestor. Several sing, gesturing to the heavens amid the intensity of this emotional passage. Others stand apart or sit contemplating in silence, mourning in their own ways. A muscular man in the chair by the bedside table might be a doctor. A figure just behind the headboard, starkly illuminated, seems semitransparent. Large shadows dance across the walls. Could they be ancestor spirits arriving to comfort the living and provide the dying safe passage to the afterlife? Alston's powerful depiction of a deathbed scene and the erupting celebration of life emphasizes community and a relationship between generations, something he deeply valued. He once reminded a critic, "Before you're a painter you're a human being and involved in what happens."

Mary E. (May) Bangs

American, 1862–1917

Elizabeth Snow (Lizzie) Bangs

American, 1859–1920

and Spirits

Precipitated Portrait of Lizzie, Mary and Christina Daugherty with Dr. Daugherty, c. 1900

Precipitated by Spirit: pigment on canvas

Camp Chesterfield, Hett Art Gallery and Museum, Chesterfield, Indiana

Spiritualists believe there is no death, that we transition into spirit, and that the spirit world surrounds the living and can be contacted. This group portrait is an example of a “precipitated spirit painting”—made before witnesses without the intervention of a human hand. Here, spirits manifested the image, precipitating the pigment like droplets, a residue generated out of the charged environment. Such paintings are sacred objects within the religion of Spiritualism.

In this family portrait, produced through mediumship in a ritual performed by the sisters Mary and Elizabeth Bangs, Christina Daugherty and her daughters may have been the artistic forces. Dr. Daugherty sat for a portrait to include his wife (who was in spirit). She appeared, just as the Bangs sisters had promised. When he asked why their (deceased) twins, Mary and Lizzie, could not also appear, the Bangs sisters brought forth their likenesses. The resulting spectral portrait shows each family member’s eyes fixed on a different point beyond the frame.

James Henry Beard

American, 1812–1893

The Night Before the Battle, 1865

Oil on canvas

Gift of Dr. Ronald M. Lawrence 1978.15

Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, N.Y.

James Henry Beard witnessed the terrors and grief of the American Civil War firsthand as an enlisted Union soldier. Witnesses to the war found it difficult to convey the depth of loss and terrifying scenes of carnage. This painting attempts to show the destructive forces at work through the depiction of an animated skeleton preparing weapons on the eve of battle as the living sleep.

That year, 1865, while recovering the relics of another battle, burial crews at Cold Harbor, Virginia, reportedly discovered the dead had written their names on paper and pinned them to their coats before bedding down the night before. With voices from beyond the grave, they told their finders who they were. During a victory march that May, journalist Noah Brooks watched the Grand Procession of Union Armies march down Pennsylvania Avenue and imagined that “another host, spectral and shadowy, but as numerous and as vividly characterized and marked, moved with and over them in the viewless air.” Brooks observed “two armies, one living and one dead.”

Jeremy Blake

American, 1971–2007

Winchester, 2002

Digital animation with sound, installation dimensions variable

Gift of Marti and Tony Oppenheimer and the Oppenheimer Brothers Foundation

Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas

Jeremy Blake's kaleidoscope-like animated film is a fantasy on the history and legends surrounding the Winchester Mystery House in San Jose, California. The vast mansion was constructed over some 40 years by Sarah Winchester, heiress to the Winchester repeating-rifle fortune. It is said to have been built to appease the spirits of those killed by Winchester guns. The house has 160 rooms, 40 stairways (some leading nowhere), and 2,000 doors (some opening onto blank walls). People flock to it both for its architectural peculiarities and also for its owner's persona as an erratic person haunted by gun violence who held séances to communicate with spirits.

Blake's piece begins with glimpses of the intricate façade interspersed with ghostly shadows of gunfighters and Rorschach blotches that conjure up exploding bullet wounds. A handheld camera winds down through skylights into the mansion's interior, where it lingers on damage wrought by the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. The score combines the whirr of rattling projector sprockets with eerie moans, foreboding electronic music, and snatches of John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" march.

**Cabinet portrait:
Jennie Matthewson
with elderly spirit, c. 1909**
Albumen silver print

William H. Mumler
American, 1832–1884

**Man writing with spirit
guiding his hand, c. 1877**
Albumen silver print
Michael McDowell Death Collection*

Needham photo studio
**Male sitter with spirits and
automatic writing, c. 1875**
Albumen silver print
Michael McDowell Death Collection*

William H. Mumler
American, 1832–1884

**Photographs assembled in
an album, including Fanny
Conant, medium [left], c. 1862-75**
Albumen silver prints
Collection of Brandon Hodge

**Cabinet portrait:
Mrs. George Hector (Jessie
Anderson Simpson), with
child spirit, October 22, 1909**
Albumen silver print

William H. Mumler
American, 1832–1884

**Woman with child spirit,
c. 1872–76**
Albumen silver print
Michael McDowell Death Collection*

* Michael McDowell Death Collection
Northwestern University Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections
Northwestern University Libraries, Evanston, Illinois

Artist unknown

Featuring photographs by William H. Mumler and hand-colored collage elements, *Family Memorial: A Photographic record of the Family: Their kindred, children at various ages; cherished scenery and objects, birth-places, views of their residences, and a Memorial of their deceased friends*, c. 1875

Collection of Tony Oursler

The enormous loss caused by the American Civil War transformed the culture of mourning in the United States. Massive numbers of young men died suddenly, far away from their families, leaving no possibility for closure for their survivors. Photographers rose to the challenge, creating images to remember the dead, one manifestation of which was spirit photography. Photographers such as Mumler purported to reveal a companion spirit present during the taking of a sitter's portrait. The resulting image proved a comfort to grieving loved ones.

Spirit photography coincided with the peak of the religion known as Spiritualism. A basic tenet of Spiritualism is that there is no death, that the spirit world is around us, and that it can be contacted and can, in turn, contact us. This is the broader cultural context for the impulse to invent, commission, and mourn through spirit photographs. These images served communal, familial, and spiritual needs to visualize those who had left their bodies and to provide the living with an enduring physical presence of their deceased loved ones. Though Mumler was accused of trickery in his "spirit" images, they became icons of faith and served a critical role in the visual culture of Spiritualism.

Caroline Wogan Durieux

American, 1896–1989

Visitor, c. 1944

Lithograph

Purchased with the Lola Downin Peck Fund from the Carl and Laura Zigrosser Collection 1972-24-43
Philadelphia Museum of Art

The spirit of a dead woman, manifesting as a skeleton wearing a fancy dress, has returned to call on the living. One can only guess how she will be received. Durieux was an influential printmaker based in Louisiana. Her immersion in the culture of New Orleans informed her subject matter—in this case, the matter-of-fact acceptance that the living and the dead share space and can interact. *Visitor* shows the power of her imagination, combining gothic thrills with humor.

Thomas Le Clear

American, 1818–1882

Interior with Portraits, c. 1865

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase made possible by the Pauline Edwards Bequest
1993.6

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

In a photographer's studio, siblings Parnell and James Sidway stand before a painted backdrop. They patiently wait for the photographer to complete his work. Le Clear has defined the interior with precise details, ranging from the décor, to the photographer's equipment, to the quality of light on the children as they pose. What we actually see are conjured ghosts. The siblings' older brother, Franklin, commissioned this painting after their deaths: Parnell in 1849 at age 13; James in 1865 at age 25.

We witness a scene that never happened, the deceased revived in colorful hope to preserve their memory. As if aware of the spectral scenario, the dog barks. Both a memorial born of mourning and an unusual depiction of the dead, Le Clear's painting considers the many ways we might remember those now in spirit.

Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze

American, 1816–1868

Angel on the Battlefield, 1864

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase with funds provided by Joan and Macon Brock, the Christiane and James Valone Charitable Fund, Shirley and Dick Roberts, David and Susan Goode, Mr. Joseph T. Waldo and Ms. Ashby Vail, Dr. and Mrs. T. W. Hubbard, Micky and David Jester, Kay and Al Abiouness, Mr. and Mrs. Emanuel A. Arias, Angelica and Henry Light, Ed and Linda Lilly, Leah and Richard Waitzer, Nancy and Malcolm Branch, Kathy and Bob Carter, Mr. Leslie H. Freidman and Mrs. Janet H. Hamlin, Mr. and Mrs. Cyrus W. Grandy V, and Tom and Carol Anne Kent 2012.14
Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Va.

Leutze's painting reveals the depth of grief and hope during the traumatic course of the American Civil War. Acts of mourning the dead, killed in battle or taken by disease, had a spiritual and social urgency for those left behind. Here, the artist visualized both the horrific reality of war and the redemptive concept of souls freed from the physical body. These intangible bodies, conceived imaginatively as featureless children, rise and swirl around a benevolent angel who writes their names in a book recording their passage from one world to another. At the time, Spiritualism—a religion that asserts that there is no death, only the passage of the spirit into another realm—was at its peak, and those who lost loved ones in the war turned to it for comfort. Leutze made his painting in a period when the relationship between death and the afterlife demanded urgent resolution.

Glenn Ligon

American, born 1960

Untitled (I'm Turning into a Specter Before Your Very Eyes and I'm Going to Haunt You), 1992

Oil and gesso on canvas

Purchased with the Adele Haas Turner and Beatrice Pastorius Turner Memorial Fund 1992
Philadelphia Museum of Art

An evocative statement, a veiled threat, an assertion of absence but also of emphatic presence, Ligon's text painting makes ghostly presence a central subject. He notes, "The text is something that I wanted to inhabit and the way I chose to inhabit it was to make paintings that have quotes that create confusion about who's speaking." The repeated phrase on this painting comes from the 1958 play *The Blacks*, written by the white, queer French dramatist, novelist, and poet Jean Genet to cross-examine racial prejudice. Ligon invokes ghostliness through the choice of text and the manner in which he gradually obscures its legibility, as though the speaker has transformed into an apparition by the time it reaches the bottom edge. For the artist, haunting is a metaphor for those treated as marginal and invisible. He suggests the subversive power in not being seen and yet being present as a witness.

Whitfield Lovell

American, born 1959

Visitation: The Richmond Project, 2001

Mixed media installation; names read by Njeri Jackson

Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York

The specific objects, scents, and audio components of this full-scale parlor evoke the spirits of those named whose lives intertwined with the assembled materials. As Lovell says, “History is very much alive. Most people think of time in a linear sense, the end of this era, the beginning of another, but for me, the souls, the spirits who walked the Earth before we did are somehow still with us. They shaped what we’re doing now and we’re affected by all of the things they did.”

Two sound elements are heard in the room. One is the gospel tune, “I’m Just Waiting on the Lord,” sung by the Roberta Martin Singers. The second is a recitation of the names and addresses of early 20th-century residents of Richmond’s historic Jackson Ward community published in an old neighborhood association pamphlet.

Memorial for S.C. Washington, c. 1789

Watercolor, chopped hair, gold wire, pearls, and applied ivory on ivory

Promised bequest of Davida Tenenbaum Deutsch and Alvin Deutsch, LL.B. 1958, in honor of Kathleen Luhrs ILE1999.3.18
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.

This tiny artwork is a memorial and a reliquary (it contains hair of the deceased) made to honor a woman who died at the age of 19. It depicts her spirit breaking free from the tomb in order to make contact with her mother as she mourns at the gravesite. The woman's parents likely treasured this intimate scene of hope and spiritual survival, consulting it from time to time to feel her presence.

Fernando Orellana

American (born El Salvador), 1973

His Minerals—In his one bedroom house he left behind his collection of minerals and the last batch of incense that he crafted, 2012

Wood, plastic, metal, electronics, motors, minerals, incense, LCD screen

Courtesy of the artist

This assemblage is a working machine designed by the artist to be triggered by the ghost of the man whose collection of mineral specimens is displayed here. Orellana acquired the materials at an estate sale. A monitor scans the room for electromagnetic changes and, when the spirit interacts with the device, a lever (at left) springs into motion to strike a match that lights incense. Of the series that includes this piece, Orellana explained:

A few years ago I started making a series of machines that ghosts could use. Finding well used objects in estate-sales, I created robotic interfaces . . . with sensors that ghost-hunters use, like electromagnetic fields, temperature and infrared light detectors. The machines then continuously looked for fluctuations or patterns in the readings, triggering the robotic interface if it determined that a paranormal event transpired. In this way, perhaps the dead could have the ability to use earthly items again.

For safety reasons, the match trigger is turned off. To see a film of this piece in action, scan the QR code with your smartphone camera:



Hiram Powers

American (died Italy), 1805–1873

Loulie's Hand, 1839

Marble

Gift of Professor James Hardy Ropes 1928.115

Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Mass.

Supernatural phenomena fascinated Powers, whose letters include personal accounts of premonitions and ghosts. This life-like sculpture depicts the left hand of his 1-year-old daughter Louisa Greenough Powers emerging from the center of a sunflower. The flower eventually became a symbol for Spiritualists, as it turns toward sunlight in the way the religion “turns the face of humanity to the Light of Truth.” Powers brings forth the tangible presence of his daughter through his sensitive attention to detail and suggestion of warm life in the cold marble. It became an extremely popular sculpture, and he fulfilled many commissions for copies over the following few decades paralleling the rise of Spiritualism. The hand conveys a groping for contact, a material expression of connection between the living and the spirit worlds.

George Tooker

American, 1920–2011

Dance, 1946

Egg tempera on gessoed panel

Private collection

Terror erupts in this evening street scene. Death, appearing as an animated skeleton, confronts a couple of unwitting New Yorkers strolling along a Brooklyn sidewalk. Taunting them, Death lifts the man's hat off his head and links a bony arm with the woman so she cannot flee. A hole has opened up in the sidewalk before them, suggesting a route to the underworld. The other pedestrians appear unaware of the visitation—or as New Yorkers, perhaps they have seen it all before. A similar scene unfolds down the block, past the “BAR” on the right side. Tooker playfully includes himself twice, wearing a khaki jacket and blue tie: once approaching the corner from the left and again in a shelter at right.

Dance is a modern reinterpretation of a popular theme of late-medieval art that addresses the soul's readiness for the afterlife. Death appears suddenly to claim individuals regardless of class, vocation, piety, or age. Unlike the historical works that inspired it, the painting draws no religious conclusions about readiness for death. The couple's fate is deliberately and frighteningly ambiguous.

Jack Whitten

LEFT TO RIGHT:

Head 1, 1965

Acrylic on plexiglass

Michael Clark and Charmaine De Mello

Form (3rd set) 1, 1965

Oil, enamel, and acrylic on gessoed paper

Collection of Jeremy Kost, New York/Los Angeles

These abstract heads belong to a series of paintings that represented a breakthrough for Whitten. In his own telling, these “ghost paintings” were inspired by the tale of Henry Wells, an African American freedman who was arrested in 1878 and held in the Pickens County, Alabama, courthouse. As a white lynch mob gathered outside, lightning struck the building and an image of Wells’s face, then close to the window, remained etched on the glass. The tale haunted the artist as a child. When he started to make black, white, and gray paintings in 1964, a cultural shift in the United States was in a fever pitch, full of violence and public outrage around race, and this legend, which had simmered within him, emerged. Whitten did not set out to depict Wells, nor did he consider the paintings illustrations of the tale. When he looked at his “ghost paintings,” the artist felt he had brought forth something unusual—possibly a form of traumatic memory, so often interpreted as the agent of haunting.

John McCrady

American, 1911–1968

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, 1937

Oil on canvas

Eliza McMillan Trust 7:1938

Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, Mo.

This painting posits the question of what happens to the soul after the body dies. A man on his deathbed breathes his final breath. Angels arrive to awaken his spirit with a trumpet so that it may rise out of the body and go home to Heaven. They gather to receive it while warding off the Devil, who breathes flames and hovers over the house, ready to snatch up the man's soul with his pitchfork. McCrady depicts the supernatural beings as Black, breaking with traditional Christian iconography, but in line with his sensitivity to the communities he moved within. The son of a rural southern minister, the artist sketched this house in Oxford, Mississippi, and met with an older man who lived there. When he returned many years later, "he was gone, and so was his house. . . . Even though I never knew his name, I was well acquainted with his conversation, and I feel today that something like what is depicted in the painting, was very likely what really happened."

Alison Saar

American, born 1956

Cotton Demon, 1993

Kaolin, ceiling tin on wood, cotton ball

Hedy Fischer and Randy Shull

Cotton Demon came from an installation Saar created to explore the role of agricultural spirits and the relationship between enslaved Africans and the American landscape. Author bell hooks suggested that the sculpture flips “the image of whiteness as pure and innocent” in order to make visible “a barrenness of spirit that drives this demon, an absence of soul.”

By making these figures, Saar noted, she is developing “constructive ways of facing tragic, painful experiences. And that’s how the slaves survived all that pain—through creating, by making music, dance, poetry. That’s how, you know, we survive in Haiti, in Mexico. You just somehow turn it around; you’re up against death, then you make death this buffoon, this trickster, and that’s how you deal with what you face, and that’s how you survive it, because otherwise you’d just lay down and die.”

APPARITIONS

What does a spirit look like? Does it have the semitransparent shape of a human body? Is it an orb of light? Can you see a living person's spirit emanating from their body as a colored energy aura? Most of the depictions of spirits in this gallery come from artists' actual encounters, or are based on the experiences of their friends or family members. Taken together, they represent a broad approach to depicting ghosts, sometimes relying on artistic conventions or literary sources, and other times finding wholly new ways to illustrate an experience with the unknown. The imagery makes manifest the idea of contact from another realm, or the other side.

Gertrude Abercrombie

American, 1909–1977

Strange Shadows (Shadow and Substance), 1950

Oil on canvas

Private collection

Abercrombie reveled in the mysterious and often described her own supernatural encounters. She had premonitions, saw ghosts, and experienced poltergeists (mischievous house specters that make noises or cause other disturbances). Her neighbors thought she was a witch, a persona she cultivated in her South Side Chicago neighborhood through her clothing choices and behavior. *Strange Shadows* includes several of Abercrombie's personal motifs: an owl, a clock, a bare tree, deep shadows, and Gertrude herself, striding through the sparse room in a trance. The shadows deviate from their solid sources, revealing hidden realities. Abercrombie's own shadow, holding a goblet, appears to sprout from the white column while her body casts shadows of a tree and owl.

Ivan Albright

American, 1897–1983

The Vermonter (if life were life there would be no death), 1966–77

Oil on Masonite panel

Gift of Josephine Patterson Albright, Class of 1978HW P.985.31
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth, Hanover, N.H.

This portrait culminates Albright's lifelong, deeply spiritual rumination on the relationship between the physical body and intangible life forces. It is the most direct presentation of his conclusions regarding the body's role as a cocoon for the limitless, mysterious, and powerful soul. In 1974, several years into painting his sitter, Kenneth Harper Atwood, he wrote that his aim for the portrait and his work in general was to "study and comprehend the union of the soul with body. The soul is life—life never dies." This "union" of two complementary cosmic bodies is shown with tiny high-keyed concentric color rings that surround the figure as chromatic haloes. Many seem to emerge from the folds, sleeves, and openings in Atwood's clothing; others float around his body. This peculiar depiction of color and light, as rising spots emitted by the figure, gives visual form to Albright's concept of an intangible life force that can penetrate matter. We watch as Atwood's life force departs the physical body as discs of colored energy.

Macena Barton

American, 1901–1986

Untitled (Portrait of Mother), 1933

Oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery

Barton's portrait is a focused look at her mother. With her shoulders relaxed, face passive, eyes half-closed, and hair undone, her mother stares coolly out of the picture in contrast with the activity in the air around her body. A green aura emanates around her form, swelling up from within to match her shape. It is most intense where it meets the body and then gradates to a chartreuse. The space surrounding her head is full of swirling lines and shapes like vines and flowers, with dashes of pink and violet subtly enlivening the field. Are they mere decorative motifs, or a manifestation of mysterious energy? This was one in a series of aura portraits Barton made of close friends and family. It purports to reveal the sitter's astral body, the intangible substance that mediates between the soul and intelligence or consciousness. The artist felt she could see this emanation, and wanted to make it part of her already psychologically complex portraits.

Metaphysical Research Group

Hastings, England

Aura Goggles, c. 1960

Black leather and elastic with glass lenses

Collection of Brandon Hodge

Although some communities believe that one can perceive auras of the human body unaided, over the past two centuries many people have devised ways of viewing auras with devices. This pair of goggles was designed to help its user to perceive auras with the aid of special lenses.

Scientists across disciplines have attempted to see and record auras as part of their study of the intangible life force within the body. English medical researcher Dr. Walter J. Kilner (1847–1920) was on the forefront of this field; he invented a viewing apparatus coated with dicyanin, a coal tar dye. This dye seemed to enable some people to perceive ultraviolet light. After studying Kilner's work, a Spiritualist named Harry Boddington made portable goggles using glass containing a solution of the dicyanin dye; he patented them in 1928 as "Aurospects." The goggles on view here are a later manifestation of this attempt to see auras.

J. Z. (Jacob Zavel) Jacobson

Art of Today, Chicago, 1933

Chicago: L. M. Stein, 1932

Anonymous loan

Ivan Albright and Macena Barton, whose paintings are on view in this room, are among the artists included in this early document of Chicago's modernist art. Albright's statement asserts his belief that the body is merely a shell and that our essence is contained in the intangible life force. Throughout his career, he aspired to depict that spirit within matter, the limitless ghost animating the body.

Ethel Isadore Brown

American, 1872–1944

Vision de Saint Jean a Patmos (Vision of St. John at Patmos), 1898

Oil on canvas

Gift of Frances Smyth 1972.148

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Saint John the Evangelist, an aged hermit, appears alone on the island of Patmos where he has been meditating. An angel approaches as a radiant being, whose words emerge as a beam of light. Through this and a subsequent series of visions, the Christian book of Revelations is revealed to the saint.

Brown's portrayal of this story from the New Testament of the Christian Bible juxtaposes the ethereal supernatural being with the aged, earthbound saint. This depiction is startling and spectacular, heightening the sense that we are also witness to his visions.

Marvin Cone

American, 1891–1965

Anniversary, 1938

Oil on canvas

Museum purchase, Art Advancement Fund with gift of Winnifred Cone 82.10.3

Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Cedar Rapids, Iowa

Cone loved the atmosphere of old houses and often investigated abandoned buildings with the intrigue of a murder mystery, making numerous paintings of their interiors. *Anniversary*, one of his first such works, contains all the eerie, spine-tingling elements. An open door confronts the viewer, revealing steep steps that grow darker as they ascend. The walls and floor are bare, and the whole is rendered in dim greens and grays, Cone explained, to “help establish a lonesome and apprehensive atmosphere.” The artist also skewed the perspective: everything is subtly off-kilter, adding to a sense of anxiety and mystery.

As if to make us run for the door, Cone includes the translucent figure of a ghost hovering just above the floor at left of the stairway. Recalling murder scenes in which a victim’s body is traced in chalk upon the floor, the ghost is contoured in white. The mystery, of course, involves the apparition’s identity and intentions. Is it a suicide, or the victim of foul play? Or is the apparition simply the resident spirit, a soul caught between the natural and supernatural realms?

Marvin Cone

American, 1891–1965

The Appointed Room, 1940

Oil on canvas

Myron Kunin Collection of American Art

What makes a house feel haunted? How can an artist convey the creepy feeling without actually depicting the source of haunting? Interested in these questions, Cone made many paintings of specific, observed haunted interiors totally devoid of ghosts.

The Appointed Room confronts us with a bare interior rendered in dim greens and dingy yellows. The space is distorted, stretched, and squeezed as if seen through a wide-angle lens that also torques right angles just enough to produce a subtle disorientation, like the crooked room in a funhouse. Nothing is here apart from looming, slanting shadows, a door opening onto darkness, and another that affords a glimpse of steep, narrow stairs; nevertheless, the space is charged, prompting us to imagine what might lurk just out of sight. As newspaper writer Frank Nye put it, in Cone's interiors "you can almost hear the doors creaking and the chains clanking upstairs and in the basement, though there are no chains—or even ghosts—in the painting. There's nothing there but an abandoned house."

Morris Kantor

American (born Russia), 1896–1974

Haunted House, 1930

Oil on canvas

Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize Fund 1931.707
The Art Institute of Chicago

As a Russian émigré, Kantor experienced the architecture and material culture of the American colonial era as unfamiliar and strange. After visiting old houses in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in the late 1920s, the artist noted, “My work took on a new character. The humble interior of the American farmhouse, old and quaint, with its peculiar moldy smell, the fading beauty of old plaster discolored by time . . . layers upon layers of wallpaper, all turned my imagination to the past, to the people who had lived there and gone.”

The room shown here includes an ancestral portrait, ladderback chairs, a framed picture of a clipper ship, and an austere fireplace mantel. A ghostly silhouette, recognizably human, materializes at right, as if seeping in from the inky night; its contours contain aspects of the nocturnal streetscape, with steep gable roofs and amber-glowing windows. On the left, too, the walls have dissolved, glimpsing the darkness outside, relieved only by a single streetlight. The interpenetration of past and present—those who had lived there and gone—renders this otherwise quaint interior uncanny. Who or what is this shadow? What happened here?

Dulah Marie Evans Krehbiel

American, 1875–1951

Ascending Soul Figures, c. 1920s

Oil on canvas

On loan from the Krehbiel Corporation, Courtesy Richard Norton Gallery

Amid a natural landscape, individual souls are released into the atmosphere, as though to join a larger mystical body. *Ascending Soul Figures* makes visible the beliefs of many overlapping religions and philosophies—that an intangible soul animates the physical body. This concept closely relates to the Theosophical notion of an “Over-soul,” a vast continuum of collective consciousness joining all beings. During the period of this painting, Krehbiel spent several years in Southern California, hubs of the Theosophical Society in America. Its influential leader Katherine Tingley (1847–1929) welcomed artists to visit her in San Diego and nearby Point Loma. It is not known whether Krehbiel had direct connections to Theosophy, but the content of her work around 1920 aligns with its ideas and manifestation in contemporary art.

Helen Lundeberg

American, 1908–1999

Double Portrait of the Artist in Time, 1935

Oil on fiberboard

Museum purchase 1978.51

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

A child sits in a fancy dress with stockings and polished shoes. She looks out at us and smiles, as though posing for her photograph. A painting on the wall behind her shows a woman in profile seated at a table, her left hand supporting her head, her right hand holding a flower. The two are connected by a long human-like shadow that appears to emanate from the child's body. Both images represent the artist; the image of her as a child was based on a family photograph, and the painting is a copy of another self-portrait. Through the living shadow, the two are connected across time and space. The artist in the past seems to look at us in the present, communicating across dimensions.

Hobson Layfayette Pittman

American 1899–1972

Midnight #2, 1938–40

Oil on canvas

Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust H-204.1940
Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

Midnight strikes! Some call it the start of the “witching hour” or “devil’s hour” when supernatural events take place and paranormal creatures are at their most powerful. This haunted interior might show someone terrified by the supernatural. It might also show a supernatural event. Pittman’s painting is deliberately vague and open-ended. The artist depicted the bedridden figure as though glowing, shrinking in size, and frozen. The room by contrast is warm, expanding outward, and full of space. The distances between walls, ceiling, floor, and objects feel like too much, unfathomable. Have we come upon a ghost materializing in a long-uninhabited room? Or is the person in bed experiencing sounds, chills, voices, and sights unseen? Pittman captures the feeling of being rooted in place, watching and waiting for the effects of haunting.

Winold Reiss

American (born Germany), 1886–1953

Short Haired Young Man in Collarless Shirt, c. 1935

Color pencil on black paper

Private collection, Courtesy Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, N.Y.

Like the portrait by Macena Barton on view nearby, this portrait reveals the artist's interest in energy and spirit auras that show the life force of the sitter emanating outward like visible sound. In Reiss's hands, this force has a sense of vibration, transmission, and its own swelling life force.

William Rimmer

American (born England), 1816–1879

Flight and Pursuit, 1872

Oil on canvas

Bequest of Miss Edith Nichols 56.119

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

A man races through an ornate interior, casting a long shadow. A large and unusual shadow spills out behind him. What is casting this shadow? Is it chasing the man—or running with him? Our eyes also fall on another running figure at center. It, too, races, but clothing obscures this transparent spirit who flits through the halls.

Rimmer's painting has no known source and remains mysterious. A drawing of the main figure, now in a medical library at Yale University, is inscribed "oh for the horns of the Altar." The phrase appears several times in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible and implies that one of the figures is rushing toward sanctuary; he might be a criminal seeking protection within the sacred space of the altar. If so, might he be a murderer? Is that the spirit or soul of a life taken, keeping pace?

Edward Steichen

American (born Luxembourg), 1879–1973

Shrouded Figure in Moonlight, 1905

Oil on canvas

Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust H-1483.1969
Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln

A glowing figure stands with bowed head in a moonlit landscape, rows of trees in the distance, a pond nearby. The spectral emanation matches, in color and contour, the upper band of clouds, as though composed of the same vapor or of celestial origin. The picture reflects Steichen's admiration of European Symbolist poets, who used language to express the subconscious and often intermingled dreams and reality. He was particularly taken by Maurice Maeterlinck's expressive evocation of silence in the moods he set in poetry. Steichen had recently photographed the Belgian poet and playwright as part of a series devoted to artists and writers he held in high esteem. The expressive possibilities of moonlight, the deep tones of darkness, and a shrouded figure resounded with Steichen's European contemporaries, who felt the painter had revealed a place for the soul.

Henry Ossawa Tanner

American (died France), 1859–1937

The Disciples See Christ Walking on the Water,

c. 1907

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Des Moines Association of Fine Arts 1921.1

Des Moines Art Center Permanent Collections, Des Moines, Iowa

On the Sea of Galilee, Jesus Christ appears as a vertical shroud on the upper-left horizon. Breaking with naturalistic depictions of Christ in human form, Tanner reasserts the supernatural qualities and predicament of the Christian Son of God; the figure barely maintains his physical form. The artist seems to have made a point of transmuting the miraculous from its human shape; flesh and blood are unnecessary in this spirit domain.

Among the innovative and disorienting features of the painting is the manner in which the sea, now calm, mirrors the heavens. Moonlight, clouds, and the dark interstices between them have turned the world on its head, imprinting the heavens onto the earth as if to underscore the profundity of what the disciples are witnessing. Tanner's painting makes abstraction a mode of revelation, challenging our perception and forcing us to contemplate the picture while imagining our place in the miraculous scene.

Dorothea Tanning

American, 1910–2012

Guardian Angels, 1946

Oil on canvas

Kate P. Jourdan Memorial Fund 49.15

New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, La.

What world is this? Is it consciousness, or sleep? Is it a spirit world, or ours—or both intermingled? Draperies cover the ground, their shapes revealing beds beneath. And a writhing system of twisted forms rises up at the center to suggest bodies, children, specters. *Guardian Angels* seems to show a spirit world behind the veil of the unconscious. Mediums who channel spirits and talk to those in the spirit world regularly compare their trance states to dreaming, being semi-awake. The communication happens at an unconscious level, where the channel is open.

Tanning understood the power of gothic tales and magical thinking. She made many works about spirits walking among the living and dreams spilling into daily life. She exhibited with the Surrealists, a group of artists who believed that the unconscious held the key to revolutionary thought and action. Surrealism's early history intertwined with that of Spiritualism and parapsychology, a branch of science that investigates phenomena such as extrasensory perception (ESP). These ideas continuously appealed to Tanning, an open-minded explorer of parallel worlds.

Bill Viola

American, born 1951

Three Women, 2008

Performed by Anika, Cornelia, and Helena Ballent

Color high-definition video on plasma display

Gift of funds from Alida Messinger 2010.97

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis

From his “Transfigurations” series, this piece was inspired in part by “the palpable feeling of the presence of the dead” Viola experienced while working on an installation in a church in Venice. The artist also drew inspiration from “Spirits,” a poem by Senegalese poet and storyteller Birago Diop (1906–1989).

In part it reads:

. . . The dead are never gone,
they're in the breast of a woman,
they're in the crying of a child,
in the flaming torch.

The dead are not in the earth:
they're in the dying fire,
the weeping grasses,
whimpering rocks
they're in the forest, they're in the house,
the dead are not dead.

Benjamin West

American, 1738–1820

Saul and the Witch of Endor, 1777

Oil on canvas

Bequest of Clara Hinton Gould 1948.186

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Conn.

A desperate King Saul, on the eve of Israel's battle with the Philistines, asked God for counsel but received none. In response, Saul violates his own ban on sorcerers by traveling in disguise to consult a witch in the town of Endor. Saul asked her to contact the Jewish Prophet Samuel's spirit. When she does, Samuel's spirit is angered by the disturbance and Saul's circumvention of God. He reveals that the king's army will be defeated and assures Saul that he and his sons will fall, joining him in the spirit realm.

The witch alone could see, hear, and convey the spirit of Samuel's prophesy to Saul. She mediated the dire news between king and prophet, between the living and the dead. This story from the Old Testament of the Christian Bible was often cited to illustrate the power of mediumship in history and the biblical tradition, providing a precedent for spirit communication and evidence of the paranormal.

Andrew Wyeth

American, 1917–2009

The Revenant, 1949

Tempera on plasterboard panel

Harriet Russell Stanley Fund 1952.12

New Britain Museum of American Art, New Britain, Conn.

“Revenant” means “one who returns after death or a long absence.” Wyeth’s ghostly self-portrait relates to many aspects of his personality and life story. Haunted by ghosts, he lived with the histories of the places he inhabited and was preoccupied by the traumatic events of the nation’s past, in particular the Civil War and World War I. The violent death of his father, N.C. Wyeth—he and his 4-year-old grandson were hit by a train—gave rise to innuendo and remained a lingering presence among the family. Wyeth, who painted few self-portraits, appears to acknowledge the constant presence of the mysterious in his creative life.

Revenant evokes the uncanny aspects of seeing oneself in the mirror, calling to mind the long and rich visual histories of the self as shadow, doppelgänger, and spirit. Wyeth’s body appears to be aglow with an internal aura of light, incandescent and mysterious. In contrast, his face dissolves into shadow and strange atmosphere, suggesting that life is fluid and that seeing oneself is elusive.

IMAGINING THE UNSEEN

How do artists visualize the intangible, the invisible, the unseen? What are the ways in which they attempt to convey sensory experiences of the paranormal? This room explores how artists depict magic, psychic experiences, and altered states emanating from supernatural contact. Some artists have reported new sensory perceptions after such experiences—they can hear colors or see sound. Others believe they at times left their bodies and traveled to places they had never physically experienced, yet felt and saw as though truly there. It is a challenge for artists to make visible these phenomena in order to share them with others. In this gallery, we discover those who have tried to make the intangible visible.

Gertrude Abercrombie

American, 1909–1977

Search for Rest, 1951

Oil on canvas

Collection of Sandy and Bram Dijkstra

A woman strolls through a moonlit landscape, her left arm extended out, palm upturned. Along the horizon on the left, a row of skeletal trees reaches toward the bright moon. The land is bare, except for a few bushes and a large tree near the woman. A meandering river runs through the landscape, and in the background, a giraffe has paused before its bank. Where does this scene take place? Is it real—or a dream? Could the woman—Abercrombie herself—be in her Chicago home, sleepwalking? The furniture—a long blue seat and round marble-top table owned by the artist—seems out of place. Abercrombie felt that painting, magic, dreaming, and the supernatural were intertwined and interdependent. In this self-portrait, she seems to declare the artist as conjurer, capable of extraordinary things.

Ivan Albright

American, 1897–1983

Wherefore Now Ariseth the Illusion of a Third Dimension, 1931

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ivan Albright 1977.23

The Art Institute of Chicago

Albright presented every item in a painting from multiple positions, walking around them rather than sitting in one fixed place. Integrating composite views of light, space, and matter, he tried to imagine what it might be like to perceive things as a spirit. “Without this planetary body,” he wrote, “our motion might accelerate.”

In this tabletop arrangement, the artist has rendered every object and surface as if seen under a magnifying glass. He also forces us to contend with a totally unexpected viewpoint: we are floating above, looking down. The objects themselves do not seem still; they appear to be rising, slowly rolling. Look at the apple nearest the wineglass. It casts a dark shadow on the lace and appears about to plunge into the tilted vessel. For Albright, imagining what would be possible beyond the physical body by emulating the spirit was a way of tapping into the power of the divine. He always connected it to being an artist: “Remember the Infinite sees my model from every viewpoint, from every time point, from every movement point.”

Sylvia Fein

American, born 1919

The Lady Magician, 1954

Egg tempera on fiber board

Gift of the Artist and William Scheuber 2010.50.6

Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison

A woman stands before us, arms raised, eyes wide, a smile forming on her face. Between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand she holds a thin wand with a flower-like fan at the tip. She rests her right heel on a maroon pillow and pushes upward on her insteps while releasing a spherical aviary to float on the breeze. She may have conjured the brilliantly plumed bird, or merely encased it in a hazy bubble. The “lady magician” in Fein’s painting appears able to alter nature’s laws, aided by the array of items (a candle, manuscript, brushes, and vial) displayed on a curious red table fringed in yellow.

Nearly all of Fein’s paintings of women are stand-ins for parts of herself. Here, in the figure of a woman performing creative transformations, she seems to imply that an artist controls mysterious forces.

William Sidney Mount

American, 1807–1868

Dregs in the Cup (Fortune Telling, the Fortune Teller), 1838

Oil on canvas

Gift of The New-York Gallery of the Fine Arts 1858.57
New York Historical Society Museum & Library, New York

Dregs in the Cup considers the relationship between magical thinking and everyday life. The subjects are engaged in a communal act of examining something ordinary to find the extraordinary. The woman tips a teacup and gestures toward tea leaves that remain at the bottom, analyzing what she sees for omens or secrets. One onlooker is curious and interested; she looks intently at the cup and holds her right hand near her neck in suspense. Her companion seems embarrassed, blushing and giggling, her face hidden by her bonnet.

Mount attended séances (a communal ritual led by a medium to contact spirits) and the trance lectures of mediums, who spoke in public under the control of spirits to convey wisdom and knowledge. Curious about the unseen, he wondered how his contemporaries navigated feeling and knowing about the supernatural.

Agnes Pelton

American, 1881–1961

White Fire, 1930

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ed and Coreva Garman to the Raymond Jonson Collection

82.221.1949

University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque

A brilliant column of glowing light undulates before a deep field of indigo to inky blue. The waving plait opens in three places to reveal a pale yellow interior and intense star-like forms glowing with an amber hue. *White Fire* was Pelton's attempt to visualize, among other things, a purifying flame that would heal wounds of the past. A meditative image that meant a great deal to the artist, it hung above her living room fireplace for many years. Pelton's idea of a psychic purifying flame came through her study of Agni Yoga, which uses fire as a central image and metaphor for consciousness and spiritual aspiration.

Charles Whedon Rain

American, 1911–1985

Prophecy, 1967

Oil on fiber board

Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, N.Y.

A carefully balanced house of cards floats in a stormy space crackling with light behind dark green clouds. An alert eye stares out from the center behind an opening in a bright burst of radiating light and energy. The cards are decorated with illustrations of a tarot deck, used for telling fortunes and connecting to cosmological events that might reveal prophecy, or premonitions of the future. The astrological signs for the planets, sun, and moon connect to the cards through thin lines of light, which might suggest that this elaborate construction is part of a cosmological plan revealed to the person whose eye peers out from within.

Henriette Reiss

American (born England), 1889–1992

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

Rhumba, c. 1939

Finger paint on paper

Poem Symphonique: redemption Tone Poem, César Franck, ‘Temptation’, 1937

Tempera on paper mounted on board

Brahms Symphony No. 1, before 1939

Tempera on paper

BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT

Frederic Chopin Impromptu A Flat Major, ‘Carefree’, before 1939

Tempera on paper mounted on backing

Bach Toccata, before 1939

Tempera on paper

Scent of Violets (Parfum de Violettes), before 1939

Tempera on paper

Private collection

The dazzling paintings of Reiss record her experiences of synesthesia—experiencing two or more senses simultaneously from one triggering source. In the artist’s case, when she heard music, she also involuntarily experienced it as form and color as real and present as the sound. Each small painting is an attempt to convey that experience. Reiss recorded many paranormal experiences in her lifetime, including seeing ghosts. Her art was frequently an attempt to make visible intangible experiences.

Betye Saar

American, born 1926

The View from the Sorcerer's Window, 1966

Assemblage of color and intaglio etchings and wood window frame with six panes of glass

Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld

Saar has experienced a lifetime of paranormal encounters. Her connection to these phenomena has informed both her artistic process and her choice of subject matter. Here, she used a wooden multipaned window frame to present six vertically arranged images. This format invites seeing into another dimension.

The scenes in the top register display crescent moons, a sun, and a constellation of six-pointed stars before indigo and gray skies. The central panels depict an erupting volcano and the silhouette of a person looking through a window to a star-filled night. Black and ivory prints of two left hands fill the bottom windowpanes. The hand on the left is mapped as a palmistry chart, used to interpret one's fate based on lines and marks on the palm. The hand on the right is Saar's own—a personal invitation to the viewer to analyze her characteristics and join in the divination practice as someone sensitive to the cosmic and spirit forces surrounding us.

Kurt Seligmann

American (born Switzerland), 1900–1962

High Priest, 1950

Oil on canvas

Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois on behalf of its
Krannert Art Museum,
University of Illinois Purchase through the Festival of Arts
Purchase Fund 1951-3-1
Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois

High Priest shows a mysterious place teeming with suggestive forms and silhouettes made up of composite organic matter from plants and creatures. All of these hybrid forms appear to have come to life and are creeping, slithering, and pulling themselves up. Perhaps the “high priest” of the title has made this happen, or perhaps he is transformed among the living forms?

Seligmann pursued a lifelong interest in magic and the occult as a practitioner and scholar. He published a history of magic in 1948 and held performances and rituals with friends in his New York studio. All of this activity informed his work.

Alma Thomas

American, 1891–1978

Phantasmagoria, 1973

Acrylic on canvas

Collection of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York

Thomas's painting takes its title from early, immersive, multisensory forms of entertainment, phantasmagoria, which showcased the magical, the uncanny, and the perceptually dazzling. Stare at her composition for some time, and its parts might appear to move, melt, and shift into one another. An uncharacteristically understated palette for Thomas, surprising ghost tones of other colors play beneath what first appears to be gray, contributing to a testing of the senses for viewers.

Renée Stout

American, born 1958

The Rootworker's Worktable, 2011

Altered and reconstructed table, blown and hot-formed glass,
found and constructed objects, oil stick on panel, found carpet
Karen and Robert Duncan Collection, Lincoln, Nebraska

A chalkboard filled with lists and drawings, hinting at recipes and cures. A table covered with bottles of many sizes and shapes. What do they contain? Is this an apothecary, a workshop, a sacred cabinet? All of these associations are fair game in Stout's homage to healers, spell makers, and potion brewers in African diaspora communities. She notes:

[A] community secret to be spoken of in whispers, the rootworker can perform an important role in many underserved African American areas where access to mental and physical healthcare can be limited. . . . [A] rootworker/herbalist may prescribe a specific combination of herbs to be brewed into a tea to alleviate headaches or digestive problems. On the spiritual end, the rootworker can aid someone who feels they need protection from negative energies being aimed in their direction. Supplying them with an arrangement of various herbs and organic objects gathered and placed into a bag to be carried on their person can neutralize those adverse energies. . . . Most rootworkers have inherited knowledge passed down from someone in the previous generation, one who has specifically chosen them, knowing they could shoulder the responsibilities of that traditional role within the community while also withstanding the scrutiny they would surely receive from the descendants of a people who had been brainwashed by their American captors to fear their own ancestral spiritual traditions in favor of Christianity. . . .

James Abbott McNeill Whistler

American, 1834–1903

Arrangement in Black (The Lady in the Yellow Buskin), c. 1883

Oil on canvas

Purchased with the W. P. Wilstach Fund 1895.1.11
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

After destroying two earlier attempts, Whistler painted this portrait of Lady Archibald Campbell (Janey Sevilla Campbell) relatively quickly, in just a few sittings, showing her emerging from the shadows. She pauses to adjust her gloves, twisting her body and casting a glance over her shoulder before returning to the darkness. The contrast between her active living presence and her indeterminate surroundings thrilled audiences. The portrait inspired critics to compare its subject and other contemporary figures painted by Whistler to “half-materialised ghosts at a spiritualistic *séance*.”

Both Whistler and Lady Campbell held Spiritualist beliefs and attended *séances* (a communal ritual led by a medium to contact spirits). There, he witnessed mediums experiencing clairvoyance, heard spirit rapping, and participated in table tipping. Whistler’s brother reportedly possessed the power of second sight, the ability to see future events or people and objects out of physical vision. Whistler himself claimed to possess the abilities of a medium. “Everyone knows,” he insisted, “there are certain chemicals that act only in the darkness. Why should it not be the same with the spirits?”

Hyman Bloom

American (born Latvia), 1913–2009

LEFT TO RIGHT

The Séance, 1951

Charcoal on paper

Collection of Timothy Phillips

The Medium, 1951

Oil on canvas

Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966, 66.550-551

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Bloom spent his life seeking ways to expand his consciousness. He traveled widely, sought out occult philosophies, and moved within like-minded communities open to new experiences. These works convey his experience of taking part in séances (a communal ritual led by a medium to contact spirits). It reveals the depth to which he understood the visual language of the supernatural.

In these and other artworks made after his experiences, Bloom included details such as hands joined to form a circle, the hazy atmosphere from candles or materializing spirits, a depiction of a medium in a trance state, and apparitions emerging from the darkness.

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

G. W. Pitcher

Planchette, c. 1860s

Wood, metal, paper, and ink

The Wm. W. Wheeler Co.

The Wireless Messenger, 1898

Wood, paper, and ink

BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT

Pendulum board, c. 1930s

Wood, brass, and twine

Hudson Tuttle

Psychograph dial and planchette

Cardboard, wood, paper, glue, and text

Collection of Brandon Hodge

As Spiritualism gained popularity, manufacturers made a wide range of devices as instruments with which to facilitate communication with the spirit world. The devices on display here are but a few of the many objects people have invented to convey spirit messages, ranging from dials and pendulums that swing to spell out words, to a planchette that holds a pencil to allow spirits to write.

To use a planchette, guests at a séance lightly place their hands upon it together. Harnessing the energies brought by the gathered individuals as well as the contacted spirits, the sitters' seemingly passive touch guides the planchette to write messages on paper. Its basic form is that of a small, usually heart-shaped board, two small wheels, and a pencil acting as a third leg.

RIGHT

Columbia Industries

Mystic Answer Board, c. 1940s

Wood and pigments

LEFT

William Andrew Fuld

Electric Mystifying Oracle, c. 1930s

Wood, metal, and pigments

Collection of Brandon Hodge

In the late 1880s, Ohio Spiritualists used planchettes as guides on wooden alphabet boards, creating what was promoted as a revolutionary new incarnation of spirit apparatus: the talking board. Sitters at a séance placed hands on a planchette and, instead of writing responses with a pencil on paper, the device moved to letters and numbers to express messages. The idea inspired two men to pursue the talking board on a commercial scale; aided by investors, patentee Elijah Bond, and the “strong medium” Helen Peters (who named the board), the Ouija board was born.

Ouija was a massive hit and, like the writing planchette before it, brought the concepts of Spiritualism to a wider audience. The ease of spelling and the seeming mystery of its evocative movements fostered its popularity, which has surged and ebbed over the years. Now owned by Hasbro, Inc., Ouija remains the world’s most popular, and infamous, spirit communication device. Despite its controversial legacy, Spiritualists honor its original purpose of communicating with the dead in séances.

OBJECTS AND RITUALS FOR THE SPIRIT

If you wanted to make an object to attract a spirit, what would it look like? Is it possible to combine materials in order to honor or welcome spirits? What materials might be used to transform someone else? Can objects or potions change, control, or otherwise influence our world?

Many of the works in this room bring together materials, including bone, blood, glass, plants, metal, herbs, and other natural elements, in an effort to provide a place in which to honor ancestors, hold supernatural power, and connect with the spirit world. In some cases, artists made work for ritual, or that depict rituals to honor spirits or deities. They represent objects made and assembled through knowledge systems that developed apart from, but conscious of, Christian religious practices from a broad range of communities.

Barbara Bullock

American, born 1938

Guardian Spirit Altar, 1970s

Mixed media

Barbara J. Bullock

Philadelphia-based Bullock made several objects in the 1970s based on her immersion in African knowledge systems, dance, history, and culture. She was the art director of the Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center in North Philadelphia (now, the Village of Arts and Humanities) and engaged in exchanges between African American artists and their African counterparts. During this period, she sought an alternative to her Western training in Black aesthetics. She made works such as *Guardian Spirit Altar* through a gradual process of accumulating meaningful materials that enlivened the assemblage. As Bullock notes:

Journeying through my African American life, I have found an intuitive need to create forms which are protective spirits. . . . They are important in my life as I intend to travel both physically and spiritually through many open areas to become stronger in my creative manifestations and closer to my ancestral heritage.

Thornton Dial

American, 1928–2016

Monument to the Minds of the Little Negro Steelworkers, 2001–03

Steel, wood, wire, twine, artificial flowers, ax blade, glass bottles, animal bones, cloth, tin cans, paint can lids, and enamel

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and Gift of the Souls
Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection
2019.16.6
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Dial's elaborate steel sculpture blossoms with glass bottles, bones, and other objects that serve as offerings to ancestral spirits. Designed to look like a growing garden, the steel stalks roll into curls at the top like flowers, fronds, and vines. This monument honors the spirits of the Black workers of Bessemer, Alabama's steelworks and other craftspeople who built the infrastructure of the modern United States, yet who have never received proper recognition. Dial's piece, a funerary tribute, is a place both to celebrate spirits and a powerful site to attract them to gather and know they are honored.

Mary Beth Edelson

American, 1933–2021

Dematerializing in Fire Ring, 1975

Gelatin silver print gouged with sharp point

Private Collection, Courtesy of David Lewis Gallery, New York

A feminist artist and activist, Edelson engaged for many years in personal rituals to honor ancient goddesses. This photograph documents one ritual she performed in a studio space, surrounded by flickering lights, arms extended to connect with the great goddess. Edelson embellished the photograph afterward, adding marks, design elements, and gouges. She later traveled to ancient sites with documented histories of ritual practices, including a Neolithic cave in Yugoslavia, to perform similar rituals for the camera. She described the experience for the feminist journal *Heresies*. As she made marks on the cave wall, she noted, “In a few strokes I felt one long hand extending across time, sending a jolt of energy into my body. I began my rituals. The energy from the rituals seemed to pulsate from the vaulted ceiling to me and back again.”

Mary Beth Edelson

American, 1933–2021

Four pieces from the Women Rising series, made at Outer Banks, North Carolina, 1973

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Patriarchal Piss: Swing in the Wind

Oil, ink, china marker on gelatin silver print

Collection of Sacha Llewellyn

Sheela's Secret Weapon

Oil, ink, china marker, collage on gelatin silver print

David Lewis

BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Write By the Tail/Bite the Tail/I Bite/Belly Snakes

Oil, ink, china marker, collage on gelatin silver print

David Lewis

Hounds of Hell

Oil, ink, china marker on gelatin silver print

The Raman/Luthra Collection

In the 1970s, Edelson and others of her generation examined goddess imagery from a feminist perspective, reclaiming the body and its connections to spirituality in a powerful, celebratory manner. She performed private goddess rituals in her studio or at outdoor sites and documented these in photographs, which she described as “totems.” Using prints of her body in the same pose, Edelson made variations by painting, drawing, cutting, and embellishing the images. Each one shows a manifestation of supernatural female power, with ancient symbols of that relationship taking hold of and flowing from the artist's body.

Mary Beth Edelson

American, 1933–2021

Women Rising, 1975–77

Ink and collage on paper

Private Collection, Courtesy of David Lewis Gallery, New York

Unidentified artist(s)

Group of folk magic poppets,

c. 1930s

Mixed media, wire, clay, cloth, paint, blood

Collection of Stephen Romano

This group of dolls, called “poppets,” came from a site in Northern California with an active witchcraft community. Poppets

can be used to represent the target of spells and other magic. Little is known about the specific intentions for these poppets, but they may have been made for and used in private rituals. Today, poppets are often used for protection and to induce prosperity, luck, love, health, and happiness. Yet, if necessary, they can also be used to prevent harm to a loved one or oneself.

Dario Robleto

American, born 1972

The Common Denominator of Existence is Loss,

2008

50,000-year-old extinct cave bear paws, human hand bones, stretched and pulled audiotape of the earliest audio recording of time (experimental clock, 1878), 19th-century mourning ribbon, bocote, shellac, glass

Gift of Stanley and Nancy Singer 2019.18.1

Collection of the Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky

Skeletal hands and ancient bear claws connect across vast gaps of time (tens of thousands of years), holding onto a ring made from an elongated audio tape—of the earliest recording of the ticking of a clock—itsself woven with a mourning ribbon. Robleto's sculpture invites viewers to meditate on absence and presence, the ghosts of people and species that have gone before us, and the ways we try to conjure them in the present. The artist brings together objects that evoke spirits, both connected to the remains of bodies and the ephemeral traces of sound, arranged as though present in a séance circle.

Betye Saar

American, born 1926

Damballa, 1966

Wood, snakeskin, paper, metal, plastic, shells, glass, wirebone, rock, fabric, brush

Civic Art Collection, Seattle

Named for the serpent god from Haitian Vodou, Damballa, this table-based

assemblage is covered in copper-toned paint and snakeskins. Saar's eclectic accumulation recalls the collecting practices of her youth, including wood-carved snakes, bottled potions, seashells, a chicken foot, and dentures. With these materials she creates a place to summon and make offerings to the powerful deity, whose ability to shed his skin makes him a symbol of transformation and renewal.

Betye Saar

American, born 1926

Spirit Catcher, 1976–77

Mixed media assemblage

Collection of Kyle McBain Leaser

Spirit Catcher is a wicker and bamboo sculpture embellished with feathers, shells, and bones. Its form riffs on artist Simon Rodia's monumental outdoor sculpture *Watts Towers* in Los Angeles, where Saar grew up, and also Tibetan spirit traps that are placed on roofs to ward off evil spirits. *Spirit Catcher* can be seen as a spiritually engaged object and an abstracted depiction of a conjurer in action. Saar identifies with the presence of such objects and the artist's capacity to connect them to a more mysterious power.

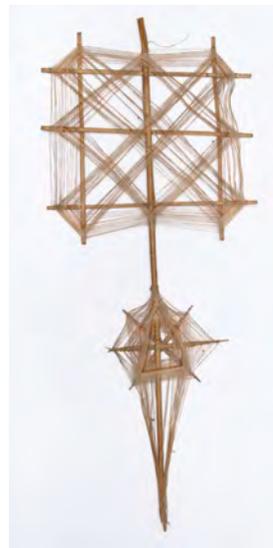
Her interest in the metaphysical world came through personal experience, and a belief that objects had inherent power drawn from how they have been used, where they have been, and who used them. For Saar, art is a ritual practice able to account for the Black presence in the world and to document Black modes of survival. Her childhood memories of Southern California include paranormal activity, mysterious places that provoked wonder, and having an imaginary friend.



*Betye Saar with daughters
at Watts Tower, ca. 1960*

Photo by John Crume

Courtesy of the Artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, CA



*Thread-cross or ghost trap
(mdos nam-mkha')*

Wood and string

Horniman Museum, nn4413

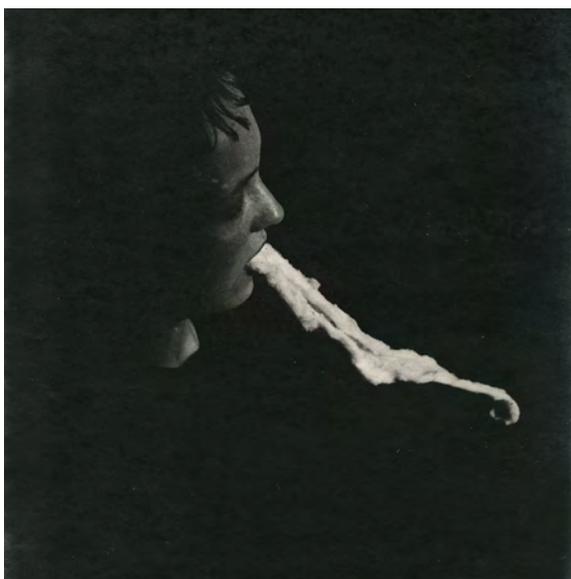
Carolee Schneemann

American, 1939–2019

Interior Scroll, 1975 (second in an edition of three)

Beet juice, urine, and coffee on photographic print

This photograph documents a landmark performance piece in the history of feminist and postwar art. In *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann's body becomes a source of language and power. It came to her in a dream, which she drew upon waking as *The Message* (on view nearby). As part of the performance, the artist gradually read from a scroll that unspooled from within her body, akin to a spirit medium's channeling of voices and ectoplasmic excretion (see below). Schneemann's initial source of inspiration could often be that interior voice suggesting an idea or the flash of a fully realized experience in a visionary dream. Here, she transformed her body into the source of art and the otherworldly voice. "I think I had an instinct that this was the only way to cut through predetermined ideas of what a female imagination and creative will was supposed to be about, which was not what I was about," she said.



Albert von Schrenck-Notzing
German, 1862-1929

*Emission and resorption of an
ectoplasmic substance through
the mouth*, 1913

Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie und
Psychohygiene, Breisgau, German

Carolee Schneemann

American, 1939–2019

The Message, 1974

Artist authorized facsimile; ink on paper

Private Collection, Courtesy of PPOW Gallery, New York

Harriet Goodhue Hosmer

American, 1830–1908

Medusa, 1854

Marble

The Walter C. and Mary C. Briggs Purchase Fund 2003.125
Minneapolis Institute of Art

In Greek mythology Medusa was a beautiful priestess of Athena, the goddess of war. Medusa angered Athena, who punished Medusa by transforming her into a powerful monster with snakes in place of hair and a gaze that turned those who looked at her to stone. In Hosmer's hands, Medusa retains her beauty, her hair writhing in transformation. Hosmer herself experienced supernatural events—premonitions, clairvoyance (perceiving things through extrasensory perception), and visits from spirits—so she may have considered Medusa's curse a gift rather than a detriment. Perhaps she associated Medusa's changed state with one of power and authority, as much to be respected as feared.

GALLERY 5
SUBPANEL

Honoring the Goddess

In the 1970s, several female artists of diverse backgrounds came together to promote women-centered artwork and writing, start feminist co-op galleries, and organize collective political action. They sought to correct the overwhelming patriarchal power dynamic in the art world and the broader society. Some looked to a wide range of ancient cultures around the globe for evidence of matriarchal leadership in an effort to bring forward and reclaim the transformative effect of female power. Mary Beth Edelson and Carolee Schneemann were among the most prominent artists to directly engage in rituals that connected them to the power of goddess and priestess imagery. Absent from this gallery is their artistic contemporary Ana Mendieta, whose site-specific work, embedded in landscapes and archaeological sites, were critical to developing a new way of engaging with this subject. Read about her in the catalogue that accompanies this exhibition.



Ana Mendieta
Cuban-American, 1948-1985

Black Venus, 1980/1992
Black and white photograph,
39 1/4 × 53 3/4 in.

© 2022 The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection,
LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. / Licensed by
Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**GALLERY 6:
DUST**

Tony Oursler

American, born 1957

Dust, from the Thought Forms series, 2006

Fiberglass sculpture, Harman Kardon HS100 5.1 sound system, Sony XGA VPL-PX41 projector, 2 Sanyo PLC-XU48 projectors, 3 DVD players, 6 DVDs, 3 master tapes

The Broad, Los Angeles F-Ours-1So6.05

This multisensory immersive installation features a large fiberglass sculpture at its center, on which a foggy shifting mass of body parts is continuously projected. Multiple voices overlap and move back and forth out of a constant cacophony of murmurs. Inspired by the 1901 book *Thought Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation* and its illustrations of sound and emotions, Oursler imagines a particle of dust magnified to a massive scale and teeming with information and life. Oursler notes:

Dust, as the Bible reminds us, is what we are made of, as well as our physical inevitability. Surrounded by invisible particles, we actually breathe and shed minute bits of every human endeavor. Particles from Egyptian pyramids, DDT, the World Trade Center, pollen, CO₂, spittle, viruses, springtime, Marilyn Monroe's perfume, automobile exhaust, and wildflowers mixed with Chernobyl could all be floating around at any given moment. Dust struck me as a physical interconnector in a world increasingly dominated by virtual isolation. . . . I wanted the viewer to be able to move around inside the installation and perhaps imagine what may be surrounding them or how they fit into this borderless system. In the end, I wanted their presence and shadows to become part of the projections, and the surface of the walls and suspended organic form to become part of the churning cloud of amorphous light, image, and sound.

Annie Besant

British (died India), 1847–1933

Charles Leadbeater

British (died Australia), 1854–1934

Illustrations by John Varley, Jr., Prince, and Mcfarlane

Thought-Forms, 1905 edition published by Theosophical
Publishing Society, London, England

Collection of Tony Oursler

The authors of this book purported to describe the experience of visualizing intangible states or phenomena. They felt that some human beings could “see” music, emotion, thoughts, and other sensory input as colors, shapes, and designs. This would occur spontaneously, involuntarily—the perception of these images as real as that which triggered them. This idea of visualizing states of being has had a deep influence on many generations of artists and art educators since the book was first published in 1901.

Volume 45 of the Spencer Collection, featuring images hand-copied from *Spectropia, or, surprising spectral illusions showing ghosts everywhere and of any colour* by J. H. Brown, first published in New York by James G. Gregory, 1864
Collection of Tony Oursler

This is one of 45 bound volumes that feature hand-compiled information from various sources on occult knowledge across centuries. This volume includes hand-copied designs from a famous book of spectral illusions used in performances of phantasmagoria, exhibitions of optical effects and illusions. This spectacle, enacted before theater audiences, was performed with lanterns, projecting the spooky images in a life-like way to thrill, frighten (and delight) crowds.



Lejeune
French, 1763–1837

After Étienne-Gaspard Robert (“Robertson”), *Phantasmagoria* (An illustration of a phantasmagoria projection. The frontispiece from Etienne Gaspard Robertson’s *Memoires recreatifs scientifiques et anecdotiques*, published in Paris [B108], before 1831
Engraving, 43/8 × 71/2 in.

Photo courtesy of the Hagley Museum and Library

SPIRIT ARTISTS

“I am guided by [the spirits’] thoughts inducted to my perception, and these same thoughts take possession of the brain cells that actuate my hands. These unseen People are using me, obedient to their own thought and concept.”

—Marion Spore Bush, Spirit Artist

Many artists throughout history have asserted art-making collaborations with spirits. These individuals were and are *mediums*, gifted with the ability to communicate with the spirit realm. These medium-spirit collaborations take many forms. Some mediums, like Marion Spore Bush, deny any responsibility for the work at all, asserting that spirits entered their bodies and controlled their hands. Some spirit artists, such as Helen Butler Wells, gathered a close-knit group of students who carefully transcribed verbal messages that came through Wells, whom the spirits considered their “instrument.” Some worked at Spiritualist Camps, such as Indiana’s Camp Chesterfield, and considered the art made as a result of trance states to be sacred. Others, like J. B. Murray, did not always know the meaning of the messages conveyed through the spirit realm but devised ingenious ways to interpret them.

Wella P. Anderson

American, 1833–c. 1900

Lizzie “Pet” Anderson

American, 1836–1896

and Spirits

LEFT TO RIGHT

Ben Franklin, 1869

Vashti, 1873

Hiram Abiff, 1869

Pencil on paper

Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History, Middlebury, Vt.

1979.450.011, 04, 014

Married couple Wella and Lizzie “Pet” Anderson worked together in New York City as mediums, with Pet often drawing in collaboration with spirits. These collaborations took several hours over multiple séance sessions. Wealthy clients asked the Andersons to bring forth spirit portraits of deceased family members.

The drawings on display belong to a mysterious body of work depicting “The Ancient Band,” a spirit population of seers, mystics, and philosophers (from Persia to Atlantis) who came through the mediums to transfer their wisdom to humanity. They include Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), Hiram Abiff (a figure from Freemasonry, a secret order popular at the time), and Vashti (a Persian queen from biblical times who became a feminist icon in 1800s America). Each drawing shows a hand that worked with extraordinary control and precision and allowed for unusual details. Vashti’s eyes are upturned toward the heavenly sphere. Franklin emerges from subtle clouds and mists. Abiff’s clothing bears spirit writing, and masonic symbols decorate his hat.

ABOVE

Two automatic writing slates with spirit drawings,

c. 1910–20

Chalk on slate board with wooden frame

Hett Art Gallery and Museum at Camp Chesterfield, Chesterfield, Indiana

RIGHT

Spirit slate with automatic writing and portrait drawing, c. 1910–20

Colored chalk on slate board

Morris Pratt Institute America's Spiritualist College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

In the religion of Spiritualism, slate writing was accomplished only by highly sensitive mediums chosen by spirits for the task. To enable this collaboration, a medium would place blank writing slates and a writing implement in a small pitch-dark cabinet or a cloth bag. The medium would then place their hands on the container for as long as an hour to work with the spirit to transfer energies to the slate (see below). The results could range from a cogent message from a spirit to character-like symbols from the spirit realm. In rare instances, as shown here, pictures would also appear.



Reverend Clara E. Barnett
and Dr. Robert Jenson (Spirit)
*Physical–Spiritual–Mental Science:
Slate Writing*, ca. 1936

Watercolor on paper, 8 × 10 in.

Photo by Randi Millman-Brown, courtesy
Lily Dale Assembly Museum, Lily Dale, NY

Marian Spore Bush (Flora Mae Spore)

American, 1878–1946

and Spirits

Wherefore War, c. 1930

Oil on canvas

Gift from the family of Marian S. Bush 2014/2.200

University of Michigan Art Museum, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Bush first had contact with spirits after her mother died. Starting in 1922, a chorus of “unseen People,” whom she referred to as “They,” gave her premonitions of a coming global war and urged her to draw and paint at their will. Most of her output consists of war paintings made between 1933 and 1943, inspired by terrifying messages from the spirits who also controlled her hand. The paintings show predatory birds, menacing landscapes, the aftermath of disasters, and armies preparing for an apocalyptic battle.

Wherefore War is made in impasto and stark black, white, and gold, which she claimed derived from techniques the spirits used when alive. Hundreds of soldiers gather in staging grounds beneath a cliff. In the foreground, the cliff churns with human skulls, piled, tumbled, unsettled. A black serpentine bird dominates the composition and connects the two realms.

Henry Church, Jr.

American, 1836–1908

Self-Portrait with Five Muses, c. 1880

Oil on paper mounted to board

Delia E. Holden Fund 2012.30

The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland

An inventive and savvy entrepreneur, Church began making art without any formal training and eventually opened the first commercial art gallery in eastern Ohio. As a committed pacifist and a Spiritualist, he often invoked these aspects of his life as subjects in his work. In this self-portrait, Church is surrounded by a group of traditional Greek winged muses, inspiring painting, sculpture, music, poetry, and one added for his professional trade of blacksmithing. Because Church was a Spiritualist, these figures might equally represent guiding spirits speaking to him from another realm. A showman to the end, Church “spoke” from beyond the grave at his funeral; he recorded a message to be played via an Edison phonograph.

Elizabeth (Lizzie) Connor

American, 1869–1947

and Peter Paul Rubens (Spirit)

Spirit Daughter, likely Ida Gertrude Bronnenberg,

c. 1891

Graphite heightened with white on paper

Hett Art Gallery and Museum at Camp Chesterfield, Chesterfield,
Indiana

Connor was related to a family deeply involved in the Indiana Association of Spiritualists and the Spiritualist community at Camp Chesterfield. While at a séance there, when “her hand began to shake violently,” someone suggested to get her a paper and pencil, and she began to draw. Connor developed her sensitivity until she grew adept at mediumship through automatic drawing. The spirit controlling her hand revealed itself to be that of the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640).

Among the spirit drawings Connor made are portraits of the deceased children of Camp Chesterfield’s founding families. Her portrait for Carroll and Emily Bronnenberg shows the “spirit daughter” draped in a veil of cloud and emerging from a corona of multiplying flowers. They form wreaths, braids, and blooms along her left side. She cradles a bird in her right hand, which turns its head to kiss her cheek. Other spirits emerge as faces amid the flowers to her right. The entire composition is alive with perpetual growth.

Minnie Evans

American, 1892–1987

TOP

Untitled, 1960/63/66

Pencil, crayon, ink, and paint on board

BOTTOM

Untitled, c. 1946

Oil and pencil on paper

Gift of Anthony Petullo M2012.42, 44
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee

Evans made no distinction between her dreams and spiritual visions, considering them integral to her life and the source of her art. She said, “I never plan a drawing, they just happen. In a dream it was shown to me what I have to do, of paintings. The whole entire horizon all the way across the whole earth was out together like this with pictures. All over my yard, up all the sides of trees and everywhere were pictures.”

Evans found the resulting images mysterious. The colorful plants and lush organic growth throughout her drawings also reflected her longtime work in botanical gardens. References to Christianity came through her hand too, including the cross and women who resemble images of the Virgin Mary.

Reverend Howard Finster

American, 1916–2001

From the *Wings of the Morning*, 1982

Tractor enamel on wood with wood applique and artist's frame

Arient Family Collection

Reverend Finster was a charismatic preacher who enlivened his sermons by performing banjo and yodeling. In 1976 he started to paint spiritual visions. He recalled how he had dipped his finger in white paint, and a human face appeared over his fingerprint. Finster said, “while I was lookin’ at it a warm flash kind’a went all over me, all the way down, and it said, ‘Paint sacred art.’ And I said to it, I said, ‘I cain’t do that. I know professionals can, but not me.’ And it comes to me again and it says, ‘How do you know?’ I said, ‘How do I know that I cain’t paint?’” He made his first painting not long afterward, and continued to be visited by messengers inspiring his work. Finster went on to make many thousands of pieces of sacred art and an ever-changing installation around his home in Georgia, called *Paradise Garden*, all directly inspired by visions and messages from the spirit realm.

Reverend Howard Finster

American, 1916–2001

Shortest Message Up.Or.Down, 1987

Tractor enamel on wood

Arient Family Collection

Finster's art often carries messages about morality and the consequences of earthly deeds. In this painting, he conveyed his Christian vision that a righteous path leads to Heaven, while one of wickedness leads to eternal suffering in Hell. To dramatize these fates, Finster shows the spirits of people flying, or falling, from the surface of the earth. They either soar toward a cloud-filled paradise or plummet to a place of fiery damnation surrounded by the watchful entities of sin (manifested as black mountains with faces).

Edward Imeson Horsman

American, 1843–1927

The Scientific Planchette, 1890s–1920s

3-ply maple, brass, wood, and paper

Collection of Brandon Hodge

Don Dickerman

American, 1893-1981

Automatic writing, 1940s

Graphite on paper

Collection of Brandon Hodge

Kennard Novelty Company

Ouija with Planchette, c. 1890s

Wood and pigments

Collection of Brandon Hodge

Dr. Robert Hare

American, 1781–1858

Experimental Investigations of the Spirit Manifestations, 1855

Spiritoscope, c. 1855

Collection of Brandon Hodge

Philadelphia-based chemist Dr. Hare sought to use his high public profile and scientific acumen to debunk mediums and Spiritualist activities. He developed a series of devices, including his alphabetic-spelling “Spiritoscopes,” to publicly test famous mediums of the day. A medium would sit apart from a disk bearing the letters of the alphabet through which spirits would communicate, making it spin to indicate letters. Dr. Hare wanted to create a controlled situation in which the mediums could not influence the messages from the dead they delivered. When these blind challenges to mediums produced intelligible messages, Dr. Hare became convinced that spirit communication was real and worthy of scientific study. He went on to declare his support of Spiritualism in books and lectures.

Frank Jones

American, 1900–1969

Tom Devil Gambling, c. 1964–69

Untitled, c. 1964–69

Colored pencil on paper

Carl Hammer Gallery, Chicago

Many threads of divination, supernatural seeing, and trauma coalesce in Jones's drawings of "haints," or spirits, in devil houses. The drawings are elaborate, with numerous horned demonic creatures held tight in buildings made of vines and plants. He saw his first haint around age 9 and had "double sightedness" (his phrase for being able to see into the spirit world) for the rest of his life. Jones affirmed its existence and credited his ability to see spirits with a story his mother had told him—of his being born with a "veil," or caul (part of the fetal membrane), over his left eye. This belief is connected to Jones's own ancestry leading for generations back to West Africa.

Jones started to draw the grinning, horned haints in cell-like structures while serving a contested sentence for murder in Huntsville State Prison in Texas, possibly to keep them at bay and protect himself. He made hundreds of drawings of these spirits using discarded stubs of red and blue pencils. During an interview, he described the haints as mischief-makers and malevolent tricksters, who will try to lure someone "to come closer to drag you down."

Frances Haines McVey

American, 1903–1984

and William Blake (Spirit)

Head, from the Saints series, c. 1955

Oil on canvas

Hett Art Gallery and Museum at Camp Chesterfield, Chesterfield,
Indiana

McVey was an academically trained artist and trance medium who was associated with Camp Chesterfield Spiritualist Camp in Indiana. She was able to identify the spirits who guided her hand: French artist Édouard Manet (1832–1883) and, most frequently, William Blake (1757–1827), a visionary British poet and artist.

This painting was part of a series of saints, painted in trance during a séance (a gathering to communicate with the spirit world).

Frances Haines McVey

American, 1903–1984

and William Blake (Spirit)

Macrocosm (The Dream), c. 1957

Oil on canvas in artist's hand-painted frame

Hett Art Gallery and Museum at Camp Chesterfield, Chesterfield,
Indiana

This painting recalls a visionary dream experienced by McVey, which she interpreted as a message from the spirit world. She is shown at the bottom left, looking through an opening that appears to show a deep blue celestial vision. Faces, heads of beasts, and hundreds of pinpoint lights, possibly representing stars, appear to glimmer and expand before the eyes. It was likely made through a combination of deliberate composition and automatic painting with direction from the spirit of British poet and artist William Blake (1757–1827) while in a trance state.

Frances Haines McVey

American, 1903–1984

and William Blake (Spirit)

Six examples from the series Soul Travel Drawings,

c. 1955

Six drawings of charcoal and pencil on paper

Hett Art Gallery and Museum at Camp Chesterfield, Chesterfield,
Indiana

The spirit whom McVey asserted most frequently guided her hand was that of British poet and artist William Blake (1757–1827).

Their collaboration resulted in a suite of black-on-white drawings that purports to trace the movement of a soul in the time between its release from an earthly body to its entrance into heaven. Each drawing consists of one unbroken single-gesture line, tracing that path as revealed by Blake. All include a connected phrase of automatic writing in Blake's voice, also made as one continuous line.

These “soul travel drawings” hint at the individual personality of the new spirits, treat them with empathy, and often show signs that McVey and Blake communicated amid the process. Blake seems to answer McVey's telepathic questions of clarification in some.

INSCRIPTIONS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

This is the flight of a soul which has been carried by a soul older than it, after it has been put on its own way. One who did not know about Christ while on earth. The tail end at the left is its trail. William Blake, spirit.

This is a soul on its way to becoming a saint. Yes very much more than another way of drifting. I like the other pencil better better control yes, but not English anymore. No but all are One in God almighty sight. William Blake 

William Blake, Spirit. This is a soul in Heaven's doorway trying to get in it is a very little soul and the way is very difficult yes on the left.

William Blake is drawing a soul in the way of love; in learning the way to love we must travel with patience, and awareness and humility. The love is in gray and the soul is in black. William Blake.

This is the way a soul whose own way is wrong must travel until it finds the right way. Yes the oval is the soul. No these cannot be done in color. They are only drawings. William Blake Spirit.

This is the result of a long wait until the soul finds its resting place in heaven. William Blake.

John Bunion (J.B.) Murray

American, 1908–1988

Abstract figures on paper, 1984

Tempera and felt-tip pen on paper

Gift of Elizabeth Ross Johnson 1995.35.20

American Folk Art Museum, New York

Murray had visions, and what they revealed to him led to his first artworks: purposeful arrangements of natural elements in his yard around his home. They had a protective function, warding off the evils of the world. Eventually, he made drawings and paintings. Works like this show the qualities that Murray cultivated as he worked out responses to his connection with spirits and the divine. Small, vertical, animated, brightly colored figures populate the drawing, gathering in rows. Their clothing bears daubs and squiggles of paint, which Murray considered spirit writing. Each held the potential to act as a prayer and blessing for the artist and visitors to his home.

John Bunion (J.B.) Murray

American, 1908–1988

Spirit Water, c. 1980s

Glass bottle, metal lid, and water

Blanchard-Hill Collection, Gift of M. Anne Hill and Edward V.

Blanchard, Jr. 1998.10.34

American Folk Art Museum, New York

Murray devised a method to interpret the script in his drawings. Using a bottle like this, containing “spirit water,” he could look through the glass to see the writing. He also held it aloft in prayer and occasionally conducted ritual divination readings for visitors using the water. Murray was a private man, and the significance may ultimately have been something between him and his God. He seemed to connect the spirit water to his artwork’s connection to healing and protection.

John Bunion (J.B.) Murray

American, 1908–1988

Untitled, c. 1980s

Pen, ink, crayon, and watercolor on paper

Gift of Thea Westreich and Ethan Wagner 2006.20.1

American Folk Art Museum, New York

Melvin Edward Nelson

American, 1908–1992

Octopus Series, June 24, 1963–April 16, 1964

Twelve works of mineral pigment and watercolor on paper

Promised gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler P2.2017.1-4
American Folk Art Museum, New York

On June 24, 1963, at his home in Colton, Oregon, Melvin Edward Nelson, or as he referred to himself, MEN (Mighty Eternal Nation), saw and felt a great terror coming. He began writing and depicting this revelation in this series of watercolors made with earth pigments from around his property. MEN saw a cosmic whirl that became a massive octopus, which draped itself over the earth, shaking and squeezing it before the creature broke apart into space. The first eight images and inscriptions precede an actual catastrophic geological event. On March 27, 1964, at 5:36 p.m. local time, a massive (9.2 on the Richter scale) megathrust earthquake occurred at William Sound, Alaska. It killed over 130 people on the Northwest Coast, and its impact stretched from California to Florida. A towering tsunami measuring over 200 feet high hit the Alaska coast, and its reverberations extended as far away as Peru, Japan, Papua New Guinea, and Antarctica. Somehow, MEN felt it coming and interpreted its vibrations as best he could in the Octopus series.

1. *The octopus first emerges as a whirl. The “planetary band” is at upper right, Colton, Oregon, June 24, 1963, 1 a.m.*
2. *The great umbrella over the top of the world changed into a great octopus, Colton, Oregon, March 24, 1964, 8:31 p.m.*
3. *The mighty umbrella over the top of the earth, Colton, Oregon, March 25, 1964, 7:30 p.m.*
4. *The octopus prepares to crush the earth, Colton, Oregon, March 25, 1964, 9:31 p.m.*
5. *The earth becomes squeezed in a terrible vise, Colton, Oregon, March 26, 1964, 12:04 a.m.*
6. *The octopus begins crushing the earth something terrible, Colton, Oregon, March 26, 1964, 2:30 a.m.*
7. *Two forces at work, Colton, Oregon, March 26, 1964, 7:37 p.m.*
8. *The octopus puts a terrible squeeze onto the earth below, Colton, Oregon, March 27, 1964, 4:31 p.m.*
9. *Seeing the end of the octopus but the advent of the serpent, Colton, Oregon, March 28, 1964, 2:16 a.m.*
10. *The octopus is whirled and hacked to pieces, Colton, Oregon, March 29, 1964, 3:31 a.m.*
11. *Aftermath: A few weeks later, a big whirl encircles the earth, Colton, Oregon, April 11, 1964, 12:50 p.m.*
12. *Greater earthquakes are still to come, Colton, Oregon, April 16, 1964, 2:51 a.m.*

Norma Oliver (Aurelia Zadory)

American, 1893–1979 (?)

Strongly in Deed; spiritual portrait of Helen Butler Wells, 1947

Mixed media, collage/paper

Courtesy Randall Morris and Shari Cavin, New York

Oliver was the adopted daughter of the medium and spirit artist Helen Butler Wells. (Wells's artwork is also on view in this gallery.) After Wells passed into spirit (1940), Oliver was the primary "instrument" for making automatic drawings in the New York–based Jansen Group séance circle. As her successor, Oliver became the keeper of her legacy and guided the group's pedagogical mission for the next two decades. She made several abstract manifestations of the personalities of the group's members after they passed into spirit and often included a photograph of the sitter along with her channeled drawing. Her portrait of Wells is a fitting organic emblem, comprised of thriving flowers illuminated by shafts of light and framed by opposing, overlapping, and interlocked petals and vines.

Paulina Peavy

American, 1901–1999

Blue Coral Descent (trance mask), 1960s

Mixed media

Gift of various donors, by exchange 2019.95.3

Minneapolis Institute of Art

Peavy made “trance masks,” like this one, in order to better tune into the vibrations and messages of her spirit collaborator, Lacamo. She wore them while painting, and it seemed to facilitate communication. Peavy was proud of the masks and posed for photographs wearing these handmade transmitters, making them integral to her image.



Unknown photographer,

Paulina Peavy standing in front of one of her paintings, wearing and holding trance masks, c. 1940.

Courtesy the Artist's Estate

Paulina Peavy

American, 1901–1999

with Lacamo (Spirit)

Untitled, 1930s

Oil on canvas

Gift of Funds from Robert and Frances Coulborn Kohler, the Benjamin V. and Jane M. Siegel Fund, Gift of Various Donors, by exchange 2019.95.1

Minneapolis Institute of Art

Peavy had attended séances for many years before encountering an entity calling itself Lacamo around 1938. The artist was in a trance, and the spirit that came through conveyed it was moving through space. A bond formed, and Peavy claimed afterward that Lacamo guided her brush and became her perpetual teacher. This painting shows swells and veils of hot electric color turning and floating out of darkness. Drifting behind these plantlike tendrils is a hand, lazily drifting upward, as though coming through from another dimension to make contact with Peavy and the viewer.

Medium Mina “Margery” Crandon (1888–1941) producing the ectoplasmic hand of her deceased brother, Walter, c. 1925

Facsimile copies from the originals

Collection of Tony Oursler

Crandon was a world-renowned and infamous medium who claimed she could channel her dead brother Walter Stinson. She was investigated numerous times by psychic researchers, championed by author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of detective Sherlock Holmes, and ridiculed as a fraud by illusionist and escape artist Harry Houdini. Both bold-faced men were invested in testing the veracity of mediums.

In this series of sensational photographs, Crandon is apparently shown in the process of summoning the ectoplasmic (a mysterious substance produced as the energy of a spirit passes through a physical medium) hand of her brother Walter, its shape emerging from her own body.

Séance dress worn by Louise Parke during her work as a Spiritualist in Wisconsin, 1895–1905

Wisconsin Historical Museum, Madison 1958.650

This handmade dress was made to be worn for sacred rituals by a Spiritualist medium in Wisconsin named Louise Parke. Her family had a history of paranormal sensitivities, and Parke was a medium who worked in Madison as well as at the Spiritualist Camp Wonewoc. Contemporary mediums speculate that this garment functioned like a “medium’s cabinet” (see below)—that is, a self-contained protective space for the medium’s body to concentrate the energies of the spirits they channel during séances.



Shannon Taggart
American, born 1975
*Kai Muegge’s medium’s cabinet,
with Lakota prayer ties. TiOmimé,
Cassadaga, NY, 2013*
Archival pigment print, 30 × 20 in.
Courtesy the Artist



Shannon Taggart
American, born 1975
*Medium Sylvia Howarth’s trance
spirit-art demonstration. England,
2013*
Archival pigment print, 30 × 20 in.
Courtesy the Artist

Chholing Taha

Cree First Nations, born 1948

Bear Medicine, 2016

Acrylic on 300 lb. watercolor paper

Collection of Louise Erdrich

Taha makes her paintings only after receiving a complete and detailed vision, revealed by a variety of spirits at powerful moments she cannot anticipate. “The images are fully formed and appear almost like a slide being inserted in [my] head,” she said. “I know it sounds unusual, but I have come to be patient and see what will appear, I never know.”

This painting honors the importance of the women’s ceremonial sweat lodge in her Cree community “to clear our hearts, minds, and bodies so we may see past the shrouding of discord.” Reflecting the artist’s experience of the ceremony, she included images of rebirth and regeneration as well as a prehistoric grizzly bear skeleton, denoting deep ancestral wisdom. The bear, Taha noted, represents the community caretaker, providing safety, being “strong, alert and ready. This bear possesses the aspects of the day and night, blending the two strategically.”

Chholing Taha

Cree First Nations, born 1948

Healing: nanâtawihowin, March, 2017, 2017

Acrylic on paper

Courtesy of the artist

Taha's painting on the theme of healing honors duality and its significance and power, shown through pairs in this symmetrical composition. The turtle, for instance, is a creation spirit, bearing within it the "raw materials of a new life, everything has potential." It also depicts a spirit entity (in the lower center) that appeared to her many decades earlier. "I was worried even then of where are we headed as a collection of spirits," she recalls, "and in such a hurry to get somewhere. This spirit was actually blue and followed me everywhere I looked for four days. It was quite disconcerting at first, but there was a teaching going on so I just waited."

Emily A. Tallmadge

American, 1874–1956

and Hugh McNabb (Spirit)

Untitled, c. 1930s

Untitled, c. 1930s

Crayon on paper

Bethlem Museum of the Mind, Beckenham, Kent, England

LDBTH:177 and 178

Tallmadge, a member of Helen Butler Wells's Jansen Group séance circle, made mandala-like pencil and crayon drawings in a trance state. She worked invariably from a central eye outward, drawing freehand with red, yellow, and blue crayon. Whenever interviewed, she emphasized that she had no training and suppressed her personal imagination, striving to be an open channel. Tallmadge started this work in 1919 after influenza claimed the life of a young girl with whom she was close. In her efforts to contact the girl's spirit, she realized her talent for channeling, first through automatic writing and eventually in automatic drawing. What resulted were meditative images, meant to heal, bring peace, and open channels to the viewer's higher consciousness.

Helen Butler Wells

American, 1854–1940

and Eswald (Spirit)

TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT

Spirit Drawing #22, c. 1930

Pencil on paper

Courtesy Randall Morris and Shari Cavin

Automatic drawing #116 (Pilgrim), 1920

Graphite on paper

American Folk Art Museum, New York, Gift of Jacqueline Loewe Fowler 2018.19.18

BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT

Automatic drawing #12 (animal spirits), October 6, 1919, 1919

Pencil on paper

Collection of Thomas Isenberg

Automatic drawing #15 (Hidden Names), June 23, 1919, 1919

Pencil on paper with collage added later

David M. Sacks and Vivyan Tran

Automatic Drawing #81, August 8th, c. 1925

Pencil on paper

Collection of Thomas Isenberg

Wells's elaborate pencil drawings present strands and tendrils of ghostly growth. She worked a page from all sides, sometimes unconscious of a disparity between image orientation and her viewpoint. Her lines bunch up and then wander freely across the paper. Vines expand and contract, and within their clusters little faces, hands, animals, and names interleaf. Some reproduce the haze of ectoplasmic phenomena, the tangible by-product of physical mediumship. Her spirit guide's name, Eswald, is woven into the drawings, asserting his constant presence as the maker guiding Wells's hand. Ornate floral motifs hint at her work as a flower arranger and gardener. The drawings reward careful, slow looking as innumerable phantoms reside in their forms.

Agatha Wojciechowsky

American (born Germany), 1896–1986

and Spirits

Untitled, 1971

Watercolor on paper

Collection of Sue Dean, Courtesy the artist's estate and Day Art Consulting LLC

Wojciechowsky, a healer and Spiritualist minister, was prolific and versatile in her drawings. They ranged from kaleidoscopic, color-bursting spirit landscapes to densely packed webs of faces in clouds executed in pencil or ink. The artist made the work in a trance, guided by at least 11 spirits, whose proclivities seem manifest in the range of styles she enacted. The process always unfolded in the same manner, absent of any pre-sketching or overall design presented to her in a vision. The spirits always began in the lower left-hand corner of a sheet and worked across the bottom from left to right in a band. The compositions feel full and complete, despite this curious gradual reveal of the whole. Often they appear as fantastic fields of nature and tiny faces, peering out of richly textured or colorful forms.

Agatha Wojciechowsky

American (born Germany), 1896–1986

and Spirits

TOP LEFT

Untitled, 1964

Watercolor on paper

RIGHT

Untitled, 1968

Ink on paper

Collection of Sue Dean, Courtesy the artist's estate and Day Art Consulting LLC

Agatha Wojciechowsky

American (born Germany), 1896–1986

and Spirits

Untitled, 1963

Watercolor and crayon on paper

Collection of Steven Day, Courtesy the artist's estate and Day Art Consulting LLC

When fascinated reporters asked Wojciechowsky about her training or the source of her inspiration, she asserted consistently that she was “an instrument of the spirit world,” echoing the conviction that many others before her had in mediumship. She said, “I really have nothing to do with it. This is the work of different entities who take over and step into my body, directing my hand.”

Here, ghostly faces emerge from the brilliant field of soaked-in color, as though looking at us from the other side of the veil.

Agatha Wojciechowsky

American (born Germany), 1896–1986

and Spirits

Notebook with automatic writing,

April 1, 1959–October 11, 1964

Ink on paper

Gift of Charles T. O’Neal 2014.12.9

American Folk Art Museum, New York

Wojciechowsky made hundreds of pages of automatic writing, guided in a trance by spirits. Sometimes the spirits awakened her from sleep at four in the morning and compelled her to write, ambidextrously and simultaneously, for dozens of pages at a time. Some of the automatic writing was in English, some in her native German, and much came out in “ancient writings’ that cannot yet be translated.” The latter is on display here in a notebook full of endlessly inventive characters channeled from the spirit realm.

Agatha Wojciechowsky

American (born Germany), 1896–1986

and Spirits

Untitled, 1974

Ink on paper

Gift of Charles T. O’Neal 2014.12.2

American Folk Art Museum, New York

Wojciechowsky created her drawings in private, rarely allowing visitors to see her at work. She considered the bond between her and the spirits to be sacred. The exception was when she allowed a student to film her working for a short documentary. She also did foot and hand tracings for those interested in sitting for her. The artist would enter a light trance, trace someone’s hand (as in the case here), and then begin to fill it in as the spirits directed. She interpreted the components of these drawings to be the faces of the sitters’ ancestors, past lives, and spirit guides.



Charles O’Neal
American, 1937–2018

Still from *The Art Mediumship of
Agatha Wojciechowsky*, 1976

Super 8 original film to digital Betacam,
12:45 minutes.

American Folk Art Museum, Gift of Charles T. O’Neal,
SC.2014.1

ABOVE

Agatha Wojciechowsky's Spirit Trumpet

Tin

Collection of Sue Dean

Wojciechowsky was a highly respected medium who traveled to Spiritualist churches and camps to preach and perform séances. She often used a spirit trumpet to receive spirit voices, which whispered from their dimension to hers through its large opening to a small one poised near her ear. This tool, still used by mediums today, was invented by Ohio medium Nahum Koons in the early 1850s. It serves to amplify the whispered voices of spirits and deliver messages from across the séance table.

Allen B. Campbell

American (born England), 1833–1919

Charles A. Shourds

American, died 1926

and Azur (spirit)

Azur the Helper, June 15, 1898

Precipitated by Spirit: pigment on canvas

Lily Dale Assembly, Lily Dale, New York

On the evening of June 15, 1898, six people gathered for a séance (a communal ritual led by a medium to contact spirits) at the home of mediums Allen Campbell and Charles Shourds, a couple known professionally as “the Campbell Brothers.” With a blank canvas by his side, Campbell fell into a trance state as his spirit guide, Azur the Helper, entered his body and began to speak through him. The guests watched as an image gradually manifested on the canvas with no visible source of its making. According to historical accounts, neither medium touched the canvas, and no art materials were in sight.

Azur the Helper is a “precipitated spirit painting,” so called due to the manner in which pigment was reported to appear like droplets generated out of the spirit-charged environment. A sacred icon in Spiritualism, it is a pilgrimage site within the Lily Dale Spiritualist community, representing both the power of mediumship and evidence that the soul and intelligence survive the physical body.

Helen Butler Wells

American, 1854–1940

*Spiritual America: As Seen from the Other Side,
Dictated by Invisible Teachers, Clairaudiently
Received by Helen [Butler] Wells, Transcribed by a
Class of Eight Students*

Boston: Richard G. Badger, Publisher; the Gorham Press, 1927

Anonymous loan

Spiritual America is one of 162 books the Jansen Group, a séance circle, published to reveal the messages of spirits that spoke through and to medium Helen Butler Wells while in a trance state. The group gathered weekly with Wells to study psychic and spiritual development. Her students wrote down the messages as they came through her. Some saw images through clairvoyance as the lessons unfolded. Wells also did automatic drawings, on view in this gallery, along with channeled drawings by other members of her Jansen circle, Norma Oliver and Emily Tallmadge.

Marian Spore Bush

THEY

New York: The Beechhurst Press, 1947

University of Minnesota Libraries

In this posthumously published autobiography, Bush (whose painting, *Wherefore War*, is on view in this gallery) traces her life story with special attention to her development as a medium and spirit artist. Illustrated with Bush's volatile paintings as directed by a spectral chorus she referred to as They, her account of spirits controlling her hand is lucid and harrowing. She recounted:

After I get the canvas on the easel and the paint in readiness, They move my hand up and down and onward, across and sideways in all directions. . . . Sometimes They do this until my arm aches. . . . They work rapidly and never fail to reprove me when I do not respond readily or if I am in any way inattentive. . . . These unseen People are using me, obedient to their own thought and concept.

Mark A. Barwise

A Preface to Spiritualism

Washington, D.C.: National Spiritualist Association of
U.S.A., 1938

Anonymous loan

GALLERY 7
SUBPANELS

The Jansen Group

Helen Butler Wells (American, 1854–1940) referred to herself as a prolific instrument for clairaudient messages (conveyed to her mind without sound) that she conveyed to students in a séance circle called the Jansen Group, active in New York. Among the spirits (a “coterie of instructors”) who came through Wells to address her circle were the philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Pythagoras (about 570–495 BCE), Zarathustra (about 1500–1000 BCE), and Erasmus (1466–1536); American leaders Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) and Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865); and Christian martyr Saint Sebastian (256–288), U.S. lexicographer Noah Webster (1758–1843), and Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses III (r. 1186–1155 BCE). Some spirits also came from other planets, including Jupiter, Saturn, and Venus.

The first Jansen Group included eight women who gathered for weekly meetings with Wells to study psychic and spiritual development. Some saw images through clairvoyance as the lessons unfolded. From 1919 to 1940, these spirits dictated 162 books and 74 pamphlets to form The Wells Thought-Extension Library of Psychic Science and The Jansen School of Science of Spirit. Wells explained in her autobiography that after her husband and son died, she was “led into a knowledge of the power of psychic gifts and from the time that it was proven to me that my loved ones were still alive I felt that if anything I could do would help others out of the horrors of uncertainty into a knowledge of eternal life, I would gladly consecrate my life to this work.”

Garment Worn by a Spiritualist Medium

This is a special garment handmade for Spiritualist medium Louise (Kingsley) Parke. Parke's family had a history of clairvoyance and healing practices. Used solely in rituals sacred to the Spiritualist religion, the dress is installed here to suggest the context in which it was worn. Though it may call to mind a Ku Klux Klan robe, this unfortunate resemblance is coincidental.

On Mia's accompanying audio guide, you can hear Dr. Susan Barnes, an educator, spirit artist, and medium, discuss her experience of mediumship. Many contemporary mediums advised on this installation and the way this garment functioned, including Barnes; Reverend Marrice Coverson, pastor of the Church of the Spirit in Chicago; Reverend Todd Leonard of Camp Chesterfield, Indiana; and Reverend Stacy L. Kopchinski of the Morris Pratt Institute in Milwaukee.

PLURAL UNIVERSES

What lies beyond Earth, or within the earth? Are there interplanetary or interdimensional beings that move freely between realms and visit us? If so, what do they look like? The objects and imagery here affirm that visitations are possible or are actually happening, and they visualize what form they might take.

Some artists claim to have had personal experiences of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and extraterrestrial sightings. They have faithfully translated these encounters and mulled over their meaning. Others have made images of far-off galaxies and interplanetary space, speculating on the possibility of life from those faraway places. The artists ask: Are there worlds beyond our own? Are they ethereal, a spirit realm—or light years away? Are visitors from these places already here among us?

George Adamski

American (born Poland), 1891–1965

LEFT TO RIGHT

**Craft Rising from Moon's Surface, May 29, 1950,
11 PM, 1950**

**Venusian Scout in Motion, photographed with a
6-inch telescope at Palomar Gardens, California,
12/13/1952, 9-9:10 AM, 1952**

Venusian dropped message, 12/13/1952, 9am, 1952

**Space Ship in Glow Near Moon, January 17, 1951,
7:40 PM, 1951**

**Space Craft Releasing Saucers (Scouts), March 5,
1951, 10:30 AM, 1951**

Collection of Tony Oursler

Adamski claimed to see his first unidentified flying object (UFO) in 1946. By the late 1950s he had made numerous photographs of spacecraft like those on view here. He even reported meeting a Venusian (visitor from planet Venus) in 1952, and later claimed to have been taken aboard a spacecraft, from which he saw an enormous mothership orbiting Earth. The artist described the mothership as sending more nimble “scouts” into Earth’s atmosphere, where they surveyed the planet’s activities and left behind messages. Some of the snapshots here capture “scouts,” and others, taken with the aid of a telescope, show activity near the moon. Adamski photographed some spacecraft using a telephoto lens; in other cases, he focused the camera lens through a device connected to the telescope.

Shell R. Alpert

**First daylight photo of - what are they?
Unidentified flying objects flying in a "V"
formation, 9:35 AM Salem, MA, July 16, 1952**

Official Coast Guard photo 5554

Collection of Tony Oursler

A group of glowing orbs lights up the already day-lit sky above Salem, Massachusetts. Regarded as one of the earliest official U.S. government UFO photographs, it was taken by a member of the Coast Guard through a window screen at an Air Station.

Macena Barton

American, 1901–1986

Untitled (Flying Saucers with Snakes), 1961

Oil on canvas

M. Christine Schwartz Collection

Flying saucers and other fantastic spacecraft blast through orange skies above craggy rock formations teeming with life. The heavens erupt high above, with a dazzling array of stars and planets visible from the warm sea below. People who have ascended these natural wonders gesture at the sky and the flying saucers. Enormous snakes, lizards, dragonflies, and tropical flowers appear to sprout from the rocks. Looking toward the interplanetary visitors, the massive faces of Barton and a male companion emerge from the islands and are repeated along the rocks. Barton was a member of several organizations devoted to mysticism and to discussing interplanetary travel and extraterrestrial life. Made the same year Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human launched into space, this painting registers the excitement, strangeness, and adventure posed by the possibility of visitors from other worlds.

Peter Attie “Charlie” Besharo

American (born Syria), 1898–1960

1902, 1903, 1904, 1909, 1911, c. 1950

Gift of the Karen Lennox Gallery, Chicago 2015.85
Minneapolis Institute of Art

Several events and activities unfold in this narrative painting, which can be “read” from left to right, top to bottom. Each scene is dated, suggesting Besharo had chronicled what to him were historical moments—actual occurrences that included processions, conjuring, invocations of ancestors, and ritual interactions between earthlings and interplanetary travelers. Spaceships roar overhead, winged planets ply the sky, and light beams down from the heavens.

Little is known about what Besharo intended through his artworks, but their themes consistently focus on mysticism, sacred rituals, and space travel. He immigrated to the United States in 1903 and lived a quiet life as a housepainter and handyman in Leechburg, Pennsylvania. It was only after his death that his artwork was found. Fewer than 80 examples had been stored in a garage he rented behind a hardware store, which possibly served as his studio.

Peter Attie “Charlie” Besharo

American (born Syria), 1898–1960

The Double All-Seeing Eye, c. 1950

Oil on cardboard

Blanchard-Hill Collection, Gift of M. Anne Hill and

Edward V. Blanchard, Jr. 1998.10.8

American Folk Art Museum, New York

Many of Besharo’s paintings show interplanetary travelers meeting with supernatural beings and leaders on what appears to be Earth—though it could be another world. In this painting the encounter takes place outside a temple under the protective gaze of mystical eyes. Each figure radiates light as they interact in an exchange or ritual.

Budd Hopkins

American, 1931–2011

Sun Tondo, 1972

Oil on canvas

Estate of Budd Hopkins and Downs & Ross, New York

Installed to appear as though floating above the visitor, Hopkins's painted disc is as close as he came to a direct representation of an unidentified flying object. Perhaps best known as the father of UFO abduction narratives, Hopkins was first a professional artist. He and his wife had a daytime UFO sighting while driving to a party in Truro, Massachusetts, in August 1964. They spotted a mysterious object flying in unexpected, surprising ways in the sky. Hopkins later reflected, "Two things began to occur in my life after that time. [One was that a] memory trace of the UFO's appearance began to infiltrate my paintings in the form of a dark, centralizing circle."

In the 1970s, he began meeting with UFO investigators, witnesses, and abduction survivors. Eventually, he formed a support group and wrote several books about the phenomenon based on his experiences with those who claimed a direct contact with extraterrestrial beings.

Norman Lewis

American, 1909–1979

New World A'Coming, 1971

Oil on canvas

Collection of Billy E. Hodges

A shining red planet or star punctuates the atmosphere of warm brown tones in Lewis's *New World A'Coming*. The heavenly body seems to spin, its form a blur of motion. Beneath its glow, a crescent shape of fragmented forms or abstracted figures make a procession, their bodies adorned with headdresses and outfits that suggest a celebration or ritual. Their upward movement might connect Lewis's title to Duke Ellington's tune "New World A-Comin'," written and performed during the same year of the painting. Ellington found inspiration in author Roi Ottley's best-selling book of the same name, in which Ottley expressed hope that, "In spite of selfish interests, a new world is a-coming with the sweep and fury of the Resurrection." For all three men, it was a futurist image of Black life, in Ellington's words, "where there would be no war, no greed, no categorization, no non-believers, where love was unconditional, and no pronoun was good enough for God."

Gerald Light (aka Dr. Kappa)

American (born in China of Irish parents), active 1950s

Diagram inscribed with Ralph Waldo Emerson quote: “Astrology is Astronomy brought to Earth and applied to the affairs of men,” c. 1954

Collection of Tony Oursler

Light was a clairvoyant, a medium, and had contact with spirits and extraterrestrials. He conveyed the wisdom he gained from these experiences in extensive self-published writings. In some cases, he attempted to chart these revelations in diagrams such as this one. His first encounter was in Chicago in 1933. He recalled:

as I turned a corner in a rather deserted section of the ground, I came face to face with what I can only call the Presence. He, or She, was not of our earth. This I knew instantly, completely—and fearfully, the moment my eyes met His. Deep within myself I heard, my mind, my soul perhaps, I heard these words: ‘Son of Aquarius! Flame of Uranus! Witness the White Company in the Land of the Heights. Hear Our Message, observe Our Genius! Prepare!’

John McCracken

American, 1934–2011

Black Plank, 1967

Polyester resin, fiberglass, and plywood

Gift of the Collectors Committee 2010.18.1

National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

McCracken is rightfully known as a pioneer of minimalist art, an innovator of form and materials who broadly influenced his contemporaries. The artist aspired to make, in his own words, “the kind of work that could have been brought here by an [unidentified flying object].” In a 1965 notebook, he mused on his practice this way: “Interesting idea . . . these are beings of another world transmitting themselves here through me.”

McCracken’s uncanny objects developed from his extensive reading and own experiences, which convinced him that “there really are UFOs and aliens all around us. Aliens are elusive and hard to pin down because of their other-dimensionality; their medium of travel of time. . . . I think there are actually thousands of extraterrestrials—and other entities that you wouldn’t call extraterrestrials—flying and running around, looking at us, studying us.”

Chris Pappan

Osage Nation, Kaw, and Cheyenne River Lakhóta,
born 1971

Another Incident at the Big Chief, 2021

Graphite, colored pencil, ink, and map collage on Evanston
Municipal ledger dated 1923–24

Collection of Amy Gordon and Daniel Dunn

See Haw Directs an Alien Invasion from the West, 1996

Graphite, colored pencil, and map collage on Evanston
Municipal ledger dated 1924

Anonymous loan

Pappan's fantastic drawings recast the European colonial invasion of what we now call North America in terms of an "alien" attack. In his words:

Based on a visual narrative tradition known as "ledger art" these works tell a new story. Possibly imagined, maybe not. They both seek to relate our connection to things that cannot be explained by "science" or also point out how science is only just now catching up to Indigenous knowledge systems. The invading alien force is definitely a metaphor of the United States and subsequent attempted extermination, but it also relates to my, and our ancestors' belief of other worlds. This new narrative is not about a specific historical event (as historical ledgers usually are) but it is about ideas and beliefs related through pop culture identifiers that resonate with so many. The truth is out there!

Howardena Pindell

American, born 1943

M64, 1982

Acrylic, gouache, tempera, dye, punched paper, powder and glitter on sewn canvas

Collection of Michael Black

Pindell's swirling *M64* takes its name from a distant galaxy, also known as the Black Eye or Evil Eye galaxy. Its shape is meant to evoke the churning and expanding spiral cluster of stars. In order to give the sense of an animated source of potential life, Pindell painted, collaged hole-punched papers, and added photo-transfers, powder, cut postcards, and glitter to the vibrating surface. The painting also reflects Pindell's musing on how human perception of the universe might be changed "by the very fact of the existence of vehicles that could take us out to space."

Pindell was a friend of artist Budd Hopkins, whose work, *Sun Tondo*, is in this gallery. He included this piece in an exhibition he curated on UFOs and art at the Queens Museum in 1982.

Prophet Royal Robertson

American, 1936–1997

Untitled (UFO with planets), 1980s

Enamel paint, acrylic marker, and ink on poster board

Collection of Scott Ogden

Prophet Royal Robertson

American, 1936–1997

Untitled, 1996

Marker on poster board

The William Sidney Arnett Revocable Trust

The Louisiana-based artist had frequent contact from interdimensional and interplanetary beings, and sometimes received their messages through electronic devices. Robertson saw spacecraft and made connections between biblical verses, stories such as Prophet Ezekiel's vision of a fiery wheel in the sky, and his personal conflicts with his wife and neighbors. All connected in his imagination as he drew and wrote extensively, in works such as these, showing visions of UFOs traveling through space and beaming up Earth's inhabitants.

Prophet Royal Robertson

American, 1936–1997

God, 1979

Ballpoint pen and paint on poster board

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.21

Minneapolis Institute of Art

Louisiana-based Robertson made a wide range of drawings that record his emotional states and relationship to paranormal events. This image of a cosmic vision is notable in his body of work for its directness and clear singular subject, absent his usual accompaniment of dense text. Here he simply lets us know it was a revelation of an image of “God,” like an eye in the center of the universe.

Prophet Royal Robertson

American, 1936–1997

Untitled (“Extremities”), 1970s

Enamel, ink, and marker on cut on poster board

Collection of Scott Ogden

Robertson made hundreds of drawings densely packed with writing and imagery based on his intense feelings about life experiences. Many of these experiences include accounts of visitations and of being monitored by interdimensional entities—spirits, demons, and extraterrestrials. Robertson was haunted by disembodied voices and shadowy figures moving outside his house. This drawing is likely an attempt to visualize one of these visitors, a presence as real to him as you are to the people near you in the gallery.

Patrick J. Sullivan

American, 1894–1967

The Fourth Dimension, 1938

Oil on canvas

The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection 656.1967

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Sullivan, a house painter working in West Virginia, is known for only 19 surviving paintings, all conveying his desire to “bring truth out in all its glory on my canvases . . . a sort of parable in picture form.” He strove for a “clean and plain” look in his compositions, a quality that makes the resulting images no less mysterious.

The Fourth Dimension depicts several ideas about otherworldly experiences in one powerful image. A man, chained to a wooden post and facing away, looks out at the night sky, which is alive with planets, moons, stars, a comet, and a spiral galaxy. At right, a ghostly body emerges from a prone man, who has broken his chain. Are these two versions of the same man? Or an allegory of leaving the limits of Earth as spirit, and possibly as a traveler through time in space? Sullivan was less interested in illustrating religious or philosophical notions and more concerned with revealing an “infinite system of worlds and wonders.”

Julia Thecla

American, 1896–1973

In the Clouds, 1960

Oil on canvas

Gift of Helen T. Findlay 5212

Collection of DePaul Art Museum, Chicago

Chicago-based Thecla began making space-inspired paintings and drawings in the late 1940s. Often the viewer is placed in the vantage point of traveling in near-Earth orbit, in space, or as though on another planet. *In the Clouds* imagines just that feeling, of nearing the edge of planetary limits. Made at a time of great geopolitical tension between the United States and the Soviet Union around a nuclear arms race, it registers the feelings of hope and possibility that humanity might transcend its limits, connecting the space-travel aspirations of both countries.

Julia Thecla

American, 1896–1973

Red Grass Planet, 1961

Charcoal, tempera on Strathmore board, mounted onto cardboard

Gift of Helen T. Findlay 5191

Collection of DePaul Art Museum, Chicago

Thecla's *Red Grass Planet* places us on another world's surface. Iridescent rocks and other organic matter punctuate a lush carpet of red plants. A jagged stone at bottom-right appears to have heavy lidded eyes and a mouth. Nine moons or other planets are visible in the sky, while a mysterious dark aperture appears at center. Thecla frequently depicted landscapes with such great clarity, she may have believed she could astrally project to interplanetary worlds.

Admired for her humor, unconventional behavior, and precisely rendered fantastic imagery, Thecla's persona was inseparable from her vivid interior life. She endured many hardships, leading to a series of evictions and the loss of much of her possessions by her death in a Catholic Charities residence in Chicago. In the absence of a personal archive, Thecla's artwork and its relationship to her beliefs and lived experience remain mysterious.

Alma Thomas

American, 1891–1978

New Galaxy, 1970

Acrylic on canvas

Gift of Douglas H. Teller in memory of Julian H. Singman 1997.017

Tampa Museum of Art, Florida

Thomas's *New Galaxy* suggests the extraordinary color and light phenomena associated with nebulae in deep space. Illuminated by stars, these clusters of dust, hydrogen, helium, and other gases are vast. Thomas was fascinated by NASA's first voyages into space and followed astronomers' discoveries with keen interest. New images of deep-space objects would not have been as brilliant as her lively floral palette. Yet she suggests the possibility of life emerging from the birth of a new galaxy, white strokes glimmering like starlight and the warm transition from blue to orange indicating a primordial world.

Sara Weiss

American, died 1904

and Carl De L'Ester (Spirit)

**Journeys to the Planet Mars or Our
Mission to Ento, 1903**

Illustrations by Aaron Poole

Hardcover book published by The Bradford Press, New York

Morris Pratt Institute America's Spiritualist College, Milwaukee

Weiss, a writer and medium, wrote this book after her experiences of being taken to Mars. She was careful to state that her travel was not “bodily,” but rather in spirit and consciousness. While there, she was led by a guide who taught her that the indigenous inhabitants of the red planet refer to it as “Ento” and shared their language (included in the book's glossary). The flora and fauna of the planet delighted her, and the drawings included here were clairvoyantly conveyed to the illustrator for inclusion in the book.

Ayé A. Aton (born Robert Underwood)

American, 1940–2017

Cosmic Eye, 1970

Acrylic on board

James Bryant

American

Sun Ra and His Arkestra, 1963

Acrylic on suede

Alton Abraham collection of Sun Ra, 1822–2008

Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Ill.

Composer, musician, poet, and prophet Sun Ra (1914–1993) claimed to have been born on Saturn. He declared that “space is the place” for Black futures through a philosophy that combined Egyptology, astronomy, and Black intergalactic travel. He gathered a talented group of people to help bring his cosmic vision to the world, mainly through recording and performing with his “Arkestra.”

Visual art played an integral role in all of his endeavors. These paintings are among the many made by artists for Sun Ra’s records, stage shows, and posters. Their vibrant images of music and cosmic vision support Sun Ra’s philosophy of making music “designed to convey the message of hope and happiness and a living message from the better world of tomorrow.

Ionel Talpazan (Adrian DaVinci)

American (born Romania), 1955–2015

Bituim Dey and Noit, 2007

Mixed media on artist's board

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of James Wojcik 2021.122.1

Talpazan first encountered an unidentified flying object as a child, at age 8, in Romania. Having run away from home, and while hiding in a ditch, he saw a UFO hovering overhead; its calming illuminations told him all would be fine. The event changed his life and his consciousness. As an adult in New York, his memories fueled ideas about interplanetary beings and spacecraft, resulting in a proliferation of related images.

He told an interviewer that, when he made art, his mind “goes direct to the aliens’ mind. . . . I try to think like aliens think. I don’t know, maybe I get some ideas from other planets, maybe messages come telepathic, from mind to mind.”

**GALLERY 9:
PLURAL UNIVERSES**

Paul Laffoley

American, 1935–2015

The Thanaton III, 1989

Oil, acrylic, ink, and hand-applied vinyl letters on canvas;
painted wooden frame

Private Collection, Courtesy of Kent Fine Art, New York

Laffoley experienced decades of spirit and extraterrestrial visitations. They came together to inform the design of *The Thanaton III*. The painting was inspired by the artist's third encounter with “the alien Quazgaa Klaatu, who manifested as a body of light” in Boston on December 31, 1988. The event is depicted in the lower left, based on a photograph taken by a friend. Quazgaa Klaatu revealed to Laffoley how and why to make the painting. It is “a psychotronic—or mind-matter interactive—device” designed to be read, he said, and also for the viewer to facilitate meditation and revelation by placing hands on the handprints and focusing on the eye.

Ionel Talpazan (Adrian DaVinci)

American (born Romania), 1955–2015

Selection of UFO sketches, 1999–2015

Mixed media on paper

Collection of James Wojcik

With an urgency to make his revelations known, Talpazan made UFO drawings on every available kind of paper. The selection here gives a sense of the variety, and emulates the way he lived with them in his apartment.



Ted Degener
American, b. 1948

*Ionel Talpazan in his
New York apartment
with UFO sketches on
various supports, 2002*

Ionel Talpazan (Adrian DaVinci)

American (born Romania), 1955–2015

Spiritual Technology, 2003

Oil crayon, marker, poster paint, pencil, and ink on paper

Collection of James Wojcik

According to Talpazan, this diagram of a cross-section of a UFO is “a very special drawing, because it shows secret and spiritual technology.” To illustrate this technology, the artist developed a color-coded system that delineates the various energy sources used to propel spaceships (nuclear, antigravitational, magnetic, antimagnetic, electromagnetic, metallurgical, solar, volcanic, “vacuum technologies,” and “free energy,” among others). The diagram also encodes several theories Talpazan would not reveal.

Charles A. A. Dellschau

American (born Prussia), 1830–1923

**Plate 4382, LONG CENTER, FYERLES
MOTO, May 23, 1919**

Plate 4789, .51., AIROBOMBA, January 23, 1921

Plate 4348, NIX, April 9, 1919

**Plate 4487, Fig.7. FALLIN RISE MYOS DECK,
October 7, 1919**

Watercolor and collage on paper

Courtesy Stephen Romano Gallery

These four designs for flying machines are part of 12 surviving illustrated books made by Dellschau documenting the meetings and work of the Sonora Aero Club. It is not clear whether the club existed, or if it was an invention of the artist's imagination. The remaining images (an estimated 10 volumes are lost) present a dazzling array of concepts for aircraft, possibly made with the intention of leaving the Earth's atmosphere.

Dellschau had experienced loss and tragedy in his life, and it is possible that the Aero Club became a place for him to invest hopes and dreams, or to convey channeled information from exterior voices as a means to rebuild his world.

Ionel Talpazan (Adrian DaVinci)

American (born Romania), 1955–2015

Energies of the Cosmos, 2000

Oil on canvas

Collection of James Wojcik

A powerful source of energy sends down a cone of light to activate a mass that churns the universe. As it spins it also sets numerous spiral galaxies into motion, which in turn churn other matter and dimensions of the universe. This vision, revealed to Talpazan through his UFO encounters, was among the many he translated into drawings and paintings that envision cosmic knowledge and the possibility of interplanetary travel.

Ionel Talpazan (Adrian DaVinci)

American (born Romania), 1955–2015

Untitled, 2000

Plaster and pigments

Minneapolis Institute of Art, Gift of James Wojcik 2021.122.3