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ARTISTS INSPIRED BY GHOSTS AND MAGIC

by Peter Saenger



Gertrude Abercrombie, 'Strange Shadows' (1950).
PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION, COURTESY RICHARD NORTON GALLERY PHOTO: JAMES PRINZ PHOTOGRAPHY, CHICAGO

Agatha Wojciechowsky was riding a New York City bus when, she claimed, she heard a voice. It was the early 1950s, and the former seamstress was learning to be a medium and spiritual healer. She had done many modest drawings, and when the bus stopped in front of an art-supply store, the voice told her, “Go in and buy some watercolors.”

For three days she sat at home waiting for instructions on what to paint. She then worked in what she called a trance, beginning at the lower left-hand corner of the canvas and working in bands from the bottom up. By the mid-1960s, Wojciechowsky was showing her paintings—many of them vivid abstractions dotted with human faces—alongside famous artists like Man Ray and Jean Dubuffet.

Next month, her work will be featured in “Supernatural America,” a new exhibition opening June 12 at the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio that covers more than two centuries of art related to the paranormal. The roughly 160 works in the show are almost all by Americans who claimed to have experience with the spirit world. They range from well-known artists like Andrew Wyeth, Grant Wood and the contemporary video artist Bill Viola to photographers of UFOs and 19th-century mediums who claimed spirits guided their drawings.

In the 1860s, the husband-and-wife team of Wella P. and Lizzie “Pet” Anderson gained wide popularity. Wealthy clients would ask them to make contact with and sketch deceased family members or historical figures like Benjamin Franklin. The show includes a 1869 pencil sketch by the Andersons depicting Hiram Abiff, a figure from Masonic legend, with symbols and writing covering his hat and robes.

Another medium, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Connor, said that the Baroque master Peter Paul Rubens collaborated on her ink drawing “Spirit Daughter” (ca. 1891), though his style is hard to see in the elflike, smiling creature in flowery garb. The exhibition’s curator, Robert Cozzolino of the Minneapolis Institute of Art—which organized the show and will exhibit it in 2022—points out that female mediums enjoyed an artistic authority in the spiritualist world that women were usually denied elsewhere—though the spirits said to have guided the mediums’ work were mostly male.

In the 20th century, artists interested in the paranormal began to put themselves front-and-center onto the canvas. Gertrude Abercrombie (1909-77), a formally trained artist, painted “idealized versions of herself as an ethereal enchantress in long, slinky gowns and playing on magical charms, spells and occult enigmas,” writes art historian Sarah Burns in the exhibition’s catalog. In the surrealist “Strange Shadows” (1950), an impossibly elongated Abercrombie casts the shadow of a bare tree with an owl sitting on one of the branches.

Similarly, Andrew Wyeth portrayed a ghostly version of himself in “The Revenant” (1949), in which he seems to be glowing—particularly his right, painting hand. Mr. Cozzolino notes Wyeth’s interest in spiritual subjects, possibly as a result of the tragic death of his father and one of his nephews in a locomotive collision.

Other well-known artists used Gothic imagery to evoke the supernatural. In the oil painting “Shrouded Figure in Moonlight” (1905), Edward Steichen, better known as a photographer, depicts a glowing figure whose shroud echoes the color of a billowing bank of clouds. A mother and two daughters look even more ghostly in Bill Viola’s short black-and-white video “Three Women” (2008). When they walk through a wall of water, they burst into full color, but the respite is brief: In a moving statement of the fleetingness of life, they return through the water into colorlessness.

The contemporary artist Renée Stout laces her work with humor. She describes her 2011 piece “The Rootworker’s Worktable” as being “built” for Fatima Mayfield, a fictitious, spell-casting healer. A rootworker, Ms. Stout writes, “can perform an important role in many underserved African-American areas,” offering mental and physical healthcare as well as spiritual protection. The work features a desk bursting with bottles and steampunk

dials, beneath a blackboard bearing lists of herbs and Afro-Caribbean deities. There are also instructions for making a love potion, with the note “things I’ll need for the seduction of Sterling Rochambeau.”

“Supernatural America” has been in the works for five years, said Mr. Cozzolino. But its roots stretch back decades, to his work on a show at the Art Institute of Chicago devoted to the artist Ivan Albright (1897-1983), who earned the title “Master of the Macabre” for his many paintings haunted by death and decay. After Albright’s exposure to the horrors of World War I, he turned to reading mystics and philosophers, developing his own spiritual philosophy.

The Toledo show includes Albright’s portrait “The Vermonter,” which took him 11 years to finish. By then the sitter, a farmer and politician who lived near the artist, was dead. The painting evokes a man nearing his end, with detailed wrinkles on his face and hands and a jumbled, decayed background including an apple core and chain. Yet Mr. Cozzolino points out that Albright imbues the painting with signs of cosmic wisdom, as well—in “the color rings that surround the figure as chromatic halos,” in the red skull cap that recalls Diego Velázquez’s famous portrait of Pope Innocent X and—most of all—in the enigmatic subtitle of “The Vermonter”: “If Life Were Life There Would Be No Death.”