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Books

Ghostbrushers

Otherworldly beliefs have long been a part of the process for many artists—including, a new book reminds us, many women artists

by
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Had you attended Max Weber's famous 1917 lecture in which he argued that the world had gone through a period of "disenchantment"—or, in a literal translation of his German term, *Entzauberung*, "de-magic-ation"—then you might have found yourself nodding along vigorously. After all, the previous century had seen the introduction of railways and mass communication, the spread of industry and empire. Everywhere, mystery seemed to be giving way to the cold, hard facts of rationalism.

And yet, if you'd moved in different circles back then, you might have noticed an undercurrent of something else. Belief in spiritualism, the idea that the living can commune with the dead, blossomed throughout the 19th century and into the early decades of the 20th. Even some of the newest scientific developments—the telegram, the telephone, electric lighting—seemed supernatural compared with what had come before.

It is hardly surprising, then, that there were those such as Weber's near-contemporary, the enigmatic "Madame" Helena Blavatsky (inspiration for TS Eliot's "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante"), who founded their own occultist movements. Blavatsky's was the "Theosophical Society", a group that believed in an "ancient wisdom religion" connected to late antiquity's Neoplatonism.

It is this undercurrent—or, you could say, "other side"—that Jennifer Higgle's vivid new book, *The Other Side*, taps into. Her concern is the artists for whom the world was never truly "disenchanted": those who retained their interest in spirits and fairies; those who engage with #witchtok and tarot cards nowadays.

In 1911, the Russian forefather of abstraction, Wassily Kandinsky, published *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*

(*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). For an essay on such a tricky, elusive subject, it is surprisingly lively and accessible: he describes how the "soul" is fighting against the "nightmare of materialism", and how the "glimmer of spiritual closeness" is the key to an artist's creation.

This delicate, tentative spiritualism was also linked to the development of abstraction itself: with the endless possibilities of other worlds, why should artists stick to pure representation? In Higgle's words: "How to picture an aura or a soul? How best to visualise modernity's exciting disorientations?"

But, as Higgle points out, histories of modern, abstract art have always focused on Kandinsky and other male artists (Paul Klee and Piet Mondrian among them). So this is the *other* other side of her book: much like Katy Hessel's *The Story of Art Without Men*, from last year, there is an effort to give women artists the primacy they deserve.

It was over a decade before Kandinsky's essay that the Swedish artist Hilma af Klint became interested in Blavatsky's Theosophy. Af Klint's paintings—concentric swirls of blue and yellow over darker blue backgrounds; numbered, circular forms with seemingly symbolic shapes alongside them; and clean, near-brutal triangular shapes designed for her "altarpieces"—appear, at first glance, to be an early development of modernism and pure abstraction. But af Klint may

well have taken umbrage with that definition. She was not painting abstract ideas or concepts, but was, instead, directed by the spirit world. Through séances with other women involved with spiritualism, she had contacted the "Masters" who controlled her painting hand.

Indeed, in 1906—when af Klint painted her most famous works—she described herself as a conduit: "I had no idea what the paintings were supposed to depict; nevertheless, I worked swiftly and surely, without changing a single brushstroke." As Higgle notes, af Klint's spiritualism was one of the reasons why she wasn't "taken seriously" by curators and historians (until 2018, that is, when the newfound feminist interest in her as a forgotten pioneer made her the subject of a sellout show at the Guggenheim). She was far from alone in this predicament: "When a male artist explored spirituality it didn't necessarily harm his career, but when a woman followed the same path, she was dismissed as, at best, eccentric, at worst, a maverick."

Still more decades before af Klint summoned her spirits, the English watercolourist Georgiana Houghton exhibited her "spirit drawings" in a gallery on Old Bond Street. 1870s London could hardly have been prepared for what they saw: swirling lines and kaleidoscopic spirals painted over vivid backgrounds—colours which, according to Houghton, all had symbolic value—and with tantalisingly descriptive titles, such as *The Eye of the Lord* or *The Portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ*.

Houghton became interested in spiritualism after attending a séance, and had then trained herself to become a medium. Her paintings were, she claimed, the result of being directed by the spirit of "Lenny" (the late Henry Lenny, the prince consort), other royals



**The Other Side:
A Journey into
Women, Art and the
Spirit World**
by Jennifer Higgle
(Orion, £22)



Directed by the spirit world: detail of "The Ten Largest No. 3" (1907) by Hilma af Klint

and famous painters, and 70 archangels. As Higgin puts it, "No one was making anything like this in the London art world of the 1860s. No one is making anything like this today."

The spiritualism of the 19th century developed into a 20th-century interest in "other worlds". With all its emphasis on the importance of the subconscious, dreams and "automatic writing", the surrealist movement has much in common with the spirit-directed art of the Victorian era. One member of the British surrealists—whose work was shown in the recent *Surrealism Beyond Borders* exhibition at the Tate—was Ithell Colquhoun, a poet, writer and artist who moved to Cornwall in the aftermath of the Second World War. With a fascination in tarot, the occult and esoteric traditions, her paintings seem to be reaching towards a different world—and always have more

than one possible meaning. Is her most famous work, *Scylla*, a depiction of two ancient mythological monsters—Scylla and Charybdis—or something more phallic? Or, in yet another reading, is it the view of a woman's open legs?

It can be all three, says Higgin: Colquhoun was as interested in the supernatural and the mythological as she was in new ways of depicting sexuality. Much the same could be said of her fellow surrealist Leonora Carrington, whose books and paintings are replete with outrageous animals and bizarre occurrences.

There's a difficulty here: it is undeniably tricky to write with precision about something as wilfully intangible as "other worlds", and Higgin establishes early on that she is not bothered by the veracity of an artist's claims to have interacted with the spiritual ("the creative act is often mystifying"). But, even

so, this approach can leave the reader wanting. What, for example, is the precise link between conversations with the dead and Carrington's psychedelic invocations? What were Colquhoun's occult beliefs that got her expelled from the British surrealists?

A more precise approach to the supernatural's many manifestations would not lessen the radicalism or interest of the subject, but would, instead, enable it to be taken more seriously. Higgin has, rightly, drawn attention to an underappreciated area of art history, but there is a more academic study to be written: one with a clearer delineation between those who believe fully in these "other worlds" and those who use them to further their art; an explanation of how beliefs in spirits have co-existed with Christianity for centuries; and an understanding of how, despite their fringe status, these alternative beliefs are often highly codified.

Higgin also posits this interest in the spiritual as something intrinsically feminine: it is women, more than men, who have been drawn to other worlds. She brings attention to a supposed heritage that goes as far back as the 12th-century religious mystic Hildegard von Bingen and traces it, sketchily, through to the witch-hunts of early modernity and contemporary interest in all things spooky.

But if there *is* a certain female strain of spiritual interest, surely it is linked to women's historically peripheral position in religious teaching? There is no mention of the female mystics Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe, nor any of the early female philosophers, from Margaret Cavendish to Anne Conway, whose natural philosophy was more open to the possibility of other worlds than many men's.

Even with these shortcomings, however, *The Other Side* is a colourful, varied look at the many artists and thinkers who have touched worlds beyond our own—and a necessary reconsideration of why they have all too often been "brushed aside". Let us, in 2023, walk through the door into what Colquhoun evocatively called the "depths of the phantasy-life, that dream-world of which many are hardly aware in waking consciousness". ♦