

REVIEW

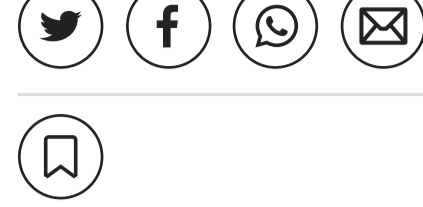
Can ghosts inspire great art?

★★★★☆ 4/5

Jennifer Higgie's *The Other Side* explores the lives of female artists who dabbled in spiritualism – from Emma Kunz to Hilma af Klint

By Lucy Scholes
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Abstract artist Hilma af Klint, pictured here at the Kungliga Akademien in Stockholm in 1885, used a spirit guide | CREDIT: Fine Art Images/Heritage Images via Getty

The *Mirror and the Palette*, artist, art critic and ex-editor of Frieze magazine Jennifer Higgie's previous book, told the story of 500 years of the female gaze: women artists who rebelled against the white male status quo and dared to paint their own self-portraits. Now, with *The Other Side*, she's narrowed her path of enquiry to explore how an interest in the spiritual – from 19th-century Theosophy to more recent preoccupations with practices such as Zen Buddhism and Siddha Yoga – has influenced the work of a whole host of female creatives.

As Higgie points out early on, many of her subjects were women “for whom being an artist was less a career than a calling; women who found solace in the spiritual realm because the physical one was too hostile to their seemingly limitless talents.” And it comes as no surprise to learn that much of their work wasn't taken anywhere near as seriously as that produced by male artists who also dabbled in encounters with the spirit world. (Think of Kandinsky, Mondrian and Klee, to name just a few.)

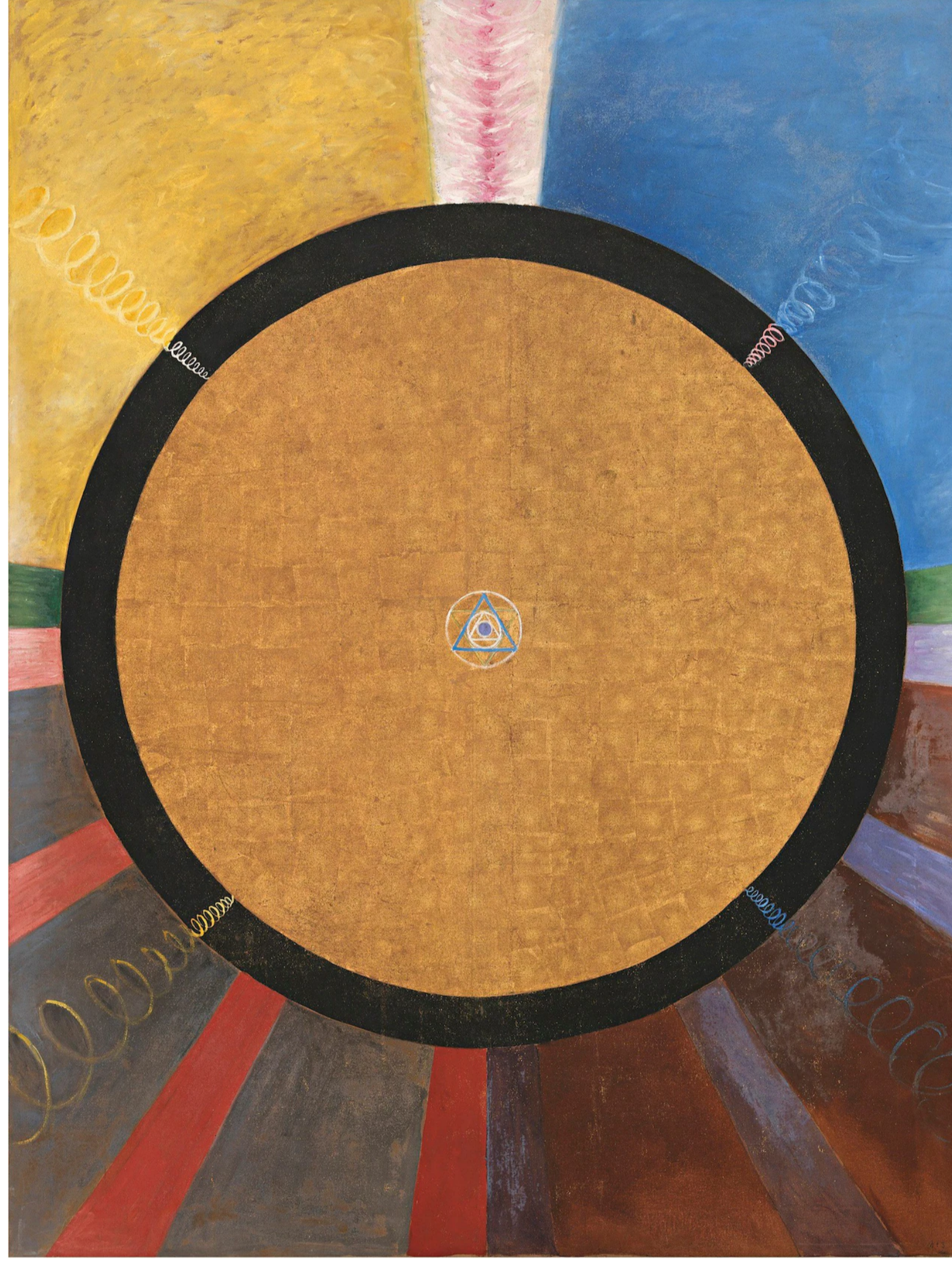
What's more fascinating though is how very modern and ahead of its time so much of this work was. Take the 19th-century English spiritualist **Georgiana Houghton** (1814-1884), whose “freely expressive, vividly original, strange” paintings call to mind Jackson Pollock's creations. “To look at these works, you'd think they were Freudian experiments, made at the height of European Surrealism, or else acid-addled '60s psychedelia,” wrote one critic of the 2016 Courtauld exhibition of Houghton's pieces. Or the Swiss healer, researcher and artist Emma Kunz (1892-1963), who expressly declared that her abstract geometric prints were designed for the 21st century.

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“Most artists are, in some shape or form, time-travellers and ghost-whisperers,” Higgie writes, and although these kinds of wishy-washy statements often made me want to roll my eyes, she does have a point. Her openness to what she rather nebulously describes as “new energies” allows her to weave otherworldly episodes from her own life into the narrative.

As a student, she lives in a supposedly haunted house – the “energy” of which leaches into her artworks: “spectral horses flying through vague landscapes; sleeping dogs floating above their beds; a self-portrait hovering above trees; a woman drowning in a bath” – and which leaves her “attuned to the possibility of other realms.” A strange dream tells her information she otherwise wouldn't know about a stranger who later becomes a friend. She sees two other friends' lives saved because a keen “sense of dread” stops them from entering a caravan that's crushed by a collapsing wall only moments later.

Not that she lingers for too long on her own experience, nor on that of any of her subjects. This is a whistle-stop tour through the last 150-odd years – and is very much focused on the Western canon. Potted biographies of the artists under discussion accompany snappy analyses of their work, and before you know it, she's onto the next chapter. I found the pace invigorating, but some readers might yearn for a more meditative, focused approach.



Group X, No. 3, Altarpiece by Hilma af Klint | CREDIT: Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Getty

The late 19th century is a particularly heady time, from a widespread interest in fairy folk, through the growing popularity of Spiritualism — “a movement that erupted, in the main, from female energy,” Higgie explains, giving voice both to the women who practised it as well as the spirits who guided them — to the broader confusions between mysticism and science. It might seem crazy to us today, but the speed of technological change during these years suggested that all manner of previously unimaginable phenomena could perhaps become a reality. “If thoughts could be transmitted across time and space,” writes Higgie, referring to Samuel Morse's first experiments with telegraph, “then perhaps spirit communication was possible.”

One also has to remember how very close the dead were in the years before advances in sanitation and medicine significantly reduced infant mortality rates and increased life expectancy. Take the Swedish artist **Hilma af Klint** (1862-1944), who used a spirit guide to help her create what were some of the very first Abstract works in Western art history, and whose interest in séances was, Higgie conjectures, most likely “fuelled” by the devastating death of her beloved younger sister. And af Klint wasn't the only one. By 1917, Higgie tells us, Spiritualism was so popular it actually presented a real challenge to the dominance of the Anglican Church.

Tarot cards – which, incidentally, I learnt here were only allowed to be sold freely in England after the Witchcraft Act was repealed in 1951 – on the table: I'm a sceptic. All the same, I still found *The Other Side* endlessly intriguing. I wasn't converted, but I was rather enchanted.

The Other Side: A Journey Into Women, Art and the Spirit World by Jennifer Higgie is published by Orion at £22. To order your copy for £19.99 call 0844 871 1514 or visit [Telegraph Bookshop](#)

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