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17th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, D.C. 20006

AUDIO-VISUAL PROGRAM

SET 219 CHILE ROBERTO "MATTA" ECHAURREU

Roberto Matta Echaurreu was born in Santiago, Chile in 1912. As a child, he was educated in Spain and France. In 1931 he graduated from the School of Architecture in Santiago.

Roberto Matta returned to Paris and studied with LeCorbusier in 1934-1935. He joined the Surrealist movement there in 1937. In 1939, with war threatening Europe, Matta emigrated to New York City, where with other expatriates like Fernand Leger, Piet Mondrian, Marc Chagall and Max Ernst, he became a pivotal figure in the development of American abstract expressionism.

Matta soon became acquainted with Julian Levy at whose gallery he had his first show in 1940. Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Reize, collectors of Surrealist art, became his sponsors. Of the exiled Surrealists, Matta was the youngest at thirty, while the others were already in their forties.

In an interview conducted by Sidney Simon at the Minneapolis School of Art in 1966, Roberto Matta and Peter Busa discuss the beginning of the New York School: 1939-1943. The painter, George Kamrowski, was one of the first to use automatic painting in the United States. Around 1940, Jackson Pollock was squeezing tubes of color directly onto the canvas without using brushes. Even before Matta entered the New York scene, there was groundwork for a "new" art not being shown in the galleries.

During the years from 1939 to 1943, Matta's enthusiasm, energy, charm, brilliance, and poetic qualities served as a catalyst for the artists working in New York - many of whom worked for the W.P.A. As Peter Busa stated in the interview, "we used to practice a clandestine kind of automatic drawing, which we took seriously, but was obviously not acceptable to the Project officials." Matta adds, "Don't you think all of that has something to do...[with] the idea that someone could express himself in relation to the oppression of the workers around him. The W.P.A. artists painted the working class "looking at" it, not from the "inside," not from the need for emancipation." Busa replies,..."I felt close to the abstract artists on the Project, but we couldn't submit any of that work. It wouldn't have been acceptable. What we did on the Project was colored by our having to do commissioned work. It's ironic, but some of the best things were the murals..."

According to Matta the artists that he met, Peter Busa, Pollock, Kamrowski, Baziotes, Motherwell were full of vitality. They were very professional. They knew a great deal, even more than we Surrealists knew about art history. Busa states, "we had a healthy attitude of anti-art. We were abstract painters, so that our idea of the role of the imagination differed greatly from that of the Surrealists."



Robert Motherwell told Matta about Pollock. Motherwell became an important link between the Surrealists, Matta, and the New York artists. Surrealist automatism was attractive to the Americans because it allowed total freedom of expression. Automatism became a creative principle. This theory was the first modern theory of creating that was introduced into America to allow American artists to go beyond the bounds of imitation. Motherwell could organize and translate in aesthetic and pragmatic terms what the New York painters were trying to express. However, Matta feels that such ability and aesthetics is only one of the conditions necessary to create. (Emancipation is another.)

The Surrealists used the technique of suspending the conscious mind in order to release the repressed ideas and images of the unconscious for expression. Matta introduced the group of abstract painters to the idea that paint would transcend the fact of just being something on canvas. The theory of automatism - consciousness does not control action, but is a mere adjunct of physiological changes - became the germ for the abstract expressionist movement.

Matta used translucent washes to create an illusion of fluid forms dissolving in an infinite spatial depth. He called his landscapes "psychological morphologies" and "inscapes". He created them by spilling thin films of paint on canvas, spreading them with rags, and then using the brush to define smaller areas and shapes. Accidents of spilling suggested definition and meanings, and thus upheld the improvisational and random bias of the formal Surrealists. Some of Matta's fantastic interior landscapes seemed reminiscent of the meticulously painted pictorial illusions of Dali and Tanguy. Veiled eroticism and a spatial theatre can be found in some of Matta's works. Matta, Motherwell and other artists would plan a manifesto against Surrealism and stage an exhibit supporting their position against Surrealism.

Art - not life - became the preoccupation of the New York action painters; however Gorky, de Kooning and Matta wanted to reach back to the figure. They experimented with the Surrealists "Exquisite Corpse" where the paper is folded and each artist makes a different part of the figure. A conflict between Motherwell and Matta developed over style and the execution of the Exquisite Corpses.

Peggy Guggenheim, who was interested in the new artists, suggested they make some collages which, if she judged them acceptable, would hang in an international collage show including works by Schwitters, Max Ernst, Cornell, Picasso, Braque, Miró, Masson, etc. It was Matta who encouraged Motherwell to enlarge his collages. In 1944 these collages were exhibited at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century in New York City. During this period Motherwell considered Matta's pencil drawings of the 1930's and 1940's to be some of the most beautiful work in America, but judged his paintings critically saying they were too theatrical and glossy, too illusionistic.

In 1951, Matta's electrically vibrant canvases pondered the threatened, explosive disintegration of the modern world. Slashing brushstrokes, swerving rhythms, rotating planes created unbearable tensions. Although non-representational, his canvases give the viewer the sensation of looking down from a great height upon a seething metropolis going to smithereens.

New subject matter of Matta's art in 1953 depicted "the morning on earth" and "the real soul" which is tenderness toward everything alive. His paintings are not mere designs, but explorations of the verb "to be" and relate to human existence. "I represent man as a force constantly changing. Man is fifty percent irrational. One half has been measured by mathematics; the other can be reached only through poetry."



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219 A DECADA (1940)

This mystical vision based on phenomena observed in the outer world glows against a translucent atmosphere.

219 B DECADA (1940)

Space and depth is expressed in crystalline shading while obscurely zoomorphic forms, brilliantly colored, dominate the foreground.

219 C Untitled (1941)

Swirling, gleaming color seems to erupt in a tempestuous universe which at the same time suggests organic forms.

219 D Untitled (no date)

Colorful forms with vague reference to reality float in a mythical atmosphere created by thin washes of clear color.

219 E FINE DEL 50

In a jewel-like sky float a constellation of geometric and vaguely organic forms. This mural is in the UNESCO Building in Paris, France.

219 F NERMALA No. 2 (1948)

There is a science-fiction feeling in the insect-like forms carefully arranged on the picture surface. This painting is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art of Latin America in Washington, D.C.

219 G Untitled (no date)

In a transparent cosmos of gray, black, and white geometrical objects revolve splashed with brilliant color.

219 H I KNOW WHO I AM (1966)

Composed in jewel-like Renaissance colors, vaguely familiar structures and forms seem to explode toward the picture's surface.

219 I LE PERE VERTE (1969)

In a pulsating gray atmosphere, skeletal forms splashed with white, red, and yellow seem to scream of human degradation.

219 J ETRUSARUDENE (1970)

In a fantasy landscape, human-like forms appear to be enjoying an erotic orgy.

museum of modern art of latin america



In his early works, Matta's color is anti-illusionistic forcing the viewer to make the scale small suggesting a microcosmic world of protoplasm. His drawings around 1957 stressed human degradation - tiny forms are depicted as slaves of powerful, contemporary structures of oppression.

Now - forty years later - man has landed on the moon and the strange shapes and lines of force that circle, loop, and dart across his paintings do not seem so strange to us. Matta's works on paper in 1969 showed scenes of space flight. Matta's paintings are a compound of outer formulations and inner expression which find shape in zoomorphic and anthropomorphic hybridizations which evoke a science fiction atmosphere. There is a personal, private logic of shapes existing in atmosphere. Primarily a stirring of a mystical vision based in a vague way upon objects and phenomena actually perceived in the other world but subjected to transformation.

General Text by Sharon Crockett and Ruth Marsteller.

Slide captions by Ruth Marsteller.

Note: Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Program included the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.). From 1935-1943 the WPA included the Federal Arts Project. The Federal Arts Project is discussed on pages 448, 463 in American Art by Brown, et al.