

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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## PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS BY MATTA AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Thirty-five paintings and drawings by the youngest and one of the most arresting members of the Surrealist movement, Matta Echaurren, will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from September 11 through October 20 in an exhibition organized by William Rubin, Professor of Art History at Sarah Lawrence. The exhibition is presented by the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture as one of a series devoted to work by artists in mid-career.

Unlike the older Surrealists who painted exact representations of everyday objects in new and unexpected juxtapositions, Matta's personalized fantasy has created a universe of strange new forms in a constant state of flux. These forms do not come from everyday visual experience, and though they suggest many things, they can be identified with nothing. Their material substance seems a new and universal element, linking the artist's pictorial and psychic worlds.

Defining the artist's place in the development of modern painting, Mr.

Rubin says:\*

Periods of great anxiety and tension have often been marked by the emergence of visionary painters. Amid the uneasy revelations of our scientific age many familiar social, spiritual and artistic concepts seem exhausted, and a widespread feeling persists that their elaboration can no longer substitute for fresh ideas. It is in this context that the Surrealist and allied painters of the last thirty years have sought to discover a wholly new picture of ourselves and of our universe which might help to resolve the contemporary conflict of values. The unique vision of Matta is the most recent and, in its cosmic focus, the most far-reaching that this manner of painting has proposed.

Matta's full name is Roberto Sebastian Antonio Matta Echaurren. He was born in Chile in 1912 of mixed Spanish and French descent and has lived and worked in South America, France, Mexico, the United States and Italy. In the early 30's he enrolled as an apprentice in the Paris office of the internationally famous architect, Le Corbusier, but architecture did not afford adequate scope for his restless fantasy and he spent an increasing amount of time with the Surrealists, whose group he joined officially in 1937.

The earliest picture in the exhibition, Morphology of Desire, was painted in 1938, a year later. This is followed by Inscape (1939) a form of "landscape discovered within the self" constituting what Matta calls a "psychological morphology."

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From 1939 until some time after the war, Matta lived in New York where he was at the center of a group of painters who formed the nucleus of the New York school. Here his influence was considerable not only as a painter, but as a personality of extraordinary intellectual perspicacity and conversational brilliance. He acted as a catalyst in stimulating adventurousness among young painters and as a bridge between them and such widely-known avant-garde expatriates of the older generation as Tanguy, Ernst and Duchamp. During his American sojourn his work seemed to have influenced Arshile Gorky particularly.

Among the works in the show from this period are the apocalyptic The Earth is a Man (1942) his first large picture and a brilliant synthesis of all his early discoveries and the Disasters of Mysticism, the most expressionistic of his early works.

During this time Matta was deeply involved with mystical speculations deriving from his interest in magic, the cabala, and the tarot deck from which The Hanged Man of 1942 gets its name. In this painting he also fully exploited the possibilities of the painterly accident and ~~change~~ arrangements of form, thus echoing the surrealist belief that the crises of modern experience can be resolved only when the importance of the irrational element in human affairs is adequately appreciated.

The Vertigo of Eros (1944) Mr. Rubin characterizes as the central image of Matta's oeuvre.

This is the cosmic Matta who, in the evocation of infinite space, suggests simultaneously the vastness of the universe and the profound depth of the psyche. The title . . . relates to a passage in which Freud located all consciousness as falling between Eros and the death-wish--the life force and its antithesis. Afloat in a mystical light which emanates from the deepest recesses of space, an inscrutable morphology of shapes suggesting liquid, fire, roots and sexual parts stimulates an awareness of inner consciousness such as we trap occasionally in reverie and dreams. . . Light rather than color is the unifying factor. . . Whatever stability had previously been afforded by a horizon line (in the inscapes) is here abolished in favor of a sensation of suspension in space. Having penetrated deeply into human consciousness, Matta recognized that Eros, or "the spirit of life" produces vertigo, and man's problem is that of remaining erect in the grip of this force, achieving physical and spiritual equilibrium. Equilibrium in Matta's art, like equilibrium in life, is a continuing dramatic factor. It is constantly being "lost" and must be regained.

A symbolic portrait of Andre Breton, Surrealism's founder, completed the following year, initiated a radical change in Matta's art and led to a whole new "demonology of creatures" which has characterized many of his paintings since. In The Heart Players, two fantastic creatures play a fatalistic game of three-dimensional chess whose pieces are the straight-edged plane and solar eggs of the previous years' iconography. A similar imagery appears in A Grave Situation and in the immense canvas of 1946, Being With, a climactic summary of Matta's figurative fantasies and an indictment of social aggression second only to Picasso's Guernica in

violence, Mr. Rubin notes.

The imagery of these pictures, as, indeed of most of Matta's work, reflects his interest in science and his belief that the artist must interpret in subjective human terms the technological and spiritual impact of its discoveries. From the beginning, Mr. Rubin observes, the microscopic-telescopic realities of the universe stimulated Matta's visionary process, and this interest in science represents a major distinction between him and the more psychologically oriented Surrealists.

Biological growth, the poetry of germination conceived in terms of a botanical fantasy, is the theme of the "Dawn" variations that have occupied Matta from the end of 1952 to the present. This process, which Matta describes as 're-naming the world,' is illustrated in the painting To Cover the Earth with a New Dew (1953).

During the past year Matta has elaborated a non-anthropomorphic "synoptic" creature which give graphic expression to man, not as an isolated being, but as a complex of biological and social interactions within his world, as seen in The Un-thinkable of 1957.

"Matta's recent introspective explorations suggest a refocussing on the ultimate goal of his painterly Odyssey," Mr. Rubin concludes. "He has always wished to demonstrate his belief that 'one can see within one's self.' This is the 'inscape' idea . . . Toward the end of the war he was drawn from seeing within by 'being with' a society that bred war and concentration camps. A second such period resulted from his experience of conditions in post-war Europe and the politics of the cold war. To speak about these things, and relate his vision to that of others, Matta created the convention of his creatures. The 'Dawns' represent a renewal of hope and the return to an inner search enriched by the painter's sojourns in the regions of man's external dilemmas."

Paintings and drawings in the exhibition have been borrowed from private and public collections including the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Baltimore Museum of Art, Lawrence Art Museum, Williams College, Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, City Art Museum of St. Louis and the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

After the New York showing the exhibition will be seen at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Sam Hunter, Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture, installed the exhibition in New York.

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Photographs and additional material are available from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York. CI 5-8900.