

Roberto Sebastian Matta (1912-2002)

Tentation sans Visage

(*Temptation without a Face*)

oil on canvas, 1958

1984 Gift of Howard F. & Isabel A. Baer

image: (h) 44 1/2" x 57"



Introduction

Roberto Matta, a native of Chile, began his career in Paris in 1938 as a student of architecture. He soon abandoned the formal discipline of architecture to pursue art, producing drawings and paintings inspired by his association with Surrealist artists Salvador Dali and Andre Breton. During World War II, Matta went to New York where his creativity was nourished by the American Abstract Expressionists and European Modernists. He became a leader in the use of “automatism” as an innovative method for the subconscious flow of thoughts and promoted its use in art. *Tentation Sans Visage* reveals Matta's lingering interest in architecture with planes that intersect with dream-like spaces. Surreal anthropomorphic structures appear to float in areas of jewel-like color.

The Artist

Roberto Matta was born in Santiago, Chile in 1911. His early studies were in architecture. After graduating, he went to Paris to work as an apprentice with Le Corbusier. He met many artists and writers, including Salvador Dali, who persuaded Matta to show his drawings to the Surrealist Andre Breton. Matta was greatly influenced by Surrealist theories and officially joined the group in 1937. He was particularly drawn to Surrealist ideas about "automatic" writing and painting, a technique used to release the artist's unconscious thoughts. Using the technique of “automatic composition,” Matta devised a signature style of painting that he called “psychological morphologies” or “inscapes.”

In the late 1930s Matta traveled throughout Europe, where he worked with Walter Gropius and Moholy-Nagy. When war broke out in Europe, he went to New York where he continued to paint. He exhibited in the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris. Biomechanical forms and the idea of man versus machine dominate his work from that period. He mixed with New York's thriving artistic community as the first wave of Abstract Expressionism was establishing New York as the center of the art world, but retained his distinct Surrealist style. New York artists such as Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock and Arshile Gorky met regularly at Matta's home during the winter of 1941. He spent most of the 1940s in New York, though a trip with his wife to Mexico in 1941 gave him a renewed interest in pre-Columbian culture. He

continued to work and exhibit in New York throughout the 1940s but in 1947 he returned to Europe and officially broke with the Surrealists. By 1950 he was well established as an artist and lived between homes in Rome, London and Paris, where he finally settled in 1954.

The 1960s marked a change in subject and style in Matta's work as he turned to contemporary socio-political themes, still heavily influenced by his Surrealist roots. The scale of his paintings increased in the 1960s and he began painting very large, politically inspired works. Throughout the 1960s and 70s he traveled worldwide. He also worked on commissions and explored other artistic media, such as printmaking and bronze sculpture. He worked prolifically until his death in 2002, at the age of 90. Matta received recognition during his lifetime in the form of numerous awards, and in October 1995 was awarded a Nobel Prize for Art. During his lifetime he had solo exhibitions at important galleries in the US, Japan, and Europe's major cities. His work is in museum collections worldwide.

Discussion

Matta is known for the Surrealistic "inscapes" in which architectural, geometric and ambiguous organic forms emerge from a dim netherworld. Painted in 1958, *Tentation sans Visage* is typical of Matta's mature style. His architectural background is very evident in this work; the forms have the look of a futuristic cityscape. In ***Mainstreams of Modern Art*** Canady refers to Matta's paintings as ". . . diagrammatic composition . . . where a kind of astral geometry organizes the holocaust."

In *Tentation Sans Visage*, Matta used a vibrant palette to create forms that float within muted colors; warm tones emerge like electric lights through a fog. They complement the saturated greens that cover the spindly forms like moss. The glowing organic forms are suspended by scaffolding that is clearly designed, not random. They are both jewel-like and beautiful, and unnaturally luminous. Matta juxtaposes the precise analytical line of the architect in parts of his composition, with undefined expressionist blurs of color. In parts of the painting some forms appear to be static while those in the lower left area seem to be vibrating like moving forms in a blurred photograph. Perhaps they shimmer with heat, like the haze of a mirage in the desert. Matta has used a bird's eye view; similar to the axonometric projection used by architects, to create a great sense of space in the painting. Yet, there is some confusion as to whether we are viewing a microscopic or telescopic vision. The two triangular forms and some of the lines are set at strange angles to the picture plane, creating a sense of instability that is not typical in architectural forms.

Style

Tentation sans Visage is typical of Matta's mature style, in which Matta combined his own awareness of the horrors of the war in Europe with inspiration from the allegorical hellscapes of 15th century Dutch artist Hieronymus Bosch. These influences, as well as those from the Surrealist movement and his architectural background, lead to a very specific style that was quite unlike the Abstract Expressionist movement that dominated New York, where Matta spent his former years. The type of ambiguous surrealistic forms seen in this work dominated Matta's unique artistic language. His work can generally be categorized into the *cosmic* and *apocalyptic* paintings, this painting falling into the latter group.

Sources

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