



11 April 2019

Surreal in Fourth Dimension

The State Hermitage brings back creative legacy of Roberto Matta

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Is it possible to combine French Surrealism with American Abstractionism? The new State Hermitage exhibition "Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension" gives the answer. Its main character is virtually unknown to us, though he was an associate of Le Corbusier and Salvador Dali; inspired Guattari and Deleuze, the ideologists of Postmodernism; and worked closely with Jackson Pollock. The first ever Russian retrospective of Matta's work is meant to fix this historical injustice.

91 works by the painter have been brought to St. Petersburg. The earliest ones, dating back to the 1930s, reflect the influence of the Surrealists, to whom Matta was introduced by Andre Breton after the latter saw Matta's architectural sketches. Three small, colored pencil drawings from 1936 remind us of Yves Tanguy. But while Tanguy's fancy objects usually rest on the ground, Matta makes everything soar in a weightless state.

Even back then the artist rejected clear figurativeness and meaningfulness. His images and their strange titles (Convict the Impossible, Ergonauts/Disastronauts) stir the viewer's imagination, making them dive into a space that has its own laws, with a distorted but nevertheless present perspective.

Matta stands out from his colleagues by his desire to create a three-dimensional or even four-dimensional world, not a flat surface. Instead of the multilayered, colorful splashes of Jackson Pollock or the pulsing planes of color by Mark Rothko, we see almost architectural structures of shapes (reminding of his experience with Le Corbusier) and a strictly organized, internal dynamic tension.

Interestingly, despite the formally abstract nature of images, Matta is able to preserve the glimmer of the real world in almost all of his works. His largest work in this exhibition, *Liberos* (1969), is 30 square-meters in size and

one can discern in it some Medusas, grapes, and something like a pipeline system. The Couple (1950–1954) shows two lovers as an angled, flying object, absolutely not anthropomorphic, and the Unthinkable (1957) reminds us of a laboratory from a sci-fi movie.

Sometimes Matta even dares to use straightforward, objective images, like in the erotic Fig Leaf (1945), and particularly Volcano (1954). However, there's a paradox: adding figurative motifs to abstract paintings, he approaches figurative art as an abstractionist. Therefore, for example, a lava eruption is painted like flashes of colors not found in nature. This constant balancing act between the distorted "reflections" of reality and absolute fantasy is typical of Matta's creative legacy as a whole.

The retrospective is located in two halls of the General Staff building at the State Hermitage. Curators Dmitry Ozerkov and Oksana Salamatina were able to fit various aspects and periods of Matta's work quite smoothly in this relatively small space. Note that many items came to Russia from the US, which is particularly valuable in current conditions where museum exchanges between the two countries has ceased. Despite the formally abstract nature of his works, Matta is able to preserve the glimmer of the real world in almost all of them.

Some 80% of the works came from the US. Regardless of anything, American collectors and funds were willing to give these works for a Russian exhibition, Oksana Salamatina told Izvestiya. In the US, Russia's State Hermitage enjoys the reputation as one of the world's best museums. I think that, given the current political tensions, cultural events of such a scale help us overcome artificial disagreements.

The sponsors of the exhibition note that this is the second largest ever retrospective of the artist after his 1957 exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Time will show whether this event can revive interest in his creative legacy. Anyway, looking at Matta's canvases, one cannot help thinking that they still look like phantasmagoric pieces of the future, even in the 21st century.

Exhibition "Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension."

"The Open Cube" (1977) illustrates the artist's experiments with space.