



The State Hermitage opens the "year of Surrealism" with a large scale exhibition of Roberto Matta.

Doubts in the Fourth Dimension

The exhibition "Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension" opened at the White Hall of the General Staff building of the State Hermitage as part of the "Hermitage 20/21" project.

Over 90 works from 23 private collections and funds from Great Britain, Israel, Italy, Mexico, the US, France and Switzerland have come to Russia for the first time for a large-scale presentation of the "last Surrealist," one of the most influential artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The State Hermitage exhibition, curated by Dmitry Ozerkov and Oksana Salamatina (the latter from the US side) is not only the first ever Matta exhibition in Russia, but also one of his largest retrospectives since his exhibitions in New York Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery in Berlin and in Pompidou Center in Paris.

Roberto Antonio Sebastian Matta Echaurren – as the full name of the artist goes – is probably an almost perfect hero of the Transatlantic avant-garde.

*Roberto Matta became a Surrealist. However, he preferred to talk about the "scars of Surrealism."*

Almost, because this avant-garde mostly implies reckless futurists: and writers experimenting with language, most often with the English language. It is believed that the London – Paris – New York triangle was responsible for the transfer of ideas and new forms in the 1910s – 1940s. This "triangle" gave birth not only to the Versailles Treaty of 1919, but also to the age of huge Transatlantic liners covering the distance from the Old World to the New World within days. Apparently, Roberto Matta does not quite fit the "transatlantic avant-garde" description. He was one of the most famous artists in that London – Paris – New York triangle, but the routes of his life made a more complicated geometric figure, one of its vertices being Latin America.

However, it is hard to imagine a more "transatlantic" artist. Born in a wealthy Chilean family that spoke both Spanish and Basque, he received a degree in architecture at Catholic University of Santiago but moved to Paris in 1935, where he worked in Le Corbusier's workshop and, certainly, made friends, including poets Federico Garcia Lorca, Pablo Neruda, and Gabriela Mistral. Garcia Lorca introduced Roberto to Salvador Dali, who suggested that Roberto should show his drawings to Andre Breton. The latter bought several of Matta's works and made an official invitation for him to join the Surrealists. This is how Roberto Matta became a Surrealist. He himself preferred to talk about it as "the scars of Surrealism."

As World War II broke out in 1939, Matta left the Old World and moved to New York. He became famous there and had his first personal exhibition. He made friends with Jackson

Pollock, William Baziotes, and Arshile Gorky. Unfairly blamed for Gorky's suicide in 1948, Matta returned to Europe. "The scars of Surrealism," as well as those of abstract expressionism, will remain in his works as the memories of the past. But the artist was always trying to find his way between the empyrean mystic revelations and the urge for social equality.

Anti-capitalist left-wing views go well with Surrealism, but not with Abstract Expressionism. However, Matta could combine these. The exhibition includes the paintings made in 1952 that were devoted to the trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, sentenced and electrocuted for giving classified information on nuclear bomb production to the USSR. The contrast between the grey space, divided into sections, and the brightly colored spots is aggravated by the strange, creepy, and monstrous figures of the judges that look like prototypes of clones from George Lucas' *Star Wars*. An opposition between biomorphic figures that have features of idols, insects, centaur and birds of paradise, and the mechanistic world is an inherent part of Matta's art. Surprisingly, his space remains flowing, able to unfold like a box or twist in a spiral, but never static. He makes color a way to present power lines of various energy fields.

This non-linear space that Matta worked with is taken as the starting point for the State Hermitage exhibition. The idea of a rolled-up space-time is linked here to the "fourth dimension" theory of the mathematician and theosophist Pyotr Ouspensky. The lectures of the Russian theosophist were popular in England. As Matta was in London, his friend Gordon Onslow Ford, also bearing "the scars of Surrealism," took him to see these lectures. The traces of Matta's interest in these ideas can be seen in his aquatint album *L'ame du Tarot de Theleme* (1994).

Pyotr Ouspenski's ideas (for example, that time is a spiral) were popular among the "transatlantic avant-garde" poets as well. For example, Eugene Jolas, who made *transition* magazine, could refer to Nietzsche, Ouspensky, and Spanish mystics in the same essay. For these poets, language was a key to the secrets of space. One may say that for Roberto Matta, with his "transatlantic" life, painting was this key.