



ROBERTO MATTA: 105 YEARS OF COSMIC VASTNESS AND DEPTH OF THE PSYCHE

“What does it Matter if Matter is mad as a Hatter?”

By Roberto Matta¹

A truly international artist whose fame transcends borders, schools and generations, Matta has been a major influence on the artistic scene in Latin America, North America and Europe. With his personal and recognizable visual vocabulary, his creativity is based on “instinctive automatism”, moral concerns about humanity and the forces of the rational vs the irrational. In Matta's own words, the function of art is “to unveil the enormous economic, cultural, and emotional forces that materially interact in our lives.”²

Born in Santiago de Chile in 1911, Matta would have been 105 years old this November 11th. The background of Roberto Sebastian Antonio Matta Echaurren is almost as variegated as his work. Son of a Spanish father and French mother, he enjoyed a privileged upbringing and excellent academic training in architecture before leaving his family and arriving in Europe in 1932.³

As Le Corbusier's apprentice, Matta did not find an adequate scope for his artistic vision within architecture. He thus became immersed in the intellectual life of the French Surrealist group in 1937, before moving to New York a few years later. During this initial period, he conceived the imagery of artworks like *Wet Sheets* (1936), which at first glance looks like something out of science fiction, but, upon deeper study and the realization that each form has an organic basis, the suggestive references to sexuality become clear. In this first pictorial formation period, Matta focused on discrete shapes and tenuous horizons, suggesting fantastic landscapes, which he denominated as “Inscapes”. His earliest

¹ From Michael Batterberry, 20th Century Art; *Discovering Art Series*, New York. McGraw-Hill Book Company, p. 172 in Bolge, Georges. *Re-Generation*. Boca Raton, Florida: Boca Raton Museum of Art, 1997.

² Echaurren, Roberto Sebastia, and Elizabeth T. Goizueta. *Matta: Making the Invisible Visible*. Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2004. p. 34.

³ Rubin, William. “Matta.” *Jstor*. The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/4058260?seq=3#page_scan_tab_contents



drawings demonstrate the two characteristics that would distinguish his work for the next seventy years: a keen sense of line and interest in biomorphic forms.

At the end of 1939, Matta “escaped” to the United States, where he was inspired by the turmoil of the world at war. This inspired some of his most complex -almost labyrinthine- artworks, like *Yennes* (1939). The membranous walls and amorphous shapes recalling Tanguy, bestowed Matta an influential role in the development of the New York School of Abstract Expressionists. At that moment, Matta was the intersection and connection between European Surrealism and the American School Movement.

At the beginning of the 1940's, Duchamp wrote a few lines about Matta: “His first contribution to Surrealist painting, and the most important, was the discovery of regions of space until then unknown in the field of art.”⁴ Duchamp hit the bull's eye: Matta's space is space in motion, in continuous bifurcation and rearrangement. During this period of time, Matta introduced his interpretation of tribal art as a new insignia in his work, expressing his sociopolitical concerns by using totemic figures in his graphic lexicon.⁵ Inspired by travel to Mexican volcanic landscapes, the artworks from this creative period, just like *Galaxies (Mysticism of Infinity)* (1942), refer to the explosive character of the painter's creative energies and departures from repression.⁶ “This series of paintings were extremely aggressive, often dark and ritualistic.”⁷

Inspired by the primeval nature of the landscape and vestiges of Pre-Columbian monuments and symbolism, he was determined to adapt his European notions of surreal space to create a fantastic new realm for his paintings.⁸ During this period, the spatial ambiguity of the canvas is sketched with a translucent glaze that reveals the virtual empowered explosion of the volcanic forms. These intense reactions were engendered by the last years of war and revelations of horror. Nevertheless, by the end of this decade, Matta relaxed, as suggested by more delicate coloring and smoother rhythms.

⁴ Bozo, Dominique. *Matta*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985.p. 25.

⁵ Echaurren, Roberto Sebastia, and Elizabeth T. Goizueta. *Matta: Making the Invisible Visible*. Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2004. p. 11.

⁶ Rubin, William. “Matta.” *Jstor*. The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4058260?seq=3#page_scan_tab_contents

⁷ Russell, John. “ART: THE OTHERWORDLY WORLD OF ROBERTO MATTA.” *The New York Times*, 6 Feb. 1986. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/07/arts/art-the-otherwordly-world-of-roberto-matta.html>

⁸ Bozo, Dominique. *Matta*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985. p. 9.



In 1948, Matta broke with the Surrealists after having illustrated Breton's "Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism - or else" and returned to Europe, settling in Rome in 1953.⁹ This freed Matta's creativity, as it gave the artist the opportunity to pursue his interests in science, mineralogy, physics and mathematics as inspiration for his art. Also fascinated with the concepts of change, academic James Thrall Soby considered that Matta's artworks are full of "cosmic mysticism" as a consequence of the artist's interest in magic, cabala and tarot.¹⁰ This new phase of creativity turned towards his Latin American roots and his burgeoning revolutionary spirit.

In the decade of 1950, Matta emphasized this artistic evolution, encouraged by his continuous travels to South America, and pictorially translated his hometown's iconography and color. "The luminous layers concentrated on the creation of images of fine matter in the infinite space."¹¹ During this period, artworks like *Morningness* (1953), exhibit the dimensionless and ever-extensible space in which the components of the image seem weightless and slithering around in the indecipherable location. In this artwork, Matta's style is easily observed, since he manipulates pigments in order to conjure up vaporous and unearthly spaces. The silver shine of a mechanical device articulates futuristic warfare and phantasmagoric creatures. This period is considered as one of the most aesthetically valued by the academia and sought after by collectors. Throughout his career, Matta has invented, enlarged, and perfected an extraordinary repertory of shapes.¹² Unlike traditional perspectives, in his work, space does not focus on a single plane, but rather on a continuous movement of the elements. His unconscious fantasies materialize into futuristic but primitive abstractions full of intensity and energy. For example, in *Re-evolvers* (1953), the mystical light emanates from the deepest recesses of space, resembling a sidereal extension, in which a new morphology is conveyed through a constellation of pigments.



Re-evolvers (1953).

⁹ "Artista Presente Roberto Matta Echaurren." *LatinArt.com*. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.

<http://www.latinart.com/spanish/faview.cfm?id=428>

¹⁰ Bolge, Georges. *Re-Generation*. Boca Ratón, Florida: Boca Ratón Museum of Art, 1997. p. 5.

¹¹ Russell, John. "ART: THE OTHERWORDLY WORLD OF ROBERTO MATTA." *The New York Times*, 6 Feb. 1986. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/07/arts/art-the-otherwordly-world-of-roberto-matta.html>

¹² Bolge, Georges. *Re-Generation*. Boca Ratón, Florida: Boca Ratón Museum of Art, 1997. p.7/

Freud's impact on Matta's worldview extended well beyond theory. In fact, the Chilean artist invented visual equivalents for various states of personal consciousness. Matta's masterpiece: *Re-evolvers* (1953), is a visual representation of Freudian ideas, where a man (closed) and a woman (open) form a sexual unit that appears to float in space. According to Freud, the sexual repression is such a powerful force, that it should be unveiled in order to relieve sexual restraint.¹³ Sexuality and violence are ever present in his canvases, ranging from subtle to explicit. And while the scene may depict a moment of abandon, it still occurs within the perfect *Golden Ratio*.¹⁴



Golden Ratio composition analysis over *Re-evolvers* (1953), which shows Matta's architectonic education of detailed structure and visual perfection.

The botanical fantasy and fictitious biology simulating neuronal connections appear abstract but are actually based on anatomical sketches. In the Pompidou's Museum monographic publication of the referred artist, William Rubin wrote: "Matta's growing anxieties were expressed through flagrantly orgasmic compositions."¹⁵ The fantastic anthropological beings in *Re-evolvers* (1953), play dynamically in the ethereal location, suggesting the correlation between the outer and inner space in his abstractions.

By the end of the 60's, Matta reincorporated to the surrealist movement and began working on monumental murals in Paris, London, New York and Chile. In 1970, the National Art Museum of Chile inaugurated the subterranean section dedicated to Matta, the artist being present. Inspired by the ideas of a revolutionary art, during this decade, he worked along with dozens of young artists from "Brigada Roma Parra" in the execution of collective murals in Chile. In 1971, he was considered by the French Magazine *Connaissance des Arts*, one of the ten best painters in

¹³ Carter, Curtis L. *Matta: Surrealism and beyond*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, 1997.p. 65.

¹⁴ There's a mathematical ratio commonly found in nature—the ratio of 1 to 1.618—that has many names. Most often we call it the Golden Section, Golden Ratio, or Golden Mean, but it's also occasionally referred to as the Golden Number, Divine Proportion, Golden Proportion, Fibonacci Number, and Phi. For further information about the Golden Ratio, please refer to: <http://emptyeasel.com/2009/01/20/a-guide-to-the-golden-ratio-aka-golden-section-or-golden-mean-for-artists/>

¹⁵ Bozo, Dominique. *Matta*. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985. p. 10



the world.¹⁶ In 1990 the artist received the National Prize for Art in Chile, and a retrospective of his works was held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Santiago. Roberto Matta died in Civitavecchia, Rome, on November 23, 2002.¹⁷

During his long creative career, Matta lived and worked in South America, France, Mexico, United States, Italy, Spain and England. The international character of the Latin American artist led to the establishment of more than sixty public collections worldwide located in highly reputed venues, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, The Guggenheim Museum in Lisbon, The Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou in Paris, among others.



Senile D'incertitude (1973)

Labeled “the last surrealist” Matta served as a creative bridge between the young American war artists and Tanguy, Ernst and Duchamp. His contribution to Surrealism, as well as to the development of Abstract Expressionism in the United States, places the artist among the cadre of masters of Twentieth Century Art.¹⁸ Matta sought to make a difference in people's lives, challenging them and provoking them to look beyond images, words and boundaries. Each of his paintings recounts an imaginary spectacle of exploration, with bizarre creatures amidst transparent structures, all vying for supremacy in the scenes that border, sometimes on the erotic and sometimes on science fiction.

As abstract as these paintings may be to today's discourse, there is nothing diminished about their expressive power.¹⁹

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¹⁶ “APCH Artistas Plásticos Chilenos.” *Roberto Matta Echaurren*. Biblioteca Y Centro De Documentación Del Museo Nacional De Bellas Artes. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. <http://www.artistasplasticoschilenos.cl/658/w3-article-39915.html>

¹⁷ “Roberto Sebastián Matta.” *Guggenheim Collection*. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. http://www.guggenheim-venice.it/inglese/collections/artisti/biografia.php?id_art=110

¹⁸ André Breton told (about Matta) “Each of his paintings is a party where all the possibilities are in play, one pearl that becomes into a snowball, in which al physical and mental lights incorporates” Quote taken from:

¹⁹ Russell, John. “ART: THE OTHERWORDLY WORLD OF ROBERTO MATTA.” *The New York Times*, 6 Feb. 1986. Web. 9 Nov. 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/02/07/arts/art-the-otherwordly-world-of-roberto-matta.html>



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