

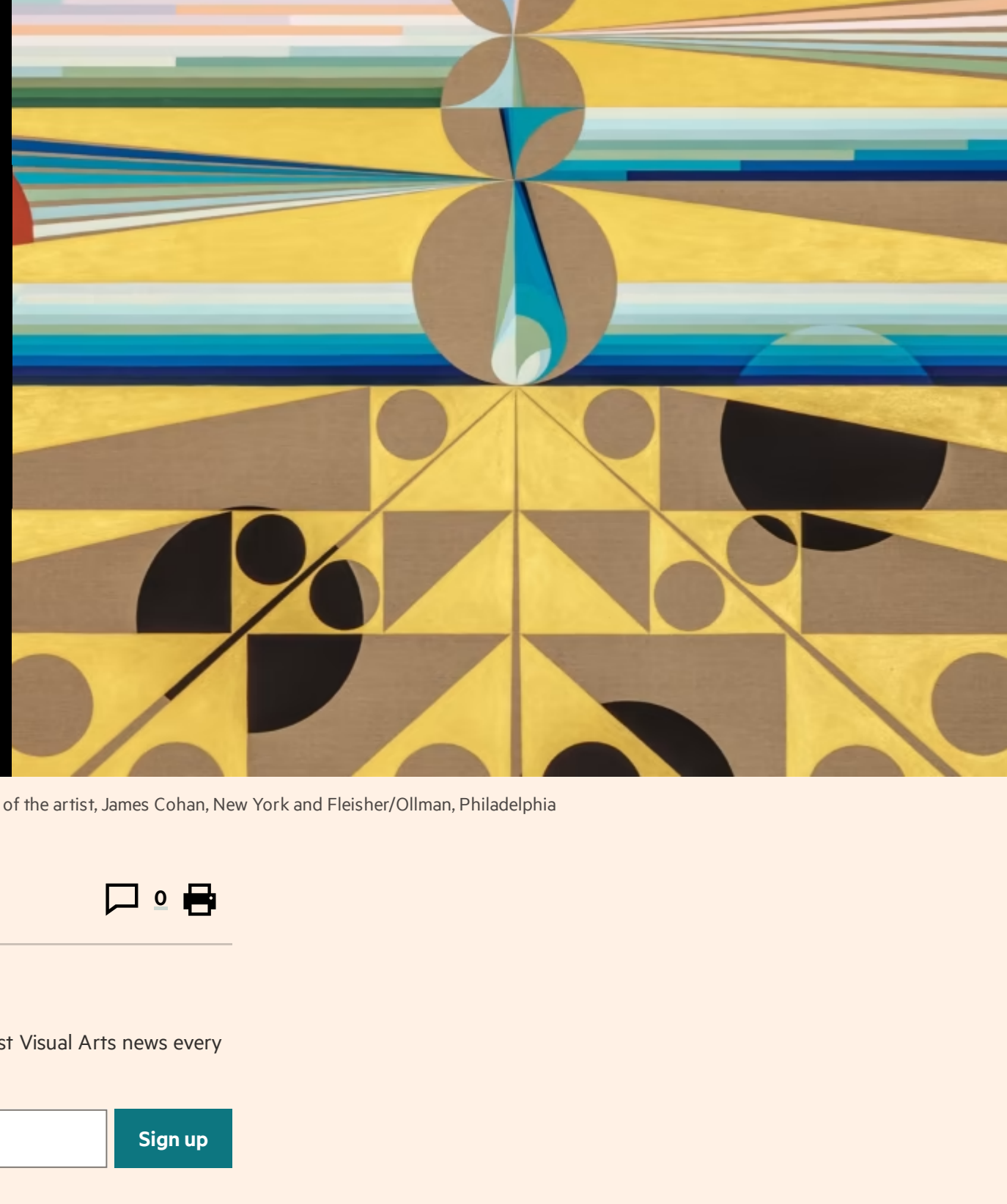
Make sense of it all. Become an FT subscriber. Pay annually and save 20%.

Subscribe now

HTSI Visual Arts + Add to myFT

The cosmic heirs of Hilma af Klint

The spiritual Swedish painter is being channelled by a constellation of contemporary artists



Victoria Woodcock 6 HOURS AGO

Receive free Visual Arts updates

We'll send you a myFT Daily Digest email rounding up the latest Visual Arts news every morning.

Enter your email address [Sign up]

In 1906, the Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint was "contacted" about a large and ambitious project. Af Klint was part of a small occult group that conducted seances and communed with spiritual beings, and *The Paintings for the Temple* was "assigned" by one of the artist's spirit guides. By the time of its completion in 1915, it totalled 193 works. "The pictures were painted directly through me, without any preliminary drawings, and with great force," said af Klint of one series. Colourful, geometric and symbolic, her other-worldly abstract compositions were wildly radical.

Once the project was finished, af Klint continued painting, but her work from 1917 until her death in 1944 was no longer guided by spirits. In 1932, she decreed that many of her paintings and drawings should be kept secret for 20 years after her death. Even then, the art world was slow to appreciate her oeuvre. In 1970, a leading modern art museum in Sweden turned down the af Klint estate. Only in the 21st century did her work begin to resonate.



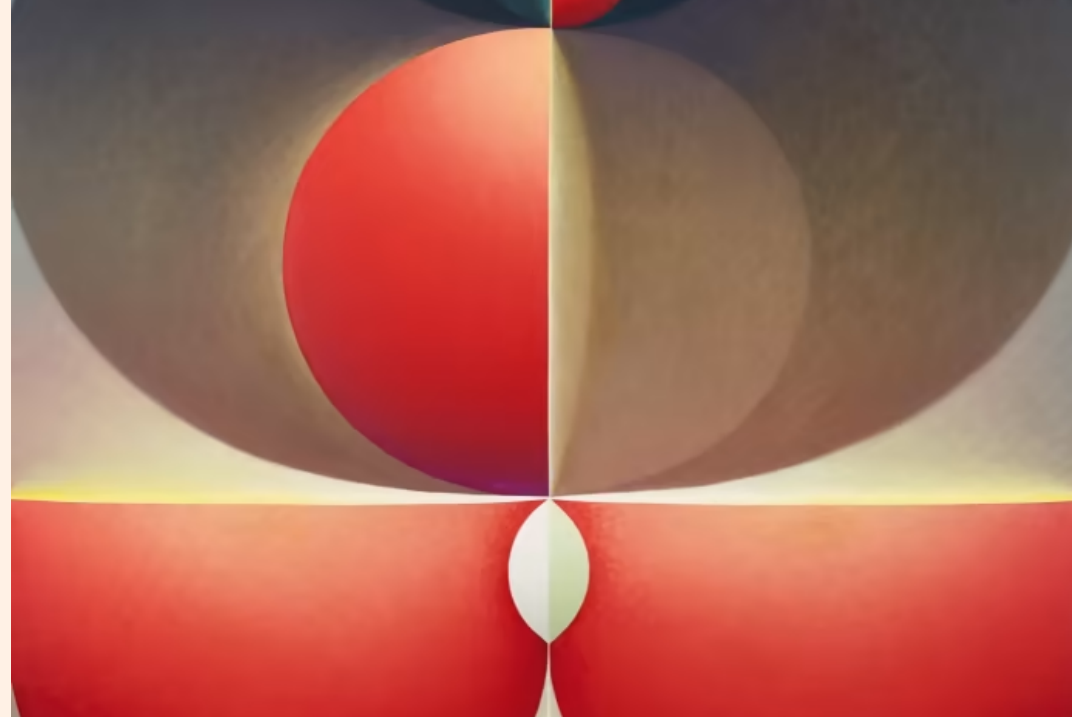
The Swans, The Swan Series, Group IX, No 17, 1916-1915, by Hilma af Klint © Courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation, Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian at The Tate Modern



The Ten Largest, Group IV, No 7, Adulthood, 1907, by Hilma af Klint © Courtesy of the Hilma af Klint Foundation, Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian at The Tate Modern

Following a profile-raising exhibition in Sweden in 2013, New York's Guggenheim opened an af Klint retrospective in 2018, and the furure around the mysterious artist and her radical, spiritual paintings heated fever pitch. The reason? "She upended everything that we thought about the history of abstraction," says Tate Modern international-art curator Nabila Abdel Nabi.

Today, the fascination around af Klint continues to grow, fuelled by a flurry of new books and the current blockbuster exhibition at Tate Modern until 3 September. Meanwhile, the influence of her lyrical abstraction, and the tale of mysticism and mediumship behind it, is palpable among a constellation of artists working today.



Pregnant Red, 2019, by Loie Hollowell © Loie Hollowell, courtesy of Pace Gallery/Melissa Goodwin

In the beginning I would dream myself as the colour orange

Artist Algana Gali

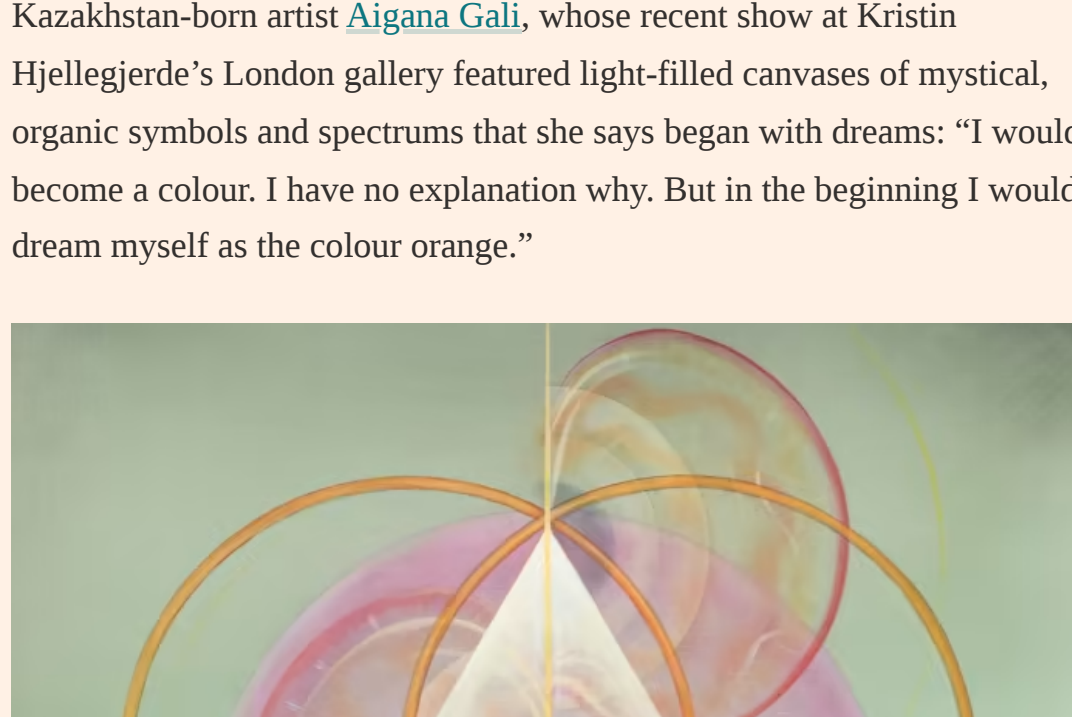
Klint solidified my comfort with making symmetrical images," adds New York-based Loie Hollowell, whose pulsating abstracts are hotly sought-after (auction prices are upwards of \$1m). "I also really like the relationship of her work to the body, the way the large works encompass you and bring you in." Hollowell's body-based works are also autobiographical. "During my first pregnancy, I started making paintings with big semi-circles; I'd compose them in geometric layouts, thinking about the breasts, belly, head and butt," she says. The painted surface is also built upon in foam, creating a 3D element that she recently pushed further, "bringing the actual physical cast of the pregnant belly into the work".



Pearly, 2023, by Angela Heisch © Courtesy of Angela Heisch and Pippa Houldsworth Gallery, London/Matthew Herrmann

Hollowell doesn't refer to herself or her work as "spiritual". Nor does fellow New-Yorker Angela Heisch, whose dynamic abstract work was recently exhibited at Pippa Houldsworth Gallery in London (the show sold out before opening, with half of the works going to institutions). The New Zealand-born painter does, however, mention "vibrational force" as a common theme in these latest works, which draw the viewer into central spherical forms, reminiscent of pearls or planets. She also admits an interest in "that unknown component that ties us all together – in trying to get across feelings and emotions".

In her book *The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World*, Jennifer Higbie writes that "the very air throbbed with unseen energies" for af Klint. "The question was how to interpret them? How to give them shape?" For artists today, the nature of these "energies" is interpreted in different ways. "I feel like I'm channelling something," says Kazakhstan-born artist Algana Gali, whose recent show at Kristin Hjellegjerde's London gallery featured light-filled canvases of mystical, organic symbols and spectrums that she says began with dreams: "I would become a colour. I have no explanation why. But in the beginning I would dream myself as the colour orange."



Ornisk, 2022, by Algana Gali © BJ Deakin Photography, Courtesy of the artist/Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery



November 2011, January 2018, NY 2018, by Johanna Unzueta © Johanna Unzueta, courtesy of the artist, Casey Kaplan, New York, and Proyectos Uru arakanta, Guatemala City/Timo Othier

Chilean artist Johanna Unzueta sees af Klint as one of a number of artists who "understand geometry and abstraction as a means to connect to something metaphysical", she says. Unzueta's watercolour and pastel patterns strive to make the same connection; punctuated with pinholes, they are often presented as freestanding forms that let light shine through. Los Angeles-based artist Eamon Ore-Giron agrees. His geometric constellations are inspired by "an abstraction born in the Americas", but he also feels a "simpatico relationship towards [af Klint's] approach – not just as formalist exercises, but as a means to express personal philosophical ideas".



Rotted in Motion, 2023, by Tiffanie Delune © Courtesy of Tiffanie Delune and Gallery 1957

But the spiritual and the self are not separate forces in the mind of French, Belgo-Congolese artist Tiffanie Delune: "What guides my practice is something already inside me," she says. "It's hard to explain, but maybe it's a mix of your ancestors, your soul, and all of your other influences and travels." Her latest body of work was made in Africa and shown at the city's Gallery 1957, with floral motifs at the fore of an ultra-bright palette.

Recommended



The Art of Fashion: the British issue Still life: what Mondrian tells us about style

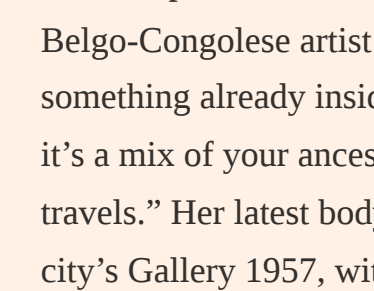
"What really comes through in af Klint's work today is the interconnectedness of things," Abdel Nabi concludes. "The ecological perspective that structures her work, asking questions about the very fragile and delicate relationships that form our universe, is something we've never been more aware of. She thought about her work as being for future generations – and I think we are that generation."

Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian: Forms of Life is at Tate Modern until 3 September

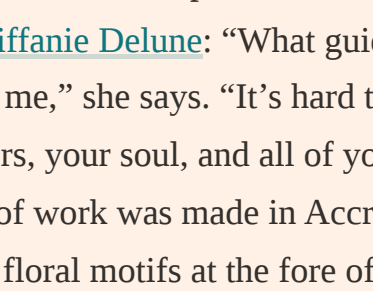
Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.

Reuse this content Comments

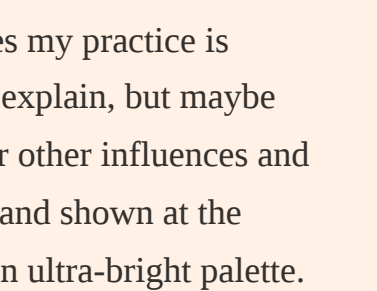
Latest on Visual Arts



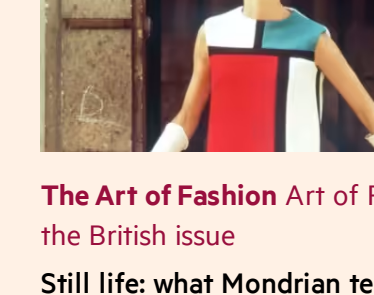
From Bowie to Jagger, the photos that created legends



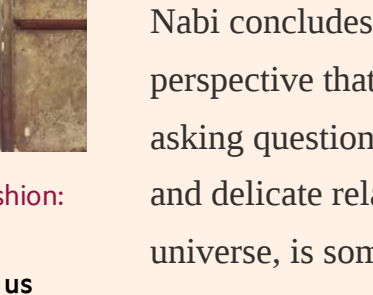
Gâteau at the châtea: Lord Rothschild's latest folly



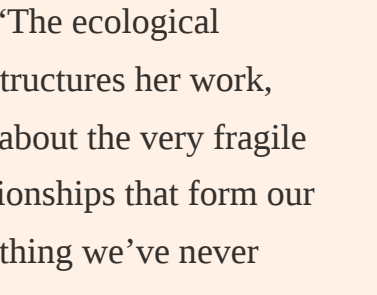
How To Spend It...: Harvard Anderson's guide to Cambridge



The Art Market: Art market booms hits the buffers



Review Visual Arts: Tate Britain's rehang puts politics before art



Review Visual Arts: Van Gogh's Cypresses, Metropolitan Museum – the perfectionist behind the wild genius



Review Visual Arts: Hylton Nel, Charleston – pioneer potter who still crosses boundaries

Comments

Comment guidelines Please keep comments respectful. Use plain English for our global readership and avoid using phrasing that could be misinterpreted as offensive. By commenting, you agree to abide by our community guidelines and these terms and conditions. We encourage you to report inappropriate comments.

Post a comment

Sign in and Join the Conversation

All Comments 0 Sort by Newest

There are no comments yet. Why don't you write one?

0 Top of comments 0 Top of article