

Words Izabella Scott

# The Party

When I first saw the paintings of Hilma af Klint, I was taken by surprise: expansive canvasses, three metres tall, awash with flannel-pink, tangerine and dusty mauve. They show pastel-coloured gatherings of organic forms, highly organised but entirely abstracted. In one image, a powder blue oval splits, creating a mirror image in maze-yellow. Above, a pale-green spiral echoes a sea mollusk. There are pink discs, like stylised roses and chains of white fingers, perhaps honeysuckle. Dotted lines trace ellipses: these are formal experiments in colour and geometry, replete with constellations of letters, numerals, and crescents.

They were painted by a woman born in 1863.

Hilma af Klint, a Swedish mystic, began these paintings, which depart entirely from representation, in 1906, some years before the familiar giants Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich claimed to make the historic break into abstraction. Klint's work has only recently been consolidated – it was not until 2013 that all her paintings were restored and presented at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, a show that positioned Klint as the first abstractionist in the western canon.



Part of Klint’s invisibility is bound to the very essence of her work: mysticism. She painted on the instruction of a spirit contacted through séance, named Amaliel. When she died in 1944, she left behind an enormous body of work – 1,300 paintings and 125 notebooks – that were hidden away, at her behest. Amaliel, who Klint considered the author of the paintings, told her the world was not yet ready to see them; they had to be concealed for twenty years. It was not until the 1960s that her canvasses resurfaced – their palette curiously ready for an era of oatmeal, cream and pastel – but they were dismissed by the Moderna Museet, and not shown publicly until 1985. With few exceptions, Klint has since been presented as an ‘outsider artist’, an anomaly in the story of modernism and abstraction, until a major reassessment five years ago.

Séance has always been feminised. A Victorian phenomenon, its popularity grew with the rise of Spiritism in the nineteenth century, a movement that counted Klint among its followers. Spiritists believed the dead could be contacted through séance sessions, and many leading members (and mediums) were women, some Suffragists too. Klint’s sessions were held first in Stockholm in the 1890s, and later at a studio built in Munsö, a former island, thick with forests and almost completely surrounded by water, located forty miles west of the city. Munsö became a retreat for Klint and her all-female collective, known as The Five, who met most Fridays to conduct automatic writing, medium drawings and séance. After ten years of esoteric training, as she understood it, Klint began her paintings.

During the period of Klint’s lifetime, across Europe and North America, Spiritists were met by a barrage of ridicule: public investigations into ‘fraud’ mediums that made newspaper headlines for days; medicine men and theologists scoffing at the sheer credulity around séance. Women and their work were, as usual, trivialised, and theories around the ‘weaker sex’ spawned, as women’s engagement with the spirit world was pathologised, seen in tandem with hysteria – exaggerated emotionality, uncontrollable feeling, and excess.

These attitudes were part of a conversation, between men, taking place across the centuries, in which women were accused of being unreasonable, wild, vain, wasteful. These ideas actually gained ground in the early fifteenth century, and have roots in

the European witch hunts, a three-century period, when historians estimate 100,000 people – mainly women – were accused of and tried for the crime of ‘witchcraft’.

“It’s not fashionable to talk about symbolist art, or occult art – that is, art based in gnostic knowledge, hermetic knowledge, alchemy or occultism,” Alge Julija Kavaliuskaitė, a young Lithuanian artist, tells me from her studio in the Finnish forest. “It has a slippery place in art history, and often it’s not even considered art.”

Kavaliuskaitė lives in a ‘glass village’ called Nuutajarvi in Finland, where the furnaces for glass-making have been burning for 225 years, and describes herself as a magical practitioner. I came across her sculptures made of paper and glass in Helsinki at Kiasma museum. In various iterations of *Evening Breakfast* (2016) shimmering, splintering tea sets sit atop lithograph prints, laid out like cloths, as if awaiting sibylline guests. Kavaliauskaitė’s tarot-like prints are populated with hermetic symbols – although, to my contemporary eyes, they are easier to interpret than Klint’s organic forms. I see golden cups, candlesticks, flying fish, and stags with narrow eyes. Kavaliauskaitė’s prints reference the tabletops of séance, as a meeting point of the human and spirit world over which hands and glasses might slide. “My work is a method to communicate with various spirits,” she tells me, from her workshop in Nuutajarvi. “The cups and dishes act as offerings. Once there is a table and there is an offering, then I can invite the guests – and the party begins.” The guests include Frida Kahlo, John Donne and Alejandro Jodorowsky. “I often wrap the meaning of my work in other words, or using allegory to hide its meaning – because of the low status of hermetic art.”

The witch hunts leave historians with legal records and misogynist treaties (like *Malleus Maleficarum* or ‘The Witch Hammer’, from 1487), which accuse women of abominable crimes such as stealing penises, flying on broomsticks, attending diabolical parties, and having sex with animals. Because these documents are authored by men in positions of power – clerks, priests, philosophers, judges – it’s extremely hard to determine whether the accused ever identified as ‘witches’. Magic and superstition were deeply entwined into mediaeval life; Christianity and paganism twisted together. What behaviours were

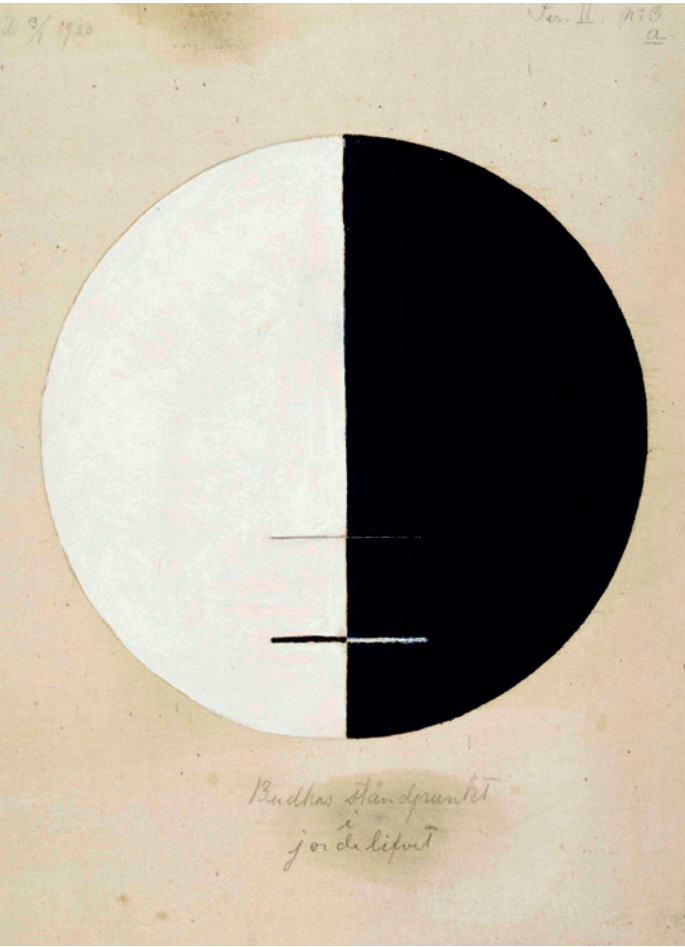
permitted, and what behaviours were isolated and ghettoised as witchcraft, condemned as heresy? As Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English set out in their 1973 study, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* it was, for the most part, female practices that were stigmatised: herbalism, midwifery, pregnancy prevention.

What is clear to anyone looking at the period is this: women lost their social status, and suffered a unique process of social degradation. Superstitions emerged around women, who were made into fearful, irrational things. One of the many insights that witchcraft accusations offer is the anxiety, emerging in the fifteenth century, around female power. Witches were thought to make men impotent, to harvest penises, to abort infants, to fly out the house by night, to drink and revel, and hunt for treasure and become independently wealthy – all threats to male privilege.

As the Enlightenment came about, Europe appeared to come to its senses. The fears that had escalated during the Witch Hunts – thousands of trials, mass hysteria – were made to seem silly, irrational, even absurd. Witchcraft was put away – or at least, put *out of sight*. (It is well documented that just as the witchcraft laws were being *erased* in Britain and across Europe, they start *appearing* in British and European colonies – in other words, witchcraft was quite literally exported.) Meanwhile, in the capitals, the occult, now fully feminised, had lost its sting. Women’s status was so decorated that it no longer posed a threat.

The new recognition of Klint’s work is no accident. It comes alongside a so-called spiritual turn in contemporary art, an epistemological climate of a renewed interest in witchcraft, tarot, cosmology, zodiac and crystals. There is an acknowledgement of the influence of theosophy on the Modernists (otherwise a stereotype invested with rationality, flatness, reduction) – a recognition that, like Klint, Mondrian and Kandinsky approached abstraction through forms of spiritual practice.

Estonian performance artist Kris Lemsalu, also showing her work in Helsinki, creates wild sculptures made of ceramic, fur and textile. In Kiasma, I find a parachute, suspended in the centre of the room. The falling body is faceless. She wears a ceramic hoodie and a gold party hat, pointed like a witch’s. Below her, two dishevelled porcelain dogs seem to yelp in delight, hybrids, I



*Buddha’s Standpoint in the Earthly Life, No. 3a, 1920*, Hilma af Klint. Courtesy of Hamburger Bahnhof

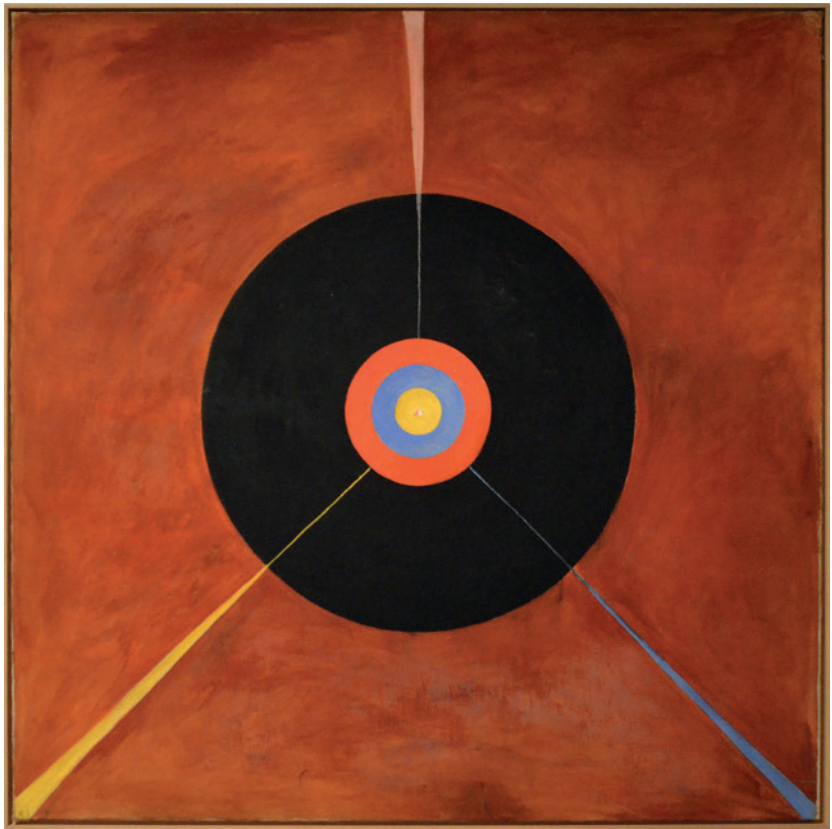


*Svanen, 1914*, Hilma af Klint



Portrait of Hilma af Klint by unknown photographer





*Svanen, No. 18, 1915, Hilma af Klint*  
*Svanen, No. 17, 1915, Hilma af Klint*

discover as I walk on, to see their skin-pink arses mooning.

When I spoke to Lemsalu, from her family home in Estonia, she described the metamorphic process of clay work, using a Japanese outdoor kiln located on a small island in the forest. A firing takes six days to compete, Lemsalu explains, heating up the kiln four days in a row, until it reaches 1,000 degrees. The colours and shapes of the clay will shift during the process. “At the very late stages, the kiln begins to talk,” Lemsalu tells me. “It’s such an extreme force, so you really can’t expect anything. The fire decides. It’s really one of my collaborators.” When the dogs emerge, their faces are streaked blue, their manes a dirty yellow. They wear sheepskin fleeces dipped in pink, while glazed human hands sit, like paws, below their noses. These bombastic guard dogs seem to lick and pant, their lolling puce-pink tongues dripping with saliva.

The supernatural collaboration Lemsalu describes has shades of Animistic beliefs, which invest animals, objects and materials with agency – life, soul – insisting on a different kind of relationship with the non-human world. It is something I’ve been thinking about over the past year: the relationship between art and alchemy, and the artist as a magical practitioner – turning things into other things, joining forces with glass, ceramic, oil.

“I don’t think of myself as a creator, more of a collaborator,” Kavaliauskaitė tells me. “With paper, fire, and glass.”

Speaking from her studio in the forest, she tells me of her engagement with Finnish and Altai shamanism – the beliefs that souls can move out the body, and that the body can shapeshift. As a child, Kavaliauskaitė was initiated by an Altai shaman from the Siberian region and shamanism exists in oral histories in Lithuania where she grew up. It still survives in the Sami culture of northern Norway, Finland and Sweden, and includes forms of Animism, like bear worship.

In Finnish, the word for witches and shamans entwine. ‘Noita’ (witch) also refers to somebody who practices falling into a trance. The word for trance (‘lovi’) literally means a hole, and the shaman would use a ‘witch drum’, made of wood and skin and painted with symbols, to fall into a trance – and thus travel to the underworld. The underworld, it was believed, was ruled by the female goddess

Pohjolan Emäntä, creator of all adversaries. Sami shamans were engaged in banishing Emäntä’s spirits back to the underworld.

During the period of the witch hunts, in Finland (then part of Sweden) 2,000 people were accused of witchcraft. Against the general trend, more than half of the accused were men. Finland was a tar and timber exporter, a region rich in iron and copper – and exploited for it – and accusations were concentrated in urban centres. Witch hunting, as Silvia Federici demonstrated in her study *Caliban and the Witch*, went in hand with the rise of factory work, and the transition from feudal to capitalist society. And it was with capitalism that ideas around the disciplined body and gendered labour took root – men in the factory; women in the home. The Finnish witch trials concentrated in Turku and Vyborg, the wealthiest, most densely populated, and factory-heavy areas in Finland.

In her novel *The True Deceiver*, which is set in a remote snowbound village in Finland, Tove Jansson demonstrates how the witch stigma remains a kind of cultural superstition, a misogynist anxiety transmuted into fairytales and chanted by children. In Jansson’s story, an independent and unmarried woman, Katri Kling, is labelled ‘the witch’ by the local children, and isolated by the villagers. Eventually, she finds friendship with another outsider, Anna, a children’s book illustrator and recluse, who occupies an old mansion outside the village, where she paints watercolours and reads adventure stories. These self-sufficient, unorthodox women are suspicious, witchy, and as Jansson goes on to suggest, lesbian. Indeed, many of the inherited stereotypes around the figure of the witch – as a social outsider, living alone, a woman who threatens children – indicate that ‘the witch’ may also, always, have been a euphemism for lesbianism. Jansson lived as an openly gay woman in 1940s Finland, when homosexuality was illegal (as it was across most of Europe). She eventually came to own a studio in the Kaartinkaupunki neighbourhood of Helsinki, where she worked on her Moomin series, paintings and writing. In the 1950s, she met her lifelong partner, Tuulikki Pietilä – or Tooti, as she was known – but while in the city, they continued to live separately, in neighbouring blocks, visiting each other privately though an attic passageway. Eventually, in the 1960s, they built a house on a tiny uninhabited

island in the Gulf of Finland, 100 kilometres from Helsinki, where they would escape for the summer months. A little universe of their own, Jansson and Pietilä spent twenty-eight summers at the house in Klovharu, until they were in their seventies. When I think of Tove and Tooti, I think of ‘Party in the City’ and ‘Party in the Countryside’, which Jansson painted in 1947, before she and Pietilä had met. The mural, installed in the dining room of Helsinki City Hall, is in the Art Nouveau, or ‘Jugendstil’, style and shows a post-war celebration – a party.

In the first mural, set in the city, three couples dance in low-backed ball gowns; men wear roses in their lapels. They are handsome, of course, moving around the little tables replete with green glasses of wine, vases spilling flowers, eucalyptus and jasmine, baskets of summer fruits, a discarded fan. It’s all soft colours – magnolia and barley and so much blue – a hazy, Dionysian party with doves flying into the room and a red-haired girl in a gossamer dress skipping after them. My eyes are drawn to the foreground, where a woman sits alone, smoking, her skin yellow and green, as she looks out at the leaves. Behind her, to the back of the picture, another woman, also alone, sips at a glass of wine, spectral in a green ivory dress that is the same colour as her skin. She looks across at the smoking woman. They have not yet found each other.

The mural’s twin, ‘Party in the Countryside’, also abounds with figures – a boy playing a violin, two loving couples, a woman staring into a mirror in the palm of her hand – but now there is an overflow of foliage. Ferns and long grasses, trees full of autumn leaves, all maze-green, brindle and wheat. I can’t help but see Klint in the work – her shapes and colours; her whorled roses, hourglasses and honeysuckle; her tendency towards abstraction; the natural world as her spiritual guide.

“The pictures were painted directly through me,” wrote Klint in one of her notebooks, often abnegating authorship and casting herself as a vessel. But the medium is always more than a hollow container; she is full of agency, anticipation, desire. Klint, a resistor to otherworldly currents, was also a visionary in the simplest sense; she used spiritual practice to make the greatest conceptual breakthrough in the history of twentieth century art – the leap into abstraction.