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## Matta: Surrealism and Beyond [Essay]

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## Matta: Surrealism and Beyond

Curtis L. Carter

Matta stands at the crossroads of several current interests in art of the modern era. He has long been connected with Surrealism, which continues to attract the attention of artists practicing today and the art public. Recently, the importance of Matta's role in the movement has received heightened attention. Similarly his influence on Latin American art is of increasing interest in the context of multicultural concerns of the past decade. Most recently Matta comes to attention with respect to critical examination of emigré artists and their influence on American art of the forties. All of these developments point to Matta's unique role in twentieth-century art and attest to his status as a figure of major importance.

The art of Matta, produced during a career that spans over sixty years, represents a significant life achievement. Matta's life and work exemplify the internationalization of art brought on by changing world conditions and the convergence of American and European cultures. They represent a pastiche of latent issues that have recently surfaced with reference to art and cultural identity in the discourse over multiculturalism. A brief overview of his connections to the Surrealists, the Abstract Expressionists, and, to a lesser extent, younger Latin American artists, provides a context for viewing the developments in his art from the late thirties to the present. These connections also provide a framework for the evolution of his aesthetic which embraces Surrealist techniques, Freudian psychology, modern science, and a humanistic approach to the role of art in society. Matta's art also invites exploration of its relations to literature and dance of the twentieth century.

Matta was born in 1912 in Santiago into a prominent Chilean family with strong European ties.<sup>1</sup> His artistic gifts were

recognized early on by his teachers and later by members of the art world. His early education was entrusted to the Jesuits from whom he received a lifelong quest for knowledge and a deep concern for the welfare of mankind. Matta studied architecture at Santiago's Universidad Católica and drawing at the Academia de Bellas Artes with artist Hernán Gazmuri. These studies helped prepare him for his eventual connections to the European art world. Little is known of his early works, but apparently some were saved by family members and friends. Lillian Lorca de Tangle, a fellow art student, recalls that Matta received an award for a still life exhibited at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes.<sup>2</sup> Having left Chile in the 1930s for Paris, Matta served for a time in the architectural office of Le Corbusier before deciding to become a painter and establishing his place in the art world.

In part because of his geographic migrations and also because of his independent beliefs about art, Matta remains an outsider. He holds a similar status with respect to his place in art history, where he has yet to be acknowledged for the full range of his accomplishments. Matta characterizes himself in this respect: "I am an outsider identified with outsiders, all my life has been spent *farawaying* and *unfarawaying*. . . . [S]o that being an outsider is another mode of being. . . . I don't know if I am Chilean, I don't know how to be Chilean, but to be it one does not have to be there. . . . In this case to be away . . . is more productive than to be there."<sup>3</sup> Being an outsider means being free to select elements of one's surroundings from a broad spectrum of cultures. From his Latin origins, Matta drew inspiration from the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (who he met at his aunt's home in Madrid), the Chilean poets Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral, and

other literary figures of the mid-thirties and early forties.<sup>4</sup> He credits the works of these literary artists as influences on his political views concerning injustice, and on the imagery of his paintings. His occasional visits to Chile and other parts of Latin America after 1950 helped to keep him in touch with the political struggles and the artistic developments there. His visits to Mexico provided contact with pre-Columbian imagery which was subsequently reflected in his paintings.

Through his association with the Spanish poet Lorca, Matta was introduced to Salvador Dalí. Dalí's philosophy of painting was instrumental in attracting Matta to Surrealism. Dalí expressed succinctly the essence of his Surrealism in these words: "My whole ambition in the pictorial domain is to materialize the images of concrete irrationality . . . in order that the world of the imagination and of concrete irrationality may be as objectively evident . . . as that of the exterior world of phenomenal reality."<sup>5</sup> Dalí subsequently presented Matta to André Breton, the axial figure of Surrealism, and Matta joined the Surrealists in 1937.

Matta's connections to the artists of his time are of particular importance for an understanding of his role in twentieth-century art. Like the other Surrealists, he did not draw upon a vast knowledge of art history. The earlier rejection of past traditions in art initiated by the Dadaists and Surrealists created a barrier to the art of the past that Matta did not choose to reexamine. Matta himself noted that the young Americans with whom he came into contact in New York were better informed and more concerned about art history than were he and his Surrealist associates.

Among his fellow artists in Europe, the United States, and Latin America, Matta was for the most part greatly admired. Judging from his acclaim among the Surrealists, as expressed in the writings of

André Breton, and his acceptance by the young Abstract Expressionists in New York, it would appear that he was a virtual artistic and a social magnet. His earlier experiences in Europe, which brought him into contact with important poets, artists, and other creative individuals, confirm a widespread interest in his art among a wide range of conceptually and artistically gifted persons. Breton credited Matta with revolutionizing pictorial space and the use of color in painting, resulting in new ways of seeing the world compatible to the latest discoveries in science. He praised Matta's innovative uses of color for symbolic purposes and his bold experiments with a wide range of unusual shades of color. William Rubin cites the influence of the mystic Eliphas Lévi on Matta's use of light. Lévi wrote in his *History of Magic* the following: "There exists a mixed agent, natural and divine, corporeal and spiritual, a universal plastic mediator, a common receptacle of the vibrations of movements and the images of form. . . . This universal agent of the works of nature is "astral light."<sup>6</sup>

Along with many other artists working in Europe during Hitler's reign, Matta was in exile in New York from 1939 to 1948. His early paintings were introduced to New York artists in a one-person exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1940, and he later exhibited at Pierre Matisse Gallery. Lectures on Matta given by fellow Surrealist Gordon Onslow-Ford in 1941 at the New School for Social Research also provided access to his works for New York artists.<sup>7</sup> Matta was welcomed in New York by younger artists such as Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, and William Baziotis, with whom he shared his Surrealist ideas on painting and drawing. He was for a time close to Motherwell, and also to Gorky.<sup>8</sup> Motherwell, one of the Abstract Expressionists, once described Matta as the most energetic, enthusiastic, poetic,

charming, and brilliant young artist that he had ever met.<sup>9</sup> Younger artists in Latin America, some of whom encountered Matta on his visits to Cuba, Chile, and other Latin America countries, refer to Matta as an important influence on their work.<sup>10</sup> While in New York, Matta also enjoyed the friendship of Marcel Duchamp whose paintings *The Passage from The Virgin to the Bride* and *The Large Glass: The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923) were important references for the development of Matta's art.<sup>11</sup> He cites *Passage* for its attempt to address the representation of change, showing movement from one state to another.<sup>12</sup> *The Large Glass* may have been instrumental in shaping Matta's ideas concerning space and movement. During his time in New York, Matta was also in contact with Yves Tanguy, whose ideas on the representation of "being-scapes," consisting of inner fears and desires, interested him.<sup>13</sup>

Later on, Matta found himself at odds with both the Surrealists, who distrusted his growing interest in science and humanistic concerns, and the Abstract Expressionists, who rejected Surrealism in pursuit of the problems of formalism in art. Matta returned to Europe in 1948 to pursue his own direction grounded in Surrealism, but receptive to incorporating broader humanitarian and scientific interests.

The cultural framework that shaped Matta's work is thus essentially conceptual and ideological in character. Particular ideological reference points in Matta's conceptual framework derive from two dominant intellectual constructs of the twentieth century: Freudian theory of the unconscious, and the culture of modern science which C. P. Snow and others have identified.<sup>14</sup> Freud serves as a means to examine the inner life of the unconscious, while science provides experimental methods to explore the external world. Matta's task was to discover the hidden wisdom and creativity of the inner unconscious and

relate these discoveries to the exterior world.

Like Cezanne, Matta understood that art expresses a theory of knowledge of what can be known, and offers unique approaches to how it can be known.<sup>15</sup> He directed his art to finding alternatives to the conventional ways of representing the appearances of the familiar world. In keeping with his Surrealist orientation, Matta's approach to creating art focused initially on the interior landscapes of the human psyche. His curiosity about the inner life was fueled by the influences of Freudian psychology and aided by his experiments with the Surrealist techniques of automatic writing and the principle of chance. Perhaps he shared the anxiety of Freud and others that the appearances of the external world are not trustworthy as a source of knowledge, and first turned inward in his search for truth. He did not accept the constraints of rational, logical modes of thought, insisting rather, on the freedom to extend the range of experience to include emotions and whatever other features might reside in the irrational unconscious. He claims to have invented his own visual language and techniques for making art. Although he might rival William Blake in visionary imagination, Wassily Kandinsky in his use of abstract forms to depict the emotions, or J. M. W. Turner in his renderings of atmospheric space, the lack of significant precedents for Matta's works in traditional art history lends support to his claim to have invented a unique visual language.<sup>16</sup> In his approach to a language of art, Matta thus began with the intent of using the shapes and colors of paintings to map the interior realms of consciousness, in the manner of the Surrealists.

Beginning in the late thirties, he applied his visual language to the development of a series of paintings called psychological morphologies.<sup>17</sup> The result of these early paintings was a series of explosive visual metaphors that attracted widespread

attention in the art worlds of Europe and the Americas. Morphology, as the term is employed by Matta, refers to the visual forms and structures he used to express the internal activities of the mind. An example of these early paintings is *Psychological Morphology*, 1938 (cat. no. 1). It consists of an explosive pictorial space filled with brightly colored, soft-edged abstract forms which float loosely on the canvas. In this series, he eschews the realist approach to art focused on representation of the external world. The paintings go beyond figuration, in the direction of pure abstraction, but they are endowed with latent symbolism that invites the viewer's imaginative responses. Matta used morphology as a means of developing new images of human beings. As in the biological sciences, morphology in his paintings marks change and transformation in the evolution of things. His account of the development of his morphological paintings recalls Hegel's notion of the evolving stages of the pre-rational mind and the corresponding developments of form in art. In each case the evolution of forms is accompanied by dialectical activity consisting of a process of change and transformation.

Matta's paintings subsequently evolved through several stylistic phases, but without ever leaving entirely their early Surrealist foundations. After the psychological morphologies, he developed a more abstract style with planar, geometric shapes and swirling lines laid over the softer, biomorphic shapes of his earlier work. *Children's Fear of Idols*, 1943 (cat. no. 2) and *Inscape*, 1943 (cat. no. 3) are representative of this stage. Matta's shift in 1944 from psychological morphologies to social morphologies reflects his growing concern with the human condition in the external world. These works were intended to express social concerns that would challenge people to become engaged in addressing issues such as injustice and the

impact of technology on human existence. At this time, Matta introduced humanoid figures into his art, perhaps inspired by his exposure to the totemic images of Northwest Coast Indians. The totemic influence can be seen in sculptures such as *The Clan*, 1959 (cat. no. 35), and in *Je m'arche*, 1949 (cat. no. 7), which includes a humanoid figure perhaps referring to the role of the warrior in modern society. In the fifties, Matta continued his commentaries on society, often using compressed spaces created with rectangles composed at right angles to the picture plane. *The Unthinkable*, 1957 (cat. no. 13) is a metaphor of creative thought seeking to break out of an enclosed structure. The subject of eros or sexuality is often a part of the iconography of these paintings as well as of Matta's drawings. *Threshold of Love*, 1955 (cat. no. 11) features an orgiastic scene of lovemaking with two humanoid characters. In contrast to this erotic scene, *Woman Looked At*, 1949 (cat. no. 8) portrays a Wesselmann-like female nude depicting the horrific side of human sexuality. The images in these paintings offer a commentary on some of the major issues of modern society: war, human freedom, and sexual strife.

In the course of developing these aspects of his work, Matta essentially becomes a philosophical humanist whose primary desire as an artist is to use art to advance human understanding and to revolutionize society through the discovery of new concepts of human beings. His evolving approach to art is practical and didactic, referring back to Plato's idea of art as *techne*, or art useful to satisfy some human need. Perhaps Matta was influenced in this direction by his initiation into the arts through architecture, which is an applied art form. In this respect he dissociates himself from the Kantian, romantic aesthetic of art for art's sake. The point of making art, according to Matta, is to communicate a humanistic vision that gives sense to the

life in the external world which he shares with others. Matta once remarked, "A picture is not a canvas on the wall, it is the impact that hits the bull's-eye of your mind." And the artist is a public servant whose task is to wake up the masses of people who are in bondage to their survival without regard for the conditions.<sup>18</sup> In Matta's words, "What I want is an art that has been invented by society and is at the disposal of everyone to be used, not an art one goes to a museum to see, but an art that helps you know yourself and grow. That's what art is for."<sup>19</sup> The artist does not offer solutions to society's problems, according to Matta, but helps to engage others by expressing his own ways of confronting societal problems.

An essential component of his shift of emphasis from the interior landscape to the exterior world is Matta's concern with science. He explored the connections between art and science in the mid-forties concurrent with his growing interest in societal issues. Matta held the view that science and art share a common goal of trying to understand the functioning of reality: "... science is as poetical as poetry."<sup>20</sup> Matta regards the artist's task with equal seriousness of purpose as that of the scientist. He understands that there is no necessary opposition between the methods of art and science when both aim at the discovery of new knowledge beneficial to human life. Science expands the boundaries of art, and art is a catalyst to science encouraging the broadening of scientific inquiry to unexplored areas of human experience. He looks to science for new ways of imagining and inventing reality, which he then attempts to visually represent in his paintings. The reality that he depicts is distinctively different from that which is normally seen, both in its forms and its colors and in representations of space. Reality as portrayed in Matta's paintings emerges from the imagination as stimulated by biology, chemistry, or astrophysics, rather than from conventional observations or memories of actual past experiences.

The philosophical connections of science to Matta's work are deeper than they might at first appear. Although he is not a scientist by training, and while his initial Surrealist interests might well be suspect in a community of scientists whose work is guided by empirical observations processed according to rationalistic means, Matta nevertheless has a great deal in common with the interests of science. He embraces openness to truth and a commitment to open-ended inquiry and questioning that are inherent to scientific inquiry. Like the scientists who guide explorations into outer space and the search for advances in medicine, he is committed to the quest for ideas that will advance the conditions of human life. His visual works show considerable awareness of scientists' concerns such as the exploration of time, space, and motion. Moreover, he greatly admires the work of Albert Einstein, whose investigations led to the theory of relativity, even to the point of ranking Einstein as equal in importance to Freud.

One important aspect of Matta's painting that has not been widely noted is its affinity with the other arts such as literature and modern dance. Concerning literature, he said, "What is called literature is the fantasy of the mind, an extraordinary creation of the mind."<sup>21</sup> As was noted earlier, Matta drew inspiration from Lorca, Neruda, and Mistral. Lorca's rejection of formalism in favor of emotive expression in his writings may have contributed to Matta's anti-formalist practices. Matta also credited Neruda's *Residencia en la tierra* (1932, 1935) and his *Canto general de Chile* (1943) with influence on his paintings.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Matta drew upon the poems of Mistral such as *Desolación* (1922), and *Tala* (1938).<sup>23</sup> In part the literary influences concern narrative content pertaining to the writers' subjects of melancholy, chaos and desolation, political strife, human suffering, and death. In Matta's paintings these themes are trans-

formed into their corresponding visual symbols.

Although there are not such direct, or well-documented connections between Matta's visual compositions and concurrent developments in modern dance, the common element of importance of rhythmic motion and his concern with the visualization of time, space, and motion invite a comparison of his art and the dance of his time. Similarly his interest in fashioning images to depict the psychological dimensions of the unconscious mind is shared by certain artists of the dance. The paintings *Untitled*, 1970 (cat. no. 24) and *Ilse xplode* 1982 (cat. no. 32), a work commonly associated with the outbreak of AIDS, offer an especially fine representation of Matta's use of rhythmic motion. In the latter, the presence of a sombrero above a whirl of energized lines suggests the representation of an actual dance, perhaps, in this instance, a dance of death.

During the time when Matta was developing his art, dance in the United States was undergoing major new developments as choreographers and dancers participated in the search for new understanding through movement. Martha Graham's philosophy of dance was based on the idea that "dance is a fundamental aesthetic vehicle for expressing personal and collective inner worlds."<sup>24</sup> Her dances were intended to give concrete form to the inner hidden forces of life which are located in the unconscious.<sup>25</sup> The dances of Graham parallel Matta's probing of the unconscious in his art. On another level, Matta's experiences with the development of pictorial forms correspond in interesting ways to the movement experiments of choreographer Merce Cunningham. Using the principle of chance, which was also used in Surrealism, Cunningham experimented with time and space in the creation of dances. He advanced the scope of modern dance by applying chance to common movements and gestures as experienced

from the point of view of the dancers. Just as Matta's experiments moved painting beyond its traditional compositional forms through the use of morphology, Graham's explorations of the unconscious through dances based on ancient and contemporary myth and Cunningham's improvisational experiments with time and space forever opened new possibilities for creative dance.

Matta's life in art spans many of the major cultural and artistic developments of the twentieth century. Through his work, he has attempted to connect art to the culture of science. In doing so he has transcended the irreconcilable gap that Tolstoy had seen earlier between traditional culture and the new sciences. In a world struggling with so many kinds of disruption, Matta's efforts on behalf of reconciliation are welcome. His commitment to addressing major changes in the world helps to establish the social relevance of his work. His openness to art and artists in culturally diverse settings offers a model for exploring the differences that have become so important in a multicultural approach to art. His vision of the social usefulness of art offers a potent antidote for the view that art is peripheral to the life of society. For all of these reasons, his work warrants an important place in the art history of the twentieth century.

## Notes

1. Matta preferred the mythical 11/11/11 as his date of birth. There is some question as well about whether he was actually born in Santiago, or another site in Chile.
2. Valerie Fletcher, "Matta," in *Crossroads of Modernism: Four Latin American Pioneers: Diego Rivera, Joaquín Torres-García, Wifredo Lam, Matta* (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in association with Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 251, note 7. A selection of Matta's early works consisting of two watercolors and twenty drawings was exhibited at the Packerston Gallery in Houston in 1991.
3. Matta in Cecilia Valdéz Urrutia, "Roberto Matta: Premio nacional de arte," *El Mercurio* (Santiago), 2 September 1990. Cited in Fletcher, 231.
4. Fletcher, 235-37.
5. Salvador Dalí, *Conquest of the Irrational*, 1935. Cited in Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944), 28.
6. Cited in William Rubin, *Matta* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1957), 6.
7. Nancy Miller, *Matta: The First Decade* (Waltham, Mass.: Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, 1982), 24.
8. Miller, 26.
9. Miller, 25.
10. Lowery S. Sims, "New York Dada and New World Surrealism," in *The Latin American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970* (New York: The Bronx Museum of the Arts in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988), 177.
11. Romy Golan, "Matta, Duchamp et le mythe: Un nouveau paradigme pour la dernière phase du surréalisme," in *Matta* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, 1985), 37-51.
12. Nancy Miller, "Interview with Matta," in Miller, 11.
13. Miller, "Interview with Matta," 11.
14. Sir Charles Snow, *Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Rede Lecture, 1959, Cambridge University. Snow offered a plea for intercommunication between exponents of scientific and humanistic disciplines. Ironically the discussion did not include the arts or the social sciences. See Gerald Holton, ed., *Science and Culture: A Study of Cohesive and Disjunctive Forces* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) for an examination of this issue by various scholars.
15. William S. Williams, "Cezanne's Rapport," in *Writers on Artists*, ed. Daniel Halpern (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), 196.
16. Wassily Kandinsky and Joseph Mallord William Turner have visual means in common with Matta, but there is no evidence that Matta drew upon the work of these artists.
17. For an analysis of Matta's morphologies see Alvaro Medina, "The Mobile Matter of Sebastián Matta," in *Art Nexus*, no. 17 (September 1995), 68-75.
18. *Roberto Matta: Paintings and Drawings 1971-1979* (La Jolla, Calif.: Tasende Gallery, 1980), 10-12.
19. Miller, "Interview with Matta," 16.
20. Miller, "Interview with Matta," 17.
21. Miller, "Interview with Matta," 17.
22. Eduardo Carrasco, *Matta conversaciones* (Santiago: Ediciones Chile y América, CESOC, 1987), 75-77. Cited in Fletcher, 237.
23. Fletcher, 237.
24. Alice Helpern, *The Technique of Martha Graham* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Morgan & Morgan, 1994), 4.
25. For information and photographs of Graham's dances see Barbara Morgan, *Martha Graham: Sixteen Dances in Photographs* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Morgan & Morgan, 1941, 1980).