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"Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension" – Guide to the Exhibition of the Main Independent Artist of the 20th Century

Curator Oksana Salamatina explains why contemporary art would be impossible without Matta's ten-meter canvases and biomorphic structures.



On April 10, the exhibition of Roberto Matta opened at the White Hall of the General Staff building of the State Hermitage. Roberto, one of the last Surrealists, is hardly known to Russian audiences. He has always asked not to focus on his Chilean origin or the artistic trend his works belonged to: he considered himself a cosmopolite and was an example of creative freedom. It took curator Oksana Salamatina nine years to collect the over 90-piece exhibition from private collections. Harper's Bazaar visited the opening of the exhibition and asked Oksana to explain how the independent artist worked on the edge of art and science, his works reflecting the global catastrophes and greatest achievements of mankind, which were so abundant during his lifetime.

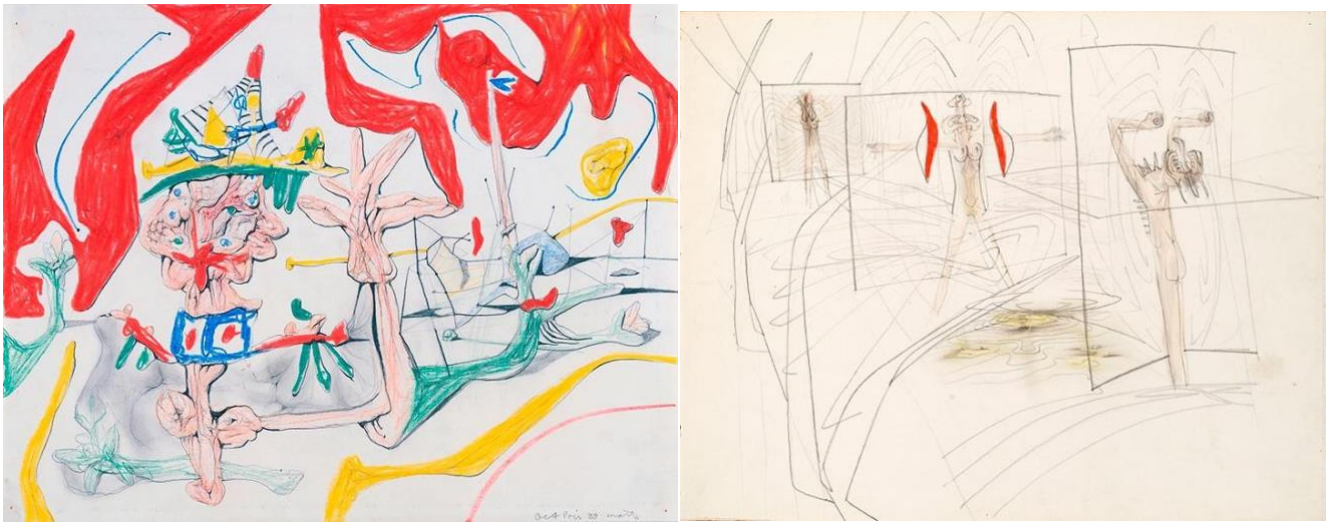
Roberto Antonio Sebastian Matta Echaurren was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1911, where he graduated from the Catholic University with a degree in architecture. His parents insisted on him getting the degree, as they believed that painting was not a serious occupation, but this led him to Le Corbusier's office in Paris.

Oksana is confident that the following event was crucial in Matta's artistic career. "In 1938, his friend Gordon Onslow Ford invited him to his country house in France and said: "Look, here are brushes, oils, a canvas, why not try painting a picture?" Before that, Matta only did drawings, and he did the following: dipped his finger in the paint and started mixing colors, explaining to Gordon that he didn't want to ruin his canvas. This is how Matta's painting career began, and why his earlier works of the 1930s seem like watercolors: you can see the canvas through the light touches of paint," Oksana says.



At that time he entered the circle of Surrealist painters and learned about the teaching of Pyotr Ouspensky, the theorist of the "fourth dimension." The title of the exhibition refers to this chapter of the artist's biography. The Russian philosopher believed that artists are meant "to see what others cannot see," to enhance our reality with the feeling of space, movement and time, overcoming the limitations of human vision. Matta was inspired by Ouspensky's way of explaining metaphors with geometry. Due to Matta's architectural background, it was particularly appealing to him:

"The work that opens the exhibition, *The Morphology of Death*, reflects Matta's knowledge of the 'fourth dimension' teaching, showing the transition from 'here' to the unknown and scary 'there.' Let me remind you that Matta had attended a church school and was interested in the very concept of the soul, developing it in his next works," Oksana says.



Matta moved to the United States at the start of World War II, and began working with oils. He had his first overseas exhibition in 1940. After a while, Matta became interested in monumental art. His huge five meter canvases, or "mindsapes," had a strong impact on the younger generation of American artists: Jackson Pollock, Arshile Gorky, and Robert Motherwell.



Out of the artist's works of World War II and post-World War II times, the curator highlights three ones: *Convict the Impossible*, *The Trial of the Rosenbergs*, and *The Execution of the Rosenbergs* as examples of his deep symbolic vision. "One can 'read' Matta in different ways, including the political way. Thorns, caterpillars, teeth—even if you don't know what's happening in the picture, you still know what it is about."

The Trial and *The Execution of the Rosenbergs* are the reaction to the terrible story of the spouses accused of espionage. All the world was pleading to pardon the Rosenbergs, but then US President Dwight Eisenhower was unwilling to change his mind, and Julius and Ethel were executed in the electric chair in 1953. While *The Trial* combines cold grey and warm green shades, symbolizing hope, only lonely glowing embers are visible in *The Execution*," Oksana explains.

Matta has experimented a lot with materials, textures, and fluorescent paints, and was one of the first to introduce biomorphic elements, painting natural organisms as parts of technical devices: "There is nothing definite in Matta's late works: he plays with the morphology of the human body, delving deep into ancient mythology and taking liberty to use made-up, meaningless titles for his paintings." How can one find their way around the artist's huge and understudied legacy? Oksana recommends to feel it rather than to try to understand: "Matta is always about feelings and he is totally devoid of the visual thing that the Surrealists had, where you could single out familiar, understandable images."

The exhibition "Roberto Matta and the Fourth Dimension" is open until June 30, 2019.