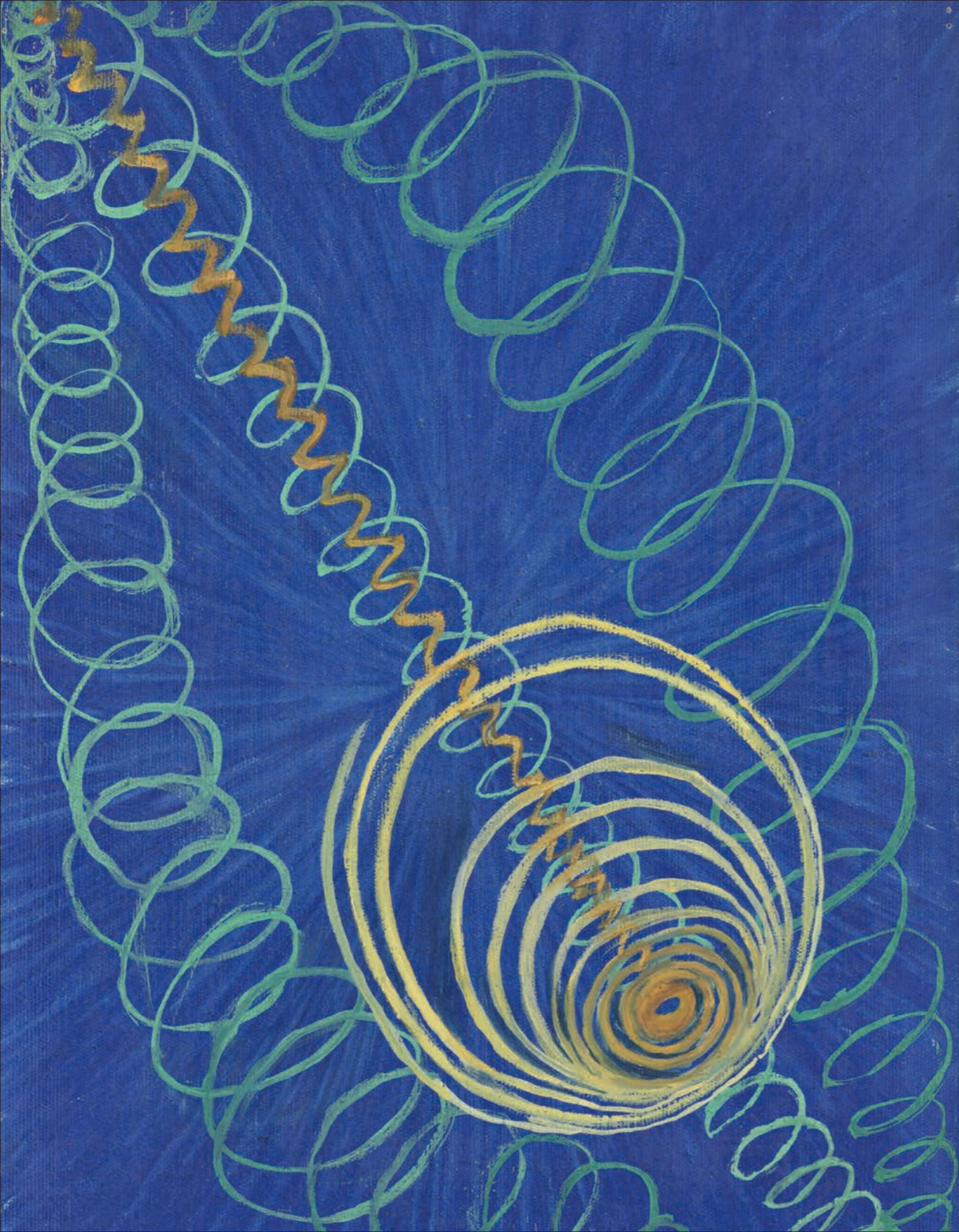


# Swedish



HILMA AF KLINT, AUGUST STRINDBERG & OTHER VISIONARIES

# Ecstasy



# Swedish Ecstasy

ed. Daniel Birnbaum



August Strindberg

*Seascape* (1894)

Oil on cardboard, 57 × 42 cm.  
Nationalmuseum Stockholm

## Swedenborg's Flying Machine Swedish Ecstasy (and Ascetism)

Daniel Birnbaum

*Taller than the others, this man  
Walked among them, at a distance,  
Now and then calling the angels  
By their secret names. He would see  
That which earthly eyes do not see:  
The fierce geometry, the crystal  
Labyrinth of God and the sordid  
Milling of infernal delights.*

— Jorge Luis Borges, "Emanuel Swedenborg"

Sweden is a Protestant nation of great engineers and entrepreneurs. Yes, that is true. But there is also a less official aspect of the nation's spiritual life, visible in its art and literature rather than in the worlds of technology and industry. Mysticism and esoteric speculation runs like a red thread through the writings of some of Sweden's most important literary figures, from Emanuel Swedenborg to August Strindberg and beyond. In the visual art of the nation, one finds visionaries like Carl Fredrik Hill, Ernst Josephson and Hilma af Klint.

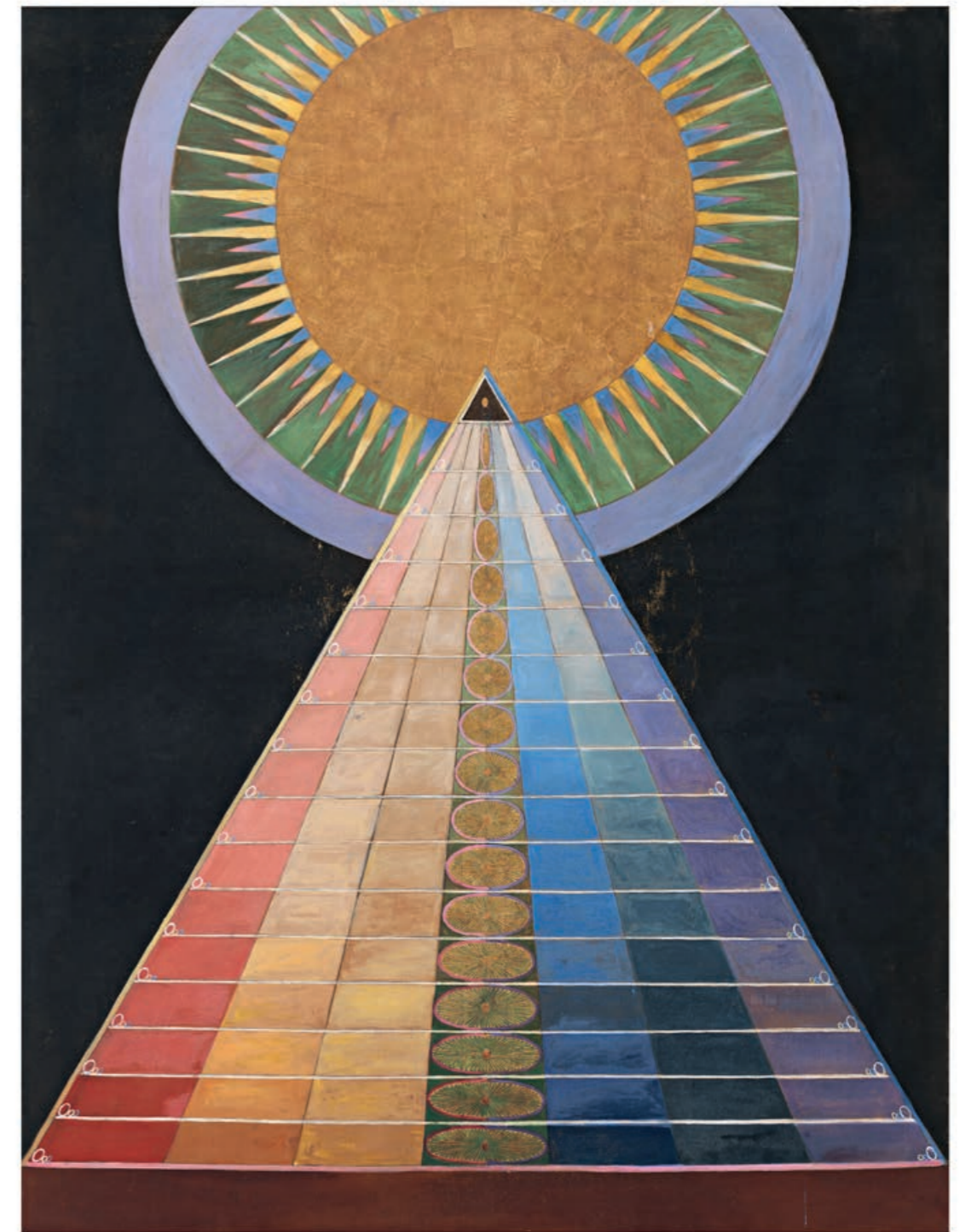
Strindberg, a leading novelist and playwright, was also a visual artist. His multidisciplinary practice involved alchemical experiments, occult photography and proto-expressionist paintings that verge on abstraction. In his occult writings, references to Swedenborg abound. Clearly, Strindberg saw himself as a disciple of the eighteenth-century mystic, who described his experiences of transcendent spheres in ecstatic literary works. It is less well known that Swedenborg also made these higher realms visible in diagrammatic drawings. It remains unclear whether he made them from memory or whilst immersed in a visionary state, says leading Swedenborg scholar Stephen McNeilly in his contribution to this publication. According to the mystic himself, the drawings were made *through*

him rather than *by* him. His hand was led to depict the events unfolding before him: "I have written entire pages," he notes, "and the spirits did not dictate the words but guided my hand, so that it was they who were doing the writing."<sup>1</sup>

One finds similar mediumistic ideas in the writings of af Klint. She undertook *The Paintings for the Temple* as a commission from "High Masters". It is a complicated, nuanced and elusive body of work. With its 193 paintings categorized into series, groups and subgroups, a didactic reading of the cycle is not straightforward. The whole sequence can perhaps be understood as af Klint's pursuit of an original "oneness" – a basic unity which she believed existed at the world's creation. Af Klint felt this integrity had since been lost, giving way to a world of polarities: good and evil, woman and man, matter and spirit. She saw these dichotomies as having become the principle of all life.

Af Klint was surrounded by a group of lesser-known female artists and spiritual seekers, all exploring otherworldly spheres through occult techniques. Already as a student at the Academy of Fine Arts, she befriended Anna Cassel, one of the four women with whom she established The Five (De Fem), a group exploring spiritual realms through meditation and seances. The other members were Cornelia Cederberg, Sigrid Hedman and Mathilda Nilsson, all of whom had been members of the Edelweiss Society, a Stockholm association that combined Christian ideas, theosophical teachings and spiritualism. The Five, active between 1896 and 1908, recorded messages from higher spirits. In trancelike states, the group believed they could communicate with mystic beings with names such as Amaliel, Ananda and Gregor – understood to be intermediaries of the High Masters – transcribing their messages via automatic writing and drawing. It seems that all the members were active in this collective mediumistic practice. It is therefore often difficult to say whose hand actually drew an individual drawing although some of them are marked with initials. Recently a large number of works by Anna Cassel were discovered at the Anthroposophical Society outside Stockholm. A selection of her works is included in this exhibition; it is the very first time they are reaching a large audience.

What was Cassel's role in relationship to af Klint's temple? In her notes, af Klint is very clear about the fact that Cassel supported her in the creation of the paintings that were to adorn her tabernacle. "A and H completed the large series," she jotted on 4 July 1914. It is true that at various points in her writings af Klint distinguished her own works, which she referred to as "future pictures", from those created by



Hilma af Klint

*Altarpiece no. 1, Group X (1915)*

Oil and metal leaf on canvas, 237.5 × 179.5 cm.

Hilma af Klint Foundation



to grasp the real state of things. This idea is based on Strindberg's view that an all-encompassing life force pervades existence, so that light, heat, electricity, magnetism, chemical affinities and gravity are simply different manifestations of the same unity. This is scientific speculation mediated through Arthur Schopenhauer. Strindberg sees the constant metamorphoses and transformations of existence as natural expressions of this uniform life force – in geology, physics, chemistry and biology. And whoever is able to attentively observe these transitions can also come into contact with the real universe and its real source: God.

In *A Dream Play*, the Poet is one such attentive observer, describing how “a cloud comes travelling over the heath, past the sun, of course ... now it's all gone ... the water of the cloud extinguished the fire of the sun! – The sun's light created the tower's dark form, but the cloud's dark form smothered the tower's dark form.” Here the poet presents a rapid series of oppositions – light / dark, cloud / sun, coming / going, created / extinguished, water / fire – that overturns our ingrained and trusted perceptions by means of a certain kind of sensitive vision that Strindberg associated with an optical term of his own invention: “Dark Rays.” A term that in physics refers to light with frequencies beyond the perception of the human eye, but has a much broader significance: whoever is attentive to such dark rays has the ability to see life without distortion. And it is precisely these dark rays that celestographs are able to capture, so that they can show us the heavens as they are.

In one sense, the ideas about light are connected with the question of existence:

“Where does the self begin, and where does it end?” Strindberg asks his question from a diffused transitional realm between world and self, where the questioner occupies an intermediate position: half situated, half diffused, half seen, half unseen. And here arises the personal lure of being embraced by another kind of light – a thought that appears in a passage of freely philosophizing dialogue in the novel *Black Banners*: “Becoming invisible in the light could occur.” And not just become invisible, but also be able to make oneself invisible by an act of willpower: “it may be possible in the future, with practice.”<sup>1</sup> The words are a physical speculation on the route away from the fixed self and at the same time an expression of an absolute authorial desire – to be the one who sees the others, but who themselves remains in the dark, concealed.<sup>2</sup>

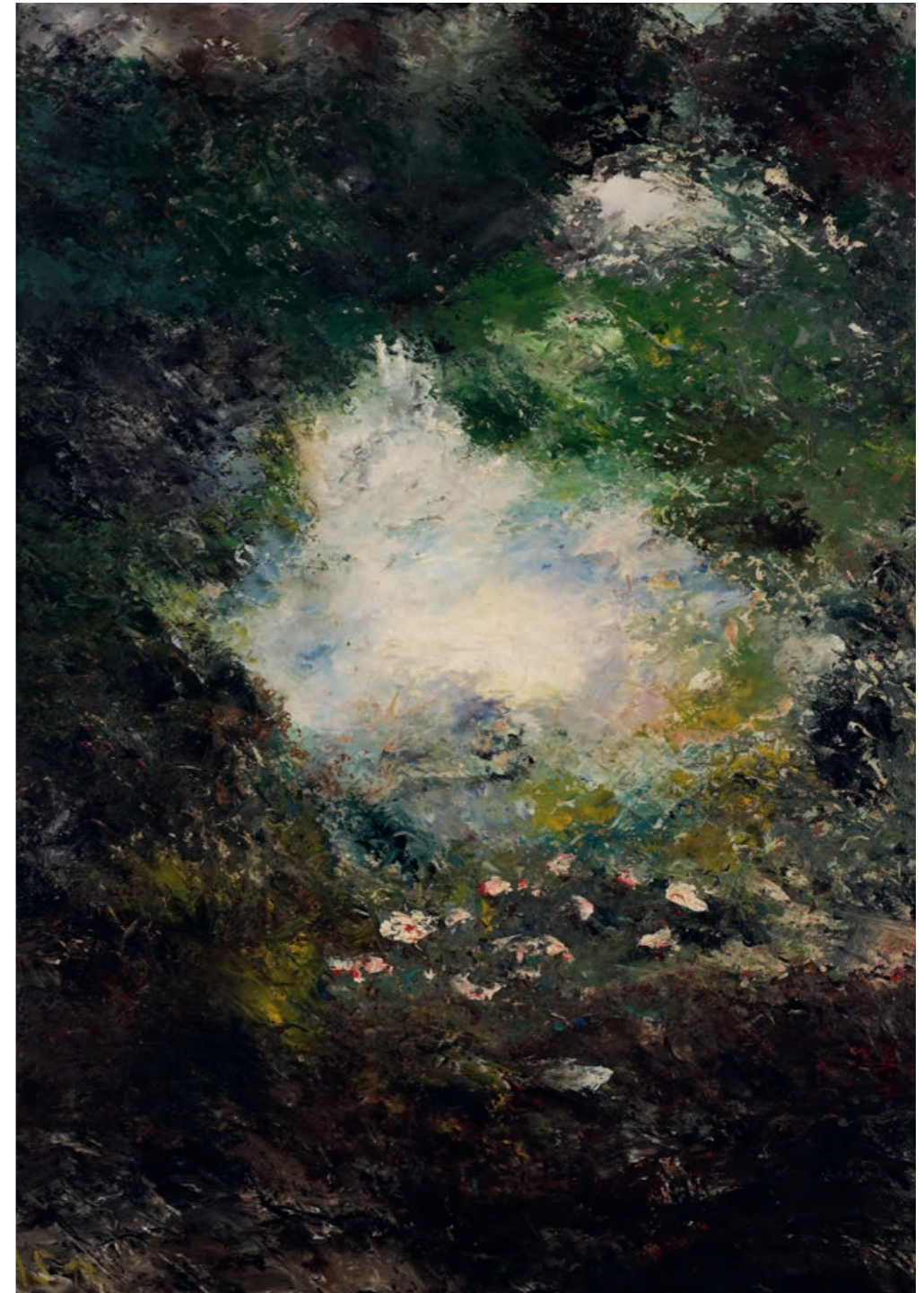
1. August Strindberg, *Black Banners: Genre Scenes from the Turn of the Century*, trans. Donald K. Weaver (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2010), p. 196.
2. The references from Strindberg in this essay are from texts published in Swedish and from his letters.

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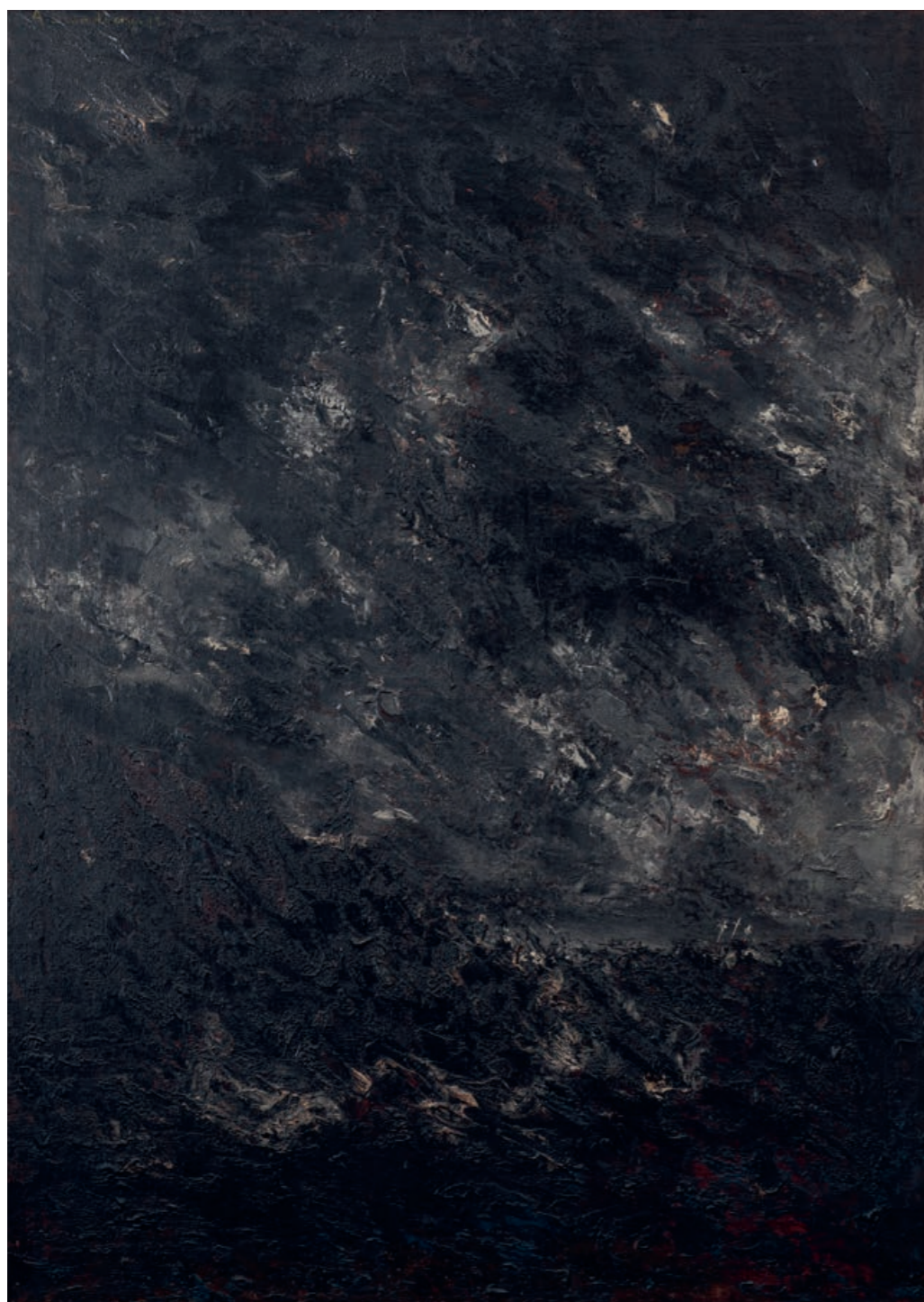


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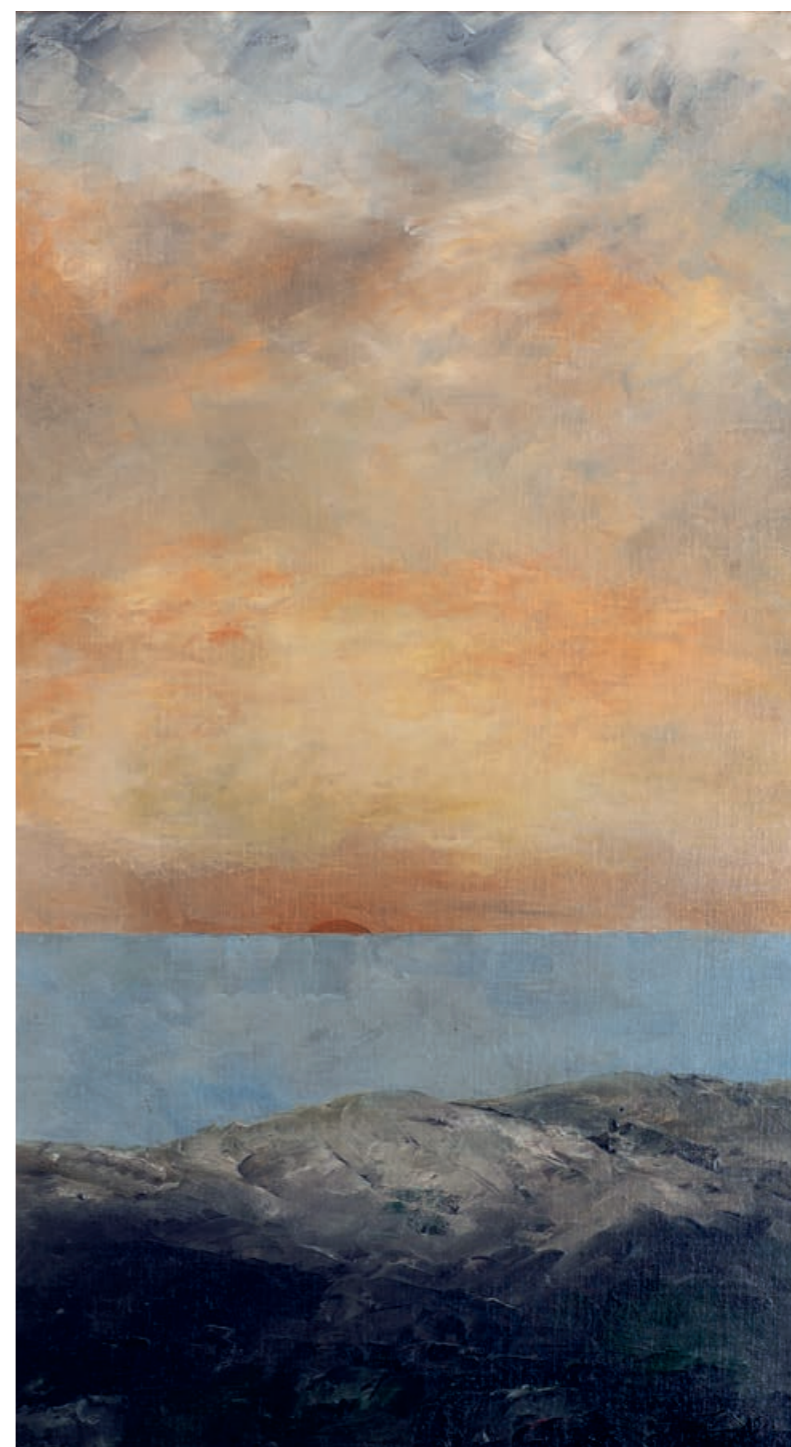


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## Ecstatic Diagrams

Briony Fer

Hilma af Klint is part of an ecstatic tradition that includes the great Swedish visionary Emanuel Swedenborg as well the English painter William Blake. Her work is embedded in – whether consciously or unconsciously – a complex of available cultural and artistic forms that derived from that historical tradition, including conventions of visualization of spiritual experience. This did not only involve the expressive pictorial means she developed to invoke hallucinatory visions but also, and more pointedly here, the proliferation of schematic diagrams that she produced to articulate alternative modes of understanding a world beyond the visible.

Of course the diagrammatic, in this context, is directly connected with esoteric thought, and especially the kind of schematic visual notations found in theosophical and occult literature, from Madame Blavatsky through to Rudolf Steiner. Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater's *Thought-Forms*, which was published in 1901, and is full of diagrams of this sort, combining a geometric vocabulary with freer and more amorphous forms. The medium is very often watercolour, mixed with line drawings which use the full range of graphic notations derived from scientific technical drawing, like vectors, arrows, short dashed lines suggesting non-visible surfaces and so on. This was an adaptation of a language of geometry that

aimed to visualize the world beyond the visible and dimensions beyond those we know. That this kind of material also informed the language of abstract painting as it developed in the hands of artists like Wassily Kandinsky in the early 1910s is clear. But my point here is simply that these conventional graphic forms of encoding spatial relationships carry with them the cryptic appeal of a “mystical geometry” that has proven fertile imaginative ground for artists to work with. Like many other esoteric guidebooks to the spirit world, the old belief in geometry, as that which is able to unlock the secrets of the universe, is translated into a highly cryptic system that opens on to the cosmic order.

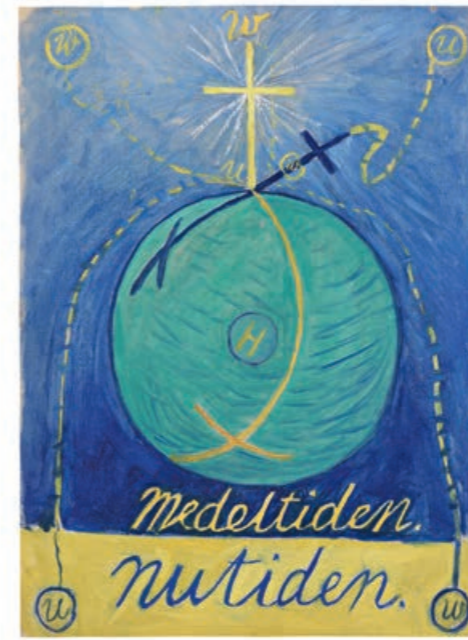
I would suggest an even more fluid network of connections here: between such mystical diagramming and the more concrete explications of colour theory, many of which abounded in late nineteenth-century artistic circles. For example, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Theory of Colour*, published in 1810, was translated into English by Sir Charles Eastlake in 1840 and seems to have influenced Leadbeater and Besant even if was not directly available in Swedish to Hilma af Klint. Even more significant than the influence of Goethe's ideas about colour are the colour illustrations that elucidated the theory. They are schematic diagrams, but they also mix together graphic notations with more conventional representational images. In the pages of the *Theory of Colour* and other theoretical texts like it, this highly permissive manner of compounding otherwise completely unacceptable and incompatible idioms in one and the same image is very striking. Even the most scientific investigations into the effects of light and colour, then, are very much part of the historical

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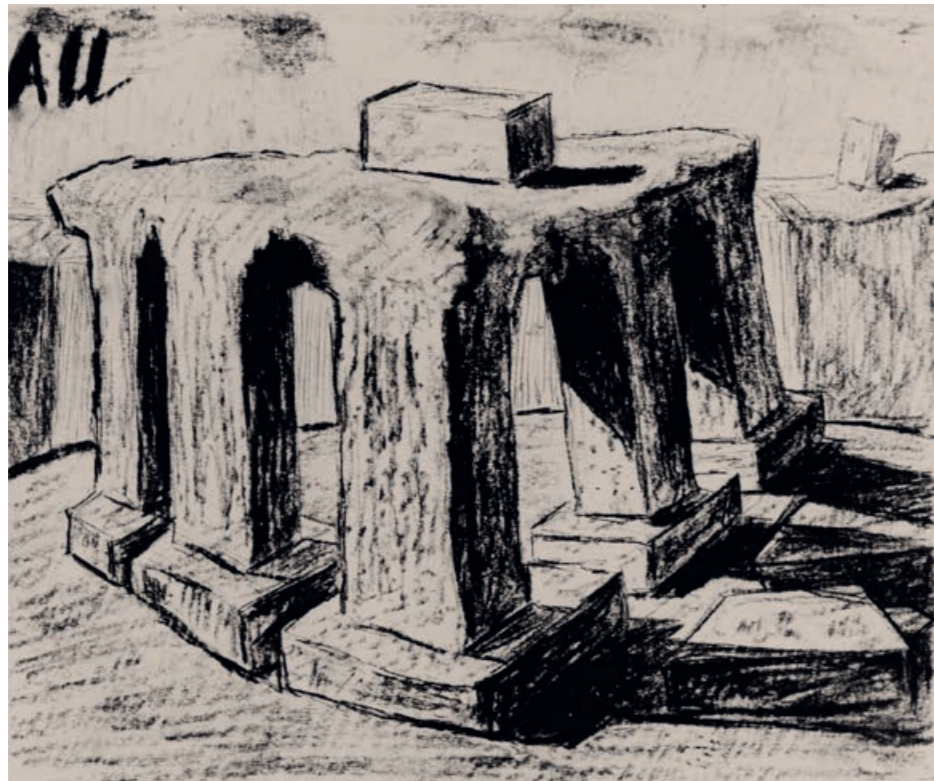


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