

ART SEEN: Exhibition reveals Emily Carr in a new light by connecting her to Wolfgang Paalen



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Detail of Messagers des trois ples by Wolfgang Paalen. It's part of the exhibition I Had An Interesting French Artist To See Me This Summer: Emily Carr and Wolfgang Paalen at the Vancouver Art Gallery to Nov. 13, 2016. VANCOUVER SUN

When the thin softcover arrived in the mail, my first thought was: ‘Not another book on Emily Carr (<http://bit.ly/29QOWzw>)!’

I knew it was the catalogue for an exhibition in a few months at the Vancouver Art Gallery (<http://www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/>). That irritated me too. I wondered to myself how the VAG could hold another exhibition about Carr and say anything new about her.

So I ignored it. I left the book in my pile of Things to Do, hoping it would go away. Of course it didn't.

As the date of the exhibition neared, I knew I'd have to deal with it. But even after the exhibition opened, I was still in a state of denial.

Soon after, I realized I couldn't ignore it any longer. I thought I should at least open and look at the catalogue which has an unusual title: I Had An Interesting French Artist To See Me This Summer (<http://bit.ly/29X6ef7>).

I started reading and I was hooked. Instead of the usual academic style of art writing, this was different: it was a good story told by Colin Browne (<http://bit.ly/2a0g3ru>), a poet, essayist and documentary filmmaker, about the meeting between Carr and surrealist artist Wolfgang Paalen (<http://bit.ly/29YJRUt>) in Victoria on the eve of the Second World War.

Most unexpectedly, both the exhibition Browne curated and his catalogue have had a big impact on me and my partner Leon Phillips, a painter. Carr has been reframed for both of us. Until reading Browne's catalogue essay we were both guilty of seeing only Carr the stereotype: the eccentric old woman who lived with her pets

and painted in isolation. Browne's writing has opened up Carr for us by revealing that she both knew where she was situated and made sure she was connected to the modern world of art and ideas. Thanks to Browne, we're now reading Carr's works not out of a sense of duty but because we realize she still has lots to say about what it means to be an artist in this part of the world.

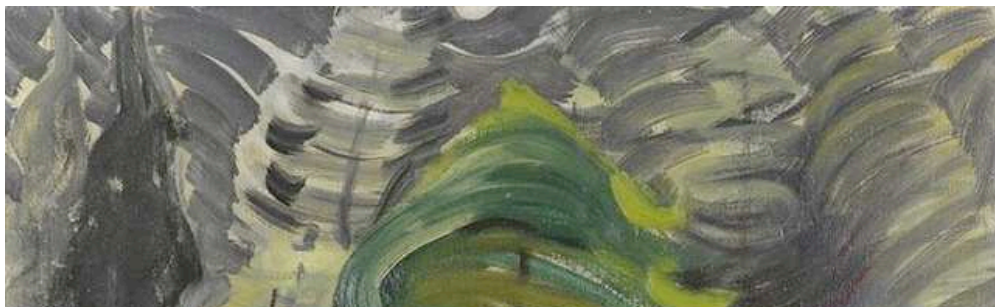
Paalen, born in Vienna, became was part of the circle of surrealist artists in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. He showed work with some of the big avant garde artists of the time such as Man Ray and Yves Tanguy. Although Paalen eventually went his own way and broke from surrealism, he later published the journal *Dyn* that celebrated the art of the Northwest Coast which the surrealists held in high regard.

In 1939, Paalen visited indigenous communities in B.C. to see and collect Northwest Coast art. He was accompanied by his wife Alice Rahon and friend [Eva Sulzer \(http://bit.ly/2a67q1m\)](http://bit.ly/2a67q1m). On the trip, Paalen met Carr, looked at her paintings and drawings and took her for a grand dinner at The Empress Hotel.

Carr didn't think much of surrealism but she was thrilled to meet Paalen. Being contacted by Paalen must have helped Carr feel connected to Paris what was then the centre of art.

"To my surprise," Carr wrote in a letter which is quoted in the catalogue, "Mr. Paalen was very enthusiastic over my own work."

The title of the exhibition comes from the same letter where Carr refers to Paalen's visit. The title, as Browne said, puts Carr right at the centre of the book and the exhibition.





Juice of Life by Emily Carr. VANCOUVER SUN

Browne said he had been researching a book on the connection between surrealism and the indigenous art of the Northwest Coast when he was included in early discussions for the 2011 show on surrealism at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Curated by Dawn Ades, The Colour of My Dreams exhibition displayed 15 Northwest Coast art works including a Kwakwaka'wakw headpiece from the collection of Andre Breton, the founder of surrealism. The exhibition also mentioned Paalen's trip to B.C.

Paalen eventually came to the conclusion that there was much more to Northwest Coast art and culture than what he and other Europeans had originally imagined. In the catalogue, he's quoted saying that totem poles were "among the greatest sculptural achievements of all time."

Two years ago, the Gallery Wendi Norris (<http://bit.ly/29TVnkp>) in San Francisco contacted Browne to let him know about a Paalen exhibition. Among the works for sale was his epic painting Les cosmogones (<http://bit.ly/2a1EUxl>) (The Cosmogons) which had been in the possession of a private collector for more than 50 years.

“I don’t usually just get on planes but I did. I don’t quite know why I went,” Browne said.

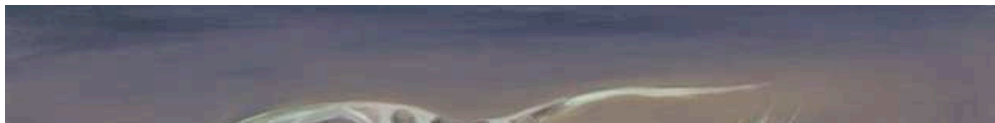
“I spent two days looking at (The Cosmogons) and I thought: ‘This has got to be here in Vancouver.’”

He returned home and talked to Daina Augaitis, the VAG’s associate director and chief curator. He told her that Les cosmogones was a marvellous painting that was evidence of Paalen’s connection to the Northwest Coast.

About a year later, Augaitis called Browne. She said it was time to include Paalen in one of the VAG’s ongoing series of exhibitions on Carr called “Dialogues With Carr.”

In the exhibition, many of the paintings by the two artists are displayed with a great sense of visual awareness. There are several examples where paintings really do seem to talk to one another.

Les étrangers (The Strangers)was one of several paintings Paalen created with the help of a technique called fumage to help remove intentionality from his work. Fumage involved creating random patterns on a canvas by holding it over a candle flame and moving it back and forth without looking. The Strangers shows a group of vertical forms that resemble totem poles in an imaginary landscape. It’s displayed close to Carr’s Vanquished whose row of leaning totem poles on Skedans Beach in Haida Gwaii resembles the ones in Paalen’s painting.





Combat des princes saturniens III (Combat of the Saturnian Princes III) by Wolfgang Paalen. VANCOUVER SUN

Carr represents a dense forest in *Juice of Life* (above) with vibrating bands in dark green, blues and browns. Directly across the exhibition room is *Espace Libre* (Space Unbound) by Paalen. Where Carr's gestures and colours are subdued, Paalen's are vibrating and pulsating. One writer described Paalen's paintings as "Van Gogh on acid (<http://bit.ly/29YJRUt>).". The circular forms in *Espace Libre* resemble the round eyes and sockets in a rare prehistoric Haisla

stone figure Paalen bought in Bella Coola but which has since been lost.

The Cosmogons (Les Cosmogones) is a beautifully dynamic painting dominated by numerous parabolas that recall the expressive formlines of Northwest Coast art. In a joining of masculine and feminine, the protruding ends of three parabolas meet in a circle in the centre of the painting. It's displayed across from Carr's Big Raven, a wonderful painting of a strong, diagonally-shaped raven pointing from earth to sky.

At first, The Cosmogons appears to be an abstract painting. But Browne pointed out that if you look closely, you can barely make out three ghostly figures: they're the Cosmogons who Paalen believed are forces or presences that have shaped the world through eternity even though they can't be seen by normal vision.

Both Paalen and Carr, Browne said, realized that the indigenous art of the Northwest Coast was about transformation. The exhibition isn't about showing how one artist influenced the other but how both were influenced by Northwest Coast art.

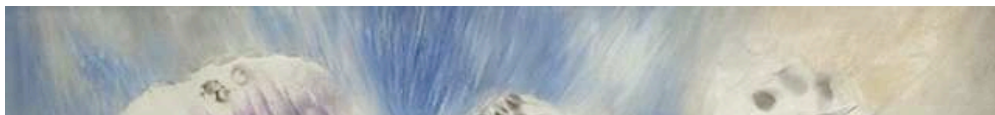
"They were both deeply moved and touched and kind of astonished by the great beauty and profundity of Northwest Coast art," he said.

Browne said the exhibition brings to light a side of Carr (<http://bit.ly/29QOWzw>) and the history of art that was hidden in plain sight "under our noses all along.

"When we put Paalen by Carr, we see Carr in a new light," he said.

"We see her as a serious and intelligent artist and writer."

I Had an Interesting French Artist to See Me This Summer (<http://bit.ly/29X6ef7>) continues at the Vancouver Art Gallery to Nov. 13.





Bella Coola by Wolfgang Paalen. VANCOUVER SUN

Several of Paalen's works such as [The Cosmogons](http://bit.ly/2a1EUxl) (<http://bit.ly/2a1EUxl>) were unavailable as images to include in this blog.

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