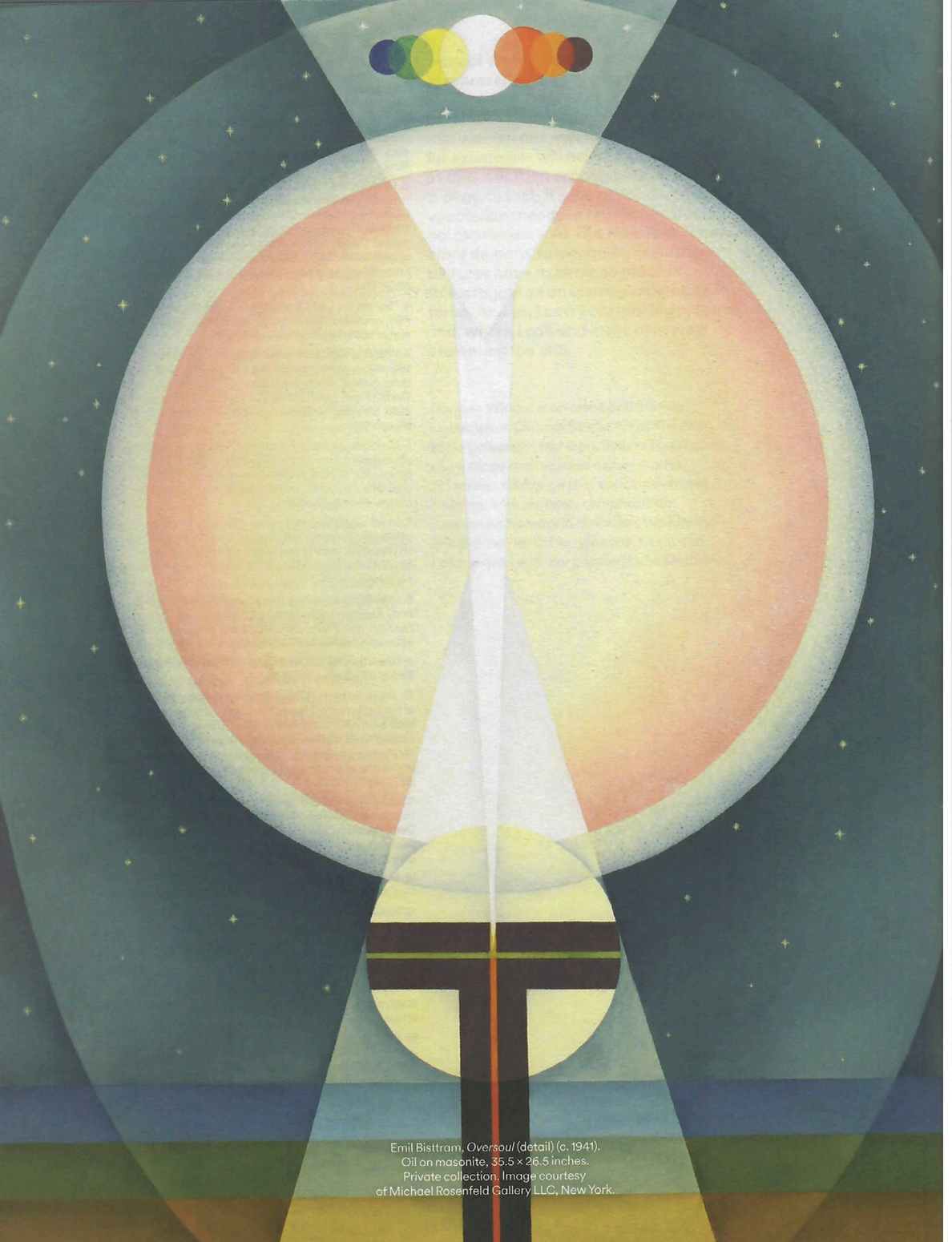


Emil Bisttram, *Oversoul* (detail) (c. 1941). Oil on masonite, 35.5 × 26.5 inches. Private collection. Image courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York.

Tuning In and Dropping Out

Spiritual Frontiers in Recent Art and Curation

Isabella Miller

At the close of the nineteenth century, the American West was not only a geographic and economic frontier but also a spiritual one. The Protestantism that so gripped the Eastern United States loosened as young settlers colonized the furthest reaches of the American continent, where institutionalized traditionalism began, for some, to wane in favor of a more individualist and heterodox orientation towards religion.[1] Christian Science, New Thought, and Theosophy posed compelling alternatives to more dominant beliefs. As scholar Sandra Sizier Frankiel put it, "a diffuse California mythology arose."[2] Palpably skeptical of East coast conservatism, this mythos eschewed codified moral or ethical programs. A nascent interest in South and East Asian spiritual practices baked in the sun and sands of the region's sweeping desert tundra and staggering cliffside beaches.[3]

It is not difficult to find vestiges of Frankiel's diffuse California mythology around Los Angeles today. Some varieties are explicitly religious, like the Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), a nondenominational spiritual organization with several locations spanning Hollywood and the Pacific Palisades that teaches Kriya Yoga,[4] while others are scholarly, like the Philosophical Research Society (PRS) in Los Feliz, which houses a remarkable library of esoteric and spiritual texts.[5] But most evidence of this spiritual heritage—from boutique yoga studios to crystal shops, occult apothecaries to manifestation studios—is more banal, part and parcel of the commercial fabric of Southern California. In many cases, these markets have commodified the more nuanced aspects of Californian spiritualism.

Such imbrications of the mystical with capital have garnered their fair share of criticism. Notably, Western adaptations of Eastern religions and the occult often overemphasize individual identity and personal freedom to the detriment of structural race, ethnic, and class-based struggles. And, while esotericism and occultism are often cozily entwined with capital, especially in Los Angeles, they have also proven to be indelibly fertile terrain for artistic pursuits that explore the friction between the mystical and the market. Recently, Los Angeles has seen a reinvigorated interest in exhibiting and historicizing work engaged with mysticism, highlighting artists who belong(ed) to a greater cultural milieu of West coasters seeking spiritual transcendence in the early twentieth century and beyond. While these earlier artists tended to refuse the art economy in favor of their individual pursuits, some contemporary artists are bridging the material and spiritual by incorporating critiques of capital into their work.

Many midcentury artists grew disillusioned with the burgeoning art market of their time, instead cultivating alternative lifestyles that enabled art-making on their own terms. One such group was recently the subject of the touring exhibition *Another World: The Transcendental Painting Group, 1938–1945*, on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) this summer. In 1938 Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico, this cohort of artists allied in their common desire to reject the aesthetic trends and art markets of New York and Europe in order to access their vision of the spiritual through art. The artists involved—including Emil Bisttram, Raymond Jonson, Robert Gribbroek, Lawren Harris, and Agnes Pelton (a member of the Transcendental Painting Group [TPG] in absentia, as she spent her artistic maturity living in the desert near Palm Springs[6])—had varying degrees of commitment to any one religion, but they shared a distrust

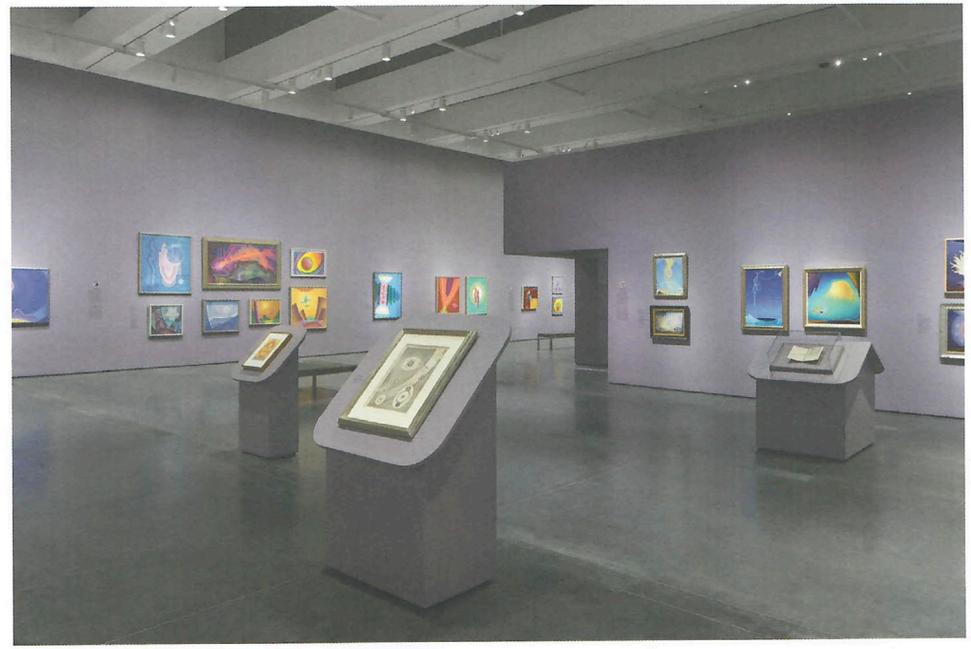
of modernity, an interest in the occult, and a devotion to representing that which lies "beyond the appearance of the physical world…[in the] imaginative realms that are idealistic and spiritual."[7] For the TPG artists, the effort to access the divine to the exclusion of the greater social world necessitated a rejection of the arts economies burgeoning in global capitals.

Through their geographic isolation from urban cultural centers, the artists of the TPG were better able to detach from visual and political conventions shaping the commercial art world at the time, most notably social realism and the proto-New York school of abstract art.[8] Agnes Pelton left New York even while her career was budding in the region,[9] while Jonson refused Josef Albers' invitation to join the American Abstract Artists alliance in 1937.[10] To be sure, the group still exhibited at institutions across the United States—at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting (now known as the Guggenheim Museum) in 1940, for instance[11]—but their steadfast seclusion from the mainstream market and its rubrics of salability allowed them to take an eccentric, often polarizing approach to painting. For instance, the repeated presence of the egg, a theosophical symbol of generation, grounds many of their highly geometric compositions, evident in many of the paintings on display at LACMA. In Bisttram's nocturne *Oversoul* (c. 1941), overlapping ovoid orbs are superimposed atop a blue ground with white stars, dotted like a night sky. Also unconventional for the time, the artists often favored romance and mood within their abstractions; Pelton's *Winter* (1933) features a glowing rondure in the center of the composition, but is contextualized by a more sentimental—rather than punctiliously geometric—atmosphere featuring doves, soft patches of snow, and whirling flower petals.

Similarly to how the artists of the TPG disentangled from their contemporary art circuits in pursuit of mediating between the physical world and that which lies beyond consciousness, painter Alan Lynch repudiated the art market in pursuit of a more isolated artistic practice alongside his study of Sōtō Zen Buddhism. Lynch was immersed with the artists of the mid-century California avant-garde, many of whom were energized by inquiries into the subconscious, developments in abstraction, and new popular forms of visual culture like comics and advertisements. In this climate, Lynch exhibited publicly for a short 10-year period, after which his artistic practice became more private, meditative, and spiritual. Lynch's work formed the centerpiece of *The Disappearance of Rituals*, a group exhibition at Château Shatto this summer that marked the first public exhibition of the artist's work since he left behind the commercial art world in 1969.[12]

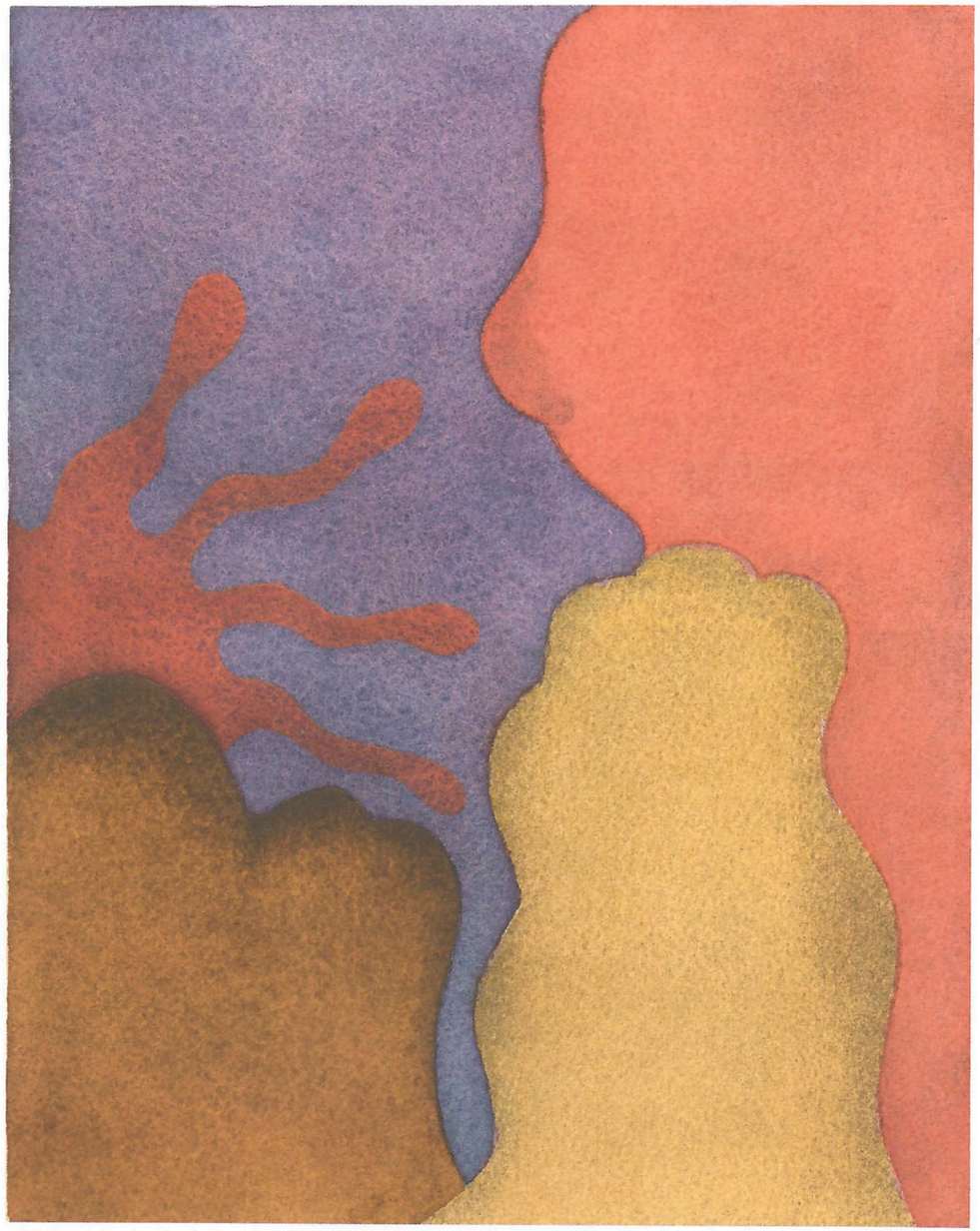
The exhibition centered on a series of previously unexhibited protean watercolors produced while Lynch was pursuing ordination as a monk. The works are themselves meditative in their small scale and similar compositions, as though the ritualistic pace of Zen study was incarnated through his artistic work. Like the work of the TPG artists, Lynch's framed paintings are socially disengaged and often contain curving forms that sometimes appear biomorphic, sometimes geologic. *Untitled* (1978) depicts six curving tentacles emanating from the lower-right-hand corner like algae. A sandy halo radiates from behind or between them, fading into an opalescent wash that merges into deep blue at the artwork's edges. Four similar watercolors of the same scale hung to the right, iterating Lynch's approach to painting simple, abstract forms. Here, Lynch was responding to the tensions embedded within the California mythology—the pursuit of spiritual freedom that paradoxically relies on the material trappings of capital and colonialism—by innovating spiritual abstraction, as did the artists of the TPG.

For artists working throughout the twentieth century, from Pelton



Top: Alan Lynch, *Untitled (Espiritu Santo)* and *Untitled (New York)* (installation view) (1977; 1975). Water and graphite on watercolor paper, 20 × 14.5 inches and 14 × 10.25 inches. Château Shatto, Los Angeles, 2023. Image courtesy of Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

Bottom: *Another World: The Transcendental Painting Group, 1938–1945* (installation view) (2023). Image courtesy of LACMA. Photo: © Museum Associates/LACMA.



Alan Lynch, *Untitled* (detail) (1977). Watercolor and graphite on watercolor paper, 24 × 18 inches. Image courtesy of Château Shatto, Los Angeles.

to Lynch, the spiritual thrust of their practice ultimately informed their turn away from many of the trappings of modern urban life and the commercial art world. But even as their work becomes integrated into more dominant histories of contemporary art, and even as spiritual-kitsch is an increasingly present commercial category, artists working today who unabashedly speak about their alternative spiritualities can struggle to find welcome audiences. Lynch and the artists of the TPG responded to the friction between commercial art markets and their spiritual-artistic practices by dropping out. Yet, others, like British-born and Los Angeles-based artist Penny Slinger, had that decision made for them. In a 2017 *Carla* interview with Eliza Swann, Slinger commented on how difficult it has been to exhibit work she created after the 1970s, which is steeped in references to Tantra and the divine feminine, indicating that her use of the word "Goddess" was alienating collectors.[13] A vocal feminist whose work deconstructs the aesthetics of patriarchy, Slinger's spiritual work invites—rather than forecloses—the greater social and political world. While more palatable, minimal spiritual art in the vein of Lynch and the TPG artists becomes increasingly integrated within the institutional and commercial mainstream, confrontational work such as Slinger's can still be met with skepticism.

A latent escapism seems to lurk in the recent invigorated interest in spirituality in art, favoring a marketable refuge in individual spiritual experience over engaging with the sticky problematics of the material world. Meanwhile, the demands of contemporary life increasingly restrict most artists' freedom to proclaim a wholesale rejection of the arts economy. Many artists living or exhibiting in Los Angeles who engage with this matrix of issues use their spiritually inclined work as a vehicle for critiquing capitalist economies while still operating within the commercial gallery market. Los Angeles-based artist Umar Rashid's (also known as Frohawk Two Feathers) history paintings are almost like palimpsests, juxtaposing diverse geographies, temporalities, and spiritual belief systems in his accounts of empire, especially in early America. Featuring imagery associated with the religious and cosmological beliefs of his subjects, his paintings critique the Frenglish colonial instrumentalization of organized religion while also celebrating minoritarian spiritualities.[14] And jocularly self-described "spiritual garbage man"[15] Moffat Takadiwa, in his 2021–22 exhibition at Craft Contemporary, *Witch Craft: Rethinking Power*, used the very materials of contemporary empire—post-consumer waste like toothpaste tubes, bottle caps, and zip ties—to create kaleidoscopic sculptures that populate the gallery walls with collections of refuse from out-of-sight landfills. (In Los Angeles, Rashid is represented by Blum & Poe, Takadiwa by Nicodim.) These artists are not engaging in art against art, instrumentalizing their work in rebellion against the art world, but rather are striking a more ambivalent position to the spiritual and capital—one that can covertly operate within a contemporary market while also critiquing its structures.

From art world shirkers like the TPG artists and Lynch to the sometimes too-radical-to-show Slinger, negotiating the art market alongside unconventional spiritualities can appear a zero-sum game. But perhaps the gulf between heterodox beliefs and the art market is closing. Writer and curator Mark Pilkington argues that "we have entered a new new age"[16] in which feelings override facts, and goals to optimize mind, body, and spirit occlude the often harsh material realities of the outside world. Meanwhile, critic J.J. Charlesworth warns that emergent "new magical thinking" in art is not only on the rise but operates as a "projection of wish-fulfillment onto a reality we'd rather withdraw from."[17] In the work of Rashid and Takadiwa, spirituality forms part of a larger critique of capital and colonialism—the outside world,

in other words, becomes part of the project. Rather than tuning in and dropping out, perhaps we will see more tuning in and dropping in—critically engaging both a mystical beyond and those more tangible matters shaping our lived realities.

Isabella Miller lives and works in Los Angeles.

1. Sandra Sizer Frankiel, *California's Spiritual Frontiers: Religious Alternatives in Anglo-Protestantism, 1850–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), xi.

2. Frankiel, *California's Spiritual Frontiers*, xii.

3. Frankiel, *California's Spiritual Frontiers*, xii–xiv. See also John Dart, "West Coasts's 'Spiritual Style' Described," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1998, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-apr-25-me-42759-story.html.

4. Paramahansa Yogananda, the Self-Realization Fellowship's founder, moved from Gorakhpur, India to the United States in 1920. "'He felt that Southern California was open to new metaphysical concepts and that he could put down roots here,' [SRF administrator and minister] Satyananda explains. 'You can imagine, during the '20s and '30s, America was [...] having trouble accepting new ideas and new people. Yogananda found open arms in California. It turned out to be quite a successful genesis for his operation.'" See Liz Ohanesian, "LA Icon: The Self Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine," *Discover Los Angeles*, July 12, 2021, http://www.discoverlosangeles.com/things-to-do/la-icon-the-self-realization-fellowship-lake-shrine.

5. Speaking about the founding of the PRS, executive director Dennis Bartok stated that "there were a lot of fascinating esoteric and religious movements that were springing up in the early part of the 20th century, particularly on the West Coast. It seemed to be a magnet for them." See Ohanesian, "Philosophical Research Society: The Story of an LA Icon," *Discover Los Angeles*, October 7, 2022, http://www.discoverlosangeles.com/things-to-do/philosophical-research-society-the-story-of-an-la-icon.

6. Jonathan Griffin, "The artists who wanted to rise above it all," *Apollo*, November 20, 2021, https://www.apollo-magazine.com/transcendental-painting-group-new-mexico/.

7. Transcendental Painting Group (N.M.), Transcendental Painting Group statement of purpose, c. 1938, Agnes Pelton papers, 1885–1989, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, quoted in "Another World: The Transcendental Painting Group, 1938–1945," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, https://www.lacma.org/press/another-world-transcendental-painting-group-1938-1945.

8. Max Pearl, "The Curious Case of the Transcendental Painting Group," *The Nation*, May 22, 2023, https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/transcendental-painting-group/.

9. Lisa Beck, "Agnes Pelton: The Familiar Sublime," *The Brooklyn Rail*, June 2018, https://www.brooklynrail.org/2018/06/criticspage/Agnes-Pelton-The-Familiar-Sublime.

10. Suzanne Hudson, "Another World: The Transcendental Painting Group, 1938–1945,'" *Artforum* 61, no. 10 (Summer 2023), https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202306/another-world-the-transcendental-painting-group-1938-1945-90583.

11. Jonathan Griffin, "The artists who wanted to rise above it all."

12. Laura Whitcomb, "Alan Lynch," in *Dilexi: A Gallery & Beyond* (Los Angeles: Label Curatorial, 2021), 104–5.

13. Eliza Swann, "Interview with Penny Slinger," *Carla* 8, June 21, 2017, https://www.contemporaryartreview.la/interview-with-penny-slinger/.

14. Constanza Falco Raez, "Umar Rashid | 'En Garde / On God' at Blum & Poe Gallery," *Flaunt*, accessed September 28, 2023, https://www.flaunt.com/blog/umar-rashid.

15. "Moffat Takadiwa," *Africanah.org*, September 26, 2014, https://www.africanah.org/moffat-takadiwa/.

16. Mark Pilkington, "Art & New Age: Pyramid Scheming," *Frieze* 185, March 27, 2017, https://www.frieze.com/article/art-new-age-pyramid-scheming.

17. J.J. Charlesworth, "The Return of Magic in Art," *ArtReview*, May 30, 2022, https://www.artreview.com/the-return-of-magic-in-art/.