

New book illuminates Gordon Onslow Ford



"All One's Company" by Gordon Onslow Ford, 1993, acrylic on canvas

Gordon Onslow Ford's cosmic paintings reused elements and featured a "personnage" that voyaged from one to another. This work was the final and largest of a series exploring the "inner sky."

Point Reyes Light
By Braden Cartwright
10/16/2019

The first major work on Gordon Onslow Ford, a 1930s surrealist painter who spent the last 40 years of his life in Inverness, was released last month by the Lucid Art Foundation, titled "A Man on a Green Island." The 348-page fine press book spans from Mr. Onslow Ford's first painting, of a rugged beach, to his last, an array of circles, lines and dots. In between, it tracks his evolution across multiple countries and numerous art movements. The book's seven chapters are each written by a different international scholar or art historian, focusing on a distinct period in his life.

“Usually you have either a scholarly book or an art book—my vision was to have both,” said Fariba Bogzaran, the book’s editor and the president of the Lucid Art Foundation. “This is the first time that people are going to see the depth and breadth of his work all together.” She will present on the monograph at the Point Reyes Presbyterian Church on Oct. 26. Point Reyes Books is sponsoring the event.

Ms. Bogzaran first met Mr. Onslow Ford in 1989 after she finished her master’s thesis—on lucid dreaming—from the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. They lived on opposite sides of the same hill in Inverness, independently working in related fields. “When we met each other, it was instant recognition,” she said. A book he wrote to help people understand his paintings, “Once Upon a Time,” talked about the things she was studying in dreams. He explained his paintings’ spontaneous lines, circles and dots as messengers from an inner world with a life of its own.

“The key overlap we came to understand was that the imagery encountered in transpersonal experiences during lucid dreams resembled the images that Onslow Ford and his circle of friends were depicting in their paintings with the intention of exploring the inner worlds,” Ms. Bogzaran wrote in the book’s final chapter.

After coming to this realization, she undertook an art-based study that illustrated how advanced lucid dreamers recognized the “inner world” painting of Onslow Ford and his associates, without ever having been exposed to the images before.

The study helped lead the pair to create the Lucid Art Foundation, a forum to support artists interested in the exploration of consciousness. When Mr. Onslow Ford died, he left his estate to the foundation.

Ms. Bogzaran said the book would never have materialized while he was alive, because they were too busy creating projects and looking at the present and to the future. But she felt the need to introduce his work to a wider audience, especially in the art world. She hired a team of editors, researchers, designers and a project manager, Jasmine

Moorhead. They printed only 1,500 copies of the book.

“A Man on a Green Island” begins with Mr. Onslow Ford’s early work, which featured painterly scenes inspired by his time in the British Navy. But his paintings took a turn away from traditional landscapes after he met fellow artist Roberto Matta and they started exploring metaphysics and inner worlds. In 1938, he joined the surrealist movement led by Andre Bréton.

The book’s title is a reference to Mr. Onslow Ford’s 1939 painting of the same name. Dawn Ades, a British art historian, explains the esoteric painting in the book’s first chapter: “Its title allows us to identify the green wedge on which the hard-edged red-and-yellow form sits as an island, but as such it suddenly casts doubt on the alternating darker and lighter blue bands. If the darker blue line represents a sea horizon, what then is happening as we go down towards the bottom of the picture where there is a wider, graduated lighter blue band? The sense of a void, a cosmic space, rather than an underwater zone, opens up with neither ‘up’ nor ‘down.’”

Thirty years after the painting, Mr. Onslow Ford alluded to the green island as his home in Inverness. “I live on a peninsula that is slowly moving up the coast of California at about two inches per year,” he described. “In reality it is an island that has been above the Pacific Ocean much longer than the gently rolling coast to which it is now attached.”

Between chapters, nine interludes compiled with his letters, handwritten notes and personal photographs tell a first-hand account of his life. He met his wife, Jacqueline Johnson, in New York in 1941, while he was giving a series of lectures on surrealism that would influence the future abstract expressionists sitting in the audience. The two quickly fell in love, married and moved to Erongaricuaró, a small village in Mexico.

Terri Geis, an art curator, wrote the chapter on Ms. Johnson. “Although [Ms. Johnson’s] name has regularly been noted in the literature on Mr. Onslow Ford, surrealism and post-war California art, little about her life and work has been discussed in any detail,” Ms. Geis wrote.

The author takes the time to tell Ms. Johnson's story, from growing up in San Francisco to becoming a "continual fountain of new inspiration" for Mr. Onslow Ford. She was an accomplished writer and often gave him feedback on his art. After they met, his work shifted stylistically based on their shared discussions about indigenous art.

After six years in Mexico, the couple moved to the Bay Area, where Mr. Onslow Ford bought half of the S.S. Vallejo, a boat-turned-art-studio docked in Sausalito. An interlude in the book contains scenes from aboard the vessel, where Mr. Onslow Ford hosted an eclectic group of counterculture figures and Eastern artists. He became fascinated with Asian calligraphy and his art started to draw inspiration from Zen Buddhism.

The artist eventually sold his half of the boat to Alan Watts in the early 1960s, and he and Ms. Johnson purchased 300 acres of land in Inverness. He wanted to get away from the hubbub, and he loved nature, so he had his house built on top of a ridge overlooking Mount Vision, surrounded by Bishop pines.

He invited his friends J.B. Blunk, a sculptor and painter, and John Anderson, his former studio assistant, to build their homes and studios on the land. Ms. Johnson served on a committee that advocated for the establishment of the Point Reyes National Seashore and the couple donated the majority of their land to the Nature Conservancy. The book contains a copy of the speech Mr. Onslow Ford gave when the Bishop Pine Preserve was dedicated to its natural state.

He was always prolific, but especially in Inverness, Ms. Bogzaran said. As his paintings grew in size, he started to paint very cosmic scenes, often in black and white. The last chapter of the book is the most extensive, delving into a theory of the inner world that he developed throughout his 91-year life. "This chapter really synthesizes his whole world," Ms. Bogzaran said. Although he came to rest in Inverness, his work continued to evolve.

"A Man on a Green Island" ends with 12 of his last paintings, from

2000 to 2003, up until three weeks before he died.

Ms. Bogzaran tailors her book talks to the audience, so in Point Reyes Station she will focus on Mr. Onslow Ford's four decades in Inverness. The event starts at 4 p.m. and admission is by donation. \$65 copies of the book are available at Point Reyes Books.

online as: <https://www.ptreyeslight.com/article/new-book-illuminates-gordon-onslow-ford>