

Gordon Onslow Ford

Voyager and Visionary



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The Mint Museum





COVER
Gordon Onslow Ford, Le Vallee,
Switzerland, circa 1938
Photograph by Elisabeth Onslow Ford,
courtesy of Lucid Art Foundation

FIGURE 1
Sketch for *Escape*, October 1939
gouache on paper
Photograph courtesy of Lucid Art
Foundation

Gordon Onslow Ford: Voyager and Visionary

As a young midshipman in the British Royal Navy, Gordon Onslow Ford (1912-2003) welcomed standing the night watch on deck, where he was charged with determining the ship's location by using a sextant to take readings from the stars. Although he left the navy, the experience of those nights at sea may well have been the starting point for the voyages he was to make in his painting over a lifetime, at first into a fabricated symbolic realm, and eventually into the expanding spaces he created on his canvases. The trajectory of Gordon Onslow Ford's voyages began at his birthplace in Wendover, England and led to the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth and to three years at sea as a junior officer in the Mediterranean and Atlantic fleets of the British Navy. He resigned from the navy in order to study art in Paris, where he became the youngest member of the pre-war Surrealist group. At the start of World War II, he returned to England for active duty.

While in London awaiting a naval assignment, he organized a Surrealist exhibition and oversaw the publication of Surrealist poetry and artworks that had been produced the previous summer in France (fig. 1). Illness prevented his sailing with his assigned ship – the first to be sunk by a torpedo from a German U-boat, with the loss of its entire crew. He succeeded in obtaining a leave from the navy in order to accept an invitation from the Committee

to Preserve European Culture to lecture in the United States. The American expatriate artist Kay Sage had devised this strategy in order to bring her future husband, Yves Tanguy, and some of his Surrealist colleagues to safety across the Atlantic. In New York, Onslow Ford met young American artists and electrified audiences at the New School with his lectures on Surrealism. His work hung, alongside that of his fellow Surrealist émigrés, in the famous “First Papers of Surrealism” show in 1942. But by the time the exhibition opened, he had left for Mexico, where he was to live for seven years in a remote Tarascan village in the company of Jacqueline Johnson, a writer he had met and married in New York.

In Mexico, Onslow Ford formed a friendship with former Surrealist Wolfgang Paalen, who shared his passion for both science and pre-Columbian art. Paalen was editing a journal, *DYN*, in which he advocated a synthesis of art and modern physics, an art that would be “a direct visualization of forces which move our bodies and minds.” Following Paalen’s lead, Onslow Ford decided to resign from Surrealism and to pursue in his own art a means of portraying the “inner worlds of the mind” as they coincided with the cosmic world described by contemporary physicists (fig. 2). After the war ended, he shipped his latest paintings off for a show at the Nierendorf Gallery in New York while he and Jacqueline headed up the California coast to her native city, San Francisco. In 1948 the San Francisco Museum of Art mounted the first of several Onslow Ford exhibitions and published his first book, *Toward a New Subject in Painting*. Two years later the museum exhibited paintings by Paalen, Onslow Ford, and a young American, Lee Mullican, in a show that Paalen titled *Dynaton*, meaning *possible* in Greek, and referring to Plato’s statement: “Anything imagined is possible.”



FIGURE 2
Migrators with Bird 1, 1944
oil on canvas
Photograph courtesy of Lucid Art Foundation



FIGURE 3
Finger at the Moon, 1951
casein on paper
Photograph courtesy of Max Onslow
Ford Rouslin

In the years that followed, Onslow Ford set up a studio in an old iron-hulled ferry moored in Sausalito, and began the study of calligraphy with Zen Master Hodo Tobase, a way of working that was to strongly influence the spontaneous execution of his paintings (fig. 3). He became friendly with several of the writers on New Age physics and also was close to Alan Watts, a scholar of Oriental religions, who eventually took over the ferry. In the later 1950s, his geographic voyage reached an end point on California's Point Reyes Peninsula, part of the northward-moving Pacific plate. He acquired land on the brow of a hill above Tomales Bay and built a house and studio facing the dark silhouetted profile of Mount Vision across a steep canyon. Until his death in 2003, this tranquil setting served as the earthbound base for the voyages into unknown spaces that he launched in his paintings. Living in that remote and silent place, he was able to keep worldly concerns at a distance and focus on the means of transmitting his vision of unending space. He would emerge periodically to give a lecture or attend an exhibition – retrospectives were held at the Oakland Museum in 1977, in 1995 in Santiago, Chile, and in Compostella, Spain in 1998 – or for a trip to the Far East with Jacqueline or to meet relatives in Germany and England, but he managed for the most part to remain detached from the stresses of the world at large.

Undoubtedly the most significant encounter during the course of Onslow Ford's voyaging life was meeting Roberto Matta, a Chilean of his own age, in Paris in 1937. Matta was working as a

draftsman in the atelier of Le Corbusier, and spending his spare time on fantastic drawings, which often were improvisations based on botanical microphotographs. Onslow Ford was immediately intrigued by Matta's drawings and eventually persuaded him to take up a paintbrush. They found they shared a preoccupation with trying to express what lay beyond the visually perceived world. During a rainy summer in Brittany they read P.D. Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* and were inspired by his belief that "an artist should be a clairvoyant" who could transcend "the prison house of sight." Each in his own way sought a means of breaking through the barrier of the visible in order to represent a continuum of time and space, sometimes using Surrealist automatism (the practice of drawing or painting with as little conscious intervention as possible) as a starting point.

They continued sharing their ideas in a snowbound chalet in the Alps, in a rented chateau in the Rhone Valley, and, having been reunited in New York in 1940, during a summer in a cabin on the Maine coast, as well as through visits and exchanges of letters for the remainder of their lives. Their goals diverged when Matta introduced hominoid creatures into his multi-dimensional compositions, saying that his aim was to explore "a social morphology, to show the enormous economic, cultural, and emotional forces that materially interact in our lives and that constitute the real space in which we live." Onslow Ford moved in an opposite direction, depopulating his paintings and dissolving all traces of a material world. This process can be observed in the current exhibition, starting with the post-Mexican works (those created after 1947). He began to work with dripped and poured paint above a canvas spread on the studio floor, and one had the sense that as he worked he imagined traveling into the world of his creation, embarking on yet another voyage (fig. 4).



FIGURE 4
Radiant Being, April 1980
acrylic on paper
Photograph courtesy of Lucid Art Foundation



FIGURE 5
*Sketch for "Propaganda
for Love"*, circa 1940
pencil on paper
Photograph courtesy of
Max Onslow Ford Rouslin

The works in this exhibition, shown publicly for the first time, constitute a representative sampling of Onslow Ford's work, starting with a painting of the family orchard done when he was twelve and including preliminary versions of several of his major works such as *Propaganda for Love*, 1940 (fig. 5). They were given to his sister Elisabeth Onslow Ford Rouslin over a lifetime by the artist, whom she often joined in the course of his voyages. It is her photographs that record the summer of 1938 with Matta in Brittany and the legendary pre-war summer of 1939 at Chemillieu. She worked with her brother on the Surrealist show he staged in London and managed to leave wartime England to join him in Mexico. In later years she spent part of many summers with him in California, where they often hiked together in the mountains. Other than the holdings of the Lucid Art Foundation, there is no Onslow Ford collection comparable in range to the works he selected to demonstrate his closeness in spirit to his sister. She would surely be gratified to know that this collection was coming into public view in North Carolina, where she chose to live when her long career of teaching ended.

Martica Sawin



FIGURE 6
Gordon Onslow Ford, Max Onslow Ford Rouslin, and
Elisabeth Onslow Ford Rouslin, Mill Valley, CA, 1953
Photograph courtesy of Max Onslow Ford Rouslin



FIGURE 7
Gordon Onslow Ford and Elisabeth Onslow Ford, January 16, 1922
Photograph courtesy of Max Onslow Ford Rouslin

Memoir of Reunion

Visits to my “Uncle Gordon” with my mother, Elisabeth, were the high points of my childhood (fig. 6). We knew he had taken precious time away from his painting, writing, and meditation to renew these family ties. He met us at the airport in San Francisco with a grin like the Cheshire Cat, and then he whisked us away to a world of enchantment in the hills of Marin. As the steep hairpin bends rose from the little town of Inverness up to his Bishop Pine Preserve, we gained more than altitude. Gordon was fond of recognizing that even the very bones of his land were millennia older than those on the other side of the San Andreas Fault line. I knew I was in a place like no other, and in the presence of an extraordinary man. Over the years my feelings evolved from simple childish awe and delight to the realization that “eternity” and the Zen “instant” were one in the same in this world. Always, best of all for me was seeing the joy of Gordon and Elisabeth’s reunion.

Elisabeth’s vividly detailed stories of her childhood with Gordon in Wendover, England transported the listener to a bygone era (fig. 7). A few of her favorite memories included summers at the seaside in Tintagel, visits to the Gypsies’ migratory encampment that their grandfather allowed on his land in Wendover, rituals of garlanding, with buttercups, and daisies, the Chinese dragon brought by their father from Far East travels, whimsical and

elaborate family performances of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, and the great bonfire lit on the Chiltern Hills for the celebration of the Armistice that ended the war that caused so much misfortune to our family and to so many others.

Elisabeth told me she could not remember a time when Gordon was not drawing and painting. They spent hours with their “Uncle Rudi” in the hills and woods of Buckinghamshire watching him paint and learning how he loaded and turned his brush to capture the nuances of light, shadow, and texture. When their dreaded “aunties” visited at Christmas, Gordon had all the advantage because he had only to present his paintings, whereas she had to perform on the piano under their stern gaze! They had very few other children as companions and became bonded as lifelong friends, drawing deeply from their shared English countryside roots and family heritage as they traveled the world.

Gordon led us on vigorous hikes through ancient woods. Following old steep deer trails, ducking low under branches thick with hanging moss, he led us unerringly to a grand overlook, a waterfall, a ridge top of dwarfed and stunted trees, places of origin and inspiration. The pungent scent of the bay trees and the dusty forest floor mixed with the salt air from Tomales Bay. Along the way he named every tree, flower, fern, edible mushroom, and bird we came upon. He navigated that forest just as he charted the seas of his navy youth, and brought us home in time for one of Jacqueline’s legendary dinners.

My aunt Jacqueline, gentle, elegant, exuberant and passionately creative, was the perfect companion in, and complement to, Gordon’s world. From a kitchen hardly bigger than a shoebox, she concocted feasts of epic proportions. Under her wing, I helped pick fresh herbs, greens, carrots, and radishes from their garden. The creation of her pie crusts and breads was, to me, as much alchemy as that of any image on canvas.

Gordon, Jacqueline, Elisabeth, and I were often joined for dinner by other artists, writers, friends, and neighbors. For all his reclusive lifestyle, he knew an astounding number of interesting people, and he loved to be the perfect host. Carefully chosen bottles from the wine cellar would be ceremonially opened. Formal dinner was served. Into the hot fireplace, Gordon would throw gnarled pine knots gathered on our hike. The evening’s conversation became punctuated by resinous explosions and trails of sparks like little fireworks.

FIGURE 9
Roberto Matta. Chilean, 1911-2002
Letter Puzzle to Elisabeth Onslow Ford, 1938
crayon and ink on paper
Photograph courtesy of Max Onslow Ford Rouslin



FIGURE 8
Jacqueline Onslow Ford, Gordon Onslow Ford,
Remedios Varo, and Caesar Moro, Erongarícuaro,
Mexico, 1941-47
Photograph by Elisabeth Onslow Ford,
courtesy of Lucid Art Foundation



Talk flowed about art old and new, Surrealism, tea at André Breton's studio, the Les Deux Magots café in Paris, the seminal summer at Chemilieu, the war and its shadow, the meaning of the New School lectures then, and what he would say to young artists today. Gordon, Jacqueline, and Elisabeth recalled colorful expatriates who visited them at "El Molino" in Erongarícuaro (fig. 8). It was a safe house, a point of pilgrimage, a navigational beacon for other artists seeking new worlds outside the map. Gordon talked about his work for environmental causes and the establishment of the Point Reyes National Seashore. One moment I might hear of Gordon and Elisabeth's canoeing on Lake Pátzcuaro at dusk to a Dia de los Muertos ceremony, he steering by the twinkling lights of the Indian village on a far shore. Next moment Elisabeth might remember browsing with Matta in the flea markets of Paris for old picture frames and *objets trouvés* (fig. 9). Sometimes as the three of them talked into the night, I would fall asleep in a corner of the fantastic driftwood couch made by composer friend Harry Partch.



FIGURE 10
Gordon and Elisabeth
in Gordon Onslow
Ford's studio,
Inverness, CA, 2001
Photograph by and
courtesy of Max Onslow
Ford Rouslin

When he was not guiding us through the woods, Gordon opened his studio, his inner sanctum, to Elisabeth and me to show us works in progress and talk about his vision. The studio was a great ark-like space, fragrant with pine and paint and wood smoke and filled with Gordon's energy and excitement (fig. 10). He unrolled canvas after canvas and opened his sketchbooks to illustrate his ideas. He occasionally demonstrated the dance-like brushstrokes of Chinese calligraphy or the creation of live line beings via Parle's paint carefully, yet spontaneously, flung from diner-issue ketchup squeeze bottles. Sometimes all was in basic black and white; sometimes there was an ever-expanding family of colors.

We knew that soon, Gordon would return to that studio to plunge back into his journey to the instant and the inner worlds. Between visits, he and Elisabeth would keep in frequent touch by letter, phone, and big manila envelopes full of excited sketches, plans, rough drafts, and the postcards of his latest works. Back in the drab ordinary world, I felt I had a secret that nobody else could understand.

Gordon was for me a figure much larger than life and a man of imposing dimensions. He was steeped in English tradition, an elegant and confident man of the world who could mix in the highest society. He took me to Brooks Brothers in San Francisco when I was a young man to "outfit" me with some essentials of a gentleman's wardrobe. That night he took me to a tiny restaurant

deep in Chinatown where he knew the owner, ordered by writing in Chinese calligraphy, and taught me how to use chopsticks. His tremendous discipline from the navy days enabled him to “work like a beaver” in his studio. He said to the very end that his work was just beginning to take form. He was comfortable as a solitary visionary explorer in a world few understood or shared. He was unimpressed and unintimidated by show and ego, and cared little for approval or notoriety. One of his fondest lifelong missions was to be the provider of a fertile ground for young developing visionary artists. He helped many. He believed that good art and good seeing could lift the world, and he loved the company of other unfettered creators. I was in total awe of him. I see now that one of my mother’s great gifts to me was to be able to see Gordon, the man, the teacher and the visionary through her loving eyes, and to be able to absorb some of his lessons.

Max Onslow Ford Rouslin



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Jonathan Stuhlman, Curator of American Art



This exhibition is dedicated to Elisabeth Onslow Ford Rouslin, who spent the final years of her life in Asheville, NC.



Elisabeth Onslow Ford Rouslin on the Blue Ridge Parkway, circa 2009
Photograph by Lynn Pace, courtesy of Max Onslow Ford Rouslin

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All works in the exhibition are from the collection of Max Onslow Ford Rouslin



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