

Gordon Onslow-Ford @ Weinstein

FEBRUARY 15, 2013



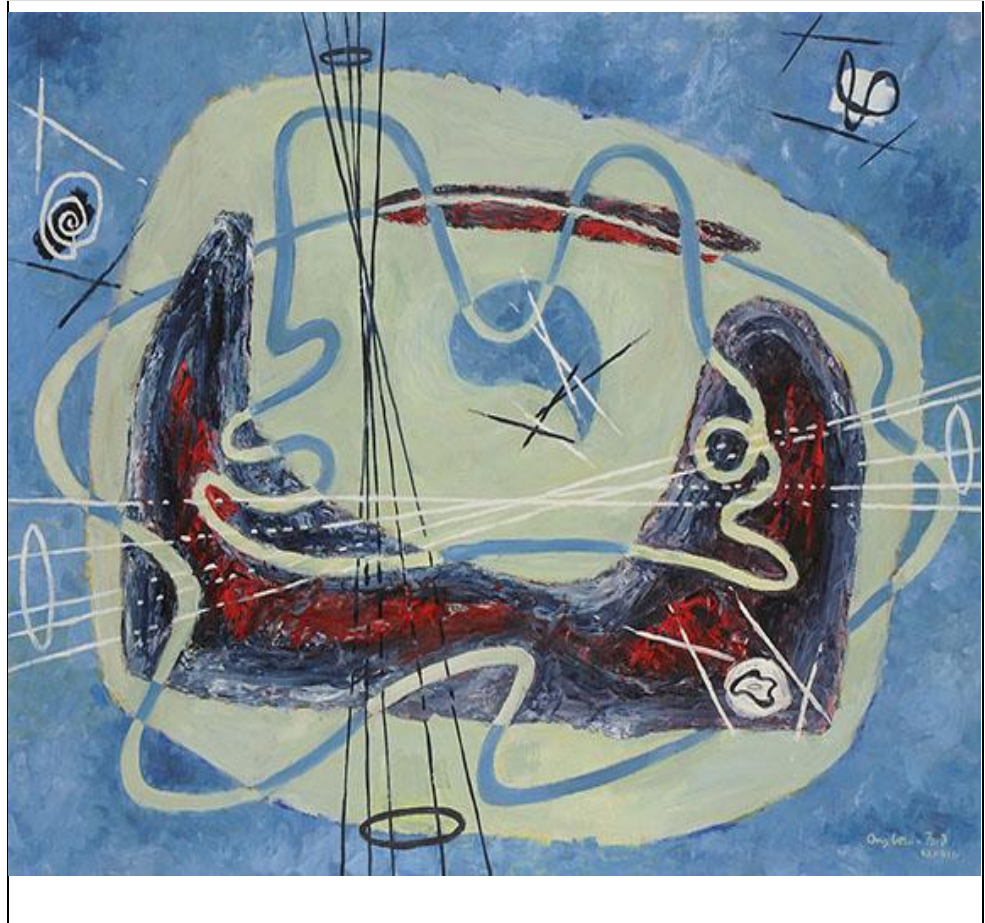
Time mountain, 1939, oil on canvas, 16 x 20"

Peggy Guggenheim was famous for many things, including mismatched earrings. Her taste for opposites also extended to her infatuations with surrealist automatism *ala* Joan Miró, and its more austere partner, geometric abstraction *ala* Mondrian. Together, they represent Ms. Guggenheim's "twin allegiances" to what she thought to be the most important movements in modern art, but also prompted the question of what a synthesis of the two might look like. Certainly, Jackson Pollock's pre-1944 work might serve as one answer to that

question, but there were many other notable artists barking up the same tree at the same time. One is Gordon Onslow-Ford (1912-2003), who is remembered as the youngest and most recently anointed "official" member of Andre Breton's surrealist group, and the only one who could speak English fluently. As such, he was invited to come to New York in 1940 to give several lectures about the movement at the New School of Social Research in 1941.

This proved to be a momentous invitation, as Onslow-Ford had been given special dispensation to stray from his wartime obligations as a British naval officer to give those lectures, absenting himself from a warship that would soon be sunk by a German submarine. Soon thereafter, he decamped for Mexico when New York buzzing with talk of war, became overcrowded with European emigrés and abstract expressionists. After spending five years in Oaxaca he arrived in San Francisco in 1947. The fact that Grace McCann Morley gave him a solo exhibition at the San Francisco Museum (not yet the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) little more than a year after his arrival is testament to the influence that a letter of introduction from Ms. Guggenheim could exert. And the title of that exhibition, *Toward a New Subject in Painting*, would speak volumes about Onslow-Ford's ambition to create works that could "transcend self-consciousness" and reveal a world of pure spirit.

It would serve as a guidepost for the many subsequent phases of Onslow-Ford's career, all of which took place in northern California, first in San Francisco, and then aboard an old ferryboat called the *Vallejo* that was docked in Sausalito, and finally, after 1957, in Inverness, where he lived and worked on a large forested estate that he purchased at that time. He lived and worked there until his death in 2003.



Peinture, 1938, oil on canvas 28 3/4 x 36 1/8"

Every phase of Onslow-Ford's career is represented in this superbly chosen retrospective, which is the most recent of four, but the first that encapsulates the artist's entire career. The earliest work is one of the very best, hailing from Onslow-Ford's long stay at a French chateau with Breton and other French Surrealists in 1939. Simply titled *Peinture*, it clearly speaks to all of the varied influences that Onslow-Ford absorbed around that time (including hints of Miró and Kandinsky, among others), but more importantly, it also foreshadows the many things that were to come forward amid the artist's seven-decade career. *Peinture* reveals a kind of pictorial space that was an imaginary hybrid of the graphic flatness of the picture plane mixed with a subtly suggested spatial articulation, which seems conjured from a magical dream space of the type that we might associate with the graphic expressions of the tribal cultures of Australia and New Zealand. It would be another 15 years before the British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott would theorize such imagery as being examples of what he called "potential space," a term that suggests that paintings such as those made by Onslow-Ford could be best understood as having a transitional significance that bridged ordinary consciousness and lucid

daydreaming. Almost all of Onslow-Ford's work up until 1948 explored the imaginative potential of that kind of space. It included some works that blend rigid schematic elements with more freely improvised biomorphic shapes (as seen in *Time Mountain* from the same year), and it is interesting to compare these early works with later abstract paintings made by the likes of Elizabeth Murray, Jay DeFeo and Frank Lobdell.



Composition, 1971, acrylic on paper on canvas, 80 x 59"

In 1951, Onslow-Ford again exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Art in an exhibition called *Dynaton*, the title of which was taken from the journal *Dyn* (Greek for "the possible"), edited by the Austrian painter Wolfgang Paalen whom he met in Mexico. Including work by Paalen, Lee Mullican and Onslow-Ford's wife Jacqueline Johnson, that early exhibition was one of the very first that had a catalog with color reproductions. It complicated the commonly held notion that Clyfford Still was the one who brought advanced abstract painting to San Francisco, although Still no doubt would have scoffed at the spiritual ambitions of the *Dynaton* artists. Another notable feature of Onslow-Ford's work from this period is the artist's use of oscillating bands of color to suggest the almost electrical energization of

a picture space configured as a complex circuit. A good example is *No Time* from 1950.

It is worth mentioning here that Onslow-Ford's decade on the *Vallejo* was a transformative period that was rich in social influences. He shared the floating studio with the surrealist collage artist Jean Varda, and visitors to the boat included the likes of Roberto Matta, Henry Miller and Alan Watts. Japanese calligraphy artists Sabro Hasegawa and Hodo Tobase came to the boat and taught Onslow-Ford the techniques of painting on mulberry paper with sumi ink, and this exerted an inestimable influence on the subsequent development of his work. Soon after the Dynaton period, we see Onslow-Ford's style moving toward a more confident and casual lyricism, and his paintings from this period abandoned oil on canvas in favor of casein on mulberry paper. The exhibition under consideration here has only a few works from the Dynaton period, but quite a few of the subsequent casein works such as *Wild Time* (1953), which show the artists seeking a balance between sheer spontaneity and disciplined focus. They also reveal the emergence of Onslow-Ford's belief that the essence of the visible world could be expressed through configurations of dots, circles and lines, creating a principle that would guide all of his subsequent work, even as it owed much to Wassily Kandinsky's similar postulation about points, lines and planes.



Untitled, 1980–82, acrylic on paper 17 x 76"

After 1948, Onslow-Ford slowly distanced himself from the surrealism of his early period, turning against Breton's attempt at linking Marxism and Freudianism in favor of a synthesis of Asian style, technique and philosophy mixed with a Jungian fascination with the archetypal forms that are the vivid features of tribal ritual.

Clearly, the governing fascination had something to do with making a connection between the deep pre-historical past and an imagined post-historical universalism that was free of the burden of a "history" that he might have thought to be a distracting fiction that masked the true profundity of artistic creativity.

Over time, Onslow-Ford pared his palate down to a smaller range of fewer and fewer colors, gradually favoring the use of white paint set against grey and black grounds. He also switched to acrylic paint, after going through a period of using a water-based material called Parle's pigment, which emphasized the penumbral luster of the artist's white ideograms hovering above black fields, galvanizing their allusion to the "white light" of spiritual

The works that Onslow-Ford created during the last decade of his life are stunning examples of the work of an artist who was able to sustain and advance his artistic vision at a point when most artists collapse into easy repetitions of well-worn formulas. Certainly, this is not to say that Onslow-Ford didn't succumb to the temptations of diluted over-production during that last decade; rather, in the case of this particular exhibition, the selection of examples is so judicious that the artist's late works shine forth as representing the best aspects of late career artistic maturity—every shape representing an optimal decision suffused in the lessons gained from long experience and deep reflection.

—MARK VAN PROYEN



Water World, 1956, casein on mulberry paper
on linen, 36 x 37"

Gordon Onslow Ford, "Centennial Celebration" @ [Weinstein Gallery](#), through February 23, 2013.

About the author:

Mark Van Proyen's visual work and written commentaries focus on satirizing the tragic consequences of blind faith placed in economies of narcissistic reward. Since 2003, he has been a corresponding editor for Art in America. His recent publications include: Facing Innocence: The art of Gottfried Helnwein (2011) and Cirian Logic and

the Painting of Preconstruction (2010). He is the coordinator of the annual Art Criticism Conference at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Originally published at: <https://www.squarecylinder.com/2013/02/gordon-onslow-ford-weinstein/>