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on the farce
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BOOKS & ARTS

Julie Myerson admires the agonised self-scrutiny of the mother of a Columbine killer

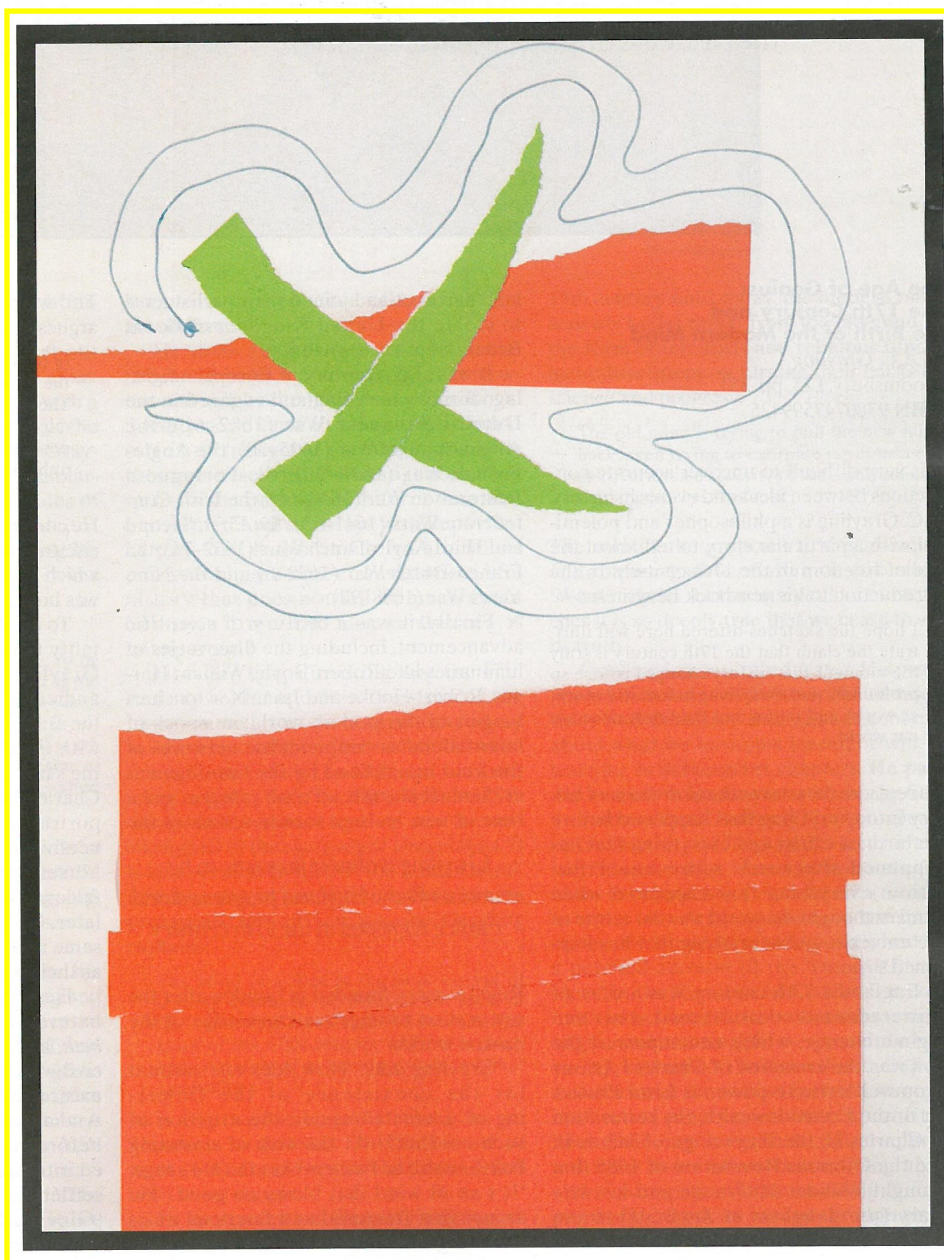
Craig Raine finds T.S. Eliot in the early Thirties exhausted by lecturing and a mad wife

Ian Thomson follows the legend of the Green Man from the Roman god Sylvanus to Romanesque ceiling bosses

James Walton applauds Julian Fellowes's new costume drama for being so undemanding

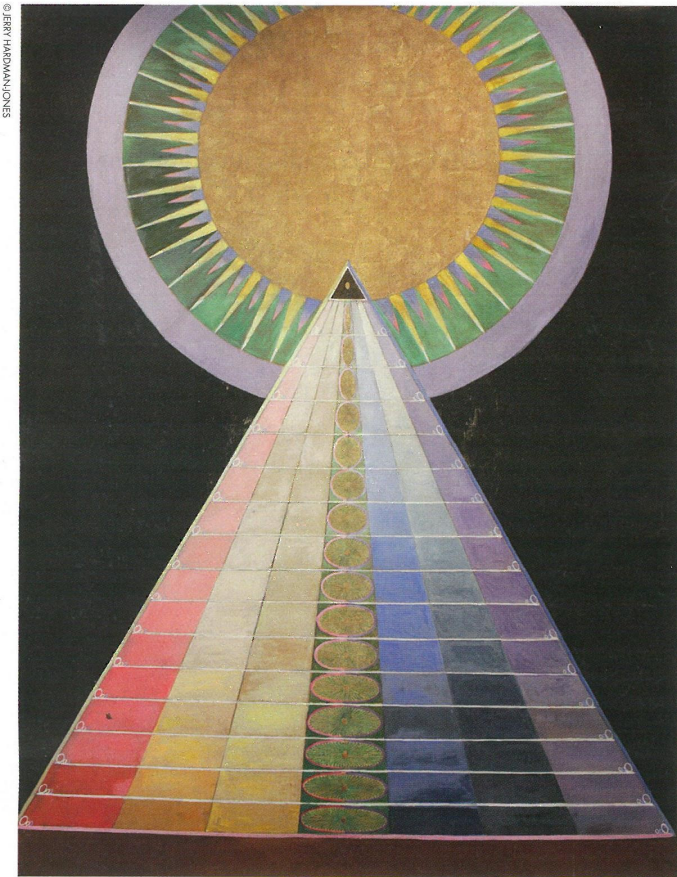
Deborah Ross can't remember any puppets in Wallace and Gromit going down on each other as they do in *Anomalisa*

Lloyd Evans is surprised to find that Charles de Gaulle wasn't a slab of garlic-scented arrogance with the face of a parrot-fish



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*'Collage 1 1968', 1968, by Barry Flanagan
Martin Gayford — p44*



'Altarpiece, No. 1, Group X, Altarpieces', 1907, by Hilma af Klint

Exhibitions

Paranormal activity

Martin Gayford

Hilma af Klint: Painting the Unseen
Serpentine Gallery, until 15 May

Das Institut
Serpentine Sackler Gallery, until 15 May

Barry Flanagan: Animal, Vegetable, Mineral
Waddington Custot Galleries, until 14 May

Chillida: Rhythm-Time-Silence
Ordovas, until 23 April

In 1896, a group of five young Swedish women artists began to meet regularly in order to access mystical zones beyond the confines of mundane everyday reality. Every Friday, they would gather in order to contact the incorporeal beings they called 'spirit world leaders' or 'High Masters'; among these were five named Ananda, Clemens, Esther, Gregor and

Amaliel. In 1904, during a séance, Amaliel instructed one of the artists, Hilma af Klint, to make paintings 'on the astral plane' representing the 'immortal aspects of man'.

Many of the results of this occult commission are on display in *Painting the Unseen*, a new exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery. As you might expect, they are distinctly weird: an eclectic mélange of geometric shapes, flower and fruit forms, squiggles, diagrams of nothing very specific, shells, numbers and letters, often executed in a slightly dingy pastel palette. By 1908, af Klint (1862–1944) had produced more than a hundred — some over three metres high — and she painted another 82 between 1912 and 1915.

She stipulated in her will that these pictures should not be seen for two decades after her death. In the event, it took even longer: none was exhibited until the 1980s. Since then, art world interest has grown in af Klint, or, more precisely, in these works 'commissioned' by Amaliel and apparently at his astral direction. No one has ever been much excited by the more conventional landscapes and portraits by which she made her living. These 'Paintings for the Temple',

as she termed them, have been claimed as the first European abstractions, predating by several years any such works by Kandinsky, Malevich or Mondrian. The official birth of abstract art is usually dated to 1910.

This raises two questions. Are af Klint's paintings truly abstract? And, more importantly, are they any good? They certainly have an early modernist look, with sharp outlines and flat areas of colour. Indeed some don't even appear to be that early; one or two concentric dartboard-like images could have come from New York, circa 1960. Others, however, contain awkward but unmistakable depictions of birds, dogs and naked people.

Af Klint herself doesn't seem to have had any intention of being avant-garde, or indeed any conscious purpose at all. By her account, these pictures were made 'through her', without 'any preliminary drawings and with great force'. She had no idea what they were supposed to represent, though she spent a lot of time subsequently trying to work it out.

On the other hand, the slightly later works by Kandinsky usually credited as the first abstractions are also full of real objects (most are lightly disguised landscapes). It is also true

Judged as paintings, these mystic images just aren't very good

that the beliefs of Mondrian, Kandinsky and Malevich were only a degree or two less loopy than those of af Klint and her four friends. Around 1900, spiritualism, the mishmash of esoteric doctrines known as theosophy and excursions into what Conan Doyle called 'the land of mists' were all part of the zeitgeist.

The crucial point is that judged as paintings, these mystic images just aren't very good. The brushwork is boring, the drawing a bit slack, the colour harmonies lacking in zing. In comparison, a good Kandinsky is a hugely impressive sight. Being first, chronologically, is perhaps overrated; it's being better that counts. Af Klint's mystic pictures were worth exhibiting, and indeed deserve a look, but they are a minor footnote rather than a major rediscovery.

Nearby in Kensington Gardens, at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, there are works by two German artists, Kerstin Brätsch and Adele Röder, who exhibit together under the collective name Das Institut. Between them, Brätsch and Röder use a variety of media, including painting, neon and stained glass. The unique feature of the show is the way they display their works, sometimes actually piled on top of each other in open crates. Individually, the most striking pieces are Röder's neon drawings of body parts, such as the outlines of two breasts that the visitor encounters at the start. But the various ingredients are less novel than the way they are jumbled together. Overall, there is an air of cheerful, chaotic muddle.

Over at the Waddington Custot Galler-

ies on Cork Street, there is a fine exhibition of early works by Barry Flanagan (1941–2009), a sculptor whose later output consisted largely of bronze hares. Earlier, however, his work was both varied and audacious, as is demonstrated by the pieces on show, which date from 1964 to 1983.

The young Flanagan seemed preoccupied with an unusual range of qualities, including lightness, thinness and floppiness. Even when in 1964 he made an early work in his teacher Anthony Caro's trademark medium of painted steel, it protruded a wavering rod like the tendril of a vine. Later pieces are made out of cloth, or sheet metal torn and folded as casually as paper. A bronze from 1980 turns and twists like a piece of apple peel. Three beautiful photographs of long grass from 1967 reveal this everyday sight to be as complex and dramatic as a storm at sea. Everywhere you find a unique sensibility at work.

A few minutes' walk away at Ordovas, 25 Savile Row, there is an intriguing sculptural contrast in the form of three massive works by the Spanish sculptor Eduardo Chillida. Chillida (1924–2002) was an exact contemporary of Caro's and some of his work belongs to an abstract idiom that might be dubbed heavy metal (a Chillida show at the Hayward a quarter of a century ago was actually publicised as the weightiest ever shown in London). The three works on show at Ordovas — two steel, one stone — certainly have a massive presence. But there is a feeling of growth about them too; one looming, rust-coloured piece extends curved members into the air like the branches of a tree. This little exhibition makes Chillida's work, still not well-known in Britain, seem formidable.

Opera Round-up of new opera *Igor Toronyi-Lalic*

A mixed year so far for new opera. A few really dismal things have appeared from people who should know better. Did the world really need an operatic treatment of Dante's *Divine Comedy* for orchestra and chorus? Louis Andriessen thought so; his *La Commedia* (2004–8) luckily only reared its drab head for one night at the Barbican. If you're going to splurge as much money as opera often has to splurge, you have to ask yourself why. If you don't, you create a situation in which operas come about merely because they can, often just to continue the tradition in the most inoffensive way possible.

'Don't mind me!' says this kind of zombie opera. 'I'm just trying to be as comfortably familiar as I can be without it being too obvious that I'm bereft of ambition, originality or life.' Joining the living dead is a



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Naked ambition: Anthony Roth Costanzo in Philip Glass's 'Akhnaten'

strange aim for an artist. But it seems to be the aim nonetheless of several composers, including Stuart MacRae.

His opera *The Devil Inside* (2016) alights on a moral conundrum you might have come across before — perhaps in a school play. Two scruffy Scots chance upon an imp in a bottle who will grant them anything they desire. 'Fame and fortune, please.' Cut to a New York apartment and the scruffs are now suited and booted and flashing the cash. The imp's not done, though; there are terms and conditions — the kind that could sustain a whole series of *Money Box*. Prosperity comes, but at a price.

Leaving aside gripes with the moral thrust (why exactly is it so dreadful to want money and success, and why — beyond bitterness — does art always feel the need to wag its finger at such striving?), we barely left am-dram in terms of narrative sophistication. The music was plausible. Music Theatre Wales's staging harmless. Awards usually await this sort of milky pap.

At least MacRae wasn't pretending to do anything new. *Book of Disquiet's* (2009) claim to originality — a 'cutting-edge integration of music, live action and video' — made it harder to forgive. The video included a woman in a red dress singing alongside a bull in a field. The 'live action' involved Samuel West as an author, furiously writing away in every position imaginable (standing, sitting, leaning, lying) until he was out of breath. (Exactly how writing works, Sam, spot on.) Michel van der Aa's music, meanwhile, felt as though it had been faxed in from 1991.

What's the opposite of a Gesamtkunstwerk? A total non-work of art? It comes

close to this. Far better to be uninteresting in one medium than four simultaneously.

So thank god for Philip Glass. I didn't think I'd ever say that. But *Akhnaten*, his 32-year-old opera about ancient Egypt, is minty fresh, the sense of otherworldliness palpable (helped by the text being mostly sung in Egyptian). At the same time the work taps into the oldest of operatic tradi-

*I didn't ever think I'd say this but
thank god for Philip Glass*

tions. Ritual is its motor, as it is in so many operas. What makes it so much more enjoyable than Glass's previous ritualistic epic, *Satyagraha*, is its lack of didacticism.

Ritual is also all that's readily available to us of the ancient Egyptians. Fat chance of us resurrecting their interior lives. But we can at least attempt to reimagine the political ur-events hinted at in the hieroglyphs. One of the most intriguing is the reign of Akhnaten, who is thought to have invented monotheism.

Elegantly, mesmerically, we journey through the fundamentals of state formation, from the ceremonial robing of Akhnaten (Anthony Roth Costanzo — clearly chosen less for his voice and more for his willingness to sing in the buff) to the establishment of a body politic to dethronement and the flight into myth.

Phelim McDermott is not quite as good a director as ENO clearly thinks he is. There needs to be 75 per cent less juggling for a start. But his production isn't bad. And there are some ravishing moments when the stage clears, mostly filched from Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*. In fact I wish McDer-