

Roberto Matta: Earths

By Mathilde Gubanski



ROBERTO MATTA
Untitled, 1954
Mixed media on canvas
139,5 x 184 cm / 54.92 x 72.44 in.

Roberto Matta (1911-2002), a tireless traveller who was born in Chile, quickly became a quintessential international artist. A fluent speaker of four languages, endowed with enormous charisma, this major painter had a profound influence on his contemporaries. His travels and friendships nourished his artistic practice and his political conscience. Matta's art was committed: he translated the troubles and preoccupations of the 20th century. His son Ramuntcho has wondered: "What is an artist? An artist is someone who displaces himself or herself to see reality better."

The American period: years of research

In the USA during the 1940s, Matta who was fascinated by scientific journals, was particularly interested in theories on the "fourth dimension". He explored this subject in this artwork from 1954, bringing together in the same painting an aerial view, a "material" view with a representation of a monkey and a mathematical view

with an arrow. All possible views are thus represented in the material of the artwork. Matta wants to create spaces beyond the visible, outside the conventional perspective. Régis Debray said: "With this desire to regain the energy of the world, this point where matter and energy are the same... Matta was always upset when he was called a painter because he wanted to be an alchemist or an astrophysicist."

The painter Gordon Onslow Ford (1912-2003) spoke to Matta about the research of Peter D. Ouspensky (1878-1947), a Russian philosopher and theorist of the "fourth dimension". The fourth dimension is the feeling of space, movement and time. It is essential to the process of change in the world, where every new moment is different from the previous one. Ouspensky, in his book *Tertium Organum* (1912), states that the artist must assume the role "of guide and visionary", and "must have the gift of opening the eyes of others to what they cannot see for themselves".

The illustrations in this book influenced Matta who take them away to describe in his turn invisible structures. Matta said "I'm not an artist. I am someone who is trying to build images that will help us realize the essence of the verb 'to see'."

Earth as the medium: Matta and the Cobra movement

Matta used earth as a medium for the first time in 1954 in Albisola in Italy where gatherings around ceramics were organized by the artist Asger Jorn (1914-1973), in the studio of Giuseppe Mazzotti (1907–1981) with the artists Enrico Baj (1924-2003), Corneille (1922-2010), and Sergio Dangelo (1932), and also the poet Édouard Jaguer (1924-2006).

From ceramics, earth was then used in painting, integrated directly as a raw material. These encounters thus allowed Matta to work with artists of the Cobra movement.

The first Earth paintings: Panarea

Matta created his first Earth paintings in Italy, in his house at Panarea where he moved in 1957. The Italian philosopher Italo Calvino (1923-1985) wrote about these works: “a happy season of work in Italy and the encounter with a material rich in elementary suggestiveness, a reddish earth from the Roman countryside: all this is the source of these almost monochromatic paintings, where frescoes between the prehistorical, the totemic and the science-fiction agitate as if they were guided by the sound of a subterranean saxophone.”

The gorgeous artwork from 1954 shown at the gallery is one of these Italian Earths. The rough material is mixed with glues and applied to hessian. The use of these modest materials is doubtless influenced by Arte Povera artists.

In 1936, Matta discovered the work of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) especially *Le Grand Verre*. Mechanics in the manner of Duchamp made him realise that it “was possible to paint the process of change”. His search for a form that was constantly evolving comes from this revelation. This idea is applied to earth, a poor and rough material, it is transformed into pigment and reaches the status of a work of art.

The Earth paintings: Historical Morphologies

With his Earths, Matta wanted to depict a morphology of humanity in relation to itself, others and the world: he referred to *Historical Morphology*. The Earths are in fact primarily connected to the places where they were created. Matta therefore expresses in these works the preoccupations of his time.



Roberto Matta, Malitte Pope-Matta, Asger Jorn and Corneille, Albisola, 1954



Roberto Matta and Malitte Pope-Matta, Panarea, ca. 1957



GORDON ONSLOW-FORD
Untitled, 1963
Acrylic on canvas
131 x 118 cm.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington



ROBERTO MATTA
Untitled, 1954
Mixed media on canvas
139,5 x 184 cm / 54.92 x 72.44 in.

From the *Psychological Morphologies* to the *Historical Morphologies*: the Earth holds in itself its space and time, applied onto a rough canvas it thus becomes the privileged language of engagement.

Following on from the *Psychological Morphologies*, the Earths are graphical representations of the fluxes that circulated between humanity and the world to become *Historical Morphologies*.