

For Immediate Release
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IMCA Announces Fall 2021 Exhibition
The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting

On view September 11, 2021—January 15, 2022



Agnes Pelton, *San Geronio in Spring*, 1932.

Irvine, CA... The [Institute and Museum of California Art \(IMCA\)](#) at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) today announced its fall exhibition, *The Resonant Surface: Movement, Image, and Sound in California Painting* on view September 11, 2021 through January 15, 2022 at IMCA's interim museum location at 18881 Von Karman Avenue. Featuring 24 paintings and two films spanning the early to mid-20th century, the exhibition invites viewers to experience the works beyond the immediacy of visual perception to discover musical landscapes, rhythmic abstractions, and sound and color experiments. The exhibition and related programs are free and open to the public.

The Resonant Surface considers these kinds of perceptual investigations from both the artists' and viewers' perspectives. Integrating works from IMCA's The Irvine Museum and The Buck collections, Erin Stout, PhD, IMCA curatorial and research associate, organized the exhibition in four central themes with prompts to reveal connections and comparisons:

- *Correspondences* – Is it possible to see sound or hear color?
- *Rhythm and Abstraction* – How do line, shape, and color activate physical sensations of movement, sound, and touch?
- *Dynamism and Flux* – What role does the imagination play in one's perception of the world?
- *Visual Music* – Can a painted surface convey acoustical elements and movement?

Stout said, "*The Resonant Surface* traces links across time, space, images, objects, and sensations—presenting the artworks as connective tissues for engaging with, and understanding, the world. It suggests that they can be experienced as interconnected surfaces that 'resonate' within and beyond the spaces they occupy, the times in which they were created, and the artists' intentions."

Correspondences

In this section, 11 paintings and a film by 10 artists explore interdisciplinary correlations between sound and vision or music and painting. The artworks convey a mood, emotional quality, or spiritual undertone—traits commonly associated with music. Tonalists like John Bond Francisco, Amédée Joullin, Xavier Martinez, Arthur F. Mathews, Gottardo Piazzoni, and Calthea Vivian used subtle compositions of color and blurred forms in landscape paintings to create atmosphere, both literally and metaphorically. In *Scrub Oak in a Canyon* (c. 1910), Francisco—who was also an accomplished musician—depicts a stormy landscape evoking a natural soundscape with dark clouds suggesting thunder and vegetation rendered to hint at rustling wind.



John Bond Francisco, *Scrub Oak in a Canyon*, possibly circa 1910.

Visualizing expressive content through analogy or metaphor led artists of the period to consider how to paint all kinds of unseen phenomena. Some California painters were influenced by Theosophy, an esoteric belief that artists were highly sensitive to colors, shapes, and sounds imperceptible to others. Maurice Braun, Agnes Pelton, and Frederick John Schwankovsky integrated the theory into their practices. Pelton's *San Geronio in Spring* (1932) conveys a metaphysical dimension through her distinctive use of color, light, and depth.

Rhythm and Abstraction



William Henry Clapp, *Country Road*, 1943.

Grounded in scientific theories on how colors interact optically, techniques like Pointillism, the use of individual dots of pure paint to form an image, and Divisionism, which uses dashes of paint, rely on the viewer's eye and mind to blend colors to see forms. Long after falling out of fashion in Europe in the late 19th century, California painters continued to experiment with these techniques. Both William Henry Clapp and William A. Gaw used staccato brushstrokes and dots of pure pigment to construct rhythmic landscapes. When viewed at close range, Clapp's *Country Road* (1943) dissolves from representation into abstraction. The same interactive, perceptual elements are present in *plein air* compositions by John M. Gamble and Alfred R. Mitchell for the same mid-20th century period.

Dynamism and Flux

In 1942, Knud Merrild began creating what he called "flux paintings" prefiguring Jackson Pollock's drip paintings and Helen Frankenthaler's color field paintings a few years later. Drizzling house paint onto a fluid surface and then tilting it to let colors interact and combine by both the artist's hand and gravity, he generated spontaneous imagery. Merrild's "automatic" or improvisational method signaled a wider tendency of modern California artists to embrace forces outside their control—like gravity—to produce unique results.

The Dynaton—Wolfgang Paalen, Gordon Onslow Ford, and Lee Mullican—showed their work together in the late 1940s in San Francisco, taking their name for the Greek word for “the possible.” The group’s objective was to visualize alternative realities by using improvisation to help liberate their imaginations. Ford’s interest in the natural world, the cosmos, and the spontaneous gesture is evident in *Constellations and Grasses* (1957); the combination of these elements results in a dynamic composition that seems to vibrate with energy that expands outward from the surface.



Gordon Onslow Ford, *Constellations and Grasses*, 1957.

Visual Music

In the first half of the 20th century, some painters such as Oskar Fischinger began emulating musical structures in their work, hoping to evoke sensations in the same way music does: by directly acting on the senses rather than merely suggesting them with imagery. Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell were founders of the Synchronist movement that held that the sensations of time and motion could be conveyed using systematic color arrangements. They used musical metaphor to illustrate their philosophy. Just as a symphony was made up of sounds, their paintings were composed with color for aural/visual effects.

A roster of public programs is planned, and details will be released as they are confirmed. Visit imca.uci.edu for more information.

About the UCI Institute and Museum of California Art

UCI’s Institute and Museum of California Art (IMCA) is home to two foundational collections of California art—The Irvine Museum Collection, comprising more than 1,300 California Impressionist and *plein air* paintings, and The Buck Collection, including 3,000-plus works of California modern and post-war contemporary art. The university is planning to construct a permanent museum and research institute to serve as a global magnet for the exhibition and study of California art within its social, historical, environmental, and cultural frameworks. Open to the public Tuesday through Saturday 10 am – 4 pm, IMCA is located in an interim museum space at 18881 Von Karman Avenue, Suite 100, and admission is free. For more information, visit imca.uci.edu.

About the University of California, Irvine

Founded in 1965, UCI is the youngest member of the prestigious Association of American Universities. The campus has produced three Nobel laureates and is known for its academic achievement, premier research, innovation, and anteater mascot. Led by Chancellor Howard Gillman, UCI has more than 36,000 students and offers 222 degree programs. It is located in one of the world’s safest and most economically vibrant communities and is Orange County’s second-largest employer, contributing \$5 billion annually to the local economy. For more on UCI, visit www.uci.edu.

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Image captions

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Agnes Pelton, *San Geronio in Spring*, 1932.

Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in.

The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art.

Page 2, top

John Bond Francisco, *Scrub Oak in a Canyon*, possibly circa 1910.

Oil on canvas, 26 x 34 in.

The Irvine Museum Collection at the University of California, Irvine.

Page 2, bottom

William Henry Clapp, *Country Road*, 1943.

Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in.

The Irvine Museum Collection at the University of California, Irvine.

Page 3

Gordon Onslow Ford, *Constellations and Grasses*, 1957.

Casein on mulberry paper, 38 x 56 in.

The Buck Collection at UCI Institute and Museum of California Art, © Courtesy of the Lucid Art Foundation.