

Review of
Double Solitaire: The Surreal Worlds of Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy
Stephen Robeson Miller, Jonathan Stuhlman
Nancy Wallach, ed.
Katonah Museum of Art and Mint Museum of Art, 2011, 104 pp.



Kay Sage: The Biographical Chronology and Four Surrealist One Act
Plays
Stephen Robeson Miller, Kay Sage
The Gallery of Surrealism, 2011, 112 pp.

Larry List
New York

Anyone with an interest in Surrealism will immediately want to add these two books to their library. Both volumes were published on the occasion of the 2011 – 2012 exhibition “Double Solitaire: The Surreal Worlds of Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy” curated by scholars Stephen Robeson Miller and Jonathan Stuhlman for the Katonah Museum of Art and the Mint Museum of Art.

The exhibition and first book derive their title from a 1954 article “Double Solitaire” written by the artists’ friend, Museum of Modern Art curator James Thrall Soby. To describe the only joint exhibition of Sage and Tanguy paintings during their lifetimes, Soby used as his metaphor a form of solitaire that two people played “on the same table, but kept separate scores.”¹ Indeed, the Wadsworth Atheneum exhibited the artist couple’s works, as requested, in separate galleries. Sage and Tanguy were married for 15 years, lived together in the same house, and worked for 10 of those years in adjoining studios, yet, their friend Soby was compelled to stress that “their pictures make very individual points. Their differences of vision and technique have never been more apparent...”²

Long and meticulous in its research and development, this exhibition and book display and discuss the work of this singular Surrealist couple side by side

Larry List: larrylist1@verizon.net

Copyright © 2013 (Larry List). Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. Available at <http://jsa.asu.edu/>

for the first time, ever. Just as synergies are revealed between the two artists, this book and exhibition benefit greatly from the complimentary analyses offered by the two author-curators and the unflagging interest and support of the two museums which recognized the value of this project and made a commitment to host it. (The exhibition also subsequently traveled to the Davis Museum at Wellesley College in Massachusetts). The book offers a rich section of full page color plates accompanied by succinct comments. The only element that could have been added would be the dimensions of the paintings in the captions of the plates, since the works range greatly in size. This project does prove the maxim that if one can thoroughly know the artists' lives, one can much better appreciate the artists' work.

In Stephen Robeson Miller's essay "The Intersection of Art and Fate in the Lives of Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy," the author traces the biographical path that led the young, well-to-do American Kay Sage via an Italian prince, Ezra Pound, and the sculptor Heinz Henges, to Surrealism and ultimately, to Yves Tanguy. Miller details just how fate and coincidence did abound, socially and creatively, in the artists' shared lives in more than a dozen significant ways, from Sage's encounter with Tanguy's painting *I Am Waiting for You*, which she felt portended their future relationship, to events during their last days together and their legacies beyond.

While Miller's essay offers examples of *shared* sources of inspiration and of influence flowing *both* ways between Sage and Tanguy, Jonathan Stuhlman makes a convincing case for Sage's influence on the more widely celebrated Tanguy. In his essay "Double Solitaire: Kay Sage's Influence on Yves Tanguy," Stuhlman offers specific comparative examples of how Tanguy's style evolved in terms of the structure of his forms, his sense of composition, and his use of color once in America and sequestered with Sage in the privileged solitude of what Tanguy described as the "isolated island"³ of a rural Connecticut farmhouse they shared.

Max Ernst once stated his belief that "art is not produced by one artist, but by several. It is to a degree a product of their exchange of ideas one with another."⁴ This exhibition and book by Stephen Robeson Miller and Jonathan Stuhlman lucidly demonstrate how much even two artists' ongoing relationship and exchange of ideas can cause their work to grow.

The Gallery of Surrealism, New York, is to be thanked for publishing the companion volume, *Kay Sage: The Biographical Chronology and Four Surrealist One Act Plays*, that had been carefully compiled by Stephen Robeson Miller over the course of many years. Though previously unacknowledged, Miller had made this chronology accessible as early as 1983 via microfilm at the Archives of American Art (microfilm reel number 2886), along with his valuable illustrated catalogue raisonné of Sage's

work on microfilm (reel nos. 2887-2888). Offered in an affordable limited edition of 1000 copies, at last this chronology information can be had in book form, complete with the titles of each Sage painting produced listed at the end of each year's entries.

Miller provides a detailed and revealing biography of Sage – replete with photos taken from personal albums owned by Sage and Tanguy, the Seligmanns, Max Ernst and Alexander Calder. Miller even includes the duo's marriage license! Here we learn revelatory collateral information such as the fact that as a beneficiary of Sage Land and Improvement Company, a family business that had huge holdings of timberland in the northwest, Sage was independently very wealthy even before she married Italian Prince Ranieri di San Faustino in 1925.

As World War Two broke out, Sage is shown to have been immensely generous with her time and her family connections to the Secretary of Labor and Immigration to save many artists and intellectuals from the horrors of the war and then quietly using her own funds to set them up in secure new lives in New York. Miller astutely observes both here and in the text above, that, had the war and fate not driven so many influential Surrealists from Europe to New York (thanks to Sage's help) the New York School may never have developed as vibrantly as it did.

Sage's means also enabled her and Tanguy to focus solely on their own work. Free of financial worries for the rest of their lives, they were each able to develop further and to complete more works in their years together than would have otherwise been possible – a huge asset to both them and to posterity.

The four heretofore unpublished one act plays; “Château de Chémillieu” (1939), “Cote d'Azur” and “Failure to Discover” (both 1956), and “Jean Dibdou” (1960), give us insights over time into Sage's vision and temperament through her words, instead of her pictures. They remind us too, that Sage, and the Surrealists in general, readily used poetry, drama and the written word in all its permutations as means of expression. Description and commentary on my part, however, cannot substitute for the experience of reading these plays.

A Postscript

The downside of being wealthy was the prospect of not being taken seriously. Kay Sage sought to avoid this prospect through a lifetime of discretion and hard work. She painted and exhibited; she wanted and got good reviews of her work. She earned the respect of her fellow Surrealists and the small, elite circle of people who mattered to her. Not driven to paint-to-sell-to-pay-the-rent however, she did not over-produce, nor ever repeat herself. She also sacrificed years of her creative time during the war and thereafter assuring the welfare of others in the arts community. Hence there are only about 220 Kay Sage works in total, a far smaller

body of works than there might otherwise be. Furthermore, during her lifetime, and later, as a condition of her will, she donated most of her works directly to museums. This left no residual cache of additional works large enough to offer commercial gallery dealers incentive to continue to promote Sage to subsequent generations of the public and exhibit her work for lucrative re-sale.

Absent a large body of available/salable work and a commercial incentive, Stephen Robeson Miller's many years of independent scholarship has been central to accruing a critical mass of knowledge about Sage's life and work, which had otherwise been treated in piecemeal fashion and, at times, bent to fit others' agendas. Miller has been joined in recent years by Jonathan Stuhlman, and, together, they have produced a book of record which celebrates Yves Tanguy anew and elevates his American Surrealist partner Kay Sage to a more appropriate level of respect and recognition for her significant accomplishments as a painter and her unflagging support of her fellow artists.



1 James Thrall Soby, "Double Solitaire," *Saturday Review* (1 September, 1954): 29 – 30.

2 Ibid.

3 Yves Tanguy to Jacques Hérold, 9 July, 1946, cited in Dominique Bozo, et al., *Yves Tanguy* (exhibition catalogue, Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1982), 222 (Jonathan Stuhlman translation).

4 James Johnson Sweeney, "Eleven Europeans in America," *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 13, nos. 4 -5 (February 1946): 16–17.