Max Ernst (German, 1891 - 1976)
*L’oeil du silence (The Eye of Silence)*, 1943-44
Oil on canvas, 43 1/4 x 56 1/4 "
University purchase, Kende Sale Fund, 1946

Max Ernst’s otherworldly landscape *The Eye of Silence* depicts what may be described as an artificial hell.

Considering the many artificial paradises produced by artists over the last two hundred years in order to compensate for the modern experience of loss of nature, Ernst certainly adds to this trajectory a dichotomous position. The painting does not render a refined or composed expression of a natural site, but collages together elements that have their origin in fantastic and exotic garden architectures, as exemplified by the columns in the background, in grottoes populated with stalactites and stalagmites that surround and are reflected in the central lake, and in the surreal, circular forms resembling eyes that animate the geological forms. The fairy tale woman who lounges on the rock formation in the lower right-hand corner further transforms the landscape into an uncanny and imaginary space. Underscoring these haunting, even terrifying affects is Ernst’s choice of colors, which includes a wide range of earth tones but is dominated by an eerie green that evokes both beauty and ghostly worlds. However, the dark cloud formation above the grotto scene is moving on, as if to leave the scene, making place for a brighter, more expectant sky in which an optimistic and peaceful blue breaks through white clouds in the distance.

Ernst painted *The Eye of Silence* while in exile in the United States and traveling with his then-wife Peggy Guggenheim through the American West; through a small opening between the rock formations on the left side of the canvas we glimpse what could be the seemingly endless and wide open landscape of the American West. Yet Ernst’s reception
in the U.S. as an exile and famous Surrealist artist from Nazi Germany is not what one would call a success.[1] Although he was an undeniable presence in the New York art world during his first year of exile in 1941, in the following years he was largely absent from exhibitions and other cultural activities. Ernst himself described his exilic experience as one marked by isolation and estrangement.[2] Given these alienating circumstances, it is not surprising that Ernst, similar to fellow Surrealist exiles such as André Masson, Yves Tanguy, and Matta Echaurren, took up the genre of landscape painting rather than engaging with American modernization and the manifold sensuous and sensational experiences of its bustling urbanity.

In distinction to his colleagues, however, Ernst inflected his landscapes with conventions of German Romanticism. *The Eye of Silence*, for example, evokes the work of German painter and philosopher Carl Gustav Carus and his so-called earth-life paintings, such as *Fingal’s Cave* (after 1844) depicting an underground grotto.[3] Instead of imitating or improving upon nature, Carus was interested in exploring nature itself. Coinciding with the importance of speculative physics, the sciences in general, and the newly established interrelation between science, art, and nature in the nineteenth century, Carus was interested in comprehending nature as a geological formation, as a living organism that is instable, continuously changing and constantly in motion.[4] In short, Carus attempted to “learn to speak the language of nature” in order to visualize an unmediated state of nature that prefigures any and all enlightened conceptions of landscape.[5] This ambition was coupled with a notion of the artist as an autonomous shaper of invisible, divine, or better natural worlds.

But how, we have to ask, does Ernst utilize and transform Carus’s concept of earth-life painting under the condition of exile in the new world? Is Ernst, in line with Carus, invested in reaching back to a status of natural history that predates and prefigures the devastations enabled by rational order, including the destruction of the European continent by the Nazi regime?

Similar to Carus, Ernst depicted a combination of nature’s forms: those that we can see, such as the pool of water and the sky, and those that lie behind and below the surface, such as stalactites and stalagmites.[6] Yet Ernst moved these nether formations above
ground, from the inside of caves to the exterior, under a foreboding sky, where their visual quality is one of movement and transformation. In contrast to the water and sky, which we can fix with our eyes, the instable and fragmented structures seem to be undergoing a visual metamorphosis into shapes that resemble human figures, animals, architectural elements, and natural forms alike. To underscore this perceptual experience of change, instability, and hybridity, Ernst experimented with the technique of décalcomania. Replacing the usual modernist and individualistic artistic mark-making, décalcomania, by contrast, relies on chance and pre-existing visual forms. Developed together with Hans Bellmer in the concentration camp of Les Milles in the South of France in 1938/39, décalcomania encompasses the process of pressing thin paint with the help of an object, such as a flat piece of cardboard, onto the canvas.[7] The uneven amounts of paint generate shapes that bear a resemblance to stalactites and stalagmites. Yet, in paintings such as *The Eye of Silence*, Ernst also imitated the results of décalcomania through painterly means.

*The Eye of Silence* is thus comprised of chance forms, naturalistically rendered geological structures and landscape elements, and fantastic, surreal shapes, all of which are arrested within a loosely conceived perspectival order in which background elements push into the foreground, toward the picture plane, while others recess spatially. Through the technique of décalcomania, Ernst consciously indicated the removal of artistic subjectivity and creative ambitions from the painting, contesting the treasured analogy between the natural and artistic expression.[8] Moreover, the artist collaged together different landscapes in fragments not usually experienced together. By bringing ulterior elements of nature to the surface—depicted as undergoing metamorphosis and resembling surrealist and fantastic forms that are, however, as inanimate as the lifeless, silent eyes that populate the eerie scene—Ernst inverted the notion of nature as a living organism. It is in this sense that we may comprehend the ossified structures as metaphors of the destroyed Europe.

Since Ernst painted similar grottoesque landscapes in Europe, some of which he brought with him to the United States, we can read the painting as a combination of narrative threads from the past and present that also anticipate, even, a utopian future. To be sure,
both the painting’s title and the uncanny scene itself allude to a frozen moment, first and foremost bespeaking silence and death, and hence might be seen to refer to the European situation the artist had left behind. Nevertheless, other elements in the painting direct us to a possibly more humane present and future. Together with the figure of the woman, who indicates new beginnings,[9] we can read the small opening onto a vast and bright, albeit still blurry and unspecific, natural space as promising new life. And, although this landscape is one that remains at an auratic distance, it marks *The Eye of Silence* as a transitory image, including both decay and regeneration, that notably converts political history into metaphors of nature’s processes.

Despite this glimmer of optimism, it is important to recognize that with *The Eye of Silence* Ernst visualized the experience of exile and estrangement by turning nature into a lifeless space, as opposed to articulating a place of belonging where one can experience sensory pleasures and comfort—an unhomely and uncanny space.


2 Ibid., 156.


4 Ibid., 29.

5 Ibid., 30.

6 It is interesting to note that Thomas Demand recently remade an underground grotto in paper and cardboard which he, as usual, photographed afterwards.


Not only Ernst but also fellow Surrealist exile André Breton articulated the hope of a new world order led by women. For example, in 1945 he explained that “the time should come to assert the ideas of woman at the expense of those of man, the bankruptcy of which is today so tumultuously complete.” As cited in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology*, ed. Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 138.