

WALTER QUIRT  
*UNTITLED, 1951 (Surrealist Woman As Landscape)*

## **PROVENANCE**

Painted in 1951 and held by the artist for his personal collection.

Purchased by a private collector from the artist's wife, Eleanor Quirt, ca. 1968 (either prior to or shortly after the artist's passing.)

Consigned for sale by the private collector's estate upon his passing in 2020 to Frederick Holmes And Company, Seattle.

## **NOTES**

Three examples of this particular form of abstract surrealism are also found in the permanent public collections of the Massillon Museum of Art, Canton, OH; The Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA; and the Sioux City Art Centre, IA. - all having been painted during this same period of 1951-52. The painting owned by The Des Moines Art Center, "*An Animal Studying It's Tracks*", 1952 was featured in their December 2017 exhibition of Surrealism, "*The Irrational And The Marvelous*". All three were donated to these museums by New York investment advisor and arts patrons, Benjamin Weiss (1910-1992) and his wife, Irma (1919-2015).

At first glance, *Untitled (Abstract Surrealism)*, 1951 seems to draw some of its inspiration from the earlier work of Catalan, Joan Miro (1893-1983), but with the exception of Fernand Leger, (1881-1955) Quirt consistently denied any direct influence of the Europeans. "*It's not that I'd mind admitting to them either, if I thought it was true. It's just that I didn't know enough to find any influences in those days. What I did have was friends*"... (Abe Rather, Max Weber, Stuart Davis, Marsden Hartley, Joseph Stella) "*They did something better than influence me. They gave me a philosophy.*"

The painting instead bears a resemblance to Sumi drawing and calligraphy. Yet Quirt never studied Asian calligraphy of any type; what they have in common however is both draw influence from nature. Beginning in the early 1950s, Quirt became increasingly interested in the primacy of line in his paintings, as influenced by his natural surroundings, and often with little to no emphasis on color.

*"He revealed that the content of his paintings was the social tempo of the psychological change in America. He equated this tempo with the curvilinear direction and used the curve and counter curve in most of his canvases. He wrote that the curvilinear line was taken from nature, 'in particular from the separate branches of a pine tree to which I have devoted much study. It is a dissonant and erratic curve that I find in Nature, and it conveys feeling and natural warmth.'*" (Excerpt from "*Walter Quirt: A Retrospective*" catalogue, 1980, Mary Towles Swanson.)

One can clearly see the linear/curvilinear emphasis, creating a surreal landscape, above which flags or perhaps a flock of surrealist birds fly, while the somewhat

humorous character on right, in a halo of pistachio-green, seems to be in an inexplicable motion. The field is nearly monochromatic, the *Sumi*-like black lines, dominant and flowing like the aforementioned pine tree branches, and shadows emphasizing their dimensionality and perspective. Now adjust one's visual perspective and the "surreal landscape" becomes a reclining woman, her face far left; perhaps in slumber, her two breasts rising from her abbreviated figure, the one black dot (lower left) being her belly's navel. (Another Quirt painting in the collection, dated 1953, is in fact titled, *Woman Is A Landscape*.)

Like many American artists coming of age in the 1930s-50s, Quirt experimented with other developing genres from Cubism to Surrealism to Non-Objective to Expressionism; often in his own very particular vernacular. Among his paintings between 1951-1952, which were predominantly figurative-expressionism, were a small group of paintings more influenced by Quirt's earlier explorations of Surrealism in the 1940s. Comparisons to the aforementioned early work of Joan Miro or Roberto Matta seem inevitable, although much of Quirt's priority in his painting at this time was his growing interest in the psychological character of line and the use of space surrounding the figure. (Priorities which account for the artist's occasional near abandonment of color, in favor of line and form; which we see so brilliantly exemplified in this particular painting.)

This short-lived but important series of abstract surrealist paintings are superlative examples of Quirt's maturity as an important artist, his passionate interest in emerging and intellectually/psychologically challenging theories, (including his own "*Quirt Hypothesis*") and his critical contribution to the canon of American Modern.