KAY SAGE (1898–1963)

With Egg

Mixed media construction, 17 3/4 in. high x 12 1/4 in. wide x 3 1/4 in. deep

Executed in 1961–62

RECORDED: Stephen Robeson Miller, "Kay Sage (1898–1963): Catalogue Raisonné" (unpub. ms., 1983, Archives of American Art), no. 213 illus.

EX COLL.: the artist; to her estate, until 1965; by gift to the Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury, Connecticut, until the present

Kay Sage was part of the inner circle of the surrealist artists who were active in Paris and New York in the late 1930s and 1940s, and is one of the leading American surrealists. Sage's career has long been overshadowed by that of her husband, Yves Tanguy (1900–1955), but through the exploration of her own dreams and memories, Sage developed a uniquely powerful and often haunting imagery that is hers alone. In paintings filled with mystery—landscapes occupied by bare scaffolding, solitary walls or buildings, and strangely human-like draped forms—we recognize today Sage's

rightful place among masters of surrealist painting in America.

Kay Sage lived an interesting and emotionally varied life. She was born in Albany, New York, to State Senator Henry Manning Sage and Anne Wheeler Ward Sage. At the age of two, following her parents' divorce, Kay and her mother embarked on a years-long journey around the United States and Europe, rarely spending more than one year in any one place. At the age of 20, she moved to Rome to study art, where, in 1925, she met Prince Ranieri di San Faustino, with whom she immediately fell in love and subsequently married. During the decade of her marriage, she evidently did not produce any paintings. The appeal of life as a princess eventually waned, and Sage and the Prince divorced.

Sage moved to Paris in 1937, where she met Tanguy and the surrealists, and quickly joined their group. At the onset of World War II, Sage and Tanguy fled Europe for America, and while on a trip west to California they married in Nevada in 1940. The following year they moved to Woodbury, Connecticut, where they both enjoyed productive careers as artists and collectors. Tanguy died suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage in 1955, throwing Sage into a depression that lasted until the end of her life. Her vision began to fail in 1958 and, following an unsuccessful double cataract operation, she ceased painting. She found an outlet for her creativity by producing mixed-media constructions, a group of which she showed at the Catherine Viviano Gallery, New York, in 1961. Sage occupied much of her time by working to compile the *catalogue raisonné* of Tanguy's work, a project which she never completed. After a failed attempt at suicide in 1959, she ultimately succeeded in taking her own life in 1963.

Sage was mostly content to live in the shadow of Tanguy's fame. Indeed, all of her life, Sage subordinated herself to single, powerful figures, first her mother, then Prince Ranieri, and finally Tanguy. Sage and Tanguy's relationship had a famously sadomasochistic character, with Sage herself writing about Tanguy: "Another thing I really needed in a bad way was someone to have authority over me. It is not what I wanted, but what I needed. I should have had someone knock me around" (Kay Sage, *China Eggs* [Charlotte, North Carolina: Starbooks, 1996], p. 270). It is telling that Sage struggled after Tanguy's death and that her own life ended in suicide. Perhaps not surprisingly, Sage did very little to promote her career. She never commented on her own work, preferring to let it to speak for itself. But despite her modesty and reticence, Sage's work was widely shown and collected in her lifetime. She had her first solo show at the prestigious Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, in 1940. Sage exhibited in the important "First Papers of Surrealism" exhibit organized by André Breton and held at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion in New York in 1942, and at Peggy Guggenheim's "Art of This Century" gallery in 1943. Between 1943 and 1947, she exhibited at the highly influential Julien Levy Gallery, New York, the beating heart of Surrealism in America, and from 1950 until her death she was represented by the Catherine Viviano Gallery, which mounted several solo shows of Sage's work over the course of a decade. Sage also exhibited at the annual exhibitions of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; and the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut. Sage had an international following, with much of her work finding its way to French collections. In 1955, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum all purchased works by Sage for their permanent collections.

Although her work is often compared and subordinated to Tanguy's, Sage herself stated that the artist who had influenced her the most was fellow surrealist Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978). This is certainly evident in her earliest works, but by the mid-1940s Sage had begun to form her own, unique vision of Surrealism that drew on the architectonic forms of de Chirico and the infinite landscapes of Tanguy, joining them with a haunting, almost solemn palette of grayed yellows, greens, and browns. Sage's work is stark, intellectual, and challenging, with an air of sadness. Her forms are almost entirely structural, with only egg forms (in her early works) and telltale wrapped sheets hinting at any kind of human presence. Surrealist scholar Whitney Chadwick has stated that Sage's work is "imbued with an aura of purified form and a sense of motionlessness and impending doom found nowhere else in Surrealism" (Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1985], p. 165).p. 166). Sage's barren vistas, skeletal buildings, blocked passageways, and bound and cloaked figures have been read by scholars as expressing Sage's self-effacement in her own life. Others note that the gloomy, post-apocalyptic ruination of many of her landscapes is a reflection of the man-made devastation of World War II.

Sage's will, filed in 1958, left her and Tanguy's collection of artwork by other artists to the Museum of Modern Art. She directed that her own work be distributed to museums by her friend and onetime dealer, Pierre Matisse, and James Thrall Soby, an important critic, collector, and leader at the Museum of Modern Art. Matisse and Soby placed Sage's works in a number of museums across the United States. The local lawyer working with Matisse and Soby was John Monagan, former mayor of Waterbury, Connecticut, U.S. Congressman from Connecticut's Fifth District, and a board member of the Mattatuck Museum in Waterbury. He suggested that a number of Sage's works from her estate should be given to the Mattatuck Museum, where Sage had served on the Exhibits

Committee. The Kay Sage Collection, consisting of over 400 items, including paintings, collages, constructions, drawings, and prints created by Sage and Tanguy, was given to the Mattatuck Museum in 1965. *With Egg* has been part of the Kay Sage Collection until the present time.

With Egg is a mixed-media construction from 1961. With her eyes failing as a result of cataracts and unsuccessful corrective surgeries, Sage in her final years abandoned painting and turned instead to producing constructions and collages. These fascinating late works are a testament to Sage's irrepressible creativity even as her ability to paint collapsed. Sage created these mixed-media pieces out of a variety of materials, including wooden sticks, glass beads and marbles, wire, small stones, and other small-scale elements, often gluing them to paper mounts. Though at first glance these collages and constructions seem to have little to do with her paintings, the appearance of wooden sticks, often arranged in rectilinear forms, parallel the sticks and scaffolds in her painted work. And because of the three-dimensionality of these works, they cast actual shadows of the kind frequently seen in her paintings.

Sage showed seventeen of her late works in *Your Move*, a November 1961 solo exhibition devoted exclusively to her mixed media works held at the Catherine Viviano Gallery in New York. This was the last exhibition of Sage's work held in her lifetime. The title of the show refers to one of the pieces in it, called *Your Move*, a chessboard where all of the pieces are bullet cartridges. In fact, all of the works included in the exhibition—and by extension, all of her late-period collages and assemblages—can be interpreted as surrealist games or *jeux*, which echoed the literary *jeux* of surrealist literature (e.g., exquisite corpse). Kay's *jeux* are irrational and inscrutable, with no apparent order or rules. The mounting tensions and apparent irrationality of the Cold War cannot be

discounted as a backdrop to these works (the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred the following year, Dr. Strangelove played in theaters two years after that), and Sage's exhibition at Viviano as a whole was an attack on the Cold War mentality, subverting its purported rationality by her "games without issue."

With Egg postdates the Viviano exhibition but belongs to this last group of works nonetheless. In his 1983 draft version of his *catalogue raisonné* of Sage's work, Stephen Robeson Miller dates *With Egg* to 1961–62. It is also the last entry in the catalogue, making *With Egg* by all appearances the final artwork of Sage's career. In this piece, Sage simply joined two readymade forms together: a wooden drying rack and a white glass egg.

It is fitting that, here in her last work, Sage returned full circle to the egg form that was so prominent in her first surrealist canvases of the 1930s. The title "With Egg" implies that there is something else here accompanying the egg, which is directly at odds with the otherwise empty wooden rack. Eggs appear frequently in Sage's work from the late 1930s and early 1940s, but essentially disappear from her work thereafter. The egg is a symbol frequently employed by surrealist artists, with its connotation of a protean life form and symbol of female creative power. It has been suggested that, in Sage's case, one can read the egg form in her early work as sort of traveler passing through time, through one subconscious environment after another (see Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Down the Rabbit Hole: An Art of Shamanic Initiations and Mythic Rebirth," in Susan Ilene Fort and Tere Arcq, eds., *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States*, exhib. cat. [Los Angeles, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2012], p. 175). However, Whitney Chadwick cautions against seeking single explanations of iconographic elements in Sage's

work, noting that the egg is as much a formal device for "relieving the strict geometry of her compositions" as it is a symbol of "life in landscapes otherwise devoid of human presence" (Chadwick, p. 165). Here in *With Egg*, though, the solitary egg seems a placeholder for Sage herself, in the endgame of her life.

With Egg will be included in the forthcoming *catalogue raisonné* of Sage's work, currently under preparation by Stephen Robeson Miller under the auspices of Mark Kelman and Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York.

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