

*Review of Eric Ratcliffe, Ithell Colquhoun
Pioneer Surrealist, Artist, Occultist, Writer and Poet
Mandrake of Oxford, 2007, 300 pp.*

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In writing *Ithell Colquhoun: Pioneer Surrealist, Artist, Occultist, Writer, and Poet*, Eric Ratcliffe's goal is abundantly clear. Like many before him who attempted to change the canon of an artistic movement dominated by male artists or a single nationality, he has written this book in order to unearth an artist who has mostly been forgotten in an attempt to reassert her into the history of art. As he clearly states, he thinks "that [Ithell Colquhoun's] long dedication to painting combined with a multiplicity of writing skills and fantastic occult knowledge have been inadequately presented by historians, unaware of this totality within her character."¹

Margaret Ithell Colquhoun, known as Ithell, was a British artist, poet, and writer. Born in 1906 while her family was living in India, she was raised and spent most of her life in England. Through her formal studies, friendships, romances, and travels throughout Europe, Colquhoun developed a broad range of interests and artistic pursuits. She dedicated herself to creative expression in various forms, using the mediums of painting, poetry and prose to express ideas influenced both by the Surrealists artists and the occult thinkers with whom she associated. She died in 1988.

Ithell Colquhoun can be divided thematically into two main sections. The first section, chapters one through nine, is for the most part a strictly chronological biographical narrative. Ratcliffe begins with Colquhoun's birth, moving backwards slightly to trace her ancestral lineage and painting a picture of the family to which she was born. From there, he follows her as she moves around the United Kingdom. To the best of his ability given her incomplete archive, he chronicles her locations, activities, and relationships. He discusses her influences—namely, as the title sug-

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gests, both formal Bretonian Surrealism and occult practices—and illustrates his points with examples from both her paintings and her writings.

These creative pursuits are documented at length in the second section, which starts with chapter nine and continues through the five appendices. Ratcliffe uses these pages as a repository for his extensive and thorough research. In an attempt to create a complete research source for future scholars, he provides a selection of her poetry in Chapter Ten, a manuscript of her personal beliefs and glossary titled “Cornish Earth” in Appendix 1, and in Appendix II A-C, the most complete record of her works of art, exhibition history, and bibliography that he could compile. This portion of the book, which is nearly equal in length to Ratcliffe’s own writing, is an invaluable resource. Ratcliffe has done difficult, time consuming research that he generously offers to those who wish to continue the examination of Colquhoun’s work.

This thorough research is truly the main strength of *Ithell Colquhoun*. It is also unfortunately a likely cause of the weaknesses in Ratcliffe’s analysis. When an author gets too close to his subject or becomes too invested in the history he recreates, the final product often suffers. This is probably what happened to Ratcliffe in the process of research and writing this book; he went to great lengths to unearth the history of this dynamic woman, but then becomes so invested in the research that he feels compelled to include every minutiae of her life he discovered.

Ratcliffe spends a large portion of the book detailing aspects of Colquhoun’s biography. It is clear both from the information he cites and from his explanations of some of his research practices that the author researched every single facet of Colquhoun’s life. He examined her family history, her whereabouts during each of her years, and any and all encounters that others may have had with her, in an attempt to reconstruct an incomplete history and to paint a more dynamic picture of an obviously interesting woman. A problem arises however when Ratcliffe’s detailed discoveries are chronicled even if they do not add to the narrative of her life or to the analysis of her work. For example, Ratcliffe writes,

While studying at the Slade, to which she gained admission in October 1927, Ithell’s addresses were first at 49 British Grove, W4, and later in the Adam and Eve Mews, W8. Her parents were then no longer at 25 Park Place in Cheltenham, but had moved also in about 1927 to ‘Battledown Priors’ in the Battledown are of the town. Battledown Estate was established east of Cheltenham in 1859, providing quality villas for the gentry.²

This information, while factual and relating to her biography, does not add to the reader's understanding of who Colquhoun was and what informed her artistic practices. In another example Ratcliffe starts chapter nine with a long paragraph that simply lists her exhibitions after 1971. In a final example of Ratcliffe's desire to include all of his clearly thorough and laborious research in the book, he goes so far as to publish, in the back of the book, photographs of the graves of Colquhoun's relatives.

It would have been possible for Ratcliffe to balance this desire to include all aspects of his research with strong arguments and insightful analyses of his subject. At times, however, Ratcliffe's writing does not stand up to this thorough research. He has a tendency to slip between various tenses and voices. For example, he writes, "Later that August...she was ordained a deaconess of the church, the diaconal ceremony involving a floor ritual of prostration with arms crossed on chest. At the hermitage at St. Dolay, where all are robed, and the ceremonies took place, we catch a glimpse of Ithell applying meditative techniques in its chapel...Before this she is careful to select her seating..."³ Ratcliffe switches from past tense to present tense and from third person to first person in one paragraph, disorienting the reader and disguising his intentions.

Similarly his language, which can at times be very polished, has a tendency to launch into a kind of stream-of-consciousness style. In the middle of a paragraph discussing Colquhoun's absence from the discussion of Surrealism—and the lack of women artists in the history in general—he weakens his valid argument by writing,

It seems that an invisible array of stacked social influence over a long period is stronger than exhibited skills over long periods. Is this imagination or does the statement of Jonathan Blond ring true? This massive luxury catalogue [for the Tate Modern's exhibition *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*] was to be made available in America on the exhibition tour to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in early 2002. Some have visited Cornwall for holiday parties. Ithell went there as a kind of 'nature fundamentalist.'⁴

From this writing style the reader gets the impression that there is so much that Ratcliffe wants to say that he cannot stay on track. Again, not only does it confuse the reader, but it also weakens his arguments.

However despite these problems there are moments of clarity. When Ratcliffe steps away from Colquhoun's biography and discusses her paintings, he often brings an insight into her visual language and the implications of her symbolism that

is positively informed by his understanding of her life. For example, in one of the most compelling passages in the book, Ratcliffe describes and analyzes the painting *The Pine Family* (1941). While it is difficult without prior knowledge of the work to independently judge Ratcliffe's suggestions about the work since the reproduction is grainy and in black-and-white, he thoroughly discusses both the forms, which simultaneously resemble the human body and tree trunks, as well as the written labels Colquhoun has given them. He explains what these phrases—"Atthis", "celle qui boite", and "l'hermaphrodite circonsis"—would most likely have meant to Colquhoun and the stories, myths and themes she was likely referencing. After discussing these references, Ratcliffe sums up his perspective on the work: "The general, though perhaps superficial message seems to be that identity or definition via the potency of any sexual aspect is doomed. There is no hint of hope via symbolic seasonal imagery of resurrection."⁵ It is in these moments, when Ratcliffe interprets a work based on his research and understanding of Colquhoun, that his arguments are the most compelling.

Additionally, Ratcliffe's discussion of Colquhoun's complicated relationship with Bretonian Surrealism sheds light on an artist whose influences and interests were disparate and, often, in conflict. For example, in "Chapter Nine: Cornwall (activities post 1971)," Ratcliffe tackles Colquhoun's feelings about and writings on Surrealism. Colquhoun was an artist and writer interested in both the Surrealist movement as practiced by André Breton and his circle of friends and disciples as well as spiritual beliefs as practiced by those in occult societies. While both practices are interested in tapping into thought outside the reach of consciousness, their ways of unearthing this aspect of the mind is very different. As Ratcliffe explains, "Breton had no time for a mediumistic source of automatic writing or painting, and was scornful, considering only the plumbing of hidden psychological depths... [Colquhoun] had found endless variety in the flux of imagery below conscious level, which could be tapped via the various automatic processes."⁶ Through Ratcliffe's description the reader begins to see a picture of an artist less concerned with the labels and rules of various schools of thought, and more interested in utilizing a range of methods to find her innermost thoughts. Colquhoun deserves further scholarly attention due to her perspective—"bored with the restrictive political side of surrealism"—and due to her new understanding of the ideas of unconscious thought and automatism. In this conclusion Ratcliffe makes her case well.⁷

Overall *Ithell Colquhoun: Pioneer Surrealist, Artist, Occultist, Writer, and Poet* is a problematic book. It has deep stylistic and structural faults that nearly obscure the thorough research and good intentions that are at its core. While his reader may at times be frustrated, Ratcliffe succeeds in presenting a picture of an artist complicated

and diverse enough to merit further attention. Hopefully *Ithell Colquhoun* will serve as a starting point for future studies into the life and work of this dynamic woman.

1 Eric Ratcliffe, *Ithell Colquhoun: Pioneer Surrealist, Artist, Occultist, Writer, and Poet* (Oxford: Mandrake of Oxford, 2007), 181.

2 *Ibid.*, 34.

3 *Ibid.*, 127.

4 *Ibid.*, 180.

5 *Ibid.*, 59.

6 *Ibid.*, 142.

7 *Ibid.*, xi.