

“In Wonderland: the Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States”

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Susan L. Aberth
Bard College

Co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM) in Mexico City, the large survey exhibition “In Wonderland: the Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States” presents a much-welcome focus on the artistic contributions of women Surrealist artists working outside of the movement’s epicenter of Europe. Judging from the exhibitions’ popularity (over 100,000 visitors at LACMA alone), the appeal of a show dedicated exclusively to women artists has lost neither its public allure nor its intellectual relevance in our supposedly “post-feminist” age. The co-curators, Dr. Ilene Susan Fort (LACMA’s Gail and John Liebes Curator of American Art) and Tere Arcq (MAM’s Adjunct Curator) brought together their considerable knowledge and curatorial experience to create this first international survey of women Surrealist artists in North America. Not only are there major works from such well-known favorites as Frida Kahlo, Dorothea Tanning, Lee Miller and Remedios Varo, there are rarely seen works by these masters as well, such as Leonora Carrington’s breathtaking oil on canvas *The Chrysopeia of Mary the Jewess* from 1964. In addition, many long-neglected women artists are represented with stunning examples from their oeuvre, while others, almost completely overlooked, have been here rediscovered and make their debut to our surprise and delight. This is an exhibition that will undoubtedly spark further research and discussion within the study of Surrealism, a field that continues to engage great scholarly interest and debate.

Susan L. Aberth: aberth@bard.edu

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Lewis Carroll's fantastical *Alice in Wonderland* books were beloved by the Surrealists and serve as the organizing backdrop for the exhibition because, as the catalogue introduction states, "Alice, like the female surrealists, ignored proscribed societal limitations, traveling conceptually as well as geographically to explore new worlds." (25). By concentrating on artists working in Mexico and the United States the show expands surrealism's parameters of influence outside of Europe, and in particular France. Although only rarely does work directly reference the character of Alice herself (such as Alice Rahon's 1951 *Self Portrait (Alice in Wonderland)*, or the Japanese Yayoi Kusama's *The Anatomic Explosion Happening at a statue of Alice in Wonderland, Central Park, New York, 1969*), it is the questing spirit of Alice, trying to navigate a nonsensical and often disturbing world, that is evoked everywhere with great nuance and diversity. North America's ancient Pre-Columbian and indigenous cultures inspired many of these artists who either drew directly on their myths to create personal symbols, or were led by a study of their artifacts to explore new techniques and constructions. Narrative and abstract languages are in evidence in a wide variety of media, testifying to the great sense of visual experimentation at play amongst these artists. Likewise, there is a wide array of thematic concerns, ranging from personal (and perhaps more gendered) explorations of sexuality, domesticity, and identity, to studies in theater design, the occult and psychology.

One of the highlights of "In Wonderland" is the strong showing of works by Alice Rahon, a French ex-patriot living in Mexico, whose work has long been overshadowed by her husband Wolfgang Paalen. In addition to some of her large-scale paintings, for example her 1956-66 *Balada para Frida Kablo (Ballad for Frida Kablo)*, there were also lesser known works such as a 1942 assemblage *Rendez-vous des rivières (Encounter of Two Rivers)*, and drawings and wire marionettes designed for a cosmic ballet she wrote inspired by Orion. It was also good to see the haunting landscapes and portraits of María Izquierdo, an important Mexican artist often left out of such surveys. Bridget Tichenor, an artist mostly unknown to Americans but who lived and worked in Mexico from 1953 until her death in 1990, was also represented by three paintings that will hopefully spark greater interest in her work. Another important inclusion was *Introspection* (1966) by Lilia Carrillo, an abstract Mexican painter who was inspired by Surrealist automatism. Although there was a spectacular sculpture by the Brazilian María Martins *The Road, The Shadow, Too Long, Too Narrow* (1946), it would have been interesting to see more from this artist who lived and worked in Washington D.C. from 1939-1948.

The biggest surprises, however, come from the United States and collectively the work created by these women is a veritable revelation. Of particular note is Rosa Rolanda, (whose *Self-Portrait* of 1945 graces the cover of the accompanying

book) the child of Mexican and Scottish immigrants living in Los Angeles. Under the influence of Man Ray in Paris she created a stunning series of photograms in the late 1920s and later on worked in the theater as a dancer before beginning to paint in 1926. There was a substantial showing of works by Kay Sage, an American artist known primarily for her paintings, but a startling mixed media construction *Spontaneous Confusion* (1961) made us realize that there is still more to be discovered about her output. Dorothea Tanning and Helen Lundeborg likewise had a strong presence and it was especially gratifying to see examples of Tanning's remarkable soft sculptures. But it was works by such lesser known artists as Gertrude Abercrombie, Dorr Bothwell, Sylvia Fein, Gerrie Gutmann, Adaline Kent, Loren MacIver, and Julia Thecla that most contributed to an expanded notion of surrealist practice in the United States. One wished to see more by artists such as Helen Phillips, Grace Clements, Juanita Guccione, Madge Knight, Doris Lindo Lewis, Barbara Morgan, Stella Snead, Muriel Streeter, and Margaret Tomkins, who were tantalizingly represented by only one work, but then of course the already large exhibition would have had to be expanded even further.

Photography was seamlessly interspersed to great effect in the exhibition, highlighting the thematic crosscurrents between media. In addition to well-known photographers working within surrealism like Lee Miller, Kati Horna and Lola Alvarez Bravo, there were also exciting images by the German-born Ruth Bernard and the Polish Rose Mandel, who escaped the impending war by joining her husband in Switzerland in 1939 and then immigrating to the United States in 1942. After taking courses with Ansel Adams in 1945 at the suggestion of Edward Weston, Mandel, under the partial influence of Surrealism, began to photograph storefront windows, advertisements, and graffiti while walking the streets of San Francisco. Three images from the resulting series *On Walls and Behind Glass* (1947-48) are on view, in addition to her striking *Untitled (Split Portrait of a Woman)* (c. 1949).

The exhibition's installation took some risks that at first might have appeared merely sensational, but ultimately served to foreground the intense sense of theatricality of much of the work on display. Immediately upon entering one was met with a large projection of Maya Deren's 1943 *Meshes of the Afternoon*, co-directed with her husband Alexander Hammid and starring them both. This iconic short film nods back to Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) as well as forward to such contemporary women experimental filmmakers as Barbara Hammer, Su Friedrich, and Carolee Schneemann, (not to mention David Lynch) who have been profoundly influenced by Deren's surrealist concerns and techniques. For a city like Los Angeles, built on the dreams that the film industry offers to the world, it seemed a particularly apt move. Likewise, the web of woven rope used to

divide one viewing area from another was a playful allusion to Marcel Duchamp's twine installation for the 1942 exhibition "First Papers of Surrealism" in New York City, which on a deeper level perhaps references the state of exile and marginality many of these women experienced, particularly those who emigrated to Mexico during World War II. In addition to the many paintings, sculptures, photographs and drawings on view by almost fifty different artists, were a plethora of vitrines scattered throughout the exhibition that contained many treasures such as personal letters, diaries, brochures and other memorabilia. Towards the end of the exhibition were walls containing photographs of the artists and other important didactic information, providing viewers with the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the individual lives of these women, brought together for the first time, and to hopefully bring a sense of cohesion to the newly expanded parameters of artistic involvement proposed.

The book accompanying the exhibition, edited by the curators, contains many informative essays, including one on photography by Dawn Ades, "One Hundred Percent Photographic." In a respectful full-circle gesture, the surrealist literary scholar Gloria Orenstein, Professor of Comparative Literature and Gender Studies at University of Southern California, was invited to contribute to the catalogue. Orenstein was instrumental in bringing surrealist women artists to wider attention in the 1970's during the feminist movement and her trailblazing articles in such venues as *The Feminist Art Journal* and *Heresies* helped spark interest in Leonora Carrington and others. "Down the Rabbit Hole: An Art of Shamanic Initiations and Mythic Rebirth" is a continuation of Orenstein's long study of the visionary and mythic aspects of the surrealist imagery done by women artists. The eminent surrealist scholar Whitney Chadwick tellingly comments in the book's Prologue, "Like most groundbreaking efforts, *In Wonderland* will no doubt raise more questions than it answers, but the questions it raises remain central both to our understanding of Surrealism's international impact and to its complicated, often vexed, relationship to women's growing demands for expanded roles within vanguard modernist movement." (11).

