

Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna.

Edited by Stefan van Raay, Joanna Moorhead and Teresa Arq.

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BOOK REVIEW BY ERIN TAPLEY

For many K-12 students, exposure to Surrealism is memorable. Perhaps the idea that abstraction or distortion and odd juxtapositions can be both skillfully rendered and interesting is revelatory for them. Frequently, landmark works of Salvador Dalí and René Magritte are displayed in classrooms. And while, Frida Kahlo has increasingly been discussed, many people ignore the contributions of female and non-European artists to the Surrealist movement. The book *Surreal Friends* looks at three women (emigrants from Europe) who joined Kahlo in Mexico and practiced Surrealism earnestly and for the duration of their lives. *Surreal Friends* is a companion book to a retrospective exhibition at the Pallant House Gallery in London. The show was largely that of Leonora Carrington's work, but also featured works by her friends and neighbors, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna.

Coincident with the centennial celebration of the Mexican Revolution, this exhibition celebrated Mexico's open arm policy to European refugees of both the Spanish Civil War and WWII. Carrington, Horna and Varo all settled in the suburb of Colonia Roma, Mexico in the late 30's and early 40's, escaping the events in Europe. While friends with one another, they each maintained an introspective working style that yielded a quintessentially feminine Surrealist aesthetic. Unlike their male counterparts, who often objectified the female figure and psyche, these women produced an aesthetic that has been much theorized as a depiction of intuition itself. The art world has only recently considered contributions of female Surrealist artists, whose work testifies to the diaspora of the movement.

An issue this book emphasizes is the nature of these women's relationship as both amicable and familial. Horna and Carrington's children played together and Varo and Carrington's work has definite chronological correlation. Like many Surrealists, these friends tried to incorporate the lifestyle of Surrealism as inquiry into the subconscious and happenstance by engaging in word play games and games of eidetic circumstance. Varo and Carrington wrote two Surrealist plays around 1954. All born within a decade of one another (Remedios Varo in 1908 in Spain, Kati Horna in 1912 in Hungary and Leonora Carrington in

1917 in Great Britain), they involved themselves in revolutionary movements of the early 20th century Europe, often by partnering with the contentious leading men of these struggles. In so doing, they defied expectations of the social classes and genders into which they were born. Varo and Horna endured prison time for their rebellious actions and Carrington was committed to a Spanish asylum when her bohemian and fervent relationship to much older artist, Max Ernst, was quashed. Even as emigrants to a distant urban culture, these women supported political causes in Mexico and remained dedicated to honing their artistry.

A slight critique of the book is its lopsided coverage of the three women. Most chapters spotlight Carrington's life and work, dealing less with Varo or Horna. Many readers will be unfamiliar with Kati Horna who never had the financial backing or ambition to publicize her work as Carrington and Varo did. However, Horna's work in photography uses superimposition and montage, producing a sentimental mood uncommon in the movement's early years.

As any group of artists who espouse similar objectives, their work is still individualized based upon upbringing. The *Surreal Friends* all received either fine or commercial art training and furthermore were affected by the conditions of their childhoods. Carrington has links to Irish folkways and study in Italy that is apparent in her architectural settings and gnomish figures. Dry British humor often informed her paintings as germinated in word play and irony. Varo was the most intense of the trio (in terms of career ambition). Varo was raised a Spaniard and painted androgynous, beakish characters amid settings rendered in uncomfortable perspective. Her work came into western consciousness in 2000, with a retrospective show at the National Museum of Women in Art. Both Varo and Carrington read copiously about mysticism, alchemy, Jungianism and other means toward the transformation of consciousness.

The book, *Surreal Friends* is a lovely treatise on a trio of women whose work exudes a sense of searching. While Simone de Beauvoir claimed that women in Surrealism were "everything but themselves" it is also arguable that Surrealist women did exceed the normal objectification of "women" as popularized by key male Surrealists. The 200+ color illustrations in this book prove this strength and offers keen insights into these three artistic lives.

FURTHER READING:

Women in Surrealism:

<http://www.suite101.com/content/women-in-surrealism-a236786#ixzz16dXjd59D>

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