

Three Women of Surrealism: Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning

Surrealism is the style generally associated with both Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo, in large part because they were in Paris and interacted with the Surrealist circle, and they both married surrealists. Their imagery suggests the thinking and imagery of the surrealists, but a study of their sources and images might suggest that the similarity between their work and that of the male surrealists is coincidence and not the result of comparable stylistic goals. This might be expected to some extent because of the place given women in surrealism. Women were seen as the muse for the male artists, but a muse who was either an erotic object, a child, or an insane person, not a muse who represented an equally capable and creative artist. Thus, while there were several female surrealists, they were compelled to find ways of subverting the surrealist expectations of women. This has been suggested as the reason for a sense of gender ambiguity in some of their art, especially in the case of Varo. Still, gender is not in the end the real theme of Varo's work, except to the extent that self-discovery and self-transformation include gender and to the extent that these artists seek a creative language that can be used to express the creative quest of a female artist. In that sense, the search for self can be seen to be a spiritual quest, and spirituality does seem to be a pervasive theme in the works of these artists. It is the spirituality of hermetic or occult traditions such as alchemy – a metamorphic, transformative process which distills the cosmic and the spiritual from the impure, which Varo explores – as does Carrington, so alchemy becomes a link, visual and ideological, between them.

Varo: biographical facts

- studied art in Spain, spent a year in Paris, returned to Spain,
- married a surrealist poet,
- they fled to Paris during the Civil War; were part of the surrealist circle where Varo and Carrington became friends;
- fled to Mexico during the occupation of Paris; she and Carrington resumed their Paris friendship in Mexico
- In Mexico, she did not immediately paint: was a commercial artist, a furniture designer, a stage set designer, and restored pottery

Varo is an understudied artist, infrequently included in exhibitions, who does not readily fit categories: ie, she is not a European surrealist, she lived in Latin America but is not Latin American¹. Her artistic qualities may make her more elusive than her geographic ones: the women in her paintings do not conform to portraiture conventions, although they are likely

¹The most complete source to date is Janet Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys* (NY: Abbeville Press, 1988). Other work on Varo includes Estella Lauter, "Remedios Varo: The Creative Woman and the Female Quest, in *Women as Mythmakers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) and Deborah J. Haynes, "The Art of Remedios Varo," *Woman's Art Journal*, 16 (spring-summer 1995), 26-32.

to be self-portraits in the sense that they are paintings of creative energy. They are engaged in unconventional activities and the space of her paintings is idiosyncratic. In a strictly visual sense, many of the paintings merge a more cartesian spatial system of verticals and grids, what has been referred to by some writers as a masculine spatial system, with a cosmic system of space--one that is governed by a center from which spiraling forces emanate outward, ultimately producing tension between a stable vertical and a dynamic spiral. A metaphorical implication of this dual system of space may be an attempt to represent spiritual realities as present in the material world.²

Two of Varo's paintings which depict alchemical imagery are *Useless Science or the Alchemist*, 1955 (Figure 1) and the *Creation of the Birds*, 1958 (Figure 2). Here, Varo seems to be a bird, an owl, as she sits at the table wearing a musical instrument around her neck--a three-stringed instrument, perhaps a lyre which, in ancient Greece, symbolized the human being. The alchemical vessels, which function in the realm of machines of fantasy and machines of transformative voyages, sit on the floor and look equally human, reinforcing their role as extensions or even surrogates for the human and serving to unite the artist and vessels who appear to be sharing in the act of creation. Creating birds, as the title claims, but given the artist's quest for a sense of self, perhaps it is the birds which are really creating the artist or through an alchemical process, one is being transformed into the other. Alchemy is a secret science; all that is ever shared is that it seeks to transform one substance into another, into a cosmic elixir. But in the *Creation of the Birds*, Varo appears to be, perhaps, the alchemist, and whereas she calls alchemy a useless science in one image, here the alchemist is literally an artist. The artist as artist is also the image she gives us in *Solar Music*, 1955 (Figure 3), a painting in which she becomes a musician who plays upon the rays of the sun, thereby freeing birds in the trees. Although this artist seems to be more attuned to the cosmos, the creative act is a lesser one than the act of the alchemist, at least in a visual sense. Music, however, has been associated with the heavens and the cosmos, the music of the spheres, so in that sense, the solar musician may be the more potent artist. The difference may lie, however, in that the nature of the creative quest is not the same--in one she is depicting the idea of creativity, while in the other, at issue is the quest for finding a female identity as creator.

The artist of Renaissance times who is believed to have been influenced by alchemy is Hieronymous Bosch. Janet Kaplan has identified relationships between paintings of Bosch and Varo. These visual analogies are convincing, but they also lend support to the idea that Varo, and probably Carrington as well, may have looked to the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. Those artists themselves looked to Flemish influences and they rejected the modern world of their times while foregrounding as morality tales, stories of fantasy, of loss of a sense of self, in the quest for a new self, as their subject matter. The pre-Raphaelites were influenced, thematically if not visually, by William Blake, himself a mystic and visionary who treated political themes in a mystical and allegorical vein and who often centralized female quests for independence in his subject matter, a theme which ultimately appears to be the theme of Varo.

Varo was literally an emigre and in her art, she likewise makes journeys and the

²Lois Parkinson Zamora, "The Magical Tables of Isabel Allende and Remedios Varo," *Comparative Literature*, 44 (spring, 1992), 113-143.

creation of a world central. Her self-portrait characters are not exact replicas--they are abstracted from her own features. The situations they exist in are also abstracted from reality and from fantasy. As Kaplan puts it, "Like an actress taking on roles, Varo consistently used these self-portrait characters as a way to explore alternative identities, both personal and universal, in a style that quickly became her signature."³ Her work is narratively oriented, and the narrative concerns metamorphosis--metamorphosis within a frame of dynamics concerning freedom and control, independence versus rootedness and continuity. *Toward the Tower*, of 1961 (Figure 4) and *Escape* (1962) deal with this narrative, but seem to avoid the narrative of the search for creativity, unless it is implied and subsumed by the escape. Objects in other paintings become anthropomorphized, taking on the qualities of a person who is not free--a person who is frightened and submissive, who can't escape. People in these scenes encounter doubles, are almost entombed in cloth and walls and masks at times (for example, see Figure 5, *Harmony*, 1956), are fleeing at other times. The reverse of passivity and submission is not only escape; it is the seizure of control, in symbolic or actual terms. In *Star Catcher*, 1956 (Figure 6), a huntress captures the moon, a symbol of female consciousness, yet the huntress herself is an archetypal female symbol. The interplay between power and powerlessness, between feminine assertion and feminine submission, is unclear in this image. Or should we see it as a dualistic image which unites both poles of the duality, resolving the dialectic as the moon, the more intuitive part of the woman's consciousness becomes synthesized with the rational and cognitive part, making this into the ultimate image of a female artist? In contrast, in *Breaking the Vicious Circle*, 1962 (Figure 7), she breaks free of an electric rope to enter the transcendent domain of a forest--to enter in the sense that she is one with it. But the spirituality of this image, which is less ambiguous than the *Star Catcher* image, is more frightening and less satisfying as a metaphor for the artist. Yet, it embodies a theme of rebirth, a theme which is present in many of her paintings and follows from her interest in alchemy, Jungian psychology, theosophy -- the spiritual interests of not only the surrealists but the artists who turned to spiritual and metaphysical forms of abstraction, such as Kandinsky, Mondrian, most of the abstract expressionists. Where Varo departs from these artists, however, is in her commitment to a narrative embodied in figural imagery, and in the end, to the discovery of a female creator. And this may be what she finds in *To be Reborn*, 1960 (Figure 8), a painting infused with female imagery as well as the sense of bursting through and embodiment.

Leonora Carrington

Carrington, an English artist, met the surrealist Max Ernst in Paris in 1937. In 1940 he was interned by the French who believed he was a Nazi collaborator. Carrington had a nervous breakdown, didn't eat, and finally fled to Spain where she was incarcerated for mental illness, or at least this is the experience described in her book *Down-Below*. It is not clear if *Down-Below* is autobiography or fiction. The events described at first seem to be so horrifying, it is difficult to believe they are imagined; but at the same time, the horrifying nature makes them seem unreal. In recounting these events, from a distance of many years, Carrington inserts her present self into the story. This insertion, suggests Renee reise Hubert, makes the narrative

³Kaplan, 147.

into an act which goes beyond the events, reframes them, and the new narrative, she suggests, is one of feminine liberation⁴. On another level, perhaps her story can be a metaphor for the insanity of Europe and the ineffectiveness of human beings in resisting or redirecting this insanity. Some of what Hubert sees as deliberate surrealist strategies, or parodies, even, could actually be a true and literal response to the events she was undergoing, if she was undergoing them. And similarly, if the hospitalization is not invented, and the medications she was injected with caused hallucinations, they are real, not contrived surrealist images. If, however, Carrington is adopting or parodizing a surrealist strategy and theme, she is doing something other than that, too, for her writing is layered with stories within stories, references to a female-centered religion, symbols of Celtic and Aztec myths, fantasy creatures and landscapes worthy of Hieronymous Bosch.

All of this can be seen in her paintings as well – paintings subsequent to her 1937 *Self-portrait* (Figure 9) which, in its clarity and legibility of imagery, is so different from the rest of her work, it is almost hard to associate it with the artist. Still, even here the imagery and symbolism is more complex than we might suspect, and stylistically, she may be closer here to the pre-Raphaelite influence on her work rather than to the Redon-esque type of symbolist influence which is more prevalent later. The white rocking horse was a personal symbol, one which she chose at the very start of her writing and painting career. By 1937, the white horse is also Max Ernst, who has begun to seem a form of escape from her conservative British upbringing. Here the rocking horse exists in her mind, above her head, and running to freedom outside the window. The blue of the sky and the wall, and the continuity of the green from her jacket to the landscape outside, reflect a continuity from her imagination to the real world where she will be reborn. The presence of the black hyena in conjunction with the white horse suggests a duality, that of life and death. This is the only painting of hers with a hyena in it; the white horse will reappear, although in a more fantastical form; but it seems that the duality hinted at here is also overcome.

Other paintings, like those of Varo, use alchemical symbols to deal more explicitly with themes of transformation and discovery: the *Garden of Paracelsus*, 1957, and the *Sidhe, the White People*, 1954 (Figure 10), are good examples. Paracelsus was a Renaissance scientist who believed that both religion and art were alchemical in that they transformed base elements into cosmic purities. Alchemical treatises are rich in imagery that derives from nature but presents it in chimerical or metamorphosing and ephemeral forms. Serpentine dragons and snakes represent the alchemical potentials of nature, and birds and clouds in the atmosphere are the purified substances released from the alchemical fusion. The processes of alchemy take place in a rounded beaker like contraption – here, we do not see an alchemical test tube but the entire landscape has been perfused by a pyramidal sector of light which may be symbolically transforming Paracelsus's garden into a complete alchemical chamber. Typical of Carrington's paintings is an almost collage-like profusion of fantastical forms, as in the *Burning of Giordano Bruno*, 1964 (Figure 11). The space is perspectival, and not fractured or fragmentary as in cubism, but it also lacks the deep recession of the illusionary surrealists. Yet

⁴*Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism and Partnership* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

it is closer to a dream-like or hallucinatory space than is the space of Dali, for example, because the placement of forms in these spaces defies the depth which can be read. Yet, at the same time, the paintings give us clues which suggest deep landscape space, forcing the viewer to read the paintings simultaneously in two competing ways. Any one of a number of Carrington's paintings do this. See, for example, *Chiki, ton pays* (1947, Figure 12) and *Nine, Nine, Nine* (1948, Figure 13). These are paintings in which any sense of foreground or background is immediately contradicted by the creation of a more ethereal space which encompasses both foreground and background and a more compartmentalized space. The ethereal qualities suggest a continued relationship to symbolism, but stylistically there seems to be some indication of the influence of New York artists who themselves were experimenting with surrealism as their paintings became increasingly abstract. Another influence may come from a Mexican neo-baroque stylistic tradition which was based on a circumscribed visual space filled with profuse manifestations of organic imagery, creating once again the co-existence of two competing spatial systems. These spatial volumes are both opaque and diaphanous through the use of light, shadow and color,⁵ another suggestion of alchemical imagery and also a suggestion of the creation of order out of a marine universe, associated with chaos.

Dorothea Tanning has also been described as an American surrealist, and the description seems apt in her case with the difference being again that her work takes a highly personalized focus in terms of subject matter. Her later work becomes increasingly biomorphic, baroque, and sculptural in its visual qualities, before becoming almost akin to De Kooning's abstract gestural style. She also begins to make sculpture in her later years, works which appear to be direct translations into three-dimensions of her paintings.

Tanning was initially from Illinois, the daughter of Swedish immigrants. Growing up in Galesburg, her early paintings and stories might be seen as almost the opposite of what the American scene painters (her contemporaries) tried to do: she does not celebrate rural America; she creates an alternate existence for herself. This may not be surprising for another reason: probably the earliest influences on her artistic development were illustrated books from the 19th and 20th centuries, in particular, fairy tales illustrated by Arthur Rackham. She also, for several reasons related to family life, was attracted to the idea of secrets and secrecy. Other early influences, which do not set her apart from the surrealists, or at least the female surrealists, are the British pre-Raphaelites.

Most of her paintings before 1940 have not been saved, by her own choice, so one of the first paintings we can judge her by is a 1943 painting, *A Little Night Music* (Figure 14). It actually predicts and sums up many themes which characterize her early works: long corridors, doors which hint at secrets and unknown passages, a relatively exclusive focus on females as subject matter, in this case, little girls who may be echoes of her sisters. The sexual innuendoes in this painting suggest an "Alice in Wonderland" type of landscape as well as Freud, which is not surprising given her exposure to surrealism by this time. Locked doors in her paintings almost continually suggest inaccessibility--to what, we can only guess, but the imagery of a closed door and its suggestion of unknown aspects of oneself is not uncommon in dream

⁵See Zamora again on the space in Carrington's and Varo's paintings.

imagery. In this vein, it is of interest that when she later ventures into sculpture, she creates whole settings, environments, in which the figures are almost fused with the furniture and the setting itself is defined by the forms within it. The sculpture seems to become "roomsize, lifesize, dreamsize; and the dream envelops us, inexorably."⁶

When asked whether her painting is autobiographical, because, the interviewer says, her real life seems to have been very mundane and her paintings are not, she replies that: "Everything we do is autobiographical. So one of my reasons for painting was really to escape my biography. Are we the prisoners of our events or can another life be entirely made up?" She goes on to say that sometimes she uses her belief in human destiny to excuse herself for doing things she later considers questionable, and that in her paintings, there are events and references to things which she hasn't known or experienced. But they remain autobiographical through the world of dreams and in the sense of the painting and the autobiography as a "distorting mirror."⁷

⁶Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday* (Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986), 27.

⁷Tanning, p. 51.

07. Three Women of Surrealism: Figures



Creator	Varo, Remedios
Title	Useless Science or the Alchemist
Date	1955
Commentary	Figure 1



Creator	Varo, Remedios
Title	Creation of the Birds
Date	1958
Commentary	Figure 2



Creator	Varo, Remedios
Title	Solar Music
Date	1955
Commentary	Figure 3



Creator	Varo, Remedios
Title	Toward the Tower
Date	1961
Commentary	Figure 4



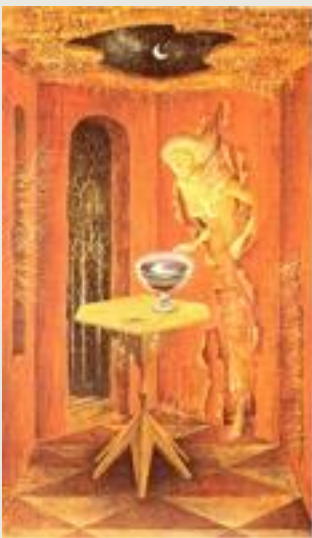
Creator	Varo, Remedios
Title	Harmony
Date	1956
Commentary	Figure 5



Creator	Varo, Remedios
Title	Star Catcher
Date	1956
Commentary	Figure 6



Creator	Varo, Remedios
Title	Breaking the Vicious Cycle
Date	1962
Commentary	Figure 7



Creator	Varo, Remedios
Title	To Be Reborn
Date	1960
Commentary	Figure 8



Creator	Carrington, Leonora, 1917-
Title	Self-Portrait
Date	c.1938
Commentary	Figure 9



Creator	Carrington, Leonora
Title	Sidhe, the White People of the Tuatha de' Danaan
Date	1954
Commentary	Figure 10



Creator	Carrington, Leonora, 1917-
Title	Burning of Giordano Bruno
Date	1964
Commentary	Figure 11



Creator	Carrington, Leonora
Title	Chiki, ton pays
Date	1947
Commentary	Figure 12



Creator	Carrington, Leonora
Title	Nine, Nine, Nine
Date	1948
Commentary	Figure 13



Creator	Tanning, G
Title	Eine Kleine Nacht Musik
Date	1944
Commentary	Figure 14 (A Little Night Music)