

COVER YOURSELF, LEONORA

THE SURREALIST WHO WOULD NOT BE SILENCED

BY **CAITLIN DONOHUE**


Today, 100 years after her birth in Lancashire, England, and six after her death in Mexico City, one can imagine a future in which the Surrealist artist Leonora Carrington is no longer relegated to a secondary mention in the compendia of the movement.



The painter Leonora Carrington in her Greenwich Village apartment, circa 1942.
bpk Bildagentur/Sammlung Fotografie/Archiv Landshof/Art Resource, NY

In 2014, Sotheby's sold one of her paintings for \$2.6 million. In 2015, a Tate Liverpool retrospective reintroduced her to her native country. This year saw the release of an anthology of her unnerving short stories, featuring previously unpublished work. Like Frida Kahlo, another artist who worked in Mexico and whose fame skyrocketed posthumously, Carrington's legacy appears bound for the kind of renown often denied to women who had the mixed blessing of having been linked to high-powered men.

Born into a nouveau riche textiles family, Carrington spent her childhood riding horses and getting kicked out of convent schools. In her teens she enraptured Max Ernst, who was then one of the world's most famous visual artists. The two moved to Paris, where Carrington, once presented as a debutante to the queen of England, entered Surrealist café society. She met Marcel Duchamp, Louis Aragon and André Breton, and she famously declined to fetch Joan Miró cigarettes. "I wasn't daunted by any of them," she recalled of these male luminaries, whose artistic predilection for presenting female sexuality ran aground on a woman keen to be her own muse. It was rumored she later covered Luis Buñuel's hotel room with menstrual-blood handprints after he forced his keys upon her at a party, in ham-handed ardor.



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—STACY KLEIN

Amanda Miller in rehearsal for “Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro.” Photo: Milena Dabova

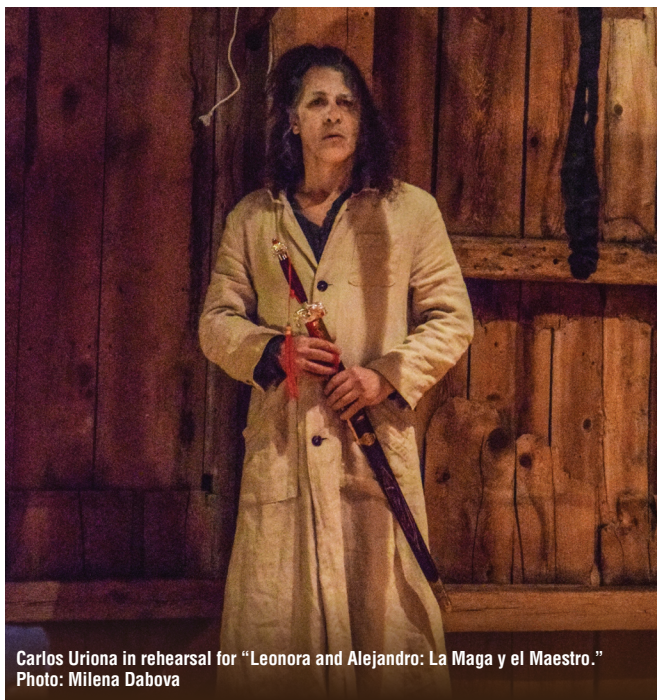
When Ernst was incarcerated, first by the French and then by the Nazis, Carrington fled to Franco's Spain, where her stress led to a nervous breakdown and admission into an asylum. (She later documented the experience in her book "Down Below," a memoir that reads as descent into the netherworld.) Her family eventually attempted to transfer her to an institution in South Africa; instead, she fled to a Mexican diplomat who brought her to his country after a hasty marriage.

It was in Mexico, where Carrington lived until her death, that she was fully able to develop her art. Some of her fellow artists saw themselves diminished in a nation of such magic. As Dalí famously commented after one visit, "I can't be in a country that is more Surrealist than my paintings." But Carrington's Mexico City life imparted space to breathe deeply, to create a world safe from violent political upheaval and her overbearing family. Located between sleep and wakefulness, her creations teem with human animals, supernatural queens and androgynous self-portraiture. She came late to Surrealism, but — like that of her friends Remedios Varo and Kati Horna, as well as Lee Miller, Leonor Fini, Helen Lundeberg, Kay Sage, Dorothea Tanning, Méret Oppenheim and Rosa Rolanda — Carrington's work enriched the movement with experiences beyond the understanding of her male counterparts. To acknowledge the entirety of Surrealism's possibilities is to honor these women's contributions.

Double Edge Theatre's "Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro" was at first focused solely on the Chilean director, writer and magician Alejandro Jodorowsky; it was the company founder Stacy Klein's repulsion to the news during the 2016



"The Chrysopeia of Mary the Jewess," by Leonora Carrington, 1964. Oil on canvas. Digital image © 2017. Museum Associates - LACMA. Licensed by Art Resource, NY.



Carlos Uriona in rehearsal for "Leonora and Alejandro: La Maga y el Maestro." Photo: Milena Dabova

U.S. presidential campaign that summoned Carrington. "I just recognized the way that Hillary [Clinton] was being treated was completely different than any [male candidate], whether I agreed or disagreed with them," Klein remembered. "It was the same as the whore-Madonna [dichotomy] that's been going on for thousands of years. She was an awful bitch, or a vulnerable person who couldn't walk on her own, who cried."

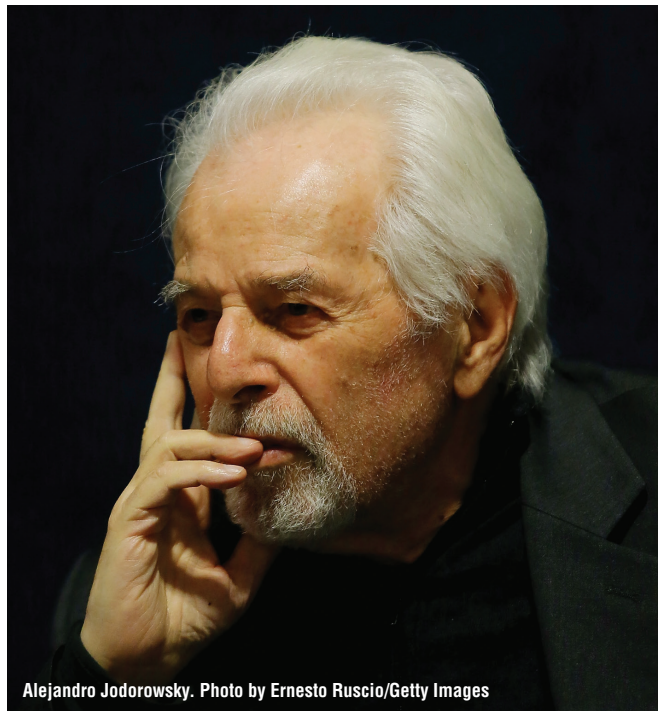
Klein thought Clinton surely must triumph, forcing society to reckon with her as a president and with the weight that position implied. Of course, this never came to pass. And Klein made a decision: "to never work on a piece again that didn't have the leading voice of a woman."

So Jodorowsky needed a check and balance, a female voice that those familiar with his work will know is often lacking in his real life. For some, the cult filmmaker's work is overshadowed by his treatment of women — from his Twitter comments asserting that a woman could dress up her lover "as the person who abused you, and it will excite you," to the murky ethics of engaging an "El Topo" actress in sexual activity

while the cameras rolled. Though he has used the word “rape” to describe this infamous scene, in some later interviews he has said that actress Mara Lorenzio was informed before shooting of his plans.

Double Edge was unaware when it chose its two subjects that Jodorowsky and Carrington knew each other — in fact, their yearlong friendship in Mexico City bohemia resulted in a stage production of “Penelope.” While Carrington’s account of this alignment has not been found, Jodorowsky immortalized his in “The Spiritual Journey of Alejandro Jodorowsky,” in which he recalls being ordered by his guru, Ejo Takata, to accept Carrington as his master, to deal with his mommy issues. “You are still an angry child who rejects women in every domain except that of sex,” Takata says in the book. “You think you can learn only from men.”

After a series of mystical encounters with Carrington-as-Surrealist-princess, the relationship comes to a close. Carrington bids Jodorowsky adieu, but then rushes after him on the street,



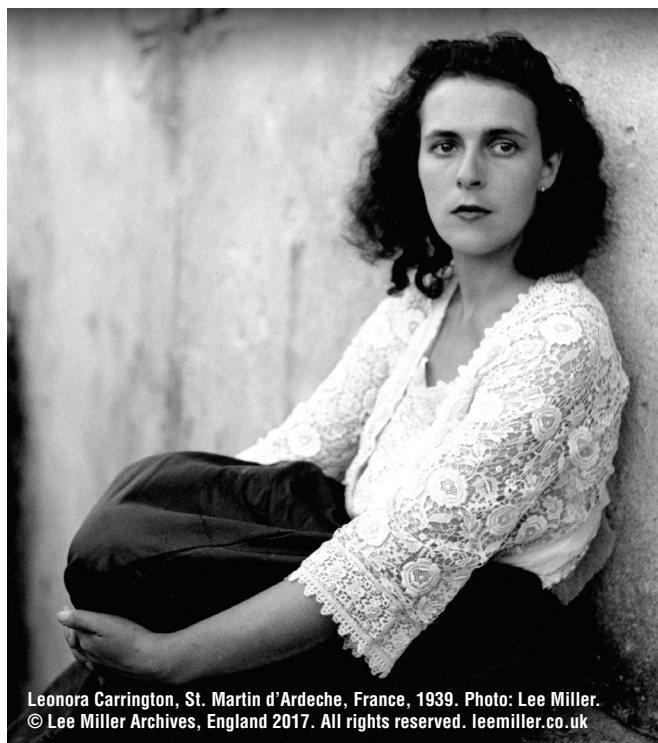
Alejandro Jodorowsky. Photo by Ernesto Ruscio/Getty Images

Carrington’s work seems all the more powerful when considered alongside attempts by even her peers to strip her of agency and recast her in limiting, powerless roles. With shocking persistence, her work refuses these dismissals.

her clothes in disarray. The provocateur who had recently incited riot with his nudity-laced film “Fando and Lis” sees nothing in her attempt at denouement but a woman at risk of losing her decency. “Cover yourself, Leonora,” he says before they part. “Someone might come by.”

Klein found the genesis of Carrington’s artistic consequence in the challenges she overcame throughout her storied life. “She had to live and survive by her imagination because she was being oppressed and silenced. Her internal world was all that she could live through.”

Like so many other women artists — not to mention the unique yet parallel experiences of queer, trans and differently abled artists, artists of color and those from developing nations — Leonora Carrington’s work seems all the more powerful when considered alongside attempts by even her peers to strip her of agency and recast her in limiting, powerless roles: muse, fallen woman, crone. With shocking persistence, her work refuses these dismissals, demanding instead to be placed in conversation with those who might find her silence more convenient.



Leonora Carrington, St. Martin d’Ardeche, France, 1939. Photo: Lee Miller. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2017. All rights reserved. leemiller.co.uk