Reframing the Occult-inspired Paintings of Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo with Anti-Essentialist Methodology

Elizabeth Robinson

A Thesis in
The Department
Of
Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Art History)
Concordia University

December 2023

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Elizabeth Robinson

Entitled: Reframing the Occult-inspired Paintings of Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo with Anti-Essentialist Methodology

and submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (Art History)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final Examining Committee:

_____ Examiner
Dr. Nicola Tullio Pezolet

_____ Examiner

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)
Dr. Steven Stowell

_____ Thesis Supervisor(s)
Dr. Cynthia Hammond

Approved by: _____
Dr. Alice Ming Wai Jim Graduate Program Director

_____
Dr. Annie Gérin Dean of Faculty of Fine Arts

ABSTRACT

Reframing the Occult-inspired Paintings of

Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo with Anti-Essentialist Methodology

Elizabeth Robinson

This thesis examines the use of occult-inspired imagery in the paintings of Surrealist artists, Leonora Carrington, and Remedios Varo, through a feminist, anti-essentialist methodology. My approach departs from essentialist and universalist definitions of women that I identify in foundational scholarship on women Surrealists and offers a new approach by engaging with anti-essentialist theories. I argue that these artists draw on occult sources and folklore to convey images of womanhood that challenge the notion of a normative, fixed identity that essentialist ideologies necessitate. Further, I explain how their representations of typically "feminized" occult archetypes, such as the goddess and the witch, encourage anti-essentialist analyses by resisting and deconstructing the normative patriarchal stereotypes these artists encountered throughout their lives, including the limiting characterizations of women in the Surrealist movement. I employ feminist theories from Elizabeth Grosz, Diana Fuss, Simone de Beauvoir, and others to my anti-essentialist reading of their occult-inspired paintings. Finally, I use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism to analyze how, in their paintings and magic practices, these artists drew on and simultaneously parodied the empowering yet essentialist myths about women that exist in occult traditions, such as the perception that women wield magical faculties and innate spiritual connections to the natural world. Ultimately, this thesis argues for the relevance and value of an anti-essentialist methodology in feminist interpretations of Varo's and Carrington's occult-inspired paintings.

Acknowledgements

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to both of my supervisors, Dr. Cynthia Hammond and Dr. Steven Stowell. I feel so privileged to have received your unwavering support, patience, guidance, and invaluable feedback throughout this process. Your insights have been instrumental to this thesis and have greatly contributed to my positive experience of this graduate program.

I would like to thank my reader, Dr. Nicola Tullio Pezolet. I am exceedingly grateful for your thoughtful questions and insightful suggestions on my thesis. The interest and enthusiasm that you have shown for my research has helped motivate me throughout this challenging process.

Thank you to all the professors and fellow students in the Department of Art History who have offered words of wisdom and encouragement during my studies here. I am grateful for receiving the SSHRC CGS-M Scholarship, Concordia Special Entrance Scholarship, and FRQSC Masters Research Scholarship to support my thesis.

To my family and friends (Mum, Dad, Thomas, Irene, and Sammi): thank you for always pushing me to believe in myself. I am indebted to your endless emotional support and encouragement.

Finally, I'd like to thank my partner Tim, for proofreading every essay and listening to every single presentation. Your warmth, humour, clarity, care, and wit has helped keep me grounded throughout the duration of my studies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures

Introduction

Artists Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) and Remedios Varo (1908-1963) worked within the Surrealist movement. Surrealism lasted from c. 1920 to the 1950s, though its direct and indirect impact continued to be felt in subsequent decades. Varo and Carrington joined the movement in the 1930s, and would continue to produce Surrealist art until the end of their lives. As many scholars have argued, paintings by women Surrealists often reveal a proto-feminist ethos and centre powerful women.[1] For instance, Varo's painting, *Premonition*, 1953 (Fig. 1) conveys a feminist sensibility by incorporating magical themes and motifs. In this painting, four women walk away from an immense loom that towers above them in a starry sky. The straps of the loom are held up by two pearly orbs floating in the sky, which resemble small moons. Powered by these two celestial bodies, the loom weaves ethereal, cosmic threads into the checkered floor. Women emerge from these threads and walk away, infused with the cosmic material woven by the loom, an historical emblem of women's creativity and labour. Animated and fueled by the moons, this loom weaves women into existence like tapestries. By depicting an enormous magical loom engaged in cosmic creation, Varo elevates women's creative labour by associating it with a godlike act of genesis.

Similarly, Carrington's portrayal of women in *The House Opposite*, 1945 (Fig. 2) centres magical imagery to aggrandize labour traditionally associated with women and the domestic environment. At the right of the composition, three women stand around a bubbling cauldron, brewing a green potion—a depiction that calls to mind the enduring image of witches gathered

[1] Susan L. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art (*Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004); Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985); Janet Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988); Gloria Feman Orenstein. "Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism," *The Journal of General Education* 27, no. 1 (1975): 31–54; Ingrid Pfeiffer, *Fantastic Women: Surreal Worlds from Meret Oppenheim to Frida Kahlo*, (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2020).

around a cauldron in fantasy and art history (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4, for instance). At the middle of the painting, a horse-headed woman turns to glance at the commotion on her right, where another hybrid person—a woman with a tree head—leaps through the door. Small, robed figures populate the floor in the centre of the painting and appear to be miniature versions of the tree-headed woman, thus I read them as her children. The horse-woman's distinctly equine shadow emphasizes her animal-human hybridity, and may suggest that she has metamorphic capabilities, while a figure in the centre of the composition sprouts trees for fingers. Carrington has reimagined the traditional domestic environment and the tasks that historically befall women, such as cooking and childcare, as an invigorating and active magical realm in which women are powerful witches brewing potions and hybrid creatures capable of metamorphosis.

As these paintings demonstrate, Varo and Carrington were interested in magical imagery and often used it in their paintings to subvert patriarchal gender norms. They were interested in Western occult traditions, and often depicted women's central roles in these traditions. Victoria Ferentinou describes the occult as an

> amorphous, non-hierarchical, nondogmatic, constantly evolving form of culture that comprises various currents associated with esotericism, heterodox science and religiosity, and the supernatural, challenges dominant religious worldviews, is antagonistic to scientism and secularism, and is resourced by and resources popular culture.[2]

Varo and Carrington were familiar with many magical and occult traditions, including Theosophy, mysticism, Spiritualism, Jungian esotericism, alchemy, Wicca, Goddess spirituality, fairy-tales, Neo-pagan and ancient Pagan belief systems.[3] Many scholars have investigated the

---

[2] Victoria Ferentinou, "Surrealism, Occulture and Gender: Women Artists, Power and Occultism," *Aries* 13, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 107, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-01301006.

[3] It is important to note that Theosophists and other occult organizations heavily appropriated Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism because they sought to create a syncretic belief system that benefited from each culture's ancient wisdom. Carrington engaged in cultural appropriation herself, as some of her later works reference Mesoamerican Indigenous shamanic traditions. Varo also occasionally appropriated imagery from non-Western belief systems, such as Sufism and the Chinese cosmological text, the *I Ching.* The appropriation of other cultures'

role that occult-inspired imagery plays in Varo's and Carrington's paintings of women, however several foundational sources rely on essentialist language and concepts to explore these themes.[4] In other words, their analyses reinforce sexual difference and universalize women's diverse experiences by positing that certain traits are innate (essential) to all women. Some recent scholarship briefly addresses essentialism in relation to women Surrealists, but these sources do not utilize an anti-essentialist methodology, and instead conclude that the artists leaned on essentialist occult myths in their art,[5] and actively perpetuated essentialist, feminized iconography.[6] This scholarship gap prompted me to formulate the following research question: How might *anti-essentialist* methodologies illuminate Varo's and Carrington's occult-inspired paintings of women?

Throughout my research, I have come to the conclusion that Carrington and Varo used occult themes in their art to convey images of women characterized by nuanced, multi-faceted identities that are in tension with the notion of rigid identity that essentialism necessitates. In this thesis, I argue that anti-essentialism is an accurate framework to understand their work. For instance, I explore how Varo's and Carrington's depictions of women subvert and deconstruct essentialist views of women that they encountered in their male-dominated Surrealist community

---

imagery and symbols—even if the artist has a purported respectful intent—is problematic. Using imagery or symbols that originate from a specific culture without gaining consent from representatives of that culture is disrespectful because it removes them from their original spiritually significant context. Because Varo and Carrington only seldom appropriated imagery from non-Western cultures in the period that I discuss (1949-1960), this thesis exclusively focuses on their references to Western occultism and folklore.

[4] Chadwick, *Women Artists*; Orenstein, "Art History"; Gloria Feman Orenstein, *The Reflowering of the Goddess* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990); Estella Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth Century Women* (Indiana University Press, 1984).

[5] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 126; Victoria Ferentinou, "The Quest for the Goddess Matriarchy, Surrealism and Gender Politics in the Work of Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington," in *In Search of the Marvellous*: *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics,* ed. Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani (New York & London: Routledge, 2018), 188.

[6] Robert Belton, "Speaking with Forked Tongues: 'Male' Discourse in 'Female' Surrealism?' in *Surrealism and Women,* ed. Mary Ann Caws, Rudolph E. Kuenzh and Gwen Raaberg (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 1991), 58.

and patriarchal societies. I demonstrate my argument by analyzing two paintings by Carrington, and two paintings by Varo, all produced between 1949 and 1960, when they lived in the same Mexican neighbourhood and developed a meaningful friendship. I draw from primary sources, including the artists' paintings, their recorded oral statements, and their own published writing, as well as on biographical details about their lives.[7] Furthermore, I draw from the historical occult texts that these artists themselves read.[8] My secondary sources consist of foundational feminist texts on women Surrealists,[9] and theoretical feminist texts on gender roles and essentialism.[10] The first chapter sets the stage for the thesis by exploring the traditional gender roles Varo and Carrington faced, as well as arguing for the relevance of an anti-essentialist feminist methodology. In the second chapter, I present a literature synthesis through a close reading of one painting by each artist. In doing so, I build upon other scholars' feminist interpretations of the paintings by supplementing them with my own anti-essentialist analyses. In the third chapter, I explore Gayatri Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism as a means to advance an anti-essentialist analysis of these artists' engagement with feminized occult archetypes. I demonstrate

---

[7] Excerpts of unpublished interviews with Carrington quoted in Aberth, *Leonora Carrington* and Chadwick, *Women Artists;* Interviews with Carrington recorded in Kim Evans, *Leonora Carrington and the House of Fear*, (UK: BBC, 1992), Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4aooKLEHQg&ab_channel=MajorEsterhazy; Remedios Varo, *Letters, Dreams & Other Writings*, trans. Margaret Carson (Cambridge, Mass.: Wakefield Press, 2018).

[8] Gerald Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (New York: Magickal Childe, 1982); Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historic Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1948); P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York & London: Harvest Book, 1949); G.I. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World: Early Talks in Moscow, Essentuki, Tiflis, Berlin, London, Paris, New York, and Chicago, As Recollected by his Pupils* (London: Routledge, 1973).

[9] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*; Chadwick, *Women Artists;* Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys;* Orenstein, "Art History."

[10] Joan W. Scott "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75, https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376; Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York & London: Methuen, 1987); Alison Stone, "Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1 no. 2 (2004): 135-153, doi:10.1177/174046810400100202; Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays (*New York: Routledge, 2018); Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology (*London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).

this by analyzing the use of humour in one painting by each artist, as well as a historical account about their personal magic practice.

My anti-essentialist argumentation contributes an innovative outlook to scholarship on these artists. To my knowledge, no other scholars have proposed an explicitly anti-essentialist theoretical framework to understand the work of women Surrealists. In the following chapter, I provide context about the women artists of Surrealism, and the role of the occult in their work. I also explore the chauvinist stereotypes and patriarchal gender roles that they faced and rejected, both as Surrealist women artists, but also more broadly in their societies (pre-war/wartime Europe and wartime/post-war Mexico). I set up the goals of this thesis by elaborating on how some scholars have relied on essentialist ideas to understand occult-inspired imagery in the work of women Surrealists.

CHAPTER ONE: Traditional Gender Roles and the Feminist Role of the Occult

Surrealism emerged in Europe after World War I and was founded in 1924 when French writer André Breton (1896-1966) published his first Surrealist Manifesto.[11] The Surrealist movement was, generally, a welcoming environment for young women artists. Feminist art historian Whitney Chadwick argues that no other artistic or literary movement prior to Surrealism had as many women participants.[12] In addition to Varo and Carrington, many women artists were drawn into the movement through social contacts with male Surrealists. Léonor Fini (1907-1996), Dora Maar (1907-1997), Lee Miller (1907-1977), and Alice Rahon (1904-1987) are just a few examples of these important women artists. As an avant-garde and counter-cultural movement, Surrealism offered a "sympathetic milieu" to creative young women looking to rebel against conservative values and traditional gender roles.[13] Chadwick describes this phenomenon with admiration, noting that women Surrealists "dared to renounce the conventions of their upbringing," and became artists "at a time when few role models existed for women in the visual arts and there was little encouragement for women to establish professional identities for themselves."[14] Varo and Carrington are examples of the type of artist Chadwick describes. They were creative and rebellious young women, each of whom left behind her Catholic family's traditional values to become artists and live nonconformist lives among a community of like-minded Surrealists.

Like other Surrealists, Varo and Carrington incorporated occult imagery in their paintings. Some women Surrealists were especially attracted to the occult, as they were interested

---

[11] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (University of Michigan Press, 1969).
[12] Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 7.
[13] Ibid, 9.
[14] Ibid.

in women's roles in occult history and viewed spiritual alternatives as more egalitarian than institutional Christianity.[15] These artists experimented with the depiction of different gender roles by developing a visual language inspired by the occult, a spiritual alternative to the Christian patriarchal order. As Ferentinou explains, women Surrealists understood that the occult encouraged a mode of self-discovery independent of gender and offered "an alternative discourse" for women who rejected patriarchal definitions of femininity.[16] Nadia Choucha writes: "Faced with no strong female roles to emulate, many of the women turned to occultism, which held an attraction because of the powerful female archetypes and mythological goddesses in these systems."[17] To Varo and Carrington, these figures likely represented women role models with more agency than the limiting characterizations of women they encountered in their strict Catholic upbringings and the convent schools they attended as youths. Carrington even identified herself as a witch in a 1971 interview with art historian, Gloria Feman Orenstein.[18] Further, Varo's friend stated in an interview about the artist that "she liked to think that she was a witch."[19] Both artists' biographers insist that they rejected institutionalized Catholicism, in favour of less dogmatic occult systems.[20] In an interview after Varo's passing, her husband recalled a statement that Varo had made to him, referring to her preference for occult knowledge and alternative spiritual pursuits over the strict Catholicism of her upbringing: "What you grow up with you are given dogmatically, what you find you conquer yourself."[21] In this thesis, I narrow

---

[15] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 110.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Nadia Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy, and the Birth of an Artistic Movement* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1991), 96.
[18] Terri Geis, "Leonora Carrington in the 1970s: An Interview with Gloria Feman Orenstein," *Revista de Arte Ibero Nierika* 1 (2012): 18.
[19] Testimony of Xavier Lizarraga in Tufic Makhlouf Akl, *Remedios Varo: Mystery and Revelation* (Grenoble: Seven-Doc, 2013), DVD.
[20] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 18-23; Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys,* 96.
[21] Walter Gruen (Varo's husband), in discussion with Janet Kaplan, January 1979, Mexico City, quoted in Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys,* 164.

my focus on five of the occult traditions that inspired Varo's and Carrington's visual languages: witchcraft, alchemy, ancient and neo-Pagan mythologies, goddess-spirituality, and mysticism. Carrington's and Varo's biographical details demonstrate the traditional gender roles that impacted their early lives and elucidate how these relatively stifling environments influenced their view of occult traditions as attractive spiritual alternatives to Catholicism.

Leonora Carrington: Gender Norms and Feminism in Interwar England

Carrington was born in Lancashire, England in 1917 to a wealthy textile manufacturer father and an Irish mother. Raised Roman Catholic, Carrington spent much of her childhood resisting the social mores that shaped the lived experiences of girls of her class and age. Carrington attended convent school at the age of nine, but the nuns sent her home because they deemed her "mentally deficient."[22] Her parents shipped her to another convent school, where the nuns' strict treatment of her fuelled her distrust of the Catholic Church.[23] The nuns considered her rebellious behaviour inappropriate for an aristocratic girl and ultimately expelled her due to her unwillingness to conform to the rules. Carrington's parents sent her to finishing school in 1933, but this establishment also quickly expelled her for unruly behaviour. In a 1992 documentary, Carrington recalls her religious and upper-class upbringing as oppressive, due to the relatively outdated gender expectations that her parents and educators imposed on her: "They wanted me to conform to a life of horses and hunt balls and to be well considered by the local gentry I suppose."[24] Her biographer, Susan Aberth, refers to Carrington as a "reluctant debutante": as a member of high society, she was obliged to be presented to the court of George

[22] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 15.
[23] Ibid, 18.
[24] Testimony of Leonora Carrington, in Kim Evans, *Leonora Carrington and the House of Fear* (UK: BBC, 1992), Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4aooKLEHQg&ab_channel=MajorEsterhazy.

V, but Carrington had no intention of marrying an aristocrat as her parents desired.[25] At age eighteen, Carrington attended art school but as her parents opposed this, she had little financial support.[26] While these accounts of Carrington's upbringing demonstrate that she rebelled against conservative gender roles from a young age, the social mores she resisted were more traditional than the norm, and resulted from her specific context in devout Catholic, upper-class family.

Outside of this context, gender roles and patriarchal expectations were more nuanced. In 1928, British women gained equal voting rights, and historian Adrian Bingham argues that during the interwar period, Britain "saw the articulation of a self-consciously 'modern' femininity that drew upon real changes in the political, social, economic and sexual position of women."[27] This is not to say that patriarchal ideologies and traditional gender roles disappeared during the interwar period. As Sue Bruley argues, post-WWI British society also saw the re-assertion of many conservative values, in an attempt to restore pre-war "normal life."[28] Such conservative values included "the [reassertion] of gender divisions, separate spheres ideology and, after the war losses, an insistence on the need for women to procreate."[29] Nonetheless, Carrington's ability to imagine an alternative life for herself was indicative of the developments in women's history at this time and the decades leading up to it.

Furthermore, Carrington's father finally conceded in 1936 and funded his daughter's art education, allowing her to study under French modernist painter, Amédée Ozenfant (1886-1966). In 1937, Carrington began a romantic relationship with Surrealist artist, Max Ernst (1891-1976). This relationship, Susan L. Aberth explains, "propelled [her] into an artistic community and

---

[25] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 19.
[26] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington,* 21.
[27] Adrian Bingham, "'An Era of Domesticity'? Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain," *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 2 (2004): 233, doi: 10.1191/1478003804cs0014ra.
[28] Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (London: MacMillan Press LTD, 1999), 70.
[29] Ibid.

lifestyle that promised the sorts of freedoms and creative expression she had always longed for."[30] Her relationship with Ernst ended when Vichy France interned Ernst as an undesirable foreigner at Camp-des-Milles in 1939. Carrington suffered a mental breakdown, and her family sent her to a mental institution in Spain.[31] During her transfer to another mental institution, Carrington escaped and fled to New York City, ultimately settling in Mexico in 1942. Carrington lived in Mexico until her death in 2011. In Mexico, surrounded by a community of Surrealists who also fled the war, Carrington developed her own artistic vision. She married Hungarian photographer Emerico Weisz (1911-2007) in 1946 and had two children with him. She also cultivated a deeply meaningful friendship with fellow artist, Remedios Varo.

Remedios Varo: Gender Norms and Feminism in pre-Civil War Spain

Varo's upbringing was less conservative than Carrington's, and her family was middle-class. Born in Catalonia, Spain, Varo's father was a hydraulic engineer who encouraged her artistic development, and her mother was an extremely devout Catholic. Because of her mother's religious beliefs and the limitations of the Spanish education system in the early twentieth century, Varo's parents sent her to a convent school to receive a Catholic education.[32]
Like Carrington, Varo encountered patriarchal restrictions rooted in conservative Catholic traditions during her upbringing. Her husband, with whom she lived in Mexico from 1952 until her death in 1963, recounts that Varo often stated how Catholicism had been "thrown at her" since she was a child.[33] She came of age in the 1920s, when Spain was under the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera (1870-1930). Historian Shirley Mangini González indicates that the

[30] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington,* 27.
[31] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington,* 46.
[32] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 16.
[33] Ibid.

feminist consciousness which had developed in England and the United States was less present in Spain at this time.[34] She notes that until feminist groups began to mobilize more effectively in early 1930s, "women were still thought fit only for housewifery."[35] Drawing on firsthand accounts of Spanish women writers who were Varo's contemporaries, Mangini González writes that many educated women testified to "the embarrassment experienced by their families because they read books or wished to have a career […]"[36] She states that these firsthand statements from female writers and educated women attest to the prevalence of traditional gender roles in the country, which remained quite pervasive and impactful until Spanish feminism developed in the 1930s.[37] Varo's parents, however, recognized their daughter's artistic talent and went against Spain's traditional social mores by sending her to art school at age fifteen. Kaplan notes that this choice may be in part understood in light of her father's agnosticism and liberal-minded attitudes, which contrasted with her mother's devout views.[38] By 1930, Primo de Rivera's dictatorship came to an end and in the years leading up to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), women were beginning to "express more audible dissent" and "reject patriarchally inscribed definitions of womanhood."[39] Varo was thus not the only young Spanish woman rejecting patriarchal definitions of womanhood in pre-Civil war Spain.

In 1930, Varo married Spanish Surrealist artist Gerardo Lizarraga (1905-1982). Despite recent feminist advancements in the early 30s, Kaplan writes that predominantly Catholic Spanish society still expected unmarried women to live with their parents, thus Varo's marriage

---

[34] Shirley Mangini González, *Memories of Resistance: Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 7.
[35] Ibid, 5.
[36] Ibid, 8.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 27.
[39] Janet Diaz, "Vanguardism, Modernism and Spanish Women Writers in the Years Between the Wars," *SigloXX/20th Century* 6, no. 1-2 (1988-1989): 41.

to an anarchist avant-garde artist allowed her to move out from her childhood home and "establish the kind of life she wanted to lead."[40] Varo and Lizarraga had an polyamorous relationship which ended amicably after five or six years.[41] She then began a relationship with Surrealist poet Benjamin Péret (1899-1959) in Paris in 1937, after fleeing the Spanish Civil War. The two made their way to Mexico in 1941 after the French government separately arrested, imprisoned, and ultimately released them, due to their associations with avant-garde art and anarchism.[42] Varo and Péret ended their relationship in 1947. She married Austrian refugee Walter Gruen (1914-2008) in 1952, and this union gave her the financial support she needed to focus on her artistic career. Varo's sudden passing in 1963 of a heart-attack at age 54 devastated Carrington.[43] For the most part, Carrington and Varo lived in proximity to each other in Mexico City from 1942 until Varo's death, and Kaplan notes that the two women visited each other almost every day when they lived there.[44]

Mexico and Surrealist Gender Roles

Although Carrington escaped the conservative expectations of her family and Varo left behind the social mores of Spanish society, there is evidence that patriarchal and essentialist ideas about women were present in their host society. This is not to say that feminists had not made strides in Mexico: women gained the right to free, state-sponsored secular education and the right to equal pay for the same work as early as 1917. Moreover, women artists were building their careers in interwar Mexico. For example, Frida Kahlo (1907-1954, widely considered a feminist

[40] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys,* 31.
[41] Ibid, 32.
[42] Ibid, 69, 85.
[43] Stefan van Raay, "Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna," in *Surreal Friends*, ed. Stefan van Raay, Joanna Moorhead and Teresa Arcq (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010), 22.
[44] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 93.

and cultural icon of Mexico today) developed her artistic style in the 1930s and often explored issues relating to Mexican identity and challenged gender norms in her paintings.[45] Nonetheless, some scholars argue that traditional gender roles resurfaced during and after WWII. Monica A. Rankin cites Mexican propaganda encouraging women to join the workforce during the war, which reinforced essentialist gender ideology by insisting that the public sphere (in addition to the private/domestic) required woman's inherently maternal, nurturing touch.[46] Varo never had children, but Carrington became a mother in 1946 and rejected the unequal amount of domestic work that befell women. In an interview, she recalls a conversation with Varo in which she stated sarcastically: "We need a wife, like men have, so we can work all the time and somebody else would take care of the cooking and the children. Yes, men are really spoiled!"[47]

According to historian Soledad Loaeza, traditional views on gender roles in Mexican society resurfaced with more vigour in the 1950s, due in part to the development of anti-communist anxieties during the Cold War and the renewed influence of the Catholic Church.[48] In rural and urban areas alike, women were, generally, "expected to be the center of the family and the keepers of continuity."[49] However, Joanna Moorhead indicates in her recent biography about Carrington that her and Varo's lives in post-war Mexico were significantly less restrictive than the lives they led in pre-war Europe, and that they benefited from their white privilege in

---

[45] Liza Bakewell, "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 3 (1993): 168-170. According to Janet Kaplan, although Carrington may have visited Kahlo's studio in the early 40s with other Surrealists, Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera (1886-1957), ultimately distanced themselves from the Surrealist newcomers due to their privileging of Mexican Indigenous culture and their belief that these European artists had a colonializing influence in Mexico. For more on this, see Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 87-88.
[46] Monica A. Rankin, "Mexicanas En Guerra: World War II and the Discourse of Mexican Female Identity," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32, no. 2 (2011): 91, https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.32.2.0083.
[47] Testimony of Leonora Carrington, quoted in Nan Mulder, "Leonora Carrington in Mexico," *Alba* 1 no. 6 (December 1991-January 1992), 6.
[48] Soledad Loaeza, "Mexico in the Fifties: Women and Church in Holy Alliance," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2005): 144, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004422.
[49] Ibid.

Mexico.[50] Moorhead writes: "So far away from the conventions of their homelands, they were able to reinvent themselves–and also, as white, educated Europeans, they had far more choices and greater privilege than the vast majority of Mexican women."[51] Indeed, while they may have encountered some traditional gender roles in their broader Mexican society, Carrington herself speaks more to the role that gender norms played in her immediate Surrealist community, in both Europe and Mexico. Before moving to Mexico in the early 1940s, Carrington and Varo both spent some time in Paris with the core group of Surrealists, including André Breton, the leader of the movement.[52] The group of artists that settled in Mexico and made up the Surrealist community there included Benjamin Péret, Wolfgang Paalen (1905-1959), Eva Sulzer (1902-1990), Kati Horna (1912-2000), Esteban Francés (1913-1976), and Gerardo Lizarraga (1905-1982).[53] Carrington stated in a documentary that, "women surrealists were considered secondary to the male surrealists," and were "there [to do] the washing, cooking, cleaning, and feeding."[54] Moreover, male Surrealists often resorted to stereotypes, deeming the young and attractive women artists of the movement muses or *femmes-enfants,* an infantilizing term that emphasizes woman's allegedly inherent naivety.[55]

These stereotypes characterized the young women artists of Surrealism as sources of inspiration for male creativity, rather than artists in their own rights.[56] The *femme-enfant*

---

[50] Joanna Moorhead, *Surreal Spaces: The Life and Art of Leonora Carrington* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), 172.
[51] Ibid.
[52] This group also included Paul Éluard (1895-1952), Benjamin Péret (1899-1959), Max Ernst (1891-1976), René Magritte (1898-1967), Salvador Dalí (1904-1989), and others.
[53] Joanna Moorhead, *Surreal Spaces: The Life and Art of Leonora* Carrington (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023), 155-156.
[54] Testimony of Leonora Carrington, in Alli Acker, *The Flowering of the Crone: Another Reality* (New York: Reel Woman Trust Foundation, 2017), eVideo, https://concordiauniversity.on.worldcat.org/oclc/897766276.
[55] Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 33.
[56] Art historian Amy Lyford (2007) suggests that male Surrealists utilized stereotypes of femininity in their works to criticize French patriarchal models of masculinity, undermining common views on the connections between male creativity, rationality, and progress (17). For more on the relationship between constructions of femininity and

stereotype was not only infantilizing for the women in the movement; it also represented a limiting, abstract ideal. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker note that the Surrealists'

> […] notions of the feminine and their fascination with Woman are no more than idealist or essentialist notions of the difference between the sexes and ultimately work to endorse traditional definitions of Woman as Nature, Woman as silent enigma, Woman as Sphinx, Woman as Child.[57]

The Surrealist romanticization of "femininity" thus reinforced essentialist definitions of woman, and the *femme-enfant* trope was harmful for woman artists developing their artistic identities. It characterized women as inherently childlike, unrestrained and in touch with the unconscious. The unconscious is a concept from the Freudian psychological model. Indeed, the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), defines the unconscious as the unknown and obscure part of the human mind that exists outside of awareness and influences conscious behaviour.[58] But this association with the unconscious was not unilaterally positive or empowering.

The *femme-enfant* is an essentialist image of woman whose sole purpose is to, in Chadwick's words, "complement and complete the male creative cycle."[59] The stereotypical Surrealist muses also derive from male Surrealists' eroticization and sexual objectification of women. Breton contributed to these views about women. For instance, some of his writing conveys the idea that young, attractive women were muses capable of revealing the metaphysical ideal of Beauty to man by evoking erotic sensations within him.[60] He and other male Surrealists

---

masculinity in Surrealism, see Amy Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[57] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology (*London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 138.

[58] Sigmund Freud, *Dream Psychology: Psychoanalysis for Beginners*, trans. M.D. Eder (New York: The James A. McCann Company, 1921), 224.

[59] Chadwick, *Women Artists,* 13.

[60] André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 19.

believed that (heterosexual) erotic excess was subversive and capable of transforming human consciousness and society.[61] The *femme-enfant* stereotype was not meant to specifically apply to women artists. It could apply to women who were not artists, but it had a major impact on women Surrealists. The Surrealist emphasis on youth, naivety, and beauty led to an exclusion of mature woman artists, which the young women of Surrealism inevitably became. In a discussion on this topic, Carrington stated: "Once you were over twenty-five you were pretty well out."[62] Orenstein has argued that several (unnamed) women Surrealists experienced personal identity crises as they aged because of such stereotypes.[63] Carrington rejected both the role of muse and *femme-enfant,* stating on separate occasions: "I didn't have time to be anyone's muse… I was too busy rebelling against my family and learning to be an artist."[64] She continues:

> I never considered myself a *femme-enfant* like André Breton wanted to see women. Nor did I want to be understood by this, nor did I try to change the rest. I fell into Surrealism like that. I never asked if I had the right to enter or not.[65]

Although there are fewer direct quotes from Varo (in part due to her untimely death) the feminist sensibility in her artwork, her unconventional lifestyle, and her close relationship with Carrington suggests that she may have also rejected these stereotypes.

Feminist Scholarship and Gender Essentialism

---

[61] André Breton, "Introduction to the International Surrealist Exhibition (1959)," trans. Simon Watson-Tyler, in *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Discussions*, ed. Jose Pierre (London & New York: Verso, 2011), 152-155.
[62] Testimony of Leonora Carrington, in Jane Perlez, "Woman in the News: Leonora Carrington, Surrealism Lives," *New York Post,* Weekend Magazine, Section 3, 6 December 1975, 1.
[63] Orenstein, "Art History," 32.
[64] Leonora Carrington in discussion with Whitney Chadwick, 1983, New York quoted in Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 66.
[65] Testimony of Leonora Carrington in Fernando Orgambides, "Leonora Carrington: No me arrepiento de mi vida," *EL PAÍS (Madrid*), 18 April 1993, 30.

Feminist art historians have considered Varo and Carrington to be trailblazers for women in the arts, exploring their rejection of patriarchal conventions, as found in their lives and paintings alike. There is, further, ample feminist scholarship on Varo's and Carrington's paintings and their use of occult imagery. Some of the foundational scholarship on this topic relies on gender essentialism or insists that the feminist meaning of the works originates from the artists' own admiration for essentialist definitions of femininity within occultism. In her analysis of women Surrealists, Chadwick writes:

> Unlike the male surrealist, who absorbed the image of woman into his own image through the metaphor of the androgyne or the couple, *women artists have often chosen to emphasize the fundamental biological and spiritual forces that distinguish woman's experience from that of man, and that place her in direct contact with the magic powers of nature*. [emphasis added][66]

I owe much to Chadwick's ground-breaking book on women Surrealists, as it has brought many of their stories to light and paved the way for further research. However, I depart from Chadwick's acceptance of essentialist tropes in her own assessment of women Surrealists' art. She notes that women Surrealists emphasized "fundamental biological and spiritual forces" that differentiate women's experiences from those of men, and that these forces put women in touch with the "magic powers of nature." Following this quote, Chadwick goes on to interpret early Surrealist paintings by Eileen Agar (1899-1991) and Leonor Fini (1907-1996), arguing that the mythic and occult motifs in their paintings are direct or indirect references to women's "secret powers."[67] Ultimately, Chadwick argues that all women Surrealists believed that women had magic powers and a spiritual connection to nature by virtue of their gender, and she builds her interpretations of their paintings on this argument.

---

[66] Chadwick, *Women Artists,* 182.
[67] Ibid, 183.

While Varo and Carrington were both interested in myth and the occult, and the powerful female figures that emerge from these traditions (goddesses and witches), it is unclear whether they believed that women held special powers due to their gender. The statements of women Surrealists are often poetic, cryptic, and subject to interpretation. To my knowledge, Varo never made any statements that could be interpreted as evidence that she believed in these gendered powers. Moreover, although Carrington would later align herself with ecofeminist spirituality in the 1980s (which has been subject to accusations of essentialism due to its emphasis on a mystical connection between women and nature[68]), it is not evident that she believed in women's innate spiritual powers during the period that I discuss in this thesis (1949 to 1960). The goal of this thesis is not to identify with absolute certainty what these artists believed or not. Rather, my goal is to approach Varo's and Carrington's occult-inspired paintings of women from a new perspective which emphasizes the ways in which these depictions encourage anti-essentialist feminist analyses.

Chadwick is not the only scholar who has made the argument that the paintings of women Surrealists reveal these artists' preoccupation with essentialist myths about womanhood. For instance, art critic Gloria Orenstein argues that women Surrealists sought to define the "nature of their female identity" by "probing the symbolism related to the Feminine Archetype," and that women Surrealists such as Carrington were attuned to the "spiritual wisdom inherent in the feminine principle."[69] Like Chadwick, Orenstein bases her feminist analysis of the paintings on the essentialist assumption that fundamental spiritual forces distinguish women from men and that women Surrealists communicated this in their work. While it is unclear to me whether Chadwick and Orenstein are actively endorsing essentialist views in their texts, they do not

[68] Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: Southend Press, 1991), 154.
[69] Orenstein, "Art History," 35-38.

discuss the essentialist nature of these beliefs; rather, they both celebrate these ideas as being empowering for women.[70] Similarly, Estella Lauter argues that the presence of shared mythological motifs in the work by women Surrealists reveal a common, distinctly female experience and inspires a universal female epistemology.[71] Her analyses of Varo's paintings rely on the historic, essentialist association between women and nature: she argues that her paintings suggest that the world requires a specifically female saviour to "reconnect human life with the natural cycle of nonhuman life."[72] Not all art historians agree upon the emancipatory potential of the associations between women nature, and the divine. Art historian Linda Nochlin argues that these views "function as potent and vastly attractive mythic projections of essentialist notions of femininity," and are thus "the very antithesis of historical action."[73] In other words, although these ideas may be compelling to feminists who embrace the occult because they posit a distinct sphere of influence exclusive to women, they reinscribe gender binaries and universalize womanhood by presupposing that certain traits are *essential* to all women and their experiences.

Such universalism ignores the fact that women's experiences are inherently diverse. Philosopher Elizabeth Spelman argues that "gender is constructed and defined in conjunction with elements of identity such as race, class, ethnicity, and nationality."[74] Women's experiences also differ on an individual basis, because each woman is a unique individual.[75] Diana Fuss argues that "the very object of [feminist] inquiry, 'female experience,' is never as unified, as knowable, as universal, and as stable as we presume it to be."[76] This argument nuances

---

[70] Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 182; Orenstein, "Art History," 35.
[71] Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers*, 20.
[72] Ibid, 16.
[73] Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 67.
[74] Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 175.
[75] Mari Mikkola, "Gender Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism," in *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry (New York; London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 172.
[76] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 114.

Chadwick's, Lauter's, and Orenstein's contention that "woman's experience" is distinct from "man's experience." Moreover, by specifying that women's purportedly shared biology makes their lives different from those of men, Chadwick engages in a biologically determinist argument. Biological determinism is a form of essentialism that patriarchal power structures have used to justify the oppression of women.[77] Although Chadwick engages with this essentialism in the name of women's empowerment, a feminist use of biological determinism is still problematic because it is falsely universal and simply reinforces the ideology that biology rules women's behaviour and *ought* to dictate their treatment within society.

Some feminists even consider the term "woman" to be essentialist. Judith Butler argues that any attempt to define the category of women/womanhood, even in the service of feminisms, will produce normative requirements, which makes the definition restrictive and thus problematic. For Butler, even if its definition were to eschew biological determinism and anatomy-based conclusions about gender identity, the mere concept of womanhood "necessarily produce[s] factionalization… 'identity' as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement. Identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary."[78] I consider Butler's observation insightful and accurate, but other scholars argue that it is useful to retain some gendered terminology for the sake of feminist analysis. In a foundational essay, Joan W. Scott asserts that gender is a crucial category for historical analysis because "gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated."[79] Scott views gender as a fundamental, yet socially-constructed

---

[77] Mikkola, "Gender Essentialism," 172.
[78] Judith Butler,"Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism," *Praxis International* 11 (1991): 160.
[79] Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1069, https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376.

aspect of social relationships, "based on perceived differences between the sexes."[80] She concludes that studying the history of gender will foster a critical understanding of society's power structures and will help to comprehend "how history operates as a site of the production of gender knowledge."[81] While I appreciate Butler's contention that gendered terminology produces normative requirements, I also agree with Scott that gender is a crucial category for historical analysis, and her arguments justify my use of the terms "woman" and "womanhood" for a feminist analysis of historical women artists, even one that centres anti-essentialist ideas.[82] Furthermore, philosopher Mari Mikkola shows that conceiving of women as an "unbound and gerrymandered collection of individuals" rather than as a gendered social category is in tension with the central feminist assertion that "gender injustice targets women in a systematic, group-based fashion."[83] In other words, feminisms necessitate distinct individuals to take on a shared and consolidated identity category.

Alison Stone posits an anti-essentialist conception of womanhood as a remedy to this problem, which I consider an attractive solution. Like Scott and Spelman, Stone believes that gender identity is subjective and that multiple factors define it, including one's culture and historical period. She posits that women share a genealogy rather than an essence and become women "by taking over and reinterpreting pre-existing cultural constructions of femininity."[84] Women's reinterpretations of pre-existing iterations of femininity comprise an overlapping and complex "chain of history" in which women are positioned.[85] In sum, women's participation in

---

[80] Ibid, 1067.
[81] Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 10.
[82] I use the term "womanhood" in the narrow sense, to refer simply to the state of being (identifying as) a woman, not as an abstract term that encapsulates essentializing "feminine" ideals typically associated with women.
[83] Mikkola, "Gender Essentialism," 172.
[84] Alison Stone, "Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1 (2004): 153.
[85] Mikkola, "Gender Essentialism," 176.

history is what defines them as a social group, rather than any "essential" features that society believes they share. This position affirms the notion that conceptions of femininity and womanhood evolve throughout history and differ from one culture to another. By asserting that women become women by reinterpreting various iterations of femininity that have passed through history, Stone strips the concept of femininity of its essentialist and static implications. Stone's solution to the essentialism debate is also appealing because her definition of womanhood does not exclude trans women, genderqueer folk, and people who identify as women but do not present themselves as conventionally feminine. If women adopt, reinterpret, and express femininity on a unique, individual basis, then all women can make femininity their own without giving up their identification with the social group known as "women."

In what follows, I present how Varo and Carrington themselves reinterpret womanhood in their artworks. In the next chapter, I argue that an anti-essentialist framework is an appropriate methodology with which to approach their occult-inspired paintings, as their representations of magical women are nuanced and multi-faceted. I draw on feminist theory and art historians' interpretations of one painting by each artist, to set the stage for my anti-essentialist understanding of the occult motifs in their paintings. I also use this chapter to open a discursive space for my final argument in chapter three, wherein I explore Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism as a means to advance an anti-essentialist analysis of these artists' engagement with "feminine" occult tropes.

CHAPTER TWO: Transcending Stasis through Metamorphosis and Reshaping Reality

The present chapter is a literature synthesis through a close reading of one painting by each artist. I begin by outlining ideas from feminist anti-essentialist theorists and art historians, to assert the goals of a visual analysis that draws on these theories. I address common feminist interpretations of Varo's and Carrington's occult-inspired paintings, and discuss how these interpretations are in tension with, or support my own anti-essentialist understanding of the paintings discussed in this chapter. I expand on Ferentinou's argument that the occult functioned as a means of feminist resistance for these artists, without relying on essentialist occult associations about women, as others have. I draw on a variety of feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Elizabeth Grosz to argue that these artists' occult-inspired paintings of women do not necessitate essentialist feminist analyses but can instead be read through a feminist lens that embraces anti-essentialism.

Metamorphosis and its Symbolic Significance in Anti-essentialist Analysis

Post-modern feminists, critical race scholars, and post-colonial theorists have demonstrated the harmful role that essentialist ideas play in society. For instance, Spivak explores essentialism and how imperialist and patriarchal regimes use it to justify the oppression of colonized peoples, especially women. She uses the philosophical method of Deconstructionism to show that there is no essential truth behind the notion of gender difference. In a discussion about gender, Spivak writes that "no rigorous definition of anything is ultimately possible […]" and that therefore the "opposition between man and women […] is a binary opposition that displaces itself."[86] In other words, the identity categories that some individuals

[86] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York & London: Methuen, 1987), 77.

hold to be essential truths about the world are without foundation. Spivak insists that scholars should deconstruct entrenched presuppositions and practice alternate ways of understanding that are not dependent on "the self-identical category of truth."[87] If language is ambiguous and uncertain, then it makes no sense to strive for objective truth, much less define it. By engaging with the uncertainty of language, Spivak exposes how "the categories by which one understands, the qualities of plus and minus, are revealing themselves as arbitrary, situational."[88] For Spivak then, "man" and "woman" are empty terms that only gain meaning through opposition to one another. Regardless of their social construction, categories such as race and gender still carry social significance.[89] Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that it is important to think about the ways in which purportedly "essential" categories of identity are used to justify the organization of power and oppression.[90] Post-modern and contemporary theorists like Spivak and Crenshaw demonstrate that there is no essential truth undergirding social categories like race and gender, likewise the harmful stereotypes and structural inequalities that emerge from these categories.

Like Spivak and Crenshaw, feminist art historians have identified how and why essentialist ideology is so entrenched in patriarchal culture and highlight the deconstructive work that individuals must undertake to challenge these ideas. For instance, Parker and Pollock insist that, under patriarchy's current organization of gender difference, "there is no possibility of simply conjuring up and asserting a positive and alternative set of meanings for women. The work to be done is that of deconstruction."[91] In other words, it is not possible to simply assert new and more empowering representations of womanhood as positive alternatives to the

---

[87] Ibid, 88.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 no. 6 (July 1991): 1296-1297.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses,* 132-33.

patriarchal symbolic order, without first deconstructing the latter. While I agree that deconstruction is the most effective strategy for challenging and dismantling essentialist ideologies, I argue that Carrington and Varo successfully assert alternative meanings of womanhood through their art, which effectively contributes to the deconstruction of patriarchal narratives about women. The dominance of essentialist patriarchal ideologies in Varo's and Carrington's societies (the communities in which they lived in Europe and Mexico, and their surrounding Surrealist community) illustrates the need for alternative narratives, which these artists delivered by depicting women as nuanced, complex, and characterized by (often magical) agency. I understand these depictions as implicitly deconstructive because they subvert patriarchal narratives about women, simply by virtue of their powerful deviation from dominant gender norms. While this may not be the most effective form of deconstruction, to assert alternate narratives for women that subvert limiting gender roles, as Varo and Carrington did, establishes the notion that essentialist and prescriptive gender ideals are unsatisfactory and problematic in the first place.

They achieve these alternative representations by developing a visual language inspired by the occult, which I introduced above as an important theme for women Surrealists who sought a spiritual alternative to the Christian patriarchal order. As I explain below, occultism was by no means immune to patriarchal conceptions of sexual difference. Nevertheless, the occult provided a useful visual language to women Surrealists because it was a potential substitute for the prevailing patriarchal visual tropes and institutionalized Christianity.[92] Ferentinou states that for many Surrealists, but especially women artists in the Surrealist movement, occultism functioned as a "site of resistance" because they believed it to be socio-culturally positioned outside of

[92] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 110.

mainstream Western culture.[93] For instance, Choucha explains that in addition to their interests in inner subjective experiences and their search for the marvellous in everyday life, it was also the Surrealists' distaste for "conventional thought, behavior, and appearances" that led them to occult tradition.[94] Breton called for a "veritable occultation of Surrealism" in his second manifesto in 1929, around the same time that Varo and Carrington entered the movement.[95] The occult, with its emphasis on the esoteric and the magical, represented an antithesis to the rational ideology of the bourgeois establishment.[96] Varo and Carrington, like other women Surrealists, developed a visual language inspired by the occult that facilitated their artistic representations of more nuanced narratives for women. While I cannot be sure whether this was their conscious intention or not, I argue that the paintings encourage anti-essentialist feminist analyses.

Remedios Varo's and Leonora Carrington's paintings showcase women with magical abilities to transform themselves and the world around them. Being able to transcend embodiment or reality through metamorphosis or magically altering one's surroundings are significant capabilities because both practices are oppositional to stasis, a central feature of essentialism which feminists criticize. Simone de Beauvoir was an early critic of this kind of patriarchal ideology and highlights the discrepancy between the rigid ideal of "woman" that patriarchy perpetuates, and the reality of diverse, multi-faceted women. While there is no evidence (to my knowledge) that either artist read de Beauvoir's writing, her work sheds light on the idea of essentialism and how second-wave feminists like de Beauvoir, a contemporary of Varo and Carrington, criticized patriarchal ideas that we now understand as "essentialist." In *The*

---

[93] Ibid, 125.
[94] Choucha, *Surrealism and the Occult*, 3.
[95] André Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 178.
[96] Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 52.

Second Sex, de Beauvoir writes that the "Eternal Feminine" is a mythical and fixed ideal of femininity which fails to reflect the reality of the "dispersed, contingent, and multiple existence of *women.*"[97] She maintains that when women do not embody feminine ideals, they are made culpable: "it is said not that Femininity is an entity, but that women are not feminine."[98] Varo's and Carrington's depictions of women imply a subversion of this discourse. By drawing on occult traditions such as witchcraft and pagan goddess-centred spirituality to portray women in metamorphosis or engaged in reshaping their environment, they symbolically convey an image of womanhood characterized by agency and flexibility, as opposed to passivity and fixity.

Occult Motifs in Leonora Carrington's *Three Women Around the Table,* 1951

For instance, in *Three Women Around the Table,* 1951 (Fig. 5), Carrington uses motifs inspired by witchcraft and Celtic mythology to depict various stages of women's metamorphosis. Although the ethereal personages around the table are not figurative representations of human women, Carrington has identified them as "women" in her title. The supernatural scene shows three women with different physical features, floating in seated positions around a table. A partially eclipsed moon illuminates the scene. White strokes of paint emerge from the moon, appearing as rays of light cast upon the central gathering. A dark, muddy brown colour frames the scene and evokes an atmosphere of primordial earthiness which calls to mind herbal witchcraft practices.[99] There are several objects on the table: a bowl of round items reminiscent

[97] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011) 277.
[98] Ibid.
[99] The common view that accused witches in early modern Europe were simply healers who used herbs to create salves and potions to help rather than harm their community has been disputed in recent historical studies: see Michael Ostling, "Witches' Herbs on Trial," *Folklore* 125, no. 2 (2014): 179–201. However, the popular modern image of witchcraft – and the one which Carrington would have been most familiar with – promoted this positive image of the witch who uses natural magic and herbal healing to help the sick. For more on this conception of witchcraft, see

of acorns or walnuts, a vessel for pouring liquid, an orange fish, yellow fruit, and a perching crow. Two women hold fruit in their hands, and the red woman at right has a bird for a head. The light blue woman at left has a crow on her head, and the back of her head is disintegrating, as if transforming into something else. The woman in the centre of the composition has a brown complexion that mimics the colour of the painting's background, as if she were a chameleon blending in with her surroundings. The brightness of her gray-blue eyes contrasts with the background, and her haunting gaze confronts the viewer. All three women appear to have the power of metamorphosis. The woman on the right has already partially transformed, the woman on the left is beginning this process, and the centre woman appears to have the capacity to become one with the background.

Art historian Teresa Arcq interprets this scene as witches gathered at a ritual banquet, a customary celebration of the witch's Sabbath.[100] She notes that the women are "surrounded by crows, which according to occult traditions have the ability to shapeshift and are associated with witches and sorceresses."[101] I find Arcq's interpretation convincing, and I would add that the earth tones and the perhaps foraged natural items on the table convey an herbal magic commonly associated with witches in folklore traditions.[102] Because Surrealist paintings tend to be cryptic, encouraging polyvalent meanings, I would like to add another layer of interpretation to this work. Carrington was interested in Celtic mythology and goddesses, perhaps more than any other Pagan

---

Jo Pearson, "Resisting Rhetorics of Violence: Women, Witches and Wicca," *Feminist Theology* 18, no. 2 (2010), 152.

[100] Teresa Arcq, "Mirrors of the Marvellous: Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo," in *Surreal Friends*, ed. Stefan van Raay, Joanna Moorhead and Teresa Arcq, 107.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Elizabeth Tucker, "Antecedents of Contemporary Witchcraft in the Middle Ages," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 14, no. 1 (1980): 72, https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1980.1401_70.x.

religion.[103] Thus, I argue that these three women could also represent the tripartite identity of the shapeshifting goddess, Morrigan, one of the most important goddesses in Celtic folklore. She shapeshifts and primarily appears as a crow, or sometimes as other birds.[104] As a "triple goddess," Morrigan could appear as three distinct but interrelated goddesses: Badb, Nemain, and Macha.[105] As the painting represents three shapeshifting women surrounded by crows, I understand it as a depiction of Morrigan's three identities.

Although the Morrigan is not explicitly connected to the moon in Celtic sources, Robert Graves' book, *The White Goddess* (1948), associates goddesses in general with the moon.[106] This book had a great impact on Carrington and her understanding of goddess-centred spirituality.[107] Moreover, Morrigan is one of the Tuatha de Danann (tribe of the goddess Danu), who emerge frequently in Carrington's paintings of the 1950s. Her interest in the Tuatha de Danann began in early childhood, when her Irish grandmother told her that their family descended from this sacred tribe.[108] The modern witchcraft sources that fascinated Carrington drew inspiration from ancient Pagan religions and their powerful goddesses, so there was often an overlap between Celtic mythology and witchcraft practices.[109]

In particular, Carrington was interested in Wicca, a neo-Pagan religion that merged ancient Pagan beliefs with modern witchcraft. Although the key Wiccan source that we know

---

[103] Sean Kissane, "Celtic Surrealist." *Irish Arts Review (2002-)* 30, no. 4 (2013): 76, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23611550.

[104] Patricia Monaghan, *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore* (New York: Library of Congress, 2004), 340.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historic Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1948), 9-10.
[107] Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 186.
[108] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington,* 12.
[109] Margaret A. Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe. A Study in Anthropology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921); Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (New York: Magickal Childe, 1982), 37-38; Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière: The Witch of the Middle Ages*, trans. Lionel James Trotter (Paris, 1862; Project Gutenberg, 2010), 3-4, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/31420/31420-h/31420-h.htm#Page_4.

Carrington read (Gerald Gardner's book, *Witchcraft Today)* was published 3 years after she made these paintings, Ferentinou argues that the artist was likely familiar with earlier texts about witchcraft that made similar connections between witchcraft and pagan religions, and which would ultimately impact Gardnerian Wicca, such as Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862) and Margaret Murray's *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921).[110] Furthermore, many ancient Celtic sources present the Morrigan's three identities as witches or hags. [111] This overlap explains why certain elements in the painting can be read as both references to witchcraft and Celtic myth, such as the crows and the shapeshifting. Moreover, the Morrigan is connected to Samhain Eve (Celtic New Year) in Celtic lore.[112] Wiccans later adopted this Celtic celebration, which Carrington explicitly depicts in *Samain,* 1951 (Fig. 6).[113] While the two paintings differ in composition and colour scheme, they both capture a similar thematic: ethereal female figures in front of a moonlit night sky. This overlap between modern witchcraft and Celtic myth, both of which interested Carrington, indicates that these two interpretations are simultaneously possible: this could be a depiction of three witches, or a depiction of the three, hag-like manifestations of a Celtic goddess.[114] Women Surrealists often painted goddesses and witches, as they were both powerful feminized figures with much more agency than the chauvinist definitions of femininity that male artists thrust upon them.

---

[110] Victoria Ferentinou, "The Quest for the Goddess Matriarchy, Surrealism and Gender Politics in the Work of Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington," in *In Search of the Marvellous*: *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics,* ed. Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani (New York & London: Routledge, 2018): 176-177.
[111] Sharon Paice MacLeod, "Oenach Aimsire Na MBan: Early Irish Seasonal Celebrations, Gender Roles and Mythological Cycles," *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 23 (2003): 281.
[112] Geo Athena Trevarthen, "The Celtic origins of Halloween transcend fear," *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 90, no. 3 (2010): 6.
[113] Carole M. Cusack, "The Return of the Goddess: Mythology, Witchcraft and Feminist Spirituality," in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2009): 345.

As Aberth notes, there is no key with which to decipher Carrington's work, as her symbols and images "are profoundly personal interpretations of complex philosophical and magical ideas whose meanings have always been permeable and shifting, encouraging multiple levels of perception."[115] In other words, there are endless possible interpretations of this esoteric painting. Orenstein understands Carrington's depictions of goddesses as portrayals of an ancient Great Mother Goddess, that matristic societies collectively worshipped before the advent of patriarchal religions and the historic subjugation of women. She writes that the goddess imagery and

> tales of power that surrealist women artists and writers painted and narrated all point to the locus of gynergy (female creativity, energy, or life force) in their connection to the Earth, to legendary and historic knowledge about ancient matristic cultures, to power places, and to the spirit world, as well as to nature and the cosmos.[116]

For Orenstein then, Carrington's goddess imagery calls to mind a distinctly "female" creativity and energy that reinscribes women's purported connection to the Earth and the spirit world, which had allegedly become corrupted when patriarchal religions replaced ancient matristic cultures.

While I also apply Carrington's interest in goddess-centred spirituality to my own interpretation of this painting, I depart from this essentialist view that Carrington's goddess imagery reveals a specifically female connection to nature and the spirit world, choosing instead to focus on the centrality of these figures' metamorphosis, and how I understand this through an anti-essentialist lens. In response to criticisms that Goddess scholarship is essentialist, Orenstein writes that re-valorising a monolithic Goddess symbol does not generate an image of the "essential" feminine. She acknowledges that the notion of the "feminine" is culturally constructed

---

[115] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington,* 9.
[116] Gloria Feman Orenstein, *The Reflowering of the Goddess* (New York, Pergamon Press, 1990), 47

and maintains that the goal of the Goddess symbol is not to conjure a universal image of the feminine, "but rather a universal symbol of a worldwide civilization that was the antithesis of patriarchy."[117] Nonetheless, as evidenced by the quote above regarding "gynergy," her writing often reveals a tendency to universalize and essentialize women's experiences by positing that all women have unique powers of creativity and deep connections to the natural and magical realms by virtue of their gender. Furthermore, I read Orenstein's approach to Carrington's women-animal hybrids as essentialist. She argues that these depictions refer to women's natural association with animals and as such, function as metaphors for unrestrained female creativity.[118] Again, her argument reinforces sexual difference and insists that women have innate connections to nature, solidifying a prescriptive definition of "woman" that rests upon the notion of a homogenous "feminine" identity. In contrast, Ferentinou notes that the animal form of the hybrid suggests a fluid identity—but she does not argue for the significance of this within an anti-essentialist framework, as I do.[119] She writes elsewhere that a certain amount of essentializing is inevitable with women Surrealists, due to their historic and cultural context.[120]

Furthermore, she contends that women Surrealists ultimately accepted such essentialist associations about women, leaning on them in their work in ways that "centered on female experience and empowerment," by "[defying] cultural norms about femininity."[121] Although Ferentinou concludes that women Surrealists used occult tropes to "[renegotiate] fixed gender and identity issues," her emphasis on how these artists centre "female experience," and generate

---

[117] Gloria Feman Orenstein, "Recovering her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess" in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994), 177 (endnote 17).
[118] Gloria Feman Orenstein, "La Nature animale et divine de la femme dans les oeuvres de Leonora Carrington," *Melusine* 2 (1981): 133.
[119] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 121.
[120] Ferentinou, "Goddess," 188.
[121] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 126.

"feminine-oriented imagery" undermines this argument, as both concepts reinforce a fixed notion of "femininity," further essentializing women.[122] I therefore build off of Ferentinou's ideas regarding hybridity and fixed versus fluid identity, but depart from her overall approach by applying anti-essentialist theories to my understanding of Carrington's and Varo's feminized occult figures, and arguing in my final chapter that Carrington and Varo were often quite critical of these essentialist, "feminine" occult tropes. I also depart from Orenstein's interpretation of the empowering, albeit essentialist, implications that the Goddess symbol conjures in the work of women Surrealists. My approach foregoes the pre-supposition that representations of women-animal hybrids or women transforming into animal form infers a socially liberating yet highly essentialist primal link between women and animals. While these purported fundamental associations may be liberating or empowering for some, they reinscribe false notions of binary sexual difference and contribute to woman's position as Other.

While it is fair to say that the centrality of metamorphosis in this work does not represent anti-essentialist ideas in any explicit or formal way, I understand Carrington's frequent representation of women's metamorphosis in opposition to Surrealist and patriarchal conceptions of womanhood that are normative and as such, impose rigid identities upon women. These depictions contest the static notion of fixed identity that essentialism necessitates. Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz notes that essentialism

> implies a limit of the variations and possibilities of change—it is not possible for a subject to act in a manner contrary to her essence […] Essentialism thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristic, given attributes, and ahistorical functions that limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization.[123]

[122] Ibid, 125-126.
[123] Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 47.

In other words, essentialist definitions of womanhood and femininity imply a fixed subject, incapable of deviating from her established identity because essential attributes weigh it down. In this painting and others, Carrington's female figures transcend material reality by magically transforming themselves, and thus by extension they also transcend embodiment and stasis. Morrigan, the Celtic goddess whom I argue is represented in this painting, is said to be capable not only of shapeshifting, but also appearing as three goddesses. As such, I propose an anti-essentialist reading of this work: metamorphic capabilities suggest a multi-faceted identity that is transient, and thus opposes prescriptive patriarchal definitions of womanhood that, to quote Grosz, "limit the possibilities of change."

Furthermore, although the figures in *Women Around the Table* are not realistic depictions of human women, and their variable identities are the result of their magical abilities, I argue that the ideas this painting conveys about women are in certain ways truer to reality than the essentialist and prescriptive definitions of womanhood that persisted in mid-twentieth century patriarchal societies (e.g. the communities in Europe and Mexico where the artists lived) and which emerged in Surrealist discourses. While essentialist definitions of women tend to objectify and impose rigidity, the figure of the hybrid woman who may appear to be initiating her own metamorphosis reflects the notion of an identity that, as Ferentinou argues, is characterized by fluctuation and becoming.[124] In reality, women are not objects defined and stultified by essentialist concepts, such as the Eternal Feminine, but multi-faceted *subjects* whose identities are multiple and in a constant process of becoming. Indeed, Grosz maintains that the stasis necessary for a fixed identity does not even exist.[125] As such, she argues that all subjects are

[124] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 121.
[125] Elizabeth Grosz, "Bergson, Deleuze, and the Becoming of Unbecoming," *Parallax* 11 no. 2 (2006): 12.

constantly undergoing a process of becoming.[126] Consequently, essentialist myths which posit static characterizations of women have no foundation. I argue that this is a useful lens with which to approach Carrington's representations of feminized occult figures engaging in metamorphosis. Rather than view the feminized occult figures in her works as symbols of the goddess archetype – a fixed and monolithic representation of female subjectivity—I interpret these metamorphoses as symbolic of the multitudes that all women, as active subjects, embody. This also reflects Carrington's personal rejection of the one-dimensional characterizations of women in the Surrealist movement, such as the *femme-enfant.* She preferred to depict multi-faceted feminized occult figures who could alter themselves and material reality, such as goddesses and witches.

Occult Motifs in Remedios Varo's *Creation of the Birds,* 1958

In another deployment of feminized chimerism, Varo's painting, *Creation of the Birds*, 1958 (Fig. 7) features an owl-woman hybrid. In contrast to *Three Women Around a Table*, Varo's owl-woman is not in the process of transforming herself, but rather transforming the world around her by creating birds. This figure's hybridity nonetheless entails a fluid identity, as Ferentinou explains, as she is neither fully owl nor fully woman.[127] Varo depicts a feminized figure who has the agency and magical ability to transform the world through the creative process, a far more empowering and nuanced representation of the woman artist than the limiting Surrealist archetypes of muse and *femme-enfant.*

This owl-woman sits at a desk and looks down at her task with utmost concentration. Around her neck hangs a necklace holding a small string instrument. The pen she draws with is

[126] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), 66.
[127] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 121.

connected to the instrument's strings, indicating that music is a key ingredient in this otherworldly act of creation. To the figure's right is a palette with primary colours that emerge from an alchemical vessel, probably an alembic.[128] This container is linked to the window with small pipes, indicating that the colours are "distilled from the atmosphere."[129] The owl-woman holds a triangular prism up toward the window to harness the power of moonlight. Using triangular prisms in this way can split white light into spectral components and produce the colours of the rainbow. In this case, however, the light splits into three rays that bring the bird to life.

This image showcases Varo's frequent blending of scientific knowledge with occult traditions and magic. Janet Kaplan explains that Varo saw "scientific inquiry as analogous to spiritual pursuit, [and] felt that science must adopt the role not of domination but of harmony with natural forces."[130] Varo's hybrid owl-woman-artist is thus multi-faceted and embodies a vast array of diverse talents and sources of knowledge. In addition to references to alchemy, science, and mythical chimerism in this work, Varo likely drew inspiration from Gurdjieffian mysticism. She viewed the spiritual teachings of George Gurdjieff (c. 1866-1949) and his disciple, P.D. Ouspensky (1878-1947) as avenues to "self-knowledge and the transformation of consciousness."[131] Heavily influenced by Sufi Islam and Eastern philosophy, Gurdjieff and Ouspensky taught that most humans lack true consciousness and live their lives in a hypnotic state, but can try to achieve full human potential by developing their consciousness through

[128] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 202.
[129] Ibid, 181.
[130] Ibid, 172.
[131] Ibid, 164.

meditative self-observation.[132] She read texts which Gurdjieff and his disciple Ouspensky wrote, and met with his followers in Mexico alongside Carrington.[133]

In Varo's painting, the owl-woman uses the artistic process to create life, an act that Teresa Arcq maintains echoes Gurdjieff's ideas about art, the soul, and consciousness.[134] According to Gurdjieff, if a piece of art (visual art, music, or literature) advances the artist's or the viewer's spiritual evolution, then it has a "soul."[135] Further, for Gurdjieff, art has a soul if it results from the creator's active and focused consciousness, or because it brings the viewer, reader, or listener into conscious engagement with the work. This theory of art stems from Gurdjieff's primary goal in his spiritual teaching, which is to lead his pupils to a state of "objective consciousness," a heightened self-awareness attained through constant self-observation.[136] In Gurdjieffian mysticism, humans are not born with souls: they must evolve their state of consciousness to create their own souls.[137] While earlier Surrealists advocated for automatism (a method by which, it was thought, artists could access the unconscious through purportedly involuntary art creation or writing),[138] Varo's own "painstakingly deliberate technique" more closely resembled the highly focused, Gurdjieffian approach to art-making.[139] Arcq even suggests that Gurdjieff's theories motivated Varo's meticulous approach to painting and caused her to distance herself from Surrealist automatism.[140] In Mexico, Varo befriended

---

[132] P.D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (New York & London: Harvest Book, 1949), 141-142.
[133] Tere Arcq, "In Search of the Miraculous," in *Five Keys to the Secret World of Remedios Varo,* ed. Margarita de Orellana (Cordoba: Artes de Mexico, 2008), 36.
[134] Ibid, 69.
[135] Anna Challenger, "Gurdjieff's Theory of Art," *Gurdjieff International Review* 11, no.2 (Summer 2012): para. 4. https://www.gurdjieff.org/challenger2.htm.
[136] Ouspensky, *Miraculous,* 141-142.
[137] G.I. Gurdjieff, *Views from the Real World: Early Talks in Moscow, Essentuki, Tiflis, Berlin, London, Paris, New York, and Chicago, As Recollected by his Pupils* (London: Routledge, 1973), 191-192.
[138] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.
[139] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 147.
[140] Arcq, "In Search of the Miraculous," 40.

painter Christopher Fremantle (1906-1978), who applied Gurdjieff's teachings to his art practice. In the 1950s, he began a painting group in which artists worked for six to seven hours straight in complete silence, and Varo participated in this group.[141] Another participant recounts how those who attended began to perceive a "livingness" and movement in the inanimate objects that they depicted.[142]

Although Gurdjieff may not have literally meant that conscious art contains a soul, his theory is worth considering in relation to Varo's painting. Given the likelihood that Fremantle and Varo discussed Gurdjieff's ideas, she too may have explored their fantastical implication: that the hyper-conscious artist can generate a kind of sentience in inanimate objects. The "artwork" that she creates are living things, specifically birds. Arcq notes that the stringed instrument that connects with her pen could refer to Gurdjieff's belief that the universe is composed of vibrations and that as such, the perfect musical harmony can result in cosmic creation.[143] Having grown up with a devout Catholic mother and attended convent school in early twentieth century Spain, it is likely that Varo already encountered the spiritual belief that a piece of art could have agency or even a living presence within it, in the form of devotional and miracle-working images of saints and other religious figures.[144] In other words, the notion of the artist as a creator of conscious life was probably not new to her, and she explores this idea in her representation of a woman artist.

Arcq's interpretation, however, does not touch upon the significance of the central figure's hybrid owl appearance, arguably the most prominent and immediately noticeable feature

---

[141] Ibid, 37.
[142] Lilian Firestone in discussion with Tere Arcq, October 2006, New York, quoted in Arcq, "In Search of the Miraculous," 37.
[143] Arcq, "In Search of the Miraculous," 67-68.
[144] For more on Catholic miracle-working images and the spiritual belief in an artwork's agency, see Steven F.H. Stowell, "The Origins and Agency of the Miraculous Annunciation at the Santissima Annunziata in Counter-Reformation Florence," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 45, no. 1 (2022): 133-186.

of the painting. Following Arcq's contention that this painting is symbolic of Gurdjieff's ideas about heightened consciousness and the power of creation, perhaps the owl-woman is so concentrated on her creation process, such that she herself has become part bird. María José González Madrid raises the possibility that the owl-woman is a witch, noting that the Basque folklore of Varo's childhood often associated witches with owls.[145] This seems likely, as Varo would have encountered the association between owls and witches in art historical precedents as well.

For instance, she was highly interested in Dutch and Flemish Renaissance painting, including painters such as Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516) and Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525-1569).[146] Both painters included owls in their illustrations of witches. For instance, *Witches and Monsters,* c. 1475-1516 (Fig. 8) by Bosch (but formerly attributed to Bruegel the Elder) shows a witch at the top left corner riding a bread paddle with an owl perched on the end. In Bruegel's *The Stone Operation or the Witch of Mallegem*, c. 1559 (Fig. 9), a witch and her assistants heal villagers' ailments, and an owl appears perched at the left side of the composition. Varo may have been inspired by early modern artworks such as these. Indeed, there was a renewed interest in early modern artists among the Surrealists in the post-WWII period.[147] As always, polyvalent meanings are possible (and probable) in Surrealist painting.

Given the presence of multiple references to occult and scientific knowledge in this work, such as the alchemical alembic, the chimeric owl-woman, and Gurdjieffian mysticism, Varo was

---

[145] María José González Madrid, "'On the True Exercise of Witchcraft' in the work of Remedios Varo," in *In Search of the Marvellous: Surrealism Occulture and Politics*, eds. Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani (New York & London: Routledge, 2018), 275.
[146] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 193.
[147] This is evidenced in part by Breton's publication of *L'Art Magique* in 1957, in which he analyzes enigmatic paintings by early modern painters such as Bosch and Bruegel, in an attempt to assert a definition of "magic art." The book includes statements from other Surrealists (including Carrington) who propose their own definitions of magic art. See André Breton, *L'Art magique* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1957).

likely informed by multiple occult traditions and merged them in one painting. Varo herself was knowledgeable in many areas, having read books on witchcraft, magic, and mysticism, but also scientific texts.[148] González Madrid writes that "the various elements in the painting have multiple and complex symbolic readings, which point to the painter's broad knowledge of magical lore and practices."[149] I would take this statement further and argue that Varo reflects her own multi-faceted abilities and knowledges within the painting itself, personifying them within the hybrid figure of the owl-woman-artist.

Ferentinou argues that this work "mirrors Varo's personalized vision as a female artist," in part because it communicates "the hidden transformative potentials of woman."[150] I depart from this stance because, although it posits transformative potentials for women, it universalizes and essentializes women by implying that they share this innate quality by virtue of their gender. This is evidenced by Ferentinou's use of the singular form, "woman," as opposed to "women." Because women and their experiences are so diverse, some feminist philosophers recommend refraining from the urge to universalize these experiences by using the singular form, woman's experience.[151] Therefore, keeping in line with my anti-essentialist methodology, I argue that *Creation of the Birds* reflects Varo's unique personal experience as an artist, rather than a personalized vision that posits universal and intrinsic characteristics among women artists. There is evidence that Varo believed that she had extra-ordinary abilities, but her statement does not indicate that she believed all women shared these same powers.

---

[148] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 172.
[149] Madrid, "Witchcraft," 275.
[150] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 121.
[151] Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford, *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 6.

For instance, Varo addresses her abilities in an undated letter she wrote to Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca. She writes: "I don't believe I'm endowed with any special powers, but instead with an ability to see relationships of cause and effect quickly, and this beyond the ordinary limits of common logic."[152] Varo depicts this ability through the magical capabilities of the owl-woman artist. She represents the owl-woman as a potent magical figure, who has a great knowledge of the interconnected laws of the universe, distilling cosmic materials from the atmosphere into paint colours and splitting light rays, and combining these actions to create living birds. Combined with her magical abilities, this extraordinary understanding facilitates her creation of living beings.

By depicting a woman artist consciously engaged in creating not only art, but living things, Varo's painting connects Gurdjieffian mysticism, witchcraft, alchemy, and science. As such, her representation is in tension with essentialist ideas and Surrealist stereotypes about women artists. She associates the owl-woman's creative agency with the cosmic creation of goddesses and the magic abilities of witches, as well as the Gurdjieffian notion that a conscious artist, such as Varo herself, is powerful enough to create life. Varo's representation of the woman artist is not only empowering, but also a nuanced and multi-faceted alternative to the essentialist and often one-dimensional Surrealist stereotypes about women. Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti notes that it is helpful for feminists who embrace anti-essentialism to think of subject positions as nomadic, writing, "nomadic consciousness consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent."[153] I argue that it is useful to approach Varo's hybrid woman through this

---

[152] Remedios Varo, *Letters, Dreams, and Other Writings,* trans. Margaret Carson (Cambridge Mass.: Wakefield Press, 2018), 23. The letter is undated but she must have written it between 1954 (the publication date of Gardner's book, to which she refers in the letter) and 1963 (the year of her death).
[153] Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 33.

lens, to better comprehend the feminist sensibility of this painting. The owl-woman's hybridity symbolizes her (and Varo's) nomadic identity, characterized by multi-faceted knowledges and abilities. She is a single individual who embodies many identities: owl, woman, alchemist, artist, musician, conscious cosmic creator, and witch, all at once. Like Carrington in *Three Women Around the Table,* Varo deploys an occult-inspired visual language to depict a woman whose hybrid appearance, magical abilities, and nuanced identity challenges not only stereotypes, but any notion of rigid identity that essentialism relies on and perpetuates.

The goal of this chapter has been to discuss Varo's and Carrington's deployment of feminized occult figures, to explore common interpretations of this imagery and supplement them with my own anti-essentialist analyses. Moreover, I have attempted to build a discursive space for my final section, in which I address the opinion that women Surrealists acquiesced to essentialist occult myths about womanhood, leaning on these universal ideals to produce images of female empowerment. While Varo and Carrington admired the texts that argued for women's mythic powers and connection to nature (Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* and Graves' *The White Goddess,* for instance),[154] it is difficult to discern whether they actively believed in such essentialist tropes of occult womanhood that emphasize sexual difference. Carrington herself stated: "I've always found women as individuals as stupid or as intelligent as men. I've never had any reason to find them otherwise."[155] While this statement does not touch upon magic or the occult, Carrington's words undermine essentialist and gendered notions of intelligence that reinforce sexual difference. In short, the notion that Varo and Carrington actively believed and endorsed essentialist myths about women is, in my view, more ambiguous than the

---

[154] Gerald Gardner, *Witchcraft Today* (New York: Magickal Childe, 1982); Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historic Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1948.

[155] Leonora Carrington, quoted in Jane Perlez, "Woman in the News: Leonora Carrington, Surrealism Lives," *New York Post,* Weekend Magazine, Section 3, 6 December 1975, 1.

aforementioned art historians (Chadwick; Orenstein; Lauter) have argued. In the following chapter, I address these ideas and outline the ways in which these artists critiqued these myths in their lives and art, through humour. I ultimately argue that it is helpful to approach Varo's and Carrington's use of feminized occult tropes through the framework of Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism.

CHAPTER THREE: Strategic Essentialism and the Satirical Critique of "Occult Womanhood"

Varo's and Carrington's paintings of women draw on occult imagery and symbols, creating multi-faceted, agential representations of womanhood. These representations are powerful alternatives to essentialist gender norms and stereotypes that these and other women artists faced in the Surrealist movement, and patriarchal society. They cannot be said, however, to be radical expressions of anti-essentialist politics; this terminology did not exist in the artists' historical moment. Nonetheless, because Varo's and Carrington's paintings subvert the patriarchal views that feminists have since identified as essentialist, a contemporary feminist analysis of their work benefits from an anti-essentialist stance. It provides a framework that elucidates how these artists' paintings of women undermined the misogynist definitions of womanhood that were prevalent in their artistic community and historical context. In other words, the fact that these women artists depicted nuanced and agential images of womanhood as alternatives to the normative and often stifling images of femininity they encountered in their daily lives is significant for anti-essentialist discourse today. It demonstrates that many women artists did not accept the essentialist ideas that their communities thrust upon them. Women Surrealists understood that prevailing expectations of women were problematic, rigid, and limiting. Varo's biographer maintains that she would have "surely eschewed [the] essentialist definitions of women" that associate them with nurturance,[156] and Carrington explicitly denounced Surrealist and patriarchal stereotypes on multiple occasions, as cited above.

[156] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys,* 215.

The Essentialist Concept of "Occult Womanhood"

While some feminist art historians perpetuate gender essentialism in their analyses of Carrington's and Varo's paintings, Ferentinou offers a more appealing approach. While she does not go so far as engaging in an anti-essentialist analysis as I do, she distances herself from essentialist scholarship by acknowledging that the feminized occult archetypes and myths these artists drew from were indeed essentialist, but ultimately helped these artists produce "highly generative" proto-feminist messages of empowerment.[157] The essentialist images from occultism are variations of what Ferentinou refers to as the concept of "occult womanhood," a phenomenon that emerged at the turn of the century, as women interested in occultism came to recognize its emancipatory benefits.[158] Early supporters of women's rights who embraced the occult,

> intertwined current images of occult femininity, exposing a female identity that trespasses the Western notion of normative womanhood and rests upon the idea of women as the repositories of secret knowledge and exceptional spirituality.[159]

For instance, Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891), the founder of the occult movement known as Theosophy, and Annie Besant (1847-1933), who would become president of the Theosophical Society both supported women's emancipation and embraced this empowering Victorian notion occult womanhood.[160] Even earlier, writer Flora Tristan (1803-1844) perpetuated the notion of the female Messiah in her advocacy for women's rights, a concept that relies on "occult associations" of women with the divinatory and the spiritual.[161] Simply put, some proto-feminists and suffragettes viewed women as individuals with clairvoyant and mediumistic abilities who could communicate with the mystical forces of nature.[162] This belief was equally held by male

---

[157] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 126.
[158] Ferentinou builds on and borrows this term from Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1992).
[159] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 111.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid, 110.
[162] Ibid.

Surrealists who promoted the image of the woman artist as muse: she was a beautiful sorceress capable of enchanting men, but women Surrealists repurposed this fetishistic image to promote more empowering representations of women.[163] Women who embraced occultism utilized these essentialist associations to oppose the misogynist notion that women were inherently inferior to men "and to challenge their conditions of oppression in both the domestic and public domains."[164] I concur with Ferentinou's belief that the myth of occult womanhood was essentialist, albeit empowering for certain women. It emphasized sexual difference and rested upon the outdated belief that some characteristics and faculties are innate or "essential" to women.

Ferentinou explains that some occult conceptions of femininity insinuated a hierarchy reversal, and many feminist occultists were attracted to the idea of replacing patriarchy with matriarchy.[165] As mentioned above, Carrington was intrigued by Robert Graves' *The White Goddess,* in which he argues that goddess worship and matriarchy characterized early European civilizations.[166] He explains that the power of the omnipotent Goddess diminished as patriarchy spread to Europe from the East.[167] Consequently, the ancient Goddess was divided into multiple inferior deities, as patriarchal religions eventually came to dominate the world.[168] Although historians dispute Graves' claims as unscholarly and unfounded, his book formed a basis for feminist arguments about hierarchy reversal.[169] Carrington was attracted to his book's attention to goddess worship in Celtic culture, and she recalls that "Reading *The White Goddess* was the

---

[163] Madrid, "Witchcraft," 284.
[164]Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 126.
[165] Ferentinou, "Goddess," 173.
[166] Graves, *The White Goddess*, 341-346.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid, 345-346.
[169] Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 11; Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 145.

greatest revelation of my life."[170] Witchcraft also plays a role in the essentialist trope of occult womanhood, and modern witchcraft has historical implications of hierarchy reversal because some authors argued that it is a vestige of ancient goddess worship.[171] Gardner's *Witchcraft Today* "reiterated [Margaret Murray's] thesis on witchcraft as an 'Old Religion' and also argued that the infamous Sabbaths were actually pagan rites in which the Mother Goddess was venerated."[172] Following Orenstein's arguments about goddess-spirituality cited above, Ferentinou maintains that women Surrealists leaned on these essentialist images of occult womanhood to represent women as powerful and, suggest a hierarchy reversal by invoking ancient matriarchal traditions in their depictions of witches and goddesses.[173]

Feminism and "Strategic Essentialism"

In light of my anti-essentialist argument, it is productive to approach Ferentinou's statement in conjunction with Spivak's theory of strategic essentialism, whereby oppressed groups strategically adopt essentialist categories to further their enfranchisement and political goals, while remaining critical of essentialism.[174] Spivak asserts that the Indian Subaltern Studies Group's insistence on a shared "peasant consciousness" represents "a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest."[175] I understand Varo's and Carrington's use of occult womanhood tropes in the context of strategic essentialism, because their re-appropriation of these essentialist tropes convey images of women characterized by flexible,

---

[170] Leonora Carrington, in discussion with Whitney Chadwick, April 1984, New York, quoted in Chadwick, *Women Artists*, 186.
[171] Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 13.
[172] Ferentinou, "Goddess," 177.
[173] Ibid, 174.
[174] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York & London: Methuen, 1987), 205
[175] Ibid.

plural identities, and thus encourage an anti-essentialist reading. While they may incorporate somewhat essentialist tropes of occult womanhood such as the witch and goddess, their paintings strategically disrupt essentialist definitions of womanhood which impose fixed identities, because they represent women capable of altering the world—and themselves—with magic.

The notion of strategic essentialism reframes Ferentinou's argument and reconciles it with my own because it elucidates how, even if these artists sometimes used essentialist tropes in their paintings, an anti-essentialist approach remains an appropriate methodology to understand their depictions of women. Although Spivak's concept originated in her reworking of post-colonial theory, she has also stated that the concept can be useful in feminist discourse and gender studies.[176] Some feminists have also adopted the concept in their theories. Diana Fuss, for example, maintains that essentialism "can be deployed effectively in the service of both […] progressive and reactionary, mythologizing and resistive discourses,"[177] and that essentialism can either be oppressive or revolutionary, depending upon "the subject-position from which one speaks."[178] In theory, women can temporarily and strategically *deploy* essentialism to push back against patriarchy. Spivak does not believe that every case of strategic essentialism has effective results, noting that it works best when the end goal is deconstructive.[179] Because Varo's and Carrington's use of the image of occult womanhood ultimately subvert patriarchal definitions of womanhood and sexist stereotypes, I view this usage as implicitly deconstructive, though certainly not in a rigorous, theoretical sense.[180]

---

[176] Elizabeth Grosz and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Thesis Eleven* 10-11 vol. 1 (1985): 183.
[177] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, xiii.
[178] Ibid, 32.
[179] Spivak, *In Other Worlds,* 206-207.
[180] I should acknowledge that Varo and Carrington were nowhere near as oppressed as the group that Spivak *originally* intended strategic essentialism to apply to (the subaltern in colonized countries, specifically India). As European women, they benefited from white privilege, and although they left their families and their financial

Spivak insists that ongoing critique should accompany strategic essentialism to mitigate the inherent risks of essentialism.[181] Avril Bell builds on this idea, noting that this critique "ensures the ongoing dynamism and openness of identity categories crucial to avoiding atrophy and a lapse into a fixed essentialism […]."[182] I will show that Varo and Carrington critiqued the concept of occult womanhood by using humour in their art and personal magic practice. While they may have employed the essentialist concept of occult womanhood in their artwork, they also actively transformed its significance by making light of occult tradition in both life and art. For this reason, I depart from Ferentinou's stance that Varo and Carrington accepted the essentialist myth of occult womanhood. In the remainder of this chapter, I present their paintings and historical accounts from their lives as evidence that while they used it as an empowering alternative to patriarchal stereotypes, they did not always take occult traditions seriously.

To be clear, while Spivak's ideas contribute to my anti-essentialist methodology by furthering our understanding of these artists' complicated engagement with the image of occult womanhood, it would be inaccurate and anachronistic to insist that Varo's and Carrington's employment of occult womanhood constitutes strategic essentialism in a strict, theoretical sense. While their humorous depictions of occult womanhood work to undermine its gravity and by extension, its essentialist overtones, this is not a critique in the "robust European philosophical sense," and thus does not fulfill Spivak's specifications for the type of critique that would accompany an effective use of strategic essentialism.[183] Moreover, Spivak maintains that those

---

support behind when they fled Europe, there is no evidence that financial struggles were ever a major issue for them in Mexico. I use Spivak's term here because of its applicability and use in feminist theory, regarding patriarchal oppression of women in general. For another feminist art historical use of Spivak's theory, see Hilary Robinson, "Art & Society: Reframing Women," *Circa*, no. 72 (1995): 18–23, https://doi.org/10.2307/25562809.

[181] Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 206-207.

[182] Avril Bell, "Strategic Essentialism," in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology,* ed. G. Ritzer (John Wiley & Sons, 2021), para. 6, https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeoss268.pub2.

[183] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

who temporarily use essentialism as a revolutionary strategy should ideally do so self-consciously, with full awareness of the risks of slipping into a permanent essentialist position.[184] The concept of essentialism did not exist in the 50s and early 60s; Spivak's articulation came much later. Thus, despite their feminist sensibilities, the two artists obviously could not have been consciously engaging in strategic essentialism. For these reasons, I understand these artists' subversive employment of occult womanhood as parallel or analogous to strategic essentialism, rather than as an actual iteration of it as per Spivak's exacting specifications. Their complicated relationship with the myth of occult womanhood is in part evidenced by their own magic practice, which they often conducted together and with a sense of humour that undermines the potential spiritual seriousness of these practices.

Remedios Varo's and Leonora Carrington's Magic Practice

Historical accounts show that Varo and Carrington had a penchant for mischief and got together to create humorous recipes for potions. The absurdity of some of these potions ridicules the serious role that potions play in witchcraft and apothecary traditions. For instance, Varo's notebook contains a recipe for a witch's brew meant to stimulate erotic dreams, which calls for "a kilo of strong roots, three white hens, a head of garlic, four kilos of honey, a mirror, two calf livers, a brick, two clothespins, a corset with stays, two false moustaches, and hats to taste."[185] The specific instructions for the cook amplify the humour of this recipe:

> Put on the corset and make it quite tight. Sit down in front of the mirror, relax your nervous tension, smile and try on the mustaches and hats according to your taste (three-cornered, Napoleonic, cardinal's hat, imitation with lace, Basque beret, etc.) … Run and pour the broth (which should be very reduced) quickly into a cup. Quickly come back with it to in front of the mirror, smile, take a sip of broth, try on one of the mustaches,

[184] Ibid, 3.
[185] Remedios Varo's hand-written recipe in sketchbook, undated, Walter Gruen's personal archive, quoted in Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys,* 95.

> take another sip, try on a hat, drink, try on everything, taking sips in between and do it all as quickly as you can."[186]

These preposterously meticulous and comical directions are for a recipe that is meant to bring hedonistic pleasure to the cook in the form of erotic dreams. In addition to poking fun at the tradition of potion-making by pushing the absurdity of the recipe to its limits, there is something tongue-in-cheek about the gendered aspects of this recipe.

The instructions oblige the cook to perform and witness their own whimsical performance of gender masquerade, by sitting in front of a mirror, wearing a very tight corset, smiling, trying on various mustaches, and a variety of women's and men's hats. The recipe seems to joke that watching oneself perform two genders at once can stimulate erotic dreams. As Judith Butler explains, imitating or parodying gender can be subversive because it reveals that gender is performative rather than natural.[187] Both the ingredients and instructions in Varo's recipe work together to imply a critique not only of apothecary/witchcraft traditions (in which strange and seemingly random ingredients and methods promise outlandish results), but also of the fixed extremes of performative gender roles. To give a historical example of the strange type of ingredients found in witch's potions, the following items were allegedly discovered by Parisian police in cauldrons belonging to two French women who were sentenced to death on charges of witchcraft and poisoning in 1679: witches' thimble, root of mandragore, powder of toad, bat, and viper, pieces of hanged-man's fat, bone splinters, nail clippings, samples of human blood, and other human bodily fluids.[188] The arbitrary ingredients in Varo's recipe seem to mock this kind of

---

[186] Ibid.
[187] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York & London: Routledge, 1999), 175.
[188] Frances Mossiker, *The Affair of the Poisons: Louis XIV, Madame de Montespan, and one of History's Great Unsolved Mysteries* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 157.

potion recipe, while her ridiculous instructions for the "cook" encourage a gender masquerade that I read as a parody of gender performativity.

This critique of gendered occult traditions and conventional gender roles is evidenced through Varo's and Carrington's association of the traditionally feminized domestic task of cooking with potion-making in this recipe, a theme that Kaplan explores in her discussion of Varo's and Carrington's paintings: "Using images of cooking as a metaphor for hermetic pursuits, they established an association between women's traditional roles and magical acts of transformation."[189] This recipe in particular draws a connection between the "domestic" act of cooking and potion-making, which Western society associates with women because of their historic role in making and distributing potions in Europe: some historians argue that in the Medieval era, midwives, herbalists, and wise women made potions for their healing practices, but the Church often deemed them witches.[190] Furthermore, a gendered dichotomy emerged in occult discourses during the Renaissance. These discourses associated magical practice (such as potion-making) with the body and the feminine and connected theory with the mind and the masculine.[191] In other words, potion-making plays a role in the essentialist myth of occult womanhood. It is a practice and trope that Western society associates with occult womanhood through historical witchcraft traditions and biologically determinist ideas in occult discourse that are traceable back to the early modern period. The recipe links potion-making with the traditionally domestic act of cooking, as Varo has written and formatted her text like a recipe for a meal.[192] It thus brings together two related practices that Western patriarchal society views as

---

[189] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 96.
[190] William L. Minkowski "Women Healers of the Middle Ages: Selected Aspects of Their History," *American Journal of Public Health* 82, no. 2 (February 1992): 294, doi:10.2105/AJPH.82.2.288.
[191] Jay Johnston, "Gender and the Occult" in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London: Routledge, 2014): 685.
[192] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys,* 95.

feminine, one magical and the other domestic. In doing so, Varo adds gendered layers to this recipe, contributing to the effectiveness of the gender parody and implicit critique of occult womanhood. I also approach some of Varo's and Carrington's paintings as critiques of occult womanhood, even while understanding their frequent use of gendered occult imagery as strategically opposed to patriarchal and Surrealist definitions of "woman."

Parody of "Occult Womanhood" in Remedios Varo's *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon*, 1960

For instance, I read Varo's painting *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon,* 1960 (Fig. 10) as a parody of plastic surgery that humorously plays with concepts related to occult "femininity." In it, a young woman with light blue skin wears a transparent veil that is comically ineffective at hiding her large angular nose. As the woman leaps over the doorway, the threshold between her current appearance and future cosmetic transformation, she humorously gazes back toward the viewer and reveals her profile in all its glory. The imagery in the painting indicates that this is no ordinary plastic surgeon: the surgeon's office is ironically located in a Gothic crypt-like building reminiscent of gloomy medieval fantasy settings. The model in the display window appears lifelike and her long hair swirls gracefully around her exaggerated hourglass figure. Notably, it is implied that the plastic surgeon gave her two extra pairs of breasts. The writing on the window boasts: "We surpass nature! In our glorious plastic-nylon era there are no limits / boldness / good taste / elegance and turgidity / is our motto. We speak French."[193] This advertisement is amusing because of its surreal absurdity, a comic device that Varo also uses in the recipe to stimulate erotic dreams. The use of the Spanish word "turgencia" (turgidity) adds to the advertisement's

[193] "Remedios Varo: Visita Al Cirujano Plástico*,"* Sotheby's, accessed January 10, 2023, https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2022/modern-evening-auction-4/visita-al-cirujano-plastico.

comedic effect by rendering it grotesque, because of the fleshly implications of this scientific word for swelling. This enhances the monstrousness of the model's abnormally exaggerated signifiers of conventional femininity and contributes to the painting's general sense of parody.

I argue that this painting is not a critical satire of plastic surgery but rather a playful parody of such surgical procedures and the myth of occult womanhood, that draws from occult themes to depict a monstrous exaggeration of femininity. Because of her own feelings about plastic surgery, and the recipient for whom Varo made this work, it is unlikely that this is a seething critique of cosmetic procedures. She gave this painting to a plastic surgeon in Mexico, with whom she consulted frequently "only half in jest" about the length of her own nose and the potential benefits of rhinoplasty.[194] It is fairer to say that *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon* makes use of a plastic surgery setting to parody normative and occult modes of femininity. Part of this parody emerges from Varo's depiction of the model in the display window, whose many-breasted appearance calls to mind other historic iterations of occult and mythological womanhood.

In Pagan mythologies and occult traditions, as well as within the Surrealist art movement, there are multiple references to polymastia (the presence of supernumerary breasts) that Varo would have probably been familiar with. Many-breasted goddesses have historically been present in various religions and folklores around the world. For instance, Greco-Roman sculptors often depicted Diana/Artemis of Ephesus with many breasts (although some historians argue that the breast-like protuberances are dates, also symbols of fertility).[195] The figure in the display window calls to mind a depiction of the many-breasted Mother Goddess in an early modern alchemical text (Fig. 11), in which the deity personifies an alchemical furnace.[196] It is challenging to know

[194] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys,* 185.
[195] Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 16.
[196] Diana/Artemis of Ephesus also appears in Chapter 19 of The Acts of the Apostles, which Varo may have read during her time in convent school, although the goddess's appearance is not described in this text.

whether Varo was familiar with this specific source.[197] Nonetheless, Varo would have certainly been familiar with the Wiccan appropriation of Diana/Artemis for worship under the form of the Great Mother,[198] as Carrington translated a copy of *Witchcraft Today* into Spanish for Varo to read.[199] Western folklore began to associate witches with polymastia throughout the witch trials. In England and Ireland during the Renaissance, some individuals referred to an extra protuberance or mark on a woman's body as a "witch's teat" and took it as a sign that she was a witch.[200] Some individuals believed that the witch's devil (her familiar) would seek nourishment by sucking blood from this third breast.[201] In other words, the presence of extra breasts as traditional bodily signifiers of "femininity" has played a role in the tropes of occult womanhood throughout history.

In other cases, polymastia represents patriarchal anxieties around a monstrous, abject version of "female" sexuality. Several male Surrealists depicted polymastia as disturbing and grotesque, such as Max Ernst (Fig. 12) and Hans Bellmer (Fig. 13). While Bellmer's *The Doll* is also meant to be erotic, it ultimately expresses male anxieties about the abject and monstrous female form in its disturbing and uncanny exploration of the doll's body as passive sexual object.[202] Bellmer was fascinated by so-called cases of female hysteria in young girls, "whose body images and behavior were severely disturbed by the onset of puberty."[203] He reflects these

---

[197]The sources that discuss Varo's interest in alchemy (e.g. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*; Chadwick, *Women Artists*, etc.) do not reference the specific alchemical texts that she consulted.
[198] Gardner, *Witchcraft Today,* 42.
[199] Remedios Varo, *Letters, Dreams, and Other Writings,* trans. Margaret Carson (Cambridge MA: Wakefield Press, 2018), 23.
[200] Yalom, *History of the Breast,* 60.
[201] Ibid.
[202] For two major studies on anxiety and the uncanny in Bellmer's *The Doll* series, see Rosalind Krauss, "Uncanny," in *Formless: A User's Guide,* ed. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 192-197; Hal Foster, "Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus," in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, ed. Jennifer Mundy (Princeton University Press, 2001), 203-226.
[203] Sue Taylor, "Hans Bellmer in The Art Institute of Chicago: The Wandering Libido and the Hysterical Body," *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 162, https://doi.org/10.2307/4104319.

pathologies in his uncanny dolls, whose body parts are often displaced to a grotesque effect, or in this case, presented with abnormal extra breasts. Moreover, in her historical study of witchcraft, Lyndal Roper argues that during the early modern witch-hunts, Protestants and Catholics often identified mature women as witches due to the belief that their femininity and sexuality could no longer be tamed and chastened, and could thus be used in conjunction with magic to cause harm to children or castrate men.[204] While Varo's model appears youthful as opposed to mature, I argue that her abnormal breasts parody this anxiety that a witch harbours dangerously excessive amounts of unrestrainable "female sexuality." In sum, Western pagan religions have understood the presence of multiple breasts to signify fertility (i.e. a desirable, "natural" femininity), but later occult history and male Surrealist artists have also associated polymastia with a threatening, monstrous femininity.

In *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon*, Varo plays with the notion of conventional femininity by pushing it to an inhuman anatomical extreme. There are many potential layers of meaning in this work. I approach her engagement with the body and biology in this painting as a parody of occult womanhood, which stresses sexual difference in its positioning of woman as closer to nature. Exaggerating "female" anatomy to the extreme and situating it in the context of plastic surgery and its implications of artifice generates a playful parody that questions this aspect of occult womanhood and the idea of a rigid or fixed feminine ideal more generally. I understand this parody of occult femininity in opposition to its limited representations in male Surrealist representations as fetishized, erotic, and grotesque. The woman in the display window is multi-faceted, embodying both conventional beauty and freakish abnormality simultaneously. She advertises a version of femininity that is so highly idealized and over-the-top, that it borders on

[204] Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994),192.

Frankensteinian abomination. This carries tongue-in-cheek implications about Western society's unattainable beauty standards, which attempt to limit women's diversity by perpetuating universal ideals.

Yet, Varo's painting is also a witty representation of women's metamorphosis, like other works that I discuss above, but one that she presents with humour. While witches, goddesses, and other feminine spiritual entities are often able to shapeshift in occult traditions and folklore, the feminine figures in this depiction actuate their metamorphoses by visiting the plastic surgeon, just like women in the real world. Yet Varo implies that the plastic surgeon can produce a woman like the one in the display window, reminiscent of goddesses and supernatural feminized entities of myth and fantasy. *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon* thus expresses Varo's interest in both fantastical metamorphosis and the scientific advancements of her time. She merges the two in this humorous representation of women's metamorphosis. Whether through the aid of technological developments, magic, or both, Varo often depicted women capable of self-transformation. In a statement about *The Call,* 1961 (Fig. 14), which she finished just one year after *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon*, Varo writes that the central figure in this work carries an alchemist's mortar around her neck, "not for mixing substances and conspiracies, but for transcending her own self."[205] This statement reflects Varo's privileging of metamorphosis and her frequent depictions of women using magic or other means to transcend embodiment and fixed identity by altering material reality.

[205] Varo, *Letters,* 110.

Parody of "Occult Womanhood" in Leonora Carrington's *Bird Pong*, 1949

Similarly, many of Carrington's fantastical representations of women are steeped in a dry and sometimes macabre sense of humour. As Aberth explains, occult practices play a great role in Carrington's paintings but are "animated by a mischievous sense of humour that serves to subvert any potentially pedantic spiritual weight."[206] This mischievous sense of humour not only subverts the spiritual weight of occult traditions; I argue that it also undermines the myth of occult womanhood. Carrington is famous for her subtle but sometimes grisly sense of humour, which was more prominent in her short stories but is also evident in some paintings.[207] For instance, consider *Bird Pong,* 1949 (Fig. 15), which depicts two hybrid animal women playing what appears at first glance to be ping-pong. The woman at the left appears to have fur, and the one at the right is birdlike, with wings on her body and a nest on her head. A closer inspection reveals that a colourful bird is attached to the right woman's paddle on a string, and her opponent holds the same type of bird on another string, as if on a leash. Underneath the ping-pong table lays a lifeless bird, its feathers scattered around its body. The title dryly indicates that these hybrid women are playing ping-pong with birds instead of balls. At the bottom left of the painting, three faceless children huddle around whispering to each other, as though horrified by the brutality of this game and the monstrous women. The blood-red colour of the background amplifies the macabre nature of the depiction and its subject matter. A window at the centre of the composition looks out onto a prestigious Victorian garden setting, populated by lush greenery, statues, and two figures taking a stroll. The peaceful setting on the other side of the window creates an

[206] Aberth, *Leonora Carrington,* 9.
[207] For more on parody in Carrington's fiction, see Tifaine Bachet, "Parody and Femininity in British Surrealism (Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington)," *Polysèmes* 23 (2020): 1-14.

exaggerated contrast with the grim yet playful depiction of violence that occurs inside, giving this painting a mischievous sense of satire and black humour.

I approach *Bird Pong* as a subtle satire of the occult discourse that associates women with nature and animals. In Chapter 2, I discussed how Carrington and Varo depict women-animal hybrids, and how I understand these representations with anti-essentialist methodologies because they emphasize the women's multi-faceted identities and their ability to transform themselves. While *Bird Pong* centres two powerful hybrid women, the scene's mischievous black humour adds another layer of meaning, simultaneously undermining the trope of occult womanhood which posits that women are spiritually connected to nature and animals. In this scene, despite being depicted as half-animal, these women appear to have no spiritual connection to the birds they indifferently treat as objects to serve their frivolous aristocratic past-time. Carrington emphasizes the women's callousness in this absurdly comical, yet disturbing, representation of occult womanhood. The figures' cruelty implies a subversion of the essentialist notion that nurturance is an inherently feminine trait, an idea that undergirds the occult discourse that associates women with nature, or Mother Earth.[208] In short, I view Carrington's engagement with the myth of occult womanhood as an implicitly subversive employment of essentialist tropes in the same vein as strategic essentialism. She utilizes archetypal images of occult womanhood such as witches and goddesses to generate alternative narratives of womanhood that are antithetical to patriarchal and Surrealist stereotypes. Since I interpret this as an implicitly deconstructive and dissentient use of occult womanhood, I equally consider her use of humour in some of these depictions as a subtle critique of the same myth of occult womanhood.

---

[208] Kathryn Rountree, "The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 43, no. 2 (1999): 147.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo to some extent rejected the essentialist myth of occult womanhood. Their employment of these feminine occult tropes comes across as strategically empowering and subversive, as their occult-inspired depictions of women oppose the often limiting definitions of womanhood that existed in Western patriarchal culture and Surrealism at the time. Both artists depicted magical women with the ability to transform themselves and the world around them, an artistic choice that I approach with an anti-essentialist framework. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism is thus helpful in furthering an understanding of Varo's and Carrington's feminist sensibilities and their implicitly subversive engagement with the myth of occult womanhood. They often addressed the tropes of occult womanhood with humour and playful critique. As Spivak maintains, an ongoing critique of essentialist narrative must occur for strategic essentialism to be effective. I understand the artists' humorous engagements with the myth of occult womanhood as a subtle form of critique. The sense of humour present in many of their paintings undermines the gravitas of many occult sources and associated myths about womanhood. Their subtle critiques of the essentialist myth of occult womanhood, along with their occult-inspired depictions of women, which imply anti-patriarchal meaning and empowerment for women, lead me to perceive their artistic employment of occult womanhood as ultimately subversive and analogous to strategic essentialism.

Conclusion

I have argued that Varo's and Carrington's occult-inspired visual languages encourage an anti-essentialist feminist approach because their depictions of women and feminized occult figures underscore an image of womanhood that is nuanced and multi-faceted. This is not to say that these artists were aware of anti-essentialist ideas, as this would be anachronistic. Rather, my goal has been to propose an alternative way of understanding the intersection of feminisms and occultist motifs in these artists' works. This alternative mode of understanding acknowledges these artists' usage of essentialist tropes of occult womanhood but indicates how these representations might ultimately and productively be read through an anti-essentialist lens because, in their content and composition, they undermine essentialist narratives about womanhood by presenting images of women's identities that are nuanced, plural, and flexible.

My feminist analysis of women Surrealists' artwork diverges from the gender essentialism undergirding some of the foundational scholarship on this subject, which inspired me to respond to this research question. While Chadwick argues that women Surrealists emphasized women's innate spiritual and biological connections to the spiritual and natural world, a notion that perpetuates sexual difference by positing a universalized and fixed female identity, I have proposed anti-essentialist readings of Varo's and Carrington's paintings as alternatives to this foundational feminist approach to their work. Furthermore, I depart from Orenstein's interpretation of women Surrealists' goddess imagery. Carrington and Varo may have admired the empowering connotations of matriarchal goddess reclamation, a salvage operation that Orenstein and Lauter believe reveals a distinctly feminine reality.[209] However, their representations of women's metamorphosis and hybridity are in tension with the position

[209] Orenstein, "Art History," 38; Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers*, 20.

that they fully accepted the notion of a universal and monolithic feminine principle, symbolized by the goddess archetype. While more recent scholarship has briefly addressed essentialism regarding women Surrealists and their use of occult tropes, my thesis has taken this further by approaching Varo's and Carrington's work with a strictly anti-essentialist methodology.[210]

In my engagement with anti-essentialist analysis, I disagree with the contention that these artists fully accepted the essentialist occult tropes which they leaned on.[211] Varo's and Carrington's visual uses of humour often undermine the seriousness of the essentialist tropes of occult womanhood they depict. Historical accounts regarding their own magic practices also reveal a shared sense of humour regarding magic and the occult. Their humorous approach to the occult played a great role in their friendship, and they loved to joke around while concocting ludicrous potions and spells together.[212]

Carrington has identified her relationship with Varo as her "most important friendship."[213] It is unclear to me whether Varo's death impacted Carrington's mature work, as she continued incorporating magical and occult motifs in her art until her death and to my knowledge, no scholars have addressed this possibility. However, given the significance of their friendship and the similarity of their occult-inspired visual languages, this question could represent a new direction for future research.[214] Moreover, it could be fruitful for future research to explore how recent exhibitions on women Surrealists might contribute to the network of essentialist ideas

---

[210] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 126; Ferentinou, "Goddess," 188.
[211] Ferentinou, "Surrealism," 126; Belton, "Forked Tongues," 58.
[212] Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys*, 95-96.
[213] Leonora Carrington in discussion with Whitney Chadwick, April 1984, New York, quoted in Whitney Chadwick, "Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness," *Woman's Art Journal* 7, no. 1 (1986): 40, https://doi.org/10.2307/1358235.
[214] I would like to thank my fellow student and friend, Olivia Vidmar, for raising this pertinent question during my thesis presentation.

surrounding these artists and their interest in occult themes.[215] Proposing new feminist analyses of historical art is important since feminisms are always developing: what feminists considered empowering or groundbreaking forty years ago may not be what feminists consider revolutionary or inclusive today.

Approaching artwork by women Surrealists with a contemporary feminist lens is especially pertinent given the renewed interest in these artists today, as well as a renewed interest in the intersection of feminisms and occultism. Cecilia Alemani, the curator of the 2022 Venice Biennale (the longest-running and, arguably, most important international exhibition in the world) titled the exhibition *The Milk of Dreams*, after a children's book that Carrington wrote and illustrated.[216] In her curatorial statement, she describes the author's fictional world as a world "where everyone can change, be transformed, become something or someone else; a world set free, brimming with possibilities."[217] This quote underlines a key aspect of Carrington's and Varo's art that I have highlighted and connected to their emphasis on magical metamorphosis and hybridity, and women's multi-faceted identities. Moreover, many contemporary women are finding empowerment in occult practices such as Wicca, Tarot, and astrology, and using social media to present witchcraft as a potentially feminist occult practice.[218] Feminists who embrace witchcraft have even attempted to use magic to influence political events and social issues in recent years, by casting hexes on Donald Trump or protective spells against police brutality for Black Lives Matter protesters.[219] Modern feminists are exploring and reclaiming women's central roles in occult traditions, just as Carrington and Varo did in their lives and art. As the often-

---

[215] Dr. Alice Jim raised this interesting question during my thesis presentation as well. While I have not seen any exhibitions of women Surrealists, this would be a great avenue for future research on this topic.
[216] The book was posthumously published in 2017.
[217] Cecilia Alemani, "Biennale Arte 2022: Statement by Cecilia Alemani," *The Milk of Dreams* (La Biennale di Venezia, April 19, 2022), https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/statement-cecilia-alemani.
[218] Johanna Braun, "#WITCHTOK," *FKW//Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur* 70 (2022): 163.
[219] Ibid, 164.

overlapping interests in occult womanhood, feminist occultism, and women Surrealists continue to develop, it becomes increasingly relevant to critically engage with these topics and contribute to the emerging field of scholarship that explores their intersections.

Figures

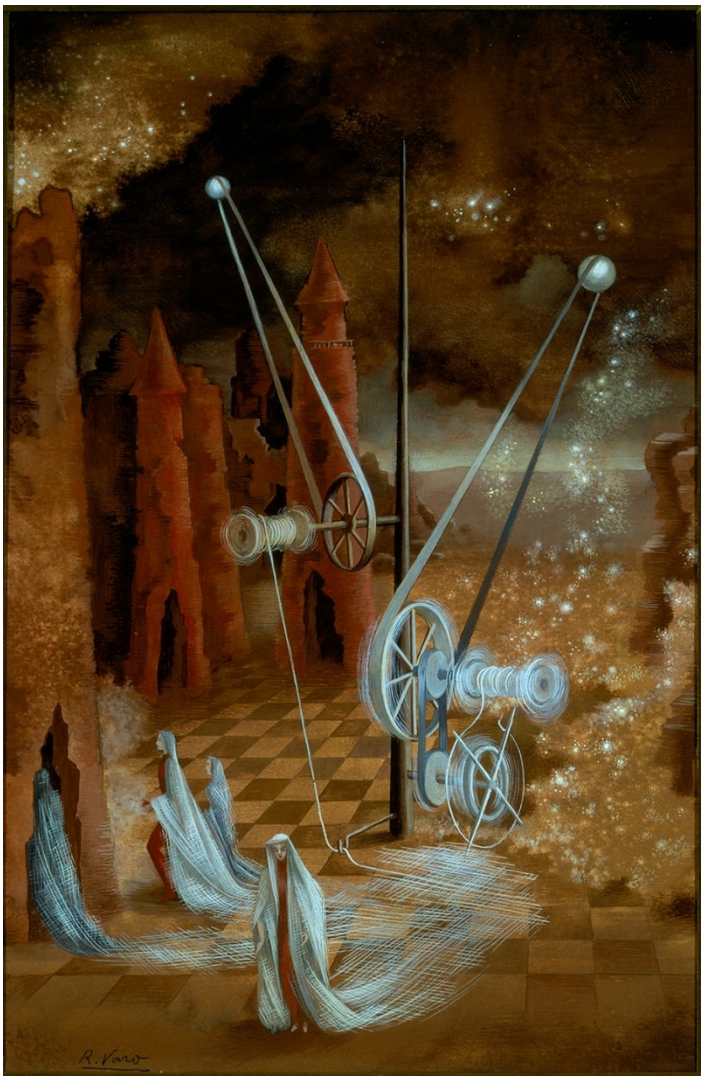

Figure 1: Varo, Remedios. *Premonition,* 1953. Gouache on paper, 36 × 24 cm. Private collection. https://www.remedios-varo.com/?s=premonicion

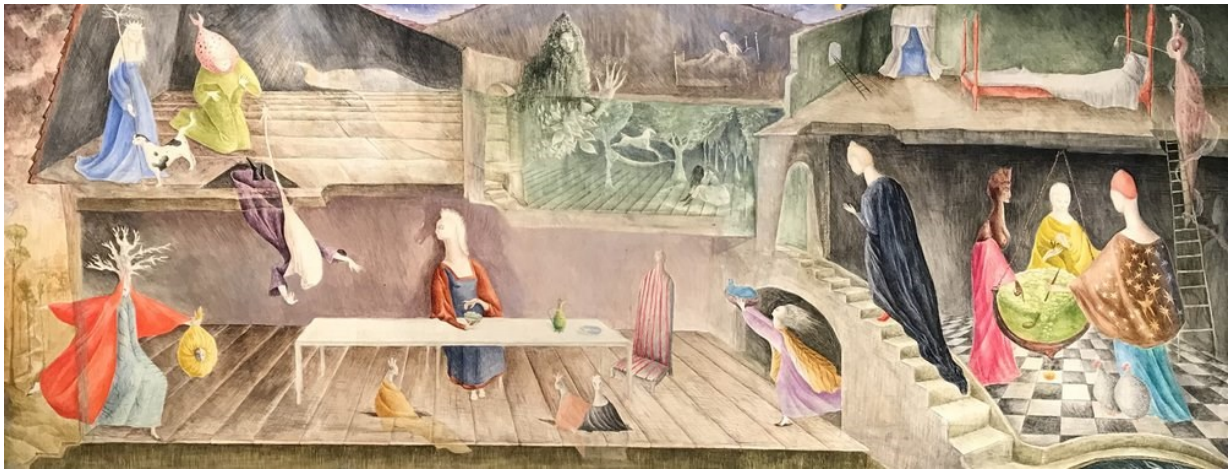

Figure 2: Carrington, Leonora. *The House Opposite*, 1945. Tempera on panel, 33 × 82 cm. Edward James Foundation, United Kingdom. https://www.bondlatin.com/blog/32018leonora-carrington-exhibition-mam-mexico

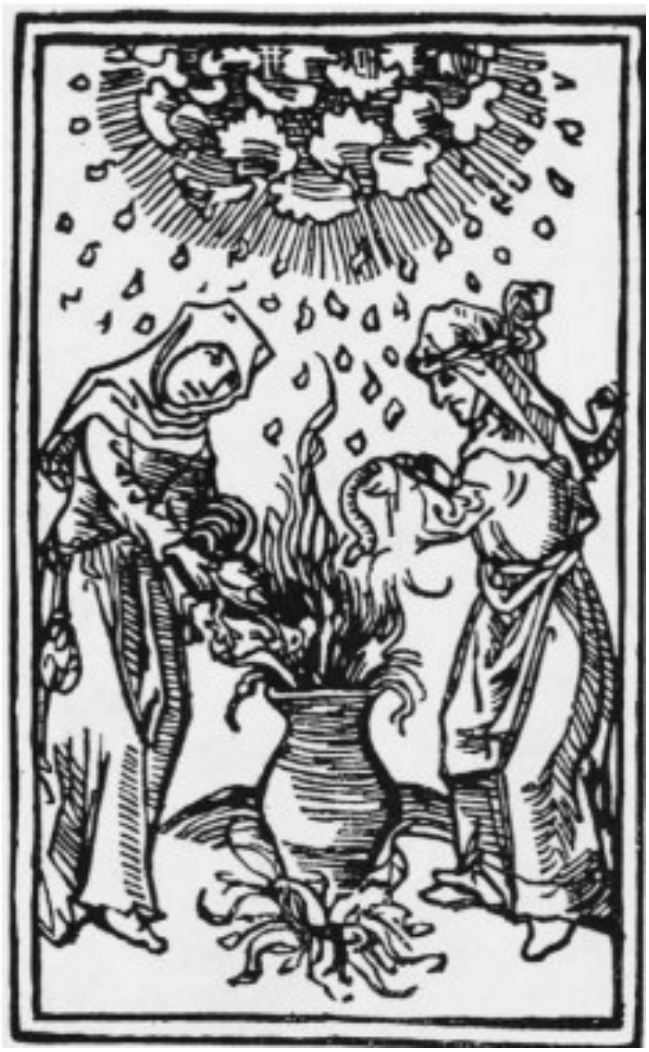

Figure 3: Anonymous. *Weather Witches*, illustration in Ulrich Molitor, *De Laniis et Phitonicis Mulierbus*, 1489. Woodcut, 21 × 14.5 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Image courtesy of Ulrich Molitor, *Des sorcières et des devineresses* (Paris: E. Nourry, 1926), 64. https://archive.org/details/dessorciresetd00moli/page/n45/mode/2up

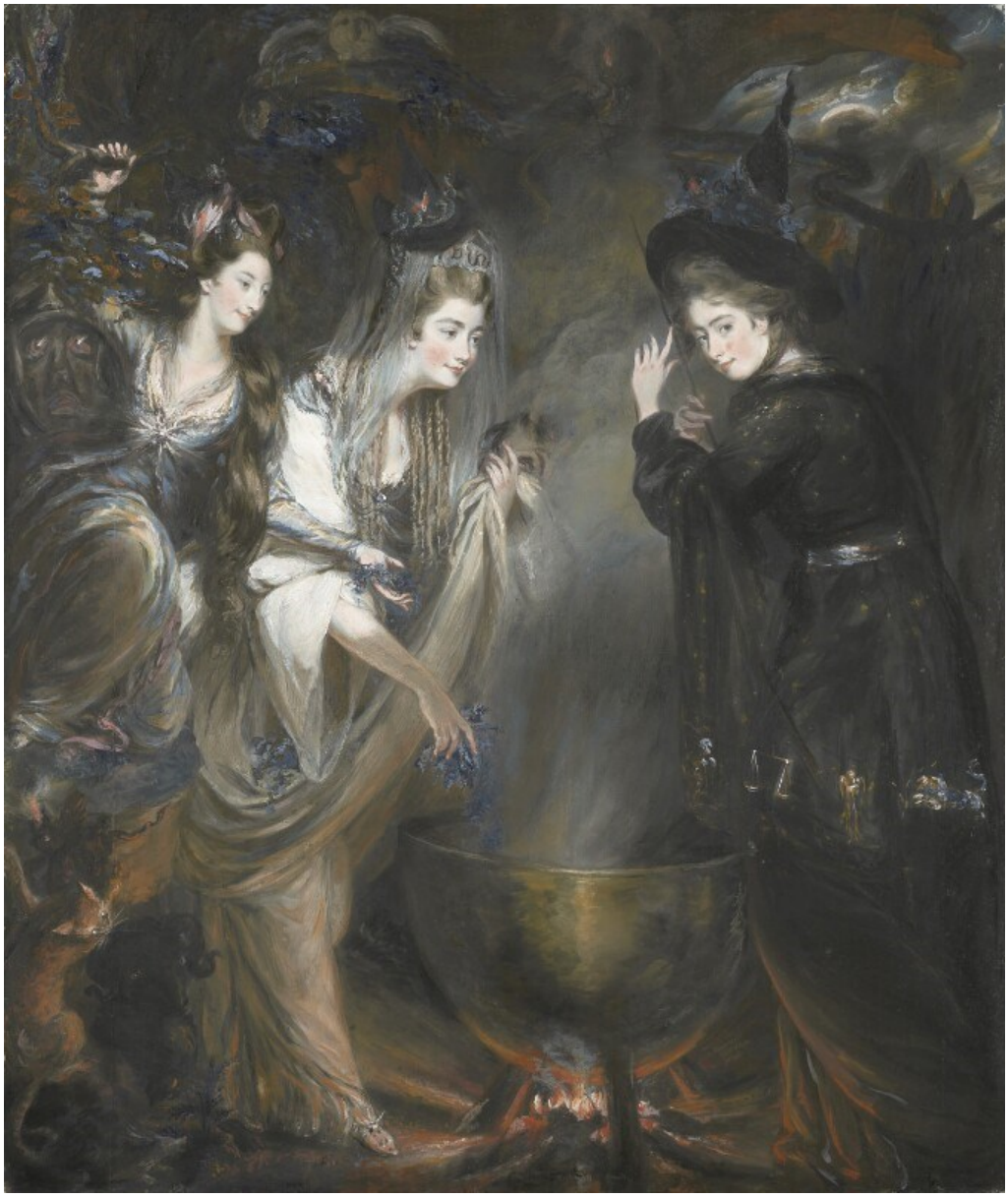

Figure 4: Gardner, Daniel. *The Three Witches from Macbeth,* 1775. Gouache and chalk on paper, 94 × 79 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London.
https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/display/2011/the-three-witches-from-macbeth.php

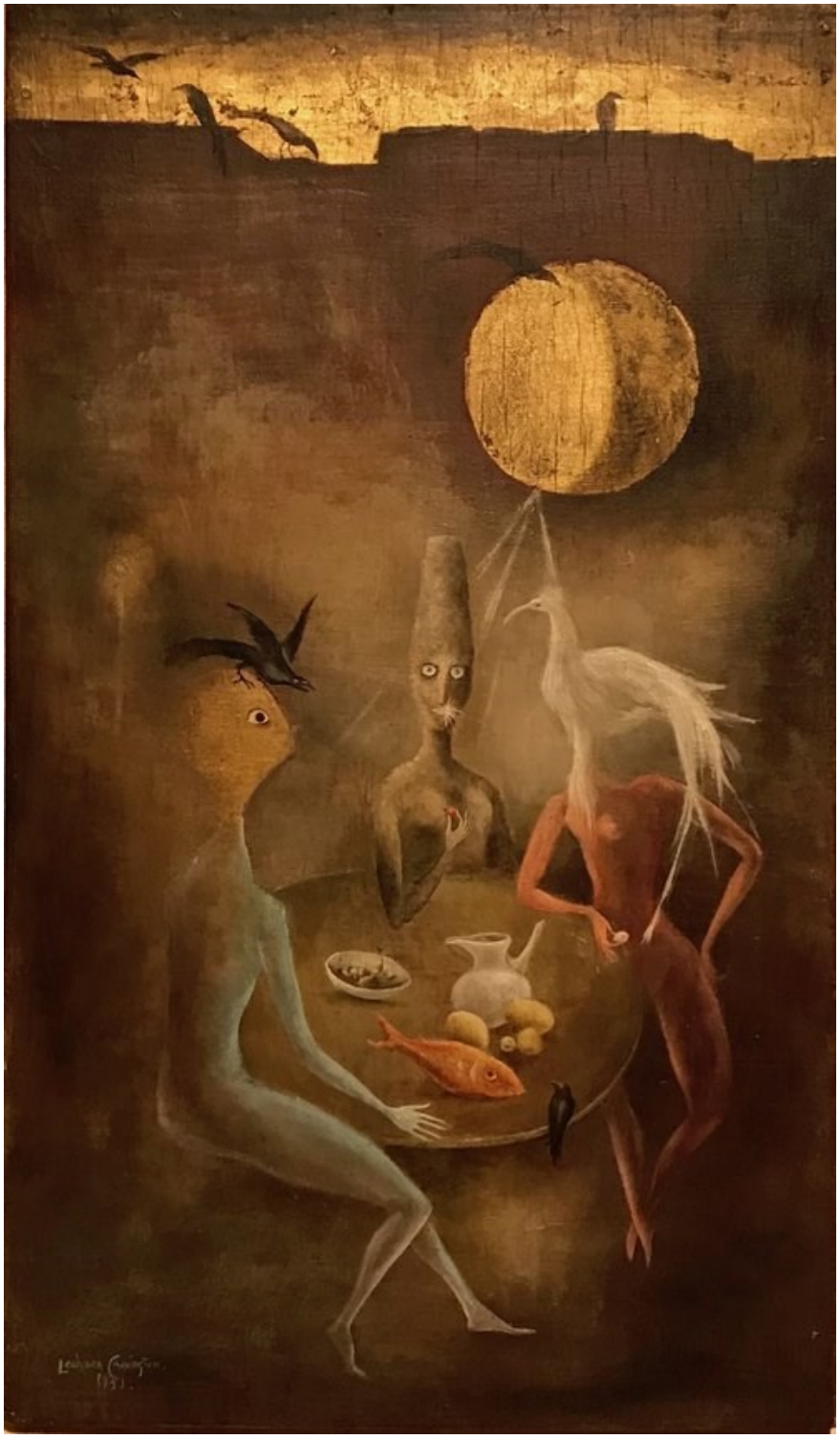

Figure 5: Carrington, Leonora. *Three Women Around the Table*, 1951. Oil on canvas, 52 × 30 cm. Private collection, Mexico. https://www.bondlatin.com/blog/32018leonora-carrington-exhibition-mam-mexico

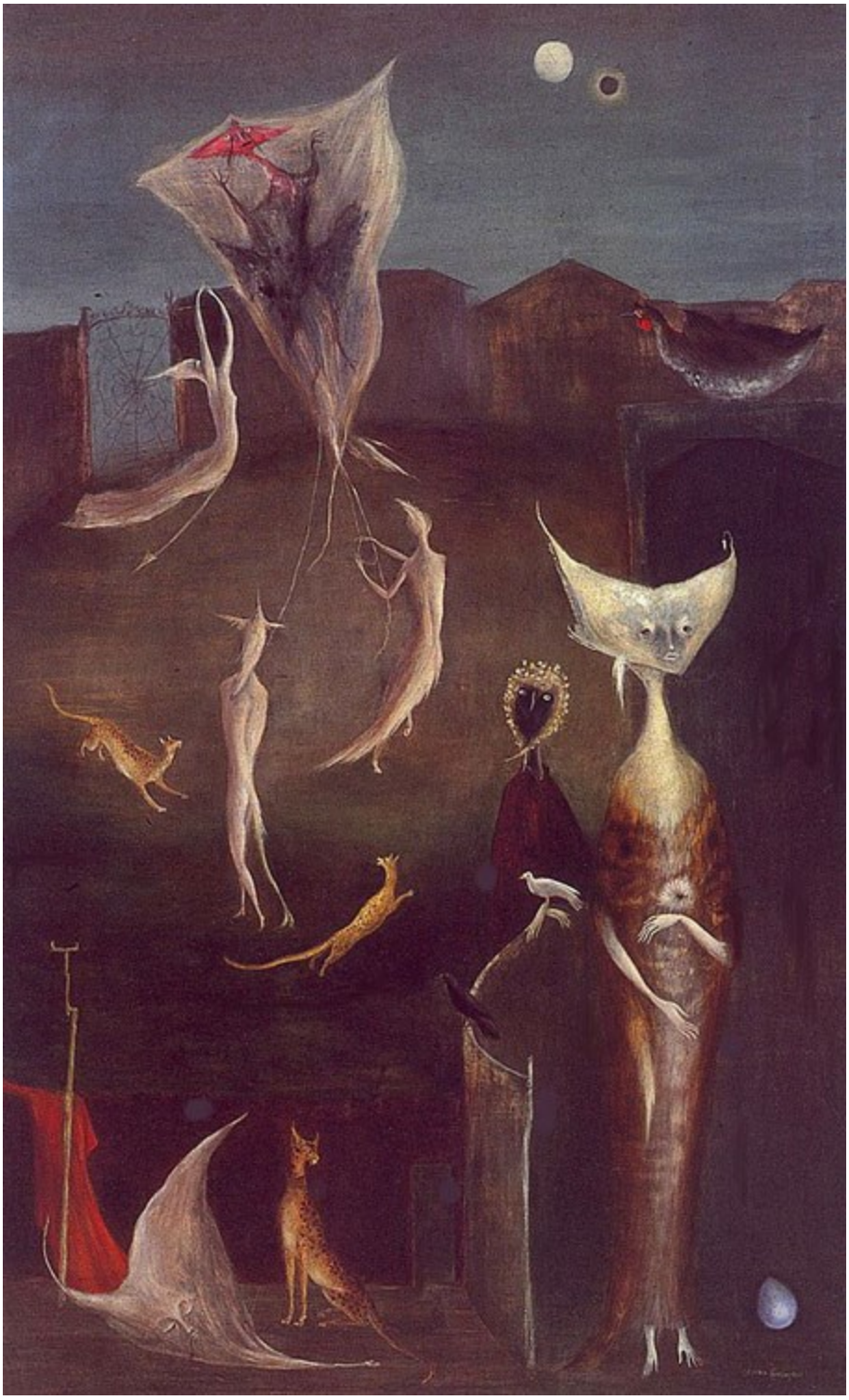

Figure 6: Carrington, Leonora. *Samain*, 1951. Oil and tempera on three-ply, 91 × 55 cm. Private collection. http://www.leonoracarrington.com.mx/pintura.html

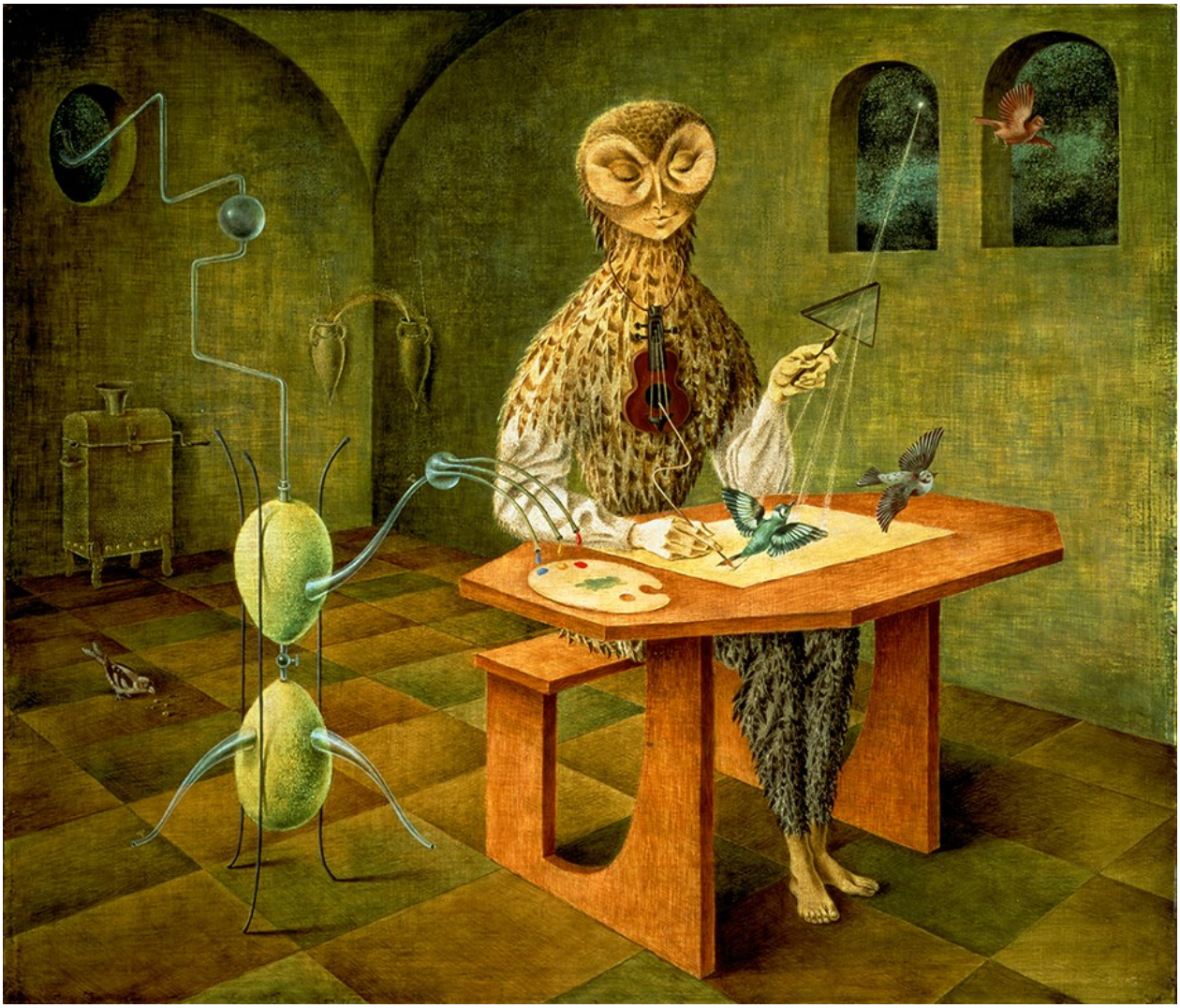

Figure 7: Varo, Remedios. *Creation of the Birds*, 1957. Oil on masonite, 54 × 64 cm. Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. https://www.remedios-varo.com/creacion-de-las-aves-1957/

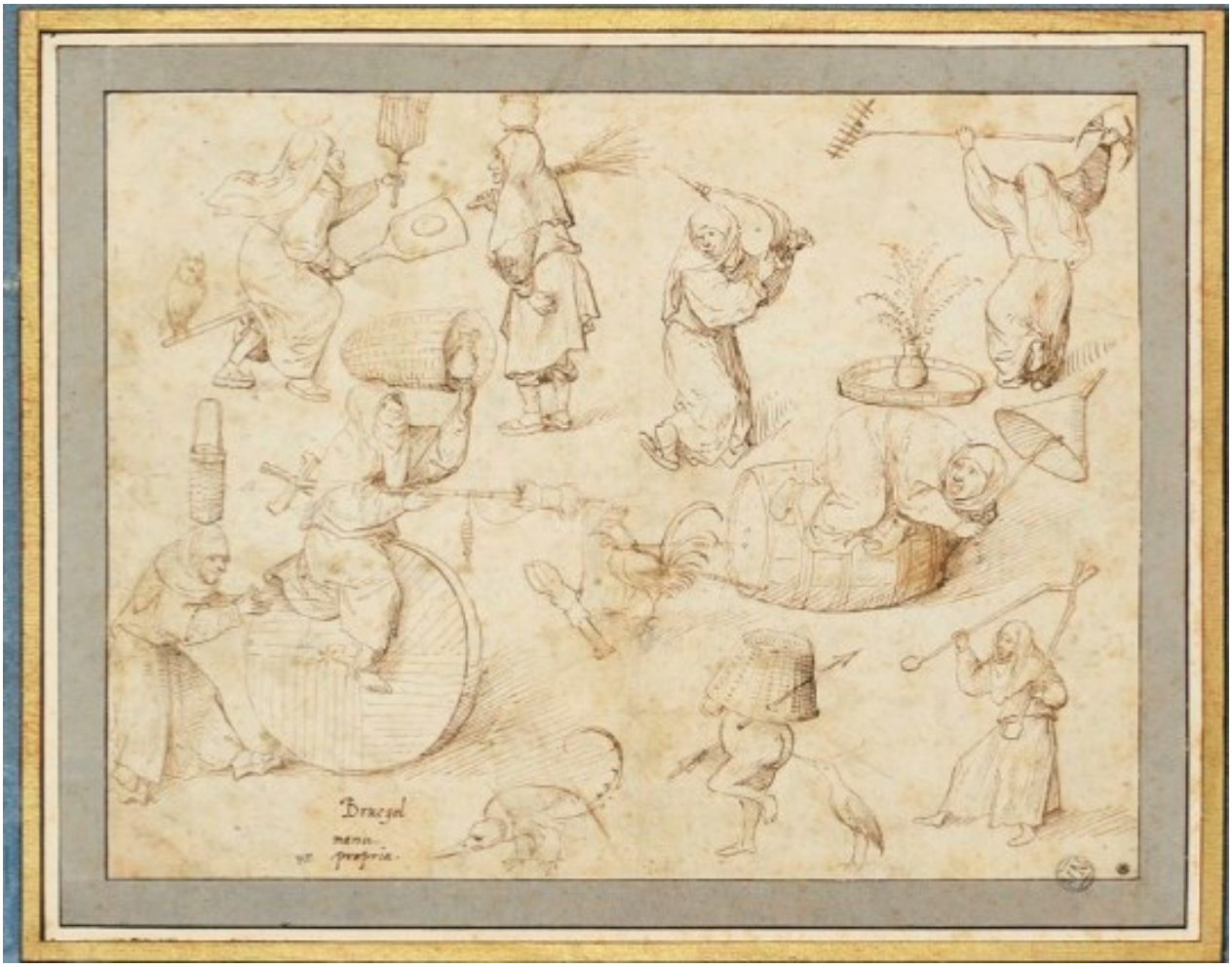

Figure 8: Bosch, Hieronymus. *Witches and Monsters*, c. 1475-1516. Pen and brown ink on paper, 20.4 cm × 25.5 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl020109863

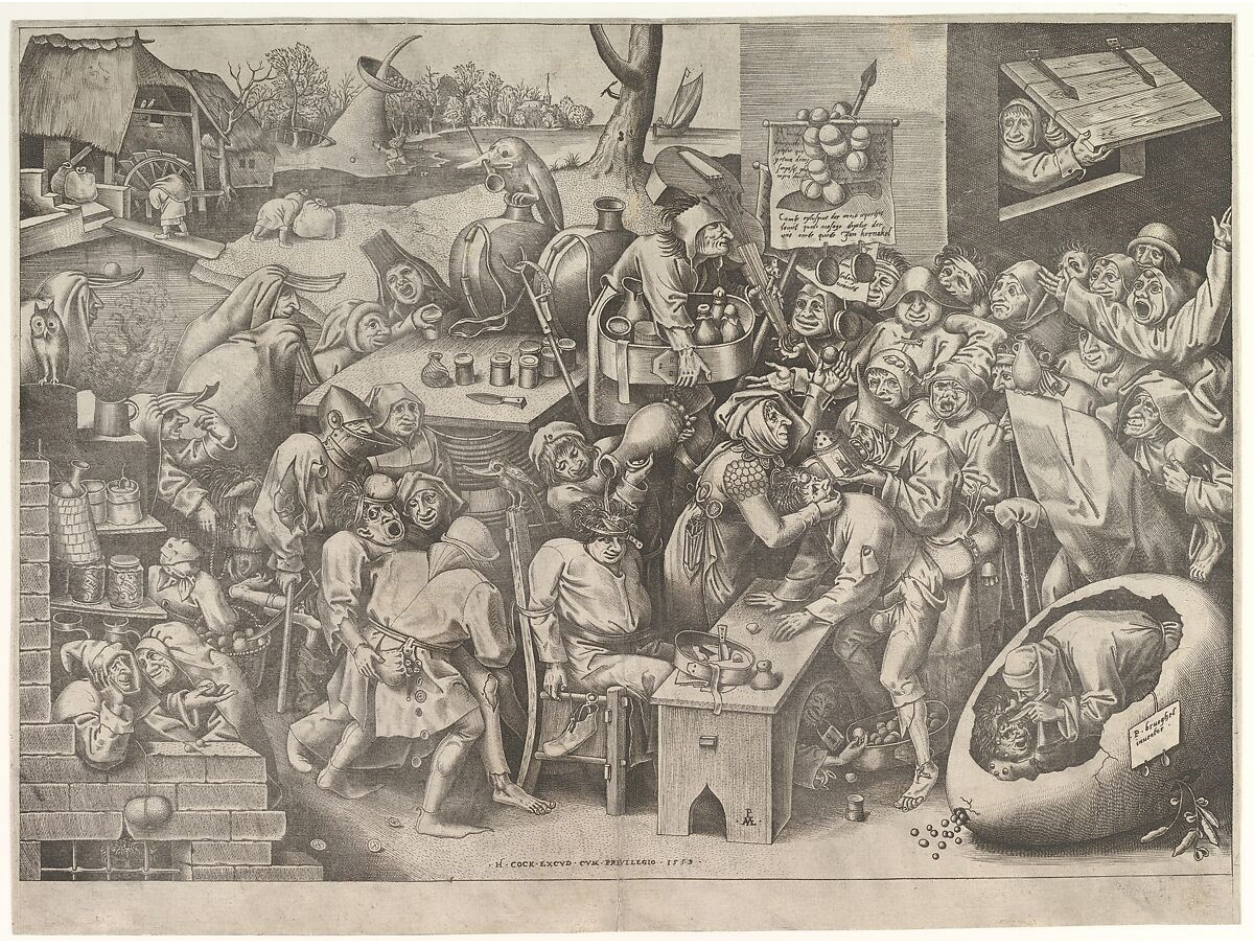

Figure 9: van der Heyden, Pieter after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Stone Operation or the Witch of Mallegem*, 1559. Engraving, 35.4 × 47.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/366818

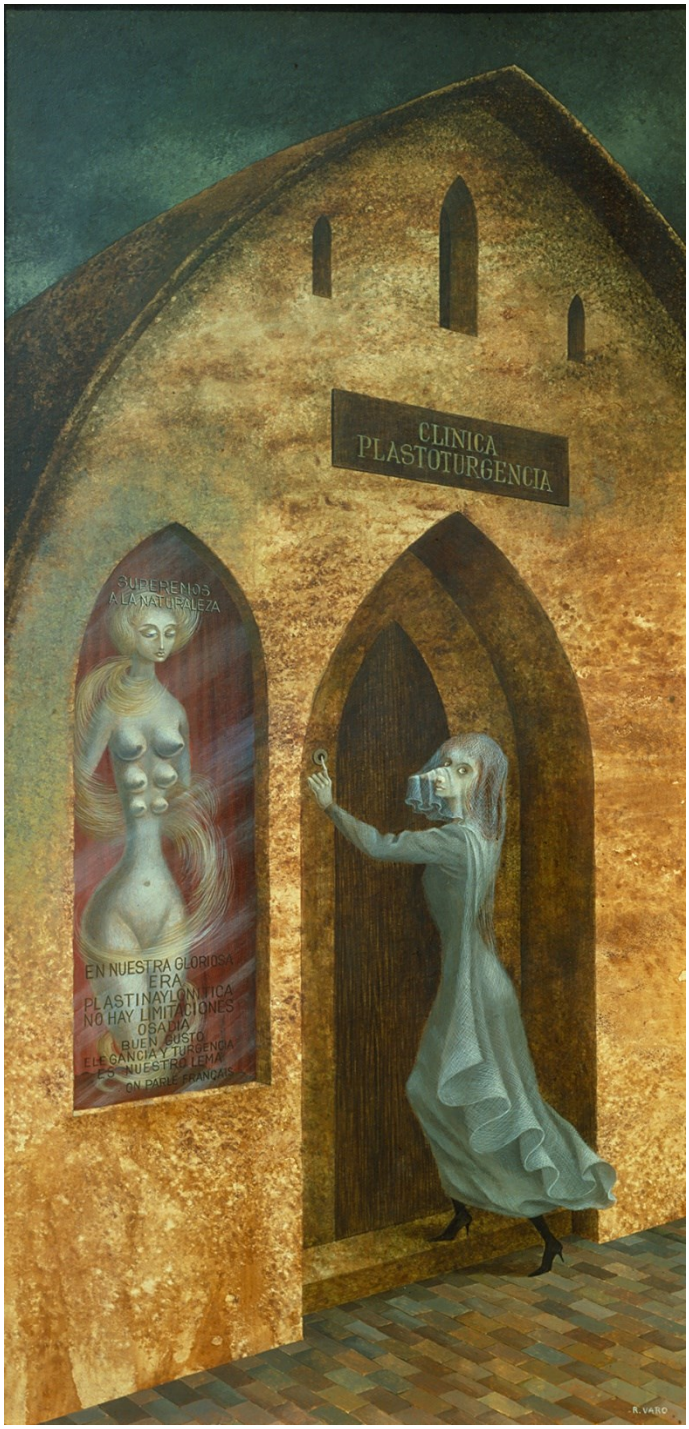

Figure 10: Varo, Remedios. *Visit to the Plastic Surgeon*, 1960. Oil on Masonite, 71 × 35.5 cm. Private collection. https://www.remedios-varo.com/visita-al-cirujano-plastico-1960/

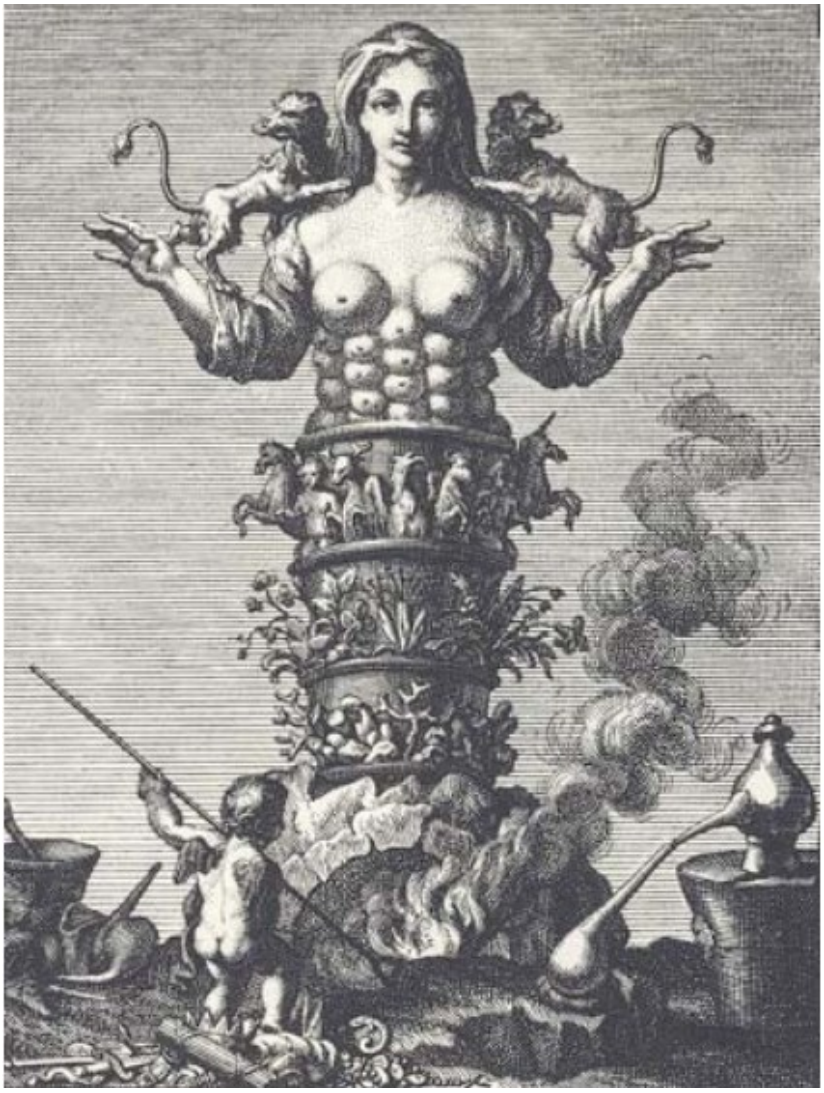

Figure 11: Anonymous. *The Furnace of the Great Mother*, frontispiece from Urban Hjärne, Actorum Chemicorum Holmensium, 1712. Photo courtesy of Johannes Fabricius, *Alchemy: The Medieval Alchemists and their Royal Art* (London: Diamond Books, 1994), 54.

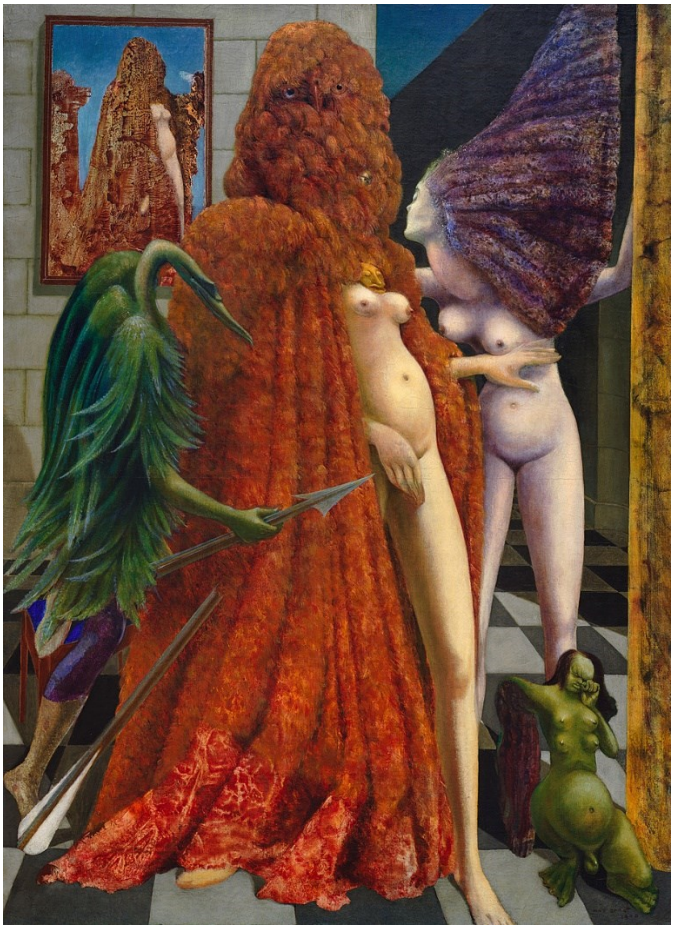

Figure 12: Ernst, Max. *Attirement of the Bride*, 1940. Oil on canvas, 129.6 × 96.3 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City. https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/1186

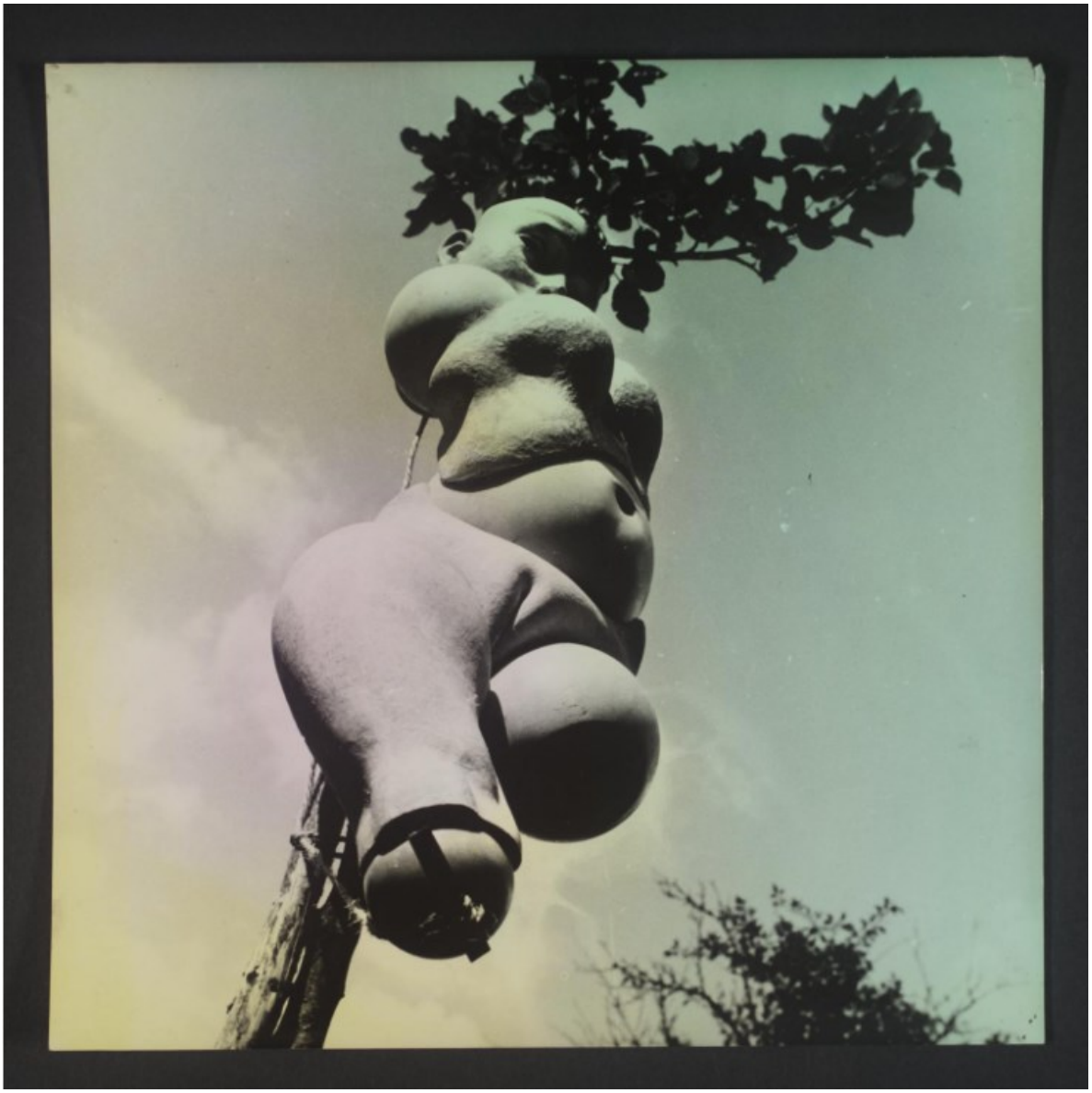

Figure 13: Bellmer, Hans. *The Doll*, 1936. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 23.8 × 24 cm. Tate Modern, London. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bellmer-the-doll-t11781

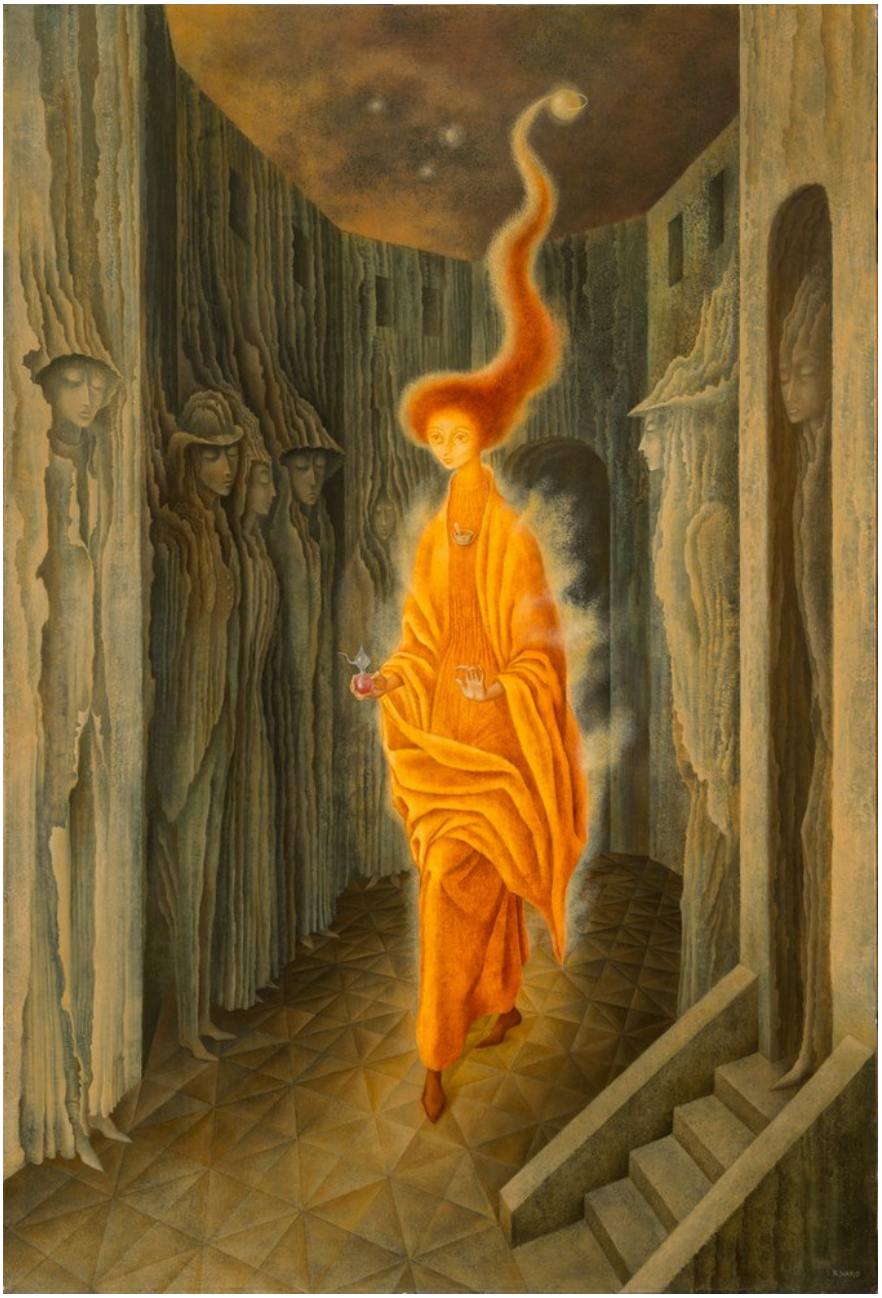

Figure 14: Varo, Remedios. *The Call*, 1961. Oil on Masonite, 106.68 × 78.74. National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington. https://nmwa.org/art/collection/la-llamada-call/

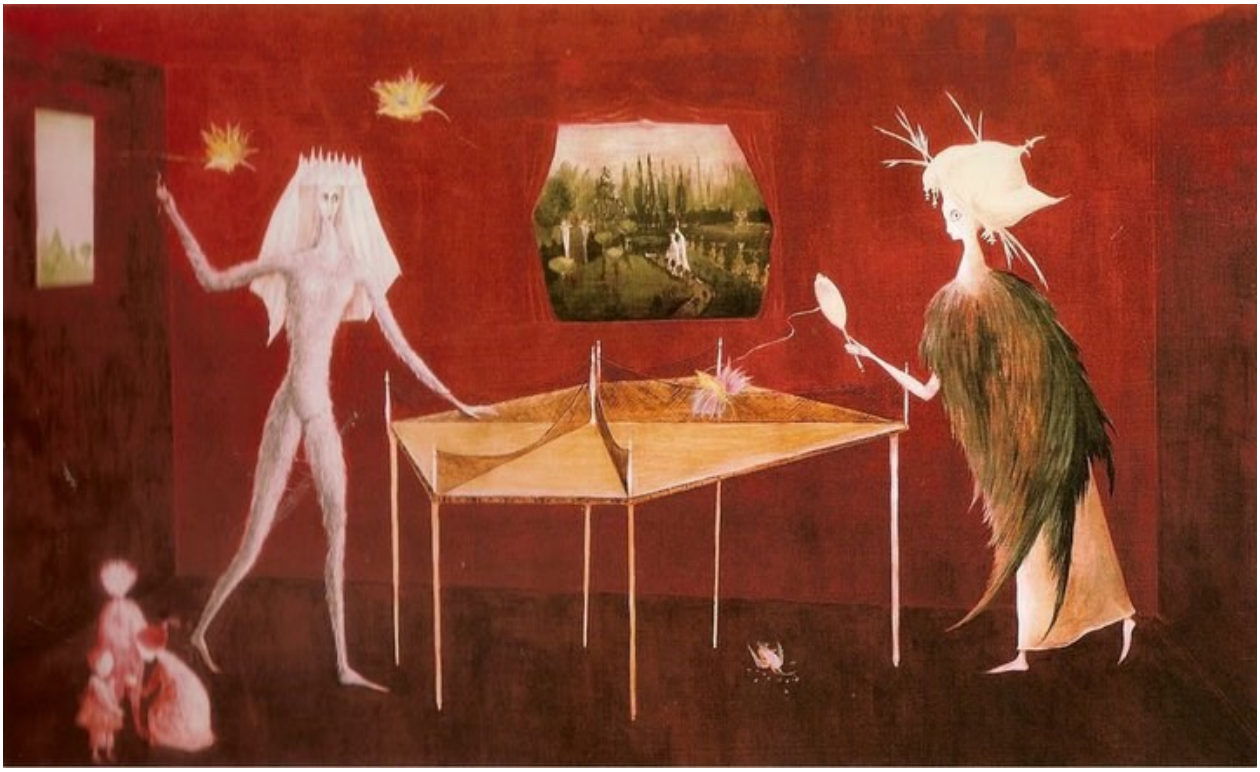

Figure 15: Carrington, Leonora. *Bird Pong*, 1949. Egg tempera on panel, 45 × 72.5 cm. Private collection, United Kingdom. https://surrealism.website/Leonora%20Carrington.ht

Bibliography

Aberth, Susan L. *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art.* Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004.

Acker, Alli. *The Flowering of the Crone: Another Reality.* New York: Reel Woman Trust Foundation, 2014. eVideo. https://concordiauniversity.on.worldcat.org/oclc/897766276.

Alemani, Cecilia. "Biennale Arte 2022: Statement by Cecilia Alemani." *The Milk of Dreams*, La Biennale di Venezia. April 19, 2022. https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/statement-cecilia-alemani.

Arcq, Teresa. "In Search of the Miraculous." In *Five Keys to the Secret World of Remedios Varo,* edited by Margarita de Orellana, 21-87. Cordoba: Artes de Mexico, 2008.

Arcq, Teresa. "Mirrors of the Marvellous: Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo." In *Surreal Friends*, edited by Stefan van Raay, Joanna Moorhead and Teresa Arcq, 98-115. Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010.

Bachet, Tifaine. "Parody and Femininity in British Surrealism (Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington)." *Polysèmes* 23 (2020): 1-14.

Bakewell, Liza. "Frida Kahlo: A Contemporary Feminist Reading." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 13, no. 3 (1993): 165-189.

Basham, Diana. *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society.* London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1992.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex.* Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage Books, 2011

Bell, Avril. "Strategic Essentialism." In *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology,* edited by G. Ritzer. John Wiley & Sons, 2021. https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeoss268.pub2.

Belton, Robert. "Speaking with Forked Tongues: 'Male' Discourse in 'Female' Surrealism?' In *Surrealism and Women,* edited by Mary Ann Caws, Rudolph E. Kuenzh and Gwen Raaberg, 50-62. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991.

Biehl, Janet. *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics.* Boston: Southend Press, 1991.

Bingham, Adrian. "'An Era of Domesticity'? Histories of Women and Gender in Interwar Britain." *Cultural and Social History* 1, no. 2 (2004): 225-233. doi: 10.1191/1478003804cs0014ra.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Braun, Johanna. "#WITCHTOK." *FKW//Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur* 70 (2022): 163-165.

Breton, André. *L'Art magique*. Paris: Club français du livre, 1957.

Breton, André. "Manifesto of Surrealism." In *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* translated and edited by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, 1-48. MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969.

Breton, André ."Second Manifesto of Surrealism." In *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated and edited by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, 117-194. MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969.

Breton, André. *Mad Love*. Translated by Mary Ann Caws. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987.

Breton, André. *Arcanum 17.* Translated by Zack Rogow. LA: Sun & Moon Press, 1994.

Breton, André. "Introduction to the International Surrealist Exhibition (1959)." Translated by Simon Watson-Tyler. In *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Discussions*, edited by José Pierre, 152-155. London & New York: Verso, 2011.

Bruley, Sue. *Women in Britain since 1900.* London: MacMillan Press LTD, 1999.

Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism." *Praxis International* 11 no. 2 (1991): 150-165.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble.* New York & London: Routledge, 1999.

Chadwick, Whitney. *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1985.

Chadwick, Whitney. "Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness." *Woman's Art Journal* 7 no. 1 (Spring 1986): 37-42. doi:10.2307/1358235.

Challenger, Anna. "Gurdjieff's Theory of Art." *Gurdjieff International Review* 11, no.2 (Summer 2012). https://www.gurdjieff.org/challenger2.htm.

Choucha, Nadia. *Surrealism and the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy, and the Birth of an Artistic Movement*. Rochester: Destiny Books, 1991.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 no. 6 (July 1991): 1241-1299.

Cusack, Carole M. “The Return of the Goddess: Mythology, Witchcraft and Feminist Spirituality.” In *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, edited by James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza, 335-362. Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2009.

Davidson, Hilda Ellis. *Roles of the Northern Goddess.* London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Diaz, Janet. “Vanguardism, Modernism and Spanish Women Writers in the Years Between the Wars.” *SigloXX/20th Century* 6, no. 1-2 (1988-1989): 40-47.

Drury, Neville. “The Modern Magical Revival.” In *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, edited by Murphy Pizza and James Lewis, 13-80. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

Eliade, Mircea. *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions.* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

Evans, Kim. *Leonora Carrington and the House of Fear*. UK: BBC, 1992. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4aooKLEHQg&ab_channel=MajorEsterhazy.

Ferentinou, Victoria. “Surrealism, Occulture and Gender: Women Artists, Power and Occultism.” *Aries* 13, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 103–30. https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-01301006.

Ferentinou, Victoria. “The Quest for the Goddess: Matriarchy, Surrealism, and Gender Politics in the Work of Ithell Colquhoun and Leonora Carrington.” In *In Search of the Marvellous: Surrealism, Occultism and Politics,* edited by Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani, 210-232. New York & London: Routledge, 2018.

Foster, Hal. “Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus.” In *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, edited by Jennifer Mundy, 203-226. Princeton University Press, 2001.

Freud, Sigmund. *Dream Psychology: Psychoanalysis for Beginners*. Translated by M.D. Eder. New York: The James A. McCann Company, 1921.

Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

Gardner, Gerald. *Witchcraft Today.* New York: Magickal Childe, 1982.

Geis, Terri. "Leonora Carrington in the 1970s: An Interview with Gloria Feman Orenstein." *Revista de Arte Ibero Nierika* 1 (2012): 16-25.

González Madrid, María José. “‘On the True Exercise of Witchcraft’ in the work of Remedios Varo.” In *In Search of the Marvellous: Surrealism* Occulture and Politics, edited by Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani, 194-209. New York & London: Routledge, 2018.

Graves, Robert. *The White Goddess: A Historic Grammar of Poetic Myth*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1948.

Griffiths, Morwenna and Margaret Whitford. *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy.* Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art.* Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Bergson, Deleuze, and the Becoming of Unbecoming," *Parallax* 11 no. 2 (2006): 4-13.

Grosz, Elizabeth and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. "Criticism, Feminism, and the Institution: An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak." *Thesis Eleven* 10-11 vol. 1 (1985): 175-187.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies.* New York: Routledge, 1995.

Gurdjieff, G.I. *Views from the Real World: Early Talks in Moscow, Essentuki, Tiflis, Berlin, London, Paris, New York, and Chicago, As Recollected by his Pupils.* London: Routledge, 1973.

Harris, Ann Sutherland and Linda Nochlin. *Women Artists: 1550-1950.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979.

Haynes, Deborah J. "The Art of Remedios Varo: Issues of Gender Ambiguity and Religious Meaning." *Woman's Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1995): 26–32. https://doi.org/10.2307/1358627.

Hutton, Ronald. *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles: Their Nature and Legacy.* Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993.

Johnston, Jay. "Gender and the Occult." In *The Occult World*, edited by Christopher Partridge, 67-78. London: Routledge, 2014.

Kaplan, Janet. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo.* New York: Abbeville Press, 1988.

Kissane, Sean. "Celtic Surrealist." *Irish Arts Review* 30, no. 4 (2013): 74–77. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23611550

Krauss, Rosalind. "Uncanny." In *Formless: A User's Guide,* edited by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, 192-197. New York: Zone Books, 1997.

Lauter, Estella. *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth Century Women.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Loaeza, Soledad. “Mexico in the Fifties: Women and Church in Holy Alliance.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2005): 138–60. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004422.

Lyford, Amy. *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

MacLeod, Sharon Paice. “Oenach Aimsire Na MBan: Early Irish Seasonal Celebrations, Gender Roles and Mythological Cycles.” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 23 (2003): 257–283.

Makhlouf Akl, Tufic. *Remedios Varo: Mystery and Revelation.* Grenoble: Seven-Doc, 2013. DVD.

Mangini González, Shirley. *Memories of Resistance: Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Michelet, Jules. *La Sorcière: The Witch of the Middle Ages*. Translated by Lionel James Trotter. Paris, 1862; Project Gutenberg, 2010. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/31420/31420-h/31420-h.htm#Page_4.

Mikkola, Mari. “Gender Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism.” In *The Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Ann Garry, 168-179. New York & London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Minkowski, William L. “Women Healers of the Middle Ages: Selected Aspects of Their History.” *American Journal of Public Health* 82, no. 2 (February 1992): 288–95. doi:10.2105/AJPH.82.2.288.

Monaghan, Patricia. *The Encyclopedia of Celtic Mythology and Folklore*. New York: Library of Congress, 2004.

Moorhead, Joanna. “Surreal Friends in Mexico.” In *Surreal Friends*, edited by Stefan van Raay, Joanna Moorhead, and Teresa Arcq, 70-98. Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010.

Moorhead, Joanna. *Surreal Spaces: The Life and Art of Leonora Carrington.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023.

Mossiker, Frances. *The Affair of the Poisons: Louis XIV, Madame de Montespan, and one of History’s Great Unsolved Mysteries.* New York: Knopf, 1969.

Mulder, Nan. “Leonora Carrington in Mexico,” *Alba* 1 no. 6 (December 1991-January 1992): 4-7.

Murray, Margaret. *The Witch Cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921.

Nochlin, Linda. *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays.* New York: Routledge, 2018.

Nonaka, Masayo. "Exiled Women Surrealists in Mexico: The Creativity of the 1940s through 1960s." In *Women Surrealists in Mexico*. Exhibition Catalogue. Tokyo: Bunkamura Museum of Art, 2003.

Orenstein, Gloria Feman. "Art History and the Case for the Women of Surrealism." *The Journal of General Education* 27, no. 1 (1975): 31–54.

Orenstein, Gloria Feman. "La Nature animale et divine de la femme dans les oeuvres de Leonora Carrington." *Melusine* 2 (1981): 130-137.

Orenstein, Gloria Feman. "Recovering her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess." In *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact,* edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, 174-189. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1988.

Orenstein, Gloria Feman. *The Reflowering of the Goddess.* New York: Pergamon Press, 1990.

Ostling, Michael. "Witches' Herbs on Trial." *Folklore* 125, no. 2 (2014): 179–201.

Ouspensky, P.D. *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching.* New York & London: Harvest Book, 1949.

Parker, Rozsika and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology.* London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013.

Pearson, Jo. "Resisting Rhetorics of Violence: Women, Witches and Wicca." *Feminist Theology* 18, no. 2 (2010): 141-159.

Perlez, Jane. "Woman in the News: Leonora Carrington, Surrealism Lives," *New York Post, Weekend Magazine,* Section 3 (6 December 1975): 1-19.

Pfeiffer, Ingrid. *Fantastic Women: Surreal Worlds from Meret Oppenheim to Frida Kahlo.* Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2020.

Rankin, Monica A. "Mexicanas En Guerra: World War II and the Discourse of Mexican Female Identity." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 32, no. 2 (2011): 83-110. https://doi.org/10.5250/fronjwomestud.32.2.0083.

Robinson, Hilary. "Art & Society: Reframing Women." *Circa*, no. 72 (1995): 18–23. https://doi.org/10.2307/25562809.

Roper, Lyndal. *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe.* London & New York: Routledge, 1994.

Rountree, Kathryn. “The Politics of the Goddess: Feminist Spirituality and the Essentialism Debate.” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 43, no. 2 (1999): 138–65.

Scott, Joan W. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053–75. https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376, 1069.

Scott, Joan W. *Gender and the Politics of History.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Sotheby's. “Remedios Varo: Visita Al Cirujano Plástico*.”* Accessed January 10, 2023. https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2022/modern-evening-auction-4/visita-al-cirujano-plastico.

Spelman, Elizabeth. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics.* New York and London: Methuen, 1987.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Outside in the Teaching Machine.* New York: Routledge, 1993.

Stone, Alison. “Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy.” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1 no. 2 (2004): 135-153. Doi:10.1177/174046810400100202.

Stowell, Steven F.H. “The Origins and Agency of the Miraculous Annunciation at the Santissima Annunziata in Counter-Reformation Florence.” *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 45, no. 1 (2022): 133-186.

Taylor, Sue. “Hans Bellmer in The Art Institute of Chicago: The Wandering Libido and the Hysterical Body.” *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 151–99. https://doi.org/10.2307/4104319.

Trevarthen, Geo Athena. "The Celtic origins of Halloween transcend fear." *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 90, no. 3 (2010): 6-7.

Tucker, Elizabeth. “Antecedents of Contemporary Witchcraft in the Middle Ages.” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 14, no. 1 (1980): 70-78. https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1980.1401_70.x.

Varo, Remedios. *Letters, Dreams and Other Writings.* Translated by Margaret Carson. Wakefield Press, 2018.

van Raay, Stefan. “Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna.” In *Surreal Friends*, edited by Stefan van Raay, Joanna Moorhead and Teresa Arcq, 8-27. Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010.

Yalom, Marilyn. *A History of the Breast.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.