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SURREALISM

and

WOMEN

by

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Fine Art Printmaking

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CHAPTER 1

This thesis is an investigation of the Surrealist movement and its relationship to women. I want to explore the work of several women artists who were connected to the Surrealist group. I did not originally intend to write a thesis on "Women Artists". However, as soon as one begins to study a period of Art History, I find it impossible not to become fascinated by the almost total lack of information available on women artists. Literature on the Surrealist movement is peppered with mentions of women artists. Creative women's names are often linked with the names of members of the Surrealist group as lovers or friends. Occasionally, one finds a line or two about a particular woman's work, but good reproductions are rare indeed.

Surrealism (the movement following dadaism) was a more positive reaction than dadaism to an emotionally, creatively and spiritually bankrupt post war world. The dadaists had produced nonsensical anti-art works. Dadaism was bound by its very nature to burn itself out, as it had no positive alternative to offer in place of the culture which it mocked. Dadaism and Surrealism are, however, closely linked.

Dadaism was the very necessary first step towards Surrealism. Dada reacted violently against the conservative, pompous, humourless, unoriginal, complacent Art world. But, having ridiculed the existing cultural structure, dada turned to a public shocked to attention and found that farce and nihilism were inadequate substitutes for the existing "Arts".



MARCEL DUCHAMP "URINAL"

Dada had made the breakthrough of using found objects (ready-mades) and literally putting them on a pedestal and in a gallery and calling them "Art". A perfect example of this is Marcel Duchamp's "Urinal". The Surrealists took this to a more sophisticated level, often using a combination of several inanimate objects arranged in a highly unlikely way in an attempt to invoke the subconscious. The Surrealists also carried on Dada's bizarre sense of humour or sense of the improbable. Both movements produced images and objects, some of which were unlikely, peculiar, disconcerting and at times very funny.

Surrealism, on the other hand, had the whole subconscious world to explore. The atrocities of World War I seemed to the Surrealists to be yet another symptom of a world governed politically and culturally by "rationalism" and "logic".

Andre Breton published the first surrealist manifesto in 1924. Surrealism was a means of uniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in "an absolute reality, a surreality".<sup>(1)</sup>

Surrealism rejected the rational and logical in favour of the irrational. The Surrealists used automatism to explore the subconscious. They attempted to record the images in a subject's mind at the approach of sleep. Surrealism was defined in 1924 as "pure psychic automatism".<sup>(2)</sup>

In 1929 Andre Breton wrote

"The problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world".<sup>(3)</sup>

Woman was a muse. She was man's inspiration and his salvation. She was child, virgin, celestial being, sorceress, erotic object and femme fatale. From the beginning the Surrealists demanded the liberation of all women from the bondage of home and hearth and encouraged the creative activity of women associated with the group. This was all very fine in theory but realistically there were too many underlying currents and deeply-rooted prejudices for the complex question of women's liberation to be so easily solved. The first World War did more to change the status of women than the surrealist movement did. Attitudes were changing dramatically in Western Europe and America. The war had liberated many women from domestic activity and pushed them into hospitals and factories. After the war they proved unwilling to give up their new-found freedom. Women were prepared to fight for their place at work and in the polling booth. They cut their hair and wore trousers. The new almost androgynous woman conflicted with the Surrealist's "ideal woman". To begin with, the Surrealists did not wish to support a movement promoted by the bourgeoisie whom they held responsible for the present state of cultural and moral bankruptcy. Even more importantly, their adolescent images of women had derived from nineteenth century literature. Surrealism's poetic sources lie in Romanticism and Symbolism. Symbolism presented a polarised view of women which embraced



"La Revolution Surrealiste" 1924.

both the creative and subversive powers of love. Freud also gave them an ambivalent psychological model. In "The Theme of the Three Caskets" of 1913 he developed what he saw as the source of woman's dual nature - her incompatible roles of mother, the bearer of life, and of death and destruction. The Surrealist poets wrote of a woman who was at once ethereal and inner directed, and also capable of revolutionary action in the world.

Gala was to become the first living muse of the Surrealists. She was first married to Eluard; Max Earnst fell in love with her; then she eventually left Eluard for Salvador Dali. She was not an artist but inspired many artists. She demanded free sexual expression but in every other way she fulfilled the role of the Muse of Poetry. According to Matthew Josephson, the Surrealists often responded to a particularly successful painting or poem with the words

"Ah, well, he was in love with Gala then".<sup>(4)</sup>

Germaine Berton was much admired by the Surrealists. She was a young Anarchist who on January 22, 1923, had walked into the office of the right wing newspaper "Action Française", and shot Marius Plateau, head of the Camelots du Roi. The Surrealists rushed to her defence with pamphlets and demonstrations. In the 1924 edition of "La Revolution Surrealiste" they published a photograph of Germaine Berton surrounded by pictures of the Surrealists, with the accompanying quote from Baudelaire



"La Revolution Surrealiste" 1924

"Woman is the being who projects the greatest shadow or the greatest light into our dreams". (5)

Although the Surrealists supported the radical action of women outside the Surrealist group, it would seem that they didn't encourage the political action of women within the group. The real political woman would have upset the idealised, romanticised vision of women the group had created. Another photograph published in the same issue depicts a group of Surrealists surrounding a visitor who is describing a dream to them. At the centre of the group is Simone Berton, the only woman present. She is seated in front of a typewriter, passively recording the information in the traditional role of secretary. This image, I believe, says more about the real role of women involved with the Surrealists than the previous one.

On October 1st, 1927, the ninth issue of "La Revolution Surrealiste" appeared. In it was an article under the heading "Hands Off Love" which attacked the case being taken against Charlie Chaplin by his wife. His wife was suing him for divorce because he had been unfaithful and rejected the fatherhood imposed on him by her two pregnancies. According to the Surrealists, this was a grave infringement of Chaplin's right to practice love however he chose. The Surrealists demanded that love remain free of the restraints of conventional marriage. No understanding or consideration was given to the





L'ECRITURE AUTOMATIQUE

19 *L'écriture Automatique*, 1927

emotional and financial plight of a woman in Mrs. Chaplin's position.

In the same issue of "La Revolution Surrealiste", we are introduced to the Femme-Enfant. She illustrated the heading L'écriture Automatique. She sits at a school desk writing automatically. She wears a schoolgirl's uniform and sits with legs tucked under her in such a way that one can see her underwear and the tops of her stockings. Her face is young and innocent but she wears heavy make-up and has her hair cut in a sophisticated style. The woman-child who was innocent, pure and childlike enough to be more fully in touch with her subconscious, than man, was also sexually attractive. This was the new Surrealist muse which was to dominate Surrealism throughout the 1930s. The Femme-Enfant must surely have alienated and prevented women artists from fully identifying with Surrealism's theoretical side.

At this stage of Surrealism's history, no women were included in the official ranks of Surrealism. Women were not recorded as having taken part on any of the automatic experiments. They were not included in official group portraits. However, they were involved in many group activities as informal photographs record. They also took part in the drawing of "exquisite corpses" and the making of surrealist objects. In July, 1930, the periodical "Le Surrealisme au Service de la Revolution" is saturated with images of women. The cover is a reproduction of Magritte's



Magritte - "I Do Not See The (Woman)  
Hidden In The Forest"

"I Do Not See The (Woman) Hidden In The Forest", in which the image of a nude woman is surrounded by the pictures of the Surrealists, all of whom have their eyes closed. Inside, Dali's essay "The Stinking Ass" was dedicated to Gala; Breton's poem "Free Union" was written in praise of his loved woman of the moment; there are stills from "L'Age d'Or" (Dali and Bunuel), a film celebrating erotic love; and Man Ray's first photograph's of Lee Miller.

Considering all these references to women, it would seem that the Surrealists were obsessed with women, or rather, with an image of women, a rather unsubstantial and romantic image. While they also celebrated the radical political action of women outside the group, women within the group were not given political roles. They rather admired the women within the group for the quality of their imagination and their sensuality.

The case of Lee Miller illustrates their attitude to a truly independent woman. Lee Miller was a young American woman of great classical beauty. She approached Man Ray and informed him that she was his new student. Man Ray told her he didn't have students but he was intrigued despite himself. They became lovers and worked together for some time. They developed solarization together. Miller insisted on her own sexual freedom and this was less enthusiastically received than Charlie Chaplin's demand for sexual liberation. Like many other women artists involved with the Surrealists, she

had no interest in the politics or theory of the group. She was involved entirely on a personal level.

The Surrealist's despised Cocteau for several reasons - Breton considered him

"The most hateful being of our time"<sup>(6)</sup>

When Lee Miller volunteered for a small part in Cocteau's 1930 film "Blood of a Poet" Breton was furious. The fact that her career as a fashion photographer for Vogue was very successful contributed to her final break-up with Man Ray in 1932. Le Miller was the epitome of the newly liberated 1920s woman. She did not fit the role of surrealist muse, being far too strong-minded and independent. She clearly overstepped the white line laid down by Breton to be toed by the surrealist women.

Breton had, by this time, become further and further removed from any confrontation with the realities of women's lives and the complex problems of women's liberation. He had slowly built up an idealised, poetic vision of women as almost mythical creatures. They were ethereal femme-enfants who were in touch with the subconscious and had psychic powers. They were seductresses and sirens but with the naiveté of children.

This view of women can have done nothing to help young women artists struggling to achieve artistic maturity.

Many women were actively involved in the Surrealist movement. Evidence of their existence is to be found in group photographs, the art and poetry of the male Surrealists, and in exhibition catalogues of the thirties and forties. No other art movement has had such a large number of participating women artists. No other movement had offered women such a powerful and central role as Surrealism did.

The following women became involved with the Surrealist movement -

Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, Velentine Hugo, Jaqueline Hugo, Jaqueline Lamba, Dora Maar, Lee Miller, Valentine Penrose, Alice Rahon, Remedios Varo, Eileen Agar, Frida Kahlo, Meret Oppenheim, Kay Sage, Rita Kernn-Larsen and Dorethea Tanning. These women were independent minded and rebellious. They had few role models and little or no encouragement to become practicing artists. They all turned their backs on the conventions of their upbringing and the expectations of society. All of these artists participated in one or more of the international surrealist exhibitions. They all contributed work to major surrealist periodicals, and all of their work shows the influence of surrealist ideas about art and the creative process.

I have chosen to concentrate on the work of three artists from the many who were involved with the Surrealist group. I have chosen Leonor Fini, Dorethea Tanning and Remedios Varo. I have

picked these particular artists for various reasons. Their work frequently embodies Surrealism's ideals. Unfortunately, I have also had to let the availability of information and reproductions of the artists work affect my choice. It has proved extremely difficult to find more than a few scraps of information on many of the artists previously listed. It would seem that only a few of these artists are "significant" enough to warrant the publication of studies on their work!

Their work appeals to me personally for many reasons. It is a sincere exploration of the subconscious and dream worlds. The works reveal an intensely personal vision. I have a fascination with the strong sense of personality which emerges from these women's paintings. I hope to prove in this thesis that the work of these three artists is more than significant enough to warrant the publication of an in-depth study of their work, or more importantly, a reappraisal of the contribution they made to the art of their time.

CHAPTER 2

LEONOR FINI

LEONOR FINI

Leonor Fini was born in 1918 in Buenos Aires, of Spanish/Italian/Argentine parents. She lived in Trieste from the age of two years. She studied Renaissance and Mannerist painting in European museums as a teenager. She came across the Pre-Raphaelites, Aubrey Beardsley, Klimt, the German and Flemish Romantics in her uncle's library. She exhibited in Trieste at the age of seventeen. She spent some time in Milan and arrived in Paris in 1936. She became friends with Eluard, Ernst, Magritte and Brauner. This brought her into contact with the Surrealists but she was never a member of the group. She did, however, display paintings at many surrealist exhibitions. She also had many international exhibitions.

She was not prepared to give herself over to Surrealism's collective goals. She was not interested in Breton's theorising and disagreed with him on several issues -

"I was hostile - first, because of Breton's puritanism; also because of the paradoxical misappreciation for the anatomy of women - characteristic of this movement which pretended to liberate men".<sup>(7)</sup>

Fini was one of the few women, independent and confident enough to disassociate herself ideologically from the Surrealist group.

Leonor Fini, in her life and work, presented the image of an independent, self-governing, absolute woman; imperious, beautiful and governed by passion. She rejected both marriage and the

Surrealists' replacement for it - serial monogamy. She lived communally, frequently with two men,

"one more lover than friend, the other more friend than lover".<sup>(8)</sup>

She demanded sexual freedom which could include bisexuality but it is important not to confuse the desire to experience a woman's love with the choice of lesbianism as a lifestyle. She was not a lesbian.

Leonor Fini had a profound belief in the ability to shape the exterior world according to one's desires. This high-mindedness was rare in a woman of Fini's generation. She made herself the central image of her painting, exploring and strengthening her own identity. She asserted her freedom and independence to a degree that seems the embodiment of the surrealist ideal. She wrote -

"The small child believes that it is the centre of the world. But I, I accept this officially. I have lived and celebrated it".<sup>(9)</sup>

This is obvious in her work.

Fini was uninhibited. She used her sexuality as a form of revolution. She explored forbidden areas of consciousness in her work - perversion, female sexual imagery, and sexual power and dominance by women.

Fini's work is full of curious subtle symbolism but never blatantly obvious references. Many of her images reflect her interest in mythology, alchemy and the occult. She does not





LEONOR FINI "SELF PORTRAIT" (1942-1943)

use direct references but rather invents her own symbols.

She wrote

"Painting is immobile and silent and I love it thus".<sup>(10)</sup>

She reinvests women with creative and magical powers which have long been suppressed by western civilisation. She believed in the magical powers of creativity and in the untapped ability of the mind over matter. In her life and in her work she had absolute belief in the power of the mind to transform and surmount reality.

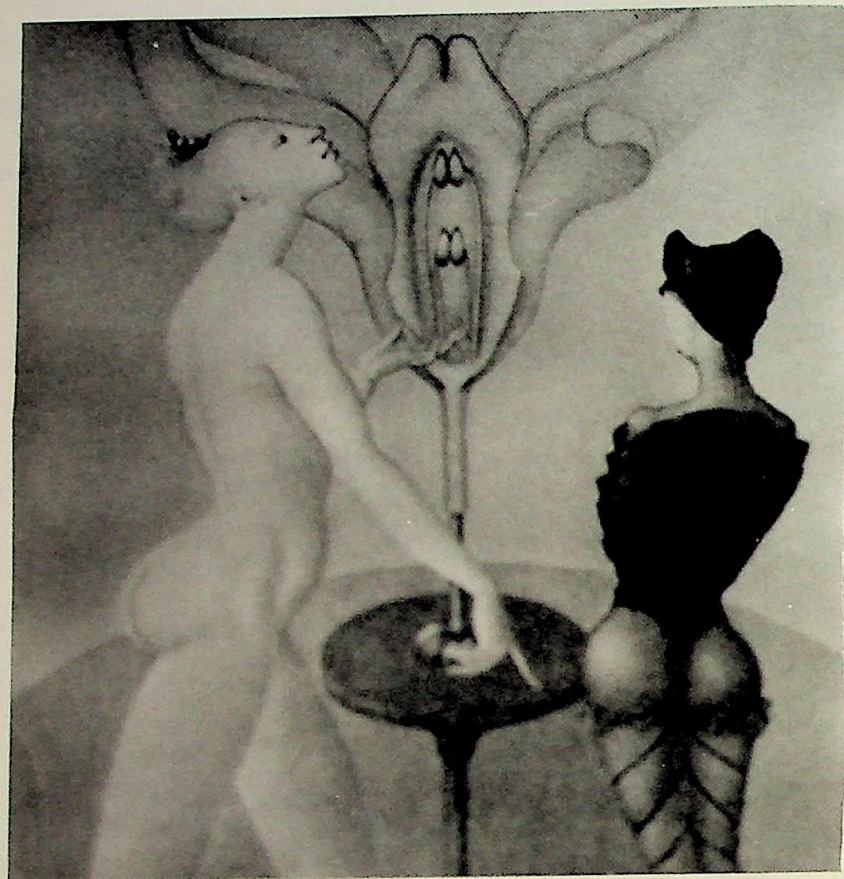
In her paintings all her female figures have her own delicate features, sensuous mouth, dark feline eyes and dark unruly hair. This form of self-portrait reflects her self centred attitude to life. She is almost always at the centre of her paintings.

This shows an unusual degree of self-confidence amongst the women artists of her day. The fact that she chose her own reality or surreality as subject matter for a lifetime's work reflects her autonomous, self-assured state of mind.

Her female figures frequently have a trance-like expression in their eyes and move or sit motionless as though in a dream. The exception to this is the direct self portraits (such as self portrait 1942-43) where she presents an image of herself as intensely self-possessed. She is wearing a ballgown which falls from her shoulders leaving them bare. She also wears jewels and has her hair elaborately styled. She is the epitome of self composure; her face is guarded and almost suspicious.

The position she sits in, poised, head proud and erect, and the way she lets one arm rest on the table in front of her and also the bareness of her shoulders and almost revealed breasts suggest the position of the Sphinx. The way in which her gown falls from her shoulders almost baring her breasts is slightly disconcerting as is the length of her nails. Her long nails give a slightly animalistic tinge to the image. These two elements are all the more disturbing because of the otherwise pristine arrangement of everything in the picture.

In another self-portrait "The Ideal Life" 1950, she sits at the centre of the painting, one foot supported by a plinth, elbow leaning on it, and head in hand. She sits in a very unfeminine position and had a rather unfriendly expression on her face. She is surrounded by cats of all shapes, sizes and colours. One of them, the largest, is more like a leopard than a cat. He sits at her feet, sharing her plinth with her and looks as though he had just been gazing up at her, or indeed communing with her. Another smaller cat brushes against her as though looking for attention. Several other cats, one of which is very large, lounge about at her feet. One is curled up asleep. The rest all have their eyes focused on the viewer. Behind her is a shield/screen or decorative object with ray like patterns on it. Strewn about the room are leaves, balls of string, fruit and various bits of organic matter.



Leonor Fini - "The Lesson On Botany."

Fini herself is wearing a long regal gown and her chest and shoulders are almost completely bare. She wears jewels around her neck and a headress with feathers in it. Her hair is wild and unruly. The whole composition is reminiscent of Britannia sitting on her throne with her shield, headress and the lion who sits on her right hand side sharing her plinth. The pattern on Fini's shield echoes that on Britannia's. Fini's shield is draped with tattered material or possibly cobwebs. The most striking thing about "The Ideal Life" is the vague feeling of hostility one senses in the watchful gaze of all the creatures present. The viewer feels as though s/he is intruding on a private magical world where animals and humans communicate and humans are closer to their animalistic origins and thereby regain the use of many archaic senses and powers. The viewer becomes the viewed and is watched by all seven pairs of less than friendly eyes.

In Fini's painting "The Lesson on Botany" she explores female sexual imagery. Two peculiar creatures stand examining what appear to be the reproductive organs of a flower. The flower stands on a table or pedestal. The flower image also represents the vagina with the two large petals representing legs. The flower dominates the picture as it is so large and is at the head level of the other two creatures. The larger of the two figures is completely naked except for a decorative clasp in its hair. It would appear to be a feminine figure though it is almost androgynous in appearance. It most certainly does not fulfil the aesthetic standards of feminine beauty. It stands, nose in the air, one hand indicating the flower and the other pointing towards the sexual organs of the other



LEONOR FINI "COMPOSITION WITH FIGURES ON A TERRACE"

creature. The larger creature appears to be lecturing the smaller one on the subject of its own sexual organs. The smaller creature is dressed in very peculiar garb which seems to have become part of its body. It seems to have no arms or, if it does, they are confined inside the peculiar armour-like corset it is wearing. It also wears frilly knickers, striped tights (which look like shells or other organic objects) and a peculiar hat or headress. The overall effect is that it appears more like the stamen of a flower than a human body.

The smaller being represents repressed female sexuality, which is ignorant of its own sexual mechanisms. Its clothing represents its state of bondage. The other figure represents the enlightened liberated woman who fully understands her own sexual desires and needs. She is also much more at ease with her body.

This painting is an attempt to visualise complex questions and ideas concerning women's sexuality. It may appear to be a clumsy attempt but it must be remembered that there was no visual language in existence at this time for dealing with such subject matter. Indeed, Leonor Fini took some of the first steps in developing a whole new visual language which is still in its infancy.

In Fini's "Composition with Figures on a Terrace" five figures are in various positions on a terrace. Three of the figures are female and two of these are at different stages of undress. Both the male figures are fully dressed. The three female figures are dressed in full length gowns which lends a romantic



LEONOR FINI "PETIT SPHINX ERMITE" 1948

period air to their appearance. They all have long wild dark hair which is standing on end as though static currents were causing it to do so, or like the hackles rising on a frightened animal. The woman at the forefront is fully dressed. She appears to be in a serene trance-like state as though acting out a dream. She stares away from the viewer with a faraway dazed look in her eyes. She is surrounded by scattered bird feathers as though a cat had just pounced on a bird and devoured it. The second female figure's dress is open, revealing her breasts. From one of her breasts drips milk; it falls into her lap forming a small puddle. One of her hands is clinched as though about to claw at something. She seems to be involved in some intense emotional struggle. The third woman is climbing up the steps which lead to the terrace. She is in an even more revealing state of undress. She wears a long cloak and gloves and is naked to her knees. She, too, is in a trance-like state and appears to be gliding rather than walking or perhaps sleepwalking. The male figure at the forefront is the only figure whose eyes meet the viewers. He is Pan-like in appearance and is cloaked in furs. The other male figure appears to have a rope tied about his waist which is dragging him over the edge of the balustrade. Discarded clothes are strewn about. All the figures seem to be isolated in their own psychological worlds. They are all so introverted that they are unaware of anything but their own subconscious worlds. This has a disconcerting affect and makes one feel that one is indeed watching someone else's dream. There is no logic to the composition and the isolated



though frequently intense emotional experiences one has in a dream are well captured. Fini reveals a visible animalism in her female figures.

There are many tensions in the picture. The man on the left side is being dragged over the edge of the terrace but we cannot see what is beyond the terrace. A rope in the right hand corner is stretched taut and leaves one wondering what it might be attached to. The women are portrayed as erotic, emotionally-involved beings whereas one of the men, at least, is fully aware of his surroundings and in control of his emotions.

Unfortunately, the draughtsmanship of this painting leaves something to be desired. However, the sense of emotional confusion and isolation frequently experienced in dreams is well captured.

Fini's use of sexual imagery can sometimes be confusing and conflicting. The women in "Composition with Figures on a Terrace" could have walked straight out of a male sexual fantasy. The women in many of her other compositions do not fit this role at all. Her women frequently look as though they are about to turn into hyaenas, tigers or some other fantastical creatures. A good example of this is "Petit Sphinx Ermite" 1948 and "Chthonian Divinity Watching over the Sleep of a Young Man" 1947. Her friend, Jean Genet, wrote to her in 1950 -



LEONOR FINI

"If you hold so fast to the bridle of the fabulous and misshapen animal that breaks out in your work and perhaps in your person, it seems to me, Mademoiselle, that you are highly afraid of letting yourself be carried away by savagery. You go to the masked ball, masked with a cat's muzzle, but dressed like a Roman Cardinal - you cling to appearances lest you be invaded by the rump of the Sphinx and driven by wings and claws. Wise prudence: You seem on the brink of metamorphosis".<sup>(11)</sup>

This quote captures some of the unique qualities of Fini's work and life. She endowed women with magical chameleon qualities and an unorthodox, unexplored sexuality. She was one of the first women artists of the 20th century to tackle this unfamiliar terrain. Her work also embodies many of the aims of Surrealism but with one exception. She explores the realms of the subconscious and dream worlds; her work also deals with erotic and sexual imagery; her paintings express a very personal, rich, subconscious world; however, she does not use the erotic female as a key to the revolutionary transformation of consciousness which was one of the central issues of surrealism. It would be somewhat absurd for a woman artist to eroticise the female figure using the same imagery that men use. Neither does she eroticise the male figure; her male figures are asexual. She does give her own personal interpretation of female roles and sexuality.

CHAPTER 3

DORETHERA TANNING



DORETHEA TANNING

Dorethea Tanning was an American painter, born in Illinois in 1912. She studied art in the Art Institute of Chicago. In New York she saw the 1937 Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism exhibition. This greatly influenced her career as a painter. She arrived in Europe in 1939 with letters of introduction to several Surrealist painters but found Paris deserted. When she returned to New York in 1942 she met Max Ernst. She had her first one-woman exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1944. She married Ernst in 1946 and the two of them lived in Arizona, Huismes and Paris. She has had numerous one-woman exhibitions and retrospective exhibitions since 1944.

Tanning's father was Swedish and had come to America dreaming of becoming a cowboy in the American West. Her mother invented extravagant fantasies of musical or theatrical careers for her daughters. She dressed them in silk and taffeta. Dorethea grew up in Galesbury, a small repressive puritanical American town. She escaped into a rich and complex fantasy life influenced by Carroll, Andersen, Wilde, Radcliffe and others.

Tanning was one of many younger women who was not present during the official beginning of Surrealism. She became involved at a later date when her male contemporaries were working as mature artists. Most of the women attracted to

Surrealism at this time were young and only beginning the long struggle towards artistic maturity. Many of them were politically and ideologically unsure of themselves. Tanning met Breton in New York in the early 1940s. Asked why Breton had never written about her work, Tanning said that he was only interested in Ernst's work, and also that her imperfect French (Breton refused to learn English) and her shyness prevented her from ever really talking to him. In an interview with Alain Jouffroy, Tanning said -

"I noticed with a certain consternation that the place of women in Surrealism was no different than her place in bourgeois society in general".<sup>(12)</sup>

Several images or events from Tanning's childhood in Galesburg (Illinois) are reflected in her work. She once referred to Galesburg as a place "where nothing happens but the wallpaper". In her painting "Children's Games" two nubile girls are tearing the wallpaper from the walls and as they do so it bursts into flames. Dorethea Tanning had two sisters and her mother liked to dress the three girls in fancy silk and taffeta dresses. This could be the origin of her many images of groups of young girls dressed in Victorian-style dresses. In many of Tanning's paintings violent winds tear through rooms pulling at hair and clothing. On the day Tanning was born there was a hurricane -

"A day of high wind; a regular hurricane that blew down one of the three poplars in front of our house. My mother was terrified. So I was born".<sup>(13)</sup>

This event certainly influenced her imagery.



DORETHEA TANNING - TITLE UNKNOWN

Tanning was fascinated by the difference between the elusiveness of visual memory and clarity of the written word. She once said -

"My dreams are bristling with objects which relate to nothing in the dictionary. On waking, they lose their clarity. Dreams one reads in books are composed of known symbols but it is the strangeness of dreams that distinguishes them". (14)

In Tanning's paintings there is a tangible fear of the descent into the recesses of the mind. Tanning's journey to the unconscious is not the collective and well-documented day-trip of the Surrealists with their group games and dictionaries of symbols. The Surrealists thought of insanity as a state of mind which could be harnessed and utilised with no loss of control or risk involved.

Unfortunately, some of the less stable Surrealists and friends of the Surrealists such as Antoin Artaud, Leonora Carrington, Nadja and Robert Desnos suffered greatly as a result of this naive attitude to madness. Susan Suntag wrote.....

"The Surrealists heralded the benefits that would accrue from unlocking the gates of reason, and ignored the abominations". (15)

In Tanning's painting there is a sense of fear of the uncontrollable unpredictable realm of the unconscious. In Breton's essay "Surrealism: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow" he encourages the total expression of psychic reality:



DORETHEA TANNING "EINE KLEINE NACHT MUSIK"

"thanks to which there will be nothing but the dizzy descent to within ourselves, the flooding with light of our secret places, and the gradual blotting out of the others: a perpetual sauntering through wide spaces hitherto out of bounds".<sup>(16)</sup>

It is this psychic reality which inspires Tanning's painting.

Tanning regards her paintings as portraying emotions which cannot be specified as sexual. However, there is a strong sexual force evident in her work. It is a creative, emotional and psychological sexuality rather than genital or physical.

Tanning's style of painting is meticulously realistic. "Eine Kleine Nacht-Musik" 1946 was influenced by Pierre Roy's "Danger on the Stairs". She uses a similar setting for "Eine Kleine Nacht-Musik" and a similarly realistic style. "Eine Kleine Nacht-Musik" is semi-narrative. It is obvious that something has just happened and that something is just about to happen. The stairs leading down from the landing and the half open door extend the picture, leaving the possibility of exploration. The stairs leading down from the landing seem dark and threatening. The fact that the corridor extends indefinitely in both directions is also disquieting. The three closed doors are more formidable than the open one which seems to offer sanctuary and comfort. A glowing warm light comes from the open door. The three closed doors look forbidding and one imagines that they are probably locked. The peeling wallpaper seems ominous too, as though



Dorothea Tanning - "Guardian Angels."

the wall is about to shed its own skin. One little girl leans against a doorpost with a trance-like expression of oblivion on her face. Her dress is ripped to shreds and hangs around her hips. She has a prepubescent body as does the other girl. The blonde girl is clutching a petal from the sunflower in her hand. The other little girl is wearing a white Victorian style dress. The end of it is ripped and falls in tatters on the floor. Her fists are clinched and her hair rises vertically into the air as though the violence of her emotions is causing it to do so. She looks down at the giant writhing sunflower as though about to trample on it with her tiny heeled shoes. The sunflower blocks the corridor leading to the open door and also blocks the stairs. The shadow of the sunflower makes it seem even larger and more threatening. It is evident that a vicious struggle has just taken place and it isn't over yet. There is a frenzied feeling of destruction and danger from this painting. There are undeniable erotic implications. One girl looks as though she has just been ravished and the other seems about to attack or be attacked by the sunflower.

In Tanning's "Guardian Angels" the whole landscape seems to be shrouded in white sheets. Empty beds are scattered everywhere and their occupants are being carried off by hideous-looking winged creatures and seem to dissolve again and become part of the sheets. One figure in red is about to be carried off and a female figure has slipped between two beds and it seems that she might escape. Are these figures being transported to the



DORETHERA TANNING "THE GUEST ROOM"

terrible land of Nightmare or to the pleasant land of sweet dreams?

In Tanning's "The Guest Room" an adolescent girl lies sleeping in bed with an almost life size doll which has a broken arm and stares blankly ahead of it. At the entrance to the room stands a young adolescent girl. She stares unseeingly out of the picture as though dazed or sleep-walking. Behind the door is a shadow of herself but the shadow is blindfolded. Beside the bedside table is a dwarf wearing cowboy boots and spurs. He seems to be looking towards the naked girl. On the table are four broken eggshells - the egg was an initiation symbol in European Folklore - and a cup and saucer. Behind the bed in the shadows stands a hooded figure with a wand in its hand. The room is in great disorder with all the drapery being blown about by a strong wind. The table cloth is crumpled and so is the rug under the bed. All over the floor are the broken tops of eggs. A struggle is taking place but it is an inner struggle. It is the struggle between the girl who wishes to remain a child, and clings to the things of childhood, and her emergent sexuality.

In "Palaestra" one sleepy prepubescent girl has just tumbled out of bed and above her head five young girls who seem in transports of ecstasy tumble about. Most of their clothes are torn. At the top a naked girl kneels and prays. One of the girls is pulling her own hair and another seems to be in sexual ecstasy. A girl in hat and coat walks towards the door with a skipping rope in her hand. Some organic object is skewered into a sort of cage. Again there is the same



REMEDIOS VARO "CELESTIAL PABLUM"

wind pulling at hair and clothes.

Tanning produced many such profoundly disturbing images and was unique in her attempt to visualise turbulent emotional forces.

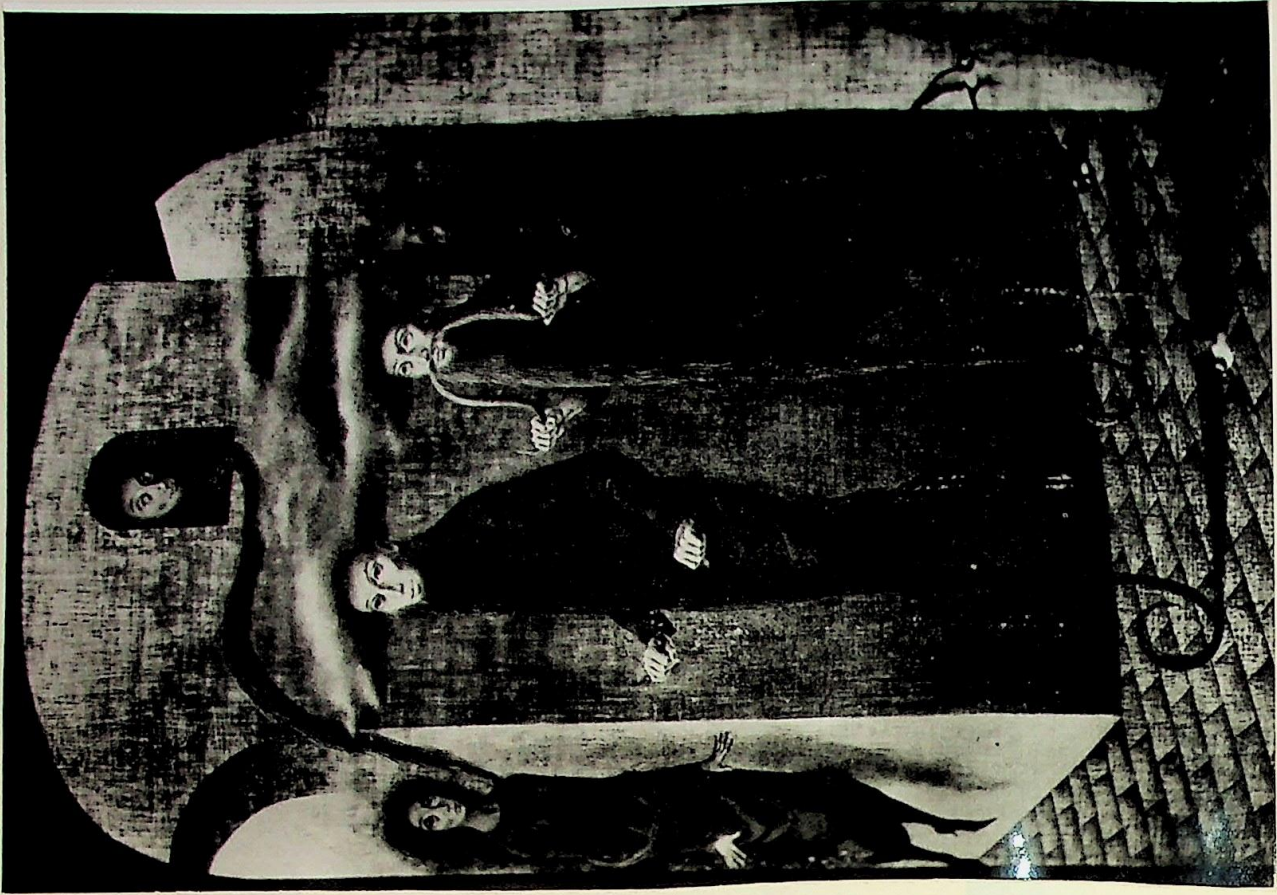


Dorothea Tanning - "Children's Games."

Remidios Varo - "The Vegetarian Vampires."



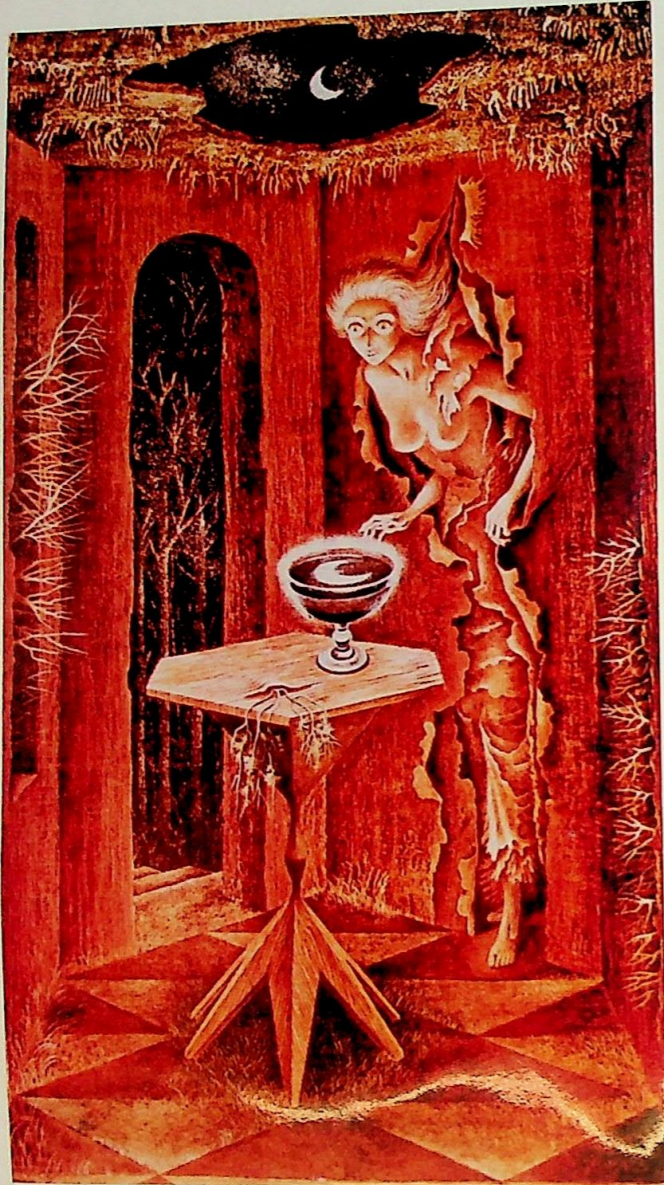
Remidios Varo - "Capillary Movement."



CHAPTER 4

REMIDIOS VARO





Remedios Varo - title unknown.

## REMIDIOS VARO

Varo was born in Spain in 1913. She died in 1963 in Mexico City. Her father was a hydraulic engineer and this inspired a fascination with mathematics and mechanical drawing. As a child she travelled in Spain and North Africa with her father. This perhaps inspired her drawings of strange locomotive machines. She studied Art in the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid, where she was a year behind Dali. She married Benjamin Peret in Barcelona and they moved to Paris where they were both active in surrealist circles between 1937 and 1939. The war forced them to move to Mexico. Varo had her first one-woman exhibition in 1956 in Mexico City at the "Galeria Diana". A retrospective of her work was held in 1971 and it drew the largest audiences in Mexican history.

Varo had already embarked on an artistic career before meeting the Surrealists. Her closest friends in the group were the Spanish painters Esteban Frances and Oscar Dominguez. She would later become very close friends with Leonora Carrington who also settled in Mexico. Varo and most of the other women within the group would have been younger than their male contemporaries. In an interview in 1957 Varo explained her position within the group -

"Yes, I attended those meetings where they talked a lot and one learned various things; sometimes I participated with works in their exhibitions; my position was one of a timid and humble listener; I



REMEDIOS VARO "HARMONY"

was not old enough nor did I have the aplomb to face up to them, to a Paul Eluard, a Benjamin Peret or an Andre Breton. I was with an open mouth within this group of brilliant and gifted people. I was together with them because I felt a certain affinity..."<sup>(17)</sup>

This quote must represent the feelings of many of the younger women involved with the group at this time. Many of them would have felt shy and intimidated by the group's well-educated, outspoken and opinionated leader, Andre Breton. Many of the young women's political, artistic and ideological stances were as yet indefinite. They were most certainly inspired and influenced by the Surrealists' ideas but many of the women artists eventually rejected Surrealism's strictly outlined ideals in favour of their own more personal ideals. In Mexico, Varo and Carrington came to share a perception of painting as a recording of life's many adventures and journeys - spiritual, physical and metaphysical.

Varo's painting technique is meticulous. Every area of her paintings has been given the same attention, the whole surface being highly worked and finished. Every grain and knot on wooden surfaces is visible and every blade of grass is clear. Varo was a skilled draughtswoman. In her painting an almost microscopic scrutiny of natural forms is visible.

Varo was fascinated by alchemy and the occult. She wrote a short story about a "Lady Milagra" in Mexico in 1941. This



REMEDIOS VARO "THE CREATION OF THE BIRDS"

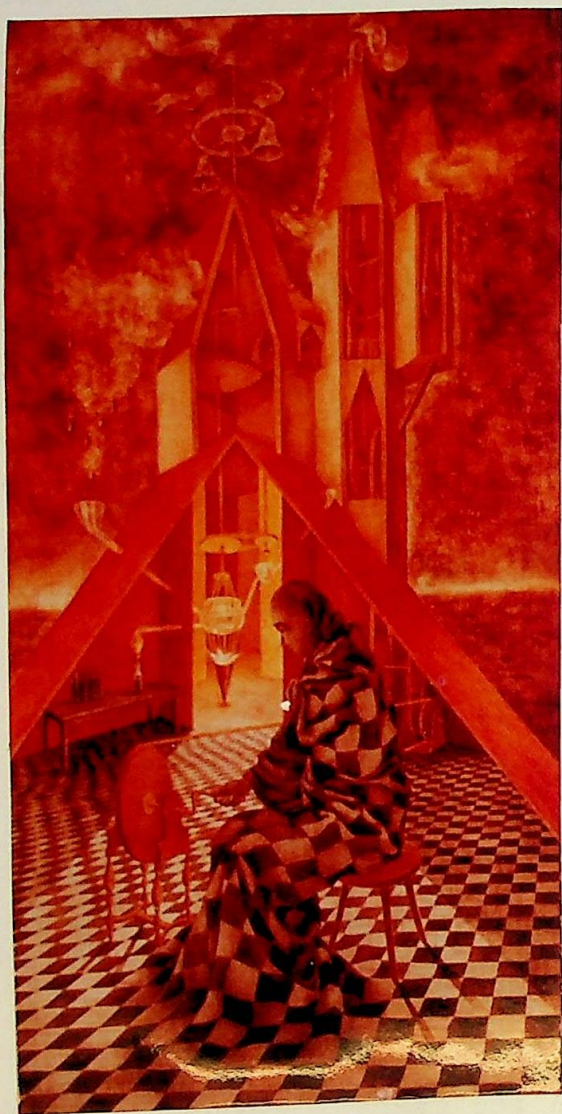
story was about an alchemist who studies the mysterious properties of a metal necessary for the first step of the alchemical work. Woman is in possession of intuitive magical powers without which the alchemist's knowledge is useless.

The women in Varo's paintings are often alchemists, musicians, engineers and scientists. They travel through landscapes or the sky in fantastic vehicles which run on sunlight, stardust or music.

In Varo's painting "The Creation of the Birds" a woman in the form of an owl sits drawing. She holds a magnifying glass through which shines the light of a star. The starlight transforms her drawing into a living bird which flies off the page and joins several other birds which fly about the room. Her paint comes from an alchemical device which is fed by raindrops outside the window.

In "Harmony" a figure sits adjusting seashells, crystals, leaves and fruit on a musical clef in an effort to create harmony from the chaos that erupts within the room.

In "Alchemy or the Useless Science" a figure sits wrapped in the tiles from the floor. The figure wearily turns the handle of a machine which collects raindrops and turns them into some precious liquid which is bottled. We are given no indication as to what the precious liquid is or why it is useless.



REMIDIOS VARO "ALCHEMY OR THE USELESS SCIENCE"

All of Varo's paintings seem to portray a spiritual journey of discovery. She creates highly improbable magical worlds full of fantastic inventions. Her imagery is frequently whimsical and highly amusing. Her figures are usually female or androgynous and are perpetually on a lonely but exciting quest for knowledge. The isolation of her figures relates to the dream world or subconscious world where one is always isolated. Varo's exploration of the subconscious is a highly personal and sophisticated one, full of personal symbols, alchemical and mythical references. Varo's work represents yet another woman painter who has successfully brought to life a highly personal subconscious existence.



Remedios Varo - Voyage



LEONOR FINI - NO TITLE

CHAPTER 5

SEXUALITY

## SEXUALITY

In 1928 the Surrealists organised an inquiry into sexuality. No women were present although women's sexuality was being discussed. Aragon was the only member of the group to comment on this. It is perfectly logical that the Surrealists' attitude to the erotic, formulated by a group of men, was liable to be responsive only to male desire. In *l'Amour Fou* Breton wrote that -

"...between poetic emotion and erotic pleasure the difference is only one of degree".<sup>(18)</sup>

Surrealism made women into an active sexual force and also gave her an active role in man's creative life but in the end her image was still defined by male desire.

The Marquis de Sade and Freud profoundly influenced the Surrealist movement. Tanning, Fini and Toyen are the only women artists of this time who can be said to have explored Sade's iconography. Fini and Toyen (Czech painter) actually illustrated Sade. Fini is the only female painter who made a distinctive contribution to Surrealism's perverse Sadean imagery. Fini illustrated Sade's "Juliette" for a 1944 edition. Fini used images in "Juliette" to illustrate the sexual power and dominance of women. Toyen, however, chose to illustrate "Justine" who was the most abused and servile of all Sade's victims. Fini and Toyen both actively took part in Surrealism's obsession with the erotic but they did so independently of the movement.



LEONOR FINI - ILLUSTRATION FOR "JULIETTE"



TOYEN - EROTIC DRAWING 1936

Toyen's painting "Relache" (which means "no performance") is highly suggestive. Nothing actually happens but the objects in the painting suggest an erotic scene. A young girl is hanging upside down on a bar so that her face and head are covered by her skirt. Her frilly white knickers and skirt suggest virginity. Her belly and legs are vulnerably bare. Her feet merge with the wall. The fact that her face and head are hidden impersonalises the image and she becomes an object, a female body. On the ground is a riding crop and an empty paper bag. Both these objects are highly suggestive.

Toyen also brought a sense of humour to erotic imagery. Her erotic drawing of 1936 is refreshing in its playfulness.

In one of Fini's illustrations for "Juliette" she portrays two female bodies skewered on long poles. One of the bodies is decapitated and only the head and torso (which has been torn from the rest of the body) are visible. The victim has an expression of horror on her face. The other figure is skewered through the rectum, the whole body and the head. Its hands and feet are bound and the body is battered and tortured. Clutching her two victims is Juliette who wears an expression of ecstatic savagery. Her hair has turned to feathers as though she is metamorphosing into some strange beast. Her face is transformed with lust into a mask of depravity. Juliette is an exception amongst Sade's string



DORETHEA TANNING "MATERNITY"

of family life. Many of the women involved with Surrealism never had children and those who did often had only one or two. The image of the femme-enfant (eternal child) conflicted with the realities of maternity. Many of these women never had any desire to bear children or were repulsed by the idea. Fini wrote -

"I have never been attracted by fecundity. It is a refusal of utility: participation in the continuity of the species is an abdication. In order to have children, a humility nearly unconceivable in the modern world is necessary, a brutalised passivity or a mad pretension..... Myself, I know that I belong with the idea of Lilith, the anti-Eve, and that my universe is that of the spirit. Physical maternity instinctively repulses me".<sup>(19)</sup>

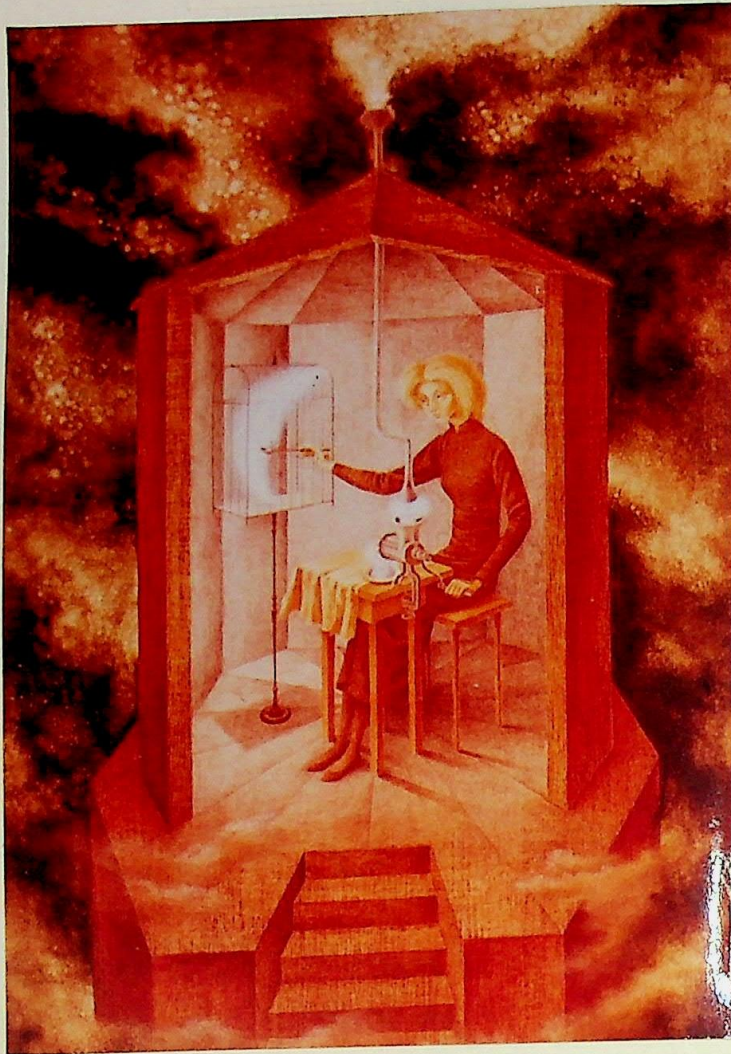
This view of maternity was common to several of the Surrealist women painters.

Tanning and Varo's paintings reflect powerful images of the conflicts inherent in maternity. The once sexual being becomes a nurturing milk-giving maternal being. The mother's body changes with pregnancy and there is the fear that it is no longer sexually attractive. Also, the mother is afraid of losing her independence and is exhausted after the birth.

Tanning's painting "Maternity" (1946) reflects some of these conflicts. A woman stands with an unhappy child in her arms whose nightgown is tattered and torn. The mother looks depressed and world-weary. At her feet is a dog with a baby's



REMIDIOS VARO ~ "Celestial Pabulum"<sup>3)</sup>



face. Through a door in the barren landscape is a sail-like construction. The sails represent the mother's swollen breasts and bloated pregnant belly. Dark threatening clouds hang over the landscape.

Varo's "Celestial Pabulum" (1958) represents the loneliness and exhaustion felt by the mother fulfilling her child's demands. She sits alone in a tower turning the handle of a machine which sucks stars in through the roof, grinds them and churns them out onto a plate. She feeds the ground stars to the moon, which sits in a cage obediently opening its mouth to be spoon-fed.

Women artists were in the position of either adopting male erotic imagery or exploring their own personal erotic imagery. Many women artists made attempts at exploring a very personal erotic imagery. Often it was a more psychological or emotional eroticism than the phalocentric eroticism of the male Surrealists. Only Fini created a genuinely new language which expressed woman's sexual reality from a woman's point of view, for women. Her success in creating this new language naturally isolated her still further from the Surrealist's collective aims.



LEONOR FINI - EROTIC DRAWING

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSION

The Surrealist revolution was intended to free the individual from the control of rational thought, the demands of a monetary society, and the institutions of the state, church and family. In order to do this it was necessary to rediscover those human senses largely repressed by Western civilisation - intuition, emotion and the irrational. These senses had been labeled as female qualities in a civilisation where women were politically and economically powerless and thereby devalued. Surrealism validated art which expressed the personal reality and explored the subconscious and dream-world. Although women artists were in many ways alienated by patriarchal values, which proved to be more difficult to overcome than was anticipated, they undoubtedly benefited from the influence of a group who extolled the virtues of the "fair sex" and indeed coveted these virtues.

Michel Thevoz, speaking of the creativity of the socially repressed says -

"One accordingly finds that women get their own back in forbidden spheres which lie outside the cultural domain. They are gifted for Art Brut, just as they are for magic, clairvoyance, mediumism, and more generally, for the exercise of all those irrational powers which a male dominated society runs down and medicalises under the sarcastic term of 'hysteria'".<sup>(20)</sup>

Although this quote refers to Art Brut, I believe it to be equally relevant to Surrealism. Precisely because women's art was not taken seriously and their work was ignored, they were uniquely free to express internal emotions and thoughts. Once again, with Surrealism, women's art was isolated, trivialised and ignored. Women painters found themselves pushed outside or alienated from the Surrealist "movement". However, they derived much valuable influence and some support from the Surrealists ideals and explorations and continued to work, usually in isolation and without due recognition. The many rich and unique images produced by the artists I have written of and many others, provide powerful proof that human creativity is not determined by gender. Hopefully, some day in the not too far distant future, our libraries will contain not merely a token percentage of these women's work, but will be full of reproductions of their work and information on their lives.

NOTES

- (1) Jean, Marcel. The History of Surrealist Painting p.693, Grove Press, New York, 1960
- (2) Ibid., p. 118.
- (3) Chadwick, Whitney. Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, p.7, London, Thames and Hudson, 1985.
- (4) Josephson, Matthew. Life Among the Surrealists, New York, 1962.
- (5) Chadwick, Whitney. Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, p. 31, Thames and Hudson, 1985.
- (6) Ibid., p. 42.
- (7) Le Livre de Leonor Fini: Peintures, Ecrits, Notes de Leonor Fini, Paris, 1975.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Chadwick, Whitney. Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement.
- (10) Le Livre de Leonor Fini: Peintures, Ecrits, Notes de Leonor Fini, Paris, 1975.
- (11) Genet, Jean. Lettre a Leonor Fini, Paris, 1950.
- (12) Jouffroy, Alain. Dorethea Tanning Exhibition Catalogue, Paris: Centre National d'Art Contemporain, 1974.
- (13) Chadwick, Whitney. Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, p. 92, Thames and Hudson, 1985.
- (14) Ibid., p. 95.
- (15) A Susan Sontag Reader, Editor Elizabeth Hardwick, Penguin Books, Great Britain, 1983.
- (16) Chadwick, Whitney. Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement, p. 98, Thames and Hudson, 1985.
- (17) Ibid., p. 11.
- (18) Breton, Andre. L'Amour Fou, Paris, 1937.
- (19) Gauthier, X. Leonor Fini, Le Musee de Poche, Paris, 1973, p. 74.
- (20) McGregor, John M. The Discovery of the Art of the Insane, p. 318, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1978.

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