

# Leonora Carrington Discovering Diverging Worlds

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Photos reproduced by permission of Leonora Carrington

*The Daring Young Men on the Purple Balloon*, 54 x 99 cm, 1970 (oil on canvas).

*I am armed with madness for a long journey.*  
Leonora Carrington<sup>1</sup>

“Irremediably mad.” With that label—beyond playful or creative metaphors—Leonora Carrington spent time in a madhouse for seeing the world in an unusual way, far from simplifications, for bestowing cosmic powers on the most humdrum of objects, for trying to save the planet, or at least discover it in a different way in order to put a distinctive stamp on it.

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A person who questioned rational systems, a rebellious woman and an indecipherable creator, a firm believer in the powers of the beyond, above all with faith in intelligence, Leonora has been a complete surrealist since she was born April 6, 1917 in Clayton Green, Lancashire, England.

Brought up in a strict Catholic family, from the time she was a child, she was un-ed-u-ca-ble. At least that was how teachers and governesses described her to her Irish, country-bred mother and her prosperous English industrialist father.

The thing was, Leonora was only interested in drawing and daydreaming about the stories



*Took My Way Down, Like a Messenger, to the Deep*, triptych, 181 x 120 cm, 1970 (oil on canvas).



*Crookhey Hall*, 31.5 x 60 cm, 1947 (oil on canvas).

her Irish nanny told her about ghosts, gnomes and fairies, the very same characters that have peopled not only her mind, but her paintings and sculptures all her life.

In 1920, her family moved to Crookhey Hall, close to Lancaster, and she and her three brothers were left in the care of a French governess, a religious tutor and the Irish nana who fed her imagination. One year later, the little girl began to invent her own stories and illustrate them with drawings. But, while her rebelliousness flowered, her parents sent her to Florence and Paris to train her in the canons of the English monarchy.

Nine months in a Florentine boarding school immersed her in Renaissance art. In 1936, she entered the London academy of purist painter Amédée Ozanfant and made her first contact with the work of Max Ernst when she saw the cover of *Two Children Threatened by a Hummingbird*. One year later, she met Ernst personally and decided to live with him; they moved to the south of France where

together they designed the sets for Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Roi* (Ubu the King).

The year 1938 was key for the young painter who seriously began her professional and public life as an artist with her participation in the exhibitions "International Exposition of Surrealism" at Paris' Fine Arts Gallery and the "Exposition of Surrealism" in Amsterdam's Robert Gallery.

From that time on, Carrington's universe has included not only painted and sculpted images, but also words, through plays, novels and short stories. *The oval lady*, her first literary work was written in 1939 and illustrated by Ernst. That same year, Ernst was imprisoned in a concentration camp, and, although Leonora managed to have him freed some months later, in the early 1940s, he was jailed again by the Nazis. When Leonora could not effect his rescue, she escaped to Spain and had a nervous breakdown and was confined to a mental hospital for six months in Santander. Following the advice of André Breton and Pierre Mabille, she wrote *Down Below*, a memoir of that experience.



*Friday the 13th*, 60 x 90 cm, 1965 (oil on canvas).

In 1941, her father requested her transfer to southern Africa, but she went to Lisbon and took refuge in the Mexican consulate. There, she came into contact with Mexican writer Renato Leduc, who married her in order to get the visa that would allow the two of them to go to New York. In Manhattan, she contributed to surrealist magazines and exhibitions and, in 1942, she traveled to Mexico. From then on, she would play a very active part in Mexico's intellectual life, but particularly with the surrealists who had come there as war refugees: Benjamin Péret, Remedios Varo, Kati and José Horna and the Hungarian photographer Emerico "Chiqui" Weisz, her husband from 1946 until today.

In 1946, she wrote *Penelope*, her best known play. Two years later she would have her first individual show in New York in the Pierre Matisse Gallery. Later would come shows in Paris and Mexico City, with a one-woman show in the Fine Arts Palace in 1960.

She ventured into costume design in 1961 when she did the clothing and masks for Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Meanwhile, *Penelope* was produced in 1962, directed by Alejandro Jodorowski. Twelve months later, she painted a mural for the National Museum of Anthropology, *The Magical World of the Maya*.

In the 1960s and 1970s she had a great presence in museums and galleries in Mexico, the United States, England, Japan and Brazil. In 1971 she studied with a Tibetan lama exiled in Canada and Scotland. In the 1980s she traveled with her work to spaces in the United States and Europe. In 1976, she published *La Porte de pierre* (The Door of Stone), and yet a decade later, she published her short stories in a volume *Pigeon volé* (Pigeon on the Wing), written many years before, between 1937 and 1940.

Leonora's literary endeavors produced two volumes more, *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales* and *The House of Fear*, a selection of



*Rabbit Loew's Bath*, 45.5 x 68 cm, 1969 (oil on canvas).

short stories published in 1988 in New York and a year later in London. In 1991, they were translated in Spain and, in Mexico, publishers Siglo XXI Editores distributed them in 1992.

Other examples of her narrative translated to Spanish are *The oval lady* published in 1965 by Era, 26 years after it had been first written in French; and *Le Cornet acoustique* (The Hearing Trumpet) published in Paris in 1974, translated three years later for publishers Monte Avila Editores. Of the vast amount of biographic work about the artist, Juan García Ponce's work, Leonora's own piece entitled *Leonora Carrington* (1974), and Whitney Chadwick's work *Leonora Carrington. La realidad de la imaginación* (Leonora Carrington. The Reality of the Imagination),<sup>2</sup> published by the National Council for Culture and the Arts and Ediciones Era, are only a few examples.

According to her own calculations, Leonora estimates that she did more than 1,000 paintings, hundreds of drawings, water colors, scul-

tures and tapestries. One of her most recent projects is "Freedom in Bronze," a collection of sculptures by artists unaccustomed to the medium, like José Luis Cuevas, Vicente Rojo, Juan Soriano and Gunther Gerzso. The collection was exhibited along Mexico City's Reforma Avenue, but one of them —Leonora's— was stolen from its place in Chapultepec Park, and later recovered. A few months ago, in a kind of homage to her, the Mexico City government unveiled a Carringtonian piece that is half row-boat, half crocodile.

#### A WORLD IN METAMORPHOSIS

Universes full of concepts more than feelings. Complex painting, ironic and indecipherable. Iconography beyond stories, niceness and the feminine. Far-off canvases, removed from traditional considerations of "what is beautiful" and "what is well done." All of this has been part of



*Adelita Escapes*, 75 x 60 cm, 1987 (acrylic on canvas).



Untitled (For Jahae and Jean François), 30.5 x 72.5 cm, 1952 (oil on canvas).

Carrington's creative endeavors for more than half a century, since she presented her first show in New York in 1948. But it has been in Mexico where her language jelled, marked by different themes and techniques: from Celtic myth to the Cabala, from Tibetan Buddhism to Gnosticism. A world in constant metamorphosis.

In the 1940s, her painting emphasized large women and also the recreation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, a work which left its mark on her. Later, inspired by Bosch and a few painters from the Renaissance, she fragmented her compositions, using a classical technique, tempera over egg, which gives the canvases an intense, bright finish.

In the 1950s, the infinite sense of space of Carrington's previous canvases disappeared and she began limiting her scenes. Hybrid things took center stage, as did esoteric and mystical icons. By the 1960s, the influence of Jung and Buddhism appeared; dull tones became vivid and her murals revealed her interest in the Chiapas Indians' traditions and the myths of Popol Vuh. Finally, her very personal vision of women led her to recuperate that universe with a mix of irony and mystery, but never literally or as illustration.

#### MOVED BY PASSION

Reluctant to be interviewed, Leonora Carrington becomes quite talkative when asked about women. She is interested in them all: artisans or prostitutes, anthropologists or mythical figures like Lilith. Talking about "women's culture," as she calls it, brings her to life.

"I don't like interviews. For me, the most important thing is that the work be looked at. Since I was young, I have made my own decisions about my life, particularly when I decided to become a painter. My parents had me all prepared for a comfortable existence, staying in England and having a life that would have been acceptable to society. But, if you are possessed by a passion, like I was by painting, you have to obey it...I have done a lot of work on my interior being. It has been like saying to myself, for better or for worse, I did that painting, and I would never exchange it for a Rembrandt or for someone else's, someone better than I. I would say no because I put my being into my painting. For me, the value of a work is the labor it takes to become yourself, making something honest. It's the work of a lifetime, and even if it's a disaster, I prefer it to changing my life."<sup>3</sup>



*Jack Be Nimble, Jack Be Quick*, 90 x 90 cm, 1970 (oil on canvas).

A great deal has been written about this member of the surrealist group, the group with which André Breton, Benjamin Péret and Max Ernst tried to discover the universe and give it a different image. Breton said that Leonora looked at the real world with the eyes of madness and at the madness of the world with lucidity. Octavio Paz called her “the bewitched witch, insensitive to social morality, to aesthetics and price.”<sup>4</sup> And she herself has said she was “armed with madness for a long journey.” And she has been for her 83 years, accompanied by a frenzy in the face of the world and its inhabitants, a lucid mind in the face of the injustice of men, paying equal attention to human beings, animals, rocks and the cos-

mos, always part of her universe crammed with mystery. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Catálogo Leonora Carrington. Una retrospectiva* (Monterrey, Nuevo León: Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Leonora Carrington. La realidad de la imaginación* (Mexico City: CNCA/Era, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Quotes from Leonora Carrington, unless otherwise specified, are from interviews with the author in 1993, 1994 and 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Octavio Paz, *Los privilegios de la vista* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987).