

From Mexico's political, social and mythical atmosphere, from its fantasy and folklore, the French poet no doubt singled out characteristics which apparently linked our way of life to surrealist principles. His enthusiasm was all the greater because at the time he visited our country the surrealist movement tended toward the revolutionary left and its projects. Mexico under Cárdenas seemed to be enacting some of the aspirations and petitions that European surrealists included in their Manifesto of 1924.

Fourteen years separated the Breton of the First Surrealist Manifesto from the poet who came to Mexico in 1938, years during which not only the man but surrealism itself changed. Breton arrived shrouded in the fame of controversy, enlightenment and sectarianism, cloaked in the image of the intolerant prophet-inquisitor. He was no longer supported by the friends who originally set out with him on the adventurous attempt to save mankind. Most of them had fallen by the wayside under the pressure of his lashing tongue and of the public indictments meted out by Breton's intolerance toward the contradictions that he exalted in theory. This is why throughout his life the poet was forced to seek out new and increasingly younger followers. We can even understand how the artist's conceit led him to publicly remark on the Mexican press' failure to give adequate coverage to his lectures, since he was explaining none other than the program that art should follow in this atmosphere so potentially akin to surrealism.

When the International Surrealist Exhibit opened at the Mexican Art Gallery in January, 1940 it received the same luke-warm welcome Breton had been given two years before. The show

was organized by a young star of the European movement, the Austrian Wolfgang Paalen, and by Peruvian Poet César Moro. It included works by Dalí, Magritte, Picasso, Masson, Delveaux, Tanguy and other Europeans, along with the paintings of Mexican artists such as Diego Rivera, Guillermo Meza, Agustín Lazo, Frida Kahlo and Remedios Varo. Prehispanic art objects and other so-called works of "savage art" were included along with photographs. The exhibit was mounted conventionally instead of with the excentric flourishes surrealists were notorious for.

Mexican painter Manuel Rodríguez Lozano wrote at the time: "It's naive to bring surrealism to the homeland of marijuana. You don't paint when you're high, you paint when you're lucid, and that's when the reality of the Mexican people is portrayed."

The works of two women painters, Remedios Varo and Frida Kahlo, were included in this now famous 1940 exhibit. Perhaps an analysis of their painting can help explain why the surrealist's program had such a scant following in Mexico and was really only taken up by foreign-born artists, as was the case of Remedios Varo.

This artist came to Mexico from Cataluña in 1942, although one of her works, *Memory of The Valkyrie*, preceded her and was exhibited in 1938. When Remedios Varo came to America she was a fully developed artist with a solid and knowledgeable mastery of her craft. She was firmly rooted in the surrealist school after having lived in Paris with Poet Benjamin Peret, who came with her, and partaking in the close circle of Breton's followers: Paul Eluard, Ives

## Painters of Seven Generations

Works by seven generations of painters were brought together to communicate among themselves and with visitors at an important new exhibit, *Confrontation 86: A Synchronic View of Mexican Painting*. Shown at the Palace of Fine Arts from July 18 to September 7, this sampling of 165 painters occupied six of the museum's large halls. The exhibit was sponsored by the Division of Visual Arts to provide a "balance sheet of Mexico's artistic assets." Works were chosen by six external specialists along with three others from the Division.

The organizers maintain that the show revealed "one of the possible pictorial truths of today's national reality," and that it provided a journey through several

Mexican schools of art: realist, free figurativist, fantastic, lyric abstract, geometric, minimalist, neofigurativist and neoexpressionist. Nonetheless, for this reviewer's taste, the journey was excessive.

The painters chosen to be shown by all of the judges (Tamayo, Gerzo, Soriano, Cuevas, Rojo, Felguérez, Gironella and Toledo) were given 3.6 meters of exhibition space for up to three works. The next group received 3.2 meters for up to two paintings, and the others 1.6 meters for one work.

It is said that Diego Rivera, hyphenation Mexican muralist, often listened to the conversations of the plant kingdom and the music of paintings. If we sup-

pose that common mortals may also partake of that possibility, then this reviewer would have to say, perhaps rather rashly, that he was left with only one thing for certain: *Confrontation 86* offered lots of painting and little music and much noise and, at best, a couple of nuts.

Through the view of these particular eyes, the only memorable and vigorous music was to be found in "The Vocation of Teacher Magdalena" (Belkin; "La vocación de la maestra Magdalena"), "Sacrifice" (Castañeda; "Sacrificio"), "The Hour is Transparent" (Coen; "La hora es transparente"), "Intolerance" (Cuevas; "Intolerancia"), "Without Work" (Dosamantes; "El sin trabajo"), "Time Threatened" (Esquedo; "Tiempo ame-

nazado"), "The Miraculous Lord of the Iguanas" (Flores; "El señor milagroso de las iguanas"), "Crowded and Cornered" (González Rodríguez; "Amon-tonados y arrinconados"), "Adolescent Conversing with a Bird" (Hernández; "Adolescente dialogando con un pájaro"), "Character in the Border Country" (Val Ra; "Personaje en el país de la frontera"), "Pompey" (Rivera; "Pompeya"), "Landscape with Birds" (Soriano; "Paisaje con pájaros"), "Against the Wind" (Vargas; "Contra el viento"), and "Prometheus, Second State" (Vlady; "Prometeo, segundo estado").

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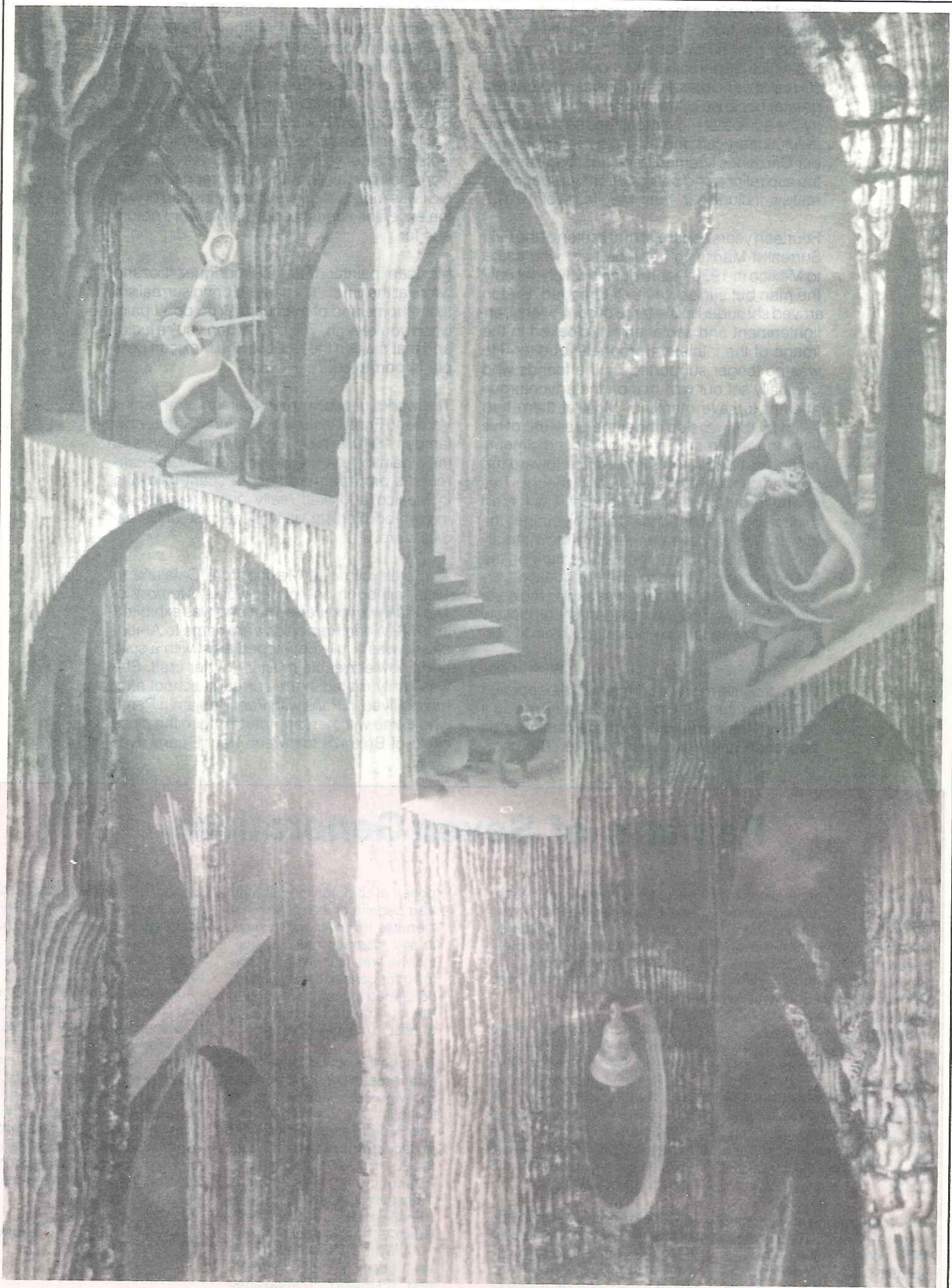


Photo by INBA/SEP

María Izquierdo, *Sueño y presentimiento* (*Dream and Foreboding*), oil painting, 1947.



Tanguy, Joan Miró, Max Ernst and so on.

Remedios Varo's work is a far cry from automatic, unconscious surrealism. Her line of thought has a clear sense of direction that shapes an arbitrarily organized world, and in this sense she came close to the excess of rationality that finally pervaded surrealism. She strongly identified with Breton's idea that "only the marvelous is beautiful, there is no beauty without marvel." Varo painted a world of fantasy, but her starting point and connecting thread is rational and preconceived. Everything is measured and proportioned, and the spark of the initiate is absent. Her images overlap and seem to spring forth spontaneously, yet this is merely a refined illusion. Once you follow her paintings you're never surprised.

This artist's work envelops us in life and in the happenings in a wondrous magician's world. Yet her sober, prudent story-telling never gets carried away by either magic or anguish. Her paintings leave us with a soothing sense of pleasure and a lingering smile.

Frida Kahlo's work, on the other hand, produces an entirely different effect: it racks our soul with emotions, terror, fear and pain. In comparing the two painters we find that although both are centered in worlds of their own, the Spaniard has none other than that of a visionary little girl. Frida, in appearance also full of herself, her illness and sadness, her thorn-covered face and tearful eyes, is really a mirror that reflects Mexico. Behind her initial images lurks the core issue of our western culture and of man himself: life and death, which in Mexico are regarded as complementary parts of a whole rather than as contradictory.

Frida met Breton and other surrealists during a short stay in Paris in 1937. The poet came to Mexico a year later and included her work in the second enlarged edition of his book *Le surrealisme et la peinture* (Surrealism and Painting.) His commentary was to the effect that Kahlo's work had been conceived in total ignorance of the reasoning guiding him and his followers, yet had nonetheless blossomed into full surrealism. Breton added that Frida's painting was like a ribbon tied around a bomb.

Breton is right about Frida's ignorance of the ongoing French movement when she painted the early part of her work, yet he's wrong to classify her work as surrealist.

I consider Frida Kahlo the most important artist Mexico has produced because of her depth and vigor. Knowledge of the surrealist program may have provided her with additional confidence in her own search, but she's firmly rooted in Mexican and Latin American tradition rather than in the paths of western-world logic that eventually produced surrealism.

Just as it's impossible to tell time and space in the work of Remedios Varo or in Englishwoman Leonora Carrington's, who also lived in Mex-

ico, in Frida the place is Mexico and Latin America, and the time is specific: the nationalistic revolutionary period that followed the Revolution of 1910. Precisely because her work refers to time and space, it's a link with a tradition that starts in pre-Hispanic times.

Frida is nurtured by America, by the concept of good and evil permeating the Mayan poem *Popol Vuh* in the Quiché version we're familiar with even though it was written down in colonial times. As Luis Cardoza y Aragón wrote so beautifully in *Guatemala, las líneas de su mano* (*Guatemala, The Lines of Her Hand*), the work is prodigious in its portrayal of the world's telluric gestation in the struggle between the men of death and darkness—the men of Xibalbá—and the first men of life. The duality between good and evil, heaven and hell, day and night is debated constantly throughout the work. The poem is dense and tumultuous, brutal yet at the same time intensely refined. Man-gods and men moved by magical obsession progress through the dawn of dreams and time, creating and destroying worlds. In this vein, Frida's work reflects destruction and rebirth.

My main point is that there's a constant cultural factor in Mexican art, a flowing of life inhabited by kindred species, by spirits that touch and take in the Mexican people's cultural sap and convert it into poems, sculpted stone, folk-songs such as the *corrido*, votive offerings or acts of thanksgiving. The world of necessity and roots flowers through in Mexican culture, as do survival, the creaking bone of Posadas and blood, be it from a heart cut from the breaster from skin torn from the flesh in pre-Hispanic culture, the same blood that returns in the lacerated village Christ-figures and sprouts like the flower of tradition in the scars of Frida Kahlo's tormented body and in her double heart exposed to bloodletting.

The black humour Breton so cherished is intellectual game and ingenious paradox in surrealism, a subtle and almost pitiless sense of the absurd. In Mexico, in Frida Kahlo, black humour is a wound, sharp pain, destiny and everyday reality that must be accepted in order to carry on with life and death.

It's by no means accidental that Breton's surrealist program for Mexico failed to develop into a school of painting at a time in which the revolution brought the recognition of national tradition and authenticity to the forefront. It was only years later when young generations sought to break out of what they regarded as a cultural barrier and to "broaden their international scope", that surrealism was taken up as a possible program, as were lyrical and geometrical abstractionism. From the 1950s and on we can say there are Mexican surrealist painters who incorporated the European school's teachings. Before that only foreign-born painters, among them Remedios Varo, worked within the surrealist program. But they were also foreign to the Mexican tradition that produced painters like Antonio Ruiz, Carlos Lazo and Frida Kahlo.★