

**Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art** by *Susan L. Aberth*, Lund Humphries, Hampshire and Burlington, 2004, 160 pp., 120 colour illus., £35.00, ISBN: 978 0853319085 (hardcover)

Susan Aberth's *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* provides a much-needed resource for the continued study of one of the twentieth century's most fascinating artists and writers. Aberth's lavishly illustrated book is the first monograph in English dedicated to Leonora Carrington's long and prolific career, with the exception of a 1991 exhibition catalogue (*Leonora Carrington, The Mexican Years 1943-1985*),<sup>1</sup> which included an essay by Whitney Chadwick and an autobiographical interview with the artist. With these texts serving as the basis for Aberth's study, *Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* fleshes out such earlier treatments of the artist, integrating biography with analyses of Carrington's individual works and a thematic assessment of her career.

Aberth's book opens with image of Carrington as a 'beautifully savoured gourmet dish' and as a 'rare and singular treasure' (7). Aberth's point is, rightly, that Carrington's artistic work has proven both elusive – overlooked by many art historians and critics, and considered unfathomable by others – and exquisite. Aberth's metaphorical language indicates possibilities for reevaluating Carrington's unorthodox relationship to traditional aesthetics. As the artist's numerous texts and paintings devoted to the culinary arts suggest, Carrington's career might be said to privilege the physical and intellectual pleasure of eating over the disinterested aesthetic judgment of taste. Carrington's paintings, like her writings, resist totalizing judgments and exegeses, instead multiplying the pleasures (and frustrations) of an ongoing process of interpretation.

Aberth's metaphors thus correspond to Carrington's own intellectual project. Her allusions to gastronomy and treasure invoke what Aberth calls the 'alchemical process of distillation and transmutation' that abound in Carrington's work (7). Alchemy, the heretical 'black art' of magical transformation, bears not only a material similarity to the art of cooking, with all its alembics and cauldrons, but also a similarly eccentric epistemology: a centuries-long genealogy of texts, recipes, illustrations, and hearsay that form a body of knowledge passed down against the current of religious and scientific orthodoxy. At the heart of this interest in alchemy lies the idea that Leonora Carrington's art and writing explore not only alternative forms of beauty, but alternative forms of knowledge and understanding as well.

Aberth's introduction promises that Carrington's seemingly hermetic works have an internal logic of their own. Yet rather than explicate or articulate this logic, Aberth compares it to 'the idiosyncratic language of dreams supplied by our unconscious.' 'The great secret to Carrington's



art,' she continues, 'is that there is no key with which to decipher her work easily, because there *cannot* be one. It is not that certain embedded symbols have no meaning; it is that these symbols cannot and do not 'illustrate' ideas in the manner we are accustomed to' (9). Aberth explains that Carrington's paintings are, like alchemical engravings, 'profoundly personal interpretations of complex philosophical and magical ideas whose meanings have always been permeable and shifting, encouraging multiple levels of perception' (9).

Aberth offers a number of suggestions for what these philosophical and magical ideas might be, documenting Carrington's ties to purism and surrealism, to Celtic mythology, to children's literature, to feminism, and to the ethnographic study of religion, myth, and magic. The book's biographical organisation tends, however, to reduce these ideas to influences along the path of Carrington's life, rather than discussing their conceptual specificity as intellectual projects in which Carrington was deeply involved. Aberth does well, for instance, to move beyond the well-documented discussion of Carrington's relationship with surrealism, and especially her involvement with Max Ernst; but her study would have benefited from discussing more concretely what it was that Carrington drew from surrealism, as well as what she contributed to it. Likewise, Aberth argues that Carrington's relationship with Ernst was intellectual as well as romantic, but her biography dramatises rather than downplays their romantic involvement, offering little new analysis of their collaborative intellectual work. Instead, Aberth foregrounds the significance of the Spanish-Mexican painter Remedios Varo to Carrington's life and work, contrasting the two women's mutual, artistically productive friendship to the atmosphere of entrapment and obsession that surrounded her relationship with Ernst.

Aberth's study traces such influences over the course of Carrington's life, from her English childhood in the 1920s to her post-surrealist career in Mexico and London. Chapter one describes Carrington's early years, documenting her formal upbringing, her artistic beginnings in school, and her travels to the continent, concluding with her introduction into the surrealist movement in 1936. The second chapter narrates the artist's 'escape' from the haute-bourgeoisie of her childhood into the artistic circles of Amédée Ozenfant and, later, the surrealists. This new artistic lifestyle, Aberth explains, provided a means for Carrington to 'rebel against her family' (29), while at the same time, her upper-class training and confidence 'enable[d] her to interact with a certain ease and lack of self-consciousness with the older male members of the Surrealist circle' (28). Chapter three discusses the artist's tempestuous relationship with Ernst and her mental and physical trials during the Nazi occupation of France; Aberth's brief discussion of Carrington's 1944 text *Down Below*, which recounts her escape from France and ensuing incarceration in a Spanish mental institution, is one of the book's few treatments of Carrington's writing. Chapter four documents Carrington's postwar life in Mexico City, offering a useful discussion of the artist's



close relationship with Remedios Varo. In Mexico, Aberth writes, Carrington was 'liberated from the constraints of her relationship with Ernst, far from the controlling machinations of her father and Imperial Chemicals, and immersed in a new country rich with dynamic and religious hybrids' (59). Likewise, in Mexico she was 'fortunate to be welcomed into the existing émigré Surrealist community living in Mexico City, and through their support and encouragement was able to achieve a new kind of personal and creative autonomy' (59). This autonomy becomes the overarching theme of the book's brief final chapter, which traces Carrington's continued development as an artist from the 1950s to the present.

Aberth's study admirably strives to view Carrington through a critical lens other than that of surrealist movement, and the book's reproductions of a wide range of the artist's post-1950s work establishes it as an important resource for establishing the field of study for this important artist and writer. Of particular interest is its inclusion of Carrington's 1965 text 'Jezzmathatics or Introduction to the Wonderful Process of Painting,' translated from the Spanish.

The tantalising inclusion of one of Carrington's later nonfiction texts shows how much there remains to learn about the artist's vast body of written and visual work, as well as her contribution to twentieth-century thought more broadly. Indeed, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* would have benefited from further attention to Carrington's prose, as well as to the many literary and nonfiction texts to which her artwork responds. This is especially true of writings on alchemy. Aberth usefully documents Carrington's interest in texts such as Kurt Seligmann's *The History of Magic*, Pierre Mabille's *Mirror of the Marvelous*, and especially Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, but tends to describe them as sources for Carrington's use of alchemical and magical symbols and themes, rather than as constituting a field of inquiry in which Carrington participated. For instance, Aberth discusses how Graves's *The White Goddess* (1948) represented a 'turning point' in Carrington's career when she read it in 1949, 'spark[ing] a re-discovery of her Celtic roots and recall[ing] the stories told to her by her maternal grandmother Moorhead' (79). Was Graves's work simply a mirror, reflecting Carrington's own childhood exposure to myth? Or did Carrington interact conceptually with Graves's text as well? Aberth points suggestively toward the intertextuality of Carrington's work, but her study would benefit from a more thorough discussion of the discourses uniting all these thinkers. Carrington was, after all, their peer and an important question to ask of her relations with writers like Seligmann, Mabille, and Graves would be why so many surrealist-influenced thinkers turned their attention after WWII from psychoanalysis to the ethnographic exploration of magic and the occult (as was the case for André Breton in *Arcane 17*, Benjamin Péret in his anthology of Mexican folk tales, and Jules Monnerot in *La Poésie moderne et le sacré*).



Another issue to which Aberth's study devotes limited attention is Carrington's politics. Aberth claims, paradoxically, that Carrington is both 'an early and staunch feminist' and 'an outspoken advocate for women's rights in Mexico' (63), and yet is someone who 'eschew[s] direct political involvement as always.' Aberth mentions the artist's 'vociferous support of feminism in both the American and Mexican press' (103), while championing the artist's separation from the domain of political involvement. This paradox, which characterizes a wide range of postwar art, is worthy of discussion: what constitutes political involvement? How does Leonora Carrington understand her work as bearing a political voice? As with her treatment of Carrington's conceptual involvement in modernist ideas, Aberth's discussion of the artist's politics is evocative but superficial.

It is to Aberth's credit that *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* provides the means to consider these questions, whether explicitly or implicitly; Aberth's book invites other scholars to take up the many issues it raises in future scholarship on Carrington's impressive and far-reaching artistic career.

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<sup>1</sup> Whitney Chadwick, Paul De Angelis, Salomon Grimberg, *Leonora Carrington, The Mexican Years 1943-1985*, exh. cat., Albuquerque and San Francisco, 1991.

