

Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism. Manchester City Art Gallery, 29 September 2009 - 10 January 2010

Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism. Edited by Patricia Allmer, Prestel, Munich, Berlin, London, New York, 2009, 256 pp. ISBN 978-0-901673-74-9

*Beware of women whose sisters are beautiful
Beware of daughters who have beautiful wives*

Valentine Penrose, *Dons des féminines*, 1951.

Eileen Agar's *Angel of Anarchy* (1936 - 1940), from which this show takes its title, functions as the locus of attention in the introductory space of the exhibition. Drawing together the work of Frida Kahlo, Emmy Bridgewater, Leonora Carrington and Penny Slinger, *Angel of Anarchy* provides the structuring metaphors around which the discussion of these artists is framed. Both concepts, the anarchical thrust of body politics, and the angelic disposition for metamorphosis and flight, are the axes along which further narratives and themes are plotted. This curatorial strategy is further elaborated by Patricia Allmer, the exhibition's curator, in her essay 'Of Fallen Angels and Angels of Anarchy.' Taking her prompt from Luce Irigaray, Allmer's formulation of the angel places an emphasis on 'flux, multiplicity, transgression, becoming and transformation.'¹ Establishing these concepts as the major concerns in the exhibition itself, Allmer posits that the fundamental correspondences and connections between many of the works included in the show are rooted in a desire 'to overcome dualities, boundaries and binaries.'² Thinking about identity and female subjectivity outside of the Oedipal frameworks that enforce the oppositional notions of male and female, Allmer draws upon a Deleuzian model of subjectivity, suggesting a rejection of binary construction, which results in a subject with an infinite possibility of identity positions.

Evolving from landmark studies which addressed the role of women in surrealist practice, such as Whitney Chadwick's *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985) and the show *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation* (1998), *Angels of Anarchy* presents familiar concerns, yet is additionally informed by the subsequent scholarly attention bestowed on female surrealists in the last two decades. *Angels of Anarchy* incorporates a plurality of forms and expression in a variety of media, including photography, sculpture, poetry, painting, and collage. One of the key operations of the exhibition is to present a range of work by women from varying time-frames and geographical regions in order to illustrate the temporal and spatial spread of surrealism. From a curatorial perspective, the combination of familiar surrealists with lesser-known names, such as Czech artists Toyen, Emila Medková and Eva Švankmajerová, was insightful and smart. Medková's piece *Haarwasserfall* (*Cascade of Hair*) from the cycle *Schattenspiele* (*Shadow Games*, 1949), for example, is a



haunting and deeply disturbing composition that distorts perspective through the projection of shadows and silhouettes.

In the accompanying essay to such works, Donna Roberts pitches these artists in relation to the specific geographical, historical and political concerns of the Czech surrealist group. Exploring the ways in which the female artists associated with this collective reflect the 'trajectories' of Czech surrealism, Roberts conveys how female creativity was welcomed and encouraged in Czech practice through collaboration and support. Roberts interestingly identifies a mood of anxiety which pervades these works, noting Breton's description of Toyen as an artist imbued with a sense of 'dark foreboding.'³ This feeling of unease is realised in Toyen's *L'Avant-printemps* (*Early Spring*, 1945) which depicts rows of recently filled graves in a vast landscape, sprinkled with the solemn hue of blue butterflies. This darkness is also apparent in an exciting animation by Eva Švankmajerová of 1971. Incorporating Czech folklore, the sequence presents the story of parents who accidentally murder their son and, realising their error, commit suicide. Roberts centres on this aspect of black humour in Czech practice. Quoting Vratislav Effenberger, a theoretician in the Czech group between 1950 and 1980, who described black humour as 'the most authentic weapon of poetry,' Roberts highlights the subversive potential of humour and how it can be adopted as a discourse with which to question and upset social norms.⁴ Indeed, humour, satire and the wry manipulation of form and imagery are recurring motifs in the exhibition. This theme is perhaps most significantly embodied in Meret Oppenheim's *Eichörnchen* (*Squirrel*, 1969), a work which is presented in the exhibition as the male counterpart to her feminine fur lined teacup, *Object* (*Breakfast in Fur*, 1936).

Compiling these works in one show demonstrates the narrative complexity and depth in the work of these women artists. Influences are numerous, from the alchemical and occult, to the fairytale, the gothic and mythological. Secreted in an L-shaped nook in the 'Fantasy' section are several pieces by Valentine Penrose, Francesca Woodman and Mimi Parent that incorporate classical allusions to, and re-interpretations of, Leda and the Swan. The gothic is invoked in works such as Leonor Fini's *L'Ombrelle* (*The Parasol*, 1947), which depicts the fading glamour of a parasol, and Ithell Colquhoun's *The Goose of Hermogenes: a Gothick Fantasy* (1961), a novella which is testament to Colquhoun's enduring interest in the occult and both folk and Celtic lore. Colquhoun's combination of alchemy, classicism, and precious jewels, conjures an atmosphere of magic, which is further compounded by the author's inclusion of typically gothic conventions. The inclusion of such works reveals that, in addition to the more obvious groupings, there are more subtle correspondences between many of the pieces represented in the show. Significantly, in his contribution to the catalogue, Roger Cardinal posits that 'surrealist art can even come close to the sublime in its quest for a metaphysical or mythic *elsewhere*, discovering that the door flung open or the curtain torn



aside can disclose something terrible, beyond our capacity to apprehend.⁵ Cardinal claims that surrealism includes 'a succession of women who evoke dream places or sites of reverie, their art discloses a secondary dimension of reality'⁶ and that in '[t]aking its cue from the gothic novel, surrealist art loves to dwell in spaces which harbour a mesmeric otherness, unexplained yet compelling.'⁷ Indeed, space, or alternative spaces of fantasy and reality, is one of the key features of much of the work. Lee Miller's *Dorothea Tanning, Sedona Arizona* of 1946, for example, is an intriguing photograph that captures Tanning as artist and creator at work in the studio. Her artistic utensils are juxtaposed with domestic objects and crockery resulting in a distinctly feminine interpretation of creative space. Tanning's jeans and smock are manipulated at the seam to create ragged edges which resonate with the tattered fabric in the portrait of the mother with child she is poised before, establishing a space of maternal longing and female connectivity. Domestic space is similarly explored by Belgian artist Rachael Baes in her paintings *La Polka (The Polka, 1946)* and *La Naissance du secret (The Birth of The Secret, 1948)*, both of which depict the sartorial signifiers of femininity within a purposefully barren domestic interior. This notion of feminine space is probed in Katherine Conley's essay,⁸ in which the author explores the spaces of the home and the domestic in the works of Miller, Varo, Tanning and Woodman, whilst Alyce Mahon suggests that, as domestic objects are often utilised in still life compositions, we may describe the genre as 'inherently feminine.'⁹

Exterior spaces are explored in several examples of Kay Sage's paintings that feature dystopian landscapes, such as *Tomorrow is Never (1955)*. Yet, ultimately it is Lee Miller's *Portrait of Space (1937)* that proves one of the highlights. This work encapsulates many of the subtle messages of the exhibition as a whole. The aperture in the fraying gauze through which we peer is indicative of the hymenal remnant; the barrier between interior and exterior, and a specifically feminine divide. Miller's work encapsulates the focus on the liminal that Allmer seeks to promote in her Deleuzian obliquing of perspectives – creating a different way of looking at the world, a way to frame and map a terrain that is specifically feminine. This theoretical aspect of the work is explored at length in the catalogue essays through the invocation of feminism and its surrounding discourses. Georgiana M. M. Colville's evocation of Hélène Cixous' concept of *vol* (French for 'flight' or 'theft'), for example, suggests through both an angelic and ormithological metaphor that many women 'acquired artistic skills and sexual freedom from the surrealist group(s), before migrating to personal territories.'¹⁰

At times, however, the feminist discourse and reading strategies drawn upon in the supporting literature could have been pushed further within the exhibition itself. It is somewhat lamentable that the opportunity was not taken to emphasise the possibilities surrealism and its techniques offer with regard to the expression of sexuality, and to explore how many female surrealists were attracted to the mode specifically for those reasons. Despite Allmer's



application of a Deleuzian model of subjectivity, much of the gender difference in the show was framed as physical and Freudian, with insistent visual references to the vaginal and an emphasis on phallic imagery. Understandably, gender difference takes primacy in any show that prioritises the work of artists previously marginalised within a movement because of their sex, and from the moment one enters this space via the deep crimson panels of the introductory corridor, the exhibition is clearly gendered as female. Yet, many of the artists included in *Angels of Anarchy* play with the visual signifiers of gender and sexual identity in more sophisticated ways than the exhibition allowed, as can be discerned in Claude Cahun's photographic experimentation. Whilst celebrating eroticisation and female sexuality, the show unfortunately shies away from overtly referencing same-sex desire. The section 'Portrait and Self-Portrait,' however, seeks to explore the intricacies and complexities of female friendship and creativity, something that Mary Ann Caws identifies in the work of Cahun, Maar and Miller as 'eroticism and drama, friendship and intimacy.'¹¹ Cahun's photographic experimentation exemplifies how gender and identity can be assumed through masking and performative strategies, [*Self-portrait (kneeling on quilt)*, c.1928]. In this section, a cluster of Claude Cahun's work is neatly juxtaposed with two photographs of Frida Kahlo taken by Lola Alvarez Bravo that depict a doubling of Kahlo's visage; *Frida Enfrente del espejo (Frida Kahlo sitting at her Dressing Table Facing her Mirror)*, c. 1945) and *Frida parade junto a muro (Frida Kahlo Facing Mirror in Patio)*, c.1944). To the left of this pairing is some fascinating and rare film footage of Kahlo. The sequence follows the young Tina Misrachi, the daughter of Diego Riviera's art dealer, as she is lured into Kahlo's residence in a manner that is simultaneously maternal and seductive.

The divisions themselves, 'Portrait and Self Portrait,' 'Landscape,' 'Interior,' 'Still Life,' and 'Fantasy,' are by no means taxonomically exclusive; the groupings are loose, allowing the viewer to make their own connections and interpretations. However, this simplicity proves challenging at times as the categories, rather than serving to communicate the diverse experiences and contexts in which this work was produced, instead reduced connections to arbitrary correspondences and clichéd framings. It must be noted, however, that the catalogue produced to accompany the show offers a more comprehensive reading of the work, and aids an understanding of the decisions behind the arrangements. This is certainly the case for the 'Still Life' section that incorporates works exhibiting a gendered engagement with the object, as a retort against a specifically male compositional technique. Mahon's supporting article gives credence to groupings which otherwise seem rather contrived. This particular section includes some intriguing examples of surrealist practice, such as Lee Miller's gruesome staging of a removed breast, (*Still Life – Amputated breast on Plate*, c. 1929) served up on a plate, complete with cutlery. This work is cleverly paired with Francesca Woodman's composition (*From the Three Kind of Melon in Four Kinds of Light Series*, 1975 - 78), in which an image of a melon obscures one breast, whilst the flesh from the fruit in the



foreground spills out, mirroring the rotten tissue of the cancerous breast in Miller's composition.

In addition to painting, sculpture and photography, there are several examples of written work produced by women located in glass cabinets in the central space of the first room. Valentine Penrose's *Dons des féminines* (*Gifts of the Feminine*, 1951) is one of the texts that feature in these bureaus of literary delights. Whilst emulating the technique of her male contemporary Max Ernst, Penrose's collage-poem radically departs from his application of the mode, offering a more sympathetic, feminine alternative to his violent images. Each monochrome image is comprised of both objects and landscape, juxtaposing nature and astrology, animals and mythical beasts, visualising the relationship between the work's protagonists, Maria Elona and Rubia. Significantly, Picasso's frontispiece to Penrose's collection is also presented. Picasso's visual interpretation of the text is one of the only explicit references to lesbianism or an eroticised same-sex relationship to feature in the exhibition, with the artist's lithograph clearly depicting two women in a gripping embrace. Picasso's interpretation of *Dons des féminines* perfectly exemplifies the divergence between male and female artistic representation of female relationships. What is not made explicit in Penrose, or in the space of the exhibition itself, is addressed starkly by Picasso. This piece is one of the few examples of work by men in the show. Presenting a counterpoint to female practice, it reinforces the idea that, far from operating as a separate group, women surrealists collaborated convivially with their male colleagues. This issue is addressed by Colvile, who relates how women surrealists never purposefully defined themselves as a separate school; rather they appropriated or subverted certain 'male' techniques.¹² This emphasis on collaboration is similarly represented within the exhibition in a section focusing on 'The Exquisite Corpse.' Here examples of the surrealist automatic technique illustrate how men and women often worked in unison to create hybrid forms.

The broad historical spectrum and geographical range of the exhibition are striking. The show presents a comprehensive collection of women artists who have or can be associated with surrealism and seeks to redress the typically male dominated surrealist canon. Perhaps one anomalous, yet successful entry was that of Francesca Woodman. In addition to numerous examples of her photography, a reel of moving images is also exhibited. The film begins with the camera claustrophobically centring on the corner of a room. A trickle of liquid slowly intensifies to a pour, before the lens retracts to reveal a pair of legs straddling a pool of water developing at the groin. The reel proceeds to showcase several short performance pieces, one of which sees Woodman enter the frame in boots and coat, before removing them to reveal her naked body. A series of affecting frames ensues, in which Woodman stands naked behind thin reams of white paper. Pressing her naked body to the gossamer canvas and exerting a ghostly presence, she inscribes her name on the paper from above. Woodman



subsequently pierces the screen, ripping through her name, to reveal her bare figure, before posing momentarily and breaking the banner in two. This recalcitrant gesture reinforces one of the aims of *Angels of Anarchy*: to promote a move away from the organised notion of a surrealist group, of naming, labelling, and of fixed identities, and to suggest that any woman working in this mode or with a surrealist spirit can adopt and manipulate these conventions to explore the limits and possibilities of their own sexuality and gender.

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¹ Patricia Allmer, 'Of Fallen Angels and Angels of Anarchy,' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, Prestel, Munich, Berlin, London, New York, 2009, 12.

² *Ibid.*

³ André Breton, 'Introduction to the work of Toyen, by André Breton, Benjamin Péret and Jindřich Heisler,' cited in Donna Roberts, "'Neither Wings nor Stones": The Psychological Realism of Czech Women Surrealists,' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, 76.

⁴ Vratislav Effenberger, 'Variants, Constants and Dominants of Surrealism,' (1966 - 1967), cited in *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵ Roger Cardinal, 'The Imaging of Magic,' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁸ Katharine Conley, 'Safe as Houses: Anamorphic Bodies in Ordinary Spaces: Miller, Varo, Tanning, Woodman,' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, 46-53.

⁹ Alyce Mahon, 'Women Surrealists and the Still Life,' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, 54.

¹⁰ Georgiana M.M. Colvile, 'Women Artists, Surrealism and Animal Representation,' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, 72.

¹¹ Mary Ann Caws, 'These Photographing Women: The Scandal of Genius,' in *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism*, 28-35.

¹² Colvile, 64.

