

Leonora Carrington exhibition review – the fantastical made ferocious

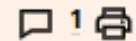
The artist's strange, ceaselessly inventive work is celebrated in a show in New York State



Leonora Carrington, 'Nunscape at Manzanillo' (1956) © Leonora Carrington/ARS

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“I didn’t have time to be anyone’s muse,” the surrealist painter Leonora Carrington once said. “I was too busy rebelling against my family and learning to be an artist.”

Carrington, who died at 94 in 2011, had time to lead a twisty, unconventional life, become famous as Max Ernst’s mistress, survive the early years of the second world war in France and settle in Mexico. And yet she painted so prolifically and well that her 1945 opus “Les Distractions de Dagobert” sold at auction for \$28.5mn last year, handily beating Ernst’s record price of \$24.4mn in 2022.

There’s a lot of drama, trauma, mystical vision, technical virtuosity, formal grace and plain old eccentricity packed into *Leonora Carrington: Dream Weaver*, a compact retrospective of her work at the Katonah Museum of Art, an hour outside of Manhattan. If the gaudy gathering of grotesque “Rabinos” (“The Rabbis”) from 1960 isn’t to your taste, slide a few feet over and you come to an adorably tender “Portrait of Gooky” from 1933, or the pencil drawing “Girl, Horse, Tree” (c1940), in which the three subjects merge into a vaporous interspecies concoction.

A few steps away is “Pastoral” (1950), a complex tableau of creatures, spirits and humans picnicking in a dappled wood. Here, Carrington evokes Giorgione’s “The Tempest” and Manet’s “Le déjeuner sur l’herbe” to endow the scene with art-historical gravitas, but she animates the breeze-stirred trees, mint green meadows and twilit sky with a light brush all her own.



'Cabbage' (1987) © Leonora Carrington/ARS

Her fierce eye imbued the most improbable objects with intensity. Consider the solitary vegetable she painted in 1987: it's not just a red cabbage; it's a sanguinary one, with crimson leaves edged in papery grey. I don't think I've ever seen a single item of produce rendered with so much sentient vitality. Carrington didn't see it as an inert foodstuff, waiting to be chopped and browned, but as the "alchemical rose", a talisman pregnant with sacred meaning and capable of inducing some freaky psychedelic experiences. It's also a victim of human appetites, which, she claimed, "screams when dragged out of the earth and plunged into boiling water or grease — forgive us, cabbage".

Reading these words does her a disservice. Perhaps she takes empathy for plant matter a little far, and some viewers may wrinkle their noses at her mash-up of Tibetan Buddhism, Kabbalah, ghost stories, alchemy, shamanism, Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, Celtic legends and Mayan mystical epics. But skip the texts and cryptic symbols, and you find that her art itself is ceaselessly inventive and appealingly strange. I find it helpful to focus on the quality of her brushstroke and line, and on the wisps of insoluble mystery.

To her, style was a tool, and she was ready to trade it in for a new one when the occasion arose. She kept returning to her life-long themes — incidents from her life, a menagerie of real and fantastical creatures, horses, landscapes imbued with a spiritual buzz — but gave them constantly shifting forms. Edward James, a surrealist impresario and promoter of Magritte and Dalí, remarked that "she has never relinquished her love of experimentation; the results being that she has been able to diversify and explore a hundred or more techniques for the expression of her creative powers. She continues to try new media which help her to clothe her vital ideas with fresh shapes."

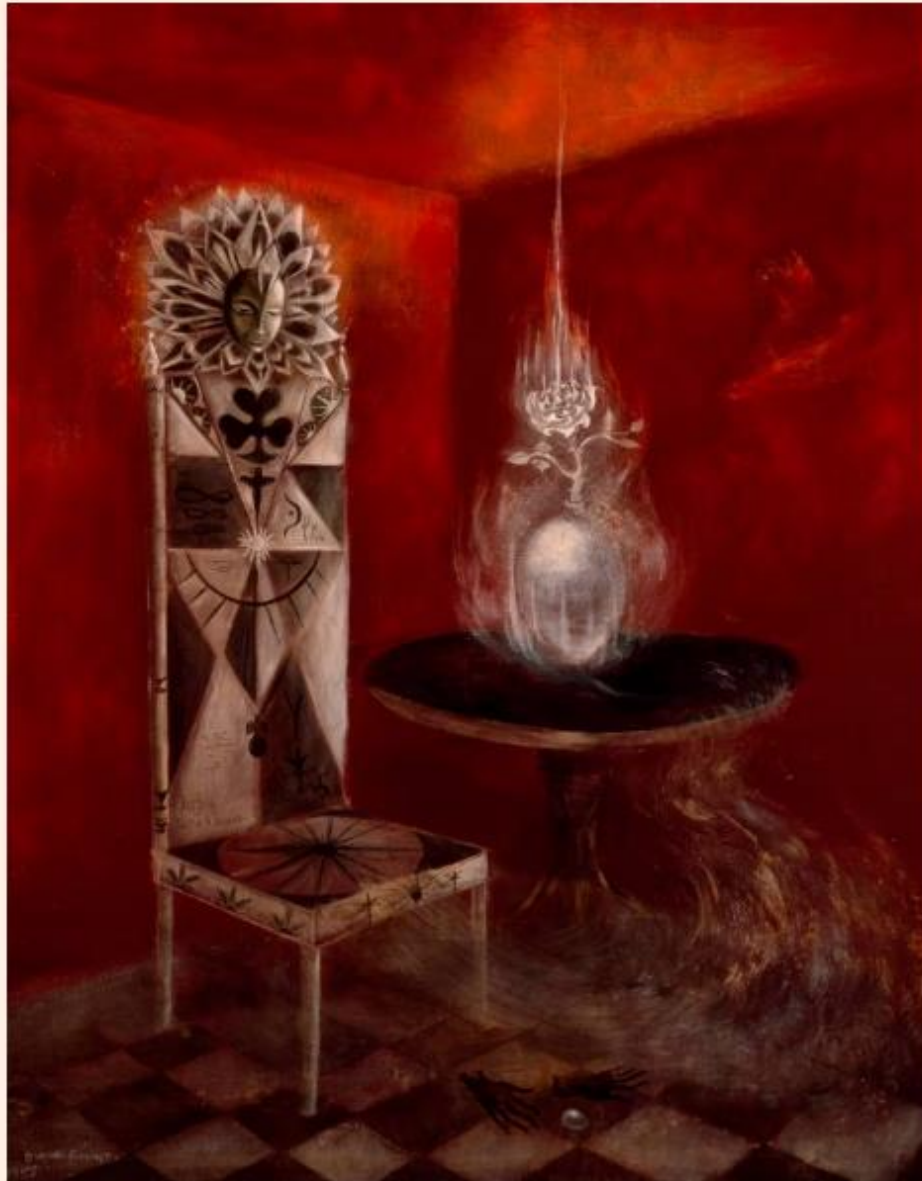


'Pastoral' (1950) © Leonora Carrington/ARS

Carrington was born in 1917 in Lancashire, north-west England, into a wealthy Catholic family with a grand, if creepy, neogothic house, aptly named Crookhey Hall. First, she antagonised her parents, and then the nuns at a series of convent schools, who kept throwing her out. She got her revenge in “Nunscape at Manzanillo” (1956), in which a boatload of sisters founder on rocks. Some sing in the surf or dance on the beach, one tries to swim while her habit drags her down, another cradles a great fish like an overgrown baby. Somewhere out of the frame or beneath the waves, one of the nuns must be up to something un-nun-like because her underclothes hang from an improvised line.

After hunting for an education in Florence, she alighted in London in 1935, and in 1936 she studied with the French modernist painter Amédée Ozenfant. Her pencil sketch of a man with sensuous lips, conspicuous nose and vigilant eyes is a testament to her respect for the teacher who, she said, “gave me the first tools”.

That was a watershed year for Carrington. Herbert Read published his seminal book *Surrealism*, and her mother understood enough about Leonora to give her a copy. She also attended London’s first surrealism exhibition and saw Max Ernst’s “Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale”, an experience that changed her life. She was 19 when she met Ernst, who was 45 and twice married (not counting his ménage à trois with Paul Éluard and his wife Gala). Stricken with bolts of mutual infatuation, Carrington and Ernst settled in an old farmhouse in the village of Saint-Martin-d’Ardèche in the Rhône Valley.



'The Chair: Daghdha Tuatha de Danann' (1955) © Leonora Carrington/ARS

“It was an era of paradise,” she later said. Together, they decorated the interior with equine women and waggly legged lizards, and set a stiff monumental mermaid to guard the terrace.

The idyll came to an end with the war. Ernst was arrested twice — by the French for being German and by the Germans for being a “degenerate artist”. She fled to Madrid, he to the US with Peggy Guggenheim (who became his third, but not final, wife). Carrington experienced a psychotic episode and landed at an asylum in Santander, northern Spain. Shortly after her release, she met the Mexican poet and journalist Renato Leduc, who married her and whisked her first to New York and then, in 1942, to Mexico City. Though the marriage dissolved, Carrington fell in love with the city, which suited her eclectic sensibility and remained her home for the rest of her life.

The 1950s marked the apex of her career, when she could dwell on her past and in her imagination without the distractions of war or sexual adventures. (In Mexico, she enjoyed a long, apparently stable marriage with the photographer Chiki Weisz.) In the stunning 1957 “Country House”, a castle much like her childhood home is veiled in extravagant greenery and watched over by charmingly sedate monsters. This uncharacteristically misty painting is rendered in the manner of the frescoes in the ancient Roman Villa Livia, giving it the air of a bucolic retreat from stress and the passage of time.



'Sueño (Nephesh as the Soul in a State of Sleep)' (1959) © Leonora Carrington/ARS

A few years later, she used a contrasting technique with a similar degree of control in the fearsome “Bird of Prey”. The avian predator, executed with ruthless precision in white chalk lines on black card and finished in gouache, gazes at a rodent that wriggles in its talons. The bird’s eye is a black circle with spokes of light; the victim’s is a white disc of terror. Like so many of her busy paintings and quick sketches, this supremely elegant drawing lingers in the zone she knew best: the eerie fusion of cruelty and beauty.

To October 5, katonahmuseum.org