

Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism

Manchester Art Gallery



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Unquiet presences ... Dora Maar's *Sans Titre* (1934) at Manchester Art Gallery.

Photograph: Jacques Faujour/Centre Georges Pompidou

What happens when a muse is left to her own devices, when an object becomes a subject, when a woman is free to be herself? *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* is a fascinating show that asks all these questions. It has been curated with a clear, intelligent – if occasionally oversimplified – feminist purpose and looks at three generations of surrealist women artists, from the 1920s onwards, and their paintings, photographs and miscellaneous art works. Visiting the show is like finding oneself in an attic filled with incredible souvenirs and severally haunted. So much of the work is about suffering, and so many of the artists ([Frida Kahlo](#), Leonora Carrington, Francesca Woodman) are unquiet presences. As I walked round, the question I most wanted answered was about visibility. How did each woman want to be seen? Did she long to be conspicuous – or dream of vanishing? For surrealism, with its insistence on transformation, is at once fugitive and attention-seeking.

The exhibition takes its title from Eileen Agar's *Angel of Anarchy* (1936-40), the three-dimensional head of a woman, unable to see – only to be seen. She does not look in any condition to be anarchic or an angel. She seems to be playing blind-woman's-buff, her large face

layered with oriental sashes, her nose encrusted with diamante dots. She is an absent presence: you feel she could be part of an extinct royal line. She gives nothing away – least of all herself.

Frida Kahlo, a dominant figure here, also looks like royalty – she dressed as if she were a self-appointed Mexican princess. She offers a thin slice of herself in her most striking piece, *Diego and Frida* (1929-1944), splitting her face down the middle, allowing Diego Rivera to be, in every sense, her other half. It is an ambiguous portrait, with its sense of love as surgery. And Kahlo's hallmark was to make the decorative disturbing. The pearly, symmetrical frame, like a dainty seashore, is in ironically conventional contrast to what it surrounds.

Kahlo established a comparable sense of false security in her still lifes (they really are *nature morte* – unbelievably wooden). Decoratively arranged, the fruit is seldom innocent. In *Still Life With Parrot and Flag* (1951), the Mexican "mamey" fruit represents female genitalia and is stabbed with a metal stick bearing a Mexican flag to represent Kahlo's tram accident in which she was skewered by an iron railing. An appalling incident but the painting leaves one cold.

I was far more taken by a transfixing fragment of film in which Kahlo acts with Tina Misrachi, a beautiful young woman who is intended to represent death. Kahlo pulls the woman inside a room, and white panelled doors close between them and us. They have crossed to the other side – a complete vanishing act.

In Penny Slinger's grotesque and militant contribution, *I Hear What You Say* (1973), an open mouth is entirely filled by an ear, complete with pearl earring. It carries a loud message about silence, about being forced to listen but unable to speak. And it is eyeless – another absent presence.

Leonora Carrington, in her self-portrait (1937-38), meanwhile, demands attention. She sits at the centre of her own myth, looking like a creature from an invented bestiary, with a greyish brown mane. If you stare at her, the look you get back is feral: she looks right through you. The mythical beast beside her is biddable – if her right hand is to be believed – but unsavoury with pale, swollen teats. The happiest animal is the white horse that cavorts in parkland beyond a

glassless window. It has mastered freedom.

There is a theatricality about surrealism that often backfires. But Dorothea Tanning, Max Ernst's wife, holds her own as impresario in *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1943). Two little girls stand in a hotel corridor with brown, varnished doors, too under-dressed to be chambermaids – their skirts panicky swirls of paint. One girl's hair stands on end, as if growing up to the light. On a red carpet, a giant sunflower has shed some of its petals. It looks like a girl-eating plant. It's a painting that begs to be turned into a short story.

The dreamy oddity of Toyen (a pseudonym for Czech artist Marie Cerminova) might charm a writer too. I enjoyed her pseudo-Victorian engraving (1930-40) in which a damsel in – or perhaps past – distress lies on a seashore with closed eyes, a peculiar stopwatch beside her, in a seascape dominated by three old-fashioned perambulators, two trundling on the horizon and one wheel-deep in the sea – time's hooded chariots.

Theatricality extends to many of the objects in the show too. I coveted Meret Oppenheim's wolfish *Fur Gloves With Wooden Fingers*. I liked the delicate nail varnish peeping out at the end of each fierce paw (they'd be useful in emergencies). Alongside, Elisa Breton's embalmed birds of paradise, with their bright, tragic plumage, summed up the show's more mournful aspect.

But it was not until I had left the exhibition that I realised the extent to which I had felt that photography trumped painting. The photograph of Dora Maar (Picasso's lover and muse and a model for Man Ray), which she took herself in 1938, standing naked in a doorway, is especially beautiful – and not only because she was. It's a study in light and shade. She has a calm inwardness, her face partly in shadow, as if she were trying to become a statue. Maar's photograph of a woman's hand emerging from a shell (1934) like some new incarnation of a mermaid also has a strange grace (perhaps the woman's head is in the sand elsewhere).

I also loved Francesca Woodman's photograph of a woman and a swan against darkness, an untitled *Leda* (1975-8). And Lee Miller's photos of women artists are a delight because they suggest such camaraderie – there is a wonderful shot of Leonora Carrington (1939)

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with a warmth and curiosity in her uplifted face that could not be more different from her self-portrait, and a charming photo of Valentine Penrose trying, with a pipe, to charm a grass snake for Lee Miller's son, Antony (1952). And who could resist Nusch Eluard (1937) up against the bonnet of a car, head thrown back, laughing as if her sides would burst? What I liked most, I realised, were the moments when women were at their least surreal, capable of happiness and yet – inescapably – themselves.