

WOMEN SURREALISTS: SEXUALITY, FETISH, FEMININITY AND FEMALE  
SURREALISM

BY

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is to challenge the patriarchal traditions of Surrealism by examining the topic from the perspective of its women practitioners. Unlike past research, which often focuses on the biographical details of women artists, this thesis provides a case study of a select group of women Surrealists – chosen for the variety of their artistic practice and creativity – based on the close textual analysis of selected works. Specifically, this study will deal with names that are familiar (Lee Miller, Meret Oppenheim, Frida Kahlo), marginal (Elsa Schiaparelli) or simply ignored or dismissed within existing critical analyses (Alice Rahon). The focus of individual chapters will range from photography and sculpture to fashion, alchemy and folklore. By exploring subjects neglected in much orthodox male Surrealist practice, it will become evident that the women artists discussed here created their own form of Surrealism, one that was respectful and loyal to the movement's founding principles even while it playfully and provocatively transformed them.

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## NOTE

Given much of the primary source material dealt with in this study, as well as the MA dissertation that served as the genesis of the project, the development of this thesis has been supervised within a Department of French Studies. My own academic training and background, however, lie in Cultural Studies rather than French Studies *per se*. In turn, all quotations from French language sources will be from published English translations. This will not apply to Chapter 6, with relevant French extracts translated by myself because the analysis of the original text is particularly crucial to the analysis of both literary and visual sources.

We will refer throughout to Surrealism with a capital 'S', except where rendered with a lower case letter in quoted text.

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*Un chien andalou* (1928)

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Gallery location: In store

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Salvador Dalí

Oil on canvas

54.0 x 65.1 cm

The Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida

Worldwide Rights: © Salvador Dalí, Fundació

Gala-Salvador Dalí, VISCOPY, 2009

In the USA: © Salvador Dalí Museum Inc.

St. Petersburg, FL, 2009

*Evening dress (c. 1932)*

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*Nacer de Nuevo* (Born Again) (1960)

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Philadelphia Museum of Art

Purchased with funds contributed by Charles K. Williams II, 1999

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Dorothea Tanning

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Purchased with funds provided by the Mr and Mrs William Preston Harrison

Collection

Modern Art Department

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Frida Kahlo

Nicholas Murray Collection

Oil on Canvas, 61.25 cm x 47 cm

Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre

The University of Texas at Austin

*Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940)

Frida Kahlo

Oil on canvas, 15 3/4 x 11" (40 x 27.9 cm).

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Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, The Morgan Library and Museum

## INTRODUCTION

Between March and July 2007 the Victoria and Albert Museum in London staged an exhibition entitled 'Surreal Things'. This retrospective, centring upon Surrealist practitioners and their designs, included artists' works in a diverse range of media running from painting to sculpture and fashion to furniture. The Museum described this event as 'the first to explore the influence of Surrealism on the worlds of fashion, design, theatre, interiors, film, architecture and advertising. It showed how artists engaged with design and how designers were inspired by Surrealism'.<sup>1</sup>

Amongst the items on show were a plethora of works by women practitioners. These included Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup, Elsa Schiaparelli's *Skeleton Dress* (1938) and a bureau chest by Leonora Carrington. These pieces were grouped thematically, accentuating the vast and varied creativity that Surrealism was able to invoke. The exhibition was striking, but a visitor could not help but notice the number and nature of works produced by women practitioners. These works, both complementing and differing from those produced by Surrealist men, appeared to inject seemingly inanimate and everyday objects with elements of whimsy and playfulness that could make any object, such as a teapot, appear sexually graphic. The exhibition also made it clear that many women Surrealists incorporated nature into their work, which suggests a question: does the reoccurring motif of nature within work by women Surrealists allow these artists to engage with their corporeal sexuality to a greater extent than work by male Surrealists?

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<sup>1</sup> For information and exhibition resources see Ghislaine Wood, *Surreal Things: Surrealism and Design* (London: V&A Publications, 2007) and [http://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/past\\_exhibs/surreal\\_things/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/past_exhibs/surreal_things/) [accessed 8 January 2009].

While the success of this exhibition reignited much interest in the Surrealist movement, particularly in work by female practitioners, it also confirmed that the popularity of Surrealism continues to influence a variety of media today from film directors to fashion designers. As well as the V&A's interest in Women Surrealists – the term that I will use to describe these women who engaged with Surrealism – there have been other exhibitions on various women that have also attracted interest. Following the success of 'Surreal Things', for example, the photographic works of Lee Miller were exhibited at the V&A independently. Taking place between September 2007 and January 2008, the exhibition focused upon her efforts as a photographic war correspondent, her chosen genre following her relationship with fellow Surrealist Man Ray. Although now taking place within what may be considered a more mainstream outlet, these images still display evidence of her Surrealist influence; her images incorporating the rayographic technique that she and Man Ray pioneered, as well as her ability to inject creativity into what were to be a series of photographs documenting the war. The popularity of these events can be gauged by the number of visitors attending the exhibitions. 'Surreal Things' attracted a total number of 129,894 attendees while 'The Art of Lee Miller' resulted in 78,946 visitors.<sup>2</sup> Although the latter attracted fewer visitors it remains an impressive figure for an exhibition based on the work of an individual female who was better known as her lover's muse. Other interest came to the fore a few years earlier in the guise of the motion picture *Frida* (2002), an account of the life of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Starring the Mexican actress Salma Hayek, the film reignited interest in an artist who has long been a figure of fascination, especially due to her turbulent marriage with

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Tora Soderlind in the V&A marketing department for responding to my request for visitor data in February 2009.

muralist Diego Rivera. The influence of women Surrealists can be seen in the handbags of designer Lulu Guinness, which borrow from the fashion designs of Elsa Schiaparelli and the sculptures of Meret Oppenheim. Guinness' collections offer playfully detailed accessories, designs based on lips (naturally also evoking Dalí's lip sofa) and flower pots. We may also consider the eclectic designs of Dame Vivienne Westwood as forming punk icons informed by Surrealists, such that her garments – which include bondage trousers adorned with safety pins – take everyday functional objects and imbue them with new meaning. This was a technique regularly used by the Surrealists and we may look to Oppenheim's fur covered teacup to provide the quintessential example of this technique. Much more recently, Manchester Art Gallery held an exhibition entitled 'Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism' between September 2009 and January 2010,<sup>3</sup> while Chichester's Pallant House Gallery has held two exhibitions of relevance to this thesis. The first, 'Surreal Friends', ran June–September 2010 and focused on Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna, while 'Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: Masterpieces from the Gelman Collection' was held July–September 2011.<sup>4</sup> Although the latter exhibition did not dwell on Kahlo's Surrealist connections, it nonetheless underscored her continued popularity.

The recent prominence given to women Surrealists by public-facing exhibitions and events follows a rising academic interest in the area. Penelope Rosemont's compendium of writing, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, charts the progression of women writers in Surrealism through the decades, also

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<sup>3</sup> For information and exhibition resources see Patricia Allmer, *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (London: Prestel, 2009) and

<http://www.manchestergalleries.org/angelsOfAnarchy/> [accessed 2 July 2011].

<sup>4</sup> The exhibition is due to run until October 2011, <http://www.pallant.org.uk/> [accessed 2 July 2011].

offering a few examples of visually based work.<sup>5</sup> Perusing Rosemont's volume, it is impossible not to be astounded by the vast array of Surrealist women who have existed, and continue to exist, from when the movement was established in 1920s' Paris. The reader is unable to ignore too Surrealism's international appeal, the text highlighting how this small Paris-based group managed to expand from its French roots, with activity encompassing such distant areas as South America and the country landscapes of rural England. Whitney Chadwick is another example of a scholar who has worked extensively on Surrealist women, her work showcasing the vast array of works produced by these artists and their continuing influence within critical and cultural fields.<sup>6</sup> Other scholars who have worked extensively on women and Surrealism include Mary Ann Caws (co-editor of *Surrealism and Women*),<sup>7</sup> Georgiana Colville, and Renée Riese Hubert (*Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism and Partnership*).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, what such studies show is that women of varying races and nationalities shared an affinity with Surrealism, a movement that provoked widespread controversy due to its ability to shock with sexually provocative images largely based on representations of the female body. This contrasts with the masculine objectification of Surrealism which appeared to claim the woman's body for his own amusement and purpose, producing abstracted images that sexualised the

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<sup>5</sup> Penelope Rosemont (ed.), *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (London: The Athlone Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> For more on the diversity of women Surrealists, see Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002) and *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self Representation* (Cambridge, Mass. & London, England: The MIT Press, 1998). For a more general account of women artists, see Chadwick's *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli, and Gwen Raaberg (eds), *Surrealism and Women* Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

female form and described by Caws as ‘problematic and imprisoned, for the other eyes. She may be lit or framed, but she is not whole’.<sup>9</sup>

One topic that is certain to occur in a discussion of women Surrealists is their involvement with male members of the Surrealist circle. However, texts such as those aforementioned, combined with the exhibits of the V&A, have reaffirmed how these were women who created their own brand of Surrealism, one that was distinctively whimsical, playful and sexual. Precisely because they may have been motivated by the woman’s objectification displayed by the movement’s male founders, and by the patriarchal traditions that gave impetus and drive to the creation of the orthodox Surrealist pieces, I hope to show through this thesis how pieces produced by women, although inherently sexual and graphic, tended to be free of derogatory associations. However, before I begin to analyse the legacy of women Surrealists I must firstly position the phenomenon of Surrealism in a wider context, and to do this I will lead with a brief history of the movement.

Although Surrealism centred upon the unconscious, and initially focused on literature and then painting, the sheer diversity of material that exists within the Surrealist realm is striking. Through vast and varied areas of activity within this field, including sculpture, furniture design, photography and fashion, we can see how all these media have contributed towards a legacy that continues to exist in today’s culture, from high-brow exhibitions to modern film and television comedy. What then were the main roots of Surrealism, and what qualities have contributed to the longevity of the movement’s legacy?

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1997), pp. 53-54.

To begin formulating an answer to this question, it must be stressed how the movement's Parisian origins greatly contributed to what can be called Surrealism's *state of mind*, that is to say the movement formed through the ideas and inspirations of individuals while they were living in a particular city. As the birthplace of Surrealism Paris evidently influenced individuals through its history, geography and magnetism, allowing the establishment of Surrealism in a place where artists had free expression and artistic license, and where they could behave freely and without major inhibition while their art crossed previously unexplored boundaries.

In a major recent work on Surrealism, Gérard Durozoi states the following about the city's influence: 'Paris was above all a place of idle wandering, and it was during one's wandering that one might discover the city's magical or "magnetic" places [...]; the city offered a wealth of incongruous encounters and pretensions for hallucinations or premonitions'.<sup>10</sup> The city's magnetism spawned various publications by the movement's founders who, using the allure and hypnotic qualities of Paris, created almost mystical scenarios. *Nadja*<sup>11</sup> by Breton and *Paris Peasant*<sup>12</sup> by Aragon are the canonical examples of this point. Returning to Durozoi, he continues that 'to wander was to be open to whatever might happen: such openness transformed what there was to satisfy one's desire. Even if the actual setting was mediocre, the stroller could intuit a deeper meaning, more secretive and intimate'.<sup>13</sup> Although both texts are relevant to this thesis, due to their description of the city into which Surrealism was born, it is the former that has influenced this thesis in the greater capacity. Centred upon a young woman's descent into madness and her eventual incarceration, *Nadja*

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<sup>10</sup> Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, trans. by Alison Anderson (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 173.

<sup>11</sup> Andre Breton, *Nadja*, translated by Mark Polizzotti (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, translated by Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> Durozoi, p. 173.

institutionalised the concept of the *Surrealist female*, one who was almost totally dependent upon her male companion and who belonged to her mate.

In retrospect, however, what appears just as relevant is that this creature, as the male artist's muse, was relied on as much by her mate as she relied on him; the male Surrealist was dependent on her presence to fuel his creativity and he would have been unable to fulfil the creative potential of the great Surrealist mission without her company. This is usually the memory that lingers of the woman Surrealist and something that I wish to challenge within this study. I intend to prove that femininity in Surrealism does not equate simply to facilitating creativity through episodes of sexuality and madness, and that women practitioners were more active within the field of Surrealism than the majority of current analysis has acknowledged.

I will now consider Breton's comments about 'woman' in his prose. Extending beyond the connotations of dependence as previously cited, Breton writes affectionately of *Nadja*, both professing his love for the eponymous character while describing the dilemmas that she creates. Breton considers how, in spite of her problematic demeanour, she is the only woman capable of projecting the love that a male requires. Nonetheless, this love contributes to her mental decline and her downfall, as well underpinning a physical dependency that the male yearns from her in return. The result is that Nadja is left at his mercy, unable to achieve independence.

To quote a passage from the text:

The problem of woman is the most wonderful and disturbing problem there is in the world. And this is precisely to the extent that the faith a noncorrupted man must be able to place, not only in the revolution, *but also in love*, brings us back to it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Breton, 1999, p. 180.

This 'problem' as conceived by Breton will be returned to throughout this discussion; the instant categorisation surrounding the Surrealist woman made her fight harder for her place in the movement. Breton talks of love, and of love for a woman, yet is inclined to restrict women as objects to be loved by men and incapable of loving for themselves. He continues his discussion of love by stating how 'we are restoring it to its meaning which threatens a human being with total attachments, based upon the overwhelming awareness of the truth, of *our truth*, "in a soul and a body" which are the soul and body of that person'.<sup>15</sup> Love may signify freedom for the Surrealists, but partnerships could also be restrictive and stifling for women. Looking ahead to individual cases, obsessive love very likely contributed to the fact that Dora Maar and Leonora Carrington were driven to madness through all-consuming affairs with Picasso and Max Ernst respectively.

With reference to women being driven to madness by men, we may consider why these individuals were attracted to Surrealism in the first place, and ask for what reasons these practitioners might have wished to integrate themselves within such a patriarchal group. One main reason may have been as a reaction against previous labels thrust upon them by Breton and his cohorts, as per the confines of 'woman' as muse or psychiatric patient emotionally reliant upon their male partner. Another may have been the use of Surrealism as an outlet for self-expression. In retrospect, could male Surrealists have felt threatened by a woman's presence within their circle? It is certainly possible that Surrealist men predicted the female involvement of future Surrealist activity, and that they were worried that women – as individual practitioners and as subject matter – might eventually achieve greater self sufficiency. Madness, for the Surrealists, enhanced an individual's status rather than suppressing

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 181.

it, both freeing and purifying the mind, and exhibiting the true mental state of an individual. However, the practical and moral implications of madness differed radically between the sexes: the madwoman was incarcerated while the madman achieved freedom from his mind's limitations. In the *Surrealist Manifesto* Breton writes:

We all know, in fact, that the insane owe their incarceration to a tiny number of legally reprehensible acts and that, were it not for these acts, their freedom, (or what we see as their freedom) would not be threatened. I am willing to admit that it induces them not to pay attention to certain rules – outside of which the species feels itself threatened – which we are all supposed to know and respect.<sup>16</sup>

As the above quotation suggests, Breton's justification of madness was to blame law enforcement. Believing that imposed restrictions stifled an individual's creativity, Breton promoted hallucinations as offering momentary relief and freedom from the rules that governed society. This is because, to quote Breton, people suffering from madness 'derive a great deal of comfort and consolation from their imagination, that they enjoy their madness sufficiently to endure the thought that this validity does not extend beyond themselves. And, indeed, hallucinations, illusions, etc., are not a source of trifling pleasure'.<sup>17</sup>

Durozoi's work tends to favour specific individuals within the movement's history. There exists in particular a tendency to prioritise Breton as the quintessential embodiment of Surrealism whose literature encapsulated the 'truth' of the movement. Moreover, Breton himself was guilty of favouritism in both *Surrealist Manifestos*. Breton was considered by many to be the 'Pope' of Surrealism, an appropriate term to use when discussing the manifesto, and especially applicable regarding certain

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<sup>16</sup> André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* [sic] trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

individuals who are sometimes written about in an air of Saint-like worship. While Durozoi describes Breton's devotion to Freud and psychoanalysis in this way, Durozoi's eulogistic prioritisation of Breton in charting the origins of Surrealism has both positive and negative consequences.

Although favouring Breton may allow Durozoi's methodology to focus particular areas of discussion into a more concise framework, it can function in the opposite manner to both hinder and isolate the text. For this reason Durozoi has inadvertently narrowed his intention to provide a broad account of the Surrealist subject, veering instead into a chronology of one individual's ideas and opinions. Additionally he prioritises the twenty-year span of 1924-1944, favouring such individuals as Man Ray and Ernst along with Breton and giving particular attention to the themes of politics, internationalism, journals, and the group's excommunication of particular members. This recalls the origins of Surrealism as a political group whose members attempted a revolution against the mainstream and the bestowal of free thought on all who joined in its revolt. To quote Durozoi, 'Surrealism was historically defined; it was able to claim a political dimension. In the manifesto however, any political dimension remained implicit'.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this was an alternative mode of politics formed by those at the centre of the movement, its foundations based on existing political movements and groups, for example Marxism, while advocating the freedom of self expression.

Moreover, the Manifesto did not only generate positive responses; Durozoi has considered how it merely 'validated the ambitions that for some time had already been those of Breton and his close circle'.<sup>19</sup> In regard to their political stance, which

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<sup>18</sup> Durozoi, p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

the Surrealists used as a ruse to be contested and a catalyst for their rebellion, they expected others to follow in their personal beliefs. This was evident when Breton excommunicated certain individuals from the group, following a rash of opposing opinions and disregarded these individuals during the first manifesto. While the first manifesto reads like a running commentary of personal opinions, Breton appears to have integrated a greater amount of logical reasoning into the second one. Breton uses the second manifesto to justify his original thoughts, defending his opinions while stating his original intention for the movement ‘to provoke, from the intellectual and moral point of view, *an attack of conscience*, of the most general and serious kind, and that the extent to which this was or was not accomplished alone can determine its historical successes or failure’.<sup>20</sup>

As in the first manifesto, Breton puts forward the provocative nature of Surrealism, demonstrated with the comment that Surrealism can be defined as both constructive and destructive,<sup>21</sup> and emphasising that Surrealism knows no boundaries outside itself; it exists internally with no patience for anything that fails to generate interest. Breton also defines Surrealism as an ‘experiment’,<sup>22</sup> evoking the playful state in which the movement revelled, while adamantly demonstrating that Surrealism is a movement of longevity:

This is because unflagging fidelity to the commitments of Surrealism presupposes a disinterestedness, a contempt for risk, a refusal to compromise, of which very few men prove, in the long run, to be capable. Were there to remain not a single one, from among all those who were the first to measure by its standards their chance for significance and their desire for truth, yet would Surrealism continue to live.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Breton, 1990, p. 123.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 129.

In order to justify both his original manifesto and the politics of the movement Breton uses the second manifesto to attack specific individuals as demonstrated in the following passage: ‘speaking personally, I admit to feeling a certain pleasure knowing that M. Artaud is, without the least provocation, trying to pass me off as a dishonest man, and that M. Soupault has the gall to accuse me of theft.’<sup>24</sup>

This is a curious comment, for it was also the era when Breton and Soupault co-authored *Les Champs Magnétiques* and began to develop a close friendship. Breton appears less vitriolic than in the first manifesto, possibly intending his second manifesto to focus upon different matters of discussion beyond antagonism and confrontation. It could too be possible that, as many of the prominent figures had left the movement during this time, there was no outlet, or individual, for Breton to vent his anger upon. In the light of the foregoing discussion we are reminded of another individual’s concern with Surrealism, this time Bataille, and his concern that Surrealist poetry would contribute to the movement’s undoing. Although he moved in the same social circles as Breton, Bataille was reluctant to acknowledge that Surrealism embodied qualities similar to his own beliefs. This is especially true of poetry which, for Bataille, privileged external modes of thought while ignoring reality, thereby visualising a grander form of Surrealism in service of Breton’s stately declaration that ‘Le grand surréalisme commence’.<sup>25</sup> It is the abandonment of poetry that Bataille believed must be achieved for Surrealism to function more successfully and ensure its longevity.

As I have already proposed, and as I intend to demonstrate, Surrealism’s reluctance to privilege certain modes of artistic practice proved advantageous to the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 134.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 89.

women who were soon to integrate themselves within the movement and who worked in and across various media. This can align with Dalí's view, following the second manifesto, that Surrealism should place greater emphasis upon the 'Surrealist object' and bring together the notion of the dream and reality.<sup>26</sup> Ever since the 1930s, work shown as part of exhibitions suggests that the movement began to move away from literary texts and towards visual displays featuring paintings and sculptures, something that can also be attributed in part to the internationalism that increasingly characterised the movement.

In discussing the foundations of the Surrealist phenomenon, I once again return to the city's role as another member of the circle, as an entity rather than a location. The subject is emphasised in the works of Durozoi and Nadeau, particularly the latter, who describes how, for the Surrealists, 'the important thing was to rediscover life under the thick carapace of centuries of culture - life, pure, naked, raw, lacerated. The important thing was to bring the unconscious of a city into unison with the unconscious of man'.<sup>27</sup> Among the constant references to the city we are reminded of the concept of the *flâneur*: a city dweller and wanderer – assumed to be male – who invisibly absorbs and watches all the city life that is occurring around him. This allows me to pose the following question: can such a concept as the *flâneuse* exist? If so, is she able to function in other cities of the world or can *flâneurs* function only in Paris? The idea of differentiating between public and private spaces is most important, for certain areas in cities forbid women from entering. According to Wolff,

The *flâneur* (the French term is always used, in English as well as in German) is the person who strolls aimlessly in the modern city, observing people and

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<sup>26</sup> Green, p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Nadeau, *The History of Surrealism* (London: Plantin Publishers, 1987), p. 98.

events, perhaps (if the *flâneur* happens also to be a writer or an artist) with a view to recording these observations in word or image.<sup>28</sup>

While male Surrealists may have been able to wander the streets relatively unnoticed it would have been more difficult for unaccompanied women, given likely associations with prostitution and with a general lack of respectability. This made it more difficult for women artists to observe the city, especially due to the restrictions upon gender boundaries; idle wandering was not easily achievable, and required a companion for entry into certain public spaces. Such restrictions may also be behind the Surrealist interest in fallen women requiring rescue by men, as in *Nadja*. Usually the places where the *flâneuse* was able to function were the cinema or shopping arcades, in the guise of what Wolff punningly describes as “les *flâneurs* du mal(l) [sic]”<sup>29</sup> in reference to Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), for these were spaces where women could move with less restriction. Although the *flâneur* may be applied to any city where walking is a major activity, with reference to Surrealism it is Paris that remains a pivotal topic. Durozoi has commented upon this in depth, stating how ‘the city offered a wealth of incongruous encounters and pretensions for hallucinations or premonitions’.<sup>30</sup> He additionally describes Paris as ‘mediocre’, with individuals desiring to source new places to find a new creative atmosphere, adding that ‘to wander was to be open to whatever might happen: such openness transformed what there was to satisfy one’s desire. Even if the actual setting was mediocre, the stroller could intuit a deeper meaning, more secretive and intimate’.<sup>31</sup> Durozoi continues: ‘it is likely that the international Bohemian crowd of Montparnasse held

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<sup>28</sup> Janet Wolff, ‘Gender and the haunting of cities (or, the retirement of the *flâneur*)’ in Aruna D’Souza and Tom McDonough (eds), *The invisible flâneuse?* (Manchester University Press: Manchester & New York, 2006), p. 18. Author’s parentheses.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Durozoi, p. 173.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 173.

little appeal for the surrealists: its brilliance consisted of so much mere show, and in its *laisser-aller* there was too much indifference to the very idea of a quest for the meaning of life'.<sup>32</sup> We may reflect whether this desire to find new locations of inspiration assisted in expanding Surrealism into a worldwide phenomenon.

Although Durozoi mentions women Surrealists fleetingly, he bypasses them and their artistic contributions for what he considers to be more relevant subjects. What space he does give to women and Surrealism sets out their role as wives, muses or lovers, neglecting the further contributions that they made to the history of Surrealism. However, significant recent work by Johanna Malt shows how particular material, mostly by Adorno, Benjamin and Dalí, centred upon the female body as a fetishised commodity, and considers the ways in which anatomical parts such as legs, feet and breasts were photographed, or captured, on film or canvas.<sup>33</sup> With an emphasis on male Surrealist practitioners Malt raises and develops ideas around the woman as a sexual vessel. Especially relevant is the Surrealist's desire to fetishise seemingly inanimate objects that would not generally be thought of as sexual, even everyday objects whose appearance apparently holds no relevance to sexuality in any way. Malt considers this in the following passage:

What the surrealists display in their fetishistic imagery is a heightened sensitivity to the erotic allure of the object as commodity. Not only are they aware of this auratic power; they put it in a new perspective by juxtaposing it with more conventionally erotic bodily images. So the body, which might have seemed to have been excluded from commodity-based readings of the object in surrealism, is brought back into focus in a dialectical relationship with the inanimate commodity. And what is more, in the surrealist object, it is on the body that the fetish and the commodity fetish converge.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 172.

<sup>33</sup> Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

As established here, Malt's own analysis describes fetish as a commodity which she demonstrates through descriptions of anatomical parts and inanimate objects. Through the writings of Adorno, and his theories upon commodity fetishism, she describes how the Surrealist body manifests itself through desire. She notes how any object can appear desirable through a series of actions, whether through silk stockings or the removal of a mannequin's breasts, while describing how 'the fetish and commodity fetish are not simply held together in an analogical relation in this reading of surrealist imagery: they are one and the same object'.<sup>35</sup>

With reference to my own analysis of women Surrealists, erotica is a topic of central importance, particularly the way in which these artists were able to turn what was an originally sexualized and aggressive control of the woman, whether in body or in mind, into a playful mode which developed into their own expression of Surrealism. Malt's analysis demonstrates the violence that was often attached to these depictions of the woman's body, drawing out its subjugation through projection as a mannequin, and the use of women to extend Surrealist experiments around what constituted a fetish object. Nonetheless, I can elaborate on Malt's analysis in that although a violent attack appears to have occurred on the woman's body, the absence of blood diminishes excessive brutality. In describing this she states how 'the body may be cut into pieces in much surrealist imagery, but there is never a wound, for mannequins do not bleed, indeed they incorporate into the very structure of the articulation the possibility of their own disintegration'.<sup>36</sup> With further reference to Adorno, Malt comments:

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 138.

Indeed, it is the presence of desire in the fetishism of commodities that makes the fetish in all its forms such a powerful model. The images of surrealism are, in Adorno's words, "commodity fetishes on which something subjective, libido, was once fixated".<sup>37</sup>

This is an instructive comment, raising the question of how multiple fetishes are able to function, which will in turn inform much of the analysis to follow in this thesis, and underpin my investigation of the ways in which specific works by women Surrealists incorporated these ideas. However, were these works guilty of displaying violence and, if not, how did they avoid such associations? Did libido and sexual charge enhance creations by women or was this something that they intentionally avoided? With reference to existing published analysis, and the work of individual artists, I will revisit the idea of the woman's body as a subject of fetish and consider ways in which women Surrealists choose to acknowledge, or ignore, the implications that it raised.

The aim of this thesis is as follows: it proposes an analysis of women Surrealists via themes that include the fetishism and the city. In doing so it will provide evidence of the challenges that these artists faced when confronted with what often appears to have been an 'All boys' club' deeply rooted in a patriarchal culture. It will provide evidence of how these women created their own place within and without the Surrealist movement while remaining true to the sexuality and the unconscious as principal foundations of the body both as a physical thing and in orthodox Surrealism.

As Caws comments:

The relationship between women and Surrealism is indeed problematic. Nevertheless, the women Surrealists explored the challenges and contradictions of their situation with passion and courage, devising their own approaches to surrealist language, imagery, techniques, and principles, and experimenting with various translations of surrealist discourse. Ultimately,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 220.

through their exploration of the female psyche and experiences, they develop new iconographies and mythologies, revising the premises of Surrealism and expanding the parameters of its discourse. Opening the surrealist canon to the works of these women enlarges the scope of Surrealism.<sup>38</sup>

In thinking about women Surrealists I return to Bataille who applied the term ‘heterogeneous’, to mean bourgeois and everyday routine, which was used to describe how the essence of Surrealism could be condensed within a text, or essentially any piece of art. Habermas has described the term as follows:

In this concept Bataille condensed the basic experience of the surrealist writers and artists who wanted to call attention to the ecstatic forces of intoxication and of dream-life against the imperatives of utility, normality and sobriety, in order to shake up conventionally set modes of perception and experience.<sup>39</sup>

Continuing with these ideas, it can be further acknowledged how Habermas, in interpreting Bataille, encapsulated the essence of Surrealism in the same manner as Breton in his manifestos.<sup>40</sup> Although Bataille uses the notion of heterogeneity to describe marginal social groups, ‘be they the pariahs and the untouchables, the prostitutes or the lumpen proletariat, the crazies, the rioters and revolutionaries, the poets or the bohemians’,<sup>41</sup> it is descriptions such as these by Bataille that are integral to an analysis of Surrealism, particularly in respect of the relationship between Surrealism and the work produced by women Surrealists.

It can be argued, for example, that artists who were part of the Surrealist movement were original outsiders; they worked to earn their own place within the movement and to establish an outlet of Surrealism to call their own. The meaning and

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg (eds), *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Jürgen Habermas: ‘The French Path to Postmodernity: Bataille Between Eroticism and General Economics’ in Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (eds), *Bataille: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 167-190 (p. 168).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 168.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 168.

purpose of Surrealism was constantly contested by its followers and practitioners, and Surrealism continues to escape easy or final definition. The movement and what it encapsulates cannot be fixed in entirety. Although Surrealism originally concentrated on literature, as determined and demonstrated by Breton's manifestos, it moved forward to encompass a variety of artistic practices. The original concepts of automatic writing and the novel, as demonstrated by Breton himself, had an inherently male agenda, centring in their subject matter upon women who lack any input or agency. Although this progressed, and women have contributed to Surrealist literary and poetic practice, I will bring out the huge contribution of women Surrealists made in the areas of painting, sculpture, fashion and photography.

This thesis will therefore draw out Surrealism as a multi-layered artistic form that relates to a variety of media. The inclusion of such works within this analysis, will provide evidence of how media such as fashion, not usually thought of as a Surrealist format, offers rich scope for Surrealist activity. Was it a conscious decision for women practitioners to gravitate towards the visual as a way of claiming a particular type of work for their own? Is there such thing as a Surrealist gender divide between male dominated literature and visually based work by women artists? Did women believe that they could not contribute to the literary canon? Or did they simply feel more at ease with the visual arts, prefer them as an outlet for self expression and believe that they could capture visually what they could not put into words?

In pursuing detailed textual analysis beyond these general questions, this thesis will explore the issue of sexuality and Surrealism in considerable depth. While it has been previously established how fetishism of female anatomy was inherently present in orthodox Surrealist art, I will consider how representations of femininity by women artists functioned as an attack upon Surrealist male orthodoxy and as a

challenge to convention more generally. By challenging masculine conceptions of art and femininity, often with sexual charge, the artists dealt with in this study were able to provide results that were provocative yet whimsical. These practitioners celebrated and flaunted their sexuality in a variety of guises, taking the foundations and original traits of Surrealism, yet rebelling against the patriarchal nature of the movement. In turn a series of questions emerge that relate to the very essence of Surrealism. Was Surrealist art produced by women, in its attack on convention and male orthodoxy, the truest form of Surrealism to exist? Did these practitioners find it empowering to reaffirm their creativity through sexually charged symbols or did they only use such imagery as an attack on previous traditional values? How were they able to use images steeped in derogatory connotation to fuel and enhance their own sexual creativity?

In re-imagining the history of Surrealism in today's climate, it must be acknowledged how women Surrealists were able to distance themselves from being only muses to their male contemporaries to establishing themselves as respected artists in the movement. Although Patricia Allmer uses the example of Lee Miller when commenting that 'the muses do return as outstanding artists',<sup>42</sup> originally the idea of the muse was an often sexualised symbol that male Surrealists came to depend upon to drive their creativity. I will, however, challenge this dynamic asking if the muse can function in reverse: can men serve as muses to women Surrealists? Did male partners fuel the Surrealist woman's creativity? Did the depiction of male muses replicate that of female muses? Furthermore, in the case of practitioners who do not

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<sup>42</sup> Patricia Allmer (ed.), *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (Manchester: Prestel, 2009), p. 16.

tend to depict muses, was there a conscious effort to abolish the muse label and consciously achieve distance in respect of work by male Surrealists?

A host of other questions emerge to be dealt with in a study such as this. What else fuelled the creativity of Surrealist women? Did their biological identity as women, a reoccurring motif in their art, rely on patriarchal gender conventions or did they establish their own framework of female sexuality and fetish? Was Surrealism an arena in which they could achieve creativity through the 'natural' tools of nature and their own body and, if so, were Surrealist women able to in some sense reclaim their sexuality? Certainly, attention must be given to the obvious frequency of depictions of the natural world, in which organic notions such as motherhood and plants are saturated with graphically provocative imagery. Were these artists attempting to push the boundaries of what is conventionally thought of as *male* and *female* Surrealism, and how were they able to use motherhood and manipulate their biology, and sexuality, to their own advantage? Such questions will be posed throughout this analysis in pursuit of a general, founding thesis: Surrealist women counter-posed male Surrealist orthodoxy while remaining true to the outlines of the Surrealist project as laid out by Breton and his manifestos.

Such questions lead into another area that will be discussed throughout this analysis, primarily the question of how female Surrealists could use their body in a non-sexual way. This leads to Chadwick's comment that much modern art created by women has 'collaborated in fusing the sexual and the artistic by equating artistic creation with male sexual energy, presenting women as powerless and sexually subjugated'.<sup>43</sup> She continues by quoting Carol Duncan's article 'Domination and Virility in Vanguard Painting', which describes how, among work by groups such as

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<sup>43</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 279.

the (male dominated) Cubists, 'the female subject is rendered powerless before the artist/viewer'.<sup>44</sup> To quote Duncan:

Her body [is] contorted according to the dictates of his erotic will. Instead of the consuming *femme-fatale*, one sees an obedient animal. The artist, in asserting his own sexual will, had annihilated all that is human in his opponent [sic]. According to their paintings, the liberation of the artist means the domination of others; his freedom requires their unfreedom.<sup>45</sup>

The female body has always existed as a major motif in art, often subjugated for the viewer's pleasure, and depicted in a variety of guises, whether clothed, or nude. In taking on multiple roles the woman artist, in becoming her own subject, raises a range of issues around 'representation, morality, and female sexuality'.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, a persistent problem exists in that the woman is constantly at the mercy of the male's gaze and a source of his viewing pleasure, often with added notions of violence. According to Segal, 'muses stand for the eyes downcast, the body proffered somewhere around the navel, mindless, organless, giving, an inspiration at the price of being fast-frozen. No, if she darts, glances or wiggles violently, she is no muse'.<sup>47</sup> It is therefore only at the moment when the muse establishes her independence that she is no longer the artist's subject for his manipulation. This has been a concern for women artists, especially those who gained original notoriety through the muse association, and who sought to distance themselves from such labels. This relates to Caws' comment that 'Surrealism brought about a new way of looking. Like much else in that movement and manner of thinking, the world has two senses: what it looks like and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 280.

<sup>45</sup> Duncan quoted in Chadwick, p. 280.

<sup>46</sup> Chadwick, p. 280.

<sup>47</sup> Naomi Segal, 'Who Whom? Violence, Politics and the aesthetic' in Jana Howlett and Rod Mengham (eds), *The Violent Muse: Violence and the Artistic Imagination in Europe, 1910-1939* (Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York, 1994), pp. 141-149, (p. 141).

how it looks at the world outside it and then inward, to an “interior model”.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally Chadwick comments:

The difficulty of distinguishing between overtly sexualized (i.e. voyeurism, fetishism, and scopophilia) and other forms of looking, the issue of female subjectivity, and the identification of the female body with nature, generation and the instinctual life have become important areas of investigation for contemporary feminism.<sup>49</sup>

Although critics such as Segal may have considered how the muse association hindered women professionally, many artists chose to use these preconceived notions to their own advantage, using the tools at their disposal to fulfil a creative potential. Over the twentieth century sexuality integrated itself more explicitly and fully within art, as artists began to experiment with cross-dressing and more androgynous styles of fashion. Coco Chanel, for example, began to masculinise women’s clothing, while in Surrealism Man Ray, Duchamp and Picabia created a series of images dressed and posed in women’s fashion. Some of these images were included in another recent exhibition, when the Tate Modern held ‘Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia: The Moment Art changed Forever’ between February and March 2008.<sup>50</sup>

Over the early part of the twentieth century, avant-garde art was playfully and provocatively causing the lines between sex and gender to narrow and overlap, something that avant-garde women used successfully to their great advantage. This was perfectly expressed through Surrealism, as suggested by Chadwick:

No artistic movement since the nineteenth century has celebrated the idea of woman and her creativity as passionately as did Surrealism during the 1920s and 1930s. None has had as many female practitioners, and none has evolved a more complex role for the woman artist in a modern movement.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Caws 1997, p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Chadwick, p. 281.

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Mundy (ed.), *Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> Chadwick, p. 308.

Chadwick comments further how ‘the female body – assaulted, fragmented, rewritten as subject and verb, interior and exterior – became the Surrealist symbol *par excellence*’.<sup>52</sup> However, while Surrealism attracted many women during the 1930s, they still found it difficult to assert their position. According to Perry, conditions improved for women artists during the 1920s, especially in Paris,<sup>53</sup> as opportunities for exhibiting work improved and more artists were able to showcase their work within groups that included Surrealism. Until this time exhibiting art was usually reduced to private salons or small galleries and, more significantly, was a privilege usually reserved for male artists. Nevertheless, the appeal of Paris always represented a strong magnetic pull for both genders, especially ‘women who had chosen their career as artists’.<sup>54</sup> In homage to the original Parisian bohemia of the nineteenth century, ‘the capital provided more possibilities for women who had chosen careers as artists. It was also seen by many painters (both male and female) as providing working spaces in which progressive attitudes towards both artistic and social conventions could flourish’.<sup>55</sup>

Education is important to consider, especially the role of education for women in the later nineteenth century as impacting women’s artistic progression. During this time women’s education was largely the responsibility of the Catholic Church.<sup>56</sup> The Church, through controlling education, was largely concerned with the morals of family life and religion for women, whereas knowledge was a male preserve. This was often challenged by the middle-class parents of these girls, who demanded that

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 310.

<sup>53</sup> Gill Perry, *Women Artists and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

they be educated for professional or vocational purposes beyond teaching qualifications.<sup>57</sup> In respect of women in French society we may also consider the figure of the artist's model, for these were associated with prostitution 'in polite society'.<sup>58</sup> This may be attributed to the artistic practice of studying supervised brothels. Known as *maisons closes* or *maisons de tolérance*, these were abolished in 1946 having featured in many paintings by male artists.<sup>59</sup>

With reference to the social conventions surrounding women in society, and the figuring of women in orthodox Surrealism, this thesis will seek to challenge and revise in a number of areas. Through existing work on Surrealism, gender and women Surrealists, I will propose an analysis that will expand and reaffirm the importance that such practitioners created for themselves within the movement. Drawing upon topics such as sexuality, gender, motherhood, nature and, particularly, fetish, I will explore in detail individual works by individual artists. In so doing, I will look at the qualities that imbued their work with Surrealism, ask how women artists challenged the patriarchy of the movement and assess their attraction towards particular media. In order to achieve a continuity of the progression of women Surrealists, this analysis will be structured chronologically according to decade, with each chapter dedicated to a particular creative medium.

Close reading of artworks will be supported by a range of published theories and ideas. With reference to Breton's manifestos, Durozoi and Nadeau's histories of Surrealism, and Malt's analysis of fetish and the body, the thesis will draw upon pre-existing scholarship and apply this to the discussion of a relatively small and focussed body of artists. What I intend to provide is an account of work by women who have

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 32.

been actively present within the movement yet who have not achieved full or even partial recognition for their efforts. Therefore, one key aim of this study is to distance many of these practitioners from the simple marker of 'muse'. As mentioned at the beginning of this study, women artists were subjected to a particular kind of bodily figuration which was the preserve of their male paramours. I have in turn chosen a selection of artists who may or may not have been characterised by the muse label that has been so often bestowed upon practitioners, ranging from Lee Miller, as Man Ray's muse, to Elsa Schiaparelli's (non-sexual) creative partnership with Dalí.

Certainly, it is impossible to escape from the notion of the muse when discussing the physical presence of women in art. However, what I propose to achieve in this analysis, while still focusing on the woman's body as fetish, is to draw out the depiction of the feminine form as a mode of empowerment and as a different type of fetish. Although women Surrealists used the naked body as an artistic subject, they were able to turn its original notion of sexual derogation into one that flaunted and flattered their femininity. They were able to use motherhood to their aesthetic advantage, giving maternal bodies a higher significance and stronger mode of power instead of an implication of motherhood as ruined and de-fetishised bodily state. How were they able to use motherhood as a fetish, integrating it as one of their artistic subjects? I will argue that the depiction of motherhood is central to the ways in which Surrealist women created their own brand of fetish – let us call it *feminine* fetish – and that I will argue represents a quintessential Surrealist form of art.

This study will differ from published accounts of women Surrealists, such as Rosemont's anthology of women writers, or Chadwick's various demonstrations that feminine presences in Surrealism have ranged from fulfilling the muse obligation to underpinning significant recurring textual themes. For example, Ruth Hemus

comments that Rosemont ‘drew attention to a greater range of writers, but was reluctant to criticise Breton’s Surrealism, and refuted accusations of its misogyny’.<sup>60</sup> This thesis aims to analyse in detail the diversity and the motivation of women artists’ contributions to Surrealism, while remaining prepared to acknowledge and think critically about the patriarchal foundations on which Surrealism was built. The practitioners discussed here have not been included for their similarity or, as Rosemont believed, because they all engaged directly and consistently with ‘Surrealist activity,’<sup>61</sup> but rather because they are thematically similar. It must be noted that, of the vast array of practitioners that appear in recent studies of Surrealist activity, the name of Elsa Schiaparelli is missing. Does the omission of Schiaparelli insinuate that, as a designer and not a *true* artist, she cannot be considered a *real* Surrealist? It certainly seems strange that the woman half of one of Surrealism’s most effective creative partnerships has been omitted from specific volumes that deal with the subject of Surrealist women. For my part, this thesis will attempt to show how the varied media they used served to broaden conceptions of Surrealism. Thus, what follows is a very close analysis of work by a small number of women Surrealists across disciplines who have not previously been examined in this particular combination. In this respect, the specific corpus and content of this thesis follows less the historical and biographical spread of Chadwick and Rosemont, and more the tight analytical focus of Hemus’ *Dada’s Women*, which offers a detailed analysis of five avant-garde women whose contributions to Dada span a variety of creative media.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ruth Hemus, ‘Céline Arnould: Dada Présidente?’, in Stephen Forcer and Emma Wagstaff (eds), *The French Avant-Garde*, special issue of *Nottingham French Studies*, Volume 50, (Autumn 2011), pp. 67-77 (p. 70).

<sup>61</sup> Rosemont, p. xxxvii.

<sup>62</sup> Ruth Hemus, *Dada’s Women* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

As previously suggested, the muse association usually connotes a woman's naked body and the way in which individual women originally came to the attention of the Surrealism's male founders. In an article about Surrealist women artists, Germaine Greer has commented that 'the model became the artist, but at the same time she clung to her role as model, so that she became her own subject'.<sup>63</sup> This is a provocative comment as the majority of women practitioners within the arts, both past and present, have subjected their bodies to the camera's lens or the (male) artist's canvas. On the one hand, one could agree with Greer and say that, by placing herself as subject, the woman artist unwittingly perpetuates the active male gaze. On the other hand, it could be argued that Greer's comment ignores the importance of self-portraiture as a method of expression and creativity, or even that self-portraits by women artists reclaim the position of the gaze.

Individual chapters will be used to provide more detailed evidence in respect of questions around self-portraits by women Surrealists. Certainly, having complete ownership of her own body allowed an artist to wield it as she pleased; she could use it for both exposure and exploration, and was able to create her own boundaries. Did women artists believe that reclaiming ownership of their bodies allowed them to expose them as they wished, or did they believe that it was the only tool at their disposal? How empowering did women find the process of using their own body and were there any particular artists who attempted to distance their art from associations of the sexualised body? Indeed, was this the only way in which women artists could gain attention for their art, and could the body be used as a non-sexual commodity that had the ability to produce repulsion? This is particularly relevant to Frida Kahlo

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<sup>63</sup> Germaine Greer, 'The Connection Between Art and Exhibitionism', *The Guardian*, 28 January 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jan/28/art.gender> [accessed 27 July 2011].

whose use of her own body will be afforded close analysis here. Kahlo allows for a revealing study as, in completely desexualising her bodily image, she plays out richly rendered trauma in her art.

The six chapters that make up this thesis are laid out in chronological order and deal either with one artist or with a grouping of up to three. This structure has been chosen for several reasons. Firstly, a chronological order will allow for the progression of women practitioners within the history of Surrealism to flow, while the groupings will be based on instructive similarities between the artwork involved. For example, themes including alchemy and the natural world resonate throughout analysis of Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning and Remedios Varo, thus explaining their being grouped together for this chapter. Furthermore, dealing with one-to-three artists per chapter will allow for greater in-depth analysis which will consider any similarities, differences and collaborations between them. Although some chosen artists produced work in various media that would allow them to be considered in different configurations – Carrington’s prose, for example, could have provided an interesting parallel to Rahon in Chapter 6 – I have chosen to treat them in the following progression, in order to best facilitate an in-depth analysis of each artist’s work and give particular themes full attention.

Chapter 1 will be one of several to combine the creative practices of two individuals. Beginning with the medium of photography during the 1920s, it is entitled ‘The Muses Revolt: Behind the Cameras of Lee Miller and Dora Maar’. I have chosen to begin with these two women Surrealists due to their association as muses. Miller was Man Ray’s muse, while Maar was Picasso’s paramour and became the subject of one of the most expensive paintings ever to be sold at auction, *Dora Maar au Chat* (1941). Both of these artists moved in the same social circle while

Miller gained herself a reputation as an established photographer later in her career, breaking away from her past life as a fashion model and Man Ray's muse.

This chapter will analyse a variety of photographs created by these artists and will follow with an analysis of their subjects. Their work will be discussed in comparison to each other as well as to the male artists that they were associated with. Such questions that will be asked include: how did their work differ from, or emulate, that of their partners, and was this a conscious effort to establish their own place within Surrealism or an attempt to divert attention away from their association with better known male figures? Fetish will be a reoccurring subject throughout each chapter, and will here be discussed in relation to photographic imagery. Discussion of fetishism will also allow for progression into the following chapter, 'Sculpture and Sexuality: The Erotic *Objets* of Meret Oppenheim'.

Although the images discussed in the first chapter contain elements of fetish association, Chapter 2 will explore this subject in greater depth. In this instance the work of Oppenheim has been chosen, and the chapter isolated to one specific individual, as this is an artist who significantly pushed the boundaries of female Surrealism, challenging preconceived ideas about fetish and women's bodies, and creating playful and provocative art that was not driven by masculine notions of femininity. I will discuss whether such provocative imagery would be deemed sexist and derogatory to the woman's body if created by a male artist, and the use of everyday utensils in Oppenheim's work.

The theme of erotica as based on the fetishised female body will be continued in the third chapter. Having previously discussed photography and sculpture, it will be instructive to see if sexualisation of the body can be transferred to another art form, albeit one that may not be even considered artistic practice. I will explore the 1930s

and ‘The Fashionable Surrealism of Elsa Schiaparelli’, a chapter informed by materials held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, as we focus on clothes and accessories and consider the much overlooked yet significant niche of Surrealist fashion. Schiaparelli has been chosen for this analysis not only for her collaborations with Dalí but for her ability to reverse the essence of fetish as it existed in Surrealism. How was she able to achieve this and what made a clothed body just as, or more, sexualised than the naked form? Through which materials was she able to enhance the body and how did accessories contribute to the overall Surrealist effect? What qualities were deployed to turn usual modes of dressing – such as dresses, gloves and hats – into quintessentially Surrealist pieces? What is significant about this chapter, as with its predecessor, is that the art does not depict or display the naked woman in any way, only achieving the illusion of naked flesh through association. Furthermore, Schiaparelli’s work implicitly asks whether a corporeal presence is actually necessary for a genuine fetish to be established.

The chronological order progresses into the fourth chapter, which is entitled ‘Surrealism and Alchemy: The Cosmos of Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning and Remedios Varo’. Carrington’s death in May 2011 enhances the topicality of this project, and informs the chapter’s discussion of the woman’s body and of the cycle of life. Motherhood is not usually examined by Surrealist artists and will provide much of the focus of this chapter. Here I will deal less with the woman as a symbol of fetish, exploring instead her identity as nurturer and bringer of life, and her biological connection to the natural world. Although a vast and varied body of work, both visual and literary, exists between these three artists, I will analyse their paintings with attention to intertwining personal lives and reoccurring motifs. A crucial question for this chapter is that of whether claims to Surrealism are precluded by issues rising from

motherhood and nature. I will challenge preconceived opinions about Surrealism as focusing purely upon the body and fetish by examining how these artists' portrayal of motherhood, which male Surrealists believed to desecrate the body, enhanced feminine sexuality. How do motherhood and domesticity, which might well be considered as highly conventional and antithetical to the foundations of Surrealism, enhance and fuel Surrealist creativity? Recurring motifs will be a subject of consideration, allowing for an analysis that considers Surrealism's relationship to nature and its potential for the empowerment of women artists. Interaction between these artists is another factor explaining why they have been chosen for a treatment in a composite chapter, while the question of fertility allows for a transition into the fifth and penultimate chapter.

Motherhood is the main theme of Chapter 5, in which a single artist has been prioritised for discussion. The title of the chapter is 'The Reluctant Surrealist: The Real Art of Frida Kahlo'. Continuing with the theme of birth and the creation of life, this chapter will allow the subject to be viewed from the opposite perspective, this being infertility. Kahlo's inability to bear children during her life is intriguingly mediated in her artwork. Was her art a method of 'producing life', and did she feel any less *feminine* due to her inability to have a child? Furthermore, did this accentuate any of her *masculine* qualities? How did she react and integrate with her fellow artists, and was she ever considered a muse to her husband Rivera? In what ways did her bisexuality influence her work? Was her infertility a hindrance or a benefit for her integration within the Surrealist community? Did infertility 'enhance' Kahlo's masculinity and was she therefore accepted more easily than fellow women practitioners within the Surrealist community? I will also consider the issue of self-

portraits in relation to Kahlo, and ask if the desexualisation that she thought followed from her infertility negates her relationship to the category of muse.

This analytical study of women Surrealists will conclude with a somewhat unknown figure within Surrealism, the French poet and artist Alice Rahon. Why has Rahon often been disregarded in Surrealist historiography? Why has this figure, her art and her legacy been widely unacknowledged when her work is so relevant to Surrealism? With reference both to Rahon's paintings and prose, this chapter will deal in particular with her poem *Sablier couché* (1938), analysis of which has been made possible through archival research; the fragile nature of the poem means that it is not available to the general public. Both prose and art will combine as I look to Rahon's lesbian persona, and ask how sexuality guided and informed the art of a chronically under-researched Surrealist practitioner.

As outlined above, the chronology and thematic concerns of each chapter progresses from each previous discussion. Each artist has been chosen specifically for her ability to depict her own brand of Surrealism which, as explained, is extremely varied in content. This study will consider how the work of women Surrealists is indeed vastly varied, rich in detail and includes a variety of guises and incarnations. In turn this thesis will work towards a central provocative question that challenges the male-oriented orthodoxy both of the Surrealist executive and of much canonical writing about the movement: is Surrealism at its most effective when depicted by women artists, and can it therefore be said that Surrealism, at its most authentic, is effectively female?

CHAPTER 1

‘THE MUSES’ REVOLT: BEHIND THE CAMERAS OF LEE MILLER AND  
DORA MAAR’

In opening this analysis of women Surrealists it is important that I begin at the turn of the 1920s, the time when the movement was at its most active and such figures as André Breton had achieved their greatest notoriety. It was also the highpoint when the woman Surrealist was used as muse and possession, becoming the male artist’s lover, subject and constant admirer. During this decade two women, themselves partners of prominent artists, began to create their own art, moving out of their partners’ shadows into their own light. These artists were Lee Miller (1907-1977) and Dora Maar (1907-1997), coupled with Man Ray and Pablo Picasso respectively.

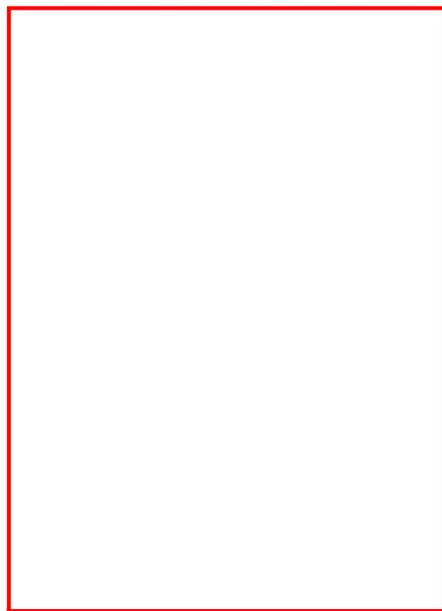


Fig. 1 *Dora Maar au Chat* (1941)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pablo Picasso, *Dora Maar au chat* (1941), oil on canvas, 128.3 cm×95.3 cm (50.5 in×37.5 in), Private Collection, image viewed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3655068/Who-is-the-mystery-buyer-of-the-95m-Picasso.html> [accessed 21 October 2010].

While Lee Miller was most famous as a model-cum-muse to Man Ray and appears in many of his photographs, Dora Maar was a frequent subject for Picasso and was most famously immortalised in the Picasso portrait *Dora Maar au chat* (1941), sold at auction in 1996 and, at the time, the most expensive painting in the world.<sup>2</sup> These two artists have been chosen to begin this analysis of women Surrealists for a variety of reasons. Apart from their shared activity within the same decade, and both muses to successful male partners, they still established independent careers based upon their own merit. Furthermore, while both chose photography as their medium of choice, it is the question of the muse that has underpinned this analysis, particularly as the woman's function as Surrealist muse was established from the time of the original Manifesto. In a recent article David Hare comments that for male Surrealists, 'artists should be able to sleep with who they chose. Men were free, and women were muses'.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, Hare's remarks shows that, whether creator or spectator, women Surrealists still retained the muse persona. Although women artists may have been determined to emerge from their partner's side, it remains striking that both Miller and Maar, as prominent figures associated with canonical male avant-gardists, should both choose photography as their creative media. Did Miller choose photography in order to prove herself in Man Ray's field? Conversely, did Maar wish to distance herself from Picasso – who is in a sense synonymous with painting – and establish her own creative identity, in an attempt to move on from her previous role as painter's mistress and muse?

Although these questions will be acknowledged during analysis of these two women, this chapter will prioritise detailed analytical readings of Miller and Maar's

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<sup>2</sup> Marc Spiegler, 'Who is the mystery buyer of the \$95m Picasso?', *The Telegraph*, 3 September 2006, viewed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/3655068/Who-is-the-mystery-buyer-of-the-95m-Picasso.html> [accessed 21 October 2010].

<sup>3</sup> David Hare, 'The Real Surrealist', *The Guardian*, Saturday 26 October 2002, viewed online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2002/Oct/26/art.photography> [accessed 21 October 2010].

photographic styles and themes and, in doing so, make reference to works that embody canonical male Surrealism. Through textual analysis of photographic imagery, as well as reference to film and gender studies, this chapter will begin with Miller's photography via the following description of her initial desire to be included in the movement:

When Miller walked into the Bateau Ivre, a café conveniently located next to Man Ray's studio, and asked, unannounced, for a job as his assistant, it was thereafter inevitable that what we would now call laddishness of surrealism would be put into flight in the most painful and dramatic way.<sup>4</sup>

As demonstrated by Hare, Lee Miller's association with the Surrealist movement is usually linked to her relationship with Man Ray and her role limited to acting as his muse, model and collaborative partner.<sup>5</sup> This absence of critical analysis of her work is unfortunate, meaning that many are ignorant of Miller's photographic work and influence. In one example of her innovative practice, she and Man Ray pioneered the photogram (or rayograph) technique, a method of producing images without a camera by placing objects directly onto light-sensitive paper.<sup>6</sup> Thus, by exposing a partly developed print to white light before completely developing the image, a positive and a negative image has been created. Indeed, Miller was deeply involved with the Surrealist world technically as well as socially, her work was highly representative of the movement that she inhabited, and her images were imbued with symbols and motifs that were central to the Surrealist movement. Although these symbols will be explored in detail later in this chapter, I will begin with her use of the human hand, itself a frequent motif in Surrealism and a recurring theme in Miller's photographic imagery.

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<sup>4</sup> Hare.

<sup>5</sup> For more biographical information on Lee Miller see Antony Penrose, *The Lives of Lee Miller* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *Dora Maar: With and Without Picasso* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 31.

Although Miller's work was documentary-based during the later part of her career, we will here discuss her work from the time period 1929-1938 – when she was most active in the movement – in order to showcase her importance as one of the original pioneers among women Surrealists. Before beginning analysis of Miller's photography, Hare helps to provide some biographical context to our discussion:

No one can pretend that Miller's story is anything but overwhelmingly sad. Her independent vitality and adventures turned in on itself. At the end, a clear voice chose nothing but silence. Miller set off into her life, maybe damaged, maybe not, by the trauma of her early experiences, with exhilaratingly unconventional attitudes that served her brilliantly for 40 years, but then failed her for the last 30. Behind her she leaves a legacy that, for some of us, is second to none.<sup>7</sup>

Central themes to be discussed in this chapter include castration, desire and the feminine body as a symbol of fetish. All will be approached in the context of references to influential Surrealist films that assisted in establishing the notoriety of the movement and the legacy of Surrealist iconography. After analysis of Miller we will look to Maar, considering how each artist's work differs in both approach and subject and asking what themes, if any, remain constant between the two. With Miller's work I will begin by focusing on the recurring Surrealist theme of the female body, an issue central to the work of all the women Surrealists who have been chosen as part of this study. Firstly, it is important to establish the relationship between the body and Surrealism. To do this I will begin with a discussion of Surrealist film of the 1920s, with particular attention given to the figure of the hand.

Generally speaking, work produced by male Surrealists gravitated towards nude women, or their body parts, which they used to invest their images with symbols of fetish. This technique is no less apparent in work by women Surrealists and is an

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<sup>7</sup> Hare.

issue that will be raised throughout this thesis. However, it must first be considered why these motifs are so important to Surrealism and set out why they have been included as part of this analysis. To begin, I will consider issues that surround, and are representative of, the objectified and disjointed body, as well as castration and Freudian psychology, all in relation to the pivotal Surrealist films *Un chien andalou* (Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, 1928) and *L'Age d'Or* (Buñuel, 1930).

The symbolism of hands in *Un chien andalou* relates to Williams' statement that 'the function of the fetish arises from the fear of castration' and can only be preserved through making the object in question a symbol of fetish.<sup>8</sup> The wounded and severed hands of *Un chien andalou* represent the fear of castration by symbolising a disembodied phallus. Most interestingly, the hands featured in close-up in the film, whether injured or exuding ants (Fig. 2), are male.



Fig. 2 *Un chien andalou*<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Berkeley California, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p. 83.

<sup>9</sup>*Un chien andalou*, BBC's Modern Masters, viewed online at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbccone/modernmasters/virtual-exhibition/dali/3-un-chien-andalou.shtml> [accessed 21 July 2011].

Such images emphasise Freud's notion of the castration complex and the absence of the maternal phallus in its feared symbolism. Williams has commented that 'while the first appearance of the hole and ants emphasized the fear that women have *undergone* castration, the excruciation of this same hand caught in a door emphasizes the more present and direct agony of *undergoing* dismemberment.'<sup>10</sup> Dalí's interest in hands is also evident in his independent work, which uses this part of the anatomy to great effect. Indeed, according to Short, an initial idea for a scene in *L'Age d'Or* was based on a Dalí drawing 'of the man kissing the tips of the woman's fingers and ripping out her nails with his teeth'.<sup>11</sup> Short continues that 'Dalí believed that 'this element of horror' would be "much stronger than the severed eye in *Un Chien Andalou*". As we have seen, Buñuel replaced the ripping out of nails with an amputee's hand, missing fingers compensated by phallic thumb'.<sup>12</sup> Dalí's original idea involves the removal of anatomical matter connected to living flesh. So too in *Un chien andalou* the symbolic threat of castration is produced by the finger standing in for the phallus, thereby generating stronger charge than dismemberment or symbolic castration involving, say, an amputee's false limb.

Hopkins has considered the Surrealist movement's overtly-masculine attitudes as a reflection of male-dominated eroticism and its emphasis on the female body.<sup>13</sup> With reference to the Oedipus complex, he comments that 'the fetish thus stands in for the missing maternal phallus and symbolically allays the reminder of castration evoked by the sight of female genitalia.'<sup>14</sup> This implies that the woman, 'lacking' a penis, requires a substitute for the organ, something she achieves through a focus on

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, p. 92.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Short, *The Age of Gold: Surrealist Cinema* (UK: Creation Books, 2002), p. 154.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 154.

<sup>13</sup> David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 121

her other body parts or through the use of props placed upon the body. Such conceptions are almost universally condemned by feminist critics as degrading theoretical props to objectification, as Hopkins writes:

Female commentators have justifiably argued that women's bodies, and by extension, femininity, are often demeaned via the objectification and fetishisation visited on the female body in the service of male psychological 'liberation', and Surrealism in particular has comparatively little to offer in the way of a counterbalancing female viewpoint.<sup>15</sup>

The castration, or dismemberment, of a limb may be identified with acts of violence, and comparisons made to sadomasochism, especially as the body usually belongs to a woman. Here we must question what makes pain and pleasure operate in this instance. This is because, as the depicted wound or severed arm is never shown to bleed, it heightens the Surrealist, disjointed and, above all, symbolic nature of the image as well as the movement's dreamlike imagery. According to Malt,

Just as in the case of fetish, the present object connotes the absent trauma, and it is significant that the trauma of amputation or truncation which the body so often undergoes in surrealist imagery is always in some sense absent, for it has occurred in a body that is always already a representation.<sup>16</sup>

I will now return to the symbolism surrounding the hands in these films and the question of their recurring as a sexual motif. While *Un chien andalou* offers representations of castration, any similarities that occur within *L'Age d'Or* are placed within a slightly different context, instead focusing on the theme of masturbation. Evoking sexualised depictions of desire, Williams writes that *L'Age d'Or*'s 'first suggestion of masturbation occurs when the female hand of the hand-cream ad comes

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<sup>15</sup> Hopkins, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 138.

alive and begins rubbing the black cloth of the background with two fingers'.<sup>17</sup> This is exactly why hands are a prominent symbol of fetish; they have the potential to produce both pleasure and pain in intense forms. As a body part, the hand is essentially responsible for masturbation, and this forms the basis of its highly suggestive function and connotations in much Surrealist art. In *Un chien andalou*, for example, the various hands are representative of 'psychic infestation',<sup>18</sup> evoking an almost fidgety sensation that is comparable to erotic bodily desire and an impatient yearning for sexual intercourse. With reference to *Un chien andalou*, and theories of masturbation, Short comments that

The ants-in-the-hand shot doesn't just reprise the guilty, masturbating hands – similarly enlarged, similarly 'severed' at the wrist – in Dalí's paintings of the time. It also illustrates the French phrase for pins and needles – "avoir des fourmis (dans la main)", which doubles for "feeling randy". And the repeated composition of close-ups in which the frame cuts off a hand at the wrist evokes the age-old paternal threat to sons found masturbating.<sup>19</sup>

This threat to 'sons' described by Short is intriguing, implying that the feminine hand poses a threat to males by alluding to myths of masturbation. Amongst these include the age-old social stigma of young boys being told by adults that, if found masturbating, they will have their hands chopped off. For the male, the loss of a hand may essentially be compared to the loss of their phallus, resulting in the child's innate fear of castration through the threat of this absence. As has been demonstrated, masturbation as a sinful activity for young boys later manifests itself as a symbol of sexual desire within Surrealism. In *L'Age d'Or* fingers are frequently encased in bandages as though injured. This is significant, as Short indicates: 'fingers are

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<sup>17</sup> Williams, p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> Short, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 101.

bandaged because “bander” also means “to feel randy”. The girl’s ring finger bandaged alternates with the same unbandaged: horniness with detumescence’.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 3 *Un chien andalou*<sup>21</sup>

Dalí may have considered the eye-cutting scene in *Un chien andalou* (Fig. 3) less effective for reasons connected to hands and fetishism. Although still horrifying, the scene poses less of a symbolic and sexual threat than hands, especially because eyes less commonly denote a fetish. The eye’s relative lack of castration symbolism means that their removal is less symbolic to Dalí’s cherished notion of castration anxiety than a hand. The threat of castration is still present, however, as seen by the inclusion of a hand-held razor blade and its demonstrated potential to cut into the body.

Having thus set up questions of Freudian fetish and sexuality in work by canonical male Surrealists, I will now move to Miller’s photography and test such issues in work produced by women associated with the Surrealist movement.

The first image chosen for analysis is entitled *Solarised Photograph* (1930). The image is portraiture based, while the subject, Swedish artist and fellow Surrealist

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> *Un chien andalou*, *Film Reference*, viewed online at [http://www.filmreference.com/images/sjff\\_01\\_img0103.jpg](http://www.filmreference.com/images/sjff_01_img0103.jpg) [accessed 21 July 2011].

Meret Oppenheim – whose work forms the basis of Chapter 2 – has equal emphasis placed on her hands than on her face. Miller has chosen to accentuate this body part using rayographs, highlighting the fingers and forearm. This is what instantly captures the viewer’s attention; whereas portraits traditionally concentrate on the face of the subject, Miller’s inclusion of the hand and fingers heightens their significance, appearing to bring them to a plane in front of Oppenheim’s torso and head.



Fig. 4 *Solarised Photograph* (1930)<sup>22</sup>

Thus the hands become the image’s prime focus. The result proves an effectively poised image, the position of the fingers – which are very much reminiscent of the masturbating woman’s hand in *L’Age d’Or* – suggesting a sensuality and eroticism that subliminally allude to what the hand is capable of doing to the body as an instigator of both pleasure and pain. The image appears dreamlike due to the subject’s downcast gaze and half-closed eyes, as if she is cocooned within her own peace. As Hare comments,

<sup>22</sup> Lee Miller, *Solarised Photograph* (1930), The Lee Miller Archive, image viewed online at <http://www.leemiller.co.uk> [accessed 26 March 2007].

It is as if, at the very heart of the familiar conviction that life may finally amount to nothing but chaos and dream, Miller is that rare surrealist artist who is able to find, amid that chaos, a simple human dignity and poise. The portraits are not pure portraits. They are placed. Around the face itself, the air is somehow charged, the theatrical props are weighted with a sense of the subject's own deepest history, and an eerie intuitive sense of how exactly the person came to be who they are.<sup>23</sup>

Miller's piece draws on the feminine hand, dreamlike states and fetish as themes that are endemic to Surrealism. Furthermore, the depiction of a woman by a woman brings forward questions about the importance of gender to the meanings generated by both the subject and the artist. For example, does the presentation of the feminine body differ according to the artist's biology? It is evident that *Solarised Photograph* evokes visual similarities to both *Un chien andalou* and *L'Age d'Or* in the treatment of the hand, and the relationship between masturbation, fetish and the isolated, fragmented body can be pursued in Miller's photography.

Malt, for example, comments on a commonly held view that, in art, the dismembered (female) body is no more than a series of lifeless pieces:

The familiar argument runs that the body, and more specifically the female body, is made fetish in surrealist art; that in being 'butchered', presented in pieces, as no more than a collection of inanimate parts, the human subject itself is reified and reduced to its most brutalized commodity form.<sup>24</sup>

It is instructive to consider this view alongside the theme of violence, especially as the Surrealist depiction of disjointed limbs usually lacks the brutality of dismemberment. Instead, it appears as though the separation of flesh and body have enhanced the independence of the body parts involved: they are no longer the property of an *owner*, and avoid violent acts associated with the agency of any one person. Malt has described such depictions as revelling 'in the play of fetish and

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<sup>23</sup> Hare.

<sup>24</sup> Malt, p. 136.

commodity fetish',<sup>25</sup> implying that the Surrealists were celebrating the form as opposed to objectifying or mocking it. In Dada art, the body is not generally celebrated overtly or sexually, the emphasis placed rather on the body's contribution to experiments in geometric form.<sup>26</sup> Surrealism, after all, openly enjoys and revels in women's bodies, driven by strong heterosexual impulses that presented the body as 'more often pledged to pleasure, or pleasurable pain, than trauma'.<sup>27</sup> Such figuration of the body (whole or fragmented) is repeated and exaggerated across Surrealist art.

I will now return to Miller and her untitled image commonly referred to as *Hand Reaching for an Umbrella Fringe* (1929). Stylistically different from *Solarised Photograph*, the image again gives prominence to the hand, although in this instance the hand appears independently, disconnected from the rest of the body.

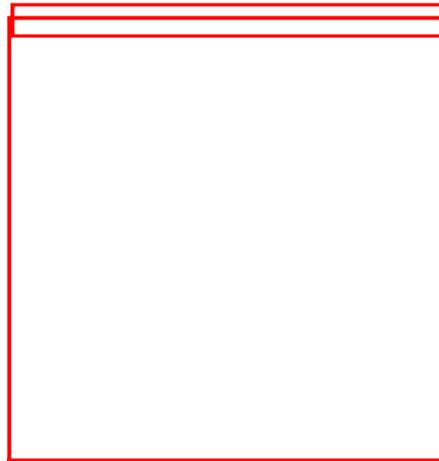


Fig. 5 *Untitled* (1930)<sup>28</sup>

The relationships between the objects in *Untitled* are similarly unclear. The composition of the image leads the eye towards the subject's forearm, with the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 137-138.

<sup>26</sup> Hopkins, p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>28</sup> *Untitled* (1930), Lee Miller, The Lee Miller Archive, image viewed online at <http://www.leemiller.co.uk> [accessed 26 March 2007].

fingertips occupying the centre of the frame, and the position of arm is similar to that of Oppenheim in *Solarised Photograph*. In respect of *Untitled* we might ask what the arm is reaching for. Is the subject sitting under a parasol? Is the arm about to touch the owner's face or make a gesture with their hand? Does the enigma of the hand connote issues raised by hands in the films of Buñuel and Dalí, such as rape, violence, guilt and sexual desire either for a partner or for masturbation? Indeed, has the hand already engaged in such activity? Is it pondering past actions or preparing to inflict them? The strong black profile of the hand enhances such questions for, despite an awareness of other material within the frame, we choose to focus and prioritise this limb, while its dominance, achieved through rayographs, suggests independence. This technique has been repeated by Miller in further images, such as *Exploding Hand* (1930):



Fig. 6 *Exploding Hand* (1930)<sup>29</sup>

Unlike *Solarised Photograph*, the gender of the eponymous exploding hand is ambiguous and may lead the viewer to wonder whether Miller has continued with the

<sup>29</sup> Lee Miller, *Exploding Hand* (1930). The Lee Miller Archive, image viewed online at <http://www.leemiller.co.uk/> [accessed 26 March 2007].

Surrealist convention of favouring female models or whether, in a challenge to gender stereotypes, Miller has chosen to disguise a masculine hand in feminised clothing. Ultimately, of course, in the absence of concrete biographical information it is impossible to know for sure, but the image does offer another instance of the relationship between the hand and sexuality. Particularly, while in other Surrealist images hands are connected to the threat of castration, the exploding quality of this hand could be representative of sexual intercourse and orgasm.

The question of hands and sexuality is extended further in Miller's *Woman with hand on head*:

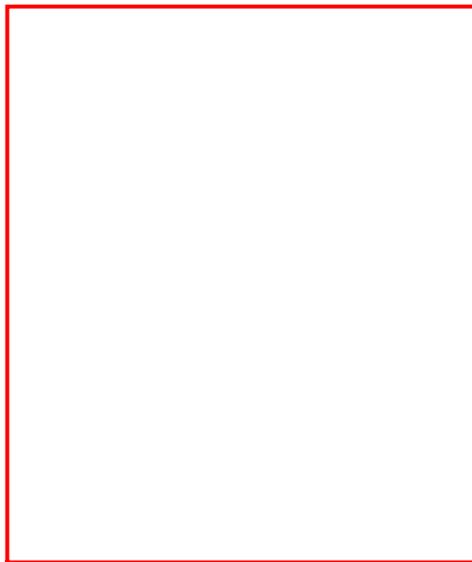


Fig. 7 *Woman with hand on head* (1932)<sup>30</sup>

This photograph is perhaps the least ambiguous of Miller's photographs chosen for this analysis. This is because while the previous images appear to be either studio based and produced with the help of individual techniques and stylisation, this one takes place in the outside world and could have been taken without the subject's

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<sup>30</sup> Lee Miller, *Woman with hand on head* (1932), The Lee Miller Archive, image viewed online at <http://www.leemiller.co.uk> [accessed 26 March 2007].

consent. The image appears less worked over in form and shape than its predecessors, and although the hand is again a main object within the frame it shares the composition with the hair on the woman's head. Furthermore, it does not display the unreal qualities of Miller's previous images. Rayograms have not been used for accentuation, as we saw in *Solarised Photograph*, and the image is not as abstracted as *Untitled*. However, it does possess the same playful sexual attributes as *Exploding Hand*, the model's hair offers some particularly loaded connotations.

While initially appearing to be an innocent image of a subject whose hand is reaching for their head, the weight of previous evidence around hands and sexuality suggests that *Woman with hand on head* evokes the idea that toying with hair may represent 'fiddling' with pubic hair. In this way the subject's hand represents reaching towards genitalia with the intention of beginning masturbation, while the parted fingers recall the hands of *Un chien andalou* and *L'Age d'Or*, which are variously associated with massaging, groping and sexual guilt. Again, due to Surrealism's prioritising of the fetishised body and self-pleasure, it may have been Miller's intention to play with the idea of what constitutes a fetish for both sexes. Indeed, she may be implying that a woman is masturbating, of how an act can be made sexual without having to be reduced to a naked body.

It may be possible that, as Man Ray frequently depicted naked women in his photography, Miller included intertextual references to further Surrealist pieces in her imagery. This results in a self-referential quality in her images. For example, although *Woman with hand on head* appears to be less sexually graphic than other images that feature a naked body, it evokes comparisons to the aforementioned films. While a scene depicting the caressing of a woman's buttocks occurs within *Un chien andalou* (Fig. 8), another focuses on the armpit hair of a male body that dissolves into a mound

of his pubic hair. Consciously or not, Miller's work connects with such references, imbuing her images with the knowing sexual playfulness of Surrealism. The subtlety with which these connections emerge is perhaps the greatest achievement of Miller's intertextuality, for it is only through the comparison with other Surrealist works and the movement's interest in fetish that we are able to acknowledge fully Miller's work as a rich and authentic demonstration of Surrealism.



Fig. 8. *Un chien andalou*<sup>31</sup>

Although Miller ended her photography career as a photojournalist, working as *Vogue* magazine's official war photographer and for Condé Nast as the US Army's War Correspondent in 1944, her 1947 marriage to Roland Penrose – co-founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, an art historian, poet and Surrealist painter – may have signalled her partial return to the medium.<sup>32</sup> Despite this, she did not work

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<sup>31</sup>*Un chien andalou*, 1928, image viewed at Tempo Dual, <http://tempodual.blogspot.com/search?q=un+chien+andalou> [accessed 18 April 2007].

<sup>32</sup>For further biographical detail about Lee Miller see Carolyn Burke, *Lee Miller: On Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).

professionally again and chose to relate to Surrealism as a spectator rather than as a directly involved practitioner.

Although she began her career as an artistic Surrealist photographer and ended it documenting war zones, recurrent themes within Lee Miller's work remain prominent. What is most apparent about Miller's involvement with Surrealism is her iconic use of hands, her ability to recall how fetish surrounds the feminine body, and the playfulness that she inscribed within her work. Miller's images are profoundly Surrealist, incorporating castration, sexuality and masturbation. Unlike many male Surrealists, however, she did not objectify the female body and instead chose to celebrate and respect it, imbuing her work with a playfulness that was an inherent trait of the Surrealists, and evoking sexuality not through explicit nakedness or salacious acts but through association, suggestion and metonymy. Hubert comments:

Although Lee Miller's association with Man Ray's photographic experimentation superficially resembles an apprenticeship and a discipleship, it followed a course of action as deliberately motivated as her decision to become a war correspondent. Characteristically she took possession of a 'master' who firmly refused to accept pupils.<sup>33</sup>

I now turn to another photographer and begin our study of Dora Maar, described by Mary Ann Caws as 'sensuous, macabre, bizarre' whilst displaying 'insipient Surrealist tendencies'.<sup>34</sup> A lover of Pablo Picasso, and a regular member of artistic circles of the era, Maar's reputation as a photographer extends beyond her label as 'The Weeping Woman', which she acquired following the infamous Picasso portrait. She was a well-respected photographer, achieving artistic success through independent creativity, and has been described as 'far and away the most intelligent woman Picasso had ever met: the only intellectual with whom he ever shared part of

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<sup>33</sup> Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Caws, pp. 70-71.

his life'.<sup>35</sup> Despite such accolades Maar was not immune to the pressures of sharing her life with an infamous individual, experiencing personal problems both psychologically and through the loss of loved ones, and venting loss and trauma through her art. Taylor offers a vivid depiction of Picasso's first encounter with Maar:

Sitting there one evening he [Picasso] saw a young woman peel off her elegant, embroidered gloves, lay her hand on the table with its fingers spread and, like a circus performer throwing daggers, stab between them with a pointed knife. Her aim was poor and everytime she missed she drew blood.<sup>36</sup>

Maar's relationship with Picasso is noticeably similar to the Miller/Man Ray creative partnership. As Caws has commented, 'despite such tensions [his relationship with Marie-Thérèse Walter], Picasso and Dora were now immersed in an extraordinarily close collaboration as painter/photographer/lovers'.<sup>37</sup> It is not coincidental that Maar has been chosen for analysis following Miller for, apart from using Man Ray's photogram technique in her photography, Maar's work also evolves strikingly around hands, fetish and sexuality. However, while Miller's hands have primarily been analysed here in either direct or suggested relationship to the body, Maar's have an almost mythical quality that renders them magical and supernatural. Many of Maar's images appear as disjointed as the scenes of *Un chien andalou* and as disturbing as the immolated eye. Although Maar's additional talents included prose and literature she was best known as a photographer, and it is this area of her work that will be dwelt on here, especially as Maar's photographs can be considered the most Surrealist of her works. Ranging from the portrait to the bizarre via the grotesque, Maar's eclectic work reflected her personality. As Caws has commented,

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<sup>35</sup> O'Brian cited in Alan Taylor, 'The Weeping Woman', *Sunday Herald*, 15 October 2000. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qn4156/is\\_20001015/ai\\_n13954420/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4156/is_20001015/ai_n13954420/) [accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2009].

<sup>36</sup> Taylor.

<sup>37</sup> Caws, p. 116.

‘by the mid-1930s, Dora Maar was a flamboyant presence in the Surrealist circle, renowned for her brightly painted fingernails and her fondness for the modish hats of Albouis and Elsa Schiaparelli’.<sup>38</sup>

Through carefully selected imagery this study will draw upon visual examples of Maar’s work, allowing them to be discussed in relation to Surrealism and showing her individual interpretation of the movement’s motifs. As well as the more traditional portraiture, some of the images chosen include displays of the eroticised body while others evoke macabre, disturbing tendencies. Essentially, these are all images that provoke a reaction.

According to Caws, Maar’s ‘most powerful works are full of the mystery of surrealism’.<sup>39</sup> I will begin with an evaluation of one of Maar’s most conventional images. The portrait, dated between 1935 and 1938, is of Nusch Eluard, the second wife of Paul Eluard, and allows our discussion to return to the hand as a quintessential Surrealist icon:

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Ann Caws, ‘These Photographing Women: The Scandal of Genius’ in Patricia Allmer, (ed.), *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (London: Prestel, 2009), pp. 28-35 (p. 32).



Fig. 9. *Portrait of Nusch Eluard* (c. 1935-1938)<sup>40</sup>

Like her fellow Surrealist photographer Lee Miller, who prioritised hands in her work, the figure again appears an essential ingredient when creating a piece of Surrealist imagery. As *Un chien andalou* depicted a swarm of ants emerging from a hand, their focus here remains similarly imbued with fetish-like qualities, and can be related to the way in which Miller portrayed the hand just as a tool for sexual pleasure or pain, tension and trauma. Maar and Miller have both included and prioritised hands in their photographs and, through accentuation, the hands have become almost separated from the rest of the composition. Roger Cardinal has discussed the significance of hands in this photograph, noting in particular how Nusch Eluard's 'delicate fingers, with their nails pressed into the softness of the face, encourage us to imagine caressing this perfect skin. At the same time, the fingernails hint at the possibility of a defensive reaction of scratching – so that the woman appears both

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<sup>40</sup> Dora Maar, *Portrait of Nusch Eluard* (c. 1935-1938) image viewed online at <http://www.masdearte.com/imagenes/fotos/LDoraMaarNusch.jpg> [accessed 23 February 2009].

desirable and fearsome'.<sup>41</sup> The image is not unlike *Solarised Photograph* by Miller: both portraits are of women, both focus on the hands and both appear free from eroticism on first impression, despite their use of women known, admired and desired within the avant-garde. Is this because the images were created by women Surrealists? If Man Ray had produced a similar image would we assume them to be more immediately sexually charged?

This is interesting. Images produced by male Surrealists are instantly thought to sexualise the female subject, while Surrealism produced by women, although not as obviously explicit, is nonetheless provocative in sexual detail. Instead of instantly appearing to be sexually charged images, the photography of women by women has greater elements of documentary and portraiture; it is art that women have created, using women's bodies, that lacks misogyny or sexism and hints at a secret dialogue between the photographer and her model, and echoes Caws' statement that 'in their own posed *look*, both photographer and willing subject are captured in a collaboration that seduces the onlooker, forcibly in cahoots with the pair or entirely excluded'.<sup>42</sup> Allmer has elaborated on how women Surrealists' use of their friends, and often fellow artists, as their models broke with the patriarchal tradition of male photographer and female model:

"The muse as her own subject" [sic] is also at the core of little-explored photographs by women surrealists of women surrealists. Away from her traditional status as muse of the male artist, away from her conventional representation through the male gaze, here the muse is revealed as artist.<sup>43</sup>

The Surrealist circle has included wives, lovers and artists, thus making it understandable that these women forged friendships that extended to their work. As

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<sup>41</sup> Roger Cardinal, 'The Imaging of Magic' in Patricia Allmer (ed.), *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (London: Prestel, 2009), pp. 36-45, (p. 44).

<sup>42</sup> Caws 1997, p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Patricia Allmer (ed.), p. 18.

artists they used their friends as their subjects, accentuating the topics that were prevalent amongst this group - particularly the female body. As with much Surrealism produced by women, it is not only what appears on the surface that is important and we must consider this image in close connection to fetish, Freud and the significance of hands.

What is obvious when viewing this image, and again drawing comparisons to Miller and early Surrealist cinema, is how Nusch Eluard's hands appear to have been given equal importance to her face. On closer inspection of the portrait, we see that the right side of the face is in shadow, while the hands appear almost three dimensionally forward from the picture plane, suggesting a semi-independent quality that is both attached to the rest of the image and separate from it. Indeed, looking at the hands one might ask whether these hands really belong to Nusch Eluard at all, as they appear distant and disconnected from the rest of her body. This is strikingly similar to a scene in *L'Age d'Or* described by Williams in relation to masturbation and the female hand:

The first suggestion of masturbation occurs when the female hand of the hand-cream ad comes alive and begins rubbing the black cloth of the background with two fingers. But even when the black cloth is suddenly replaced by hair, the nature of the gesture is not immediately apparent. Nor is it clear whose hand this is.<sup>44</sup>

In her photograph Maar has created a strong shadow along one the right-hand side of Nusch Eluard's face. This is a potentially significant detail as the left side of the body is associated with the unconscious and irrationality, while the practicality of the right-hand side of the body has been suppressed. The prominence of the subject's eyes within a head-shot of a woman recalls the cutting-of-the-eye sequence in *Un*

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<sup>44</sup> Williams, p. 146.

*chien andalou*. The viewer may focus on the subject's eyes, which appear unmodified by photographic techniques and appear to have no connection to the film's mutilation. Roger Cardinal has considered both the delicacy and violence that underpins this photograph:

There is something which transcends the natural prettiness of Paul Éluard's wife and muse. Above all, her delicate fingers, with their nails pressed into the softness of the face, encourage us to imagine caressing this perfect skin. At the same time, the fingernails hint at the possibility of a defensive reaction of scratching – so that the woman appears both desirable and fearsome.<sup>45</sup>

The adornment of a ring on Nusch Eluard's finger draws the eye to the bottom right of the photograph. The hands in the image bear an uncanny likeness to those seen in Man Ray and Miller's rayographs of hands. In Maar's example, the fingers, spread evenly on the face have produced a shadow and, although occupying proportionally less space than the head, gained considerable visual importance, encroaching on the face as if the fingers are creeping upwards. Although we have established how hands were a recurring motif for the Surrealists, both as a cinematic icon and imbued with ideas of fetish, they were also significant in Maar's personal encounter with Picasso, as in Caws' remarks:

The three main ingredients of the encounter – her knife, her fingers and her gloves – are like the elements of Surrealist still still-life. They also have a fetishistic value. Some versions of the fable have blood spurting freely, some have it spotting the gloves, while some simply have a drop or two visible. There hovers about the meeting an odour of perversity and spying, of observer and observed, prey and victim, and sado-masochistic delight in blood ritual.<sup>46</sup>

Although I have chosen to begin analysis of Maar with one of her more traditional examples of portraiture, the next image for discussion represents a departure in theme and is closer to her other images that venture into Surrealist

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<sup>45</sup> Cardinal, p. 44.

<sup>46</sup> Caws, p. 83.

territory. However, despite such differing themes, whether portrait or montage, they all merit an inclusion as part of the Surrealist movement. This image itself is a photograph by Maar entitled *29 rue d'Astorg* (1936), named after the address of her photographic studio at the time in Paris' 8<sup>th</sup> arrondissement – and described by Caws alongside *Portrait of Ubu* and *Silence* as a quintessential Surrealist image.<sup>47</sup> An evocation of distorted subject matter within a spatially strange space, the photograph was originally produced in black and white. The title refers to the gallery address of Picasso's art dealer and an area of Paris where Picasso used to cohabit with his wife Olga. According to L'Enfant Maar wished to emulate Picasso's paintings of Olga rather than Olga herself.<sup>48</sup>

Maar later chose to duplicate the photograph several times, by adding pinks and yellows, enhancing the almost otherworldly and warped quality of the image. The figure in the image is practically a monument in itself, solid in shape and structure, appearing unmoveable and almost part of the arcade within which it is sitting. As Caws states, 'with its stout legs, classic drapes and strangely phallic head, the statuette – which she [Maar] claimed was an *objet-trouvé* – floats above the floor like an apparition in the distorted architecture of the cloister.'<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> L'Enfant, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Caws, p. 72.



Fig. 10. *29 rue d'Astorg* (1936)<sup>50</sup>

Sitting upon a raised bench in an arched cloister, the figure possesses human characteristics although the head has been shaped into a phallic object, with a long neck and bulbous head. The inclusion of hands, feet, eyes and a nose give the figure a human quality, made somewhat unreal by its physical stoutness. As regards the gender of the figure the costume of dress suggests femininity while the delicate phallic head implies masculinity. According to L'Enfant, the image evokes scenes from the Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1919).<sup>51</sup> L'Enfant also claims that the subject is indeed a woman or, more specifically, a representation of Picasso's then wife Olga, stating that 'in the early 1920s Picasso portrayed his wife sometimes as a bather, sometimes as a "woman in an armchair", but always with large limbs and a small head'.<sup>52</sup> Maar extends these references to Olga, the hallucinations that Maar reportedly suffered also influencing the cloister's

<sup>50</sup> Dora Maar, *29 rue d'Astorg* (1936), 29.4 x 24.4 cm, Musée National de Art Moderne, Centre de Création industrielle, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, image viewed online at [http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/picasso/education/ed\\_PYV\\_DM.html](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/picasso/education/ed_PYV_DM.html) [accessed 20 February 2009].

<sup>51</sup> Julie L'Enfant, 'Dora Maar and the Art of Mystery', *Woman's Art Journal*, 17: 2 (Autumn 1996-Winter 1997), pp. 15-20 (p. 17).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

distorted arches (Olga, however, did not reside at the address of the image's title).<sup>53</sup> The image connects to issues discussed previously, particularly *L'Age d'Or*'s mutilated hands and bandaged fingers. Thus, on closer inspection, we can see that the hand of Maar's figure is missing a thumb. The combination of castrated hand and phallic shaped head also evokes both femininity and masculinity in playful counterpoint. In turn, it could be argued that Maar has represented the head in phallic form as symbolic compensation for the castrated hand.



Fig. 11. *Disquieting Muses* (1916)<sup>54</sup>

Caws has compared *29 rue d'Astorg* to de Chirico's *Disquieting Muses* (Fig. 11), such that Maar's piece recalls the small scale heads of de Chirico's image. It goes without saying that phallic symbols, warped configurations of bodies, time and space, fantasy and sexuality were germane to the work of male Surrealists. As Chadwick elaborates,

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> Giorgio de Chirico, *Disquieting Muses* (1916), oil on canvas, 97.16cm x 66 cm (38 ¼ in x 26 in), University of Iowa Museum of Art, image viewed online at <http://uima.uiowa.edu/giorgio-de-chirico> [accessed 18 June 2011].

Discussions of sexuality, the display of erotic objects and paintings, and the cultivation by chance in the locating of the loved one took place in a theoretical context defined by men; even paintings by male artists that elevated woman to a position of power often did so in terms of male imagery and expectation.<sup>55</sup>

In this Chapter, however, I have begun to set out numerous instances in which women Surrealists picked up such themes for themselves to produce their own distinctive pieces.

Reminding us of Freudian theory surrounding the castrated woman, the figure of *29 rue d'Astorg* possesses both femininity and a masculine phallus and heavy set figure. The androgynous being could therefore be considered an asexual combination of both genders. Castration and femininity is a recurrent theme in this thesis and will continue to arise in a variety of guises. In asking why such issues were so important for these artists we may be reminded of Chadwick's comment that 'women artists were forced either to reject this male language of female sexuality altogether, to adapt it to their own ends, or to attempt to create a new language that spoke more directly to female experience'.<sup>56</sup> The preliminary evidence presented by close examination of work by Miller and Maar suggests that women Surrealists pursued the second of Chadwick's options and adapted orthodox Surrealism for their own ends. Another example of the adoption of Surrealist sexuality – rather than its outright rejection or the creation of an entirely new 'language' – can be seen in the tunnel in Maar's image which, combined with the figure's head, serves as a metaphor for sexual intercourse. At the same time, the position of the figure's right hand – which suggests the pulling up of its dress – gestures subtly to the enigma of its biological sex, and to possible masturbation. Indeed, self-penetration by women is connoted obliquely by the

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<sup>55</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 105.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105.

presence of a phallus on a feminine body. The tunnel, which is shadowy and closed off at one end, also suggests a private or forbidden place that may in turn connote virginity. Could the artist be referencing her own loss of virginity, and is the dark, tiny figure at the end of the tunnel the person responsible? Or is the distant figure an outcast not required by the act of masturbation? In these terms, the prominent phallic representation in this photograph could imply feminine empowerment through masturbation.

The forms that Maar has created in *29 rue d'Astorg* allow a return to *Un Chien andalou*, this time via the gendering of shapes. In her piece Maar depicts an androgynous figure in possession of both masculine and feminine qualities, particularly a phallic head against the roundness of a female body. In relation to *Un Chien andalou*, Williams comments that 'in the metaphoric series this pattern is repeated within a single figure: the shift from concave to convex roundness that culminates in the appearance of the aerodyne, who combines in one person the same contradictory gender traits as the cyclist'.<sup>57</sup> Gender and androgyny appear regularly in Surrealism, the combination of sexes and anatomy merging and overlapping into what is usually believed to be traditionally masculine or feminine, and attempting to unsettle the viewer to the same extent as the film's mutilated eye. There are further deformations incorporated in the background of the cloister of *29 rue d'Astorg*. While the building is unaffected to the right hand side of the figure, the background appears manipulated, tilting to one side as though in a dreamlike scenario. While there is shadow and darkness present in the image, there is a light at the end of the corridor and a door seems to be levitating in the distance. The door has four windows, allowing the light to come through, while a tiny black figure stands at its entrance.

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<sup>57</sup> Williams, p. 82.

Who is this? Are they man or woman? Are they waiting and, if so, what for? In what direction are they facing, and are they be waiting for the door to open? Are we witnessing a figure trapped in a nightmare and are they hoping to escape through the unopened door? Is the figure a stand-in for the viewer, caught up in the image's strangeness and resistance to final interpretation, and unable to find a way out of the scene? For reasons of coherence and space this discussion must retain its focus on the uniting themes of sexuality and fetish, but the abundance of questions that remain in respect of *29 rue d'Astorg* are testament to the sheer richness and multiplicity of meanings that Maar is able to put into play.

The penultimate image by Maar to be discussed in this chapter underscores such qualities. *Portrait of Ubu* (1936), perhaps her most famous work, was created during the peak of Maar's artistic fame and soon became a Surrealist icon that was 'exhibited, widely circulated, and even included in a series of postcards'.<sup>58</sup> The image's Surrealist credentials were heightened when Maar refused to confirm the exact nature of the subject, although it is widely speculated to be an animal foetus or an armadillo. So great was the photograph's reputation that *Ubu* became the focal point of the International Surrealist Exhibition held in London that year, for which it became the semi-official mascot.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Caws, p. 79.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79.

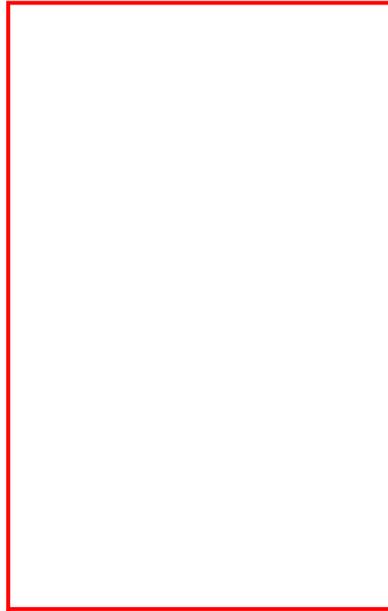


Fig. 12. *Père Ubu* (1936)<sup>60</sup>

The image was named after the 1895 play of the same name by Alfred Jarry about his physics teacher, whose physical appearance resembled an animal.<sup>61</sup> Surrealism intermingles the grotesque and the beautiful, the monstrous with the exotic. In the case of Maar's *Ubu* we may proceed in relation to the notion of Surrealist Collage, which L'Enfant describes as involving 'the theme of man as a beast, a frequent element of Dada and Surrealist humor that can be traced back to Isidore Ducasse's *Chants de Malador*, a central text for Surrealists'.<sup>62</sup> Surrealist Collage has also been described by Adamowicz as 'an experimentation in limit-forms of analogy which englobes anomalies in monstrous matings'.<sup>63</sup> The Surrealist combination of beauty and monstrosity cannot contain the monster, and the resulting being achieves freedom and independence. As Adamowicz continues, 'as a figure

<sup>60</sup> Dora Maar, *Père Ubu* (1936), 15 9/16 x 11 in (39.6 cm x 28 cm) Gilman Collection, image viewed online at <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2005.100.443> [accessed 21 October 2009].

<sup>61</sup> Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, The Metropolitan Museum of Art <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2005.100.443> [accessed 29 June 2011].

<sup>62</sup> L'Enfant, p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 95.

articulated on several isotopes, the monster, by rejecting the depth of metaphysical discourse and parading its being as a literal agglomeration of heterogeneous limbs, seem to defy analysis – can it not be netted?’<sup>64</sup>

It is curious to consider whether *Ubu* represented something else for Maar, beyond homage to Surrealist touchstones such as Jarry’s *Ubu*. Both beautiful and monstrous, the image evokes unease with its scaly body and mottled flesh, and appears unsettling. Most importantly, as the object resists definitive categorisation it could be a representation of artistic freedom, both for Maar and for other women active in Surrealism. Could it be that *Ubu* is the embodiment of women Surrealists and the manifestation of their emotional liberation?

Liberation, both sexual and artistic, was part of why so many women turned towards Surrealism, gaining an artistic license to express their sexuality as they saw fit, whether through painting, photography, sculpture, or prose. In practising this creativity they gained a greater understanding of their bodies, a greater control of their needs and a method of expressing their desires, creating a model of a woman’s sexuality based upon a structure that existed previously in patriarchal form. As Chadwick explains:

In Victor Brauner’s *Mytholotomie* (1942), the woman – the muse, the magician, the transformer of the world – is nevertheless dominated by the image of the cyclopeian Janus, half man, half animal, which reigns over her head. Dali’s *femme-phallique*, with her elongated pointed breasts pointing like two aggressive lances, is a creation of man’s fears, Matta’s *La femme Affamée* a distinctly male vision of a woman starving for sexual pleasure. Her face is a huge vaginal-like jaw, adorned with sharp hooks; her tongue, in the shape of an erect penis, is also hooked. Thrusting her two hands into her mouth in order to stretch the orifice ever wider she becomes, as Xavière Gauthier points out in *Surréalisme et Sexualité*, a carrier of the phallus.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 95.

<sup>65</sup> Chadwick, p. 105.

Chadwick's explanation of Brauner encapsulates one of the issues on which this thesis is founded: the way in which figure of the woman has been relegated and objectified in orthodox masculine Surrealism, figured usually as either muse, magician or alchemist. Unfortunately, the first term is the role within which both Miller and Maar were initially categorised and constrained. Famous as their lovers' muses, both artists have been seen here to produce work that emphasises supernatural, magical, or otherworldly qualities surrounding the female body. Finally, I have shown how their ability as 'transformers of the world' suggests a variation on orthodox patriarchal Surrealism based on sexuality, whimsy and feminine erotica through complex suggestiveness and metaphor.

Before concluding this chapter I will return to the subject of hands as examined in Miller's photography. Preliminary analysis based on castration and psychoanalytical theory indicates Miller's authenticity as a psycho-sexual Surrealist and suggests that further close work could be conducted to draw out recognition and understanding of her material. Analysis of Miller's photography expands questions around the recurring Surrealist theme of the feminine body as a symbol of fetish. The figure of the hand has emerged as a particularly significant and sexual provocation element in Miller's work. Nor is the hand neglected by Maar, as in her 1934 image *Sans Titre*.



Fig. 13. *Sans Titre* (1934)<sup>66</sup>

Like Miller's female hands, this one also appears feminine due to the lacquered nails, something for which Maar had a penchant and which were likely to be blood red in colour. The hand extends out, as if it is a pearl within an oyster, the image thereby suggesting a fragmented Modernist reprise of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486) as femininity emerges from a seashell. From love, connoted by Venus, we might also see a sexual dimension to Maar's image, such that the shell (a delicate vessel which has been penetrated) connotes the vagina. However, while Venus emerged from her conch shell naked and as an emblem of feminine sexuality, Maar's image signifies through a single disembodied feminine hand.

Botticelli's Venus points us in the direction of another famous painting that features hands as sexual metaphors. For in Ingres' *Paolo et Francesca* (1819), the hand of Francesca appears similarly placed to Maar's *Sans Titre*, appearing limp and lifeless with fingers loose. Her right hand holds a book while her left hand is cradled by her lover, Paolo. He appears eager to hold her hand while she feigns lack of

<sup>66</sup> Dora Maar, *Sans Titre* (1934), The Guardian, 27 September 2009, image viewed online at, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2009/sep/27/angels-anarchy-surrealism-women-artists?INTCMP=SRCH> [accessed 14th October 2009].

interest, as if by resigning her hand to him she will imply that she is giving over her body and consenting to intercourse. And yet the index and middle finger of her left hand are left knowingly and coyly parted by Ingres, suggesting that she will accept Paolo's advances. The threat of castration or even dismemberment is imminent in the form of Gianciotto, brandishing a sword on the right of the frame.



Fig. 14. *Paolo et Francesca*<sup>67</sup>

Space permitting, the connection between work by Surrealist women and figures from other parts of art history will be developed in subsequent chapters. For now, although I have argued that the hand often symbolises fetish, it should be added that its appearance is not necessarily sexual. The shell of Maar's image, for example, may be an impossible souvenir, something found on a beachside wander, a shell that happens to have a hand inside. This fusing of the hand and shell makes for a fantastical occurrence and results in a form of *le merveilleux* as Maar's hand takes on

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<sup>67</sup> Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Gianciotto Discovers Paolo and Francesca* (Gianciotto découvre Paolo et Francesca) (1819), Oil on Canvas, Musée Turpin de Crissé, image viewed online at <http://www.jeanaugustedominiqueingres.org/Paolo-and-Francesca---1.html> [accessed 20 November 2009].

a supernatural quality and becomes a captivating sight at which to marvel. This allows a return to the root of Surrealism as centring upon the marvellous, the magical and the unexpected. But the hand also provokes and teases, hinting at future events that may about to take place. In Maar's example it signifies emergence as well as sexual penetration, the shell suggesting a female pubis, and the hand a phallus that has completed penetration. It could also be another reference to female masturbation. Indeed, the hand flops, post-coital and limp as though depleted of energy. The connection to *L'Age d'Or* is thus ignited, such that Williams' comment about the woman's hand in the film, tired from masturbating, resonates strikingly with Maar's image of a hand left limp following the same action:

Her left hand hangs limp at her side, her right hand rests on the black material of her skirt, at crotch level, in a position and with a background similar to that of the hand in the hand-cream ad (the bracelet and ring are the same). The inference, of course, is that the previous shots of the hand rubbing the cloth and hair belong to this woman, who has just left off masturbating.<sup>68</sup>

The question of gender and sexuality can be extended by a Giacometti sculpture entitled *Invisible Object* (1934). Sexual imagery is prominent here as the figure – who is obviously a woman on account of her breasts – reaches for them as though ready to pleasure herself. Is this image more sexual than Maar's? If so, could it be because the figure is naked and the body appears in complete rather than fragmented form? Or is it because the piece has been created by a male artist? Paradoxically, Maar's image appears considerably more feminine than Giacometti's statue, which is somewhat androgynous apart from the breasts. Maar's creation states its femininity on account of the lacquered nails and delicate fingers, which are enhanced by the vagina-like shell.

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<sup>68</sup> Williams, p. 118.

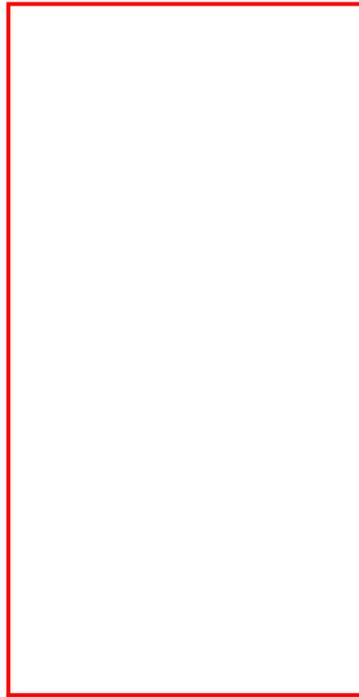


Fig. 15. *Invisible Object* (1934)<sup>69</sup>

In conclusion, this chapter has pursued the question of sexuality and fetish within work by two women photographers. Using theories associated with orthodox Surrealism, and with particular reference to canonical Surrealist films, it has been established how works by both women put into play fine-level readings to do with hands, women's sexuality and masturbation. Both these women Surrealists tease the viewer with their art, allowing multi-faceted readings of their work and of feminine sexuality. Such work created the opportunity for women artists to achieve creative freedom and cast away sexual inhibitions. These examples also highlight the feminine body as a functional artistic object – beyond the 'muse' role – and raise questions to do with categorisation of a work of art as sexual according to the gender of its creator. Without resorting to salacious or graphic representations, both Miller and Maar were

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<sup>69</sup> Alberto Giacometti, *Invisible Object* (1934), image viewed online at [http://media2.moma.org/collection\\_images/resized/220/w500h420/CRI\\_66220.jpg](http://media2.moma.org/collection_images/resized/220/w500h420/CRI_66220.jpg) [accessed 20 November 2009].

able to create depictions of masturbation and castration involving women, while Maar in particular attempted to escape personal trauma through her work. Her artistic license was to create Surrealist and bizarre imagery where she gained personal and sexual freedom, venting her imagination without criticism for her actions.

The themes set out in this chapter will continue to be developed throughout the thesis, with subsequent discussion focusing on the sculpture and *objets* of Meret Oppenheim.

CHAPTER 2  
 ‘SCULPTURE AND SEXUALITY: THE EROTIC *OBJETS* OF  
 MERET OPPENHEIM’

An imagery of body parts – eyes, breasts, hands, legs, and feet became the fare of Surrealism during the 1930s, and was quickly subsumed into commercial advertising as a powerful symbol of desire; a desire that could be fulfilled through consumption.<sup>1</sup>

In the Introduction to this thesis it was established how the popularity of the V&A’s 2007 ‘Surreal Things’ exhibition highlighted the diversity of Surrealist works produced by women, spawned various publications, and emphasised the diverse ways that these artists explored the female body. In the first chapter it was acknowledged how a nonsexual body part, such as hands, can ignite a sexual fetish. In this chapter I shall explore, with reference to Wood’s above quotation, how sexual desire can be provoked through the functional and commercial rendering of body parts. It could be argued that the field of advertising does this all the time, transferring and sublimating images into public consciousness.

Indeed, in something of a contrast to the Surrealist ethos of resisting mass conformity, advertising proved advantageous to Surrealism. It brought Surrealism to a wider audience, as its iconography began to infiltrate the previously uncharted medium of fashion, and broadened the scope of the female fetish. Wood’s publication, as well as the exhibition, highlighted the use of body parts by the women Surrealists who came to prominence during this time. The popularity of Surrealism amongst women artists of 1930s may have been something of a retaliatory response to the movement’s patriarchal history and to the confinement of them as muses in service of

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<sup>1</sup> Ghislaine Wood, *The Surreal Body: Fashion & Fetish* (London: V&A Publications, 2007), p. 32.

what Wood describes as the ‘owned body’.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the body was the site of obsessive experimentation by Surrealists, becoming ‘the subject of intense scrutiny: dismembered, fragmented, desecrated, eroticized and eulogized in the pursuit of a range of psychological, sociological and sexual concerns’.<sup>3</sup>

Allow me to elaborate on Wood’s comments. As has been seen in Chapter 1, apparently detached and dismembered hands featured prominently in both Miller and Maar’s work and, although not always attached to the body, still provided impetus for desire and eroticism. The fragmented body became an independent entity that was capable of manifesting an independent persona. All the same, it is not always anatomical body parts to which the discussion of fragmentation, fetish and sexuality relates: in this chapter I will consider the ways in which objects that once had a connection to the body can provoke a reaction that is as great if not greater, and look at how Surrealist objects (rather than body parts) can function as independent entities while remaining semantically connected to the body.

This will begin by revisiting Breton’s *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*. Around this time Surrealist works shifted from philosophical inquisitions about the unconscious – what Breton described as the ‘interior model’ – to focus more on the interaction between interior selfhood and external reality.<sup>4</sup> This transition was particularly evident in the visual arena of Surrealism and was pivotal to the development of the Surrealist object during the 1930s. The notion of an external object’s ability to respond to the unconscious is a fruitful way of approaching the artist Meret Oppenheim (1913-1985). It is her objects, and the issues they raise

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<sup>2</sup> See the chapter entitled ‘Bodies Transformed: Surrealist Women’ (pp. 42-55) in Wood for further examples.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2004, p. 21.

around female fetishism and desire,<sup>5</sup> that have particularly informed my analysis here. This chapter will set out Oppenheim's best known works and conclude with readings of her lesser known objects, all in consideration of the following questions. How has Oppenheim used inanimate materials to establish fetish as a gendered medium? What makes such objects evoke sensual pleasure or incite repulsion? How do these objects, in their relationship to the female fetish, differ from works created by male Surrealists?

In order to answer these questions I will begin with some words from Chadwick detailing Oppenheim's background:

Her youth and beauty, her free spirit and uninhibited behaviour, her precarious walks on the ledges of high buildings, and the "surrealist" food she concocted from marzipan in her studio, all contributed to the creation of an image of the Surrealist woman as beautiful, independent, and creative.<sup>6</sup>

In May 1932 Meret Oppenheim arrived in Paris, marking, according to Chadwick 'the beginning of the most active period for women artists in the Surrealist movement',<sup>7</sup> and soon becoming intimate with both Max Ernst and Man Ray.<sup>8</sup> However, it may have been Giacometti, with Arp, who became Oppenheim's first artistic mentor and encouraged her foray into furniture design.<sup>9</sup> In 1933 she created her first piece, entitled *Giacometti's Ear*, which both men encouraged her to exhibit amongst their own work at the Salon des Surindépendents. Soon Oppenheim was frequenting Surrealist gatherings and attending group meetings, and 'increasingly identifying her life and her art with the movement'.<sup>10</sup> It is her association with fur that

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Whitney Chadwick. *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.47.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pp. 46-47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

established Oppenheim. As Chadwick remarks: ‘one object above all has dominated the Surrealist imagination’,<sup>11</sup> a 1936 piece entitled *Objet or Breakfast in Fur*. The piece was inspired by a conversation between Oppenheim, Picasso and Dora Maar in 1936, who, discussing the dominant use of fur within Oppenheim’s work, began to express their admiration of a fur covered bracelet that Oppenheim had created.<sup>12</sup> Alyce Mahon has commented that ‘Maar’s role in this exchange adds to the sense of female camaraderie over erotic symbolism, enjoying fur’s Freudian potential but also its literary association with Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s erotic novel about female domination and male masochism, *Venus in Furs* (1869)’.<sup>13</sup> The use of fur as an artistic and Surrealist material has provoked and formed the basis of the analysis presented in this chapter.



Fig. 1. *Bracelet or Fur (beaver)* (1936)<sup>14</sup>

Oppenheim took Picasso’s remark that any object, such as a teacup, could be covered in fur, and combined it with her request for ‘un peu plus de fourrure’ or ‘a

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>12</sup> Wood, p.32.

<sup>13</sup> Alyce Mahon, ‘Women Surrealists and the Still Life’ in Patricia Allmer (ed.) *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (Manchester: Prestel, 2009), pp. 54-63 (p. 57).

<sup>14</sup> Meret Oppenheim. *Bracelet* (1938), V&A Collection, image viewed online at [http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1558\\_surrealthings/displaying\\_5.php](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1558_surrealthings/displaying_5.php) [accessed 11 June 2007].

little more fur' when a cup of tea became cold.<sup>15</sup> Semantically, the object opens up readings to do with eroticism and fetishism. Chadwick, for instance, describes how fur has become an eroticised material that provokes associations with the mouth, feminine genitalia and oral sex:

Its erotic content arises from the richness of its visual associations and from the language that embraces the idea of "having a furry tongue". More often than not, women artists approached the issue of eroticism obliquely, focusing attention on aspects of eroticism other than women's sexual appetites, creating works that reveal their content indirectly and that rely on disguise to obscure meaning.<sup>16</sup>

According to Chadwick the appeal of Oppenheim's teacup for the Surrealists is the multifaceted meanings that it represents. Sexually, the reference to the 'furry tongue' may be interpreted in a number of ways, most returning to oral sex performed on a woman, the pubic area and Oppenheim's playfully provocative link between vagina and teacup. Although it may appear as an intrinsically feminine image, the balancing of genders has been achieved by the fur covered teaspoon as a phallic object that, by *stirring* the teacup's contents, suggests penetration. Nonetheless, as the shape of the spoon suggests a greater similarity to a tongue than it does to a penis (and a tongue may also penetrate), Oppenheim has created a highly symbolic depiction of oral sex. Using fur has softened the image in conventional gender terms; the contours are round and delicate (feminine) with the absence of any sharp (masculine) angles. *Objet* is a highly charged, sexually explicit image that, as the product of a woman artist, has managed to preclude the accusations of sexism that might have been attracted by a male artist. Instead, the viewer witnesses a celebration of women's

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<sup>15</sup> Chadwick 2002, p.122.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p.123.

sexuality and an explicit declaration of sexual enjoyment from a female perspective. However, as we will now elaborate, this does not mean a lack of eroticism.



Fig. 2 *Objet or Breakfast in Fur* (1936)<sup>17</sup>

Oppenheim's teacup has become a victim of what Caws has described, in Breton's words, as 'The crisis of the object'. She continues:

This is the expression Breton used to describe the extraordinary atmosphere in which the surrealist manifestoes and writings of all sorts flourished in such abundance. In this critical state, the customary limits of things – objects, ideas, texts – are altered, disturbed, expanded. The outlines of individual elements, stirred up and troubled by the incessant questioning of their natures and essences, permit the extension of those natures and essences past their special fetishisms attaching to them in their customary context.<sup>18</sup>

The erotic implications that surround the fur-lined teacup (Fig. 2) are exaggerated by the connection between the external object and the internal

<sup>17</sup> Meret Oppenheim, *Objet or Breakfast in Fur* (1936), The Museum of Modern Art, New York, image viewed at [http://moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=80997](http://moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=80997) [accessed 31 May 2007].

<sup>18</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1997), p. 201.

consciousness, in acknowledgement of Freudian theory.<sup>19</sup> This provokes connotations of what Malt deems ‘sexualised’ Surrealism, and of the object’s ability to function fetishistically. To quote Malt, this is because ‘feathers, along with hair and fur and their analogues, wool, suede, velvet abound in surrealist objects’.<sup>20</sup> Using Freud’s ideas Malt demonstrates how hair, fur and additional tactile materials function in this mode. She explains that although they are independent objects, and essentially dead matter that may repel, they were once part of something that was living and therefore will always retain a certain connection to live flesh. Malt describes these textures:

Fascinating yet repellent, they mark the eroticized territory of the object, but they also represent a peculiarly ambiguous category of matter. Fur, feathers, and hair are as close to live flesh as dead matter can come. They are of the body, but not of the flesh. Robbed of their association with life when removed from the body out of which they grew, they remain as charged relics of that presence. They are dead but refer us to an absent life.<sup>21</sup>

Malt’s description of hair as a ‘charged relic’ is intriguing and implies that essentially lifeless matter is able to generate almost magical associations. One example is the way in which body hair is both dead and alive and, because of this, has acquired an independent status. Stating that ‘Surrealism’s imagery teems with fetish objects of many kinds’,<sup>22</sup> Malt continues on the question of fetish:

Not only are inanimate objects eroticized to an unprecedented degree by the contexts and configurations in which they are made to appear; the body itself figures as object and as fetish, presented in fragmentary form, the whole adding up to less than the sum of its fragmented parts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays in the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. Angela Richard and James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 352.

<sup>20</sup> Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

The fragmented body is central to readings of Oppenheim's *Objet*, which can be considered in detail with the help of Malt's remarks. Firstly, the context of the teacup is highly significant: it is a Surrealist piece alluding to oral sex and has been created by a woman artist. The combination of the artist's gender, and the teacup's shape, instantly infuses the piece with sexual meanings and fetish-like associations. Despite Malt's description of hair as a 'charged relic' she implies that, once it is removed from the body, its potency is diminished. Therefore, hair can only be 'charged' when attached to the head or other parts of anatomy. This is something that I wish to challenge, as describing hair as a relic (which also recalls the super-charged potency of religious relics) in the first place instantly infuses it with power, whether isolated and independent, or if attached to other matter. Furthermore, we may ask why should hair only be significant when attached to the body. This question allows a reference to Stephen Houlgate's discussion of Hegel:

At its simplest and most primitive, art manifests human freedom by imbuing with spiritual significance that which is not spiritual and free itself, namely lifeless, inorganic matter. It thus transforms "dead" matter into the meaningful expression of spirit, freedom, and life.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of dead matter being reborn, of how a life force may penetrate an inanimate object, is significant to this discussion. Still, I am unable to dismiss Hegel's ideas of how the artistic object provokes the senses by stirring emotions and eliciting strange sensations. With reference to Hegel, Steinkraus and Schmitz comment:

The art object is sensuous in character. It is a physical entity and the locus of perceptual experience. Indeed it is produced for man's sense. Thus since it is not immediately an object of thought some thinkers tended to believe that its

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<sup>24</sup> Stephen Houlgate, 'Hegel on the Beauty of Sculpture' in Stephen Houlgate (ed.), *Hegel and the Arts* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 59.

purpose is to evoke in us a peculiar type of feeling, e.g., love, fear, exaltation, serenity, pleasure.<sup>25</sup>

This description of the internal reactions generated by art is relevant to the way in which Oppenheim's work generates varying emotions that range from excitement to repulsion. It is with reference to this response range that Hopkins writes that 'Breton's aesthetics, which were rooted in Hegelian dialectics, returned constantly to the notion of the new reality produced when two incompatible images collide'.<sup>26</sup> The result was a 'new, "higher" unity' that projected itself through the Surrealist image.<sup>27</sup> Although Breton much admired Hegel, the latter's opinions of art did not necessarily favour the Surrealist object.<sup>28</sup> This is because Hegel believed that art's agenda was to reflect notions of beauty, and what is considered conventionally beautiful, by instantly captivating its interlocutor without the need for decoding. However, this is exactly what was toyed with by the Surrealists: rendering an object to leave it open to interpretations not aroused by *premier degré* impressions. In the example of Oppenheim's teacup, a basic commodity and utensil used for hot drinks is used to allude to (female) sexuality. Mahon concurs:

Oppenheim's *Object* [sic] (*Breakfast in Fur*) of 1936 wreaked havoc on the genre [of the still-life object] and the male gaze. She stages a slice of domestic life and the banal objects of an afternoon cup of tea – a mass-produced, department store purchased, china tea-cup, saucer and spoon – but transports them into a monstrous gazelle-fur-covered fetish. The cup metamorphoses into an empathetically feminine and the three-dimensional variation of the nineteenth-century parlour game so loved by the surrealists, the *cadavre exquis* [exquisite corpse] [sic], which exploited the potential of bizarre juxtaposition to make the banal monstrous, reflected in the surrealists'

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<sup>25</sup> Warren E. Steinkraus & Kenneth I. Schmitz, *Art and Logic in Hegel's Philosophy* (New Jersey: Humanities Press & Sussex Harvester Press), 1980, p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Hopkins, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>28</sup> In *Hegel: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 103, Peter Singer states how the dialectic consists of 'opposing elements which lead to the disintegration of what seemed stable, and the emergence of something new which reconciles the previously opposing elements but in turn develops its own internal tensions'.

contemporary fascination with metamorphosis, not least in their journal *Minotaure* (1933-39).<sup>29</sup>

A beautiful artistic piece, according to Hegel, is so because ‘this beauty is not an abstract essence or quality mysteriously attached to the physical object. It is not, in short, given as ready made but, rather, *uniquely formed* and enjoyed in the process of aesthetic perception’.<sup>30</sup> This comment could have been written about *Objet* and the multilayered qualities that exist in Oppenheim’s uniquely odd piece. Thus, Oppenheim draws on Surrealism’s interest in making apparently mundane objects appear sensational. It is this flare for the marvellous that brings us to the topic of commodity fetishism in relation to Surrealism.

According to Walter Benjamin, in commodity fetishism ‘the commodity functions as a cypher, an encoded representation of the collective values projected onto it’.<sup>31</sup> Marx believed that the product’s meaning is derived from its value within commodity exchange. This is interesting and implies that Surrealism can be considered in one of two ways: first as a vessel, or mirror, on which other ideas may be reflected; or secondly in acknowledgement of self-worth and exchange value. Malt’s stress on the way in which fetish is able to function upon a variety of levels – as commodity and art, as feminine and masculine – allows further readings of Oppenheim’s *Objet*, both sexually and in relation to practical human affairs.

The item in question is a teacup, an everyday utensil that has practical usage for millions of individuals as part of their daily routine. However, Oppenheim’s presentation of this object enables its transformation from an innocent household item to a ‘charged relic’ imbued with sexual associations. As I have suggested previously, this can be attributed to a number of reasons. To begin, by covering the artefact with

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<sup>29</sup> Mahon, p. 57.

<sup>30</sup> Steinkraus & Schmitz, p.74.

<sup>31</sup> Malt, p. 104.

fur, the closest material to human hair, the innocence of tea drinking has become synonymous with oral sex as ‘the work takes advantage of differences in the varieties of sensual pleasure: fur may delight the touch but it repels the tongue. And a cup and spoon, of course, are made to be put in the mouth’.<sup>32</sup> Through the notion of drinking the hot liquid contained in the vessel, the person looking at the object is unconsciously implicated in a sexual act.

Breton writes of *Objet* that ‘the sexuality of the fur seemed specifically Freudian’,<sup>33</sup> and he considered Oppenheim’s piece alongside Edouard Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863) as well as another scandalous work that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Leopold Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* (1870). Sacher-Masoch’s novella, which featured a group of clothed men surrounding a naked female model, can be compared to the ‘maleness’ of Manet’s painting, in which men are associated with the sexual ‘consumption’ of a naked woman. Wood has also acknowledged this association of man as animal in relation to Oppenheim’s fur lined teacup.<sup>34</sup> The cup was later renamed by Breton as *Déjeuner sur fourrure* or ‘luncheon in fur’,<sup>35</sup> and it remains revealing that the word ‘déjeuner’ is used in conjunction with both Oppenheim’s piece and Manet’s painting. However, while Manet’s literally translates into ‘Lunch on the Grass’, Oppenheim’s translation of ‘Breakfast’ seems to diminish its importance and implies that her ‘meal’ has a reduced significance. Did she intend *Objet* to achieve ‘main meal status’ and has the title become lost in translation due to Oppenheim’s biology? Gale has considered this issue from another perspective, suggesting that breakfast is the most important meal of the day and that

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<sup>32</sup> The Museum of Modern Art, ‘MoMA Highlights’, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, revised 2004, original text 1999, p. 155, viewed online at <http://www.moma.org> [accessed 31 May 2004].

<sup>33</sup> Matthew Gale, *Dada & Surrealism* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997), p. 312.

<sup>34</sup> Wood, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Gale, p. 312

Oppenheim's piece gains from this connotation.<sup>36</sup> These parallels allow a brief return to the issue of famous paintings from art history being reworked by women Surrealists.



Fig. 3 *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863)<sup>37</sup>

Allow me to consider the tactile nature of fur. Like animal hair, fur varies in texture and coarseness and is able to both repel and entice, as even the softest fur, while pleasant to the touch externally, will physically repel when orally ingested (we might think, for example, of the unpleasant situation of feeling a stray hair in our mouth or of repulsion at the thought of hair in our food). These sorts of instances may produce disgust and yet, in spite of this, hair, and most significantly women's hair, remains a fetish material. The cup can be considered a feminine object because of its formal connotations of the vagina or even the womb, thus becoming a sexualised object. For these reasons Oppenheim's cup is unlikely to be masculine, because the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 312.

<sup>37</sup> Edouard Manet, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), Musée d'Orsay, Paris, image viewed online at [http://www.musee-orsay.fr/index.php?id=851&L=1&tx\\_commentaire\\_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=7123&no\\_cache=1](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/index.php?id=851&L=1&tx_commentaire_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=7123&no_cache=1) [accessed 10th November 2009].

male reproductive system does not bear any similarity to cup-like shapes. Therefore, recalling Maar's *29 rue d'Astorg* (1936), the object serves to balance genders (the masculine spoon and the feminine cup), which in turn reaffirms its heterosexuality and references the patriarchal ethos surrounding homosexuality that many male Surrealists found to be repugnant and did not wish to evoke within their art.<sup>38</sup> This leads into the unexplored female fetish that still remains an unacknowledged issue within Surrealism.

Although the piece has been designed by a woman Surrealist, *Objet* has the potential to be a male-produced work that celebrates the female pubis. Despite this, the piece remains inherently feminine in its outcome, because Oppenheim *implies* that the cup is female, while those viewing the object may well make the same assumption. It is not a large sculpture made of cold marble by a male artist but a small, animal-like piece that is tactile, soft and feminine. The cup coaxes and teases the viewer to come closer instead of contemplating it from afar. This is emphasised in the following comments:

A small concave object covered with fur, *Objet* may also have a sexual connotation and politics: working in a male-dominated art world, perhaps Oppenheim was mocking the prevailing "masculinity" of sculpture, which conventionally adopts a hard substance and vertical orientation that can be seen as almost absurdly self-referential. Chic, wry, and simultaneously attractive and disturbing, *Objet* is shrewdly and quietly aggressive.<sup>39</sup>

Comments about the 'masculinity of sculpture' are very instructive and can be related to the whole idea of women Surrealists. As we have established, Surrealist art, not only sculpture but also painting and poetry, was originally the domain of male artists and the female body their primary subject. This places greater emphasis on the

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<sup>38</sup> Hopkins, p. 117.

<sup>39</sup> Quotation about *Objet* from the The Museum of Modern Art, viewed at <http://www.moma.org> [accessed 27 May 2007].

importance of Oppenheim's *Objet*. To begin, the piece can be viewed as Oppenheim's attack against patriarchal depictions of the women's bodies traditionally presented in sculpture, and her retaliation against the use of cold stone or marble, the result of which is a feminine declaration of sexuality in celebration of oral sex. It is a piece that, although subtle in approach, is aggressive in its meanings. Kachur comments that the male Surrealist artists had greater leanings towards the erotic, or 'disturbing means of violent juxtaposition', while women artists imbued their work with greater subtlety.<sup>40</sup> This is particularly applicable to *Objet* as, although a feminine piece, Oppenheim's sculpture contains elements that we can recognise as mocking the movement's masculine dominance and the politics of the era and, in doing so, becomes a celebration of the female form. *Objet* invites its viewer to engage with it, to touch it, stroke it and drink from it. The creation is an independent force, the reclamation of women's sexuality and dominance, and eschews the notion of masculine control of avant-garde practice. *Objet* can be considered a political statement, Oppenheim's feminist stance against the mocked and vilified women within Surrealism, which she creates in aggressively allusive celebration of woman's sexual liberation.

Oppenheim has managed to achieve all of the above by basing her work on preconceived Surrealist ideals of the fetishised female body. However, as we have seen, the creation is not derogatory but whimsical and playful, allowing Oppenheim to produce a piece challenging gender stereotypes while projecting a pro-feminine approach to art. As has been established, Surrealist art leans heavily towards masculinity and often objectifies the female body. Nevertheless, through the creation of work imbued with themes that enable it to be transformed from inanimate to alive,

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<sup>40</sup> Lewis Kachur, *Displaying the Marvellous: Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dalí, and Surrealist Exhibition Installations* (Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT, 2001), p. 81.

the teacup takes on a new life with new meaning. Additionally, as the item can be used by both sexes, it also implies the giving of oral sex by a man to a woman, which suggests the reclamation of feminine primacy and the re-configuration of power boundaries. The cup is enticing and provocative because it *wants* to be drunk from; by so doing, a male would be made to submit to the exuded feminine dominance. According to Haber, *Objet* has become Oppenheim's only famous piece of work 'not only for its playfulness' but by suggesting 'something bristly and inaccessible'.<sup>41</sup> This is because the fear generated by the object could be 'related to a male viewer's unconscious associations with a vagina' and the inherently male fear of castration.<sup>42</sup> The spoon lying beside the cup emphasises the sensation of contact with the fur because, to quote Bradley, 'the cup is a cipher for the female sex'<sup>43</sup> and described by Oppenheim herself as 'the image of femininity imprinted in the minds of men and projected onto women'.<sup>44</sup> More specifically Oppenheim was using the cup as an expression of her body and her genitalia, creating a three-dimensional self-portrait that was tactile and intimate. She was the cup, both enticing and inviting the viewer to drink from her vessel.

Oppenheim's work noticeably contains elements of whimsy that relate to Bradley's description that Surrealist objects 'at their best combined the wit of Duchamp's "readymades" with the unexpected and unsettling insight of exquisite corpse figure drawings'.<sup>45</sup> These are objects that generate both humour and unease, instantly attracting the eye while also generating resistance or aporia. With reference

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<sup>41</sup> John Haber, 'The Great Beyond', cited in Jacqueline Burckhardt and Nancy Spector (eds), *Meret Oppenheim: Beyond the Teacup* (New York: Independent Curators Inc, 1996), p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> Haber, p. 21.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Edward D. Powers, 'These Boots Ain't Made For Walking', *Art History* 24:3 (June 2001), pp. 358-379 (p. 369) quoted in Wood p. 47.

<sup>45</sup> Fiona Bradley, *Movements in Modern Art: Surrealism* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), p. 44.

to Dalí's *Lobster Telephone* (1936) (Fig. 4) Bradley suggests that these images provoke a narrative and want to be part of a scenario, encouraging the viewer to visualise, and fantasise, about what it would be like to pick up the lobster receiver.



Fig. 4 *Lobster Telephone* (1936)<sup>46</sup>

*Objet* too is able to produce such a fetish, creating its own narrative and providing a sexual fantasy for both genders. Bradley has reflected on the erotic connotations that reside in the piece:

Meret Oppenheim's *Fur Breakfast* is a beautiful, tactile thing which begins to mobilise ambiguities of desire and distrust when the viewer imagines using it, raising the cup to their lips. Oppenheim reinvents a mundane, familiar object as an erotic fantasy of oral and vaginal sexual pleasure. In cladding a teacup and saucer with fur, she makes a fetish object.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, anything encased in fur is certain to be a tactile object. The teacup, referencing Bradley's comment, is now desired *because* of its fur, the thought of feeling the material making it the first reason why the item can be desired as an object of fetish. It evokes a child's desire to play with a furry toy animal; but in this case the

<sup>46</sup> Salvador Dalí, *Lobster Telephone* (1936), The Tate Collection, image viewed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=2988&tabview=image> [accessed 18 June 2004].

<sup>47</sup> Bradley, p. 44.

animal has been transformed into a sexual plaything. It is revealing to think that something that tactile and comforting is deemed sexual once in adulthood. The child may trust its toy as it is *allowed* to have fur. The teacup, by contrast, is not normally meant or allowed to have fur.

Freud and Binet allow me to expand on the recurring subject of fetish in Surrealism. Binet has discussed how the fetish evokes both mental obsession and desire, commenting that fetishism ‘becomes abnormal, or pathological, when, frustrated in (or even unaware of) a sexual desire, an individual diverts this desire onto inanimate objects, item of clothing, or part of the body, most usually, hands, feet or eyes’.<sup>48</sup> According to Freudian analysis, however, sexual desire transferred onto a material object is caused through the realisation of an absent maternal phallus. Therefore in *Objet Oppenheim* could be aligning herself with Freud’s notion that the transference, and reclamation, of the maternal phallus is only appropriated through the use of a symbolic or material object.<sup>49</sup> The viewer may not be expected to desire the teacup but is coaxed into doing so. This strangeness of the object exemplifies Bradley’s view that ‘Surrealist objects are odd, disorientating and often vaguely (or specifically) sexually disturbing’.<sup>50</sup> Is this not, however, what constitutes a fetish, the combined influence of physical repulsion and an implicitly sexual situation serving as the catalyst for a sexual fetish to materialise?

Certainly, fetishism can generate pleasure but also disturbance. Chadwick has considered how sexual situations are often generated through acts of discomfort or horror. She writes that ‘often women artists in the Surrealist movement wove the pieces of feminine self-awareness into fabulous narratives peopled with magical

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

beasts and legendary characters.’<sup>51</sup> These comments are instructive, as by looking to *Objet* we realise that Oppenheim’s symbolism in respect of mythic beasts denotes both masculine and feminine qualities, offering a balancing of gender traits, and expanding on masculine notions of what is sexual, and patriarchal, in traditional Surrealism. Chadwick continues:

Images of fecundity and barrenness, rich imaginings and fearful isolation, self and other, interior and exterior, the female body in the works in which women Surrealists served as an important harbinger of women’s desire to image themselves by speaking through their own bodies.<sup>52</sup>

From Chadwick’s comment it can be noted how this alienation, or *Otherness*, of the female body creates a threat *because* of its difference, the juxtaposition of the mutilated and dismembered form forming a sign of beauty. The body became an expression of cultural reflection with women artists believing the exterior form to function as a manifestation of our internal fears and anxieties as, to quote Chadwick, they ‘increasingly deploy the body as a site of resistance and a locus for expressions of death, disintegration, horror, and presymbolic forms of expression’.<sup>53</sup> This develops further into presentations of the erotic body, as Wood describes:

These women artists manipulated the imagery of their own bodies and clearly positioned themselves in relation to the Surrealist discourse by creating objects which referenced the body. Regeneration was perhaps the key theme they explored through the transformation of the body.<sup>54</sup>

Continuing with the theme of regeneration, alongside rebirth and renewal, I emphasise how these are feminine subjects because of their association with childbirth. Surrealism’s celebration of, and challenge to, femininity led Breton to

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<sup>51</sup> Whitney Chadwick (ed.) *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self Representation* (Cambridge, Mass. & London, England: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>54</sup> Wood, p. 53.

exclaim in 1937 that the female body was ‘exploding with erotic energy’ while artistic licence justified self-mutilation<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the latter was not about self-harm but rather the artist using their body as instrument and artistic tool, putting their body into their art to inject more personality into inanimate objects. Such remarks are most relevant to discussion of Oppenheim, especially when we learn how she used her own body as an artistic creation, exposing her skull to radioactive matter, which resulted in the visual capture of her glowing skeletal structure. This resonates with Chadwick’s remark that ‘Surrealism challenged the rational ordering of the body and with its distinctions between mind and body, reason and sexuality, human and animal, higher and lower’.<sup>56</sup> The material used to create Oppenheim’s fur-lined teacup encourages reading the female body as *Other* and exotic, highlighting erotic themes that animal connotations imply when considered alongside sexuality, and alluding to sexual intercourse itself as a carnal, animalistic practice. The fur-lined teacup asserts desire by suggesting contact with its hair-like substance, signifying sexuality and bringing the viewer closer to the notion of carnal desire without actual or physical (sexual) penetration. The furry texture of the teacup enhances the fetish-like nature of the object and generates comparisons to the female body and pubic hair.

In the first chapter we saw that the same basic meanings attached to the figure of the hand in Surrealist works – such as desire, violence and guilt in cinema – could be identified in a work of Renaissance painting. In this discussion of Oppenheim, the link to works from art history is provided by the interpretation of food. For example, the fruit and vegetable paintings of Giuseppe Arcimboldo made for a highly individual interpretation of traditional portraiture. Indeed, while Arcimboldo did not

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<sup>55</sup> Chadwick 1998, p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 15.

achieve much recognition during his lifetime, it was the admiration of Dalí and his fellow Surrealists that resulted in renewed interest in his work.

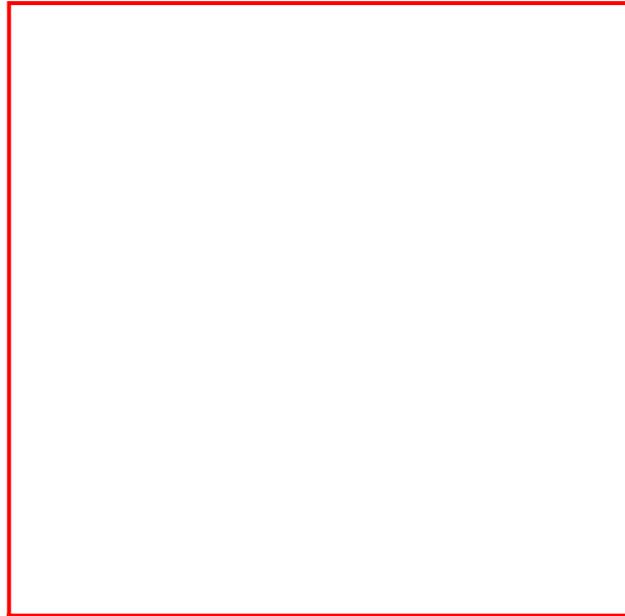


Fig. 5 *Emperor Rudolf II as Vertumnus* (1591)<sup>57</sup>

The painting is a bizarre but highly skilful work, with each fruit and vegetable carefully selected to replicate particular facial features. The pear is an ideal replacement for a nose, while the pumpkin perfectly represents the chest and bronchial cavity. Perhaps the greatest ‘Surrealist’ element of the portrait is the way in which the fruits and vegetables accurately replicate the muscular and skeletal structure that lies beneath human flesh. Unlike the painting of a nude woman, however, despite its composition of edible fruit the portrait may not elicit the desire to consume what it represents. Why is this so? It could be due to gender, because Arcimboldo’s art focuses on male subjects. So too the portrait is not offered as an example of a feast but as an idiosyncratic take on portraiture and an individual

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<sup>57</sup> Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Emperor Rudolf II as Vertumnus* (1591), image viewed online at <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/old-masters/arcimboldo.htm> [accessed 20 July 2010].

subject. It does not entice the viewer into the frame, unlike Manet's naked woman, who is implied as a sight to be devoured at the picnic, a part of the lunch presented to the guests as would a roasted animal upon a platter. Or perhaps she is the dessert, a sweet offering that will complete the meal as she sits amongst the food apparently not resisting her place at the table. She is not present as a guest but as a symbol of male fetish and desire. Oppenheim offers an abstracted, coded version of the implications around sex, consumption and eating implicit within Manet's painting. That sex and food are to an extent linked is brought out by Robert Gray:

Food, which typically serves to relieve hunger, may also serve to heighten it. There is, of course, a point at which the analogy between hunger and sexual feeling breaks down, for sexual feeling is typically relieved by intensifying it. Whereas a little food may, in some cases, be very satisfying, a little bit of sex often leaves an individual feeling less satisfied than he might otherwise have been.<sup>58</sup>

There are those who ingest what might be thought to be *abnormal*, inedible or grotesque. One such instance of this, cannibalism, relates back to Manet's 'edible' woman. Thus in Manet's painting eating is (part of) a sexualised activity, as in Gray's work:

Those activities, accordingly, are sexual which serve to relieve sexual feeling or, alternatively put, which give rise to sexual pleasure. Of course, it might well be objected that sexual activity does not, in fact, serve so much to relieve, as to heighten sexual feeling (which, for purposes of this discussion, we may take to refer, at least initially, to a physiological state, although many emotional and cognitive states may, and typically do, come to be intimately associated with it).<sup>59</sup>

Gray's comment attests that some examples of fetish can only function fully when combined alongside another activity, in this case food and the pleasure that is

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<sup>58</sup> Robert Gray, 'Sex and Sexual Perversion', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 75: 4 (Apr.1978), 189-199 (p. 192).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 191-192.

derived from eating. Manet's depiction of a scene of literal and figurative eating may have proved less effective if the title had not alluded to a lunch or if food had not appeared in the background. Would the subject still be as alluring and 'consumable' if placed in an isolated setting? It would not appear so. Although thousands of paintings depict the naked female form Manet's interpretation of a naked female present at the feast implies that the fetish is fuelled both by the food and by the presence of the naked woman. Manet has represented a scene of a sensual meal, both literally and metaphorically, to be consumed by viewers and the painting's subjects. Neustadt has discussed how the human sense fields are placed in hierarchical order, with some relegated to a lower status. For example, she states how 'the eyes – [sic] and, to a lesser extent, the ears – [sic] are privileged above the other senses' while 'the faculties of smell, taste, and touch-traditionally and significantly termed "the lower senses"'.<sup>60</sup> Her reasoning is based on how these particular senses enjoy perverse actions by engaging with another body to a greater extent than the more respectable senses:

Sniffing, tasting, touching (licking partakes of all three): they are so immediate, so intense, so of the body. In contrast to the tidily rational qualities ascribed to sight and sound, the senses of smell and taste and touch are most often associated in a Western context with bodily needs and bodily pleasures, described by such words as natural, physical, irrational, sensual, emotional, animalistic, and erotic.<sup>61</sup>

Neustadt's comments provoke us into thinking how those actions, where an individual engages more fully with the body, are deemed less 'respectable' than other senses, such as the sense of sight. One organ which is discussed at length is the tongue, instantly recognisable as a potentially sexual body part, and one which crosses the boundaries from functional to erotic activity:

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<sup>60</sup> Kathy Neustadt, 'The Folkloristics of Licking', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 107: 423 (1994), pp. 181-196 (p. 184).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 185.

Licking is about more than just the tongue: it is about sex. And sex, as we all “know,” is powerful business involving all those orifices, all that crossing of boundaries, and so much “marginal stuff.” Sex is so powerful, in fact, that it mostly takes place “in the dark,” where it is hard to see, hard to discuss, and harder still to think about.<sup>62</sup>

The taboo that surrounds both sex and the erotic body allows me to regard Manet from this perspective, such that the woman is figured as an edible product devoured from the perspective of sexual pleasure and, to a lesser extent, nourishment - not in terms of cannibalism but rather nourishment that achieves an elevated, orgasmic, spirituality. The notion of licking is particularly applicable to the discussion of Oppenheim’s *Breakfast in Fur* and her work *My Nurse* (1936). Neustadt has described licking as a gendered action demoted amongst the senses due to its connotations of feminine functionality, such as a female animal licking her cubs clean. However, if a man licks a woman this becomes what Neustadt describes as a ‘primacy of language’ from an anthropological perspective,<sup>63</sup> a sexualised act that asserts masculine dominance and control over a passive female who submits to ‘power and control, and who panders to the needs of the Other’.<sup>64</sup> Again, the use of language is of relevance to our discussion, with masculine and feminine words resulting in multiple meanings.

In a return to Manet, and to Breton’s reading of this painting, Gale has suggested that Breton failed to recognise other important themes present within the image, especially the transformation of an inanimate object into an animal.<sup>65</sup> Gardner writes that, as well as enhancing the erotic appeal of Oppenheim’s creation, ‘the fur-

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 190.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 189.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 189.

<sup>65</sup> Gale, p. 312.

cup becomes a fetish, a symbol of female sexuality'.<sup>66</sup> McElvilley has commented that the challenge of Oppenheim's work is that the fur, in denying the 'naked surface' of the object, heightens the desirability of the product. With reference to Ursula Simreich<sup>67</sup> Gardner has continued with this theme:

The artist, "through the material that she chooses for this camouflage" sparks off "a double-pronged desire – to see what is hidden from the gaze, but above all to touch what is being displayed". In the "total refusal" of this desire "the actual explosive force of the work" would lie.<sup>68</sup>

The fur may conceal the fetishized body, as in the pubis, but covering it only reinforces its presence and strengthens the impact of the design. The attempt to hide the fetish has only exaggerated it further. This time using McElvilley<sup>69</sup> to comment on the combination of desire and animalistic attributes in Oppenheim's work, Gardner continues:

In conjoining "a cultural object with a natural condition – the condition of furry beasts" she [Oppenheim] is referring precisely to this contradiction between nature and culture, while at the same time threatening to "sink" culture ultimately into nature: "The fur grows over the teacup like fur growing on a werewolf in a horror movie".<sup>70</sup>

Most significantly, and in reference to the above, fur can be related to the concept of the Minotaur, the mythological creature who was part-animal part-man, not restricted to one gender, and who was a favourite entity among the Surrealists.<sup>71</sup> This also generates a pathway into Oppenheim's use of 'fur' in other pieces as in the following example of gloves.

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<sup>66</sup> Belinda Grace Gardner, *Meret Oppenheim: From Breakfast in Fur and Back Again* (Germany: Distributed Art Publishers Inc, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>67</sup> Ursula Simreich in 'Du', February 2001, No. 713, p. 29.

<sup>68</sup> Gardner, p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas McElvilley, 'Basic Dichotomies in Meret Oppenheim's Work' in Jacqueline Burckhardt and Nancy Spector (eds), *Meret Oppenheim: Beyond the Teacup* (New York: Independent Curators, 1996), pp. 45-54 (p. 46).

<sup>70</sup> Gardner, p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> Wood, p. 38.

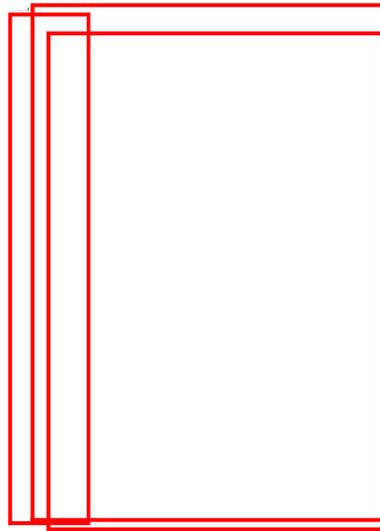


Fig. 6 *Gloves*<sup>72</sup>

The hairy gloves are particularly interesting, evoking werewolf associations. Usually a masculine symbol, the werewolf has been feminised by Oppenheim through the inclusion of red lacquered nails, gendering the gloves but without necessarily relinquishing any of the animal's physical strength or character. The redness may also evoke the 'blood-red' acts of violence or murder. Indeed, the fact that werewolves behave according to the cycles of the moon suggests an oblique symbolic reference to the female menstrual cycle. As in the transformation of a man into a werewolf, the beginning of menstruation symbolises the time when a woman emerges from childhood and becomes a self-sufficient individual, signalling new beginnings and the development of sexuality. The moon is an icon of femininity (*la lune* in French, as Liebman mentions in his discussion of gendered iconography in *Un chien andalou*, a film in which Buñuel appears to undergo a supernatural transformation while looking

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<sup>72</sup> Meret Oppenheim, *Gloves* (date unknown), Manchester Art Gallery, image viewed online at <http://www.manchestergalleries.org/angelfofanarchy/resources> [accessed 24 July 2011].

at the moon, right before he slices open the woman's eye).<sup>73</sup> The werewolf, meanwhile, is usually depicted as a male creature. In turn Oppenheim's gloves both feminise the werewolf and endow the wearer with connotations of superhuman strength.

These suggestions of horror are significant. Although the woman – as a sexual figure – is admired and often worshipped in Surrealist art, her representation often also symbolises masculine fear of her produced by her absent phallus. Freud writes that 'the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis',<sup>74</sup> and that the infant male wishes to reclaim and replace this absent phallus through material objects:

What is substituted for the sexual object is some part of the body (such as the foot or hair) which is in general very inappropriate for sexual purposes, or some inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person's sexuality (e.g. a piece of clothing or underlinen).<sup>75</sup>

Additionally, shoes are amongst the most common fetishes which, according to Malt, Freud lists because 'the woman's genitals are seen from below'.<sup>76</sup> Freud's comments reaffirm the relevance of pubic hair and oral sex to discussion of fetishism in Oppenheim's work. I will now return to Oppenheim and consider *My Nurse* from the perspective of the gendered Surrealist object.

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<sup>73</sup> Liebman, p. 144.

<sup>74</sup> Freud, p. 352.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

<sup>76</sup> Malt, p. 120.



Fig. 7 *My Nurse* (1936)<sup>77</sup>

Another image of an everyday object that has been subjected to a Surrealist modification, *My Nurse* is a multi layered and intricately designed piece. The shoes obviously are female and their state – upside down and trussed – instantly conjures images of a bound chicken ready to be cooked. Oppenheim has placed paper upon the heels, similar to those which appear on poultry or lamb before roasting in the oven, the high heels representing the legs of the animal to be consumed. The image is striking for its cartoon-like quality and it would not seem out of place in a Bugs Bunny sequence. Furthermore, it allows us to revisit Chadwick’s quotation about Oppenheim’s background and her Surrealist food created from marzipan. That is to say that Oppenheim clearly considered food as having a greater purpose than acting purely as fuel for the body, and that she viewed food as an art material that could be used to create whimsical and playful sculptures. In the example of *My Nurse* this is reversed and the shoes have become her edible art for the viewer to devour. Oppenheim’s creative thinking seems to have involved the following question: why could any substance – food included – not be made to function in multiple modes? If

<sup>77</sup> Meret Oppenheim, *My Nurse* (1936), image viewed online at [http://www.all-art.org/art\\_20th\\_century/surrealist\\_art/oppenheim/29a.jpg](http://www.all-art.org/art_20th_century/surrealist_art/oppenheim/29a.jpg) [accessed. 11 November 2009].

art could create food, why would fur not be able to function as a teacup? In the context of serving animals as food we can observe *My Nurse* to represent a helpless creature presented to fulfil a carnivorous desire but also – in demonstration of the idea of sexual and Surrealist food – of woman being metonymically offered upon a plate for consumption. Unlike Oppenheim's teacup, which made references to oral sex, this example uses shoes and allows us to consider such other sexual practices as foot fetishism. This is a topic that will be considered in the following chapter, and involves the suggestion of toes being sucked as foreplay. Again, this is similar to the fingers of early Surrealist cinema discussed in Chapter 1. We may also be reminded of additional earlier models of avant-garde practice, most notably Marcel Duchamp's readymade *Fountain* (1917), which can be briefly compared to Oppenheim's *My Nurse*.



Fig. 8 *Fountain* (1917)<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917), The Tate Collection, image viewed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=26850> [accessed 11 November 2009].

Hopkins has described *My Nurse* as alluding to ‘a hint of lesbian fantasy’ and ‘some form of bondage fantasy on the part of the artist’ due to the shoes and the bandaged feet’.<sup>79</sup> Thus the piece suggests lesbian consumption, in a queering of the figure of the woman as an object of consumption found in a piece such as Manet’s. However, Oppenheim’s choice of footwear for this piece must not go unnoticed, because the image would not be sexually suggestive if it featured a pair of flat loafers or household slippers. It can be noted as a piece designed by a woman Surrealist *for* women, perhaps providing the first example of a sexually ‘desirable’ art piece for women: the shoes connote desire, envy, bondage and even sexual jealousy. Kuenzli has commented:

Why does Oppenheim show a pair rather than a single shoe? Allusions to gender, displacement, and cannibalism could have been made by presenting a single shoe. The shoes, tied together, have lost their independence. Diminished or elevated to the role of a roast fresh out of the oven, these lady’s shoes are ready to be devoured by consumers. Through the strings they are turned into a mutual and common imprisonment.<sup>80</sup>

In comparison, Hopkins believes that Duchamp’s piece is not as simple to deconstruct. It is obvious that *Fountain* is a urinal and therefore a male receptacle, but the curves also imply a female body, softening what might initially be thought of as a masculine object. Hopkins notes that ‘*Fountain* has been interpreted as a bi-gendered form, with its curves and the hole at the base giving a ‘feminine’ inflection to an otherwise ‘masculine’ receptacle.’<sup>81</sup> Where Oppenheim’s teacup balances gender attributes with the phallic spoon, *My Nurse* is not the same on account of the high heeled shoes feminising the allusion to the chicken. Once again this has allowed us to return to the woman as an object to be devoured through consumption.

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<sup>79</sup> Hopkins, p. 89.

<sup>80</sup> Rudolf E. Kuenzli, ‘Surrealism and Misogyny’ in Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg (eds), *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: The MIT Press, 1991), pp. 37-49. (p. 39).

<sup>81</sup> Hopkins, pp. 89-90.

It is striking how *My Nurse* appears a feminine object on account of the high heeled shoes while the urinal *Fountain* is instantly recognised as masculine. Apart from the visual association of a male urinal, *Fountain* suggests a somewhat more sterile objective than Oppenheim's work. Duchamp has created a piece that satirises the seriousness of art in a literalisation of toilet humour.

The issue of gender and language is also important when discussing both *My Nurse* and *Fountain*. In his article 'The Talking Cure', which is based on *Un Chien andalou* (1928), Stuart Liebman examines how gendered language and wordplay charge particular scenes with sexual meaning while avoiding censorship. This is because 'we "hear" in our inner ear a series of words, phrases and implied sentence-fragments that circle around themes of violence, eroticism and perversity'.<sup>82</sup> Liebman expands his point, using a specific example drawn from *Un Chien Andalou*:

Thumb in French is "*le pouce*" and it is pronounced only slightly different from the slang word "*la puce*", which refers to a slut and which is also related to the adjective for virgin, "*pucelle*" (or "*puceau*" for men) and the word for hymen, "*le pucelage*."<sup>83</sup>

A similar analytical approach, which draws out the relationship(s) between word and image, might be applied to *My Nurse*; Oppenheim's chosen subject, a functional, everyday item of clothing, is inverted to imply sexual bondage and intercourse. In French the word for hen, *la poule*, is feminine, with *le poulet* used for chicken. In our study of *Objet* we can note how *la tasse*, or teacup, is another feminine noun, while *boire la tasse* literally translates revealingly into 'to swallow a mouthful'. Thus, Oppenheim has created objects that not only connote gender and

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<sup>82</sup> Stuart Liebman, 'Un Chien andalou: The Talking Cure' in Rudolf Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1996), pp. 143-158 (p. 149).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, p. 148.

sexuality in their form but that allow further meanings to arise through the 'translation' of the objects themselves into language.

By way of beginning to conclude this chapter, it can be asked whether toying with convention led to works by women Surrealists being less valued than Surrealism produced by men. Did women Surrealists, by using satirical works, hinder their chances of success and respect within a male dominated community? In many ways *Fountain* is similar to Oppenheim's objects. Why, though, do *My Nurse* and even *Objet* lack the recognition of the former? Was it because Oppenheim toyed with male Surrealist convention in choosing to push the boundaries of Surrealism into cartoon-like territories, or was it because of her gendering of the object? Although *Fountain* was gendered it had an agenda – the making of a satirical statement that anything can be turned into art – Oppenheim's creation may have been perceived to lack these qualities, and disregarded as a childlike parody of male a Surrealist piece who was vying for greater attention.

Within the thesis so far, it has also been established how both photography and sculpture offered the potential to mobilise feminine modes of reclamation and power. In continuation of the genre-based purview of this thesis, the next chapter will examine works of fashion and design within Surrealism. Thus I will test the potential of these media to extend the loaded representations of sexual fetish and feminine dominance analysed so far, with a particular focus on the Surrealist costumes of Elsa Schiaparelli.

## CHAPTER 3

## ‘THE FASHIONABLE SURREALISM OF ELSA SCHIAPARELLI’

She was able to transform the ordinary and mundane into the strangely beautiful and contradictory. Her clothing and accessories were often outrageous and even shocking in their inventiveness, and the women who wore them became surreal apparitions, bringing to life one of the principles of the first Surrealist manifesto, written by André Breton in 1924: “The marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvellous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvellous is beautiful.”<sup>1</sup>

Up until now this analysis has examined how women Surrealists became self-respecting artists in their own right, the works discussed in Chapter 1 taking women Surrealists away from the muse label and challenging the patriarchal tradition of Surrealism. In the second chapter I examined the progression of sculpture into feminine and provocative items by Oppenheim, who explicitly alluded to the idea of female sexuality with humour and playfulness. The female body, as we have seen, became a tool for women Surrealists who created a vast and varied expression of their sexuality not restricted to one artistic medium. One outlet for Surrealism that receives less attention than most is fashion which, as will be demonstrated, has made its own rich contribution to the movement.

Certainly, when we think of Surrealism the medium of fashion does not necessarily come immediately to mind. From the 1930s, however, fashion became a fertile area of Surrealist creativity as artists and designers began to collaborate on collections of clothing, hats and accessories. In this chapter, using a combination of psychological theory and ideas around female and male bodies, I will analyse the fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli (1890-1973). An often overlooked Surrealist whose contribution to the movement is rich and pertinent, Schiaparelli was an artist who

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<sup>1</sup> Dilys E. Blum, *Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2003), p. 121.

challenged conventional representations of femininity through playfulness, moving beyond the idea of women as objects of male consumption and transforming the female body into an independent entity that revelled in elegant sexual display. Drawing particularly on work done in the area of fashion and psychology, I will first offer close readings of three of Schiaparelli's best known designs in relation to fetish, sexuality and gender, and show that she produced garments that were both functional and feminine while retaining the Surrealist theme of the female anatomy as fetish. As part of this chapter I will question how this fusion affected the construction, and deconstruction, of costume by acknowledging how clothing influences, and governs, personal behaviour. For example, if an individual dresses in a certain way it may (subconsciously) influence their personality, movement and speech. When a woman dresses in accordance with mainstream society's view of what constitutes sexual appeal she may *feel* in greater possession of sexuality, and exude a greater degree of sensuality. This is particularly relevant to shoes and the way in which the height of the heel affects the woman's walk: the wearer unconsciously, and sexually, sways her hips to accommodate her new accessory. The latter part of this chapter will consider in detail the psychology of shoes and their effect on the wearer and those around her.

Schiaparelli is best known for her collaborations with Salvador Dalí, in which Surrealist art was animated and brought to life. As Blum comments, with Dalí Schiaparelli took 'fashion out of the closet and turned it into 'dressing with attitude''.<sup>2</sup> Dalí respected the ways in which Schiaparelli's costumes were able to give physical manifestation to the fantasies of the unconscious mind, and her ability to 'create a type of feminine beauty corresponding to man's erotic imagination,'<sup>3</sup> while costume's eroticism is 'a constant metaphor of the erogenous zones, transformed by

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 254.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 103.

psychomotive means – attracted, suggested, exhibited, hidden.’<sup>4</sup> The materiality of clothing, serving as an adornment of the body, made Surrealist art into physical, visual fashion, and fashion allowed for the creation of functional pieces out of unusual or ordinarily irrelevant objects – all of which helps to explain why Dalí and other Surrealists were attracted to *haute couture*.

Unfortunately, continues Blum, many of Schiaparelli’s designs have become ‘such a part of the mainstream of clothing design that her influence is not even recognized and goes unnoticed’.<sup>5</sup> However, as I later demonstrate, Schiaparelli was an artist who, by collaborating with Dalí, brought Surrealism to life, animating his paintings and making art both wearable and functional. Schiaparelli was acutely aware that clothes and accessories can serve as an extension of the woman, giving her the ability to transform her personality and *choose* who she wishes to become.

Although her most renowned pieces are collaborations with Dalí, Schiaparelli also worked with other Surrealists including Louis Aragon, Leonor Fini, Alberto Giacometti, Meret Oppenheim and Elsa Triolet, producing jewellery and perfume bottles as well as clothing. The designs in her solo collection also remained thematically Surrealist. Unlike the enduring appeal of Coco Chanel, however, whose fashion continues to thrive, the House of Schiaparelli has failed to achieve such enduring popularity, or indeed to incite a great deal of critical analysis. As Blum writes, Schiaparelli’s ‘influence on the Surrealist community has yet to be fully acknowledged or documented [...] Her contributions have frequently been dismissed as derivative, and she has even been accused of stealing ideas’.<sup>6</sup> Although the 2007 V&A event included garments by Schiaparelli, exhibitions of her work remain a rare occurrence, the last exhibition devoted exclusively to her taking place between

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<sup>4</sup> Ghislaine Wood, *The Surreal Body: Fashion & Fetish* (London: V&A Publications, 2007), p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Blum, p. 254.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

September 2002 and January 2003 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In view of the absence of critical work on Schiaparelli, and the relative difficulty of viewing her work, this chapter is informed by access to Schiaparelli's archive at Le Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, which contains a vast selection of sketches and images that are unavailable to the general public.

Before exploring in detail individual works by Schiaparelli I will provide some more general, contextual remarks in respect of fashion, Surrealism and the body. Writing with specific reference to fashion, Evans and Thornton suggest that

The Body always manages to sound rather *disembodied*; the problems of language, specifically the contrast of fashion's seductive pattern and the severities of contemporary analytical discourse, are ones which, perhaps, are primary when tackling the question of ascribing meaning to fashion.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter I will attempt to draw out ways in which Schiaparelli uses clothes not to conceal the female form – to 'disembody' it – but rather to flaunt and exhibit it, connecting internal consciousness to visible exteriors, and contradicting the notion of fashion as a way of covering and hiding bodies, even while the outfits themselves cover most of the wearer's body. In turn, I aim to show that Schiaparelli combines classical and avant-garde styles to produce fashionable pieces that are functional and feminine but that also play with and modify the key Surrealist trope of the fetishised female anatomy. The result is a set of singular variations on the age-old relationship between art and eroticism, and in which gender essentialism is both a theme to be explored and a driver of the construction and deconstruction of costume. This chapter will therefore extend previous discussion of fetishism, femininity and

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<sup>7</sup> Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton, 'Fashion, Representation, Femininity', *Feminist Review*, 38 (1991), pp. 48-66 (p. 49).

motifs, using psychological sources, recent fashion theory and feminist analysis, as well as work by Breton and Georges Bataille.

Also central to this chapter is the idea of gendered costume, such that ‘masculine’ clothing has a greater practicality than feminine, or sallic, garments and sartorial objects. Trousers and coats are primarily functional items, while ‘feminine’ items evoke a *fancy-dress* element used to enhance appearance far beyond the basic practical use of clothes. These are objects of decoration as they serve to enhance, display and accentuate the body. The nature and size of garments can also lead to gendered meanings and establish a hierarchy of importance among clothing. As Wood has commented, ‘a great many articles of dress, such as the shoe, the tie, the hat, the collar and even large and more voluminous garments such as the coat, the trousers, and the mantle may be taken to represent phallic symbols, while the shoe, the girdle and the garter (as well as most jewels) may be corresponding female symbols’.<sup>8</sup> The question of gender and clothing will underpin the analytical readings offered here of selected Schiaparelli designs, beginning with her most recognised work and concluding with designs that, commercially and critically, are lesser known. I will show that Schiaparelli’s ties to the movement are strong both professionally and personally. She had personal connections to Oppenheim, being the buyer of her fur-covered bracelet, and her work can be linked to the earlier discussion of fetish, the *female* body and work by women Surrealists in relation to work by Miller, Maar and Oppenheim. In so doing I will ask whether Schiaparelli’s fashion pandered to conventional ideals around the sexuality of women, or whether they served to enhance the body and offer greater status to their wearer.

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<sup>8</sup> Wood, p. 62.

Relevant published writing on fashion more or less contemporary with Schiaparelli's early work includes J. C. Flügel's *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930)<sup>9</sup> and Tristan Tzara's article 'D'un certain automatisme du goût'. Printed in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure*,<sup>10</sup> Tzara's text explores the sexual symbolism of hats by Schiaparelli. Wood notes that Tzara regarded these hats as 'representative of female genitalia', for Schiaparelli 'was then very well versed in the sexual implications of clothing and readily exploited them in her collection'.<sup>11</sup> Although I will return to this poem later on I will start with Schiaparelli's collaborations with Dalí, which began in 1936, and in 1938 produced the infamous *Skeleton Dress* and *Tear Dress*.<sup>12</sup> Together the duo created numerous designs which were to 'radically alter the way in which fashion and Surrealism were perceived',<sup>13</sup> as 'through Schiaparelli and Dalí's work, the body was refashioned by Surrealism, and Surrealism was in turn subsumed into the cultural mainstream'.<sup>14</sup>

Not that Schiaparelli was simply an assistant to Dalí. On the contrary, Svendsen underscores her status as a fashion pioneer:

[Schiaparelli] was probably the first fashion designer who was really part of the avant-garde, and she was a pioneer of later avant-garde strategies in fashion, such as how to decontextualize and recontextualize objects, to mix "high" and "low", and to use unexpected shades and materials.<sup>15</sup>

As Svendsen suggests, Schiaparelli created clothing that was both practical and avant-garde. In turn, by drawing on pre-existing notions of a woman's sexuality and erotica, Schiaparelli's Surrealist fashion literally and figuratively turned

<sup>9</sup> See J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930).

<sup>10</sup> Tristan Tzara, "D'un certain automatisme du goût", *Minotaure*, 3-4 (December 1933), 81-84.

<sup>11</sup> Wood, p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> For images of the two dresses, see respectively: <http://www.vam.ac.uk/images/image/14209-large.jpg> <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O84418/evening-ensemble-dress-the-tears-dress-the-circus/> [both accessed 30 June 2011].

<sup>13</sup> Wood, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Lars Svendsen, *Fashion: A Philosophy* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006), p. 96.

mainstream convention upside down. Her display of sexuality was a carefully crafted process, with her costumes exploring (representations of) the female body through outfits designed to be explicitly sexualised but without exposing excess flesh. Thus Schiaparelli plays with traditional notions of what might be thought of as ‘sexual’ or ‘erotic’ clothing. Schiaparelli is avant-garde for this precise reason, for more than any other fashion designer she pioneered the blurring of conventional sexuality and femininity.



Fig. 1 *Skeleton Dress* (1938)<sup>16</sup>

Let me introduce the first garment chosen for analysis. *Skeleton Dress* (Fig. 1) is a one-piece black dress, visually alike both front and back, that closes with plastic zips on both the shoulder seams and right side of the body, while the built-in padding emphasises the wearer’s ribs and rib cage. The garment’s combination of fabrics achieves a three-dimensional internal body structure that integrates Dalí’s fascination

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<sup>16</sup> Elsa Schiaparelli. *Skeleton Dress*, 1938, V&A Collections, image viewed online at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O65687/evening-dress-the-skeleton-dress-the-circus/> [accessed 12 July 2007].

with corporeality.<sup>17</sup> Returning to Svendson, who considered the *Skeleton Dress* as incorporating the use of ‘bone-shaped soft structures’ in its design,<sup>18</sup> Schiaparelli’s ‘skin tight’ dress produces the illusion of a ‘faux anatomy’, or second skin. Svendson has considered how the dress’s plainness, which implies a naked body and a lack of clothing, emphasises and expresses the personality of the individual wearing the garment. The dress becomes a symbol containing a body of hidden messages that shapes individual identity. Essentially the choice of clothing comes to ‘mean something and help say something about the person wearing the symbol’.<sup>19</sup>

The *Skeleton Dress*, which makes use of a detailed piping upon the dress, accentuates both the body’s bone structure and the pubic area surrounding the genitalia. Furthermore, the dress is completely black, as is the featured detail, which matches Lurie’s comments regarding the way in which poised concealment (rather than garish exposure) can actually enhance appeal: ‘sometimes the currently thrilling bit of anatomy is only exposed in impolite society. In respectable circumstances it is elaborately wrapped up, and often exaggerated in the process’.<sup>20</sup> In conventional terms, this particular design is not obviously sexual – the dress is long and reaches up to the wearer’s neck – yet Schiaparelli has managed through intricate detail to create a teasing and engaging piece that alludes to the body underneath the garment, to the skeleton underneath the body, and to the pubic area in loaded invitation of visual foreplay. It is a powerful creation that makes use of the power of suggestion – which can be as potent as the presentation of a completely naked body – showing that a body does not need to be naked to generate desire or fetish. Indeed, sexual fetishes are often created by bodies that, precisely, are not completely naked, tending instead to involve

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<sup>17</sup> Svendson, p. 65.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>20</sup> Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 250.

a particular area of the body that is generally covered or that has been partially or temporarily revealed. The creation of erotic suggestion, arousal and fetish through the clothed body is intrinsic to the discussion of Schiaparelli's costume, which again bears out Lurie's remarks: 'even in isolation an unadorned human body is often less exciting than a clothed one, and the most stimulating costumes of all are those which simultaneously conceal and reveal, like a suggestively wrapped gift hinting at delights beneath.'<sup>21</sup>

The *Skeleton Dress* playfully alludes to that which it conceals: the high-necked dress covers the entire body while the design detail accentuates both the body's bone structure and the pubic area. Such intricate detailing has allowed Schiaparelli to create a provocative piece: replicating a skeleton structure refers to the body underneath the dress and the piping plays with our gaze, visibly alluding to anatomy while the dress as a whole covers it, and directing the eyes to the pubis. In this sense, then, the dress is an example of Lurie's point that 'some modern writers believe that the deliberate concealment of certain parts of the body originated not as a way of discouraging sexual interest, but as a clever device for arousing it.'<sup>22</sup> As she adds, 'in reality even the most sedate costume may contain erotic clues.'<sup>23</sup>

The phrase 'the power of suggestion' comes to mind as part of an idea that intimate bodily encounters can be evoked not only by nakedness and the exposure of flesh but by the possibility of things to come that are currently concealed. Lurie goes on to compare bodily underexposure to a gift: 'people done up in shiny colored wrappings and bows affects us just as a birthday present does: we're curious, turned on; we want to undo the package.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 214.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 213.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 230.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 213.

Lurie's notion of packages and bodies that are hidden or encoded take us usefully into discussion of Schiaparelli's *Tear Dress*. Described by Svendson as presenting 'an imagery of torn and desecrated flesh',<sup>25</sup> *Tear Dress* suggests that the woman's body is a fragile object made of delicate material. Reading the garment closely, however, it can be seen that the piece is not a statement of weakness and is instead making a bold statement that seeks to incite a strong reaction.



Fig. 2 *Tear Dress* (1938)<sup>26</sup>

This design was inspired by the Dalí painting *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding In Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra* (1936). Through her inimitable style, the result became, according to Svendson, 'a combination of the illusory and the real'.<sup>27</sup> The result is a white, pretty dress with pink print on the fabric that is flowing and ethereal, a contrast to the previously discussed *Skeleton Dress*, while the added

<sup>25</sup> Svendson, p. 65.

<sup>26</sup> Elsa Schiaparelli, *Tear Dress* (1938), V&A Collections, image viewed online at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O84418/evening-ensemble-dress-the-tears-dress-the-circus/> [accessed 12 July 2007].

<sup>27</sup> Svendson, p. 65.

headdress (or veil) implies a bridal (or virginal) quality. The detail in the dress is astonishing, combining a printed *trompe l'oeil* pattern of torn flesh, an appliquéd mantle of tears, and pale stripes of fabric that peel back to reveal a livid pink underneath.<sup>28</sup> Although flesh is evoked by Schiaparelli's choice of colour scheme, the dress is not ugly or grotesque. Instead the dress draws the eye to the design and attracts rather than repulses, reminding us of Evans' and Thornton's comment that Schiaparelli's designs are not frightening or morbid, but rather are imbued with a sense of masquerade, carnival, excess and decadence,<sup>29</sup> and that, in contrast to other designers, Schiaparelli embraces 'the decorative, the superfluous and the nonfunctional'.<sup>30</sup>



Fig. 3 *Three Young Surrealist Women* (1936)<sup>31</sup>

In addition to Dalí's *Three Young Surrealist Women* providing the inspiration for *Tear Dress*, the duo additionally created another two, thematically similar,

<sup>28</sup> Evans and Thornton., p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.49.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.50.

<sup>31</sup> Salvador Dalí, *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra* (1936), The Salvador Dalí Museum, St Petersburg, Florida, image viewed online at [http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/dali/salvador/imagebank/artwork\\_EXHI006882.html](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/dali/salvador/imagebank/artwork_EXHI006882.html) [accessed 29 July 2011].

costumes in 1936. Entitled *Necrophiliac Springtime* and *The Dream Places a Hand on a Man's Shoulder*, the designs based on Dalí's paintings were developed as part of Schiaparelli's *Circus Collection* and presented at the Surrealist exhibition of 1938. It remains curious that Schiaparelli, a collaborator of Dalí and well known in the Surrealist community, remains an under-acknowledged fashion pioneer. One explanation could be the professional rivalry that existed between Schiaparelli and Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel during this time. Although both designers created functional and practical clothing, their fashion aesthetics remained very different and both had very separate ideas of what could be considered fashion, with Chanel's sedate designs – less elaborate and experimental – contrasted with Schiaparelli's vivid, and often explicit, details and accessories. As Evans and Thornton write,

A comparison between Chanel's work in the 1920s and Schiaparelli's in the 1930s would suggest radically different ways of representing/constructing the feminine. A genuine polemic emerges from such comparisons which contrast Chanel's appropriation of masculine power with Schiaparelli's appropriation of female masquerade.<sup>32</sup>

I will now briefly examine two evening gowns, one from each couturier, that highlight the diverse artistic approach of both women while indicating, and accentuating, the experimental quality that was consistent throughout Schiaparelli's garments.

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<sup>32</sup> Evans and Thornton, p. 50.



Fig. 4 *Evening Dress* (c. 1932)<sup>33</sup>

Although Chanel championed the sporty designs favoured during the 1920s, the 1930s saw her create more feminine designs and eveningwear and her most popular designs of this time comprised floor-length gowns with low necklines and bare backs. In contrast, Schiaparelli's 1936 evening dress (see below) is stylistically different to Chanel's and constitutes a counterpoint to the established conventions of eveningwear. Rather than a low neckline, Schiaparelli has offered a complete covering of the body. This does not detract from the body present underneath the gown, for both the figure-hugging dress, and the detail of gold bands, allow for the accentuation, or creation, of womanly curves and an hourglass figure that links to Dalí's earlier comment about eroticizing women's bodies. Although this design may be viewed as Schiaparelli complying with patriarchal opinions of female beauty, the dress can be interpreted as manifesting Surrealism's unconscious desires that connected the internal psyche to the external body. The detail of padding, traditionally

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<sup>33</sup> Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, machine- and hand-sewn blue tulle and sequins (c. 1932), V&A Collections, image viewed online at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/3315> [accessed 4 February 2010].

placed inside the gown to fill out the wearer's bust, has been promoted to the exterior to attract attention to the breasts and afford them greater effect. The padding has not been disguised to blend in with the rest of the dress; it wants to be seen by indicating what it is concealing.



Fig. 5 *Evening dress - Wool crepe and gold braid* (1936)<sup>34</sup>

Although this design by Schiaparelli is based on a neutral colour scheme its interest is exaggerated by the appliquéd detail creating a three dimensional effect. Schiaparelli's evening dress provides an example of one of her more wearable creations, providing a contrast to her other examples which possessed greater aspirations to sculpture and living works of art. The *Tear Dress* is an example of a point made by Svendson: 'these are not clothes to be *used* - their utility value is completely irrelevant.'<sup>35</sup> This view is related to the idea that women's clothing is imbued with elements of costume and theatricality, rather than practicality. Evans and

<sup>34</sup> Elsa Schiaparelli, *Evening dress-Wool crepe and gold braid* (1936), V&A Collections, image viewed online at <http://www.vam.ac.uk/images/image/56578-popup.html> [accessed 4 February 2010].

<sup>35</sup> Svendson, p. 73.

Thornton go on to state that the design of the *Tear Dress* ‘counterposes violence and anxiety with poise and tranquillity’<sup>36</sup> as seen though the pale blue fabric, faded to white, on which the dress was produced to provide the illusion of skin. The printed design provides the illusion of animal skin ‘turned inside out’. This juxtaposition of violence and poise has created a powerful, yet vulnerable, design that coincides with earlier mentioned themes surrounding the objectified female body that dominates patriarchal Surrealism.

Until now it has been acknowledged how Schiaparelli’s designs hint at the female body as a delicate and fragile vessel, while also concealing the potential for charged meaning and unexpected discoveries. *Skeleton Dress* and *Tear Dress* have taken us in new directions, explicitly displaying the female body and offering a provocation and contrast in relation to conventional notions of femininity. What is most evocative about the latter is how the design alludes to the desecrated woman, particularly the act of rape. Similarly murder, or a violent attack, is evoked by the pink of the dress’s torn panels representing the damaged naked flesh underneath the garment. Although an attempt to disrobe her has been made the woman has remained clothed, Schiaparelli’s gown highlighting the skin rather than cutting away large panels of material. Evans and Thornton comment that the design suggests a woman who has been left naked and powerless through the violation of her clothing:

The imagery of violence, the suggestion of attack, is counterposed by the elegance of the dress, its existence as sophisticated fashion, the fact that it is *not* rags, *not* torn. It is a piece suggestive of a fantasy which is both acknowledged and denied. Violence and eroticism are simultaneously displayed and made to disappear; beauty is brought to bear on rupture’.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Evans & Thornton, p. 50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

Schiaparelli has evidently designed a dress intended to blur the boundaries of fabric and flesh, and someone looking at the dress when worn may find it difficult to distinguish between the two. Although *Tear Dress* may represent a conforming to violent Surrealist images of disembodied mannequins, Schiaparelli has managed to retain a strong sexual element within the design. This has been made explicit through the combined association of the torn flesh and the naked body concealed beneath the clothing. Surrealism's manifestation of sexuality by women artists, although still sexual and remaining true to patriarchal themes, differed in approaching and exploring the fetish with more theatricality. Evans and Thornton write that 'the feminine was a metaphor for Surrealism's discourse of illusion, artifice and masquerade.'<sup>38</sup> The *Tear Dress* appears as an apparition; it has been provided with an unreal corporality and otherworldliness.<sup>39</sup> Schiaparelli, while acknowledging patriarchal figurations that surround the naked female body, has chosen to accentuate the woman's strength and vulnerability by confronting and refusing to hide the violent attack that has taken place. The result is that Schiaparelli's designs have become 'self-conscious, constructive and critical,'<sup>40</sup> allowing fashion to become a language linking the internal subconscious to the external physical body.

As part of this chapter it has been acknowledged how the fusion of the practical and the avant-garde combine in Surrealist fashion to produce particular forms of costume and related readings. Although there are many examples of fetish objects related to women's bodies, shoes (and the psychology thereof) remain particularly topical and will be pursued in subsequent analysis of the themes initiated in this chapter. I will now build on this to consider the effect of individual designs on the behaviour and response of both wearer and spectator.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.53.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 53.



Fig. 6 *Shoe Hat* (1937)<sup>41</sup>

Never were Schiaparelli's 'self-conscious, constructive and critical' qualities more evident than in *Shoe Hat*, which constitutes the richest depiction of gender essentialism in Surrealist fashion. The outfit itself is a contradiction balancing male and female gender associations; the simple design of the suit – dark, high-necked and covering the body – reaffirms and hints at what is underneath the garment.<sup>42</sup> The lip embellishment, detailed on the pockets, alludes both to the mucous membrane of the mouth and to the female genitalia present underneath the garment, while the phallic high-heeled shoe hat suggests penetration. Despite remaining covered, the individual wearing the outfit still flaunts her sexuality, the suit making her appear dominant and

<sup>41</sup> Image from Evans and Thornton, p. 54. The original hat can be viewed online at [http://www.metmuseum.org/works\\_of\\_art/collection\\_database/all/hat\\_elsa\\_schiaparelli/objectview.aspx?page=3&sort=6&sortdir=asc&keyword=elsa\\_schiaparelli&fp=1&dd1=0&dd2=0&vw=1&collID=0&OID=80004760&vT=1&hi=0&ov=0](http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/all/hat_elsa_schiaparelli/objectview.aspx?page=3&sort=6&sortdir=asc&keyword=elsa_schiaparelli&fp=1&dd1=0&dd2=0&vw=1&collID=0&OID=80004760&vT=1&hi=0&ov=0)

<sup>42</sup> See Evans and Thornton, p. 54 (fig. 6).

confident while the hat provides an unlikely fetish. This is because shoes are able to provide a sexual fetish for both genders. As regards heteronormative masculine desire, shoes elongate the leg and raise the genitals of the woman wearing them. In this sense shoes also serve as the start of an erotic map, alluding to the beginning of a sexual journey up the legs. As regards the wearer, on the other hand, according to Beatrice Faust ‘high heels are not a visual stimuli for men; they are also tactile stimuli for women [...] Walking in high heels makes the buttocks undulate about twice as much as walking in flat heels with correspondingly greater sensation transmitted to the vulva.’<sup>43</sup> The popularity of the shoe as a fetishised fashion accessory can thus also be attributed to its effect on the gait and mood of the wearer.

I will now return to Tzara’s article ‘D’un certain automatisme du goût’, which deals with women’s hats, with reference to Schiaparelli’s use of the female body in her collections. The text was illustrated with three Man Ray photographs of hats from Schiaparelli’s 1933-1934 winter collection, and the composition of the images ‘plays up Tzara’s thesis that contemporary women’s hats resemble female genitalia – a subconscious transforming of women’s desires into clearly readable symbols within the realm of fashion.’<sup>44</sup> Schiaparelli’s singular combination of the two broaches worn as part of the *Shoe Hat* ensemble allows us to consider Döpp, who has traced the origins of this sort of foot-fetishism:

The shoe and foot fetish was influenced by fashion as well. When women still wore long skirts with their feet every so often accidentally peeking out from underneath, it was literally a “fiendish joy” to steal a glance of leg and shoe’, while ‘concealment steered the imagination towards calves, feet, and footwear, and promoted the fetishistic preference for these body parts and their clothing.’<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Faust cited in Valerie Steele, *Shoes: A Lexicon of Style* (Scriptum Editions: UK, 1998), pp. 33-36.

<sup>44</sup> Blum, p. 122.

<sup>45</sup> Hans-Jürgen Döpp, *Feet-ism* (New York: Parkstone Press, 2001), p. 29.

Döpp charts the progression of foot-fetishism from ancient China to 18<sup>th</sup>-century France and the writer Rétif de la Bretonne (1734-1806), who displayed ‘a pure shoe fetish. When looking at women’s shoes he used to quiver lustfully and blushed in front of them as if they were the girls themselves. He collected slippers and shoes of his lover, kissed and smelled them, and sometimes masturbated into them.’<sup>46</sup> Indeed, so strong was Rétif’s obsession with feet that the fetish was named after him:

The foot and shoe fetish is Rétif’s primary sexual perversion in life. He was the first to describe this variation of fetishism in detail, the shoe and foot fetishism “Rétifism” – applying the same logic that derive the term “sadism” from Sade and “masochism” from Sacher-Masoch.<sup>47</sup>

Fetishism involving feet provokes various meanings because different variations of footwear allude to male or female genitalia. For example, while the stiletto can symbolise an extension, or the gaining, of a phallus, a soft leather sandal, according to Döpp, implies the vagina to be a soft and easily penetrable vessel, while the stiletto’s sharp contours make it capable of inflicting pain, penetration and discomfort for its internal recipient. Here may I remind us of the fairytale Cinderella, an apparently innocent fable about a young girl waiting for a Prince to rescue her from the drudgery of her existence. On reflection this is a tale of sexual fetish, with the plot centring upon finding the correct person’s foot for a particular shoe. Certainly, the Prince’s quest for the ‘perfect fit’ could be read as an attempt to find a sexual partner through close inspection of her feet (which, as has been noted previously, lead upwards). Storfer pursues the sexual symbolism in Cinderella:

The prince sees her shoe (vulva) and is so delighted with its smallness and daintiness that he searches for its owner and married her. Cinderella, who has

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

a “small shoe,” is the proper counterpart to the youngest brother, who has a “large sword”.<sup>48</sup>

In Surrealism, the relationship between shoes and sexuality found an obvious outlet of expression, particularly in the context of the prominence given to Freud’s theories regarding fetishism. I would argue that Schiaparelli’s *Shoe Hat*, which is imbued with considerable sexual charge, represents an iconic depiction of the unconscious manifestations as described by Freud. Evans and Thornton note that ‘the edges of the pockets are appliquéd to look like lips, and worn with two brooches on the lapels in the form of lips in profile’.<sup>49</sup> It has already been suggested that the *Shoe Hat*’s high heel is representative of the penis. If I now apply Freud’s remarks about castration to the design as a whole, and to the wider discussion of phallic and sallic fashion, it can be seen that the *Shoe Hat* allows a previously ‘castrated’ woman to playfully take possession of a male phallus through a fashion accessory. However, what is most interesting is that while clothes generally function to hide the phallus, this hat is displayed prominently upon the female body; it takes pride of place upon her head and does not want to be disguised. The woman proudly accepts her newly acquired symbolic genitalia and revels in the power of connoted phallic appropriation.

The lips, as an allusion to the vagina, recall Wood’s earlier comments about feminine and masculine garments. Conventionally, male garments are designed for practicality while women’s clothing is created with the intention of decorating and adorning the body. Additionally, the body may be penetrated by accessories such as earrings. Schiaparelli’s designs offer contrasting depictions of sexuality combining attributes belonging to both genders, but they particularly allude to the body’s ability to possess both masculine and feminine attributes. While the *Tear Dress* was a

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<sup>48</sup> A. J. Storfer cited in Hans-Jürgen Döpp, p. 77.

<sup>49</sup> Evans and Thornton, p. 53.

manifestation of the violence and delicacy that femininity may possess and evoke, *Shoe Hat*, when combined with the lip brooches, results in a gained masculinity representing the symbolic and materialistic possession of a phallus. This can also be applied to earrings, for although their intended effect is the decorative enhancement of femininity they also have the ‘masculine’ property of penetrating the female body. In their discussion of the *Shoe Hat*, Evans and Thornton write that

Schiaparelli’s work is imbued with an appreciation of the fetishistic function of dress. In the ‘Shoe Hat’ ensemble the association pocket/mouth/vagina plays against that of hat/high heels/phallus. The piece suggests the body and its relationship to clothes as an interface of multiple fetishistic possibilities.<sup>50</sup>

I will now analyse *Shoe Hat* in the light of these remarks.

Steele has emphasised how the frequency of shoe fetishism derives partly from shoes’ ability to make a woman feel sexual, particularly when she slips on a pair of high heeled stilettos,<sup>51</sup> while according to Freud

The foot or shoe owes its preference as a fetish – or a part of it – to the circumstance that the inquisitive boy peered up at the woman’s genitals from below, from her legs up; fur and velvet – as has long been suspected – are a fixation of the sight of the public hair, which should have been followed by the longed-for sight of the female member; pieces of underclothing, which are so often chosen as fetish, crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic.<sup>52</sup>

Lurie also holds that high-heeled footwear are sexual signifiers ‘partly because they make the legs look longer – an extended leg is the biological sign of sexual availability in several animal species – and because they produce what anthropologists call a “courtship strut”’.<sup>53</sup> A woman may therefore walk more slowly

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>51</sup> Steele, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays in the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. Angela Richards and James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), pp. 353-354.

<sup>53</sup> Lurie, p. 227.

because of her footwear, exuding appeal and inciting interest. Lurie provocatively suggests that the choice to wear heels arouses desire ‘perhaps because it guarantees that no woman wearing them can outrun a man who is chasing her,’<sup>54</sup> while according to Steele

Even before she moves, a woman in high heels has transformed her body. She looks taller and thinner. Her secondary sexual characteristics are fragrantly emphasized, while her legs – the pathway to the genitals – are as long as Bambi’s. As the leg muscles tighten, the calves appear shapelier. And because they are at an angle, her feet look smaller and more pointed.<sup>55</sup>

In *Shoe Hat* it is noticeable how Schiaparelli has reversed the conventional feminine ideal: the head has become the site of erotic desire while the shoe’s heel represents the ‘lost’ female phallus and a manifestation of Freud’s theories on fetishism and the unconscious anxieties that drive it. The lip brooches are also significant, especially in relation to Barthes’ theories of jewellery’s function within fashion. As he comments: ‘the most modest piece of jewellery remains the vital element in getting dressed, because it underlines the desire for order, for composition, for intelligence’.<sup>56</sup> Elaborating on this theme, Barthes writes that

The piece of jewellery *reigns* over the clothing not because it is absolutely precious but because it plays a crucial role in making clothing mean something. It is the *meaning* in a style which now becomes precious and this meaning depends, not on each element, but on the link between them and in this link it is the *detached* term (a pocket, a flower, a scarf, a piece of jewellery) that holds the ultimate power of significance.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, *Shoe Hat* is a work that generates multiple meanings that elevate the design beyond a straightforward fashion statement. For example, it is possible that the

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<sup>54</sup> Lurie, pp. 227-228.

<sup>55</sup> Steele, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, translated and edited by Andy Stafford (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2006), p. 63.

<sup>57</sup> Barthes, p. 64 [original emphasis].

work also alludes to oral sex and, by Freudian association, to the anus. This is because the mouth, as a moist orifice, has similar characteristics to the anus; and both may be penetrated. To quote Freud, ‘the use of the mouth as a sexual organ is regarded as a perversion if the lips (or tongue) of one person are brought into contact with the genitals of another, but not if the mucous membranes of the lips of both of them come together.’<sup>58</sup> Intriguingly, Schiaparelli has consciously included *two* lip-shaped brooches on the design. This could be read as a doubled evocation of the mouth, or as an oblique but knowing reference to metonymic function of ‘lips’ – their ability to refer to themselves and to other body parts – which in Freudian metonymy may mean the vagina and/or the anus. The brooch accessory is therefore functional, feminine and psycho-sexual, boldly alluding to that which is made unobtainable by clothing (a view onto genitalia) and heightening the dramatic impact of the outfit as a whole, which combines sallic and phallic imagery in sexual symbolism of both genders, while also playfully referencing the fetishized Surrealist body.

As I have established, Schiaparelli’s designs are theatrical and striking, while remaining sexual and feminine. In turn, I would argue that Schiaparelli’s work involves much more than a feminine ‘masquerade’ which, for Mary-Ann Doane, ‘in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance’.<sup>59</sup> For a start, Schiaparelli’s garments all highlight and accentuate the female form; they exaggerate certain anatomical parts while keeping the body covered. Furthermore, in exaggerating her femininity, whether by wearing an unusual hat, or through a dress that refers either directly or symbolically to the female’s naked torso, the wearer is compelling others to look at her, admire her and respect her femininity. Schiaparelli’s method of exploring female sexuality was to put it on display; her designs enhanced femininity and sexuality,

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<sup>58</sup> Freud, pp. 63-64.

<sup>59</sup> Mary Ann Doane, ‘Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator’, *Screen*, 23 (3-4), 1982, pp. 74-88 (p. 81).

rather than ignoring them or keeping them at a distance. I would also qualify Evans and Thornton's comments that 'the theatricality of Schiaparelli's work proposes the woman as actress, in terms of both tragic irony and comedy. Ultimately her work suggests that the woman must *play* her way out of her predicament, the impasse of femininity.'<sup>60</sup> More than facilitating theatrics and performance, Schiaparelli's work transforms the woman by allowing her to govern her own identity, flaunt sexual symbolism and manifest her own personality by altering her appearance, but not as a conventionally eroticised object. Work such as the *Shoe Hat* costume therefore allows a woman to show herself off, flaunt her femininity and become a sexual being while keeping her clothes on. Indeed, the wearer does not lose clothing but acquires it in the hat, brooch, shoes and carefully placed accessories.

Schiaparelli's works were vast and thematically varied, and considerable further critical analysis should be done even on her other collected material from the time of *Shoe Hat*, such as *Circus Collection* (1938) and *Music Collection* (1939). In the case of this chapter, the remaining discussion will focus on lesser known works, the first of which is simply titled *Veste* (1938):

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<sup>60</sup> Evans and Thornton, p. 55.

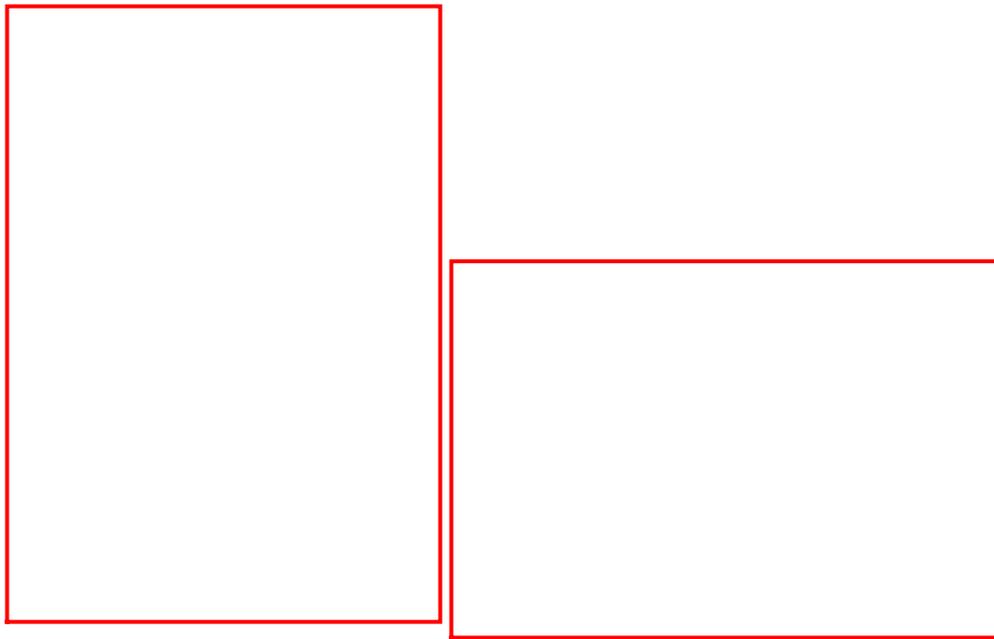


Fig. 7 *Veste* (1938)<sup>61</sup>

This garment can be described as a black, long-length frock-coat with embellished detail that suggests an abstracted, colourful collarbone and ribcage outside the body. This has been achieved by Schiaparelli's use of sequins, rather than the previous technique of black-on-black piping, and again revels in the concepts of play and masquerade, while the coloured sequins enhance the femininity of the costume. Although the item was included in Schiaparelli's 1938 Summer Collection the design's theatricality was not unlike some items in her themed collections.<sup>62</sup> *Veste* from Schiaparelli's *Music Collection*, highlights the bust as does *Skeleton Dress*, hinting at clinical anatomy in the traced lines of a ribcage. Together with *Tear Dress*, the designs figure the body as both an anatomical structure and a site of erotic charge.

Another Schiaparelli design, *Sirène Dress* (1945), provocatively evokes women's genitalia by emphasising the area anatomically. Similarly to the plastic zip

<sup>61</sup> Elsa Schiaparelli, *Veste* (1938), Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Schiaparelli archive [accessed 17 November 2009].

<sup>62</sup> Schiaparelli produced six collections of various themes. These were *The Circus Comes to Town* (Summer 1938), *A Pagan Collection* (Autumn 1938), *Lucky Stars* (Winter 1938-1939), *A Modern Comedy* (Spring 1939), *Return to the Bustle* (Summer 1939) and *Music in the Air* (Autumn 1939).

of the *Skeleton Dress*, the area of fabric covering the pubic area is embedded with a metal zip in playful allusion to 'vagina dentate'.<sup>63</sup> Lurie suggests that a basic function of costume is to distinguish the two sexes, because 'what is properly worn by a man cannot be worn by a woman, and vice versa'.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, Lurie considers how sexual interest (or the absence thereof) can be determined by an individual's choice of clothing (she gives the example of work clothing, which is 'supposed to downplay rather than flaunt sexuality').<sup>65</sup> *Sirène Dress* demonstrates Lurie's comments as a design that on first impression appears more functional than sexual. Almost utilitarian in appearance (it fully covers the body), the dress's dark colour, long sleeves and high neck are practically shielding the wearer from her environment as protective suits safeguard manual labourers. However, Schiaparelli's zip feminises the dress while men's trousers have frontal zips for practical reasons, this zip is purely decorative and has been included for the purpose of drawing attention to the hidden area between the female wearer's legs.

To pick up an issue discussed at the end of Chapter 2, I will now consider the socio-sexual functions of gloves. In the 1930s, for example, wearing gloves was a statement of high social standing that symbolically protected women when introduced to a new male:

A well-bred woman wore gloves - usually short white cotton ones - whenever she might expect to be introduced to strangers. If she forgot or misplaced them and had to touch the hand of a strange man with her own bare hand, she was aware of having made - inadvertently or not - a sexual gesture.<sup>66</sup>

Surrealist artists and photographers used both the glove and the hand as a recurring motif within their work believing the gloves, or a hand like Maar's *Sans*

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<sup>63</sup> Wood, p. 81.

<sup>64</sup> Lurie., p. 213.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 230.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 242.

*Titre*, to be *objets trouvés*, or found objects. Schiaparelli herself created a variety of accessories based upon the theme of hands:

Among the most significant [designs] were the miniature hands that Schiaparelli used as belt fastenings, buttons and lapel clips. These first appeared in her fall 1934 collection in a variety of forms: a white plastic hand with red nails used as a belt buckle, a set of five hands fastening a coat and a cape, and a single hand closing the top of a box-shaped handbag.<sup>67</sup>

Blum notes that in 1934 hands were the subject of a *Minotaure* essay by George Hugnet, entitled 'Petite Rêverie du grand veneur' or 'Small Dream of the Great Huntsmen'.<sup>68</sup> The illustrations accompanying the article, of hands in various poses, recall how carved hands used to be worn as amulets in expressions of different meanings. Two years later, Schiaparelli produced a pair of black gloves with red snakeskin fingernails, a design which reversed a previous photograph that Man Ray had based on Picasso's painting of hands representing gloves.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Blum, p. 122.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 122.

<sup>69</sup> Wood, p. 73.



Fig. 8 *Hands Painted by Picasso* (1935)<sup>70</sup>

In retrospect it appears that gloves have been a consistent Surrealist motif, especially when we regard Matheson's comments about Dalí's objects which, for Matheson, 'clearly privilege fetishism':<sup>71</sup>

In Hugo's *Object with Symbolic Function*, in which one hand clad in a red-leather, fur-trimmed glove caresses another wearing a white leather glove; or again in Dalí's work, in its obsessive repartition of the woman's high-heeled shoe and its inclusion of pubic hairs.<sup>72</sup>

These designs refer back to Lurie's remark about gloves functioning to conceal hands and ensure a woman's modesty. This concealment is similar to Schiaparelli's thought behind the *Skeleton Dress*: what is concealed can possess greater sexual significance than something that is noticeably displayed.

<sup>70</sup> Man Ray, *Hands Painted by Picasso* (1935)  
<http://midnightmunchbunch.blogspot.co.uk/2010/05/man-ray-hands-painted-by-picasso-1935.html>  
 [accessed 29 March 2012].

<sup>71</sup> Neil Matheson (ed.), *The Sources of Surrealism* (East Sussex: Lund Humphries, 2006), p. 63.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 63.

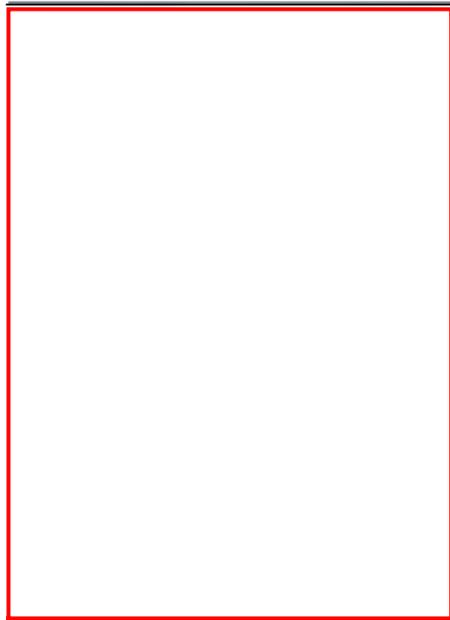


Fig. 9 *Gloves* (1936)<sup>73</sup>

The erotic nature of dress was highlighted by Laver in his theory of fashion's 'shifting erogenous zones'.<sup>74</sup> By this he meant 'that at any period one portion of the female body must be emphasized, but that this emphasis must continually shift since otherwise men will become satiated.'<sup>75</sup> Within this context Laver considered the defunct nature of male fashion, while Flügel psychoanalysed sex in relation to dress. Wilson too has considered how everyday clothing 'must articulate sexual fantasies in a less specific way,'<sup>76</sup> while 'fashion is obsessed with gender', and because of this, 'defines and redefines the gender boundary'.<sup>77</sup> Davis, however, has queried what

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<sup>73</sup> Elsa Schiaparelli, *Gloves* (1936) Philadelphia Museum of Art, image viewed online at <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/65330.html?mulR=23538|52> [accessed 10 July 2007].

<sup>74</sup> John Laver cited in Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Essex: Anchor, 1985), p. 92.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, p. 92.

<sup>76</sup> Wilson, p. 95.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, p. 117.

actually defines an erogenous zone, which he believes may be dependent on the cyclical nature of fashion or changing cultural perceptions:<sup>78</sup>

Why the specific move from one localized zone to another? From bosom to buttocks, let us say, and not to abdomen? Is this purely a matter of some designer's whim, or are there deeper psychic or, more likely, psychological forces at play that influence the direction of the shift?<sup>79</sup>

Davis also raises the issue of erogenous zones differing between cultures: 'why, then, do some African peoples find sexual excitement in distended lips whereas those in the West find them grotesque?'<sup>80</sup> Considering what other cultures find attractive or repulsive has made cultural relativism 'almost impossible to accommodate in the shifting erogenous zone theory of fashion change'.<sup>81</sup> As Davis makes clear, the 'erotic' nature of clothes, like fashion itself, is constantly evolving, and involves both the individual wearing the costume and those who will see it worn.

Repeatedly in these first three chapters I have shown that women Surrealists connect the body to power and female fetish, using psycho-sexual Surrealism in their own way and in their own art. It should be added, however, that Surrealism by women artists was not completely concerned with eroticism and fetish. This chapter will now depart from the sexuality of Schiaparelli's designs and focus on another central theme, that being an affinity with nature.

Motifs of nature in women Surrealists' works are no less loyal to the movement's history, nor do they diminish female empowerment. The designs to be considered in the remainder of this discussion also help to set up subsequent chapters. I will approach these works by turning to the motif of insects, and most particularly

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<sup>78</sup> Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p. 85.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 86.

butterflies, as both an icon of Surrealism generally and as a striking detail within Surrealist fashion.

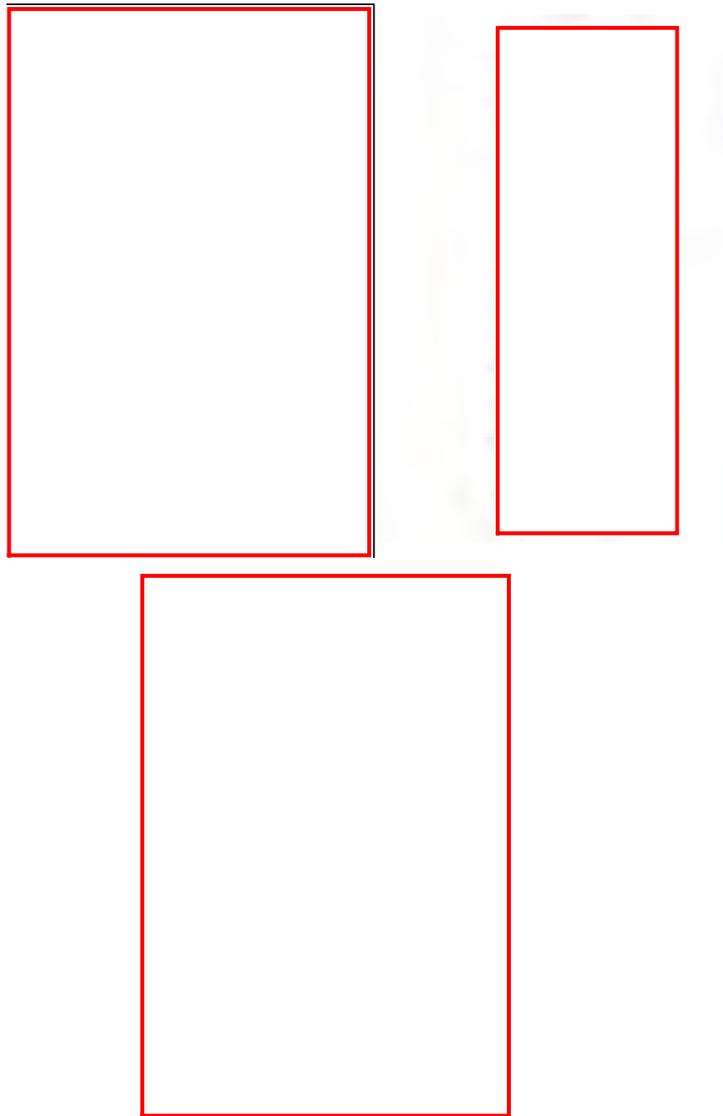


Fig. 10 *Robe du Soir, ensemble deux pièces* (1937)<sup>82</sup>

Schiaparelli's 1937 summer collection, based on the theme of metamorphosis, incorporated a butterfly motif. Blum has commented that 'for the Surrealists butterflies symbolized metamorphosis, the evolution from ugliness to beauty,'<sup>83</sup> while

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<sup>82</sup> Elsa Schiaparelli, *Robe du Soir, ensemble deux pièces* (1937), Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Schiaparelli archive [accessed 17 November 2009].

<sup>83</sup> Blum, p. 151.

both Max Ernst and Man Ray were fascinated with symbolic representation of metamorphosis and transformation.<sup>84</sup> Schiaparelli whimsically incorporated butterflies, fruits and leaves into accessories that included hats, shoes, bags, gloves and hair clips.<sup>85</sup>

Throughout Schiaparelli's career metamorphosis and physical transformation – particularly the idea that any woman could be physically transformed through a well made garment – provided her with inspiration. Such a view may have originated in her childhood, for in her autobiography Schiaparelli writes of herself, in the third person, that 'she was always being told that she was as ugly as her sister was beautiful. So Schiap [sic], believing that this was really so, thought up ways of beautifying herself'.<sup>86</sup> Blum has commented on this particular collection:

Women were literally transformed into butterflies. Butterflies fluttered onto printed dresses and alighted on hats and gloves. The collection included several butterfly-printed evening gowns that were worn with "cage" coats of coarse wide mesh – the butterfly caught in a net transformed into the liberated woman imprisoned.<sup>87</sup>

Symbols of nature, as seen here in the example of the butterfly anticipate subsequent chapters which will show how the fetish, becoming less sexually explicit, orients itself towards nature. In these chapters I will attempt to show that the fetish is intricate and unconventional for women as it operates through many themes that challenge preconceived ideas about female sexuality. This is not unlike how Schiaparelli's Surrealist fashion broke with tradition and established her as a designer who eschewed conventional clothing. The importance of other winged creatures can be noted in relation to Schiaparelli. Her favourite painting was Picasso's *Bird Cage*

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<sup>84</sup> Wood, p. 68.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p. 73.

<sup>86</sup> Elsa Schiaparelli, *Shocking Life: The Autobiography of Elsa Schiaparelli* (London: V&A publications, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>87</sup> Blum, p. 151.

*and Playing Cards* (1933), as she associated herself with both the angry black bird outside the cage and the dove caged inside.<sup>88</sup> Apart from the butterfly print dress, other designs included butterfly clasps and puffed sleeves that created the illusion of wings. The design reproduced below, entitled *Manteau du Soir* (1946) and held at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, is another example, the garment's wing-like sleeves characteristic of a bird or a butterfly. Again, the outfit encases the body, yet the black and white contrast highlights the chest area, while the white lower half draws together between the wearer's legs. Unlike *Skeleton Dress* this design is not formfitting but loose, with comfort appearing to be a high priority.

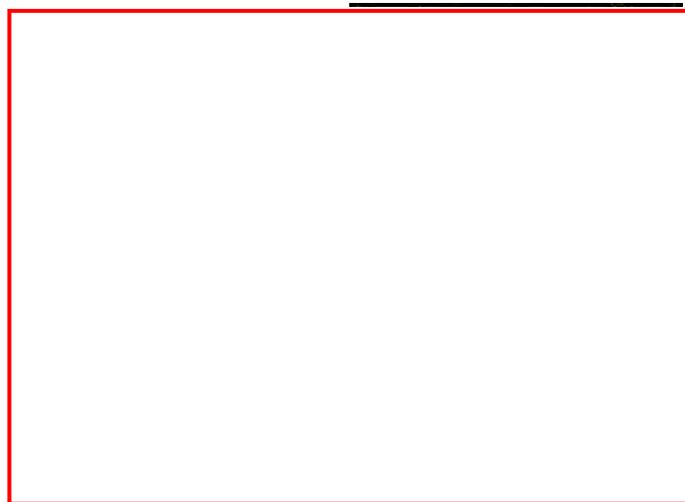


Fig. 11 *Manteau du Soir* (1946)<sup>89</sup>

Although the literal translation of *manteau* is coat, or in this example 'evening coat', the garment's smock-like appearance allows comparisons to maternity wear, and the dress appears very comfortable. This is another contrast to *Skeleton Dress*, which provided the illusion of a second skin. Importantly, comparisons to maternity

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 151.

<sup>89</sup> *Manteau du Soir* (1946), Elsa Schiaparelli, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Schiaparelli archive [accessed 17 November 2009].

and motherhood evoked by the design do not diminish the sexual potency of its wearer, and as we will see from following chapters, in which motherhood will be discussed in relation to highly charged erotic and sexual emotions. In respect of *Manteau du Soir*, white is generally a symbol of purity and innocence contrasting to the often sexual colours of black and red. Lurie writes that ‘all-white clothing has often suggested delicacy, and even physical infirmity or weakness, especially if the material is fragile.’<sup>90</sup> Although the material is delicate and lacking rigid structure, the contrasting colours of black and white are significant: ‘just as white suggests innocence black suggests sophistication – which, after all, consists in the knowledge or experience of the darker side of life: evil, unhappiness and death’.<sup>91</sup> The result in this case is a gown that includes black, not inappropriate at a funeral, and all-white, insinuating virginity.

Although not as erotically stimulating or provocative as the designs discussed previously, we can still recognise in *Manteau du Soir* intrinsic Schiaparelli traits, particularly the drawing of the eye between the legs to the pubic area. While the *Skeleton Dress* used black-on-black piping, here it is noticeable in the combination of contrasting colours and shapes, the V-like white lace upon the black shapeless smock pointing downwards, drawing the gaze to the ground, and evoking the shape of the female pubis underneath the garment. The highlighted white area, drawing the eye down the body to the pubic region, subtly alludes to a virginal purity and innocence, while the contrasting colour draws the eye to the body and provocatively hints at the wearer being undressed and disrobed of her innocence. Again this is an example where Schiaparelli has remained true to a personal trademark: that is, the notion that a

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<sup>90</sup> Lurie, p. 185.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 188.

clothed body can be as sexual and provocative, if not more so, than one dressed in little or no clothing.

In conclusion to this chapter, it can be said that the Surrealist fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli highlights and accentuates the female form, exaggerating or alluding to certain parts of the anatomy while keeping the body covered. Most importantly, Schiaparelli's designs allow the wearer to be proud to display her femininity in a way that had never been previously achieved, revelling in her confident reinvention through clothing and toying with psycho-sexual symbolism. Schiaparelli created a fashion that was playful and inoffensive to its wearer, allowing a woman to accentuate her assets while remaining comfortable, confident, sexual and feminine. This was fashion that courted contradiction and provocation by acknowledging and emphasising the violated female body, but remained harmonious. Schiaparelli allowed women to become flirtatious and assertive, confident yet vulnerable through their chosen costume.

Close analysis also reveals a further possible reason behind the Surrealists' interest in *haute couture*, beyond those I suggested in the Introduction. Matheson, for instance, comments that 'the Surrealist object [...] has deeper roots and can be traced back to various manifestations of Dada, as in the work of Ernst, Man Ray, and particularly in that of Duchamp and his invention of the "ready-made", a strategy whereby mundane objects appropriated from the world of reality – a bottle rack, a snow-shovel – are transformed through the intervention of the artist.'<sup>92</sup> Schiaparelli shares the avant-garde ability to transform everyday categories of object – such as shoes, hats and brooches – into figures of provocation and sexual charge.

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<sup>92</sup> Matheson, pp. 61-62.

Consequently, although her pieces cover the body and prevent unnecessary exposure, they are still able to highlight certain areas of the anatomy through carefully placed detail and accessories, such as by accentuating the pubic area or reclaiming the 'missing' male phallus. Crucially, however, this has been achieved through the celebratory and playful *gaining* of clothing as opposed to the *loss* of it, thereby precluding possible accusations of pornography or misogyny through the overt eroticisation or objectification of the female form.

What is evident throughout the Surrealist designs of Elsa Schiaparelli, as with Miller, Maar and Oppenheim, is that the works themselves are constantly imbued with themes of female intimacy and sexual fetish, while closer inspection of individual pieces enables us to see how they accentuate the playfulness of the body. Schiaparelli, together with Miller, Maar and Oppenheim, acknowledged male themes within orthodox Surrealism, producing whimsical pieces that gently mocked patriarchy and served to balance out any misogynistic characteristics that feminists might associate with the movement. In turn the work of women Surrealists was generally not sexist, even though it remained true to the Surrealists' fundamentals of the bizarre and the erotic. Although these were pieces influenced by canonical male-produced Surrealism, the women discussed here did not slavishly replicate Surrealist orthodoxy. Instead, they choose to work to *enhance* existing concepts and aesthetics, and, without compromising Surrealist resistance by producing more subdued or mainstream pieces, served to extend the boundaries of Surrealism and widen its appeal to a larger audience.

I will now direct our attention to other women Surrealists who, by connecting with their body from a Surrealist perspective, exhibited the female form in a natural, organic state. I will prove that, as Schiaparelli used butterflies as a natural motif,

Leonora Carrington, Dorothea Tanning and Remedios Varo based their work on subjects closely connected to the feminine, such as maternity, nature and, more unconventionally, alchemy. In turn, these women transformed the body from a sexualised vessel centred on the fetish into an understated yet erotic and sensual femininity that is at the heart of work by women Surrealists.

## CHAPTER 4

‘THE COSMOS OF SURREALISM: LEONORA CARRINGTON,  
REMEDIOS VARO AND DOROTHEA TANNING’

They made significant contributions to the language of Surrealism, replacing the male Surrealists’ love of hallucination and erotic violence with an art of magical fantasy and narrative flow, and moving, however tentatively, toward laying claim to female subject positions within male dominated movements.<sup>1</sup>

Although it is noticeable how the activity of women Surrealists had increased by the 1930s with the support of the movement’s founding fathers, as in the collaborations of Dalí and Schiaparelli, the female body remained subject to bodily vilification in Surrealist practice. According to Bradley the focus remained the collective “‘woman” rather than women’,<sup>2</sup> as women Surrealists strove to lose their long established association of muse and gain the label of independent artist. The elevation of ‘woman’ to the status of *higher being* was something that can be attributed to male Surrealism and their tendency to define the female gender as *Other*, in the various guises of the femme-enfant, femme-fatale, muse and goddess.<sup>3</sup> For male Surrealists, women were as much figures of contradiction, admiration, desire and fear as objects of devotion. However, these restrictions resulted in a struggle for women artists, both personally and artistically, as they fought against this label to create an identity of their own. Women Surrealists understood that they were more than objects and wished to achieve their own place as established artists based on own merit.

The opening quotation from Chadwick is a reminder that male Surrealist imagery was imbued with themes that sexualised the body and that women artists consciously sought to change this by fully integrating themselves within the

<sup>1</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 311.

<sup>2</sup> Fiona Bradley, *Movements in Modern Art: Surrealism* (London: Tate, 1997), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 47.

movement.<sup>4</sup> In previous chapters I acknowledged these themes, understanding how, until women Surrealists began to challenge these preconceptions, Surrealist representations of the female body were based upon explicit objectification, violence, misogyny, dismemberment and castration. These offered opportunities for Miller, Oppenheim, Schiaparelli and, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 5, Frida Kahlo, to challenge and rework masculinised tropes. Their depiction of the female form took on many guises, most particularly as an erotic autobiographical figure which formed the basis of their art. Although these women Surrealists challenged preconceived stereotypes through their sexuality, other women artists depicted the female as a figure of nature and as an ethereal, or maternal, being. As with sexually celebrated images that surrounded the female body, these individuals based their images upon 'the female body's organic, erotic and maternal reality',<sup>5</sup> qualities which may be considered as forming the basis of early feminism.<sup>6</sup>

With particular emphasis on the themes of nature, motherhood and alchemy, this chapter will deal with the paintings of Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Dorothea Tanning. Linked both thematically and personally, these artists created their own interpretation of Surrealism, depicting images of femininity while demonstrating how the female body can retain eroticism through seemingly non-sexual associations. For example, Carrington and Tanning's paintings will be considered for their articulation of nature, birth and all-powerful femininity, all qualities that provided their work with an etherealness that, although not as strongly sexual as work discussed in Chapters 1 to 3, were none the less prominent in displaying female sexuality. However, what is most relevant when discussing these artists is their

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Surrealist women in prose see Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (London: The Athlone Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Chadwick 2007, p. 311.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 311.

challenge to Surrealism through their relationship to masculine tradition, adapting patriarchal themes and feminising them for their own creative purposes. Male artists, particularly poets, frequently made the connection between women's bodies and nature, comparing female sexual organs to flowers and surrounding them with luxurious vegetation.<sup>7</sup> Combined with Varo's work, whose portrayal of nature and science replicated such ideas, the result of this study will be to demonstrate how women Surrealists departed from the obviously sexual body to offer a perspective on the *organic body* that remained loyal to orthodox Surrealist themes. Although Chadwick's work, which will be used here, has also focused on the natural world of these artists, this analysis will aim to go further in its attention to femininity and fetish, while also showing how previously unexplored themes widen the appreciation of work by women artists who continually provoked patriarchy and resisted conventional expectations surrounding the place of women in society more generally.

Let me begin by revisiting the male Surrealist interpretation of the female body as a sexualised vessel and object of erotic pleasure designed for masculine consumption. The mannequin, for example, was a frequent figure of such Surrealist imagery for, in addition to facilitating symbolic fragmentation and castration of the female body, its toy-like associations allowed the figure of the woman to be moulded and manipulated by its male 'owner'. Among others, the popularity of the mannequin, or 'dismembered female', within Surrealism has been attributed particularly to depictions of the female muse in paintings and sculptures by de Chirico. Bradley comments on Surrealist figurines:

Headless (and therefore "marvellously" creative, free from the constraints of rationality, "out of her head", even) often armless and ultimately manipulable, the presence of the mannequin in Surrealist imagery evidences the artists'

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<sup>7</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 141.

Pygmalion-like obsession with woman as a perfect being who could bring them closer to their hearts' desires.<sup>8</sup>

Bailly and Morgan have commented that some past research on Surrealist women has focused on uniquely 'feminine traits', such as nature and motherhood.<sup>9</sup> In previous chapters I challenged this state of affairs, showing women Surrealists as challenging orthodox Surrealist representations through depictions of the body in photography, sculpture and clothing. This raises many questions around women Surrealists, including whether 'natural femininity' can be as empowering to a woman's sexuality as their naked body. I might also ask how the work of women artists extends and engages with key Surrealist themes as well as creating distance.

The ways in which nature and motherhood were used by women practitioners, and their relationship to the Surrealist movement, require further investigation. How have women artists adapted patriarchal Surrealism while remaining true to orthodox Surrealist interest in madness and the sexualised body? With reference to *Nadja* and the unstable female I will consider the topic of madness and mental decline. Was madness in some sense pre-programmed into the relationship between Surrealism and women, and does this help to explain Carrington's institutionalisation at the age of twenty three, following an episode in which, she reports, "for 24 hours I indulged in voluntary vomiting induced by drinking orange blossom water and interrupted by a short nap"?<sup>10</sup> Madness, however, may also function in the opposite way, as Hubert has commented:

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<sup>8</sup> Bradley, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Christophe Bailly and Robert C. Morgan, 'Dorothea Tanning', *Women's Art Journal*, 20: 2 (Autumn 1999 - Winter 2000), pp. 56-59 (p. 56).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in 'Art Obituaries', *The Telegraph* 26 May 2011, article viewed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/art-obituaries/8539650/Leonora-Carrington.html> [accessed 8 June 2011].

In rewriting parts of *Nadja*, Carrington champions the cause of Breton's most famous protagonist and in a sense becomes her avenger. She implicitly makes Breton responsible for losing the trace of the enigmatic woman who unwittingly served as his muse and whose wanderings allowed him to escape from a world of unmitigated boredom.<sup>11</sup>

In the Introduction I established that madness is a consistent concern in the work of Breton and the male Surrealists, heralding both a freedom and captivity that varies according to the gender of the individual in which it takes root. Thus Surrealism internalised the default association between woman and madness, to the advantage of would-be male explorers and liberators: in orthodox Surrealism, such as *Nadja* (1928), mad women are incarcerated, while men's relationship to madness is characterised by an heroic attempt to achieve freedom from the mind's limitations. Close attention to Tanning's work allows us to go beyond reading her 'mad laughter' as yet another episode of generic female hysteria.

As was noted in Chapter 3, however, as in the non-sexual collaborations of Dalí and Schiaparelli there existed partnerships in Surrealism of a mutual respect and creativity. Hubert comments that 'from a historical standpoint, surrealism may very well have provided a watershed in women's liberation by encouraging several independent women, who might not have succeeded without male support, to become prominent artists'.<sup>12</sup>

Until now there has been little critical analysis about male muses, how they were a fundamental part of these women's art and how women artists painted their mate as frequently as they were painted by him. According to Hubert: 'for obvious reasons, portraits and self-portraits by one of the partners are more frequent than double portraits. A portrait and a self-portrait, especially if they are contemporaneous,

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<sup>11</sup> Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 117.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2.

can be read in parallel as echoes of the partner's relationship at a given moment. Ernst and Tanning, Ernst and Carrington portrayed each other [sic]; they projected the partner into an elsewhere corresponding to their respective myths'.<sup>13</sup> The ways in which couples shared similar themes in their art and functioned as one another's muse will be explored through this analysis of Leonora Carrington who, during her relationship with Ernst, was as much his muse as he was to her.

In Chapter 2 I acknowledged nature as a recurring Surrealist motif by offering a comparative reading of Oppenheim's sculpture in relation to notions of erotic feeding. As in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), through lush landscapes and gardens, women throughout art history have been portrayed by male artists as in some sense magical or unreal (Manet's naked woman is present but unlikely), or as sorceresses and compared to mythological figures and legends of Celtic mythology. A strong example is the fairy Melusine, who changed into half-woman half-serpent, and who is referred to as 'the White Goddess' by Robert Graves.<sup>14</sup> Chadwick offers further comment on the Melusine myth:

Identified with water and the spring that gushes from the earth, she incarnates the fertility of the soil and guarantees the riches of the harvest. Mother of a large family, she insures fertility among humans. On another level, the symbolism of Melusine's transformation into a serpent that must remain hidden relates to her female sexuality and the mystery of women's identification with hidden symbols of the earth.<sup>15</sup>

By re-evaluating the challenge made by women Surrealists to traditional symbolism, I will prove that these practitioners created playful and provocative images based on the body. This proved an effective method that remained true to traditional feminine ideals but presented the body with greater whimsy and less sexual

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>14</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

degradation. As previously explored, examples of the female body at its most allusive, ludic and metonymic have included Oppenheim's *Objet* (1936) and the fashion designs of Schiaparelli, both artists offering figurations of femininity that are empowering. Although these two Surrealists used the body's sexuality as an outlet for a woman's sexual pleasure and to exhibit humour, other artists depicted eroticism through comparisons to Mother Nature. Chadwick comments that 'Surrealism's multiple and ambivalent visions of women converge in identifications of the female body with the mysterious forces and the regenerative powers of nature'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Surrealism implies that women are born with a creativity and an affinity to nature that is fundamentally Surrealist, and that maternity can be empowering to femininity. What connections did these women make between Surrealism and the natural world how did each artist's interpretation vary in their expression?

I will begin the close analysis of individual works with remarks from Chadwick on Carrington's paintings:

Filled with animals and birds, they spin a web of mystery and fantasy in an illusionistic space derived from Giorgio de Chirico and from the early Ernst. Fairy tales and bible stories filled Carrington's childhood; their influence lends her early paintings an air of gentle narrative.<sup>17</sup>

Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) was described as 'a kind of embodiment of all that the movement held dear in its women: young, beautiful, vivacious, uninhibited and in possession of an imagination that knew no limits'.<sup>18</sup> Once asked her thoughts on the Surrealist identification of woman as muse, Carrington's response was "bullshit".<sup>19</sup> Despite a rejection of her label as a 'Surrealist' cultural history has

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 141.

<sup>17</sup> Whitney Chadwick, 'Leonora Carrington: Evolution of Feminist Consciousness', *Woman's Art Journal*, 7: 1 (Spring-Summer 1986), pp. 37-42 (p. 37).

<sup>18</sup> Bradley, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

continued to associate her with the movement; indeed, her romantic involvement with Ernst strengthened the connection. As can be read in an obituary for her in 2011:

Leonora Carrington, who has died aged 94, led a life almost as picaresque and surreal as her art; born in Britain, she eloped with Max Ernst, hung out with Picasso and Dalí, fled the Nazis, escaped from a Spanish psychiatric hospital and later settled in Mexico, where she built a reputation as one of the most original and visionary British artists and writers of the 20th century.<sup>20</sup>

What is evident in Carrington's work is the presence of nature, mythology and femininity, and as Colville has written, 'in their art and writing, these women [including Kahlo and Rahon], inscribe a myriad of beasts, birds and insects, the richest bestiary being Leonora Carrington's'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Robert Graves' aforementioned *The White Goddess* (1949) was an influential text for Carrington that furthered her interest in the occult and divination,<sup>22</sup> while the spiritual association of animals became a prominent motif during her relationship with Ernst. Significantly the relationship reignited existing themes of nature within Surrealism, as in the first piece for chosen for analysis, Carrington's *Self-Portrait* (1937).

The presence of horses and a hyena is instantly noticeable in this painting: a rocking horse is suspended on the wall behind the artist and another roams free through the open window. Nature and feminine mythology were highly significant to Carrington, her reoccurring motif of horses reflecting her strict childhood upbringing, and the animals' ability to be free and run wild echoing an inner desire for freedom and independence.<sup>23</sup> Carrington's appearance may also be based on equestrian themes as her hair appears as wild as a horse's mane and her clothing is similar to a jockey's

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<sup>20</sup> Leonora Carrington, 'Art Obituaries', *The Telegraph* 26 May 2011, article viewed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/art-obituaries/8539650/Leonora-Carrington.html> [accessed June 8 2011].

<sup>21</sup> Georgiana M. M. Colville, 'Women Artists, Surrealism and Animal Representation' in Patricia Allmer (ed.), *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (London: Prestel, 2009), pp. 64-73 (p. 65).

<sup>22</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 186.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 68.

riding attire, almost as if she wishes to transform herself into the animal. More detailed reflection reveals that in Carrington's paintings animals (a hyena appears in addition to horses) and nature have a strong connection to mythology, as well as to dreams, the nocturnal and the Surrealist unconscious.



Fig. 1 *Self-Portrait* (1937)<sup>24</sup>

I will now direct our attention to Freudian symbolism, particularly as the horse's association to dreams, and the unconscious, remains a vital component of Surrealist history. However, while male Surrealist practitioners might have interpreted horses as a symbol of male fertility and strength, 'the source of Carrington's magical white horse lies not in Freud's use of the horse as a symbol of male power but in the Celtic legends that nourished her childhood'.<sup>25</sup> Although hyenas were another recurring motif for Carrington, making an appearance in one of her first creative pieces – a short story entitled *The Debutante* (1937) – it is the white rocking horse, for

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<sup>24</sup> Leonora Carrington, *Self-Portrait* (1937), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, image viewed online at <http://www.metmuseum.org/special/Matisse/2.r.htm> [accessed 7 January 2008].

<sup>25</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 79.

many years her most powerful and personal image,<sup>26</sup> that is central to Carrington's self-image and which stands in as a personal reference in her portraits. In her first published short story, *The House of Fear* (1937), the horse appears as a psychic guide, 'a friendly animal who conducts the young heroine into a world marked by mysterious ceremonies and rituals of transformation'.<sup>27</sup> The gender associations surrounding these animals are most intriguing and allow us to consider how women artists often created pieces that merged qualities of both sexes. In this case both the hyena and the horse combine masculine and feminine attributes. According to Chadwick, Carrington's horses became 'a metaphor for transcendent vision and a symbolic image of the sexual union which the Surrealists believed would resolve the polarities of male and female into an androgynous creative whole'.<sup>28</sup> This recalls Schiaparelli, who balanced out her masculine *Shoe Hat* with feminine lip brooches upon her jacket's lapels, signalling methods sought by women Surrealists to break the divide of *Male* and *Female* Surrealist aesthetics and move towards genderless representation. I have shown how these women artists imbued their imagery with a combination of motifs crossing both genders, also making it harder to determine the biology of the artist who produced a piece.

In *Self-Portrait*, we are able to see Carrington's technique of fusing the inanimate and animate world (the rocking horse and the live animals) and merging identifications of dreams with reality. This suggests a visual form of automatic writing that has been created through freedom of the mind and expressed through painting. I will now pursue such ideas in Carrington's *Portrait of Max Ernst* (1939), a work interpreted as Carrington's 'love token' of gratitude to Ernst.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Chadwick 1986, p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> Bradley, p. 53.

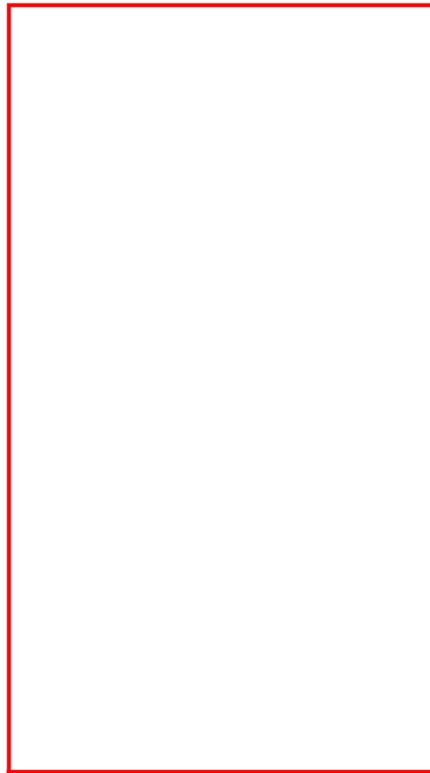


Fig 2. *Portrait of Max Ernst* (1939)<sup>30</sup>

The painting shows a man, Ernst, wearing a red fur coat, bright yellow socks and holding what appears to be a frozen egg. His tail is forked and he seems to be the only unfrozen subject in an otherwise frozen scene. In addition there is a frozen white horse in the background. Hubert notes that ‘Max Ernst holds in his hand an alchemical vessel, enclosing ritual objects seemingly in the process of transformation’, while ‘the painting testifies to the mutual offering that Ernst and Carrington brought to the world of imagination’.<sup>31</sup>

On a first viewing, the painting is a colourful and vibrant image that combines Carrington’s usual motifs of animals and mysticism in an affectionately strange

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<sup>30</sup> Leonora Carrington, *Portrait of Max Ernst* (1939). Image viewed online at <http://i12bent.tumblr.com/post/197459490/leonora-carrington-portrait-of-max-ernst-1938-9> [accessed 14 February 2008].

<sup>31</sup> Hubert, p. 122.

depiction of her mate. Furthermore, this painting can also be viewed both as Carrington's assertion of inner strength and as an engagement with central Surrealist themes to do with women's sexuality and empowerment. Usually an artist who concentrated on topics surrounding motherhood and nature, in this example Carrington has created a powerful image that demonstrates a woman's reclamation of her agency, and the re-configuring of gender relationships, by using her partner as subject. By placing Ernst at the centre of the image, essentially depicting Ernst as her muse, Carrington takes on for herself the way in which male Surrealists favoured the figure of a lover or muse in their painting and writing. Thus Carrington plays with the subject-object gender relations of orthodox Surrealism, reversing the muse convention for her advantage.

At the same time, Ernst is the only unfrozen subject in the painting; both the landscape and white horse, the latter again a metaphor for Carrington, are frozen. Bradley has commented on the implications of this scene, and Ernst's inclusion as both rescuer and figure of transformation, underscoring his role as muse:

Bird-like and also fish-like, Ernst is a vivid splash of colour, capable of liberating and reviving both the frozen horse behind him and the one trapped in the glass of the lantern he carries. If the bird and the horse may be read as totemic substitutions for Carrington and Ernst, the picture perhaps reverses conventional Surrealist male/female behaviour: Carrington may be claiming Ernst as her "muse".<sup>32</sup>

This is a very instructive comment, for the idea of animalism and a 'reversal' of male/female iconography underpins the idea that Carrington feminises Ernst by painting him as a mermaid. Thus Ernst's fish-like appearance, made evident by the forked tail, both references a mermaid and transforms him into a highly Surrealist hybrid. These characteristics look forward to discussion in the next chapter of the

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<sup>32</sup> Bradley, p. 53.

Minotaur as a Surrealist emblem that combined both human and animal characteristics. He is further feminised by red fur, which – in striking resonance with Oppenheim and Schiaparelli – resembles both animal hair and a glamorous piece of female fashion.

Significantly, then, the painting allows the viewer to balance the figure of Ernst as Carrington's 'rescuer' with the idea that he is also her partially and Surrealistically feminised muse. Indeed, Ernst carries an egg-shaped lantern (a feminine reference) with a frozen horse inside (another reference to Carrington), suggesting that he is assisting in her liberation: previously frozen, she is about to be hatched, reborn from her egg-like vessel, the dynamics of the painting her liberation, and evolution, into a Surrealist artist.

Femininity was a consistent theme of Carrington's paintings in addition to her depiction of female alchemy, referencing both fertility and motherhood, which she combined with the themes of cooking and domestic chores, or the conventional, routine activities of a woman's daily rituals. These themes were also incorporated into her literary prose, as 'she began to develop her notions about kitchens as magically charged spaces used to concoct potions, weave spells, prepare herbs and conduct alchemical "cooking" experiments',<sup>33</sup> thus creating an 'alchemical kitchen'. As Hubert says of Carrington's fantastical concoctions and creatures, 'none of them really belong to a known zoological species, for they are the products of imaginary encounters hatched in an alchemical kitchen'.<sup>34</sup> Carrington's name is therefore synonymous with themes of animals and alchemy, pursuing the symbolisation of what

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing 2004), p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> Renée Riese Hubert, 'Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst: Artistic Partnership and Feminist Liberation', *New Literary History*, 22:3, 'Undermining Subjects' (Summer 1991), pp. 715-745 (p. 732).

I will refer to as ‘Natural Surrealism’, with birds and horses used as metaphors for freedom and the desire to escape from patriarchal society.

An idealised existence where femininity reigns supreme can be seen in *The House Opposite* (1947), a painting of an otherworldly house with multiple staircases and levels, which is occupied by women involved in acts of sorcery. An affectionate homage to Carrington’s childhood influences, the painting recalls childhood, dreams and the night with her trademark motifs of nature and femininity. Katherine Conley has commented on this image and themes of patriarchy that exist in Carrington’s paintings more generally:

These portraits of women *in* houses, women *as* houses, share in common a narrative thread that conforms to the cultural expectation that a woman will be identified by her body, with her body, and that the most logical space for that body will be domestic, typified by a house. To be a woman raised with the commonplace that the house is a safe and natural place for her inspired these artists to provide visual commentaries on female bodies in domestic spaces suggestive of inner worlds enfolding other worlds. The notion that we all live a double life, a dream life and a waking one, was fundamental to surrealism and it was Breton’s desire in the *Manifesto* to hope for a *future* resolution of the two states.<sup>35</sup>

In *The House Opposite* Carrington has created an all-female house that parallels a male-dominated existence with domesticity the central theme of these women’s world. Further references to childhood are seen with the inclusion of the white rocking horse, while the presence of a cauldron offers a symbol of female domesticity and of a mother cooking for her family. Chadwick, commenting how Celtic mythology inspired the painting, also notes references to the Holy Grail.<sup>36</sup> Further details, such as a child taking a bowl of the cauldron’s bubbling brew to a

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<sup>35</sup> Katherine Conley, ‘Safe as Houses: Anamorphic Bodies in Outer Spaces: Miller Varo, Tanning, Woodman’ in Patricia Allmer (ed.), *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (London: Prestel, 2009), pp. 46-53 (p. 52).

<sup>36</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 200.

figure which casts a horse's shadow,<sup>37</sup> imply notions of otherworldliness, acts of sorcery and incantation.



Fig. 3 *The House Opposite* (1947)<sup>38</sup>

Carrington's interest in nature and alchemy can be attributed to her residence in Mexico, as during this period of her life her work became greatly imbued with symbols of magic, alchemy and Celtic folklore.<sup>39</sup> Chadwick has commented that '[Carrington's] female protagonists are like the sibyls, sorceresses, and priestesses of some ancient religion.'<sup>40</sup> Such figurations are combined by Carrington with her day-to-day routine, grounding, continues Chadwick 'the pursuit of the arcane and the hermetic in images of woman's everyday life: cooking, knitting, tending children'.<sup>41</sup> Gardens are used to border Carrington's feminine scenes, as seen here in the painted walled garden that symbolises the female body. The painting evokes images of gardens in hermetic literature, for 'hermetic parables by Christian Rosenkreutz and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 200.

<sup>38</sup> Leonora Carrington, *The House Opposite* (1947). Image viewed online at <http://www.pallant.org.uk> [accessed 7 January 2008].

<sup>39</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 208.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 208.

others give a central place to the walled garden as one of the oldest and most indubitable symbols of the female body'.<sup>42</sup>

Another of Carrington's nature motifs were eggs. A symbol of procreation, fertilisation and nourishment, both in a physical sense and to connote an artist's creativity, eggs were painted by Carrington in reference to both child bearing and a notion of femininity as all-powerful. Carrington's paintings also feature eggs used for a practical purpose. These included her use of an egg shaped vessel as an apparatus to warm alchemical ingredients for both cooking and painting, its usage serving as purposeful for both creativity and practicality. Eggs are one of the oldest symbols of fertility in Pagan religions, and have a pivotal role in alchemical and magical processes.<sup>43</sup> They have additionally appeared in numerous works of art by both genders, something made all the more interesting when we take account of the fact that they often featured in work by Ernst.

The characteristics of the egg, including as a Pagan symbol of rebirth and life, can be drawn out in Carrington's *Palatine Predella* (1946). Although I have not included the painting in this analysis I will briefly refer to its significance. Featuring saints, ascendancy and the images of the Goddess, the image depicts a white-robed figure ascending from a flame filled underworld, the references to an underworld underscored by the presence of horned beings. It is significant that the image's female subject wields a flame that does not appear to harm her, implying that she is in possession of a magical, or spiritual, higher power. The colours of the image, red and yellow hues, suggest autumnal shades and the abundance of nature that is seen in the image, while the wintry landscape and horned cows in the painting point to the

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<sup>42</sup> Chadwick 1986, p. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Rowena Sheperd and Robert Sheperd, *1000 Symbols: What Shapes Mean in Art and Myth* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 599.

Egyptian Goddess Isis, also known to be the Goddess of magic, and her associated season of winter.<sup>44</sup>

The themes of fire and the Goddess Isis lead naturally into the work of Remedios Varo (1908-1963) as the second artist to be discussed here in relation to Surrealist alchemy. With particular emphasis on nature and science in addition to alchemy, I will show how Varo's paintings extend discussion of the mystical femininity inherent in Carrington's art, while expanding upon masculine themes surrounding women's identity as construed by male Surrealists. Although, as the following quotation by Hubert demonstrates, it was Varo's subjects – ethereal and otherworldly, blending supernatural realms, genders and combining Surrealism with science – that drove her originality:

Like the Surrealists, Varo painted women. Unlike them, she painted women as active, creative sentient beings – artists and travellers, seers, sorceresses and scientists. As in the writings of Breton, these women have a special purchase on extra logical truth. They are at home with nature and in touch with the spiritual. But they do not exist only for men; they are busy with their own explorations.<sup>45</sup>

Also a woman whose work challenged Surrealism's patriarchal aesthetic heritage, Varo combines 'feminine' nature with 'masculine' science, resulting in the depiction of essentially genderless beings. Varo demonstrated how science could be inhabited by women, animals and birds, all equal creatures able to co-exist without reference to difference between species. Roger Cardinal writes that '[by] taking its cue from the gothic novel, surrealist art loves to dwell in spaces which harbour a mesmeric *otherness*, unexplained yet compelling.'<sup>46</sup> Cardinal's comments apply also

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<sup>44</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 214.

<sup>45</sup> Janet Kaplan, 'Remedios Varo: Voyages and visions', *Woman's Art Journal*, 1: 2 (Autumn, 1980–Winter, 1981), pp. 13-18 (p. 17).

<sup>46</sup> Roger Cardinal, 'Imagining the Magic' in Patricia Allmer (ed.), *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (Manchester: Prestel, 2009), pp. 36-45 (p. 40).

to the way in which Varo's humans are given animal- and bird-like characteristics and are essentially sexless, even alien, in appearance. However, there exists a beguiling gentleness to the subjects that instantly suggests them to be female. This does not only apply to the obviously human figures but also to the alien creatures. As Zamora writes, in Varo's paintings such practice resulted in a world 'populated by sensuous, aggressive, intelligent, mystical women who exist outside the visual conventions of female portraiture, and outside the usual cultural conventions of female activity as well.'<sup>47</sup>

Using her work as both personal expression and to reaffirm her own identity, Varo's later work created 'a wide variety of roles for women: they can be explorers, scientists, mystics, and are sometimes more androgynous than female'.<sup>48</sup> Essentially asexual characters with an element of sorcery about them, her subjects' demeanour is always pleasing and, in spite of the supernatural air that often surrounds them, they are never disturbing. Kaplan also notes that Varo's creatures are inherently likeable, as '[Varo] keeps her characters, and surely herself, from an overbearing sanctimoniousness through her penetrating sense of humour'.<sup>49</sup> Thus, when we look on Varo's images, we see beaming faces, pleasant smiles and an almost self-deprecating nature. Her subjects appear to be in good humour and in the midst of prank-like activity and, although exhibiting a playful exuberance, they additionally appear omniscient, as if they know something that the rest of us do not, and are up to something secret or about to tease somebody. Their impishness is a fundamental characteristic of the magical world inhabited by Varo's characters, and is made all the more distinctive by their features: heart-shaped faces, large almond shaped eyes, long

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<sup>47</sup> Zamora, p. 113.

<sup>48</sup> Kaplan, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

noses and thick manes of hair. Their appearance is not unlike Varo's own; indeed, her images are often thought to be a form of self-portrait.<sup>50</sup>

Varo was the daughter of a hydraulic engineer,<sup>51</sup> and her father's profession proved highly influential to her work, as she frequently depicted mechanical objects. Together with mysticism, magic and the occult, his profession provided a huge influence upon her creations that, according to Zamora, is manifested through her paintings as Varo's art represented 'her personal preoccupation with the presence of spiritual realities in the physical world, and with the process of metamorphosis'.<sup>52</sup> The result of this clash of realms is a display of fantastical flights of fantasy, as Zamora continues: 'Varo's idiosyncratic iconography includes fantastical machines that facilitate metaphysical voyages to other shores, other worlds'.<sup>53</sup> It is these themes of metamorphosis that Kaplan considers to be evident in the teachings of Sufi mysticism, a topic of great significance to this discussion and to which I will later return. As Kaplan elaborates, 'the word metamorphosis contains the Greek prefix "meta", which is the same prefix as the word metaphor. In Varo's paintings, metamorphosis is a metaphor for the very presence of metaphor – that is, for the transformative process of creative activity'.<sup>54</sup>

Although influenced by the notion of enigma, Varo, unlike her fellow Surrealists, did not practise psychic automatism but planned her works carefully.<sup>55</sup> Such meticulousness appears quite at odds with the dreamlike, ethereal imagery that dominated her work. This practice, however, strengthens rather than diminishes her connection to Surrealism. Varo was a close friend of Carrington, and both artists used

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<sup>50</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> Kaplan, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Zamora, p. 113.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 118.

<sup>54</sup> Kaplan, p. 16.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

similar themes in their work, femininity and eggs being prominent examples. As has been previously mentioned, Varo's work was significantly more scientific and less ethereal, yet almost hallucinatory in a way that develops Surrealist interests in the release of the rational mind.

According to Chadwick, Varo's 'vision of the Surrealist "marvellous" built on the principle of scientific illustration' as 'like Dalí, she sought to render the visions of her imagination with the clarity of the camera's relentless gaze'.<sup>56</sup> This is evidently part of the reason why she has been chosen for this analysis of women Surrealists, for while other artists chose to base their work explicitly upon the body, Varo ventured into the realm of the mind, seeking to depict a freedom that could be achieved scientifically. We may think here of the use of hallucinogenic drugs – obviously obtained through science – by male Surrealists,<sup>57</sup> with Varo's art visualising psychotropic events. While male artists fictionalised these accounts through literature, Varo painted her visions, her freedom of the mind and altered states made appealing to an audience through the use of bright colours and by a cast of engaging characters.

Varo's 1961 *The Call* offers a very evocative use of myth and symbolism based on traditional mythology. Most striking is the painting's depiction of fire, an element that has the potential both to scar and to cleanse, and which in astrology symbolises the lion. Leo's zodiac colours, however, also suggest the orange, red and yellow of the sun. Could Varo also be using this image in reference to the solar system and its dominant planet the Sun? Throughout history, the sun as a star has remained a symbol of power and strength. Although traditional astrology implies that the sun is the masculine ruler of the solar system, Varo's interpretation is significantly more feminine, and even delicate. The subject is ethereal and otherworldly, appearing

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<sup>56</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 177.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

a little androgynous due to her angular features, and with a loose and free-flowing cloak draped around her body. The image is not sexual, but rather, it recalls the figure of the Holy Spirit descending onto the heads of the Disciples in the Bible (this also fits the notion of 'The Call'). The themes of nature and the maternal feminine are suggested in the loose clothing, and the drape of the cloth around the being's lower torso accentuates a slight protrusion around the belly area. Is this figure pregnant, and is Varo using the female body to bring out a connection to maternity and nature?



Fig. 4 *The Call* (1961)<sup>58</sup>

The character's hair is striking, a fiery hued giant flame providing a focal point of the image, occupying one-third of the canvas area as it reaches towards the sky as a symbol of power and authority. Although appearing to be 'on fire' she appears unharmed, instead looking relaxed and content, and emanating a warm energy

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<sup>58</sup> Remedios Varo, *The Call* (1961). Image viewed online at <http://www.galeriedada.com/remedios-varo-the-call-00001995.html> [accessed 7 October 2008].

made explicit by the glowing aura surrounding her body. The result is the suggestion of a peaceable higher deity, her clothing signifying maternity but also suggestive of mythological Celtic Goddesses who, conventionally, are depicted wearing free-flowing gowns and dresses.

Continuing with the analogy to mythology, we can see that the being walks through a corridor with a series of figures looking on. Are these living people or statues whose stone-like nature alludes to lifelessness? Do their closed eyes signify devotion to a deity or are they shielding their eyes from the flame? One figure in particular stands at the top of a brief flight of stairs. Could this be another deity, or an intermediary with the flaming figure? Ambiguously resembling Egyptian and Incan appearance, the statue wears a headdress similar to those worn by the Queens Cleopatra and Nefertiti, thereby suggesting an extension of Varo's interest in mythology and folklore beyond Celtic iconography. Is it possible that Varo has painted the venerated Egyptian Goddess Isis, whose husband Osiris was the Egyptian Sun God?<sup>59</sup> This could be the significant meaning behind the image with its symbolic association of fire and folklore. Thus, the painting could represent Isis herself, pregnant with the child of Osiris, symbolically alluded to by Varo in the sun-like glow that surrounds the subject and by the warmth being generated around her body, while her red hair identifies her as a Celtic Goddess: usually painted with gold or vibrant hued hair, such figures recur in Varo's work as evidence of her interest in Celtic mythology and symbolism, which she displayed proudly.

As shown by the previous examples, Varo's art was concerned with myth and nature; her father's profession proved hugely influential to her creative process and led to a concurrent interest in science. While science and nature are often in conflict in

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<sup>59</sup> Carolyn Merchant, 'Isis' Consciousness Raised', *The History of Social Science*, 73:3, September 1982, pp. 398-409 (p. 398).

art and literature, the combination was harmonious in Varo's art. I will now consider this union in brief reference to Varo's *The Creation of the Birds* (1958).

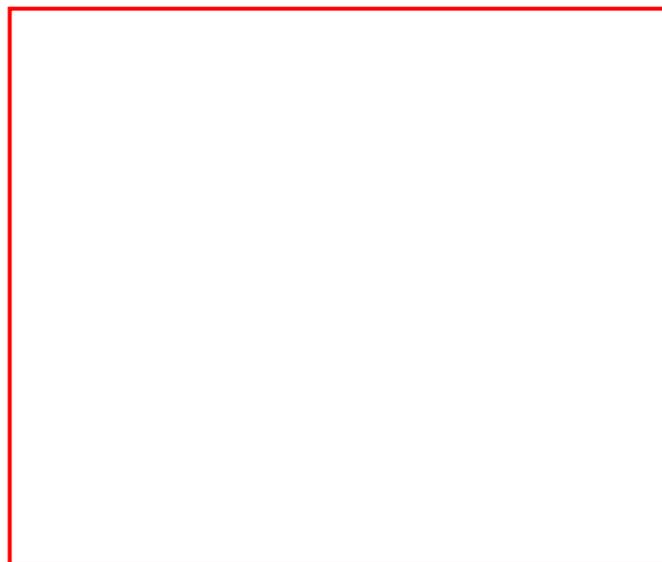


Fig. 5 *The Creation of the Birds* (1958)<sup>60</sup>

This is a wonderful image: what appears to be a humanoid owl sits at its desk working on a scientific experiment. The owl seems to be female on account of the slim legs and large eyes – indeed, it does not look unlike Varo's other female protagonists. It is a unique and captivating image that provokes the viewer to ask a variety of questions, including: what exactly is this creature's profession? Is she scientist or magician? What is the prism that she holds and was she the creator of the small birds seen flying on the table? Has she created any other life forms and did she create the world that she now inhabits? Above all, this particular image allows further discussion of the relationship between science and Surrealism. Symbolically, the painting connects the tubes feeding into the beakers to nature and nurturing. The latter theme was a favourite among Kahlo, Carrington and Varo, the trio frequently evoking

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<sup>60</sup> Remedios Varo, *The Creation of the Birds* (1958). Image viewed online at <http://img.artknowledgenews.com/files2010mar/Creation-of-the-Birds-Remedios-Varo.jpg> [accessed 7 October 2008].

nature through plants and eggs. As established, eggs provide nourishment in both ancient and modern symbolism, and Varo has chosen to prioritise their place in the image by painting them as an egg timer. A scientific and holistic implement, the instrument is significant as it connects to an apparatus that is ‘feeding’ the owl’s paint palette. Is Varo implying that art and nature are able to work together and that in life we require both to sustain and nourish us?

The painting’s subject, a wise, humanised female owl with a miniature violin hanging from her neck, makes for a reference to Islamic philosophy and a return to the theme of Sufi mysticism. It is alleged that Varo was a follower of the teachings of Sufi mystic G. I. Gurdjieff, ‘whose believe in the spiritual powers of music and dance had been shaped by Sufi mysticism’,<sup>61</sup> and that she believed that combined vibrations of light and sound are the source of all creation. Another of Varo’s paintings which visualises this belief is  



 *Solar Music* (1955)<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 202.

<sup>62</sup> Remedios Varo, *Solar Music* (1955), image viewed online at <http://www.remediosvaro-simones.synthasite.com/gallery.php> [accessed 8 October 2008].

In this image Varo has painted birds emerging from trees as music is played by a feminine figure with a stringed sunbeam. The result is seen through the music which causes the birds to appear from their nests, cocoon-like in appearance, while grass and flowers emerge from the cloak that she wears. The sun's rays are the catalyst for this activity, the Earth producing new life generated through the woman's music. The location of the image is an overgrown forest inhabited by trees, its appearance barren and almost dead, the emerging life coaxed by the music, and contrasting the lush green forests that usually signify a fertile landscape. In this image Varo suggests that life and art are not only generated by traditional symbols of fertility and colour, but through the engrossingly impossible notion of an instrument capable of producing sound vibrations through being moved across the wave-particle energy of light.

Varo has again included Sufi mysticism in the image, seen through the music played by the painting's subject, as light emerging from the beam helps the flora to grow. As the figure uses her instrument, flowers reach towards the light as a source of nourishment, nature replenishing the forest as the bird inhabitants look on, while other animals appear encased in cobwebs and trapped within the forest. However, as the music is played they appear to be set free. In this painting, then, Varo figures a woman as both nurturer and scientist, a synaesthetic artist-physicist able to play regenerative music through a higher understanding of light.

Nature and science also combine in Varo's *Nacer de Nuevo* (1960).

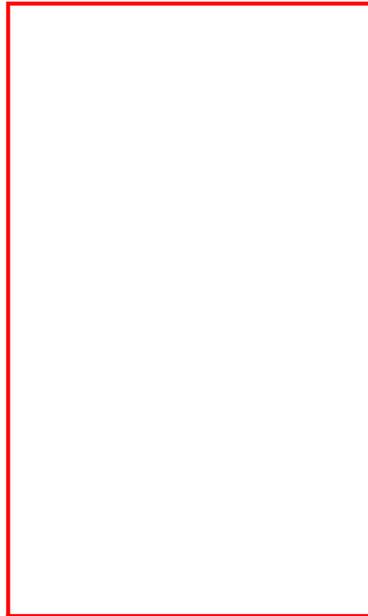


Fig. 7 *Nacer de Nuevo* (1960)<sup>63</sup>

Zamora has commented that ‘Varo’s imaginary spaces are filled with geometrically patterned forms and furnishings – arches, corridors, steps, fountains, towers. Their exaggerated artifice – they are, after all, structures that could never stand – creates the impression of painted theatrical backdrops or stage sets’.<sup>64</sup> This prevails in the above image, especially the floor and the shape of the table, while the tall, arched black and white door is reminiscent of a theatrical stage. The colours offer contrast to the emanating glow, while once again an orange hue surrounds the central figure. Although apparently floating, the figure appears to have materialised from the wall as the paper is ripped and torn. Zamora describes how this suggests the figure’s rebirth ‘by means of and through her gender. She is both witness to the symbolic source of the cosmic force generated by the painting’s centric system – eyes, breast, table, moon, bowl, moon’.<sup>65</sup> The moon allegory – a moon is visible through the hole

<sup>63</sup> Remedio Varo, *Nacer de Nuevo* (1960). Image viewed online at <http://www.angelfire.com/hiphop/diablo4u/remedios.html> [accessed 12 October 2008].

<sup>64</sup> Zamora, p. 130.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

in the ceiling – is expanded upon as the figure gazes at a floating moon in a bowl shaped like a chalice on the table. The multiple allusions to cosmic forces suggest that the figure may have been created by the natural forces of the solar system and imbued with its associated power. The great life energies contained within the planets are symbolised within the subject; she is a force with the potential to create life and these elements exist as part of her essential being. Varo extends such themes in a piece entitled *Still Life Reviving* (1963), which Zamora describes as a depiction of cosmic energy and of the life force that exists in the universe:

The whirling table spins around a cosmic center, a center that is reiterated by the circles expanding outward centrically from it. Centrifugal force sends planetary fruit and saucers into orbit: on the left, a pomegranate (symbol of fertility and maternity in medieval Jewish and Christian iconography) bursts; on the right, other fruits collide, their seeds falling to Earth like meteorites.<sup>66</sup>



Fig. 8 *Still Life Reviving* (1963)<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

<sup>67</sup> Remedios Varo, *Still Life Reviving* (1963). Image viewed online at <http://www.spamula.net/blog/i37/varo13.jpg> [accessed 5 September 2011].

As Zamora has demonstrated, the image replicates the solar system, seen through a series of small planets rotating around the dominant candle at the centre. It is revealing that the fruit, symbolic of female fertility, rotates around the flame, remaining ever present within the planet's orbit while the burst pomegranate, symbolising male fertility, appears to have been shattered by the female's presence.<sup>68</sup> Zamora considers this an attack on patriarchy and the tension that it creates,<sup>69</sup> which is appropriate to the increasing distance I am able to identify in this thesis between the work of women Surrealists and that of male practitioners.

The final woman Surrealist to be discussed here, Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012), is linked to the previous sections of this chapter both thematically and personally. Regularly using the themes of nature and fertility, Tanning was also romantically involved with Max Ernst. In addition to analysis of Tanning's work, I will also ask here which of the artists previously discussed have produced the work closest to orthodox Surrealism. Lumbard sets out the often difficult subject matter broached in Tanning's work: 'Dorothea Tanning brazenly exposes the underbelly of motherhood, puberty, child molestation'; 'she simultaneously exalts frenzied states of madness'.<sup>70</sup> Lumbard describes Tanning as 'an archaeologist of the human psyche, she carefully removes debris from areas within her unconscious, catalogs the shards of memory, fantasy, and prophecy, and then displays them in paintings that are alarmingly beautiful'.<sup>71</sup>

As Lumbard writes, Tanning draws on the provocative, sexual and generally unexplored sides to childhood. Unlike Carrington's images, abundant in their display of femininity through the traditional guises of motherhood and nurturing, Tanning's

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<sup>68</sup> Zamora, p. 131.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 131.

<sup>70</sup> Paula Lumbard, 'Dorothea Tanning: On the Threshold to a Darker Place', *Woman's Art Journal*, 2: 1 (Spring-Summer 1981), pp. 49-52 (p. 49).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 49.

version of motherhood was significantly more disquieting, an exploration of the darker side to childhood and of sexual awakening occurring from a young age. Such themes will be used to validate Tanning's credentials as a Surrealist, as I explore how themes of sexuality in children, and erotic leanings, are established during early childhood. Tanning's work also allows for a comparative reading with Carrington, via themes such as the Goddess, Mother Nature and Paganism.

The first of Tanning's images for consideration is *Birthday* (1942), an image that combines the patriarchal themes of traditional symbolism while feminising them much in the same manner as Carrington's work.



Fig. 9 *Birthday* (1942)<sup>72</sup>

Let me first emphasise that, although I have previously analysed the various ways in which all of these paintings reference feminine sexuality and empowerment,

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<sup>72</sup> Dorothea Tanning, *Birthday* (1942). Image viewed online at <http://dir.salon.com/story/people/feature/2002/02/11/tanning/index.html> [accessed 9 January 2008].

it is important to establish why the following portrait can be justified as a vital piece of Surrealist art. I will begin by considering the hybrid creature depicted for, as has been previously mentioned, mythical creatures such as the Minotaur were a recurring motif of male-produced works and, although later adapted by women artists such as Kahlo and Carrington, Tanning's 'Minotaur' creature is distinct in its own right. Both feminine and bird-like, the creature's feathers form a skirt or dress and enhance the femininity of the painting's subject.

Lumbard writes that, in Tanning's work, 'images of flowers, eggs, and mirrors are called upon to reflect and represent the presence of the female archetype.'<sup>73</sup>

Indeed,

Dorothea Tanning explores female nature. She takes the cycles of female evolution and reveals them as they really are - multilayered experiences of anxiety and joy, fraught with the female condition she covets, a "mad laughter".<sup>74</sup>

Chadwick comments that 'the academic perfection of *Birthday* intensifies the effect of the interwoven strands of fantasy and reality',<sup>75</sup> in that the image is another example of the fantastical self-portraiture that characterises women Surrealists. Tanning has placed herself at the centre of a fantastical scenario and provides a fantastic and mythological creature that can be read as a manifestation of two separate worlds, offering parallels to the earlier discussion of Carrington and her painted desire for freedom expressed in her wild horses. As Cardinal suggests:

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 drawn aside can disclose something terrible, beyond our capacity to apprehend. The true sacred can be harrowing.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Lumbard, p. 50.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>75</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 92.

<sup>76</sup> Cardinal, p. 43.

This has been achieved by Tanning in a number of ways. As suggested previously, the subject's clothing has resulted in a part-animal part-human appearance that evokes the earlier discussion of mythology. However, as she is clothed in feathers I am able to return to the egg as a symbol of fertility, as connected to a winged or birdlike female creature that lays her eggs and nurtures her young. The clothing that Tanning wears can be compared to Schiaparelli's costumes. However while *Tear Dress* suggests a violent altercation has taken place, Tanning's portrait exudes calmness, her bare feet and breasts supporting her connection to the Earth rather than a victim of attack.

Although a winged creature has been painted at her feet, Tanning looks alone in the painting, in the midst of a dreamlike state and tentatively exiting the scene as suggested by her hand upon the doorknob. The torn clothing and open door suggest that she has been involved in an encounter, possibly a fight, with the creature. The Freudian symbolism of the door must also be acknowledged: clearly the painting suggests an attempt by Tanning to navigate her own psyche. As Chadwick writes,

The doors usher the viewer into her "elsewhere," a hidden world of fantasy and obsession. But behind the doors in *Birthday* lies emptiness; poised on the edge of the future, at the juncture between art and life, the artist confronts the possibility of the void.<sup>77</sup>

The question of what may lurk behind the door provides an interesting angle to *Birthday*, offering an element of intrigue and uncertainty to the viewer, and leading us to ask whether Tanning is escaping from someone or something. The door may herald a manifestation of fears and the contents of the unconscious, as symbolised by the notion of a dark realm that exists beyond doors in the Freudian unconscious.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 94.

<sup>78</sup> Hopkins, p. 101.

Caws considers Tanning's doors to be a significant part of her work, creating their own narrative and implying uncertain situations that may unfold behind them. With reference to *Birthday*, Caws describes how 'an almost estatic drama appears [...] reaching past what has so often been called eroticism toward something else, something behind and beyond. Something more profound and more troubling, indefinable.'<sup>79</sup> She concludes that 'doors are all about divination: of space, of sight, of imagination. In a sense, all of these doors recall Duchamp's exterior door of *Etant donnés* (1944-66): they both block visual access and invite seeing through'.<sup>80</sup> Whatever Tanning is seeking by going through these doors is as uncertain to the artist as to the viewer. Caws comments that 'outside in nature, no doors open upon each other, no face appears with inquiring gaze; the observer sees *with* the artist, instead of seeing her alone. This work, profound and magisterial, opens out, not just in'.<sup>81</sup> However, the doors of *Birthday* may signify that Tanning wishes to find something in this undiscovered realm, as though this portal allows her to delve into a part of her psyche never previously explored, and confront an alternative version of herself.

This idea of never knowing who or what is behind the door can be applied to Tanning's *Guardian Angels* (1946) and Chadwick's comments about hurricanes:

These winds transform the world, snatching us out of our preconceptions and whirling us into an ecstatic maelstrom, just as they rip the children from their beds and pull them into a dizzying vortex of beating wings and flying drapery in *Guardian Angels* (1946).<sup>82</sup>

Another thematically similar painting to *Guardian Angels* is Tanning's *Palaestra* (1949). In this piece Tanning has portrayed children in a tired, dreamlike

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<sup>79</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1997), p. 63.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, p. 87.

<sup>82</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 138.

state, the delicate intricacy of their faces and hair reminiscent of Renaissance works. The image plays with unsettling voyeurism: the age of the children is ambiguous, and it is unclear whether these are children or young adults in the throes of puberty. Childhood and adolescence are often overlooked in Surrealism, which is striking given that the notion of child sexuality is taboo, and that Freud brought out the ways in which children, curious about biological difference and the sex lives of adults, effectively explore sexuality from a young age. In *Palaestra*, however, Tanning's figures float free from the bed, their variously semi-undressed or naked bodies intertwining in a range of suggestive positions.



Fig. 10 *Palaestra* (1949)<sup>83</sup>

Age is central to Tanning's relevance to the Surrealist movement via the issue of erotic compulsion. Sexuality remained a consistent theme throughout Tanning's

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<sup>83</sup> Dorothea Tanning, *Palaestra* (1949). Image viewed online at [http://www.bluffton.edu/womenartists/ch10\(20c\)/tanning.jpg](http://www.bluffton.edu/womenartists/ch10(20c)/tanning.jpg) [accessed 9 January 2008].

work. Her 1942 painting *Jeux d'Enfants* (1942), for example, has been described as displaying 'the erotic life of girls, for which she attained notoriety',<sup>84</sup> and formally established her as a Surrealist. Bailly and Morgan have also noted that, after producing this painting, Tanning's art began to be read alongside those produced by male Surrealists:

Tanning's still shocking and daring imagery of sexually aggressive female pubescents inevitably invites comparisons with the art of Balthus and Hans Bellmer, but their works portray sexuality from a man's perspective, as voyeur and orchestrator. Tanning's girls care only about fulfilling their very particular erotic needs. Her work is rooted in her own sexuality, which she candidly, unapologetically, proudly and brutally exposes to the discomfort and/or fascination of the spectator.<sup>85</sup>

The context of Bailly and Morgan's comment becomes clearer when it is learned that Tanning was a sexually precocious child who would sketch anatomical drawings featuring naked figures with feathered wings. This penchant continued into her adulthood as she produced 'a rapturous, suffocating, nightmarish, beautiful, disquieting body of work, which continuously reformulates the female erotic life'.<sup>86</sup> Thus Tanning's display of sexuality was more explicit than the techniques deployed by Carrington, most particularly evident in her images of children's bodies, her subjects exhibiting a sexual awareness at a young age.

Chadwick describes how Tanning transferred the world of sexuality from adulthood into childhood, *Palaestra* revealing 'nubile young girls caught in unseen forces which sweep through the room, animating drapery and whipping the children's hair and garments into the air'.<sup>87</sup> This 'invisible force' implies sexuality or possibly a celestial or mythical energy. Although the symbolism surrounding childhood may not

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<sup>84</sup> Bailly and Morgan, p. 56.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.58.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 59.

<sup>87</sup> Chadwick 2007, p. 315.

initially appear relevant to Surrealism, it remains applicable through comparisons to the mirror and the unconscious as figured in Breton's *Nadja* and in relation to childhood and womanhood. An otherworldliness resides in *Palaestra*, revealing childhood to be a time of both sexual and unisexual awakening, arousing possibilities that cannot necessarily be contained by human control. Chadwick's comment about *The Guest Room* (1950-52), relevant to both puberty and the female ovulation cycle, signals another reason why the image of the egg was used by Tanning as a prominent motif to imply feminine power and Goddesses:

The image of the egg, pagan emblem of creation and the rejuvenation of the earth after the winters sleep, Christian symbol of the Resurrection, combines with the naked child's closed face and unseeing stare (reinforced by the blindfolded shadow that appears on the other side of the door) to form a powerful and disquieting image of the turbulence of puberty and sexual awakening. To the child's body are attached the hands and feet of the adult. The egg, a common initiation symbol in European folklore is echoed by the dwarf's embryolike form.<sup>88</sup>

Tanning's depiction of child sexuality recalls Freud and his published account of Wilhelm Jensen's German short story entitled *Gradiva: A Pompeiian Fancy*.<sup>89</sup> The story centres on a young girl, whom the protagonist believes to be the reincarnation of a lost love, and deals with the way in which his obsession with the girl releases previously repressed desire. According to Bradley, Gradiva 'is a site of exchange between dream and reality and, as such, was venerated by the Surrealists'.<sup>90</sup> This celebration of Gradiva, who embodied a favourite Surrealist trope of the child-woman, resulted among other things in Breton's opening of the Gradiva gallery in 1937. In Tanning's paintings, however, the child does not serve as the objectified

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<sup>88</sup> Chadwick 2002, p.140.

<sup>89</sup> Wilhelm Jensen, *Gradiva: A Pompeiian Fancy* (UK: Kessinger Publishing, 2008).

<sup>90</sup> Bradley, p. 49.

catalyst for the awakening or release of male desire, but takes on her own provocative agency in authentically Surrealist dreamscapes and impossible scenes.

Returning to *Palaestra* I will revisit the issue of violence, alluded to in *Birthday*. Although not explicit in *Palaestra*, the notion of violence is suggested by the ruffled bed linen, which implies less a literally violent altercation than an *internal* struggle, in line with the symbolic dreamscape of the painting as a whole. *Palaestra* may be a depiction of nature as an all-powerful force that both consumes and agitates individuals at various stages of their lives, and which has also been in effect in the scene presented by *Birthday*. According to Katherine Conley, ‘Tanning’s paintings redefine domestic space for young women as claustrophobic, haunted by malevolent spirits: “we are waging a desperate a desperate battle with unknown forces”’, she [Tanning] writes’.<sup>91</sup> The angled doors and wooden floors of both paintings subtly invite the question of whether the spaces presented in each painting are not actually related. For example, could the figure of Tanning be responsible for the agitation in *Palaestra*, having passed into the scene from *Birthday* to ‘rip the children from their beds and pull them into a dizzying vortex of beating wings and flying drapery’? Certainly, an adult presence is suggested in *Palaestra*, through the shadowy figure that hovers in the background near a closed door, holding a long whip: in counterpoint to the liberated playfulness of the floating children, the painting also features a figure of authority and punishment, a Freudian stand-in for the policing of carnal desires. In a variety of ways, then, the painting can be seen to relate to Freudian notions of childhood and to Surrealist dreamscapes. What, however, exists within *Palaestra* that connects these motifs, especially when I have suggested earlier that the image also represents the ethereal depiction of femininity? I would also argue that we can sustain

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<sup>91</sup> Conley, p. 50.

readings of Tanning in relation to motherhood, even if, as previously stated by Chadwick, Tanning's work is undoubtedly also concerned with portraying darker sides of childhood.

For the presence of children in Tanning's work leads to the issue of Surrealism and maternity, a topic which is antithetical to orthodox male-produced Surrealism and, indeed, to the work of many women Surrealists, as Chadwick points out: 'the imagery of the sexually mature, sometimes maternal, woman, has no place in the work of women Surrealists'.<sup>92</sup> Let us pursue the question of motherhood in relation to Tanning's *Maternity* (1946). As mentioned earlier in relation to *The Guest Room*, Tanning's maternal images are filled with the conflict of internal struggle: 'the physical changes initiated by pregnancy and lactation' as well as 'the mother's exhaustion and feared loss of anatomy.'<sup>93</sup> Does this 'loss' relate to previous discussions around castration and dismemberment of the female body? Although attributed to a male fearing the loss of his phallus, it is useful to consider how 'castration' might relate to women and the natural process of maternity. Thus, it might be said that childbirth can in some cases 'castrate' a woman, desexualising her and making her body no longer desirable, as she serves nature's imperative of providing for the needs of another individual. The dog in *Maternity*, Tanning's reference to Ernst's Pekingese, underscores the relationship to nature and mythology. Drawn with a childlike face, the animal frequently appears in Tanning's work as an expression in 'her belief that the spirits of the animal world are, perhaps, more highly involved than those of the human world,' while 'in mythology, the dog is a companion of the goddess Diana',<sup>94</sup> who in Roman mythology, was the goddess of nature. The equivalent to the Greek goddess Artemis, Diana later became known as goddess of the

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<sup>92</sup> Chadwick 2007, p. 315.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 315.

<sup>94</sup> Lombard, p. 51.

hunt, protector of the weak and goddess of the Woods.<sup>95</sup> It implies that by including Ernst's dog in her painting Tanning is drawing on this female deity to protect her and keep her from harm, whether inflicted by external forces that cannot be controlled or from herself.

I will now consider another image that features darkness as signifying Tanning's fear of the unknown and her possible fear of her unconscious.



Fig. 11 *Night Music* (1946)<sup>96</sup>

The sunflower, one of the primary subjects of *Night Music*, is described by Lombard: 'symbolic of the sun, the season of summer and of fecundity, the sunflower is massive in scale and very much alive'.<sup>97</sup> The appearances of the two featured young girls differs considerably: one is blond and fair-skinned with her face exposed and her expression relaxed, while the other is caught in a storm as her hair blows upwards,

<sup>95</sup> Greek Gods and Goddesses, 'The Roman Goddess Diana', <http://www.greek-gods-and-goddesses.com/roman-goddess-diana.html> [accessed 3 July 2012]

<sup>96</sup> Dorothea Tanning, *Night Music* (1946), The Tate Collection, image viewed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=25977> [accessed 15 January 2008].

<sup>97</sup> Lombard, p. 52.

and her face is turned from the viewer. The tendrils at her feet evoke comparisons to *Birthday* as she is connected to nature, while the staircase is representative of ‘the many levels of this world’ and ‘the descent into both another world and the girl’s unconscious.’<sup>98</sup> In turn, the painting relates to orthodox Surrealism’s anxiety concerning the relationship between femininity and the unconscious, for, according to Bradley, in male Surrealist art ‘woman is presented as being in closer touch than man with the desired irrationality of the dream.’<sup>99</sup> Thus, as Bradley continues, in Surrealist art men always appear to be ‘searching for the woman, following her as she turns away from the creative “forest” of the marvellous’.<sup>100</sup>

It may be briefly noted here how Tanning reversed this analogy in *Maternity* (1946), intriguingly capturing Ernst as her muse, albeit in animal form, to parallel Ernst’s own Surrealist creations. With reference to dreamlike sequences and animals, Adamowicz has discussed Ernst’s novel *Une semaine de bonté* (1934),<sup>101</sup> a graphic novel depicting images of culture and nature,<sup>102</sup> and dealing in particular with the representation of the unconscious and dreamlike spaces, through gothic imagery and animal hybrids, in two chapters entitled ‘La Cour du dragon’ and ‘La Rive du coq’. The topography of Ernst’s novel, which is evocative of *Birthday* in its depictions of a winged animal-female hybrid, is described by Adamowicz:

These closed spaces evoke a dream space, whose folds, draperies and furniture are inhabited by hybrids, giant insects and bestial heads. The mistress of the house sprouts bat-wings, while the ribbons and frills of her voluminous skirts become a bestial adjunct.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p. 52.

<sup>99</sup> Bradley, p. 53.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

<sup>101</sup> Max Ernst, *Une semaine de bonté* (Paris: Aux éditions Jeanne Bucher Paris, 1934).

<sup>102</sup> Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), p.

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p. 118.

With further description of ‘La Cour du dragon’ Adamowicz analyses the recurring Surrealist icons of doors, mirrors and paintings which, as I have previously mentioned, can be read as portholes into an individual’s unconscious. She also considers how their symbolism relates to desire, or impending drama, and writes that Ernst has created a space where the real and the fantastic intermingle.<sup>104</sup> Ernst’s *Une semaine de bonté* is therefore another vital point of reference for Tanning’s work, demonstrating the Surrealist penchant for part-human part-animal depictions, and for the substituting of body parts considered to represent phallic substitution and generalised eroticism.<sup>105</sup> The notion of the feminised ‘alchemical kitchen’ can also be viewed as parallel to Ernst’s use of alchemical symbols, with lions, dragons and birds all connoting violence, decay, death and even fornication.<sup>106</sup> Tanning’s adaptation of such ideas within her paintings further enhances her credentials as a Surrealist, while Carrington appears to be the first woman Surrealist who has chosen to reverse the muse dynamic of orthodox Surrealism. Both artists deployed the original themes of Surrealism, producing works that respond richly to being read in relation to Freudian notions and the unconscious.

Tanning’s method has been described by Adamowicz as involving a ‘montaging’ of the body, allowing it to function on a greater variety of levels than in work by male artists. Adamowicz describes how the art of women Surrealists allowed them to ‘extend the body,’ enhancing its life force and connecting it to nature.<sup>107</sup> The fetishised body has receded, while the natural body, with its connection to animals, connects it to a greater sense of energy and life. Additionally, the ‘montaging’ – or superimposing – of themes has allowed Tanning to incorporate Surrealist themes with

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p. 183.

<sup>106</sup> Warlick cited in Adamowicz, p.124.

<sup>107</sup> Adamowicz, p. 183.

aSurrealist [sic] themes, leading to her own personal expression of Surrealism. The quality of distinctiveness is crucial to the choice of Tanning, along with Carrington and Varo, for discussion in this chapter: all offered a highly personalised interpretation of orthodox Surrealism through feminine ideas, taking the movement into the treatment of new topics.

As the chapter has demonstrated, motifs surrounding nature and femininity abound in the work of Carrington, Varo and Tanning. While their fellow women Surrealists demonstrated how the female body could be a tool for erotic sexuality – as in the work of Oppenheim or Schiaparelli – this particular trinity returned femininity to associations of Mother Earth, nature and maternity while building on orthodox Surrealist conceptions. In practice they did not diverge fully from Surrealism, incorporating key themes to do with the unconscious and Freudian imagery in their pieces, and thereby ensuring an authentic engagement with the movement even while they adapted its principles for themselves. Thus Carrington played with the reversal of the muse dynamic, presenting her lover in feminised-animal form at the centre of her image. In the case of Varo, it was noted how her Surrealistic scenes combined science and nature in harmonious actions performed by feminised higher beings. Indeed, the combination of two different or even opposing phenomena to make the impossible possible – as in Varo's treatment of art, science and nature – is quintessentially Surrealist. Tanning, meanwhile, has been shown to offer her own treatment of madness and childhood sexuality in Surrealist painting, demonstrating that women artists can pass through the Surrealist mirror as instigators of conflict and disruption. The undeniable, provocative and strangely rendered erotic aspect of Carrington's work is also inherently Surrealist.

This analysis has demonstrated that work by women Surrealists functions on a multitude of levels. I have previously shown how the female body, usually figured as a sexualised object by male practitioners, has been imbued with a playful sexuality through work in fashion and sculpture. The works considered in this chapter extend further women Surrealists' aesthetic relationship to femininity by articulating characteristics associated with the 'essence' of womanhood. The result of this is a set of pieces, which although ethereal and non-sexual, are vitally and authentically Surrealist. As demonstrated, it is the combination of traditional male fetishism with 'natural' femininity that distinguish such works, and leading into readings around alchemy, the unconscious and nature as offering a form of rebellion.

The figuring of the female body as sexual, maternal and intimately connected to nature will underpin the next chapter, which will deal with Frida Kahlo as another vital woman Surrealist, and whose refusal of the label 'Surrealist' inadvertently strengthened her ties to the movement.

## CHAPTER 5

## 'THE RELUCTANT SURREALIST: THE REAL ART OF FRIDA KAHLO'

Her knowing and her control over what is represented, her production of this object figure, is a part of the power of the representation. For she is not a man, she is a woman playing the game of woman and thus to some extent exposing it. Consciously or unconsciously, she is thereby directly confronting the tensions inherent in portraits of women.<sup>1</sup>

It has been commented that 'Frida Kahlo [1907-1954] called herself a realist who painted her own life',<sup>2</sup> and although her life and self image provided most of her subject material, she remained a complex web of contradictions. Foremost, she is remembered as the quintessentially feminine Mexican artist who used both her gender and sexuality as a tool to explore a variety of roles, amongst them mother figure, artist, invalid and scorned woman. She is an artist of constant intrigue, her life and work spawning films and a current (at the time of writing) exhibition at Pallant House Gallery,<sup>3</sup> and whose work is owned by singer Madonna. Chadwick has commented that 'despite being photographed as an image of exotic beauty and the exquisite wife of Mexico's most famous painter, her own vision of herself was starker'.<sup>4</sup> It appears that Kahlo was aware of the contradictions that occurred within her gender, both as a female artist and what was biologically expected of her in society, and due to these reasons I am able to isolate, and analyse, her paintings with reference to both gender studies and orthodox Surrealism. Furthermore, many of her self-portraits relate to her

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Bonner, Lizbeth Goodman, Richard Allen, Linda Jones and Catherine King (eds.), *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender* (Milton Keynes: Polity Press/The Open University, 1995), p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 166.

<sup>3</sup> 'Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera: Masterpieces from the Gelman Collection', 9 July-9 October 2011. See <http://www.pallant.org.uk/> [accessed 2 July 2011].

<sup>4</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 89.

multilayered biography, displaying varied personae that leave the viewer uncertain as to who the 'real' Frida is.

Before beginning this analysis, it must be acknowledged that Kahlo has been chosen as part of this study both as a female artist and as a vital practitioner of Surrealism. Perhaps the most significant general characteristic of Kahlo is that her celebrity has lingered to this day. Recently her art, letters and personal notes have been the subject of exhibitions in both Mexico and at London's Tate Modern Gallery,<sup>5</sup> while her life was explored in the Hollywood biopic *Frida* (2002), her popularity increasing as a result of this greater exposure. Although Kahlo was depicted in the film by the Mexican actress and Kahlo admirer Salma Hayek, the singer Madonna was also eager to pursue the role, having collected Kahlo's art for a number of years.<sup>6</sup> At the recent Pallant House Gallery exhibition her paintings are displayed alongside those of her husband Diego Rivera.<sup>7</sup> As part of this analysis I will reflect on her status as something of an enigma, asking why she continues to appeal both to the general public and to high-profile individuals. The one general certainty is that the multifaceted layers of Kahlo's persona, when combined with her highly provocative art, have ensured that she remains a respected and acknowledged artist within the history of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art.

Fundamental to this chapter is the fact that Kahlo, as a 'Surrealist' artist, refused to submit to the label, once stating: 'there is no doubt that in many respects my painting is related to that of the Surrealists, but it was never my intention to produce a work that would fit into that category'.<sup>8</sup> She adamantly vetoed any idea or

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<sup>5</sup> These have included The Tate Gallery's *Frida Kahlo* (June-October, 2005) and *The Heart of Frida* exhibition in Mexico (5 December-30 July 2007).

<sup>6</sup> For more on *Frida* see The Internet Movie Database <http://www.imdb.com>.

<sup>7</sup> 'Frida Kahlo & Diego Rivera: Masterpieces from the Gelman Collection', 9 July-9 October 2011, Pallant House Gallery, <http://www.pallant.org.uk/>.

<sup>8</sup> Claudia Bauer, *Frida Kahlo* (Munich: Prestel, 2007), p. 36.

notion that she was part of Surrealism, choosing instead to produce biographically based work that was founded on her internal struggles, past anguishes, and turbulent relationship with her husband and fellow artist Rivera. Despite her disregard for Surrealism, qualities remain that parallel Kahlo with her fellow female Surrealists, most obviously the association with Rivera and the influence that he exerted during her career. According to Renée Riese Hubert:

Since collaboration provides so prominent a role in surrealism [sic], it seems to be linked to the sudden emergence of artist couples within the group. Surrealism is generally considered a movement characterised by a radical transformation in membership and perspective; and it is perhaps for that reason that so many studies focus on single authors and painters.<sup>9</sup>

As with the relationship between Lee Miller and Man Ray, Kahlo's marriage to a fellow artist often overshadowed her independent work, thus creating a determination and desire to create work based upon her own terms, independently of her partner. Perhaps this inadvertently appealed to the movement's dismissal of labels, as in René Magritte's iconic image (Fig. 1), *The Treachery of Images* (1928-1929).

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<sup>9</sup> Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 10.



Fig. 1 *The Treachery of Images* (1928-1929)<sup>10</sup>

Thus, by claiming that she was not how she appeared to others, and despite her protestations, she might be said to have inadvertently strengthened her connection to Surrealism as a movement to which many *did* want to belong. Kahlo's reaction to Surrealism also invites consideration of issues around femininity, gender and biology, particularly remarks from Judith Butler regarding gender, identity and essence:

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethical, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.<sup>11</sup>

Kahlo's refusal to confine her identity, both personally and professionally, is what will be considered in this chapter as I focus particularly on Kahlo's legacy, her challenge to conventional expectations of the female sex and of the female image as presented in male produced art. Most particularly I will reflect on her association with

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<sup>10</sup> Rene Magritte, *The Treachery of Images* (1928-1929), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, image viewed online at <http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=34438;type=101> [accessed 25 October 2007].

<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 6.

orthodox Surrealism, which has its origins in a comment made by André Breton who, in the brochure for Kahlo's 1938 New York debut, commented that 'in Kahlo, and in Mexico generally, he had discovered "pure Surreality"'.<sup>12</sup> This comment appeared to have a great effect on Kahlo, as Lindauer comments: 'in subsequent years, Kahlo made a conscientious effort to repudiate her affiliation with Breton and with Surrealism'.<sup>13</sup> Why did Breton categorise Kahlo as a Surrealist artist when she herself refused to connect herself to the movement? Lindauer elaborates:

The "surrealism" implied in Breton's discovery of Kahlo is distinct from the "surrealism" of Kahlo's subjectivity within masculine practice. However, denying Kahlo's paintings critical access to the language of surrealism maintains masculinist authority; when Kahlo decidedly is NOT as surrealist, the decision accedes to patriarchal authority of women's art based on histories that deny women access to theoretical production. Classifying Kahlo as a surrealist is problematic only when submitting to masculinist authority to define "woman".<sup>14</sup>

This chapter will offer an analysis of Kahlo's art within the context of Surrealism, as well as the ways in which she personally embodied the Surrealist movement. How did Kahlo's image, so often portraying her as a pathetic and wounded individual, assist in establishing her work as part of Surrealism? How did her work reflect her personal turmoil and how did her personal appearance contribute to her *Surrealist image*?

Although it has been established that much of Kahlo's value is based on the perceived production of important Surrealist art, what I am interested in here is the artist as the artistic subject, something achieved by Kahlo through the combination of her art, her image, her style of dress, and the persona that she cultivated. I will consider how Kahlo's personal appearance is perhaps more *Surrealism-based* than her

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<sup>12</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 90.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret A. Lindauer, *Devouring Frida: The Art History and Popular Culture of Frida Kahlo* (New England & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

images, and that her persona – combined with her art – transformed the artist into a form of living installation. Thus, it will be examined how Kahlo used her body as an artistic tool to create a form of Surrealism that can be considered as effective, if not more so, as her paintings themselves? In order to establish Kahlo as a Surrealist I will look at the question of the artist as subject within her own paintings. As Bonner's opening quotation states, Kahlo used her identity to play and experiment, an adult engaged in a child's game of dressing up in which she toys with gender stereotypes and scenarios. The boundaries of gender, as demonstrated by Kahlo, will also be discussed.

To begin setting up this analysis I will direct our attention to queer theory and the ways in which it can be used to help understand Kahlo and her work. Kirsch writes that:

The *principle* of “queer,” then, is the disassembling of common beliefs about gender and sexuality, from their representation in film, literature, and music to their placement in the social and physical sciences. The *activity* of “queer” is the “queering” of culture, ranging from the reinterpretation of characters in novels and cinemas to the deconstruction of historical analyses.<sup>15</sup>

Here Kirsch describes how the term ‘queer’ has come to refer to anything that resists traditional conventions. It is a most appropriate notion to follow when discussing Kahlo, for ‘the popular use of queer and the academic context of queer, then [...] are both based on [...] resistance strategies to sexual and gender labeling’.<sup>16</sup> In this chapter I will consider how play can be associated with queer theory, particularly the merging of gender boundaries, the refusal to be labelled in sexual terms, and the fluidity and display of identity. As Valocchi writes, ‘queer analysis reveals the instabilities in [...] hegemonic sexual formation and is sensitive to the

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<sup>15</sup> Max H. Kirsch, *Queer Theory and Social Change* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 33.

ways individuals may subvert the normative alignments of sex, gender, and sexuality in the construction of heterosexuality'.<sup>17</sup> By resisting and dismantling such boundaries, queer theory and practice may therefore cause unease and complications within attempts to categorise gender and sexual preferences on the basis of biology and appearance. Other elements have to be considered within the equation as individuals may not be reduced to one social structure. Butler has examined how queer theory also relates to the ways in which gender is acted out, through performance or costume, and that may fluctuate depending on circumstances.<sup>18</sup>

I will now begin to apply queer to Kahlo. There are three dominant images of Kahlo: the traditional Mexican female, the mother, and the masculine woman. It has been stated that 'she does not present just one identity despite the unchanging face. Each image explores a different set of feelings, associations and experiences, a different sense of self, different subjectivities.'<sup>19</sup> Kahlo created herself in her own image, her life etched upon her face, both of which she used to expose her anxieties, past traumas and desires. However, there is also an *earthiness* about Kahlo's work: her images often have qualities associated with nature, regularly featuring animals or trees and emphasising their tones and backgrounds with earthy shades of greens, oranges and browns. Chadwick has commented on the connection that exists between the femininity, the earth, and Surrealism:

In *L'Union Libre* Breton lyrically extols the parts of a woman's body as herbs, trees, and plants. This identification of woman and nature is as Xavière Gauthier points out in her *Surréalisme et Sexualité* a theme to which he and other Surrealist poets constantly return, comparing women, especially their

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Valocchi, 'Not Yet Queer Enough: The Lessons of Queer Theory for the Sociology of Gender and Sexuality', *Gender and Society*, 19: 6 (December 2005), 750-770 (p. 754).

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, *On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Liana De Girolami Cheney, Alicia Craig Faxon, Kathleen Lucey Russo, *Self-Portraits by Women Artists* (England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2000), p. 167.

sexual organs, to flowers, metaphorically surrounding them with luxurious vegetation.<sup>20</sup>

Kahlo and other women Surrealists adapt such practice for themselves, replacing 'Surrealism's concern with latent eroticism with an intuitive identification of the unconscious with a nature that is always implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, female'.<sup>21</sup> One of the first female Surrealists to identify the female as connected to nature was indeed Meret Oppenheim, who had been named after the Meretelein or 'Little Meret' of Gottfried Keller's *Green Henry*, a story 'based on the life of an actual eighteenth-century child whose unconventionality deemed her a witch, and which helped to create her own self image as a 'child of nature'.<sup>22</sup> Another such woman Surrealist was the British painter Eileen Agar, whose art combined 'references to the classical past with mythical animals and lush vegetation'.<sup>23</sup> Kahlo establishes her relationship to nature in a number of ways, as noted by Chadwick:

Sometimes she represents herself as linked by blood to parents, by milk to her nurse and Indian Mexico, by veins to herself and to Diego. In many of her solitary self portraits she is connected by roots and tendrils to the earth, to plants tied with ribbons or plants to animals.<sup>24</sup>

Such references are apparent in Kahlo's piece *Self Portrait* (1940) which was painted a year after she divorced Rivera. The image both reflects their separation and affirms a greater connection between Kahlo and nature, especially in her inclusion of animals and foliage, which allude to the myths of Mother Nature towards which many female Surrealists appeared to gravitate. It is notable that the image includes three black animals, in the cat, hummingbird and monkey. Perhaps these are symbolic

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<sup>20</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 141.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p.142.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 142.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 151.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 167.

references by Kahlo to her inner turmoil and allude to mourning for her failed relationship. At the same time, the image is lush, green and lively, the insects at the top of the frame suggesting movement. Surrounded by live creatures and foliage, Kahlo appears to be immersing herself in a natural space suggestive of growth, freedom and potential wildness.



Fig. 2 *Self Portrait* (1940)<sup>25</sup>

In a discussion of Simone de Beauvoir's theories regarding woman's mirror image of herself, Chadwick suggests that 'Kahlo uses painting as a means of exploring the reality of her own body and her consciousness of its vulnerability,'<sup>26</sup> meanwhile, according to Hubert, 'self-portraits and autobiographical writings are genres abundantly practiced [sic] by women and in particular by women artists

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<sup>25</sup> Frida Kahlo, *Self Portrait* (1940), Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre. Image viewed online at <http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/2011/kahlo/> [accessed 15 August 2011].

<sup>26</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 314.

associated with surrealism, whose female representations strongly deviate from generic conventions'.<sup>27</sup> This can be applied to the way in which female artists used Surrealism as a form of exchange or interface between their constructed social persona and inner instincts. Although an image of nature and life, *Self Portrait* is somewhat stark, Kahlo's stare at the viewer appearing weary and exhausted with the necklace of thorns implying a host of negative connotations and given a ritualistic flourish by the dead bird that hangs from it. All of the imagery present here can be linked to a statement made by Fuentes, which sets up discussion of the use of thorns.

Frida Kahlo was a natural pantheist, a woman and an artist involved in the glory of universal celebration, an explorer of the interrelatedness of all things, a priestess declaring everything created as sacred. Fertility symbols - flowers, fruits, monkeys, parrots - abound in her art, but never in isolation, always interred with ribbons, necklaces, vines, veins and even thorns. The latter may hurt but they also bind.<sup>28</sup>

The inclusion of a sharp necklace instantly invites comparisons with Christ's crown of thorns. In this instance we may consider why somebody would choose to wear such an item, especially as the jewellery in this example appears to be piercing Kahlo's neck, the drawing of blood implying a form of self-crucifixion. Regarding the animals, each appears present for a reason and each with a different agenda, some playful and others predatory, their various demeanours signifying the various and sometimes contradictory emotions that Kahlo might have felt as a woman coming out of a divorce. The monkey appears oblivious to both Kahlo and its surroundings, its playful personality evident as it fiddles with the thorns around Kahlo's neck, believing them to be a toy rather than an object capable of harm. The animal appears childlike and may symbolise the child that Kahlo was not able to have, her body

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<sup>27</sup> Renée Riese Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership* (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Carlos Fuentes in Alas Rotas, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2006), p. 15.

having been permanently damaged when, aged fifteen, she suffered a broken pelvis and spine in a streetcar accident.<sup>29</sup> However, the inclusion of both cat and hummingbird is interesting, possibly referencing both Kahlo and Rivera during their union, the predatory feline (Rivera) having killed, or intending to harm further, the hummingbird. This reading reaffirms Chadwick's comment that 'this image of Kahlo at a moment of deep personal loss reads as an image of life about to be choked off and bled dry'.<sup>30</sup>

Another reading of nature in Kahlo's image involves hair, most particularly facial hair, for it is impossible to not notice her joined eyebrows, which recur in her self-portraits. Another symbol of nature and naturalness, in mainstream UK society 'excess' hair on a woman is usually associated with medical conditions or pejoratively in relation to European women. However, while many Western women choose to 'treat' this feature of their body with a range of products or procedures, it is strikingly noticeable on Kahlo's face. In some cultures abundant hair on the body is an emblem of virility and heightened sexuality. This notion is affirmed by Lurie: 'one of the most common signs of an active sexuality has always been the display of hair. Among men, though the hair style is primarily a political and social indicator.'<sup>31</sup> Lurie adds that hair additionally possesses 'a secondary erotic meaning'.<sup>32</sup> Kahlo's own views on hair remain unclear, but her paintings repeatedly make a point of rendering both her joined eyebrows and a line of hair over her upper lip. Thus, Kahlo's open allusion to her own facial hair suggests a defiant naturalness and authentic femininity in spite of her 'unnatural' inability to bear children.

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<sup>29</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 160.

<sup>31</sup> Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 237.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 237.

Lurie continues that ‘long, luxuriant hair is the traditional mark of the sexual woman in most countries and times.’<sup>33</sup> I may in turn suggest that Kahlo, who in her paintings often wears her hair short or up, resisted and diverged from conventional notions of vanity and female beauty, and wanted to desexualise herself, altering her appearance to appear less attractive to the opposite sex. Her frank depiction of facial hair is also queer, in that she can perform a masculinised persona, against the sexed body of her female biology. Thus Kahlo’s appearance plays with contradictory gender associations, for while her hairiness and sexual relationships with women evoke conventionally ‘masculine’ tendencies, her clothes, traditionally Mexican, remained consistently feminine. It may also be noted that in many European countries hairiness is a common trait in women and a sign of heightened virility. Lindauer has discussed two issues of fashion magazines *Elle* (May 1989) and *Vogue* (February 1990), both of which ran features on Kahlo, in respect of Kahlo’s appearance and costume. *Elle* proclaimed that Kahlo projected a “look” of passion, indulgence, and ostentatiousness’,<sup>34</sup> while in 1939 the cover of an issue of *Vogue* featured an image of Kahlo’s ring adorned fingers, making her something of an unlikely and reluctant fashion icon.<sup>35</sup> Tseëlon too has commented on Kahlo’s appearance which, for her, relates to the subversive potential of certain types of femininity:

Femininity is thus a disarming disguise: it is donned, like masquerade, to distinguish the female’s desire of the phallus (of power). Afraid to challenge the male who possesses the phallus directly, the woman deflects attention from her desire for power through its opposite constructing a very feminine, non-threatening image of herself.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp. 238-239.

<sup>34</sup> Lindauer, p. 154.

<sup>35</sup> Claudia Bauer, *Frida Kahlo* (Munich: Prestel, 2007), p. 114

<sup>36</sup> Efrat Tseëlon, *The Masque of Femininity* (London & New Delhi: Thousand Oaks & Sage Publications, 1995), p. 37.

These remarks are useful in relation to Kahlo's ethnicity, her Mexican heritage, and the Latina image that she exhibited. We may view Kahlo as the "Other" woman whose exoticism may be a source of discomfort, anxiety or fear to those unfamiliar with it. Tseëlon comments: 'the visible self, the clothed self, and the fragile self all point at the central role 'the gaze of the Other' plays in the construction of the female visual self. It is commonly accepted that direct gaze is a form of invasion'.<sup>37</sup> Kahlo's image was indeed provocative, exerting a pull on those who spent time in her presence, and was produced by a comingling of subconscious desire, conscious intention to express her body in certain ways, and reflections of her past.

Her difficult lived experience (for example, Kahlo had numerous pregnancies that all ended in miscarriage) manifested itself in her work. Thus Chadwick notes the 'fear of barrenness in paintings dominated by immense empty plains and dry, cracked earth'.<sup>38</sup> With reference to her past we, as her audience, may consider whether Kahlo chose to draw attention to her femininity through costume, specifically selecting outfits that emphasised and exaggerated her female sexuality, while masking her inability to have children. Richmond has commented that 'Kahlo's appearance, rather than her art, attracted attention',<sup>39</sup> while the Tehuana style of dress favoured by the artist was 'a source of physical pleasure'.<sup>40</sup> Richmond has considered the notion of the 'narcissistic woman, a female parallel to fetishism, which Freud distinguishes as primarily male'.<sup>41</sup> This reaffirms the idea of a woman who chooses to draw attention to herself through the construction of her clothing by emphasising her femininity as phallic supplementation. Lindauer continues that 'this narcissistic investment is "a kind of compensation for her recognition of her inferiority". In other words, the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 134.

<sup>39</sup> Robin Richmond, *Frida Kahlo in Mexico* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Books, 1994), p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>41</sup> Lindauer, p. 155.

narcissistic woman accepts her secondary status and comforts herself with an obsessive interest in her body as a fetishized object'.<sup>42</sup>

I will now investigate how Kahlo's very forthright expression of her femininity acted as a reclamation of feminine power that counters the masculine gaze.

As Grosz emphasizes:

The woman who fetishizes her body is not, as Freud suggests, equating the fetish with a penis, but rather using it to signify power and authority. The woman with a narcissistic investment in her body considers it an agent for captivating the male gaze, and it thereby assumes a power to command attention and manipulate male behaviour.<sup>43</sup>

With consideration to the varying associations surrounding both the masculine and the feminine gaze, I will begin with the power dynamic between the controlling male gaze and the passive female returning the gaze. Bonner has emphasised how Kahlo's use of the gaze acted as a recurring method of power and control:

This is a reoccurring theme within her work, for despite taking upon herself the role of the submissive gazee, she has taken control to become the controlling gazer and has acquired power through this self knowing, for her desire to be looked upon enables her to exploit these societal conventions, for she is seen in this way as the subject of her own creation: her lips painted, her hair in complex and very different styles, her clothes elaborate and highly decorated.<sup>44</sup>

By positioning herself as her image's subject Kahlo was both pandering to and challenging this dynamic, complying with female submissiveness by placing herself as the image's focal point to attract attention yet provoking and desiring the viewer to gaze at her, inviting the dominance of the look. However, there is also the challenge of the gaze which Kahlo's work involves, as although she is the subject in the image and has chosen to pose for the portrait, she is additionally the artist responsible for the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>43</sup> Grosz in Lindauer , p. 155.

<sup>44</sup> Bonner et al, p. 166.

image, and therefore also occupies an active position relinquished in the act of submitting to the gaze. As both the holder and the subject of the gaze, Kahlo thus controls the way in which she perceives herself and is perceived by others. This in turn leads to different versions of 'herself' as she explores and plays with the various sides of her persona, appearing feminine and vulnerable in some of her images but masculine and dominant in others. An artist's gaze may control her or his subject but, as Kahlo demonstrates, this may be played up as contingent – and gender traits depicted as ambiguous or contradictory – when artist is both the holder and the subject of the look.

The stare that Kahlo emits through much of her artwork draws attention to her face and its features. The viewer cannot fail to notice how, despite the variety of guises in which Kahlo paints her likeness – and whether surrounded by animals or dressed in masculine or feminine attire – her facial expression remains the same, in a constant visual statement that reaffirms and asserts her identity, her underlying femininity and her sexuality. She remains an immobile entity at the centre of the image, her expression unchanged despite varying locations and scenarios. Her surrounding location may have changed but her self remains, suggesting a personality that does not fluctuate between varying circumstances.

It is striking that Kahlo's art is essentially a collection of self portraits that reaffirm her presence by capturing and preserving her image on canvas. Furthermore, as with her eyebrows, Kahlo's portraits appear to capture conventionally male characteristics within her character. There is also an air of confrontation in her gaze, depicting herself as a scorned and wronged woman as she stares at the viewer with a glare that could be intended for Rivera, as though she is envisaging him as the recipient of her images. Her self-portraits are messages to him and to others about

how he has wronged her and made her suffer. This stare is all that she displays, the lack of any further emotion through her portraits perhaps a self-conscious tool to exercise control and power. That is, by remaining composed Kahlo has distanced herself from stereotypes surrounding women and (the overt expression of) emotion. Instead she appears masculine, dark and poised, conveying an air of sexual dominance, agency and potency by depicting herself in ‘masculine’ ways. Kahlo’s bisexuality could reinforce this reading: her conducting of same-sex affairs implies that her personality was open both to ‘male’ attributes of strength and domination, as well as femininity and motherhood.<sup>45</sup>

Why was Kahlo so keen to depict herself in a number of contradictory gender guises throughout her art, reinventing her image and personality during her career? Biographically speaking, this was certainly influenced by her infertility and by a desire to balance this absence by exhibiting dominance and sexual promiscuity in her self-portraits. It is also possible that she believed that leading a more *masculine* existence could symbolically counteract her inability to conceive. Although such questions suggest a connection between Kahlo and earlier analysis in this thesis of nature and motherhood, there are moments where she abandons femininity altogether, as manifested through specific images where sexuality comes to the fore. This is most apparent in Kahlo’s *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940).

Amongst first reactions to this image, one may think of a child playing at dressing-up: Kahlo, who has painted herself wearing Rivera’s suit, appears to be replicating a young child playing with her parent’s clothes and shoes, and pretending to be a grown-up. However, young girls do not often choose to wear their father’s clothing. Unlike exuberant queer gender parodies – such as drag – this image leaves a

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<sup>45</sup> Rotas, p. 208.

feeling of awkwardness as we look at Kahlo, in masculine dress, playing gender in a reaction against conventional femininity. Kirsch writes that ‘gender is not performed but real, and, certainly, a queer reality is different from a heterosexual one’.<sup>46</sup> I will now pursue such ideas in relation to Kahlo, queer theory and gender essentialism.



Fig. 3 *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940)<sup>47</sup>

To begin analysis of this painting I will consider the implications surrounding cross dressing, an activity which many may have encountered through the pantomime tradition in which characters are played by the opposite gender. Although the pantomime staple of men dressing as women may generate a tone of comedy, Kahlo’s portrait does not produce humour. As Tseëlon comments, ‘cross-dressing is not always comic. It is not funny when a woman is dressing in man’s clothes: only the

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<sup>46</sup> Kirsch, p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (1940), New York MoMA, image viewed online at [http://www.moma.org/collection/browse\\_results.php?object\\_id=78333](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?object_id=78333) [accessed 22 October 2007].

reverse is funny, because of the loss of status displayed'.<sup>48</sup> In Kahlo's case, by choosing to wear her husband's clothing she 'puts on' a form of social status by shedding her performed femininity, and implies an inner resolve and strength through her choice of costume. In this image Kahlo also plays with heteronormativity, as it defined by Valocchi: 'the understanding of power is captured by queer theory's concept of heteronormativity. For queer theorists, heteronormativity means the set of norms that make heterosexuality seem natural or right and that organize homosexuality as its binary opposite'.<sup>49</sup> Referring to the ways in which identity and performance intertwine, Valocchi goes on to reference Rupp and Taylor's illustration of how 'queer analysis highlights the limitations of the dominant identity categories for capturing the complexity of peoples lives, yet at the same time, they demonstrate the continued power of these categories in shaping people's understandings of themselves'.<sup>50</sup> In certain situations queer theory, by shifting the boundaries of existing gender studies, created further identity categories, albeit ones with looser and less rigid agendas. Queer theory also gives individuals the opportunity to act in a manner dependant on company and situation – beyond biological 'truth' – and to make identity and sexuality fluid within the performance of gender.

Butler shows that 'performance' can expose the internal and external.<sup>51</sup> In Kahlo's case her display of masculinity exposes an inner rage, and her performance of roles associated with the opposite gender creates greater opportunities of power.

Butler asks:

Is masquerade the consequence of a feminine desire that must be negated, and thus, made into a lack that, nevertheless, must appear in some way? Is masquerade the consequence of a denial *of* this lack for the purpose of

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<sup>48</sup> Tseëlon, p. 90.

<sup>49</sup> Valocchi, p. 756.

<sup>50</sup> Rupp and Taylor cited in Valocchi, p. 759.

<sup>51</sup> Butler 1990, p. 67.

appearing to be the Phallus? Does masquerade construct femininity as the reflection of the Phallus in order to disguise bisexual possibilities that otherwise might disrupt the seamless construction of a heterosexualized femininity?<sup>52</sup>

I will now expand on these questions in relation to *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair*. Unlike the lush green colours that accentuated a connection to nature in *Self Portrait*, this image is barren, stark and places Kahlo at a greater distance from the viewer. This contrasts to the close proximity of the first self portrait, in which Kahlo appeared more confident and strong willed, alongside more explicit connotations of femininity. When, as the viewer, we allow biographical information to assist in our understanding of the image, which was created during her initial separation from Rivera and prior to their first reconciliation, we notice that the suit worn by Kahlo is Rivera's, while the remains of her shorn hair lie on the floor beside her. The latter portrait, although an attempt by Kahlo to project a masculine dominance and strength, fails to achieve this and instead shows that her desire to attain an internal masculine dominance has failed. It is a painting where Kahlo, her suit and the room create a departure from preconceptions of femininity usually surrounding the female body. This reaffirms Caws' comment that 'the various representations of the female body, and the androgynous one, have to be seen in their setting, within and against surrealism's dramatically explosive, undoing or self-undoing, and undone décor'.<sup>53</sup>

Kahlo's inner strength is displayed by her security of playing with her femininity, and although she expresses moments of craving masculine qualities, this is supplemented by an unfulfilled desire for motherhood. By projecting themes of nature through her work she was attempting to replace something that she was not able to

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1997), p. 303.

attain naturally, using art as a coping mechanism to erase this absence, and exhibiting a confident demeanour to those who would regard a woman damaged in this way as deficient or sterile. Indeed, it is the barrenness of this image which is the greatest clue to this self awareness. The interior space appears to replicate a desert landscape, dry and arid, hinting at her failed marriage and inability to carry a child full-term.

The image is the strongest example of Kahlo's more masculine self-portraits, and relates to Tseëlon's comments that through her appearance the female 'can either side with the phallus and appear masculine (castrating), or she can side with the no-phallus and appear feminine (castrated)'.<sup>54</sup> In this example Kahlo adopts a position of masculine agency by cutting her hair, an especially powerful gesture as long hair on a woman is a great signifier of femininity. By choosing to discard her hair Kahlo has made a strongly masculine gesture as she disregards all of her feminine attributes. She is mocking societal conventions of how a female should dress, how they should wear their hair and how they should be seated. De Girolami Cheney comments that, in this image,

Kahlo is protesting against the stereotyping of femininity in which love depends on an expendable attribute – luxuriant hair – rather than on the person herself. Wearing her ex-husband's oversized suit, she seems to be saying, 'Do I have to be a man to succeed as an artist, whether this role is appropriate to me or not?'.<sup>55</sup>

This quotation links into our previous discussion surrounding Kahlo's femininity, her choice of costume and her sexuality. This is because the image allows Kahlo to project a greater dominance and courage of strength than she may have found possible to project in person. Kahlo's belief that she was more masculine, or a defeminised female on account of infertility and a reduced femininity, also manifests

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>55</sup> De Girolami Cheney et al, p. 178.

itself within this self-portrait as she alludes to conventions associated with lesbianism. Wearing the suit of her husband panders to the social convention of lesbians favouring a masculine style of dress, while the short hair reaffirms her masculine qualities. As I have explained, in popular culture Kahlo was usually depicted as typically feminine, an embodiment of the stereotypical Latina female in her traditional Mexican attire, plaited hair and brightly coloured outfits. As regards South American femininity in the twentieth century, Hoffert writes that

As the century progressed [...] there were important changes in how Mexican-American women defined womanliness. Young women in the 1920s began to assert their independence from their families by challenging the tradition of chaperonage which inhibited their ability to freely associate with members of the opposite sex.<sup>56</sup>

Hoffert continues that others ‘openly rebelled against the system’.<sup>57</sup> I would argue that we can locate Kahlo within the context of such rebellion, given her interpretation of femininity within her self-portraits, especially her symbolic reference to female castration. In this image Kahlo provocatively holds a pair of scissors between her legs, a symbolic gesture for a multitude of reasons, and she appears to have savaged long female hair and its conventional symbolism. The scissors are her weapon and a destroyer of femininity as she takes on male characteristics. Lindauer elaborates on the theme of hair and gender in ways that further relate to Kahlo’s rendering of her own identity:

Hair is a highly charged physical feature but also a symbolic gendered act. Gender identity in Mexico refers much more to active (masculine) versus passive (feminine) “acts,” and is distinct from hegemonic European-American societal gender codes constructed in reference to sexual “object choice” that categorizes people as homosexual or heterosexual (with bisexuality as a

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<sup>56</sup> Sylvia D. Hoffert, *A History of Gender in America: Essays, Documents, and Articles* (New Jersey: Prentice Hill, 2003), p. 317.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 317.

complex sexual identity to which neither “homosexual” or “heterosexual” fields find an affinity).<sup>58</sup>

Apart from gendered associations surrounding weaponry, the appearance of scissors also parallels a playfulness that exists throughout Surrealism. In this instance Kahlo appears to tease and provoke the viewer with the weapon, her prop providing a sexual gesture that alludes to her bisexuality (that is, of a person who is sexually active – or ‘phallic’ – with women). Lindauer has commented on Kahlo’s taking of partners of both genders: ‘in a Latin American sexual system, it is not the biological sex of Kahlo’s sexual partners that is important, but rather her sexual identity was determined by the acts she performed or wished to perform’.<sup>59</sup> These ‘acts’ are a reference to the varying gender roles acted out within a non-heterosexual relationship in which one partner assumes the more masculine, or dominant, role over a more passive lover. It is also interesting to consider Kahlo’s sexual impulses in relation to male Surrealists’ disgust for homosexuality. Was Kahlo’s sexual identity something that she consciously manifested in resistance to Breton’s abhorrence of homosexuality? Was this Kahlo using her sexuality to further distance herself from the constraints of the label ‘Surrealist’? Or did she wish to be acknowledged as a ‘male’ artist by developing sexual encounters with females, believing that she would gain greater recognition in imitating the behaviour and personae of male practitioners? Describing the patriarchal bias that links Freudianism and Surrealism, Meskimmon writes that

The indebtedness of the surrealists to Freudian theory in part accounts for the strong emphasis upon sexuality in their works. Additionally, the links between sexuality, creativity and the unconscious which, though tending to become

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<sup>58</sup> Lindauer, p. 46.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 46.

exclusively masculine in the practice of the male surrealists, permitted women artists greater freedom to explore female sexuality in their art.<sup>60</sup>

Perhaps personally, Kahlo's sexuality and appearance all contributed to a form of power mechanism, compensating for her weakened physical state. I would argue that some of her appeal and recognition derives from the fact that Kahlo's self-portraits depict her as in some sense the performative equal of male artists, opposing the stereotypes imposed on women (both generally and as artists) and presenting a strong image of defiance. Kahlo was more of a Surrealist than she realised, as by consciously choosing to create distance from the movement she irrevocably become even more tightly entwined in Surrealist principles. Breton believed that the Surrealist female was 'born out of Freud's ambivalent and dualistic positioning of woman at the center of the creative and the subversive powers of the love instinct in her incompatible roles as mother and the bearer of life, and destroyer of man'.<sup>61</sup> The contradictory nature of Kahlo's self portraits is especially relevant to Breton's views here, especially when Chadwick notes how these female artists 'metaphorically obliterated subject/object polarities through violent assaults on the female image'.<sup>62</sup> The latter remark allows our return to the topic of shorn hair and scissors, especially the way in which they again refer to sexuality and to the castrated female as figured by Freud. In her self-portrait Kahlo is stating that she has shorn both hair and phallus; she has become masculine yet does not require a part of the male anatomy to do so.

The scissors signify further in relation to genitalia and the *female* anatomy. The symbolism here derives from Kahlo's infertility and her inability to conceive, part of her groin having been severed in the accident which caused her paralysis. In

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<sup>60</sup> Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Scarlet Press, 1996), p. 108.

<sup>61</sup> Chadwick 2007, p. 310.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. 310.

this instance the scissors are representing the metal part of the bus that, although penetrating her as would a phallus, resulted in the impossibility of pregnancy. Kahlo's image replaces the metal of the bus pole with the metal of the scissors, the image a representation of her past and of the plight of having become a biologically 'failed' woman. Kahlo's divorce from Rivera is also potentially connoted by the symbolic evocation of severance and male castration. Thus, even in the single object of the scissors, Kahlo combines 'masculine and feminine attributes, situating herself in an enigmatic category between masculine and feminine stereotypes.'<sup>63</sup>

Also relevant to the question of sexuality in this image is the positioning of Kahlo's feet. Notice how she positions her right leg slightly outwards, almost intentionally separating it from the rest of her body, while the left leg remains positioned in line to the rest of her. This allows a revisit to an issue mentioned in earlier chapters, that of the left side of the body belonging to the feminine and the right to the masculine. This incredibly subtle gesture, drawing the viewer's sight up the right hand side of Kahlo's body, reaffirms the presence of her masculine side, the right foot serving as an indication of her personality and her desire to resist conventional stereotypes of femininity.

Against the context of a tumultuous personal life, in Kahlo's work masculine clothing (and gender attributes) and traditional Mexican fashion combine to produce a multilayered and contradictory set of self-portraits. In particular, as Lindauer writes, 'Kahlo's obsessive need to create herself for Rivera's approbation paints a rather pathetic portrait of the artist'.<sup>64</sup> Further images serve to affirm this, as in Kahlo's *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana (Diego on My Mind)* (1943).

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<sup>63</sup> Lindauer, p. 45.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 156.



Fig. 4 *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* (1943)<sup>65</sup>

Despite their turbulent history, Rivera's presence continues throughout Kahlo's career, becoming a variation of the muse figure reminiscent of the Tanning-Ernst relationship by providing the inspiration for individual pieces and allowing her to explore her identity through various guises. I can also compare the muse relationship of Rivera and Kahlo to that of Nadja and Breton. For example, in this portrait we can see how Rivera – clearly symbolic by this stage in her life of breakdown and divorce – appears to inhabit Kahlo's mind as would a tumour, consuming her every thought. The costume that she wears is almost bridal, a combination of a veil and virginal white hinting at a continued form of devotion to Rivera.

Further issues in Kahlo's work take us back to issues of childbirth.

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<sup>65</sup> Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait as a Tehuana* (1943), Artchive, image viewed online at [http://artchive.com/artchive/K/kahlo/kahlo\\_tehuana.jpg.html](http://artchive.com/artchive/K/kahlo/kahlo_tehuana.jpg.html) [accessed 23 October 2007].



Fig. 5 *What the Water Gave Me* (1938)<sup>66</sup>

Kahlo's paintings are always captivating and *What the Water Gave Me* (1938) is no exception. A woman, implied to be Kahlo, lies in the bathtub, her naked body surrounded by various images that resemble her individual paintings. She is either daydreaming or metaphorically giving birth to the art around her as she substitutes physical childbirth for creative birth. The image is biographical and includes individuals, likely family members, and places of significance in her life. Chadwick has commented that the image is both an amalgamation of contradictions and of parallels to Kahlo's previous works:

If water is the medium of life, it is the mental life that is brought into being here. Daydreaming in the bath, Kahlo peoples the water with a swarm of freely associated images, many of them derived from her earlier paintings,

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<sup>66</sup> Frida Kahlo, *What the Water Gave Me* (1938), Artchive, image viewed online at [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/K/kahlo/kahlo\\_water.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/K/kahlo/kahlo_water.jpg.html) [accessed 1 November 2007].

images of sexuality, pain and death are filtered through the history of her art, and memory, dream and art flow together.<sup>67</sup>

Some Surrealist women (such as Miller, Carrington and Schiaparelli) were mothers, but many others demonstrate a point noted earlier in this thesis that parenthood was in many ways antithetical to Surrealism:

This movement that extolled the *femme-enfant* as the perfect embodiment of femininity had little room for the rigors of maternity; women who were striving to liberate themselves from conventional lives and become artists had little inclination towards domestic life with children.<sup>68</sup>

Surrealist anxiety around motherhood is driven by a fear that women – subjugated in orthodox Surrealism as sexualised bodies facilitating male mental exploration – would become de-sexualised by childbirth. Chadwick has described *My Birth* (1932) as one of the most disturbing images of maternity produced by a female artist, and notes that her paintings ‘are remarkable for their powerful imagining of the conflicts inherent in maternity: the physical changes initiated by pregnancy and lactation, the mother’s exhaustion and feared loss of autonomy’.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 92.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 130.

<sup>69</sup> Chadwick, 2007, p. 315.

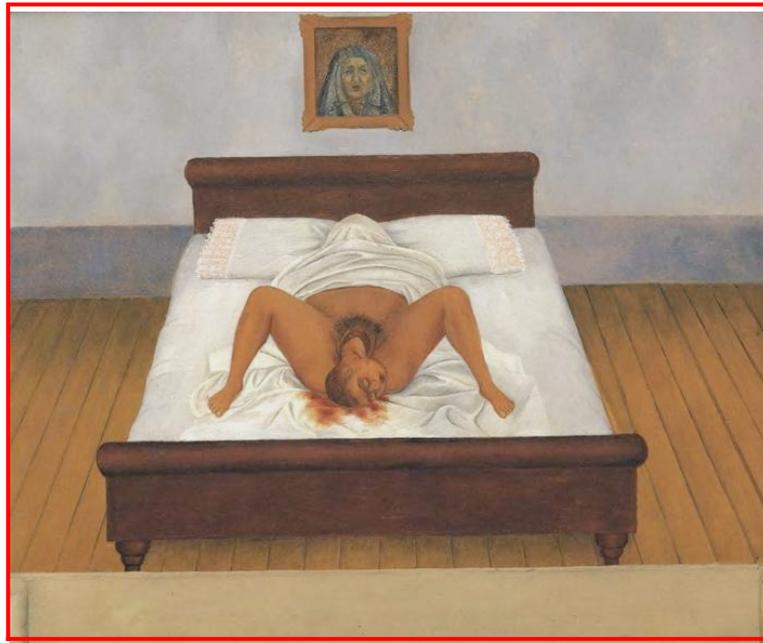


Fig 6. *My Birth* (1932)<sup>70</sup>

In this painting Kahlo depicts a body lying on a bed, legs apart, in the middle of childbirth. The head is covered by a sheet so we are unsure whether it is Kahlo giving birth, or if she is the one emerging from between the figure's legs. Despite the painting's eponymous and visual references to childbirth, the head does not necessarily resemble a newborn child; the ambiguity of the image is emphasised by the associations of death that are generated by the sheathed head and torso of the body. Is this body producing life or is it a corpse? There is a painting on the wall behind the bed of an elderly woman in a blue veil that resembles the Virgin Mary; she appears to be presiding over the birth or death that is taking place in front of her. The painting evokes the life cycle and the intrinsic relationship between life and death.

Kahlo's longing for a child often consumed her art and clearly manifests itself in strange, violent projections. Thus, for Kahlo childbirth takes on dark and bleak connotations; as Chadwick notes, themes of self-violence were taken to a new heights

<sup>70</sup> Frida Kahlo, *My Birth* (1932), image viewed online at <http://www.abcgallery.com/K/kahlo/kahlo3.html> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2007].

by Kahlo's 'terrifying self-portraits in which childbirth rather than the Surrealist act of love forms the connecting link in an external cycle of love and death'.<sup>71</sup> The image offers an impossible but grotesque scenario, contradicting the spiritual quality that is often associated with childbirth. Again, the image demonstrates Kahlo's Surrealist mentality, using art to visualise an unconscious space in which the intense effect of lived mental and physical damage produces unreal trauma.

In spite of Kahlo's protestations against Surrealism, Chadwick's comment about 'freely associated images' is applicable to both Kahlo's character and her art, for the liberated expression of thoughts, desires and sensations was of course fundamental to Surrealism. As regards Kahlo, 'she used paintings as a means of exploring her own body and her consciousness of that reality'.<sup>72</sup> Maternity became something of an internal conflict for females like Kahlo as they appeared more violent than nurturing in their rendering of the subject. *My Birth* has been credited as one of the few depictions of childbirth to exist within Western art that stresses the 'cyclical relationship between fertile eroticism and death by placing the self at the centre of the cycle'.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the violence of the painting is striking in that it relates more to death than to the birth of a new life. Hopkins writes that

Kahlo's strikingly original image, in which she pictures herself emerging from her shrouded mother's body, was stimulated partly by her mother's death and partly by the death of her unborn child. In effect she gives birth to herself. Her work implicitly repudiates the lyricism of male evocations of procreation, asserting that birth is physically messy and emotionally traumatic.<sup>74</sup>

Herrera adds that the infant being born is unmistakably Kahlo on account of the joined eyebrows, and further relates the painting to the year that saw both her

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<sup>71</sup> Chadwick 2002, p. 130.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p.92.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.117.

<sup>74</sup> David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 129.

mother's death and Kahlo's miscarriage.<sup>75</sup> By reconfiguring lived affective experience within an impossible scenario, Kahlo parallels 'European Surrealism's drive to integrate the rational and the irrational'.<sup>76</sup> Further aspects of her work and mentality can be compared to male Surrealists.

*My Birth* may be compared to another Surrealist piece, Max Ernst's 1923 *Men Shall Know Nothing of This* (*Les Hommes n'en sauront rien*). Interestingly, both Kahlo and Ernst have chosen to depict the lower half of the female torso with splayed legs. In both images the head of the woman is also not visible. The formal, geometric rhyme between the images is extended by consideration of Ernst's title, which suggests a male lack of intimate knowledge, and experience, of maternity and childbirth ('Men shall know nothing of this' – and, indeed, masculinity is completely absent in Kahlo's image). In both images the background is almost sparse in content, colour and tone, thereby highlighting the subject matter and the references to bodies and birth.

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<sup>75</sup> Herrera in Lindauer, p. 88

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, p.89.



Fig. 7 *Men Shall Know Nothing of This* (1923)<sup>77</sup>

Although Kahlo proclaimed her work to be primarily biographical, it is easy to see why her work attracted comparisons to Surrealist contemporaries of both genders. Her treatment of femininity leads to work that is about more than straightforward ‘desire’, presenting strange and challenging images that depict or allude to erotic violence and childbirth. Hers are paintings of self-violence based on maternity as a form of radical physical change, fatigue and potential loss of independence.<sup>78</sup> While in some cases sexual violence has the potential to translate into playful erotic acts, the violence mediated by Kahlo has the ability to wound and, depicted as it is by a woman, amounts to an act of self-mutilation.

As Meret Oppenheim’s *Object* is a playful mediation of the female sexual organ, Kahlo used her gender as a resolute assertion of her work and to merge and

<sup>77</sup> Maz Ernst, *Men Shall Know Nothing of This* (1923), The Tate Collection, image viewed online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?workid=4133&tabview=image> [accessed 27 November 2007].

<sup>78</sup> Chadwick 2007, p. 315.

resist gender traits. *Self Portrait with Cropped Hair* is a typical example of the way in which Kahlo toys with her gender in proclamation of her separation from Rivera, defiantly suggesting female domination through the treatment of costume. In turn, Kahlo reminds us of Schiaparelli's Surrealist pieces and of the costume as playful, powerful and as a reminder of how external clothing can be made to connote or refer to the body underneath (Kahlo's 'castrated' reproductive organs, for example). Thus, Kahlo's style of dress functioned as both an integral part of her cultural identity and persona, and as part of her artwork. Kahlo's intricate layering of Mexican dress perhaps was also functional, her 'necklaces, rings, white organdy headgear, flowery peasant blouses, garnet-coloured shawls, long skirts [...] covering the broken body' that she inhabited.<sup>79</sup> As Herrera continues, in Kahlo's case 'dress was often a form of humour, too, a great disguise, a theatrical, self-fascinated form of autoeroticism, but also to imagine the naked, suffering body underneath and discover its secrets'.<sup>80</sup>

Despite Kahlo's protestations about her 'Surrealism', Fuentes has noted in Kahlo's paintings 'an interest in the unconscious; disquieting, often inchoate imagery; and unorthodox subject matter, all traits of the second phase of French Surrealism, when the imagists, such as Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and Yves Tanguy, were ascendant.'<sup>81</sup> Fuentes adds that 'Kahlo remains (along with Posada) the most powerful reminder that what the French Surrealists codified has always been an everyday reality in myth and fact, dream and vigil, reason and fantasy'.<sup>82</sup> As I have established, elements of fantasy and dream are fundamental to Kahlo's work. As Fuentes writes, 'this is Kahlo's brand of Surrealism: a capacity to convoke a whole universe out of bits and fragments of her own self and of the persistent traditions of her own

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<sup>79</sup> Herrera, p. 23.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>81</sup> Sarah M. Lowe in Rotas, p. 27.

<sup>82</sup> Carlos Fuentes in Rotas, p. 14.

culture'.<sup>83</sup> Thus Kahlo loyally draws on references to her Mexican homeland in her treatment of nature, landscapes and infertility. Particularly within her self portraits, she chooses to disguise her biological femininity. Such paintings raise the question of beauty and of what renders something 'beautiful'. For example, of Kahlo's paintings Fuentes asks, 'is this beauty, this terrifying series of open wounds, blood clots, miscarriages, black tears, *un mar de lágrimas*, indeed, a sea of tears?'<sup>84</sup> I would suggest that images and allegories of the grotesque may actually have been beautiful to the crippled Kahlo, who used such ideas to reaffirm her own self worth as a vibrant and sexual woman whose lifestyle and self-image were 'queer' in their unapologetic and liberated divergence from heteronormative convention.

Kahlo's rejection of the term 'Surrealist' may also be rooted in a feeling that her varying personas, as demonstrated in her self portraits, could not be reduced to a single movement. As this analysis has shown, however, Kahlo was an artist who produced two different types of artwork in ways reminiscent of a canonical Surrealist such as Dalí: the first she transferred onto a canvas, and the second she lived through her life. Her life was a colourful montage of vibrancy and sexuality that contributed to a Surrealist persona, ironically cemented by her refusal to acknowledge the label, while her art was a graphic portrayal of her inner emotions and relationship to her own body, biology and sexuality. Although she never intended her work to be formally connected with Surrealism, her paintings became a form of automatic writing as she expressed her innermost feelings and past turmoil, and set up her enduring popularity as a vulnerable yet strong willed woman artist. Whatever her intentions, Kahlo was more of a Surrealist than she wanted to be.

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<sup>83</sup> Rotas, p. 15.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

## CHAPTER 6

## ‘ALICE RAHON: THE LOST VOICE OF SURREALISM’

There were no women present when Surrealism was launched in 1924, nor do any appear in formal line-ups before 1934, but Leonora Carrington, Léonor Fini, Valentine Hugo, Jacqueline Lamba, Dora Maar, Lee Miller, Valentine Penrose, Alice Rahon, and Remedios Varo all figure in many informal snapshots.<sup>1</sup>

Alice Rahon (1904-1987) once commented that ‘the invisible speaks to us, and the world it paints takes the form of apparitions, it awakens in each of us that yearning for the marvellous and shows us the way back to it’.<sup>2</sup> Although very limited information exists about this woman artist, especially in connection to Surrealism, this chapter will demonstrate the connection between both her painting and poetry to the movement, and will consider why Rahon has been largely disregarded by contemporary research compared to the other women discussed in this thesis.

Certainly, Rahon’s bisexuality seems to have partially influenced this exclusion (given the heteronormative and homophobic leanings of orthodox Surrealism). In terms of the wider progression of the thesis as a whole, this chapter will approach Rahon – as a ‘Mexican’ Surrealist, similar to Kahlo and Varo – on the back of previous discussion of South America, (bi-)sexuality, gender and queer theory. This will begin with a reading of *Sablier couché* (1938), Rahon’s poem that brought her the greatest attention but which, like the artist herself, remained something of an enigma. Although this thesis has dealt largely with visual Surrealism, the lack of current research on Rahon makes it necessary to begin by examining this pivotal text before I move on to her painting. This comparative reading will allow this

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *Dora Maar: With and Without Picasso* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Alice Rahon (1951) cited in Whitney Chadwick, *Women artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 201.

analysis to delve deeper into Rahon's persona to create a profile of an often unacknowledged woman Surrealist.

In order to draw out Rahon's Surrealist connections a few carefully selected stanzas from *Sablier couché* have been chosen for analysis, as determined by their themes, relationship to Surrealism, and similarities to the work of other women Surrealists on which I have focused previously. In keeping with previous chapters, her work will also be analysed in chronological order. Before beginning analysis of *Sablier couché*, however, some background information on Rahon is required to contextualise discussion.

Rahon was born Alice Marie Ivonne Philippot (later Rahon) in Chenecey-Buillon, a region of the France's Franche-Comté. She turned to the Surrealist movement after an encounter with her future husband Wolfgang Paalen; over the course of her marriage Rahon had sexual relationships with writer Elizabeth Smart and artist Sonja Sekula (she and Paalen divorced in 1947).<sup>3</sup> Although Rahon was largely a painter, Paalen's poetry proved influential throughout her career and, following a move to India with Valentine Penrose in 1926, she published her first book of poetry entitled *À même la terre*, followed by *Sablier couché* and *Noir animal* (1936), while a later residence in Mexico saw Paalen become her artistic mentor. Between 1942 and 1944 she concentrated on painting and worked for *Dyn*, the journal founded by Paalen and César Moro. Her first exhibition of paintings was held at the Galeria de Arte Mexicano in Mexico City during 1944, later followed by others held in New York and Los Angeles. Like Carrington and Varo, Mexico made a profound

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<sup>3</sup> For more biographical information on Alice Rahon see Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 121.

impression upon Rahon, influencing both her art and poetry, and was a frequent subject of her work.<sup>4</sup>

It is unfortunate that her marriage to Paalen relegated Rahon to muse status and kept her independent work from a wider audience. As noted in Chapter 4, in 1937 Breton opened the Surrealist gallery *Gradiva* on the rue de Seine, the mythological figure of the *femme-enfant* having previously appeared in works by Breton, Dalí and Masson, as well as in Freudian writing.<sup>5</sup> In this instance the gallery had used Rahon's name, along with other women Surrealists of the 1930s, to frame Gradiva's name on the wall. Chadwick elaborates on the figure of Gradiva:

[Gradiva embodies] a means of symbolically demonstrating the dynamism of repressed erotic desire and as a myth of metamorphosis. The mythic image of Gradiva subsumed the lives of real women associated with the Surrealists. "Gala is Trinity," Dalí said. "She is Gradiva the woman who advances." She is, according to Paul Eluard, "the woman whose glance pierces walls".<sup>6</sup>

In earlier chapters I demonstrated how myth and symbolism surrounding femininity were adopted by women Surrealists, with comparisons drawn in relation to Mother Earth, magic and mysticism. Although these themes are all relevant to Rahon, in this chapter I will show that Chadwick's comments about repressed erotic desire are particularly significant, by examining Rahon's interpretation of female sexuality as raw, primitive and erotic. This will begin by a close reading of Rahon's poetry.<sup>7</sup>

With knowledge of her personal life the reader may read *Sablier couché* as an autobiographical piece. In the work Rahon has placed herself as both the poem's protagonist and narrator, evoking emotional issues of abandonment, torment and a

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<sup>4</sup> Chadwick, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Sablier Couché* was printed in small numbers. A rare copy of the book was consulted at the National Art Library, within the V&A Museum, during October 2010.

lover's ill treatment. An early indication of this comes in the following reference to a bereft and entrapped female figure:

La femme déserte comme la maison vendue  
prise au filet sans bruit de langues (pp. 10-11).

The title of Rahon's book also primes us to issues around femininity, for when translated *Sablier couché* becomes 'Hourglass Lying/Lain Down', suggesting a reference to an hourglass female body shape and, in turn, to the female body as a vessel and timepiece. Thus Rahon indicates that the poem is about, or narrated from, a woman's perspective, either that of Rahon herself or (with knowledge of her bisexuality) a female lover, or indeed both. The disjointed structure of the poem, with breaks in the narrative, and alternating locations and themes, give it a certain difficulty and character. In spite of this, however, central themes emerge in the form of nature, animals, seasons and mythology. The poem describes processes of mythological metamorphoses that are similar to Kahlo's paintings of animals, particularly cats, panthers and monkeys, as Rahon creates alternate manifestations of herself in animal or symbolic form. Animal transformation, including tales of nonhuman Gods and animal worship, are frequent within the folklore and myth of ancient Greece and Rome,<sup>8</sup> and the Surrealists also drew on such themes as part of their own marvellous creations.

Structurally, *Sablier couché* possesses similar attributes to orthodox Surrealist literature: disjointed verses, confusion between who is speaking and when, and conflict between unconscious and waking states. The contradiction between lush landscapes against emotional abandonment and turmoil drives a visual journey

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<sup>8</sup> William Hansen, *Classical Mythology: A Guide to the Mythical World of the Greeks and Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

through fabrics, materials and sensations that is tactile and sensual, sad yet euphoric. We see the seasons change from autumn – ‘tes feuillages ne sont pas nés’ (line 18) (your leaves are not born) – to the spring Harvest, as Rahon takes the reader on a spiritual and physical journey through the poem. Unlike the playfully erotic provocation of Oppenheim or Schiaparelli, Rahon’s evocation of sexuality is achieved through nature based elements, such as landscapes, forests and greenery. In the example of *Sablier couché*, the poem’s speaking subject – who adopts the roles both of Rahon herself and as a female other – is akin to a divine entity, or a spiritual being, able to traverse different worlds or spaces, and manifest itself in various forms. Again the connection between women Surrealists and the natural world makes an appearance with a possible reference to the Goddess Gaia, who was known as Earth Mother or Mother Earth, her presence reaffirmed by the prominent symbolism of nature and animals in the poem.<sup>9</sup>

The appearance of an otherworldly presence leads us into the topic of transformation, of which, according to Hansen, there are three main types in mythology: radical transformations, temporary transformations, and aspectual transformations.<sup>10</sup> Hansen’s first type of transformation is the most relevant to *Sablier couché*, with the idea that the human in question is transformed into ‘an animal, plant, or inanimate object’ especially significant, as in the following verse:

la colombe  
à la robe usée de captivité  
en cage d’osier à la fenêtre  
tes feuillages ne sont pas nés  
le merle oiseau des crépuscules  
je ne peux à l’aube écouter ta voix  
qui ferme les portes et les yeux  
qui a bu mon coeur (lines 15-22).

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<sup>9</sup> Ron Leadbetter, ‘Gaia’, *Encyclopedia Mythica* <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/g/gaia.html> [accessed 9 September 2011].

<sup>10</sup> Hansen, p. 303.

For reasons that I will develop shortly, this extract identifies Rahon herself with the figure of a bird. Indeed, in continuation of the discussion of the natural world in our chapter on Carrington, Varo and Tanning, I would suggest that *Sablier couché* evokes the theme of animal metamorphosis. Although mythology is full of tales of animal transformation, changes into birds are not particularly frequent mythological occurrences. According to Hamel, the most frequent transformations were of humans into cats, because ‘the cat, as appears from many legends, easily holds the place amongst mystic animals that the serpent has among reptiles, partly no doubt because of its close relationship with sorcerers and witches.’<sup>11</sup> He continues that ‘the Egyptians also believed that Diana, wishing to escape from giants, chose to hide herself in the form of a cat,’ while ‘cats, like foxes, are credited in Japan with the power of assuming human shape in order to bewitch mankind’.<sup>12</sup> Animal metamorphosis is also relevant to fables, as demonstrated in Aesop’s *The Cat Maiden*:

The gods were once disputing whether it was possible for a living being to change its nature. Jupiter said “Yes,” but Venus said “No.” So, to try the question, Jupiter turned a Cat into a Maiden, and gave her to a young man for a wife. The wedding was duly performed and the young couple sat down to the wedding-feast. “See,” said Jupiter, to Venus, “how becomingly she behaves. Who could tell that yesterday she was but a Cat? Surely her nature is changed?” “Wait a minute,” replied Venus, and let loose a mouse into the room. No sooner did the bride see this than she jumped up from her seat and tried to pounce upon the mouse. “Ah, you see,” said Venus: “*Nature will out.*”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Frank Hamel, *Werewolves, Bird-Women, Tiger-Men and Other Human Animals* (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), p. 189.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>13</sup> Aesop, *The Cat Maiden*, <http://www.aesops-fables.org.uk/aesop-fable-the-cat-maiden.htm> [accessed 14 December 2010].

Another instance in *Sablier couché* where Rahon describes animal transformation and fables occurs in the lines ‘Un chat tombe d’un arbre/Comme une goutte,’ (lines 51-52). There are also mythological undertones in: ‘Voici Orion le grande [sic] homme du ciel/étendu sur la plus haute montagne/parmi les grandes flaques du sang blanc des pierres’ (lines 23-24). Rahon’s similarities to Aesop’s above tale provide another example of how the natural world and animals were favoured subjects amongst women Surrealists, while the statement that ‘Nature will out’ could very well be a motto of these artists. Rahon’s affiliation to nature can be linked to both Aesop’s fable and her sexuality, in that she followed her inner persona and choice of sexual partners beyond the bounds of heteronormativity, and her trapped dove is a metaphor for the dilemma that she is facing concerning her sexuality and choice of relationships. Although cats are often mentioned in texts featuring transformation Rahon has omitted them from *Sablier couché*, choosing to prioritise birds and subjects of myth surrounding the female body, gender and sexuality, although, like Kahlo, she has painted felines. We will see this example in our later discussion of Rahon’s painting *Gatos en el valle* (The Cats) (1957). For the moment, however, I will concentrate on Rahon’s prioritising of birds.

Significantly including a dove and a blackbird, the verse quoted previously uses gendered nouns to imply that a feminine dove, usually presented as a peaceful creature, has been imprisoned by the male blackbird (‘le merle’). Rahon’s sexual history, lesbian relationships and personal life allow a straightforward biographical reading here. We might therefore assume that the blackbird symbolises Paalen, whose imprisonment through marriage generates associations of a caged bird. The idea of femininity worn out by constraint is extended in the reference to ‘la robe usée de captivité’ (line 16). Beyond simple biography, however, *Sablier couché* can be linked

to another Aesop fable entitled *The Labourer and the Nightingale*, which tells of a caged bird earning its release by outwitting its human captor, as in the following quotation from the poem:

A Labourer lay listening to a Nightingale's song throughout the summer night. So pleased was he with it that the next night he set a trap for it and captured it. "Now that I have caught thee," he cried, "thou shalt always sing to me." "We Nightingales never sing." "Then I'll eat thee" said the labourer. "I have always heard say that a nightingale on toast is dainty morsel." "Nay, kill me not," said the Nightingale; "but let me free, and I'll tell thee three things far better worth than my poor body." The labourer let him loose, and he flew up to a branch of a tree and said: "Never believe a captive's promise; that's one thing. Then again: Keep what you have. And third piece of advice is: Sorrow not over what is lost forever." Then the song-bird flew away.<sup>14</sup>

The imprisoned bird in Aesop's above fable can be compared to how Rahon uses caged birds to replicate her feelings of imprisonment through marriage. It is important, however, to think beyond the ready-made dynamic of biography (Rahon = dove, Paalen = blackbird) and ask whether Rahon is really the dominant male bird imprisoning a female lover. The appearance of a lovebird in the final section – which is entitled 'Muttra', in reference to time she spent in India with Valentine Penrose, her lover at the time<sup>15</sup> – backs up the suggestion of a link between birds and femininity, including the female body ('seins'):

Tourterelle par terre  
 cherchant le corail pour sa lampe  
 Seins délivrés qui volez et chantez  
 A l'inverse de la pie qui remplit de son chant  
 invisible dans l'arbre mouillé  
 Toutes les voix femelles à l'orée de la forêt  
 sous la patte palmée  
 qui sème une orge de nuages  
 au-dessus des terrasses de l'orge ('Muttra', lines 1-9).

<sup>14</sup> Aesop, *The Labourer and the Nightingale*, <http://www.aesops-fables.org.uk/aesop-fable-the-labourer-and-the-nightingale.htm> [accessed 14 December 2010].

<sup>15</sup> Georgiana M Colvile, 'Through An Hour-glass Lightly: Valentine Penrose and Alice Rahon Paalen' in Russell King and Bernard McGuirk (eds), *Reconceptions: Reading Modern French Poetry*, pp. 81-112 (p. 82).

As I have shown in previous analyses, Carrington aligned herself with both birds and equestrian themes while Kahlo's exotic cats and monkeys paid homage to the Mexican jungle. Rahon's poem also weaves together the conscious and unconscious, a frequent technique found in canonical Surrealist works. Colville has commented on the similarity between Rahon's text and 'Breton's "communicating vessels" of dream and reality,'<sup>16</sup> as the poem shifts from one situation to another. This can be compared to Rahon's move from poetry to painting, as the full quotation from Colville suggests:

The poet Alice Paalen went through a looking glass into Mexico, to become and remain the painter Alice Rahon. The rich hour-glass image inscribed in the title of Rahon's second poetry collection, the short plaquette *Sablier couché*, predicts her passage from one *art* to another and the correspondence maintained between them, much like Breton's 'communicating vessels' of dream and reality.<sup>17</sup>

Colville also considers *Sablier couché* alongside another of Rahon's poems, *A Mème la terre* (1936), comparing Rahon's privileging of colours and landscapes within her poetic journey:

Throughout *A Mème la terre*, Rahon's lyrical sadness, against a background of varied colours, exotic places and surrealist bric-à-brac, produces a feeling of musical disconnectedness and an all-pervading sense of loss. The subject herself hovers between detached body parts and a disembodied voice.<sup>18</sup>

This 'lyrical sadness' also makes its presence felt in *Sablier couché*. In lines 62-65, for example, we read:

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<sup>16</sup> Colville, p. 94.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 97-98.

Du langage parlant les battements du Cœur  
 de la voix féminine en cercle en écho  
 des mains jointes sur les rencontres prédestinées  
 des doigts fanés avant l'aurore.

Rahon evokes a looped female voice that produces only itself in return, as well as entropy in the 'doigts fanés', despite the first line's suggestion of a desire to express emotion in language. (A lovers') separation or decline is also suggested by the idea of a detached or wandering female voice, and by hands that are joined but which have passed their high point.

Having used *Sablier couché* to set out some of the main themes of Rahon's work, I now move on to consider her relationship to painting, a process that she believed stripped down female sexuality to a raw and pure form, and which for Rahon was a magical process that produced fantastical results. As she once exclaimed, 'like the shaman, the sybil and the wizard, that painter had to make himself humble, so that he could share in the manifestation of spirits and forms.'<sup>19</sup> Rahon's entry into painting was somewhat accidental, however, having begun when she began to randomly scrape the surface of Paalen's discarded palettes with a nail and throw sand and cement over their surface.<sup>20</sup> Although she began to paint professionally during the 1950s her subjects remain thematically similar to her poetry, with all exhibiting a connection to the natural world and mythology, and she produced pieces not unlike hieroglyphics featuring animals, architectural symbols and primitive stick figures, evoking comparisons to Masson's sand paintings of the 1950s.

The connection between Rahon's paintings and the more primitive and tribal art of Mexico can be seen in her 1945 painting *Sin titulo*, a connection emphasised by Chadwick commenting, 'of all the European Surrealists working in Mexico, Rahon

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<sup>19</sup> Chadwick, p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 201.

appears to be the one most directly influenced by the country's indigenous art'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Rahon's primitive influences are clear in the image and, although the painting is not instantly Surrealist, it still displays links to the movement that merit its inclusion as part of this analysis.



Fig. 1. *Sin titulo* (c. 1945)<sup>22</sup>

According to Rhodes, 'primitivism' was a way for Europeans to create their own racial 'Otherness' that differentiated them from the majority of Western society:

These include not only peasants, gypsies, children and the insane, but other 'outsiders' such as prostitutes, criminals, and circus and variety performers', and stating how 'the "normal" woman was regarded in biological terms to be altogether more primitive than her male counterpart'.<sup>23</sup>

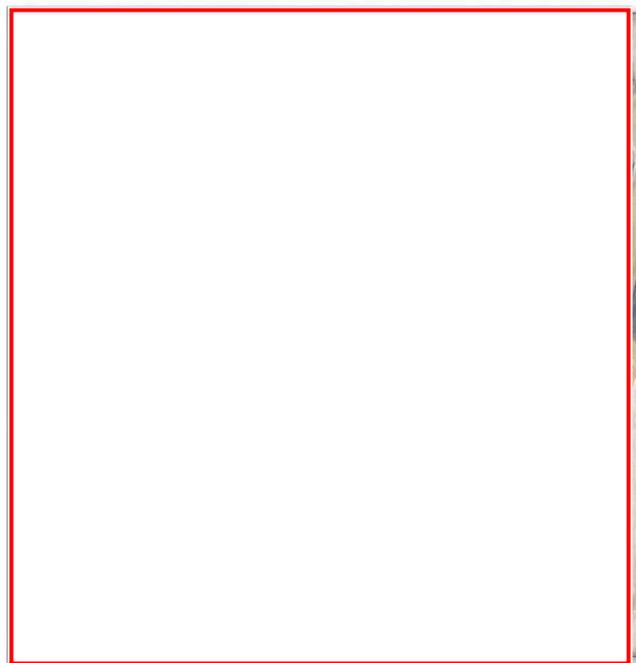
Here the 'normal woman' is described as 'primitive' on account of her biology, which develops during puberty when the body begins to prepare for

<sup>21</sup> Chadwick, p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Alice Rahon, *Sin titulo* (c. 1945), image viewed online at [http://images.artnet.com/artwork\\_images/425202309/416851t.jpg](http://images.artnet.com/artwork_images/425202309/416851t.jpg) [accessed 14 April 2010].

<sup>23</sup> Rhodes cited in Colvile, p. 62.

procreation. In avant-garde work this may produce women with almost beast-like qualities, suggesting a sexuality that is savage, unhinged and liberated from conventional society. Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911), for example, suggests the figure of what I might refer to as the 'primal woman'. Picasso's image of prostitutes features a group of women with eyes open in hunger, as if ready to savagely consume their prey. Although aesthetically different, Picasso's painting possesses a rawness that is comparable to *Sin titulo* and suggests an abstract treatment of 'primitive' art. I will now consider the similarities of these images, beginning with their similar composition and their presentation of an abstracted group portrait. Indeed, I might go as far as to say that Rahon's painting is a stripped down version of Picasso's, with the colours removed but with some of the geometry and arrangement of figures retained.



 *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1911), Moma, image viewed online at <http://www.moma.org/explore/conservation/demoiselles/history.html> [accessed 9 June 2010].

The rawness and primal essence of *Sin titulo* may be found in the image's simplicity. Almost childlike, the painting would not appear out of place etched on a cave wall or tribal dwelling. Rahon's painting of stick-figures – who, in spite of absent anatomy, are recognisably human – are bordered left and right by two staircases. Although simple, the multilayered image makes it difficult to determine the number of individuals present in the scene. Is there one figure at the front with two hands, or are two separate figures present each with their own head? Are the stairs intended for ascent or descent? Indeed, the ambiguity of the parallel stairs and the figure(s) at the front of the image obliquely suggest a link to Rahon's bisexuality, connoting an individual facing simultaneously in two directions, with movement possible both up and down the stairs. Simple and childlike on a first impression, the painting allows us to uncover meaning hidden beneath the visual surface of the piece, encouraging us to metaphorically etch away at the surface in analogy of Rahon's experimental scratching of Paalen's canvases.

The chance nature of Rahon's entry into an artistic career underscores her relevance to the Surrealist movement, in which better known pieces were often created (partially) by accident. We only have to look to Lee Miller and Man Ray's iconic rayographs for an example. Additionally *Sin titulo*'s faded colours and blurred edges imply that the painting was the result of chance occurrence and experimentation as opposed to a carefully thought out and executed artistic process. Rahon takes on the avant-garde practice of stripping art back to its purest forms. Could it be possible that Rahon was painting automatically when she produced *Sin titulo*? Certainly, the piece gives the impression that she may have idly etched away at Paalen's canvases as a child doodles upon a piece of paper. The piece's absence of explicit narrative and

content suggests that Rahon allowed her mind to wander and for the unconscious to take the place of rational, directed thought.

However, another interpretation may be produced through a biographical reading of the painting. In this instance any preconceptions surrounding *Sin titulo*'s simplicity are eradicated as we see Rahon drawing on her personal history to produce a stripped down painting that also bears the trace of different aesthetics influences. Although it could be argued that this is an overly simplistic way of creating art, Rahon's painting relates to substantial issues, evoking in particular an internal struggle or multiplicity of selfhood arising from an individual's many and conflicting personalities. The image may leave us wondering whether it was created during a period when Rahon was struggling with her sexual preferences and torn between lovers of both sexes. In this way the stairs may be a metaphor for her climb, or gravitation, towards one gender or lover among several (the smaller figures in *Sin titulo*) and Rahon's uncertainty about which path to take. This is emphasised by the fact that the figures appear to be resting on the stairs and uncertain whether to climb or descend. The reading of *Sin titulo* as a reflection of Rahon's sexual identity is emphasised by the subjects' faceless appearances, for she may have altered her personality and behaved differently according to the partner that she was with at that time. Thus I would argue that the painting may be read as Rahon's self-portrait, a reflection of her failed marriage and numerous sexual partners, and suggesting a need to reflect after personal difficulty, resting on the stairwell until she makes a decision. Using abstract forms, the painting depicts the different sides of Rahon's character, as well as various lovers waiting for a commitment from her.

Rahon has stripped the body back to its primal state in depicting human sexuality and confused emotions, producing a raw and honest image whose faceless

beings highlight Rahon's own invisibility as a woman artist overlooked in part due to her gender and sexuality. With traces of the abstracted, fragmented and primal forms of Dada and Cubism, Rahon produces a painting that does not allow one theme to dominate its subject matter. This reading of *Sin titulo* will now allow me to consider the question of homosexual women from a Surrealist perspective, and reflect on relationships between women artists. This will also allow for a greater understanding of Rahon's position as a woman Surrealist.

I have established that Rahon's sexuality remains the dominant theme in the majority of available material currently written about her. There is rarely a mention of the artist without the phrase 'lesbian' or 'bisexual' being used, these adjectives seeming to preclude any consideration of Rahon as a Surrealist figure. This causes her work to be categorised as 'lesbian art', as opposed to Surrealist or avant-garde, something which I have already begun to contest. An example of Rahon's sexuality dominating discussion of her art can be seen in a piece of writing about Valentine Penrose, in which Marwood notes that 'most significantly it is her [Penrose] relationship with Alice Rahon (Paalen), wife of Wolfgang Paalen, which has been subject to the most scrutiny'.<sup>25</sup> Marwood continues on the Rahon's relationship with Penrose:

Vincent Gille describes how, in 1936, Valentine left Roland and went to India: There she was joined by Alice Paalen (who had just had a brief liaison with Picasso) and for several months the two women had an affair. This is evidenced in their respective poetry collections, *Sorts de la Lune* by Valentine Penrose (1937) and *Sablier Couché* by Alice Paalen (1938). Love affairs between women were not all that rare within the various surrealist groups.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Vincent Gille, 'Lives and Loves' in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, in Jennifer Mundy (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press in association with Tate Publishing, 2001), pp. 136-171 (p.162) quoted in Kimberley Marwood, 'Shadows of Femininity: Women, Surrealism and the Gothic', *re-bus*, 4 (Autumn-Winter 2009), pp. 1-17.

<sup>26</sup> Marwood, p. 4.

According to Marwood, ‘relationships between women were often fetishized – and in some cases manufactured by the male Surrealist. Man Ray’s 1937 photographs of Nusch [Eluard] and Ady Fidelin, for example, are sexually charged compositions which rest on the slippage between friendship and lesbianism’.<sup>27</sup> This comment seems entirely appropriate here, the male Surrealist’s abhorrence of homosexual relationships juxtaposing the visual fetish of witnessing two women in coitus. It also recalls earlier discussion of Miller’s photography, which includes candid images taken by women friends simply playing with a camera by taking photographs of each other.

During the 1920s and 1930s male Surrealists based their art upon themes of sexuality and love, especially Freud’s theories of deviant sexual behaviour. Lyford has commented that Freud ‘saw the “normal” sexual instinct as a matter of endless variation, with the possibility of multiple object choices by the sexualized human subject’.<sup>28</sup> In 1933 Sade scholar and Freud acquaintance Maurice Heine published a study entitled “Psycho-Biological Classification of Sexual Parenthesis”, extending ‘the logic of Freud’s account of human bisexuality to the subject of Sadeian forms of sexual perversion’.<sup>29</sup> The diagram, which appeared similar in appearance to a plant, ‘gives visual form to the notion that an integral relationship exists between normal sexuality and sexual perversions: the two sides of sexuality appear as plants deriving from the same psychophysical root’.<sup>30</sup> The themes that Heine considers as part of the sexual instinct include sadism, sadomasochism, fetishism, paedophilia, necrophilia and bestiality, the diagram depicting how the combination of such perverse actions

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Amy Lyford, *Surrealist Masculinities: Gender Anxiety and the Aesthetics of Post-World War I Reconstruction in France* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 2007, p. 149.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>30</sup> Heine cited in Lyford, p. 149.

function as a unity. Interestingly, however, homosexuality does not appear within this list. Lyford states:

Heine's case for the commonality of perversion – or at least the possibility that it could emerge in every human subject – benefitted surrealism in the 1930s by pressing forward an understanding of perversion as the unconscious or other of “normal” human sexuality.<sup>31</sup>

The reasons for this, according to Heine, occur ‘as the discovery and active deployment of the sexual unconscious might help transform these “perverse” desires into weapons against the moribund state of the postwar social and sexual order’.<sup>32</sup> This notion of perverse desire as weapons allows our discussion to turn towards the topic of the Lesbian Gaze, which for Lewis is characterised by two main themes: ‘the first is concerned with distancing effects of the (male) gaze that objectify (read dehumanize) women, and the second with an (over)identification between viewer and image, that is, with the opposite of distancing.’<sup>33</sup> Lewis continues:

In both cases the possibility of a female visual pleasure based on a sometimes voyeuristic gaze at images of the female body raises the question of pornographic or eroticized pleasures that are difficult to accommodate within accounts which assume a solely heterosexual positioning.<sup>34</sup>

Although Lewis' argument centres upon how the woman becomes the spectator of fashion magazines, her comments remain relevant to this analysis. Her view is that the original concern – of the woman wanting to be the object – is not as relevant to the gaze anymore and has been overtaken by women wanting possession of the object. Let us remind ourselves of Freud's account of narcissism, of the

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<sup>31</sup> Lyford, p. 150.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> Reina Lewis, ‘Chapter 15: (Ad)dressing the Dyke: Lesbian looks and Lesbian Looking’, in Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (eds.), *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 178-190 (p. 181).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 181.

pleasure derived from identification with the object as a child gazes up a woman's skirt to view her pubic hair, although, according to Lewis, there is only one type of lesbian viewer:

This implicit recognition that the lesbian gaze does not operate alone, nor outside of the social context, allows us to think about a variety of lesbian viewing positions (all of which may be occupied within the viewing experience of any one woman). In other words, the discussion of the lesbian gaze denotes a shifting spectatorship that can include both what we have characterized as a paradigmatically lesbian position (open, but not exclusive to, women coded as heterosexual) and, although I hesitate to use the word 'actual', a self-consciously, self-identified, lesbian viewing position (occupied by women conscious of themselves and others as lesbian).<sup>35</sup>

Again we may here recall earlier chapters, particularly the first, in which I discussed Miller and Maar's photography. In this chapter I acknowledged that the majority of Miller's photographic portraits were of women, with men rarely the subject as the camera took on female playfulness. Instead of being an instrument that captures the fetish the camera has become the viewer, the lens taking on a voyeuristic, pleasure that is almost fetish-like when capturing these women. However, as was detailed in the first chapter, the woman-controlled camera did not objectify the woman subject. Instead the camera's gaze became transformed into a playful and non-derogatory female fetish.

I may query whether this changes when the viewer becomes aware of the sexuality of either the photographer or subject. Here I can turn to Gibson, who has commented that 'abstraction is rarely approached in terms of gender; in fact, it is usually considered to have escaped such constraints. And certainly it has seldom been analysed in a lesbian perspective.'<sup>36</sup> During the 1940s the Betty Parsons' Gallery,

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 183.

<sup>36</sup> Ann Gibson, 'Lesbian Identity and the Politics of Representation in Betty Parsons' Gallery' in Whitney Davis (ed.), *Gay and Lesbian Studies in Art History* (New York, London & Norwood: Harrington Park Press, 1994), pp. 245-270 (p. 245).

named after a lesbian artist and an active institution in New York at that time, curated an exhibition called ‘Heterosexual and male – Abstract Expressionism’,<sup>37</sup> which was Parsons’ attempt to showcase the work of creative individuals regardless of their sexual orientation or gender. A similar approach can be applied to Surrealism: despite the male-dominated abstraction that surrounded the female body, women found a creative outlet within the movement’s principles and aesthetics, as if in demonstration of the fact that art cannot be categorised definitively by gender, and that creativity has no sexual, or biological, ‘truth’. Like the pieces that Rahon created, those on display in Parson’s curated exhibition had a *faceless* quality that made it more difficult to determine the gender of the artist, therefore reducing prejudice and preconceptions in art produced by women, and allowing these artists greater opportunity to exhibit their work. One example was Gertrude Barer, an Abstract Expressionist who believed that her lesbianism prevented the exhibition of her pieces, stating how male artists faced no prejudice, while ‘being a woman, straight *or* lesbian was’.<sup>38</sup> Gibson extends this argument when she claims that, despite being a hindrance, homosexuality could also prove advantageous:

In an era where properly feminine women were supposed to subject themselves to masculine needs, there was, however, also an up side to lesbian identity. If gay men were belittled as “less than” heterosexual men and therefore comic or neurotic in a binary sexual system that constructed gay males as feminine, lesbian women were “more than” heterosexual women – that is, more like men. Men in dresses were funny; women in pants were real artists.<sup>39</sup>

Continuing with the theme of gender, and the influence of sexuality thereon, it is instructive at this point to revisit Kahlo. For in Chapter 5, and with particular emphasis on her bisexual orientation and masculine self portraits, I noted that a

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 246.

<sup>38</sup> Gertrude Barer quoted in Gibson, p. 251.

<sup>39</sup> Gibson, p. 252.

woman dressing as a man may evoke unease, while the reverse was considered more humorous. Women artists sought to be established as professionals regardless of their gender, and yet paradoxically often felt the need to exaggerate any masculinity that they possessed because of this. Apart from Kahlo another Surrealist woman, whose 1920s' self-portraiture was a prominent display of sexual ambiguity, was Claude Cahun.



Fig. 3. *Self Portrait* (1927)<sup>40</sup>

According to Hopkins, and demonstrated in the above example, Cahun's 'photographs presented a variety of guises – from body-builder to Japanese puppet – such that her femininity becomes something manifestly “constructed” and referencing an image whereby ‘her severely mannish appearance clearly hints at her

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<sup>40</sup> Claude Cahun, *Self Portrait* (1927), Manchester Art Galleries, image viewed online at <http://www.manchestergalleries.org/angelsfanarchy/explore/themes/portrait> [accessed 3 February 2011].

lesbianism'.<sup>41</sup> Caws adds that 'no one had more *ways of looking* than Claude Cahun. She fascinates. She horrifies. She is monstrous. There is no better way of putting it'.<sup>42</sup> Unlike Cahun's androgynous appearance, images of Rahon show her adorned in vibrant and exotic dresses. Her style is similar to the Mexicana style of dress favoured by Kahlo, the two artists favouring feminine and delicate attire and accessories, though Rahon makes no overt attempt to mask her gender or exaggerate masculinity.

Although often compared to Kahlo for reasons of ethnicity and sexuality, Rahon did not play with her appearance by wearing men's suits or adopting an occasional masculine persona. Instead, Rahon seems to have avoided the image of the lesbian wearing masculine clothing, and chosen instead to exhibit her femininity through her choice of costume. This separates her from Kahlo and Cahun, possibly feeling that, while her sexuality may have been fluid, her appearance was stable, with no need for alteration.

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<sup>41</sup> David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997), p. 95.

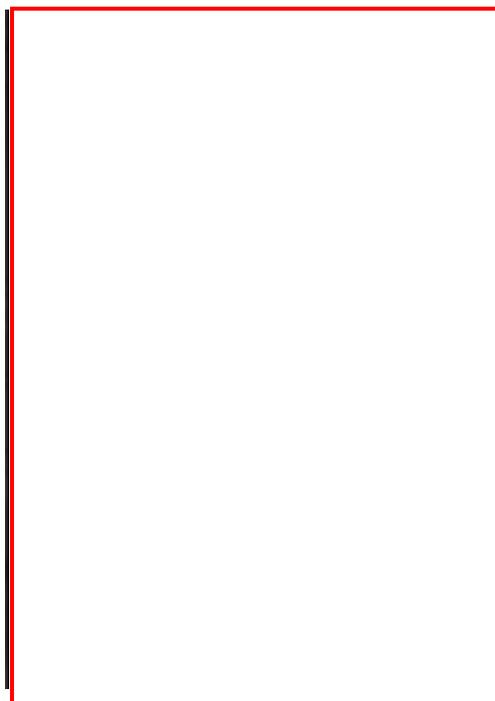


Fig. 4. Alice Rahon (date unknown)<sup>43</sup>

In the eleventh issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (1928) the topics of fetish and sexuality were discussed by a group of canonical male Surrealists: male homosexuality was rejected vehemently and women's sexuality was omitted from the agenda.<sup>44</sup> That year's Surrealist survey of sexuality proclaimed that, although horses and male lovers were not permitted, lesbianism was tolerated.<sup>45</sup> Chadwick comments how lesbianism became a form of sexual liberation for those artists previously under the control of their male partners or fathers:

Most women willingly embraced sexual liberation as a fact of life, sexuality as an aspect of style they had battled their families for the right to independent lives, they had inherited the 1920s call for greater sexual freedom for women. That freedom sometimes included forming temporary sexual relationships with other women, not as a rejection of heterosexuality, but as part of a new

<sup>43</sup> Photograph of Alice Rahon (date unknown), *La Jornada: Cultura*, image viewed online at <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2009/04/13/fotos/a08n1cul-1.jpg>, [accessed 22 June 2010].

<sup>44</sup> Breton *et al.*, 'Recherches sur la sexualité' in *La Révolution surréaliste*, 11 (15 March 1928), 32-40.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Carrington in 1983: 'it is the loved one, the other who gives the key. Now the question is: Who can the loved one be? It can be a man or a horse or another woman'; cited in Whitney Chadwick, *Women artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 105.

awareness of the realities of other women's lives outside the domestic sphere and outside social conventions.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the freedom of same-sex relations appealed to Rahon and allowed her to escape the confines of marriage. Although offering parallels to the Kahlo/Rivera partnership, Rahon's same-sex dalliances were a more frequent occurrence than Kahlo's. In what ways did Rahon's work vary in tone and subject matter during these relationships? Were particular subjects more prominent during her heterosexual relations, or was she consistent in her choice and treatment of themes? Gibson comments that 'one's social identity affects what one wants to write about, for instance, and how much one knows about it. But *how* it counts is not always the same. The relation, that is, between one's identity and what one does is not one of fixed determinism'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the categorisation of 'gay artist' is certain to generate a certain set of expectations around lifestyle choices and behaviour. Was the effect of Surrealism, itself a lifestyle choice, heightened by an artist's sexual orientation? In fact, were lesbian Surrealists at an advantage, and were they considered more masculine due to their sexual preference? Cooper has stated that 'Queer art remains a paradox':<sup>48</sup>

What it is and the forms it takes virtually defy definition, though its spirit informs work by many young artists, and its existence seems to be as much concerned with lifestyle – evident in street demonstrations, parades and nightclubs – as shown on the walls of art galleries.<sup>49</sup>

An important element of queer art crucial to address in this analysis is fetishism. Although the topic of queer culture has presented itself throughout this

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<sup>46</sup> Chadwick, pp. 105-106.

<sup>47</sup> Gibson, p. 258.

<sup>48</sup> Emmanuel Cooper, 'Queer Spectacles' in Peter Horne and Reina Lewis (eds), *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

discussion of women Surrealists, both gay culture and fetish are relevant. Cooper has described how the majority of queer culture 'centres around fetishism, and the ultimate excesses of bodily sensation and sado-masochism (s/m) with its connotations of deviancy and "kinky" sexuality'.<sup>50</sup> He continues that 'Queer and the avant-garde, while appearing to be following similar paths, are in fact in total conflict';<sup>51</sup> for while 'queer represents radical/social/cultural/artistic change, the avant-garde is essentially a manifestation of modernism and a move towards more remote and elitist forms of art'.<sup>52</sup> This is not necessarily true, however: as the women artists discussed here demonstrate, an artist can make a 'queer' statement without embracing a queer lifestyle, choosing to make statements or adopt particular aesthetic positions in response to given situations but without fully embracing the associated lifestyle.

It is apparent that the majority of male Surrealists made every effort to distance themselves from homosexual activity by overcompensating with strong assertions of their heterosexuality. The same cannot be said of all the women discussed here – not only those who enjoyed sexual liaisons with other women – who we have seen to toy with ideas of the erotic female body and exhibit a playful (pseudo-)lesbianism/bisexuality. Whether through Miller's girl-on-girl camera, Oppenheim's invitation to drink from female vessels or Schiaparelli's exhibition of the naked, yet clothed, feminine body, we can look to these artists as comfortable enough with their sexuality to display it playfully and provocatively; and if they were lesbian, or thought to be so, they were comfortable enough to acknowledge such issues in their art, thereby making (sexually) political statements of their own. In their pursuit of a lifestyle abhorrent to conventional morality, lesbian artists achieved

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

power, notoriety and a platform to showcase their art, acquiring a speaking voice that they were previously refused.

Female empowerment and sexuality, acquired through supernatural means, may have been the inspiration behind the Rahon painting that will set up the final section of this chapter, *Gatos en el valle* (The Cats) (1957), in which Rahon incorporates exoticism, otherness and the paranormal. The painting's background is a vivid shade of turquoise while trees are etched into the middle and either side of the frame, evoking Rahon's technique of etching away at a canvas surface. Prominence has been given to two burnt orange subjects which, on close inspection, are the cats of the painting's title. It is difficult to decipher whether the image contains four cats or two cats in motion, which would explain their layered appearance.

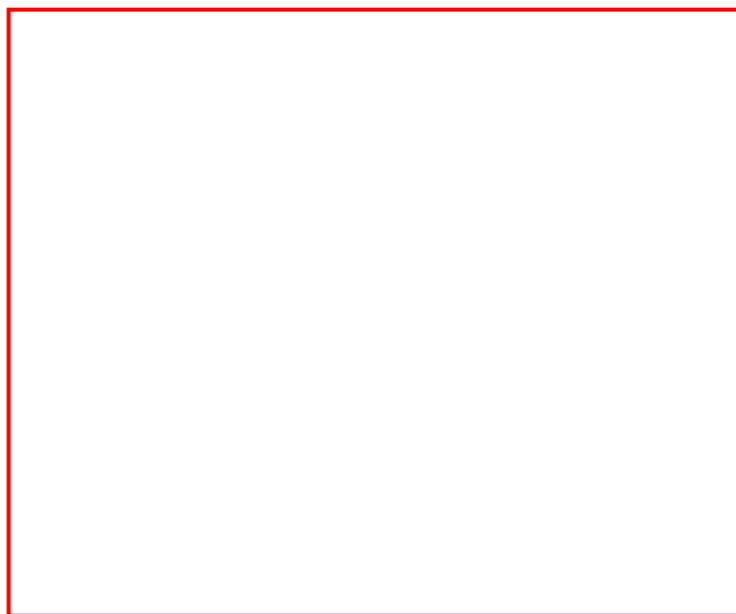


Fig. 5. *Gatos en el valle* (1957)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Alice Rahon, *Gatos en el valle* (1957), image viewed online at [http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot\\_details.aspx?intObjectID=5139693](http://www.christies.com/LotFinder/lot_details.aspx?intObjectID=5139693) [accessed 15 April 2009].

The Mexican influence of the painting can be seen in its primal characteristics, raw colours and the cats hiding in the forest, and recalls the animals of Kahlo's images. Indeed, it is striking that Rahon and Kahlo – respectively French/Mexican and Mexican – were both bisexuals who had lesbian experiences when married. According to Hallett this is not coincidental: 'medical frameworks of the early modern period had already connected racial and sexual anomaly'.<sup>54</sup> So too Freud equated race, mystery and female sexuality, describing the exoticism of European women, especially concerning their dark body and head hair, as determining a preference for same-sex relationships.<sup>55</sup>

Rahon's residence in Mexico can be aligned with theories of colonialism and Otherness, both themes relevant to this debate, and which allow for the consideration of Anzaldúa's article *Borderlands/La Frontere: The New Mestiza*.<sup>56</sup> In this text it is claimed that 'the *metiza* – neither male nor female but lesbian; neither American nor Mexican but Mexican American – is read as holding open a libratory position beyond the legislative binary oppositions which enable colonialism, homophobia and phallocentrism'.<sup>57</sup> According to *Borderlands*, Mexico was the antithesis of the United States, offering opportunities for feminine sexuality and lesbianism that contradicted the heterosexual masculinity of the USA. Could it be that the location of Surrealist activity contributed to enhancing the gender divide within the movement? Did Paris, home of the movement's founding fathers, function as a homosocial masculine network compared to the type of Surrealist femininity afforded in Mexico? It is certainly evident that the work produced by Rahon in the country appears to have

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<sup>54</sup> Nicky Hallett, *Lesbian Lives: Identity and Auto/Biography in the Twentieth Century* (London & Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1999), p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontere: The New Mestiza* cited in Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), p. 137.

<sup>57</sup> Jagose, p. 137.

brought her work closer to the animalism, femininity and nature of paintings by Kahlo.

In respect of whether Rahon considered herself bisexual, or whether her same-sex relations were merely temporary trysts, I wish to consider a comment made by Leonor Fini: 'I am a woman therefore I have had the "feminine experience" but I am not a lesbian'.<sup>58</sup> Is this how Rahon explained her sexuality to herself, or did she consider herself to be an outright bisexual female? Artistically, Fini can be compared to Rahon via Fini's illustrations where, as Chadwick comments, 'in the face of women's power, men become apes with giant engorged phalluses, or skeletal death heads'.<sup>59</sup> Fini's *The Beauty* is a captivating example of this, the piece instantly striking in its use of a vivid blue as a background colour, and presenting many contradictions. The image's title contrasts with the subject matter as Fini plays with conventions of feminine beauty, while the vibrancy of the blue surround and the pink flowers juxtapose the symbolism of death and decay. Whereas women in art are often figured as creators of life, Fini's character is both Grim Reaper and Centaur usually depicted as a male in classic mythology. The painting can be described as Fini's depiction of female power via patriarchal themes surrounding women's bodies and femininity, a skeletal centaur whose femininity is made obvious by her bare breasts and pink crown of roses. Although I have included the image in this chapter's analysis of Rahon, due to the mythological connotations of a centaur-like creature, additionally Fini's painting can be added to earlier chapters and the recurring theme of the eroticised female body abundant in male Surrealist imagery.

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<sup>58</sup> Leonor Fini, 1982 interview cited in Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), p. 110.

<sup>59</sup> Chadwick, p. 110.

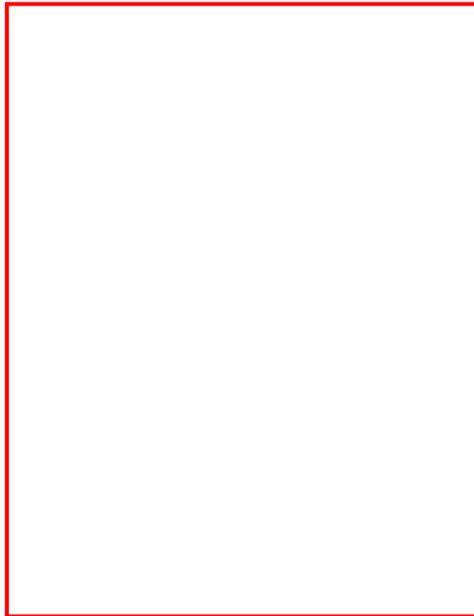


Fig. 6. *The Beauty* (1974)<sup>60</sup>

Another intertext relevant to this discussion is Balthus' *Les Beaux jours* (1944-1946), which is loaded with symbolism connected to the female body, abandonment and sexuality. Balthus' subject is a young girl holding a mirror and reclining in an armchair, the dark room emphasising the whiteness of her shoes and the flames of the fire being stoked by a male figure. As so often in the works considered in this thesis, the painting raises many questions, some of them subtle, some of them not. Is the mirror turned towards the girl or away from her? Is she contemplating using the mirror to examine herself sexually?

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<sup>60</sup> Leonor Fini, *The Beauty* (1974), Spaight Wood Galleries, image viewed online at <http://www.spaightwoodgalleries.com/Pages/Fini2.html> [accessed 3 February 2011].

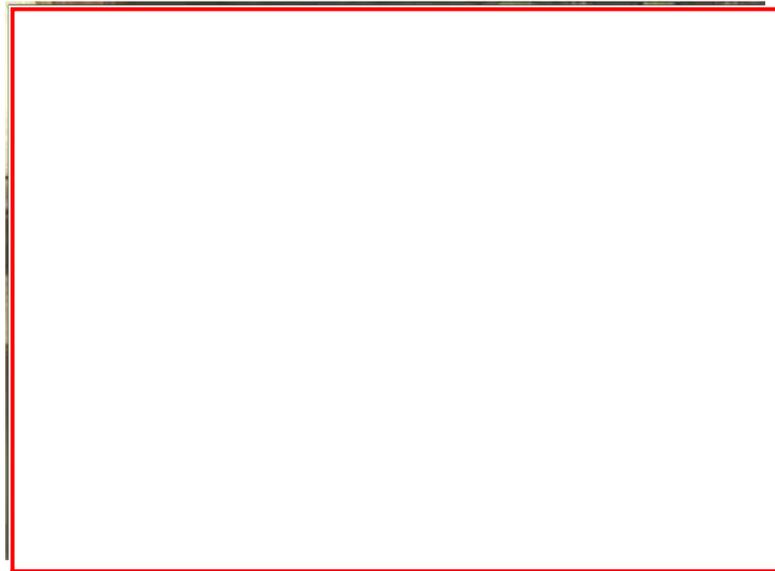


Fig. 7. *Les Beaux jours* (The Golden Days) (1944–46)<sup>61</sup>

It is an image of lost innocence, awakened sexuality, and which by implication anticipates the loss of virginity. Her childlike features are gentle but provocative, a Lolita figure contemplating seduction, while the dress slipping off her shoulder suggests that she may be about to undress. Or is she about to examine herself post-coitus? Her white shoes recall the discussion of *My Nurse* by Oppenheim and Schiaparelli's suggestive *Shoe Hat*. The former in particular was instantly suggestive of the female anatomy, which contrasts with the pure whiteness of the shoes worn by Balthus' subject. The particular connections to *Sablier couché* arise in respect of mythology and the other-worldly, for the fire stoked by Balthus' faceless male subject – whose odd bodily proportions could almost be those of a fawn, half man and half beast – connotes not only the intense energy of physical desire but the flames of the underworld, and of punishment overseen by the devil for human crimes of the flesh.

Rahon also draws on the motifs of fire and mirrors in the following verse:

<sup>61</sup> Balthus (Balthasar Klossowski de Rola; French, 1908–2001), *The Golden Days* (Les Beaux Jours), 1944–46, Oil on canvas, 58 3/8 x 78 1/2 in. (1,483 x 1,994 mm), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, The Morgan Library and Museum, <http://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/exhibPast03asp?id=50> [accessed 24 November 2010].

voici la nuit revenue  
 portant dans ses bras la constellation humaine  
 dont la tête est un phare  
 voici mon visage en feu  
 vu dans le miroir des fantômes (lines 34-38).

The supernatural aspect of Rahon's verse prompts us to reconsider Balthus' image. The girl's pale appearance can be considered ghostly, for example; indeed, perhaps she is an apparition that the male subject is unaware of, having Surrealistically passed through the looking glass and materialising in the chair. Rahon's lines also imply a Godlike deity, perhaps a divine rescuer, an Angel cast from the skies, or something more demonic sent to abduct its victim. Heralding a return to Greek and Roman mythology, the physical changes occurring in *Sablier couché* provoke a 'binatural' reading of the text as the poem possesses two themes running parallel to one another, in this instance when the unconscious manifests itself alongside the physical. Hansen writes that

When a feature of the world, whether physical (such as the Earth) or conceptual (such as love), is personified, the being that results is binatural, possessing two natures. Gaia is both the physical upon which humans tread and plant crops and also a living, anthropomorphic female creature capable of thoughts, emotions and sexual reproduction.<sup>62</sup>

The above remarks allow me to posit that the themes primitivism and nature in the majority of Rahon's art may be an attack on ideas surrounding the female nude as painted by male artists. While I have acknowledged the methods that Oppenheim and Schiaparelli chose to exaggerate the naked female as a form of empowerment, Rahon took the opposite direction in painting by focusing on the body – male or female – and literally stripping it down to its most primitive. Although her images, particularly *Sin*

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<sup>62</sup> Hansen, p. 49.

*Titulo*, may possess a childlike innocence, they remain highly provocative, a presentation of the unadorned, powerless body as an object to be displayed, viewed and visually consumed whether that body is male or female. Additionally her poetry applies on account of its gender ambiguity, metamorphosis and transformational occurrences. Therefore, I am able to establish how Rahon was able to create a non-exhibitionist female art, and a display of Surrealism that was authentic. Halpern writes that

In Breton's poetry, the question "who acts?" gives way to the parallel questions of "who speaks?" and "who sees?" The clearest principle of structuration in his poems, the ground on which they propose to commit mayhem, is description, posed first as an integrating, articulating and centering force, marked from a critical perspective by the transposition of elements from the plastic arts: point of view, frame, signature.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, if *Sablier couché* is read as a piece of Surrealist verse, coupled with Rahon's biography, the reader is able to follow it with a greater understanding. This gives the poem a greater depth of meaning, as through this structure the reader is able to identify themes proposed by Breton in his original manifesto to do with dreams, reality and the lost object as a marvellous discovery. Halpern continues:

The Surrealist text retains both the markings of sequence, independent of a definition of events, and a common sense possibility of something happening, for a reason, because of something else, only to blur the notions of intention, consequence and logical causation too effectively for narration to act unilaterally as the springboard of description.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout *Sablier couché* the reader witnesses Rahon unconsciously projecting her thoughts and feelings of the moment onto paper by combining fantasies with everyday occurrences. Here we can recall Breton's *Manifestos* and Surrealism's

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<sup>63</sup> Joseph Halpern, 'Describing the Surreal' *Yale French Studies*, 'Towards a Theory of Description', 61, 1981, pp. 89-106 (p. 98).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 97-98.

aspiration not to a purely unconscious state but to the harmonious *merging* of the real and the unreal: ‘I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak’.<sup>65</sup> I have already demonstrated that, in *Sablier couché*, the issue of who is speaking and when may at times confuse the reader, requiring the poem – as with the paintings and other works discussed in this thesis – to be ‘read’ in a certain manner, in adoption of a process that will transform the illogical into a coherent verse. Halpern has stated that ‘the surrealist equation of comparison and identification, the recasting of metaphor as meta-morphosis, means that any and all elements of the text are potential sources of action’.<sup>66</sup> With particular emphasis on the word ‘metamorphosis’ it can be established that Rahon’s poem is about both physical and mental transformations, as the author embarks on a spiritual journey that manifests itself in her alternating transformations between human being and animal.

With its fluctuating scenarios, animals, places and moods, Rahon’s poetry is also reminiscent of Kristeva’s *Pouvoirs de l’horreur*, which describes abjection as a state in which human bodies exist between being and nothingness. To quote Kristeva, abjection is

A “somethingness” that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1924), p. 14.

<sup>66</sup> Halpern, p. 97.

<sup>67</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

Abjection involves the blurring of boundaries and a state of being that hovers between existence and the abyss that is based on sexual urges, bodily fluids and repulsion surrounding death or food. Furthermore, 'contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes, what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection'.<sup>68</sup> The combination of abjection and Surrealist writing gives our reading of *Sablier couché* greater structure and echoes Halpern's comments that 'if surrealist writing in any way effects an escape from the constraints of description, it does so by exploding description from within, by overloading the system'.<sup>69</sup> This is most relevant to *Sablier couché*, especially when I consider the piece to be a work of automatic writing that overwhelms the reader through seasons, textures and emotions. In turn, I suggest that more work is needed to investigate how the Surrealist writing process is abjection in action as the mind is made to transgress boundaries of consciousness, merging mental zones and states that are normally demarcated from each other. This is not always a pleasant experience and can be over-powering both for the reader and for the writer. It is, however, a process that demonstrates what Surrealism wished to achieve from the beginning: a complete liberation of the mind.

I will now make one final comment in concluding this analysis of Rahon. Towards the end of *Sablier couché* Rahon writes rather poignantly, in possible indication of her emotional and sexual state at the time:

La grande moisson des orages est proche  
 Coupe les pieds du cheval pour qu'il se ressemble  
 Coupe les ponts pour mieux sauter  
 Cherche les larmes boiteuses dans une botte de foin  
 Corps cassé qui a joué au jeu du volant (lines 76-80).

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<sup>68</sup> Kristeva, p. 108.

<sup>69</sup> Halpern, p. 94.

In this case I am specifically interested in the second and third lines of the poem, especially the cutting analogy. Cutting and fears of castration have been mentioned in most chapters of this thesis as a male fear and as a female reclamation of power. In this case, the references to cutting and severing relate to acts and figures being set free and liberation. A horse may lose its feet but it will gain in likeness to itself, a notion that hints at Rahon's separation from Paalen (she will lose what is expected of her – a husband – but be allowed to adopt a newly authentic relationship to herself and her sexuality. So too the line 'Coupe les ponts pour mieux sauter' is evocative of internal hurdles being overcome and the gaining of freedom. Occurring before *Muttra*, and her written homage to India, the lines are hopeful and uplifting, suggesting new beginnings and an optimistic future.

In conclusion, *Sablier couché*, together with Rahon's paintings, can be described as her own personal automatic text, as she allows her subconscious mind to interweave with overt biographical experience. The result is a body of work that expresses honestly her sexuality, thoughts and emotions. Although it is in part true to male-oriented Surrealist themes, *Sablier couché* is distinctively feminine in its delicacy, tenderness and absence of flagrant sexuality, a forgotten treasure that highlights a lost Surrealist voice speaking lyrically as Rahon sings of her abandonment. Indeed, it may well be an awareness of her identity as the lost Surrealist writer that led to Rahon's enigma, becoming a forgotten Surrealist in her lyricism.

Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated how women Surrealists chose to use their sexuality playfully through their art, attaching particular importance to the female fetish. We may remember Oppenheim's *Breakfast in Fur*, its strong connotation of feminine oral sex, and the use of fur to allude playfully to the female pubis. I have demonstrated that women Surrealists exhibited a central but often subtly

coded concern with (their) sexuality more freely and with greater celebration than many male artists. These women used sex and fetish as playful subject matter for the creation of art, sculpture and fashion, in turn provoking a range of gender-based questions about the relationship between art and artists. Did women artists feel more secure and less threatened by their sexuality than their male contemporaries? Did they feel more comfortable than male artists in playing and experimenting artistically with women's bodies, and in exhibiting their own sexuality? Was it possible that women artists considered sexuality to be a basic human need as opposed to the romanticised, fantastical male visions offered to them by orthodox Surrealism? The works considered closely in this thesis suggest that the basic answer to all these questions is 'Yes', and show that, not unlike a fetish, female sexuality was a multifaceted phenomenon – variously pleasurable, satisfying, conflictual and traumatic – that they owned themselves.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that many surrealists consciously believed that Woman in a new society would be powerful in bringing forth a new consciousness, and she would also, by virtue of new independence and activity, participate in creation of the new art.<sup>1</sup>

In the Introduction I commented on a 2008 article that featured in *The Guardian* newspaper. Titled ‘The Connection Between Art and Exhibitionism’, the commentary, by Germaine Greer, effectively describes as a failure the decision of women Surrealists to use their own bodies as subject matter.<sup>2</sup> I am now in a position to refute this view, for, as my analysis of various women Surrealists has demonstrated, these were artists whose figuration of female bodies substantially challenged and modified the presentation of femininity within orthodox Surrealism. Rather than focusing on the positive contributions that women made to Surrealism, Greer asks, ‘why did the women of surrealism have to follow such a sterile, narcissistic paradigm?’<sup>3</sup> Thus, Greer argues that, rather than seeking to assert their own aesthetic agency, women Surrealists became parodies of themselves.

In light of analysis conducted in this thesis, I am compelled to disagree with Greer, particularly her remark that ‘most of them [women Surrealists] put more paint on their faces than they did on canvas in their lifetime’.<sup>4</sup> In my endeavours to investigate the ways in which women Surrealists strove to go beyond the patriarchal depictions of femininity inherited from orthodox Surrealism, I have brought out a range of themes and media used by the women. The resulting work they produced (of

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<sup>1</sup> Bethany Ladimer, ‘Madness and the Irrational in the Work of André Breton: A Feminist Perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, 6: 1 (Spring, 1980), pp. 175-195 (p. 177).

<sup>2</sup> See Germaine Greer, ‘The Connection Between Art and Exhibitionism’, *The Guardian*, Monday 28 January 2008, viewed online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jan/28/art.gender> [accessed 27 July 2011].

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

which I have been able to consider only a sample, even in a thesis-length project) makes for a vast contribution to the movement, challenging previous treatments of Surrealist subject matter and pushing mainstream and Surrealist conventions that surround the ideal of 'woman'. Although this is not an exhaustive account (as regards omissions one might cite Jacqueline Lamba, Lise Deharme and Valentine Penrose), those included here have been chosen for the challenge they present to Surrealist tenets and aesthetics, the interaction between their various bodies of work and lifestyles, and the way in which their material served to expand Surrealist practice into previously unexplored territories. Thus I have been able to trace substantial Surrealist practice by women artists not only in such media as photography and painting, but also in the greatly overlooked realm of fashion, an area which has also contributed towards Surrealism's continued influence in contemporary and popular culture, from fashion designers (such as Vivienne Westwood and the late Alexander McQueen) to Lady Gaga.

Greer concludes her article by stating that 'the woman who displays her own body as her artwork seems to me to be travelling in the tracks of an outworn tradition that spirals downward and inward to nothingness'.<sup>5</sup> This is a most negative comment, especially as women Surrealists' interpretation of the movement was to celebrate what femininity signified to them. While Greer's statement may be relevant to the way in which the *female body* was displayed in orthodox Surrealism, I am able to contest Greer's implied view of the body of work produced by the practitioners cited in this study. Although it is true that women Surrealists incorporated their own bodies in their art, obvious displays of sexuality were absent, replaced instead with playful exaggeration. They toyed with conventions of femininity, often using intimate objects

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

to push ideas of the feminine fetish and their own sexuality. The result was a humorous acknowledgement of male stereotypes and provided an exhibition of women's sexuality that combined irony and candour while opposing pre-existing Surrealist male narcissism. Greer's commentary is also at odds with a work such as Oppenheim's groundbreaking *Breakfast in Fur*, an inanimate object exploring the taboo of female oral sex. Oppenheim's *My Nurse* is another example of the fact that women Surrealists dared to allude to the female pubis from different angles (literally, in the case of *My Nurse*). Meanwhile, although Schiaparelli used the body through more traditional means of fashion, her methodology was still original. She used the living woman, and her body, as a channel of expression for intimate objects, most famously a shoe, as the body instead became the vessel and catalyst to bring these ideas to life. Although Schiaparelli approached the subject with more subtlety than Oppenheim the impact was dramatic, creating a niche for Surrealism in fashion that used the body as an erotic tool, and the results were potent: Schiaparelli's work is a display of dominance and sexuality that, although suggesting the naked and sexual body, allowed the woman to remain fully clothed. Greer's statement about 'nothingness' may well be untrue, both in the example of Schiaparelli, and regarding Durozoi's comment about Oppenheim:

Oppenheim broke very young with all convention, and until 1937, when she returned to Basle, she was carefree and generous in the way she shared what she called – scarcely mindful of feminist demands – the androgyny of thought: “If a man, the genius, needs a muse, a feminine spiritual element, for a work to be produced, then the woman, the muse, has a need of a genius, of the masculine spiritual element: as it happens man has this touch of the feminine element and inversely”.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gérard Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, translated by Alison Anderson (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 265.

This raises the question of *femaleness*, and of whether these women were pandering to the stereotypes that orthodox Surrealism and society placed around them. Judith Butler asks: ‘does being female constitute a “natural fact” or a cultural performance, or is “naturalness” constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?’<sup>7</sup> I have argued that gender is indeed a performance of sorts that necessitates, whether we are aware or not, that we *perform* according to societal expectations. However, the women Surrealists discussed in this study thought beyond such restrictions. They challenged conventional gender roles, making art out of an implied belief that, regardless of our biological sex, we should not be expected to perform a certain way in society. This allowed the Surrealist mind to become unrestricted by biological codes and gender conformity as women artists gained freedom to push beyond conventional sexual binaries and imposed societal restrictions. The following comment from Butler could have been intended for Kahlo in particular, specifically with reference to those portraits that depicted her masculine persona, as she shied away from her traditional feminine image and chose to present a masculine version of herself:

The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the construction status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.<sup>8</sup>

The issue of gender was embraced by women Surrealists and explored throughout their various bodies of work. We have seen how these practitioners strove

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), xxviii-xxix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

to create an artistic equilibrium where conventional assumptions around gender were played with or made irrelevant, to challenge preconceptions of masculinity and femininity. In the case of Schiaparelli, it has been established how her garments show that the most obviously sexual pieces produced by women Surrealists were achieved through the use of inanimate objects. Interestingly, unlike the chapters on photography and painting, where the artist often used herself as subject, Schiaparelli made it known in her biography that she considered her appearance to be not entirely desirable.<sup>9</sup> Again, this opposes Greer's comment about women Surrealists exhibiting their own bodies as art. In the example of Schiaparelli, her clothing was her art: she was the creator rather than the subject, the latter often clothed in a garment that covered the entire body. Those artists who did choose to render their own appearance used their physical likeness rather than their body, and manifested their inner personality as a method of projecting their sexuality or inciting arousal. In Chapter 5 it became noticeable that, although Kahlo used her body, she expressed an emotional honesty to create a raw, honest and powerful self image rather than depict a sexually charged likeness. Yes, these women were explicitly emphasising their femininity in their work and, although their material is very often provocative, sexual arousal was not its only intention. Instead, their art reclaims control of their bodies from male Surrealists by expressing their multifaceted and layered identities through candid works and would, if required, use their body as one of many possible sources or influences to create distinct and individual interpretations of Surrealism.

Additionally the subject of *femininity* is a recurring topic in the work discussed here, although not exclusively restricted to the *female* body. It has emerged that, for many of these artists, sexuality was about a woman's intimate sexual identity and her

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<sup>9</sup> Elsa Schiaparelli, *Shocking Life: The Autobiography of Elsa Schiaparelli* (London: V&A publications, 2007), p. 6.

role in the world that she inhabited. Butler's comment supports the idea that the woman's self does not have to be definitively changed or constituted by her varying role as lover, wife or mother:

If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethical, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained'.<sup>10</sup>

This comment serves to strengthen the argument centred on the *female's role* within Surrealism, as women artists learnt to adapt to the various situations and circumstances in which they found themselves. Butler has argued that the challenge to gender roles only exists because the individual's essential core is not fixed, but fluid, and so will depend on her cultural and lifestyle choices. Thus I have shown that women Surrealists often explore and project themes that in orthodox Surrealism (and elsewhere) might be considered as mutually exclusive, such as maternity and sexual or erotic potency. Furthermore, each artist offered their own variation of the feminine body put on display by orthodox Surrealism and mainstream convention. In respect of the playful body, we have seen how women artists adapted preconceived patriarchal ideas that surrounded women's sexuality by interpreting them without sexual obviousness.

Let me here refer to the examples of Carrington and Tanning, who used their physical likeness to explore subjects that orthodox Surrealism had objectified, such as the female psyche, and the hysterical Surrealist woman, as personified through Breton's *Nadja*. In his objectifying of the woman it is apparent that the male

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<sup>10</sup> Butler, p. 6.

Surrealist feared her and the potential power that she possessed. Although male Surrealists believed that the madness of women was caused by societal restrictions, Durozoi considers hysteria ‘to be a highly poetic behaviour,’<sup>11</sup> a romanticised interpretation of madness that sees mental illness as allowing a woman to restore her mind and heal her body. Hysteria became the ‘socially acceptable’ form of madness experienced by women and unintentionally elevated the woman in the male Surrealist’s opinion. As Durozoi continues, ‘it would seem particularly unwarranted to want to restore a so-called normality by healing that body’.<sup>12</sup> Seemingly, if she was ‘normal’, the male would not be as devoted to her. It would seem that Breton romanticized madness in order to bolster a dynamic in which male artist-researchers were in control of female love objects. In orthodox Surrealism, one might therefore say that the Surrealist woman only experienced true madness when involved in a relationship with a male Surrealist (as evidence, we can point to Carrington’s eventual institutionalisation following her relationship with Ernst).<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, Carrington was one of the few women Surrealists who could call her lover her muse, reversing the roles that had been long established in Surrealism and contributing to the eradication of gender significant boundaries. Kahlo also used Rivera as her artistic muse, and she was notable for the political position she adopted in relation to the movement. Thus, both personally and professionally, Breton believed Kahlo to be ‘wonderfully situated at the point of intersection between the political (philosophical line) and the artistic line’.<sup>14</sup> By approaching the subject through mindsets that were prepared to take on gender politics, these women

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<sup>11</sup> Durozoi, p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> Leonora Carrington, ‘Art Obituaries’, *The Telegraph*, 26 May 2011, article viewed online at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/art-obituaries/8539650/Leonora-Carrington.html> [accessed June 8 2011].

<sup>14</sup> Durozoi, p. 356.

Surrealists depicted images that dealt with darker sides of female puberty and sexual awakening.

Another previously unexplored subject that women Surrealists brought to the movement was motherhood. Usually met with contention amongst the male Surrealist community, the subject was tackled confidently by these women. In respect of the female body as a traditional icon of male lust and sexual arousal, the bodily changes that occur throughout gestation and following childbirth accompany the transition from lover to mother. In Chapter 4 I examined Tanning's interpretation of motherhood and femininity, framed by Chadwick's comments concerning the exhausted female and her changed body.<sup>15</sup> Motherhood became another source of creativity for these Surrealist women and their own personal, surrogate, artistic project. As noted by Chadwick, however, it remained difficult for female artists to combine their own artistic projects with motherhood:

For [Jacqueline] Lamba, the demands of motherhood, combined with Breton's insistence that his projects and desires shape their life together, effectively kept her from painting for much of the decade; she did not exhibit her work until after she and Breton had separated in the 1940s.<sup>16</sup>

It has been emphasised how motherhood resulted in a perceived threat to the idealised female body and to the time that she might be able devote to her mate. In spite of the woman fulfilling a possible personal desire of her own through motherhood, as well as performing a certain biological 'purpose', her male lover may have objected to his loss of her body as his mannequin and tool to be manipulated according to his desire. The essence of the female body in Surrealism is encapsulated by Wood:

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<sup>15</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), p. 315.

<sup>16</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 130.

The representation of the body, and particularly the female body, provides a thread through the public displays, exhibitions, and commercial activities of the Surrealists. The body was a site for Surrealist experiment and a conduit for the transmission of ideas. It became the subject of intense scrutiny: dismembered, fragmented, desecrated, eroticized and eulogized in the pursuit of a range of psychological, sociological and sexual concerns. These processes were iterated in mind and physical act.<sup>17</sup>

Here a little background is required on Surrealism's use of the mannequin as featured at the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism. One piece on display was Dalí's *Rainy Taxi* which, when peered into, led viewers 'to discover a scantily clad female mannequin, crawling with snails, perched on the back seat in a cascade of water'.<sup>18</sup> Other displays of mannequins, described by Hopkins, were as follows:

Entering the show, they [visitors] were compelled to walk along the 'Street of Mannequins' and thus notionally to 'choose' among sixteen fetishistically attired mannequins, which might be construed to be 'streetwalkers,' each the outcome of the fantasies of a different Surrealist artist.<sup>19</sup>

The Surrealist's use of mannequins cannot be discussed without mentioning Hans Bellmer who famously sexualised dolls and mannequins based on adolescent girls. Hopkins continues: 'the Surrealists, in the wake of certain paintings by Giorgio de Chirico, had turned the mannequin into something of a cult'.<sup>20</sup> Hemus, too, has commented that 'dolls, puppets and mannequins became chief components of the Surrealist movement, demonstrated most radically and graphically in the photographic works of Hans Bellmer, where the doll stands for the eroticised, sexualised, and often violated female body'.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, during the 1940s Bellmer produced a series of drawings showing 'young girls lying back, entranced, as erect penises emerge from

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<sup>17</sup> Ghislaine Wood, *The Surreal Body: Fashion & Fetish* (London: V&A Publications, 2007), p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> David Hopkins, *Dada and Surrealism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Hemus, *Dada's Women* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 200.

their vaginas',<sup>22</sup> in the artist's depiction of the maternal phallus. This reminds us of the unease generated for male Surrealists by the notion of castration: the mother, in giving birth to a child and acquiring a symbolic phallus, was not feared any more. Psychoanalytically, then, it is also possible that motherhood was feared by male Surrealists because childbirth enabled women to gain their 'lost' phallus, within a wider process of radical bodily transformation (pregnancy and childbirth) of the female body.

I might also suggest that motherhood could be made to work to the advantage of a woman Surrealist by allowing her to regain possession of her body and her identity, losing her position as the artist's muse and subject, and reinventing her status after childbirth. This provides one thread of my argument that women Surrealists may actually have been the truest practitioners of the movement. In their challenge to previous conceptions or beliefs structured by the male founders of the movement, these artists produced pieces that were full of life and functioning, whether that was through representations of the creation of life, or, by making the inanimate come to life. We must not forget, however, those women who considered motherhood negatively. When Léonor Fini commented that 'physical maternity repulses me',<sup>23</sup> for example, she was also attacking social expectations and rebelling against what it meant to be a free and creative woman artist.

Another topic that has emerged as part of this analysis is gender and the geographical location of Surrealism. Women practitioners located themselves more widely than male artists, refusing to limit their version of the movement to one particular location as the male Surrealists did with Paris. The French capital became a haven of literary activity with Paris influencing and motivating the production of

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<sup>22</sup> Hopkins, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> Fini in X. Gauthier, 'Léonor Fini' (Paris, 1981) cited in Chadwick 2002, p. 130.

canonical Surrealist theory and practice, and serving as Surrealism's default base. By isolating the movement to one particular location, as was the case in the movement's early years, it is as if nothing truly Surrealist could be achieved outside the city's walls. Durozoi indicates the role of the French capital as a cipher of special richness for the Surrealists: 'beyond the Paris that was visible and anonymous there existed a latent city, to be decoded by the poet-seer'.<sup>24</sup> The women Surrealists discussed in this analysis can be regarded as 'poet-seers' but who looked beyond the confines of one particular location, and of the terms of the original Surrealist manifesto, embracing new spaces and the opportunities that they provided in the way suggested by Durozoi:

An image, an object, a scene, could unleash an immediate emotional or passionate reaction – there would always be time to look for explanations later – and in the immediate, all that mattered was one's response to an unexpected magnetic pull, or what amounted, secretly, to a beckoning.<sup>25</sup>

Surrealist women assisted in the transport of the movement to a global and multicultural scale. This widened Surrealism's geographical boundaries and acted in retaliation to orthodox Surrealism's confinement of the feminine body within the Parisian city. The interweaving of the female body and Paris is indicated in Durozoi's reference to Breton:

The few pages of Breton's "Pont-Neuf" are undoubtedly the finest and most concise example of a complete subjective topography, revealing the Place Dauphine as the female sex of Paris, depicting the Seine as the body of a woman, and, in one sovereign movement, condensing both the secret and popular history of the capital, as if it were the hidden side of its apparent geography. This reverie invites one to grasp, almost physically, the emotional resonance, capable of eliciting attraction or repulsion.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Durozoi, p. 173.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 176.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 509.

The female body as portrayed through Surrealism's patriarchal lineage remained guilty of eroticising and elevating the woman's status to object. The link between femininity and Paris became stronger as Surrealist practice figured the two as merged, or even effectively a single entity. Could this also have been a catalyst that fuelled women Surrealists' need to venture beyond the city of Paris? Adamowicz has looked at how Surrealism's initial location within Paris was extended, with abstract borders crossed as new cities are taken up as places of residence:

Crossings of the illusory boundaries of identity are stages in the surrealists' multiple personae, their masks and masquerades, between masculine and feminine [sic], the shifts between self and other [sic], but also as an undoing of the frontiers of the self.<sup>27</sup>

Adamowicz's text describes how the boundaries of Surrealism were crossed metaphorically and physically as geographical boundaries, and unexplored artistic subjects, were approached by artists of both sexes. For Breton, such figurative crossings were more enticing in prose or verse form, and were facilitated by recreational strolls through Parisian streets. Breton's Francophile tendencies contrasted to the more geographically minded women artists who exhibited more adventurous tendencies to cross both physical and artistic borders. Although Breton does appear to have had some enjoyment of international travel, he appears to have found the most inspiration, and perhaps comfort, when exploring Paris on foot. This is affirmed by Cardinal, who adds that 'one would do well to credit him with a certain physical fitness as a *flâneur*'.<sup>28</sup> Intriguingly, these boundaries appear gender oriented, with women Surrealists gravitating towards Mexico and more exotic climes over the masculine and relatively less 'other' environment of the US, venturing into vibrantly

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<sup>27</sup> Elza Adamowicz (ed.), *Surrealism: Crossing/Frontiers* (Oxford & Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Cardinal, 'Breton's Travels' in Elza Adamowicz (ed.), *Surrealism: Crossing/Frontiers* (Oxford & Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 17-38 (p. 18).

new and richly coloured climates that were reflected in their painting and prose. Bate comments that

Surrealism has itself already been accused of othering various social groups in its representations of gender, sex, race and class. Critiques include the representation of Women as other (hysterical, sexualized, debased other of Man); homosexuality as the disgusted other surrealist heterosexuality; African, native American and Asian culture as the 'primitive' other of the surrealist western culture; and Communism as the vulgar mass proletarian ideology other of the surrealist 'consciousness'. It is as though, in a kind of reality-testing, these representations made by the surrealists do not fit the pictures which are held of these others.<sup>29</sup>

Tired with the association between the female body and Paris as a complete entity, woman Surrealists seem to have found inspiration in their everyday routine and the experiences with which life presented them. Wood comments that 'for many women artists, the boundaries of the self were not limited by the image, but spread to the object, home and the body'.<sup>30</sup> One way in which this was achieved was to take everyday events and occurrences, including themselves, and transport them into marvellous and captivating scenarios. Carrington and Varo, for example, explored the mother's kitchen as a centre of nourishment and alchemical activity. As Adamowicz's above quotation suggests, these artists introduced unexplored ideas to Surrealism that included an array of work based upon the themes of femininity, motherhood, sexuality and gender. Probing the human psyche through their work, as Schiaparelli and Oppenheim's pieces have demonstrated, often generated work that was more provocative and psycho-sexually loaded than that of their male contemporaries. Although Schiaparelli was largely based in Paris, in hindsight we can see that those practitioners who chose to work elsewhere may have done so consciously to prevent their work from becoming lost in an over-inhabited city. As noted in earlier chapters,

<sup>29</sup> David Bate, 'The Space of the Other' in Elza Adamowicz (ed.), *Surrealism: Crossings/Frontiers*, (Oxford & Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), pp.185-196 (p. 184).

<sup>30</sup> Wood, p, 45.

Kahlo was Mexican by birth while Rahon, Carrington and Varo resided in Mexico temporarily, either alone or with another woman artist as a companion. It is clear that this change of location generated considerable artistic energy and creativity. Women Surrealists needed their own locations and cities to thrive and it was only when they stepped out of the boundaries of homocentric Paris was their art met with unprejudiced response, the change of location helping to circumvent the fact of Surrealism as a male-dominated group that did not let women into its inner circle except as a muse or lover.

Durozoi has quoted Breton's comment that 'urban space is never neutral; it is, on the contrary, punctuated with signs to be deciphered poetically, whether the historical and the imaginary, the anecdotal and the fictitious, have left their sediment'.<sup>31</sup> This allows an expansion on Adamowicz's work and Breton's negative opinions on travel, especially his dislike for foreign land and locations away from Paris. She comments: 'as it happens, many of Breton's journeys were plainly 'sedentary' and of interest purely as negative examples,'<sup>32</sup> and continues that 'there are also a number of enforced displacements which might appear to represent examples of sedentary travel, in the sense that Breton neither solicited, chose nor relished them.'<sup>33</sup> These remarks make for an interesting comparison to the women Surrealists included in this analysis, especially as travel for them appears to have been an activity bringing personal pleasure as well as creative development and fulfilment. While Breton may have viewed the exploring of new lands as a tedious and tiresome activity, his colleagues used the opportunity to combine work and pleasure, visit artistic friends, make new acquaintances, and search for new sources of inspiration from fresh surroundings. Often these occasions extended to making new and exotic

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<sup>31</sup> Durozoi, p. 512.

<sup>32</sup> Adamowicz, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

locations an adoptive homeland, as in the example of Carrington's residency in Mexico. For Breton, meanwhile, 'we may allow that travel was more a versatile attitude of mind than a physical action, but no less significant for that'.<sup>34</sup> Unlike those who choose to venture elsewhere to more exotic climes, Breton relished the possibilities that would spring from an unexplored Parisian street and the chance encounters that would occur. Somewhat paradoxically for the leader of a movement dedicated to the liberation of the mind, the implication is that Breton felt more in control of his mind and art by remaining in the familiar location of Paris.

Pinder has commented that

The significance of urban space and the city in surrealist writings by Breton, Louis Aragon and others is well documented with Walter Benjamin referring to Paris as 'the most dreamed-of of their objects', and to Surrealism itself in terms of a 'new art of *flâneurie*' [sic] with 'Paris its classic locale'.<sup>35</sup>

Remaining in Paris also allowed Breton to retain close control of his movement. The official founder of Surrealism, Breton's name, along with the Surrealist movement, became collectively tied to Paris, Breton choosing to travel more by his subconscious mind than by physical means. Meanwhile, women Surrealists embraced travel in all its physicality as boundaries were blurred both geographically and artistically. The greater prominence that their work received the wider the boundaries of the movement became, their travels to locations unexplored by other Surrealists bringing new opportunities for Surrealism that had not yet been established.

Among other themes to have emerged throughout this study is the issue of gender, the avant-garde and queer theory. Although questions of sexuality and the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> David Pinder, 'Chapter 2: Urban encounters: derives from Surrealism' in Elza Adamowicz (ed.), *Surrealism: Crossing/Frontiers* (Oxford & Bern, 2006: Peter Lang), pp. 39-64 (pp. 41-42).

female body, especially fetishism, have been embraced by all the practitioners chosen in this analysis, Kahlo and Rahon sought in particular to strengthen the link between the two. These artists, through painting and prose respectively, explored the themes of broken marriages, infertility and sexual relationships between women. In respect of queer theory, Cranny-Francis et al have stated that ‘queer challenges the concept of identity and the binaristic (self/other) thinking it encodes. It rejects the binaristic definitions of gender and sexuality that construct heteronormative descriptions of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual’.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Beasley has argued that ‘queer thinking does involve a multiplicity of sexualities and a rejection of singular gay/lesbian identities, but arguably the queer that is invoked is not simply a refusal of identity *per/se*’.<sup>37</sup> He adds that ‘the queer in question may not so much involve a non-identity but rather a multiple and/or ambiguous *sexual* identity’.<sup>38</sup> Women Surrealists used the challenge to masculine and feminine identities to their advantage, playing with gender and traditional expectations of a woman in society, but this does not mean that they *negated* their identity. On the contrary, Kahlo and Rahon used their work to multiply their identities, rendering themselves as ambiguous but also resolute and present. Thus Kahlo was an artist whose fluid sexuality was reflected in her paintings and choice of dress. This varied from her fragile frame, compensated by a masculine suit, to the unreal trauma of impossible motherhood, lying on a bed while losing her child. Apart from Rahon, who was open about her lesbian sexuality, and Kahlo, the rest of the women who have been included in this study were heterosexual, and indeed many married and raised a family with

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<sup>36</sup> Anne Cranny-Francis, Wendy Waring, Pam Stavropoulos, Joan Kirkby, *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Beasley, *Gender and Sexuality: Critical Theories, Critical Thinkers* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), p.167.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 167.

their partners. These women's personal and professional relationships do not fit one model, but were as diverse as their creative work.

I will now return to Greer's opening comment about how women Surrealists became self-parodies. I can only reply that instead of being a parody, she became an *exaggeration* of herself. Although it is true that she exhibited her body and sexuality in her art, this was more a self-created character that was both her body and her creation. Her likeness was used, yet this was to explore undiscovered psychic spaces and emotions that she may have felt unable to engage with in her ordinary routine. This may be the opportunity to align the earlier discussion with queer theory and the avant-garde, an issue suggested by the ways in which Surrealist women diverged from themes and motifs that were based on the movement's heritage. Certain topics that were previously ignored were combined, creating harmony and unison, and taking Surrealism to previously ignored territories. This has been most evident in the examination of Varo, this chapter's analysis demonstrating the fusion of nature and science as coexisting without conflict, each influencing and nourishing the other. Varo demonstrated how it was possible to incorporate alchemy and the natural world into Surrealist aesthetics. Thus far, orthodox Surrealism's relationship to science mostly involved mind games and activities involving scientific psychology rather than practical alchemy.

Rather than agree with Greer to the extent that women Surrealists became their own artistic pariah, I can conclude by making the following remarks. Although it is true that in the work of women Surrealists the body was fashioned and sometimes tailored to invoke the fetish, this was not necessarily a one-sided, male fetish. Although the fetish was based on the female body it did not have to be *connected* to a *live* body. Instead it appeared in many guises, whether literally disjointed, as in the

example of mannequins, or in lyrical prose. Although Greer comments that the fetish based on the female body was predominantly sexual, I have shown it to be a multifaceted subject that was manipulated differently from one artist to another. The body became the foundation upon which these women artists built their art, as they used desires of both men and women to produce material that functioned to a woman's advantage. In using her body as she pleased, the woman Surrealist was able to reclaim her lost agency, achieved by referencing male fetishes and desires, and often leading her to produce her most controversial pieces. She stared at her body and chose to refer to it intimately – either allusively or flaunting it – to such an extent that male Surrealists may have kept away from her work through discomfort or embarrassment, as well as prejudice or simple misogyny. She was now in control.

In retrospect I will again return to Greer's article and, in particular, to her thoughts on Kahlo: 'Frida Kahlo could engage with no subject other than her fictionalised and glamorised self. Her proliferating faux-naïve paintings are advertisements for the performance that was her life'.<sup>39</sup> Although it is true that women Surrealists used their likeness in their art, it has been demonstrated that Kahlo's depiction of herself was certainly not always glamorous, and that she often actually painted a stark and brutal self image. True, her body was the *premier degré* 'subject', yet it was usually portrayed from the perspective of loss, tragedy or sorrow rather than through glamour or fetishisation.

As this analysis has shown, the often overlooked canon of women Surrealists assisted in expanding the movement in previously unexplored directions. Some may have ventured further than others, but their intentions were always based on the fundamental principles of the movement. It could be said that the women who entered

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<sup>39</sup> Greer.

into Surrealist society largely did so through contacts with men; while this may have been true for some, however, the strength of the work produced by women Surrealists can only suggest that this factor was soon overshadowed by their own creative abilities.

Although this study has attempted to widen preconceived ideas of Surrealism, it is not conclusive. Further research needs to be carried out in such fields as music and film by women practitioners, serving to widen the boundaries even further and draw out the ways in which their work and methods have influenced more modern cultural production. Another rich opportunity for psycho-Surrealist study, relating to the topic of fashion and the body, would be the 'Shop Window' as 'the ideal proscenium for desire, both self-reflexive and representative of consumerism'.<sup>40</sup> So too research into Surrealist fashion and *objets* could extend substantially into the question of jewellery. There exists a wealth of further work that could be investigated within such research projects, by women Surrealists both dealt with in this study and by those that it has not been possible to discuss here.

By extending the borders of Surrealism established by male pioneers, the break that the women Surrealists made with convention challenged gender boundaries and contributed to the production of an almost sexless art medium. Art became harder to define according to the gender of its creator as women artists began to challenge social expectations of 'women' in society. The Surrealist movement may no longer exist, but academic interest in the movement could continue in further directions, such as the role of men as objects, male Surrealists as muses, and the question of how they in their turn influenced Surrealist works produced by women.

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<sup>40</sup> Wood, p, 57.

To conclude, I have demonstrated in this thesis how Surrealism produced by women artists was vast and varied, powerful yet subtle, hinting at unconscious manifestations that male practitioners had never ventured into previously. They took ideas and findings that were germane to patriarchal Surrealism, such as the loathing of homosexuality, and embraced same-sex relationships in their art and, in some cases, in their personal lives. In this, women Surrealists such as Kahlo and Rahon arguably go beyond even the Surrealism of central male figures: for if Surrealism is truly about the liberation of the mind and body from sexual convention, it would be logical for Surrealist artists to embrace the principle of homosexuality rather than refuse it. Women Surrealists used the art forms and their own bodies – all of which had been used previously used to marshal and objectify women in Surrealist practice – and turned them on themselves, allowing them artistic control of their own bodies.

Rather than refusing out-right male-established ideals around the Surrealist ‘female’ body, women Surrealists took on Surrealist principles and adapted them, exploring and emphasising women’s physicality through clothing, sculpture and images that were provocative – either explicitly or through fine-level semantic encoding – to create a uniquely ‘feminine’ art. Their exploration of motherhood and nature remained true to Surrealism and even enhanced femininity’s connection to the movement by using the natural world to nurture and nourish their creativity.

Women Surrealists began their involvement with the movement as muses and, although this association will inevitably linger both in the popular imagination and in academic work in the field, rather than preventing their involvement in Surrealism I have proved how their legacy was as rich and varied as that of the male artists who preceded them. Instead of violently retaliating against the role of muse these women accepted the association, using it for their own creativity, motivation and artistic gain.

The results of these artists' endeavours have only strengthened the founding premise of this thesis: Surrealism can be at its most powerful and authentic when produced by women.

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