

The power of Leonora Carrington's magical gifts was apparent to me by the way we first met. I was then, a graduate student in Comparative Literature about to complete my dissertation on Surrealism at NYU in New York. My advisor, Prof. Anna Balakian, had requested me to add something on Latin American Surrealism in my dissertation, and time was running out on my deadline. There was nothing in the New York Public Library, and she had said she was returning from Latin America with important texts, BUT her valise with that documentation got stuck in transit and did not arrive in time.

A good friend of mine, Joanne Pottlitzer, who then had been the Director of TOLA (Theater of Latin America), an organization that brought playwrights from Latin America to NY, told me that she knew a woman Surrealist who wrote plays in Mexico. She gave me her address, and I immediately sat down and wrote to Leonora Carrington, not knowing that she was primarily a visual artist. She never replied. So, Joanne suggested that when she would return to Mexico she would visit Leonora and ask why she never answered me, and see if she might convince her to write back to me. Leonora told her in no uncertain terms that she was not interested in academics! What she really wanted to know was why the Feminists were burning their bras in New York. Now there was a question I could respond to, as I had become involved in the New York Feminist Movement. I rewrote to her, informing her of my affiliation with the Feminist Movement, and my desire to teach Surrealism with an inclusion of the women in the movement as soon as I would get my Ph.D. Leonora wrote back to me immediately and sent me money to purchase books on Feminism for her as well as books that had published her plays in France for myself. I was overjoyed, and set right to work. I still did not know that she was a visual artist. We had a lively correspondence in which she often addressed me playfully as Grande Mere or Grand Pere. I used to wonder: "What could she be thinking?" Her grandparents were probably not even alive at that time. Then, little by little, I came to understand her sense of humor, and also the way she was using humor to disguise the contents of her mail. Often her letters would be hidden within a Birthday card that you would have to open to its fullest extent in order to

find a message folded and lying deeply within it. I came to understand that she was using playful surrealist humor to hide more important things that she wanted me to know. She was, at that time, active in the student revolt in Mexico City, and she was protecting herself. Soon she began to include newspaper articles about the student revolution in her letters.

One day a letter arrived that had hidden within it reproductions of her art work taken from a Mexican journal. When I opened them up, I was in a state of ecstatic awe. These were images that I felt I had seen in another world, another life. I had never had those thoughts before. This was so extraordinary. I decided I had better include her in my dissertation, because the world had to know about her fabulous paintings. My thesis was on Surrealist Theater in France and Latin America after WWII, but I just had to include her visual art in it. I told her about my intensely personal response to these images, and I asked for some reference material to guide me as I wanted to write about the work and include it in my dissertation, but did not have any documentation on her. She wrote to me saying that I would have to come to Mexico to meet her because, in fact, while the male Surrealists had books on their work, the women artists had nothing. She felt that she had been shelved and forgotten forever. I wish I could convey how completely shocked I was to learn that such an incredible artist was omitted from the History of Surrealist art. In fact, as I started to do research I only found her name mentioned with regard to her relationship with Max Ernst, her beauty, and her surrealist culinary creations. How was it possible that nothing was written on such amazing art? Leonora said I would have to visit her in Mexico to find out more about her. I could not do that because I had two daughters. We were preparing to spend the next academic year in Paris where my husband was to do Physics research. I did not know where to turn, so my sub-conscious took over. I somehow got the idea that I had to purchase a Mexican dress, put it on, and trust that the vibrations from Mexico would penetrate my brain, and I would understand her very mysterious and completely wondrous paintings. I did purchase a dress in Greenwich Village, and on July 6, 1971, I wore it as I stood at my kitchen table (my desk at the time), and

addressed the cosmos in these words. “If I can’t go to Mexico, let Mexico come to me!” At that very moment, the telephone rang and a deep English accent spoke to me saying: “This is Leonora Carrington. I have just arrived in New York, and I would like to meet you”. I began to shake from the unbelievable synchronicity of her ‘call’ with my words that had invoked help from the cosmos.

Excerpt from Gloria F. Orenstein’s essay “Leonora Carrington’s Feminist Alchemical Vision and Extrasensory Perception: My Magical Journey of Friendship with Leonora Carrington (1971–2011)”.

[Read the full issue here.](#)

Spread the love