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Surrealist Muse by Anne Whitehouse, and: *Escaping Lee Miller*
by Anne Whitehouse, and: *Frida* by Anne Whitehouse (review)

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(Review)

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SURREALIST MUSE

Anne Whitehouse

Ethelzine

<https://www.ethelzine.com/shop/surrealist-muse-by-anne-whitehouse>

\$9.00

ESCAPING LEE MILLER

Anne Whitehouse

Ethelzine

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FRIDA

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Alan Steinfeld

Anne Whitehouse's series on the women of surrealism provides a chronicle of the inner workings of three extraordinary women who emerged out of the surrealist art movement of the 1930s and 1940s. While surrealism sought to focus on the absurd, the fantastic, and the transhuman, the lives of Leonora Carrington, Lee Miller, and Frida Kahlo reflect the very real challenges of the human condition.

Published by Ethel Zine and Micro Press, this exquisitely handcrafted book series, designed by Sara Lefsyk, is a collector's dream. Whitehouse's thought-provoking approach invites readers to delve into the personal struggles, triumphs, and contributions of these artists. In many ways, the exceptional lives of the three women she portrays can be characterized as "surreal," marked by extreme physical suffering and emotional tribulations that set them apart from the ordinary women of their times.

The situations of these lives reflect the sentiment of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote, "Works of art always spring from those who have faced

the danger, gone to the very end of experience, to the point beyond which no human being can go.” Indeed, in these concise biographical sketches Whitehouse sheds light on journeys “no human being” would dare to embark upon.

Her approach to Carrington, Miller, and Kahlo adds a new layer of understanding to the surrealist movement, showing it as a response to the harsh realities of the world. Overall, Whitehouse is both engaging and insightful, providing a fresh perspective into the lives of extraordinary women. Each was a contributor to the surrealist movement equal to the widespread male-dominated acknowledgments that litter the art history books. For instance, Whitehouse accuses the surrealist movement of misogyny and the tendency to portray women as mere muses and symbols of mystical and erotic fantasies. She attributes this hostility to the surrealist men’s love and admiration for each other. When Kahlo was invited to Paris by the movement’s leader, André Breton, she was met with a rude reception and eventually found refuge with the painter Marcel Duchamp.

The title of Whitehouse’s first book in the series, *Surrealist Muse* (2020, a reference to Leonora Carrington), is one the painter/writer would certainly have rejected. In fact, Carrington is quoted in a MoMA exhibition as stating, “I didn’t have time to be anyone’s muse. . . . I was too busy rebelling against my family and learning to be an artist.” Whitehouse emphasizes Carrington’s fierce independence, even though she was the youngest and seemingly most glamorous member of the surrealist circle. Breton described Carrington as “magnificent in her refusals,” declining the roles of muse for Man Ray, Joan Miró, and even her first true love, Max Ernst. Carrington reminisced about her brief affair with Ernst as “an era of paradise,” until the war separated them. Yet she refused a further engagement when they met years later in New York. Her final act of defiance against male aggression occurred when she resisted the advances of the surrealist filmmaker Luis Buñuel. After being locked in a Mexican bathroom, she adorned the walls with her menstrual blood as a statement of her resistance. The episode reinforces the trilogy’s theme of resilience which female surrealists used to defy the norms of polite society.

In each narrative Whitehouse’s nonlinear approach enhances the lyrical quality of these lives. One notable omission in the Carrington account is the lack of acknowledgment for her talents as a writer. A recent publication of

her absurdist stories indicates that they are equal to those of Franz Kafka. While Leonora eventually emerged from her schizophrenia, depression, and heartbreak as a wiser woman in Mexico, Whitehouse's next biographic retelling is a contrasting tale of a creative presence who would never escape her own demons.

In the 2021 addition, *Escaping Lee Miller*, Whitehouse delves into the remarkable life of photographer Lee Miller. Like Carrington, Miller used beauty, talent, and intelligence as her currency for a life full of travel and outlandish adventures. While Carrington expressed her inner struggles through her surreal paintings of humans infused with animal imagery, Miller's creative journey involved the outward absurdity of the times. Her career as a photographer began with the frivolity of the bohemian picnics in the 1930s; it ended as a distinguished photojournalist capturing the most harrowing images of human suffering, from the frontline combat of Normandy to the Nazi death camps of World War II. It is here that Whitehouse declares: "The war destroyed Surrealism as a movement, because games like that weren't amusing anymore." Yet in what could be called the most surreal turn of events, Whitehouse describes Lee being photographed bathing in the tub of the führer's home at Berchtesgaden by her lover and journalist partner, Man Ray.

Whitehouse notes that what made Lee's work so captivating was her ability to be both subject and object simultaneously. She learned from the masters of her day, as an apprentice of Man Ray, posing for legendary photographer Edward Steichen, being painted by Picasso six times, and discovered by Condé Nast for a cover of *Vogue*, and this contributed to her photographic abilities.

However, the horrors of war left her emotionally scarred. She would later confess, "I got in over my head. I never could get the stench of Dachau out of my mouth." She returned to England a broken woman, her love for fashion and desire for sexual freedom stripped away. Despite her struggles with depression, suicidal thoughts, and alcoholism, Miller reinvented herself as a master chef, reconnected with Picasso, and published his first biography with her husband, Roland. Unlike Carrington, who found redemption through her studies of Jung and alchemy, Miller was unable to heal from her past. Whitehouse portrays her as a woman tormented by self-loathing who

nevertheless preserved her career by keeping her sixty thousand photos and negatives intact in her attic, later discovered by her estranged son.

The third installment in Whitehouse's series is *Frida* (2022), centering on the celebrated figure of Frida Kahlo. Her stardom and enduring cultural impact eclipses that of most women artists of the twentieth century. Her iconic face, plastered on walls throughout Mexico and many of the cultural centers in the United States, symbolizes the independence of creative women. Nevertheless, her suffering was no less than that of the fellow artists mentioned here.

This exploration, like the previous two, reveals the hidden wounds beneath the currency of creative genius, compassion, and raw sexuality. Those unaware of Carrington's and Miller's hardships may look to Frida as someone who used her imaginative daring as a balm for her physical and emotional suffering. Art scholar John Berger argued that "the sharing of pain is one of the essential preconditions for rediscovering dignity and hope, and Kahlo's work served as a source of healing and empowerment for herself and others." Her use of bleeding hearts, heavy braces, and corsets made of leather and metal in her paintings served as symbols of the enslavement women had faced in the past, making her one of the most significant contributors to the surrealist movement.

Kahlo's tumultuous relationship with the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera was a notable upgrade to the situation of the other two women and their male counterparts. Rivera immediately recognized the depth and complexity of Kahlo's artistic voice, appraising her work in the catalog for her first exhibition as "acid and tender, hard as steel and delicate and fine as a butterfly's wing, and profound and cruel as the bitterness of life."

Readers may criticize Whitehouse for her lack of chronological structure in these brief biographies and for her predilection for personal drama over the significance of artistic contributions. However, Whitehouse's unconventional style of jumping back and forth between various crises in these women's lives adds an emotional impact, generating a lyrical and poetic quality to the writing. Equally, the lack of a formal structure offers a greater sense of the psychological needs each woman sought for resolving the outstanding conflicts of their lives. Beyond simply showcasing their creations, we find greater meaning in learning how each woman channeled her pain into innovative

expressions. Looking back, we can see how the power of the creative imagination emerging out of these influencers pushed them beyond traditional gender roles. Their trailblazing efforts enabled women to take on a more prominent role in generating new forms of expression.

Yet in these concise reflections one point seems to have been overlooked. Whitehouse fails to mention how the search for personal expression broadened these women's creativity beyond formal elements of surrealism. Whereas Carrington drew upon alchemy and mystical elements, and Miller spotlighted themes of war and desolation, Kahlo used her own traumatic experiences as fodder to comment on Mexican culture and folklore. Despite this minor critique, Whitehouse's trilogy provides a captivating examination of three formidable revolutionaries, women who survived extraordinary challenges and defied societal norms in response to an inner calling to create. The series serves as a testament to the power of the human spirit and the role of female artists in shaping the course of art history. The booklets are a must-read for anyone interested in exploring the intersection of art, feminism, and the human experience.

Still, a lament lingers regarding the gifts of inspiration woven out of the anguished fabric of the lives of these tortured souls. It can be said without hyperbole that the "women of surrealism" plumbed the depths of the human condition. I wonder, as Emily Dickinson did, about the wounded people she knew, if these grand dames of twentieth-century art ever truly found relief from the physical, mental, and emotional afflictions they sustained. In the poem "I measure every Grief I meet," Dickinson wrote:

I wonder if when Years have piled—
Some Thousands—on the Harm—
That hurt them early—such a lapse
Could give them any Balm—

Or would they go on aching still
Through Centuries of Nerve—
Enlightened to a larger Pain—
In Contrast with the Love—

Anne Whitehouse's portrayals of pioneering women and the tenacious times they endured serves as an encouragement for those looking to over-

come seemingly insurmountable odds. The dedication to an inner calling in the face of adversity offers a model for harnessing hardships into vehicles of transformative expressions.

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