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Carrington's Kitchen

Katharine Conley

This essay argues that the objects in Leonora Carrington's kitchen, as represented in her writing and painting, are comparable to the objects in Breton's study, as he writes about them and has them photographed. Her most emblematic object - the cauldron - epitomizes the way she mixes the ingredients of her art, creating new substances through a literal process of embodiment. In comparison, Breton predominantly matches the ingredients of his art, through his strategy of juxtaposition, following the combinatory principle of the surrealist image, the spark that stimulates automatism's flow. Both sets of objects reflect the spaces that house them as the intellectual hub for each artist; the differences between them establish what distinguishes Breton from Carrington as surrealists, in particular their different approaches to non-Western objects.

Everyone who has written about visiting Leonora Carrington in Mexico describes her kitchen. Edward James in 1948 called it a 'combined kitchen, nursery, bedroom, kennel and junk store' in a state of disorder that was 'apocalyptic.'¹ 'For Carrington, everything begins in the kitchen,' Germaine Rouvre explained in the 1970s.² Silvia Cherem, in the catalogue to the recent exhibition of Carrington's work in Dallas, describes the kitchen as 'a dining room, sitting room, and place to receive visitors,' centered on 'an old round table covered with plastic, surrounded by four chairs that resent the passing of time.'³ In the catalogue to another recent exhibition, *Surreal Friends* (2010), Stefan van Raay describes having 'had the great privilege of sitting around her kitchen table in Mexico City many times.'⁴ Homero Aridjis tells a similar tale of being led into the kitchen by Carrington: 'Once seated, she offered tea, tequila, or whiskey and took advantage of our visit to smoke a cigarette. On the cupboards and the refrigerator were post cards with reproductions of works of art featuring cats as well as the royal family of England and Princess Diana.'⁵

Carrington discovered surrealism in 1936 when she was studying art in London. She admired a painting by Max Ernst, subsequently met the artist and then moved with him to France, where they lived until he was arrested as a foreign national at the outbreak of World War Two and she fled to Spain. Her memorable self-portrait, *The Inn of the Dawn Horse* (1937-38), and her first collection of short stories, *La Maison de la peur* (1938), were finished in France. She developed her own distinctive surrealist voice and vision there, adding to the plurality of voices that make up the movement. In New York during the war she rekindled her friendship with the surrealists, including André Breton, author of the founding 'Manifesto of Surrealism.' After the war, she settled in Mexico City while Breton returned to Paris. In this article I argue that the settings in which Carrington and Breton worked contextualized their individualized visions of surrealism and actively informed their thought. Through an understanding of the way each of them envisioned and spatialized their working environments, it becomes clear how Carrington's embodied version of surrealism builds on Breton's more abstract theories.



Carrington's kitchen was her living, talking, and thinking space. It was her intellectual hub, her equivalent of Breton's study in Paris, as Jonathan Eburne has persuasively argued.⁶ Carrington's accumulation of various 'systems of knowledge production' that are visible in her paintings, wherein she actively mixes Celtic, English, Tibetan, Mayan, and indigenous Mexican traditions, constitutes an 'archival effect,' according to Eburne, comparable to Breton's accumulation of practices, which similarly stand as evidence that surrealism 'lived under an archival drive.'⁷ Such a drive mirrors the dynamism of the archive itself as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have described it: an oscillating figure caught between the pleasure principle - the desire to capture and understand events as they occur - and the death drive - the inevitable creep and acceptance of mortality.⁸ The oscillation in question simultaneously follows the regular path of chronological time and inevitably seeks to disrupt and suspend it. Both Breton and Carrington's thought and work reflect this tension, typical of surrealism. Through Carrington's writings and paintings I will look at how her version of embodied surrealism builds on Breton's vision in a way that is linked tangibly to her surroundings.

Carrington, like Breton, was intentional about the objects with which she surrounded herself and was interested in those she understood as having magical, animate qualities, even a 'quasi-animal life,' as Antonin Artaud once described objects seen close up and magnified by a camera.⁹ This 'animal life' of objects to which Artaud refers comes through clearly in Carrington's paintings and writings. Furthermore, Carrington adopted an alternative 'animal life' for herself, repeatedly, identifying the horse as her totem animal. Breton also adopted a totem animal for himself—the fish or dolphin—because, as he explains in *Nadja*, he was born under the astrological sign of Pisces, but he never took this connection to an alternative animal identity for himself as seriously as Carrington did until he moved to New York during World War Two.¹⁰ When both Breton and Carrington left Europe and briefly lived in New York, before he returned to Paris and she continued on to New York City, he was exposed to objects made in the American West and actively collected Pacific Northwestern transformation masks that portrayed humans as human beings and animals. Like Carrington, he expanded his idea of what it meant to be human once he arrived in the Americas.

It was in New York that Breton wrote his 'Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not,' in which he speculated about the place of human beings in the universe in relation to animals larger and smaller than we are, the whale and the mayfly.¹¹ This speculation built on the earliest surrealist assumptions about the unconscious, based on Freud, and their conviction that human consciousness must be more mobile than the Cartesian view of the mind with which Breton grew up in early twentieth-century France. The experiments with automatic trances the surrealists undertook in Breton's study and adjoining sitting room in late 1922 underpinned his theory in the 'Manifesto' of the receptive surrealist as sharing properties with objects. He claimed that attuned surrealists were equivalent to 'receptacles of so many echoes, modest *recording instruments*'—and consequently his theory of the object had a psychological function.¹² His 'Crisis of the Object' from 1933 and the first chapter of *Mad Love* from 1934 established a connection between the psyche and the objects to which it is attracted.. This view of objects



as having a catalyzing effect, capable of helping an individual understand him or herself, complemented Carrington's view of objects as having lives of their own. Just as Breton's thought was developed in his study, the matrix for Carrington's creative labour originated in her kitchen.

Carrington's actual kitchen in Mexico City 'changed minutely over the years,' according to Susan Aberth, 'the surface of the table was consistently cluttered with an array of necessities.'¹³ I was fortunate enough to spend two evenings in that kitchen with Carrington and her husband Chiki Weisz in 2001. Cherm's description captures my own memory of it:

Oils, sauces, plates, glasses, medications, boxes of tea, and cat food are readily visible on shelves from which also hang rows of blemished pans and rusty scoops. As decoration, there are a few postcards and magazine cutouts that Leonora has treasured, with the photos of the English royalty, including of course Lady Di and Queen Elizabeth II, and Irish writers, also an Egyptian cat, some pre-Columbian and prehistoric archaeological pieces, as well as an invitation for an international conference in her honor that took place in the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City.¹⁴

It was an ordinary domestic space containing little of value. [Fig. 1]



Fig. 1: Carrington's kitchen in Mexico City, Colonia Roma. Photograph by Ann Walsh, 2009.

It was the place where Carrington served tea, whiskey, and tequila - ('It won't hurt you, you know,' she said to me when I hesitated over the choice) - and also a place of fierce intellectual challenge and debate, spiced with humor. Carrington interrogated her visitors and told them stories, sometimes playing jokes on



them.¹⁵ It was not a place where a visitor could feel completely at ease. Aberth explains how moving to Mexico in the 1940s prompted Carrington to develop her sense of 'kitchens as magically charged spaces used to concoct potions, weave spells, prepare herbs and conduct alchemical "cooking" experiments.'¹⁶ The conversation and cooking that 'charged' the space were generative of Carrington's art and were both distinctly female in nature, if not always conventionally feminine. Her choice of the kitchen as a domestic space traditionally dominated by women was deliberate, even as she challenged sexist assumptions about the limits of what women could do.

Critics have long noted the crossover between cooking and art making for Carrington. She once said, 'Painting is like making strawberry jam - really carefully and well.'¹⁷ James notably commented in 1975, '[t]he paintings of Leonora Carrington are not merely painted, they are brewed.'¹⁸ In footage from the early 1990s shown in Dominique and Julien Ferrandou's recent film, Carrington explains her method in terms of cooking, as she prepares tempera paint by breaking an egg in order to mix her colors:

The real work is done when you're alone in your studio and that's it. First it becomes a sense of something and then it becomes something that you can see and then it becomes something that you can do. It's like cooking. But cooking isn't that easy, either, as you probably know.¹⁹

In Breton's introduction to her short story, 'The Debutante,' in his *Anthology of Black Humor* (1950), (in which he also praises her 'admirable canvases' as 'laden with the modern "marvelous"'), he describes eating meals prepared by Carrington in New York from a sixteenth-century English cookbook, claiming he was 'the only one to try certain dishes,' including a hare stuffed with oysters.²⁰ Carrington created several paintings that involve dining - indoors and outdoors - including *The Meal of Lord Candlestick* (1938), *Pastoral* (1950), *Three Women Beyond the Table* (1951), *The Hunt Breakfast* (1956), and *Lepidopteros* (1969). Cooking and dining serve as a powerful metaphors for creativity in her writing, too, despite the fact that one of her short stories contains the suggestion that she was raised to believe that food was a vulgar topic: the narrator's guide in 'Uncle Sam Carrington,' who happens to be a horse, warns her to 'Never mention anything as vulgar as food' when they pay a visit to the proper Misses Cunningham-Jones.²¹

The kitchen itself is featured in her short story from 1939 'The Sisters' as a medieval space laden with food, including 'cakes and enormous tarts' that 'were cooked and put to the flame and taken from the oven. Pomegranates and melons stuffed with larks' as well as 'whole oxen ... turning slowly on spits' and 'pheasants, peacocks, and turkeys [who] awaited their turn to be cooked.'²² Sonia Assa groups the cooking in this story with two other stories from 1937-40 as a way of linking the food prepared in Carrington's fictionalized kitchens with the 'oral activity' of speech. Conflating cooking and the kitchen, Assa confirms my premise here that '[n]o matter what the plot and the cast of characters might be, there is always the question of some "sacrée cuisine."²³ The kitchen is also the focus of at least three paintings, *The House Opposite* (c. 1945), *Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen* (1975) and *Aardvark*



Groomed by Widows (1997). The busiest of these, *The House Opposite*, shows cooking as a featured activity.²⁴ [Fig. 2]



Fig. 2: Leonora Carrington, *The House Opposite* (ca. 1945) © 2013 Leonora Carrington / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

On the lower far right of *The House Opposite*, three female figures—two light, one dark skinned—stand around a gigantic, partially glass cauldron through which a bubbling green-gold brew is visible. It is suspended on a metal chain over a modest fire, while domesticated birds, awaiting ‘their turn to be cooked’ (to cite ‘The Sisters’ again), stand at the feet of the woman stirring the pot, her back to the viewer, showing off her star-strewn cape that looks like it shines with real starlight over her right shoulder. The dark skinned, bare breasted woman on the left sports a crest-like hairdo and extends a forefinger into the bubbling cauldron while the third woman facing the viewer handles herbs for the soup they are preparing for a hybrid figure seated at the painting’s center, a woman with the shadow of a horse and a blond version of the crest-like hairdo of the dark skinned cook. Beside the central figure at the dining room table that dominates the lower floor of the house, sits a chair that appears to have a tiny human head. As a young girl rushes into the dining room from the kitchen bearing a roasted bird on the right, the hybrid central figure looks up from her bowl towards another hybrid female figure entering from the left. This creature with a tree in place of a head carries what appears to be a human face in a package wrapped as a gift, whereas upstairs grows a tree with a human face below which hangs a spectral wooden rocking horse reminiscent of the wooden rocking horse in *The Inn of the Dawn Horse* from seven years earlier. At the central figure’s feet, almost under the table, sits a calm trio of minuscule female beings who look from their posture as though they are chatting.

Aberth, Marina Warner and Whitney Chadwick all describe the scene in *The House Opposite* as domestic yet magical; it is ‘infused with the sacerdotal,’ writes Aberth, in particular ‘the meal,’ which is



'designed to instigate transit and transformation.'²⁵ In this painting, as in her short stories, Carrington normalizes the fantastic with her inclusion of hybrid beings - talking horses, birds, trees and humans with animal or vegetable aspects - who interact with disarmingly realistic heroines. Breton wrote in the 'Manifesto' that *surreality* was the future resolution of dream and reality, 'which are seemingly so contradictory.'²⁶ Carrington takes this idea of fusion as essential to surrealist thought even more literally and repeatedly portrays in her writing and painting the fused and hybrid beings who exist not in the future but in her present everyday world. Carrington suggests that every character and every space has more than one aspect and that transformations are as necessary and mundane as breathing. For her, objects do not just have a psychological function, as Breton argued in 1933, they can be animate and animals can be seen as part of humankind's tangible identity.

Key to her portrayal of a 'domicile filled with images of creation and resurrection' that is 'devoted to a world of women,' as Chadwick argues about this painting, is the representation of intense magical activity.²⁷ Like an exquisite corpse drawing from the 1920s and 1930s, that makes sense because we can imagine a real body as we look at the fantastical one drawn by different hands, Carrington's *House Opposite* makes sense as a house because we are familiar with the ordinary houses upon which this one is based; *this* is a house *opposite* familiar norms. With her transpositions, Carrington reveals houses and their kitchens as laboratories in which women work on fantastic transformations that she makes appear ordinary.

The limits of the inside and outside of the body are put into question by Carrington in this painting, through the changeable hybridity of these female beings, in what Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, calls a characteristic 'problematic of identity' for Carrington.²⁸ It is clear from this work that Carrington admires humans who come close to the creaturely,²⁹ a position she confirms in an essay from 1975, in which she identifies herself as a 'Female Human Animal' as a reminder to her readers that humans have always been animals.³⁰ In Carrington's world, humans and animals readily transform into each other; they exist at the threshold between two bodies, two identities. On the upper floor of *The House Opposite*, moving from left to right, hybrid and clearly human female figures walk a cat, fall through the floor boards, wake up or experience lucid dreaming, and sit contemplatively in a wood as though out of doors. Dreaming has its own reality, as Breton argued in the first 'Manifesto,' and in Carrington's paintings those dreams are materialized.³¹ This upper floor - over which a night sky glitters on the left and the sun gleams on a cloudy day on the right - combines inside and outside, daytime and nighttime, waking and dreaming, in one extended suspended moment: chronological time dissolves into 'simultaneous time,' as Warner confirms in her comparison of this painting to Quattrocento precedents.³² The archival drive that suspends time is also on view here. Carrington's surrealist rendering of non-chronological surrealistic dreamtime is visible in the suspended identities of the figures in the paintings: not one thing *or* another, but one thing *and* another, at the same time.

Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen (1975) depicts a scene that refers to Carrington's Irish grandmother. [Fig. 3]





Fig. 3: Leonora Carrington, *Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen* (1975) @ 2013 Leonora Carrington / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

A massive English or Irish stove sits in the background on the left and serves as a reminder of Carrington's Irish grandmother and a vestige of her childhood memories, while the activity in the painting concentrates on signs of her life in Mexico in the shape of the curved cooking pot - in place of the cauldron from *The House Opposite* - balanced on top of a traditional Mexican griddle or comal at the center.³³ A large white goose dominates this kitchen and actively steps inside 'a magic circle drawn on the floor [that] contains a Celtic inscription in mirror writing.'³⁴ Carrington's quintessentially hybrid creatures inhabit this space: three crone-like beings of indeterminate sex cluster around the cooking pot and two figures wearing hats and masks at the edges participate in ritualistic activities related to cooking - the one at the back leans over the European stove while the one at the front grinds corn. Two anthropomorphized animals also participate in this ritual - the dominant white goose, 'designed to invoke the goddess,' according to Aberth, and a 'horned goat-like creature holding a broom.'³⁵ The kitchen is a site for magic: Chadwick explains how 'the garlic cloves resting on [the magic circle] are integral to all magic and healing rituals in Mexico,' revealing the kitchen 'as a place of strange transformations where strong magic is necessary to neutralize the enormous goose.'³⁶ Even the ears of corn have an animal-like appearance, particularly the one at the foot of the comal. Like the domesticated birds at the feet of the



three women stirring the cauldron in *The House Opposite*, this animal-like ear of corn awaits its eventual transformation into food, its turn to be cooked.

The ingredients in the painting, from the garlic to the vegetables intended for the shallow cooking platter, infuse the viewer inside and outside, as powerfully as any aromatic scent, with the sense that entry into this kitchen could result in as profound a transformation of the self as that experienced by the figures in the painting. This notion of physical transformation as a result of cooking echoes the less tangible but no less powerful psychic journeys with which Breton and his friends experimented in 1922 and 1923 when they practiced hypnotic trances in his study and adjacent sitting room, group activities later played as games in the 1930s and 1940s. Carrington's kitchen adds an overtly sensual dimension to the psychological experiments Breton describes in essays from 1922 such as 'Words without Wrinkles' and 'The Mediums Enter.'³⁷ Her shift of locale from the study to the kitchen materializes the surrealist idea of identity as mutable, insofar as the audible manifestation of other voices bubbling up in automatic trance states and spilling out during group meetings in the 1920s translate into the visibly multiple identities in Carrington's hybrid bodies starting in the 1930s. Carrington's emphasis on cooking and eating moves the Bretonian idea of psychic transformation leading to insight towards the idea of physical transformation in which new physical identities, not merely voices, could become manifest - of the self as a being another sex, or a human-tree, or an animal like the giant goose in this painting.

Finally, the more recent *Aardvark Groomed by Widows* (1997) shows a cozy scene of women washing what looks like the family pet in a curved, cauldron-like pot; yet this 'cave-like space' that resembles Grandmother Moorhead's kitchen, similarly serves as a setting for what Chadwick calls 'strange encounters and ritual gestures,' in which washing replaces cooking.³⁸ [Fig. 4]



Fig. 4: Leonora Carrington, *Aardvark Groomed by Widows* (1997) @ 2013 Leonora Carrington / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



The scene's domesticity naturalizes the fantastic in a manner typical of Carrington's stories in which magical transformations and substitutions - an aardvark for a dog, creaturely widows for an ordinary family - are presented as a matter of course. For example, in 'The Royal Summons' a cypress tree speaks to the narrator and tears up its roots to follow her until she complies with the rules of the deadly game she has unwittingly played with the Queen's ministers.³⁹ In 'The Oval Lady' the most moving scene comes at the end of the story, when the narrator is surrounded by talking birds and toys, including Tartar, an anthropomorphized wooden rocking-horse that the father of the house has threatened to burn. Carrington's paintings, like her stories, regularly depict humans and creatures interacting with each another intensely. They show a desire for connection. And the settings for these experiences are frequently as domestic as the kitchen where most of her serious conversations were conducted.

Both the settings for intellectual work - Carrington's kitchen and Breton's study - may be described as domestic. They were filled with necessary tools for their occupants' production: books, pens, pencils and art, in Breton's case, including non-Western sculptures originally intended for ritual use and kitchen implements, postcards and a dining table and chairs in Carrington's, as well as her own artwork in the adjacent dining room. Whereas Carrington's kitchen was a stereotypically feminine domain and Breton study, following in the tradition of Freud and Apollinaire's work spaces, a masculine one, I am arguing here that both were spaces self-consciously dedicated to creative production and to understandings of surrealist processes that operated independent of the artist's sex.

Breton published photographs from his collection in books like *Nadja*, including the Easter Island statuette that was the first non-Western object he acquired.⁴⁰ Just as Carrington visually portrays the kitchen as a creative place, Breton wrote about his apartment as a setting for surrealist activities, beginning in 1922 with 'Words without Wrinkles' and 'The Mediums Enter,' the essay in which he first described surrealist group experiments with automatic trances and gave his first definition of the word 'surrealism' as 'a certain psychic automatism that corresponds quite well to the dream state.'⁴¹ He also wrote about specific objects in his collection, including those from the Pacific islands he identifies as '*haloed* objects by which we are enthralled.'⁴² After his return to Paris in the 1940s, he described objects collected from the Arizona Hopi reservation he visited and the Pacific Northwest Coast, including a Hopi katchina doll and Kwakiutl and Yup'ik masks he later reproduced in *L'Art magique*.⁴³ But whereas Breton's study is filled with heterogeneous objects he arranged and rearranged in a kind of continuous process of material automatic writing, Carrington's representations of kitchens, particularly the three paintings to which I refer here, contain principally one recurring object - the cooking pot, platter or mystical cauldron together with a heat source - that function literally and as a metaphor for the transformational process of cooking, to which she compares painting, generative of newly fused entities and identities.⁴⁴ This powerful symbolic object, so poetically presented in *The House Opposite* as a gigantic, transparent pot, also appears literally and symbolically in her writings, including her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974) and her short, resolutely anti-colonialist play, 'The Invention of *Mole*' (1957), in which a terracotta cauldron serves an important function.⁴⁵ [Fig. 5]





Fig. 5: Leonora Carrington, *The House Opposite*, detail © 2013 Leonora Carrington / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The play turns on a key ingredient added to the quintessential Mexican sauce, which turns out to be a meddlesome missionary archbishop. In the final scene, Montezuma's 'Imperial Cook appears with a great earthen casserole fit for an Archbishop' and exclaims, while 'rubbing his hands,' "It will all be over in a couple of hours and you won't feel a thing, absolutely and relatively nothing," while the curtain falls 'on the increasingly piercing shrieks of the prelate.'⁴⁶ The casserole or cauldron stands as Carrington's transcendent metaphor, the magical pot in which all of her alchemical stews were brewed, including the secret of immortal life.

Of all her writings, *The Hearing Trumpet* best illustrates the importance of the literal kitchen cauldron in Carrington's iconology. In the penultimate scenes, Marian the protagonist descends into a cavern beneath the retirement community where she has been sent by her grandson, Galahad. In that basement cavern she discovers a crone and a cauldron. 'As I drew near the fire the woman stopped stirring the pot and rose to greet me,' writes Carrington. 'When we faced each other I felt my heart give a



convulsive leap and stop. The woman who stood before me was myself.⁴⁷ Marian then proceeds to jump into 'the boiling soup' and thereby discovers the secret of eternal life. She realizes that the cauldron is the Holy Grail, with which she and her old-lady friends will trump mortality once and for all. The Grail, in Carrington's universe, is not an object to be found by Galahad in Europe, of great spiritual and monetary value; it is simply self knowledge accessible to curious old women living in the New World, knowledge that liberates a being from the body and transmutes that body into pure transcendence.

Although both Breton and Carrington valued everyday things as potentially revelatory keys to psychic mysteries, in the post-war era of surrealism, Breton's ever-growing collection increasingly included valuable items, made even more valuable after his death in 1966 because he had owned them. Among these were artworks by his friends and his non-Western masks and sculptures, which constituted a colonial 'contradiction' for Breton: many of the things he treasured he had been able to purchase as a result of France's colonial empire, to which he was strongly ideologically opposed.⁴⁸ Carrington also decorated her house with art - her own sculptures, masks and tapestries, works that also had value in the Mexican, American and European art markets and that have presumably gained value since her death in 2011. Her connection to non-Western traditions was maintained less through objects than through her daily excursions with Chiki to the traditional local markets within modern Mexico City, as footage from the Ferrandou film shows. Her 'collection' as represented by her art remained consistently modest, like her actual kitchen, fundamentally domestic and her cooking implements inhered in one symbol - the cauldron - made precious mostly by her treatment of it in her art.

Carrington's cauldron may seem paltry when compared with the riches in Breton's study, except that as an encapsulating and recurring symbol it encompasses everything within that illustrious *atelier*, now immortalized at the Pompidou Center in Paris as *Breton's Wall*. For while we could argue for understanding Breton's study as his most successful realization of material automatic writing - each object constituting an ingredient of his thought - Carrington's metaphorical cauldron, on the other hand, is the container in which all of her intellectual ingredients are mixed and thereby transformed. While Breton was a consummate appreciator and critic of practices that might lead to transformation as exemplified by his essay on Pacific Northwest Coast transformation masks published in *Neuf* in 1950, Carrington shows the results of transformation through her consistent use of hybrid animal-human, plant-human, even object-human beings.⁴⁹ Her first stories, from 'The House of Fear' to 'The Débutante' and, as we have seen, 'The Oval Lady' and 'The Royal Summons,' already involved hybrid creatures - speaking animals and trees - who materialized the transformations that fascinated Breton intellectually.

In the 1950 article on transformation masks, Breton explains how the act of wearing a transformation mask involves a charged emotional exchange, an *échange passionnel*, between the self (both within and without) and the mask, in a reciprocal relation, allowing an individual to become psychically connected to alternate versions of the self as an animal and also to the surrounding world.⁵⁰ He describes experiencing vicariously the 'vertiginous' feeling the mask sparks during the initiation ceremony in which it is used, linked to its artistry and 'multiform spirituality' connected to the



transformation in question: 'from fish to bird, from bird to man.'⁵¹ The mask physically allows the transformation to become an action as well as an idea; it is powerful because it allows him to see a physical manifestation of the idea so dear to him of the co-existence of realities, the mask, with the pull of a string, can represent first one reality and then another. Aesthetically, Breton's cherished principle of the coexistence of realities was from the start mirrored in the definition for the surrealist image he borrowed from Pierre Reverdy, according to which the image relies on the unifying and co-existing '*juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities*.'⁵² Breton's respect for the idea of *transformisme* may be seen in his arrangement his Kwakiutl transformation mask near two masks of his own face in one iteration of his study so that he could see them together from his desk.⁵³ [Fig. 6]



Fig. 6: André Breton's Study, 2003 @ Gilles Ehrmann, coll. part. S. Ehrmann

This particular mask alternates between a human face awake and asleep, shifting the perspective from an outward to an inward-looking vision of the sort he lionized as early as 1928 in 'Surrealism and Painting.'⁵⁴

Nonetheless, what Breton called *transformisme* was primarily an *idea* for him. Even during the experiments with automatism at the outset of the movement, Breton's role had been more to record the sessions than to participate fully in them. In 'The Mediums Enter,' for example, he is the one observing,



while others like René Crevel and Robert Desnos played the leading roles, plunging 'headlong' into hypnotic trances.⁵⁵ For Carrington, on the other hand, *transformisme* was analogous to the process of brewing, or mixing (as opposed to his matching), that recurs in her thought and practice, abstract and material processes that dissolve ingredients and fuse them into new elements. Carrington's metaphorical cauldron, represented literally in *The House Opposite*, 'The Invention of *Mole*' and again in *The Hearing Trumpet*, succinctly represents this principle of embodied surrealism that characterizes her version of surrealist thought—as concepts tangibly corporealized.

In this ability to see fusion through transformation and hybridity, Carrington recognizes what anthropologist Edmund Carpenter identified as typical of the perception of visual puns that Pacific Northwest Coast inhabitants found in their masks, whether Kwakiutl masks or Yup'ik masks of the sort Breton owned, with faces that ripple back and forth between human and animal.⁵⁶ In reference to the drawing of a rabbit that looks like a duck from a different angle used by Ludwig Wittgenstein to illustrate his *Philosophical Investigations*, Carpenter argues that Wittgenstein's 'thesis is that you can only experience one at a time. But supposing you experienced both of them as a single image. And I think this is what the native people did. They recognized rabbit-duck not as alternatives but as a single form.'⁵⁷ Carpenter believes the surrealists also recognized and appreciated this notion of simultaneity. This fused perception came easily to Carrington, who was unafraid of the association of spells and magic with the occult, an association Breton only accepted openly in the 1950s when he wrote *L'Art magique* (1957), partly because earlier he was motivated to represent surrealism as different from spiritualism and to make clear that his movement, indebted to psychoanalysis, had nothing to do with superstition or the supernatural, as he fiercely asserts in 'The Mediums Enter.'⁵⁸

In Carrington's work, on the other hand, the cauldron as a tangible and metaphorical object demonstrates her openness to fused bodies and images as well as her willingness to learn from occult practices, including local Mexican traditions. Her portrayal in *The Hearing Trumpet* of the crone's cauldron as the Grail for human kind - namely the secret of eternal life - constitutes a literalisation not only of her use of cooking as a metaphor for life powered by intense creative activity but also for Breton's idea of *transformisme*, which posits the self as an intellectual force living in suspended reciprocal exchange with the surrounding universe, a power that for Breton may be conferred on a human being by wearing a mask in a ritual. In Carrington's version the transformation effected by the cauldron is less transitional than Breton's admiration for the temporary transformation induced by wearing a mask during a ritual dance. The stakes are higher and more real for her. Breton's intellectualism stops short of her more complete embrace of transformation, even though his fascination with the concept of *transformisme* hints at the possibility of a similar acceptance.

What distinguishes Carrington's symbolic Grail-object from Breton's many real objects (all of which had a sacred value for him), has to do with immediacy. For Breton, the mask always existed outside of himself. He matches through juxtaposition on his study walls, whereas Carrington mixes in a way that shows how for her, the notion of transformation is more than an idea, it is something that



happens in the self. She takes a Bretonian abstraction and concretizes it in an ordinary everyday fashion and she does so repeatedly with her hybrid, animal-human creatures who live in her paintings in a suspended synchronous time. We see this hybridity in *The House Opposite* with the central figure of the woman with the shadow of a horse or the tree with a human head upstairs in the same painting, and with Tartar, the speaking wooden rocking-horse in 'The Oval Lady' and the various horse-guides for the human female narrators in 'The House of Fear' and 'Uncle Sam Carrington,' as well the half-human, half-horse protagonist stand-in for herself in the novella 'Little Francis.' This all-at-once hybridity is epitomized in Carrington's mythology in the kitchen environment - the domestic space, par excellence, literally at the heart of her house. For while Breton ultimately returned to Europe and hung his new masks in his study as reminders of his travels and the intellectual importance to him of the mask's ability to *trouble* or provoke, Carrington remained in Mexico and, as a result, had less desire for mementoes of the ancient culture that surrounded her, co-existent with the sophisticated modern city in which she lived. Distance collapses in Carrington's version of transformation, in body, and in the timing and spacing connected to mortality, and this collapsed distance occurs in the practices of surrealism she cooked up in her kitchens.

I have sought to show how the comparison between Breton's study and Carrington's kitchen demonstrates how both spaces fostered 'systems of knowledge production' important to surrealism, as Eburne argues, that were intrinsically linked to, and animated by, their material surroundings. Carrington's version of surrealism developed further the fundamental receptivity Breton advocated of the surrealist to his or her environment. Both of their sets of objects and the animate qualities they saw in them served the practical function of nourishing each thinker's worldview, oscillating, like the archive itself, backwards and forwards in time and place. Both of them showed the extent to which surrealism embraced both European and American, ancient and contemporary, mentalities and a profound appreciation of Western and non-Western things as belonging together in what could be understood as a global aesthetic. Both provided the setting for establishing practices of making art as well as ideas, for actively sparking surrealism as work.

In Carrington's case, her transformation of kitchens in her paintings and stories into hybrid spaces as settings for the hybrid figures she brought to life exemplifies her more materialized philosophical version of surrealism, in an eminently practical environment. Her embodied vision of what Breton identified as *transformisme* extended beyond the ritual of the masked dance. In her world such ritual happened every day in the kitchen, not just in dream or automatic trance but in reality. For Carrington the tools needed for *all* aspects of surrealist work, at its most magical as well as at its most practical, were situated in the furnace of her creative thought, the kitchen out of which all her paintings, drawings, sculptures, tapestries, and stories emerged.⁵⁹



¹ Whitney Chadwick, 'Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness,' *Women's Art Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (Spring-Summer, 1986), 41.

² In Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, 'Leonora Carrington et la tunique de Nessus,' *Obliques: La femme surréaliste*, Vol. 14-15 (1977), 85.

³ Silvia Cherem, 'Eternally Married to the Wind: Interview with Leonora Carrington,' in *Leonora Carrington, What She Might Be*, ed. Salomon Grimberg, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, 2008, 18-19.

⁴ Stefan van Raay, 'Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varos and Kati Horna,' *Surreal Friends*, eds. Stefan van Raay, Joanna Moorhead, and Teresa Arcq, Lund Humphries with Pallant House, London, 2010, 26.

⁵ Homero Aridjis, 'Visite chez Leonora Carrington,' trans. Christille Vasserot, in *Leonora Carrington*, Gallimard, Paris, 2008, 55-67. My translation.

⁶ Jonathan Eburne, 'Breton's Wall, Carrington's Kitchen: Surrealism and the Archive,' in *Intermédiatités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres, et des techniques / Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies* Vol. 18, Autumn 2011, 17-43.

⁷ Eburne, 'Breton's Wall, Carrington's Kitchen,' 33, 30.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1972, and Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996.

⁹ Antonin Artaud, 'Sorcery and Cinema,' in *The Shadow and its Shadows*, ed. and trans. Paul Hammond, City Lights Bookstore, San Francisco, 2000, 103.

¹⁰ André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Grove Books, 1960, 89. See my 'Sleeping Gods in Surrealist Collections,' *Symposium* Vol. 67, No. 1, 2013, 6-24.

¹¹ See 'The Great Transparent Ones' within 'Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto or Not,' *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1972, 293-94.

¹² Breton, *Manifestoes*, 27-28; André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1988, 15.

¹³ Susan Aberth, 'The Alchemical Kitchen: At Home with Leonora Carrington,' *Nerika* Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2012, 8.

¹⁴ Cherem, 'Eternally Married to the Wind,' 18-19.

¹⁵ As an example, Carrington insisted I speak French for Chiki's sake, then *she* would switch to English; it was only after I had switched back to French for about the third time that I realized he had been laughing at all her jokes in English; she had been having fun at my expense.

¹⁶ Susan Aberth, *Leonora Carrington, Surrealism, Alchemy, and Art*, Lund Humphries, Aldershot, 2004, 69-70.

¹⁷ Marina Warner, 'Leonora Carrington's spirit bestiary; or the art of playing make-believe,' in *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculptures 1940-1990*, ed. Andrea Schlieker, Serpentine Gallery, London, 1991, 13.



¹⁸ Edward James, 'Leonora Carrington,' in *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculptures 1940-1990*, 38.

¹⁹ Dominique and Julien Ferrandou, *Leonora Carrington, ouvre-toi, porte de pierre* (Saché: TFV, November 2011). Collection DVD Phares.

²⁰ André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1997, 335. 334. In his introduction to the English translation, Polizzotti explains how Breton completed the *Anthology* in June 1940 but the German occupation delayed publication until 1945. Breton's references to Carrington's cooking in New York must date from the revised edition from 1950.

²¹ Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear; Notes from Down Below*, Plume, New York, 1990, 63.

²² Leonora Carrington, 'The Sisters,' *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales*, New York, Dutton, 1988, 43.

²³ Sonia Assa, 'Gardens of Delight or, What's Cookin'? Leonora Carrington in the Kitchen,' *Studies in Twentieth-Century Fiction* Vol. 15, No. 2 (1991), 215, 213-14.

²⁴ See Aberth's 'Alchemical Kitchen' for more examples of paintings featuring elements of Carrington's kitchen.

²⁵ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 69.

²⁶ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 14.

²⁷ Whitney Chadwick, 'Pilgrimage to the stars,' in *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculptures 1940-1990*, 30.

²⁸ Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Le Surréalisme et le roman*, L'Age d'homme, Paris, 1983, 254. My translation.

²⁹ See Warner, 'Leonora Carrington's spirit bestiary,' 13.

³⁰ Leonora Carrington, 'Female Human Animal,' in *Leonora Carrington: What She Might Be*, 11-15. Once when a dog barked at a mask she had made, 'she replied gratefully, "That was the most honorable comment I ever received,"' see Grimberg, 89.

³¹ Breton, *Manifestoes*, 16.

³² Warner argues that Carrington 'refashions the narrative sequences of Sassetta or Matteo di Giovanni or Francesco di Giorgio; they unfold a tale in a journey across the image, with simultaneous incidents represented in demarcated antechambers and chambers of a palace or other edifice seen in section, so that time flows in the stasis of a painted moment' 16.

³³ Carrington cooked on such a stove - a massive Victorian black stove - until the 1970s, when she moved it into her dining room, according to Aberth (e-mail, 2 January 2013).

³⁴ Whitney Chadwick, 'El Mundo Magico: Leonora Carrington's Enchanted Garden,' in *Leonora Carrington, The Mexican Years*, ed. Holly Barnet-Sanchez, The Mexican Museum-University of New Mexico Press, San Francisco, 1991, 14.

³⁵ Aberth, *Leonora Carrington*, 122.



³⁶ Chadwick, 'El Mundo,'14.

³⁷ See André Breton, *The Lost Steps*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 1996.

³⁸ Whitney Chadwick, *Leonora Carrington*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Mia Kim, New York, 1997, np.

³⁹ Carrington, *The House of Fear*, 53.

⁴⁰ Breton, *Nadja*, 33. See Pierre Amrouche in Jean-Michel Gauthier, editor, *André Breton, 42, rue Fontaine, Arts primitifs*, Calmels Cohen, Paris, 2003, 274.

⁴¹ Breton, *Lost Steps*, 90.

⁴² André Breton, 'Oceania,' *Free Rein*, trans. Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline Amboise, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 1995, 174.

⁴³ Breton published a photograph of a Hopi katchina doll in *La Révolution surréaliste*, No. 9-10, 1927, 34 and again in 1957 in *L'Art magique*, along with photographs of a Kwakiutl and a Yup'ik mask; *L'Art Magique*, Paris, Adam Biron, Phébus, 1991, 28, 117, 119. The number of *Cahiers d'art* in which Breton published 'Crise de l'objet' in 1936 also included multiple photographs of objects from the Pacific Islands, the Pacific Northwest Coast, following an article by Paul Eluard, *Cahiers d'art* Vol. 11, No. 6-7, 1936, 30-33.

⁴⁴ See Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, 'Le tour des objets,' *André Breton: La Beauté convulsive*, Paris, Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1991, 64-68. Based on a comparative study of photographs of Breton's studio over a ten-year period (1954-1964), she concludes: 'l'atelier, enveloppe fixe, fut propice aux métamorphoses et sortilèges et le lieu d'un regard aussi rapide et actif que celui de l'écriture,' (the studio, like a fixed envelope of space, lent itself to metamorphoses and spells and also of a gaze that was as rapid and active as writing), 66. See also my 'Surrealism and Outsider Art in Breton's "Automatic Message,"' *Yale French Studies: Surrealism and its others* Vol. 109, (2006), 129-43.

⁴⁵ I have given here the first dates of publication for these texts. *The Hearing Trumpet* was originally published by Flammarion in France as *Le cornet acoustique* in 1974. Routledge published an English version in January 1977 (copyright 1976). 'The Invention of Mole' was originally published as 'La invención del mole' in *La Revista Mexicana de Literatura* in 1957. It was published in Carrington's translation in English in the 1988 collection, *The Seventh Horse* (see note 22). On this play, see also Melanie Nicholson, *Surrealism in Latin America: Searching for Breton's Ghost*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013.

⁴⁶ Leonora Carrington, 'The Invention of Mole, A Play,' *The Seventh Horse*, 175. See Eburne's 'Leonora Carrington, Mexico, and the Culture of Death' for a persuasive argument for Carrington's intentional opposition of the Mexican cult of the dead to contemporary European philosophical meditations on death in a critique that also challenges European colonialist assumptions about the inferiority of Mexican culture, *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* No. 5 (2011), 19-32. A recent article in the *Economist* recounts the story of a bishop being eaten by Caeté tribesmen in 1556 Brazil, possibly an inspiration for Carrington. 'Pirate, Colonist, Slave,' *The Economist*, 17-30 December, 2011, 52.

⁴⁷ Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing trumpet*, Exact Change, Boston, 1996, 172.

⁴⁸ See Sophie Leclercq, *La rançon du colonialisme, les surréalistes face aux mythes de la France coloniale (1949-1962)*, 2010, 104. Breton's anticolonialism was evident early in the 1920s when the surrealists wrote a tract in support of the insurgents in the Rif Valley. It was transformed into strong support of decolonization after World War Two (see the conclusion to Eburne's *Surrealism and The Art of*



Crime, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2008). See also Phyllis Taoua, 'Of Natives and Rebels: Locating the Surrealist Revolution in French Culture,' *South Central Review* Vol. 20 No. 2-4, Summer-Winter (2003), 67-110.

⁴⁹ André Breton, 'Amérique du Nord: Note sur les masques à transformation de la côte ouest,' in *André Breton, 42, rue Fontaine, Arts primitifs*, ed. Jean-Michael Gouthier, Calmels Cohen, Paris, 2003, 142-43.

⁵⁰ In 'Amérique du Nord,' Breton cites Georges Buraud, *Les Masques*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1948. Breton published another essay on masks ten years later, 'Le phénix du masque,' *Oeuvres complètes* Vol. 4, Galliamrd-coll la pléiade, Paris, 2008, 990-94.

⁵¹ Breton, 'Amérique du Nord,' 143.

⁵² Breton, *Manifestoes*, 20.

⁵³ Breton is known to have arranged and rearranged the objects in his study on a regular basis (see Mono-Fontaine, note 44). In the Gilles Ehrmann photograph (see Figure 6), this mask hangs between the Kwakiutl transformation mask and the two masks of Breton's face (one of which is now in the Menil Collection in Houston). See Gilles Ehrmann and Julien Gracq, *42 rue Fontaine, l'atelier d'André Breton*, Adam Biro, Paris, 2003.

⁵⁴ André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2002, 4-5.

⁵⁵ 'No one else ever rushed so headlong onto every path of the marvelous,' Breton wrote about Desnos in the 1950s. 'Everyone who witnessed Desnos's daily plunges into what was truly the *unknown* was swept up into a kind of giddiness; we all hung on what he might say, what he might feverishly scribble on a scrap of paper.' André Breton, *Conversations: New York, The Autobiography of Surrealism*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, Marlowe and Company, 1995, 67. In the retrospective photograph Man Ray took of the 'period of sleeps' in 1924, the entire group, with Breton at the centre, is focused on Desnos, speaking and gesticulating.

⁵⁶ Breton's Yup'ik mask is featured in the Quai Branly's *Chefs d'Oeuvre* book as coming from Breton's collection. *Masterpieces from the Quai Branly Museum*, 2006, 86-87.

⁵⁷ Carpenter gives this explanation in a video-taped interview he gave about his design of the Menil Collection's Witnesses room, on 16 November 2000. This interview is stored in the Menil archives. The drawing was actually made by Joseph Jastrow in 1899.

⁵⁸ Breton, *Lost Steps*, 90. I argue that spiritualism consequently became the repressed ghost within surrealism in my book, *Surrealist Ghostliness*, University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

⁵⁹ I thank Ilene Fort for inviting me to give an early version of this article as a talk at the College Art Association meeting in Los Angeles in February 2012 and Susan Aberth and Sibel Zandi-Sayek for their generous readings of this text.

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