



Leonora  
Carrington

1969

*Operation  
Wednesday*

Tempera on  
Masonite

60.3 x 44.8cm

<sup>1</sup> Leonora Carrington, *Operation Wednesday*, 1969. © 2019 Estate of Leonora Carrington / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris. <https://www.gallerywendinorris.com/news-reviews/leonora-carrington-brought-a-wild-feminist-intensity-to-surrealist-painting>

## *Operation Wednesday*

Molly Stephenson

*“I felt that, through the agency of the Sun, I was an androgyne, the Moon, the Holy Ghost, a gypsy, an acrobat, Leonora Carrington, and a woman”*<sup>3</sup>

Psychological trauma, Alchemical-metamorphosis and Psychic-illumination is embedded in Leonora Carrington’s 1969 *Operation Wednesday*. I wish to dissect in my visual analysis Carrington’s relationship towards Occultism (in particular Mediumship, Animism and Irish Folklore) and how this has symbolically informed her practise. I also wish to analyse how Carrington’s ‘sympathy towards all matter’<sup>4</sup> stemmed from her rejection of Catholicism, Max Ernst’s imprisonment by the Nazi’s in World War II, her catatonic psychological breakdown and the massacre of protesting Mexican students in 1968. Throughout my essay, I will be referencing Marina Warner’s *Down Below/ Leonora Carrington*, Daisy Butcher’s *Evil Roots-Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic* and Alejandro Jodorowsky’s Mexican Surreal-Fantasy Drama film *The Holy Mountain* to aid the unpacking of Carrington’s hypnagogic visions and fever dreams.<sup>5</sup>

At first glance, viewers are confronted with an eerie yet mystical portrayal of a surgical operation being undertaken in another dimension. Scratchy, dry encryptions of anthropomorphic forms encompass the tempera painting, perhaps alluding to biomorphic, pulsating veins, psychic automatism or spiritual currents. There appears to be two ethereal, silver clothed surgeons and one ominous patient cloaked in a black veil in the foreground, all intertwined by a delicate connective tissue or web.

As our eyes continue to hover, our gaze is caught by two piercing blue objects- a seemingly incandescent cornflower blue blossom, and an aquamarine egg or spherical jewel acting as the spiritual crux of the painting. The blue blossom is floating within one of the surgeons torso’s, attached to a thin veil that connects to a delicate silver star in the pigeonhole of the patients transparent black veil. Perhaps the surgeons are “distil(ing) these plants into medicines that are as potent as a charm”<sup>6</sup>, like so in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1844 eco-fantasy short story, *Rappaccini’s Daughter*.

Two hovering bestial eyes come into fruition as we peer closer, trickling red and black blood down into a surgical flask. This blood is also seemingly operating as ink for Carrington’s encrypted patterns on the surgical floor.<sup>7</sup> Delving further, the viewers also notice a bare skeleton conceivably documenting times of death in a hand written book with the blood of a dead bird, writing “Am not Silent, Only god I Cry”. It is feasible that perhaps Carrington is symbolically personifying Death through the symbolic reference of the Grim

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<sup>3</sup> Marina Warner, *Down Below/Leonora Carrington* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), pg. 45

<sup>4</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, xxviii.

<sup>5</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, vii.

<sup>6</sup> Daisy Butcher, *Evil Roots – Killer Tales of the Botanical Gothic*. United Kingdom: The British Library, 2019), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, xxvii.

Reaper's black cloak and alluding to Christ's last words in the skeletons death diary<sup>8</sup> to suggest the 'comical and lethal' guiding of spirits into the Afterlife.<sup>9</sup> The patient's pulsating red eye, for instance, resembling the core of a throbbing sun, or perhaps an embryo or seed, may further signify Carrington's Paganistic devotion.<sup>10</sup>

The steaming of 'The Fool', (or conceivably also Jesus Christ) in Alejandro Jodorowsky's 1973 *The Holy Mountain* may also aid in our dissection of Carrington's *Operation Wednesday*. The Alchemist in the surrealist film (Alejandro Jodorowsky) steams 'The Fool', one of the Major Arcana tarot cards, in a large egg flask. The Alchemist uses his sweat and tears as the ingredient to metamorphose The Fool's faeces into pure gold.<sup>11</sup> We can recognise this parallel between The Fool's faeces metamorphosing into gold the same way as we can recognise the trickling of blood in *Operation Wednesday* ultimately birthing a beautiful chrysalis butterfly through black smog and blood. This alchemical metempsychosis, 'the migration of the soul into other bodies after death'<sup>12</sup>, has been depicted throughout Carrington's oeuvre of work, such as in *Bird Bath (1974)* and *Crookhey Hall (1986)*, featuring anthropomorphic mutations and materialisations of hyenas, moths, birds and plants. These beings radiated a sheer, glowing ectoplasm, suggesting that their manifestation was a recent one.<sup>13</sup> We could also draw a link between Jodorowsky's steaming glass instrument encircling The Fools body and the aquamarine blue egg delicately dangling above the patient's head in *Operation Wednesday*. The transparent glass egg hovers in front of a blue wall, creating the illusion of a blue egg. In Tarology, blue symbolises reception and the "attachment to the father", creating a comical link between the Fool resembling the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Without the purifying agent of oxygen, blood becomes blue, which is comparable to the blue egg or blue ball that is connected to fine chords of oxygenated red blood in *Operation Wednesday*.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, Catholicism is entrenched in Carrington's subconscious and externalised symbolically despite her revolt against it.

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<sup>8</sup> Darran Anderson, "Leonora Carrington: The Celtic Surrealist," *Studio International*, (2013):

<https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/leonora-carrington-the-celtic-surrealist>.

<sup>9</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, xi.

<sup>10</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, 45.

<sup>11</sup> *The Holy Mountain*, Directed by Alejandro Jodorowsky (United States: ABKCO Films, 1973), Mexican surreal-fantasy/Drama film.

<sup>12</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, xxviii.

<sup>13</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Woman's Art Journal: Leonora Carrington: Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness* (New Brunswick: Woman's Art Inc, Vol.7 No. 1, 1986) pg.37.

<sup>14</sup> Alejandro Jodorowsky and Marianne Costa, *The Way of Tarot The Spiritual Teacher in the Cards* (Canada: U.S edition Destiny Books, 2009) pg. 97.



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Alejandro Jodorowsky  
*The Holy Mountain*  
Surrealist film



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Leonora Carrington  
*Crookhey Hall*  
1986  
Lithograph on paper  
w30.75 x h15.125 in

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<sup>15</sup> *The Holy Mountain*.

<sup>16</sup> "Crookhey Hall," Google Arts & Culture, April 20<sup>th</sup> 2020, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/crookhey-hall/ewG3T7bHQCsjTg?hl=en-GB>.



Leonora Carrington  
*Bird Bath*  
1974  
Serigraph print  
88.9 cm x 69.9cm

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Despite Carrington's Catholic upbringing, Carrington was in fact a Polytheist who basked in Irish Folklore and 'revelled in mischievous blasphemy'<sup>18</sup> as a child in Crookhey Hall, London. After being expelled from two schools, she attended art school at Amedée Ozenfant's academy in London, engaging in Alchemy and mediumship<sup>19</sup>. Carrington sought comfort in flora, fauna and matter, believing they all possessed agency, appreciating these entities with an absence of hierarchy – "I gave an alchemical life to the objects according to their position and their contents."<sup>20</sup> However, upon her partner Max Ernst's capture and imprisonment by the Nazi's in World War II, this led to Carrington's inert psychological breakdown and placement in a mental hospital in Madrid, where she endured immense suffering and torture... "I was no longer suffering in an ordinary human dimension."<sup>21</sup> After undergoing sadistic 'treatments', such as being tied down or raped, Carrington began to unlock spiritual portals that were invisible to the naked eye for most mere mortals – "I rejoiced at seeing my eyes become miraculously solar systems"<sup>22</sup> Of course, 'female madness'<sup>23</sup> and esotericism further cemented Carrington's imprisonment in Madrid's mental institution, but also provoked Carrington's psychic illumination. She states- "I was transforming my blood into comprehensive energy – masculine and feminine, microcosmic and macrocosmic, and into a wine that was drunk by the moon and the sun".<sup>24</sup> Upon her

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<sup>17</sup> "Leonora Carrington Bird Bath," Art History Project, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2020, <https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/leonora-carrington/bird-bath/>.

<sup>18</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, x.

<sup>19</sup> Chadwick, *Woman's Art Journal*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, 47.

<sup>21</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, xx.

<sup>22</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, xxii.

<sup>24</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, 21.

escape, she travelled to Mexico City in 1942 where she resided until her death on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

Upon my first analysis of *Operation Wednesday*, my trail of thought lead me to the fundamentals of Gothic eco-horror, that being the subliminal fear of the “unknown lurking in colonial jungles...fears of hybridity and liminal figures”<sup>25</sup> and how this ideology of the unknown trickles into Carrington’s visual depiction of metamorphosis, anxiety and desire. However, a year before *Operation Wednesday* came to fruition, there was a Mexican massacre undertaken by the Mexican government on October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1968 killing protesting students, leaving Carrington emotionally and spiritually tormented. It is believed that the creation of *Operation Wednesday* may have been triggered by the student massacre and that the depictions of one of the surgeons was in fact celebratory of Dr Fernando Ortiz and his expertise, as opposed to a sinister one.<sup>26</sup> Carrington’s random mystical patterns and symbols cannot be characterised or reduced down as being Freudian or merely as Folklore Jungian - Carrington birthed these forms from her own trauma and understanding. These forms were not awaiting her collection in the abyss, they were externalisations of her subconscious. To assume so would strip Carrington of her passion and experience, deflating and depraving Carrington’s suffering, intelligence, imagination and agency.<sup>27</sup>

Leonora Carrington has externalised and exposed her psychological trauma and mediumship through Alchemy, Metamorphosis and Animism in *Operation Wednesday*. The botanical has simultaneously been depicted as disturbing yet apotropaic through Carrington’s reference to Pagan and Catholic symbols, such as the blue egg and the chrysalis butterfly. Indeed, Carrington has prognostically foretold a spiritual tale of ‘death practise’<sup>28</sup> through her unnerving, whimsical painting.

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<sup>25</sup> Butcher, *Evil Roots*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, “*Leonora Carrington: The Celtic Surrealist*”.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, “*Leonora Carrington: The Celtic Surrealist*”.

<sup>28</sup> Warner, *Down Below*, xix.

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