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# The Militant Muse

Love, War and the Women of Surrealism

Whitney Chadwick

A beautifully written and elegantly constructed narrative that explores the intense, complex and far-reaching female friendships among the Surrealists during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s

85 illustrations

23.4 x 15.3cm

256pp

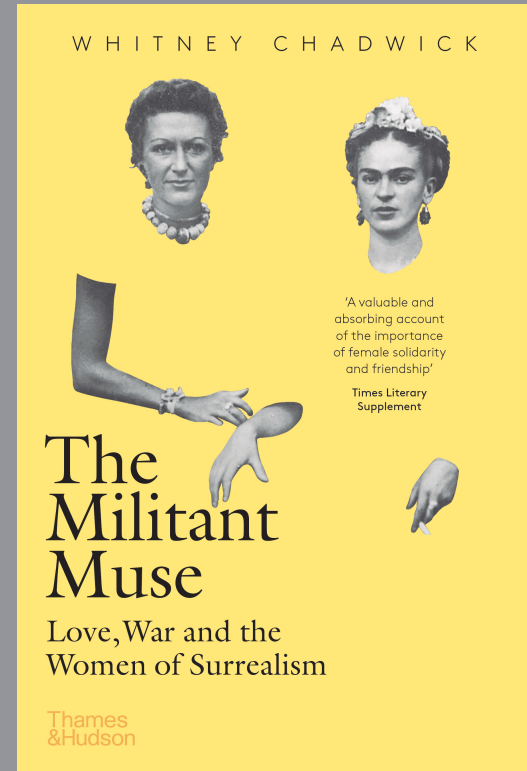
ISBN 9780500294710

BIC The arts: general issues

Paperback

£19.99

February 2021



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Book

## Praise for *The Militant Muse*

‘A valuable and absorbing account of the importance of female solidarity and friendship’

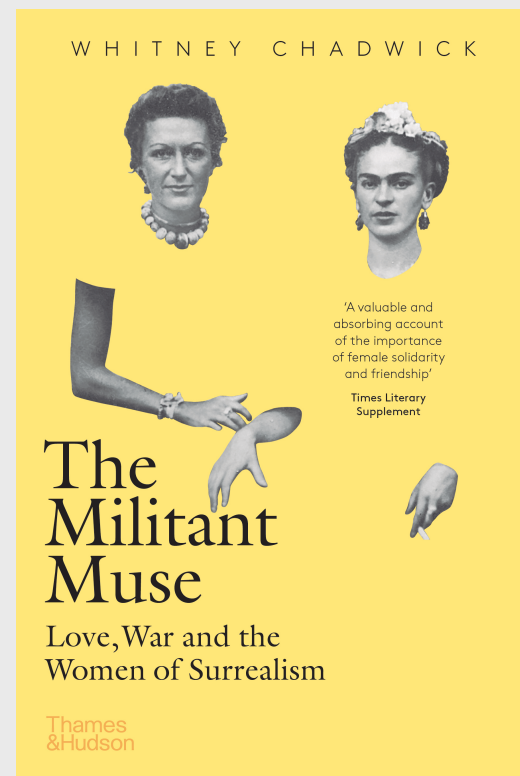
*Times Literary Supplement*

‘A beautifully constructed study of the complicated ways women needed each other and urged each other on’

*Guardian*

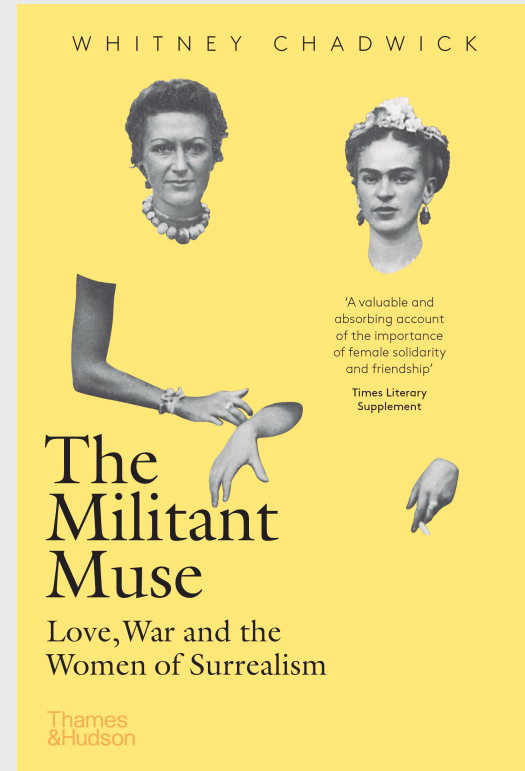
‘An important contribution to the way surrealism is understood... it succeeds in transforming our understanding of a whole generation of artists, both women and men’

*Literary Review*



## Key Sales Points

- Exceptionally well-written and full of compelling narratives that will appeal to readers interested in art history or in the lives of extraordinary women.
- Stories of well-known artists, such as Lee Miller, Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington, whose unconventional lives have captured the public imagination, are interwoven with those of lesser-known figures to show the crucial role of women in shaping Surrealism.
- Draws on unpublished correspondence to create an enthralling cross-over work that bridges art history and general non-fiction.



union. Meanwhile, Alice's 'There is the Fire' from *On the Bare Ground* acts as a counterpoint, emphasizing separation, distance and flight as the forces of nature erase the boundaries between human and animal worlds:

(Valentine)

There is the fire it burns and I am the water I drown  
o icy girl  
Earth is my friend...  
...we spent long drawn nights discovering ourselves  
beside our three mysterious fraternal fires.  
I have the loveliest flowers  
I have the loveliest mirage  
I have the loveliest mirror  
I am water singing her being.<sup>28</sup>

(Alice)

For those parallel destinies  
there is no horizon line  
where they meet where they rest  
where they flee those cruel fish  
of anguish and discord  
They swim between the shores  
of these dark rivers  
which separate lovers...<sup>29</sup>

Literary critics have pointed out the subtle exchanges of words and images that now appear in the works of both poets, and that resonate with a subtle secret language. It is as if, in the moment before the friends dare to articulate their desire, they develop a hermetic poetic language that cloaks same-sex longing by absorbing it into a series of subtle verbal exchanges. In *On the Bare Ground*, as critic Georgiana Colville perceptively noted in one of the first analyses of the literary and affective relationship between the two friends, Alice incorporates Valentine's title, *Moon Grass*, into the phrase, 'I wear the sea the moon the winds and the grass.'<sup>30</sup> Soon a poetic exploration of the exchanges that take place between bodies blurred by sameness, rather than marked by sexual difference, will emerge in the poems of both women.



Roland Penrose, *Four Women Asleep*, 1937.

From top: Lee Miller, Adrienne Fidelin, Nusch Eluard, Leonora Carrington





Roland Penrose, *The Winged Domino*, 1937

The opening poem in Alice's *On the Bare Ground* reads as a veiled 'self-portrait' that mingles the visual and the verbal in the female speaker's slow and calm translation, objectification and obliteration of the images of femininity provided by others. In the poem, a woman whose beauty is created by others chooses to erase (silence) herself. The poem opens with the words:

*A woman who was beautiful  
one day  
removed her face  
her head became smooth  
blind and deaf  
safe from the stares of mirrors  
and from looks of love.<sup>31</sup>*

The poem concludes in another voice, and in an image that echoes familiar surrealist metaphors produced through a male speaker's fusion of nature and femininity: 'You are the plaything of my eyes/I am able to be almost anything for you/passive like this oval portrait of a young woman who becomes a fruit.'

The poems Valentine wrote before and just after the winter at Le Pouy also shift between images of sensuality and desire that refuse to be marked as either male or female. Speaking voices are often subsumed into passionate expressions of nature and the cosmos. Rhythms of merging and separation, shifts between hot and cold, desire, longing and loss begin, however tentatively, to infuse the poetic expressions of both women during this period. Their resonance is heightened when the poems are read against the scenes Valentine describes in her letters to Roland: two women rest side by side after their physical exertions, their arms wrapped around each other. Lines of verse are read, images exchanged, feelings merged.

It was during the months at Le Pouy that Alice was later reported to have become 'enamoured' of Valentine.<sup>32</sup> Judging from Valentine's letters, the women's feelings were mutual, if not yet fully explicit. As Valentine continued to anticipate Alice's next visit and to worry about the conditions that made the Paalens' life in Paris 'so difficult', her descriptions of daily life at Le Pouy vacillated between quasi-maternal worry over her friends' difficulties and romantic outpourings. As tensions with Roland rose, Valentine again complained of exhaustion and back pain. Now she also felt compelled to defend



Leonor Fini, *From One Day to Another I*, 1938



Leonor Fini, *From One Day to Another II*, 1938





Leonora Carrington, *The Inn of the Dawn Horse*, 1937-8



Leonora Carrington, *The Horses of Lord Candlestick*, 1939



Leonora Carrington, *Map of Down Below*, c. 1941. Ink on paper

as the 'Phony War' (the lull between September 1939 and April 1940, when little fighting and no bombing occurred). Between September and December Leonora's letters provide a crucial window into her creative life after Max's arrest, including the ways that she internalized the effects of trauma and began to transform them into fictional and visual representation.

The letters also reveal Leonora's commitment to keeping a beloved friend intellectually and creatively active despite the terror that threatens to overwhelm her. And they challenge assumptions about Leonora's intellectual naiveté as a young woman among the cosmopolitan and educated male surrealists. Those assumptions, which included the surrealists' commitment to the image of the beguiling and naive *femme-enfant*, had previously been reinforced by Max in his preface to Leonora's first published book of short stories, *The House of Fear* (1938). There he had evoked his young lover as a surrealist woman-child, destined to inspire [man] through her youth, her beauty and

*beautiful pure horse...to abandon myself completely...perhaps even to die but without turmoil. I am erased; this keeps me from sleeping, from washing myself, from getting dressed, from walking. I am exhausted....I don't have the energy to kill myself.*

She concludes by urging Leonor to write to Max. Meanwhile, Max and his fellow prisoners at Les Milles struggled against cold, dampness and limited rations in conditions that were rudimentary at best. Fellow prisoners later reported that they found Max 'reserved' and 'effaced'. In a letter to Jeanne Bucher, his dealer in Paris, he confessed to an inevitable idleness in the midst of 'anguish, privations and absurdity'. 'I do not work here,' he admitted, 'I have tried but it doesn't happen.' He noted that Hans Bellmer was also 'rather depressed'.<sup>47</sup> The characterization might also apply to the beautiful but sad drawing Bellmer made of the head of a withdrawn and fragile Max. Dated November 1939, it shows the artist's face as if it had been constructed from the small bricks originally produced at the factory-turned-prison-camp.

Despite his assertions to the contrary, Max did produce work while imprisoned, much of it small collages and frottages (rubblings). These include a painting of Leonora titled *Alice in 39* (probably a reference to Alice in Wonderland), small enough to be easily carried with one hand or hidden under a jacket. The painting mingles images of birds and animals, all of them absorbed into a thickly worked surface. In their midst it is possible to discern fragments of a woman's nude body. These fragments emerge from, and are partially obscured by, layers of a thick, impenetrable ground cover that resembles moss or feathers. Nearby, a horse's head is swaddled in a rose-coloured feather cloak, recalling the image of the knitted rose-coloured sweater that cheered Leonora during that long and difficult autumn.

At Christmas Max received a temporary furlough after Leonora's efforts on his behalf reached Albert Sarraut, the French Minister of the Interior, through the intervention of Paul Eluard. Max returned to the house at Saint-Martin, to be greeted by a relieved but concerned Leonora. On 30 January 1940 she wrote to Leonor: 'I was very content to get your letter. Max also...but I am waiting until I see you to speak of this history.' As the weeks passed, Leonora and Max gradually re-established their former domestic routines and Max returned to painting. Still the winter chill persisted and food, both real and symbolic, remained a constant preoccupation, as did the future.



Lee Miller, E. L. T. Mesens, Max Ernst, Leonora Carrington, Paul Eluard, 1937

Leonora, determined to revive Max's spirits, escaped into cooking and described her culinary experiments to Leonor with relish. On one evening she prepared a dish based on the meagre rations that remained in the couple's larder: 'It's done with rice that one cooks until it is just tender. You mix it with a chopped onion, some black olives, two beaten eggs, black pepper and some canned tuna. You cook it in the oven like a cake and turn it out under a sauce made with some tomatoes, some small whole onions, whole olives and some cream. It is very good and not very heavy.'<sup>48</sup>

'You would like this?' she asks tentatively, perhaps wondering how Leonor would respond to the odd list of ingredients. Food was becoming more and more difficult to source; items still available to Leonora included vegetables produced in the garden at Saint-Martin along with other items not yet sold out locally, including tomatoes, onions, olives and eggs. There was also rice and canned tuna, but perishables like meat and butter were in increasingly short supply by the end of 1939. 'My mother writes to me,' Leonora reported to Leonor in January, 'and sends me good things to eat, creamed mushrooms,



but Leonora has refused. Later, Leonora would comment that although she felt sympathetic toward Peggy, the thought of a long flight across the Atlantic *en famille* with her current and former lover was more than she could face. Instead, she and Leduc travelled by ship to New York.<sup>61</sup>

Max Ernst and Peggy Guggenheim married in New York after a journey in company with Peggy's children and her former husband Laurence Vail, as well as Vail's second wife, the novelist Kay Boyle, and her four children. In New York, both Leonora and Max reconnected with André Breton and other exiled surrealists. Although Max's marriage to Peggy soon dissolved and he tried to convince Leonora to return to him, she refused. 'After Madrid I was not the same person,' she said later. 'There was no way to go back.'<sup>62</sup>

Max later married the American painter Dorothea Tanning; he died in New York in 1978. After settling in Mexico in 1942, Leonora and Renato Leduc divorced and she married the Hungarian photojournalist Emerico 'Chiki' Weisz. She lived in Mexico, in New York and in Oak Park, Illinois until her death in 2012.

Leonor Fini spent the later years of the war in Spain and Italy. When the American army liberated Rome in 1945, a group of soldiers who had heard of the painter brought American cigarettes and chocolates, unheard of during the war, to her studio in Rome. A year later she returned to Paris, where she died in 1996.

### 3. 'I Will Write to You with My Eyes' Frida Kahlo and Jacqueline Lamba Breton, Mexico and Paris, 1938–45



Jacqueline Lamba and Frida Kahlo,  
Pátzcuaro, Mexico, 1938. Photographer unknown

The two women pose in front of the painted backdrop as if it does not exist. Neither the camera's presence nor the awkwardly rendered landscape distract them from the intense and private drama that has increasingly preoccupied them since their meeting three months earlier.<sup>1</sup> It is the summer of 1938 and Frida Kahlo de Rivera and Jacqueline Lamba Breton (to use their married names) are exploring the vast and arid Mexican desert near Michoacán, as well as the heady intimacy of a growing friendship that began the moment Jacqueline crossed the threshold of the Riveras' home in the Mexico City suburb of San Angel. 'There on the threshold was the exceptional Frida Kahlo de Rivera, dressed in the fashion of the women of Tehuantepec region,' she later told an interviewer, 'and...as unexpected things were revealed, she told us that she was a surrealist painter.'<sup>2</sup>