

Houses Are Really Bodies: The Writing of Leonora Carrington, Cubitt, London, U.K.

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Leonora Carrington

Houses Are Really Bodies: The Writing of Leonora Carrington, installation views, Cubitt Gallery, London, 2017.

Photos : Mark Blower, courtesy of Cubitt Artists, London

Houses Are Really Bodies: The Writing of Leonora Carrington

“Houses are really bodies,” writes Leonora Carrington in *The Hearing Trumpet*, her novel written in the early 1960s, now considered a classic work of fantastic literature. “We connect ourselves with walls, roofs, and objects just as we hang on to our livers, skeletons, flesh and bloodstream.” Carrington, long-considered to have been overshadowed by her relationship with Max Ernst (like many of her female Surrealist counterparts, frequently cast as muses rather than auteurs), has in recent years seen a popular revival of her rich creative oeuvre, which includes painting, drawing, and sculpture, as well as a significant body of literary work.

This latter discipline of language and the literary within Carrington’s practice forms the loose impetus for Cubitt Curatorial Fellow Helen Nisbet’s first exhibition in the gallery. Carrington’s writing is rife with themes of transformation, metamorphosis, and the alchemical—young debutantes escape boring social duties by turning into ribald and ravenous hyenas; elderly women resist confinement by channelling the secret histories of the spaces in which they are interned, writhing and glittering with liberated, incandescent imaginings; and personal descents into psychological instability channel the shapeshifter who eschews the commonplace and mundane for the power of intuited affinities. “I felt that through the agency of the Sun,” Carrington writes in “Down Below,” her short memoir of a mental breakdown, “I was androgyne, the Mood, the Holy Ghost, a gypsy, an acrobat, Leonora Carrington, and a woman.”

At Cubitt, the exhibition space is transformed (by the commissioned London-based vPPR Architects) into an intimate site of reading and listening in which the elaborate and accomplished whimsy of Carrington’s writing suffuses the atmosphere. The room is partially bisected by three hanging white projection screens. On one side, the space is bare, but for a set of couches covered in a cloud of voluminous

parachute silk, bathed in faint violet light from the coloured neon strips above, where recordings of Carrington’s texts read by ten invited writers and artists play from speakers. On the other side, mud brown walls display two sparsely-hung drawings that hint at the roiling, unsettling nature of the texts presented for perusal on a shelf just beneath: *The Hearing Trumpet*, recently reissued by Penguin, *Down Below*, published this year (Carrington’s centennial) by NYRB Classics, and *The Debutante and Other Stories*, published this year in London by Silver Press, a new feminist publishing imprint. In a small vitrine nearby is an immaculately preserved first edition of *The Hearing Trumpet*, originally owned by Angela Carter.

Nisbet’s creative and open-ended curation sensitively makes available not only Carrington’s idiosyncratic and prodigious body of writing, but engenders a context in which the empty space around the words and thoughts, the embodied verbal exhalations of an artist might be considered part and parcel to her visual work. Critically, *Houses Are Really Bodies* asks what courses everywhere beneath the surface of a practice, what voices and images are constrained and unheard and why, and how an exhibition space can manifest a productive incarnation of this multifarious reality.

Emily LaBarge

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