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Cristine Brache

Commit Me; Commit to Me (Cázame; Cásame)

Fierman Gallery, June 30 - July 31, 2020

Breton defines surrealism in his 1924 Surrealist Manifesto as “dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation” (Wikipedia, n.d.). Surrealists like Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, Dorothea Tanning, Claude Cahun, and Remedios Varo elevated this form to include feminist critique:

“Women emblazoned surrealism with a new type of self-awareness never achieved by their male counterparts. Their intuitive expression turned the movement from something quite dissociated with reality, to a deeply personal exploration of human emotion, personal trauma, the subconscious, female sexuality, and identity...Overriding the way their mental state was oppressed in the past, surrealism allowed women to express their subconscious freely.” (Manatakis, 2019)

While the canonized masters of Surrealism have almost exclusively been men, the movement is more refined and better articulated by women. After all, Surrealism is based on a system of codes created in an attempt to express what the conscious mind cannot directly say (be it from an unfamiliarity with one’s own unconscious or a conscious fear of punishment). From a feminist perspective, it cannot be ignored that codified modes of expression are the ways in which women are conditioned to speak. We dexterously speak in code in order to successfully operate and survive stringent patriarchal systems: Surrealism belongs to women.

The relegation of these artists to the category of muse in lieu of artist (by male surrealists and history) is evidence of the oppressive system at work. Only recently have these women been highlighted as significant contributors to the surrealist movement, and even still, this acknowledgment is nowhere near equal (as auction houses prove). Denying a person or group’s reality is also known as gaslighting.

Artist Cristine Brache continues to reflect on codification for survival and adaptation in oppressive environments (Estape, 2019) for her second solo exhibition at the gallery, entitled, *Commit me; Commit to me (Cázame; Cásame)*. Brache sees how codification manifests through surrealism, and as a symptom of gaslighting, and the pathologization of female emotion and expression. The exhibition title is a translation from Spanish wordplay to English. Word games can lead to mind games: I love you, I hate you, hunt me, marry me.

Brache presents a sculptural installation that directly references Remedios Varo’s 1958 surrealist painting *Papilla estelar* and honors the effects of historical gaslighting and the unjust commitment women have and continue to endure. Varo’s painting is refashioned as a sculpture entitled *Gaslight* (after Remedios Varo, *Papilla estelar*, 1958), where the blue crescent moon depicted in the painting becomes a resin cast light sculpture (of a moon) enclosed in a steel

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cage. The woman in the painting becomes a sculpture of a female figure embedded into a piece of furniture, her arms posed as if they were in a straitjacket, falling into the fabric folds of a handmade upholstered seat. Made of fabric, foam, and oak, Brache's work also refers to and exists in conversation with *Révélation ou la fin du mois* (Revelation or The End of the Month), a 1970-73 sculpture by Dorothea Tanning. The figure is unable to feed the moon, its food is left on a tiled floor reminiscent of hospital rooms and is comprised of baroque freshwater pearls, a genuine silver gilt and hand carved birch spoon on a round resin-filled stainless steel dish. Blue hospital curtains surround the installation, contributing to an atmosphere of medical sterility, so that all three works, while complete and finished unto themselves, speak with a somber insightfulness to their references and the artist's thoughts and feelings that led to their creation.¹

¹Introduction to Gaslighting

"Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or in members of a targeted group, making them question their own memory, perception, or sanity. Using denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying, gaslighting involves attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim's beliefs." (Wikipedia, n.d.)

Gaslighting at Home

In Episode 2 of the NPR podcast Dolly Parton's America, the country western legend reveals that the song Daddy Come and Get Me (1970) is about her aunt's involuntary commitment to a mental institution by her husband, after expressing anger upon realizing he was having an affair. The reasonable reaction of Parton's aunt made her husband uncomfortable. Male discomfort with emotions and desires expressed by women, expression that heterosexual men have always been entitled to without much consequence, has historically, and currently, led to women being systemically gaslit, medicalized, pathologized, diagnosed, or institutionalized. The well known and ostensibly female specific illness of hysteria saw innumerable women relegated to asylums throughout Western Europe for hundreds of years. The symptoms of hysteria were as broad as the range of all human emotion: a desire for sex (with a focus on pursuing it), a lack of desire for sex, irritability, anger, nervousness, depression, insomnia, ad nauseum. Historically and today, many men find it more reasonable to interpret a woman's contentious expression as insane than to see it as a reasonable response to an unreasonable environment or treatment.

If the asylum didn't return a woman to a docile state, the secondary course of treatment was a hysterectomy (it isn't difficult to see the etymological connection between the words hysteria and hysterectomy).

While this pseudo-illness is seen to be a relic of the past, hysteria was in fact relabeled 'hysterical personality disorder' in the 1960's, and carried the same connotations. This time, renewal of interest in the 'disease' was directly related to the emergent feminist movement and

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changes in gender roles: “ women that display behaviors that are seen as masculine or aggressive are now current indicators of mental disorder for women” (Little, 2015).

A pop-culture reference serves as an ideal object lesson:

On June 23, 1993 in Manassas, Virginia, Lorena Bobbit cut off her husband John’s penis and threw it out her car window. At trial, she said she’d done it after having been raped by her abusive husband yet again. The case was made for the media, where Lorena was depicted as ‘nuts’, jealous, and hysterical. John Bobbit’s penis was reattached. He went on to star in pornographic films and appear on talk shows as an affable, victimized husband. Lorena was acquitted on the basis of insanity, and spent 45 days at Central State Hospital’s psychiatric wing. Today she’d easily be recognized as having suffered from battered wife-syndrome, and most likely would be acquitted not due to insanity, but due to self defense. Battered wife syndrome cannot occur without severe, chronic, and traumatic gaslighting. In the case of Lorena Bobbit, American media further traumatized her. The entire country gaslit her.

Gaslighting En Masse

Gaslighting takes many different forms and can be enacted upon en masse. Former experimental theatre director Vladislav Surkov has functioned primarily as Russian president Vladimir Putin’s Minister of Perception Management for many years. Surkov has used Kremlin money to fund both anti-fascist and Neo-Nazi protests, and financially supported an entire anti-Putin party. His aim, as he has said, is to play with and undermine people’s perception of the world, so they are never sure what is really happening (Wikipedia, n.d.).

It is salient to remember that Trump has expressed great admiration for Putin’s techniques. In terms of a gaslighting catchphrase, one would be hard-pressed to find one more apt than that of “Fake News,” the famous Trump neologism. When a society looks to previously reliable sources for information about reality, only to have those sources labelled fake by a supreme authority, a sense of uncertainty bordering on insanity is the inevitable result. In this way, America is coming to understand what women have been enduring for countless years.

Gaslighting in the Arts

In the arts, gaslighting and the institutionalization of women have sometimes gone hand in hand. Zelda Fitzgerald, long beleaguered wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald spent much of her life in mental institutions, eventually burning to death in one at the age of 47. The subject of much of her husband’s autobiographical writing, she herself was discouraged and derided by F. Scott Fitzgerald for attempting a literary career of her own. When Zelda Fitzgerald informed her husband she wanted to write a book based on her diaries, he became furious, stating that they were his material. He in fact plagiarized her work, stealing whole passages from those diaries

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(viewing them as recollections of the life he'd created for her through his success in literature), as well as from her own literary efforts. To him, she functioned primarily as an ornamental token, someone to humiliate at parties in Paris and at home in Long Island. In his books she was a glamorous character, in his life she was a threat. When her ambition or boredom interrupted his work, Fitzgerald repeatedly had his wife committed to asylums. While she did in fact suffer with mental illness, her decline was no doubt exacerbated by her husband's cruelty, and her familiarity with mental institutions began and ended with her husband's introduction of them (Alter, 2013).

In Andre Breton's Surrealist quasi-autobiographical novel *Nadja*, Nadja stands in for Léona Camille Ghislaine Delacourt and Leonora Carrington. Breton is drawn to her whimsy and intimations of madness. At the end of their ten-day affair however, Delacourt's mental illness becomes far too real. She cannot function as muse because she's all too humanized by crippling mental frailty. Breton abandons her as an inconvenience. Delacourt was arrested and institutionalized in 1927. The next year *Nadja* was published and became an iconic text of the Surrealist movement. The content of the book is essentially a real life account of the 'muse' effect Delacourt offered him before he found her too insane to deal with. She died in 1941, having spent 14 years in the same institution. She wrote more than two dozen letters to Breton from the asylum, which have never seen the light of day.

Until recently, women like those described above have been muses (that great cliché of Western Art) first, and artists second if ever.

The secondary noun definition of the word muse from the Cambridge English Dictionary: "A source of inspiration." Zelda Fitzgerald's life and diaries were the source of her husband's work. The various lovers of many male surrealists provided the source of their inspiration, in line with the primary definition. Léona Delacourt's life itself provided the source material for *Nadja*.

The secondary definition of 'source' from the Cambridge English Dictionary: "Someone or something that produces something, or is the origin of it."

It's a linguistic hair that's worth splitting. A muse can be the source of inspiration, as has been the case throughout art history. A muse as a literal source can be the generator of information from which others draw. An empty field in Texas can be the source of oil, which can make someone absurdly rich. Clearly in the lives of women associated with surrealists, both definitions can apply, however the last one appears to have been sorely overlooked. Slightly eccentric and charming women served as muses for celebrated male surrealists. Within that circle other putative 'muses' (painfully troubled and replete with creativity) generated material that launched the career of many men. They then watched those men succeed from within the walls of asylums and hospitals.

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The only time that profound, genuine mental illness in artists has been valorized, contributing to the value of their work by way of mythologizing, has been in the case of men. Artist Leonora Carrington and one time lover of Surrealist hero Max Ernst, spent time in an asylum, submitted to painful treatment. Vincent Van Gogh famously spent time in an asylum near Arles, where he was allowed to paint his most celebrated works. Today those works command hundreds of millions of dollars.

Leonora Carrington's *Bat-Men (How True my Love)* from 1950, sold at Phillips Auction House in 2015 for a dissonant \$245,000.00.

***Cázame; cásame literally translates to hunt me; marry me. However the Spanish conjugation in the title takes the imperative which, doesn't really exist with these two verbs (cazar and casar), though one could create the word using the language's logic. In Spanish, when this conjugation is applied, the nature of the command is different than it would be in English. For example, if one were to translate this difference in English (as it reads in Spanish) then it would read as "Marry me (to Cindy)" or "Hunt me (a pig)," for example. In Spanish it doesn't read as "Hunt me" (kill me, prey on me, etc), or "Marry me" (as in Will you marry me?). The word game, aside from the phonetic one is also a change in context and meaning so that it reads in Spanish as it would in English (if you are taking the literal translation). This wordplay appropriately describes the overall mood of the exhibition as the two demands are in direct opposition to each other yet phonetically sound the same and, convey the cognitive dissonance a woman might feel in many of the situations described in the text above.

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