

GALLERY
WENDI NORRIS

HYPERALLERGIC

Remedios Varo in a Sphere of Her Own



Remedios Varo, "Armonía" (Harmony) (1956); collection Eduardo F. Costantini (© 2023

Remedios Varo, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid)

CHICAGO — What would it be like to wake up, have coffee, and get to work cultivating the implausible, embracing not just the visible world but one of molecules, energies, metaphysics, and fourth dimensions. While all artists are conjurors, Remedios Varo (1908–1963) is a sorceress extraordinaire. Her work is so odd that it feels as if it occupies a category of its own, aligning with the Surrealist sensibilities of Dorothea Tanning, Leonor Fini, or Leonora Carrington, but more otherworldly, more like pages of a medieval spell book or an ancient codex for girls. Varo uniquely fuses technique with content, applying Surrealist methods of chance to delineate spaces and atmospheres infused with magic. Her working methods seem as much potion as process.

Science Fictions, at the Art Institute of Chicago, is the first major presentation of Varo's work in the United States since 2020, when the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC organized a survey. (Needless to say that Varo is just one of many women artists who were historically excluded from the history of Surrealism and art history in general.) Upon entering the show, the consistent orange and golden hues of her paintings set the room aglow. A few of her subjects' faces, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, catch the light like flecks of the moon. The paintings beckon us to plunge into their vaporous worlds while challenging us to decode intricate scenarios.

Remedios Varo fled her homeland of Spain during the Spanish Civil War, landing in Paris in 1937, where she entered the Surrealist circle of Max Ernst. She then emigrated to Mexico City in 1941 to avoid World War II, quickly befriending painter Leonora Carrington and photographer Kati Horna. She died there of a heart attack in 1963 at age 54. This exhibition presents about 60 drawings, paintings, objects, and sketchbooks from her final eight years in Mexico, from 1955 to 1963.



Remedios Varo, "Cazadora de astros" (Star Catcher) (1956); Toledo Museum of Art (© 2023 Remedios Varo, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid, photo by Rafael Doniz, courtesy Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco)

I asked Natanya Blanck, a friend and the host of the Spanish-language podcast *Historias de Arte*, how Varo's late work was shaped by Mexican culture. Blanck said that the underpinnings are more European, such as the references to medieval architecture, but that Mexico in general is a naturally Surrealist place and the influences are unavoidable. "The combination of Pre-Hispanic mythology and Catholic beliefs make it a very interesting place," Blanck said.

In addition to an interest in hallucinogenic plants historically used in Mexican rituals, Varo also studied art history, ancient religions, mythology, and poetry. The ideas of Russian mystics George Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky, as well as Christopher Fremantle, an English painter who lived in Mexico, and Aldous Huxley contributed to an interweaving of philosophy, mysticism, science, and art practice.

"Creation of the Birds" (1957), a symbolic self-portrait, and a significant work by the artist, was included in the 2022 Venice Biennale, *Milk of Dreams*. Here, Varo presents herself as an owl/ alchemist at a desk. One hand holds a magnifying glass to filter starlight onto her paper. The other holds a pen connected to a string attached to a violin-like instrument around her neck, which siphons music to the page. A laboratory device vacuums colors from outside the window to be extruded onto her palette. The owl/artist is drawing a bird that lifts from the page to take flight. For Varo, art is transmutation. Creation takes place in sonic collaboration with earth and cosmos. Another work thought to be a self-portrait, "Armonia/Harmony" (1956), acts as a primer of her investigative practice: figures break out of the walls, a musical staff serves as a three-dimensional page for composing with objects such as crystals, a leaf, and a pearl.



Remedios Varo, “Creación de las aves” (Creation of the Birds) (1957); Museo de Arte Moderno (INBAL/Secretaría de Cultura © 2023 Remedios Varo, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid, photo by Rodrigo Chapa)

Starlight, moonlight, and gaseous atmospheres recur in many of Varo’s paintings, where often one central figure is engaged in auguries. A frontal female figure dominates the show-stopper “Cazadora de Astros/Star Catcher” (1956). Her blustery robes appear to be made of bark or bird wings or canopies of star dust. She holds a butterfly net in one hand and a bird cage in the other. Inside the cage is a captured crescent moon. Varo applied wet paint to the paper and then folded it to create the symmetrical Rorschach effect of the robe.

The center of the exhibition is organized as a cove of angled walls to display ephemera such as sketchbooks, drawings, paintbrushes, books, and some of her crystals, purportedly

exposed to moonlight and used to etch into the canvases or boards. One spiral-bound notebook is open to a page titled "Para provocar sueños eróticos/Spell to Provoke Erotic Dreams." The ingredients include "one kilo black radishes; three white hens; one head of garlic; four kilos honey; one mirror; two calf's livers; one brick; two clothespins; one whalebone corset; two false moustaches; two hats of your choice." Large drawings done on translucent paper reveal how Varo transferred compositions to the painting surface. While her working process is meticulous, pre-planned, and structural, she undermines that precision with chance techniques of graftage, blotting, decalcomania, sgraffito, spattering, and sponging. (A glossary in the catalogue outlines these processes.)

The exhibition concludes with a tour de force trio of paintings from 1960 and 1961 starring a woman who escapes being brainwashed, controlled, and cloistered. Varo shines brightly here as a juggler of the science/fictions suggested in the show title. She straddles the personal and universal, revealing the hidden forces that constrict and often strangle women. I left the exhibition convinced that she fought a good battle for intellectual and expressive freedom, holding onto her own truth like a caged moon.



Remedios Varo, "Mujer saliendo del psicoanalista (Podría ser Juliana)" (Woman Leaving the Psychoanalyst (Could Be Juliana) (1960), oil on canvas; Museo de Arte Moderno (photo Debra Brehmer/Hyperallergic)



Remedios Varo, "Hacia la torre" (Toward the Tower) (1960); Private Collection (© 2023 Remedios Varo, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VEGAP, Madrid, photograph courtesy Sotheby's, Inc. © 2023)



Entry to *Remedios Varo: Science Fictions* at the Art Institute of Chicago (photo Debra Brehmer/Hyperallergic)



Remedios Varo, "Simpatía" (Sympathy) (1955) (photo Debra Brehmer/Hyperallergic)

Remedios Varo: Science Fictions continues at the Art Institute of Chicago (111 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois) through November 27. The exhibition was curated by Caitlin Haskell and Tere Arcq.