

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 7

Eileen Agar:
Angel of Anarchy

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving you special access to the ideas that shape the artworks.

My name is Jane Scarth, curator of public programmes, introducing you to today's episode celebrating the work of pioneering artist Eileen Agar. Whitechapel curator Laura Smith and assistant curator Grace Storey share reflections on her legacy, alongside the special guests, including artist Lucy Stein, poet Daisy Lafarge, and designer Becca Lipscombe, who tell us why the multi-talented Agar remains a leading light for contemporary creatives.

The exhibition is on display in galleries one, eight and nine from 19th May until 29th August 2021.

LS: Hello, everyone, my name is Laura Smith and I'm one of the curators here at Whitechapel. I'm thrilled to have curated, along with my colleague Grace Storey, the exhibition Eileen Agar, Angel of Anarchy. This retrospective is the largest exhibition of Eileen Agar's work to date and celebrates the crucial role that she played within the development of European 20th century culture. It features over 200 painting, collages, photographs, assemblages and archive objects, many of which have rarely been exhibited.

Agar was one of the most adventurous and prolific artists of her generation. Throughout her 70 year career, she synthesised elements of two of 20th century western cultures most significant artistic tendencies, cubism and surrealism. In a diverse and kaleidoscopic practice that moved freely through drawing, painting, photography, collage and sculpture. Fascinated by classical art, ancient mythologies, sexual pleasure and the natural world, Agar mimed these subjects for the forms and content that filled her works.

She was one of the few women included in the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936, and for her, surrealism provided the interpenetrating of reason and unreason. And she used it to inject wit, irreverence and emotion into the more analytical realms of cubism and abstraction. In doing so, Agar created a distinct and spirited style entirely her own that offers a moving commentary on society over a period of tremendous social change.

Agar was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1899, into a wealthy, privileged and eccentric family. Her descriptions of her childhood recall flamboyant and surreal beginnings. However, her mother was also strict and Agar was a rebellious child with a burgeoning interest in art. So at the age of six, she was sent alone to attend a series of rigorous academic schools in England. Unbeknown to her parents, at one of these schools, Heathfield, Agar was taught by the painter Lucy Kemp-Welch, who instructed her to always have something to do with art.

These artistic foundations, combined with the trauma of the First World War, led Agar to pursue a life that she saw as more worthwhile than that of becoming a debutante. And as a rift grew between her and her parents, she pursued her artistic aspirations and took up a place at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in 1921.

Following her studies at the Slade, Agar became frustrated by the traditional figurative style she'd been taught there. She was interested in abstraction, experimentation, and the artistic revolution she saw happening in Europe. In 1929, Agar relocated to Paris where she met surrealist Andre Breton and Paul Eluard, as well as beginning painting lessons with the Czech cubist Frantisek Foltyn, who taught her about sensitivity to form, whilst also trying to cultivate colour, plains and composition.

She was simultaneously drawn to the sensuality and irrationality of surrealism, as well as the idealism and harmony of cubism. Her early explorations into both movements, taken in tandem, allowed Agar to cultivate her unique style, which endured for the rest of her life.

Agar returned to London in 1930 and became a significant figure in ensuring the spread of the surrealist movement from Paris to Britain. In 1936, she was visited, much to her amusement, by artist Roland Penrose and writer Herbert Read, who were curating, along with the poet David Gascoyne, the

International Surrealist Exhibition in London that year.

From Agar's studio, they selected three oil paintings and five objects, much to her astonishment, as she said, "The sudden attention took me by surprise. One day I was an artist exploring highly personal combinations of form and content, and the next I was calmly informed I was a surrealist."

Agar was excited by the surrealist desire to paint the sub-conscious but was suspicious about the idea of wholly working from dreams. She sought to supplement her surreal compositions with the cubist appreciation of form and texture. Moreover, Agar did not approve of the way that the surrealist women were treated by their male peers. As one of a small but notable group of women attached to the movement, she used the emphasis it placed on imaginative freedom to envision a world where gender boundaries were fluid and where the realities of patriarchal society were less rigorously enforced.

One medium that became increasingly important to Agar was collage. For the surrealist, the use of collage, the bringing together of unrelated objects, materials, textiles, images and papers, provided a way for the unconscious mind to rapidly combine and juxtapose pre-existing elements, transforming them into new creations.

For Agar, collage and its sculptural sister assemblage were two of the surrealist techniques that held the most appeal and she attached great

importance to the instinctual responses and unexpected collisions of previously unconnected images.

At the same time, the ocean and the natural world quickly became important influences for Agar, who favoured the organic found object over the European surrealists preferred ready-made, something manmade that might be discovered in a flea market or a junk shop.

Agar began to use her found objects as creative problem-solvers, collecting stones, bones, horns, shells, textiles, ceramics, fossils, leaves and other oddments, which she would use to provoke, spark or stir her imagination. As she said, "I surround myself with fantastic bric-a-brac in order to trigger my imagination, where it is a certain kind of sensitive chaos that is creative and not sterile order."

Beachcombing and forest walking, trawling for found objects, thus became a favourite working method for Agar. And though she was already working with assemblage, it was around 1934 that she began to experiment with collage. In her paintings of the time, she was playing with watery translucencies and layering effects. But now collage offered a displacement of the banal by the fertile intervention of coincidence and she used it to pull together many of her dispirit influences.

Collecting and combining imagery and specimens of the body and its organs, insects, birds, snakes, butterflies, flowers, leaves, moulds, classical

mythologies, contemporary politics and silhouetted heads, hands and bodies, she played with their scale and orientation with often poetic, emotive, witty or jarring results.

JS: Designer Becca Lipscombe discusses Agar's influence on her own work, in particular her sculptural costume works, such as A Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse.

BL: Agar was belle epoque baby and she died in 1991, therefore she lived through cubism and futurism, surrealism and pop, and two world wars. I have no doubt these moments would have influenced her work, yet when I look at Agar's back catalogue, I feel it belongs to no particular movement or moment. It has a perpetual quality that I strive to capture within my own design work.

And a great example of this timelessness is Agar's sculpture Angel of Anarchy, which she created in the late 1930s. It could easily be a 1980 sculpture of Martin Degville, the fashion designer and front man of Sigue Sigue Sputnik. And looking at Angel of Anarchy today, I see the ostrich feather, teddy girl quiff, the muscle shell, handsfree headset. The transparency overlined clear seed beads on the end of the nose replacing actual pores. The chinoiserie wraparound sunglasses, and the Halston ultrasuede neck. Timeless.

I later learned that in order to create Angel of Anarchy, Agar cast the head of her husband, Joseph Bard, in plaster, but was so freaked out because the

result resembled a death mask, that she ended up covering the object in haberdashery. I say covered, but adorned is more fitting, because what I feel from this portrait of her husband is an expression of her deeply sensuous relationship. And Agar's placement and choices of embellishment are exquisitely considered and I feel reflect a person who understands and appreciates the importance of textiles and their interaction with the body in the everyday.

This is so unlike cursory contemporaries, who appeared to have no respect for the adorned body when they defiled and disrobed mannequins. In contrast, Agar addressed her mannequin head with a real tenderness and appreciation.

And when my friend, the fashion and dress historian Amy de la Haye, was curator for 20th century dress at the V&A, the museum were offered *A Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse*, and the *Glove Hat* by Agar for their collections. And de la Haye had to argue why these hats should come to the textile and dress department and not be given to an art institution. And she made a valiant case to acquire the pieces and she won.

I do appreciate that the hats acquired by the V&A are considered examples of surrealist art. However, for me, they are more importantly examples of the history of dress and Agar loved dress. You only have to look at the Tate's online photo collection belonging to Agar to see this.

The support structure that the V&A created for *A Hat for Eating Bouillabaisse* is evidence that the hat does in fact belong in a fashion dress department. They know how to care for this particular work, and to me the hat stand the conservation department made becomes just as important a marvel as the hat.

So when I was making *Homage to Eileen Agar*, a sculpture I created for the *Passer-by* exhibition, this interplayed between Agar's hat and the display mechanism created by the conservation department at the V&A. It really prompted me to think about their equal importance. They are both vital elements that should work in tandem. And because of this, I can never again design or display head gear without Agar popping into my head.

GS: Hello, my name is Grace Storey and I'm an Assistant Curator here at Whitechapel Gallery.

Agar worked simultaneously and in a non-hierarchical manner across painting, sculpture, collage and photography throughout her long and prolific career. Upon her death in 1991, Agar's collection of almost 1000 photographs was donated to the Tate archive. The photographs, dating from the mid-1930s to around 1960, taken on trips throughout the UK, in Cornwall, Cumbria, Dorset and Somerset, and abroad in Belgium, France, Italy, Sweden and Tenerife, a test of the sustained and renewed influence of travel on her practice. The images show Agar's curious and playful eye and reflect the subjects which endured throughout her career, from architecture, urban and rural landscapes, seascapes,

shipwrecks, natural and human made found objects, alongside portraits of her husband, writer Joseph Bard, and friends, including artist Sir Paul Eluard, Dora Maar, Lee Miller, Roland Penrose and Man Ray.

We're very excited to be showing a number of these photographs in the exhibition, many of which have never before been exhibited and exist only as negatives in the Tate archive. In doing so, we hope to show the importance of Agar's photography and the way it relates to her practice as a whole.

Agar describes being given her first camera at the age of 16, but it was not until she encountered the clusters of fantastic pastel-hued marine rock formations at the tourist destination of Ploumanac'h in Brittany in July 1936, on a trip with Bard, that her camera became a necessity and photography began to assume a greater role in her practice. Upon encountering the extraordinary rocks, lying like enormous pre-historic monsters sleeping on the turf above the sea, Agar recounts travelling immediately to buy a rolleiflex 6 x 6 cm square format twin-lens reflex camera, which was to become a constant companion for many years.

The majority of the almost 50 carefully composed black and white photographs Agar took, a selection of which are included in the exhibition, are tightly framed to isolate individual rocks and highlight their creases, folds and incisions. Layers of rocks are often counterbalanced or stand in dialogue, that outlines a sharply delineated and their undulations accentuated by dramatic shadows, which combined

with the low vantage point and absence of human presence, it emphasizes both the monumentality and the timelessness of the rocks.

Emphasising her belief that the surreal exists in and is formed by nature rather than dreams, Agar described the rocks as sculpted by the sea, that masterwork of all time, as if nature had arranged a show of sculpture in the open air, just to prove that she too was keeping her hand in. The fact that she resisted naming the metamorphic rocks and chose to record them through the mechanical medium of photography rather than by sketching, results in images with an objective and enigmatic quality.

Following the trip to Ploumanac'h, Agar photographed standing stones at sites throughout the UK, including Avebury in Wiltshire and Mullion Cove in Cornwall. Stones formed by nature but arranged by humans. Such locations were undergoing restoration following a revived interest in the Neolithic. At Avebury, the stones had been toppled in the 12th and 13th centuries in an attempt to bury the traces of paganism and the site lay derelict until it was purchased by archaeologist Alexander Keeler in 1934.

When Agar visited Avebury in 1938, she'd likely seen the photographs taken there by Paul Nash, to whom she was introduced while on holiday with Bard in Swanage, Dorset in the summer of 1935, and who quickly became her 'favourite faithful friend'. Nash visited Avebury in 1933, when the site was still in its wild state, finding it both wonderful and disquieting.

Agar too was fascinated by the site. Her photograph of a stone being reset in 1938 shows the process of restoration underway, depicting one of the large stones tightly bound and anchored by ropes, chains, pulleys and wooden beams, in order to secure and re-erect it.

And like European surrealists who often work with found objects sourced from junk shops or flea markets, Agar discovered her surreal objects in nature. She writes, “You see the shape of a tree, the way a pebble falls or is formed, and you are astounded to discover that dumb nature makes an effort to speak to you, to symbolise your innermost thoughts.”

Her photograph of a beached tree in 1936 depicts a fallen tree trunk on the beach at Perros-Guirec in France, its branches reaching out towards the sand like a kind of supersized sea creature. Or a photograph of a misshapen tree focuses on a tree with branches outstretched, which leans forward, weighed down by a bulbous growth embedded in its trunk.

Agar was fascinated by natural history and records making visits to the Natural History Museum in Paris while living there in the 1920s. This interest is evident in a number of photographs which capture natural motifs that recur throughout her paintings, collages and assemblages, a group of which are displayed alongside the photographs in the exhibition.

Whilst staying in the French seaside town of Carqueiranne with Bard in 1939, Agar spotted a fragmented ancient Greek amphora with barnacles and seashells attached, freshly hauled up in a fisherman's net, which was to become the basis of her assemblage *Marine Object* of 1939. Perhaps by chance, Agar also photographed two kitsch harbourside statues, whose forms are uncannily reminiscent of amphorae one stout and another more elongated, each adorned entirely with seashells.

Close by, she photographed a shell growth of 1939 with shell protruding outwards, almost enveloped by the dense surrounding foliage. And in photograph of daisy shells and stones, the frame is filled with dense layers of leaves, grass and daisies, with the face of a cat peeping out from the shadows underneath.

Agar continued to take photographs throughout her life and together these form a rich visual journal. It is the first series made in Ploumanac'h in 1936, however, which are the most striking. And almost 50 years after making them, she felt compelled to revisit the rock photographs. She made a series of almost 30 60 x 60 cm acrylic paintings replicating the square format of the negatives, which formed the central focus of her exhibition *Objects from a Landscape, Ploumanac'h and Port-Cros* in November 1985 at New Art Centre London.

As with Agar's photography, these works have rarely been shown since and we are very happy to present a selection of them in the final space of the exhibition.

The rock paintings are rendered in hallucinogenic colours with deep blue and orange skies, purple sea and pink rocks, characteristic of Agar's vivid palette, following her discovery of acrylic paint in 1965 and emphasised the anthropomorphic quality of the rocks more so than the black and white photographs.

Agar's photographs have rarely been shown. The fact that the majority of her photographic archive exists only as negatives is perhaps indicative of the fact that she did not hold her photography in the same regard as her work in other media. And also of the lower status historically accorded to photography in relation to the established disciplines of painting and sculpture. The breadth of Agar's photography, however, shows her as an accomplished photographer whose photographs were more than references and supporting material to inform her work in other media and should be regarded as artworks in their own right.

LS: Lucy Stein is a painter based in Cornwall. She talks here about her personal relationship with Agar's work and legacy.

LS: Agar's influence on my work really took off when I bought this book called *An Eye for Collage* by Andrew Lambert, who also co-authored her autobiography *A Look at my Life*, which came out in relation to the Pallant House show of the same name in the mid to late 2000s. And this book has been such a huge influence on me as a book because it brings together a body of her collage work and some of her sculptures and really provides a comprehensive kind

of look into her life's work, which as a younger artist, I've found really invaluable.

It was particularly invaluable to me when I was trying to make a painting show in 2011 in Zurich over the course of one very hot summer, and this book really helped to sort of kickstart the creative process and it became another sort of artwork. I covered it in paint, I'm ashamed to say, but it was a very much loved resource. And I think the reason why it was so precious to me at that time, and remains so, is because her body of collage work gives off the sense of incredible vitality through being quite flippant and casual and joyful and bright. And there's a relationship between the disciplined and the letting go that is really intrinsic to her work that this book really gets across.

I think it also really gives a good sense of the erotics in her work and I think this is a very important aspect of it for me. And the erotics of making collage and also of making painting, or how you can think about painting through looking or leafing through collage and the way that she is so kind of rounded about it. And there's a lightness of touch and a lightness of thought, which really has carried me out of a painting rut quite often.

LS: The onset of World War 2 interrupted Agar's artistic activities significantly, as it did for many artists of her generation. Inhibiting her imagination and emotional explorations and limiting her work's travel. Though a passivist, she enlisted in the war effort, volunteering in a canteen on Saville Row. Agar and

her partner, the writer Joseph Bard, also served as fire watchers on night duty, taking it in turns to sit up through the night and their London home became host to many friends and colleagues, either travelling through London to safety or newly homeless due to the blitz.

While remaining in London allowed Agar to keep her studio, she was little able to paint. As she said, "I felt it impossible to concentrate on painting when you could turn to look out of the window and see a Messerschmitt flying low over the treetops." At this time Agar found collage, with its more political foundations and direct symbolism, a medium she could maintain.

In 1942, she had a solo exhibition at Redfern Gallery where she showed 24 new collages. Her work of this period is dense and loaded, filled with desire, anxiety and a sense of urgency. As the war ended, Agar felt like something new and marvellous ought to happen, but she was, in her words, "Exhausted and humdrum, more tired and dispirited than usual." She describes this period as a physical and spiritual famine. Yearning for a change of scene but with travel outside of the country difficult, she visited Cornwall and Ireland to replenish her imagination.

Slowly, Agar returned to painting as if, quote "She was renewing a belief in life itself." Her works from the late 1940s reveal a budding and tentative optimism. Often employing a gentler pastel colour pallet to depict layered stencilled and painted forms. These works feel like a cautious step towards

celebration, and following years of rationing, or a gentle nod to abundant merriment.

By the 1950s, Agar was enjoying a successful period of painting, travelling and exhibiting and had begun to feel like herself again. She said, "Surely room must be made for joy in this world. There has to be hope and celebration." Her work was beginning to blur the divisions between collage, drawing and painting and she continued to experiment with surrealist techniques, such as automatism, frontage and decalcomania.

In 1958, Agar and Bard moved into a house in Kensington with a giant studio. And in 1965, she was also introduced to acrylic paint. Both instances had a huge effect on her practice. In the larger studio, she could paint at a scale she had never really been able to before. And she found acrylic to be a very versatile paint allowing her to layer transparencies and build up to thicker areas as she saw fit.

It was also acrylic paint that in 1984 led Agar to return to the photographs she had taken at Ploumanac'h almost 50 years earlier, creating a series of hallucinatory drawings and paints inspired by these images of the rocks. So strong that they had been imprinted on her unconscious to be awakened decades later from their slumbers and appear in paint. Agar published her autobiography in 1989 and was made a royal Academician in 1990.

For the final years of life, Agar continued to paint every day, finding continual joy in her work. Again,

she said, "Painting is the most astounding sorceress." At the same time she was making collages, photographs and exploring with felt tip pens. Her curiosity persisted.

One of my favourite quotes of her is, "Life's meaning is lost without the spirit of play. In play, all that is lovely and soaring in the human spirit strives to find expression. To play is to yield oneself to a kind of magic. In play, the mind is prepared to accept the unimagined and incredible. To enter a world where different laws apply, to be free, unfettered and divine."

Despite her mercurial approach to making, the fundamental elements of a work by Agar have endured throughout her career. The natural world, foliage, seeds, shells and watery transparencies are layered with abstracted classical figures, faces in profile and mythical symbols, all the while following the two parallel paths of abstraction and surrealism. The two movements that interested her the most and she saw nothing in compatible in that. She said, "Indeed, we walk on two legs, and for me, one is abstract, the other surreal. It is point and counterpoint."

In today's uncertain times, we hope that the exhibition will reveal Agar as one of the most dynamic and bold artists of her generation with a career that endured almost a century of transformative social change.

JS: Poet Daisy Lafarge was commissioned to write a new poem to feature in the exhibition catalogue. Here she recites this new piece and reflects on the imaginative potential of Agar's work.

PL: This poem is called *Alukah (horse-leech) pantoum for Agar*.

The severity of grass was dawning
The setting was mitochondrial eve
The leech had two daughters, Give and Give
Possessed of clean knowledge and a head at both ends.

The setting was mitochondrial eve
The wreckage was becoming a reef
Possessed of clean knowledge and a head at both ends
The scripture was clinging to unicellular dreams.

The wreckage was becoming a reef
The leech had two daughters, Give and Give
The scripture was clinging to unicellular dreams
The severity of grass was dawning.

Three things are never satisfied!
Four which never say 'enough'!
Thirsty worm,
sallow god,
mud phantom,
nemoral clot

Chaotic boundary conditions
seems a long name for a small mother.

The first went about like natural dog food
Downing a Darwin-shaped theory of milk
The second mistook man for a moon-based language

The leech has two daughters
Satisfied
as a fool filled with meat

The sever of grass
as awning
The wreckage becoming relief

When it came to writing this poem, I was inspired by a short story by Agar called *A Journey Through the Eye*, which is this strange mystical pseudoscientific jaunt through life and consciousness and the universe. And it contains, among other things, tadpoles, the milky way, primeval soup, mitochondria, worms, physicists and recycled waterfalls. And before encountering this story, I hadn't read any writing by Agar and I found myself totally carried away by its flux of images and characters. But most of all by the language that has this kind of an acerbic matter of factness to its tone, despite being very dream-like.

The story inhabits this kind of collapsing crawl space between disciplines and registers, like the biological and the psychoanalytic, which is something that really interests me. One part reads: "My nerves are very bad. I'm told one needs good eukaryotic cells instead of bad neurotic ones." Another paragraph ends by saying, "We should worship a worm instead of god." This made me think of how earthworms are

constantly metabolising the soil around us and I decided to run with Agar's idea of worshipping worms, to think about Alukah, which is a Hebrew word for leech, that appears in the Old Testament as a kind of vampiric appetite or demonic possession.

And I'd like to think it also represents the chaotic boundary conditions that Agar's story is concerned with. The poem is loosely written in a form called a pantoum that partially eats and regurgitates itself, much like the life of the mind that Agar describes. "We are at home in our brains, if only we knew it. A world of breath-taking views and luscious vegetation where the pressures of life are soothed by the loan of waterfalls splashing on to vegetation only to be recycled endlessly and magically."

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.co.org, on the Bloomberg Connects app, as well as iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher and Soundcloud. Don't forget to visit the exhibition, Eileen Agar, Angel of Anarchy, on display from 19th May until 29th August 2021. Bye for now.

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