

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode 10

Phantoms
of Surrealism

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

[Introductory music].

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 today's episode featuring Whitechapel Gallery curators, Nayia Yiakoumaki, and Cameron Foote. Who examine the pivotal role of women as both artists, and as behind the scenes organisers, within the Surrealist Movement in Britain in the 1930s, explored through the lens of the 1936 London Surrealist Exhibition.

They speak with art historian, Tor Scott, and independent researcher, Richard Shillitoe, about the work and legacy of two of the artists, Edith Rimmington, and Ithell Colquhoun. We also hear an excerpt from an interview with poet, David Gascoyne, in which he recalls Sheila Legge's performance in Trafalgar Square, in 1936. The Exhibition is free to view, in Gallery 4, and is on display from the 19th of May until the 12th of December 2021.

NY: Hello, I'm Nayia, I'm pleased to be presenting Phantoms of Surrealism, which examines the pivotal role of women, as both artists, and organisers, within the Surrealist Movement in Britain in the 1930s. It is part of the Archive Exhibition's Programme, which

started in 2009, when we expanded the Gallery, and were able to introduce new curatorial strands. This programme is research-led, and explores archives as an alternative curatorial resource. It brings to light histories that have not registered in the formal art history, and takes place at our dedicated Archive Gallery.

CF: Today, the work of many women Surrealist artists is gradually gaining recognition, with Eileen Agar's retrospective, on view at the Whitechapel Gallery this year. Nevertheless, the contribution of some figures, such as Diana Brinton Lee, Sheila Legge, and Stella Snead, as organisers, secretaries, strategists, within the early history of the Movement in Britain, remains under-studied. The starting point for this Exhibition is a performance by artist Sheila Legge. On a hot June day, in 1936, she appeared standing in Trafalgar Square, dressed in a white bridal gown, her entire head covered in a bouquet of red roses. A performance, as the Phantom of Surrealism, launched the London International Surrealist Exhibition, held that year in New Burlington Galleries in Mayfair, and it made newspaper headlines.

NY: We did extensive research to locate the documentation of Legge's historic performance. In addition, we researched works of that period by Ruth Adams, Eileen Agar, Elizabeth Andrews, Diana Brinton Lee, Claude Cahun, Ithell Colquhoun, Grace Pailthorpe, Elizabeth Raikes, Edith Rimmington, and Stella Snead. In the Exhibition you can see these important works, together with a remarkable scale model, showing the original interior of the 1936

Exhibition, made over the course of the last year, and presented here for the first time.

CF: Also on view are original materials from the Artists International Association. The organisation was dedicated to the unity of artists for peace, democracy, and cultural development. It staged an anti-war Exhibition, at Whitechapel Gallery, in 1939. It included a surrealist section that featured many leading women artists. In the Gallery, you can see photographs, documents, and beautifully designed printed matter, that reveal women's contribution to these ground-breaking exhibitions. The materials are drawn from the Gallery's own historic archives, as well as from other national collections, including the National Gallery of Scotland, the Claude Cahun Archive at Jersey Heritage Trust, and from a number of significant private collections.

NY: Many key works are included in this show. Don't miss the two self-portraits of Diana Brinton Lee. Brinton Lee becomes one of the key organisers of the London International Surrealist Exhibition, and participates with her work in this major show. It's difficult to trace her career after that moment, as she worked mainly in illustration for poetry books, caricatures, and photography.

CF: We also have on display two works by Grace Pailthorpe, an ink drawing titled, Crustacean Caress, and a vivid watercolour which is alternately called, Sea Urchin, or the Escaped Prisoner. Unlike many of her peers in the Exhibition, Pailthorpe didn't initially study to be an artist. Instead, she trained as a

criminal psychologist, having been a surgeon in the First World War. After meeting her husband, a poet and artist, called Reuben Mednikoff, they developed together a mutual artistic partnership, thinking about the borders of art and the unconscious. She joined the British Surrealist Group, from 1936 to 1940, and these two works date from the height of her engagement with the Group. Finally, you can see two sculptures in the Exhibition – Women, by Elizabeth Raikes, and Swan, by Elizabeth Andrews. They were both shown together in a surrealist section of the Artists International Association Exhibition, at Whitechapel Gallery. And they're brought together again in the Gallery for the first time since 1939.

JS: In this short excerpt we hear the poet, artist, and translator, David Gascoyne, who was pivotal to the organising of the 1936 London International Surrealist Exhibition, interviewed by writer, Mel Gooding. Gascoyne tells his side of the story, of how Sheila Legge's performance came about.

MG: Can we go back, then, to the period, '35/'36 and to the period of the Exhibition, which you had instigated, really.

DG: Well it got all exciting when opening day of the Exhibition came along, and I began to plan various things, including this idea of the Surrealist Phantom. Now, Sheila Legge had written me a fan letter when A Short Survey of Surrealism came out in 1935. And I answered her, and we made a rendezvous, and I think she was living in a bedsit in Earls Court, you know. And she had nothing to do with the film-maker of the

same name, but one had an E, and the other didn't. Anyway, she was an attractive woman, we got on very well. There was a time, when she went to Paris for a time, hoping to become a model of Man Ray, but I don't think she was quite his type, and she was rather disappointed about that. At any rate, I had this idea of making this series, so I pitched the idea of the head made of roses, you know, a rosebush growing out of a dress from Dali.

But I got Motley's, the theatrical designers, who did all the costumes for the Old Vic, at that time, in St Martin's Lane, to do a sort of wedding dress, which they did very cheaply, really. And then I got a Mayfair florist to make a mask of roses, real roses, and we took her out to Trafalgar Square, and had a photograph. My original idea had been to have a thigh-bone, as this kind of sceptre, that I couldn't find anywhere, and I went around orthopaedic shops and finally came up with a leg and as her name was Legge that was what she carried around with her.

MG: So that was your idea?

DG: Yes, it was my idea.

MG: This is in the nature of a stunt.

DG: Yes, that's right, it was a publicity stunt.

MG: And of course, the exhibition was sort of...

DG: Breton came to open it, but Eluard wouldn't come until Breton had come back, it was said that the rift between them had already become quite serious.

MG: There's a famous photograph, isn't there, taken at the Burlington Galleries?

DG: Yes.

MG: In which Eluard and Nouche, I think is in the photograph...

DG: Yes.

MG: ...and Sheila Legge, and Eileen Agar, and Ruthven Todd.

DG: Ruthven Todd was taking my place, because I'd gone out on some errand.

MG: Is that why?

DG: So yes, he had to stand in.

MG: I've always wondered why you weren't in that photograph.

DG: Yes, that's why.

JS: Collections and Research Assistant, at the National Galleries of Scotland, and PhD researcher, Tor Scott, speaks here with curator, Nayia Yiakoumaki, about the life and work of Edith Rimmington, who features in the Exhibition.

NY: Can you introduce yourself, and your research into Edith Rimmington?

TS: My name is Tor, and I work at the National Galleries of Scotland. And I do a PhD, part-time, into Edith Rimmington. And I basically became familiar with her work in the first few weeks of working with the Galleries, in 2018. My boss took me to the picture stores, and I was sort of all starry-eyed, you know, because all the pictures were hanging on the racks. And she pulled out one of the racks, and at the very, very top, there was just this tiny little frame, wooden frame, with this painting of a flayed hand, with butterflies coming out of it. And that's the work that we have called The Decoy, by Rimmington. And I was like, wow, who, you know, who painted that, and she was like, that's our Rimmington. And so I sort of went away and had a google, and I couldn't find out very much about her, and I think that probably sparked it off, I wanted to find out who she was, and what she was all about.

NY: It's actually amazing, what you said does represent the fact that these artists are widely unknown to the majority of us. Can you say a few words to introduce Rimmington, and her work?

TS: There's a word that gets sort of thrown around quite a lot, when academics are describing Rimmington's work, and it's 'disquieting'. I think it was George Melly who famously described her as that, in one of his books. But she paints these really, really delicate, intricate works, that you want to get really

up close to, but they're delicate and beautiful, but they're also revolting at the same time. So they have that sort of delicacy, but they also repel you, but you want to know more. And it's the same with her poetry, as well. And a lot of her poetry is quite sexual, there's lots of themes to do with the sea, and the ocean, and the tide, and she sometimes has mythological themes, as well, that you find with most surrealists. Creepy, but beautiful, I think those are the best ways to describe it.

NY: How did she become interested in surrealism, and to what extent was she involved in the Movement, in the period that we're looking at, which is the late '30s?

TS: Well, it's difficult to say with Rimmington, and I think a lot of academics who have looked at her work previously have struggled to put a biography together for her. Because she seems to be a bit of an enigma, until she starts at art school, we don't know very much about her teenage years. She gets married in 1927, and she moved to Manchester, and her husband is an art teacher there. And he also ends up becoming a British Surrealist. But they go down to see the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition, at the Burlington Galleries, in the summer. And I think that just sort of sparked this obsession with her fascination, and they both seemed to join the Group from then on.

I'm not really sure what happened to her husband, that's more research to be done. But she ends up, I think it was Gordon Onslow Ford who introduced her to the Group. And then in 1937, she shows, The

Family Tree, with the Surrealist Objects and Poems Exhibition, and then there's the Whitechapel Exhibition, as well. So it's just those two exhibitions that I know of, at this point. I think, it's more in the mid-1940s that you see more of her, like, her poetic work. But those two exhibitions are quite significant, that she was involved in.

NY: You mentioned the work, Family Tree, from 1937, which is indeed one of the two that we have in Phantoms of Surrealism. Can you say a few words about this work?

TS: Yeah. So, The Family Tree was shown in the Surrealist Objects and Poems Exhibition, in 1937. The Family Tree is a weird one, because I think it's her only photo montage that she's sort of painted into. It's in this amazing frame, as well, so when you see it, it's like, wow. She seems to play with words a lot. So there is a painting called, The Oneiroscopist, which shows a bird skull wearing a diving suit. And the bird skull is actually from a diving bird, so she's obviously, you know, this sort of genesis of a bird called a diving bird. So she obviously plays with words quite a lot. So I've started to look at her work in a slightly different way because of that. And with Family Tree, you've got this jetty sort of stretching off into the night, over the ocean, with a chain on top of that, and then a snake weaving through the links on the chain, and a ribbon, as well, tied to one of the links of the chain.

And I think she's playing with the idea of a family tree in a very sort of physical way. So if you – this is just

my interpretation, so this could be just, you know, completely off – but you know, if you put the jetty, the chain, the snake, and the ribbon all side by side, they are all these long objects with different levels of softness, and mobility to them. But they all sort of resemble each other almost, in certain ways. So I felt like she was maybe playing with the family tree idea, in terms of the physicality of that. But I don't know, she's an enigma, so, it's difficult to tell.

NY: I really like the way that you explained Family Tree, actually, you're very right about the points you're making about the objects that appear there, and their association. The work originally displayed in the Whitechapel Gallery Artists International Association Exhibition, is now presumed lost. Could you talk a little bit about Fallen Chariot from 1940, which is the other work we have in Phantoms of Surrealism, and the exhibition where it was first shown?

TS: So, Fallen Chariot was shown in the Zwirner show in 1940, but it was actually shown under a different title. So, we have all these photographs in the Gallery archives, of that show, and in the very background of one of them, you can see Fallen Chariot, if you zoom in. But when you go back and you check the catalogue, there are different titles shown. So, you can see that she's changing up, she's changing up the titles, and she's also changing up the dates, like she did with Family Tree, changing the date from '37 to '38. So I think, Fallen Chariot was called, Orgy and Stables, and it's also called, it's

called, Pan Genesis, in the Zwirner Gallery show. So we know that that has three titles.

So I was thinking that, maybe, the works that were in the Whitechapel show, they might not actually be lost, they could be ones that we know of, but they've just had their titles changed, and that's part of the frustration, and also the intrigue with Rimmington's work, is that you're sort of, you don't know if you've already found it, when you're looking at, you know, when you're looking at a catalogue. You're wondering, like, is that a lost one, will I ever see it, or is that something that I already know of that's a bit more famous now, but just has a totally different name. Yeah, it's all part of the Rimmington riddle.

JS: We now hear from Richard Shillitoe, an independent researcher, into the career and legacy of Ithell Colquhoun. He's interviewed by Cameron Foote, about her extraordinary life and work.

RS: My name is Richard Shillitoe. I spent all my working life as a psychologist in the NHS, and I run the website, ithellcolquhoun.co.uk. It all started for me, in 1971, when I came across a surrealist magazine that was being published called Transformaction. And it contained some quite extraordinary poems. And I'll just read out, if I may, the first couple of lines of one. It goes:

“Pigmy, diadem of body, duoenec, duoenec, greed, duoenec”, and so on, and so on, and so on. It was completely mystifying.

And there was this bizarre name at the end of the poem – Ithell Colquhoun – which I didn't think could possibly be a real name. And I thought the whole thing was just a great surrealist joke. But obviously, I was wrong. And for some reason, I was hooked. I began to see references to her in various magazines, and learned that she was alive, and it was a her, not a he, or a phantom. And later, I went to see her, at her studio. Sadly, I was too young, and far too shy, to make the most of my visit. But she did sell me one of her paintings. She took it off the wall and sold it to me, just like that. It was one of the most thrilling moments of my life, up until then. And since then, I've written and edited a number of books about her, and about her work.

CF: It's a wonderful story about your encounter with the artist, and first of all, seeing her poetry, and then visiting her studio. But perhaps for those who might not know much about her broader work, could you say something to introduce art and writing?

RS: Yeah, she was born in India, to English parents. Her father was a senior administrator over there. But she came back to the UK as a young child, and spent her formative years being brought up by an elderly aunt, on the Isle of Wight. When her parents came back to England, they retired, she went to live with them in Cheltenham, where she attended Cheltenham Ladies College. And then she went on to the Slade School of Art, in London, where she graduated in 1931. Now, fortunately for her, she was well off, comparatively well off, financially, and never had to work for a living, she was able to pursue a creative life,

independently, full time. So, in addition to being an artist, she was also a practising occultist, and magician, a sorceress, if you like, with an astonishing diversity of magical, and spiritual interests.

So over the years, she was a theosophist, she was a freemason, she was a druid, she venerated the Great Earth Mother, the Goddess. And she was particularly interested in ceremonial magic, based on the old Jewish system of the Kabbalah. She learned the arts of casting spells, astral travel, divination, and communication with spirits and angels. And she published several books on her interests. She wrote a wonderfully titled novel called, The Goose of Hermogenes. She wrote quite a well-known book called, The Living Stones, about her life in Cornwall. And she wrote a book called, The Sword of Wisdom, about a famous magician called MacGregor Mathers. And in the late '50s, she moved from London to Paul, a small village in Penzance in Cornwall. And there, she wrote, and painted, and mediated, until her death in 1988.

CF: At the start of her career, Colquhoun exhibited a few times in London, immediately after graduating from the Slade, including twice at Whitechapel Gallery in the 1930s.

RS: Yes.

CF: Can you describe, briefly, how her style was developing at this early phase, in the early to mid-1930s?

RS: When she was a student at the Slade, she developed a special interest in large scale, multi-figure compositions. And in fact, one year, she won their prestigious Summer Composition prize. And the best paintings of the early, mid-'30s continue that theme. In fact, at one point, she tried to win the Rone Scholarship in Mural Painting, but she was unsuccessful. But she continued painting these large scale paintings of traditional, biblical, and mythological subjects. And several of the ones that were shown at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1935, are now in public collections. So one of them is now owned by the University of London, and another one is owned by the Government Art Collection.

But also at the Whitechapel, she exhibited some large wall hangings of tarot cards, and that was the start of her lifelong interest in the tarot pack, and she produced various designs, all her life, culminating in a full scale pack, a full set of cards, in I think, 1977. But at this time, in the '30s, she was still using traditional oil painting techniques, tracing a full sized cartoon onto the canvas, building up the painting layers. And often, incorporating the golden section, in order to make her paintings more aesthetically pleasing. But even so, they always managed to look odd, and quirky, and some people like them, and other people find them very unsettling. But then in the mid-'30s, she discovered surrealism, and after that, everything changed.

CF: And could you say some more about Colquhoun's involvement with the Surrealist Movement in Britain?

RS: Well, she came to surrealism too late to exhibit at the Burlington House Exhibition in 1936. But it's known that she did visit it. And subsequently, she made contact with the Surrealist Group in London. And she published a number of prose poems in their journal, the London Bulletin. And in 1938, she had a joint exhibition with a man called Roland Penrose, who later went on to become a pillar of the art establishment, but then was a full-blown surrealist. Now, the leader of the London Surrealists at that time was a Belgian poet and gallery owner called, Édouard Mesens. And he took exception to Colquhoun's occult interests, and demanded that she give it all up, and give total allegiance to the surrealists. She refused to do that, and so he expelled her from the Surrealist Group. His antipathy to the occult was entirely personal to him, because a lot of the continental surrealists were deeply interested in the occult, including Andre Breton himself.

So, she left the Group in 1940, but maintained contact with some of the painters. But relationships with the Surrealist Group went from bad to worse, because in 1943, she got married to a man called Toni del Renzio, and their marriage was as disastrous as it was short. But del Renzio himself had ambitions to take over the running of the Surrealist Group from Mesens, and so conflict was inevitable. And it all became extremely acrimonious, and she never exhibited with the Surrealists again, although she continued to regard herself as a surrealist all her life.

CF: And finally, could you talk about the two works on display in the Exhibition – Waterflower, which is from 1938, and Alchemical Figure: Secret Fire, which is from 1940. They seem to come from a moment when Colquhoun's work is undergoing some stylistic shifts?

RS: Yes, that's true. Although Waterflower is painted conventionally, it has something of the surreal about it. Now, for Colquhoun, surrealism, and occultism, were all about overcoming boundaries, breaking down the barriers between apparently irreconcilable states. So, that might include the rational and the irrational, dreaming and wakefulness, male and female, or worldly and spiritual. Now, in Waterflower, there's a clear barrier, and it's a physical one. In this case, it's the boundary between air and water. The aquatic plant, the waterlily, with its flowers above, and roots below, successfully straddles the boundary of the water surface, but the fish cannot. Or, if you prefer, you can think of it in spiritual or psychological terms. There are things that lie unseen below the surface of the water, below consciousness, but which sometimes can break through, become visible, and become knowable.

As she became more immersed in surrealist ideas, she developed a much more spontaneous style, which emphasised taking advantage of chance effects. And you can see that in Alchemical Figure: Secret Fire, which is only two years later, but stylistically, years apart because it incorporates large stains of paint at the centre of the sheet. It's one of about 15 watercolours she painted at that

time, which have Alchemical Figure in their title. And they're all about states of change, and metamorphosis. When she was a young woman, she had an occult mentor called, Edward Garstin, who was her cousin, and who sadly later, took his own life. But he was very influential in her thinking. And at one point he wrote a book on alchemy called, The Secret Fire. So it may well be that she was thinking of this book when she was working on this particular painting.

Many of the paintings in the Alchemical Figure series contained references to the duality of gender. So, Secret Fire, has a female egg nestling in the transforming fires of the alchemical furnace. And the form, the flowery form sprouting from the top, it may be an illusion to the crown chakra which she knew about from her study of Eastern Tantra. But I think it can also be read of a stylised ejaculation of the male generative force, the so-called, nectar of immortality. The painting, then, shows male and female coming together in the act of creating something new.

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JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. We would like to thank the British Library for granting permission to include the excerpt of David Gascoyne interviewed by Mel Gooding, in 1990, which is part of the National Life Stories, Artists Lives series, within the Oral History collection. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org, on the Bloomberg's Connect app, as well as iTunes, Spotify, Scripture,

and SoundCloud. Don't forget to visit the Exhibition, Phantoms of Surrealism, from the 19th of May until the 12th of December 2021. Bye for now.

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