Large Print Exhibition Guide

Eileen Agar: Angel of Anarchy

19 May– 29 August 2021

Galleries 1, 8 & 9

Eileen Agar: Angel of Anarchy

Eileen Agar (1899–1991) was one of the most adventurous and prolific artists of her generation. Throughout her seventy-year career she synthesised elements of two of twentieth-century western culture's most significant artistic tendencies – Cubism and Surrealism – in a diverse and kaleidoscopic practice which moved freely through drawing, painting, photography, collage and sculpture. Fascinated by classical art, ancient mythologies, sexual pleasure and the natural world, Agar mined these subjects for the forms and content that filled her works. 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. In doing so, Agar created a distinct and spirited style, entirely her own.

Agar was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina into a wealthy and flamboyant family. Her mother was strict and Agar was a rebellious child with a burgeoning interest in art.

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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 tutored by the painter Lucy Kemp-Welch RA, 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 which she saw as more fulfilling than that of becoming a debutante. 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, London in 1921.

A full-colour exhibition catalogue including images of all the works in the exhibition plus newly commissioned essays, and writings by Agar is available from the Whitechapel Gallery bookshop.

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Gallery 1

The surprise of Surrealism and the draw of Cubism

Following her studies, Agar became frustrated by the traditional, figurative style she had been taught at The Slade. She was interested in abstraction and the artistic revolution she saw happening in Europe. In 1929 Agar travelled to Paris, where she met Surrealists André Breton and Paul Éluard, as well as beginning painting lessons with Czech Cubist František Foltýn. She was simultaneously drawn to the sensuality and irrationality of Surrealism, as well as the idealism and logic of Cubism. Her early explorations into both movements – taken in tandem – allowed Agar to cultivate a unique style that would endure for the rest of her life.
In 1936 Agar was visited by the curators planning the International Surrealist Exhibition in London that year. From Agar's studio they selected three oil paintings and five objects, much to her astonishment: 'the sudden attention took me by surprise.

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One day I was an artist exploring highly personal combinations of form and content, the next I was calmly informed I was a Surrealist!' Agar was excited by the Surrealists' desire to paint the subconscious but sought to supplement her Surreal compositions with a Cubist appreciation of form and texture. Moreover, Agar did not approve of the way 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 Surrealism placed on imaginative freedom to envision a world where gender boundaries were fluid and the structures of patriarchy less rigorously enforced.

You can find out more about the pivotal role of women within the Surrealist movement in Britain in our current archive gallery exhibition Phantoms of Surrealism.

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Collaging the natural world

For Agar, collage and its sculptural sister, assemblage, were two of the Surrealist techniques that held the most appeal – as she attached great importance to instinctual response and the unexpected collision of previously unconnected images. At the same time, the ocean and the natural world were becoming important influences for Agar who favoured organic objects over the European Surrealists' preferred found object – something humanmade which might be discovered in a flea-market or junk shop. Agar began to use natural forms as creative problem-solvers, collecting stones, bones, horns, shells, textiles, ceramics, fossils, leaves and other oddments which she would use to provoke or spark her creativity: 'I surround myself with fantastic bric-àbrac in order to trigger my imagination. For it is a certain kind of sensitive chaos that is creative, and not sterile order.' Forest-and-beachcombing thus quickly became favourite working methods for Agar and in1934 she began to formally experiment with collage.

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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 influences. She collected and combined imagery and specimens of the body, insects, birds, snakes, butterflies, flowers, leaves, classical mythologies, contemporary politics and silhouetted heads and hands, playing with their scale and orientation with poetic, emotive or jarring results.

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Gallery 9

Nature as a sculptor:

Agar's assemblage and photography

Agar was fascinated by the natural world, 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.' She sought out sculptural forms in nature, which she then choreographed into fantastical collages and sculptures. Her assemblages have a tentative quality as well as a visual playfulness. When asked about their seeming fragility she commented that they had been found 'at the behest of chance and went that way also'. Many of her objects are now known only from photographs, and records show that she repurposed several of them.

In 1936 Agar travelled to Ploumanach, France where she was struck by the coastal rock formations.

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Emphasising her belief that the Surreal is formed by nature, Agar described the rocks as ‘sculpted by the sea, that master worker of all time, as if nature had arranged a show of sculpture in the open air.’ Keen to document the extraordinary rocks, Agar travelled to the nearest town to buy a camera. She purchased a Rolleiflex square-format camera that would become ‘a constant companion’. From this point on photography began to assume a greater role in her practice. Her photographs show her curious eye and reflect the subjects which endured throughout her career; landscapes, seascapes, shipwrecks, natural and human-made found objects, alongside portraits of her partner Joseph Bard, and friends such as Nusch and Paul Éluard, Dora Maar, Lee Miller, Roland Penrose and Pablo Picasso.

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Gallery 8
Wartime anxieties

In 1939, the onset of war interrupted Agar's artistic activity significantly. Though a pacifist, she enlisted in the war effort, volunteering in a canteen on Savile Row. Agar and Bard also served as Fire Watchers on night duty and in their London home they hosted friends fleeing persecution in Europe, or newly homeless due to the Blitz. Remaining in London allowed Agar to keep her studio, though she '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.' She found collage – with its more political foundations and direct symbolism – a medium she could maintain. Her work of this period is dense and loaded, filled with desire, anxiety and a sense of urgency.

When the war ended Agar 'felt like something new and marvellous ought to happen' but she was 'exhausted and humdrum, more dispirited than usual.' She describes this period as a physical and spiritual famine.

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Yearning for change but with travel outside of the country difficult, she visited Cornwall and the Lake District to replenish her imagination. Slowly Agar returned to painting as if 'renewing a belief in life itself'. Her works from the late 1940s reveal a cautious optimism, often employing a gentler pastel colour palette to depict layered, stencilled and painted forms. These works feel like a wary step towards celebration, and, following years of rationing, a hopeful nod to more plentiful days ahead.

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Post-war experiments: automatism and frottage

Over the next ten years Agar was 'still aware of a sense of despondency and threatened by morbidity'. She travelled as much as possible, gradually working herself out of a sense of gloom. In 1953 she was invited to spend the winter in Tenerife, a trip which became 'a watershed in my life' sparking her creativity and emboldening her to return year upon year. 'I had been too long cut off from the world of nature, too cooped up, too cribbed and confined, and the relief of finding one's roots responding to the quickening pulse of vegetation, the vast mountain-scapes, the sea horizons, all this made me fall in love with that mountainous dew-drop in the ocean and I revived and could work again.'

By the mid-1950s, Agar was enjoying a successful period of painting, travelling and exhibiting and had begun to feel like herself again: 'surely room must be made for joy in this world?'

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Her work was beginning to blur the divisions between collage, drawing and painting and she continued to experiment with Surrealist techniques such as frottage, automatism and decalcomania. Some of Agar's most striking uses of automatism, or spontaneous painting, can be found in a small selection of poured paintings. Here she uses oil and enamel paints to create portraits in loose outlines, fluid drips and swirling backgrounds.

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Late painting and the joy of acrylic

In 1958, Agar moved to a much larger studio. For the first time she could paint at a scale she hadn't been able to before. Soon after, in 1965, she was introduced to acrylic paint. She found acrylic to be 'very versatile, it can be used as impasto, with a palette knife or a thin wash. I had found an ideal medium, and I wanted to both master and stretch it.' The large paintings she made during the 1970s and 80s are tightly composed, layered works that emulate collage but are created entirely in paint. The now characteristic Agar motifs appear – shells, birds, fossils, hands, silhouetted forms and foliage – all skillfully incorporated into her meticulously arranged canvases.

Agar published her autobiography in 1989 and was made a Royal Academician in 1990. During the final years of her life, she continued to work every day, finding continual joy in her art: 'life's meaning is lost without the spirit of play.

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In play all that is lovely and soaring in the human spirit strives to find expression. In play the mind is prepared to enter a world where different laws apply, to be free.' Her primary interests endured throughout her career, all the while following the two parallel paths of abstraction and Surrealism: 'the two movements that interested me most. I see nothing incompatible in that, indeed we walk on two legs, and for me, one is abstract, the other Surreal – it is point and counterpoint.'

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