

## Leonora Carrington: The Talismanic Lens

### An Interview On The Artist:

*The Penleaf* in Conversation With Wendi Norris

Wendi Norris, co-owner of the Frey Norris Gallery in San Francisco, speaks on the Surrealist artist, Leonora Carrington, and her upcoming exhibition, "Leonora Carrington: The Talismanic Lens," the first major exhibition of the iconic Surrealist painter in nearly ten years, that will run at the gallery from February 7th-March 30th, 2008. Norris honored *The Penleaf* with an interview:

THE PENLEAF: You and Raman Frey have an annex in your gallery, the Frey Norris Gallery in San Francisco, that specializes in the women artists associated with the Surrealist movement. How and when did this interest in Surrealism and its artists begin for you, and what led to the culmination of that interest in the creation of the annex?

NORRIS: Whitney Chadwick's book, "Women and the Surrealist Movement," provided the source of inspiration for the Frey Norris Gallery Annex. Raman read this book roughly ten years ago, when he was working for the Leonor Fini estate in Paris. Raman quickly became a student of this group of women artists, writing, promoting, and buying and selling their works. When we opened the contemporary gallery six years ago, we naturally started doing "back room" sales, providing clients with art consulting services, focusing on Surrealism. Three years ago, Raman and I began collecting for ourselves, selectively acquiring works from this period, focusing on artists like Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, and Dorothea Tanning, for example. We then created an intimate space that is open to the public. It has since served as a center for what is happening today for many of these artists.

THE PENLEAF: You have an exhibition, "Leonora Carrington: The Talismanic Lens," opening on February 7th, 2008 and running through March 30th, featuring the work of artist Leonora Carrington. How and when did you first come across the work of Carrington and what were your thoughts and impressions of the work at that time? Has your sight and thought of her work changed at all by knowing the artist personally as you do? How did you first come to meet Carrington and get to know her and her family, and what has been most meaningful and enlightening about knowing her? In addition, what have you learned by knowing her that has expanded your sight and understanding of both her art and her person, as well as the Surrealist movement and its history that she was so directly very much a part of?

NORRIS: I first met Leonora Carrington through Susan Aberth, a Carrington scholar and art history professor at Bard College. I had heard so many tales about Leonora - about her mercurial personality, her ability to cast spells on people, her ability to read one's mind, and her refusal to speak about her art. I first called her on the phone and we began a conversation in Spanish - a language I think that we are both warmer in when speaking. When we met in person shortly after the phone conversation, I was very pregnant and unable to smoke or drink with her - which would have been an instant bonding ritual (and has since become one). But we certainly bonded as women, as people who care about the earth, about family, and about the state of the world. We spent hours speaking about everything BUT her art (as I mention in the introduction of our catalogue). I should say that I've been very close to my grandparents who have all lived to past her age for the most part, so I am at ease and excited to be in the presence of an older, wiser person. Leonora has shown me about the importance of life - about what matters. And she makes me laugh incessantly with her stories, her quips about the world, and so on.



*"Quería ser pájaro" 1960. Image courtesy of the artist and Frey Norris Gallery.*

Leonora's paintings are another matter entirely. They are rich with symbols and inhabit a world all their own. Through the process of working on this show, I've spent a considerable amount of time speaking with art scholars and collectors about her work. Through my discussions with Ara Merjian (the author of the academic piece in the 60-page catalogue we produced for "Talismanic Lens"), I realized how difficult it is to define Leonora's work because it's so unique and so multi-faceted. Ultimately, I believe the experience with her work should be an individual one. I'm happy to walk through her iconography and share the personal history of a given work of art, but I think it's best left up to the individual and their relationship to the work. This is something I've spent hours speaking to her and her son, Gabriel Weisz Carrington (who contributed poems in the exhibition catalogue that relate to each work). I recently came back from a press tour in Mexico where Leonora is considered a national treasure, or a Goddess as one reporter described her to me. Nearly every interviewer insisted on a nice, neat description of her work and she was often sitting there. Can you imagine the pressure of trying to tidily summarize a career spanning eight decades? Impossible.



"Bird Bath," 1978. Image courtesy of the artist and Frey Norris Gallery.

THE PENLEAF: When did you and Raman Frey decide to bring this Carrington exhibition together? How long have you been working on it and what did putting it together entail? Do you have any specific hopes for this very special, historic exhibition so soon upon us?

NORRIS: Raman and I are devoted to Leonora, to ensuring her legacy is properly and boldly emblazoned in art history. I imagine our personal fondness of her and all that she embodies certainly motivates us even more. She's simply a genius with incredible grace but without pretense.

Raman and I began collecting Leonora's work roughly five years ago and began planning this exhibition two years ago. We published and produced a beautiful and scholarly sixty-page catalogue. We have also orchestrated the first symposia dedicated to Leonora's life and work, which will be held the night before our exhibition opens, on February 6th in the San Francisco Art Institute's three hundred person auditorium. We have curators, clients, friends, and scholars flying in from Europe, Mexico, and all over the United States for the exhibit. My hope is that people will grow closer to her, and to the work as a result of our efforts. And I hope that the public will embrace it and walk away realizing that a great artist has been oft-overlooked largely because she is...a woman.

*For more information about the artist and the exhibition, "Leonora Carrington: The Talismanic Lens," that runs February 7-March 30th, 2008 at the Frey Norris Gallery in San Francisco, please visit <http://www.freynorris.com>.*