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Feminist Perspectives on Materials and Making in Leonora Carrington's Esoteric Art Practice

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This article proposes that approaching the work and practice of the British-born Mexican artist Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) and other women working at the intersection of art and esotericism necessitates revisiting some fundamental assumptions and approaches of the discipline of art history, namely the separation of material from meaning and the complete transmutation of the material into "pure" form and image. At the example of two case studies drawn from Carrington's esoteric art practice related to materials and making, it argues that only by going beyond hierarchical dualistic thinking can we understand the role Carrington's materials played in the meaning and magical function of her works, and comprehend her painting process as an epistemological practice, which drew on esoteric principles and expanded notions of the Surrealist marvellous through attention to the non-human in the form of materials.

Introduction

For the British-born Mexican artist Leonora Carrington (1917–2011), all matter, and by extension her materials, were alive and thinking: in a 1985 documentary, the artist called on us to remember that our bodies are falling apart and will return to the earth, and that the matter of our bodies—like all matter—must be understood as thinking substance (Isaac 1985, 20:14–26:00).[1] In her work, she consequently horizontalised the hierarchical distinctions habitually made between different kinds of materialities—human and non-human—and critiqued Anthropos's hubris and speciesism. As part of these politics, her integrated artistic-esoteric practice was constituted by a collaboration of thinking matters, which included the artist's mind-body complex and her living materials. Meaning did not inhere solely in the finished image-system of the work of art, but in the process of painting and in the artist's relationship with her materials, such as her tempera and mineral pigments, intimately connected to and in communion not only with herself but with the whole macrocosm. Art making, and painting in particular, thus served Carrington

1 My transcription and translation. Original Spanish: "Ahora soy una mujer vieja. Sangre, carne y huesos […] algunos de nosotros comprendemos y aceptamos que nuestros cuerpos están desmoronándose, devolviendo a la tierra […] La verdad es que somos parte de la tierra y la tierra es un cuerpo celeste […] Que la materia de nuestros cuerpos como todo lo llamado materia se debería comprender como substancia pensante."

as an epistemological endeavour, creating relational meaning and knowledge about herself, her human and non-human others, and the physical and metaphysical worlds of which she was a part. Some of the works she created even functioned as active interventions into these worlds.

In this article, I propose that approaching the work and practice of Carrington and other women[2] working at this particular intersection of art and esotericism necessitates revisiting some fundamental assumptions and approaches of art history. I first show how scholarship on Surrealism and magic, and Carrington and alchemy, in particular, has neglected practice-based and material aspects and propose how paying attention to materials and making in relation to established approaches can foster feminist perspectives at the intersection of the fields. With two case studies drawn from my research on Carrington's esoteric art practice, which relate to materials and making respectively, I then proceed to show that it is only by going beyond hierarchical dualistic thinking ingrained in the historiography of art history that we can understand the role her materials played in the meaning and magical function of some of her works, and comprehend her painting process as an epistemological practice, which drew on esoteric principles and expanded notions of the Surrealist marvellous through attention to the non-human in the form of materials.

Carrington's esoteric art practice

In Kim Evans's 1992 BBC documentary *Leonora Carrington and the House of Fear*, we can "visit" Carrington in her studio and observe her preparing her egg tempera: she cracks open an egg, separates the white and the yolk with her hands and drops the yolk into a jar with water. Energetically wiping her hands on her apron, she then proceeds to shake the jar with both hands next to her head, like a bar-tender mixing a cocktail. Once satisfied, she pours the egg mixture into her palette, ready to combine it with the ground pigments, all the while describing what she is doing for the audience (34:02–36:27). Curiously, although the idea of Carrington's "egg tempera paint, cooked up in her kitchen", as Alicia Kent called it (2017, 10), has been central to scholarly discourses on the artist's work in relation to her interest in the occult and esotericism, a discussion of her actual process and handling of her materials has remained marginal.

Her use of tempera has been specifically linked to her engagement with alchemy: Whitney Chadwick argued that Carrington found "a compelling connection between the kitchen's daily rituals, the mixing of paints, and alchemical descriptions of the gentle cooking of substances placed in ovoid vessels", immediately preceding to evoke her turn to egg tempera (1991, 13–4). Susan Aberth too has linked Carrington's tempera practice to cooking through the allegory of "The Alchemical Kitchen", encapsulating the "profound confluence between the act of painting, cooking, and occult practices" for Carrington (2012, 11;

2 I use the term "women" here to refer to an expansive and inclusive category of people. Alongside the other authors in this special issue, I interrogate why we must especially revisit our approaches in relation to the work of women and how this relates to the gendered prejudices inherent in the approaches of the discipline of art history (and other disciplines beyond the scope of this particular article).

see also 2010, 9, 64–6); she defined it as the transformation of a "female domestic space [...] with is implications of drudgery and subjugation, into a sacred space celebrating the feminine sacred" (2012, 7). Katharine Conley argued that Carrington pursued an "embodied version of Surrealism" centred around the kitchen as "matrix for [...] creative labour" (2013, 1, 3). I here want to suggest to "by-pass" the (metaphor of) the kitchen and head directly to the studio.

The absence of the artist's painting process along with a serious consideration of her materials as meaningful to her artistic and esoteric pursuits in existing scholarship is emblematic of the wider historiography of Surrealism's engagement with magic and the occult, within which the upsurge of studies on Carrington, alchemy and magic took shape. Following Nadja Choucha's *Surrealism and the Occult: Shamanism, Magic, Alchemy, and the Birth of an Artistic Movement* (1991), the area of investigation concerned with Surrealists' interest in and study of esotericism and the occult developed into a growing field of study. From single-author studies by Tessel M. Bauduin (2014), Patrick Lepetit (2014) and Will Atkin (2023), the anthology *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (Bauduin, Ferentinou and Zamani eds., 2018) and the exhibition and catalogue *Surrealism and Magic: Enchanted Modernity* (Greene et al. eds., 2022), among others, scholars have traced Surrealism's sources in nineteenth- and twentieth-century esoteric traditions, relating them to the movement's epistemological and political project in face of rationalism and the violence of the imperial nation state. As Gražina Subelytė highlighted in her study of the Surrealist and occultist Kurt Seligmann, the Surrealists widely embraced magic and alchemy for their liberatory and emancipatory potential (2018, ix–xiv).

The above body of literature has placed a great emphasis on discourse and iconography—at times at the cost of practices. André Breton's introduction of the occult and especially alchemy into Surrealism for example was characterised "as a discourse through which to explore tropes of the imagination, the irrational and the unconscious" by Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou and Daniel Zamani; they noted that it was in the Surrealists' "search for a complete remaking of Western European society", that "*the metaphoric language of alchemy*, in particular, was frequently drawn upon, since themes of transformation, renewal, rebirth and regeneration of man lie at the very heart of its wider discourse" (2018, 4–5; emphasis added). Urszula Szulakowska in *Alchemy in Contemporary Art* had proposed that artists in the twentieth century more generally "employed the alchemical discourse in the promotion of radical liberal, or even leftist, political conventions", so focusing on alchemy as a political discursive tool (2011, 3–4). As Will Atkin observed in his recent study on the Surrealist object in relation to the movement's interest in magic, "in the existing scholarship on Surrealism's occult interests, the significance of the actual practice of alchemy [...] has remained largely unexplored" (2023, 22).

I suggest that conducting a "studio visit" and applying a material- and process-focused methodology, which integrates a study of Carrington's iconography and esoteric sources with a consideration of how she interacted with her materials, elucidates new aspects of the artist's engagement

with alchemy and reveals her art-making as integral to her esotericism in new ways. It consciously counters a perceived incompatibility of the material and the spiritual as expressed in observations such as Marie-Pierre Colle's, who, despite an explicit focus on artists' studios, argued that through "the simplicity of her home, and absence of objects, [Carrington] centers her life around ideas, books, and her search for truth" (1994, 89). Focussing on the materiality and processes of Carrington's esoteric artistic practice shows how instead of reducing alchemy to an allegory, she employed it as a material strategy to rethink and consequently remake her relationship to the planet, the non-human world and the more-than-human universe.

Feminist perspectives on materials and making

Traditional approaches in art history are scarcely equipped to address materials and making in relation to iconography and meaning (see Wagner 2013). And yet, a foregrounding of materials and processes of art making in relation to more dominant approaches in the discipline, such as the study of iconography and visual sources, or the socio-political entanglements of works of art, holds a feminist revisionist potential, as explored below. These feminist perspectives—to me—seem indispensable when approaching practitioners, images and objects at the intersection of art and esotericism, where prejudice against the material and process of art-making can meet wariness regarding the material and embodied aspects of spirituality and esoteric practice.

Feminist art historians like Hope Mauzerall and Petra Lange-Berndt have criticised the prevailing dominance in art historical scholarship of "a philosophical tradition that privileges form over matter, design over material, drawing over paint and the spiritual over the bodily" (Lange-Berndt 2015, 12–3; see also Mauzerall, 1998). The discipline's idealist heritage keeps us circling back to the basic foundations of Western metaphysics espoused by Aristotle and Plato, namely, form's higher status than matter, the latter always to be transcended and overcome. In this tradition, materials are passive and meant to be fully sublimated and transcended in the making of the work of art, resulting in "pure" form and image (see Wolff 2007; Lange-Berndt 2015; Wagner 2015).

Feminist thinkers and activists, from Susan Griffin (1984; 1986), Carolyn Merchant (1980), Luce Irigaray (1985) and Elizabeth V. Spelman (1982) to Judith Butler (2011), have denounced the Western philosophical tradition of devaluing matter, drawing attention to the sedimentation of materiality with discourses of gender, making it a key area of trans-generational feminist critical inquiry. Carrington's notion of matter as thinking substance can be seen within this tradition; not only did she associate with eco-feminists like Gloria Feman Orenstein and Griffin (see Geis 2012; Feman Orenstein 2018), her challenge to the gendered binary of thought and matter aligns with this feminist materialist tradition.

The art historian Monika Wagner argued that the specifically gendered notion of the form–matter binary as well as "the figure of speech coined by Aristotle about matter desiring form 'as the female desiring the male or the foul the fair' [...] can be traced down the centuries as a subtext in Western art history" (2015, 29). Materials

are etymologically linked to *mater* and *matrix* (womb), and thus to what Butler called "a problematic of reproduction" (2011, 6–7); they have been referred to as the "mother" of the artwork (see Bucklow 2014, 241). Paint specifically, as Wagner has demonstrated, far into the twentieth century was associated and imbued with the imagined qualities of the (base) feminine (1996, 177); she characterised specifically the spiritualisation of colour by early abstractionists, such as the artists of the Blauer Reiter, as aimed at overcoming the materiality of paint (2013, 22–4). Art-historical analysis, which foregrounds aspects of materiality, can hold potential for feminist revisions of disciplinary methods and theories (and histories of modernisms and modernity), if it does not blindly accept and reverse the gendered binary but instead investigates the entangled nature of material and meaning.

Recent strands of new materialist and post-human feminisms have called for such a rethinking of the relationship between discourse and matter as non-hierarchical and not at the cost of one or the other (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 3, 6). Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti defined the potential of post-human feminism as "defy[ing] binary oppositions by thinking through embodiment, multiplicity and differences" (2022, 11). Their call resonates with the work of eco-feminist Griffin, who already in ca. 1985—writing on the "schism" within traditional theologies and the religious self ("mirror[ing] a division between spirit and matter")—proposed a "'feminisation' of spirituality" which "begins to heal this schism, by bringing the flesh back to the word" (c. 1985, unpaginated). Her use of the term "feminisation" should be understood in the sense of the art historian Griselda Pollock's use of the term "feminine" as "available to all subjects as an originary psychic-symbolic positioning and potentiality for relatedness and connectivity" (2007, 45). This emphasis on relatedness and connection, on thinking across and beyond binaries, refers to new ways of knowing—in the academic fields and in the world—which feminist perspectives can usher in.

At the same time, as I explore in the following two case studies, Carrington's own approach to knowledge and the materiality of painting can serve to inspire our revision of approaches. Beyond her active engagement with organised feminism and eco-feminism in particular, her occult interests and study of figures such as the early-sixteenth-century doctor, alchemist and natural philosopher Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim, better known as Paracelsus, shaped her epistemological practice. Paracelsus, as argued by Pamela H. Smith in her work on the body of the artisan, was one of the first in the European context to "to give a scholarly voice to an artisanal understanding of the material world" (2004, 25). As an artist who daily worked with her materials, Carrington cultivated an approach to the world, others and knowledge production, which was empathetically embodied and material.

Magic, materials and meaning[3]

Carrington's challenge to the separation of material and meaning discussed above and the negation of the complete transmutation

3 Part of this research was presented at the annual conference of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism in 2021.

of the material into "pure" form and image is well exemplified by her work *XVIIII (The Sun)* from 1962. It forms part of a loosely related body of work, which appears in relation to her tarot, but exists independently of her Major Arcana created in the late 1950s (see Aberth and Arcq 2020, 2022). Susan Aberth and Tere Arcq in their pivotal work on Carrington's tarot pointed out that this particular work constitutes "an odd card" with "many strange new elements" (2022, 67). They hypothesised that with its exact date and signature with her full name (Mary Leonora Carrington), "this card was meant as a record of a particular meditation exercise" (ibid.). I suggest that by taking into account its materiality, we can begin to tackle its "oddness" and approach its place within the artist's esoteric and magical practice.

Gloria Feman Orenstein as early as the 1970s proposed that "Carrington's creative work both as a painter and as a writer is an outstanding example of magical art, of art that falls within the great esoteric and hermetic traditions both in its iconography and in its theoretical premises" (1977, 216). To this we must add her works' materiality. Scholars have primarily foregrounded Carrington's use of inscriptions, glyphs, magic circles and diagrams in some of her artworks, suggesting that she turned them into talismanic and magical devices (see Feman Orenstein 1977, 217; Aberth 2014, 89–90; Warlick 2017, 57). Aberth and Arcq have further proposed that Carrington and her friend and partner in esoteric investigations, the artist Remedios Varo (1908–63), "engaged in magical manipulation [of their works' materiality], exposing their canvases to crystals and adding particular substances to their paint"—the latter, however, remain to be identified (2019, 76). Here, I direct attention to the magical potential of Carrington's mineral pigments, by first considering the work's iconography and visual source material and then integrating a consideration of the materials into this wider meaning.

XVIIII (*The Sun)*[4] far surpasses the artist's Major Arcana cards in iconographic and material complexity. It shows a golden sun in its upper third, composed of three rings (flames, blue and golden droplets) and hovering over a horizon line in front of a bright red background. Two lines protrude from its centre, forming a large triangle with a golden square at its base; within the square we see a green circle containing a fountain with three taps and crowned by a purple sphere. Only on close inspection does another geometrical construction of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines forming a pattern of triangles within the golden square become visible; it was etched into the prepared base but then covered with gold and green paint. Around the fountain, two humanoid animals are positioned: a white stag with hands for forelegs and the symbol of mercury on its forehead, holding a black feathered serpent with breasts and the face of a black sun, its tail wrapped around the fountain in the form of a spiral. At the bottom edge of the card, we see seven flowers with an increasing number of leaves, containing the symbols of the planets Venus, Moon, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune (the latter is depicted in the inverted white on black).

4 The Leonora Carrington Estate has forbidden any reproduction of Carrington's tarot works. In place of an illustration, I have attempted to provide a more detailed description of the work.

Carrington signed the card "M. L. C.", numbered it and dated it 24 September 1962.

First focusing on the work's traditional iconography, Carrington combined canonical tarot symbolism from the Wirth and Waite-Smith decks with occult visual sources reproduced in contemporary histories of magic and alchemy, circulated amongst the Surrealists. The card follows the Wirth deck in terms of numbering and its representation of a male and female figure in a green circle. From the Rider-Waite deck, on the other hand, Carrington took the sunflowers. While it thus was undoubtedly inspired by the tarot, its iconography is more complex. The artist also appears to have borrowed from alchemical illustrations published in Carl G. Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944) and Kurt Seligmann's *The Mirror of Magic* (1948): the illustration from the alchemical *Rosarium philosophorum* (1550), reproduced in Jung's text (1980, fig. 25), probably inspired the fountain of youth imagery (fig. 1). The work's overall composition and use of geometric shapes on the other hand closely resembles the "Hermetic Scheme of the Universe" in Seligmann's text (fig. 2); it too shows a circle up top with a triangle ending in a square (Seligmann 2018, fig. 57). The symbols of the planets positioned in the sunflowers are in the same spirit as two alchemical illustrations (figs. 3 and 4); depicting the seven planets within a tree or stars, especially the one where the rightmost—in the traditional world view, Saturn, in Carrington's case, Neptune—is depicted on a black background (Seligmann 2018, fig. 43 and 56).

Having identified the source materials, in line with these alchemical source illustrations for the work, the geometric shapes can be read as referencing the alchemical numbers: the green circle and sun stand for One and the unity that is the goal of the alchemical process. The golden square references Four, the number of the elements, while the triangles and number of taps refer to the three ingredients of the alchemical process, Sulphur, Mercury and Salt, or the Spirit, Soul and Body. The sun being One, the leaves of the flowers in turn count up from Two to Eight. The green circle moreover evokes the *Prima Materia*, starting substance of the process, and, its shape symbolising unity and perfection, the result of the alchemical process, the Philosopher's Stone. The spiral of the serpent's tail in turn recalls the *ouroborus* as symbol of the eternal process repeated. The stag and snake, through their conscious gendering, stand in for the masculine and feminine principles of the substances. However, the stag has the sign for Mercury on its forehead, thus reversing the traditional gender signification of the alchemical system, where Mercury is identified with the female element.[5]

With its dense layers of hermetic references adopted from both the tarot and alchemy, the work illustrates and

5 A similar reversal of traditional alchemical genders in Carrington's novel *The Stone Door* has been noted. Szulakowska suggested that she is so subverting the "passive character of the *femme enfant*" (Szulakowska 2011, 99). Anna Watz, taking a post-structuralist feminist stance, argued that the artist employed gendered alchemical imagery to express "a feminine and a masculine element that can be seen to make up a single individual subject" (Watz 2017, 94). An iconographical study tracking Carrington's representation of gender in alchemical imagery across her visual and literary œuvre would be fruitful.

Figure 1. Konrad von Waldkirch, *Theosophische Darstellung zur Alchemie*, 1610. Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek—Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (SLUB), Signatur/Inventar-Nr.: Chem.1235-2. Abbildung S. 137. Image: Deutsche Fotothek, license CC0.


AZOTH,
OV LE MOYEN DE FAIRE
l'Or caché des Philosophes.
De Frere Basile Valentin.
Reueu, corrigé& augmenté par Mr. L'agneau Medecin.
Senior
Adolphus
A PARIS.
Chez PIERRE MOET, Libraire Iuré, proche le Pont S. Michel à l'Image S. Alexis.
M. DC. LIX.

Figure 3. Basil Valentine, Cover of the book "Azoth", 1659. National Library Madrid. Image: Wikimedia Commons, license CC0.

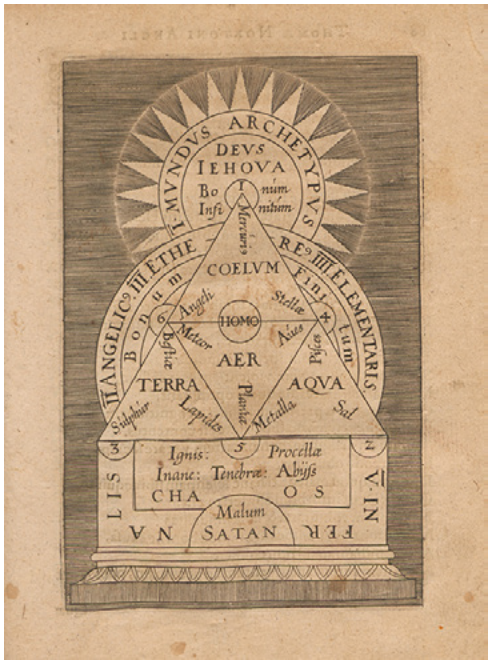

Figure 2. Tripus aureus, hoc est, tres tractatus chymici selectissimi ... : ; I. Basilii Valentini ... Practica una cum 12 clavibus & appendice, ex Germanico. Francofurti : ex chalcographia Pauli Iacobi, impensis Lugae Iennis, MDCXVIII [1618]. Image: ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, license CC0.

Figure 4. Johann Bringer, *Theosophische Darstellung zur Alchemie*, 1613. Dresden, Sächsische Lan-desbibliothek—Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Dresden (SLUB), Signatur/Inventar-Nr.: Anat.A.196.hd,misc.5. Abbildung S. 59. Image: Deutsche Fotothek, license CC0.

contemplates the hermetic worldview and cosmological determination of the alchemical process, characterised, befitting its title, as "the operation of the Sun" by the early alchemist Hermes Trismegistus (Klossowski de Rola 1973, 15). Its source materials, specifically the "Hermetic Conversation" by Basil Valentine (fig. 3) and the "Hermetic Scheme of the Universe" (fig. 2) illustrate the idea of "As Above, So Below" where the natural world is interpreted, in the words of Carrington's friend Seligmann, "not as an earthly replica independent of heavenly things but as a reflection" (2018, 153). Seligmann wrote on this principle of correspondences as the basis of a magical worldview in the Surrealist magazine *View* (1942, 3; 1946). Within this worldview and system of correspondences the work illustrates, the materials it was made from had magical properties. Seligmann in *The Mirror of Magic* elaborated how:

> Paracelsus explained that in this physical world all things were related, that the sign of a specific planet engraved upon a talisman was endowed with astral forces; that such ore used for the magic medal was related to that same planet, enforcing thus the power of the talisman; that these signs were the marks imprinted by the stars like signatures upon earthly bodies. (2018, 321)

Carrington had a good knowledge of the chemical compositions of her materials; she recalled how studying at the Ozenfant academy in London, "you had to know the chemistry of everything you used, including the pencil and the paper" (De Angelis 1991, 34). That she was also aware of this relationship between the planets and metal ores found in stones—and her ground mineral pigments—is demonstrated by a passage from her 1940s hermetic novella *The Stone Door*, where she wrote: "the stones that built your house contained old mineral knowledge from the nine planets" (1978, 100).

The card's high vertical format (18 x 10 cm)—notably different from her squarer set of Major Arcana cards—is in line with this idea of a vertically organised cosmos and ascending–descending correspondences. It is elaborately gilded, gold being the metal of the sun. In the traditional world and esoteric tradition, the "heavens were reflected on earth" (Bucklow 2009, 38) and the sun is here reflected in the gold leaf chosen by the artist, with which she could imbue the work with the sun's power. Her use of a red pigment in the upper third of the card is equally significant. All red pigments participate in the meaning of vermillion. In *The Alchemy of Paint: Art, Science and Secrets from the Middle Ages* (2009), Spike Bucklow explained its special significance for medieval artists and artisans and how "its ingredients are related to form and matter, the hylomorphic principles of all creation. Sulphur and mercury symbolise yang and yin, heaven and earth, the ingredients of the entire cosmos" (87). As a mercury sulphide, vermillion relates to the philosophical "ingredients" of the alchemical process, which make the Philosopher's Stone—one of which, mercury, is represented with its symbol on the card. The other dominating colour, green, is associated with copper pigments and so with the metal of the planet Venus and the goddess figure. Carrington also used a blue pigment, not only in the sun's droplets, but seemingly also below the final composition; it evokes the presence of the sun's and fire's

opposite. Blue participates in the meaning of ultramarine and is linked to elemental water (see Bucklow 2014, 132).

By considering the work's iconography together with its materiality, then, we might reach the conclusion that it does not constitute a tarot card in the narrower sense at all: Carrington's integration of the iconography and form of the tarot together with alchemy and materials offering sympathetic magic resulted in an occult tool for self-empowerment capable of appropriating the cosmic powers of the planets and the sun, which are not only depicted but materially integrated. Through this relationship between the cosmic bodies represented by the symbols on the card and the earthly minerals contained in her artist pigments, Carrington and the artwork could effect change in the world, using magic based on cosmic correspondences. Cosmological determination so is not only the subject of the work on an image level, but is also the basis of its magical mechanism. Only by challenging the disciplinary idea of the primacy of imagery and the material as transcended and fully sublimated and by considering the materiality of Carrington's work can we understand this meaning and function. The example of *XVIIII* (*The Sun)* so shows how the artist's esoteric practice was decisively material and integrated with her art-making. Her materials were not merely convenient stuff for visualising her subject matters but meaningful in their own right, possessing a degree of magical efficacy and ability to effect change in the world.

Carrington's process as epistemology

As introduced at the start of this article, Carrington not only understood her materials but also her body as a thinking materiality and as part of the earth. At the same time, as she explained in an interview with Marie-Pierre Colle, in her view, "everything is cosmic [...] You are cosmic, this table, my hand, the door", adding how she could not comprehend how "people think that the earth is not a celestial world" (1994, 87, 89). She explored this belief regarding the materiality of the body in two of her short stories from the 1950s, "My Flannel Knickers" and "My Mother is a Cow", where she suggests that bodies are woven or knitted from a cosmic material (Carrington 2017, 157–62, 179–86). This idea is illustrated in two contemporary paintings by Remedios Varo: In *La tejedora roja* (1956, fig. 5) and *La tejedora de Verona* (1956), a figure is knitting a body, which is about to flee through the window.[6] Bodies in their related works are not made from flesh and bones, organically growing, changing cell by cell, ageing, but are instead knitted, woven and crafted by an individual from a mythical cosmic wool. That the material they are made from is cosmic seems crucial and relates back to the worldview illustrated in *XVIIII (The Sun)*. It recalls the observation of Kurt Seligmann, writing on "Magic and the Arts" in the American Surrealist publication *View* that "what is above, is also below", and that humanity "and the stars are made of the same dust, as Paracelsus recalls to us; all things are interrelated" (1946, 16).

6 The Spanish noun *tejedora* can describe both a knitter and a weaver and points to the close relationship between the two craft techniques, used also interchangeably by Carrington in her stories.

Figure 5. Remedios Varo, *La tejedora roja*, 1956. Oil on paper mounted on panel, 44,5 x 29,2 cm. Private Collection. Image: © 2019 Christie's Images Limited, all rights reserved.

Carrington studied the writings of Paracelsus through sources such as the writings of Seligmann (1946; 2018). I here want to propose that with regard to her painting process, she was drawn to his concept of the "astral body"; it would have chimed with her preoccupations regarding the thinking materiality of the body. Szulakowska explained how "Paracelsus had taught that the human-being, as a mirror of the universal cosmic order, had two bodies, one of which was physical and the other an invisible astral one" (2011, 11). Carrington seems to have rendered these two bodies in her painted homage titled *The Garden of Paracelsus* (1957, fig. 6) where two pairs of figures consist each of one solid, black—terrestrial—body, and a second one rendered in transparent white, covered in bright stars—the astral body. The central pair moreover carries a white egg, identified by Juncal Caballero Guiral as "the alchemical egg that contains matter and thought" (2018, 148). It indicates that the two figures or bodies must be understood as one.

Paracelsus's astral body was in essence an epistemological tool: "Through the astral body it was possible for humans to comprehend all phenomena, both natural and supernatural" (Szulakowska 2011, 11). Not only was Carrington preoccupied with Paracelsus's concept of the two bodies, but she also seems to have been familiar with and implementing his notion of "overhearing" matter. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke summarised how "Paracelsus expressed a deep distrust of logical and rational thought as a scientific tool" and instead advocated a "union with the object" as "the principal means of acquiring intimate and total knowledge" (2008, 78). This union with the object was anchored in the belief in the microcosmic–macrocosmic relationship between man and the universe, or earth and the heavens—a guiding principle shared by Carrington, as explored at the example of *XVIIII (The Sun)*. Goodrick-Clarke

Figure 6. Leonora Carrington, *The Garden of Paracelsus*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 85,1 x 120 cm. Private Collection. Image: © 2025 Sotheby's, all rights reserved.

summarised this notion and how it relates to that of the astral body:

> Man, the microcosm, [...] possesses a carnal elemental body and an astral body (*corpus sidereum*) which "teaches man" and is able to communicate with the astral part of the macrocosm [...] The researcher should try to *"overhear" the knowledge of the star, herb, or stone* with respect to its virtue, activity, or function and so discover the astral sympathy between himself and the object. This identification with an object penetrates more deeply into the essence of the object than mere sensory perception can accomplish. (Ibid.; emphasis added)

Returning to the documentary footage of Carrington preparing her egg tempera, what stands out as particularly significant is a step in which she shakes the egg-water mixture inside a jar, rhythmically right next to her head, eyes closed, as if intently listening. As part of my research into the artist's tempera practice, I recreated her actions observed from the documentary footage and this experience of embodying the actions rather than just observing them was central to my understanding of their significance. When preparing her egg tempera, Carrington first established connection with it via the sense of touch, holding the fresh yolk in the palm of her bare hand; she then listened to it while rhythmically shaking it next to her head, to overhear its knowledge and learn about its

life. Recreating her actions patiently, one connects to the mixture aurally through intently listening to it, or more precisely the noise it makes when rhythmically hitting the lid, the bottom of the jar, the lid and the bottom of the jar. Through the sound and the act of listening, one's own movement shaking the jar and the egg-binder's movement inside connect and become one, moving in unison back and forth. With this process, Carrington established a relationship with her paint before putting it to use.

For the artist, no matter was without thought or spirit and there was life inside even the most inanimate-appearing things. In *The Stone Door*, the figure of the artist-artisan (perhaps a self-portrait?) states: "even the life beating inside a stone is audible to me and that is a gift" (1978, 39–40). I want to propose that Carrington listened to and could hear the life of matter and that of her materials. Attuning to life and thought of matter shaped how her artistic practice unfolded in her studio and how she engaged in particular with her tempera paint. As Pamela H. Smith outlined for the bodies of medieval and early modern artisans who inspired Carrington's practice, "matter was not dead but alive, and it behaved in idiosyncratic ways, which artisans had to come to know [...] through experience" (2004, 144). Thinking paint could not be approached as dead, passive and willingly shapable substance; it had to be communicated with in the process of painting instead.

Writing on the Surrealist marvellous in the *Mirror of the Marvelous* (1940), a collection of myths and stories from around the world, the occultist Pierre Mabille wrote:

> [Humankind's] most vital problem is communicating with other beings. Contact is established directly by a physical mechanism that calls the elements and cosmic energies into play. Erotic desire, fear, calm, anguish pass from one skin to another as heat or electricity. I am convinced that all thought can be transmitted in this way, without words or gestures. (2018, 31)

Mabille conceived of the experience of the marvellous as an embodied undertaking, advising, "Far from abandoning the body and condemning it as so much annoying weight, we will demand true testimony from our heightened senses" (ibid., 2). In Carrington's case, the marvellous union with non-human matter and its life took shape as her tempera practice, in union with her materials. Matter's mystery and relationship to consciousness drove her inquiry and understanding "written in living, primary matter" (2017, 186).

Carrington's belief, explicitly stated, in the life and consciousness of all matter—including that of our bodies and her artistic materials—is significant when it comes to understanding her embodied artistic practice. Her painting was not only about the finished paintings as images or objects, but a way of knowledge through the union with the non-human living and thinking world. Her embodied and material processes of making were knowledge-producing and at the same time formed an investigation into ways of knowing, such as the astral body that can "overhear" the materials. In opposition to a view of inquiry as an exterior subject studying an object—from a scientific, God-like perspective—Carrington suggests a relational knowing through a

marvellous union and reciprocal relationship with the world rooted in her embodied (tempera) painting practice. Her approach aligns with eco-feminism, which "dismisses the dislocated and disembodied vision of the thinker as the knower-as-spectator" (Braidotti 2022, 79) and consitutes a form of material complicity defined as "acknowledg[ing] the non-human" (Lange-Berndt 2015, 17). At the same time, as demonstrated across the case studies, it was clearly inspired by the "artisanal epistemology" of the early alchemists and artisans, such as Paracelsus, whose "act of manually engaging with matter to produce a realistic image, whether artisanal or magical, could lead to both spiritual and natural knowledge and, importantly, to works of art that were themselves efficacious, that is, could produce effects" (Smith 2004, 11).

Concluding thoughts

With these two brief examples zooming in on material and process-based aspects of Carrington's art and esotericism, I have shown how only by considering the materiality of her works and the processes of making that lead to their creation can we fully appreciate the entanglement of her art and engagement with magic, alchemy and the occult. Carrington's understanding informed by her materially engaged practice poses a challenge to our methods and approaches and at the same time lights the path towards feminist perspectives on materials and making in the interdisciplinary field of art and esotericism. It suggests that we should consider the two-way relationship between our methods and our subjects of study: the people, objects, images, practices, networks that form our case studies. To put it in stronger terms, we cannot study what we study without simultaneously rethinking how we study it. Carrington's art and practice teach us not to consider body and mind (practice and theory) or matter and spirit (material and meaning) as separate. These essences of her work can only be approached through questioning disciplinary approaches and traditions predicated on exactly these separations and ensuing dualisms. ■

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