

**COURTAULD  
INSTITUTE**

**FREUD** MUSEUM  
LONDON

# **Leonora Carrington: Navigating a world Down Below**

**28–29 May 2026**



The Courtauld Institute MA Curating programme is delighted to stage this conference in partnership with the Freud Museum, exploring the life and work of Leonora Carrington. The conference begins with an introductory evening at the Freud Museum, including a welcome drink, presentations contextualising their current special exhibition, *Leonora Carrington: The Symptomatic Surreal*, and an opportunity to view the exhibition out of hours. The second day at the Courtauld Institute brings together an international panel of Carrington scholars to discuss her work from a number of different academic perspectives.

This conference is organised in conjunction with the Freud Museum’s current exhibition, *The Symptomatic Surreal*, curated by Vanessa Boni. The exhibition is the first dedicated to drawings from Carrington’s Santander sketchbooks, offering a unique vantage point from which to reconsider the artist’s wartime output. In these works, Carrington gives form to her psychological crisis through alchemical symbolism, human–animal hybrids, and depictions of the underworld. At the centre of the exhibition stands *Down Below* (1940), painted during her hospitalisation and serving as a key anchor for the exhibition.

*Leonora Carrington: Navigating a World Below* is organised by Cecilia Brandon-Cross, Ana Karime Sierra, Han Lu Tao and Sarah Vidalin as part of the Courtauld’s MA Curating programme in collaboration with the Freud Museum.

# Programme

## Day One Thursday 28 May, Freud Museum London

### 18.00–21.00 Welcome Drink

Introductions by Vanessa Boni (the Freud Museum) and Sofia Gotti (the Courtauld Institute)

#### **Leonora Carrington: The Symptomatic Surreal**

Vanessa Boni (Exhibition Curator, the Freud Museum)

#### **Freud, Carrington and the Language of Symptoms**

Tom DeRose (Research Manager, the Freud Museum)

## Day Two Friday 29 May, Courtauld Institute

### 10.00–10.30 Registration opens

Courtauld Institute, Vernon Square Campus

### 10.30 Opening remarks

Sofia Gotti and MA Curating team

#### **Introduction to the conference**

Dawn Ades, Emeritus Professor, University of Essex

#### **Keynote**

Alyce Mahon, Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, University of Cambridge

**Professor Alyce Mahon in conversation with Professor Dawn Ades followed by Q&A**

### 12.30–13.45 Lunch Break

*Refreshments provided for speakers and organisers only*

### 13.45–15.15 **Session I** Chaired by *Dr Julia Skelly, Assistant Professor in Histories of Photography & Art History, Concordia University*

#### **Dr Victoria Ferentinou** [Pre-recorded]

Assistant Professor in Theory of Art, University of Ioannina

#### **Dr Helen Bremm**

Curatorial Assistant, Fondation Beyeler

#### **Dr Felicity Gee**

Associate Professor of Modern Literatures and Avant-Garde Studies, University of Exeter

#### **Sarah Wilson**

Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, Courtauld Institute

- 15.15–16.00 **Refreshment break**
- 16.00–17.00 **Panel discussion and Q&A**  
With Dr Helen Bremm, Dr Felicity Gee, and Professor Sarah Wilson
- 17.00–17.30 **Refreshment break**
- 17.30 **Plenary with a contribution from artist Rose English**  
Closing remarks: MA Curating team
- 18.00 **Drinks reception**

# Abstracts & Biographies

## ***The Symptomatic Surreal: Leonora Carrington's 'down below' at the Freud Museum*** Vanessa Boni, Freud Museum London

In metaphor, 'down' is associated with sadness, sickness, unconsciousness, and death – an orientation that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson describe as 'rooted in physical and cultural experience'. Leonora Carrington's memoir *Down Below* (1944) and related visual works frame her psychological crisis as a descent that is both deathly and transformative. Extending the metaphors of 'down', this paper reads Carrington's 'Down Below' works through Sigmund Freud's theory of the symptom, understood here as a symbolic expression of what lies beneath. The central proposition of this paper is that her 'Down Below' imagery can be understood as symptomatic formations: not straightforward representations of breakdown, but encrypted expressions through which the inarticulable becomes visible. Grounded in my research for the exhibition *Leonora Carrington: The Symptomatic Surreal* at the Freud Museum, the paper argues that descent becomes a form of revelation, in which the unconscious and mythic underworld operate as sites through which psychic and historical trauma are transformed into knowledge.

**Vanessa Boni** is Curator of Special Projects at the Freud Museum London and a CHASE/AHRC-funded doctoral candidate at the University of Essex. Her PhD research revisits Leonora Carrington's paintings, drawings and writings produced during and about her hospitalisation at Sanatorium Morales Santander in 1940 through her Santander sketchbooks (1940–41). In connection with this research, she has curated the major exhibition *Leonora Carrington: The Symptomatic Surreal* on view at the Freud Museum London until 9 August 2026. As Curator of the Freud Museum, she has also curated several exhibitions with contemporary artists, critically reinterpreting Sigmund Freud's collection through site-responsive interventions.

## ***Falling into Meaning: Freud, Carrington and the Language of Symptoms*** Tom Derose, Freud Museum London

This paper analyses the reading effect of *Et in bellicus medicalis lunarum*, a short story written by Leonora Carrington and published in English in 1988. Like much of her prose, the story has a uniquely anarchic tone which produces a reaction of hilarity in the reader, but what is this singular quality that infuses Carrington's written work and makes it unmistakably 'Carrington'?

Through the method of free association, this paper looks to (re)construct the aetiology of a readerly 'guffaw' in reaction to Carrington's story, tracing a pathway through Freud's self-revelations in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, to Lacan's analysis of James Joyce's 'sinthome' in *Finnegans Wake*. Carrington's prose then is seen as encounter with an enjoyment that exists, perhaps, beyond the boundary of interpretation.

**Tom DeRose** is Research Manager at the Freud Museum London. His research focusses on the cultural and philosophical aspects of Freudian theory. He has published articles and chapters on psychoanalysis and music, and his latest publication is 'Freud's Changing Views on Sodomasochism', in, ed. Akhtar and Crilley, *The Joy of Torment* (Karnac, 2024). He has forthcoming chapters on Freud's theory of Anxiety and Psychoanalysis and the Detective Novel and is currently working on a chapter on Freud and Africa.

## ***Leonora Carrington's Surrealist Ecopoetics*** Professor Alyce Mahon, University of Cambridge

In 1961 Leonora Carrington drafted her own manifesto in which she warned, 'Tomorrow the Sun might not rise on this planet, nature in all her marvellous aspects will have gone, creation ceased from a wanton and senseless destruction.' Born out of escalating Cold War tensions, between the Berlin Crisis

and the Cuban Missile Crisis, her words complement her stance against the repression of women whose rights, as she later proclaimed, had to be 'Taken Back Again, including the mysteries which were ours and which were violated, stolen or destroyed', and her experience as a mother who believed in the need to keep the imagination and enchantment alive, as the 'milk of dreams'. This lecture considers Leonora Carrington's ecopoetics as revealed across these different concerns and life roles – activist, artist, mother, and in their manifestations in text and image. I argue that Carrington immerses the viewer into a radically surreal oikos in which ecofeminism and Surrealism join forces.

**Alyce Mahon** is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History and a Fellow of Trinity College at the University of Cambridge. She is the author of *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938-1968* (2005), *Eroticism & Art* (2005), *The Marquis de Sade and the Avant-Garde* (2020), and *Dorothea Tanning: A Surrealist World* (2026), as well as essays on avant-garde, feminist, and contemporary art. As exhibition curator and advisor, her recent museum projects include *Leonor Fini: Theatre of Desire* [MoSex, New York, 2018-19] *Dorothea Tanning* [Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid and Tate Modern, London, 2018-2019], *SADE: Freedom or Evil* [CCCB, Barcelona, 2023], *Ithell Colquhoun: A World Apart* [Tate St Ives, Cornwall and Tate Britain, London, 2025], and *Leonor Fini* [Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 2026 & MAM, Paris, 2027].

***Through the mirror of alchemy: the transcorporeal ontologies of Leonora Carrington***  
**Victoria Ferentinou, University of Ioannina**

Leonora Carrington's account of her 1940 psychological breakdown and subsequent incarceration into a Spanish mental institution in *Down Below* (1944) is a groundbreaking work in many respects. Documenting her experience of mental health crisis, it interweaves several epistemological strands, from esotericism and alternative religiosity to psychoanalysis and analytical psychology. In particular, alchemy constitutes a central strategy of her contemporary textual and visual narratives in which transgression, liminality and fluidity are explored. It also informs her imagery of hybrid, inter-species bodies that populate her oeuvre dislodging dualistic thinking about corporeality and selfhood, and embracing encounters with more-than-human species. This paper aims to address and contextualize Carrington's transgressive, non-dualist aesthetic practices of embodiment in her 1940s output in terms of relationality, affect and sensorial exchange between human and non-human beings. As will be argued, in her refigurations Carrington negotiates her psychological crisis and sense of exile by resorting to alchemy as a visual and narratological trope of border-crossing, transmutation, and transcorporeality. Thus, her wartime work serves as a critical location for the formulation of alternative aesthetic knowledge that is premised on both microscopic and macroscopic vision; it further embraces the entanglement of ontologies, genders, species and ecosystems thereby laying the groundwork for her postwar surrealist ecofeminism.

**Victoria Ferentinou** is Assistant Professor at the University of Ioannina where she teaches art theory and history of art. She was the recipient of a research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain and a CHS-CCS research fellowship from the University of Harvard. Ferentinou is co-editor of the books *Surrealism, Occultism, and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (Routledge, 2017) and *The Dance of Moon and Sun: Ithell Colquhoun, British Women and Surrealism* (Fulgur Press, 2023), and editor of *Visual Ecotopias: History, Theory, Criticism* (University of Ioannina Press, 2023). She is an author of numerous academic essays (Brill, Routledge, Palgrave/Macmillan, DeGruyter, Bloomsbury, Vernon Press, Manchester University Press, Cambridge University Press) on Surrealism and the history and theories of the avant-garde, feminist art and theory, the intersections between esoteric epistemologies and modern art, and ecoaesthetics and the visual arts. She is currently working on a book on women artists, Surrealism and the feminist marvellous.

***Writing and Embodying Transformation: Leonora Carrington Journeying Down Below and High Above***  
**Helen Bremm Fondation Beyeler**

"Armed with madness for a long voyage" - so did the catalogue of her first solo exhibition summarise and introduce the artist Leonora Carrington. Departing from this aphorism and her wartime text

*Down Below* and navigating to the hermetic “maps” she created in the early 1960s, this paper traces how Carrington used art making to chart and guide changes in the self in times of war and social and political unrest. It shows how through writing, painting, and crafting, she pursued a transformation of both the mind and the body as a unity, referring to her “Body-Psyche” as the Athanor, the vessel of the alchemical process. It so argues that with her literary, embodied, and material approach to alchemy and magic, she could activate their emancipatory powers, plunging into psychological and spiritual depths while utilising the cosmic influence of the planets above to understand and change the world around her.

**Helen Bremm** works as a curatorial assistant at the Fondation Beyeler in Switzerland. She holds a PhD in History of Art from the University of Cambridge, for which she investigated “Living Paint” and the surrealist tempera paintings of Leonora Carrington, Sylvia Fein, and Gerrie Gutmann. Her research interests include Surrealism in the Americas, epistemologies of making, and feminist philosophies of materiality and embodiment. As a visiting researcher at the LANCIC-Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (2023), Helen co-organised the first technical study of a work by Leonora Carrington. She was also the co-lead of the Paul Mellon Centre-funded project “Leonora Carrington’s Tempera Paintings, c.1945-47,” a collaborative project at the University of Cambridge Museums with West Dean College of Arts and Conservation and the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts.

***Jammed/Running: Entrapment and Speaking in Leonora Carrington’s Down Below [En bas]***  
**Felicity Gee, University of Exeter**

This paper considers the psychological trauma that arises from violence enacted on the speaker – Leonora Carrington – in the valuable testimony of *Down Below*. Remembering André Breton’s fetishisation of the female hysteric, a lucid madness much coveted for its direct access to the surrealist marvellous and black humour, I resist dwelling in the realm of the marvellous. Instead, I propose that the energy that arises from the textual document of *Down Below*, can be read in terms of a feminist joy, an exuberance of language or as Hélène Cixous put it: ‘singing the abyss’. The abyss of a sanatorium, or a hotel bed; the sickness from repeated patriarchal attempts to confine and control, AND YET liberation is possible. Carrington’s voice navigates the line between life and death, without a shred of shame, refusing to be diminished. There is much to learn from Carrington, and from Cixous, on the act of speaking, and of making one’s own language, and this paper will put their texts on the limits of ‘madness’ and anguish into dialogue.

**Felicity Gee** is Associate Professor of Modernist Literatures and Avant-Garde Studies at the University of Exeter. Her first monograph *Magic Realism, World Cinema, and the Avant-Garde* was published by Routledge (2021), and she has published extensively on surrealism, women artists, film and affect theory, including essays on Raúl Ruiz, Leonora Carrington, Claude Cahun, Jean Cocteau, Kōbō Abe, Angela Carter, and Fredric Jameson. She is editor of the first English-language collected volume on French surrealist poet Valentine Penrose (*Valentine Penrose: Surrealist, Poet, Artist, Voyager*, forthcoming with Bloomsbury, 2026). Felicity was elected President of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism (2023-2025), and serves on the editorial board of the *International Journal of Surrealism* (Minnesota Press). Her current project is a comparative study of women artists and writers of the modernist period and the architectural body.

***Albion and Alice: Leonora Carrington and a tale of love.***  
**Sarah Wilson, The Courtauld Institute of Art**

The Surrealist movement was based in part upon the exaltation of love. Yet since Whitney Chadwick’s *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, 1985, it has become fashionable to write out the men in Surrealist women’s lives: — Kay Sage without Yves Tanguy, for example, or the eradication of Max Ernst’s presence in the Dorothea Tanning exhibition at Tate Modern in 2019. Leonora Carrington mania has almost completely expunged Max Ernst: yet their love story had a huge impact on both artists’ lives, thought and works. Early in his career Max Ernst was inspired by Lewis Carroll. While Tenniel’s

engravings influenced his early collages, Leonora then became his Alice, a figure of mystery and ultimately loss in many paintings. To retrace their relationship (based on my Tate and Pompidou Centre retrospective essays of 1991, I restore this narrative; my feminist politics does not exclude men.

**Sarah Wilson** has published extensively on Surrealism and launched her Courtauld career with a Surrealist buffet in the Courtauld at Portman Square, with Eileen Agar, Conroy Maddox and the poet Stephen Spender among others. She was a friend of David Gascoyne (*A Short Survey of Surrealism*, 1935), and curated the English surrealist section of *La Planète Affolée, Surréalisme, Dispersion et Influences* (Marseille, 1986), with an essay informed by Michel Rémy's pioneering work on the group. She was the first to write on late Picabia and on the surrealist phase of English artist Paule Vézelay's painting at the moment of her liaison with André Masson. Wilson engaged with post-1945 surrealism and *surréalisme révolutionnaire* in her own PhD — long before supervising Alyce Mahon's work and introducing her to the post-surrealist artist Jean-Jacques Lebel.

### **Dawn Ades, University of Essex**

**Dawn Ades** is Professor Emerita of the History and Theory of Art at the University of Essex, Fellow of the British Academy, former trustee of Tate and of the National Gallery, Professor of the History of Art at the Royal Academy and was appointed CBE in 2013 for her services to higher education. She has curated or co-curated many exhibitions in the UK and internationally over the past forty years, including *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (1978); *Art in Latin America* (1989); the Salvador Dalí centenary at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2004); *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, (with Simon Baker) Hayward Gallery (2006); *The Colour of my Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art*, at the Vancouver Art Gallery (2011), and *Dalí/Duchamp* (with William Jeffett) at the Royal Academy (2017). She was Associate Curator for *Manifesta 9* (2012). Apart from the catalogues of these and other exhibitions, publications include *Photomontage* (1976, revised 1986 and 2022), *Dalí* (1982, revised 1995 and 2022), *Marcel Duchamp* (with Cox & Hopkins, 1999 and 2022) and *Selected Writings on Art and Anti-Art* (2015). Research and writing on Dada and Surrealism has focused increasingly on the women artists and poets associated with these movements, with publications on Hannah Höch, Mina Loy, Maria Izquierdo, Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington and Claude Cahun.

### **Julia Skelly, Concordia University**

**Dr. Julia Skelly** is Assistant Professor (Histories of Photography) in the Department of Art History at Concordia University, Montreal. Her publications include *Wasted Looks: Addiction and British Visual Culture, 1751-1919* (Ashgate, 2014), *Radical Decadence: Excess in Contemporary Feminist Textiles and Craft* (Bloomsbury, 2017), and *Skin Crafts: Affect, Violence and Materiality in Global Contemporary Art* (Bloomsbury, 2022). Julia's most recent book, *Intersecting Threads: Art, Cloth and Intersectional Feminism*, was published by Bloomsbury in March 2026. Her article "Dolls, Masks and Witches: Kati Horna's Alchemical Photography," which discusses Horna's friendship with Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo in Mexico, was published in *Woman's Art Journal* in 2024, and her monograph on Horna will be out in 2027.

# Notes