



The Poms of the Subsoil

Leonora Carrington

Not on display

Title/Description: The Poms of the Subsoil

Artist/Maker: Leonora Carrington

Born: 1947

Object Type: Painting

Materials: Canvas, Tempera (?)

Measurements: Unframed: (h. 585 x w. 930 x d. 2 mm) Framed: (h. 656 x w. 1006 x d. 51 mm)

Accession Number: 28

Historic Period: 20th century

Production Place: Mexico, The Americas

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Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Birds and mysterious creatures from the underworld assemble for a ceremony in the nocturnal landscape of Leonora Carrington's *The Pimps of the Subsoil*. The pimps of the title describe the feast occasion or, as Whitney Chadwick suggested, identify the human-like figures as psychopimps, spirits accompanying souls to the underworld. [1] Rather than death, life and fertility dominate the work and the guests to the magical picnic are attending the sprouting of a new tree at the centre of the composition.

The many different birds present commune with one another and also the human-hybrid figures. A bird of prey is standing guard in the foreground, watching over the scene, while the green parrot above stares knowingly back at the viewer. While the animals are initiated into the secretive proceedings, we as viewer are on the outside. The human-like figures are slowly merging with the natural and plant world. One is growing into a tree from its head, another has the barbels of a fish, a third developed what perhaps looks like wings. Like many of Carrington's literary and visual works, the painting foregrounds harmonious interspecies relationships and the mysterious regenerative power of nature and as such constitutes a questioning of human exceptionalism.

Colour plays an important role in the work, as demonstrated by the three figures being dressed in the primary colours blue, yellow, and red. In areas of the painting, Carrington scraped back the paint to reveal lighter paint layers below and the texture of the canvas support. Light reflects from the light paint ground and makes the colours appear especially vibrant. The scraping technique is particularly well visible in the red coat and lower right corner, where the birds are merging with the rocks they are sitting on. The artist made use of the texture of the canvas and the varying transparency and opacity of the paint to create a multi-layered landscape which appears alive and in transformation. In the iconography as well as through her specific painting technique, the human, animal, plant and mineral worlds become alive and begin to metamorphose and merge.

Helen Bremm, June 2022

[1] Whitney Chadwick, 'Pilgrimage to the Stars: Leonora Carrington and the Occult Tradition', in *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, drawings and sculptures 1940-1990*, ed. by Andrea Schliecker (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991), pp. 24-33 (p. 28).

Exhibitions

'Forbidden Territories: 100 Years of Surreal Landscapes', The Hepworth Wakefield, 23/11/2024 -

Further Reading

Arcq, Tere and Stefan van Raay, eds, *Leonora Carrington: Magical Tales* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes and Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, 2018)

Chadwick, Whitney, 'Pilgrimage to the Stars: Leonora Carrington and the Occult Tradition', in *Leonora Carrington: Paintings, drawings and sculptures 1940-1990*, ed. by Andrea Schliecker (London: Serpentine Gallery, 1991), pp. 24-33

Kissane, Seán, ed., *Leonora Carrington* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2013)

Noheden, Kristoffer, 'The Grail and the Bees: Leonora Carrington's Quest for Human-Animal Coexistence', in *Beyond Given Knowledge: Investigation, Quest and Exploration in Modernism and the Avant-Gardes*, ed. by Harri Veivo and others (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2018), pp. 239-252

Provenance

Acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Pierre Matisse Gallery in 1972.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
