

NOTES ON THE CULTURE

The Works of These Female Surrealists Resonate Now More Than Ever

A rare show of paintings by Maruja Mallo, a contemporary of Salvador Dalí, is part of a larger examination of a lesser known side of the movement.



Maruja Mallo's "El racimo de uvas" (1944). © The Estate of Maruja Mallo. Courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York



By **Thessaly La Force**

Aug. 8, 2018

When the Spanish artist Maruja Mallo moved to Madrid with her family at the age of 20, she enrolled with the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando, Spain's most prestigious art school. Talented and beautiful, she became friends with another promising young student, Salvador Dalí, and in the subsequent years their friendship propelled her into the world of the avant-garde. Madrid, still less cosmopolitan than Paris, had after World War I become an attractive destination for artists, poets and writers — though it was also a place where a woman walking unaccompanied through the city's streets could easily be mistaken for a prostitute.

Mallo was one of the leading contributors to the Spanish Surrealist movement, but her name is hardly as well known as her contemporaries' (Dalí, Luis Buñuel, Federico García Lorca). Which is why it is remarkable that 18 of her paintings will be on view in September at the TriBeCa gallery [Ortuzar Projects](#) in New York City. In “El racimo de uvas” (1944), a bunch of grapes hang sumptuously from a vine against a blue background, the image’s elegant symmetry suggesting the fecundity of the womb. In “Naturaleza viva” (1943), a lilac orchid floats above two seashells, their formation strange but soothing.



Mallo's "Naturaleza viva" (1943).
© The Estate of Maruja Mallo. Courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York

While Surrealism was an expression of how the unconscious could be channeled through art, of the difficult work of accepting the limitations of our reality, it's important to remember that it emerged at a time when Europe was experiencing terrible violence and great political upheaval. Solutions, in other words, were not to be found through law and order. Over time, the movement's edge softened, until it was reduced to a handful of visual clichés: melting clocks and faceless men in bowler hats. But perhaps now — as women's truths are being questioned and our reproductive rights threatened — true Surrealism, especially as interpreted by a woman artist, is worthy of a second look.

In addition to the Mallo exhibition, there is the first American museum survey of Argentine-born Surrealist artist Leonor Fini opening at the [Museum of Sex](#) next month; and last year the feminist press Dorothy published the [first complete collection](#) of the wildly fantastical short stories of the 20th-century English-born artist and writer Leonora Carrington, whose life inspired Heidi Sopinka's forthcoming debut novel, "[The Dictionary of Animal Languages](#)." Even within artistic circles, these women were often excluded or treated as muses to male creative genius (Dalí once described Mallo as "half angel, half shellfish"). Their work, however, insists on a different story. Mallo — who never married and who eventually stopped putting clearly identifiable men in her paintings — created a painted world that suggests a wonderfully aggressive mind in search of beauty, but unconcerned with looking pretty.