

Five on Five: Kate Beynon on Remedios Varo's *The Creation of the Birds*

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KATE BEYNON [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]

A feeling of sound, image, and light are combined in this work, which reminds me how much music inspires the creative process.

TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

For this series of Five on Five, we're asking five artists to talk about a painting that has influenced or inspired them. In this episode, hear Kate Beynon discuss 'The creation of the birds' painted by Spanish artist Remedios Varo.

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Hello, I'm Kate Beynon. I've been practicing for over two decades, and I work in a range of media, including painting, works on paper, textile-based installation, and animated video. I've also collaborated on ethical fashion projects with social initiatives, the social studio and the social outfit. My work is shaped by storytelling, interests in hybridity, feminist strategies, and mixed cultural identity informed by personal and family experience. In this Australian context, it's important to acknowledge and pay respect to all First Nations people, the original owners of the lands on which my family and I live, and where I create and work. The painting I've chosen is 'The creation of the Birds (Creación De Las Aves)' from 1958 by Remedios Varo y Uranga, usually known Remedios Varo. Varo's distinctive otherworldly style was influenced by her interests and studies in psychology, Asian and Islamic philosophies, hermetic science, mysticism, and alchemy. She was amongst a group of exiled European artists living in Mexico associated with surrealism, including friends Leonora Carrington and Katie Horner, and also knew Frida Kahlo. Born in 1908 in Northern Spain, Varo was influenced by her father's work as an engineer, often copying his technical drawings when she was young. Rebellious against a strict Catholic convent schooling, she challenged traditionally passive gender roles spurred on by pursuing her interests in arts and sciences.

Early on, she read Jules Verne, Alexander Dumas, and Edgar Allan Poe, and was inspired by paintings by Hieronymus Bosch and Francisco Goya. After graduating art school, Varo qualified as a drawing teacher and worked as an illustrator and other technical jobs over the years to support her art practice. She was exiled twice; first when living in 1930s Paris, due to the Spanish Civil War preventing return, and later after being imprisoned for a time due to the Nazi occupation, Varo fled to Mexico. Except for a year in Argentina, she was based in Mexico until her death by heart attack aged 55, at the height of her exhibiting career. I first encountered the painting as a black and white reproduction in one of my favorite books from art school days, 'Women artists, and the Surrealist Movement' by Whitney Chadwick. I've since seen the work in color reproductions and online, but I'm still hoping to see it one day in the flesh.

I was initially intrigued by the protagonist, a hybrid owl woman who through a mix of mystical and scientific means is creating birds. In a minimal yet creative space, a studio with a view out to night skies, the bird woman figure is seated at a drawing table. In her left hand, she holds a pyramid shaped magnifying glass, harnessing starlight or lunar energy beamed onto paper. In her other hand is a painting tool attached at one end to a string instrument-shaped pendant around her neck as she paints the details of the bird's tail feathers. The owl woman is accompanied by a robotic double egg-shaped multi-limbed assistant, who via elongated mechanical fingers, deposits paint in primary colours onto a pallet. Of the creations, one bird feeds on the floor while others fly, and one heads out the open window.

Varo was known for her attention to obsessively painting fine details using a tiny three head brush, which I can relate to in my work where I've sometimes obsessively worked on thousands of gold dragon scales or minuscule details for hours, despite hand cramps and eye strain. 'The Creation of the Birds' is thought to reveal Varo's interest in Sufi philosophy and its influence on Western knowledge, including medieval alchemy. A feeling of sound, image and light are combined in this work,

which reminds me how much music inspires the creative process. Although there's a sense of solitude, there's also a suggestion of symbiotic connection to nature and living with other species.

The friendship between Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington is meaningful to me. Together they created mystic brews, potions and art, and I appreciate how important such connections are for artistic and moral support. The Blue Shaman, a kind of guardian figure in my work, was inspired by Varos's bird woman, combined with stories of ancient Wu Chinese Shaman who through ritual dance and music was said to communicate with the spirit world. First appearing in the 'A Chinese Ghost Tale Series', and book with art and foundation, the Blue Shaman has also been a super spirit in the 'Friendly Beasts' interactive exhibition, held at the Children's Art Center at QAGOMA, and appears in my current anatomical botanical series on paper and wood.

The Blue Shaman has an owl shaped face, feathery beard and elaborate headdress inspired by Chinese folk ritual masks, adorned with organic forms and smiling skulls. Sprouting foliage, this aims to symbolize the cycle of life and death, while her third eye is for deeper consciousness and vision. I see Varos's owl woman from 'The Creation of the Birds' as a kind of protective guardian figure, reminding us to consider ancient knowledge, creative energy, connections between art and science, nature, and the spirits. In the face of today's precarious world, she has a strong affinity with my Blue Shaman guardian.