CHAPTER 5  ESOTERIC INTERESTS

The Galería de Arte Mexicano, the most important and influential venue for modern Mexican artists, run by Inés Amor, had become Carrington’s primary dealer around 1956; for just a little over a decade from her first arrival that was quite an accomplishment. Carrington experimented with a wide variety of media, even hand-sewing and embroidering dolls. She created large-scale polychrome wood sculptures, such as the arresting Cat Woman (1951) (Fig. 69), which stands tall at 203 cm, like an ancient Egyptian guardian figure, covered with small hieroglyphic-like painted figures. Inviting indigenous weavers into her home in 1953, she designed a set of wool tapestries covered with heraldic animals and plants (Fig. 72). Like many Mexican artists in the 1950s, she delved into stage design. However, because she had a history of writing theatrical pieces Carrington was able to create the costumes and settings for her own play, Pénélope, in 1957 (Fig. 74). A theatrical ambience enters into her painting at the time as well, for example her masterful Temple of the Word from 1954 (Fig. 71) evokes medieval pageantry while another work from the same year, Sacrament at Minas (Fig. 70), hints at sacerdotal mystery plays from the ancient Near East.

By the 1960s Carrington was fully versed in a number of esoteric traditions and her work fluidly employed a vast repertoire of subjects and symbols. The extent of her prodigious output was not only indicative of her creative powers but also of a commitment to her vision and a discipline in working methods: ‘The real work is done when you are alone in your studio and that’s it, it becomes a sense of something and then it becomes something you can see and then it becomes something you can do.’232 A retrospective exhibition of her work in 1960 at the Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno in Mexico City, Exposición Retrospectiva de Pinturas y Tapices de Leonora Carrington, was substantial, with 55 pieces. Then in 1961, for the first time, she was included as a Mexican artist in the exhibition El Retrato Mexicano Contemporáneo, sponsored by the Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno and the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes. Not only had Mexico become her home but, more importantly, Mexico from now on perceived her as one of its own.

Ignacio Bernal became the Director of the highly acclaimed new Museo Nacional de Antropología, located in Chapultepec Park in Mexico City, which opened in 1964. A long-time friend, admirer and collector of Carrington’s work, Bernal was instrumental in helping her to receive a prestigious governmental commission to paint a mural for the museum. She was one of a number of famous artists chosen to execute murals for the museum’s display areas, including, among others, Rufino Tamayo, Pablo O’Higgins, Carlos Mérida, and Rafael Coronel. Entitled El mundo mágico de los Mayas (Fig. 73), hers was destined for the section in the museum dedicated to the state of Chiapas, and to that end she travelled there in 1963 to study the region and its peoples. In San Cristóbal de las Casas she stayed with the Swiss anthropologist Gertrude Blom, whose fieldwork focused on the Lacandon Indians who lived in the area. Through Blom she was introduced to two Chapas curanderos (healers) from the village of Zinacantán (called the ‘House of the Bats’) and although wary of foreigners, they were so impressed by her knowledge of and respect for traditional healing that they allowed her to attend some of their ceremonies. During a six-month period Carrington executed many preliminary drawings of the villagers and also of the animals at the zoo in Tuxtla Gutiérrez.233 When she returned home she began to study the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the ancient Quiche Maya, in order to understand better the preconquest beliefs of the Chiapas Indians, descendants of the ancient Maya. In spite of the fact that Carrington in general tended to avoid the constrictions of commissions, previously had little interest in depicting Mexican scenes, and had never painted anything of this size (the mural is 213 x 457 cm), El mundo mágico de los Mayas presents a sweeping, vibrant panorama of the
material and spiritual life of Chiapas. The composition is clearly divided into celestial, terrestrial and subterranean realms where mythological entities animate the landscape, Catholic processions take place next to indigenous healings, and animals energetically cavort, moving with ease between realms. Here the past and present, the sacred and the secular, and the seen and hidden co-exist and co-mingle as they are viewed through Carrington's visionary filter.

Themes from Jewish mysticism increasingly make their appearance throughout the 1960s in works such as The Chrysopeia of Mary the Jewess (1964) (Fig.76); El Poliedro de Hod (1965); The Bath of Rabbi Loew (1969) (Fig.77); as well as scenes from The Dybbuk (1967). The fact that Carrington's husband and a good number of her friends were Jewish may have sparked her interest in the cabbala; however, she was incapable of canonical veneration and these
paintings can veer off into playful satire as in *Pig Rush* (1960) (Fig.78) where a group of rabbis are threatened by a herd of approaching swine. Carrington’s friend, Carlos Fuentes, applauds her oppositional strategies most eloquently: ‘The world is simple and life is flat when the dualities that have impoverished and simplified our lives for twenty-five centuries succeed in excluding, if not condemning, heretical multiplicity in order to install dogmatic monotony.'

Beginning in 1968 and throughout the 1970s Carrington spent significant amounts of time in the United States, primarily in New York and the suburbs of Chicago. In New York she lived for a number of years in the neighbourhood surrounding Gramercy Park and became a regular visitor to the Kristine Mann Library of the C. G. Jung Center nearby. This library possesses an extraordinary collection of books that deal not only with psychology but also esoteric traditions from around the world. In addition, the Center houses ARAS (Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism), a remarkable collection of visual materials, arranged by subject. Carrington spent many hours there studying, with great curiosity and a desire to learn, personality traits that have defined and guided her life. She was not particularly interested in either Freud or Jung and although she had long made it a practice to record her dreams, she insists that her work is rarely inspired by her dreams. It was in the 1970s that Carrington came into contact with the feminist movement, and as early as 1972, as previously mentioned, she designed a poster for Mexican women’s liberation entitled *Mujeres Conciencia* (Fig.38). There was now an active political voice for all that Carrington had been philosophically and visually developing, and she began to receive attention from feminists re-evaluating her place in art history. Some of the creative isolation she had experienced was beginning to dissipate as interviewers and art historians sought her out, particularly in the United States. In 1974 Gloria Orenstein wrote a feature article ‘Leonora Carrington: Another Reality’ in no less than

the first mainstream feminist publication *Ms. Magazine.*

Eschewing direct political involvements as always, her vociferous support of feminism in both the American and Mexican press constituted a risk she was willing to take, even if it meant her work being seen in an unflattering light. But the result was greater attention and appreciation, along with higher sales, and she now took on a New York dealer, Brews Arts Ltd. Nor had they forgotten her in Mexico, for in 1974 Ediciones ERA published *Leonora Carrington*, a sumptuously illustrated book on her work written by Juan García Ponce.
Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen (Fig. 98) is the penultimate example of Carrington's rand of pictorial feminism, encapsulating not only cultural sources, but also her own past visual and inventory. It is a work of stunning, numinous power - manifesto of the artist's belief in the ability of to transcend static representation and to enter into the magical. In a fiery red kitchen an invocation of place, this time within a clearly demarcated magic circle, is set on the floor. To the right an open door reveals a figure, surrounded by mists under whose pale light a dark figure appears, walking towards its opening. Near the interior, stands a horned goat-like creature - a broom - a sign of the hearth and of witchcraft centuries past. To the far left, also outside the circle, two figures are busy preparing food. The one in the upper part of the room - a cooking pot on an old-fashioned Mexican stove - is attended by the women stirring the cauldron in The House of 1945), while below a red-robed figure kneels grinding corn on a Mexican stone metate (mortar). Figures amusingly wear sunglasses as if to protect their eyes from a nocturnal radiance. Both also wear black hats, with the lower figure seeming to be in the act of transforming the broom, a favourite Carrington character. The magic circle demarcates a ritual space, in the centre of which is a Mexican comal (griddle) upon which rest a cabbage, aubergine, corn, peppers and heads of garlic. Vessels and dishes, like in the altar/tables of the previously painted panels, are placed below the comal as well. The one to the left holds a knife, the middle one with something yellow in it and the third a head of lettuce before has Carrington so explicitly tied the acting to ritual magic. All three figures are raptly gazing at an enormous white goose, a manifestation of the mother-goddess, which is stepping into the circle among by their ritual food preparation.

Three heads of garlic - that ingredient essential to good cooking and to witchcraft - are carefully placed at intervals on the circle on the floor. Upon closer inspection the circle is a ring divided into a series of sections, and within each are inscriptions written in English and Celtic, some are inscribed backwards in the mirror-writing Carrington was always so easily able to do. One must resist the temptation to try to decipher these compelling fragments into a unified narrative and instead be content to understand that they refer to various episodes from the legends of the Celtic Sidhe, the people of the Tuatha dé Danaan. Carrington has created her own powerful incantations, designed to invoke the Goddess herself, who looks suspiciously like the Mother Goose of her beloved childhood fairy tales. The title, Grandmother Moorhead's Aromatic Kitchen, refers to her maternal grandmother whose name was Moorhead, and hence to her own lineage since, after all, it was this grandmother who informed her at an early age that she was directly descended from the Tuatha dé Danaan. Although it is a homage to her Irish heritage, the work utilises many Mexican culinary accoutrements and reflects her adopted nationality. A 1994 quote from Carrington helps to illuminate the spirit this work was undertaken in: 'The Mexican traditions of magic and witchcraft are fascinating, but they are not the same as mine, do you understand? I think every country has a magical tradition, but our approach to the unknown is peculiar to our ancestry. It is something that has to do with birth, your blood, flesh and bones.'

In 1977 Carrington painted another powerful work redolent of initiations and travel to nocturnal realms. A triptych arranged horizontally from top to bottom, it is entitled Took my Way Down, Like a Messenger, To the Deep (Fig. 99), and also incorporates aspects of Mexican cultural practices. The top panel features a central table at which a woman sits holding a clove of garlic. The table is round, like a magic circle, and clearly something out of the ordinary is occurring.
aro and Carrington formed an intense friendship and artistic partnership that enabled them to develop a new pictorial language. Carrington responded strongly to the magical atmosphere of Varo’s home on the Gabino Barreda, filled with objects and her specially placed talismans of stones, shells and crystals. ‘Meeting almost daily for years, they shared their dreams, their nightmares, their obsessions, and their deepest secrets.’ Kaplan goes on to explain: ‘Varo and Carrington shared an intensity of imaginative power that each found in no one else.’ Varo served as a model for the Spanish character, Carmella Velásquez, in Carrington’s novel *The Hearing Trumpet* completed in 1950, but not published until 1976. According to Carrington, when they first met, Varo was painting in an abstract style that, over the course of their relationship, changed to figuration and explored many of the same subjects as those in her work. However, any thematic similarities between Carrington’s and Varo’s paintings are overshadowed by their distinctive styles, colour palettes and paint handling.

Together they began to experiment with cooking and, with a penchant for experiment and a taste for the ludicrous, they conducted pseudoscientific investigations using the kitchen as their laboratory. Cooking, always important for Carrington, became one of their avenues for exploration into the occult:

Using cooking as a metaphor for hermetic pursuits they established an association between women’s traditional roles and magical acts of transformation. They had both been interested in the occult, stimulated by the Surrealist belief in ‘occultation of the Marvelous’ and by wide reading in witchcraft, alchemy, sorcery, Tarot and magic. They found Mexico a fertile atmosphere where magic was part of daily reality; traveling herb salesmen would set up on street corners with displays of seeds, insects, chameleons, special candles, seashells, and neatly wrapped parcels with such mysterious labels as ‘sexual weakness’ all used for the practice of witchcraft by the *curanderas* (healers), *brujas* (witches), and *espiritualistas* (spiritualists) who outnumbered doctors and nurses. Mexico proved a vibrant influence on Varo and Carrington, for whom the power of spells and omens was already very real.

Mexico’s markets deeply impressed Carrington with their antiquity and breadth of commodities: ‘I always liked markets, Mexican markets, it goes back to the start of humanity, the
Remnants of earlier Mesoamerican worship were embedded in the nation’s Catholicism, and the Surrealists found the physical manifestations of this, such as in the decor of churches, subversive. Carrington befriended the Mexican anthropologist Ignacio Bernal, Director of the Institute of Anthropology, and together they visited many archaeological sites where she became acquainted with the rich myths and images of pre-Columbian civilisations such as the Aztec goddess Coatlicue and the war god Huitzilopochtli. Her initial response was mixed; although Mexico seemed extraordinarily exotic, particularly the indigenous people and their customs, she was also repelled by the ancient practice of human sacrifice. Reflecting on the effect Mexico’s past has on her psyche, Carrington has said: ‘Once you cross the border and you arrive in Mexico you feel that you are coming to a place that’s haunted.’

marketplace. In Mexico they used to sell what they called the “delicious little fruit of the gods” and they were people they were going to eat afterwards, you know, good looking young people, males and females who were sold in the market. She also became acquainted with the traditions of Mexican healers: ‘I used to go to the curandero ... they are people who have a knowledge of herbs and the medicine that goes back to ancient times and of course at night they do witchcraft but that’s up to whether you believe it or not.’ An aspect of Mexican culture that the Surrealists relished in particular, and which would catalyse Carrington into mixing cultures in her work, was the paradoxical intermingling of the colonial Spanish with the surviving pre-Hispanic Indian culture.
The House Opposite
1945
Tempera on panel
33 x 82 cm/13 x 32½ in
Private collection