

Leonor Fini

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FRIEZE

Artists' Artists: Emma Talbot on Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini and Remedios Varo

The artist on the women Surrealists whose visions of the self, gender, emotion and transformation have influenced her own work

EMMA TALBOT

OCTOBER 03, 2022



Leonor Fini, *L'Alcôve*, 1941, oil on canvas, 73 × 97 cm. Courtesy: © Estate of Leonor Fini, Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco, and DACS, London 2022; photograph: Nicholas Pishvanov.

'The Milk of Dreams', Cecilia Alemani's exhibition for this year's Venice Biennale, which takes its title from a book by the Mexican Surrealist Leonora Carrington (1917–2011), is an extraordinary reflection on our current era of ecological, political and social instability. The show, to which I was invited to contribute, uses historical 'pods' to help frame contemporary artworks, opening up rich discourses on what it means to be human.

In 'The Witches' Cradle', an historical pod at the centre of the main pavilion, Alemani brings together works by Surrealist women artists – including Carrington, Remedios Varo (1908–63) and Leonor Fini (1907–96), among others – whose

practices were often overlooked. These potent works reveal themselves as elements in a cauldron of underground activity, where all kinds of representations of crones, witches, seers and mediums interact.

Seeing these pieces alongside my own silk paintings and 3D works at the biennial, I was intrigued by how artists articulate a kind of meta-self, almost like prescient dream versions of the self. The figures in my own work – such as *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (2021) – are always an idea of myself, viewed from the inside and shaped by emotional experience. My practice explores how personal thoughts and feelings are cast into contemporary and universal contexts, such as our relationships to technology, nature, urbanism and ecopolitics.

The female Surrealists used self-representation in an imaginative and defiant way. They rejected stereotypical gender limitations and imagined themselves as potent, magical creatures – witches, sorcerers, alchemists, quasi-animals, sphinxes and other fantastical characters – whose perceptions and knowledge gave them access to arcane, mystical understandings. The figures in their works embody intuitive sentiments such as love, fear, jealousy, desire and anxiety, but are often staged in exaggeratedly formal settings – castles, ancient landscapes, mansions – giving the viewer a sense that everything is part of an elaborate construct, and that each element has meaning.

In the work of Fini – who is featured in this year's Spotlight section at Frieze Masters – as well as in that of Carrington and Varo, we see vibrant visual invention. Thinly painted surfaces and fine-brush representations of hair, elaborate costume and pattern render even the darkest scenes airy. There's a febrile intensity, wrapped up in strange ritual, where distortions of scale and radical transformations occur: from human being to praying mantis, animal or alien. The artists' use of wispy, extended figuration makes this mutability seem possible. There's often a clever tension between what is changeable, what is fixed and what is an apparition.

My own pursuit of that same lightness of tone is one of the reasons I decided to paint on silk rather than a rigid surface. I found that presenting text and image on a very thin support, which often moves as air circulates around it, operated more like a suggestion or a vision than a statement, and I wanted to be able to articulate my thinking on these terms.

I also find the elasticity of time in the work of these women Surrealists fascinating. My painted silk hangings incorporate lots of imagery and text and are made to be read in any order, as the viewer walks around them. I don't want the narrative to be linear; rather, I'd like viewers to gather a sense of the subject over time. These women Surrealists manage to suspend time in their paintings, so that things are simultaneously happening in the past, the present and the future. Even their self-depictions describe both elderly and youthful figures.

They borrow structures from art history (it is fascinating to compare Varo's compositions to those of early Renaissance paintings) but populate those spaces with sci-fi beings and figures who seem like actors in low-budget historical dramas. In doing so, they highlight the potential to try diverse roles, to switch positions. In an era when issues of identity are so politically charged, we can surely admire and value the confidence of these artists to formulate their own self-representation.

In Fini's paintings, the figures' doll-like faces and flowing hair combine the artist's self-image with popular culture, such as film posters and soft porn. However, they can also be disarmingly distant – almost like mannequins. It's as though Fini culls female figures from all kinds of sources and reinstates (or re-enacts) them in a world where they are protagonists with power. In other paintings, Fini's wild-haired women take on the traditional roles of men, dominating – sometimes literally sitting on – supine male figures, who are turned into muses.

The narrow margin between life and death is a recurring theme in Surrealism. We see it again in Fini's paintings in 'Shocking', the Spotlight presentation at Frieze Masters. But wow! The paintings are so fresh! I see them as precursors to Marlene Dumas's amazing facility with ink in works such as *Models (1994)*, describing the fleeting beauty of a woman as her face turns into a skull. Or perhaps they reveal a truth: the face is always a skull and the presence of death is an omnipresence, a fear that rests in the mind's eye.

The New York Times

Sex, Surrealism and de Sade: The Forgotten Female Artist Leonor Fini

DANIEL MCDERMON

NOVEMBER 06, 2018



Leonor Fini's "Self-Portrait with Red Turban" (1938), left, and the undated "Bust of a Woman." Credit...2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco.

The artist Leonor Fini worked tirelessly throughout most of the 20th century, often alongside universally acknowledged masters like Max Ernst, André Breton and George Balanchine. Her paintings and designs were shown in London, Paris and New York over decades. Portraits of her, an eccentric European artiste draped in wild costume at fancy masquerade balls, regularly appeared in magazines like Life.

Fini also had three works in the landmark 1936 exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by the museum's founder, Alfred H. Barr Jr. But the museum owns none of her work, and she remains little known in the United States.

A new exhibition at the Museum of Sex in Manhattan aims to remedy that. "Leonor Fini: Theater of Desire" is the first American retrospective devoted to her paintings, drawings and other objects, and it fills two floors of the museum.



A 1934 portrait of Fini by an unknown photographer. Credit...2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Estate of Leonor Fini, Paris.

Fini, who died in 1996 at 87, was close to many of the Surrealists, including Breton, and has frequently been grouped with them, but she always resisted labels, said Lissa Rivera, the curator of the exhibition.

“She was really not interested in contemporary movements,” she said, adding, “Although she was included in shows on Surrealism, she didn’t really want to be associated with that group because André Breton, she thought, was a misogynist.”

Born in Argentina, Fini grew up in Trieste, Italy, and found her way to Paris as a young woman. She made a place for herself in the city’s artistic circles, but declined the confining roles (muse, lover, student) that were usually offered to young women.

“She already knew how to paint,” Ms. Rivera said.

Her work in this period was fantastical, but stands out from the Surrealists for its inversion of the usual gender roles. Fini painted a number of erotic male nudes that celebrate androgyny and feminine qualities in their subjects.

Like the Surrealists, she had muses, but her depictions are tender and affectionate, often rooted in her personal connection to her subjects, including her two lifelong partners, Stanislaw Lepri and Constantin Jelenski.



Her work often inverted gender roles, as in “Woman Seated on a Naked Man” (1942).Credit...2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Private collection.

Fini was successful enough in the '30s, including the MoMA exhibition, to get a show at the gallery of Julien Levy, the New York dealer who helped introduce artists like Man Ray, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Salvador Dalí to America. A rather condescending review of that show in The New York Times dings Fini's work for showing too much skin in a self-portrait: “In one picture, called ‘The Miracle That Sweeps,’ the ‘costume’ pantaloons worn by our miraculous heroine have just about dropped off.”

“She lived every aspect of her life creatively, as a form of investigation in the human psyche,” said Ms. Rivera, “and for her, gender and sexuality were the greatest ways to perform those kind of experiments, both on the canvas and in real time.”

Fini also illustrated about 50 books in her life, choosing authors and titles that fit her own interests, including “Satyricon” and works by Jean Genet and Charles Baudelaire. Some of her best-known works in this area are her drawings for a 1944 edition of the Marquis de Sade’s “Juliette.”

After World War II, Fini's work grew somewhat darker and more abstract, although it remained deeply focused on the corporeality of the body, as in “The Angel of Anatomy,” depicting a stern-looking winged figure stripped of skin. It fixes a steady gaze on the viewer, a memento mori stuck somewhere between life and death.

Fini herself chose to live as something of a recluse, although she loved to make brief, shocking appearances at formal events, dressed in elaborate costumes of her own design.

“She always liked to have center stage,” Ms. Rivera said. “She wasn’t afraid to be seen as a narcissist; she just was herself completely and didn’t feel any sense of questioning or shame.”



“The Angel of Anatomy” (1949) fixes the viewer with an intense gaze. Credit...2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Private collection.

One of her costumes, including an owl mask, inspired the final scene in the erotic novel “The Story of O,” which Fini would later illustrate.

Well into the 1980s, she worked tirelessly, often on theatrical sets and costume designs. But she continued painting as well, with her works evolving toward a more dreamlike style, but always with a strong current of sexual energy.

“She always felt that identity was just a mask,” Ms. Rivera said. “So the masks that she chose to wear were more true than her biological face.”



“The Blind Ones” (1968). Her later paintings evolved toward a more dreamlike style. Credit...2018 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco.

AnOther

The 20th-Century Artist Who Challenged the Myth of Womanhood

ROSALIND JANA

OCTOBER 09, 2018



Leonor Fini, Paris c. 1938 Anonymous, Courtesy of Leonor Fini Estate.

Leonor Fini possessed an avid taste for the dramatic. As she once declared, “I have always loved, and lived, my own theatre.” From her groundbreaking paintings to her vivid – and visually compelling – character, Fini visibly relished standing apart. Now the subject of an extensive exhibition at the New York Museum of Sex, with numerous artworks, artifacts and photos on display, Fini makes for yet another 20th-century female artist finally being paid some much overdue attention.

Born in Buenos Aires in 1907, Fini grew up in Trieste. Her parents’ separation was fraught, Fini’s mother disguising her daughter in boy’s clothes for several years after a failed kidnap attempt from her father. She was headstrong and sharp: expelled from three schools, reading voraciously (with the run of her uncle’s library), and initially teaching herself painting partly by observing the anatomy of cadavers in the local morgue. Fini’s interest in the bodily would run throughout her work, continually shaping the themes and preoccupations of her output.

Recognised for both her eye and artistic skill from a young age, in her early twenties she took off to Paris, moving easily into the midst of a thriving artistic movement. Although refusing to ever formally align herself with the Surrealists – too singular for one group’s thoughts and aims, as well as too suspicious of André Breton’s rampant misogyny (manifested in his odious belief in women’s status as passive muses rather than active creators) – Fini still socialised with and exhibited alongside leading writers, painters and photographers including Salvador Dalí, Paul Eluard, Man Ray, Dora Maar and Max Ernst.



Leonor Fini, Nonza Corsica, 1967, Photo by Eddy Brofferio, Courtesy of Leonor Fini Estate.

Seminal Moments

Fini's paintings are remarkable to observe. By turns fantastical and dark, they repeatedly dwell on mortality, eroticism, dreams, and destruction. Women are crowned with bird's skulls, or pose boldly encased in armour. Languid men lie sleeping. An angel stands stark, skin stripped back to reveal muscle and bone beneath. Repeatedly playing with different iterations of gender, Fini regularly rendered female figures as priestesses, witches, and, above all, sphinxes: the intricacies of womanhood explored via myth and mutability. Often depicted in stances of dominance, their contrast with her portraits of men – often, as she claimed, “unthreatening” and “of ambiguous sexuality” – makes for a fascinating revision of power, gaze, and approaches to muse-hood.

Elsewhere Fini's talents stretched in a rich set of directions: including erotic illustrations to accompany editions of Marquis de Sade's Juliette and Anne Desclos' Histoire d'O, dazzling sets and costumes for a wide variety of theatres, ballet companies and films (including Fellini's 8 ½), writing (she authored three novels), and design from furniture to fashion collaborations – in the case of the latter, devising the famous bottle to hold Elsa Schiaparelli's perfume Shocking, modelled on Mae West's torso.

Away from her creative endeavours, Fini also forged an unconventional personal life. Openly bisexual and non-monogamous, she often lived with a ménage of partners and Persian cats – eventually accumulating 17 feline companions. As she later reflected, “since I was 18 I have preferred to be in a sort of community – a big house with my atelier and cats and friends, and with one man who was rather a lover and another who was rather a friend”.



Leonora Fini, *Femme assise sur un homme nu*, 1942. Private Collection.

Defining Features

Fini continually revelled in framing how she was viewed. With a taste for the extravagant and an acute understanding of how attire offered the freedom of transformation, she once said of herself, “with costumes and masks, I feel I become an extension of myself”. Regularly captured by photographers from Henri Cartier-Bresson to Horst to Lee Miller, Fini’s flare for the dramatic is readily apparent: posing assertively with one stocking clad leg on show; looking gloriously witchy in a cloak of feathers; sitting placidly in a white blouse with puffed sleeves.

The artist also loved costume balls: attending numerous events in Paris post World War Two, delighting in the chance to appear in guises from owls to spies to devils to more ambiguous creations. In her daily life she was dressed by designers including Chanel, Schiaparelli and Dior – the latter having hosted one of her first exhibitions in his gallery before he made his own forays into the world of fashion (a collaboration referenced earlier this year in Dior’s Spring 2018 couture show, all tulle masks and geometric patterns, with artistic director Maria Grazia Chiuri citing Fini as her primary point of inspiration).



Leonor Fini, Arcachon, 1940Anonymous, Courtesy of Leonor Fini Estate

She's an AnOther Woman Because...

Salvador Dalí once dismissively said of Fini that she was “better than most, perhaps. But talent is in the balls.” Like many other great painters and writers of the age, she was all too often overlooked because she was a woman – one, moreover, intensely interested in exploring sexuality, desire, femininity and what it means to look and be looked at. Even after her death in 1996, male critics still registered ambivalence – George Melly’s obituary for *The Independent* describing her erotic drawings as all too pretty, damning her with the faint praise of “de Sade for Vogue”.

Luckily Fini’s prodigious output is now being appreciated anew – as is her drive and daring in establishing a life for herself that consistently challenged the status quo. From her gorgeous, unsettling paintings to her keen interest in both exploring and exploiting her visual potential, Leonor Fini’s legacy is a glittering, multifaceted one – theatrical to the very end.

The Guardian

Leonor Fini works among treasures for sale from extraordinary New York home

Gallery owner and his husband filled Chelsea apartment with paintings, ceramics and other art.

HARRIET SHERWOOD

MARCH 15, 2022



Tom Shivers, at home in the Chelsea loft. Photograph: Colin Miller.

Over more than four decades, Neil Zukerman, a New York gallery owner, and his husband, Tom Shivers, filled their Chelsea loft with paintings, books, ceramics, glassware, figurines, silk flowers and countless other treasures. “We only ever had things in our house that we loved. And if we loved it, we found a place for it,” said Shivers.

The first of 10 sales from the couple's collection will take place online from Thursday, alongside an exhibition of works by Fini and other female artists at Sotheby's London galleries. "Neil loved Fini's art, and always said if owning one is good, owning 100 is better," said Shivers.

Fini – born in Argentina in 1907, raised in Italy and later a resident of Paris – was perhaps the most ferociously independent female artist of the 20th century, according to art historians.

Although her works have been included in almost every major surrealism exhibition since the 1930s, she refused to label herself a surrealist, partly because of the misogyny of the movement's leader, André Breton. She died in 1996.

Zukerman and Fini spoke regularly by phone for two years before a face-to-face meeting in Paris in the early 1980s. "Neil learned to speak French in order to be able to converse with her. She could be incredibly kind, but she wasn't an angel," said Shivers

"Once an artist sent her one of his paintings to critique. It was returned to the gentleman in a manila envelope, cut into pieces. She said: 'Sorry, couldn't find a larger envelope.'"

On one occasion, while she was lunching with Pablo Picasso and the art dealer Julien Levy, the latter reached for a napkin that Picasso had doodled on. "Leonor picked up the napkin and said: 'Oh Pablo! The same old shit.' She tore it up and threw it into the gutter," said Shivers.

"She lived with two men for 35 years. She always said a woman should have two lovers: one for sex, and one for the emotional and intellectual."



Detail from Rasch Rasch Rasch ... Meine Puppen Warten by Leonor Fini. Photograph: Sotheby's

Last year, Fini's 1938 self-portrait, *Autoportrait au scorpion*, sold for \$2.3m. Her paintings are in the permanent collections of the Met, Tate Modern and Centre Pompidou.

Lisa Stevenson, Sotheby's modern and contemporary specialist, said it was "tricky to confine Fini's work to a category or a movement; she presented a new and truly modern sense of the feminine".

She added: "Fini's work was revolutionary. She explored sexuality and interrogated and asserted the position of the woman away from the traditional role as a muse or mother. With her continuous investigation into the notions of female identity, and her rejection of the rational, it is natural that Fini found herself so closely linked to the surrealist movement. But her relationship to the surrealist artists was a complex one.

"Over the past decade we have seen women that were historically considered on the sidelines of the surrealist movement being rightly cultivated as serious and significant artists."

Among the works being sold from Zukerman and Shivers' collection is Fini's 1975 fantastical painting *Rasch Rasch Rasch ... Meine Puppen Warten (Hurry, Hurry, Hurry ... My Dolls Are Waiting)*. It depicts the artist as a child, being dressed by an adult woman while looking through a window at five partially clothed women.



Inside the apartment. Photograph: Colin Miller.

The series of sales also includes Fini's many depictions of sphinxes and other figures metamorphosing into cats, birds and skeletons. But Shivers is keeping his favourite, a painting of *Tristan and Isolde* which hangs over the couple's bed. "That will stay until I'm gone," he said.

The apartment, in a former industrial building, contains a “garden room” with a mosaic floor made up of 80,000 tiles, a huge collection of vintage perfume bottles taking up a bathroom wall, and a cinema room dedicated to Marilyn Monroe.

Zukerman and Shivers had always intended to sell a number of works to fund their retirement. But Shivers, 79, still collects “a few bits and pieces”, and a storage room in the loft is “filled floor to ceiling” with artworks. The apartment would “never look minimalist”, he said.

A number of works by Leonor Fini from the collection will be offered in Sotheby's '(Women) Artists' auction, open for bidding from 17-23 March 2022.



Photograph: Colin Miller.

Leonor Fini: I'm Not a Muse, I'm an Artist

MAGDA MICHALASKA

SEPTEMBER 13, 2022



Leonor Fini, *Portrait of Mrs Hasellter*, 1942, Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco, CA, USA. Detail.

Leonor Fini didn't agree with André Breton about the role of women in art: the father of Surrealism saw women solely as muses inspiring male genius, whereas Fini reckoned, and proved with her art, that women can become artists equal to men. Discover her art!

Trieste

She was born in Buenos Aires in 1907 to an Italian mother and an Argentinian father. The parents separated early and Fini moved with her mother Malvina to Trieste, a city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire which at the beginning of the 20th century

was a cosmopolitan pot of mixing ethnicities and cultures. This is how she met avant-garde writers James Joyce and Italo Svevo, who introduced her to modernist thought.

Paris

After her schooling in Trieste and Milan, Italy, she traveled to Paris in 1931 with her fiancé who also happened to be a prince... Yet, having met and developed close relationships with Henri Cartier-Bresson and many Surrealists such as Paul Éluard, Salvador Dali, Man Ray, and Max Ernst, who became her lover for a time (oh, Max, he had affairs with so many women!), she abandoned the idea of marrying the prince for the sake of art, especially that just a year later she had her first one-person-show at a gallery directed by Christian Dior.

Despite friendships with the Surrealists, she never stuck with the group, maybe because she couldn't stand Breton's misogynistic views, and she retained her own, original style which attracted a lot of interest also in the States, where she was invited to participate in the groundbreaking exhibition at MoMA Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism in 1936.



Henri Cartier-Bresson, Leonor Fini in Paris, 1932. Leonor Fini Website.

Rome

Quickly did she meet a new lover, the writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues, with whom in the summer of 1939 she traveled to Arcachon in the southwest of France to wait out the war. She spent there a year, mostly hanging out with Salvador and Gala Dali, before moving to Monte Carlo where she met Stanislaw Lepri, the young Italian diplomat, who became the love of her life. They moved together to Rome, where Leonor met the Italian actress Anna Magnani and the neorealist director Luchino Visconti, yet as soon as he heard of the liberation of Paris in 1946, she returned to France.



Leonor Fini, *The darkroom*, 1939, private collection. Mara Marietta.

Paris Again

She was a talented portraitist of her milieu, yet it was for the subjects of her narrative paintings that she became most famous. She treated in her painting the theme of a complex relationship between male and female, often presenting females as more powerful and dominant. Women often take the form of a sphinx, with whom she identified and often gifted

it with her own face, while men are shown as weak and androgynous. Apart from sphinxes, other living creatures most popular in her work are cats, her real friends and life companions (Leonor never married and lived only with cats).



Leonor Fini, Stage design for theatre. Leonor Fini Website.

Moreover, around 1945 she turned to designing stage sets and costumes for the theater (La Scala in Milan), opera (Paris Opera and the Metropolitan Opera Association), ballet (Roland Petit's company Ballets de Paris and George Balanchine's ballet *Le Palais de Cristal*), and cinema (Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*, and John Huston's *A Walk with Love*), which she did until 1969. She died in Paris in 1996.

VULTURE

Why Isn't Leonor Fini As Famous As the Other (Male) Surrealists?

JENA ADRIAN-DIAZ
DECEMBER 05, 2018



Photo: Private Collection.

The artist and designer Leonor Fini never considered herself a Surrealist. They were too sexist. And despite a decades-long career in the avant-garde — she was born in 1907, and died in 1996 — she ended up being far less well-known compared to her friends and collaborators, including Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Albert Camus, and Yves Saint Laurent. But the Museum of Sex's exhibition "Leonor Fini: Theatre of Desire" should help call attention again to her provocative and expansive accomplishments.

It's the first-ever survey of her body of work, and it winds through a ruby-hued gallery reminiscent of a goth cabaret, complementing Fini's richly pigmented paintings, film, furniture, costume, and set designs. Included in the exhibit are extravagantly staged photographs of Fini, by the likes of Henri Cartier-Bresson and André Ostier. Fini used fantasy and mythology as a vehicle through which she could subvert male-dominated narratives in Western art that relegated women to the status of subservient muse. Today her legacy is revisited by media and auction houses alike, with San Francisco's Weinstein Gallery and Paris's Galerie Minsky asserting Fini's status as one of the most important artists of the 20th century.



Photo: Courtesy of Leonor Fini Estate.

Fini is one of several female Surrealists just now receiving their due. This fall, a retrospective of fellow Surrealist Maruja Mallo opened at New York gallery Ortuzar Projects, marking the first time that the Spanish artist's work has been shown in the United States in over 70 years. Fini's artwork exhibited the enigmatic, dreamlike attributes ascribed to works of the Surrealist movement, and earned her international acclaim when she participated in the 1936 "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" exhibit at the MoMA in New York City. But she never considered herself to be an official member of the group. She objected to the misogyny of leader André Breton, who actually excluded female artists from official photos of the

Surrealists and believed fervently in the traditional role of woman as erotic muse. Inverting the gendered tropes, Fini consistently depicted men in her artwork as delicate, beautiful beings in need of guidance and protection.

Lissa Rivera, who curated the Theatre of Desire retrospective, attributes Fini's relative obscurity to the reality that men were predominantly the decision-makers in the art world in the 20th century. "Attitudes at the time she passed away, in 1996, were quite negative and condescending. Her work is very emasculating in a lot of ways, so it probably wasn't the most comfortable work to sit with, for those who were in charge."



Photo: Kris Graves/Museum of Sex/PHOTOGRAPH BY KRIS GRAVES.

The sphinx is a recurring motif in Fini's work. She often styled the mythical creature in her own image and depicted this mythological avatar as a sort of protector or guide of the androgynous males in her paintings. The role of the woman and the sphinx in her artwork was informed by Fini's study of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and Sophocles' *Oedipus* in her youth. While Dalí and Ernst fixated on the remorse and threat of the sphinx for its role in the tragedy, Fini's interpretation favors the sphinx's eventual victory. "She interprets the sphinx as the character with the greatest insight," says Alyce Mahon, art-history professor at the University of Cambridge and curatorial adviser for "Theatre of Desire." "Oedipus is blind. He might be cunning, he might be virile, and he might solve the riddle, but he is ultimately revealed to be the fool. Fini interprets the sphinx as the heroine of the story."

Fini grew up in Trieste, Italy, with her mother, but was often dressed as a boy to evade kidnappers sent from Argentina by her father. It is thought that the time Fini spent dressed as a boy ignited her lifelong fascination with both androgyny and donning elaborate costumes. She is quoted describing her interest of blending the attributes of both sexes in Peter Webb's biography, *Sphinx: The Life and Art of Leonor Fini*: "I am fascinated by the androgynous, for it seems to me to be the ideal ... I would like to think of myself as androgynous." She held a lifelong aversion to being labeled in any other way, and would later object to being called a woman artist or a feminist.



Photo: Courtesy of Weinstein Gallery.

Largely self-taught, Fini was deeply fascinated by art and studied works spanning from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Renaissance and the Mannerists. As a teenager, she taught herself anatomy, sketching studies of cadavers at the morgue and read the untranslated works of Freud and Jung. It should come as no surprise, then, that Fini was readily accepted into the Salon Carré of Paris when she moved to France in 1931, at the age of 24.

While Fini got her start as an artist during a brief stint in Milan as part of a 1929 group exhibition, she truly flourished in Paris. Christian Dior, a gallerist at the time, exhibited her works before leaving art for fashion. She counted Surrealist painters Leonora Carrington, Méret Oppenheim, Salvador Dalí, and Max Ernst as close friends. By day, Fini worked for hours on end in her atelier but enjoyed a lavish nightlife, attending parties and balls in elaborate costumes with a man on each arm. Her lovers, who included Ernst, painter Stanislao Lepri and writer Constantin Jelenski, lived with her in ménages à trois and served as her muses during the daytime. “It’s this sense that her art has been an extension of her real or fantasy lives, a stage for her seductive ways, that often dominates readings of her work,” explains Mahon. “In the exhibition, we’ve very much explored the theme of theatricality; it has been not just to show her as a female troubadour, as Giorgio de Chirico described her once, but very much to show her as an excellent artist.”



Photo: Courtesy of Weinstein Gallery.

Fini’s art, for all of its subversive thematic exploration, aided her rise to fame during her lifetime. Now, it has finally begun to receive its much-deserved credit from the art world at large. Echoes of Fini’s legacy reverberate across today’s fashion and design landscape. The Elsa Schiaparelli’s “Shocking” fragrance bottle she modeled after Mae West’s figure, on display as part of the “Theatre of Desire” exhibition, directly influenced the famous Jean-Paul Gaultier perfume bottle, which Kim Kardashian-West has now imitated (lawsuit from Gaultier pending). Also on display are Fini’s 1942 costume designs for George Balanchine’s Palais de Cristal; the designs later inspired Balanchine’s 1967 ballet, *Jewels*, which recently wrapped its latest run at the New York City Ballet. Finally, Maria Grazia Chiuri dedicated Dior’s spring 2018 couture collection to the late Fini with a possible nod to her affinity for showing up to parties in Paris wearing nothing but a cape of white feathers and boots. “Periods of interest in Fini emerge, but having her work fit into the narrative in a more permanent way is something that I feel this show has a chance of achieving,” says Rivera.



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Leonor Fini, an artist who always put herself on top, finally gets her due at New York's Museum of Sex

The nonconforming artist, who was accepted by the Surrealists but never identified with them, has an art historical resurrection at an unlikely venue

VICTORIA SSTAPLEY-BROWN
SEPTEMBER 28, 2018



Leonor Fini, *Woman Seated on a Naked Man (Femme assise sur un homme nu)* (1942). Private collection.

The Argentine-Italian artist Leonor Fini, who showed with the Surrealists in the 1930s to 40s, is due to have her first major US survey at what might seem to be an unlikely venue for an art historical resurrection: the Museum of Sex (MoSex) in New York. But the show “directly relates” to the museum’s visitors, who are around 60% female and female-identifying individuals and “are looking to find new ways to express their desires or seek information about their own bodies”, says the show’s curator, Lissa Rivera. “I feel like that’s what Fini was doing through her work.”

Leonor Fini: Theater of Desire 1930-90 (28 September-4 March 2019), explores the freedom, creativity and gender-nonconformity of Fini’s life and art through around 100 objects from the 1930s to 90s, including 35 paintings, 22 drawings, illustrated books, costume studies and photographs from the Leonor Fini Archive in Paris, many never before shown. “It’s been really wonderful [working on the show] because the curatorial team here has been diving into Fini’s life,” Rivera says.



Leonor Fini in Arcachon, France, in 1940 Leonor Fini.

Though now little-known in the US, Fini was a celebrity in her time, appearing in mainstream magazines such as Life. She “was a bit of a goth before goth”, Rivera says, studying bodies in the morgue as a teenager and sometimes taking cues for

her fantastic clothing from the costumes in the Cabinet of Dr Caligari. Fini thought of herself as androgynous and lived with two male partners in a long-term ménage à trois. “She had the dominant role in her relationships,” Rivera says. Fini’s lack of an association with a particular male artist, like Leonora Carrington’s with Max Ernst, is another possible reason why she is under-recognised.

Fini also “never allowed herself to be defined or boxed in in any way, which makes it hard to categorise her work”, Rivera says. Though she showed in major Surrealist exhibitions in the 1930s and 40s, and was accepted into the group by the co-founder André Breton, she did not personally identify with the movement. “She didn’t want to be a part of something with a dogma”, Rivera says, “and she felt frankly that [Breton] was a misogynist”.

The exhibition shows the range of Fini’s practice, including her paintings, which used very thin layers of paint and have a fineness inspired by Flemish works. A wide-eyed Self-Portrait with Red Turban (Autoportrait au Turban Rouge; 1938) seems to reflect Jan Van Eyck’s putative self-portrait in a similar head-covering (1433).



Leonora Fini, *The Alcove/Self-Portrait with Nico Papatakis* (L'Alcôve/Autoportrait avec Nico Papatakis) (1941)
Courtesy of Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco.

Many of the paintings, which pull iconography from magic and mythology, show women as subjects with desire rather than objects of desire. “Fini painted really beautiful male nudes of androgynous archetypes of her idea of beauty, and she presents herself within these paintings, often as a dominant force, or a force that’s kind of projecting the feminine gaze,”

Rivera says. In one work, *Woman Seated on a Naked Man* (*Femme assise sur un homme nu*; 1942), she perches on a languid sleeping male nude.

Other pieces include the female torso-shaped bottle she designed for Elsa Schiaparelli's perfume *Shocking* and books she illustrated, such as a 1944 version of the Marquis de Sade's *Juliette*—printed secretly on the Vatican press. Fini also designed costumes for theatre and ballet productions, and the show includes preparatory studies such as a 1969 series for her friend Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* (the *Balcony*) and playfully erotic costumes for Oskar Panizza's *The Council of Love* (*Le Concile d'Amour*; 1968).

"It's really important to show a lineage of artists exploring gender and sexuality," Rivera says. "She was very aware of that herself, she was always looking back to even ancient art and early Renaissance and specific mythologies that opened up ideas of freedom about sexuality. I feel like we need that so that these [current] discussions [about gender identity] don't appear to be a trend, but are shown to be something that's deeply embedded and needed in human experience."



THE ART NEWSPAPER

Leonor Fini: Theatre of Desire

AUGUST 8, 2018



Leonor Fini in Arcachon, France, in 1940 Leonor Fini.

I always imagined that I would have a life very different than the one imagined for me, but I understood from a very early age that I would have to revolt in order to make that life.

—Leonor Fini



LEONOR FINI IN NONZA, CORSICA, 1967. PHOTO: UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER.

Admirers of the Argentine Italian artist Leonor Fini have included Andy Warhol, Madonna, Kim Kardashian West, and more recently Maria Grazia Chiuri, the head of the fashion house Dior, whose spring 2018 collection was dedicated to the artist. Multitalented and fearlessly forward-thinking, Fini refused to be categorized in any way, especially through gender norms. Although Fini exhibited in major surrealist surveys throughout the thirties and forties and counted Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí as friends, she rejected the movement's traditional view of woman as muse. Her art explores the masculine and feminine, dominance and submission, eroticism and humor. Fini's practice went beyond the medium of painting to

embrace theater, ballet, the illustrated book, and costume. Rejecting social convention, Fini insisted that identity, like artistic expression, is never fixed—it must constantly be open to inspiration and imagination. The powerful self-portraits she produced throughout her long career present woman as warrior, sphinx, dominatrix, and feline goddess, mastering landscapes and lovers alike. The first American survey of her work, “Léonor Fini: Theatre of Desire 1930–1990,” will open September 28 at the Museum of Sex and run through March 4, 2019. A selection of Fini’s work appears below.



LEONOR FINI, MAX ERNST, AND ENRICO COLOMBOTTO ROSSO IN NONZA, CORSICA, CA. 1965. PHOTO: UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER. COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF LEONOR FINI.



LEONOR FINI, PORTRAIT DE FEMME AUX FEUILLES D'ACANTHE (PORTRAIT OF WOMAN WITH ACANTHUS LEAVES), 1946, OIL ON CANVAS. COURTESY OF WEINSTEIN GALLERY.



LEONOR FINI, DANS LA TOUR (IN THE TOWER), 1952, OIL ON CANVAS. COURTESY OF WEINSTEIN GALLERY.

AnOther

The 20th-Century Artist Who Challenged the Myth of Womanhood

AnOther revives the living fantasy of the infamous surrealist artist.

LAURA HAVLIN

SEPTEMBER 03, 2015



Leonor Fini, ca.1936. Photography by Carl Van Vechten.



Leonor Fini, Saint-Dyé-sur-Loire, 1975. Photography by Eddy Brofferio.

When outspoken art critic Jerry Saltz took aim at the art world's lack of women artists included in collections, calling out MoMA for its embarrassing percentages of art by females, he imagined a scenario in which the museum could forget about their old master narrative of art history and, for a while, they could display a sign that read, "Pardon our appearance while we remove the stick from our asses, discard our atavistic linear idea of art, and lay out more of the whole story."

One female artist who might appear in a more nuanced view of art history, would be Leonor Fini. Search for works by Fini on MoMA's collections site – which boasts over 61,000 works online – and the only evidence of the accomplished surrealist

painter is a portrait snapped of her by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Leonor Fini, born in Buenos Aires in 1907, was very much part of the Parisian surrealist set in the first half of the 20th Century. Growing up in Trieste, Italy, the wild young girl – whose hobbies included painting and scouring the Adriatic coast for bones and skulls – was expelled from three schools before embracing a less rigid lifestyle in Paris in the 1930s, where she slotted into the life of a bohemian artist with ease.



Leonor Fini, *Self-Portrait with Red Hat*, 1968.

The surreal life

Jean Cocteau was enraptured by Leonor Fini's "Réalisme irréel" and Paul Eluard, Jean Genet, Giorgio de Chirico and Max Ernst were amongst her first sponsors. Having charmed the art and fashion crowd, Fini had clothes custom made especially for her by the likes of Coco Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli, and her first Parisian exhibition took place in a gallery

run by Christian Dior before his move into fashion design. Fini painted fierce goddesses, priestesses, Ophelias, skeletons and highly symbolic hybrid creatures. She also painted portraits of her contemporaries, including writer Jean Genet, and is credited as being the first female artist to create a male nude. She earned the ultimate contrarian badge of honour – outraging the Daily Mail – when the paper described two of her mildly erotic works in the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London as “a couple of slaps on the face of decency that should not be allowed to pass unnoticed.”



Leonor Fini, Italy, 1933. Photography by Henri Cartier-Bresson, Courtesy of MoMA.

Called out by Jean Genet

Alongside his novels and poetry, writer Jean Genet mused his contemporaries in critical art essays; Picasso called Genet's essay on Giacometti the greatest essay on an artist. Genet's first critical art essay was on Fini, who produced sketches for a 1947 book of Genet's poems as well as two portraits of the writer. Genet revelled in the grubby reality of life: sex, vagrancy and death were passionately romanticised by the writer. Although he appreciated Fini's charms and talents, he was frustrated by the theatrics and fantasy in her work, and in 1950, wrote to her calling her out on her fantasies, and with crude psycho-analysis accused her of using the mask of costume to shield her from the realities of life.

He wrote: "If you hold so fast to the bridle of the fabulous and misshapen animal that breaks out in your work and perhaps in your person, it seems to me, Mademoiselle, that you are highly afraid of letting yourself be carried away by savagery. You go to the masked ball, masked with a cat's muzzle, but dressed like a Roman cardinal – you cling to appearances lest you be invaded by the rump of the sphinx and driven by wings and claws. Wise prudence: you seem on the brink of metamorphosis (emphasis mine)."



Leonor Fini and Leonora Carrington, 1952