

Lee Miller's Surrealist Eye

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New Insights

Edited by

Lynn Hilditch

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MISTRESS OF L'IMAGE TROUVÉ

DEREK ADAMS

(Paris, 1929)

“The absolute power of desire – from the beginning, the only act of faith in Surrealism”

– André Breton.

she was a constantly moving eye,
she was absolute desire,
she was Surrealism,
she was moonlight silver plating skin,
she was the shadow of a net curtain blown by the wind,
she was the view through a window,
she was the obstruction of a blocked door,
she stepped out of the light, found me, spoke
‘My name is Lee Miller and I am your new student’
That was the beginning and until the end,
despite everything, it is all I could claim.

From Derek Adams, *EXPOSURE: Snapshots from the life of Lee Miller*.
Guildford, Surrey, UK: Dempsey and Windle, 2019.

INTRODUCTION

LYNN HILDITCH

...a pioneer across the fields of art, fashion and journalism. Her work encompassed experimental studio work, portraits, reportage and fashion shoots, and reflected the varied artistic circles of which she was part.

—From “Lee Miller and Surrealism in Britain Timeline”, Hepworth Gallery.¹

Since the publication of Antony Penrose’s ground-breaking biography of his mother *The Lives of Lee Miller* in 1985, American-born artist Lee Miller (1907-1977) has been increasingly championed by scholars and curators for her Surrealism-inspired photography. Her captivating images of Paris in the late-1920s and early 1930s taken when she was the muse and lover of the Dada-Surrealist artist Man Ray, her dreamlike portraits of desert landscapes and sexually suggestive architecture taken in Egypt in the mid-1930s, and her witty yet poignant and often harrowing photographs of the Second World War and its aftermath, have been widely deliberated. However, while interest in Miller’s multifaceted life and photographic work has been rapidly growing over the past forty years, her true worth as a prominent Surrealist artist has been somewhat overlooked. *Lee Miller’s Surrealist Eye* aims to address this issue with a new collection of essays, the majority of which have been contributed by women scholars, that revalidate Miller’s Surrealist position.

When I started researching Lee Miller’s work at the tail end of the 1990s, I discovered a woman about whom very little was known. Sources were limited and initial internet searches brought up one single book review of Jane Livingston’s *Lee Miller, Photographer* (1989), a catalogue of images published to coincide with an exhibition of the same name organized by the California International Arts Foundation in Los Angeles, USA. Only Penrose’s biography provided any real insight into Miller’s fascinating life, and the depth and quality of work by this extraordinary woman. It was Penrose’s book that elucidated why Miller’s name only seemed to appear,

¹ “Lee Miller and Surrealism in Britain Timeline”, Hepworth Gallery, Wakefield, <https://hepworthwakefield.org/lee-miller-and-surrealism-in-britain-timeline/>.

often very briefly, in reference to the work of Man Ray or the British Surrealist and founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Roland Penrose, who became Miller's second husband. Following the war, Miller suffered from exhausting bouts of the mental health condition we know today as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and became dependent on alcohol to numb the pain caused by her experiences. The strain on Miller and her family subsequently forced Roland to remove thousands of photographs, negatives, written notes, and letters, particularly from the war period, where they were safeguarded in the attic of their home at Farley Farm in Chiddingly, East Sussex, UK. The material was only rediscovered after Miller's death from pancreatic cancer in 1977. Consequently, it has taken Miller's son Antony, granddaughter Ami Bouhassane, and other dedicated scholars and researchers, years of painstaking work to piece together the many fragments of a life well lived.

This new volume of essays further explores Miller's oeuvre with the key aim to confirm Miller's status as a Surrealist artist rather than simply a muse, lover, collaborator, or assistant to the great men in her life. By focusing on significant periods in her career—from her time in Paris as artist and model, to her role as staff photographer at *Vogue* magazine, through the Second World War witnessing the devastation of the Blitz, the concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau, and the effects of the Third Reich's power drive, to her cookery and extravagant Surrealist dinner parties at Farley Farm—these essays aim to establish Miller as a polymorph, a remarkable creative with an ability to turn her hand to whatever interested her, and, as Becky E. Conekin describes her, “a quintessential modern woman”.²

Lee Miller was born Elizabeth Miller in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1907 to Theodore and Florence Miller, and it was from Theodore that Miller inherited her love of science and technology as well as her strong-mindedness and determination to succeed. Theodore was an engineer and superintendent at the DeLaval Separator Company and, according to Carolyn Burke, a “prominent Poughkeepsian”; ambitious, influential, and eccentric with a controlling streak.³ He was also an enthusiastic amateur photographer with a self-built darkroom in a bathroom in the family home at Cedar Hill Farm in the affluent Kingwood Park area of the town. From a

² Becky E. Conekin, “Lee Miller and the Limits of Post-war British Modernity: Femininity, Fashion, and the Problem of Biography” in Christopher Breward and Caroline Evans eds., *Fashion and Modernity* (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2005), 41.

³ Carolyn Burke, *Lee Miller* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 6-7.

child, Lee was encouraged by her father to embrace technology and take an active role in his photographic pursuits. Burke writes, “She learned the rudiments of photography from Theodore, who gave her a box camera—at a time when Kodak ads enticed young customers to adopt the Brownie as the latest, and most creative, kind of toy”.⁴ She was inquisitive and quick to learn and according to Penrose, “Photography came to Lee like everything else—as part of her surroundings”.⁵ Burke describes Theodore as “a man of the future” advocating certain activities and lifestyle habits “considered eccentric by some and progressive by others, such as birth control, a diet of whole foods, and exposure to the sun’s rays through nudism—practices in which Florence joined him. While these opinions made him seem advanced, he also enjoyed the reputation as one of Poughkeepsie’s most influential citizens”.⁶ In adulthood, Miller adopted some of Theodore’s health “quirks” almost bordering on hypochondria, and she certainly showed no inhibitions when it came to nudity. Lee became her father’s muse, with Theodore recording Lee’s childhood almost obsessively from the day she was born, but it was his nude images of Lee as a young adult, including the often-published stereoscopic portrait taken in July 1928,⁷ which suggests a somewhat unconventional yet loving father-daughter relationship. Nonetheless, it is clear to see that Theodore was a dominant influence and supporter of Miller’s artistic endeavours through his encouragement of her explorations and experiments with photography as a new technology and creative innovation.

It was Theodore who fully supported (often financially, as well as fatherly) Lee’s trip to Paris in 1925 and her training (both formally and informally) with some of the leading innovators in art, theatre design, stage lighting and photography, including Ladislav Medgyès, Jacques Copeau, Hallie Flanagan, Edward Steichen, George Hoyningen-Huene, and Man Ray. In his 2007 book, written to accompany the Victoria and Albert Museum’s exhibition “The Art of Lee Miller”⁸, Mark Haworth-Booth acknowledges that “in addition to practicing the art of the model at the

⁴ Burke, *Lee Miller*, 10.

⁵ Antony Penrose, *The Lives of Lee Miller* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), 11.

⁶ Burke, *Lee Miller*, 25.

⁷ In Theodore Miller’s *Nude Study of Lee* taken in Kingwood Park, Poughkeepsie in 1928, Lee sits in side-profile, arms bent behind her, recalling classical Greek statuary such as the *Venus de Milo*, the “living statue” in Jean Cocteau’s 1930 Surrealist film *Le Sang d’un Poète* (Miller’s only cinematic role) and Man Ray’s 1929 portrait of Miller titled *Shadow Patterns* 1929.

⁸ “The Art of Lee Miller” exhibition was on display at the V&A South Kensington from 15 September 2007 – 6 January 2008.

highest level, Lee Miller became one of the most interesting Surrealist photographers in Paris”.⁹ In 1927, at the age of nineteen she had already graced the cover of American *Vogue* becoming one of the magazine's most sought after models. She was, according to Phillip Prodger, “one of photographer Edward Steichen's favourite models”,¹⁰ and it was through Steichen's influence that Miller was introduced in 1929 via letters of introduction to George Hoyningen-Huene, Paris *Vogue's* master photographer, and Man Ray, an American expat and former Dadaist. After three years living and working with Man Ray, in 1934 Miller returned to New York to open her own commercial and portrait studio, *Lee Miller Studios, Inc.* with her younger brother Erik as her darkroom assistant. Her studio was short-lived, however, when in 1935 after a whirlwind romance she married her first husband, Egyptian businessman Aziz Eloui Bey, and moved to Cairo. Although this period of Miller's career has often been described as creatively latent, many of her Egyptian photographs stand as some of her most timeless images, such as the enigmatic *Portrait of Space* (1937), which is believed to be the influence for Rene Magritte's 1938 painting *Le Baiser*. Paris constantly beckoned and on a visit in 1937 Miller met the man who would become her second husband, Roland Penrose, and travelled with him around Eastern Europe before joining him in London in September 1939 just as war was declared. The onset of the Second World War saw Miller's career take a sudden diversion. While working as a staff photographer for British *Vogue* in 1940 and photographing the London Blitz, Miller joined the US Armed Forces as an accredited war correspondent becoming the only woman during the Second World War to photograph combat. As her close friend and colleague, the LIFE photographer David E. Scherman notes, “It is almost impossible today...to conceive how difficult it was for a woman correspondent to get beyond a rear-echelon military position, in other words to the front, where the action was”.¹¹ With her steadfast resolve in the most challenging of circumstances, Miller was, according to Scherman, “the nearest thing I knew to a mid-20th century renaissance woman”.¹² However, while writers such as David Hare and

⁹ Mark Haworth-Booth, *The Art of Lee Miller* (London: V&A Publications, 2007), 7.

¹⁰ Phillip Prodger, *Man Ray, Lee Miller: Partners in Surrealism* (London and New York: Merrell, 2011), 27.

¹¹ David E. Scherman quoted in Antony Penrose, ed., *Lee Miller's War* (London: Condé Nast Books, 1992), 9.

¹² Scherman quoted in Penrose, *Lee Miller's War*, 13.

Holly Williams¹³ have suggested that Miller retreated from photography in the 1950s—Hare claiming that Miller descended “into a sort of aimless rural rage, seeing life only from the bottom of a whisky glass or over the flyleaf of a recipe book”¹⁴—with “Working Guests”, published in British *Vogue* in 1953¹⁵ often quoted as her final professional work, it is naïve to suggest that Miller completely abandoned her career for domesticity (Miller married Penrose in 1947 in the same year gave birth to her only son, Antony). An accelerated passion for cookery became her number one “jag” and her Surrealist eye and mentality was once again put to work in creating wonderful and naturally bizarre recipes for elaborate dinner parties she hosted at Farley Farm; her love of kitchen technology and gadgets, stemming back to her early childhood, providing yet another connection to her father.¹⁶

About this Collection

The essays in this volume follow Miller’s development as a Surrealist artist from the 1920s to her later postwar career as an established gourmet cook and hostess, a passion she continued until the 1970s. Each chapter follows a broadly chronological order guiding the reader through some of the key points in Miller’s life while confirming her distinctly Surrealist vision.

The Surrealist practice of fragmentation and the isolation of (usually female) body parts are an uncanny presence throughout Surrealist art and literature. As Sabina Stent writes, “...hands are a prominent symbol of fetish; they have the potential to produce both pleasure and pain in intense

¹³ See Holly Williams, “The Unseen Lee Miller: lost images of the supermodel-turned-war photographer go on show”, *The Independent*, 21 April 2013, accessed April 23, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/the-unseen-lee-miller-lost-images-of-the-supermodelturnedwar-photographer-go-on-show-8577344.html>.

¹⁴ David Hare, “The Real Surrealist”, *The Guardian*, 26 October 2002, last accessed April 23, 2021, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2002/oct/26/art.photography>.

¹⁵ “Lee Miller”, *National Galleries Scotland*, accessed August 1, 2022, <http://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/features/lee-miller#:~:text=After%20acquiring%20Farley%20Farm%20in,Dubuffet%20and%20Georges%20Limbour%2C%201959.&text=Miller%20continued%20to%20write%20for,Vogue%20until%20the%20early%201950s>.

¹⁶ Ami Bouhassane, *Lee Miller, A Life with Food* (Oslo, Norway: Grapefrukt Forlag, 2017), 169.

forms".¹⁷ Unsurprisingly perhaps, hands appear throughout Miller's artistic oeuvre and are a focus of discussion in chapters one and two; as a surreal object created and exhibited in 1937, and as a subject in her fashion photography for *Vogue* during the early years of the Second World War. According to Kirsten H. Powell in her 1997 essay "Hands-On Surrealism", "Hands figure as weird, magical, uncanny objects, as texts to be read to unlock the secrets of the psyche, as connectors between our modern world and our primitive past, and even as icons of art in an age of Surrealist mechanical reproduction".¹⁸ In chapter one, Eleanor Clayton illuminates on a rare Surrealist sculptural work created by Miller titled *Le Baiser*. Featured in the 1937 exhibition "Surreal Objects and Poems" at the London Gallery, Clayton's essay carefully outlines the background of the sculpture's conception, how it was made, and the context in which it was exhibited. Clayton metaphorically looks at the sculpture from all angles, using an examination of materials and sculptural thinking to reveal the broader cultural landscapes and artistic inspirations that led to its creation, thus situating Miller within the field of modern sculpture.

In chapter two, hands feature again in Lynn Hilditch's essay "Art and Fashion: Lee Miller's Surrealism in *Vogue*", which concentrates on Miller's early wartime fashion photography for *Vogue* magazine. Miller was appointed Head of British *Vogue*'s Photography Department in 1940 when paper shortages had inexorably reduced the size of the magazine and circulation was cut from fortnightly to monthly. However, *Vogue* proudly announced, "Supplies may be limited but we raise the 'carry-on signal' as proudly as a banner".¹⁹ Jean Gallagher writes, "The US government actively recruited women for jobs historically held by men and encouraged home front economies and sacrifices, while at the same time cultural apparatus such as film and magazines continually reinscribed women's roles as consumers of fashionable goods, despite wartime commodities shortages".²⁰ Therefore, it was essential that magazines such as *Vogue* continued to provide women with a fashion market and a sense of normality during the

¹⁷ Sabina Stent, "Surrealism, Symbols and Sexuality in Un Chien Andalou (1929) and L'age D'or (1930)", Silent London, 14 March 2014, https://silentlondon.co.uk/2014/03/14/surrealism-hands-and-sexuality-in-un-chien-andalou-1929-and-lage-dor-1930/#_ftn8.

¹⁸ Kirsten H. Powell, "Hands-On Surrealism", *Art History*, Vol. 20, No. 4, December 1997, 517.

¹⁹ Robin Derrick and Robin Muir, eds. *People in Vogue: A Century of Portraits* (London: Little, Brown, 2003), 76.

²⁰ Jean Gallagher, *The World Wars Through the Female Gaze* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), 75.

war for propaganda purposes—albeit well-redefined and reduced in scope for most European women at this time—to uphold morale. Selected photographs by Miller during this period demonstrate how she naturally applied her Surrealist eye to her fashion assignments while drawing on the innovative creativity of several artistic mentors to present low-cost fashion in exotic and surreal locations. In *Lee Miller: Portraits from a Life* (2002) curator Richard Calvocoressi aligns Miller’s position as a portraitist and fashion photographer with the techniques of Man Ray who, according to Calvocoressi “taught her everything in her first year [1929], ‘...fashion pictures...portrait...the whole technique of what he did’”.²¹ When looking through Miller’s *Vogue* fashion assignments, it is evident that her wartime photographs do contain a distinct element of Surrealism, however, there is also evidence of other artistic influences, which this essay will address.

While Miller’s work was inexorably shaped by the vision of her creative mentors, chapters three and four move towards an exploration of how Miller’s art can be compared to, and in some cases has inspired, the work of other contemporary female artists. In “Intimate Portraits, Surreal Experiments”, Eleanor Jones draws a fascinating comparison between Miller and the British photographer Barbara Ker-Seymer, while in “Women Are Well-suited to Being Photographers”, Megan Wellington-Barratt discusses the contemporality of Miller’s work and its legacy on today’s women photographers. Jones explores how interwar British photographer Barbara Ker-Seymer (1905-1993) spoke along similar lines when reflecting on her own style of portraiture although Miller and Ker-Seymer have rarely been discussed together. Although there is little concrete evidence to suggest they met, it is likely the two women were aware of each other, at least socially, as they both navigated the overlapping networks of the European and American avant-gardes. Jones’ essay places Miller in dialogue with Ker-Seymer and traces the aesthetic connections between the two women, as their forays into fashion photography and studio portraiture went hand-in-hand with innovative approaches to printing, texture and light. By investigating the affinities and dissonances between Miller and her contemporary, Jones brings a new and more nuanced understanding of Surrealism to light, while raising the profile of two significant women photographers and exploring the roles intimacy and friendship played in their studio practice and their mutual articulation of Surrealism-inspired images.

²¹ Richard Calvocoressi, *Lee Miller: Portraits from a Life* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 7.

In a 1932 interview for the *Poughkeepsie Evening Star and Enterprise*, Miller shared her observations on the role of women in photography: “It seems to me that women have a better chance at success in photography than men, women are quicker and more adaptable... And I think they have an intuition that helps them get personalities more quickly”.²² Wellington-Barratt discusses how Miller’s work crossed many boundaries and social norms for the time in which she was making photographs establishing how Miller’s work fits into no singular box and was far reaching in subject, intent, purpose, and realisation. Wellington-Barratt addresses the candid and brave nature of Miller’s work as a standalone artist in relationship to photography by women today. In addition, she explores Miller’s extraordinarily timeless gaze on the subject matter of food, self-portraits, fabric and domestic textures, fashion, femininity, and playfulness, and acknowledges how Miller sought to continually push the boundaries of being a working woman in the first half of the twentieth century. Wellington-Barratt explores these themes by drawing on theoretical and social standpoints that have emerged since Miller’s work was made, examines themes of domesticity through the contextual framework of Gillian Rose and Sarah Pink, and draws comparisons to the work of contemporary photographers such as Juno Calypso, Clare Strand, Natasha Caruana, and Sophie Calle. Miller’s granddaughter Ami Bouhassane writes “...as her significant contribution is slowly rediscovered by the world, we enjoy watching how she continues to be relevant to new generations, inspiring equality, strength in the face of adversity and the creative world”.²³

Much emphasis has been placed on analysing Miller’s images of devastation and conflict and chapters five and six focus on Miller’s photographs of ruins, monuments, and destruction from the mid-1930s in Egypt to her photographs of the London Blitz in 1940. In “Tombs, Ruins and Embalmed Bodies”, Iman Khakoo offers an eloquent reading of Miller’s Egyptian photographs and her connection with the Egyptian Surrealist circle, *Art et Liberté*, while in “This Dreadful Masterpiece: Lee Miller, *Grim Glory* and Photographing the Blitz”, Josh Rose looks specifically at Ernestine Carter’s Ministry of Information publication *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire* (1941), which included twenty-two of Miller’s photographs taken during the German bombardment of London and other UK cities. Patricia Allmer writes, “Interest, in modernity, in the breakdown of the conception of civilization and the territorialisations

²² Lee Miller, quoted in Julia Blanshard, “Other Faces are Her Fortune”, *Poughkeepsie Evening Star and Enterprise*, 1 November 1932.

²³ Ami Bouhassane, *Lee Miller (Modern Women Artists 05)* (Eiderdown Books, 2019), 50.

accompanying it is eternal and thus stable and monolithic, embedded (for example) in Surrealism's concern (evident in works by Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico, and Rene Magritte) with the crumbling or decaying monument and its decomposing signficatory functions, is a recurrent and central focus of Miller's work".²⁴ Navigating these artistic and socio-political landscapes, Khakoo's essay centres on Miller's unique portrait of Egypt, painted both as active cultural agent in her independent artistic practice, and in collisions with other Surrealist artists and networks. Through a careful curation of Miller's works, two aspects of her Egyptian oeuvre are explored: her photographs of monuments, and those of ruins, all the while highlighting Miller's seminal role in traversing British and Egyptian Surrealism – or as a *flâneuse des deux mondes*. In the final section of her essay, Khakoo reconsiders these photographs as documents of and within visual and literary cultures, exploring how they relate to the new lines of cross-cultural affiliation established by Georges Bataille's Surrealist journal *Documents*, to propose an alternative frame for viewing Miller's Egypt.

The aesthetic and the documenting of war's destruction is subsequently examined in Rose's essay, which explores varying portrayals of the Blitz, including those in *Grim Glory* as well as other sources, to specify the ways documentary photography and photojournalism have been used to represent *reality* versus André Breton's concept of a *surreality* as informed by related Surrealist practices. Anchoring this approach is a comparison of Miller's fellow *Vogue* photographer Cecil Beaton's smoky, otherworldly *St. Paul's London* with the starkly-composed Surrealist documentary approach Miller employs in many of her Blitz images such as *Revenge on Culture* (1940) and *Bridge of Sighs* (1940).²⁵ The contrast between the two photographers will establish Beaton's aesthetic approach as one of a "populist Surrealism," deriving from the British public's awareness of Surrealism from the late-1930s, whereas Miller's approach is one steeped in Surrealist theory and practice. As British Surrealist Julian Trevelyan noted in his 1957 autobiography *Indigo Days*, it "became absurd to compose Surrealist confections when high explosives could do it much better, and when German soldiers with Tommy-guns descended from the clouds on parachutes dressed as nuns. Life had caught up with Surrealism or Surrealism with life,

²⁴ Patricia Allmer, *Lee Miller, Photography, Surrealism, and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 129.

²⁵ Beaton's photograph is included in *Grim Glory* as image 36. Ernestine Carter, *Grim Glory: Pictures of Britain Under Fire* (Lund, Humphries, 1941).

and for a giddy moment we in England lived the irrational movement to its death".²⁶

In her 2011 book *Women Modernists and Fascism*, Annalisa Zox-Weaver writes how Miller's "eye was drawn to dark absurdity, to before-and-after ironies, to images that, once charged with subduing power, become impotent and self-mocking after Nazism's fall from power".²⁷ Continuing the exploration of Miller's war photography, in chapters seven and eight Melody Davis and Viola Rühse pay particular attention to Miller's subversive images of war with emphasis on David E. Scherman's provocative portrait of Miller in Adolf Hitler's bathtub taken in May 1945. In "Revisiting the Enemy", an updated version of her 1997 essay "Lee Miller: Bathing with the Enemy",²⁸ Davis provides a thoughtful Freudian analysis of this iconic image relating Miller's war experience back to her troubled childhood when as a seven-year-old she was sexually assaulted. With reference to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Davis explores the concept of the body and (physical, psychological, and sexual) trauma in relation to Miller's personal experiences and considers the decision by Miller and Scherman to use "a simple container [a bathtub] for a surreal echo of the horrors of the Holocaust".

Like Davis, in "At the Frontline: Lee Miller as a Surrealist War Correspondent", Rühse examines the bathtub portrait while providing a broader discussion of Miller's role as a war correspondent and the only woman during the war to reach the frontline. Making comparisons with the work of other war photographers such as Gerda Taro and Margaret Bourke-White, Rühse explores gender conventions within Miller's work, considers how Miller challenges and transgresses the boundaries set for her as a woman in the traditionally male domain of war, and looks at portraits of "Miller the war correspondent" as she travelled across Europe with the US armed forces. While Rühse's essay raises questions about the role of women in the masculine sphere, we can also align this struggle with the efforts of women artists to be recognised within the male dominated world of Surrealism.

As we move into the postwar period, we see a shift in Miller's career when her passion for food and cookery replaces photography. Miller's close friend Bettina McNulty writes, "Lee chose cooking as much for therapeutic

²⁶ Julian Trevelyan, *Indigo Days: Art and Memoirs of Julian Trevelyan* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), 80.

²⁷ Annalisa Zox-Weaver, *Women Modernists and Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 177.

²⁸ Melody Davis, "Lee Miller: Bathing with the Enemy", *The History of Photography* 21, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 314-318.

reasons, gaining a real sense of escape in her newly invented career. She felt compelled to put her wartime experiences behind her and had a self-imposed censorship on discussion about her work during the war”.²⁹ In chapter nine, “Lee Miller’s Entertaining Freezer: Surrealist Cuisine for the Modern Woman”, Lottie Whelan argues that Miller’s turn to domestic art was a clear continuation of her avant-garde artistic career; allowing her to explore the themes she had developed during her years as a photographer in a radically different medium. It also situates her in a lineage of women artists who subverted conceptions of the kitchen as a site of women’s domestic drudgery—from fellow Surrealists such as Leonora Carrington and Meret Oppenheim, to later feminist artists like Martha Rosler and Bobby Baker. Exploring parallels between Leonora Carrington and Miller, Whalen’s essay draws out the ways both women collapsed boundaries between art and the everyday, the domestic and the art-world, through kitchen-based experiments with food. The rituals of cooking also became a healing practice, a refuge for two visionary Surrealist artists who had each suffered psychological trauma and misogyny at the hands of their male counterparts. Whalen also demonstrates how Miller’s culinary art practice differs from Carrington’s. Where Carrington’s kitchen functioned as an “alchemical” space of magic and the occult, Miller’s love of new kitchen gadgets (such as the freezer and – her personal favourite – the blender) speak to the fast-paced language of modernity, the city, and photography; as in her photographic art, Miller’s culinary artworks were technologically-mediated, thoroughly modern creations. Significant, too, is the degree to which they aligned with her efforts, as a photographer, to capture and make visible the realities of modern women’s lives in war time, in her own distinct Surrealist style. Continuing her understanding and appreciation of the modern working woman, Miller wanted to write a cookbook to help them be creative without expending too much time and energy: it would “redefine dinner party preparations” for those who find “entertaining in ‘haute’ style past our weekday energy levels”. Miller’s culinary art practice represents not only a significant phase in her own career (one which helps further our understanding of her earlier work), but also a fascinating Surrealist contribution to twentieth century feminist art’s efforts to break boundaries between art and the domestic practices of everyday life.

Following on from Whalen’s essay, food is again the subject as Morwenna Kearsley closes this volume with a fictional Surrealist encounter with Miller—an imaginary dinner date between author and subject.

²⁹ Bettina McNulty, “The Confessions of a Compulsive Cook”, in Bouhassane, *A Life with Food*, 15.

According to Bettina McNulty, Miller was “never a surreal icon in dress or in behaviour, only sometimes in her forthright, original conversation. She had the confidence and good sense to let her surreal inclinations pop up naturally as they chose. She was a practical and clear-thinking night nurse with the same combination of rationality and wild leap of imagination found in Marcel Duchamp”.³⁰ Thus, Kearsley's contribution is an intriguing and fitting epilogue to this new volume of essays on Miller's Surrealism.

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³⁰ McNulty, p. 15.

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CHAPTER ONE

LEE MILLER'S *LE BAISER*

ELEANOR CLAYTON

A beautiful wax hand, like a manicurist's window standing up from the wrist, vertically, and on it I'd like a bracelet made of false teeth mounted in particularly false pink-coloured gums.¹

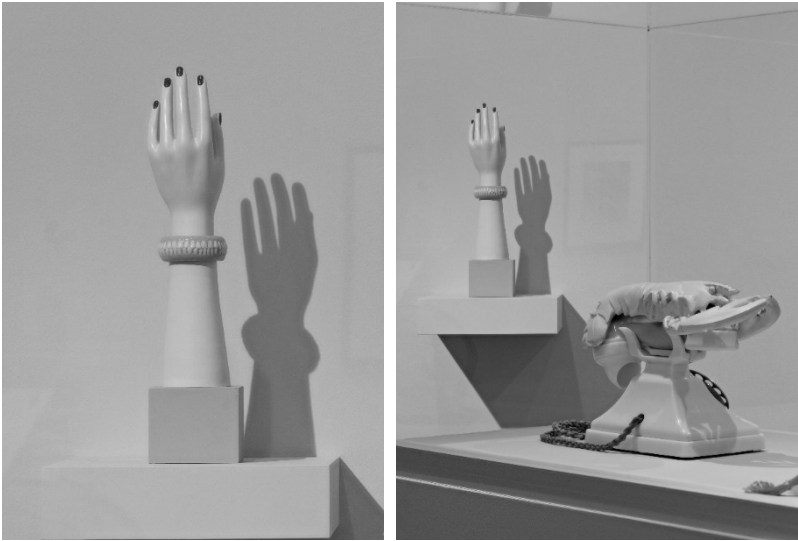


Fig. 1-1 and 1-2: Reconstruction of Lee Miller's *Le Baiser* installed at The Hepworth Wakefield alongside Salvador Dalí's *Lobster Telephone* (1938), as part of *Lee Miller: Surrealism in Britain*, 2018. Photograph: Lewis Ronald.

¹ Lee Miller to Roland Penrose, 7 November 1937, Lee Miller Archives held at Farley Farm, Sussex.

Although for much of the twentieth century Lee Miller was best known as muse and lover to Surrealist Man Ray, in recent decades her own photographic practice has been celebrated. Rarely however is her sculpture given attention, scarcely featured in exhibitions or mentioned in any depth within critical writing on her work. This may be because the one known sculpture attributed to Miller is now lost, and she did not even make it. The sculpture *Le Baiser*, 1937, as described by Miller above, featured in the exhibition *Surrealist Objects and Poems* that was held at the London Gallery in 1937. This essay will outline the conditions and influences which led conception of the sculpture, how it was made, and the context in which it was exhibited. It will metaphorically look at the sculpture from all angles, using an examination of materials and sculptural thinking to reveal the broader cultural landscapes and artistic inspirations that led to its creation. Encompassing collage, consumerism, Surrealism, feminism, and proto-pop art, exploring the hermeneutic possibilities of this singular sculpture will reach through time and geography, from New York to Paris, and the early days of the ICA in London. Further, taking a holistic and in-depth look at this one work I propose to situate Miller within the field of modern sculpture.

Le Baiser is comprised of a mannequin's hand, the sort normally used to display watches or jewellery in a shop window, mounted on a square block. The nails are painted red, and a set of false teeth are wrapped around its delicate wrist in the place of the expected wares. Conceived of as an assemblage of mass-produced objects, Miller directed its creation by letter in November 1937 to artist, collector and exhibition organiser Roland Penrose, with whom she had met and begun a relationship earlier that year. She wrote, "I'd like to have an object in the Surrealist show if possible [...] you could make it for me as it is very simple. It is a beautiful wax hand, like [one in] a manicurist's window standing up from the wrist, vertically, and on it I'd like a bracelet made of false teeth mounted in particularly false pink-coloured gums... I had thought of making the fingernails over with false eyes, but that would be too much work".² The manipulation of these mundane elements into a complex piece of surreal sculpture shows Miller's appetite for finding the unusual and strange in everyday settings, as Penrose had remarked in an earlier letter, "your way of seeing things when we are out together is a thing I miss all the time".³ Miller's material specifications; the manicurist's wax hand with painted nails, the false teeth and false eyes,

² Letter from Miller to Penrose, 7 November 1937, Lee Miller Archives.

³ Letter from Penrose to Miller, 27 October 1937, Roland Penrose Archive, National Galleries of Modern Art Scotland.

speak to her familiarity with the world of fashion and its attendant trappings of cosmetic enhancement.

Miller had been living in Paris in 1925, the year that the first exhibition of surrealist art was held at Galerie Pierre,⁴ studying experimental stage design for several months under artist and stage designer Ladislav Medvsky. She returned to Paris in 1929 to study photography having worked in the intervening years as a model in New York, prominently for *Vogue* magazine. At *Vogue*, Miller was shot by photographers such as Edward Steichen, who moved in modern art circles and exhibited fine art photography while also undertaking commissions for fashion magazines. The staging of fashion shoots offered an alternative application of the *mise-en-scène* of theatre design, with the photographer taking the place of the theatrical director, and Miller became interested in pursuing a career in photography herself. No doubt through her contacts at *Vogue*, she became aware of Man Ray who, at the forefront of the Surrealist movement, contributed to all but one of the twelve issues of the group's journal, *La Revolution Surrealiste*, between 1925 and 1929. He was also known for his commercial work as a fashion and society photographer, both in Paris and New York where he had lived until 1921. This combination made him an ideal mentor for Miller who, while experiencing the processes of fashion photography first-hand, had also studied at the Clarence White School of Photography in New York where a pictorialist approach promoted the independent art of the photographic image.

Miller made contact with Man Ray in Paris, and they began a romantic relationship while she worked as his studio assistant, looking after his portraiture clients, developing photographs, and working with him on commissions. In the autumn of 1929 Miller also began working at French *Vogue* (known as *Frogue*), first as a model and then as photographic assistant for George Hoyningen-Huene, another photographer who traversed the fields of fashion and fine art photography. By 1930 Miller was taking on enough work, both through *Frogue* and through jobs referred to her by Man Ray, to rent her own studio in Montparnasse.⁵ A conjunction of commercial jobs led to the creation of her startling diptych *Severed Breast from Radical Surgery in a Place Setting 1* and *Severed Breast from Radical*

⁴ 'L'exposition de la peinture Surréaliste' was held at Galerie Pierre in November 1925, showing the work of Arp, de Chirico, Ernst, Klee, Masson, Miró, Picasso, Man Ray and Pierre Roy.

⁵ Roland Penrose and Lee Miller: *The Surrealist and Photographer* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2006), 170.

Surgery in a Place Setting 2 (both c. 1929).⁶ Miller had been appointed to photographically document operations at the medical school of the University of Paris, and after observing a mastectomy she obtained the surgical remains which she took to the *Frogue* studio to stage this unusually macabre photoshoot. As the titles suggest, the breast is presented as a meal on a china plate with cutlery and a chequered cloth place setting reminiscent of a Parisian bistro, or bourgeois home. In the first image the breast is turned towards the viewer so the nipple – a prominent identifier of its original state – is visible. The second setting presents the breast from the fleshy severed end, drawing a nauseating visual equivalence with a minced meat dinner. Considering Miller’s experience in the modelling industry, the analogous objectification of the female body is unavoidable, the breast literally treated as a piece of meat. This objectification was not restricted to the fashion industry. Fragmented female bodies had appeared regularly within the art of the (largely male) Surrealist group in the 1920s, depersonalised - frequently depicted without faces – so that the female muse offered prominent symbolic female representation while erasing the individual identity of the women depicted. Though Miller equally offers an impersonal sexual object in her diptych, the unpleasantness of this fragmentation, of objectification, is made viscerally clear.

This work was made around the time that Miller featured in Jean Cocteau’s experimental film, *Le Sang d’un Poète* [The Blood of a Poet], 1930. In the opening section the protagonist, a young male artist, finds that his drawing of a mouth becomes independently animated. In attempting to erase it, the moving mouth is transferred onto his hand. He then places his hand over the mouth of a classical marble statue in his studio, played by Miller, thereby bringing the statue to life. The artist is the frenetic agent in the scene, his dynamism counterpointed by Miller’s frozen statue, who nonetheless, once awakened, compels the artist to enter an alternate world through a mirror. The film’s narrative reinforces the surrealist tropes of the female body as elegantly passive material, in this case static until activated by male creativity, its only function as inspiring muse. Miller recalled the parallel evident in the experience of making the film. As the statue is conceived of as armless, Miller’s own arms were bound tightly and painfully by her sides, and she recalled, “my ‘armor’ [...] didn’t fit very well: they plastered the joints with butter and flour that turned rancid and

⁶ The Miller Archives have significant charges for reproducing images in publications but have made a huge amount of Miller’s images available online. *Severed Breast from Radical Surgery in a Place Setting 2* can be seen here: https://www.leemiller.co.uk/media/_WOvpFn6NpDzK-RK7fkAg..a.

stank".⁷ Her personal discomfort was ignored by Cocteau, for whom Miller's body was simply material used to deliver his artistic vision.

As a fragment of a female body *Le Baiser* recalls Miller's *Severed Breast* diptych, and its construction from fashion-related objects similarly references her experiences as both a model at *Vogue* and photographer's assistant at *Frogué* – the professional transition from object to agent. *Le Baiser* also relates to this period of Miller's career by reinstating a missing arm of her animated statue in *Le Sang d'un Poète*. Her emphasis on the "particularly false" quality of the sculpture's components lampoons this objectification and priority given to feminine appearance alone, the one-dimensional female muse revealed as an inauthentic illusion. The false teeth ensnaring the mannequin's wrist brings to the fore male subjugation of the fragmented, objectified female body, pain and possession bound in one. Penrose makes this gendered reading of the components of *Le Baiser* clear in a letter to Miller around the time of its creation, writing, "I shall love to choose a hand as nearly like yours as possible and decorate it with teeth as nearly like mine as possible".⁸ Penrose had given Miller a pair of golden handcuffs made by Cartier the year this work was made, and their mutual interest in sadomasochism is suggested in their contemporaneous letters, one exchange in particular discussing reading de Sade, Miller bemoaning possible censorship in her copy. Penrose writes on 29 December 1937, "you ask about Sade as far as I can remember the best bit in the book is the bit in the Monastery where the old monks surpass each other in refinement in their attentions to the girls they have caught but I expect you are right about your copy being cut there was a long juicy piece in the castle which was very good".⁹ This indicates a nuance in the power dynamics at play in *Le Baiser*, Miller an active agent in her metaphorical subjugation. As "director" of both the construction of *Le Baiser* and the staging of the *Severed Breast* diptych she performs the roles of sadist and masochist, objectifier and objectified, concurrently.¹⁰

⁷ Quoted in Carolyn Burke, *Lee Miller: On Both Sides of the Camera* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), 104.

⁸ Letter from Penrose to Miller, 14 November 1937, Roland Penrose Archive.

⁹ Letter from Penrose to Miller, 29 December 1937, 'Photocopies of correspondence', 1937–38, restricted access, Roland Penrose Archive, RPA (GMA A35/1/1/RPA 700), quoted in Patricia Allmer, *Lee Miller: Photography, Surrealism and Beyond* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 45.

¹⁰ For more on the *Severed Breast* diptych and Miller's interest in sadomasochism see "Severed Breast from Radical Surgery in a Place Setting" in Allmer, *Lee Miller*, 28-58.

Shortly after the cinematic release of *Le Sang d'un Poète*, Salvador Dali published a seminal text, "Objets Surrealistes" [Surrealist Objects] in the third issue of *Le Surrealisme au service de la Revolution* in 1931.¹¹ The essay proposed six types of Surrealist object: the object functioning symbolically, transubstantiated objects, objects to project, wrapped objects, machine objects and moulded objects. *Le Baiser* can be seen as an example of the first category, an Object Functioning Symbolically, for which Dali provides the most expansive explanation:

These objects, lending themselves to a minimum of mechanical functioning, are based on phantasms and representations likely to be proved by the realisation of unconscious acts.

These are acts of the kind that you cannot understand the pleasure derived from their realisation, or which are accounted for by my erroneous theories devised by censorship and repression. In all analysed cases, these acts correspond to distinctly characterised erotic desires and fantasies.

The embodiment of these desires, their way of being objectified by substitution and metaphor, their symbolic realisation, all these constitute a typical process of sexual perversion, which resemble in every respect the process involved in the poetic act. [...] The Objects Functioning Symbolically allow no leeway to formal concerns. They depend solely on everyone's loving imagination and are extra-sculptural.¹²

Dali proposes that these types of artworks operate by repurposing or reframing common items to delve into their psychoanalytic associations, juxtaposing or positioning them in a particular manner to draw out uncanny, and particularly sexual or fetishistic, associations. Miller's *Severed Breast* diptych pre-empts this categorisation, as Patricia Allmer has noted, the photographs "constitute, *avant la lettre*, a disturbing and powerfully polysemous surrealist object".¹³

Following his definition of this artistic genre in his text, Dali discusses an object with points of connection to *Le Baiser* in his subsequent analysis of Surreal Objects by various artists. Made by Valentine Hugo, the only female artist featured, the object is described as "Gloved Hand and Red Hand".¹⁴ As in *Le Baiser*, the hands depicted in the work are fragments, detached from their bodies. A shiny red hand with fur cuff is upright, prising

¹¹ Salvador Dali, "Objets Surrealistes" *Le Surrealisme au service de la Revolution* 3 (December 1931) Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 16-17.

¹² H. Finkelstein (ed. And translated) *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dali* (Cambridge University Press), 232

¹³ Allmer, *Lee Miller*, 55.

¹⁴ Finkelstein, *Collected Writings of Salvador Dali*, 232.

into the opening of the white-gloved hand which holds a die, relating to the background of a green roulette baize. Like *Le Baiser*, these hands offer a haptic connection to the viewer while simultaneously being distanced by inauthenticity, in this case concealed by fabric, the real skin only suggested. Both red hand and gloved hand are bound by a taut web of delicate white thread, echoing the erotic restraint of *Le Baiser's* false teeth bracelet-cum-handcuff, the desire to touch tantalisingly prohibited.

Such was the growing enthusiasm for this form of artwork among the Surrealists over the next years that an exhibition of Surreal Objects, *Exposition des Objets*, was held at the Charles Ratton Gallery, Paris, in May 1936, and a second, titled *Surreal Objects and Poems*, was proposed for the London Gallery in November 1937 by Penrose and Belgian Surrealist E.L.T. Mesens. Penrose had been instrumental in fostering a network of Surrealist activity in Britain having lived in Paris himself from 1922, also meeting Man Ray and marrying Surrealist poet Valentine Boue. Meeting Max Ernst in 1928 led to his further integration into Surrealist circles, and he recalled, "Breton, Éluard, Tzara, Tanguy, Masson, Miro, Man Ray, Bunuel, Dali, initially names that intrigued me from what I could read and see of their work, became through Max live members of a turbulent group who were to become my friends".¹⁵ Ernst and Penrose appeared together in the 1930 Surrealist film *L'Age d'Or* [The Golden Age], directed by Luis Buñuel the same year that Cocteau had featured Miller in *Le Sang d'un Poète*, and financed by the same individual, Viscount Charles de Noailles. In 1936 Penrose had organised, with critic and writer Herbert Read, the International Surrealism exhibition at the Burlington Galleries in London, which attracted over 20,000 visitors thereby introducing the movement to a broad public.¹⁶ The following year, Penrose met Miller at a party in Paris, and they spent time with a loose group of Surrealist friends including Man Ray, Eileen Agar, Ernst, Leonora Carrington, Picasso and Mesens, in both Devonshire, England, and Mougins in the South of France.

At Mougins, Miller and Penrose began making postcard collages together that, although two-dimensional, functioned in a manner akin to the Surreal Object. Collage had been central to Surrealist art from its inception. In the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto Breton had referenced Picasso's cubist collages incorporating newsprint and "pieces of paper" as proto-Surrealist works, claiming "it is even permissible to entitle 'Poem' what we get from the most random assemblage possible of headlines and scraps of headlines cut out of the newspapers".¹⁷ A notable collage Miller made in 1937,

¹⁵ Finkelstein, *Collected Writings of Salvador Dali*, 38.

¹⁶ Michel Remy *Surrealism in Britain* (London: Lund Humphries, 1999), 78.

¹⁷ Breton *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 41.

Untitled Collage incorporates a postcard of the Côte d'Azur with a view of the coast towards Cannes, the nearest town to Mougins, alongside fragments of her own photography.¹⁸ The jagged triangular tips of land into the sea and peaks of the hills in the postcard are accentuated by scraps of photographs over- and under-laid, cut to echo these points, while the photographs represent a group of female Surrealists. Agar, depicted in shadowy profile against Brighton Pavilion in a photo taken earlier that year, is wearing the iconic “Mad Cap” hat designed by Elsa Schiaparelli, a fashion designer who collaborated with Surrealists such as Dali as well as pioneering her own Surrealist-fashion hybrid designs. The outline of Agar’s shadow is mirrored in a white paper silhouette. A portrait in profile of fellow Surrealist photographer Dora Maar has the face cut out, leaving only the hair and a rough profile given by the back edge of Agar’s silhouette. Through literal gaps in the images, or shown in shadow, these female figures are presented as absences while being the focal point of the image, perhaps a further commentary on the surrealist trope of the female muse as a prominent erasure.

Miller herself is also alluded to elliptically, through a snippet of patterned fabric taken from a photograph of her on the beach by Penrose. The cut-out segment of her lap is collaged to the bottom of the land-mass depicted in the postcard to form a figure, the coastline as torso supporting the multiple heads of Agar, and Maar. A fragmented hand appears again, its disembodied, unnaturally splayed fingers recalling Miller’s photograph, *Exploding Hand*, 1930, emerging from the bottom of Maar’s hair and reaching out towards the viewer. Just as poetry can be created through the juxtaposition of newspaper print, so Miller’s collage offers a new lexicon through which meaning is created from its component parts. Each fragment signifies particular people, places and moments in time, as well as generalised symbols such as the female muse, the generic seascape, packaged up and mass produced in post-card form.¹⁹ Working in sculptural form with *Le Baiser*, Miller’s process of creative collision seen in her collage is compounded by the use of found objects that bring the experience and associations of the real world – consumerism, cosmetic enhancement, physical intimacy and gender power dynamics - into the three-dimensional image.

¹⁸ Lee Miller Archives, www.leemiller.co.uk/media/xMoayxNIQk6V8MzMqM2NQ..a?ts=MIUDzix4ffbvEmeE71Lc72wGY0R3vAI824CjFUTZRk.a.

¹⁹ For further detailed analysis of this work see “Shadows of herself: Miller, Picasso, and Collage” in Allmer, *Lee Miller*, 89-119.