

# The Secret Growing: On the New Spiritual Art Canon

*Steffie Nelson surveys the recent institutional embrace of visionary women artists.*

By Steffie Nelson • February 23, 2024

ART & ARCHITECTURE



IN OCTOBER 2022, I received an invitation to celebrate the Scorpio new moon eclipse with a group of creative women. The invitation was illustrated with a 1915 painting by the Swedish artist and mystic Hilma af Klint, [The Dove, No. 14](#)—a rainbow sphere with a white center against a black background, astrological glyphs in each corner. “If you are receiving this, it’s probably because you practice magic in some form,” wrote the host, an artist and filmmaker friend. She asked those who attended to bring something to share with the group—a poem, a dance, a ritual—and an intention for the moon cycle. I felt something expand in me as I read her words: this was an opportunity to claim our own

magic and, in so doing, to connect with a growing female-centered movement—with af Klint as one of its foremothers—that is reshaping conceptions of both art and spirit.

The gathering took place in an L.A. backyard garden that had grown lush and wild over the summer. We sat around a candlelit altar decorated with photographs, flowers, cloth, bones, crystals, tarot cards, and other talismans. A wood fire kept us warm. Our host opened the circle by reading from a letter af Klint wrote in 1903 that was found in a



“How often have we heard you say that everything is futile, that nothing comes of all your labors,” she began.

Yet like amorphous buds your endeavors sprout in all directions. You see everything as formless and you forget that this is a sign of life. Gradually the formlessness takes on more precise contours and the steadily growing roots feed an ever stronger plant, which will one day explode with an abundance of leaves and flowers. You know this is so, but you must perceive this knowledge with such vividness that you dare to build on it. [...] [F]or just as invisible hands help and tend every plant on this green earth, so every budding sprout of goodness is tended and shaped and protected by invisible powers and when the time comes your eyes will open and you too will see the beautiful plant that grew in secrecy.

Af Klint faced very real obstacles and disappointments as an artist and woman living in late-19th- and early-20th-century Sweden, but her unshakable faith in her work and its ability to communicate across dimensions sustained her—and has proven prophetic. These words of consolation may have been directed to her close friends and collaborators, yet here we were, writers and musicians and artists in contemporary Los Angeles, reaching out to clasp the “invisible hands” extended across centuries and continents. It wasn’t until the day after the circle that we realized we had gathered, entirely by chance, on af Klint’s birthday—almost as if she planned (or planted) it.



The legend of Hilma af Klint begins, essentially, with her death in 1944 at the age of 81. When she died, it was revealed that she left most of her artistic output—nearly 1,400 paintings and drawings and 27,000 pages of notebooks—in the care of her nephew Erik,

with one shocking stipulation: most of it must be sealed away for the next 20 years. As she was unheralded in her lifetime—she was unknown to many of her artistic contemporaries and discouraged by her hero, Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner, to whom she presented her vision for [a spiral temple](#) to house her work—af Klint’s decree sounds like a form of artistic suicide. And yet, to a practicing Spiritualist who regularly crossed into metaphysical realms, death was not the end of communication. Af Klint believed that her dynamic, prismatic paintings would be better understood by future generations. This was an act of self-preservation—a pause, not a silencing.

In 2018, the [exhibition](#) *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* opened at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City and went on to break the museum’s attendance records by the following spring, to the surprise of everyone except, presumably, the artist, dead for 75 years. Within a spiral setting as she had envisioned, it showcased the 193 works she called *Paintings for the Temple*, whose overarching subject was the evolution of the soul. They were made between 1906 and 1915 with assistance from her inner circle, the Five (de Fem), and in full collaboration with spirit guides channeled during séances who transmitted instructions and, af Klint believed, also guided her hand. “I worked quickly and surely, without changing a single brush-stroke,” she wrote.

I made a solo trip to the Guggenheim to see this show during my annual Christmas visit to New York. The [suite of paintings](#) called *The Ten Largest* wrapped around a ground-floor gallery, and standing before them was rapturous, like being bathed in color. Representing the stages of human life (childhood, youth, adulthood, old age), these masterworks—each over 10 feet tall—were created in just 40 days, and they were, as af Klint described their colors, “paradisiacally beautiful.” Luminous forms of pink, lilac, pale blue, bright yellow, burnt orange, and white swirled and danced, referencing biology, botany, cosmology, and geometry. Like the radiant works of Botticelli, they were painted with egg tempera. Numbers and letters floated like musical insignias or secret formulas or codes; taking them in *felt* alchemical, as if one’s own codes were being rewritten. The apex of the exhibition, the gilded [Altarpieces triptych](#), was reached by ascending the spiral.

Af Klint’s story and the faith it gave us in the act of creation (and in faith itself) seemed like the best kind of poetic justice, with Hilma as avenging angel. It felt especially meaningful in the misogynist wake of #MeToo and Trump. But I am still pained by the need af Klint felt to darken, even temporarily, her colorful legacy. And I feel protective of her work—and, frankly, *all* of the work made by the women artists who form what feels like a spiritual sisterhood, including the “desert transcendentalist” Agnes Pelton (1881–

1961) and Mexico City's magical surrealists Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) and Remedios Varo (1908–63). I'm not sure we, as a society, know how to care for their gifts. Since the Guggenheim exhibition, there has been a flood of shows, projects, and scholarship centered on af Klint—some welcome, like a [biography](#) by Julia Voss, and some contentious, like [a series of NFTs](#) from Pharrell Williams—the musician/producer and current men's creative director of Louis Vuitton—which the af Klint family opposed.

Carrington, Pelton, Varo, and other artist-mystics have also been fêted in the last five years, their names spoken in such reverent tones that we might momentarily forget their historical exclusion from the museum's hallowed halls. But as these artists come up for "reevaluation" among modern art critics and gatekeepers, the inquiries feel too narrow. Within the expansive, magical contexts of their work, a question such as who invented abstraction—a popular debate with af Klint currently at its center—loses meaning. Why contort someone into a preexisting framework when it is their unbounded vision we most need to receive? Judy Chicago's *The City of Ladies*, part of the feminist icon's *Herstory retrospective* at New York City's New Museum, is among the exhibitions and texts that are presenting alternative ways to define a canon.



A new book by Jennifer Higgle, an art historian and former editor at *frieze*, aims to illuminate the synergy between the creative and spiritual practices of many women artists, and to correct systemic erasure. [The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World](#) was published last year by Weidenfeld and Nicholson in London, with a US edition from Pegasus Books out last month. It brings to life a world where feminine magic and art feed each other, and creativity is a path to transformation. The "Other Side" of the title refers to both the esoteric realm and to this unwritten side of art history.

"I came to this [subject] through my interest in gender exclusion in art histories," Higgle explained, speaking via Zoom from her native Australia, where she lives part-time. Higgle's previous book, *The Mirror and the Palette: Rebellion, Revolution, and Resilience* (2021), is about women's self-portraiture, and, she said, "even as recently as the '90s, I wasn't taught that there were great women artists in the Renaissance. You start thinking, well, what else has been excluded?"

"When I was learning about Surrealism," Higgle continued, "I wasn't learning about the spiritualist impulse of many 19th-century women who set up these female-led communities that resulted in an incredible outpouring of female-led creativity." These

artists “were exploring the world in ways that didn’t necessarily align with Western formalism, which was very suspicious of things like intuition and imagination.”

Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884), for example, founded London’s College of Psychic Studies and called her swirling, feathery, almost psychedelic watercolors “spirit drawings.” Emma Kunz (1892–1963) channeled her vibrational “energy field” designs through interdimensional guides, and considered them tools of healing. During their times, aligning with the divine was almost blasphemous, but it likely helped these women envision lives beyond rigid societal structures. “Maybe,” Higgle suggested, “art is one way of accessing important parts of our psyche that we need to understand the world and our place in it.”

*The Other Side* is also part memoir, written during the pandemic as Higgle spent time communing with the plants in her London garden, and then traveled with friends to Greece, where, as she points out in her book, “the idea of magical women is nothing new.” Here, she went deeper into Greek mythology, reading Madeline Miller’s 2018 novel *Circe*, a reimagining of the story of the daughter of Helios, the sun god, and Perse, a mortal woman—a union that gave Circe magical powers. When she used these powers against a romantic rival, she was exiled to an island where she honed her skills as a witch, herbalist, and weaver.

In Miller’s retelling, the silver lining of exile is the space and time to develop the self, and the notion of fruitful isolation reverberates throughout these women’s histories, from Higgle’s personal journey to those of featured artists like Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988), a prolific painter, writer, and tarot artist who left the Surrealist milieu and the international art world in 1946 to live in a primitive cottage in Cornwall, England. The French American artist Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002) also found a muse in the tarot, constructing her [magnificent mosaic](#) Tarot Garden on 14 acres in Tuscany. Saint Phalle lived and worked in the monumental, sphinxlike *Empress* [sculpture](#), with its rainbow talons, starry blue hair, and mirrored mosaic interiors, for seven years: the heroine of her own mythology.

Other chapters of Higgle’s book range across centuries and continents, covering subjects as diverse as Victorian fairy art and spirit photography; Aboriginal Australian art collectives; and the life of the early feminist and Theosophist Annie Besant, who led the Theosophical Society upon the death of its prominent co-founder, Madame Helena Blavatsky, and co-authored the book *Thought-Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation* with C. W. Leadbeater in 1905. Long out of print but [reissued](#) in 2020 by the



boutique press Sacred Bones, *Thought-Forms* theorizes about how color, spirit, and science are connected (i.e., the interplay between energy and form), with illustrations presented as manifestations of psychic states.

Of course, it was not only women who found enlightenment and empowerment on “the other side,” but as the spirit realm is traditionally regarded as feminine (read: unserious), a double standard was often applied if the seeker was male. When someone like Wassily Kandinsky, who published the oft-cited treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in 1910, “drank from the same spiritual well” as Hilma af Klint, noted Higgin, “it was seen as either a youthful aberration or an interesting masculine investigation. Whereas with Hilma it was not seen as art.”

This was how both Rudolf Steiner, a former Theosophical leader who left the Society to form his own Anthroposophical Society in 1913, and a 21st-century female curator at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, who [excluded](#) af Klint from a major 2012 survey of abstraction, defended their rejections of her. They argued that because she had used the tool of mediumship and was aided by spirits, the resulting works were artistically impure, and she could not be credited as their sole creator. This position is flimsy, paradoxical, and sexist. While affirming the legitimacy of the spirit realm, it then used this affirmation against af Klint, to exclude her from the category of “genius”—a word that, in fact, was originally defined as a guiding deity or spirit.

Others, like critic Hilton Kramer, didn’t bother to disguise their bias. Reviewing LACMA’s groundbreaking 1986 exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, Kramer dismissed af Klint’s paintings—shown for the first time in a major institution—as “essentially colored diagrams,” adding that the “inflated treatment” the artist received was because she was a woman.

Even Higgin herself, for years a card-carrying member of the art establishment as an editor at *frieze*, sensed that her spiritual sojourn was not always viewed impartially by her colleagues. “I do feel that there is some sort of slight prejudice against this world, like I’ve slightly gone off the rails,” she said. Higgin also wrote an essay for Judy Chicago’s *Herstory* catalog, and she found it “fascinating” to learn, during an interview with Chicago, “the extent of the abuse that she received in the ’70s for her interest in spiritual or goddess practice.” In fact, the same critic, Kramer, in a 1980 review of Chicago’s [seminal work](#) *The Dinner Party*, accused the artist of “vulgariz[ing] and exploit[ing] the imagery of female sexuality.” One dares not imagine how he might have interpreted her use of the butterfly as a symbol of the vulva.

An [exhibition](#) at the Tate Modern in London last summer, which paired af Klint with the Dutch modernist Piet Mondrian by virtue of their shared interests in Theosophy and botany, was presented as a corrective of sorts. A celebratory *New York Times* [review](#) stated that the show gave af Klint her “rightful place in the story of abstraction”—which might sound like a victory, but it’s a complicated embrace, and one I suspect af Klint might have found stifling. To truly rewrite art history, we must dismantle the entire structure and allow for new origin stories.

David Zwirner Books published a beautiful catalog for a recent [exhibition](#) featuring Hilma af Klint’s *Tree of Knowledge* series, which illustrates the imagined systems that connect living beings. It was created when she was 50 years old and living and working at an island lake house with a new creative circle. The catalog includes a poem, “Cloud Ladder,” that Joy Harjo, the first Native American to serve as US Poet Laureate, wrote for this volume in af Klint’s honor. To me, the poem shows how simple perceptual shifts can begin to unravel outmoded narratives and etch new paths. It reads, in part:

I’d had enough of questions posed by the hierophant.  
 He carries the book of rules made by men who think they own the land.  
 I will never be enough when measured by such flat line  
 Measurement of meaning.  
 Consider the curve of earth, I argued.

✧

The visionary desert painter Agnes Pelton contemplated, more deeply than most, the relationship between earth and sky and our place somewhere in the middle. Like af Klint, she drew from Theosophy’s amalgam of Eastern philosophies, Judeo-Christian mysticism, sacred geometry, color theory, and more, in her quest to give form to spiritual states. Neither woman married or had children (both were probably queer), but where af Klint thrived in community, Pelton made her best work alone, in the quiet vastness of the California desert, with only the heavens for illumination. Pelton, too, was unknown in her own lifetime beyond her intimate circles and supported herself by making landscapes for tourists—even the Palm Springs Art Museum, which now proudly claims her as a native daughter, turned down the gift of her estate in the 1970s—but her work has similarly resonated with a contemporary audience seeking healing and meaning in times of unrest. Created in meditation, with a labor-intensive glazing process that gives them an uncanny glow, Pelton’s paintings are like visitations from other dimensions: luminous

shapes and beings hover over rocky landscapes, conversing with the stars and sending signals back to earth.

*Desert Transcendentalist*, her first [major museum show](#), opened at the Whitney Museum in March 2020, just a few days before widespread COVID-19 lockdowns. I connected with Pelton's work during these strange days, when I joined a Zoom book club focused on the 2019 [anthology](#) *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West*, in which she was featured. I still find it eerily comforting to imagine her canvases illuminating darkened galleries over a grieving New York City—and fitting for an artist who grew up in Brooklyn but yearned for solitude.

Pelton was introduced to esoteric thought by a teacher at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, and this opened for her a path toward personal liberation. As American professor and esoteric-art historian Susan L. Aberth (like Higgin, a recurring name in this area of scholarship) points out in the *Desert Transcendentalist* catalog, the discovery of Eastern teachings and Theosophy in particular, with its female leadership, "was one of the few avenues helping women break free of Christianity's restrictive stranglehold on their lives."

In the late 1920s, Pelton lived briefly with the Glass Hive, a Theosophy-influenced community in South Pasadena. Its members included the musician, painter, and astrologer Dane Rudhyar, who went on to found and make Pelton honorary president of the New Mexico-based [Transcendental Painting Group](#). Her ideas gelled while she was in contemplative states, and also through the practice of Agni Yoga, with its emphasis on mental discipline. During what she believed was a short trip to Cathedral City, east of Palm Springs, in 1932, Pelton [found her permanent physical and spiritual home](#). For the next three decades until her death in 1961, she communed with the desert mountains, skies, and stars, and birthed her most powerful visions. "I knew there was a spirit in nature as in everything else," she said in a 1957 interview, "but here in the desert it was an especially bright spirit. I found wonders here."

By the time *Desert Transcendentalist* [finally landed](#) at the Palm Springs Art Museum, Pelton was also part of the [exhibition \*Another World\*](#), focused on the Transcendental Painting Group and organized by Sacramento's Crocker Art Museum. When that show [came to LACMA](#) after COVID-related delays, I attended the opening with some members of the Zoom book club. Almost giddy to be reconnecting in person, we entered the gallery and made a beeline for Pelton's works.



In [Winter](#), from 1933, a violet dawn rises from iridescent spiky clouds while two birds stand in the foreground, eating bits of grass from the thawing earth—a rare literal representation for Pelton, who described her paintings as “records of inner visual experiences.” [Birthday](#) (1943) occupies a realm between ocean and sky, with orange waves beneath a starry dome, and a starfish-like form wrapped around a glowing teardrop pendant. [Light Center](#), made between 1947 and 1948, depicts an illuminated corridor with an elliptical mirror or sun at its center. While the other TPG works danced on their canvases with a kinetic, jazzy energy, hers hummed at a deeper frequency, seeming to emanate light from within—which was her intent all along. “All of my abstractions,” she once wrote, “have to do with light and the beneficence of light, for light is really all life, you know.”



In Mexico City, where ancestors and Mesoamerican deities were simply part of the community, Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo found the kind of creative and spiritual freedom Pelton discovered in the desert and af Klint found in her occult circles. The British Carrington and the Spanish Varo originally met in Paris as the partners of older, established artists—Max Ernst and Benjamin Péret, respectively—and emigrated to Mexico in the 1940s along with other Surrealist political refugees like the movement’s founder André Breton. But while Surrealism encouraged explorations of dreams and the subconscious, it was also inherently sexist, believing a woman’s highest role was that of muse.

After enduring the horrors of war—which led to Carrington’s mental breakdown—the two women found the culture of Mexico City healing and hospitable to their mystical proclivities. Here, “magic survived the conquest in syncretic ways,” according to Susan Aberth, who befriended Carrington in the 1990s and wrote the first English-language biography of her, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, in 2004. Aberth noted that Mexico’s merging of Indigenous beliefs and Catholicism made sense to Carrington, whose Irish Celtic ancestors similarly combined paganism and Christianity.

Carrington’s influence on today’s art world—her children’s book *The Milk of Dreams* (2017) [provided the title](#) of the most recent Venice Biennale—is largely thanks to the scholarship and dedication of Aberth and her colleague, the Mexican curator and writer Tere Arcq, who organized major exhibitions on both Carrington and Remedios Varo as lead curator at Mexico City’s Museo de Arte Moderno. Arcq also cocurated last year’s Carrington [retrospective](#), *Revelación*, at the Fundación MAPFRE in Madrid, and helped

mount *Science Fictions*, the first Varo [exhibition](#) in the United States since 2000, at the Art Institute of Chicago last fall.

In 2018, while researching a Carrington retrospective in Mexico City, Arcq discovered 22 never-before-seen major arcana tarot cards by the artist in a private collection. It is a meaningful step when a practitioner creates her own magical tools—and one that women artists like Pamela Colman Smith (1878–1951), who designed the iconic Rider-Waite-Smith deck, have routinely been uncredited for—and this discovery opened new roads of scholarship about the significance of the occult and Mexico’s Indigenous traditions in Carrington’s work and life. Arcq collaborated with Aberth and Gabriel Weisz Carrington, Leonora’s son, on the [recent book](#) *The Tarot of Leonora Carrington* (2022), published by the Mexican-Spanish publisher Editorial RM, an edition that has been complemented by a [new tarot deck](#) from London’s Fulgur Press.

The text notes Leonora Carrington’s symbolic color choices: jade, the background color of her Empress card, was representative of life and fertility to the Aztecs, while black (the Magician) references obsidian, a stone of divination. Aberth and Arcq also drew connections between the tarot and other Carrington works. A [white, moth-like figure](#) in 1953’s *And Then We Saw the Daughter of the Minotaur* relates to the High Priestess card, and as early as 1939, she portrayed her then-lover, Max Ernst, [standing in a snowy land](#) and being guided by a lantern—references to the Rider-Waite-Smith deck’s Hermit card.

I was introduced to both Carrington and Varo by LACMA’s revelatory 2012 [exhibition](#) *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States*. In this show, also cocurated by Arcq, they were just two of 46 artists featured alongside superstar Frida Kahlo. Although their styles are distinct, they are unmistakably kindred souls. Carrington’s paintings conjure liminal dream spaces inhabited by mysterious hybrid creatures—half human, half animal; part person, part plant. Some works feature occult symbolism like planetary glyphs or crystal balls. Varo’s otherworldly subjects—owl-faced guardians, psychedelic cats, animated laboratories, the moon personified—are rendered with exquisite detail. The work of both women exerts an elemental, magnetic pull.

Now, Aberth and Arcq are collaborating on a new project: a book about the magical friendship between these two women when they lived in Mexico City’s bohemian Roma Norte neighborhood. Along with the Hungarian photographer Kati Horna (1912–2000), who introduced Carrington to the father of her children, they were known as “the three witches.” Speaking on the [podcast \*Witch Wave\*](#), Aberth told host Pam Grossman about

their trips to the Mercado Sonora for herbs, candles, and talismans, and their time spent reading Robert Graves's protofeminist *The White Goddess* (1948) and Jung, throwing the I Ching, and drinking tea and tequila. Carrington's pet parrot, Ouspensky, was named after the Russian esotericist. While Aberth said she was sworn to secrecy about the few details Carrington shared about their magical rituals, she did reveal that the artists would often begin paintings during particular astrological cycles, and would place crystals around their studios to invite certain energies.

As to whether the women identified as witches, Carrington's son has stated definitively that his mother was "not a witch," while Varo perceived her "ability to see relationships of cause and effect quickly, and this beyond the ordinary limits of common logic," as she wrote to Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca. But the label isn't the point. Varo and Carrington treated art-making as a magical practice: they had cast their circles, and painted them on the canvas too.

When Varo died unexpectedly from a heart attack in 1963, tributes honored her as an "alquimista" and remembered the "mundo mágico" she created. Her death occurred before the rise of second-wave feminism, but Carrington was actively engaged with the movement and linked "the mysteries" to feminine power. "Most of us," she wrote in an artist's statement for a 1976 exhibition in New York City, "I hope, are now aware that a woman should not have to demand Rights. The Rights were there from the beginning; they must be Taken Back Again, including the mysteries which were ours and which were violated, stolen or destroyed."

These words stand as their own kind of manifesto, more enduring today than Breton's 1924 *Manifeste du surréalisme*—which Carrington, who died in 2011 at the age of 94, incidentally confessed she never read.



For the British artist Penny Slinger, internationally renowned for her provocative photographic collages, reclaiming "the mysteries"—and her own agency—almost came at the expense of her career. Today, the 76-year-old tantrica and iconoclast lives and works in a former bank building in Downtown Los Angeles, collaborating with some of the biggest names in art and fashion and preparing for [a deluxe edition](#) of her 1977 book *An Exorcism* from Fulgur Press later this year. However, this was preceded by decades spent far from urban life, engaged in deep inner work after the art establishment turned its back on her.

A darling of Swinging London, Slinger upended surrealist conceits by taking herself as muse and using the tools of collage to heal the feminine psyche. In *An Exorcism*, a [series of collages](#) generally regarded as her masterpiece, Slinger presented herself in various guises, sometimes with friends or lovers, enacting personal traumas in the setting of a decadently derelict estate. Often naked, occasionally taking the form of a nun, lion, or butterfly, she transmuted the pain of identity and sexuality through art. The work is glamorous in an early definition of the word “glamour,” meaning a magical spell.

*An Exorcism* coincided with Slinger’s introduction to Tantra, the Eastern mystical tradition centered on the interplay of opposites, symbolized by Shiva and Shakti. Other late-1970s collage projects were more specifically linked to the tantric path, like *The Secret Dakini Oracle*, a 64-card [divination deck](#) with art by Slinger and text by her then-partner Nik Douglas, a scholar of Tantra. [Mountain Ecstasy](#) combined erotic and sexually explicit material with sacred, religious, and natural imagery. All three bodies of work were featured in Slinger’s 1977 London solo show, *Secrets*. A photograph from the opening showed her exotically garbed in scarves, bangles, and bells, smiling proudly through the gallery window. She was a woman at the height of her power—and therefore a threat.

In 1978, British Customs seized freshly printed copies of a *Mountain Ecstasy* book that had arrived from Holland, claiming the work was “obscene or indecent.” After a perfunctory hearing, the books were “condemned by the Magistrates” per a letter Slinger shared with me from that time, and which they then burned. It is a disturbingly archaic reminder of the hostility that witchy women have faced under a government that made [the vague crime](#) of using “magical powers” punishable by imprisonment until 1951.

Slinger left London—and the art world—for almost 35 years. She and Douglas lived in Tortola and Anguilla in the Caribbean, where Slinger spent time with the Arawak, the Indigenous people of the region. Her next home was a “palace in the redwoods” in Northern California, with a new partner and a community that celebrated the divine feminine, but eventually she decided to plug back in. “I left the art world to pursue my spiritual life over my artistic career,” she told me, “but then realized after a long time that I couldn’t really keep my position in the history of art if I didn’t come back and engage with this whole system.”

In 2014, Slinger had her [first solo show](#) with Blum & Poe (now Blum), the blue-chip gallery in Culver City that still represents her. The [documentary](#) *Penny Slinger: Out of the*

*Shadows* was released in 2017, and the next year, she moved to Los Angeles. She knows there is still resistance to the spiritual nature of her work—she was even told by one of her galleries to take her website down “because it talked about the goddess too much”—but lately, and largely thanks to the success of *af Klint*, she feels “like there is a crack in that particular veneer. So I’m trying to push with that opening.”

In a 2019 [collaboration](#) with the French fashion house Dior, Slinger transformed the label’s Paris headquarters into a space of initiation, with floor-to-ceiling photo collages and projections representing the four elements, and a Tree of Knowledge growing through the central stairwell.

The artist’s current mission—tackling ageism—might not be quite so fashion-friendly, but she sees honoring our elders—which is intrinsically connected to respecting the earth—as essential to our way forward. “If we don’t give a platform of respect to our elders,” she says, “then we don’t get that wisdom of experience. Therefore, the whole society remains immature.”

Slinger recognizes that she is part of a broken system, but she is unafraid of taking back the rights that were hers to begin with, as Leonora Carrington urged. Up next: Securing the museum retrospective she knows she deserves. “I’m still here; I’m still alive,” she states with a plainness that might break your heart if you didn’t hear her unwavering determination. “I don’t want to wait till I’m dead.”



“What if women ruled the world?” This question, embroidered on a banner hanging above an altar flanked by fertility goddesses, was the first thing my eyes met as I stepped from the elevator into a small gallery on an upper floor of the New Museum in late December. This was Judy Chicago’s show-within-a-show, *The City of Ladies*, named for a 14th-century directory of renowned women in history that Chicago cites as the first feminist text. Below other banners throughout the space that responded to the initial question—“Would old women be revered?”; “Would there be private property?”—was a selection of works by almost 90 women and genderqueer artists and writers, including an illuminated manuscript by Hildegard of Bingen on a pedestal in the center of the room.

As I walked around the floral-carpeted space, I had the uncanny sense of visiting a shrine to my own influences and heroines: here was a Maya Deren film clip and a Beatrice Wood ceramic piece, an Anaïs Nin first edition and a Julia Margaret Cameron albumen silver



print next to a Florine Stettheimer painting, Hilma af Klint flanked by Agnes Pelton and Georgia O’Keeffe, Carrington beside Kahlo. In the middle of another wall was one of my favorite Remedios Varo paintings, [Papilla Estelar \(Celestial Pablum\)](#), in which a woman spoon-feeds the moon ground-up stars.

But this was not my personal vision board; it was Chicago’s “alternative to the patriarchal paradigm in art,” a show described as “part expanded self-portrait and part revisionist historical archive.” I kept moving through the gallery, the works sparking associations and memories, reflecting my own “self-portrait” back to me. It was like returning to a path I thought I’d walked alone, and finding friends there. What had seemed to me like disparate elements, collected over the years, in fact articulated an alternative narrative—one that was more cyclical than linear, reciprocal and generative, like an ouroboros: the heroine’s journey.

I thought back to the most recent moon circle I attended, in November. Since the 2022 gathering, we have continued to meet semi-regularly on the new or full moon, and this was once again on the Scorpio new moon, a full lunar cycle since the first. Seated on a hilltop under an inky sky, Los Angeles glimmering below, we passed around [a small purple book](#) given by the evening’s host to the circle’s founder—a famous 1986 essay by Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. The essay presents an alternative to the “killer story” defined by weapons and sticks and ego, in the form of a “life story” represented by the container or “carrier bag,” which keeps those things that are “useful, edible, or beautiful” for the community. “[B]efore the tool that forces energy outward,” Le Guin asserts, “we made the tool that brings energy home.”

In the preface to this volume, the publishers, Ignota Press, explained that their name comes from Hildegard of Bingen’s invented, mystical “lingua ignota”—Latin for unknown language—and the possibilities inherent in what Audre Lorde described as “nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.” This seems to me a perfect characterization of the present moment, particularly as it pertains to the shifts in the art world discussed here. The artists included in this piece—the sisterhood that includes af Klint and Carrington and Slinger and so many others—communicate in languages both unknown and universal, giving rise to new stories that we can feel shaping the culture and ourselves, even if we don’t yet know what form they will take. What is certain is that the “invisible hands” are there; we just need to take hold, open our eyes, and see the buds that sprouted in secrecy starting to grow.

*Featured image: Leonora Carrington, La Empress (III) (ca. 1955), reproduced from The Tarot of Leonora Carrington, published by RM.*

---

#### LARB CONTRIBUTOR

*Steffie Nelson* has written for the Los Angeles Times, Alta Journal, and The New York Times. She is the editor of the essay collection *Slouching Towards Los Angeles: Living and Writing by Joan Didion's Light* (2020).

---

Share

[COPY LINK TO ARTICLE](#)



---

## LARB Staff Recommendations

---

### No Business Like the Supernatural Business

Pericles Lewis on the history of spiritualism.

**PERICLES LEWIS • FEB 15, 2017**

---

### Surrealist Afterlives: On LACMA's "In Wonderland"

**AUG 23, 2012**

---

Did you know LARB is a  
reader-supported nonprofit?

LARB publishes daily without a paywall as part of our mission to make rigorous, incisive, and engaging writing on every aspect of literature, culture, and the arts freely accessible to the public. Help us continue this work with your tax-deductible donation today!

DONATE

# LA Los Angeles Review of Books RB

---

The Los Angeles Review of Books is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and disseminating rigorous, incisive, and engaging writing on every aspect of literature, culture, and the arts.

LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

The Granada Buildings  
672 S. La Fayette Park Place, Suite 30  
Los Angeles, CA 90057



[Masthead](#)

[Volunteer](#)

[News & Press](#)

[Contact](#)

[Supporters](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Shop](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

---

GENERAL INQUIRIES

[info@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:info@lareviewofbooks.org)

MEMBERSHIP INQUIRIES

[membership@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:membership@lareviewofbooks.org)

EDITORIAL INQUIRIES

[editorial@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:editorial@lareviewofbooks.org)

PRESS INQUIRIES

[press@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:press@lareviewofbooks.org)

ADVERTISING INQUIRIES

[adsales@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:adsales@lareviewofbooks.org)

PURCHASING INQUIRIES

[larbbooks@lareviewofbooks.org](mailto:larbbooks@lareviewofbooks.org)