



Kati Horna, *Subida a la catedral, Barcelona* (Ascending to the Cathedral, Barcelona), 1938/1960, gelatin silver print photo-montage, 9 × 6 4/5"

Kati Horna

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“An aristocrat by inheritance, an anarchist by conviction, a seducer by nature, and a wanderer by vocation,” Kati Horna—as eulogized by artist Juan Luis Díaz—was born Katalin Deutsch Blau on May 19, 1912, in the twilight of the Austro-Hungarian empire. She died at the turn of millennium, leaving behind a vast and slippery body of work that, perhaps due to its roots being in photojournalism rather than in fine art, has thus far eluded much of the fanfare recently extended to her best friends Leonora Carrington and, to a lesser extent, Remedios Varo. The first gallery exhibition in New York devoted to her work, “Kati Horna: In Motion,” lightly scratched the surface of an oeuvre that encompassed war photography, agitprop, and a heteroclite Surrealism dissociated from any organized artistic movement.

The daughter of a prosperous Jewish family in Budapest, Horna relocated to Berlin in 1930, where she and her partner, Hungarian socialist Paul Partos, moved in the intellectual circle of dissident Marxist Karl Korsch, a key political influence on Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht. Fleeing Berlin in the wake of the Reichstag fire five years later, the couple eventually ended up in Paris's nineteenth arrondissement, scraping together a living in what the artist called a "delirium of poverty." Two photographs on view at Ruiz-Healy dated from Horna's inaugural "*Marchés aux puces*" (Flea Markets) series of 1933–37 and captured that echt emporium of the Surrealist uncanny—with its dolls and dress forms jettisoned amid the material refuse of the long nineteenth century—as seen through the dispassionate gaze of a photojournalist. "I was in Paris but I never went to their gatherings," Horna said of André Breton's clique. "I didn't like their idea of going to cafés to discuss things."

Indeed, by 1937 Horna was in Barcelona, at the vanguard of the anarchist propaganda effort in the Spanish Civil War and in contentious solidarity with both the Republican government and the Stalinist Communist Party. (Still close with Korsch, she shared his commitment, contra these factions, to revolutionary collectivization and workers' self-management.) Her contributions to the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT)—Spain's federation of anarchist trade unions—and its many affiliated publications was sadly unrepresented in this exhibition, apart from the photomontage *Subida a la catedral, Barcelona* (Ascending to the Cathedral, Barcelona), 1938/1960, which superimposes the ghostly, Garboesque image of a woman's face onto a stone wall in the titular city's Gothic Quarter. Published after devastating Republican losses in the CNT organs *Libre-Studio* and *Umbral* (where it was part of a spread captioned WE ARE FIGHTING TO DEATH OR VICTORY), this unnerving and unpeopled photograph seems to abandon the possibility of the latter, and perhaps even concedes a creeping disillusionment with what Horna's daughter—after learning, decades later, of her mother's hidden political past—would characterize as "the chimera of revolutionary anarchism."

Escaping the advance of Fascism across Europe in 1939, Horna and her second husband, Andalusian artist José Horna, settled permanently in Mexico, where she found success as an editorial photographer and joined a community of like-minded souls among the capital city's close-knit émigré intelligentsia (or "those European bitches," as Frida Kahlo allegedly

baptized her sororal triad with Varo and Carrington). Much of the art in this exhibition reflected this incestuous conviviality—see the off-the-cuff photos of Carrington painting and Varo smoking or mugging for the camera with her husband, painter Gunther Gerzso, at Carrington’s wedding to Emerico “Chiki” Weisz. Carrington also served as the model for Horna’s provocatively titled series “*Oda a la necrofilia*” (Ode to Necrophilia), 1962, three prints from which were on display at Ruiz-Healy. Commissioned by the short-lived Bataillean journal *S.NOB*, the selections here captured the artist naked, leaning against or sitting on an unmade bed, as she holds vigil over a white mask laid to rest on a pillow. Perturbing amalgams of chilly eroticism, stagy pictorialism, and a rather literal fetishism (the mask stands in for the absent cadaver), these afterimages of a ludic death rite transcend, by some weird alchemy, the sum of their parts and the canned profundity of memento mori. They embrace, *pace* Horna, the Bretonian *cri de coeur*: “Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be.”

— Chloe Wyma
