

WIDEWALLS

Kati Horna - A Modern Photographer Who Documented Both the Real World and the Surreal



The contribution of women to the Surrealist movement is nowadays a known fact, and the works made by female artists were there to ask important questions and address numerous issues women were facing in society.

Among the most prolific female artists who came to prominence during the interwar period was a Hungarian-born Mexican photojournalist and teacher, Kati Horna. Ongoing curiosity, technical acuity, and concern for chronicling political brutality led her to create a one-of-a-kind oeuvre that still enchants audiences across the world. Although mainly known for her photos of the Spanish Civil War taken between 1937 and 1939, her work was profoundly influenced by the principles of surrealist photography, ancient rituals, and the macabre.

To pay homage to this perplexing artist, the Michael Hoppen Gallery decided to present an online exhibition that unravels the full story of Kati Horna's career, that spanned seven decades and five countries.



Left: Kati Horna - Untitled, series Oda a la necrofilia, Ciudad de México, 1962 (Leonora Carrington) / **Right:** Kati Horna - Portrait, 1937

The High Priestess of Surrealist Photography

Kati Horna was born in Budapest and throughout her life, she lived in France, Berlin, Spain, and eventually settled in Mexico. The artist despised being defined by any of the places she lived:

“ *I am allergic to the question of where I am from. I fled Hungary, I fled Berlin, I fled Paris, and I left everything behind in Barcelona [...] When Barcelona fell, I couldn't go back for my things, I lost everything again. I got to a fifth country, Mexico, with my Rolleiflex around my neck, and nothing else.*

As she was exposed to injustice and violence, Horna had to move across Europe often. Those migrations influenced her approach to photography, but she stayed persistent in obtaining a socially engaged agenda while rejecting any form of documentary style. While in Berlin, the artist met Bertolt Brecht and was largely influenced by Bauhaus, Surrealism, especially the work of Constructivist Lajos Kassák, who perceived photography as a tool for social change. Horna learned a lot about photography in the workshop of a renowned photographer József Pecsí.

Throughout the 1930s Horna developed a close friendship with Robert Capa, the legendary photographer and Magnum founder, with whom she shared the same interest in radical politics. The two first met while Horna was still a teenager in Hungary, and then they met again in Paris and later Spain, where the two photographers documented the Civil War.

In 1939, Horna used temporary documents to leave Spain for Mexico via New York. Out there she was welcomed by local magazine editors, who were acquainted with her work in Spain, and who empowered her to pursue more artistic directions in photography. A dozen of European political activists and avant-garde practitioners found their way in Mexico City, while Horna's legendary home became a meeting point for an international circle. The bohemian atmosphere of interwar Mexico enabled several female artists such as Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti to shine, which can be the reason why Horna decided to settle here.

Horna saw photography as a vehicle for emancipation that allowed her to express her political standpoints at a time when these opportunities were extremely limited for women. The series she produced in Spain show the photographer's ongoing interest in addressing the experiences of women at war and their role in modern society. This particular focus on the representation of women was further developed in the series of photographs she produced in Mexico, some of which were featured in publications such as *Mujeres: Expresión Femenina* (Women: Feminine Expression) and the experimental journal *S.nob* (a short-lived, yet influential Surrealist publication edited by the writer Salvador Elizondo).



Left: Kati Horna - Untitled, series Oda a la necrofilia, Ciudad de México, 1962 (Leonora Carrington) / **Right:** Kati Horna - Portrait, 1937

The Significance of Kati Horna

One of the reasons Horna's photography is so staggering is the strategy she developed called *gendered witnessing* which implied introducing a more feminine view on the notion of war (that was at large a masculine concept). She developed this pioneering strategy by focusing on the behind-the-scenes, a position that allowed her to capture the effect of war on women and children. She was also editor of the magazine *Umbral* (where she met her partner José Horna), and has collaborated with other magazines, most of them anarchic, such as *Tiempos Nuevos*, *Libre-Studio*, *Mujeres Libres* and *Tierra y Libertad*.

Kati Horna is best known for the series *Oda a la Necrophilia* she produced after settling in Mexico in the late 1930s. These photographs illuminate her approach to photography that was further explored throughout her career, from cityscapes to uncanny montages and portraits. Kati Horna perfectly summarized the way she saw photography as a medium:

“ *Photography enables one to show, liberate and develop one's sensibility. [...] At the moment of pressing the shutter you had to keep the image - let your emotion, discovery, and visual surprise flow - the moment had to be kept in your head. That's what I call developing one's visual memory.*

Besides highlighting the astounding practice of one of the most intriguing photographers of the 20th century, the current exhibition serves as an important reminder of the role she had in female emancipation and the Surrealist movement over the course of the 20th century.

The exhibition *Kati Horna: A Lifetime's Work* will be accessible on [Michael Hoppen Gallery web page](#) until January 7th, 2022.