

Through female eyes

Catherine Milner is swept into an unusual world of Surrealism by the work of three remarkable women

HHEY Man, it's Surreal' is not a phrase you are likely to overhear in the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester, where a new exhibition of Surrealist art by women has just opened. In the past, Surrealism has been seen as largely a male enterprise, with women featuring as muses or props, as in Man Ray's *Violin*, or Salvador Dalí's re-creation of Mae West's lips as a sofa.

But Leonora Carrington, who was English, Kati Horna, a photographer from Hungary, and Remedios Varo, a painter from Spain, bucked the trend by becoming distinguished artists in their own right. Having fled Europe during the Second World War, they became close friends while living in Mexico City, united beyond their European roots by a fascination with the occult. This fostered, if not an art movement exactly, then an eddy of works every bit as compelling as those produced by their Surrealist brothers in Paris.

Of the three, Miss Carrington, now aged 93, is the only one still alive. Her works—haunting, dream-like scenes, deftly crafted in egg tempera—are replete with all the usual Surrealist imagery—hatching eggs, etiolated figures and desert landscapes. But they also offer a uniquely female view of the subconscious. Birds appear as symbols of freedom, men as distant beasts in the form of



The Giantess or Guardian of the Egg by Leonora Carrington

stags or bulls. Subtly erotic female sorcerers and shamans are shown in varying states of undress.

Born into a life of privilege, Miss Carrington subverted her destiny as chatelaine of a country house by becoming an artist. She was the daughter of a rich textile merchant from Lancashire who was so keen for her to marry into the aristocracy that he gave her an 18th-birthday party at The Ritz. It was to no avail: instead, she chose to live in Paris with the German Surrealist artist Max Ernst, who, 20 years her senior and married, was far from her parents' ideal as a suitor. The affair lasted three years and ended with Ernst being incarcerated in a French prisoner-of-war camp and Miss Carrington having a nervous breakdown. But the exposure to his paintings spawned an aesthetic in

her that was to last a lifetime.

Varo was perhaps the most celebrated of these three female artists. Her work differs from Miss Carrington's in that it is much more overtly autobiographical and her brushwork is arguably more polished. But both artists were fascinated by magic and religions of all types—Miss Carrington went to a Catholic boarding school, and much of her work seems a struggle with the forces of darkness, femininity and cruelty.

Horna converted reportage photographs of war into scenes of domestic grief. Among her most arresting works is a photograph of a man with only one leg cradling his newborn child against a backdrop of warplanes.

With the exception of Horna's, what is striking about the work of these artists is that it is so female-centric. Yet it is precisely

because they were released from the shackles of domestic servitude by loving house-husbands (all three were happily married in the end) that they had the time to create it. Had they stayed in Paris in the shadow of the massive egos of Dalí, Marcel Duchamp and other titans of the Surrealist Movement, they would, no doubt, have been doing the washing-up instead.

'Surreal Friends' and 'Surrealism in Sussex' are at the Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, West Sussex, until September 12 (01243 774557; www.pallant.org.uk)

Next week William Morris at Blackwell in the Lake District

Beyond the boudoir

An intriguing photograph (*below*) of four beautiful women sleeping, piled on top of each other like babies in an orphanage, is the highlight of a small exhibition of Surrealist art in collections in Sussex. They are war photographer Lee Miller; Leonora Carrington; Nusch Éluard, wife of the poet Paul Éluard, and Man Ray's girlfriend, Ady Fidelin. Famous people always seem to know each other, and this cluster of muses proves the rule. Other gems include a portrait of Edith Sitwell that makes her uncharacteristically soft and blonde, and two lobster telephones and 'lips' sofas by Dalí. But perhaps most surprising for those who thought he worked only in grey and ochres is a dazzling scarlet painting by Roland Penrose depicting his wife, Lee Miller, knitting.

