

**MUTATING BEAUTY:**

*How Artists Use The Ethereal and Grotesque to Create Ownership of One's Identity*

by

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The bodies of woman, trans, and genderqueer artists have been operated and abused by a systemized inequality of power, that has not only existed historically, but is continuously enforced today. In response, many artists have created artworks that depict new bodily forms that defy social expectation through the use of the mutated, grotesque, and unnerving. It is in this act of defiance that the artists Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Wangechi Mutu, Sarah Nicole Francois and the collective Fecal Matter have created new realities that allow them to navigate their control over being perceived by others and examine their own relationship to identity and the corporeal form.

French-American artist Louise Bourgeois acts as a stepping stone between the worlds of twentieth century artists Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo and the contemporary artists Wangechi Mutu, Sarah Nicole Francois and Fecal Matter. Her work depicts many of the same motifs continuously emulated throughout time. Bourgeois continuously combated perceptions of the body, and used her work as a coping mechanism from the pains of trauma and fear. Much of her work revealed anxieties of identity that led her practice into acting as a release. Her work expresses a longing for a desired reflection of self. Bourgeois' art often consists of body focused contours, imagery of fertility, birth, and manipulated forms that harness body parts and their symbolic meaning. For example, in reference to one of her works, *Femme Couteau* (1969-70), she stated that the knife-shaped female torso: "symbolize[d] women who are afraid of men-so they imitate men. They are made 'hatchet-women' out of fear." Bourgeois has said of the same work: "It has the shape of a penis because in her imagination she [the woman] experienced the

penis as a weapon."<sup>1</sup> Much of Bourgeois work has been described as autobiographical, as she keeps record of her own expressions of sex, motherhood and trauma.

The forms rendered by Carrington, Varo, Mutu, Francois and Fecal Matter are directly reflexive and disruptive to the canonized beliefs of beauty and gender. Their works act as entrances to other realities free from the living force and oppressive history of such beliefs. In interaction with these sociological systems, these artists create figures that reimagine concepts of beauty, strength, and individualism. A pattern of themes including the mythical, bodily, anthropomorphic, futuristic, and disembodied appear throughout their work as they explore questions of identity or heal from the violence their bodies have sustained them. Each of these artists operate within their own realms of creation that utilize surrealist motifs. Carrington and Varo became attracted to Surrealism for the escapist nature it provided. Through the construction of narratives rendered through forms of the grotesque or mystical, Carrington and Varo could respond to the trauma of World War II.

Within the Surrealist movement there has been a rigid divide between men and women artists, how their work is received and the subjects they choose to dwell deep into. The early Surrealist movement has been critiqued for its weaponized misogyny, but was pardoned for their academic and theoretical approach. The “female body” and form is dehumanized and abused under the guise of radical acceptance. Surrealism allowed for the celebration and forgiveness of “perversions” that would have alienated male artists socially. There is great value across the Surrealist movement both from men and women artists, however, the theories of men who

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<sup>1</sup> Gibson, Ann. "Louise Bourgeois's Retroactive Politics of Gender." *Art Journal* 53, no. 4 (Winter, 1994): 44, 14, 15

openly reinforce the power relations that violate and bind the mouths of women cannot be what is used to define Surrealism's value.

Surrealism calls for the destruction of societal norms, but for many artists such as Carrington and Varo, it has allowed them to illustrate an annihilation of self identity and is a source of freedom from both the restraining hands of oppressive governments and those of their male counterparts. This annihilation of self can demonstrate the destruction or departure from the expected, or express the torment suffered through the violence inflicted upon women since birth. Carrington and Varo were forced to face the cruelty of dictatorial regimes, rampant fascism, and the expected violence placed onto them as women. However, they both faced additional cruelty at the hands of those they believed they could trust, and those they continued to love; their chosen partners, artistic cohorts, and revered mentors. This distinctive abuse has led to a further separation and demand of control for oneself, and a frustration that casts their work into more mythical and suspenseful realms that are reactive to their own realities.

Contemporary artists Wangechi Mutu, Sarah Nicole Francois, and Fecal Matter combat their own relationships to perception by creating "portraits" that counter socialized expectations and reality's restrictive nature. The surrealist motifs of the grotesque, anthropomorphic and mystical of the past are illustrated again within each of their artworks, as they allow for the dominion of their own realities.

Each artist has their own inspiration and purpose feeding their artwork, yet themes of the politicized body, gender and race appear as they exist between the realms of Westernized history, a forged present and imagined futures. Wangechi Mutu has stated that her work demonstrates

how the body as an image and tool can help one rework their identity. Mutu hopes her work can provide a reflective space specific for Black women, and illustrates worlds filled with the themes of power and rebirth. Sarah Nicole Francois as a 3D digital artist describes her motivation of power.<sup>2</sup> Power drives her work both from the experience of marginalization as a Black woman and from a personal characteristic of her own. Francois creates works that are participatory to her identity online that fulfill her own joy. The Instagram collective Fecal Matter records the lives of artists Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran as they modify their bodies digitally and physically to find comfort within their own presentation and joy beyond a gender binary. They continuously advocate for a freedom from gender, and the need for embracing control over one's physical appearance.

It is important to note that in discussion of these artists, all of their pronouns and identity will be that of the one they have presented publicly in their lifetime. Carrington and Varo both identified as women yet display genderqueer qualities within their artwork and writings. It is essential to consider the historical time and social relations that they were living within and how it impacted their relationship to self identity. Additionally, those who identify as women can still be genderqueer or experience gender and or body dysphoria.

#### OWNERSHIP AND AUTHORSHIP OF THE "OTHER" IDENTITY

Artists Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Wangechi Mutu, Sarah Nicole Francois and the collective Fecal Matter have succeeded in constructing their own realities and narratives that contradict the rigid expectation and abuse enforced by those who dominate their society. The

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<sup>2</sup> Shelby Mayes, "Sarah Nicole François Is The Designer Behind Solange's 3D Avatar Who Is All About 'Black Girl Domination'". Blavity. March 2019.

dismemberment and mutating of the bodies in which they create grant power onto themselves as well as their creators.<sup>3</sup> Each figure becomes empowered by the uneasiness they string from their viewers and the questions that are placed upon their identities. Bodies become armed as if weaponized in their form. They remain otherworldly while still defending themselves from their creators' suffered abuses.



The characters and identities that are reborn at the hands of artists like Carrington, Varo, Mutu, Francois and Fecal Matter show the strength that the fusion between identities can hold across time. What can seem like disturbing imagery or cruel representation can also be the upheaval of restraints and the existence of a new otherworldly understanding of self, the perception of self within the public, and the relation one might have to the natural and occult



<sup>3</sup> Sarahnicolefrancois. Instagram post. September 17, 2019.  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/B2iJncaFeyv/?igshid=2xluyv1krik2>

simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> Wangechi Mutu describes the rendering of her work as “harvesting”; it is even in the words used by these artists to describe that create inverted meanings to the natural. Carrington’s mythical rewritings allow her to experiment with many forms of identity and hybrid characters. Many of her depictions are of animal and human crossbreeds whose power is formed in their ability to be both and neither at the same time. They transcend the limitations of “woman’s body” and beyond that of any humans— their physical mutation of the animal symbolizing their closer relationship to the earth as well as strength in justified and unjustified violence. The organic and mythical forms of Carrington and Varo can be seen again in Mutu’s own work. Additionally, the anthropomorphic figures of both artists are echoed within Sarah Nicole Francois and Fecal Matter’s identities as they pursue powerful representations.

#### LEONORA CARRINGTON

Leonora Carrington was a surrealist painter, sculptor and writer born in Clayton Le Woods, Lancashire in 1917 before eventually creating a home and name for herself in Mexico City. Carrington was noted for being one of the last surviving members of the original surrealist movement before passing in May of 2011. She authored several short stories and published a plethora of books written in combinations of French, Spanish and English. Carrington is known for causing her audience to enter the magical realms she has formed with significant color and tone, brimming with creatures, fables, and adrogenous figures all of whom further her underlying themes of alchemy, descent and creation.

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<sup>4</sup>Matieresfecales. Instagram post. August 16, 2018. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmjfftFhiNZ/>

Leonora Carrington began her life from a place of high privilege, her childhood heavily impacted her work as an adult. In addition to the affluent architecture and sculptures, Carrington was exposed to dense woods, pools, and fields of flowers that would inspire her later on.<sup>5</sup> Influenced by her devout mother, Catholicism and other religious imagery appears often in Carrington's paintings. However, themes of the occult and fantastical are also present, inspired by Celtic tales her Grandmother shared with her as a child. Carrington grew her love of cooking and an obsession for alchemy with each year and often presents depictions of kitchens and magical spaces that many believe to be inspired by her grandmother's home.

As a teen, feeling confined under her parents' strict teachings and expectations, Carrington rebelled. After being expelled from two religious boarding schools, Carrington eventually completed a term at a Florence finishing school. It was here that she was able to explore the city and embrace Renaissance art, witnessing first hand textures and colors that would influence her years later.<sup>6</sup> However, again she was expelled and returned home only to endure the social obligations of her family's class. Carrington later mocks her "coming out" ball in her short story "The Debutante" (1937-1938), in which the narrator befriends a hyena who takes her place at her own ball. To disguise the hyena appropriately the narrator dresses it in her own clothes and the two attack her maid, eating all but the face, which the hyena dons as a mask. The story ends with the girl's mother returning to her daughter's bedroom in a rage stating that the "thing" that had taken her place at the ball removed its face, eaten it and leapt out the

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<sup>5</sup> Humphries, Lund. *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> Humphries, Lund. *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, 36.



window.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing their daughter's talent and clear resistance to etiquette training, Carrington was finally enrolled in the Chelsea School of Art and learning under the French Cubist painter Amédée Ozenfant.

It was as if by fate that Carrington was in London in 1936; only nineteen years old Carrington was introduced to the artwork of iconic painters Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró and future lover Max Ernst in the first international exhibition of Surrealist art organized by movement leader, André Breton.<sup>8</sup>

After meeting at a dinner party, Ernst and Carrington became almost instant lovers. In conversation with author Lund Humphries, Carrington states that she had fallen in love with Ernst's work long before the artist himself. Ernst gave Carrington an escape from the stifling life her parents were asking of her. After informing her father and mother of her relationship and plans with the much older artist Ernst, her parents were "shocked to the core".<sup>9</sup> It was in Max Ernst that Carrington found access to the world of the Surrealism artists. She spent significant time with many prominent artists, developing her own understanding of the movement and style. Now in his mid-forties Ernst acted as a new paternal figure in Carrington's life. Carrington herself has even stated, "It was from Max that I began to learn everything I needed to know".<sup>10</sup>

In 1939 France was officially at war with Germany, making Ernst, a German painter and intellect a national enemy. Ernst was taken from Carrington into an internment camp. Ernst's

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<sup>7</sup> Carrington, Leonora, Kathrine Talbot, and Anthony Kerrigan. *The Complete Stories of Leonora Carrington*. (St. Louis: Dorothy Project, 2017, 3-7).

<sup>8</sup> Humphries, Lund. *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Humphries, Lund. *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Humphries, Lund. *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, 38.

imprisonment tormented Carrington, and when he was arrested again in May of 1940, Carrington describes a pain that “tore at [her] stomach like earthquakes”.<sup>11</sup> Within the same year, Carrington found a temporary home in Madrid. The people who shared the home with her described Carrington to be “dangerously unbalanced”<sup>12</sup> and determined her to be sent to Dr. Morales' sanatorium (asylum) in Santander, Spain. It was within these walls that Carrington suffered treatment through the drug Cardiazol that induced severe fits. Now a known “precursor to Electric Shock Treatment (EST), Cardiazol or Metrazol therapy-also known as "convulsive" or "convulsion" therapy-was both brutal and ineffective.”<sup>13</sup> It was this brutal hospitalization that inspired the recounting of Carrington’s horrors in her writing of *Down Below* in 1941. *Down Below*, promptly named after the section in which Carrington was kept, reads as a complex diary of the artist’s experiences that seem both magically fictional and horrifyingly real.

Upon release, Carrington knew she had to leave Europe as it was now almost two years into World War II. By extreme luck, while in Madrid Carrington came across Renato Leduc, a Mexican diplomat and poet. After learning of her situation Leduc devised a plan to help, the two would marry and make their way to New York. Leduc married Carrington in Lisbon, and while the two waited at the port for the ship to the United States, they ran into Max Ernst and his newly taken lover Peggy Guggenheim.<sup>14</sup> While Ernst was still in love with Carrington, she no longer

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<sup>11</sup> Carrington, Leonora, and Marina Warner. *Down Below*. New York: New York Review Books, 2017, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Humphries, Lund. *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Hoff, Ann. "I Was Convulsed, Pitiably Hideous": Convulsive Shock Treatment in Leonora Carrington's 'Down Below'. Indiana University Press. *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Spring, 2009), pp. 83-98

<sup>14</sup> Humphries, Lund. *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, 42.

felt the same. Carrington ignored Ernst's pleas for her to return to him, feeling as if "she could no longer live with him unless she became his 'slave'."<sup>15</sup>

In New York Carrington began her life again surrounded by other artists, many of whom other Surrealists who had escaped the destruction of war in Europe.<sup>16</sup> Carrington's work finally found recognition in the October-November Surrealist exhibition of 1942. After the exhibition, Carrington and Leduc moved to Mexico where she lived until her death. It was here in 1943 that Carrington met fellow painter Remedios Varo. They became lifelong friends who built their own surrealist family and world together.

Leonora Carrington's career as an author and painter has focused on self annihilation, as a chance for the female body to be disassembled and reimagined as a powerful cosmic force. A force that is capable of declaring personal strength and punishing others with as much or as little severity as they choose. In a divergence of the work of many male surrealists, Carrington's work remains fairly absent of sexual desire, and when it is, is demonstrated through disturbing or comical exchanges. Her characters' desire is often met through an affirmation of self or a quest of transcendence that is not fulfilled by male figures. Carrington's writing is filled with a desire and assumption for violence, that is desentized and valued within her worlds. Within her paintings, many of Carrington's figures appear androgynous with various indicators of femininity missing or present. Those who hold more feminine features are often depicted as magical, and either incredibly powerful or facing terror from the few male figures illustrated.

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<sup>15</sup> Alberth, Susan L. *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*. (Farnham Surrey and Burlington: Lund Humphries, Ashgate Publishing, 2010, 44).

<sup>16</sup> Humphries, Lund. *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, 42.

One of Carrington's more recognizable paintings, *The Giantess*<sup>17</sup>, depicts a figure who appears to be a young woman standing over land, her height far above what is even imaginable. At her feet are trees that barely pass her shins and people who brandish scythes and farm tools as if to attack her. The giantess appears to possess immense strength, simply due to her tremendous size, but her power is heightened by the mythical elements she holds. Her pale face is completely bordered by individual stalks of wheat that grow from the top and sides of her head, past her shoulders and neck, meeting as if it were her mane. She is cloaked in a long dark orange gown, illuminated by illustrated gold figures that break almost halfway down the middle of her body. Wrapped around the giantess' shoulders, and shielding her body is a long, white, pleated cape from which two massive birds emerge. These birds are accompanied by three others that take her sides, the only other figures that match her size and majesty. The giantess, barefoot and above her attackers, holds an egg within her right palm, her left hand just above it as if to protect and




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<sup>17</sup> Leonora Carrington, *The Giantess*, 1950, in Private collection.

claim dominion over it. Her body is disproportionately rendered, her hands and face feeling almost too small and delicate for her frame. Carrington takes care to depict the deep ocean behind the giantess, filled with terrifying sea monsters and military boats miniscule against the giantess' strength. In creating *The Giantess*, Carrington implements her signature focus on color. There is a huge variance of hues, with both cool and warm colors mixed and nestled within each other. Her space is overlapping, in a way reminiscent of traditional folklore, as the ocean behind the giantess quickly becomes her background and sky, filled with creatures that could be viewed as either below or above the water's depth. Carrington also creates uneasy separation within the image, as the balance of symmetry are bent, the sides of the giantess' body adorned with birds and framed with the ocean's figures are unequal to each other. Carrington has clearly chosen how the elements relate to each other by size. The animals, sea creatures and humans are equatable to each other, however, the giantess and her birds, as well as the egg she is holding are much larger, making them a unified force. *The Giantess*, is an example of just one of Carrington's work that implements her feminine figures as divine in nature, reigning power because of their monstrous attributes that can be both beautiful and monumental in their presence.

Other works of Carrington's show possibly feminine features on very slender white bodies crowned in wings or tendrils, or onto the bodies of imposing creatures who take flight and appear both human and animal at once. Her works, *Nine, Nine, Nine*<sup>18</sup>, and *Pastoral*<sup>19</sup>, both

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<sup>18</sup> Leonora Carrington, *Nine, Nine, Nine*, 1948, in Private collection.

<sup>19</sup> Leonora Carrington, *Pastoral*, 1950, in Private collection.

illustrate this phenomenon of hers. Within both paintings the primary figures visible are gliding through the air, or translucent in nature.



**Nine, Nine, Nine,**  
1948, in Private  
collection.



**Pastoral,** 1950, in  
Private collection.

Throughout Carrington's oeuvre, bodies have been twisted and mutated as a practice of illustrating the divine, or the malicious. Humans share space with anthropomorphic creatures, whole animals, and figures that appear to be formed out of light, fabric and space.



**The Garden of Paracelsus, 1957, in Private collection**

*The Garden of Paracelsus*<sup>20</sup>, contains all of these figures as they exist in what looks to be a celestial plane. Pairs of figures are scattered across the painting, with lone ones filling space amongst the stars that surround them. Within the center of the image, two figures are intertwined. Both hold feminine features, but one is completely dark and is rendered with a golden light that distinguishes their body and wings and the other figure is entirely silver, holding a large egg in their arm, and appearing as if created from this translucent matter themselves. They stand at the center of a dancefloor, created from very thin gold geometric lines that form triangles and circles at their feet and a pyramid above them. To the left of the middle couple, a woman formed of golden light rides a rearing dark horse, her chest completely flat and body disproportionate. Closer to the viewer, slightly to the left of the image, there is a second couple dancing. As if mirroring each other, both extend one arm to the left, their legs in motion. The closest to the viewer is created out of the darkness, visible through gold light that outlines their body and hairs that sprout from their skin. This golden figure also has a neck that is twisted forward, similar to an animal's. Their partner, formed from both darkness and silver, with hair and a face split in color like a mask. At their feet is a dog dancing near them, and a snakelike creature wrapping itself across the floor. On the right side of the image, a third couple dances. They share many features with the center couple, one entirely dark and the other silver, but they are both decapitated, as a stream of liquid spurts from their heads, each carrying their respective heads in hands as they dance. Surrounding the couples are other figures that border the dancefloor and corners of the painting. Amongst them are clouds and symbols that appear again in Carrington's

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<sup>20</sup> Leonora Carrington, *The Garden of Paracelsus*, 1957, in Private collection



work. *The Garden of Paracelsus*, exemplifies the balance of beauty and mutation that Carrington places into her figures, and creates a space of existence for adrogenyous figures who transcend the real.

Carrington's Surrealism is reliant on the development of a new reality, in which all bodies have become spiritualized. The mutant, aged or disturbing is protected within it's new organic normality or is revered as representing strength.

### REMEDIOS VARO

Maria de Los Remedios Varo y Uranga, or Remedios Varo was born in the town of Anglés, in the province of Catalonia, Spain. Born in December of 1908, Remedios Varo was her parents' second child and only daughter<sup>21</sup>. Her full name is a devotion to the Virgin Mother, Virgen de los Remedios, to act as a "remedy" to forget the death of her older sister who had died before her birth. Varo's paintings reveal a superstitious world imagined by beliefs, meticulously depicted in a style reflective of her training and representative of her "adult terrors while indulging in childhood fantasies"<sup>22</sup>. Influenced by the imagery of the prewar Spanish avant-garde and French surrealists as well as her own experience of escape from a Spain destroyed by civil war and Nazi occupied France, Varo's work received critical and popular success as she revealed the sensitive realms of her dreams and the occult, where technology overlaps with nature and new realities created.

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<sup>21</sup> Kaplan, Janet A.. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998, 11).

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, Janet A.. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, 9.

Similar to Carrington, Varo was sent to a stifling Catholic school for girls. Her education and world became steeped in Catholicism both in religious and social practices. Varo's instinct was immediately to rebel as well. She threw herself into fantastical literature and poetry, obsessing over the occult and emphasizing the importance of her dreams.<sup>23</sup>

Remedios Varo's father, understood to be a very dominating and unpredictable force in her life, trained her in the practice of mechanical drawing, encouraging her artistic development. He recognized her potential and sent her to La Escuela de Artes y Oficios and La Escuela de Bellas Artes, both leading art schools in Madrid. She studied an intense curriculum which emphasized precision. Additionally, Varo studied scientific drawing to feed her passion for science.

The Surrealist movement began to surround Varo, influencing her as she fell in love with its qualities and the work of Bosch and Goya. In 1930, at the age of 22, Varo chose to marry her friend and peer, Gerardo Lizarraga. Despite being a commercial artist, Lizarraga was highly political and identified as an anarchist and one of the first to fight for the Republic in the Spanish Civil War.<sup>24</sup> Their marriage offered freedom to Varo, and Lizarraga's commitment to social progression gave Varo the life she wanted, access into the world of new artists. Although they never divorced, a separate lover of Varo's, Benjamin Péret, traveled with Varo from Spain to France. The two shared an apartment together in Paris. In November of 1941 the couple fled from Europe to Mexico.

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<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, Janet A.. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Kaplan, Janet A.. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, 31.

Remedios Varo, a close and influential friend of Carrington and artist in her own right, reveals similar themes within her own artwork. Varo's paintings stand out in rich detail and intricate patterns that feel mathematically illustrated. Her subjects are often elongated figures with insect and animalistic characteristics. Her paintings are flooded with a balance of feminine figures who appear to have been formed through a union with nature, and androgynous beings that have been joined with mechanics or enamoured in scientific discovery. Varo successfully created an immense world of self-portrait figures who possess her own features beyond their ambiguous gender identity<sup>25</sup>. It is with these characters that she has demonstrated feelings of both imprisonment and movement, growth and stagnancy. Many of Varo's paintings demonstrate a deep fear of predatory male figures, who pose a threat to her heroines.

When discussing this reappearing theme in her book, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, Janet Kaplan writes that:

In her Mexican work Varo depicted many of her characters as tall, thin, androgynous, yet in the works that stress violence she went out of her way to emphasize that those who are damaged are female. Although violence, especially violence directed against women was a favorite theme among the Surrealists, one senses that Varo's emphasis on the female gender of the victims was a form of personalization, an expression of her own fears.<sup>26</sup>

One of her self-portrait works in particular, *Unexpected Presence*<sup>27</sup> creates a painful narrative of a surprise invasion upon a woman while she sits, as a man begins to lick the back of her neck once bursting through the back of her chair. The young woman appears motionless, trapped and possibly accustomed to this assault. Varo has isolated this figure within the room,

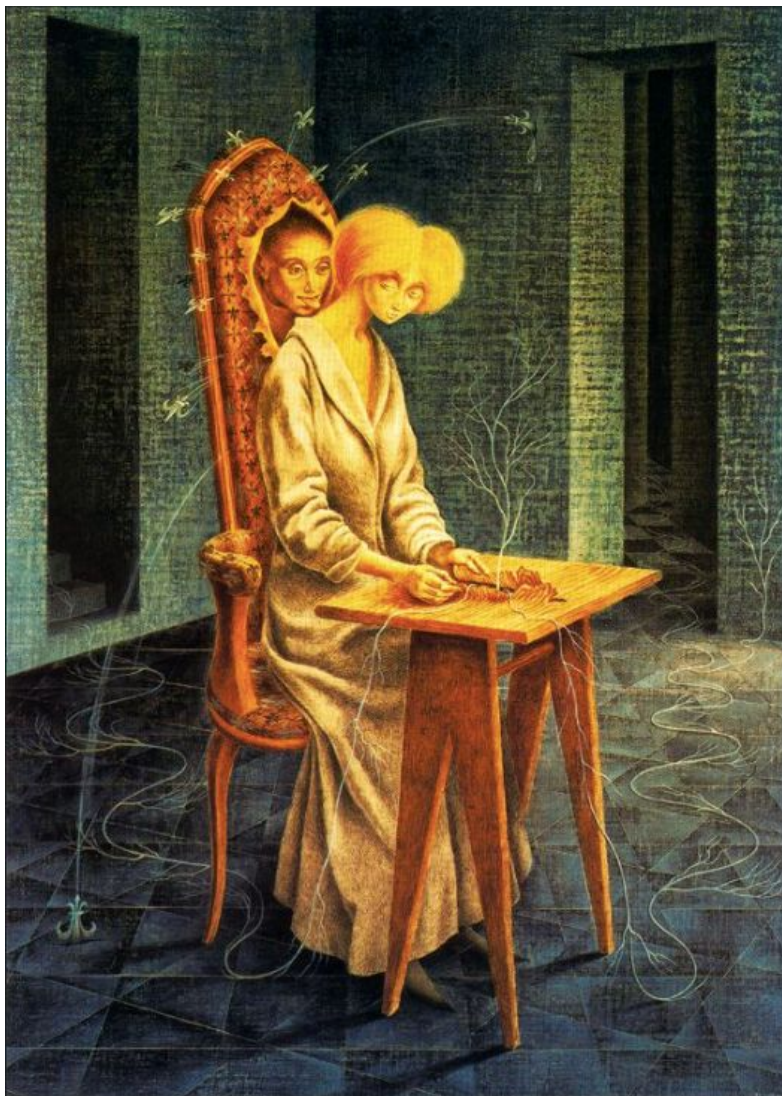
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<sup>25</sup> Kaplan, Janet A.. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, 147.

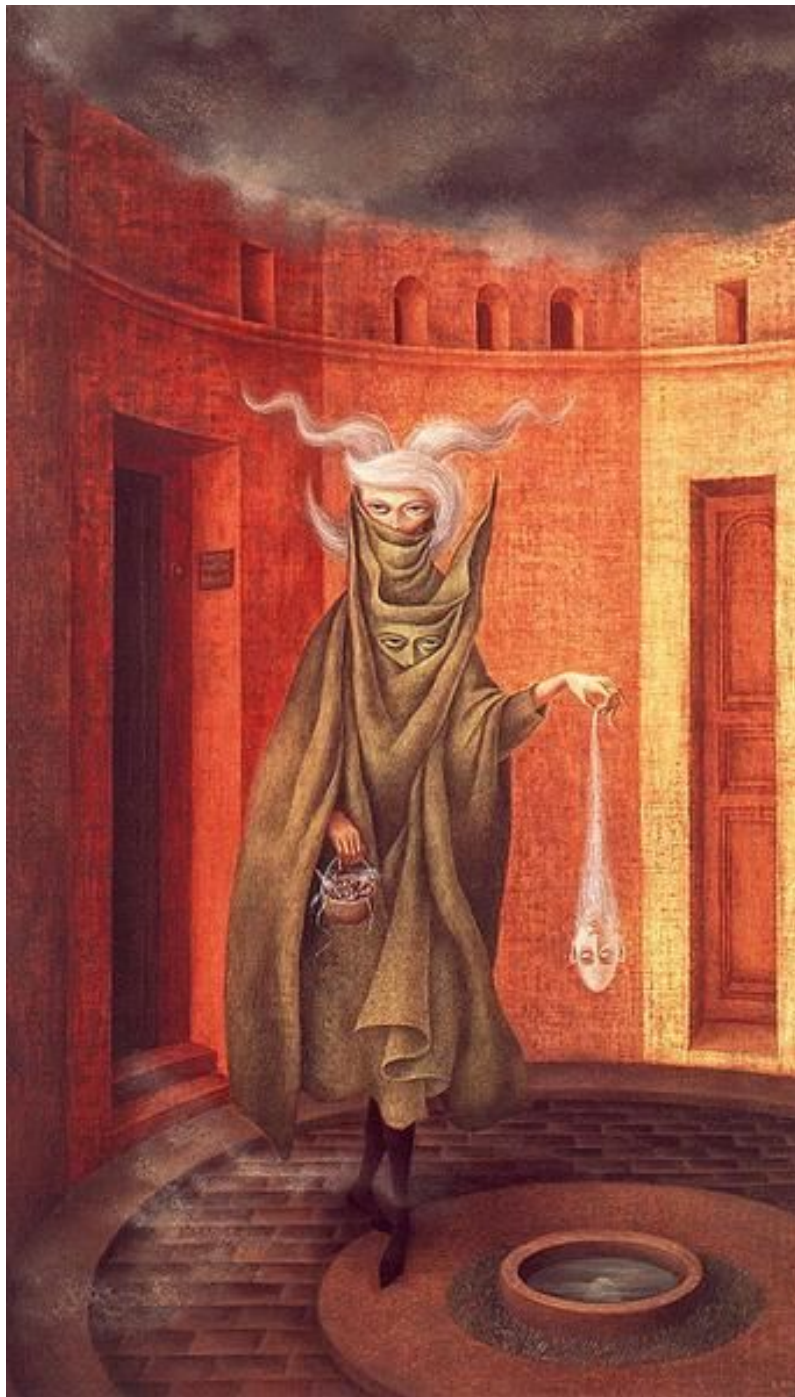
<sup>26</sup> Kaplan, Janet A.. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, 156, 158.

<sup>27</sup> Remedios Varo, *Unexpected Presence*, 1959.

her table and chair being the only thing present outside of the woman's attacker. The pattern behind the woman's head appears to have come to life, its points piercing the air and ground beside her. On the young woman's table is a small white tree that she nurtures, its thin root like branches grow upward cascading over the table and binding and fortifying the walls of the room, that is being plunged by her surprise attacker. The world in which Varo has presented depicts herself as a more androgynous, slender figure who struggles to maintain her own defenses against violence. The portrait is intended to bring a level of discomfort to the audience, it is in this uneasiness that one empathizes with the victim and is disgusted by the attacker. Varo is critiquing the male gaze, but even more so directly confronting the violence indulged through such a gaze, and the disregard of humanity and autonomy that follows such a narrative.



**Unexpected Presence, 1959.**



**Woman Leaving Psychoanalyst, 1961**

A separate work of Varo's, *Woman Leaving Psychoanalyst*<sup>28</sup>, illustrates the frustrations and hidden violence they tend to hold to those men closer in their lives. As the woman leaves, the mask around her face has seemed to fall into her coat, opening her vision. However, the fabric of the same material twists around her mouth, muting her. In her left hand she carries the disembodied head of her father, that she drops into a well at her feet.<sup>29</sup> The figure's form has not only changed through the regulation of her father's wishes, in the creation of the mask, but is also altered in the empowerment she feels from releasing his head. The woman's hair is risen, as if electrified, giving her a powerful appearance. Additionally, at her feet is the swirling of mist, marking the path made from her doorway to the well furthering a mystical quality about her.

Many of Varo's paintings depict a deep desire for control, understanding and protection. She continues to illustrate the fears of violence women felt both in peace and wartime. Those figures who have the most control within her work are those who are men acting from a place of violence as a villain, or androgenous figures in search of their own control or knowledge. Varo's love for science appears in works such as *Harmony* (1956) or *Plant Insumsia* (1961) as she illustrates extremely androgynous figures working feverishly at desks littered with organic or mystical samples. In both pieces the figures are working in what appear to be identical lab coats that are almost floor length and pants. Each figure shows a clear passion for what they are working on, at peace but drained from their own persistence to succeed.

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<sup>28</sup> Remedios Varo, *Woman Leaving Psychoanalyst*, 1961, in Private collection.

<sup>29</sup> Kaplan, Janet A.. *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, 155.



**Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River, 1959**



*Exploration of the Sources of the Orinoco River* introduces a new figure to Varo's lore who again shares several of her own features. Additionally they are wearing a coat extremely similar to the lab coat of Varo's other works *Harmony* (1956) and *Plant Insumsia* (1961). Within the painting the figure remains fairly adrogenyous, guiding their own makeshift boat to an overflowing goblet. As they steer themselves closer to the goblet they pull onto strings that lead to a small pair of wings that direct their boat. This character represents an adventurer who is capable of achieving their own success, and endeavouring on a quest for answers independently.

Remedios Varo's collection of portraits create an overarching narrative of exploration, reflection and independence. Those figures that find this success exist within a mythical realm rewritten by Varo herself that allow for them to pursue their own fulfillment. Her realms, similar to Carrington's are rendered through unnatural colors, eerie and distorted figures and her own emphasis on the repetition of patterns reminiscent of the botany.

#### WANGECHI MUTU

Contemporary artist Wangechi Mutu introduces similar concepts within her own multi-media artwork. Although currently based in Brooklyn, Mutu was born in 1972 in Nairobi, Kenya. Mutu is most well known for her composite collages that create hybrid or mutated characters from a wide range of sources. She has also created room installations and video art that immerse viewers into the realities she has rendered within her work.

Mutu began drawing as a child and, in 1989, Mutu moved to Wales to study at the United World College. By 1991, Mutu made her way to New York, attending both Parsons School of

Design and Cooper Union earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts. Mutu continued her studies at Yale University, receiving a master's degree in sculpture.

Mutu confronts the social structures of race, gender, and self identification, as well as the living impact of colonial history. Her deeply complex collages depict figures that have been constructed through a process she has named "harvesting".<sup>30</sup> Mutu expresses a rooted interest in "the power of the body, both as an image and as an actual mechanism through which we exist and find out who we are."<sup>31</sup> Through the subtraction of materials and creation of these figures, she provides a needed home for the therapeutic reflection and reworking of identity specific to Black women.<sup>32</sup> Mutu directly challenges the dehumanization and sexualization of Black women within the public eye, that may have distorted their own relationship to identity. Her work carves reflexive forms from imagery that are simultaneously ethereal and grotesque. Mutu's artwork expands elements of Afrofuturism, as well as a possible dystopia. The mutated, bubbling figures Mutu has created do not act as answers to questions of identity. Rather, they present a chance for self exploration and a doorway to eerie worlds and realities both reactive and free from social restraints-overflowing with reimagination and rebirth. Wangechi Mutu describes the figures she creates as "characters in a reality of their own that I've created".<sup>33</sup> They exist within realms that

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<sup>30</sup> Cervenak, Sarah Jane. "Like Blood Or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu's Resistant Harvests 1." *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 392,425,541, <http://ezproxy.purchase.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/1820294456?accountid=14171>.

<sup>31</sup> Cervenak, Sarah Jane. "Like Blood Or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu's Resistant Harvests 1.", 9

<sup>32</sup> Cervenak, Sarah Jane. "Like Blood Or Blossom: Wangechi Mutu's Resistant Harvests 1.", 12

<sup>33</sup> Vimeo . *Vimeo* . Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, April 7, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/124285746>.

emulate an earth either in disarray or complete flourish. Mutu has a desire to follow their stories as they come to life from her collages.



**The Bride Who Married a Camel's Head (2010)**

*The Bride Who Married a Camel's Head*<sup>34</sup>, shows a collaged depiction of a single figure, sitting on the ground-their legs bent outward before them. Lush plants and organisms surround their body as they hold a bloody jaw upward in one hand, allowing blood to splatter across the image. Mutu combines elements of the natural, divine, and mutated as she creates portraits that empower her viewers to decipher what qualities they wish to focus on and harness. The sole figure possesses snakes for hair, each snake extending across the image stretching far upward and to the left. The snakes' tendril-like bodies parallel the overgrowth sprouting from the dirt. Mutu's choice in giving her subject, the "Bride", hair reminiscent of Greek mythology's Medusa creates a tie between the Bride and the narrative Medusa is faced within canonized Western literature. Medusa is a victim of rape and is punished by the goddess Athena and is turned into a monster. The Bride immediately draws comparisons to the original myth as their hair becomes a weapon of self defense and a symbol of strength and terror. Just as Medusa was, the Bride is distanced from traditional beauty and reflects one who has been possibly violated, punished or misjudged.

In 2013 Mutu worked in collaboration with musical artist Santigold to create an eight minute animation titled *The End of Eating Everything*. In this work, Santigold's own face is that of an overwhelming being who roams a desecrated dystopia of earth, consuming what is in her

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<sup>34</sup> Wangechi Mutu, *The Bride Who Married a Camel's Head*, 2009. Mixed media, ink, and collage on Mylar, 106.7 x 76.2 cm. © Wangechi Mutu and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects. Photo: Mathias Schormann  
<https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/wangechi-mutu-my-dirty-little-heaven>

path. Her body is a mass of tumor like flesh exposed between the odd ligaments scattered across her form. The being's hair acts as powerful tendrils unfurling and tightening in reaction to the environment.



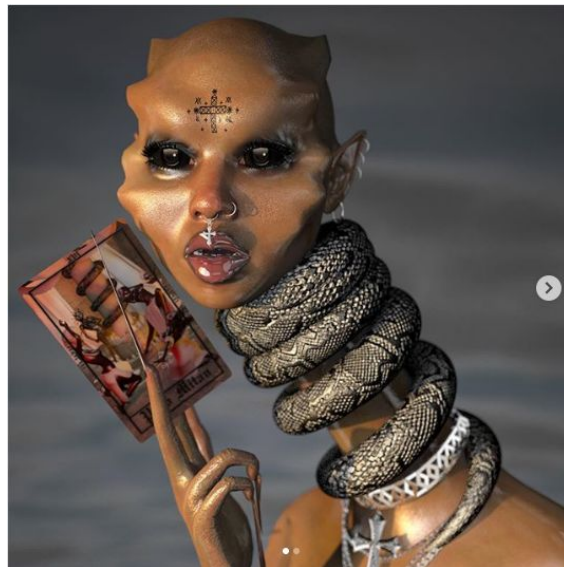
**The End of Eating Everything (2013), stills**

*The End of Eating Everything* (2013)<sup>35</sup> introduces Mutu's world of harvested bodies and empowered forms into a digital display. Within this medium Mutu has more control over the narrative she can create for her work, and the ability to enrapture her audience through pulsating textures and sound. *The End of Eating Everything* does have a being of what would be traditionally monstrous in nature, but she is also a figure to empathize with, and find one's own reflection in their relationship to the earth. Mutu creates a "planetary persona" who people can then project onto an immense feeling of loss.<sup>36</sup>

Mutu utilizes a set of aesthetics to develop deep worlds and lore that interact with our own experiences and reality. She creates cosmic figures that are empowered through their physical strength and ability to exist on an indivilustic level.

#### SARAH NICOLE FRANCOIS

Instagram artist and designer, Sarah Nicole Francois creates her own digital self representation through 3D digital images and videos. Many of her Instagram posts are of this other Sarah, who shares her features and name, but has completely black eyes .



<sup>35</sup> Mutu, Wangechi. *The End of eating Everything*, 2013. Animated video (color, sound), 8:10 minute loop, edition of 6. Courtesy of the artist, Gladstone Gallery, New York, and Victoria Miro Gallery, London. Commissioned by the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. © Wangechi Mutu.

<sup>36</sup> Vimeo . *Vimeo* . Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, April 7, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/124285746>.

Francois' work is not only autobiographical, but is supposed to have her own digital identity, in which she can exist free from reality's restraints. Francois' digital self is often accompanied by imagery of snakes<sup>37</sup>, knives for fingernails, being bloodied or bound. Digital Sarah could have distorted or positioned in ways that are impossible for Francois' physical body. Francois utilizes



the unnerving to express a second identity of hers. In a mixture of the initially grotesque and highly beautiful<sup>38</sup>, her posts range from origins of power to vulnerability and possession. She maintains ultimate control in how she wishes to be seen online in the creation of her own digital world. Francois can adorn her digital self in tattoos, extravagant clothes, or in surreal danger. Her new form gives herself dominance over how others perceive her.

“The main one that comes up in my work a lot is power; it’s mostly a personal characteristic. I’m kind of a control freak when it comes to creative aspects of my life. I like to have control of things which is why I do everything myself. Politically, there is a common theme of feeling like you lack power, especially with people in minority groups. It’s valid. So for me, I try to reclaim the power I do have.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Sarahnicolefrancois. Instagram post. October 23, 2019.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B3-GcTEluj/?igshid=4pyezsnde4d>

<sup>38</sup> Sarahnicolefrancois. Instagram post. January 5, 2020.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/B67PtMSFlhO/>

<sup>39</sup> Mayes, Shelby “Sarah Nicole François Is The Designer Behind Solange’s 3D Avatar Who Is All About 'Black Girl Domination'”. Blavity.

Francois operates within the digital art gallery space that is Instagram. As a self-taught artist, Francois' work has developed over time publicly. With the ever growing hunger for digitized media and digital versions of ourselves, Francois has collaborated with several musical artists such as Brooke Candy, Ashnikko, and Solange. Francois' work comes with other connotations as she develops a digital presence operating under her own design, in a culture of influencers and other users. Francois successfully creates the digital identities of herself and others who inherently allow for more control over perception and aestheticization. In her work she expresses similar themes to Carrington, Varo and Mutu; the anthropomorphic and weaponized beauty.



#### FECAL MATTER

The androgenous, and trascential nature that characterizes forms of Carrington and Varo are also present in the work of the contemporary duo Fecal Matter. Operating within the same digital space as Sarah Nicole Francois, Fecal Matter credits their public origin and growth through Instagram. Fecal Matter, an artist and designer collective formed by Hannah Rose Dalton and Steven Raj Bhaskaran, behaves as a contemporary example of artists whose

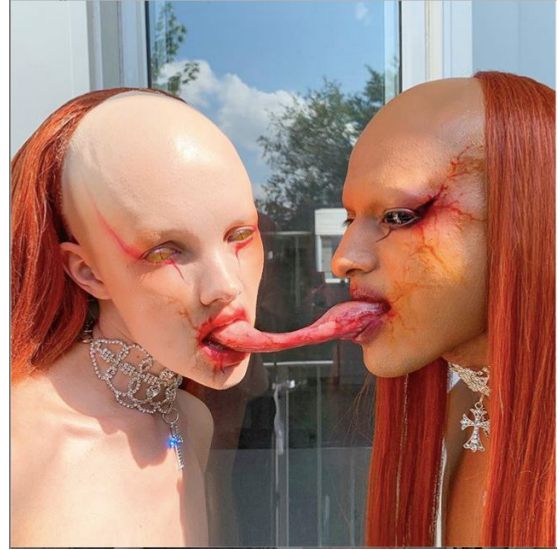
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<https://blavity.com/sarah-nicole-francois-is-the-designer-behind-solanges-3d-avatar-who-is-all-about-black-girl-domination?category1=visual-arts&subCat=news>



work and performance shatters expectations. In doing so, Fecal Matter allows them both to be truly free in expression. One post in November 2019 is even captioned: “One side is feared and the other side was living in fear”, depicting Dalton and Bhaskaran appearing more traditionally feminine and masculine on half of their bodies while their other half appears as they look now.<sup>40</sup>

Fecal Matter’s chosen stage for relation to the “Art World” and public is through the social media platform of Instagram. This allows for the use of extreme digital manipulation, and the emphasis of their own extensive “effects” makeup and sculptural work. Using these separate tools, Dalton and Bhaskaran are able to create bizarre and detailed images of themselves. The couple’s bodies appear distorted and modified to a place beyond recognition. Through the application of contact



<sup>40</sup> Matieresfecales. November 2, 2019. Instagram post. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B4YJqQ7BPD1/>

lenses, wigs, prosthetics and silicone molds, Fecal Matter transforms their “physical” form.<sup>41</sup>

The artists’ popularity skyrocketed after the public introduction of their “skin heels”. Spotlighted by VOGUE, Fecal Matter debuts the fully realized skin heels that they had photoshopped digitally.<sup>42</sup> After working in collaboration with replica body artist Sarah Sitkin, Sitkin and Fecal Matter revealed the final and fifth version of the heel. This pair matches Dalton’s skin tone, with the detailing of hair and moles. Bhaskaran is expected to have their own pair in production.

Fecal Matter has been very public in their belief to actively defy gender and gender roles through their designs and presentation.<sup>43</sup> Their work has allowed the couple to be experimental and joyful with their physical expression. Fecal matter wants us to question what it means to be human, the aesthetic ties and body sanctity we possess and to live freely beyond these reigns.

In the comparison of twentieth century Surrealist artists Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo and the contemporary work of artists such as Wangechi Mutu, Sarah Nicole Francois and Fecal Matter , operating within different parts of the artworld, a visible pattern of themes and aestheticization can be formed. Each artist creates work that harnesses power and or the reflection of trauma while using the visible pattern of anthropomorphic features, mutation, the celestial and occult. Such signatures instill a form of uneasiness and intrigue within the viewer. Their growing discomfort confirms the power which its creator holds. Aspects of

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<sup>41</sup>Matieresfecales. August 17, 2019. Instagram post. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1R1Cejh-JJ/>

<sup>42</sup> Satenstein, Liana. “Fecal Matter Has Made Its Photoshopped Skin Shoes Into Actual Wearable Heels-And They're \$10,000.” Vogue. Vogue, October 24, 2018. <https://www.vogue.com/article/fecal-matter-releases-photoshopped-skin-heels-for-real-life>. IMAGE)

<sup>43</sup> Matieresfecales. April 3, 2019. Instagram post. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BvztCkrFosL/>

surrealism are maintained throughout time and it is in these powerful signatures that they are each able to combat traditional expectations of reality. Due to its ahistorical nature, each artist instead chose to form their own realms, allowing for ultimate control and a deeper reaction from their viewers.

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