

*Ithell Colquhoun:  
Painting from the hinterland of the mind*

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Ben Hunter

An abstract painting with a textured, layered appearance. The composition is dominated by large, irregular shapes in various colors. At the top, there are bands of light red and pink. Below these, a large, textured yellow shape is prominent, with a cracked, organic surface. To the left of the yellow shape is a dark, almost black, textured area with a similar cracked appearance. Below the yellow shape, there are areas of green and dark blue/black, also with textured surfaces. The bottom of the painting is dominated by a large, textured red area, with a darker, more saturated red at the very bottom. The overall effect is one of depth and complexity, with the textures suggesting a sense of movement and organic growth.

Born in India, educated at Cheltenham Ladies College and trained in London at the Slade School of Art, for the last three decades of her life Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988) lived in the small, isolated village of Paul in the far west of Cornwall. There, amongst the holy wells, ancient crosses and stone circles she painted, composed poetry and crafted novels, topographical books and short stories. All the while, she performed magical ceremonies, meditated, and wrote articles on occult matters, ranging from short popular essays for the general public to abstruse pieces on technical issues that could only have been understood by a select few. Personally, she did not always find the world a comfortable place and, for its part, the world did not always know what to make of her. Was she an occultist who could paint and write, or was she a painter and author with deeply held, albeit unorthodox, spiritual beliefs?

Whether considered as artist or occultist, the fact of being a woman made a difference. It is striking that women have always found greater acceptance among occultists than in the art world. More than that, in esoteric circles women were frequently accorded unique powers when compared with men:

*Woman is the magician born of nature by reason of her great natural sensibility, and of her instinctive sympathy with such subtle energies as these intelligent inhabitants of the air, the earth, fire and water.*

So wrote Moina Mathers, one of the key figures in Colquhoun's developing spiritual awareness, a list that also included Helene Blavatsky, Dion Fortune and Tamara Bourkoun. Whilst the privileging of women in this way might seem to some to perpetuate gender inequalities, at the very least it avoids the atmosphere that Colquhoun experienced among the surrealists where, despite their fine talk of liberty and the celebration of women she was not alone in finding the prevailing attitude to be chauvinistic; one where, as she once put it, women were "permitted, not required".

Nonetheless the draw of surrealism remained strong. She was attracted to the movement because its goal to transform the world through mental revolution was not so far removed from the objective of magicians to effect material and spiritual change by unveiling secret knowledge and harnessing hidden forces. When Colquhoun visited André Breton, the leader of the Paris group in 1939, they compared horoscopes: Colquhoun reported that "we both have Neptune in the House of Death, but I am not nearly so much afraid of water as he is." In continental Europe, surrealists were always happy to take inspiration from occult writings, but it was her misfortune that in England, ELT Mesens, the leader of the London group, was antagonistic to magic and her refusal to curtail her occult investigations led to her expulsion from the group.

Thereafter, away from London and the artistic mainstream, she devoted herself to the pursuit of knowledge and inner harmony. She immersed herself in a world of transcendent beings and forces. It was a world in which individual colours each have their own magical properties and where spoken words have transformational powers. In her quest for enlightenment she cast her net widely: in addition to ceremonial magic, she actively engaged with Freemasonry, Druidry, mystical Christianity, and veneration of the Great Mother Goddess. Her search was never ending.

Too late for her when she was alive, the importance of spirituality in modern art is now freely acknowledged, occulture is a recognised cultural phenomenon and historic attitudes to women artists are vigorously challenged. We are beginning to see Colquhoun as a central rather than peripheral figure. The exhibition at Ben Hunter is therefore timely. It brings together artworks from all periods and clearly shows the trajectory of her development from early student work to late 'convulsive' landscapes. It can also serve as the advance guard for the major touring curated by Tate that is due to open in Cornwall next February before transferring to London in June.

For Colquhoun, the natural world held endless fascination. At first, this took the form of delicate representations of the visible forms of leaf, stem, and petal, well displayed in *Amaryllis* (1933) and *Hyacinth and Cyclamen* (1934). By contrast, *Self-Portrait* (1929), painted whilst still a student, shows a different side of nature. In it, Colquhoun placed herself in a wild marginal setting amongst rocks and churning water. It is early evidence not only of her enduring interest in restless places where upheavals and transitions occur but also of the close relationship between women and the natural environment. As time passed, she became increasingly concerned with the forces of nature that are hidden behind surface appearances. The most powerful force in nature is sex, and this became a central theme throughout her work. Colquhoun was an animist, believing that all of nature, even the parts usually regarded as inanimate, contains a life force. For her, the phrase “Mother Earth” was not just a metaphor, it was a literal truth. Being alive, the earth is also sexually active. In *Stalactite* (1962) Colquhoun takes the natural slit in the rocks at Nanjizal, a bay near Land’s End, combines it with an erect limestone column, and produces a memorable image of the gendered landscape. Less overt, the forms in *Alcove I* (1946) and its pair *Alcove II* (1948) are clearly organic but deliberately ambiguous: it is for viewers to find their own meaning. Many detect sexual writhings taking place within a distinctly blood-red and pink vulval recess.

On a purely human level Colquhoun believed that intercourse was a magical act, holding the promise of “a genuinely resolved antinomy ... a means to occult knowledge.” In other words, sexual climax enables the participants to transcend the binary division that has existed since the Fall. But she was also drawn to explore homoerotic desire. *Demeter and Persephone* (c.1928), shows the moment when Persephone was reunited with her mother, Demeter, following her return from Hades. It is one of a number of Colquhoun’s early works that focus on Classical or Biblical scenes, but the absence of the usual classical attributes and the modern dress make it easily readable as an image of two adult women embracing.

In the mid-1930s Colquhoun spent the summer months travelling around the Mediterranean making watercolour drawings of local domestic and architectural scenes. They are entirely devoid of human presence: in *Church Interior, Corsica* (1938) the ambience is, as usual, spiritual, not human. The church has not been identified, but the *Market Place, Corsica* (1938), which has neither shoppers nor stall-holders, is the covered market at Ile Rousse in the North of the island.

In 1937 the artist Lucy Cornford (several sketches by her of Colquhoun survive) was still Lucy Jameson as she did not marry Christopher Cornford until 1941. *Portrait Study of Lucy Cornford* (1937) was almost certainly titled much later when Colquhoun had it framed for exhibition.

The Ben Hunter exhibition is particularly strong on works that employ automatic methods of painting. Surrealists used automatism – painting or writing without conscious control – to directly engage the unconscious. Building on this, Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford, (both of whom Colquhoun knew well), developed their theory of psycho-morphology and came to understand automatisms as means of exploring not just the artists’own unconscious, but to mystically engage with the hidden aspects of objects: to break down the barriers of space and time and to see beyond the visible world. Colquhoun, by surrendering conscious control over her image making (at least in the initial stages), believed she was opening herself to both the influence of internal unconscious processes and external agents and hidden powers. *Elemental* (1971), formed by folding a sheet of paper to produce a symmetrical image, is one such creature conjured from the spirit world.

The earlier *Gorgon* (1946) uses the best-known automatic technique, that of decalcomania. Oil paint, randomly applied to a board or sheet of paper, when pressed against another sheet, produces highly textured shapes when separated. Colquhoun then brushed in the background and developed the forms. The gorgons were

three mythological sisters. With writhing snakes for hair, they were able to turn anyone who looked at them into stone. For Sigmund Freud, the gorgons represent the power of female sexuality: they symbolize male castration fears.

*Tendrils of Sleep* (1944) and *A Visitation* (1945) both use the ambiguities of decalcomania to suggest rich occult associations. Although sleep was not without its dangers, for Colquhoun it held the promise of the loosening of the astral from the physical body into a world of dreams, spirit contacts and hypnagogic images. *Tendrils of Sleep* offers an aerial view of an unmapped inner landscape ripe for revelation. By contrast, *A Visitation* has a cosmic rather than a human or even planetary scale. Arising from the alchemical retort from which life is generated, three spheres are born. They are the supernal triangle of the Quabalistic Tree of Life, representing the unity of Kether and the duality of Chokmah and Binah.

Decalcomania produces a positive and a negative image. Colquhoun generally put the negative aside, seldom working on both. *Alcove I* (1946) and *Alcove II* (1948) are a rare exception and the only pair ever to have been exhibited together.

*Kerry Landscape* (1949) and *Dingle Bay* (1949) were painted following a trip to Ireland the previous year. Although both have passages of decalcomania, this has been done for textural effect, and not for its inspirational qualities as a stimulus to her imagination. *Kerry Landscape* shows Mount Brandon, the hill that takes its name from Saint Brendan, 'The Navigator', who is said to have climbed to the summit in around AD 530 to see the Americas before setting sail for them. The paintings are notable for their rhythmic cursive forms.

Colquhoun began experimenting with diluted enamel paint in the early 1960s. Its use enabled her to paint "semi-automatically" and establish a close correspondence between her technique and her subject. With the paper or board placed flat, she was able to pour, stir and tilt, encouraging the fluid paint to puddle or flow. Drawn to paint moments of change and metamorphosis, volcanos were a recurring theme. *Volcanic Landscape* (1969) is the largest of these, and the most dramatic. Jagged forms, like the tracings of a seismograph, track the progress of the eruption. Her gestures seem to mimic the spurts of lava as the earth ejaculates the molten rocks. In *Crater's Edge* (1970) we look down from high as the pooling of the paint mimics the pooling of the cooling magma. By contrast, *Orange Lilies* (1981) shows a return to a more tranquil, domesticated nature. It is one of a number of flower arrangements or single specimens that Colquhoun painted towards the end of her active painting life.

*Stalactite* (1962), *Volcanic Landscape* (1969), *Crater's Edge* (1970) and *Orange Lilies* (1981) are signed not with Colquhoun's name but with a monogram formed from the letters S and V inside a circle. It is a tradition in many spiritual organizations for a person to adopt a name or motto that symbolizes their spiritual identity and purpose. When Colquhoun started studying with a magician called Kenneth Grant she chose the Latin phrase "Splendidior Vitro", more brilliant than crystal, thereby indicating that her personal spiritual quest was for purity and clarity. From 1962 onwards she signed all her paintings with this device. It is the clearest possible statement that, for her, art and magic were one.

Was she artist or occultist? It was, as she knew all along, a distinction without a difference.

*Process, experimentation and automatism  
in the works of Ithell Colquhoun*

Jacqui McIntosh

Ben Hunter

The works of Ithell Colquhoun shown within the exhibition *Elemental* at Ben Hunter span a period of over fifty years – from early drawings and paintings made while studying at the Slade School of Fine Art to the mysterious and magical forms within her automatic works of the 1940s and later enamel ‘semi-automatic’ paintings. The exhibition brings together the many facets of a versatile and extraordinary artist whose practice never stood still, but continued to expand and develop throughout her life, underpinned by her deep commitment to magical practices and esoteric study. This essay looks specifically at works made between the years 1927–1948, a period of extraordinary development for Colquhoun as an artist. During this time, she moved from a practice rooted in figuration and the ‘truth to nature’ advocated by her academic training at the Slade, to one, which by the mid-1940s, fully embraced Surrealism, automatic techniques and the magical and occult themes that fascinated her.

Colquhoun began her studies at the Slade in 1927 and took a variety of classes in subjects such as history of art, fine art anatomy, stage painting and painting from life among others. Observational drawing was at the core of the Slade’s teachings at the time. Professor Henry Tonks (1862-1937), who taught Colquhoun, believed that looking had to come before the making of an image, emphasising the importance of close observation to his students in order to faithfully replicate the appearance of what they saw. He greatly admired the naturalism of Renaissance artists such as Piero della Francesca (d.1492) and Colquhoun would later recall that at the Slade ‘one was taught to draw in the style of Michelangelo but to paint in that of the French Impressionists.’ Life drawings from this time, such as *Untitled* (c.1920s), display her growing ability as a draughtsperson and confidence in depicting the human form through the use of outline, shading and perspective. The exhibition also includes two paintings made during her years at the Slade – *Self-Portrait* (1929) and *Demeter and Persephone* (1928). While the themes of many of her paintings from this time were set by tutors, relating to stories from the Bible or Classical Mythology, *Self-Portrait* (1929) alludes to many of the themes that would appear in her later works - the connection between the feminine and the landscape; the power of natural forces and a growing animistic belief in an Earth that is alive - where all living things, including humans, are connected by a vital, energetic spirit and force.

After receiving her Diploma in Fine Art from the Slade in 1930 Colquhoun travelled, living in Paris for a year in 1931 before spending time in Greece in 1933. She completed fewer paintings during this time, working mostly on paper using ink, graphite, watercolour and gouache. Drawings and sketches made during this period show an increased desire to express her own lived experience and inner, subjective reality. Alongside sketches of friends and potential lovers, her archive, which is held at Tate Britain, London, contains drawings of unmade beds and studies of the objects around her. Other drawings tentatively hint at the magical realism that was to come later in the decade – in one, flowers grow within the water of a jug, the glass exterior like a portal to a reality within.

As the 1930s progressed, flora and fauna became a central subject within Colquhoun’s work. The watercolour *Hyacinth and Cyclamen* (1934) is an early example. In many ways, it is a straightforward observational, botanical drawing, however Colquhoun’s treatment of the cyclamen leaves add something more to the image. Instead of blending the watercolour, she has allowed the medium to behave unpredictively; the pigment separating from the water and pooling within the gentle undulations of the paper, creating an impression of texture. By leaving space for chance and the accidental, Colquhoun gives us a taste of the spontaneity that would emerge in later works through her use of automatic processes. A similar process and experimental approach to watercolour and gouache can be seen in her *Cartoon for Self-Portrait* (1933) in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. In this work, Colquhoun is shown wearing a grey and black dress, the separation of pigment and water creating the look and feel of a rich, dark velvet.

In 1936, Colquhoun had her first solo exhibitions at the Municipal Art Gallery in Cheltenham and Fine

Art Society in London, exhibiting mostly drawings and paintings of plants and flowers. Critics admired the decorative nature of her work and praised the young artist for her technical skill, with one noting: 'she worthily upholds the tradition of the Slade in her firm, sensitive drawing.' The critics seemed unaware of the increasing influence of Surrealism on Colquhoun, in particular the work of Salvador Dalí (1904-1989) and his use of the double image. In many of her botanical works, Colquhoun created her own double images, accentuating the similarities between plants and sexual organs while exploring themes of growth, rebirth and sexual union.

Colquhoun's joint exhibition with Roland Penrose (1900-1984) at the Mayor Gallery, London in 1939, which included her most famous painting and double image *Scylla* (1938), propelled her into the centre of the British and international Surrealist scene. That summer she met André Breton (1896-1966) in Paris and was photographed by Man Ray (1890-1976). She travelled to a Château in Chemillieu, France at the invitation of artist Gordon Onslow Ford (1912-2003) to spend time with him and artists Esteban Frances (1913-1976) and Roberto Matta (1911-2002). These young male artists, with Breton's seal of approval, were creating a new type of Surrealism, termed 'psychological morphology' by Matta. Onslow Ford, writing in the *London Bulletin* in 1940 described this new Surrealist development as a world which 'gives form to our unbridled thoughts [...] a Hell-Paradise where all is possible.' It's likely that during this trip Colquhoun encountered and engaged in automatic drawing and painting methods - the making of a mark or line without conscious direction to explore and express the hidden contents of the unconscious. Encounters such as these, and her connection to other Surrealist artists, would lead to a greater spontaneity in Colquhoun's work, and adoption of automatic techniques.

Colquhoun started to experiment with automatic drawing and painting processes in the early 1940s, writing about the various methods that she used in her essay *The Mantic Stain* (1949), later developed into *Children of the Mantic Stain* (1951). These included frottage – the rubbing of graphite, charcoal or another medium across a surface in order to make an imprint of what lies beneath; superautomatism – the drawing of a line without conscious control; and parsemage (her own invention), where powdered charcoal or chalk is first sprinkled onto the surface of water before an impression is taken using paper or board. Colquhoun's most used automatic method was decalcomania – a technique first coined by the Spanish Surrealist painter Óscar Domínguez (1906-1957) and used by many Surrealist artists including Max Ernst (1891 – 1976). The exhibition contains some of the finest examples of works made by Colquhoun using this technique including the paintings *Tendrils of Sleep* (1944), *A Visitation* (1945), *Gorgon* (1946) and *Alcove I* (1946) and *Alcove II* (1948).

The process of decalcomania involves the creation of a mirror image through the pressing together of two surfaces, with a media such as oil or gouache paint in between. Paintings such as *Gorgon* (1946) and *A Visitation* (1945) were made by first pressing a large sheet of paper against the painted surface to create variations in form and texture. Folders within Colquhoun's archive at Tate Britain show that she experimented extensively with this technique using different consistencies of paint, weights of paper and colour combinations to create different textures and effects. She associated the resulting marks with the natural world and landscape - to foliage, feathers, scales and marine life.

For Colquhoun, the use of these processes was often a useful starting point for an artwork. 'The principle of all these processes is the making of a stain by chance,' she writes in *Children of the Mantic Stain* '[...] the gazing at the stain in order to see what it suggests to the imagination and, finally, the developing of these suggestions in plastic terms.' While Colquhoun's use of automatism, can be seen in context with Surrealist aims of suppressing conscious control in order to reveal the hidden contents of the psyche, she believed that the stains produced may also hold mantic or divinatory power. In *Children of the Mantic*

*Stain* she compares automatic techniques to the practices of clairvoyants who use ‘ink splashes, sand, pins thrown together by chance and the irregular patterns left by tea leaves and coffee grounds to set in motion their telepathic faculty.’

The title of the painting *Gorgon* (1946) refers to the three monstrous sisters of the underworld, Stheno, Euryale, and Medusa. Sometimes depicted as winged figures with venomous snakes for hair, encountering the sisters could be deadly, the Medusa turning all who gazed at her into stone. Colquhoun’s *Gorgon* is both stunning in its vibrancy and gruesome, the fleshy decalcomania forms suggestive of fallopian tubes, ovaries and piles of polyp like nodules. Three vertical pillars arise combining to form a black winged creature or perhaps a womb, inhospitable to the creation of new life. The painting was made right after the end of the Second World War and towards the end of her marriage to the artist Toni del Renzio. While works such as *Alcove I* (1946) & *Alcove II* (1948) relate to Colquhoun’s long-standing interest in esoteric concepts of male and female unification and the Divine Androgyne, *Gorgon* could be read as a symbol of female power - a utopia or dystopia depending on your perspective, where patriarchal dominance is contested, and the feminine rules.

- i. Ithell Colquhoun, ‘A Canvas in the wind’, in Richard Shillitoe, *Medea’s Charms* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2019), pp.258-264 at p.259.
- ii. Tate Archive: 929/11/1/67, Frank Rutter, Sunday Times, Nov 15, 1936.
- iii. Gordon Onslow Ford, ‘The Painter Looks Within Himself’, *London Bulletin* No. 18-20, (London, 1940), pp.30-31, p.31.
- iv. Many of Colquhoun’s decalcomania counterparts can be found within her archive at Tate Britain, London, appearing ghostly spectres of their corresponding paintings.
- v. Ithell Colquhoun, ‘Children of Mantic Stain’, in Richard Shillitoe, *Medea’s Charms* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2019), pp. 245-254 at p.246.
- vi. *Ibid*, p.253.



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