

Transcript

Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 62

Leonor Fini

(Dead Ladies Show Music — 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: It's the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against the odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage, here in Berlin and beyond... Then, we bring you a special selection of these stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I'm joined once again by DLS co-founder Katy Derbyshire. Hi, Katy!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hello Susan!

SUSAN STONE: This episode, the featured Dead Lady presentation, comes via our friends at Dead Ladies Show NYC, which is organized and hosted by Molly O'Laughlin Kemper with Sheila Enright.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes, and the lady in question is artist Leonor Fini, who was a glamorous, passionate iconoclast with a brilliant creative mind, fiercely independent at a time when women were allowed to be muses, but not painters. You can see some of her works while you listen to the episode over on our website at deadladiesshow.com/podcast.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, do hop over there and follow along, if you like. Today's presenter is JR Pepper, a photographer, photo-retoucher, cemetery tour guide, and self-described professional eccentric with a peculiar love of guinea pigs.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: What's peculiar about *that*?

[BOTH LAUGH]

SUSAN STONE: I guess the amount of love she has for them? Anyway, here she is from New York's KGB Bar Red Room.

JR PEPPER FROM RED ROOM: Hello everyone, thank you for joining us here at the Dead Ladies Show. My name is JR Pepper. I have to admit, when I started doing this, or prompting this talk, Molly had the wherewithal to ask me why? Why this person? And in part... A, because I describe her as a sort of an artistic polyamorous badass. And then secondarily, she was also obsessed with cats. I don't have that kind of admiration for cats, but I think you know, my obsession with guinea pigs kind of fits that. So I'm also a weirdo obsessed with small furry creatures who just frankly doesn't care.

[SHOWS SLIDE] That having been said, in a movement known for its eccentric personality and tumultuous love affairs, Leonor Fini manages to stand out far beyond the crowd. She was a person defying the norms of gender and sexuality both in her art and in her life. Her work would go down in art history for breaking the barrier of the male gaze, while depicting strong,

dominant, independent, sexually powerful women. Julian Levy, of the Julian Levy Gallery and a surrealist patron described her once as having: “the head of a lioness, the mind of a man...” (which is not always such a great thing, but anyway) “... the bust of a woman, the torso of a child, the grace of an angel, and the discourse of the Devil.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] When you have to pick a photo of an artist, always make sure it’s the most inebriated one possible!

[SHOWS SLIDE] Born in 1907 to an Argentinian mother and an Italian father, her unconventional life started very early. Her father was known for his intense conservative religious views and toxic masculine behavior. Leonor described how one day her mother became “fed up” with his behavior, and they escaped to Trieste. Her mother, in an effort to hide her, would dress her up as a boy. Her teenage years were no less tumultuous. She suffered a variety of eye problems at a very young age. It was even rumored that she supposedly had vertical pupils until she four years old. Later she suffered from an eye disease causing her to wear bandages over her eyes, allowing her to produce the dynamic mental landscape which would inhabit her art in later years.

She was largely self-taught and learned from studying the composition of the famous artists of yesteryear, including Edvard Munch and the British Pre-Raphaelites. Too independent to be in a university, she studied art by going to many fabulous museums and studying anatomy at her local morgue. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is not an album cover! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

She moves to Milan, and then later in 1931 to Paris where she meets the Surrealists including Salvador Dali seen here, Giorgio De Chirico and Max Ernst. Max Ernst would introduce her to Andre Breton, who was the founder of the Surrealist movement. Max Ernst (who was also one of her lovers, but take that with a grain of salt, because apparently everybody else was too... it seems many people were his lovers, and often fantasies), Ernst described her as “Italian fury, scandalous elegance, caprice and passion.”

[SHOWS SLIDE] This scandalous elegance, unpredictably, as well as exuding sex, often put her at odds with the founder of the movement. He said he at first found her interesting, but later found her irritating, because she wasn’t obedient. Well, yeah! He strongly believed that women were meant to inspire men, not the other way around. So while surrealism is very much a leftist movement, its ideas about women and homosexuality were very much not leftwing at all. Fini defied that expectation in a variety of different ways.

In Breton’s Surrealist manifestos, of which there are formally three, it was described, women as a muse, either of two different ideologies. One of the *femme enfant*, which is essentially the equivalent of a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, where you were young, you had nothing in your brain, and your job was to inspire the men in your life. Or, you were the *femme fatale*, which meant that you were sex incarnate, and your job was to inspire and terrify and possibly castrate men. Either way, here we are.

In her youth, the *femme enfant*’s supposed purity would guide the male artist through to a sort of creative Valhalla. The *femme fatale* would exude sexuality, but it’s often fatal. The idea that a woman is desirable but also has the possibility of castration, viewing the *femme fatale*, Leonor

Fini uses this as a tool to inspire and in some ways terrify men while simultaneously producing self empowerment.

In fact she openly contested Andre Breton and did not in fact identify as a Surrealist, for the record. Neither did Frida Kahlo, they just happened to hang out with them at the bar.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS] She did, however, exhibit with them repeatedly, specifically in international shows, one in 1933, again in 1936, and then later in 1939.

She said at one point: "It was encouraging to be among the other artists but I disliked the difference with which everyone treated Breton, and I hated his misogyny. It seemed that women were expected to keep quiet in cafe discussions. Yet I felt I was just as good as the men." Despite never being a Surrealist, she would show with them multiple times, but most specifically in one instance, in particular. [SHOWS SLIDE] She had her first solo show in Paris at the age of 25, at a gallery directed by Christian Dior. Yes, that Christian Dior! Later, she had three of her paintings in Alfred H. Barr's 1936 exhibit, *The Fantastic: Art, Dada and Surrealism*, which is like *the* big exhibit, he being one of the founding fathers of the Museum of Modern Art. And during World War II, while many people were trying to escape Europe, she instead decided to live out the war with Salvador and Gala Dali. She remained there and went back to Paris in 1946. Like many artists, it's hard to separate her work from her life and she is no exception.

Here we see one of the ideas which is going to come up again and again: that lion-like hair, that fashionable female, and again, surrounded by many, many, many cats.

[SHOWS SLIDE] This exhibit in particular is the one that is the most interesting. That is Peggy Guggenheim, yes, that Peggy Guggenheim, and the exhibit *31 Women* in which she had an all-female gallery exhibition, many of the artists of which went on to great fame and acclaim. You can see the picture all the way up on the top in particular, that is Leonora's. We don't actually have full gallery shots. There are very few of them. But here's Peggy in her sensible shoes showing off her gallery exhibition. [LAUGHTER]

[SHOWS SLIDE] This piece in particular is called *Shepherdess Ruling Over the Sphinxes*. We see a tall woman very much like Fini herself. And again, going back to what we were talking about previously, about being one's own muse, she uses herself and her physicality and her sexuality as inspiration for many of her own pieces. She is surrounded by sphinx (sphinxes? Sure, why not) many of which have an uncanny resemblance to her as well. But the idea of a sphinx as a predator... Salvador Dali has a painting in which the Sphinx is Shirley Temple, so it's this kind of cute little "oh, you want to put it in your pocket and collect them all at the same time" kind of thing. That's not what Leonor Fini does. The sphinx is a predator, she is a watcher, she is an observer, it's not something cute and trendy. With that in mind, it's a predator and the idea of solving the riddle of the sphinx like Oedipus. You see in the foreground, a variety of bones and body parts from fallen suitors, perhaps, who have failed to answer her riddles, or maybe have failed to satisfy the beast. In her work, we see again the strength of women, as they take on a lion-like form and a sort of empowered goddess-like stance.

[SHOWS SLIDE] The men however, when they do show up, they're pale, sickly, emaciated, and passive by comparison. In this instance, this one seems sexually shattered by the woman in the background. Throughout her work, she refuses to show women as submissive or subordinate, nor do they follow any traditional gender roles or social norms. Instead, they show females as sexually powerful, almost predatory, threatening, and rather than look away from this, she willingly embraces it.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Another thing you see often in surrealist art is the idea of women as things: tables, chairs, cups. Things like *Clockwork Orange*, for instance, where women are actually the tool to hold on to your drinks. She decides she's not having any of that and instead she leaves that role to the men. The idea of women as literal objects in surrealism is pretty consistent (another example of this would be Hans Bellmer and his fetishized objects). In stark contrast, you see, she uses men as objects in this piece, which is called very blatantly *Woman Seated on a Naked Man*, in which she confidently, almost bored, leans on a languid sleeping male nude.

Her later paintings are populated by a variety of monsters in her art, ranging from sphinx, harpies, witches, and often mutant cat-like creatures. But these monsters are often always female, or at the very least highly androgynous and non-binary. [SHOWS SLIDE] She quickly makes a name for herself in her own theatrical fashion sense: thick black hair, arresting cat eyes. During one of her first meetings with the Surrealists, which she had arranged at a cafe, she arrived wearing a Cardinal's vestments. When asked why she replies "I liked the sacrilegious nature of dressing as a priest, and the experience of being a woman wearing the clothes of a man who will never know a woman's body."

[SHOWS SLIDE] Never a person to be confined as just one thing, she was a veritable Renaissance person of creativity. In 1945. She illustrates a work for the addition of the Marquis de Sade's *Juliet*, which was printed supposedly secretly on a Vatican printing press. In 1968, her watercolors accompanied Anaïs Nin's *Story of O*, and then during the 1970s, because she lived for quite a bit of time, she focused her attention on writing and developed three separate novels, one of which you can actually still get! It's called *Rogomelec* and it has a harpy creature on it. Support your local bookstores and go find it, it's fun!

And her flair for fashion and theatricality make her the perfect candidate to design sets and costumes for the Paris Opera, and costumes for Federico Fellini's *8½*. As an additional aside, if you wander through the YouTube channels, you'll find a decadent documentary where she describes that she absolutely loved *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi because of how campy it was and how accidentally funny it had the opportunity to be. She also apparently loved *The Shining*, which, sure, I can't blame her.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Another thing she was known for was her design aesthetic which was reflected in perfume bottles, like Schiaparelli's "Shocking" fragrance line, for which she designed the bottle in the shape of a naked female torso, reportedly inspired by none other than [Mae West](#). She is also the subject of the highest-priced Henri Cartier-Bresson work of all time, in which she is depicted nude floating in a pool or a pond with her amazing breasts, she's just floating in the water. This photograph went for an astonishing \$305,000 at auction in 2007.

[SHOWS SLIDE] I should also mention once again that she was absolutely flabbergastingly obsessed with cats... [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] No less than 20 of which wandered around her home, shared her food and shared her bed up until the day she died. They're almost always Persian. They all had specific names, and she once said that she would not do anything other than dignify them with proper names, and would never name them something stupid like Titi. Her home was filled with nearly 20 at any given point in time. She said: "In every way cats are the most perfect creatures on the face of the earth, except that their lives are just way too short."

[SHOWS SLIDE] She would also show cats and feline creatures throughout her life and throughout her work and was so obsessed with them that she was known to draw cats while she was on the phone. Depending upon how interesting the conversation was, the better the drawing might be.

This painting, entitled *An Ideal Life*, shows Leonor as a cat goddess surrounded by a makeshift throne, surrounded by, once again, many many many cats and an ocelot. I've never seen an ocelot! [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Her and her feline companions stare boldly, directly and unafraid, even somewhat bored by our presence, much like a typical cat. In her ideal world, she is the goddess left alone with her familiars. She once said she had decided to "stay at a stage when a child thinks that they are the entire world. I'm the snake that bites its own tail. I am the moon." Speaking of Bela Lugosi and overly dramatic things to say! In her ideal world she's left undaunted to create surrounded by her many cats, and she actively sought out this role as she lived and created in her Paris atelier. Her later work would evolve in a number of different ways, but she consistently included cats, feline eyes and large hair.

For example, in this particularly terrifying masterpiece known as *The Mutants*, or in some translations, *The Girl Mutants*, specifically. [SHOWS SLIDE] A sort of Island of Dr. Moreau of anthropomorphic cat creatures, such as this piece from 1972. It was the '70s OK? It was the '70s. The girls, and I used that term loosely, have smushed noses, just like the Persian cats that they hold. Additionally, their body language is very similar. Whether the girls are transforming into the cats or the cats are transforming into the girls, it's not quite clear.

She said: "I like cats because I find them calming and harmonious. And I know exactly what type of person likes cats, and what type of person does not. Generally loners and rebels, those who are in some way a solitary situation, are always those who like cats. Everything to do with witches, cats have always been linked to women and femininity, that has to do with religion. Cats were seen as an extended concept, you understand, of sin." [SHOWS SLIDE] As mentioned earlier, prominent themes in her work were sphinx often seen with her face, often watching a sleeping limp, androgynous male, in this piece, *Chthonian Deity Watching over the Sleep of a Young Man* (Surrealists like lots of words in titles and it's often exhausting) this male is passive, vulnerable and in her own words unthreatening. The sphinx by contrast, is wide awake, watching the sleeping man as if ready to pounce or devour. She shines as a representation of the power between life and death, flaunting femininity and defining female sexuality, that power to unsettle the traditional male viewer in what she knows as female sex. Female artists such as Leonor Fini would use this creature as a symbol of women's destructive power and their strengths. Volatile and dangerous, she herself is dangerous and seductive. She

is sexually secure and dominating, possibly emasculating. But despite all this, intensely desirable.

This isn't exactly surprising considering her views against traditional marriage and traditional maternal roles. [SHOWS SLIDE] She had married once and then never again. Additionally, she never had children aside from many, many cats. And although she had worn priestly clothing for its theatricality, she certainly did not associate herself with any form of piety or motherhood in any way. Quite the opposite. She identified more with Lilith than with Eve. "Myself, I know that I belong with the idea of Lilith, the anti-Eve, and that my universe is that of the spirit. Physical maternity instinctively repulses me." In 1947, she underwent a hysterectomy for medical reasons, saying that she was, "happy to have undergone the operation, the thought of having children horrifies me."

She would instead construct her own unconventional family, a family dynamic fit exactly for her. She was openly bisexual, and involved in a long term polyamorous relationship with Stanislaw Lepri, who was a former Italian diplomat turned artist, and writer Constantin Jelenski. The throuple remained together throughout the entirety of their later years. Once again, openly bisexual and anti-marriage and very much against traditional monogamy, she said: "Marriage never appealed to me. I've never lived with one person. Since I was 18. I've always preferred to live in a sort of community, a big house with my atelier and cats and friends. One with a man..." (there's a theme here!) "...who was rather a lover, and another who was rather a friend. And it has always worked." Her and her poly family remained together in her Parisian apartment, and her beloved cats, where she worked constantly well into the 1980s, until she passed away in 1996. Even in death, they were inseparable, and are rumored to be buried in the same grave outside of Paris.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Her work continues to inspire, as is evident in the increasing number of shows throughout recent years, including large scale exhibitions at the Museum of Sex here in New York City, and more recently, a show with the Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea in 2021. Her 1938 self portrait *Auto Portrait with Scorpion* fetched \$2.3 million at auction, almost four times its estimated price. In a curious role reversal she would have been directly proud of, her sudden popularity has helped the work of her partner Stanislaw Lepri, who has had a remarkable increase in value as her work has gone up in price, not the other way around.

Her artwork is also an inspiration for pop culture. Here you can see the inspiration throughout film as well. [SHOWS SLIDE] The owl mask featured in Just Jaeckin's movie *The Story of O* from 1974 – and yes, it's a reference in *The Venture Bros* – is said to be a reference to Fini's own constructed masks, probably inspired by her many feather covered outfits when she attended many of the surrealist balls.

Some of the parties included guests being instructed to appear nude only from the chest to thigh, which made her the much lauded fashionista of the Paris nightlife. [SHOWS SLIDE] Later a more direct inspiration can be seen in Madonna's music video for 'Bedtime Story', in which the singer (much like in Fini's painting *The End of the World*) is seen floating in a dark pool of blood – menstrual blood? Not sure, it doesn't matter! – surrounded by animal skulls. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Inspired by the way that she used clothing, masks and headdresses to exhibit her strong personality, styling and prolific artwork, her work is also now once again returned to the House of Dior in 2019 in their haute couture collection. As Italian fashion designer, Maria Grazia Chiuri described: “She used her image to be regal and powerful. Surrealism speaks about dreams and the unconscious, and often about women’s bodies. It’s very close to fashion.”

[SHOWS SLIDE] In her obituary in *The Independent*, George Meelly writes that due to her unconventional life and brazen sexuality: “in the 17th century, she would have been burned as a witch.” Something she might have been very proud of considering her repertoire... While this may be true, many years later it is more true to say that her work is just as captivating as her personality was invigorating.

[APPLAUSE]

SUSAN STONE: JR Pepper on Leonor Fini. If you missed Pepper’s talk last season, on the iconic [Mae West](#), be sure and check it out — it’s a heck of a good time! And for more Surrealist-adjacent fun, go back to our very first season and listen to the episode on [Leonora Carrington](#), ably presented by Jessica Miller. Or, if you just want to see some fabulous guinea pigs, follow JR Pepper on Instagram [@girduality](#). We’ll have links to all those things in our episode notes, where you’ll also of course find the link to images of Leonor Fini and her art.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: And if you’re in New York yourself, you can join the DLS NYC crowd again soon. Their next show is May 24th, and you can get all the details by signing up for their newsletter, and [we’ll give you a link](#) for that as well.

SUSAN STONE: What’s that you say? You’re looking for more Dead Lady content?

KART DERBYSHIRE: I am!

SUSAN STONE: Aren’t we all! Well we’ve got some special features just for you when you become a patron over at [patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast](#). This month I’m talking about the real-life 1920s nightclub queen Ma Meyrick who inspired the wonderful (and best-selling) book, *Shrines of Gaiety* by Kate Atkinson. And in March I interviewed Irish journalist Jennifer Collins about St Brigid, who has recently been granted her own official holiday...

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes!

SUSAN STONE: Move over, St Patrick! We also discussed the brilliant Irish writer Nuala O’Faolain.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Sounds like fun!

SUSAN STONE: It really was, Jennifer is full of energy and information, and she also happens to be one of our newest patrons, along with Tadea Klein. Thanks to you both, and thanks to all of you who support us and share our podcast with others.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Yes, thanks so much, and do follow us on social media @deadladiesshow for all updates and information. We'll be back again next month with another episode on another fabulous Dead Lady!

SUSAN STONE: Big love to everyone at Dead Ladies NYC including the lovely audience at the Red Room, which is overseen by the hospitable Lori Schwarz, and thanks also to Christopher Neil, who records the show in New York. You can see what they're up to on Instagram @deadladiesnyc.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone. Our theme tune is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. See you next time!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: See you next time!

(Dead Ladies Show Music — 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)