

Anne Walsh and 'The Hearing Trumpet'

New exhibit at Martina }{ Johnston Gallery is the first glimpse of a project that will honor Leonora Carrington's surreal 1950 feminist novel in various ways.

By Alex Bigman

2

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In 1950, surrealist painter and writer Leonora Carrington wrote a bold and bizarre feminist novel called *The Hearing Trumpet*. The story unfolds from the viewpoint of Marian Leatherby, a stone-deaf, bearded 92-year-old woman who has just been deposited in a twisted and surreal home for the aging. Here, with the aid of an ornate hearing trumpet, she embarks on a defiant adventure of fantastic, carnivalesque proportions.

While *The Hearing Trumpet's* cultural reach remains fairly limited, the following it does have is devoted and intense. Carrington continued to receive a steady stream of admiring callers — scholarly and artistic types, mostly — at her Mexico City home until her death last year, at the age of 94. "She entertained visitors willingly but cautiously," said Oakland-based artist Anne Walsh, who had been one on several occasions over the past few years. Many would be invited, but not all would be invited back. "I realized that I had some importance for her when I went back to visit a year later and saw that she had posted a picture with me on her wall," said Walsh.

The Hearing Trumpet has long enthralled Walsh, and by the time she went to Mexico it had become a focus of her artistic practice. *An Annotated Hearing Trumpet, Preface and Figures*, now at Martina }{ Johnston Gallery, is the first glimpse at an ongoing project that will include an illustrated, annotated version of the novel and, ultimately, a full-fledged film adaptation of it.

As for the current installation, Walsh aptly describes it as "an exploded storyboard" prefiguring the eventual film. The gallery space is plastered with visual media including correspondence with Carrington, photographs of Walsh's studio, magazine cutouts, photographs of family members and acquaintances, and several all-star cast lists with names like Virginia Woolf, John Waters, and Whoopi Goldberg punched in marquis-style, laser-cut type.

To understand this esoteric profusion is to understand that, for Walsh, *The Hearing Trumpet* has expanded far beyond a mere text or artistic source material. In fact, it has evolved into an interpretative schema for the greater part of her current personal and intellectual development. Scenes of daily life have become redolent of moments in the book; people on the street and pop-culture figures — characters. Indeed, even Carrington herself at some point slipped from author of *The Hearing Trumpet* to character in the loosely adapted film version that Walsh was imagining.

Walsh describes this as an exercise in coming to terms with the inevitable arrival of a certain time in her life. "I need to figure out what this thing is about being an older woman," she said. "How to do it. How to become that in a way that I'm proud of."

The exhibition explodes with possibilities, as cutting-board visions of *An Annotated Hearing Trumpet* interweave with candid exposures of the artist's personal life. Grounding it all is the figure of Carrington, reaching across time and space with guidance on a universal theme: how to grow old and do it well.

An Annotated Hearing Trumpet, Preface and Figures runs through October

28 at Martina }{ Johnston Gallery (1201 Sixth St., 2nd Fl., Berkeley). 510-558-0993 or MartinaJohnston.org

Editor's Note: The previous version of this story contained two errors. First, we got wrong the original publication date of "The Hearing Trumpet"; it was published in 1950, not 1960. Also, we mistakenly wrote that Leonora Carrington was still alive; in fact, she passed away last year. This version has been updated to reflect the changes.

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