

SANS NOM: CLAUDE CAHUN AND MARCEL MOORE

Jersey holds the world's leading collection of work by Surrealist Claude Cahun and avant-garde artist Marcel Moore, two enigmatic French stepsisters who lived and worked here from the 1930s. Louise Downie previews a new exhibition.

ARTISTS CLAUDE CAHUN AND Marcel Moore were an extraordinary couple who worked, lived and loved together for more than 40 years. Cahun and Moore were the pseudonyms for Lucy Schwob and Suzanne Malherbe, stepsisters who were born in Nantes and lived in Jersey from 1937.

The Jersey Heritage Trust was first introduced to their work in the early 1990s, when the then curator of art, Lucy Marder, was shown a collection of their work by Jersey resident John Wakeham. As a result, an exhibition entitled "Surrealist Sisters – an extraordinary story of art and politics" was held at the Jersey Museum in 1993. The rediscovery of Cahun's work in the late 1980s, the publication of her biography, *Claude Cahun L'Écart et la Métamorphose* by François Leperlier, in 1992 and exhibitions featuring her photographs have encouraged a rapid burgeoning of interest in her work.

In 1995 and 2002, the Jersey Heritage Trust acquired collections of photographs, drawings, manuscripts and other material by Cahun and Moore and today cares for the world's most important collection of their work. This material continues to offer invaluable research opportunities,



Fig 1 Fashion illustration 1916 by Marcel Moore
watercolour JHT/2003/1/20

providing new insights into the work and lives of these two incredible artists.

Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore had a long association with Jersey, having spent many childhood holidays in the Island. They usually stayed at St Brelade's Bay Hotel and became friends with the owners, the Colley

family. In 1937 the sisters purchased La Rocquaise, a house just opposite the hotel, and moved there permanently in 1938. The garden, the house and the area around the bay were favourite settings for Cahun's work. While living in Jersey they were generally known by their real names and gained a reputation for strange behaviour, such as taking their cat for a walk on a lead and wearing trousers. They remained here throughout the occupation, carrying out subversive resistance activities for which they were arrested and imprisoned.

Claude Cahun was born Lucy Schwob in 1894. She came from a wealthy Jewish family of intellectuals and publishers. In 1918 she adopted the surname of her great uncle Léon Cahun, an Orientalist and Novelist. Her forename, Claude, in French can be either male or female or, in Claude's case, both.

Marcel Moore was the pseudonym used by Suzanne Malherbe, who was born in 1892. Her father was a professor of histopathology at Nantes School of Medicine. By 1916 Suzanne had established herself as a graphic artist and her illustrations are typical of the type of work emerging from the Paris fashion scene at the time,

reflecting the influence of the dynamic fine art scene and a growing interest in non-Western cultures, especially that of Japan. She illustrated books and magazines and produced publicity material for leading figures in the world of the avant-garde theatre and dance. Her work was exhibited in important venues such as the Salon d'Automne (Figs 1 & 2).

Claude's parents divorced and her father remarried Madame Malherbe. They lived in Paris in the early 1920s, becoming closely involved in the artistic and intellectual life, frequenting journalistic and theatrical circles.

Claude seems to have identified much more with the men in her family than the women. This striking early



Fig 2 Fashion illustration 1915 by Marcel Moore watercolour JHT/2003/1/16

self portrait shows her in exactly the same pose as a photograph of her father - the stark profile emphasises her beak nose, which was a duplicate of her father's (Fig 3).

Her relationship with her mother seems to have been confrontational. Her parents did not have a happy



Fig 3 Self portrait c.1920 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/32/a

marriage. When Claude was four years old her mother had a mental breakdown and was institutionalised in a hospital long term.

Cahun published articles in journals and in 1929 translated Havelock Ellis' controversial theories which introduced the possibility of a third sex, uniting masculine and feminine traits but existing as neither one nor the other.



Fig 4 Claude Cahun, Solange and Roger Rousset in *Le Mystère d'Adam* May- June 1929 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/31/u

Her association with the Théâtre Esoterique led by Pierre Albert-Birot is evident in some of her photographs. Many of her self-portraits are theatrical in nature, with acting, masquerade and self-staging (Figs 4 & 5).

Although she described herself as a Surrealist, Cahun was separated from the main Surrealist group. Women rarely participated and none were official members. It was very much a male dominated group led by André Breton. The function and image of women in Surrealist art was often in the role of muse, child or femme fatale. Women were treated as objects to inspire male genius; their bodies were for use as aesthetic objects and for male desire. Breton is said to have avoided Claude, disliking her unconventional dress and behaviour. However, Claude had already published articles and made self portraits by the time the first Surrealist manifesto appeared in 1924.

Although he found her difficult, Breton apparently recognised her talent and individuality.

In 1930, Claude published her autobiographical work *Aveux non Avenus* (Disavowed Confessions) - a compilation of dreams, poems, philosophical and intellectual dialogues, and musings on peculiarity and uniqueness. The book was illustrated with a series of photomontages, created in collaboration with Suzanne as Marcel Moore.

In 1932 the sisters joined the Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Revolutionnaires, which was under the auspices of the Communist Party, but in May 1934 Claude published a short essay entitled *Les Paris sont ouverts* (place your bets) - an attack on propagandist cultural policies of the Communist party. In 1935 she co-founded Contre Attaque a group of Surrealists and friends protesting against the rise of Hitler and the spread of fascism in France.

In 1937 Claude and Suzanne moved to Jersey permanently. When the Germans invaded in 1940, they decided to stay in the Island. The sisters began distributing anti-Nazi leaflets intended to demoralise the troops and encourage soldiers to desert. Suzanne spoke fluent German, although she kept this fact a secret from the occupying forces, and would translate BBC radio broadcasts into German. The words were then typed or handwritten on small pieces of tissue paper. The impression given was that they were written by a German officer. Typically of Claude, these



Fig 5 Claude Cahun in *Barbe Bleue* May-June 1929 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/30/k

leaflets were signed "The soldier without a name". Lucy and Suzanne distributed the notes themselves, often travelling into St Helier where there was a denser concentration of soldiers. They would secrete them in soldiers' pockets or in staff cars. In July 1944 the sisters were arrested and charged with listening to the BBC and inciting the troops to rebellion. The latter charge carried the death penalty, which was commuted, and the pair were imprisoned for almost a year before the Liberation (Figs 6 & 7).

A portrait of 1945 shows the defiant Claude with the Nazi eagle insignia clutched between her teeth.



Fig 6 Propaganda leaflets which encouraged the German troops to rebel manuscript JHT/1995/45/53



Fig 7 Self Portrait 1945 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/30/u

CLAUDE CAHUN SELF-PORTRAITS

CLAUDE CAHUN WAS AN enigma. Her work invites but defies explanation, but perhaps some of the biggest clues are in her writings. For example she wrote: “Masculine? Feminine? But it depends on the situation. Neuter is the only gender that always suits me”, and “I will never finish removing all these masks.”



Fig 8 Self portrait 1921 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/2003/1/3

In this disturbing self-portrait of 1921, her head is shaved and tipped to emphasise the elongation of her skull (Fig 8). Her hairline is delineated, almost in preparation for some sort of brain surgery. Although the top half of her body is unclothed, the lower half is tightly bound, like a mummy or perhaps a strait jacket.



Fig 9 Self portrait 1927 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/30/j

In this self-portrait of 1927, Claude is dressed as a body-builder (Fig 9). But perhaps it is not her body she is referring to, but her self, her identity or her multiple identity. She wears a vest, tights and shorts. Her face is made up, the cheeks accentuated with hearts, echoed in the kiss curls above. Her gaze is coy and inviting, almost seductive, but at the same time contemptuous and mocking. Her nipples and pouting lips are darkened for emphasis. But emblazoned across her flat almost male chest are the words “I am in training do not kiss me”, a straight-forward denial of the invitation evident in the rest of the portrait. It is an attempt to ward off sexual trespassers. The real sex of the body is indeterminate. The nipples are accentuated but flat. The legs are protectively crossed but a heart invites you to look as the hand insinuates itself between the legs.

This is an act of ridicule and parody, of teasing eroticism and blatant denial. It mocks the viewer for being attracted to what is obviously not on offer.

There are many paintings of women looking at themselves in a mirror. Usually they refer to narcissism, voyeurism and being the object of the male gaze. However, in this self-portrait, Claude is not looking at herself, she is looking at us looking at her (Fig 10). She wears a long chequered coat, which she holds closed. The coat conceals all of her body apart from her face. Yet in the mirror image it appears almost as if she is opening the coat, revealing the base of her neck. She disrupts the viewer's



Fig 10 Self portrait 1928 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/41/n



Fig 11 Self portrait c.1928 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/22/w

gaze by staring back in a strong, confrontational and unwavering way. The eyes of the mirror image do not connect with the viewer, rather they stare beyond into the unknown.

Claude repeatedly used masks as a device in her work. She created multiple identities and in this self-portrait these multiple identities are masked (Fig 11). None of these masks has eye holes. The main face is almost doll like in appearance, suggesting perhaps that there is no real person here, that this is an inanimate object, perhaps a comment on how women were perceived.

Another masked image from 1928 (Fig 12). Claude kneels naked on a quilt, her legs tucked in neatly. She sits naked and erect. Her head lifts almost with pride at the tanned female body. But she has hidden her breasts from view. Her face is half hidden by a

painted mask and no pupils are visible behind the eye holes. She hides her eyes - the doorway to the soul. Her body has been carefully placed between two swirling patterns on the quilt, echoing the curves of her body and the elliptical shapes on the mask.

In 1929, while Claude was masquerading, psychoanalyst Joan Rivière wrote a classic paper on women who employ “womanliness as masquerade”. She proposed that masquerade was a tool used by women to deal with the anxiety of trying to be successful in a man’s world.

Claude wrote: “In front of the mirror, on a day full of enthusiasm, you put your mask on too heavily; it bites your skin...with horror you see that the flesh and its mask have become inseparable...”

“I had spent many solitary hours disguising my soul. Its masks so



Fig 12 Self portrait c.1928 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/30/t



Fig 13 Self portrait c.1928 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/32/b

perfect that when they happened to run into each other on the plaza of my consciousness, they didn’t recognise one another... But the facepaints that I’d used seemed indelible. To clean them off I rubbed so hard that I took off the skin. And my soul like a face galled to the quick, no longer resembled human form.”

Claude made several double portraits. This single image she later turned into a double portrait (Fig 13). It has been suggested that some of her self portraits recreate a mother figure. This single portrait shows Claude floating in water, as babies do in the womb. Her feet are bound with seaweed like an umbilical cord tying her to the rock. The rock itself is shaped like the groin of a woman. Her head and neck are raised out of the



Fig 14 Self portrait c.1928 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/36/b

water as if pushing from the placenta and trying to breathe.

If we are to carry this interpretation to the next image, this double portrait would be like twins in the womb, both connected to the rock by the seaweed but also connected to each other through the hand lowered from one body to touch the feet of the other body, like Siamese twins (Fig 14). This could be interpreted as another duplication of herself by Claude, or as the creation of the person she regarded



Fig 15 Self portrait c.1932 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/30/f

as her “other self”, Suzanne/Marcel, her lifelong companion.

In this portrait, Claude is dressed as a child, with short socks and a floppy bow in her hair (Fig 15). She has hidden in the closet and fallen asleep. Claude is a child, curled up in a foetal ball, hidden away from adult eyes if the doors were shut, but the arm has caused the doors to open and the child to be revealed. This image is carefully constructed. The bow in her hair



Fig 16 Self portrait c.1930 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/32/g

reflects the shapes of the cupboard finials. The lines of the body are echoed in the placing of the boxes on the shelves above.

From the late 1930s onwards Claude photographed herself not only in interior spaces but in the real world, in gardens, beaches and architectural settings. She still used extravagant costumes and masks, but much less often. She started to manipulate the real world as a tool for her self-portraiture. Here she lies nude on a beach, partially covered with clinging seaweed (Fig 16). The tide washes over and around her. The strong diagonal of the shadow seems to pull her into its darkness. She is faceless and her bright hair sinks into the rock in the background. It is almost as if she is being consumed by the overwhelming power of nature.



Fig 17 Self portrait c.1939 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/30/y

This theme is echoed in these two portraits, possibly taken in the garden of La Rocquaise. In the first Claude is surrounded by rich, lush vegetation (Fig 17). She strokes a luxurious animal fur and holds ripe grapes. The floral growth has spread to her hair and an animal tooth is aimed threateningly at her throat.

In this next picture the ripe stalks and blossoms close in on the sleeping figure, the fur insinuates itself closer to her face ready to smother the tiny gap between her lips (Fig 18).

In this self-portrait, Claude is caged behind a lattice work window (Fig 19). The reflection of the window creates another wall of the cage. Her bent knees add to the



Fig 18 Marcel Moore c.1939 by Claude Cahun
photograph JHT/1995/31/c



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Fig 19 Self portrait c.1938 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/31/x

feeling of constriction. The bars of the window cut her body into sections, and cut off her nose and mouth from her eyes. Her eyes are shut. Can they function without the rest of the body? Is she asleep, or dead, or dreaming of a place beyond the cage?

Claude's already weak health suffered during the war and the few self portraits she did after the Liberation were dominated by the theme of death. In this series of five photographs, she sets herself against the backdrop of St Brelade's churchyard, where she is buried (Figs 20-24). Some images include a skull, and some mask out her face. In the third of the series, she appears to mock death, with the cigarette dangling from her mouth (Fig 22). But death is

literally written all over her in a double exposure print, with words from gravestones overlaying her figure (Fig 24). She wears military clothes, perhaps laying blame for her death on her captors.

Claude Cahun died in 1954. Her death certificate cites coronary and pulmonary embolism, although it is known that she also had digestive problems. Suzanne moved to a smaller house, Carola in Beaumont, where she committed suicide in 1972.

Many writers and researchers have explored Cahun and Moore's work and analysed the character of these two women, often presenting interesting and thought-provoking insights with occasional conflicting opinions and creating what is now a rich pool of

research. There are a number of threads to the sisters' lives and work that invite analysis – the theatrical work of the 1920s and early 1930s and its association with Paris avant-garde theatre, Cahun's books, manuscripts and poems, Cahun's self-portraiture, their relationship with each other, Moore's art, and their resistance activities during the German Occupation of Jersey. Some studies have compared and contrasted Cahun's work with that of other artists - most notably that of Cindy Sherman - or have placed Cahun within subjects, such as Surrealist art or tableaux vivants.

Having worked on the Cahun and Moore collection for the past ten years, I feel that one of the key questions is



Fig 20 Self portrait c.1947 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/36/n



Fig 21 Self portrait c.1947 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/31/h



Fig 22 Self portrait c.1947 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/31/a

how the sisters would have reacted to the level of interest in their work. To my mind, the answer to this question is typically (of the sisters) enigmatic – they would have both loved and hated it. They would have hated the minute dissection of their art and lives, the pigeon-holing of their characters and their art. At the same time they (Cahun in particular) would have revelled in the attention and enjoyed their stardom. Most of all I think they would have enjoyed teasing, tantalising and tormenting their audience, providing just enough information to invite interpretation while at the same time denying logical answers, providing contradictory statements which pose more questions than give answers.

The new exhibition, *Acting Out: Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore*, takes place at the Jersey Museum in December 2005.

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Fig 23 Self portrait c.1947 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/36/e



Fig 24 Self portrait c.1947 by Claude Cahun photograph JHT/1995/31/g