



VISIONARIES: GRETE STERN

BY JUDITH THURMAN

IN 1948, THE avant-garde photographer Grete Stern, a German Jew living in Buenos Aires, was hired by *Idilio*, a popular women's magazine, to illustrate a weekly column called *Psychoanalysis Will Help You*. The column solicited readers' dreams, and thousands responded—a majority with nightmares. Anxiety, domination, and entrapment were common themes.

The dreams were interpreted by two male intellectuals who—embarrassed to be “agony aunts,” as one of them put it—signed their work with a joint pseudonym, Professor Richard Rest. Stern may also have considered the assignment mildly demeaning, at least initially. She had a job with the Buenos Aires urban-planning agency, documenting the city's architecture, and she believed that photography had to have “a social function.” A Marxist critic for the prestigious journal *Sur* had praised her style for its “verism.”

One of *Sur's* regular contributors was Stern's friend Jorge Luis Borges, who once admonished, “Let us admit . . . the hallucinatory character of the world.” Stern rose to his challenge in the hundred and forty photomontages that she created for the column. Starting with a sketched composition, she juxtaposed photographs of women (enlisting her daughter and friends as models) with stock images of objects and scenery, surreally shrunken or enlarged. Her sense of the grotesque suggests a debt to Goya's “*Caprichos*.” “Distorted perspective will always give the effect of insecurity,” she explained in a note on her technique.

Stern had been analyzed by the Kleinian theorist Paula Heimann, and she understood the punning syntax of the unconscious. She also had a radical intuition about femininity: it becomes nightmarish when its artifice feels inescapable. In her *Sueños* (Dreams), as the montages were known, women day-dream inside a corked bottle, or drown helplessly in a living room as fish snap at them. A monstrous baby threatens a cowering mother. Professor Rest decorously avoided the word “sex,” but Stern's imagery seethes with allusions to bondage and predation. One of her most famous montages superimposes the figure of a demure housewife on the base of a table lamp, next to a giant male hand that is turning the switch on and off.

An arrestingly creepy feature of many images is the discord between a dreamer's impassive expression and her pre-

dicament: she is literally not awake to its horror. Nor was the society she lived in. The intent of the column was to soothe a riled female id; if the woman couldn't resolve her conflict—by ending an unhappy marriage, for example—the professor counselled wifely demurrals. But Stern's aim was to satirize misogyny, not normalize it, and she must have been conscious of subverting her assignment. The writers' presumption was that a benign male authority could dictate the solution to women's existential dilemmas. Her montages suggested that the source of most dilemmas was male authority.

When the column launched, Stern was a divorcée of forty-four, with two young children by her former husband, the Argentine photographer Horacio Coppola. The couple had met as students at the Bauhaus, where they joined the Weimar avant-garde and, after Hitler's ascension, its diaspora. Before leaving Germany, Stern and a friend, Ellen Auerbach, founded a graphic-design firm, *ringl+pit*, that pioneered the use of Surrealist photomontage in advertising. Their commercial work had a macabre wit that anticipated the *Sueños*.

After the column's run ended, in 1954, Stern turned back to verism. She worked prolifically as a portraitist, in an austere style that one of her subjects called “facial nudity,” and as an ethnographer, spending months in remote provinces to document their ruins, landscapes, and people. This was art with a “social function,” but it was also, perhaps, an escape into concreteness from her own nightmares. Stern's father had died in 1910, when she was six. Her mother committed suicide in 1933, in despair at the rise of anti-Semitism. Her son killed himself at twenty-five. Her daughter went into exile during the period of state terrorism in Argentina known as “the dirty war.”

Stern's notes on the *Sueños* are impersonal, and she didn't keep the original prints. When she tried to retrieve some of them for an exhibition, in 1967, she discovered that the magazine had thrown them out. Last fall, though, Stern, who died in 1999, shared a retrospective with Coppola at the Museum of Modern Art, and the *Sueños*, in their first major U.S. exhibition, roundly upstaged Coppola's abstract cityscapes. It was as if an urgent message had washed up on a foreign shore, sent by women, long adrift, whose dreams had come back to haunt us. ♦