

Sasha Vlad

# Alebrijes

*Mexico is the most surrealist country in the world.*  
– André Breton

The story of *Alebrijes* began, like so many other stories, with a dream, and it unfolded inexorably, as if following a preordained plan. The place is Mexico City, and the year is 1936. Pedro Linares, a 30-year-old *cartonero*<sup>\*</sup>, fell ill and in a fever dream he saw a strange place that looked like a forest. The trees, as well as different rocks and clouds, turned into brightly colored otherworldly creatures. As he recalled it, they were “a donkey with butterfly wings, a rooster with bull horns, and a lion with an eagle head.” All these animals were shouting just one strange word: “*Alebrijes! Alebrijes! Alebrijes!*”



Pedro Linares with an *Alebrije*

So far, there is nothing extraordinary about someone having a hallucinatory dream caused by fever. However, what followed deserves our attention. After Pedro Linares recovered, he felt the urge to recreate those fabulous beasts by using his artisanal skills and called them “*Alebrijes*”—the strange word that he heard in his dream. We should note that, evidently, he knew nothing of André Breton’s recommendation of 1924, by which the latter was encouraging the surrealists to recreate dreamed objects (“...I recently proposed to fabricate, insofar as possible, certain objects that we approach only in dreams...”). Subsequently, a whole fantastic bestiary made out of papier-mâché and cardboard came out of Linares’ *cartonería*.

This part of the story appears to be the most fascinating. It didn’t take long until the *Alebrijes* were noticed by a gallery owner from Cuernavaca. Exhibitions were organized and the sculptures came to the attention of such artists like Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, who started collecting them and even commissioned more *Alebrijes*. Other artists and celebrities followed suit, and the production of new *Alebrijes* continued in Linares’ family workshop even after his death in 1992. Other artisans across Mexico adopted the *Alebrijes* and made their own versions of them. Slowly but surely, a myth started to coagulate around these sculptures and what they represented. The documentary *Linares: Artesano de Cartón* (1975), which gained international attention, contributed to the dissemination and

consolidation of this myth. More recently, the Pixar animation film *Coco* (2017), associated the *Alebrijes*, as spirits of the departed, with the *Día de los Muertos* celebrations. The Mexican population at large adopted this myth and nowadays one can see the brightly colored sculptures sold as folk art in street markets.



While in Mexico, in 1938, Breton wrote: “I dreamed of Mexico and I am in Mexico. The passage from the first to the second stage was carried out under these conditions without the slightest hitch. For me, never before has reality fulfilled the promise of my dreams with such splendor.” As the author of *On the Survival of Certain Myths* and *on Some Other Myths in Growth or Formation* from 1942, he would have undoubtedly appreciated the unlikely journey of the *Alebrijes* from individual dream to collective myth.



\* An artisan who makes decorative items out of papier-mâché for different religious celebrations, especially for *Día de los Muertos* (*The Day of the Dead*).

# Remedios Varo



Kati Horna (Remedios Varo wearing a headdress made by Leonora Carrington), 1957

## Dream 2

Monday

I look out the window and am annoyed to see the mailman crossing the street in a big hurry and wearing my beige Merino shirt (it's an English shirt that Eva\* gave me). He's wearing the shirt strapped around his waist with a blue woolen Michoacán-style belt, also mine (which doesn't exist in reality). I'm outraged and run to the door and downstairs to hunt for the mailman so that I can take my clothes away from him. But I can't find him and I see an old suitcase (a gray suitcase that I brought to Mexico when I came here). I understand that that's where my shirt must be and begin taking out some clothing. I find, in addition to my things, a jacket of good-quality cloth that belongs to my friend Bill. I decide to keep this jacket until he can come to retrieve it and I hang it on the back of a chair so it won't get wrinkled, but I see that the right sleeve is turned inside out and rolled up. I mean, it's folded several times as if to shorten it and as if it had been worn that way, inside out, while the other sleeve was worn normally. This seems physically impossible to me and leaves me at a loss.

\*Eva Sulzer, Swiss photographer and filmmaker.

## Dream 3

I'm bathing an orange kitten in the sink of some hotel, but that's not so, it seems instead that it's Leonora\*, who's wearing a large coat that needs to be washed. I spritz her with a little soapy water and keep on bathing the kitten, but am very puzzled and disturbed, because I'm not at all sure who it is I'm bathing. Somebody, one of the two, tells me that Mr. Gamboa\*\* has just left for Brussels and before leaving sent me a certified telegram, commanding me to paint the façade of his house turtledove gray. A mortal anguish comes over me and at that moment someone knocks on the door. I go to open it and see a person wrapped in a dark cape and wearing a summery straw hat. He tells me that he's been sent by Mrs. Yellow. Of course! I *understand* at once that yellow as a decisive and conciliatory force bodes well for me. I see him in and he seems to me somewhat tipsy, in the unnatural way of a stage actor. The cat-Leonora has disappeared. I feel a sudden terror: now I'm going to learn something I'd be better off not knowing. This mysterious man will tell me. In fact, he sits down and begins to take off his disguise, the hat, the excess hair, the whiskers, et cetera, and then I recognize Juan\*\*\*. He laughs a lot and he tells me: "*Quelle bonne farce!* I came to warn you about *something*." Then I began to cry inconsolably, for I understood at once what *something* meant. I also felt a great terror, and I cried and woke up. Now I don't

know anymore what *something* meant (two in the morning) and I think and think and I cannot remember what it was. I'm surely in a very bad way, if I imagine Juan, right now, coming into this ordinary place, with no marmalade cats or anything. I wouldn't know how to tell him I've understood, because in point of fact I've forgotten, I only know it doesn't seem to be entirely him, but instead a . . .

\* Leonora Carrington.

\*\* Fernando Gamboa, director of the Department of Plastic Arts of the National Institute of Fine Arts.

\*\*\* Juan Martín, Remedios Varo's gallerist after 1960.



Remedios Varo, *Sympathy (Madness of the Cat)*, 1955

## Dream 6

Eva and I were supposed to take a very long trip (perhaps around the world). It was time to board the ship. I asked her if she thought passports and identification documents were necessary, but she said no. We boarded and then realized that some friends of Eva's were coming as well, a married couple I didn't know and their daughter, a very beautiful young woman. The ship was very small and broad and I saw only interior corridors, but no deck, or air, or sea, or anything. I sat down to write two very important letters and left them (before putting them into their envelopes) on a table, and when I went back to retrieve them, I saw with annoyance that Eva's gentlemen friends had dunked one of the letters in the oil-and-vinegar dressing of a salad they were eating and the other letter was soaking in the juices from some pieces of stewed meat on another plate. I became extremely angry and fought with them, but I had no time to straighten things out because at that moment we reached London. We wanted to disembark at once, but immediately at the gangway a street began and there stood a customs agent who asked me for my papers and, since I didn't have them, wouldn't let me pass. So I tried to win him over by smiling and winking at him and I promised him that it was just to take a short stroll around London and no one would find out. He agreed to the stroll and I reboarded the ship to spruce myself up. While I was looking for my dress, I realized that next to the ship was a sidewalk café and that three women who looked Mexican were speaking Spanish there. One was saying, "I don't know what to think anymore. I haven't gotten a letter from him in a long time." Another one answered: "You shouldn't worry because Monterrey is far away and, besides, he's busy with serious things now and doesn't have as much free



time.” While they were saying all this, they were looking straight at one another, as if conveying things of great hidden meaning. I immediately understood it had to do with the smuggling of marijuana.

#### Dream 7

I went to visit Javier and Amaya and found their parents at home as well. After a while, I realized with surprise that the whole family seemed to have made a sort of nutritional discovery based on a great spiritual advance they’d achieved. I saw that all of them were working with pieces of modeling clay, shaping them into hollows, something like tiny cups and casserole dishes that later could be eaten, proving highly nutritional. I thought that thanks to a powerful physical influence over the clay, they could change its composition and turn it into something digestible, but I saw that that wasn’t it, instead the clay didn’t change at all, but they could control their bodies thanks to their great spiritual advance and, in that way, digest the modeling clay with great nutritional benefits. All that was needed was for the clay not to be in compact balls, but instead molded into hollow shapes with thin sides, to contain the greatest possible quantity of air.

I was amazed, but worried, because I immediately knew that this was not “objective,” though it seemed so, but it was a *personal* manifestation of earthly magic with no true relationship to the universe, and that, because of this appearance of spiritual conquest, they would be left unsuitable for any true advance.



Remedios Varo, *Celestial Gruel*, 1958

#### Dream 9

I dreamed I was asleep in my bedroom and a loud noise woke me up. The noise came from upstairs, from the studio, and it was as if somebody were dragging an armchair. I thought that this meant someone was trying to get in from the terrace and was pushing the armchair that was against the door. I was alarmed and it seemed wise to let whoever it was know that I was awake, but to do so without his realizing I knew it was him, so that he could leave before anything worse happened. I got up and from my bedroom door called upstairs to my cat. “What’s all that noise, Gordi?” I took another step forward and at that moment I sensed with frightful horror something behind me that instead *was coming out of myself* and at the same time, I realized it wasn’t true that I’d heard that ominous sound from upstairs, but that I had somehow wanted to hear that threat outside and above, whereas in truth it was always beside me or *in me*. This “thing” behind me filled me with enormous terror and with a sensation of heavy, tormented sleep from which I struggled to

wake up completely in order to defend myself, but the mysterious creature grabbed me tightly by the back of my neck, digging in with his fingers as if trying to join those two long, thin muscles at the nape (or what I believed I had there) and with his other hand he squeezed the bridge of my nose. All the while, he was saying: “This is so you don’t wake up, I don’t want you to wake up. I need you to sleep soundly so that I can do what I have to do.” He didn’t harm me and I felt no pain, but the terror I felt was worse than everything else and I didn’t want to go to sleep. “He” gave me a last, even stronger squeeze, and as I felt myself dropping into a deep sleep, I woke in reality, in great torment and drenched in sweat.



Remedios Varo, *Disturbing Presence*, 1959

#### Dream 10

I had discovered an extremely important secret, something like a part of the “absolute truth.” I don’t know how, but powerful people and government authorities had found out that I possessed that secret and considered it extremely dangerous for society, since, if it were known by everyone, the entire existing social structure would collapse. So they took me prisoner and condemned me to death. The executioner took me to a place that seemed like the wall of a city. From either side of the wall an earthen slope dropped very steeply.

The executioner seemed very pleased. I felt great fear and great distress. When I saw he was already preparing to behead me, I started to cry and pleaded with him not to kill me, it was still too soon to die and he should consider that I still had many years of life ahead of me. Then the executioner started to laugh and to mock me. He said: “Why are you afraid of death if you *know* so much? Having so much wisdom, you shouldn’t fear death.” Then I realized suddenly that what he was saying was true and that my horror wasn’t so much death, but instead because I’d forgotten to do something of the greatest importance before dying. I begged him to give me just a few more moments of life so that I could do something that would allow me to die in peace. I explained that I loved someone and needed to *weave* his “fates” with mine, since once this weaving was done, we would stay united for eternity. The executioner seemed to find my entreaty very reasonable and granted me some ten more minutes of life. So then, I acted fast and wove around myself (much as baskets and hampers are woven) a sort of cage in the shape of an enormous egg (four or five times larger than me). The material I used to weave it was like ribbons that kept materializing in my hands and which, without seeing where they came from, I *knew* were his substance and my own. When I finished weaving that egg-like object, I felt at peace, but I kept on crying. Then I told the executioner that he could kill me at once, because the man I desired was woven with me for all eternity.

(From Remedios Varo, *Letters, Dreams & Other Writings*, translated by Margaret Carson)

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# The World Ends in a Dream

[And] a dream full of horror has still not ceased to visit me, at sometimes frequent, sometimes longer, intervals. It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dream proceeds, slowly and brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses, and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more intense and more precise. Now everything has changed into chaos; I am alone in the center of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I know what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known voice resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn command, of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected: get up, 'Wstawać.'

Primo Levi, written in November 1962

The world was about to end. At the crack of dawn, with the sky still grey and not yet really light, I found myself in a large crowd on a kind of ramp, with hills on the horizon. Everyone stared at the sky. Still half dreaming, I asked whether the world would really come to an end now. People confirmed that it was so, talking just as people talk who are technically in the know; they were all experts. In the sky three huge, menacing stars could be seen; they formed an isosceles triangle. They were due to collide with the earth shortly after 11 a.m. Then a loudspeaker announced that at 8:30 a.m. Werner Heisenberg would speak once again. I thought that that couldn't be him acting as commentator on the end of the world. It could only be the repetition of a tape recording that had often been played. I awoke with the feeling that, if the world really were to come to an end, this is how it would happen.

Theodor Adorno, dream of December 1964

I find myself in a huge room of a house. A crowd of people is looking in complete silence through a large opening in one of the walls into the dark cloudy sky, where two red suns are slowly moving toward each other. Like all the people there, I am waiting for the apocalyptic moment when the two celestial bodies will clash. Suddenly I realize that my unknown lover should be nearby and I decide to find him, for mutual safety and protection.

Mitzura Salgian, dream of August 9, 1986

A black saddle received as a gift, which symbolizes and, at the same time, is the end of the world.

Sasha Vlad, dream of July 30, 2016

I am at a summer resort, on the beach. It is night, I am lying in the sand alone, I think. I look at the

Moon in the sky: it's a huge full Moon, very white. I realize then that the Moon is growing, more and more, and faster, completely lighting everything up. I understand then what is happening: the Moon is approaching the Earth and will collide with it. This spectacle offered by the Moon is very beautiful; I know it will to destroy me, it will destroy everything, but what I feel is joy, almost euphoria at so much beauty.

Jesús Garcías Rodríguez, dream of August 10, 2010

I look out my apartment window and face the familiar view of a parking lot and an office building. I see the sky is red; there is also rotating meteor (which resembles an eyeball on fire) that causes ox-blood colored smoke to fill the horizon. As I stare in a kind of pleasure at the natural disaster likely to destroy many of my fellow city-dwellers, I sense behind me, at the door of my apartment, the presence of a suited arm, which thrusts itself into my place; I gauge its intent, and see that this panicked limb is grasping for my limited resources. I close the door on the arm as hard as I can, quite annoyed that this might indicate a sort of apocalypse.

Jason Abdelhadi, dream of September 26, 2015

I am seeing in rapid motion and from above how a powerful tsunami hits a coast. I am then entering the city of Stockholm and think that the golden light that is being reflected on the water below a couple of low concrete bridges is from the setting Sun, but discover that it comes from threatening lava emerging from under the water.

Bruno Jacobs, dream of October 13, 2016

I am in a Persian restaurant with a big group of people for a lunch event. The tables are slightly mismatched. I am confused how to order. It seems part of the meal is kept in a metallic slide-out shelf that fits in underneath our chairs, almost like in a vehicle. I pull open mine and see it is full of hot pasta, which I devour. I order very spicy shish kebab. Suddenly the lights start flashing on and off. A radio starts crackling. A gust of wind keeps circling around us. Everyone is perfectly still. I wonder if something apocalyptic

could be happening. I am suddenly outside in a grassy field in broad day. A Chinese family is picnicking; they appear happy to see a paternal-like figure that is walking up to them. I say in their presence that it would be fine if the Earth ended. A horde of fire-breathing dragons suddenly emerge from the sky. I say I would feel fine if they ate me. I crouch on the ground near a tree and wonder if this is an alien invasion, and whether I should stop using my cell phone.

Jason Abdelhadi, dream of January 15, 2017

I am sitting together with R. and S. under the sun on a low wall. We are discussing the question of the Apocalypse as there is something unclear about its relationship with prophecies. S. checks the Bible and reads the answer for us: an Apocalypse only deals with people, while prophecies only deal with events and phenomena.

Bruno Jacobs, dream of March 6, 2018

