

Nature/Nurture

Surrealist painter Ithell Colquhoun's 'double-image' blends bath-time indulgence with maritime myth. Jennifer Higgie finds her sea legs

In 1936, a young woman visited London's International Surrealist Exhibition to listen to Salvador Dalí lecture on 'Some Authentic Paranoid Phantoms'. Dressed in a diving suit, the Spanish artist brandished a billiard cue in one hand and in the other, clutched a leash attached to two wolfhounds. However, his helmet was bolted too tightly and he began to suffocate; thankfully, he was rescued by a swift-thinking man with a wrench. Despite the débâcle – or, perhaps, because of it – the young woman, Ithell Colquhoun, was entranced. Born in India in 1906 to a British colonial family, she was an artist, a writer and a magician, a mystical Christian, a student of ancient Eastern texts, a tarot reader and an occultist. Inspired by Dalí's antics, she was increasingly drawn to Surrealism and joined the British group in 1939. It didn't go well: within a year she was expelled for refusing to comply with their demands to abandon her membership of secret societies. (The Surrealists were surprisingly bossy.)

In 1938, Colquhoun painted *Scylla*, which is now held in the collection at Tate Britain. It depicts two large, rocky outcrops in an aquamarine sea that touch at their extremities; beneath a limpid sky, a narrow boat sails towards the gap between them. But look again, and the image shifts: now it's the view of a female body from the perspective of someone lying in a bath. Her thighs are as strong as stones, her pubic hair as tangled as seaweed, the boat the intimation of a sexual encounter.

In Greek mythology, Scylla was a beautiful nymph who was transformed into a six-headed monster by Circe, a jealous minor goddess. She was doomed to live for eternity on one side of the Strait of Messina, opposite a monstrous whirlpool, Charybdis, where she assuaged her fury by devouring sailors. The story appears not only in numerous Renaissance paintings, but in



literature, too: in Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Keats's *Endymion* and James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Colquhoun owned a copy of the latter. First published in 1890, it's a key esoteric text; TS Eliot cited it as a central reference for *The Waste Land*. More recently, Scylla featured in Madeline Miller's best-selling feminist retelling of the myth, *Circe*.

When the painting was purchased from the artist by Tate, Colquhoun was asked what her inspiration had been. She replied: 'It was suggested by what I could see of myself in a bath – this, with a change of scale due to "alienation of sensation" became rocks and seaweed. It is thus a pictorial pun, or double-image in the Dalí-esque sense – not the result of a dream but of a dream-like state.' *Scylla*, then, is a self-portrait of sorts: alienated, learned, sensual, the young artist knew well that the female body had long been a symbol for everything from the embodiment of virtue and fertility to temptation and the downfall of man. It's also, I imagine, a sly dig at the sexism of Modern art. Despite the number of talented women who are now recognised as Surrealists, in the early years they occupied an inferior role as muses. In 1929, in his second Surrealist manifesto, André Breton had declared: 'The problem of woman is the most marvellous and disturbing problem in all the world.'

In her painting, Colquhoun decisively refutes herself as a one-dimensional being. She's the earth, a monster, a myth, an ill-fated nymph, a woman: she's impossible to pin down or sum up. That said, *Scylla* is also a homage to something quite straightforward: the solace of the bath and the musings its steamy pleasures can prompt. © Jennifer Higgie's latest book, *The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World*, is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in Feb

Ithell Colquhoun, 'Scylla', 1938, oil on board, 91 × 61cm. Tate Britain