

TRANSCENDING "INSIDER" ART:  
ENRIQUE CHAVARRÍA, SURREALISM, AND OUTSIDER ART

by

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## TRANSCENDING "INSIDER" ART: ENRIQUE CHAVARRÍA, SURREALISM, AND OUTSIDER ART

### Introduction

The term Outsider art was introduced by Roger Cardinal in his 1972 essay *Toward an Outsider Aesthetic* to describe artwork that is fundamentally different, that is, work made by a creator who possesses a distorted perception of reality and who works outside of mainstream art movements.<sup>1</sup> Cardinal's work also created a discourse for studying Outsider art. In the introduction to his book *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*, Colin Rhodes says that the act of creating images in order to communicate is something to which all humans can relate. Most of us do it as children, and although the urge generally subsides in adulthood, we always retain the ability to consciously or unconsciously explore the translation of our feelings and thoughts into visual forms.<sup>2</sup> This is the way in which children form relationships between objects, themselves, and the world. One might argue that Outsider artists retain this childlike desire to translate feelings into visual form, which results in a complex creative process that can seem elusive to all but the creator.

Rhodes suggests that the elusiveness of Outsider art is what draws some of us to art produced outside of the mainstream, or "insider" art.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Cardinal says, the appeal of Outsider art lies in its ability to inspire fantasy in the viewer. The aesthetic of outsider art "resides in its invitation to share in a creative process." Because Outsider artists communicate metaphorically through the material forms of painting and sculpture, viewers can access their

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Cardinal, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic," in *The Artist Outsider*, ed. Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr. (Washington, London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 21-43.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

alternative realities despite the highly personal language of Outsider art.<sup>4</sup> Outsider artworks present variations on the familiar and may even force us to reconsider art that is more mainstream and presumably easier to understand. Unlike professional contemporary artists, outsider artists are not affected by shifting trends or the art market. Many of them are untrained and are resourceful in their use of unsophisticated materials, like scrap paper, cardboard, pen, and pencil. Outsider artists create to express their fantasies and imaginations and often remain unaware of modern art trends.<sup>5</sup> By looking at Outsider art, we can see how artistic creation plays a part in the social and psychological development of those who are more comfortable communicating visually.

In *Toward an Outsider Aesthetic*, Cardinal gives the example of Martin Ramírez (1895-1963) to partially illustrate the concept of Outsider art. Ramírez, a native Mexican, suffered from a mental crisis, which resulted in self-imposed isolation. Unable to communicate, he ended up homeless on the streets of Los Angeles, where he was committed to a mental institution. There, he began drawing simple, symbolic images that represented his past and his feelings about his Mexican identity. Although he lived long after the Spanish conquest of Mexico, his works reveal that he was conflicted about the loss of indigenous languages and visual culture. He created an outlet to the past using pictorial symbols and spatial relationships that are reminiscent of indigenous Mexico. At first, his works were gathered as instructive material on the art of the insane, but the art dealer Randall Morris and the artist Jose Bedía began studying his art. They used psychoanalysis to analyze his drawings and introduced him as an artist who intensely

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<sup>4</sup> Roger Cardinal, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic," 35-37.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

sought to reconcile his now broken world with the comfortable past he remembered. <sup>6</sup> Cardinal says that Ramírez's art is an external record of what took place in his disaffected consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

A Mexican painter who relied on a more visually complex iconography to communicate his personal feelings and ideas, Enrique Chavarría (1927-1998), worked in Mexico City from the early 1960s until the mid-1980s. Unlike many artists that Cardinal and Rhodes have categorized as Outsider, Chavarría was formally trained and his materials were not unsophisticated. He created hundreds of easel-sized oil on masonite paintings (ranging from 13 x 25 inches to 48 x 32 inches) during his lifetime. In school at the Academia de San Carlos, sometime around 1945, he became fixated by the Surrealist style and ideology imported to Mexico by European émigrés in the late 1930s through the 1940s. He continued to paint in this style throughout his life and well after Surrealism was in vogue. Chavarría preferred the European style of Surrealism, which was meticulous and precise. Comparatively, Mexico's brand of Surrealism was more intentionally naïve and reflected the growing interest in personal expression through abstraction. As a result his work is untimely and anachronistic.

Because his work is difficult to identify stylistically and chronologically and because he was socially reclusive, Chavarría's work has remained largely unknown to most scholars and critics. The only proponent of his work was Bryna Prensky, an American gallery owner from Florida who moved to Mexico City in 1954. She purchased most of the known works Chavarría produced and kept them for her art gallery and private collection. According to Chavarría's curriculum vitae, written by Prensky, his works were displayed in at least five one-man shows and several group exhibitions between 1949 and 1963. Prensky said, "the reaction to Chavarría's

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<sup>6</sup> Lyle Rexer, *How to Look at Outsider Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Cardinal, "Toward an Outsider Aesthetic," 33.

work on the part of both the public and critics has been highly enthusiastic.”<sup>8</sup> However, after extensive research, I have found no records that indicate his participation in or any critical response to individual or group shows during his lifetime. This is not to say that Prenskey fabricated Chavarría’s curriculum vitae, but it does speak to the lack of interest in his work in these shows. In the mid-1960s, Prenskey’s gallery, Galeria Bryna, became Chavarría’s exclusive representative. According to the curriculum vitae, after this point, Chavarría participated in only one show outside of Galeria Bryna’s Mexico City and Palm Beach locations.<sup>9</sup> There are no known works by Chavarría that pre-date his involvement with Prenskey.

The lack of scholarship on Chavarría presents a challenge to approaching a thorough study of his work. I base my conclusions about him and my readings of his paintings largely on a few key sources. My main sources are three interviews Chavarría gave, one to *Vogue, Mexico* in 1991, one to *Expresión* (date unknown), and another to *El Sol de Mexico* (date unknown).<sup>10</sup> In these interviews he spoke only about his art and mentioned his fascination with Surrealism and alchemy. He believed that the need to paint was inborn and, like the Surrealists, he aimed to “fuse dream with reality.”<sup>11</sup> My other key source is Bryna Prenskey, who wrote a general account of her interaction with Chavarría. Prenskey’s account explains her fascination with his work but never attempts to analyze it.

A cursory look at his work reveals that Chavarría used an idiosyncratic language to convey a complex narrative and his paintings depict a compelling alternative universe.

Chavarría’s works are a visual record of an imaginary world, a world I propose he built in

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<sup>8</sup> Bryna Prenskey, Enrique Chavarría, Curriculum Vitae, n.d.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> A copy of the original *Vogue, Mexico* interview was obtained from an artist file at MoMA. English transcriptions of the original Spanish articles from *Expresión* and *El Sol de Mexico* were located in the artist file at the Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science. The dates for these are unknown because there is no original copy accessible.

<sup>11</sup> Z.A.M., “Enrique Chavarría Servin, Pintor,” *Expresión*, date unknown and Luis Carlos Emerich, “El lenguaje de lo olvidado,” *Vogue* (Mexico City, February 1991): p. 120-123.

homage to Remedios Varo (1908-1963), the Spanish-cum-Mexican Surrealist painter. To some, his paintings are appealing because of their mysterious and fantastic nature; the artist transforms recognizable elements by placing them in an ambiguous environment. However, to most, his works are challenging if not meaningless because without knowledge of the correct iconographic tools, they are impossible to understand. In this thesis, I will consider Chavarría and his work through the discourse of Outsider art and provide a reading of his works using what I believe to be their key iconographic text, alchemy. I will also rely upon psychoanalysis as Morris did with Ramírez. In doing so, I provide access to Chavarría's alternate reality in which he communicated his personal perspective on religion, myth, science and gender and how these cultural constructs affect the human condition. Such an undertaking is significant because it will establish the standards by which we must approach this artist's work. While Chavarría's style seems reminiscent of Surrealism on the surface, he is not truly a Surrealist. As I show in this thesis, the messages in his compositions are quite personal and calculated, whereas, according to André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism*, the Surrealists utilized "pure psychic automatism by which one proposes to express the real functioning of thought."<sup>12</sup> Judging Chavarría's work by traditional standards perpetuates its meaninglessness since there are no "insider" movements that encapsulate his practice. By using the correct criteria, Chavarría can be seen not as an irrelevant Surrealist, but as a significant Outsider artist whose work shows a unique point of view.

Chavarría's work does not fit chronologically or fundamentally into any specific artistic movement. He was not concerned with the trends of the contemporary Mexican art scene; he was concerned with creating an alternate universe within his art to explore his profoundly different perception of reality. The issues he addressed were not universal or global issues, but his

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<sup>12</sup> André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26.

personal understanding of the ideal human condition.<sup>13</sup> Since he spent most of his career in solitude, he was little aware of any human condition but his own. According to interviews, he believed that his creations were “eminently individual” and he said, “one paints what one wishes to see.”<sup>14</sup> Although many artists make this statement, what Chavarría wished to see was a world that was decidedly different from reality. His need to create and figuratively inhabit this alternate world clearly establishes him as an Outsider artist.

### Chavarría and Surrealism

The original Surrealist movement began in Europe and stemmed from André Breton’s first version of the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, published in 1924. Breton defined Surrealism as automatic psychic thought that flowed directly from the mind and was not tainted by control or reason; he called this process automatism. Pure thought represented the true function of the mind, which was free of moral or aesthetic considerations. These thoughts could also be born from a dream state, the most surreal state of which the human mind was capable. In the visual arts, material forms that appeared in association with automatism were thought to be products of the subconscious and were deemed Surrealistic. Surreal paintings display a perceived suddenness of creation, as if born from a direct path from the subconscious mind to the artist’s brush. According to Breton, the ultimate goal for Surrealist painting was to re-make the world using imagination and automatism. Surrealism was not simply a vehicle for personal emotional expression; the re-made world would seek to resolve the universal problems of reality. To achieve its goal of universality, Surrealism focused on metamorphic images with multiple

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<sup>13</sup> Enrique Ignacio Aguayo Cruz, "Homage to the Mexican Painter Enrique Chavarría," *El Sol de Mexico*, n.d., n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Z.A.M., "Enrique Chavarría Servin: Pintor."

associations and interpretations. Surrealism, by definition, did not have any prescribed techniques or restrictive visual language systems.

In the 1940s, when Chavarría began his formal training as an artist, Mexico had become a haven for European artists in search of asylum from World War II.<sup>15</sup> In 1938, Breton visited Mexico and declared it was perfect for the cultivation of Surrealism. In *Surrealism and Painting*, he stressed that the actual and metaphorical independence of post-revolution Mexico made the country ideal for the practice of Surrealism.<sup>16</sup> He believed the artists there, like Frida Kahlo, had been untouched by the motives of the European Surrealist movement and their freedom from foreign influence resulted in a purer Surrealism.<sup>17</sup> With the influx of European artists, Mexico became a haven for Surrealist expression. Mexicans were exposed to European Surrealism firsthand when Mexico City hosted the 1940 *Exposición internacional del Surrealismo* at the Galería de Arte Mexicano.

It should be clarified that Mexican Surrealism is different than European Surrealism, both in its style and its practitioners. The original European Surrealists were comprised mostly of men who used personal expression to address universal, social and political issues. It is often considered patriarchal in its objectification of the female body. In Mexico, Surrealism challenged the *machismo* inherent in the art of the country. While the Mexican muralists were making grand public political statements, Surrealists focused on private feelings. The emergence of key female Surrealist painters, like Frida Kahlo, set up a dichotomy between the femininity of personal expression and the masculinity of public expression, which can best be exemplified by Kahlo and her husband Diego Rivera. Rivera was a well-known public figure whose art focused on

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<sup>15</sup> Susan L. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art* (Burlington, Vermont: Lord Humphries, 2004), 57.

<sup>16</sup> André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, ed. Simon Watson Taylor (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 141.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

nationalistic political messages, while Kahlo's art is best described as naïve and autobiographical.<sup>18</sup> The European Surrealists painted in a technical and meticulous manner, using perspectival systems, modeling, and proportion, while Mexican Surrealists favored a more primitive style with only basic forms of perspective and modeling. Their work is expressionistic, not technical. While European Surrealism had a strict set of guidelines, Mexican Surrealism was celebrated for its lack of prescribed rules. Many Mexican artists gravitated towards the permissiveness of Surrealism and used it to propel themselves away from traditional models of nationalistic art and towards artistic independence.<sup>19</sup>

Chavarría's style of painting is clearly influenced by European Surrealism while the personal content and of his work is more reminiscent of Mexican Surrealism. Even if Chavarría did not attend the *Exposición internacional del Surrealismo*, he surely would have heard about it through his studies at the Academia. Most of the notable participants were not Mexican, but European. In fact, Remedios Varo's work was displayed there before she had even moved to Mexico City in 1942.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that Chavarría either saw her work there for the first time or read about it in the Mexican periodicals.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, although he was greatly influenced by the European Surrealist movement, his work is not accurately defined as Surrealistic.<sup>22</sup> As I show, Chavarría's compositions are not automatic. They are calculated in the fact that they rely on a one-to-one iconographical translation between alchemical symbols and their meanings. In direct conflict to the *Surrealist Manifesto*, Chavarría used a specific visual language system to

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, *Latin American Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 96.

<sup>19</sup> Tatiana Flores, "Deciphering Imagined Worlds: The Paintings of Enrique Chavarría in Their Artistic and Cultural Context," in *Enrique Chavarría: Surrealism and the Fantastic* (Tallahassee, Florida: The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science, 2006), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 266.

<sup>21</sup> Holliday T. Day and Hollister Sturges, *Art of the Fantastic: Latin America, 1920-1987* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1987), 31-32.

<sup>22</sup> Cynthia Hollis, "Chavarría, Surrealism and the Fantastic," (lecture, Latino Cultural Center, Dallas, TX, September 8, 2007).



communicate. Moreover, his language was not universal because one needs to be familiar with the icons of alchemy and their explicit meanings in order to read his works. The world that Chavarría created in his paintings does not speak to universal issues of humanity, but to extremely personal ones. His visual world was specifically tailored to himself and his desires, not humanity in general.

### Enrique Chavarría Servin: A Biography

Enrique Chavarría Servin, also known as Enrique Chavarría, was born in an old house in the Colonia Escandon neighborhood of Mexico City in 1927.<sup>23</sup> Chavarría never left Mexico City. In fact, he barely left the house in which he lived with his three maiden aunts.<sup>24</sup> He suffered from a speech impediment that caused him to stutter and which made him uncomfortable in public and social situations.<sup>25</sup> However, he did attend the prestigious Academia de San Carlos to study fine art.<sup>26</sup> The Academia at this time still taught the traditional and conservative techniques of the past, but it was also filled with students seeking personal inspiration. Chavarría was one of them.<sup>27</sup> While he believed that he expressed himself to his greatest satisfaction in the solitude of his own studio, he always attributed his self-proclaimed technical mastery of watercolor, oil paint, etching, and photography to his training at the Academia de San Carlos.<sup>28</sup>

Bryna Prenskey, who lived in Mexico City from 1954-1982, also attended the Academia San Carlos but from 1954 to 1959. Having attended the school so soon after Chavarría, her

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<sup>23</sup> Z.A.M., "Enrique Chavarria Servin: Painter."

<sup>24</sup> Bryna Prenskey, "Enrique Chavarría: Painter of Fantasy and Myth," in *Enrique Chavarría: Surrealism and the Fantastic* (Tallahassee, Florida: The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science, 2006), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Lennie Bennett, "A public display for a reclusive artist." St. Petersburg Times Online 11 Dec. 2002: 1-2. [www.sptimes.com/2002/12/11/news\\_pf/SouthPinellas/A\\_public\\_display\\_for\\_.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2002/12/11/news_pf/SouthPinellas/A_public_display_for_.shtml) (accessed 16 Sept. 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Z.A.M., "Enrique Chavarria Servin: Painter."

<sup>27</sup> *The Bryna Collection of Mexican Art*, ed. Ellen Fischer (Vero Beach, Florida: Vero Beach Museum of Art, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Z.A.M., "Enrique Chavarría Servin: Painter."

experience there would have been similar to his. Prensky said that the Academia placed an emphasis on technique and advanced knowledge of all artistic media.<sup>29</sup> Prensky met many young students who exemplified the Academia of the mid-century. She says, “what impressed me the most was that so many of the new generation were striking out on bold new paths, even though they lived under the shadow of the powerful muralist masters.” The Academia had instilled in them great technique and the means to execute it, but the “diversity of concepts” displayed by each young artist proved that a vibrant artistic spirit was alive in Mexico City.<sup>30</sup>

Chavarría’s curriculum vitae lists Pastor Velazquez (watercolor), Carlos Alvarado Lang (etching), Dolores (Lola) Alvarez Bravo (a Surrealist photographer) and Carlos Dublan (oil painting) among his professors.<sup>31</sup> Based on his date of birth and the dates when these instructors taught at the Academia, Chavarría would have attended sometime between the years of 1943 and 1950. The standard length of study at the Academia during Chavarría’s time was five years.<sup>32</sup> However, it is unclear whether Chavarría completed the full term of his studies at the Academia before he secluded himself in his home studio in the late 1950s. No works by him from his academic years are known.

Chavarría’s personality can best be described as introverted and reclusive. His patron described him as “sweet but asocial.”<sup>33</sup> He rarely left home if he was not in the company of one of his three aunts.<sup>34</sup> While his technique was developed at the Academia, Chavarría’s style and expression were developed at home, where he immersed himself in studies of alchemy, anatomy, mythology, literature, and language. Chavarría was well read in ancient literature and

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<sup>29</sup> Bryna Raskin Prensky, “Galeria Bryna, A History,” *The Bryna Collection of Mexican Art*, ed. Ellen Fischer (Vero Beach, Florida: Vero Beach Museum of Art, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Bryna Prensky, “Enrique Chavarría: Painter of Fantasy and Myth,” 4.

<sup>31</sup> Prensky, Enrique Chavarría, Curriculum Vitae, n.p.

<sup>32</sup> Prensky, “Galeria Bryna, A History,” n.p.

<sup>33</sup> Mark Hinson, Hinson, Mark. "Catch the Chavarría train into your subconscious." *Tallahassee Democrat* (18 Jan. 2002); 26.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Shakespeare and he knew several languages. Some of his works reveal an interest in French poetry and contemporary authors.<sup>35</sup> He expressed these interests through paintings in oil on masonite and drawings and watercolors on paper. The few visitors to his home said that all he did was paint, read, and watch television.<sup>36</sup> From these studies, Chavarría arrived at his fantastic blend of painting technically proficient representations of real things and the imagined perfection of figures and elements that existed only in the books he read. Since he did not travel, even within his own city, I believe that much of his rich imagery must have come from things he read about and saw in books and on television. While he never left his city, it is clear that his interests and influences did exceed Mexico. However, after he became reclusive, Chavarría was no longer affected by the international or local developments of modern art. I believe that Chavarría's stylistic development as an artist essentially ended with his studies at the Academia. There he was engaged with the technique and the stylistic influence of European Surrealism beyond which his work and style never progressed. After his retreat into privacy, he did not seek further exposure to the Mexican art scene or influences beyond Surrealism.

In 1959, Prensky opened La Galeria Bryna to promote the work of students who aspired to depart from the nationalistic trends that were privileged by the mural painters.<sup>37</sup> Chavarría met Bryna Prensky in the early 1960s.<sup>38</sup> She was immediately taken with him and his work because he combined the traditional technical skill that he had acquired at the Academia with his own artistic individuality and his exploration of the fantastic.<sup>39</sup> Although he depicted fantastical elements, he gave them a sense of realism. Prensky became Chavarría's sole patron and bought

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<sup>35</sup> Bryna Prensky, "Enrique Chavarría: Painter of Fantasy and Myth," 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Jan Sjostrom, "Chavarría's Art 'Missing Link' in Mexican Surrealism," *Palm Beach Daily News* (3 April, 2002):1,3.

<sup>38</sup> Bryna Prensky, "Enrique Chavarría: Painter of Fantasy and Myth," 4.

<sup>39</sup> Sjostrom, "Chavarría's Art 'Missing Link' in Mexican Surrealism," 1.

every painting or drawing that she could get from him. She eventually acquired more than 100 of his works. This helped Chavarría financially, but due to the fact that nearly his entire output was held in Prensky's private collection and due to his reclusive nature, he was left relatively unknown on the Mexican art scene.<sup>40</sup>

Although he did not enjoy the popularity of some of his peers, from 1961 to 1963, Prensky stimulated enough interest in Chavarría to result in a few one-man shows and participation in a few group exhibitions in North America and Europe. As mentioned before, there are no contemporary critical accounts about how Chavarría's work was received, but the current assessment of his work is apathetic at best. Mexican museums and galleries are not interested in showing his work. In fact, most known surviving paintings and works on paper are now housed in the United States at the Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science in Tallahassee, Florida on a long-term loan from a private collector.

Jose Luis Aguirre, Chief Preparator at the Brogan Museum, believes that the lack of response to Chavarría's work is due not only to Bryna Prensky's private stockpile of his work, but also to the fact that many Mexican art authorities believe him to be a glorified Remedios Varo copyist.<sup>41</sup> However, while Chavarría pays homage to Varo with his style of painting, his color palette is brighter and more vibrant, perhaps more distinctively Mexican, while Varo's is more muted and subdued. Chavarría did produce a copy of Varo's *Hacia La Torre* (1960), but only near the end of his career in 1985. From this copy (signed *Copio* by Chavarría) it is evident that Chavarría was influenced by Varo and saw her work either in person or in reproductions. Moreover, his designation of this particular work as a copy suggests that he did not see his other works as copies of Varo's even though they share a similar style and iconography.

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<sup>40</sup> Prensky, "Enrique Chavarría, Painter of Fantasy and Myth," 3.

<sup>41</sup> Personal Communication, conversation with J.L. Aguirre, May, 2010.

I believe that Chavarría's work has been largely ignored in part because it does not fit neatly into any comfortable art historical category and is difficult to situate into scholarship. By treating Chavarría as an Outsider artist and elucidating his visual language, I will propose both a category and meaning for his paintings.

### Chavarría as an Outsider artist

Bryna Prensky, described Chavarría as “the most imaginative and individual [painter] in Latin America.” She compared him to Hieronymous Bosch, René Magritte, and Salvador Dalí: an enigmatic painter from fifteenth-century Flanders, a twentieth-century Belgian who toyed with the rationale of his viewers, and a notorious Spanish painter, performance artist, director, and pop icon.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, even his principal patron who must have known him and his work best, saw Chavarría's work as spanning the art historical timeline and the globe.

Chavarría's work can be most closely related to that of Remedios Varo, whose mature signature paintings were produced between 1943 and 1963. In contrast, Chavarría's major works were created between 1968 and 1985, years after Varo's death and the peak of Surrealism's popularity in Mexico City. He was definitely exposed to Varo's works, but his own paintings were seen as copycat or passé by the time they were exhibited in the 1960s.<sup>43</sup>

Varo fled World War II in Europe to come to Mexico City in 1942 with her then-husband Benjamin Peret. She had already fled her home country of Spain for France due to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). European art movements and the conflicts of war had shaped her life. It is no surprise that she gravitated toward Surrealism as a way to express her feelings on religion, nature, creation, and mysticism. She and other misplaced European Surrealists set up a small

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<sup>42</sup> Prensky, Enrique Chavarría, Curriculum Vitae.

<sup>43</sup> Emerich, “El lenguaje de lo olvidado,” 120.

family unit in the Colonia Rosa neighborhood of Mexico City. She came to Mexico City at a time when the muralists were praised for their *machismo* revolutionary ideas. However, the practice of Surrealism appealed to Varo as a way to process her feelings about the universal tragedy of war and displacement.<sup>44</sup> In her Mexican paintings, she created a world that could resolve the conflicts of war that she had experienced first hand. Like Varo, Chavarría found that painting was a way to communicate his personal feelings and that Surrealism provided an ideal discourse for transcending the human condition. Since Surrealism is about melding dreams with reality, it is a useful vehicle for those who wish to metaphorically transcend a tragic human condition to build a world where their dreams can fuse with their humanity. This way they can figuratively re-create themselves as perfect human beings.<sup>45</sup>

Chavarría claimed to be a painter of fantasy, anatomy, alchemy, literature, mythology, primitive art, and religion.<sup>46</sup> He listed Bosch, Varo, Carrington, and Ernst among his inspirations.<sup>47</sup> However, when asked if he had any ties to a particular school or movement in an interview with *Expresión* magazine, Chavarría answered, “No! I believe that artistic creation is something eminently individual.”<sup>48</sup> While his interests and subject matters are broad, his work is stylistically coherent. The relatively recent discourse surrounding Outsider art could provide a category in which we can situate Chavarría’s art.

Chavarría, like many Outsider artists, exhibited characteristics of a potential mental illness. Although he was never diagnosed to my knowledge, he suffered from social isolation, disorganization, distorted perceptions of reality, difficulty with speech, and delusions.<sup>49</sup> These

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<sup>44</sup> Stefan van Raaij; Joanna Moorhead and Teresa Arcq, *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna* (Chichester, UK: Lund Humphries, 2010), 13-16.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Emerich, “El lenguaje de lo olvidado,” and Z.A.M., “Enrique Chavarría Servin, Pintor,”

<sup>47</sup> Emerich, “El lenguaje de lo olvidado.” 121.

<sup>48</sup> Z.A.M., “Enrique Chavarría Servin, Pintor.”

<sup>49</sup> These symptoms are determined by the interviews given by Chavarría in *Expresión*, *Vogue* and *El Sol de Mexico*.

symptoms of a possible mental disorder may have increased with age if they were never treated. As mentioned before, Chavarría was asocial. Prensky attributed this to his speech impediment. He was said to have been able to communicate through painting and drawing before he could even talk, which presents the possibility that he had trouble communicating verbally for at least the first several years of his life.<sup>50</sup> This, as well as the symptoms listed above, is a possible indication of autism, which if untreated can develop into schizophrenia later in life.<sup>51</sup> Cardinal calls such symptoms an “autistic air” but asserts it indicates “nothing less than a distinctive intensity ... [that becomes] manifest within the artwork itself.”<sup>52</sup>

From interviews with Chavarría, it becomes clear that another key reason for his refuge was his unclear perception of reality. He declared he lived in a world of “imagination rather than reason” and was conflicted with the desire to transcend the “here and now” and his wish to remain present in the physical universe as well.<sup>53</sup> From interviews, it is clear that Chavarría did not trust the world around him. Moreover, by keeping to his house, his perception of reality would have been suspended. The *Vogue, Mexico* reporter who interviewed him at his home in 1991, described his house as “trapped in another time at least a hundred years old and furnished in the manner of that period.” Chavarría lived in an anachronistic world. Perhaps this is why he felt that in his house “time doesn’t exist.” According to the same *Vogue* interview, he consulted his vast library of old texts frequently while working. Another reporter from *Expresión* said that Chavarría kept a great pile of his paintings, drawings, and materials on one large table, and during the interview, the artist’s aunt commented on the state of disarray in the house. Resisting

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<sup>50</sup> Z.A.M., “Enrique Chavarría Servin, Pintor.”

<sup>51</sup> Carl E. Munson, *The Mental Health Diagnostic Desk Reference*, New York; London; Oxford, 2001, 114.

<sup>52</sup> Cardinal, “Toward an Outsider Aesthetic,” 33.

<sup>53</sup> Cruz, “Homage to the Mexican Painter Enrique Chavarría.”

her attempts at cleaning, Chavarría feared that she may upset his delicate disorganization.<sup>54</sup>

Chavarría claimed that his goal in painting was to “sink himself into the universal subconscious in order to become cognizant of a world that is destroying itself and to find himself involved in the miracle of hope ... a hope of an encounter with transcendence.”<sup>55</sup> This statement corresponds with only one of Breton’s goals for Surrealist painting, which was to transcend the physical world using imagination. Breton also stipulated that one must use automatism to achieve this transcendence, but as I show, Chavarría did not.

Chavarría’s hope for transcendence is evident in his art through his constant tendency to visually indicate metamorphosis. Alchemy was one of Chavarría’s favorite ways to illustrate transcendence, and we can use textbook alchemy to interpret the iconography of his paintings. For example, in *El Sortilegio (The Sorcery)* (1971, Fig. 1), he depicts a scene in which three female characters work to manipulate or transform a small male character. The setting is a plain small angular room. The majority of the background consists of a highly textured brown wall. The texture creates tonal undulation within the flat color and the monotony of the wall is broken by the bright blue sky that is visible through the six high windows. Chavarría often used color contrast to create the emphasis of light and shadow in his paintings. He constructed the bodies of the women using precisely shaped fields of continuous texture, which makes the bodies appear two-dimensional compared to the modeled faces and hands. While Chavarría valued his technical skill, his ability to represent space and to model in color was rudimentary at best. He made up for this by introducing rich textures and tonal modulations to stand for light and shadow.

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<sup>54</sup> Emerich, “El lenguaje de lo olvidado.” 121.

<sup>55</sup> Cruz, “Homage to the Mexican Painter Enrique Chavarría.”



In *El Sortilegio*, the three women's headdresses are mini-narratives of transformation. The woman in green on the right side of the canvas has wooden tinder for hair. A fire rises from the crown of her head, above which floats an alchemical vessel. Alchemists believed that, within the heated vessel, they could create a universe of their own.<sup>56</sup> Here, the alchemical purification of substances is a symbolic metaphor for spiritual transcendence. The serpent on the central woman's headdress also represents alchemical transformation. In alchemy, the serpent is a symbol for the initial corrupt matter that destroys itself to eventually become the purest material known to the alchemist, the *prima materia*.<sup>57</sup> Birds, like the one on the leftmost figure's head, are also signs of the purification of base substances, while the tower is considered a philosophical furnace.<sup>58</sup> Chavarría included a self-portrait as the small man entering out of the open portal on the table.

The three women are transcendental, but they still have an earthly presence that binds Chavarría himself to the physical world. The open portal and the stairs suggest that he is attempting to walk up from the physical world into the transcendental one, but the three sorceresses are preventing him. They alone hold the key to his escape from the real world. The three women likely represent Chavarría's three maiden aunts with whom he lived until they died in his adulthood.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps he felt something about the presence of others held him back from true transcendence. Or, perhaps these women aided him in his transcendence. The fact that he always had women as authority figures in his life (his aunts, Prensky, Varo) may have led to his belief in the superiority and authority of women and perhaps his own gender ambiguity.

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<sup>56</sup> Lyndy Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5-6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 203.

<sup>59</sup> The exact dates of his aunts' deaths are unknown. Their names are not even known. Chavarría lived with them until their deaths after which he was largely supported financially by Bryna Prensky.

Upon closer examination of *El Sortilegio* and other paintings, I noticed that beneath the paint, the structural elements of the composition were worked out beforehand and outlined in ballpoint pen. All geometric objects and plumb lines are measured and divided by pen marks. Furthermore, he specifically chose visual icons of alchemy to literally stand for the alchemical meaning associated with them. For instance, he chose to depict a snake, not for its form or associations with his subconscious, but because, in alchemy, it literally stands for transformation. Chavarría's paintings are full of one-to-one iconographic references to alchemy. His desire to create an artwork in which he transcends the physical world may display a Surrealist influence, but based on his calculated formal decisions and his reliance on alchemy's complex visual language, it is evident that these works were created consciously and not automatically. His calculated control over his imaginary world, his distrust of the outside world, his lack of any normal concept of time, his fervent disorganization, and his delusions about what the world required from him define Chavarría's Outsider perspective.

### Scholarship on Outsider Art

In *Toward an Outsider Aesthetic*, Cardinal's goals were to define the criteria for Outsider art by expanding on Jean Dubuffet's original concept of Art Brut and to determine how we can still value artwork that cannot be classified under any other movement.<sup>60</sup> Cardinal believes that the term Outsider art does not indicate similarities in any intrinsic qualities of the art. Outsider art is categorized by the artist's process and the audience's response, not the stylistic tendencies of the artist.

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<sup>60</sup> Dubuffet classified art brut, or "raw art" as any art produced by a creator that was uninfluenced by any prior art movement, style or technique, basically a naive artist. Jean Dubuffet, "Art Brut in Preference to the Cultural Arts," trans. Paul Foss and Allen S. Weiss, *Art and Text* 27 (1988): 31-33.

Chavarría does not fit neatly into Dubuffet's concept of Art Brut, which is defined as art produced by those who are not "culturally compromised," meaning that his formal training at the Academia San Carlos instilled in him the need to channel his creative inspiration toward an ideal academic standard.<sup>61</sup> In other words, Art Brut does not include those with formal training and knowledge of current art and art history. By definition, Art Brut works are visionary and without precedent, and Chavarría's work is not devoid of outside influences. He had formal training at the Academia and looked to masters of the past to inform his subjects and style. In fact, Chavarría was aware of what was happening on the contemporary art scene, he just chose to revolt against it, saying that it "shows an absence of objectivity."<sup>62</sup> However, there are aspects of Dubuffet's Art Brut that Chavarría and his works exemplify. In his article "Dubuffet, Levi-Strauss, and the Idea of Art Brut," Kent Minturn describes Dubuffet's quintessential Art Brut artist as a common man who has "escaped written history" and produces art that has been "untouched by the demands of the market."<sup>63</sup> While not culturally isolated, Chavarría physically isolated himself and his art, which was not influenced by the demands of the art market. Therefore, his work was not written into history.

Cardinal expands Dubuffet's criteria to develop his discourse for Outsider art. Opening up the discourse creates room for artists like Chavarría, but the many facets of Outsider art make it difficult to situate specific artists and artworks within Cardinal's discussion. Although he originally agreed with Dubuffet on this point, Cardinal no longer limits his qualifications of Outsider art to that "without precedent or tradition" and most recent scholars of Outsider art

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Z.A.M., "Enrique Chavarría Servin, Pintor."

<sup>63</sup> Kent Minturn, "Dubuffet, Levi-Strauss, and the Idea of Art Brut," *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 46, Polemic Objects (Autumn, 2004): 253, 248.

concur.<sup>64</sup> In the introduction to his book, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*, Colin Rhodes defines the Outsider artist as dysfunctional according to the cultural parameters for normality. These fundamental differences include psychological illness, criminality, issues with gender or sexuality, undeveloped or under-developed artistic practices, and anachronism. Many times the Outsider artist displays spontaneity or immediacy in communicating a message through his or her artwork. Chavarría's work is anachronistic because he relied heavily on sources from the past and painted in a style that was not contemporary to him. He claimed sudden inspiration and the need to complete paintings that were, "calling out to [him]."<sup>65</sup> Rhodes also discounts the idea of "non-cultural" production.<sup>66</sup> Even if the producer is outside of cultural norms, artistic production does not occur in a vacuum since the reception, more than the production determines the Outsider status. If the mainstream did not exist, there would be no need for a category of Outsider art, so the reception of Outsider art objects relies on the dominant culture, if not its production.

It is important to understand that Outsider art does not represent a specific style, although recurrent features determine its conventions. According to Cardinal, these are:

dense ornamentation, compulsively repeated patterns, metamorphic accumulations; an appearance of instinctive though wayward symmetry; configurations which occupy an equivocal ground *in between* the figurative and the decorative; other configurations which hesitate between representation and an enigmatic calligraphy and certain favorite subjects, such as the totemic self-portrait. ...<sup>67</sup>

Enrique Chavarría's *Autoretrato (Self-Portrait)* (1972, Fig. 2) displays all of the recurrent elements to which Cardinal refers. The work is dense and contains many deliberate and

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<sup>64</sup> Cardinal is quoting the subtitle of an exhibition he produced with Victor Musgrave in London in 1979, *Outsiders: An Art without Precedent or Tradition*. See Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, Washington; London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994, 31 n. 23.

<sup>65</sup> Z.A.M., "Enrique Chavarría Servin, Pintor."

<sup>66</sup> Colin Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*, 7-9.

<sup>67</sup> Roger Cardinal, "Toward and Outsider Aesthetic," 33-34.

obsessive surface patterns such as the meticulous grid-like surface texture that appears on the tower and underneath the repetitive stone pattern in the foreground. Again, Chavarría used color contrast to separate the elements of his composition. Instead of using a more advanced form of perspective, he relies on the contrast between and overlapping of the dark, dull brown of the tower and the bright blue of the sky to distinguish the foreground from the background. His linear perspective is rudimentary and atmospheric perspective is non-existent.

There are many metamorphic images within this painting as well. For example, the artist's own face acts as the door to the tower. In the foreground, a tree branch rides a unicycle while holding a bird and its nest. The self-portrait displays the figurative, decorative and the merely suggestive. The patterns of the water and the mountains in the background and the rocky surface in the foreground fall between the figurative and the decorative. We are meant to know that they are mountains, water, and stones of some sort, but they are not as highly illustrative as other definable elements in the painting such as the realistically rendered owl. Other objects seem to stand alone, but point to clues about the artist's identity. Symmetry, while not perfect, is present.

The work is also enigmatic and totemic. Chavarría characteristically combines references to religion, alchemy, and personal identity within one complex work. The tower figure echoes the shape of a totem and also contains the emblems that Chavarría associates with his heritage and identity. The three floating cloud figures can be interpreted to represent his aunts and the three bells atop the tower are reminiscent of the Spanish Colonial Christian architecture that is prevalent in Mexico City.

The parallels between alchemical purification and religious cleansing are strong throughout *Autoretrato*. The water, mountains and white bird in the background of the painting

are symbolic of alchemical purification, but still perpetuate the idea of spiritual cleansing. The presence of water represents one of the four major elements and is connected to the process of alchemical purification.<sup>68</sup> Alchemically, mountains represent the vessels that contain the prima material, while flying birds represent gasses that they expel into the atmosphere. The image of a white bird flying in the painting illustrates the cleansing of impure vapors and alludes to spiritual cleansing as well.<sup>69</sup>

The figures in the water also symbolize alchemical and religious cleansing. An owl, the emblem for alchemy, floats upon the water.<sup>70</sup> This references the fifteenth-century belief that being rowed upon the water can cure ailments and the Christian belief that water can wash away the evils of sin. The eyeball represents the ablution stage of alchemy (or the moment when the base substance changes from impure to pure) and the human figure walking into its doorway references the Christian belief of passing into a sacred place by entering a church.<sup>71</sup> These icons emphasize Chavarría's need to relate spiritual cleansing to a scientific process in order to achieve a better understanding of both. Through his painting, he displays an alternate universe in which he can simultaneously become the creator and cleanser of human beings. Chavarría's obsession with purification reveals his personal struggle with society. In his mind, he is not pure in the real world. In his imagined world, he can purify himself and take his own stance on religion, science, and identity without the tension of feeling socially marginalized.

In *Autoretrato*, the woman in the central window of the tower stands as a personification of human reproduction, metamorphosis, and protection. The butterfly, a symbol of reproduction and creation, represents the major changes that must take place in order to create any new

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<sup>68</sup> M.E. Warlick, *Max Ernst and Alchemy: A Magician in Search of Myth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 267.

<sup>69</sup> Laurinda S. Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Delights* (UMI Research Press, 1981), 23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 77.

entity.<sup>72</sup> She holds a lyre, which makes a reference to alchemy as a musical art.<sup>73</sup> In terms of alchemy, music is thought to have healing elements and drive away evil spirits, thus the figure acts as a protector of Chavarría's world. Again, a woman holds the place of control and authority in the painting. Chavarría appears to have viewed certain women as muses who were responsible for his creation and transcendence.

As a reclusive and modest man, Chavarría would not have wished to be the main focus of the self-portrait, but rather to present his identity with imagery that personified him.<sup>74</sup> At the base of the tower, a door frames a human face, that of Chavarría.<sup>75</sup> Chavarría displays his physical appearance as a portal into the world of his intellect.

Chavarría's imagery in *Autoretrato* stems from his fascination with alchemy and his desire to achieve scientific and personal spiritual enlightenment through the medium of painting.<sup>76</sup> In his work Chavarría combines scientific symbolism with an eclectic blend of religious imagery.<sup>77</sup> For many in Mexico City, Catholicism provided an opportunity to transcend the earthly world. Chavarría struggled to reconcile Catholicism and alchemy, perhaps so that he did not feel guilty for believing in science over religion. He saw painting as an application of alchemy and as a way to express his desire for purification and transcendence. He identified so heavily with alchemy that he saw it as a way to change himself. In an interview he said, "Be aware that the alchemists didn't look as much for gold or the philosopher's stone as they did for a means of modifying their personalities."<sup>78</sup> Chavarría's goal was to create an alternate universe in his painting in which he could be someone different, someone perfect. For Chavarría,

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<sup>72</sup> Hollis, "Surrealism, the Fantastic and Chavarría"

<sup>73</sup> Dixon, *Alchemical Imagery in Bosch's Garden of Delights*, 58.

<sup>74</sup> Hollis, "Surrealism, the Fantastic and Chavarría"

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Tatiana Flores, "Deciphering Imagined Worlds," 2.

<sup>78</sup> Emerich, "El lenguaje de lo olvidado." 122.

perfection was the ability to transcend reality in order to be free from a world that he thought was destroying itself, or perhaps one that he thought could destroy him if he let it. It is clear that Chavarría felt he needed cleansing in order to transcend.

According to Colin Rhodes, the tendency for Outsider artists to create alternate worlds is common. Rhodes explains that most Outsider artists seek a world beyond reality. It is not mere escapism, but a yearning to construct a universe in which real living conditions are not imposed on them.<sup>79</sup> What makes these worlds hard for others to understand is that the viewer often does not have access to the “language” the artist is using to create them.<sup>80</sup> While Chavarría did feel the need to express himself through his painting, he obscured his appearance as a defense mechanism, another indication of a possibly schizophrenic sign of his inherent mistrust. He would never truly reveal in interviews what his finished works signified, more often than not claiming that he did not even know what it was all supposed to mean. But, I believe that he intentionally used alchemy as a language and there was a symbolic meaning for each individual object he painted. He was just not interested in providing the key to uncovering his secret world. John MacGregor suggests that Outsider artists create these alternate realms as safe havens, as a place to live other than reality.<sup>81</sup> I believe that Chavarría’s paintings were his universe and his reality.

Here, I believe that Paolo Bianchi’s 1989 definition of Outsider art is pertinent:

With the Outsider, we are dealing with sensitized artistic types whose feelings, thoughts, work and life are shattered by contact with the reality of the dominant majority; yet he is able to escape from the ruling customs and the dominant view of the world in so far as he takes a stand on the issue of his otherness, setting himself up in contradistinction to other people, to that which is normal and orderly, and foregrounding his status as a pariah. He

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<sup>79</sup> Colin Rhodes, *Outsider Art: Spontaneous Alternatives*, 104.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



avoids being classified as a curious comic entertainer, as a fool or a droll, by cultivating a willful isolation, a separateness, or a unconscious going-to-ground.<sup>82</sup>

Bianchi's definition accurately describes Chavarría and his work. It is also consistent with some of the symptoms of autism and schizophrenia. Chavarría's work was extremely personal to the point that he used it to create another universe. In the interview with *El Sol de Mexico*, he expressed his interest in all things human, from philosophy to religion. He created a world where perfect humans could achieve enlightenment.

### Chavarría's Universe

I suspect that Chavarría's universe is an ode to Remedios Varo. In objection to the idea that he was a knockoff and a Varo copyist, I believe that he used Varo's work as inspiration. It appears that he was so deeply enamored of the beautiful Spanish painter that she often appears in his work, sometimes through a reference to one of her works and sometimes in the form of a portrait. When compared to a photograph of Remedios Varo (Fig. 3), many of the women in Chavarría's paintings share her distinctive heart-shaped face, wide eyes and long slender nose with a flat bridge. For instance, the faces in *La Bruja de la Nieve (The Snow Witch)* (n.d., Fig. 4) and *La Vela (The Sail)* (1980, Fig. 5) bear an uncanny resemblance to Varo as well as a resemblance to the way in which Varo portrayed herself (see Fig. 6). Although the three women in *Autoretrato* can be presumed to represent his three aunts, he superimposed their faces with a likeness of Varo. This indicates that Varo was his primary muse.

It must be noted that Chavarría made no explicit claims for Varo as a muse although he does acknowledge her influence. In the interview with *Vogue Magazine, Mexico*, Chavarría says,

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<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf, Jr., *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture*, Washington; London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994, 28 from its original source Paolo Bianchi, "Bild und Seele," in *Kunstforum*, no. 101 (June 1989): 71-72.

“I met her when she arrived in Mexico and hadn’t begun painting yet, when she was with Benjamin Peret. Clearly I feel an identity with her painting.” His word is the only evidence we have that these two may have met. However, they did live within three miles of each other in Mexico City (Varo in the Colonia Roma and Chavarría in the Colonia Escandon), so it is possible that Chavarría spoke the truth. Chavarría credited Varo with bringing academic perspective to a “dream state possibility.” He says, “Before her, there were some women painters best described as naive, such as Frida Kahlo and Maria Izquierdo, who were really not the same thing.”<sup>83</sup> This shows that Chavarría valued technical skill and he singled her out among his influences, probably because Varo still followed most of the European Surrealist techniques even after she moved to Mexico. The degree to which she appears in his work proves that Varo was not a mere influence on but a presence in his work.

Varo’s influence on Chavarría’s technique and form is apparent in his process. He prepared the surface of his paintings using the same textural technique as Varo. If we compare Varo’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1956, Fig. 7) with Chavarría’s *Invocation Maturina (Morning Invocation)* (1970, Fig. 9), it is evident that Chavarría borrowed the grid-like surface texture technique from Varo. Both paintings are oil on masonite (Varo’s favored medium) and the combing technique enhances the substrate’s natural texture while other areas are treated with a smoother application of paint, which creates a contrast in textures (Figure 8). Chavarría also used Varo’s characteristic *decalcomania* technique, which is a way of floating wet paint on the surface of the substrate and applying and removing paper or foil to form a pattern. The European Surrealists, especially Max Ernst, used *decalcomania* as a means for automatist expression of chance whereas Varo and Chavarría controlled their application of *decalcomania* in order to create surface textures and details. In *Au Bonheur des Dames*, *decalcomania* is used to form the

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<sup>83</sup> Emerich, “El lenguaje de lo olvidado,” 120.

willowy bodies of the women; in *Invocation Maturina*, it can be seen in the impish figure's green body and the woman's gray garment (Figure 10). Chavarría also obviously paid attention to Varo's use of ambiguous indoor/outdoor architectural settings. Like Varo, he used architectural elements to frame the subjects in his paintings, but it is often unclear if they are meant to represent actual structures. The architectural spaces in the paintings compared above are both open to the sky. In Varo's works, there is never a reference to the interior world without a reference to the exterior world and Chavarría's works follow suit.

Lois Parkinson Zamora's comparison of the work of Remedios Varo to the writings of the Chilean magical realist writer Isabel Allende is a useful model for the comparison of painting and literature in order to determine a comparative narrative structure. One of Zamora's major arguments is that Varo rejected the patriarchal character of European Surrealism. Again, Chavarría follows Varo in this pursuit. It is known that Varo was influenced by Robert Graves's mythopoetic book *The White Goddess*, in which Graves uses his own complex language to express his dissatisfaction with patriarchal modern industrialized society. As Chavarría did in paintings, Graves did with text; he created a poetic version of a world that did not make sense to him as an artist. Graves's poem proposed worship to a kind of Mother Goddess figure who represented a combination of ancient Celtic, Eastern, and Western goddesses.<sup>84</sup> Varo's interest in this text must have led to her fascination with depicting women as muses and goddesses of creativity, an interest that Chavarría shared.

Along with Leonora Carrington, her female contemporary in Mexico, Varo developed a brand of Surrealism that is surprisingly void of automatism. Automatism was a key component to the kind of Surrealism practiced by the young followers of André Breton in the 1930s and 1940s. It was meant to be an exercise that bridged the gap between the waking and sleeping

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<sup>84</sup> See Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1948), 61-73.

consciousness. While she used automatic elements in her collages and writing, when it came to her painting, Varo was meticulous about details to the point that she worked out her compositions on translucent paper before transferring them to masonite.<sup>85</sup> From the traces of ballpoint pen that are visible through the paint layer on Chavarría's masonite boards, it is evident that he practiced a similar process. The geometric forms in his works are clearly outlined. The organic forms, while naturally more loosely rendered, are still deliberate elements in the design of the overall composition.

Whitney Chadwick explains that women Surrealists in Mexico were prone to relate to Jung's more natural and organic concept of human consciousness than Freud's more misogynist one. She states that Merret Oppenheim, a woman, was the only member of the European Surrealist circle to incline towards Jungian philosophy over Freudian psychology or psychoanalysis that the men preferred. In general, men often saw the unconscious mind as a harbinger for latent sexual desire while women saw it as a portal to a dimension that celebrated the mythical power and occult nature of a female mother goddess.<sup>86</sup>

Zamora says that Varo created a world in which women are "master builders" who "exist outside the usual cultural conventions of female activity."<sup>87</sup> That is to say that Varo depicted strong, mystical female figures in her work. These women are often in control of men or a male-dominated world by some "feminine" or "domestic" means of creation, like sewing or knitting. Zamora describes Varo's women as being "essentially a single woman whose wide-set eyes, narrow nose and mouth, and long, flowing hair constitute a stylized self-portrait."<sup>88</sup> Chavarría uses this same "everywoman" figure in his works and as mentioned before, they all share these

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<sup>85</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists in the Surrealist Movement*, (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1985), 143.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 143, 153.

<sup>87</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, "The Magical Tables of Isabel Allende and Remedios Varo," *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Spring, 1992), pp. 113-143.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

distinguishing facial characteristics. Chavarría's women are also often in control of the narrative or in control of men. They are sometimes even in control of him as seen in *El Sortilegio (The Sorcery)* and *Autoretrato (Self-Portrait)*. This gives women as much control over Chavarría's world as he has himself, making it clear that his painting denies the patriarchal elements of Surrealism. This indicates that he does not objectify women, but relates to them as equals, if not superiors. Chavarría's life was defined by the presence of strong women and he viewed them as authority figures. Perhaps he even felt that they had control over him since they so heavily informed his alternate world.

Like Chavarría, Varo was preoccupied with transmigration and transfiguration, especially the transformative processes of alchemy. Her distinctive female figures often move between the physical and metaphysical world in curious ways. Zamora cites the example of *Nacer de Nuevo* (1960, Fig. 11), in which a woman emerges from what Zamora calls a "vulvar" space. Since Varo primarily used women to represent her transcendence from the physical world, we can assume that she believed women to possess an inherent transformative capability.<sup>89</sup> In the painting, the vulvar portal reflects Varo's belief in the power of a mother goddess and female creation.

We see a similar use of the vulvar space in Chavarría's *Pared Roja (The Red Wall)* (1971, Fig. 12). A mystical woman emerges out of a red wall, in very much the same manner as Varo's woman. In this case, a man is present who closely examines the woman with a firm gaze through a magnifying glass. Again, Chavarría employed his literal translation of alchemical symbols as a language. The woman presents a book of knowledge containing the symbols  $\Omega$  and  $\Delta$ . The letter omega,  $\Omega$ , is often used to represent the symbolic end of something. Here,  $\Delta$  is the alchemical symbol for water, the substance in which all things are purified. Water is often

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 119.

associated specifically with women because both are viewed as the carriers of new life. In *Pared Roja*, Chavarría shows his acknowledgement and veneration for the mystical powers of women. The man in the painting not only sees the woman in the wall, who many are presumably blind to, but he stops to contemplate her as a beholder of life and wisdom.

Many of Chavarría's transcendental figures are women. Perhaps this is in homage to Varo, or perhaps he identified equally with men and women. In fact, it is common for those who suffer from developmental disorders to resist the need to physically interact with others and this includes sexual interactions.<sup>90</sup> I believe that, while Chavarría was preoccupied with Varo and women, his reclusive lifestyle and lack of social interaction must have led to a sexual ambiguity or even asexuality. Since he deeply identified with Varo instead of the more patriarchal male artists, his work does not objectify women as some Surrealist works do. He portrays women as subjects, not objects.

Zamora also mentions Varo's use of curious vehicles that materialize from their surroundings to transport humans from the physical world to the spiritual world. Chavarría's imagery relied heavily on this type of transformative and metamorphic process as well. He often used a boat or a ship to transport his humans on their symbolic journey. While Varo did use vessels to transport her characters in a few paintings, her preferred method of transportation was wheels. She often gave her figures tiny wheels that grew right out of their clothing to transport them through their metaphysical worlds. In *Tailleur Pour Dames* (1957, Fig. 13) we see both. A female arrives in an upright boat-shaped vessel with tiny wheel at its helm. This woman can float as well as glide through her world and this seems to lend her an air of importance when compared to the other women at the tailor's shop. Chavarría and Varo determine the transformative value of their human characters by the ease with which they commute between

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<sup>90</sup> Munson, *The Mental Health Diagnostic Desk Reference*, 114.

the physical and spiritual world. Another example of transport between the physical and metaphysical worlds appears in Varo's *Tránsito en Espiral* (1962, Fig. 14). Vacant and occupied boats float in a spiral canal toward a tower, the symbol for an alchemical furnace, that will lead to purification. In 1978, Chavarría produced *Variación sobre un Tema de Remedios Varo* (Fig. 15), in which he copied and elaborated on Varo's composition. Here, his adoration of Varo is clearly revealed.

According to alchemical texts, those who travel the smoothest represent positively enlightened and potentially perfect human beings. Chavarría would have considered Remedios Varo among these characters. For instance, in *La Vela (The Sail)* (1980, Fig. 5), Chavarría pictured Varo as a truly transcendental being. The head and torso of her body form the sail of a ship, which travels in the choppy waters of a sea cove. Chavarría's use of clear blue water as a highway for his vessels shows his interest in water as an element for transfiguration. In alchemy, an impure substance is added to the water, which first kills it and then revives it. Water is often referred to as the sperm of the world and the keeper of seeds from which all things eventually grow. The wind carries the seeds to the Earth in a great circle of reproduction. All fumes, spirits, and souls that arise from the vapors of the alchemical process of transmutation are represented by flying birds.<sup>91</sup> Here, Chavarría uses many coastal birds such as gulls and pelicans to stand in for the spiritual vapors. As the sail, Varo navigates the water and the winds. This shows her control over her own physical transience. The wagon train around her neck may represent her circling journey within her own subconscious and her figurative or intellectual transience. Chavarría saw his symbolic figures as depicting perfect human beings.<sup>92</sup> The fact that he shows Varo as just such a symbolic figure in his paintings proves her influence upon his work. She

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<sup>91</sup> Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 213, 217, 24.

<sup>92</sup> Emerich, "El lenguaje de lo olvidado," 122.

appears not only in physical form, but through references that are derivative of her own works that she produced at least twenty years before Chavarría.

Chavarría takes the idea of artistic influence further than most, to the point of veneration. He creates an entire alternate universe from paint and masonite. His universe is a place where Remedios Varo lives on. Sometimes she manifests in his work in more literal ways, such as in the form of a portrait. Other times we can only see her formal and theoretical influences. Chavarría cloaks his world in a deliberately complex language. In his world humans could transcend the physical world to achieve enlightenment and Remedios Varo was the example and the muse.

### From Hermit to Hoarder

Unfortunately, the purveyors of Outsider art are usually so eager to confine their artists to this category that they often prohibit the audience from discovering too much about them.<sup>93</sup> The gallery owner or dealer can, be it innocently or deliberately, cultivate an air of mystery around the work to prevent its inclusion in any mainstream or insider art movements. In the case of Bryna Prensky and Enrique Chavarría, their partnership was based on mutual admiration. While Prensky's enthusiastic collection of all of Chavarría's known works kept him relatively invisible to the Mexican art scene, she may be the only reason that we can still view these paintings today.

Before Chavarría met Prensky in the 1960s, "people would come to [his] house and carry away what they liked."<sup>94</sup> Prior to Prensky's acquisition and cataloging of Chavarría's works, it appears that he kept no inventory of his own works and had little interest in selling or exhibiting them. Prensky was instrumental in submitting his works for exhibition during his lifetime,

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<sup>93</sup> Cardinal, *The Artist Outsider*, 22.

<sup>94</sup> Emerich, "El lenguaje de lo olvidado," 120.



despite the fact that he was not interested in the public attention. Content to paint strictly for himself, he gave his paintings to Prenskey in return for a living wage. He produced as many as a dozen paintings a year for his patron.

However, when Prenskey left Mexico City in 1981, Chavarría stopped producing paintings at the same rate. His total known output after 1981 consists of about four oil on masonite paintings. Prenskey returned to Mexico frequently to visit and managed to obtain those paintings for her collection, which had been moved to Palm Beach, Florida.

In 1983, Chavarría produced the painting *Transmutation* (Fig. 16). While he maintained his signature style, the subject matter of *Transmutation* is perhaps the most literal image of his career. In the center of the composition stands an old man, possibly a self-portrait. He stares blankly into space while the rays from a solar eclipse shine on his face. The checkered floor of the small room contains medieval symbols associated with the alchemical process of transmutation. In the background and foreground alchemical vessels burn upon the fire. The translucent figure of Mercury arises from the smoke of the vessel in the foreground. This is a personification of mercury, the element, which is unstable and volatile. The solar activity, alchemical symbols, the heated vessels and mercury all signify change. For this first time in Chavarría's world, the transformations have occurred outside of the human being and are inflicted upon him like the rays from the sun. Chavarría's reality had changed. Was his alternate universe shifting to reflect these changes? I suspect Bryna Prenskey's absence affected his artistic output and creative energies.

By 1985, Chavarría had regressed to copying Varo's work directly. In *Hacia La Torre*, (1985, Fig. 17) he faithfully copied Varo's painting of the same name from 1960 (Fig. 18). Not only does this derivative work prove Varo's influence on Chavarría, it raises questions about

how patronage can affect an Outsider artist. Dubuffet may say that patronage would be another indication that the artist had been culturally compromised. Although Chavarría had no intentions to produce work for the sake of selling it, I believe that he had begun to work for his patron out of loyalty since he continued to produce paintings. She acted as a sort of muse to him as well; he wanted to please her, a living person who cared about him and perhaps in her absence, he lost his motivation for producing paintings and returned his attention to Varo, venerating her in a much more simplified and defeated way. The copy of *Hacia La Torre* was done thirteen years before his death; he was 58 years old and perhaps in poor mental and physical health due to the absence of Prenskey, who had looked after him and inspired him. Perhaps he had simply given up on being inspired to create something original.

Chavarría died on October 19, 1998, at age 71. The cause of death is unclear and there is no obituary for him. All of his aunts are deceased now. No one in Enrique Chavarría's small family, he and his three aunts, ever married or had children. I do not know if Bryna Prenskey visited Mexico City anytime after 1985, when she presumably went to collect *Hacia La Torre*. With her death in 2002 and her husband's in 2008, any direct connection with Chavarría was lost. Knowing what little we do about Chavarría allows us to see why he was misplaced and forgotten in contemporary art. Bryna Prenskey's collection still remains together in the hands of a private collector. About one-third of it has been displayed twice, once in Palm Beach in 2002 and once in Dallas at the Latin American Cultural Center in 2007. Like many artists, he was misunderstood and underestimated in his time, and probably will continue to be because he eludes classification.

## Conclusion

While Chavarría drew from Varo's style and subject matter, his work shows ingenuity; he was not a simple copyist. Chavarría's work can surely stand on its own artistic merit. He was formally trained, intelligent, and represented many different disciplines in his paintings. His art is an example of how Outsider artists use their creations to understand themselves and communicate their intellectual thoughts and personal feelings. For Chavarría, intellect and emotions were never separated, they existed together. I believe Chavarría made images to create a visual record of his imaginary world because his skewed perception of reality caused him to truly believe that art could help him transcend consciousness and live in his world of imagination. In his world, he paid homage to Remedios Varo, established his intellectual ideas, and communicated his innermost feelings. His creation of an alternate universe reveals that Chavarría did not identify with society and reality. His unconventional views about spiritual transcendence through the symbolic application of alchemy forced him to retreat from society and build a world in which he could change his own reality. His work conveys his individuality as well as his vulnerability. While he may have never socially developed, he left us a visual language for understanding the complex mind of an Outsider artist. Chavarría's work is a visual account of his psychological self-exploration and represents his true independence from reality. As we become familiar with Chavarría's language, artistic process, and personal aims, the thrill of recognition can begin to set in.



Figure 1.  
Enrique Chavarría  
*El Sortilegio (The Sorcery)*, 1971  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach  
Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and  
Science, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 2.  
Enrique Chavarría  
*Autoretrato (Self-Portrait)*, 1972  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach  
Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and  
Science, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 3.  
Photographer unknown  
Photograph of Remedios Varo  
Reproduced in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, (New York, Abbeville Press, 1988), 6.



Figure 4.  
Enrique Chavarría  
*La Bruja de la Nieve (The Snow Witch)*, n.d.  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach  
Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and  
Science, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 5.  
Enrique Chavarría  
*La Vela (The Sail)*, 1980  
Collection of The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science,  
Tallahassee, Florida, Gift of The Florida International Museum  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and  
Science.





Figure 6.  
Remedios Varo  
*Self-Portrait*, 1951  
Private Collection  
Reproduced in Janet A. Kaplan, *Unexpected Journeys: The  
Art and Life of Remedios Varo*, (New York, Abbeville  
Press, 1988), 6.

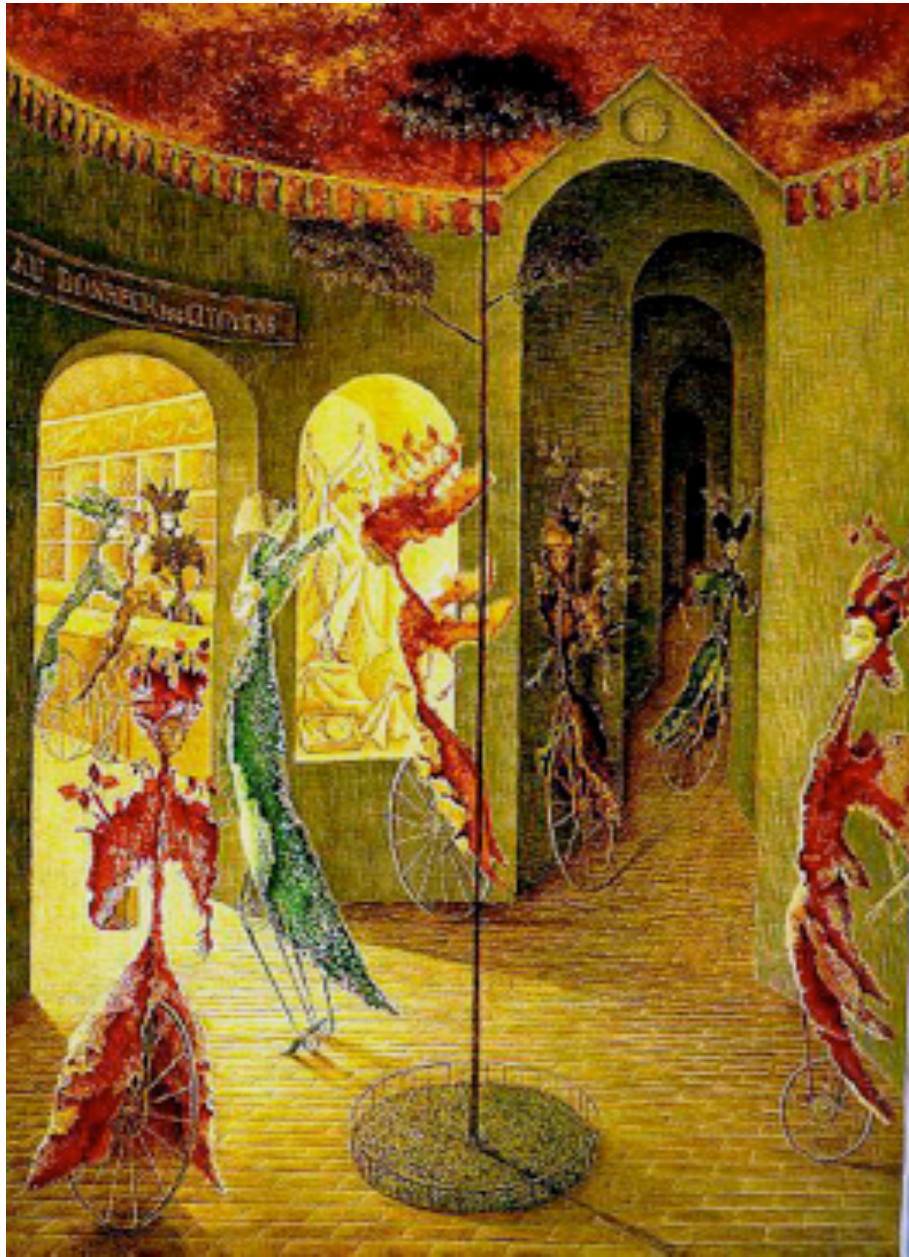


Figure 7.  
Remedios Varo  
*Au Bonheur des Dames*, 1956  
Hanni Bruder Kafka Collection, Mexico  
Reproduced in *Remedios Varo, 1908-1963*,  
(México: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1994), 53.

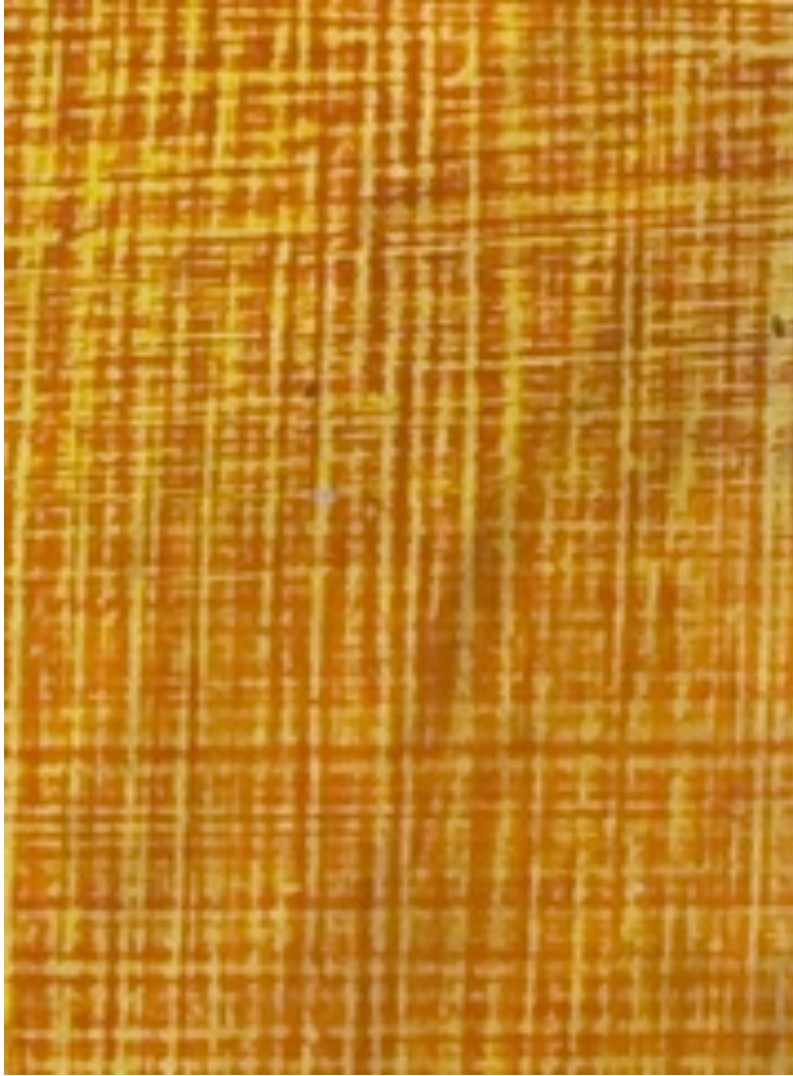


Figure 8.  
Remedios Varo  
*Au Bonheur des Dames* (Detail), 1956  
Hanni Bruder Kafka Collection, Mexico  
Reproduced in *Remedios Varo, 1908-1963*,  
(México: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1994), 53.



Figure 9.  
Enrique Chavarria  
*Invocation Maturina (Morning Invocation)*, 1970  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach  
Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and  
Science, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 10.  
Enrique Chavarría  
*Invocation Maturina (Morning Invocation)*, (Detail), 1970  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach  
Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and  
Science, Tallahassee, Florida.



Figure 11.  
Remedios Varo  
*Nacer de Nuevo*, 1960  
Private Collection, Mexico  
Reproduced in *Remedios Varo, 1908-1963*,  
(México: Museo de Arte Moderno, 1994), 105.



Figure 12.  
Enrique Chavarría  
*Pared Roja (The Red Wall)*, 1971  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach  
Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and  
Science, Tallahassee, Florida



Figure 13.  
Remedios Varo  
*Tailleur Pour Dames*, 1957  
Collection of María Rodríguez de Reyero, New York  
Reproduced in *Remedios Varo, 1908-1963*, (México: Museo de Arte  
Moderno, 1994), 59.





Figure 14.  
Remedios Varo  
*Tránsito en Espiral*, 1962  
Private Collection, New York  
Reproduced in *Remedios Varo, 1908-1963*, (México: Museo de Arte  
Moderno, 1994), 88.



Figure 15.  
Enrique Chavarría  
*Variación sobre un Tema de Remedios Varo*, 1978  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science,  
Tallahassee, Florida



Figure 16.  
Enrique Chavarria  
*Transmutation*, 1983  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science,  
Tallahassee, Florida



Figure 17.  
Enrique Chavarría  
*Hacia la Torre*, (copio), 1985  
Private Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Aranda, Palm Beach Gardens, Florida  
Image provided by The Mary Brogan Museum of Art and Science,  
Tallahassee, Florida



Figure 18.  
Remedios Varo  
*Hacia la Torre*, 1960  
Private Collection, Monterrey  
Reproduced in *Remedios Varo, 1908-1963*, (México: Museo de Arte  
Moderno, 1994), 74.

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## Abstract

The Mexican painter Enrique Chavarría (1927-1998) trained at the Academia San Carlos in the mid-1940s. He was exposed to the influence of European Surrealism and after his complete withdrawal from society he never progressed beyond this style of painting, which he continued into the 1980s. As a result of his anachronism and his reclusive nature, his works were never attended to by scholarship. Due to a speech impediment and a possible undiagnosed and untreated mental disorder, Chavarría felt he could not communicate normally. He created an alternate universe in which he could symbolically live and explore his personal feelings by using a complex, idiosyncratic visual language based on the iconography of alchemy. Chavarría's work can be treated as Outsider art, a concept introduced by Roger Cardinal in his 1972 essay *Toward an Outsider Aesthetic*. This essay describes how we can contextualize art, like Chavarría's, which falls outside of the mainstream. Through his art Chavarría paid homage to his muse, the Spanish-Mexican painter Remedios Varo. Although his works seem meaningless, if we approach them using the iconography of textbook alchemy, we can begin to see his desire to transcend his earthly experience as it visually manifests in his art.