

Affairs of the Heart

Antony Penrose grew up surrounded by some of the most influential artists and writers of the 20th century. Their paintings, photographs and sculpture filled his family's home in Sussex, England. But when he walked into the gallery for the June opening of *Man Ray | Lee Miller, Partners in Surrealism*, an awed Penrose smiled and uttered just one word: "Wow!"

This from the boy who once bit Pablo Picasso. Who irreverently toyed with the arm of one of Man Ray's famous metronomes.

"Never before have I seen someone so skillfully combine the art with the life of the artists and their relationship," says Penrose, the son of painter and writer Roland Penrose and *Vogue* model and photojournalist Lee Miller. "It's theatrical. You really get a sense for the artists, as if they were here. [Curator] Phillip Prodger explored and connected works in ways never attempted before, and Man Ray and Lee Miller's powerful love story weaves throughout."

Here, Penrose talks more about Lee Miller's relationship with Man Ray, his own art making, and how he came to accept his mother's failures.



Antony Penrose talks about the visual references in Man Ray's painting, *Le Logis de l'artiste* (*The Artist's Home*), including his mother's neck. Photo by Walter Silver/PEM.

Is there a theme that unifies the Surrealists?

Accident and chance. Once when Lee was in the darkroom something ran over her foot, probably a rat, and she turned on the light. She thought the image would be ruined but continued to develop it. The result was a sooty outline, an effect we call solarization, which Lee and Man Ray would continue to use.

What can you share about Man Ray's painting *Le Logis de l'artiste*?

It hung in the living room. Roland bought the

painting from someone who'd bought it from Man Ray. Among the possessions he chose to paint — a cello, a wooden hand, a tambourine — he included a very vulnerable neck. Clearly another possession. I had no idea it was my mother's neck until after Roland died. There's the Surrealist element of chance once again.

Doesn't Lee Miller's neck appear in a photograph in the exhibition?

Yes. Lee worked on Man Ray's negative that he had discarded, but was it his image

Man Ray | Lee Miller, Partners in Surrealism, at the Peabody Essex Museum, June 11–December 4, 2011.

because he took the photo, or hers because she printed it? They had a blazing row over attribution and she left. When she returned, she found the photo nailed to a wall, slashed with a razor and covered with blood-red ink.

And her eye frequently appears in his art?

He always carried small photographs of Lee's eye with him, the same eye that he affixed to the metronome, which was on a shelf in my father's study. My friends and I would push it back and forth, watching the eye move. I was about 14 or 15 before I recognized the eye as Lee's. Then it got more interesting. The original artwork was named *Object to be Destroyed*, which someone obliged him by doing. So he made many others and called them *Indestructible Object*.

Would you say they had a complicated relationship?

Man Ray controlled in his art what he couldn't do in life. He sliced Lee up and objectified her. It was also a time of free love, and the normal rules for relationships were off. It was good for men, but it wasn't the same for women. Lee hated double standards and went off and had affairs. Man Ray became insanely jealous. It was all a struggle for control.

Lee refused to be oppressed and was damn sure she was going to help others in danger of being oppressed, which is why she took up her camera at the start of the second World War. It was her weapon of choice in her fight for her friends in occupied France. In the death camps her lens was in the face of dead people,

"Lee Miller was my mother. I had a very high tolerance for weird."

— Antony Penrose

and I am sure she was looking for her missing friends.

Why did your mother have troubled relationships?

She felt she was a nemesis. Her first love drowned in a lake. And there were traumas in her life. She was raped at 7. As a photojournalist, she saw death and appalling human suffering. I came to see that she acted like she did not because she was feckless but because of a series of events in her life. I went through a gradual realization of my mother as a person.

How did that change you?

The more I talk about it, the more I realize others are feeling the same way. These things aren't generally talked about. There are very touching moments when abused women speak to me. It's cathartic for us both and leads to a greater understanding. Again, it's the Surrealist element of chance that I'm doing this now. With my work at the archive, I'm the pilot of a magical flying machine! I'm dedicated to the conservation and dissemination of my parents' work and the people who associated with them.

When did you come to accept your mother?

For the first 20 years of my life, she was lost to me, deeply affected by post-traumatic stress disorder. I never felt a maternal connection to Lee, but to Patsy, my nanny. We did become

friends, thanks to my late wife, Susanna, and David E. Scherman, a photojournalist and Lee's longtime friend. Now I'm connected intimately to this unpredictable person. She's mothering me now, taking me on adventures and enhancing my education.

What changed?

Lee boxed her career in the attic of the old farmhouse, a time capsule she left behind. I found it in 1978, after her death. Scherman, one of Lee's lovers, helped edit my books, titled *The Lives of Lee Miller* and *Lee Miller's War*. He was one of the most important people in my life. He helped me understand that my mother, whom I saw as a useless drunk, had had a career and been incredibly brave as a combat photographer with the U.S. Army Infantry in Europe. He helped me see a different side of the person I'd been embattled with all my life.

How did you feel about Picasso's *Portrait of Lee Miller à l'Arlesienne*?

It was excruciatingly embarrassing for me to have it in our home. My school chums expected to see a portrait they could recognize. They would snigger, "Does your mom really look like that? It's ugly." Yes, she has green hair. And no, she wasn't jaundiced, but the yellow skin shows the warmth of her personality and the intensity of her intellect (beauty only got her so far). People would say they felt like they were standing in a patch

of bright sunlight on a cold day when they were with my mother. The pink is erotic, a color you don't see unless you get up close to somebody. The metronome shape in her chest was borrowed from Man Ray's object. Perhaps a slightly sardonic metaphor for her heart.

So, what did Picasso taste like?

Arty. And he smelled wonderful, of French tobacco and cologne.

What's the story behind *A l'heure de l'observatoire — les amoureux*?

Man Ray agonized over Lee Miller, spending two years painting the original eight-foot-wide painting of her lips, hung above his bed, working on it a little bit every morning before leaving for the studio. The lips are tilted, winging their way freely in a serene sky. It was his goodbye kiss, the moment he forgave her. In 1937 they met again and became friends again. They had an enduring friendship after World War II until their deaths, he in 1976 and she in 1977.

You were a dairy farmer. Do you also make art?

I'm a sculptor of found things, inspired by Picasso and Man Ray. They showed me that it was normal to pick up interesting bits of junk and make things. I made a sculpture of a bra, out of barbed wire, for my late wife, Susanna. She was large breasted and people would come up to her and grab her. We were both appalled. I thought, ah, this will keep their hands off her, but she would not wear it. I guess it was because I made it way too small.



Lee Miller was one of the first Surrealist street photographers. Her *Exploding Hand*, ca. 1930, captures a woman reaching for the door of a perfume shop, the glass scratched by countless diamond rings. Gelatin silver print. Lee Miller Archives, Sussex, England. © Lee Miller Archives, England 2011. All rights reserved. www.leemiller.co.uk

Lee Miller took a photograph of a severed female breast on a plate. Any connection?

I didn't know about the photograph at the time. She was rebelling against the commodification of the female body. Maybe she was saying, "Here it is, you want it so much, eat it! You forget that behind the breast is a woman with a mind and a heart and a soul."

Why are you driven to keep the work of the Surrealists alive?

However you come to it, because you like

photographs of ladies with no clothes on or the crazy objects or the paintings, the chances are you'll be drawn in. It's the bait. I want people to learn the sub-text about the changes an individual can make in the world. The Surrealists placed an intensely high value on peace, freedom and justice. Their work is really communicating about the rights of the individual. Listening to your own inner voice can make you less susceptible to being deceived by others and bending to their will.

Interview conducted by Lisa Kosan, PEM director of editorial and design.