



## ENIGMATIC: THE ART OF MIRKA LUGOSI

by Kirsten Anderson  
translation by Mona Palmer

**F**rench artist Mirka Lugosi's work is an exotic exploration into the both the covertly hidden and the explicitly exposed. Evoking an artistic time period gone by, her sensual drawings feature the feminine form almost exclusively, in various states of costume. Tellingly hooded, masked, or brazenly nude, these women are bold *femme fatales*, unapologetically sexually frank as they consort amongst phantasmagorical creatures or against tableaux of otherworldly botanicals.

Clearly the presence of fetish imagery cannot go unremarked upon, although rather than kink being the focus of her work, Lugosi uses just a whiff of vintage sleaze and transmogrifies it through the use of reined-in surrealist

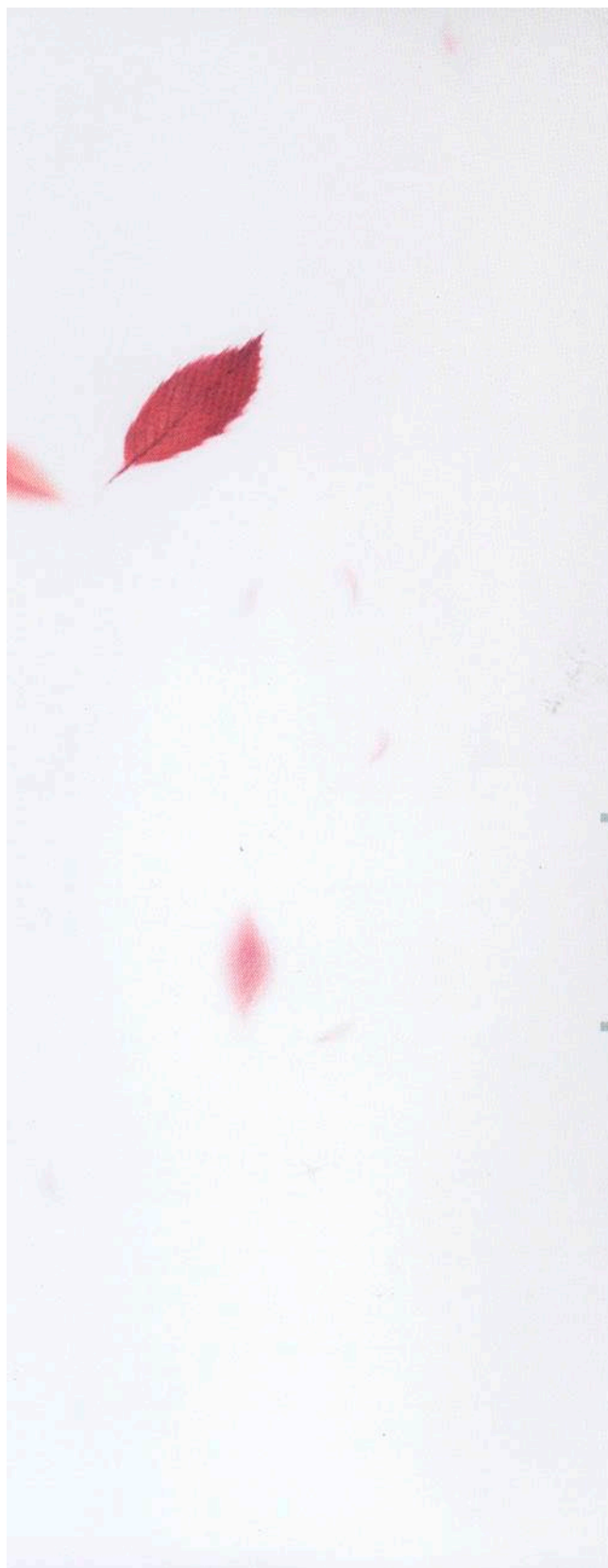
absurdity and metaphorical elements. Her imagery crackles with the intensity of "The Encounter," whether that takes place with another being or within one's own subconscious. Even her rarer drawings, such as her beautifully haunting landscapes, carry a dream-like charge, a seductive tension between light and dark, soft and sharp, creating a dark ghostly wonderland that suddenly veers off kilter.

We recently reached out to this compelling and enigmatic artist to find out what makes her tick...

(Note: This interview was conducted in French, and is translated as closely as possible to Lugosi's statements. -Kirsten)

**KA:** I'm pleased to interview you, because it's hard to find much in English about you although you are quite well known in France! Let's start with your background and who your artistic influences are?

**ML:** From an early age, I applied myself artistically. I didn't go to art school, so I'm self-taught. For me it was the only way to have illustrated books, because my parents wouldn't buy me any. I was born in a family of rural origins—very modest. This is why there weren't any books, it wasn't part of the culture. The moral values of my family were strict and all that related to sexuality was completely buried... which to me doesn't seem all that exceptional for the 1960s. But I quickly developed a big imagination and the desire to assert myself a little outside of the norm. The forbidden is also known for its exciting virtues!



When he does include backgrounds, they are typically landscapes or pieces of city buildings. These are semi-inspired by his surroundings in Norway. The urban touches, he says, could come from any city. "There really isn't too much 'urban' to be found in Norway, being it's a small country and Oslo is a small city." The landscapes in Uldalen's work, often frosty and always filled with tall trees, are undoubtedly Norwegian. He refers to the country's pockets of natural landscapes as "beautiful and spectacular, and very inspiring."

Still, the people are always central to Uldalen's work. For a forthcoming show at Culver City gallery Thinkspace, the painter has had to adapt his style to fit a very specific theme. *Wild at Heart: Keep Wildlife in the Wild* is a group show presented in connection with Born Free USA to raise awareness on the plight of animals whose natural habitats are disappearing. The thing is, Uldalen doesn't usually paint animals. "It was a big challenge," he says. But, Uldalen came up with a solution. He imagined someone floating in front of a building with an intricate, stone-like facade. The centerpiece is the head of an elephant. "I think the animal theme is quite subtle in my painting," he says. However, it works.

It takes Uldalen between two weeks and a month to complete a painting and he only works on one piece at a time. "I never work on multiple paintings," he says. "It only stresses me out."

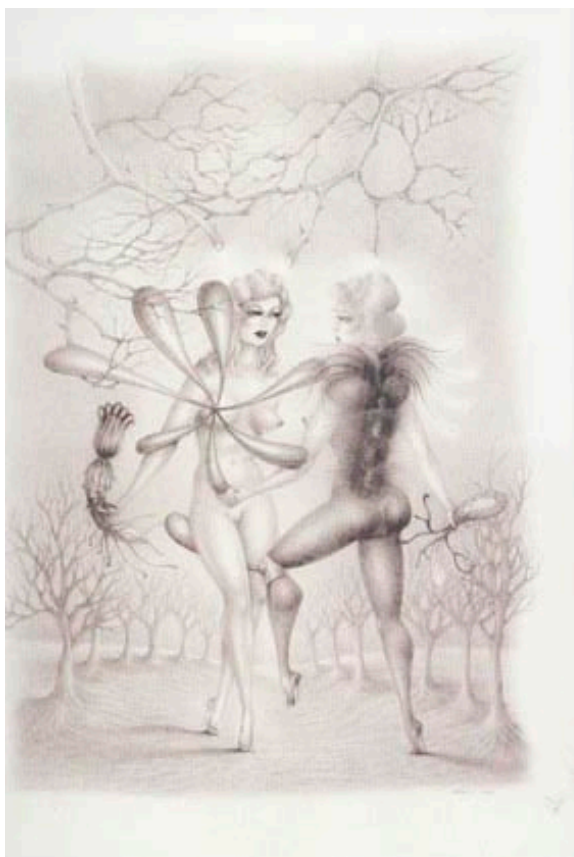
**"Skin that looks almost translucent... a shade of blue under their eyes, and skin that bruises easily."**

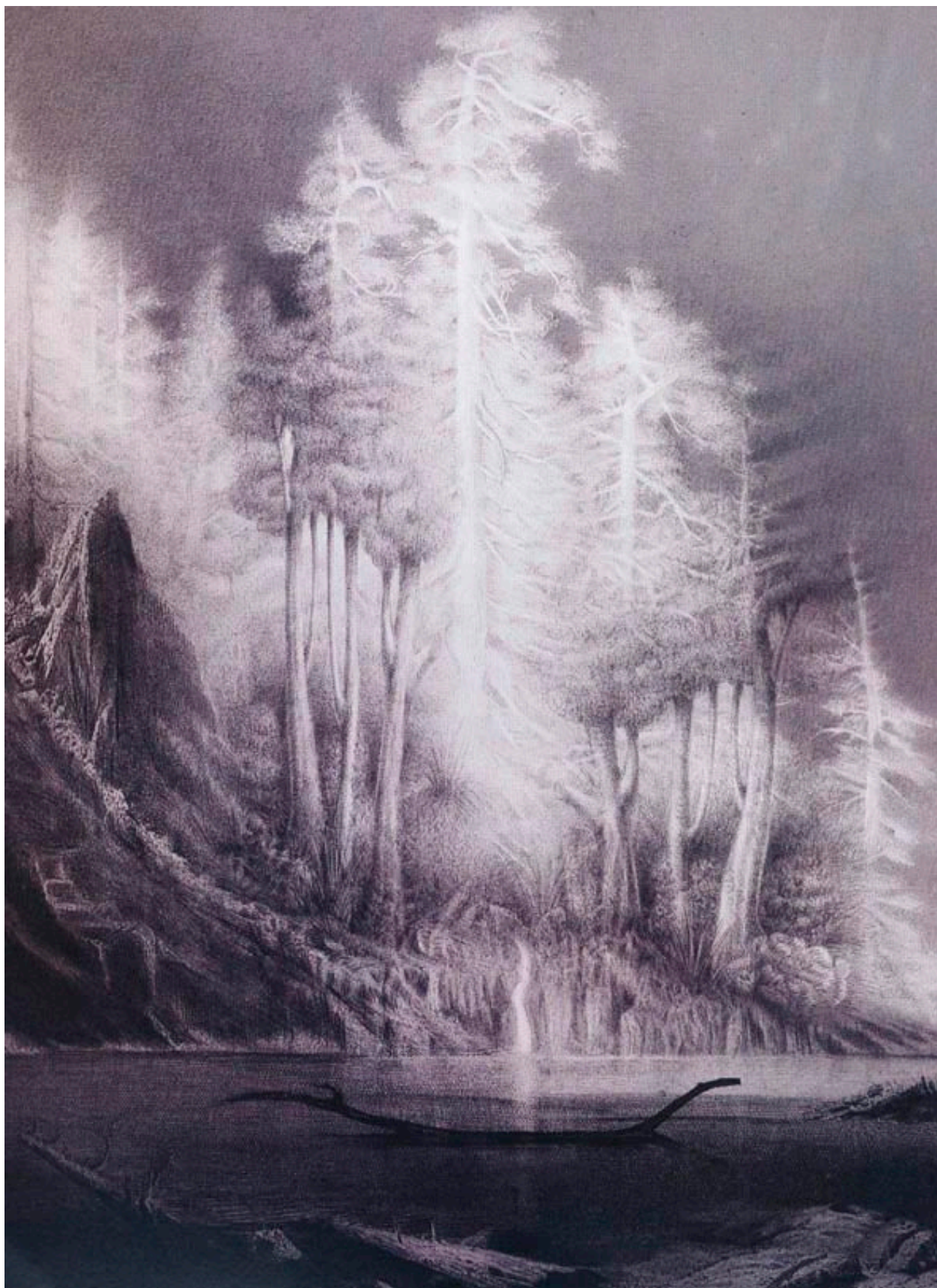
Regardless of the pace at which he works, Uldalen has built up an impressive portfolio of gorgeous paintings. In Norway, he says that he's had a good reaction to his work, but the country's small size has a bit of a drawback.

"There is perhaps not the biggest scene for my type of art here," he notes. "I kind of fall between the chairs of conceptual art and the Nerdrum-school," he adds, referencing the famed Norwegian artist Odd Nerdrum.

While Uldalen may not quite fit inside Norway's art world, he's done well there, having racked up three solo shows in Oslo since 2009. He has also shown on his own in Denmark. Although he hasn't had a solo show outside of Europe yet, Uldalen has taken part in several group shows in Los Angeles and New York. No doubt, the world will be taking notice of this painter's breathtaking vision very soon. ✦



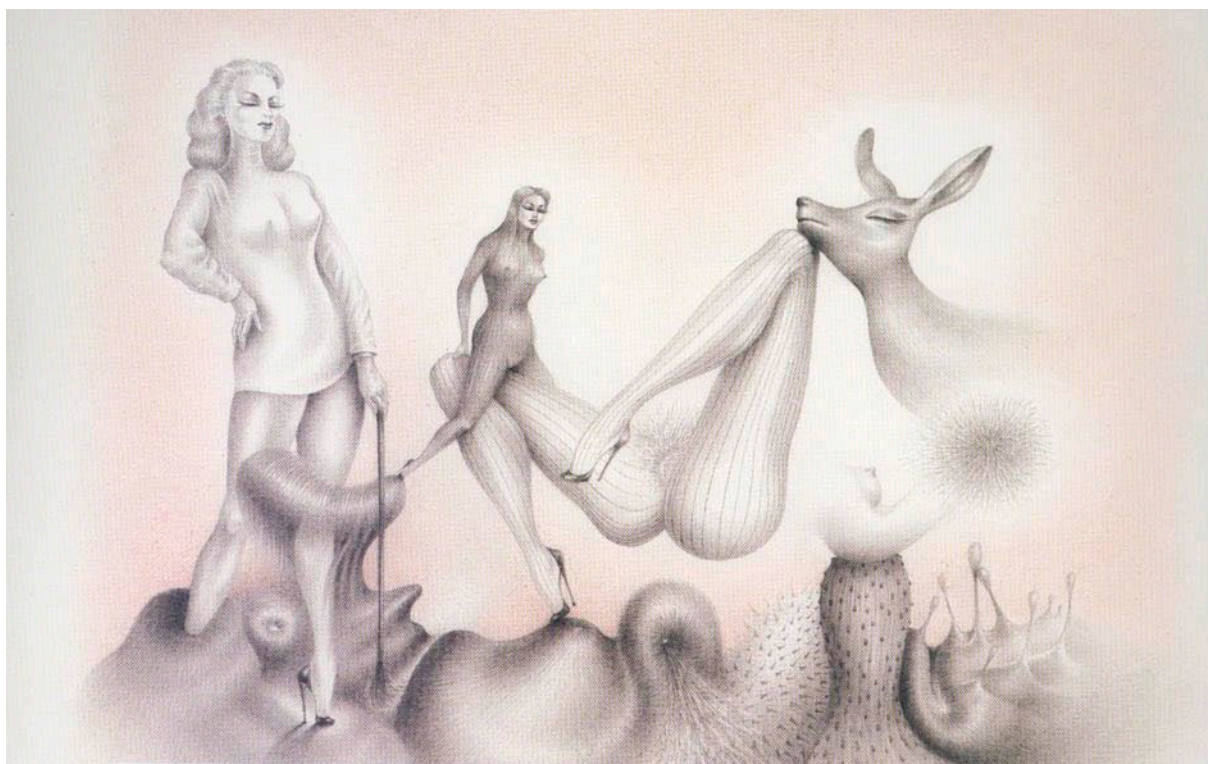












**"What fascinates me are the bridges that we can build between different influences."**

I read and re-read the books I made hundreds of times, until my eyes were sore. Thanks to these books, I developed my taste for drawing and beautiful stories. I created my own fantastic universe that grew up with me. It was my refuge. I thus escaped into my obsessive nightmares. I understood much later that I myself wanted to create books that made others dream. My first influences came from Dadaism, Futurism and more generally Avant-Gardes of the 20th century.

**KA:** Obviously your work has a heavy "fetish" or erotic component to it. Can you talk a little bit more about why that influence seems prominent in your work?

**ML:** I was especially interested by Intimist works, like those of Hans Bellmer, Pierre Molinier and Clovis Trouille. I also looked to popular culture: John Willie, Eric Stanton, Eneq... I was troubled by the fetishism of their images. These universes contain so many magical worlds, severed from reality, fantasized, where nothing is serious, anything goes. I wanted to develop this kind of freedom in my drawings.

**KA:** You say you were sort of troubled or compelled by the fetish imagery you saw... yet it was artistically compelling to you. Why is that?

The sensation upon seeing an image of a fetishistic "character" was for me a revelation and an excitement akin to a tumultuous romance. I instantly liked amongst

these artists the very intimate personal implications that this kind of work evokes. I still find it very stimulating to venture into areas of the mind that are often buried, and to play with notions of attraction and repulsion, perhaps initially to tame them and with the unconscious desire to master them. Aside from this psychological dimension, I feel a purely aesthetic attraction to the human body or the idealized form, which itself must be a kind of fetishism...

**KA:** What was it about Dadaism, Futurism, and Avant-Gard work that resonated with you so much? Your work has a look as though it genuinely could be from those movements, which is a hard trick to pull off!

**ML:** What resonates for me about that time period was the extraordinary outpouring of artistic/poetic/philosophic/political inquiries that opened the way for emancipated and revolutionary art forms, that shook up our reading of form and of meaning. It was this "bubbling in the laboratory" that gave me this desire for art, for reflection upon art. Today this foundation is enriched by contemporary findings but will always be the basis for my attraction to the "underground" layers of culture... What fascinates me are the bridges that we can build between different influences.

**KA:** How did you go about teaching yourself to make art? Did you freely draw or copy artists you like? It must have required a lot of self-discipline to learn to render so tightly.

**ML:** Very early on I felt pleasure in all acts linked to bodily











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expression and disciplines, like drawing, that allow one to develop and live in parallel imaginary universes. Then I met and lived with some artists, by watching them I started to draw and paint more seriously, and from then on I never stopped.

I emancipated myself at a young age and one of my first "jobs" was as a model at the beaux-arts, this was how I learned the basics, by listening to the professors give lessons to their students as I held my pose, nude... This method certainly took more time than a conventional art education, but today I'm quite happy about this learning experience of a lifetime. Self-discipline is a fundamental quality for an artist!

**KA: You are a multi-disciplinary artist, and your website only features a few drawings done each year, yet you are clearly incredibly skilled as far as your technical abilities. I would guess you must draw and create all the time- is self-editing a part of your process? When did you start drawing and begin to develop your style?**

**ML:** Drawing is my main medium, but I work very slowly, and never in series. Each drawing is its own event in which I invest myself sometimes for weeks at a time. Patience and minutiae constitute my body of work, and people are fascinated by the possibility for introspection that is offered by my drawings, this possibility to venture inside, like in a novel. It is the fineness of each line that allows this journey.

My drawing demands such concentration that I can't do more than ten per year. I don't want to make more than that and prefer gaining experience. After the solitary

affair of the drawing board, I need to work with other people. Video and photography are collaborative experiences that enrich my work as a draftsman.

My style has been informed by my subject matter, all the pleasure of drawing is rendered as much through the materials as it through the curves of the body. My lines allow you to feel the drawn materials: feathers, hairs, a woman's flesh. Everything is softness and makes you want to touch. Pencil lead is a tool that gives way to all of these sensations.

**KA: What materials do you like to use to get the effects you do?**

**ML:** For my drawings I use wooden pencils with graphite lead (no mechanical pencils). I choose rather hard leads ranging from 4H to HB, with little touches in B lead at the end of a drawing, to stay in very light grays.

I carefully build up the material without using a stump, which gives a transparency to the texture when drawing. I also like using color pencils. The pencil must be very sharp! From time to time I also use a brush, still very pointed, and gouache. The choice of paper is very important especially for long-term projects. I never use bright white, but rather ivory tones. For the texture I have to test and find which ones withstand hard leads and allow for a flexibility in the gradation without leaving too many marks.

I like the feel of paper, it's a fusion. I realize that the subject didn't matter, that sensuality is as much in landscapes and abstract forms as it is in the body, and that finally all that matters is the caress of pencil on paper. ➔



