

# NSU ART MUSEUM

FORT LAUDERDALE

## The Indestructible Lee Miller

October 4, 2015 – February 14, 2016

This exhibition explores the remarkable art and life of Lee Miller (1907-1977; American) from various perspectives: as the assistant, collaborator and muse of Surrealist artist Man Ray (1890-1976; American) in the early 1930s; and then as a pioneering fine art, fashion, and war photographer and correspondent. It features more than 90 works dating from 1929-1959, as well as a replica of Man Ray's sculpture of a metronome, *Indestructible Object*, 1923, which he transformed in the 1930s after his romance with Miller ended.

Before moving to Paris to learn photography from Man Ray in 1929, Miller worked as a fashion model for *Vogue Magazine*. In Paris, she came into contact with other Surrealist artists and writers and adopted their iconography and strategies in her subsequent work. These include altering pictorial motifs by using narrow image frames and applying techniques that included deforming and fragmenting the human body, focusing on details, tilting perspectives, and experimenting with methods, such as solarization, which achieves a reversal of black and white values through overexposure.

In 1934, Miller moved to Egypt and photographed its desert and architectural structures, transforming them into ambiguous shapes and forms. London became her home in 1938 and her 1940 fashion photographs for British *Vogue*, staged amidst the damages of the London Blitz, led to *Vogue* hiring her as a war photographer and correspondent in 1942. Her subsequent photographs of war-torn Europe, which illustrated her *Vogue* articles, included among others, images of the liberation of Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps. These startling photographs, which synthesize their matter-of-fact reality with Miller's Surrealist sensibilities, express her admonishment of war and distinguish her as one of America's most innovative and important photographers.

*The Indestructible Lee Miller* is organized in association with The Albertina Museum, Vienna (as the exhibition *Lee Miller*). The NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale iteration is co-curated by Walter Moser, Curator, Albertina Museum and Bonnie Clearwater, Director and Chief Curator, NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale.

Unless otherwise noted, all images in the exhibition are on loan from the Lee Miller Archives, Sussex, England.

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**Man Ray (1890-1976; American)**

*Indestructible Object (or Object to Be Destroyed)*, 1923 (replica, 1959)

Metronome - Object with gelatin silver print (vintage) of Lee Miller's eye

Man Ray created this Dada ready-made (a found object identified by an artist as a work of art) in 1923 and altered it in 1932, when his romance with Miller ended. He replaced its original cut-out form with another from a photograph of Miller's eye and wrote the following: "Cut out the eye from the photograph of one who has been loved but is seen no more. Attach the eye to the pendulum of a metronome and regulate the weight to suit the tempo desired. Keep going to the limit of endurance. With a hammer well-aimed, try to destroy the whole at a single blow." In 1957, students attending a Dada exhibition in Paris took these instructions literally and stole the object. Subsequently, Man Ray made 100 replicas of the work with the insurance money he collected and retitled them *Indestructible Object*.

**Man Ray (1890-1976; American) & Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Lee Miller's Neck*, Paris, France, c. 1930

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

Lee Miller went to Paris to study photography with famous Surrealist artist, Man Ray, through whom she became acquainted with other artists and writers of his Surrealist circle. As his model and muse, she soon became intimately involved with him, and they lived together until 1932. He made a stunning photograph of her neck, but rejected the negative. Miller retrieved it from the trash, abstracted its motif, cropped, and printed it as *Lee Miller's Neck*, 1930. Miller's intervention transformed Man Ray's photograph into a more reduced and highly provocative image that reveals her developing sensibilities and identity as a photographer.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Untitled (Severed Breast From Radical Mastectomy, 1 and 2)*, Paris, France, c. 1929

Inkjet print (printed 2005)

Lee Miller selected this subject while carrying out a commission in a Paris hospital: a severed breast on a dinner plate resting on a place-mat arranged with cutlery as if for a meal. Her selection of this startling subject and her arrangement of its forms parallels the aesthetic and compositional arrangements of Surrealist art. Yet, the photograph can also be seen as a critique of Surrealism. Many of its artists understood the body as a material to be staged, and they frequently fragmented it visually as eroticized fetishes, but these photographs turn that stereotype inside out as they desexualize their subject to present it as anything but an object of male desire.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Untitled (Rat Tails)*, Paris, France, c. 1930

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

Miller adopted the iconography and the strategies of her Surrealist colleagues by using narrow image frames, focusing on details, and tilting perspectives as a means of setting the viewer's imagination in motion. She was struck by and amused at the absurdity and unconventional motifs she found on the streets of Paris. These types of subjects had also interested Hungarian photographer Brassai (1899-1984), who had distinguished himself with his photographs of Paris, as well as Parisian photographer Eugène Atget (1857-1927). Their work had long fascinated the Surrealists. Miller presents an unusual and amusing image of four white rats lined up on a piece of wood

presumably part of a stall at the market for domestic animals on the Quai aux Fleurs.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Nude Bent Forward*, Paris, France, c. 1930 (printed 2005)

Inkjet print

Miller's Surrealist sensibilities inform this depiction of the nude female body in which she upends the form as an isolated, fragmented, seemingly weightless object. The tonalities of its white flesh contrast dramatically with the black ground to present the body as a sculptural, ambiguous shape. It is distanced, yet immediate, and can be read as a phallus-like shape. The image demonstrates Miller's awareness of the abstract shapes of the celebrated modernist Romanian sculptor, Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957), as well as her adeptness with the Surrealist interest in transposing one medium into another. Here flesh reads as marble.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Untitled (Exploding Hand)*, Paris, France, c. 1930

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

This is one of a series of photographs Miller made of the Guerlain storefront windows in Paris. A hand emerges from an elegantly sleeved arm that mysteriously enters the field of vision to grasp the store's door handle. It partially disappears behind glass scratched by the diamond rings of countless previous customers. The form thus seems to "explode," releasing a ghostly substance, lending the image a dynamic and enigmatic quality that triggers the imagination.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Solarized Portrait (Thought to be Méret Oppenheim)*, Paris, France, 1932

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

The medium of photography offered Miller numerous ways of experimenting with elements of style, composition, and iconography, as well as with technical procedures. Here she solarizes her subject, a technique she discovered in Man Ray's studio. While working on prints in the darkroom, she was startled by an animal and turned on the light, thus exposing to light the unfixed photograph she was working on for a second time. Such overexposure infuses the printed image with a reversal of positive and negative values that projects a provocative aura.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Floating Head, Mary Taylor*, New York Studio, New York, USA, 1933

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

In 1932, Miller ended her relationship with May Ray and left Paris to return to New York, where she set up a photography studio with her brother Erik. Although she had successfully extricated herself from her personal relationship, components of Surrealist ideas continued to influence her work. Man Ray was partial to presenting isolated forms floating in ambiguous spaces, as seen here in Miller's stunning portrait of Mary Taylor, floating weightlessly against a black ground. The image recalls the elegant and innovative bronze sculpture, *Sleeping Muse* (1910) by famous modernist sculptor, Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957).

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Portrait of Space*, Al Bulwayeb, Near Siwa, Egypt, 1937

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

Miller married Egyptian businessman Aziz Eloui Bey in 1934 and moved to his family home in Cairo, where she photographed the area's deserts and architecture. With a trained Surrealist eye, she transformed what she saw into ambiguous shapes and forms, as in her 1937 photograph *Portrait of Space*. She made four photographs of this view of Siwa, an oasis in the desert, seen through the torn screen of a window-frame, and she increasingly cropped each to minimize the window frame. This last photograph of the series refers to the room Miller is in--its rectangular window frame of narrow black strips on the right, left, and base of the image--while capturing an immediate and distant outside scene of the desert through an oval-triangular torn screen, which is below an oddly placed rectangular form. The oval opening functions to direct our eye toward the oasis and as a metaphor for Miller's camera lens.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*From the top of the Great Pyramid*, Giza, Egypt, c. 1937

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

In summer 1937, Miller travelled with artists Roland Penrose (1900-1984; British, became her husband in 1947), Man Ray, Dora Maar (1907-1997; French), Max Ernst (1891-1976; German), Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012; American) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973; Spanish), which renewed her interest in Surrealism. Here she creates an innovative image that explores the relationships and ambiguities of positive and negative shapes to become a metaphor of the medium she uses. She has climbed the massive granite blocks of the giant Giza pyramid to photograph its solid form as a transparent grey shadow whose flat form collapses space as it looms above the tiny buildings and extensive desert landscape beyond. The varying greys and whites of the buildings and their geometric shapes offset the greys of the large central triangle and the shape of the soft sandy ground and rigid buildings we see through it.

**Roland Penrose, (1900-1984; British)**

*Road is Wider than Long*, 1938

Original manuscript; photographs, pen and ink on paper  
Roland Penrose Estate, The Penrose Collection England

Miller traveled with British Surrealist artist Roland Penrose to Bucharest via Athens in 1938, the year he completed this book, which is dedicated to Miller. It is made up of his photographs and poems and is a celebrated masterpiece of Surrealist artist books. Penrose and Miller photographed the same motifs on this journey. While Miller's pictures are professionally composed and stand as works of art in their own right, Penrose's photographs are random snapshots that were included in the book as a kind of aide-mémoire.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Fire Masks*, Downshire Hill, London, England, 1941

Inkjet print (printed 2005)

In 1940, Miller went to London to work as a fashion photographer for British *Vogue*. She staged her sleek and elegant models amidst the ravages of the London Blitz, when German air raids devastated the city's buildings. Her models wear masks as protection against incendiary bombs, as they pose at the entrance to an air raid shelter at 21 Downshire Hill. The model on the right casually dangles an air raid warden's whistle, perhaps in reference to the paucity of any real means of defense against bombings for Londoners. Although submitted for publication in British *Vogue*, this was considered too challenging and was not published until 1941 in American *Vogue*. Miller's unconventional and provocative London fashion photographs led to her being hired by British *Vogue* in 1942 as a war correspondent and photographer, and the photographs she subsequently made were often censored as being too provocative for publication in a fashion magazine.

**David E. Scherman (1916-1977; American)**

*Lee Miller in Camouflage*, London, England, 1942

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

*Life Magazine* photographer American David E. Scherman and Miller were good friends, and it was through him that she became accredited as one of five women press war photographers working for the United States in Europe. She thus became part of a domain nearly exclusive to men and moved across Europe at the front-line with the American troops. Unlike her male colleagues, however, she was not allowed to witness or photograph battle scenes. In 1943 she began writing texts for *Vogue* that were illustrated with her photographs, but the final selection of what appeared was decided by her editor, Audrey Withers. Many of her most provocative images were never published by *Vogue*. Here, she stages herself as the naked subject of Scherman's photograph posed as if dead or as a wooden mannequin encased in netting and camouflage. This is one of the first times since the 1930s, when Miller posed for Man Ray, that she allowed herself to be photographed as the subject of someone else's work.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Fall of the Citadel*, St. Malo, France, 1944

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

In 1944, Miller witnessed the landing of the Allied troops in Normandy and the battle to wrest control of the French coastal town of St. Malo and its Citadel from the Germans. Her pictures of the battle fell victim to censorship because the smoke patterns they revealed indicated that the Americans had used napalm bombs at the time, a weapon then kept secret. The matter-of-factness of these photographs is typical of Miller's work as a photo-journalist. About St. Malo, she wrote: "I thumbed a ride to the siege of St. Malo. I had brought my bed, I begged my board, and I was given a grandstand view of fortress warfare reminiscent of Crusader times."

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*The Bürgermeister's Daughter*, Town Hall, Leipzig, Germany, 1945

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

Miller travelled to Germany in 1945, where she photographed the scene of the suicide of Leipzig's Nazi vice-mayor, Alfred Freyburg, as well as that of his dead daughter. In her article for British *Vogue*, she wrote: "the love of death . . . caught up with the high officials of the regime, and they gave a great party, toasted death and Hitler and poisoned themselves . . . . In one of the offices . . . leaning back on the sofa is a girl with extraordinarily pretty teeth, waxen and dusty. Her nurse's uniform is sprinkled with plaster from the battle for the city hall, which raged outside after their deaths." Miller photographs the dead woman from up close, cropping away any unnecessary details in what seems to be a carefully lit drama of death. This searing, historical photograph was published in the June 1945 issue of *Vogue*. It, and the photographs Miller made in Leipzig, differ markedly from those of the same subject made by her contemporary, the American photographer, Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971). Bourke-White was also a war photographer, and her photographs of the Leipzig suicides are on view in the exhibition in a May 14, 1945 issue of *Life Magazine*.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Dead Prisoners*, Buchenwald, Germany, 1945

Inkjet print (printed 2005)

Miller was an eyewitness to the liberation of Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps and realized that she could play an essential role in revealing to the world the horrors she witnessed there. Here she crops a gruesome subject so directly and closely that viewers have no escape, rendering her photograph a metaphor of prison. She wrote in one of her vivid dispatches to her editors that she would be very proud of *Vogue* if they published her photographs of the camps as a way to counteract disbelief of their existence. She typed emphatically, "Believe it . . . this is Buchenwald Concentration Camp at Weimar. . . No question that German civilians knew what went on" for the June 1945 issue of London *Vogue*. It included five quarter to full-page photographs of the liberated Buchenwald camp in a three-section piece titled: *Germans are Like This*, *I See Germany*, and *Nazi Harvest*.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*U.S. Soldiers Examine a Rail Truckload of Dead Prisoners, Dachau, Germany, 1945*  
Inkjet print (printed 2005)

Miller's photographs of Dachau function primarily to document the circumstances of the camps, its victims, and perpetrators. She and *Life Magazine* photographer American David E. Scherman (1916-1977) were among the first journalists to arrive in Dachau in 1945. Miller approached her subjects in a direct, matter-of-fact way, and the resulting disturbing images convey the reality of what she saw as well as her disgust with and condemnation of war.

To make this photograph, Miller climbed into an open railroad car next to a dead man and perhaps many others that are not in view. The diagonal position of his emaciated corpse, with gaping mouth, hollow cheeks, and open eyes, leads the viewer out of the claustrophobic space of the railroad car into the outside where standing soldiers stare at the dead man. The matter-of-factness of Miller's approach is offset by her staging the positions of the soldiers and perhaps the corpse. Viewers project themselves into the position of the two standing figures and follow their gaze to become eyewitnesses to the scene. The silent presence of people in such photographs was then considered a guarantee of its authenticity.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Lee Miller in Hitler's Bath, Hitler's Apartment, Munich, Germany, 1945*  
Gelatin silver print (vintage)

Lee Miller and *Life Magazine* photographer, American David E. Scherman (1916-1977), photographed together in Germany in 1945. On April 30, the day of Hitler's suicide and shortly before the final capitulation of Germany, they staged photographs of each other in the bathroom of Hitler's apartment in Munich, which had been transformed into a command post for the United States Army's 179<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 45<sup>th</sup> Division. The American occupation of Hitler's residence clearly indicated the drama of the change in regime. Here, Miller poses in Hitler's tub, her muddy combat boots on the white bath tiles in the foreground, implying that no amount of cleansing would wash away the horrors she witnessed. Miller and Scherman insulted the regime by placing by the tub a photograph of Hitler made by his personal photographer, an image all too familiar as it had appeared frequently on Nazi posters and other propaganda. This exhibition coincides with the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the concentration camps.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*David E. Scherman in Hitler's Bath, Hitler's Apartment, Munich, Germany, 1945*  
Gelatin silver print (vintage)

Miller also made photographs of Scherman in Hitler's tub. As Antony Penrose, the son of Miller has stated: "Miller has tilted the camera up a little to include the shower head hanging over [Scherman's] head. Scherman was Jewish. That morning in Dachau, Miller and Scherman had seen the now familiar sight of gas chambers. To trick their victims into entering the gas chambers quietly, the Nazis disguised them as *duschbad*—shower baths. Miller positions Scherman in magnificent defiance. Surrealism, fashion, and ice-cold rage distilled themselves into one of Miller's finest and most unforgettable shots."

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Children Eating Gruel Soup*, Vienna, Austria, 1945

Gelatin silver print (vintage)

Miller's reporting led her to Austria, France, Germany, Hungary and Romania in 1945. In Vienna, she photographed the destruction of the city and children in its hospitals. The city had been bombed in fifty-three air raids from June 1944 to mid-April 1945 and had been divided among the four Allied occupation forces in July 1945. Because of Austria's serious involvement in Fascism, Miller kept a critical distance from Vienna's inhabitants and rejected the myth of Austria as National Socialism's "first victim." She sympathized only with the city's ailing children, whom she regarded as innocent victims of the war. The images she made in Vienna are mostly works that are on display for the first time. These and other photographs she made of war-torn Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, and Romania are usually frontal, closely cropped images that are often taken close to her subjects, which places the viewer in their midst.

**Lee Miller (1907-1977; American)**

*Georges Limbour and Jean Dubuffet*, Farley Farm House, Chiddingly, East Sussex, England, 1955

Inkjet print (printed 2005)

Miller married Roland Penrose (1900-1977) in 1947, and they lived in East Sussex, England with their son, Antony, who was born that year. She never fully recovered from the mental strain on her psyche caused by her work as a war photographer and correspondent, and she made few photographs thereafter, turning her attention to becoming an expert chef and gardener. Here she presents two of the many important artists and writers who often visited the Penroses in England; French Surrealist poet, Georges Limbour (1900-1970) and French painter and sculptor Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985).