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Leonor Fini
Sorcière volante, ca. 1970

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LEONOR FINI

(Buenos Aires 1907 – Paris 1996)

SORCIÈRE VOLANTE, ca. 1970

Watercolour and ink on paper

32 x 30 cm.; 12 5/8 x 11 3/4 in.

Signed lower right: "*Leonor Fini*"

Provenance

Private collection, Italy.

Exhibitions

Milan, Galleria Tommaso Calabro, *Leonor Fini. Italian Fury. As Dreamed by Francesco Vezzoli*, 1 April–25 June 2022.

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This composition depicts a single nude driven diagonally across the sheet, from her outstretched hand at the lower left to the splayed head of the besom at the upper right. The broom is the only object in the drawing, bound at the neck and fanning into a spray of fine, dry, radiating strokes. The figure straddles its handle and rides it prone, her body almost horizontal, legs bent and kicking behind her. There is neither ground nor horizon; instead, she moves through the bare paper, the absence of any setting producing the sensation of flight. What distinguishes the figure is her gaze, shifting outwards as if beyond the frame towards the viewer, the face fully modelled with dark, fixed eyes and a small red mouth, framed in an enormous mass of wild curling hair that streams behind her in a tangle of fine, coiling lines. The rest of the body is described with even greater economy. Her breast, flank, thigh, and calf are all caught in a few flowing contours, while the toes of both feet are picked out with sudden precision. She appears here not as the crone of folklore but the witch as Fini consistently understood her, a figure of erotic self-possession and unlicensed freedom rather than of deformity or menace.

The sheet is executed throughout in a single warm red-brown, ink drawn into and over fluid watercolour washes, so that the whole has the appearance of a sanguine, employing the red chalk of the Italian drawing tradition Fini had studied since girlhood. The wash is allowed to bloom and pool in the hair and along the body, while the line remains rapid and unhesitating. It is a small drawing made quickly and at full pressure, and its subject, its handling and its palette are all of a piece.

Of all the figures Fini made her own, from the sphinx to the sleeping man to the skeleton, none was more persistent than the witch. She treated the subject across five decades, and its recurrence was so evidently bound up with her own public persona that one obituarist could open by remarking that in the seventeenth century she would have been burned as one. Her most sustained treatment is the suite of etchings for *Le Sabbat ressuscité par Leonor Fini*, with a text by Jacques Audiberti, published in Paris in 1957 by the Société des Amis des Livres. Two years later came *Les Sorcières*, painted for the Mexican actress María Félix, in which witches soar through a crimson void. She returned to the motif with fresh intensity in the 1970s, in drawings such as *Sorcière à plusieurs visages* (1978), in *the Sorcière bleue* lithographs of about 1970–72, and in an episode of her first novel, *Mourmour, conte pour enfants velus* (1976), describing how witches learn to fly.

That decade also gave the subject an explicitly political charge. In 1976, Fini supplied the cover image for the first issue of *Sorcières: Les femmes vivent*, the feminist review founded and edited by Xavière Gauthier, who had earlier written a monograph on Fini, and among the most widely circulated of its kind in France. That cover figure, like virtually all of Fini's witches, is shown astride a broomstick. The present drawing

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belongs to precisely this milieu, made a few years before, and rehearsing the image that the review would adopt as its emblem.

Born Eleonora Fini in Buenos Aires on 30 August 1907, she was taken as an infant to Trieste by her mother, fleeing a tyrannical husband. To foil his kidnapping attempts, Leonor was dressed as a boy whenever she left the house, an early experience of enforced disguise usually linked to her lifelong obsessions with costume and with the instability of gender. From about the age of thirteen she made regular visits to the public mortuary in Trieste, sitting among and drawing the laid-out dead, where she was struck by how beautifully they were dressed, flowered and cushioned. She later said her interest shifted to the perfection of skeletons, the most resistant corporeal element to decay. At sixteen, an ocular illness confined her to a darkened room with both eyes bandaged for two months, where she learned to construct elaborate images purely in the mind, and it was on emerging that she resolved to become an artist.

Largely self-taught, she absorbed the Flemish primitives and above all the Italian Mannerists, whose elongation and cool eroticism marked her permanently. In 1928 her uncle financed a period of study in Milan. There she met Giorgio de Chirico, exhibited with the Novecento Italiano group, met Sironi and Carrà, and studied under Achille Funi, whose neoclassicism informed her early, Renaissance-inflected portraits. Repelled by the Fascist atmosphere of the city, she travelled to Paris with Arturo Tosi, and settled there permanently around 1931. Max Jacob showed her paintings to Christian Dior, then directing the Galerie Bonjean, who gave her a solo exhibition in 1932 and then introduced her to Elsa Schiaparelli. At a garden party of the couturier Jacques Heim, she met Max Ernst, who became her lover and her entrée to the Surrealist circle so that by 1935, she was already exhibiting alongside de Chirico, Dalí, Ernst, Miró, Picasso and Tanguy in the Surrealist drawing exhibitions at the Galerie des Quatre Chemins. Despite these associations, Fini famously refused to submit to André Breton's authority and openly despised the movement's fixation on the *femme-enfant*, likewise rejecting the label "woman artist."

Around that time, she gained immense international recognition, holding her first major solo exhibition in New York at the Julien Levy Gallery in 1936, and appearing later that year, in MoMA's landmark *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* show. She returned to Paris in 1946, after a period in Rome, where her painting entered its so-called "mineral period," inspired by the underwater world she discovered in Corsica. Settling first with the painter Stanislao Lepri and, from 1952, the Polish writer Constantin "Kot" Jelenski, she then turned to writing, publishing three novels in the 1970s. She died in Paris on 18 January 1996 and was buried at Saint-Dyé-sur-Loire beside Lepri and Jelenski.

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