

LEE MILLER IN HITLER'S BATHTUB

A PORTRAIT OF THE MUSE AS AN ARTIST

»The imagination is a kind of memory,
and what we imagine is often more real than what we know.«

SUSAN SONTAG

No matter how shocking stories are, they are almost always anchored in reality. The life of Lee Miller comprises a series of events that are scarcely comprehensible within a single human life. She was a model, photographer, artist, surrealist muse, war correspondent, a victim of abuse, fiercely independent, unconventional, and tenacious. Her testimonies on the liberation of the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald established her as a remarkable 20th century icon. Yet, her work is not part of the photographic canon. In recent years, her oeuvre has been increasingly shared through documentaries, exhibitions, publications, and the biopic *Lee* (2023). The performance *Lee Miller in Hitler's Bath tub* goes one step further, with Miller – metaphorically – representing the woman in art.

HITLER'S BATHROOM

Munich, 30 April 1945. Lee Miller and David E. Sherman arrived at the house on Prinzregentenplatz 16, where Hitler had lived since the 1920s. Ironically, the residence had become the command post of the 179th Regiment of the 45th Division of the American Army, to which Lee and David were assigned. The house was not grand, and lacked intimacy and charm. Hitler had converted the cellar into a shelter, the ground floor served as the quarters for his guards, while his own apartment on the second floor had a private suite. "This was Hitler's true home", Lee wrote.

After the horror she had just witnessed in Dachau, Lee decided to take a bath. Before stepping into the green-tiled bathroom and into Hitler's bathtub, she set the scene for a series of photographs that would go down in history. In one of the photos, she is seen scrubbing her shoulder with an almost unreadable expression, with next to her a photo of Hitler, a statue of a woman, her crumpled uniform on a stool, and her boots on the dirty bath mat. A deliberately staged

scene. At midnight, the BBC reported Hitler's suicide.

This infamous photo lay in Jan Lauwers' studio for months, as part of his research into truth and photography. Together with his long-time partner-in-crime, composer Maarten Seghers, this photograph, the encounter with mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey, and the artistic bond with his daughter Romy Louise Lauwers were a source of inspiration for writing a new libretto about art, artisanship, trauma, memory, and the essence of being a woman and a muse, in tribute to a remarkable artist.

Jan Lauwers is a storyteller. His oeuvre is characterised by the portrayal of people. Starting from the autobiographical aspects of the people with whom he works, he seeks to transcend contemporary dogmas of diversity and identity by writing new universal narratives. Humanity plays a central role in his work. Joy and sorrow. The boundary with the autobiographical is continually sought out, but this is never the goal.

By exploring and rewriting Lee Miller's life and work, Lauwers reflects on the role of the artist in society, the impact of personal experiences on creativity, and the price that must be paid for it. The text goes beyond Lee Miller's story and is perfectly tailored to two artisans – artists Kate Lindsey and Romy Louise Lauwers – with whom Jan Lauwers has been collaborating for some time. For him, they represent a contemporary understanding of what a muse can still mean today.

Jan Lauwers: "Why two women? Because, first and foremost, I didn't want to write a biography. I have not studied Lee's life in depth. The libretto is a portrait of a woman who, at the end of her life, felt like a cow milked dry. A woman in the shadow of so many men. Famous men. Infamous men. I wanted to create a portrait that no longer revolves around Lee but instead highlights the many silenced women throughout art history."

Essentially, *Lee Miller in Hitler's Bath tub* goes beyond the autobiographical story to make a portrait of the female artist in contemporary society.

TOILING IN THE SOIL

Vienna, March 1945. Allied bombings accidentally destroy the Vienna State Opera. “The flames sucked air from the staircases and halls, the auditorium and the stage have been stripped bare”, Lee Miller describes. She photographs opera singer Irmgard Seefried amid the ruins, while Seefried sings an aria from Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*.

This is a photo that encapsulates Lee Miller in her entirety: her eye for composition, the elegant portrayal of a woman, the interplay of light and shadow, the lyricism of movement set against the drama of the ruin, a devastating reality, humanity versus war; a surreal, resilient image that radiates beauty. A symbol of the triumph of art over the destruction of war.

Vienna, June 2025. Mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey pays tribute to Lee Miller in NEST, the Vienna State Opera’s new platform. Today, the Vienna State Opera is one of the busiest opera houses in the world, with 350 performances per year – 60 operas and ballet productions – from its repertoire. In late 2024, NEST was launched, with which the Vienna State Opera is seeking to engage a younger audience and implement a more experimental programme, breathing new life into its offerings. New compositions find their place here in an intimate, more direct setting. *Lee Miller in Hitler’s Bathtub* is one of them.

How do you compose music for a story that contains so much atrocity and sorrow? Starting from the content of the

play written by Jan Lauwers, Maarten Seghers crafted a new composition that literally exhales the dramaturgy of the play. The drama, the confusion, the fear, the anger, and the stillness are expressed in the score almost tangibly.

Physicality and brutality play a central role in his work, in which the music is both hard-hitting and soothing. He explores two extremes: on the one hand, he approaches music as materialised sound, robust and uncompromising; on the other, he composes narrative music that leans towards an epic or emotional tale. This tension between deconstruction and construction lies at the heart of his work.

Seghers’ writing is always intended as a challenge for the musicians. There are constantly obstacles to overcome, rendering the music powerfully performative. His (musical) language shapes the character of the musicians, creating a symbiosis of the musical and the performative within his work. Maarten Seghers: “I wrote the piece of music *Lee Miller in Hitler’s Bathtub* for both Kate Lindsey’s voice and the performer Kate Lindsey. At its core lies the tension between the contemporary discovery of the voice as raw material, and the historical attainment of the voice as a transparent narrator.”

In the composition for mezzo-soprano and six instruments, the low, dark register of the cello, contrabassoon, trombone, and piano underscores the drama of the

narrative, contrasting with the violin, percussion, and voice in a higher texture, underpinned by the breath as a recurring element. Maarten Seghers: “The composition of the ensemble is driven by the quest for the moment at which the autonomous instrument and its sound become physical, and the instrumentalist becomes corporeal. There is toiling in the soil, not dreaming in the clouds.” A nod to the surrealism in which Lee was immersed.

The music in *Lee Miller in Hitler’s Bathtub* is built up of autonomous layers that transform into a bitter complexity. Each instrument frequently disrupts but still serves the whole, and together they convey the same ambiguous emotion.

While Seghers afforded a prominent place to polyrhythm in previous works, she hides away in *Lee Miller in Hitler’s Bathtub*. Her concealed presence creates a constant sense of threat and a rhythmic drive.

The intuitive character that is woven into the composition means that this work has many connections to existing works, both in terms of form and content, but it does not permit itself to be pinned down. In terms of genre, it relates to chamber opera, *Singspiel*, the “secular” cantata, as well as the monodrama. Its intimate nature, the solo vocal line, the alternation of arias with spoken dialogues, and the ensemble all serve the content, creating a symbiosis of music and text in which both media are treated as equals.

LOVELEE

Elizabeth, Li Li, Te Te, Bettie, Madame Eloui Bey, Lady Penrose, Lovelee, Lee, Lee Miller.

Born on 23 April 1907, died on 21 July 1977.

Lived intensely for 70 years.

Lee was her father’s muse. He photographed her from a young age – often naked. At the tender age of six, she was abused by a so-called uncle, “Uncle Bob”. The details of what happened are unclear. The rape and its aftermath – bouts of gonorrhoea – became an unspeakable part of her life.

In 1926, she was serendipitously discovered when she was almost run over by a car. Lee was pulled back onto the pavement by the publishing giant Condé Nast. Not long afterwards, she was gracing the cover of *Vogue* as a model, depicted in the form of a drawing; at that time, it was still

uncommon for magazines to use photos for their covers. Her modelling career was short-lived due to a controversy that arose following a photo in which she advertised sanitary towels. She resolved to dedicate herself fully to art. She moved to Paris, knocked on Man Ray’s door and asked to be his apprentice, became his partner and muse, gained recognition as a sought-after photographer, and led a vibrant social life in Paris among the Surrealists. She married her lover, Aziz Eloui Bey, became unhappy in Egypt, and returned to Paris, where she subsequently married Roland Penrose.

When the Second World War broke out, Lee became the official American war correspondent for *Vogue*, documenting life at the front, the German concentration camps, the experiences of women during wartime, and the liberation of Europe.

Traumatized by the horrors she had witnessed, Lee gradually faded from the public eye. Together with Penrose, she moved to the United Kingdom. Life in the countryside, at Farley Farm, did not bring her happiness. She had a son, Antony, with whom she had a difficult relationship. She spent the majority of her time at the stove. As a surrealist, inventing dishes amused her. It allowed her to be resourceful, preferably in the company of men and drink. Lee had an overwhelming need to forget the past and celebrate the present. Lee rarely spoke about the war, making it seem like a closed chapter. Few people knew that it would resurface at night.

In later years, she was diagnosed with cancer; she did not want to talk about it. Lee looked her fate straight in the eye, just as she always had.

FEMALE GENIUSES

Claude Cahun, Elizabeth Catlett, Camille Claudel, Tamara de Lempicka, Emilie Flöge, Artemisia Gentileschi, Françoise Gilot, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Lee Krasner, Jacqueline Lamba, Dora Maar, Victorine Meurent, Lee Miller, Georgia O'Keeffe, Amrita Sher-Gil, Elizabeth Siddal, Hedda Sterne, Suzanne Valadon, Carrie Mae Weems, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven... Women that were both artist and muse. Mostly thriving in the shadows. If they were known at all, it was more often as muses, rather than as artists. Sculptor Camille Claudel was described by a critic and contemporary as "a contradiction in nature, a female genius". A telling quote about the way women were perceived.

The female artist faces a difficult battle, starting with her social position and the accompanying centuries-long

structural discrimination. Women are viewed differently to men, with a heightened focus on appearance. Factors such as limited educational opportunities, financial dependence, imbalances in museum collections, or a lack of recognition by art historians and critics, have been detrimental in this regard. All too often, women's work was copied by men with neither permission nor payment; or was sold for a pittance. Some women were confined to psychiatric institutions, or committed suicide. Many only gained recognition posthumously.

In 1989, the art collective Guerrilla Girls counted the number of female artists, and the number of women depicted nude, in artworks at the Museum of Modern Art. Conclusion: fewer than 5% of the artists in the modern art department were women, while 85% of the nudes were

female. Do women have to be naked to be in a museum? They disseminated this question across New York by means of posters. In 2022, Christiane Struyven's eponymous book was published. It looks back at women in art from 1850 to the present day. History is being rewritten, and women are being revalued.

Today, there is a major focus on gender equality, public visibility, and creating opportunities. Museums and contemporary art institutions worldwide are paying more attention than ever to many (young) female artists. But there is still a long way to go. A recent study by the Dutch art foundation "Women in Art" shows that today, 64% of art school students are women, while women only represent 10% of the art market.

THE MUSE IS EXHAUSTED

The Muse is Exhausted is a poem and a screen print by Marlene Dumas (1991–1994). In the screen print, a figure is trying to crawl out of the frame. She's tired of the role she is playing as an object of desire. The poem ends with the words: "The muse is exhausted / Too many bodies and not enough soul / She's got the porno blues."

History is filled with immortal beauties who inspired artists. Countless muses, often portrayed as suffering figures, sometimes by choice, sometimes by force. The first muses were mentioned in an ancient Greek mythological matriarchal story with three goddesses: Aoidē (song or voice), Meletē (practise or meditation), and Mnēmē (memory). Together, they formed the driving force behind (the conditions for) poetic art. Not long after this, nine muses emerged.

Over time, the muse developed through a patriarchal lens. Artists drew their inspiration from non-divine women of flesh and blood – models or mistresses – who embodied creativity and inspiration: as romantic ideals, exotic beauties, symbols of piety, loyalty, lust or desire, as vehicles for political messages, as defenceless prey or as powerful survivors. A muse was objectified both philosophically and erotically. Turned to stone. Without a voice of her own. Something to gaze at. The embodiment of a hunger for desire, for what was absent

or out of reach; the muse as the embodiment of inspiration.

The Digital Library for Dutch Literature describes inspiratie [inspiration] as "coming from the Latin word *inspiratio* or breathing in, divine prompting, and defines it as 'inspiring, breathing in, instilling, and kindling'. A state of consciousness ('enlightenment') in which the artist possesses the maximum of their creative potential and seemingly effortlessly discovers the form that is most suitable for the intended artwork. In Ancient Greece, inspiration was attributed to a god or to the muses. Although the invocation of the muses as a source of inspiration continues to appear as a topos [cliché] in and after the Romantic period, the emphasis shifts towards the poetic genius. Many Romantic poets believed that inspiration alone was sufficient for the creation of the artwork, and that they were chosen for that inspiration. The classicist, on the other hand, assumes that inspiration is important but can only play a role once sufficient knowledge and practise have been acquired. In the 20th century, under the influence of Freud, the notion arises that inspiration wells up from the subconscious. The exploitation of the subconscious as a source of inspiration was undertaken by the surrealists."

"Inspiration" is the spark that lights the fire. It is that which captivates you

with a compulsion to create. It is the process by which you become inspired by an idea or experience that leads to new insights or actions. That spark can be anything. Thus, Maurice Ravel, Igor Stravinsky and Karl Lagerfeld had their cat as their muse, David Hockney had the dachshunds Stanley and Boogie as muses, George Dyer was Francis Bacon's male muse, and Paul Rosano was Sylvia Sleigh's muse. May the female muse (still) play a role today? Or is even this thought too binary and consequently too limiting?

The struggle for women who have been exploited – in whatever form – for and by art is especially relevant in light of the current zeitgeist. Today, it seems that there is no longer a place for the muse, given the problematic traditional power dynamics, the one-dimensional nature, and the romanticised portrayal. Her objectification by the male gaze means that she continues to reference centuries of unequal opportunities between men and women, and the stereotyping that has been rife throughout art history. The sensuality or tragedy of an ageing body, the naked pregnant woman, the woman of colour, the body with a disability... all have been ignored, brushed aside. The need for the appropriation of femininity and the female body – long defined by men – has in recent decades called for a perspective in which she is no longer sub-

jugated, but instead becomes the subject.

How can we look back? Must the muse disappear? Must we protest against her? What can the muse still signify today? How can we honour her?

Acknowledging the role of the muse does not lead to skewed power dynamics. Through her critical gaze, the muse reveals her subordinate position and imbues herself with fresh zeal. The muse cannot be seen in isolation from history. She has evolved, shed the romantic gaze, and has contributed to a widening of how the muse is seen in the broadest

sense of the word. She lives on in history, as well as in today's reality. How we imbue her with meaning is up to us.

In the performance *Lee Miller in Hitler's Bath*, Lee Miller is portrayed as a metaphor for both the female muse and the female artist (including those who have faced discrimination) throughout history, representing the complex battle that women must fight time and time again, and the price that they pay for it. By working with Kate Lindsey and his daughter Romy Louise Lauwers, Jan Lauwers forces himself to question his own

position. From the very first reading of the libretto, they were the critical readers. Their perspective, feedback, and performance enriched the text, which in turn became their tool for firing the imagination. The danger that the audience assumes that whatever is visible on stage is imposed by a director is a top-down notion, and in the Needcompany's work this is approached in a horizontal way. The freedom of performance lies with the performers, the possibilities for opening up all the jargon are endless. The muse as a synonym for inspirational collaborations.

ENGAGED TESTIMONIES

A portrait photo of a nine-year-old boy. The boy is wearing a white undershirt. Both his arms have been amputated. His name is Mahmoud Ajjour. He was seriously injured while fleeing from an Israeli attack on Gaza City in March 2024. The photo was taken by the Palestinian Samar Abu Elouf. She is a self-taught photojournalist from Gaza. Since 2010, she has been documenting daily life and conflict in her country. The photo was named World Press Photo of the Year (2025).

It is one of the thousands of war images that circulate daily in the news, in newspapers, and online. We are inundated with them. How many horrific images, callous stories, and repugnant testimonies must there be before we halt the unbearable suffering? We continue to look on and do not intervene. In her essay *On Photography* (1973) the American writer Susan Sontag wrote: "In these last decades, 'concerned' photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it." Years later, Sontag defended photography in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) as a medium to boost public engagement. She considered it a citizen's duty to look at these images.

In *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (2010) Susie Lin-

field outlines a critique of what she calls "postmodernist apathy": "Photos excel, more than any other form of journalism, at offering an immediate, viscerally emotional connection to the world." Due to the abundance of images, we have lost the ability to respond emotionally to atrocities. It is the camera that has globalised conscience. "Now we know that photos of human suffering can be the start of human connection. It is about how we use the photos of atrocities."

At the time Lee Miller went off to war, war photography was really taking off. Propaganda and shaping public opinion were its primary purposes, but what was new was the exponential increase in photos that could be disseminated. Lee Miller tried to understand the impact of the war on civilians. Her ability to penetrate to the essence was her hallmark. She learned to photograph horror, but at a price.

Susan Sontag writes: "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed." Taking photos has an aura of objectivity, but in reality, they too are interpretations. They restructure reality. As a photographer, you gain a certain power. "The camera doesn't rape, or even possess, though it may presume, intrude, trespass, distort, exploit, and, at the farthest reach of metaphor, assassinate."

In *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985), Svetlana Alexievich presents testimonies from various (Soviet) women – captains, snipers, pilots, nurses, doctors, laundresses, cooks, and others – who had experienced the war at the front. Their story is not only one of battle, but also one of women in war: what happened to them? How were they changed by the war? What was it like to learn to kill? Each of them tells the story of war in her own way. Not about heroism, but about the nauseating and insane nature of the war. A chronicle of horror, filth, exhaustion, and fear. As women – givers of life – they said that they found killing more difficult than the men did. More than 300 pages of testimonies that follow one another without interruption. Alexievich gathered the oral history through which she conveys the power of memory, reflecting on what is remembered and what is forgotten. "It is terrible to remember," one woman told her, "but it is far worse to forget."

What links Sontag, Alexievich, Elouf, Linfield, and Miller is their determination not to look away. Five women who, through their testimonies, their critical perspectives, and their art form, seek to safeguard the future from further injustice, at any cost.

PTSD

Psychotherapist Dori Laub writes: "A traumatic experience is so overwhelming that it is not stored as a memory, which can then fade over time. Instead, the trauma continually intrudes upon the present, in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, or even physical pain."

Lee Miller endured multiple traumas in her life. Not only the abuse at a young age, but also the war had left its mark on her. She had witnessed a collective trauma. She captured the war for eternity yet struggled for the rest of her life with the injustices and images she had seen.

She did not want to remember it. The collective trauma had become her personal trauma. She became unapproachable. The war and its aftermath had built a wall around her. The stubborn determination she had always been able to rely on left her. Her productivity dwindled to

a bare minimum. She drank excessively, burst out in tirades, suffered from nightmares, and battled with depression. Today, she would be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Back then, it was not yet acknowledged.

Where the abuse provoked her to use her own body and the bodies of others as art, the war compelled her to create photo-

graphs that mercilessly captured the most horrific essence. After that, there was only disillusionment and despair. Shortly after the war, she wrote: "I seem to have lost grip or enthusiasm or something with the end of war. There no longer seems to be any urgency. [...] I'm suffering from a sort of verbal impotence, when Europe was yet to be liberated... When I had thought

and burned with ideas for years and suddenly found a peg on which to hang them, I found work and transport and transmission and courage. This is a new and disillusioning world. Peace in a world of crooks who have no honor, no integrity, and no shame is not what anyone fought for."

Lee Miller in Hitler's Bath is not a romantic portrait of a woman as an artist. It does not paint a pretty picture. It lacks a comforting ending and grapples with the complexity of societal failure in creating a world in which inequality and hopelessness still prevail, and in which hard-won rights can vanish in an instant. At the same time, it showcases the fighting spirit of countless women who rise up time and time again, give voice to beauty, pain, solace, and sorrow, and find the courage to be uncompromising.

Elke Janssens