



IN WONDERLAND: THE SURREALIST ADVENTURES OF WOMEN ARTISTS IN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

DIDACTICS

Introduction

This is the first exhibition devoted to the female surrealist artists who worked in Mexico and the United States. Surrealism, one of the most influential avant-garde aesthetics of the twentieth century, has almost always been characterized as a movement based in France, involving male artists. Yet within a decade of its formation in 1924, the movement had taken root beyond Europe. North America was a logical forum, because ideals of freedom, liberty and the equality of the sexes held sway here, and women played a significant role in surrealism from the beginning. The surrealist extolled dreams and the unconscious as sources of creativity while they also advocated for the destruction of what they considered sterile, bourgeois institutions—the church, the family. According to the founder of surrealism, French writer André Breton, women served as muses for men. But the nearly fifty artists represented here demonstrate that women were independent creators, as bold, imaginative, and innovative as the men. The women adopted a personal stance, often utilizing their art as a means of psychological and spiritual exploration and catharsis, liberating them from the confines of patriarchal societies as well as from their own personal tragedies. Ultimately, surrealism empowered women and encouraged their rise of the feminist movement.

Alice in Wonderland

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* books resonated with the surrealists. Although initially intended as fiction for children, the stories have been hailed as the finest nonsense literature for adults. Female surrealist artists felt a kinship with Alice: they also experienced chaos and the irrational, and had their lives disrupted by people or events over which they had no control. Many had suffered tragic childhoods (molestation, abandonment by their parents), or they had faced disappointing adult years

that included divorce, infertility, a struggle against traditional roles of wife and mother, and mental illness. Several women chose to represent specific themes based on the books, while others referred to themselves as Alice. The dreams they delineated were their personal nightmares, and much of their art is disturbing and harrowing. Yet surrealism also offered a path toward the "marvelous," a surrealist concept about the disruption of identity and the disorientation of reality in pursuit of the revelatory. These bold and remarkable women passed through many doors and roles, often traveling to distant places, to find their independent voices.

Identity: Portraiture

The women artists, unlike their male counterparts, sought to reconstruct their identities through the strategy of self-representation. Both the European exiles and the artists born in the United States and Mexico produced an astonishing number of powerful images of themselves, friends, and lovers, creating a pictorial narrative that enabled them to investigate their bodies, their minds, and their life experiences, and ultimately their own reality. Some conceived straightforward and autobiographical portraits that refer to specific and often traumatic events and childhood memories, while others were more oblique and conveyed their fantasies and spiritual beliefs. Some of the portraits imply, through the strategy of doubling, the idea of alter egos or multiple alternate personalities; other portraits refer to the absence of self through empty landscapes or isolated objects that manifest a feeling of alienation and self-effacement. Symbolic portraits in the form of still lifes were an important strategy for representing unsavory gender roles and issues such as sexuality. The masquerade, with its transformative power, became a perfect device for these artists to conceal their identity or gender.

The Body

The female artists transformed their bodies from a male fetish to a site of resistance and creative energy; they rarely presented the nude male body. Unlike the male artists, who represented women as a personification of their sexual desires and fantasies, the female surrealists used their bodies to explore their emotions and creative powers as well as the

complex relationship between their physical selves and their identities. Their approach to their bodies was not erotic: usually they are clothed and, when naked, they explore their anatomy and the potential to conceive life almost poetically. Some artists focused on their heads and eyes to reveal their inner life and dreams. Confronting the traditional representation of nude women in art history, they created scenarios where the body became part of the landscape or was partially hidden or trapped. They resisted the objectification of the female figure by constructing symbolic images from asexual body parts: heads, eyes, mouths, or hands. While breasts remained the supreme male fetish, female artists produced uncomfortable images that addressed their dramatic experiences with breasts, such as a mastectomy.

The Creative Woman

Intelligent, creative women have long been considered a threat to the stability of patriarchal societies. In the mid-twentieth century, when marriage and children were extolled in middle-class American and Mexican cultures as a woman's supreme objective, those who pursued alternative paths were considered outsiders and at times labeled mentally unbalanced. Surrealists of both genders, however, believed that women had special powers: that they had visionary capabilities and were more attuned to emotions and the imagination. Female surrealists portrayed themselves and other women as witches and goddesses, and domestic spaces were often depicted as alchemical laboratories where magical rituals were performed. The women also favored the representation of enigmatic figures from the tarot that symbolize personal power and creativity. They often chose animal avatars that embodied different intuitive, intellectual, and sexual potentials. Many of the works of art reveal personal journeys of transformation and spiritual rebirth. Deeply interested in the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, they conceived of fantastic works of art inspired by dreams and memories and they explored the profound and obscure meanings of human relationships. In Mexico in the 1940s, a confluence of groups based on the esoteric mystical teachings of the Russians George Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky encouraged works about the potential to transform the universe.

Romance and Domesticity

Surrealism provided women with a sense of liberation from traditional roles, and many of them considered marriage and children secondary to their artistic careers. Issues of romance, domesticity, and family appeared repeatedly, sometimes in humorous ways that challenged established social mores and gender boundaries. The female artists often began their artistic careers as wives, lovers, or friends of male artists, and they produced symbolic portraits in which they used discrepancies in size and scale to draw attention to traditional gender roles within a patriarchal society. The representation of domestic spaces was important: the house, the kitchen, and the dining room sometimes became sites of feminine drudgery and confinement. The few portraits of children convey a feeling of isolation. The doll was a subject favored by the male surrealists as an incarnation of the concept of the uncanny (something that is simultaneously familiar and strange), and it signified male fantasies about eroticism. Women, however, often avoided sexual connotations, using doll heads or entire doll bodies to create disconcerting imagery that conveys anxieties and fears. Some had suffered parental abandonment, sexual abuse, or other traumatic childhood experiences that would later haunt their work.

Games and Technical Innovations

From the beginning of the movement in Paris, surrealists created games and innovative techniques, often involving chance or accident, to express the irrationalities of life and the workings of the unconscious. Some games were played collectively, such as the exquisite corpse, in which an image is composed by several participants who cannot see the previous contributions, leading to unusual juxtapositions. Chess also became a common motif in their works of art.

While women surrealist artists in North America tended to take a more solitary approach, they sometimes used these games and techniques in addition to inventing new methods to express their fantasies and fascinations. The exquisite corpses created by Frida Kahlo and Lucienne Bloch underscored gender issues in a reversal of masculine and feminine attributes. Photographers created otherworldly female forms through the

techniques of solarization (the reversal of tones through light exposure), the photogram (the placement of objects on photosensitive paper), and photomontage (an image shot from a collage of multiple photographs). A few made masterful use of the surrealist techniques of fumage (the use of smoke as a medium) and decalomania (pressing paint from one surface onto another). A number of women first experienced surrealist art at Atelier 17, a print workshop in New York founded by artist Stanley William Hayter. There, New York-based artists explored automatism (spontaneous artistic activity as an expression of the unconscious) and printmaking.

North America: The Land, Native People, and Myths

North America's ancient and indigenous cultures intrigued many women surrealists, who viewed pre-Columbian, American Indian, and Oceanic artifacts as direct links to the subconscious and the dream state. The vast terrains of the United States and Mexico not only inspired artists from these countries but also the Europeans who had arrived as refugees. These artists, through their marginalization as women and exiles, felt an affinity with living indigenous groups, and their research into other cultures and locales turned into a search for personal identity. Representations of indigenous objects often appeared in works of art; for example, pre-Columbian sculptures in Frida Kahlo's canvases, and Native American kachina dolls and teepees in Jacqueline Lamba's drawings. Myths and ancient codices also provided important symbolism for many artists. Others borrowed the construction techniques of ritual art: Isabelle Waldberg's sculptures, for example, were inspired by the Yup'ik masks of Alaska, and Jeanne Reynal's mosaics reference Navajo sand painting rituals.

Abstract Surrealism and the New Universal Myth

During the 1940s and 1950s, surrealists increasingly explored abstraction. A widespread interest in biomorphism (the use of organic shapes that reference natural life forms) was accompanied by a heightened emphasis on automatism. Investigations into abstraction paralleled the search for a new social myth, which André Breton deemed therapeutic, mind expanding, and ultimately central to society. The avant-garde's familiarity with the

concepts of Carl Jung had set the stage for this interest in myth, symbol, archetype, and the collective unconscious.

The work of women surrealists explored abstraction and the concepts of the universality of myths from many different perspectives. In San Francisco, Adaline Kent and Madge Knight were predominantly inspired by the mysteries of nature, while Helen Phillips created anthropomorphic figures locked in perpetual motion. In New York, Jewish mysticism informed the work of Lee Krasner. Jacqueline Lamba traveled in Mexico and across the United States in 1946 and began to explore light and landscapes in her images. Mexican painter Lilia Carrillo would be one of many women artists inspired by the abstract surreal and expressionist canvases of Arshile Gorky, whom she cited as having a decisive impact of the lyrical abstraction of her work.

Politics

The radical nature of surrealism involved politics as well as aesthetics. Early on, the official French surrealists group issued two journals with titles that referred to their "revolution." These activist leanings also led the male artists to express Marxist ideals, advocate general strikes, join the French Communist Party, and ally with Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1938. The female artists, however, tended not to agitate for larger political or social causes. They occasionally depicted the effects of the Depression, poverty, and capitalism, as well as the growing militarism, war, and displacement of people, yet they rarely criticized such conditions. Because of its documentary character, photography was the medium most often used for these portrayals. The technique of photcollage, in which an image is removed from its original source and placed within a new context, literally paralleled the physical disruption of normal life and could be the reason the women used it so often. It was Lee Miller, working as a war correspondent for *Vogue*, who realized the surreal nature of current events; scenes that she seems to have accidentally come across demonstrate the surrealist concept of the uncanny while underscoring the nightmare of battle. Kay Sage conveyed Europe's loss of its intelligentsia in her barren landscapes, while Margaret Tomkins and Janet Sobel suggested through their palettes and imagery the despair, frenzy, and horror of the Holocaust.

Postscript: Feminist Revolution

The female voice did not enter mainstream culture until women founded their own movement. In the late 1960s, feminism both took on and advanced the surrealist revolution in the battle of gender politics and creativity. Women artists at last became politically engaged in a public and organized way. The body remained their dominant motif, but now they reappropriated themselves, as the subject within new visual strategies. Sexually charged imagery was transformed from the suggestive and socially acceptable into the blatant and transgressive. Artists turned to new materials that had a greater sense of physicality—rubber, latex, found wooden objects from houses, and cloth—for their media and process. Whereas Dorothea Tanning's soft sculptures continued the fascination with a woman's body by exploring her softly swelling curvature, Louise Bourgeois's urethane sculptures, hanging from the ceiling, thrust anatomical parts in the face of the viewer. Less coded, the issues faced by women became both the subject and the object of artistic expression.