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& Australia

ON BEAUTY

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Defying imagination: Surrealism and 'beauty'

Caroline Hancock

IN 1941, ANDRÉ BRETON, THE 'POPE' OF SURREALISM, arrived in New York after escaping Europe and the direct trauma of the Second World War. He wrote an article for *Art in Australia*, as this magazine was known then, which acknowledged the universal necessity to re-examine all certainties:

Human thought, to-day, is greatly humiliated. Suddenly the book of history has opened wide before our eyes, and, with a rapidity which we can scarcely comprehend, its white pages are being filled with frenzied handwriting. Suddenly all of those past events, which we had been accustomed to consider purely from a speculative or theoretical standpoint – as wars, religious conflicts, crises in government, and the rise and fall of culture – all that which up to the present has been for us a beautiful but dim and misty revelation of the heroic past, has now become for us a living actuality, a poignant presence incorporated in our very being. Each one of us, from Paris to Sydney, from New York to the very depths of Asia, has an actual physical part in this world convulsion.¹

This year, a major collection of surrealist works directly experienced or narrowly missed disaster zones. The works stopped first in Tokyo at the National Art Center where 'Le Surréalisme' took pride of place from February until May. The exhibition comprised no less than 180 artworks of all sorts, masterpieces of surrealism from the Centre Pompidou's Musée National d'Art Moderne collection in Paris, curated by Deputy Director Didier Ottinger. It was a rare event, an escapade to the other side of the world. Then, starting on 11 March 2011, Japan was hit by an earthquake, a tsunami and a nuclear disaster. In June, with all its treasures intact, 'Surrealism: The Poetry of Dreams' opened in Brisbane at the Queensland Art Gallery's Gallery of Modern Art, where only a few months earlier devastating floods had brought

destruction to the city and region. One should not shudder at such near-disappearances of art, however valuable, when compared to the actual toll in human lives and livelihoods, but it may be appropriate to highlight the ridiculously ironic surreality of these situations. The shock of the real defies the imagination.

Formalised in Paris in 1924 by Breton, surrealism took the world by storm for decades. The Brisbane exhibition gives an expanded view of the surrealist movement, in terms of chronology and the geographies of its influence, beginning in 1918 with dada and ending in 1966, the year of Breton's death. International in its interests and connections, surrealism has an endlessly explorable and lasting legacy. Defining it is quasi impossible since the movement morphed over the years to be in or out of sync with historical and conceptual developments and created a plethora of sub-movements. Excommunicated members formed different groups or took separate individual routes. Initially embedded in poetry, the debates often occurred in magazines and pamphlets, as well as in the artworks.

Beauty is one concept where intense contention raged between factions. It could be said that Breton appropriated the word with a hysterical twist. At the end of his 1928 novel *Nadja*, he wrote: 'Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all.' Léona Delcourt, known as Nadja, was a real person whose creative powers temporarily fascinated Breton. When considered alongside photographs by Man Ray, Jacques-André Boiffard and Henri Manuel, Nadja's drawings and collages illustrate Breton's Parisian *dérive* (drifting or meandering). For Breton, reality and dreams were communicating vessels. Found objects, such as a bronze glove, or chance encounters, as with Nadja, conjured up uncanny associations that potentially hovered in the realm of the sublime. The work of the surrealists, such as Man Ray's photograph in the Brisbane exhibition, famously referenced the Comte de Lautréamont's incongruous qualifier from *Les Chants de Maldoror*

Yves Tanguy, *A quatre heures d'été, l'espoir ...* (Four o'clock in summer, hope ...), 1929
 Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 97 cm
 Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris
 Courtesy Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane
 © Yves Tanguy/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2011

(1868–69): 'Beautiful as the chance encounter on a dissection table of a sewing machine and an umbrella.' Meetings of the banal and the bizarre were encouraged in the surrealists' collective dream sessions, automatic writings and exquisite-corpse drawings. The recording of conscious or unconscious thoughts and visions after loss of control and emancipation was fundamental to this moment in pre-Second World War orthodox surrealism.

Any idealised poetic notion of beauty was collapsed by the group of dissident surrealists – such as Boiffard, Alberto Giacometti, Eli Lotar, Joan Miró, André Masson – who gathered in the 1920s around the writer Georges Bataille. Striving for 'beauty' in Breton's sense was highly problematic to them and they proceeded to give 'beauty' or 'aesthetics' a very different definition: that of a core, base reality, of big toes, abattoirs and spittle. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's 1929 film *Un Chien Andalou* (An Andalusian Dog) was commented on and acclaimed by both camps. Can the iconic scene of the eye being slit be defined as 'beautiful'?

The dissidents' magazine *DOCUMENTS* became known as a war machine against received ideas and cancelled distinctions between high and low, ugly and beautiful, western and non-western. It attempted to show the other side of the coin: ethnography, anthropology, music, cartoons, arts, cinema, books and ideas, from all times and places, all given equal importance. The seventh issue of *DOCUMENTS* in 1929 reproduced two photographs: on top is the River Seine in Paris, iced over during the winter of 1870–71; on the bottom a movie still from *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*. On the opposite page is one of the best-known critical dictionary definitions that has inspired many artists and exhibitions: Bataille's 'L'Informe' (Formlessness). Just before this, and linked to the first image, is Michel Leiris's 'Débacle' which refers to the contemporary Wall Street Crash and

its worldwide devastating aftermath. The link between natural phenomena and economic crisis still has a detonating currency. Here one might pause and contemplate a painting in the Brisbane exhibition: Yves Tanguy's *A quatre heures d'été, l'espoir ...* (Four o'clock in summer, hope ...), dated 1929.

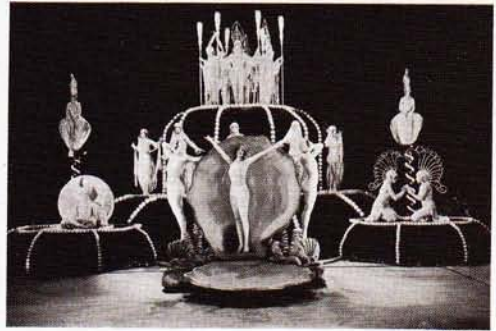
But what of other dreams? A collage published in the magazine *La Révolution Surréaliste* the same year shows photo booth portraits of members of the surrealist group – all men in suits with their eyes closed dreaming – circling around the reproduction of a painting by René Magritte of a nude woman in between the inscription '*Je ne vois pas la ... cachée dans la forêt*' (I do not see the ... hidden in the forest). Unfortunately 'the ...' or 'woman' is often still hidden. In the history of surrealism, it is recognised that women were central as muses, objects of desire, monsters, 'other' or secretaries, but less so as creative forces. Indeed, at the time women surrealists didn't publish theoretical texts and manifestos but rather fantastical narratives or poems which have all too often been relegated as second rate or devoid of critical interest.

This near invisibility persists in the Brisbane exhibition: five artists out of fifty-six are women (not that exhibition-making should be about numbers and ticking boxes, but Guerrilla Girls tactics can have useful underlining impact). 'Surrealism: The Poetry of Dreams' includes works by Claude Cahun, Dora Maar, Judit Reigl, Dorothea Tanning (who lives in New York City) and Marie Toyen. What of Eileen Agar, Ilse Bing, Leonora Carrington, Ithell Colquhoun, Bona de Mandiargues, Maya Deren, Germaine Dulac, Leonor Fini, Kati Horna, Valentine Hugo, Frida Kahlo, Greta Knutson, Jacqueline Lamba, Lee Miller, Marcel Moore, Nadja, Mimi Parent, Méret Oppenheim, Grace Pailthorpe, Alice Rahon, Kay Sage, Remedios Varo and Unica Zürn, for instance? Admittedly, as in the case of many of the men, not all of these artists would have wanted to accept the 'surrealist' label and not





La Seine pendant l'hiver 1870-71 (tel qu'il-est).



Un des tableaux du film parlant "Hollywood review".

Photo Méliès-Galton



all of these artists are represented in the Pompidou collection. Of course it is probable that some potential loans were claimed by the exhibition 'elles@centrepompidou' during which (only) half of the Musée National d'Art Moderne's collection displays were devoted to creations by women.² Hugely publicised, the Pompidou's exhibition project has laudably enabled numerous new acquisitions for the collection – just the tip of the iceberg, one hopes. Indeed, a delightful surprise emerges in the new acquisitions of works on paper: several are by the aforementioned Nadja, having been reproduced in Breton's eponymous book, including the collage *Un regard d'or de Nadja*, dated 1926.³

This reflection is prompted by an urge to pay homage to the recent shell-shocking surrealist news that Leonora Carrington orphaned the planet on 25 May 2011 at the august age of ninety-four. One of her best-known paintings, probably because it is one of the rare ones that is in a major public collection, is the early 1937–38 *Self-portrait (inn of the dawn horse)*, started in London and finished in France.⁴ Seated in trousers, with long hair flowing freely, she depicts herself glaring straight out of the picture towards the viewer, surrounded by white horses and a hyena in the corner. Undeniably a beauty, she was conquering her independence and had begun a relationship with Max Ernst. 'Max was a revelation', she said. Then their paths were separated. The Second World War led her to the Americas where she remained highly active for the rest of her life, primarily in Mexico:

*The aesthetic presence of this object was not its only quality, the hearing trumpet magnified sound to such a degree that ordinary conversation became quite audible even to my ears.*⁵

Such an instrument might be required to amplify the studies on women surrealists published by art historians such as Dawn Ades,

Mary Ann Caws, Whitney Chadwick, Georgiana M. M. Colvile, Renée Riese Hubert, Alyce Mahon and Penelope Rosemont, to cite just a few. Their academic research deserves more digestion and filtering into exhibitions worldwide as the dominant discourse begins to be challenged and art history is opened up to permit a broader cultural hybridity. Like Carrington, who up until her death continued to give visual or written form to unknown territories – human, animal, vegetable, mineral, ghost or demon – surrealism will nourish imaginations for centuries to come.

Surrealism: The Poetry of Dreams, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 11 June – 2 October 2011.



- 1 André Breton, 'Originality and liberty', *Art in Australia*, no. 4, December 1941, p. 11.
- 2 'elles@centrepompidou', Centre Pompidou, Paris, 27 May 2009 – 21 February 2011.
- 3 'Recent Acquisitions: From Antonin Artaud to Tatiana Trouvé', Centre Pompidou, Paris, 29 June – 12 September 2011.
- 4 This oil on canvas belongs to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Most works appear to be in private collections according to two recent publications: Susan L. Aberth, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, Lund Humphries, Farnham, 2010, and Stefan van Raay, Joanna Moorhead, Teresa Arcq (eds), *Surreal Friends: Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Kati Horna*, Lund Humphries, Farnham / Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 2010.
- 5 Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974), Penguin Classics, London, 2005, p. 1.

opposite, clockwise from top left
 Je ne vois pas la ... cachée dans la forêt (I do not see the ... hidden in the forest), 2009
 From *La Révolution Surréaliste*, no. 12, 15 December 1929, p. 73

DOCUMENTS, no. 7, December 1929, p. 383
 Courtesy Caroline Hancock

Dora Maar, *Sans titre – onirique* (Untitled – hallucination), 1935
 Palladium print embellished with crayon, 23.5 x 29.4 cm
 Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, purchased 2004
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