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“The Pivotal Role That Women Have Played in Surrealism”

by Izabella Scott



Women have always played a role in the Surrealist movement—but for the most part, as objects of masculine desire and fantasy. Founded in a 1924 manifesto by André Breton, Surrealism would come to be dominated by men like Max Ernst, Man Ray, René Magritte, and Salvador Dalí. Surrealism strove to be political, as a revolution of both eye and mind, but its blind spot was always gender politics. As the female body became the ultimate Surrealist object, it was mystified, fetishized, and othered.

“In those days, men thought of women simply as muses,” said British painter Eileen Agar in an interview in 1990; she joined the movement in the 1920s. Man Ray employed many sitters for his nudes, including surrealist sculptor Meret Oppenheim and his apprentice-cum-lover Lee Miller. While Dalí used the female figure in optical puzzles, Magritte painted pornified faces with breasts for eyes, and Ernst simply decapitated them. “The Noble Mannequin is so perfect,” wrote the Surrealist René Crevel in 1934, “she does not always bother to take her head, arms, and legs with her.” In other words, she was already an exquisite corpse.

Over the past decade, there has been a growing recognition of the women who took part in Surrealism. An all-female exhibition at White Cube Bermondsey, “Dreamers Awake,” remaps the history of Surrealism from 1920s to the present day, showing a wealth of work by women across a century.

“Surrealism had a very high proportion of women members who were at the heart of the movement, but who often get cast as ‘muse of’ or ‘wife of,’” explains exhibition curator Susanna Greeves. “Women were drawn to Surrealist values, to supposedly overthrow conventions, and the

movement attracted many adventurous souls.” An abundance of work by early female Surrealists are on display in “Dreamers Awake,” from the celebrated, like Dorothea Tanning, to lesser-known artists, like Marion Adnams. The latter



Julie Tuyet Curtiss, *Venus*, 2016, Acrylic and oil on canvas, 58 x 32 in

artist's painting *Serpents in Your Tides* (1940) reconfigures the symbolic woman as a thinking, creative being.

Under Breton's eye, women were often cast as harpies, sorceresses, or sphinxes. British painter Leonora Carrington adopted these guises herself as she drew on fables and folklore, painting spindly figures sailing gondolas through the cosmos, or winged sea-creatures with sleepy reptilian eyes. Carrington left her lover Ernst and immigrated to Mexico in the 1940s to continue her work in isolation. Her painting *Title Unknown* (1963) opens up a world of magical hybrid creatures, strange costumed outsiders greeting each other in unknown lands.

Among the works brought together for "Dreamers Awake" are examples of women who took on female objectification, turning the male gaze on its head. Miller's photographs present the body in fragments, in a riposte to Man Ray's use of the female figure as a curious, beautiful object. In *Untitled (Serving breast from radical surgery in a place setting 1 & 2)* (c. 1929), a breast is served up on a plate, like a dreadful loin of meat. Meanwhile, British artist Edith Rimmington's painting *Museum* (1951) depicts a female head in a jar, her eyes multiplied under the glass, so that a dozen alert pupils stare out from the canvas. On another wall is work by the Argentine Surrealist Leonor Fini, who painted sphinx-like women, translucent as ghosts. In *Le Bal des ingrates* (1982) three pale female heads are poking out of sacks and paraded by men across a dance floor—perhaps the very heads missing from Ernst's noble corpses.

"Dreamers Awake" teases out chains of influence across the century, and on show alongside Surrealism's original cast members are giants from contemporary art, including Louise Bourgeois, Tracey Emin, and Rosemarie Trockel. "Surrealism was a hugely influential avant-garde in the way it permeated visual culture from the very beginning," says Greeves. "And Surrealism never disappeared, as some have claimed."

The show makes connections between artists from different decades, such as Claude Cahun and Jo Ann Callis. Cahun is now celebrated as an early transgender artist, and the slender self-portraits from the 1920s show the artist in various guises—kneeling with a mask or lotus-legged as Buddha. The resonance of Cahun's portraits can be seen in the photography of Callis. *Untitled (Woman with Black Line)* (1976) shows a neat stripe drawn up the spine of a fragile female form, right up into the hairline—like a seam—making the body into a kind of costume. Cahun's influence can also be discerned in Hannah Wilke's famous terracotta sculptures of phallic vaginas, *Five Androgynous and Vaginal Sculptures* (1960–61), which, like Cahun's portraits, attempt to break down gender binaries. Various generations of artists are also linked by what Breton conceived as the Surrealist object—a thing stripped of its ordinary meaning to expose a psychological truth. That Surrealism's stripped object so often took the form of a naked woman was not lost on later sculptors, who sought to ironize and undermine Breton's concepts, particularly after his death in 1966.

Polish sculptor Alina Szapocznikow made casts of her own lips and breasts to create tinted polyester objects that are equal parts Pop Art and Surrealist. The protagonist of her *Lampe-Bouche* (1966) is a pair of glowing yellow lips: fragile, erotic, and camp, all at the same time. In a similar vein, Los Angeles-based sculptor Nevine Mahmoud's *Bosom* (2017) is a breast carved from alabaster that almost shivers on its glass plinth. Nearby, *Miss her (peach)* (2017), made of veined, apricot calcite, is an object that sits somewhere between an ass and a split peach, and uses Surrealism as a vehicle for irony.

There are so many young artists who are still influenced by Surrealism," says Greeves, and White Cube has attempted to bring them into the Surrealist fold. Also included in the show are Kurdish artist Hayv Kahraman, whose paintings are filled with mannequins on strings performing tasks, and U.S. sculptor Kelly Akashi, with a chain

of bronze hands dangling from a golden rope. The influence of Carrington, whose work is particularly resonant at present, can be seen in paintings by Issy Wood and Julie Curtiss.

“These artists engage with Surrealism not just aesthetically, but as a philosophy,” Greeves explains. “Surrealism is about seeking the unconscious and jolting ourselves into new ways of seeing.”

—Izabella Scott