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Independent Study in photography

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Through the looking glass: How Surrealism built space for a world without gender

Surrealism in the 1920s was key to the progression of sexual liberation. Theories on sexuality and gender were largely discussed through the medium. The surrealist movement was built by men longing to understand the meaning of life and death through more metaphorical expression after the traumatic real violence, witnessed in the first world war. The father of surrealism himself, Breton states in 1944, "It is high time for women's ideas to prevail over man's, whose bankruptcy is clear enough in the turmoil of today". Despite this, the movement was built out of the of symbol of "women" carved out by psychoanalytic theories written by men, then performed by men. Women served as a symbol to be mutilated and dissembled by the hands that stroked the ego. As limited the space was for women in the movement, they used it's psychoanalytical approach to sculpt a more complex world of their own. Building from the rubble of the countless female nudes, the focus on the self, a life free from gender came into fruition. From symbol to subject, they perfected the surrealist balance of self-image and self-knowledge where their male predecessors failed to do so. In surrealism, the self-estrangement of gender as performance started a conversation that has continued in modern artwork today.



Figure 1 'The Great Masturbator' painting by Salvador Dalí (1929)

The Victoria and Albert Museum defines Surrealism in three major topics: “dreams, the unconscious, and the irrational”. Breton was inspired by Freudian psychology, building on the foundation of Dadaism, with the addition of the artist’s thought process in creating the irrational. This is what made Surrealism its own movement. Looking back at the beginning of surrealism it is almost funny to see what we considered nuanced sexual expression. Paintings like Dalí’s ‘the great masturbator’, an exploration of his sexual desire depicted through a monstrous half-formed ball sack layered with allusive symbols, yet this does not extend to the female form which he regards as an object. The head of a woman rests on a male groin. It is clear he cannot think of a woman beyond a symbol for his own pleasure as most of his work consists of women painted with a mutilated nude body. Dalí was later kicked out of the surrealist movement for his fascist view and misuse of the Surrealist style for financial gain. It had nothing to do with his treatment of the female body, as it is a running theme throughout the work of men in the surrealist movement. André Breton, Jean Arp, Max Ernst, and Paul Delvaux are just some that come to mind.

I find it ironic that a movement focused so much on challenging the unconscious desire, fails to extend to the opposite sex. This is not surprising as the movement was built on Freudian theories, which have since been disproven and deemed dangerous in modern times. Benjamin Péret one of the key players and founders of the French surrealist group wrote “a woman is as beautiful to the extent that she most completely incarnates the secret aspirations of men”¹. This proves Surrealism was a product of societal attitudes of the time; women had only just been granted equal voting rights in 1928 in England. That same year the French surrealist group held a meeting discussing sexuality in the art form, no women were present². Yet some of their ideas around sex were revolutionary “I wish that I could change my sex as often as I change my shirt” André Breton states, but this was only intended to extend to the male heterosexual view on sex as Breton famously denounced male homosexuality.

There is no denial that sexism and homophobia shown from the founding ‘fathers’ of the movement reflected Western society at the time. “Their aims to revolutionize human experience”³ didn’t succeed because of its confined perspective. It was the outsiders who truly revolutionized the movement. I recognize the importance the surrealist movement had on creating a small space for ideas about sex and gender

¹ Péret, B. (2011). *Anthologie de l’amour sublime*. Albin Michel.

² Chadwick, W. (2021). *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*. Thames & Hudson. Page, 131

³ Tate (2022). *Surrealism – Art Term*. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/surrealism#:~:text=Surrealism%20aims%20to%20revolutionise%20human.>

to take place, but the most nuanced concepts came from those society deemed 'other'. The queer community and women who worked under the surrealist style are the ones who successfully completed the art movement's proclaimed mission.

"All known human societies seem to formulate ideas of the 'other' in order to define and legitimate their own social boundaries and individual identities" ⁴, in the western art world anything outside the view of the white straight cisgendered man is still considered 'other'. When artists in position of 'other' took up the surrealist movement something magical happened. They held up a mirror looking at how they were perceived and began to paint an identity beyond 'other'. The surrealist self-portrait became self-expression of something we had not seen before. The 'other' perfected the art of self-estrangement. José Medina describes the importance of self-estrangement, "Looking at ourselves with fresh eyes affords us opportunities to interrogate what we find in the most intimate corners of our perspective, and to recognize its limitations and the possibilities of correction and improvement"⁵. The fathers of surrealism were unable to perfect self-estrangement because they represent the surveyor. The 'other' being the surveyed. Surrealism gave them the opportunity to look for a new identity out of those constraints. It gave them a style to express their inner dialogue.

⁴ Hiller, S. (1991). *The myth of primitivism : perspectives on art*. London ; New York: Routledge.

⁵ José Medina (2013). *The epistemology of resistance : gender and racial oppression, epistemic injustice, and resistant imaginations*. New York: Oxford University Press.



Figure 2 *Rose sélavy* (Marcel Duchamp) photographed by Man Ray, (1920)

Though I am not implying all who possess the surveyor's gaze cannot practice self-estrangement. Rather that it is simply more difficult. As 'other' we are forced to mold under the surveyor in order to gain acceptance in a society that marked us as such. Dadaism and Surrealism created a normalized gender playground where a man could question gender and sex. A great example of this in the surrealist movement is Marcel Duchamp, an interesting exception to the sexist surrealist boys' club. Marcel Duchamp's creation of a female alter ego 'Rose Sélavy' (a play on the French phrase "Eros c'est la vie") was an act of self-estrangement. Duchamp's essay 'Men Before the Mirror' (1934) is a conversation between these two identities. Sélavy argues the mirror "imprisons" men, leaves them "absorbed separated from reality". She hints at a narcissism in men, a God complex that prevents them from the intricacies of human nature. I believe Duchamp's creation of Sélavy was used to cross the mirror, an attempt to become the surveyed. We cannot assume that Duchamp was transgender or queer. As far as we know he did not fall under the

category of 'other'. Duchamp shows us that this poses no threat to heteronormative masculinity. It was simply a gender he put on and chose to take off. Sélavey is more relevant today than ever as more conversations arise around gender as a construct.

The mirror for women was used as a tool for male artists to depict a female's self-obsession with appeasing the male gaze, "you put the mirror in her hand and you called the painting *vanity*"⁶. Surrealism allowed women to turn that mirror on to the men that placed it there. They could live behind the frame and choose what part of them to be seen in the mirror realm. "Surrealism became the first modernist movement in which a group of women could explore female subjectivity and give form, (however tentatively), to a feminine imagery"⁷. Because of the art style, women could strive to understand their own subconscious thoughts and play with the confines of gender that originally restricted them. The surrealist self-portrait became dominated by female artists. The inner dialogue of a woman's mind was finally being seen in the art world, she had a voice and gaze of her own. More importantly she could create a space for autonomy. As much as Leonor Fini and Frida Kahlo rejected the association with Surrealism, they exhibited alongside its members, adopting their influence. The stylistic influence allowed them to break free from female traditional painting and build on the female gaze. Fini took the vilification of the female body and turned it on its head. Her paintings are full of strong, sexually charged women. She focuses on the women that men deemed

⁶ Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. Edmonton, Alta.: The Schools.

⁷ Chadwick, W., Ades, D. and Al, E. (1998). *Mirror images : women, surrealism, and self-representation*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Mit Press.

evil due to their sexual promiscuity, drawing from folklore and fairy tales. She includes nude wild women. My favourite painting of hers 'Donna del le bout du monde II', half of a woman's body pokes above water. Surrounded by skulls she lives at sea free from society. Her reflection casting a ghostly look in the water, but she doesn't admire herself, the woman doesn't seem interested in how she's perceived. Her breasts are exposed but there is nothing about the painting that suggests the erotic. I adore Fini because she creates space free from the surveyor. Frida Kahlo pushes this concept further in her painting "Henry Ford Hospital" where she paints herself nude on a bloody hospital bed. Kahlo's veins attach to the various objects and symbols for the conflicts she faces in miscarriage. She expresses desires and weights of carrying a female body, her form is vulnerable and holds emotional space for the female experience. Both Kahlo and Fini lived openly as bisexual women. As a bisexual woman myself, having a world in art where I can play with sexual desire without the prying eyes of the fetishizing male gaze is so important. Surrealist influence allowed women to express sexual desire without nudity because of its metaphorical visual language. That's why it was so popular among queer artists. It was not openly queer sex; it was a subtle wink that could speak to the 'other' while still maintaining the respect of a heteronormative status in society.



Figure 3 'Donna del le bout du monde II' painting by Leonor Fini (1953)



Figure 4 'Henry Ford Hospital' painting by Frida Kahlo (1932)

As much as society has erased their history, there was a queer community fighting for a more complex understanding of gender in the streets of 1920's Paris. It was not until the 1970's that we discovered the surrealist movement intertwined with exploring these concepts through artists like Claude Cahun. Cahun lived openly as a gender nonconforming person alongside their lifelong partner Suzanne Malherbe. Cahun was one of the few queer female representations in the Surrealist circle, despite Breton's distaste for Cahun's appearance. In 1930, Cahun published 'Aveux non Avenus' in which they write "Individualism? Narcissism? Of course, it is my strongest tendency, the only intentional consistency I am capable of ... besides I am lying; I scatter myself too much for that"⁸. Cahun is unable to confine themselves to self-obsession because the singular self does not exist. Cahun visualized the art of self-estrangement through self-portraits. They themselves are a blank canvas that constantly paints and peels different genders and identities. Cahun's androgynous appearance allows them to blend in and out surveyor and surveyed. Cahun's pictures do not seduce, they only perform the concept of seduction. They show gender separated from sex as an exaggerated costume. Cahun was revolutionary for 1920's Europe. Cahun leaned so heavily into 'other', it allowed them to create their own world where the surveyor becomes the 'other'. I believe Cahun mastered the use of Surrealism to create nuanced views on gender and sex.

Today, we see the influences of the surrealist movement on art dealing with the complexities of gender. The surrealist self-portrait has grown in popularity. The style was mimicked in artists like Cindy Sherman and Francesca woodman in the 1970's

⁸ Cahun, C., Francois Leperlier and Pierrer Mac Orlan (2011). *Aveux non avenues*. Paris: Mille Et Une Nuits.

during the uncovering of Cahun's work. We can still see elements in rising artists today such as Sasha Gordon who uses the style to deal with the complex queer Asian female experience. Extracting the rage of the restrictive homophobia, racism and sexism that rests internally she shatters the mirror self, and places it's shards of different identities onto the canvas. She shows us an inner monologue we haven't seen in such blatant visuals. The construction of a surreal image allows her to voice a feeling that cannot be so easily expressed in logical realism. This beauty we learnt through the Surrealist movement created space for the subconscious thoughts to be examined. A safe space for the practice of self-estrangement. One that can better progress our understanding of each other and in turn better society.



Figure 5 'Almost A Very Rare Thing' painting by Sasha Gordon (2022)

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