

Review of “Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire”

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Fig. 1. Installation Photograph, “Liquid Desire,” National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2009

The art of Salvador Dalí was first seen in Australia in 1939 when the “Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art” toured Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. It is perhaps unsurprising that the substantial media attention the show

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generated centered on Dalí and the allegedly scandalous sexual theme of his lone work in the show: *Memory of the Child Woman* (1932). At one point the exhibition's sponsor, Keith Murdoch (father of Rupert), even ordered the painting's removal only to have it quickly restored following a public campaign of support for the artist unprecedented in the deeply conservative social climate of 1930s Australia.¹ Yet despite the Australian public's longheld interest in Dalí, and the dramatic effect the brief appearance of this painting had on the course of Australian modernism, "Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire" at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne was the first significant exhibition of his work to be staged in this country.

Whereas Dalí retrospectives have historically tended to focus on particular aspects of his oeuvre ("Dalí & Film" and "Dalí: Mass Culture" being just the most recent examples), "Liquid Desire" adopted a wide-ranging approach that featured over 200 works spanning his entire career. In this respect it bore a number of similarities to Dawn Ades' "Dalí: The Centenary Retrospective," with which it shared not only a broad chronological structure but an interesting if somewhat over-determined attempt to recuperate his frequently maligned post-surrealist practice.² "Liquid Desire" departed significantly from the centenary show however with its cross-media emphasis. Whereas Ades had focused predominantly on painting, "Liquid Desire" incorporated a much broader and more balanced range of media, including film, jewelry, ballet design, drawing and even television commercials. This approach was welcome for several reasons. Firstly, it provided a well-balanced if belated Australian introduction to the artist. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it emphasized the very diversity of Dalí's practice, along with those contradictions and occasionally surprising consistencies that are so fundamental to it, but that tend to be effaced by exhibitions focused on discreet moments or media.³ However while this very broad retrospective structure was the exhibition's greatest strength it was also, somewhat paradoxically, its most obvious weakness.

It was a weakness because the show was constructed from essentially just two collections: the Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí in Figueres and the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. While attempting a major retrospective within such limitations may initially seem a baffling decision, "Liquid Desire" can only be properly understood within its specific institutional and political context—a context thankfully very different to 1939, but not without its restrictions. The exhibition was the sixth installment in the Melbourne Winter Masterpieces program, a Government arts funding initiative that has three main aims: bringing major art exhibitions to Melbourne; using these as a key component of the Government's winter tourism campaign; and to "achieve high levels of positive media coverage about Melbourne."⁴ In place since 2004, the program features exhibitions of very famous

artists or art movements that have been imported from one or two equally famous collections with the imprimatur of which they are prominently branded. Previous installments have included “Impressionists: Masterpieces from the Musée d'Orsay,” “Guggenheim Collection: 1940s to Now,” “Pixar: 20 years of Animation,” and “Art Deco: 1910-1939” from the V&A. The program thus delivers extremely popular blockbuster exhibitions unfettered by many of the costs normally incurred when producing such shows. While the benefits of the program are undeniable, so too are its restrictive and conditional terms. Such are the slings and arrows of the Australian cultural sector.

To return to “Liquid Desire,” the shortcomings of this model manifest most glaringly in the fact that while Figueres and St. Petersburg are the only collections from which such a retrospective could conceivably be mounted, they are not home to many of Dalí's most iconic paintings. Just a short roll call of major works thus absented from “Liquid Desire” includes *The Lugubrious Game* (private collection, Paris), *The Persistence of Memory* (MoMA), *The Great Masturbator* (the Reina Sofia, Madrid), *Enigma of Desire* (Munich Pinakothek der Moderne), *Autumnal Cannibalism* and *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (both Tate). While this no doubt disappointed many who flocked to see the show, the problem was at least partially alleviated from an art historical perspective by some clever and nuanced curatorial decisions that provided a refreshing look at Dalí's mid-, if not his late-career, in particular.

“Liquid Desire” opened with a series of paintings from the artist's early years. These rooms underscored the protean efforts of the young Dalí, who made his way prodigiously through Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism and Purism virtually all before he was twenty, and Picasso for some years afterwards. The main interest in this section lay not, however, in watching his youthful experimentation but in the realization of just how early Dalí's self-mythologizing tendencies had manifest. In *Self-Portrait with a Raphaellesque Neck* (1921) facial hair was already deployed as a sign of otherness, while in the very strange *The Sick Child, Self-Portrait in Cadaques* of the same year the histrionics were upped a notch as he depicted himself afflicted with a fictional disease with symptoms including a deathly pallor and clawed hands. These works were striking also for the absence of the absurdist humor with which Dalí would later temper his more outlandish and perverse self-fashioning.

After a brief detour through his student years in Madrid and friendship with Luis Buñuel—*Un Chien Andalou* was screened in a partitioned room—the focus shifted to Paris and Surrealism. Again, the absence of a major *putrefacto* painting such as *Little Ashes* or *Unsatisfied Desires* was problematic as it obscured the precise nature of the transition from Dalí's earlier “haunted” realism to his signature style of Surrealism. This was ameliorated to some degree by the inclusion of the small and

extraordinary oil painting, with sand on board, *Surrealist Composition* (1928), predating his participation with Breton *et al* and thus a calling card of sorts. Characterized by an uncharacteristic iconographic restraint, it features a fetus-like lump of flesh sprouting tiny hairs and lurking in a bleak, spatially unreadable landscape without horizon. While similar figures and compositions feature in other contemporary and later works, the claustrophobic restraint of this particular painting situates Dalí closer than expected to both Joan Miró and André Masson while foreshadowing what might have been had he succumbed to the overtures of Bataille rather than Breton. Indeed this work would provide an interesting case study—as opposed to the more predictable *The Lugubrious Game*—for reconsidering Dalí's relationship with the former.

As already indicated, the section on Dalí's Surrealism was necessarily uneven. The absence of the most iconic paintings was an unavoidable problem treated as an opportunity to show a combination of strong if less famous works—such as *Three Young Surrealist Women Holding in Their Arms the Skins of an Orchestra*, 1936—alongside some excellent, virtually unknown works such as *Suez* (1932). In the latter, the international neutral zone is rendered as an eerily empty and dried-up dead-end, populated only by a painted tourist view of the pyramids dumped in a pail of water, thereby providing a subtle and unexpected reflection upon the intersection of European politics, imperialism, trade and tourism in the early 1930s. The standout works in this section were, however, the stunning illustrations for Skira's 1934 edition of the Comte de Lautréamont's *Les Chants des Maldoror*. The pared back but palpably abject horror of these intaglio prints prefigured the compositions of many of the paranoid-critical paintings hanging nearby, but without the descent into the kitsch that increasingly threatened the later works.

This section concluded with a jarring juxtaposition that served as a reminder of how difficult it ultimately became for the Surrealists to discern the marvelous in the everyday from the mendacity of spectacle. Here the *Surrealist Object Functioning Symbolically* (1936) stood on a plinth in front of a wall onto which a series of beautiful color photographs of the *Dream of Venus* pavilion from the 1939 New York World's Fair were projected. While regarding the latter an elderly woman standing next to me remarked loudly upon the similarities between Dalí and Michael Jackson, whose death two days earlier had prompted a media storm of which the former would surely have been envious. However flippant the comparison may have been, it gestured succinctly towards the remarkable shift from the still disquietingly savage eroticism of the earlier work to the oddly prim, pantomime spectacle of the Pavilion, within which desire, once liquid, had instead been liquidated.

The next major section was dedicated to Dalí's time in America. Again, the

paintings were upstaged by draftsmanship, and particularly by a spectacular room of drawings after Renaissance masters hung dramatically against circular walls lined with black felt and enclosing a central vase of flowers over two meters tall. This was followed by a large gallery seemingly seeking to express the diversity of Dalí's design practice—film sets, fashion, magazine covers, ash trays and ballet—by literally arranging it all in close proximity. The over-crowded atmosphere was compounded by the theme to *Destino* that leaked out of a curtained screening room like elevator music, only more annoying. Nonetheless, while the well-known reiteration and disarming of *Un Chien Andalou's* infamous opening in *Spellbound* was featured here, it was cleverly juxtaposed with rare footage of a 1944 New York performance of the ballet *Tristan Fou: Espectacle Paranoïaque*, in which Dalí adapted and expanded the paranoic-criticism Hollywood had thwarted with his set, costumes and libretto. Visitors were then directed down a narrow red-velvet tunnel where inset cases housed jewelery designed by Dalí, through a small room with a bank of televisions that replayed his numerous on-air appearances and commercials, and out into a Lewis Carroll-esque gallery of pastel-colored, pin-striped walls. The Alice-in-Wonderland aesthetic of this final section was an interesting choice on behalf of the exhibition designers, given that the actual context for these works was Franco's Spain, itself an all-too-real nightmare of unreason. If at this point I am emphasizing the installation it is because it really was quite remarkable, but also because I find it difficult to say very much about the art in this last gallery, with its perplexing combination of nuclear mysticism, Catholicism and elaborate optical illusion. Here a holographic portrait of Alice Cooper stood alongside a stereoscopic painting of Gala's foot and *Nieuw Amsterdam* (1974), the bust of American Indian political revolutionary White Eagle transformed, paranoid-critical style, into a Dutch still-life with Coca-Cola. The excesses and indulgences of this final section climaxed with the monumentally ghastly yet oddly mesmerising *The Ecumencial Council* (1960).

Needless to say, the recuperation of Dalí's post-war career *tout court* proposed here and at the centenary seems pre-emptive. More problematic however was some of the historical obfuscation with which this recuperation was shored up in both wall texts and catalogue entries. Dalí's engagements with the mass media, for example, were situated as proto-Warholian, an argument rehearsed before but which remains to be properly qualified.⁵ *Perhaps* this case could be made in regard to certain works, however to claim that Dalí “in many ways opened the door for Warhol's artistic celebration of consumerism” only secures the reputation of the former by simplifying that of the latter and thus does nothing for either.⁶ A similar logic was applied to Dalí's relationship with Spanish fascism, that perpetual elephant in the museum that to the curators credit was clearly acknowledged here. Yet while

attempts to underscore the complexity of Dalí's politics were welcome—indeed, it's an important subject—to claim that “the hectoring tone of André Breton, who insisted throughout the 1930s that Surrealists join the Communist Party, could only dispose the young Dalí to an opposing cause” not only caricatures Surrealism's negotiation of the complex political terrain of inter-war France, but threatens to reduce Dalí's fascist sympathies to the status of mere teenage impertinence.⁷ The question of Dalí's postwar politics was unfortunately not raised at any point.

Ultimately “Liquid Desire” was a welcome opportunity to view Dalí in all his contradictions. It was thus also a timely opportunity to recall George Orwell's famous rejoinder to the art world in his essay “Benefit of Clergy.” While Orwell's now infamous moral condemnation of Dalí was as hysterical as it was self-revealing—indeed, his apparent equation of homosexuality with necrophilia tells us far more about the critic than the entire article conveys about the artist—his general thesis nonetheless retains relevance. With audiences and critics “too frightened either of seeming to be shocked or of seeming not to be shocked,” Orwell noted, the more important question of how Dalí and his art may be a symptom of his socio-political context has been ignored. “The important thing,” Orwell remonstrated, “is not to denounce him as a cad who ought to be horsewhipped, or to defend him as a genius who ought not to be questioned, but to find out *why* he exhibits that particular set of aberrations.”⁸ However different our own definitions of aberration may be, this is a valid question that remains to be fully answered. And for anyone inclined to try, “Liquid Desire” and its catalogue would be an excellent place to begin.

1 The definitive account of this exhibition is Eileen Channen and Steven Miller, *Degenerates and Perverts: The 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2005). Some interesting documentary material of this show was included in the exhibition and catalogue under discussion.

2 Ted Gott, Monste Aguer Texidor, Joan Kropf, Laurie Benson & Sophie Mathiesson, “Introduction,” in Ted Gott, ed., *Salvador Dalí: Liquid Desire* (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 2009), 22. See also Dawn Ades, *Dalí: The Centenary Retrospective* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 17.

3 For a discussion of “Dalí + Film” that raises some related issues, see Frédérique Joseph-Lowery, “Dalí and the Specter of Cinema,” *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (22 January 2008).

4 Information about this program is available on the Victorian State Government website: http://www.arts.vic.gov.au/content/Public/About_Us/Major_Projects_and_Initiatives/Melbourne_Winter_Masterpieces.aspx, accessed 7/22/2009.

5 See, for example, Estrella da Diego, “‘To Be a Painter’ or ‘To Be Duchamp’? Dalí, Warhol and Autobiographical Conflict in a Media Society,” in Felix Fanes, ed., *Dalí: Mass Culture* (Barcelona: Fun-

dación la Caixa, 2004), 254-259.

6 Quoted from anonymously authored wall text.

7 Quoted from anonymously authored wall text. The key text on this is, of course, Robin Adèle Greeley's fascinating *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), especially Chapters 3 and 4. Dawn Ades has speculated evocatively if briefly on the intersection of Dalí's Catholicism and Spanish Fascism in Ades, 2004, 434.

8 George Orwell, "Benefit of Clergy: Some Notes on Salvador Dalí" (1944), in Sonia Orwell & Ian Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: Volume III, As I Please, 1943-1945* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), 161.