

*“The Colour of My Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art”
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“The Colour of My Dreams,” the exhibition of surrealist art on display this summer at the Vancouver Art Gallery, was an extraordinary exhibition both for the quality of its loans and for the way the exhibition was conceived. Its guest curator, Dawn Ades, used the opportunity to rethink how an exhibition of surrealist art can be organized and displayed, and the results are both engaging and instructive. The exhibition included works by famous and unknown artists, which were clearly chosen for their intrinsic interest as objects and for the dialogue that was staged between them in the installation of the exhibition, rather than for their iconic status as famous images (though it should be said that several of the works, such as Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Child’s Brain*, Max Ernst’s *Pietà or Revolution by Night*, and Salvador Dalí’s *Gala and the Angelus of Millet Immediately Preceding the Arrival of the Conic Anamorphoses*, are quite well-known). The exhibition was organized thematically rather than chronologically, with sections focused on automatism, games, and the surrealist object, as well as on the use of space in surrealist imagery, the surrealist preoccupation with *eros*, and the surrealists’ interest in and relation to indigenous arts and beliefs, among other themes. “The Colour of My Dreams” was not so much a critique of Surrealism or of surrealist art as a productive look at what might be of value in surrealist approaches to image- and object-making for contemporary audiences. It was a kind of thinking through the exhibition about a subject that has occupied Ades now for some forty years.

While this would have been an extraordinary exhibition in any city, the section devoted to the relation between indigenous arts and Surrealism was the one with the most concrete links to the Northwest Coast location of the exhibition, given

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the Surrealists' interest in the masks, headdresses, rattles and other objects produced by First Nations peoples along or near the coast of British Columbia and Alaska. Three Surrealists (Kurt Seligmann, Wolfgang Paalen and Alice Rahon) came to British Columbia and/or Alaska on two different trips in the late 1930s, in fact, and the exhibition addressed this encounter through photographs, surrealist paintings, and masks and other carved objects by Tlingit, Kwakwaka'wakw and Yup'ik peoples, among others. A number of these pieces were formerly in the collections of Surrealists, including a Kwakwaka'wakw headdress that had been seized by Canadian government authorities during a potlatch ceremony in 1922, which was bought in 1965 by André Breton, and repatriated to the U'Mista Cultural Society in Alert Bay, B.C., by his daughter Aube in 2003. (The main room in which these works were found also included several of Wifredo Lam's paintings incorporating *Santería* motifs, painted during his stay in Cuba.)

In this particular room, as throughout the exhibition, there was a juxtaposition of different kinds of works (found objects, paintings, indigenous artworks, photographs, film) that wouldn't normally be brought together, as well as a great sensitivity to the way in which the works on display related to one another. This is an aspect of the installation of exhibitions of surrealist art by the Surrealists themselves that Ades has adopted and used fruitfully in other exhibitions, such as "Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and *Documents*," which she co-curated with Simon Baker for the Hayward Gallery in London in 2006. Here, as there, film projections were scattered throughout the exhibition, including American cartoons from the 1930s and slapstick comedy, as well as films made by Surrealists.

With a few exceptions, the works on display had the modest dimensions associated with modern art from the era in which they were made (mostly from the 1920s to the 1940s), rather than the outsized scale of so much art made since then; this has to do to some extent with the economics of the art market in an earlier era, which was largely private and which experienced a great deal of economic uncertainty. But more significantly, it concerns the mode of address of surrealist works, which is an intimate and personal one quite different from the public, even rhetorical address, of much contemporary art. (I am thinking particularly in this regard of the Ken Lum retrospective that was on view on the floor above this exhibition; it is difficult to imagine two more antithetical approaches to art.) The paradigm for this more intimate mode of address was the exceptional group of Cornell boxes and collages on display in a small room at the heart of the exhibition, which followed other rooms devoted to *cadavres exquis* and surrealist objects.

Although this was a large exhibition with 350 works (which is roughly half the number of works in the landmark 1936 exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada,

Surrealism” at the Museum of Modern Art), the way in which it was installed encouraged one to focus on the dialogue between works placed in close proximity. This paradigm of viewing was established in the very first room of the exhibition, where the Kwakwaka’wakw headdress mentioned earlier was juxtaposed with Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Child’s Brain*, 1914, and with Max Ernst’s *Pietà or Revolution by Night*, 1923, a work that was itself decisively informed by Chirico’s slightly earlier painting. To give just one more example of the kinds of relations that were put into play by Ades, a large untitled abstract painting by Salvador Dalí that dates from the late 1920s was placed next to *The King’s Jester*, a 1926 painting by Joan Miró, in order to bring out the iconoclastic attitudes implicit in each of these little-known but remarkable works. “The Colour of My Dreams” offered a powerful experience of art even to those who are unfamiliar with surrealist ideas, for it worked on both an affective and an intellectual level; one of the great strengths of the exhibition was that it enabled an understanding of the values and procedures behind the work by means of this kind of juxtaposition.

There were very few recent works in the exhibition, and those were usually made by artists associated with the movement’s early days, like René Magritte, Man Ray and Hans Bellmer (though there were also a handful of works made by artists involved with Surrealism from the 1950s on, such as those by Elisa Breton, Unica Zürn, Pierre Molinier and Jan Švankmajer). This tended to make of its subject a historical movement that spoke to us (insofar as it does speak to us) from the past, despite the fact that Surrealists have continued to write, make art and agitate right up to the present, in numerous groups throughout Europe and the Americas. This slight criticism aside, the success of what was accomplished by the Vancouver Art Gallery is of a very high order: this show is certainly on a par with other large-scale exhibitions of surrealist art that I have seen—such as the “Surrealism: Desire Unbound” exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2002, and “Undercover Surrealism” at the Hayward Gallery in 2006—both in the complexity and sophistication of its conception and installation, and in the quality of its loans. It was a landmark exhibition, and one that deserves recognition.