

*Conference Review: “SURREALISMS: the Inaugural Conference of the
International Society for the Study of Surrealism”
Bucknell University Humanities Center, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania
(November 1-3, 2018)*

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“Surrealisms: the Inaugural Conference of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism” was hosted by the Bucknell University Humanities Center in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, on November 1-3, 2018. Although Surrealism was established by André Breton in Paris in 1924, nearly a century ago, this movement has influenced art, philosophy, and literature—both in practice and in scholarship—to the present day. The International Society for the Study of Surrealism (ISSS) is a newly formed organization that considers contemporary scholarship on Surrealism and its influence on current developments in art and literature as a means to centralize and circulate information. It also seeks to understand how Surrealism will come to shape our understanding of the term, now and in the future. The ISSS aims to become a comprehensive cross-disciplinary meeting place for information and new scholarship in the field, and the “Surrealisms” conference marks the organization’s first official event.

The focus of this foundational conference was broad in scope. During a series of panels and roundtable discussions over a two-day period, it brought together many art historians, curators, artists and scholars within Surrealism Studies from all over the world, whose diverse topics provide new perspectives on the movement ranging from its onset in the 1920s to its global interpretations and legacies in current affairs and contemporary art. In addition to these forty-one panels, the conference organizers arranged events for each evening that involved food and drink, an art exhibition on campus, film screenings and poetry readings, as well as a grand-finale banquet with a performance and exhibition held at the Milton Art Bank. The conference officially kicked-off on Thursday evening with a reception at Bucknell’s historic art deco Campus Theatre, where participants enjoyed a poetry reading and a screening of short films in the surrealist mode, dating from the 1930s

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to more contemporary works.

Twenty panels and roundtable discussions took place on the Bucknell University campus on Friday. Panels focused on a wide range of topics, with speakers presenting studies on artists like Marcel Duchamp and his extensive oeuvre, and on Mina Loy's role in the trans-Atlantic spread of Surrealism to the United States. In addition to lectures on surrealist poetry by Paul Éluard and André Breton in the "Underlying Forms" panel, surrealist poetry from Australian, British, and New York School artists was discussed in the "Poetry and Experimental Practice" panel; contemporary American surrealist poetry was the topic of the "Anthologizing Surrealism: Postmodern American Poetry" panel. Other major themes were surrealist film and its lasting influence on cinema; anti-colonialism and surrealist output from around the world; the Surrealists as collectors (including my own presentation, "Postcolonial Perspectives on Surrealist Collecting and Display Methods and their Impact on Indigenous Objects in Present-Day Modern Art Collections in the United States" as part of "The Object of Objects" panel); and the veiled nature of surrealist periodicals in "The Transparency & Opacity of Surrealist Periodicals" panel—to name just a few.

Looking back at the *JSA* as an innovative online journal in its field, "The *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 10 Years On" roundtable was one of the day's highlights and offered a particularly poignant conversation about the future of Surrealism scholarship and its continuing association with the Americas, which likewise concerned the conference's more general interest in postcolonial and anti-colonial themes within global Surrealism. During the discussion, a panel of *JSA* editors and contributors reminisced about the journal's progression over the past decade, from its beginnings at the "Surrealism and the American West" conference at Arizona State University in 2006, to the development of its online platform that exists today. Panel members Samantha Kavky, Katharine Conley, Michele Greet and Susan Aberth also spearheaded a dialogue with the audience as a sounding board for possible new directions for the *JSA*, in both its content and its online format (including accessibility and visibility), as it continues to publish new issues.

Another highlight from Friday was Kate Conley's lecture, "Kay Sage Alive in the World," during the "Bestiaries" panel. Conley's captivating study explores the four books of poetry published by Kay Sage after the death of her husband Yves Tanguy in 1955, and before her own suicide in 1963. She connects the animals in Sage's poems—and the bird in particular—to earlier totemic animals taken up by Breton, Ernst and other Surrealists. Conley furthermore claims Sage self-identified with the bird and revealed how the artist used animals in her poems, along with her dark humor, to symbolize and express her inner self in a more humanizing way than did her paintings. Also speaking on this panel was Catriona McAra, whose study, "Towards a Feminist Marvelous: Channeling Carrington Through the Animal Languages of Heidi Sopinka," considers Sopinka's recent novel, *The Dictionary of*

Animal Languages, as part of the contemporary legacy of Carrington's life and work. Moreover, McAra relates Sopinka's novel to a recent trend in feminist studies on Carrington, in what she calls a "feminist marvelous."

In one of the day's final panels, "Modes of Exhibition," curators presented three very different approaches to exhibiting surrealist material. Oliver Tostmann (Wadsworth Atheneum) and Oliver Shell (Baltimore Museum of Art) began with a walk-through of the exhibition "Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s," currently on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum and subsequently at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Next, Constance Krebs, online curator and webmaster for the Association Atelier André Breton website, explained the various features of the site as a treasure trove for pictorial archival material on Breton's private collection. Jesse Sentivan, editor of the Kay Sage Catalogue Raisonné and curator of the recent exhibition "Kay Sage: Serene Surrealist" discussed the process of organizing an installation that recreated a 1950 exhibition of the artist's work. After panels concluded for the day, the evening closed with a buffet dinner at Bucknell's Samek Art Museum, which included a surrealist art exhibition drawn from its collections and a surrealist poetry reading by conference attendees.

Building on the previous day, Saturday's agenda entailed another full day of speakers on twenty-one different panels that covered diverse topics on Surrealism and its influence across cultural and geographic borders, as well as its ongoing legacy. "Under the Influence: Surrealism After Surrealism" was one of the morning's first panels, and speakers offered case studies of Surrealism's lasting effect on contemporary art through its ability to constantly redefine itself, making it continually relevant in the present. Panels also covered topics like the political and cultural implications of Wifredo Lam's work, particularly in relation to his role in Surrealism in the Caribbean. The "African-American Presence in Surrealism: Ted Joans & Jayne Cortez" panel explored Surrealism's influence on the art and poetry of African-American artists in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. Several speakers focused on the Surrealists' interest in the spiritual and mythology, as seen in works by Kurt Seligmann, César Moro and Valentine Penrose that were discussed during the "Mirror of Myth" panel. Furthermore, the panel "L'Amours Folles"—in the spirit of his iconic text *L'Amour fou*—presented studies on André Breton and his relationships, as well as concerning Surrealism's collaborative nature—concluded with Mary Ann Caws' captivating lecture, "J'ai été sous une multitude de formes": Jacqueline Lamba, Aube Breton Elléouët, Yves Elléouët."

Photography and film were also central themes throughout the day. In the "Death Masks" panel, speakers discussed the power of film and photography to undermine conventional perceptions of what constitutes an object; for example, in his lecture "The Camera and Other Creatures: Luis Buñuel and the Obliteration of the Self," James Lastra examined Buñuel's use of film and the camera's

nondiscriminatory nature toward animate and inanimate objects as a means to destabilize classical hierarchies that relate to the self, such as that of life and death. Moreover, in her presentation “Framing Death: Mirrors, Masks, and the Objectness of Man Ray’s Photographic Portraits,” Keri Mongelluzzo looked at Man Ray’s play on touch and reflection in the composition of his photographs with masks, which are shown among figures in physical contact with mirrors. Mongelluzzo claims that Man Ray uses the reflective nature of mirrors to symbolize the tangible quality of the photograph itself, and therefore finds the photograph to be as much an object as the mask within the image. The panel “Photography and Self-Fashioning,” featured Michael Taylor’s study, “Percy Rainford: Surrealism’s Invisible Photographer,” which called attention to the often overlooked work by the Jamaican-born, American photographer who worked with Marcel Duchamp on *View* and on *Le Surréalisme*, and with Frederick Kiesler on the photography for Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery, and whose work came to embody collage and other surrealist techniques during the 1940s and 1950s.

In part one of two, the “Contemporary Legacies of Surrealism” panel allowed artists and scholars to focus on recent art and its interactions with Surrealism; for example, British artist Dominic Shepherd, in his lecture, “The Haunted Isle: Conjuring England’s Subconscious Landscape,” explained how his own art pulls from surrealist ideas and methods concerning myth, place, and the exploration of diverse landscapes. Patricia Allmer’s lecture, “Image and Historical Trauma in Bady Minck’s *Im Anfang War Der*,” considered Luxembourgian director Bady Minck’s 2003 surrealist film, and demonstrated how Minck’s use of repetition and animation with images of Austria’s history of landscape postcards allude to historical trauma, particularly in relation to Austria’s connection with the Holocaust. Also dealing with war and trauma, Samantha Kavky’s presentation “Surrealism, War and Camouflage” during the “Traumatic Images” panel looked at how Surrealists subversively used methods of mimesis and camouflage in relation to World War I and World War II.

Saturday’s lectures came to a close with a powerful panel on Leonora Carrington. In their presentation, “Cauldrons and Curanderas: The Magical Collaborations of Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington,” Susan Aberth (Bard College) and independent curator Tere Arcq discussed the feminist implications resulting from the close friendship of the two women artists in Mexico City in the 1940s. Based on their upcoming book and exhibition on the topic, Aberth and Arcq explored the dynamic collaboration between the two artists and how they used female-based mystical philosophies from worldly cultures to undermine misogynistic conventions. They also described their own contemporary female collaboration throughout the project’s development.

The conference ended with a bang on the final evening when conference participants were treated to a surprise performance by the artist Narcissister and

a banquet dinner at the Milton Art Bank, where the “Surrealism” exhibition was on view. Overall “Surrealisms” was a success and marked a strong first event for the newly formed ISSS. The conference was a true cross-disciplinary exchange of information and ideas, and it stayed true to the organization’s overall mission—to bring together new directions in art and scholarship on Surrealism and its contemporary legacies. Panels covered a broad scope of topics with unique perspectives by speakers from different countries and fields within Surrealism. The only downside was the difficulty in deciding which panels to attend given the number of options offered for each session. In the end, I left looking forward to what new aspects of Surrealism will be presented (and what unexpected events will be planned) at next year’s ISSS conference at the University of Exeter.