

Exhibition Review: “*Photography and the Surreal Imagination*”

*The Menil Collection, February 5 - June 14, 2020*

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“Photography and the Surreal Imagination,” currently on view at the Menil Collection, brings together over sixty photo-based works in Houston collections to delve into the psychic space between photography’s truth and its fiction. While centered on the historical Surrealists’ use of photography, a third of the works in the exhibition are much more recent, in an installation that thoughtfully intermingles surrealist practice with more contemporary efforts. Curator Natalie Dupêcher deftly demonstrates that the Surrealists’ conception of the world is part of a transhistorical understanding of the peculiarity of daily life, just as unsettling as it ever was.

Founded in 1924 as a literary movement with revolutionary aims, Surrealism quickly spread into the visual field. The medium of photography, with its premise of registering the real, became one of the most effective tools for disrupting the assumed logic of the everyday. Susan Sontag, theorizing the medium’s particular position in visual culture in the 1970s, recognized that “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision.”<sup>1</sup> Even, and perhaps especially, without manipulation, a photograph—ripped from the connective tissue of lived experience—can stand as evidence of a discomfiting worldview (as so many news and social media images continue to demonstrate).

Entering the exhibition, visitors are first greeted by Max Ernst’s large and well-known photomontage *Health through Sport* (c. 1920, Fig. 1). It seems particularly apt as a signpost for the exhibition. Ernst’s figure’s insect-like face covering serves as a proxy for mask-wearing in the age of “the new normal.” (One wonders what

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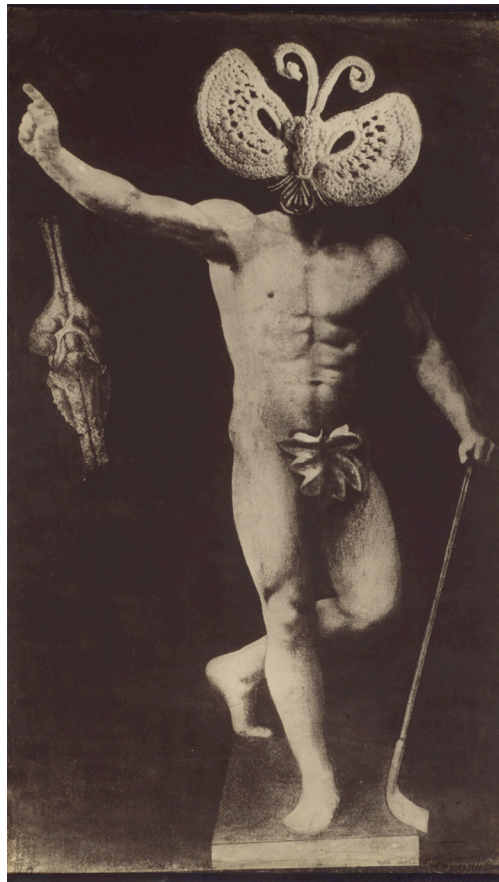


Fig. 1 Max Ernst, *Health through Sport*, c. 1920 Photographic enlargement of a photomontage mounted on wood 39 3/8 x 23 5/8 inches (100 x 60 cm) Digital Image, courtesy The Menil Collection © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

the Surrealists would have made of this now pervasive phrase). The half life-sized figure embodies numerous contradictions—it both resembles a classical statue, but also a monstrous creature. The body is at once a physical ideal of masculinity, but when adorned with the feminine crocheted butterfly mask becomes delicate and dehumanized. Perhaps most subtly, in the place of a medal or symbol of accomplishment, the figure brandishes a cross-section of an alligator brain. Sport implies a form of universal citizenship through physical interaction; Ernst's alien plays with the possibilities and limitations of that social contract.

Similarly, newly acquired photographs by Allison Janae Hamilton, *Scratching at the wrong side of firmament* (2015) and *Brecencia and Pheasant III* (2018), both from the series *Sweet milk in the badlands*, also speak to shifting and unknowable identities (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3). Her images of isolated figures (who are also masked or hide their faces) against a backdrop of Southern landscapes are as beautiful as they



Fig. 2. Allison Janae Hamilton, *Scratching at the wrong side of firmament*, 2015, Archival pigment print 24 x 36 inches (61 x 91.4 cm) Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen © Allison Janae Hamilton



Fig.3 Allison Janae Hamilton, *Brecencia and Pheasant III*, 2018, Archival pigment print, 24 × 36 inches (61 × 91.4 cm), Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen © Allison Janae Hamilton





Fig.4 Paul Hester, Installation image, “Photography and the Surreal Imagination,” Digital Image, courtesy The Menil Collection, 2020

are foreboding. Hamilton cultivates a sense of the uncanny through the body’s unresolved relationship to the landscape, suggesting the racial injustice upon which the infrastructure of the South was formed, and continues to ferment.

Dupêcher’s inclusion of several women not part of the official Surrealist movement—including Diane Arbus, Jay DeFeo, K8 Hardy, Hamilton, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, Susan Weil and Francesca Woodman—highlights how important Surrealism’s legacy is to advancing the politics of gender. While the Surrealists explicitly wanted to overthrow the norms of capitalism, this endeavor goes hand in hand with exposing gender and racial inequality. Integrating the viewpoints of queer artists and women of color into the Surrealist world view makes sense, even if the Surrealists themselves couldn’t quite manage it.

“Photography and the Surreal Imagination” opened a few weeks before the nation’s shutdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Menil Collection remains closed, but is planning a phased re-opening for later this year. It is testament to the Surrealists’ wide-ranging vision that so many of the photographs map readily onto our current situation—the emptied streets of Henri Cartier-Bresson and André Kertesz; the isolation of modern living as pictured in Man Ray, Lee Miller, Sherman, Dorothea Tanning, and Arthur Tress; Hans Bellmer’s broken bodies and

Rauschenberg and Weil's moving cyanotypes of raised hands and flattened figures (Fig. 4). John and Dominique de Menil, who formed the Menil Collection, have a commendable history of supporting activism and racial equality in Houston. At this moment, when the world seems just about as surreal as it ever has been, it is a comfort to know that images can portray a world we recognize, while offering a way for imagining things otherwise.

1 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 49.