

## "Sluice Gates of the Mind" at Leeds Central Gallery

# Groundbreaking exhibit on British Surrealism

Stuart Nolan  
12 May 1998

The recent exhibition, "Sluice Gates of the Mind", organised by Andrew Wilson, deals with two relatively unknown figures of British Surrealism, poet and artist Ruben Mednikoff and psychiatrist and untrained painter Grace Pailthorpe, and the intense relationship between them.

The catalogue explains that the purpose of the exhibition is to "explore Mednikoff and Pailthorpe's complex relationship with Surrealism. Far from inhabiting the margins where they've often been placed, they played a pivotal role, thereby shedding new light on the history of British Surrealism; and the nature of their highly-charged psychoanalytic analysis - the scientific programme that was at the centre of their artistic project."

This is the second of two groundbreaking exhibitions held at the Leeds Central Art Gallery, which has a policy of promoting neglected periods in British art. The first exhibition, "The Angels of Anarchy, Surrealist art in 1930s Britain," held in 1988, included paintings by Pailthorpe and Mednikoff, as well as works by Roland Penrose, Conroy Maddox and Aileen Agar. It was the first significant examination of the origins and development of Surrealism in Britain and sought to make comprehensible its influences and leading figures.

The recent exhibition contained a wide selection of paintings by Pailthorpe and Mednikoff, water-colours and 'automatic' drawings produced between 1935-40. During the exhibition a seminar was held, which attempted to explain the interpretations Pailthorpe and Mednikoff made of their paintings and the content of Pailthorpe's scientific research into the unconscious.

The exhibition contained many deeply affecting images. Mednikoff, in particular, created his own artistic language. "The Orgiastic melody," "September 1937," "The Flying Pig" and "January 3, 1938, 11 am - January 4, 1938, 6 pm" depict strange organic machines that are living creatures yet merge in a seamless manner with cups, tables, bicycles, push chairs and everyday objects. In such images he captures the movement of forms in and out of one another.

In these paintings Mednikoff depicts children tied to, playing with, or emerging from these forms. He creates a sense of innocence caught unawares; unable to escape and not realising the danger it may be in. Was this an expression in artistic form of the barbarism threatening the innocents in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, when the threat of fascism was hanging over Europe?

In one of his most poetic and disturbing images, "December 31, 1937, 8.00 pm." Mednikoff inspires conflicting emotions - a desire to turn away from something in repulsion, while being drawn closer to it in order to understand its essential nature. The painting depicts a half-formed human, suspended strangely in the air, with three outstretched limbs. Each has contact with an undefined female form, pushing into, as well as suspending itself on her body.

Many of Mednikoff's paintings are populated by such images.

Pailthorpe's pictures do not arouse the same feeling. They seem inhibited and a creative tension is lacking. Yet there is no doubt that their joint project, between 1935-40, represents a unique chapter in the history of Surrealism in Britain.

Grace Pailthorpe was an extraordinary woman. She was a surgeon during the First World War, but rejected surgery in favour of psycho-medicine. She dealt with victims of the war through psychoanalysis, seeking to uncover its therapeutic value.

Pailthorpe pioneered certain advances in the treatment of prisoners, such as sentences without prison terms for juvenile offenders in the 1920s. She came to believe that human liberation was bound up with the development of complete freedom of expression. To examine this conception through artistic creation, she developed an intense professional and personal relationship with Mednikoff.

Ruben Mednikoff's parents were Russian Jewish immigrants. He presented his early childhood as a rebellion against orthodox religion. He was severely beaten by the local rabbi because he would not pray. As Pailthorpe explained, many of his motifs spring from his childhood experiences.

Mednikoff had written Surrealist poetry, and exhibited two paintings at the Keene Gallery in 1933, entitled "Cactus" and "Conscious to the sub-conscious." They were inspired by the early Surrealist conceptions developed by André Breton, of automatic writing and investigating dream states.

Mednikoff was a friend of Surrealist poet David Gascoyne. They, along with Dylan Thomas, had poems published in a magazine called *The Poets' Corner*, edited by Victor Neuberg, a friend and professional colleague of Pailthorpe.

In early 1935, Mednikoff and Pailthorpe met at a party given by Neuberg, who, along with Pailthorpe, had been on the founding committee for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency. It was her studies that provided the impetus for establishing this committee. They struck up an immediate friendship and began to discuss mutually-held conceptions on the scientific and artistic exploration of the unconscious mind.

They decided to embark on a project that would see them become significant figures in the early period of Surrealism in Britain, giving lectures on their ideas and work to some of the most prominent modern artists. Pailthorpe explained that from the very beginning their work ran "parallel" to that of the Surrealists. They had the same aims, she maintained, but achieved them by a different route.

She believed that the liberation of man lay through the mental transformation of the individual. While this goal was essential also to the Surrealists, Breton, by the mid-1930s, saw liberation as a social act to be achieved through socialist revolution.

Pailthorpe and Mednikoff were engaged in a scientific and aesthetic

journey. From the psychoanalytical standpoint, they were to use painting to create a rapid entry into the unconscious. Pailthorpe explained that, "I felt there must be somewhere a quicker way to the deeper layers of the unconscious than by the long-drawn out couch method."

"When in psychoanalysis some of the pent-up energies of repression were released, there would seem to be a natural turning towards some expression of the self through art... The art development helped on the analysis, the analysis helped on the art. The two, functioning together, produced greater art, greater knowledge in the science of the mind."

These conceptions were not peculiar to Pailthorpe. Many of the early experiments of the Surrealists consisted of attempts to unleash the unconscious from conscious control.

Mednikoff's earlier work lacks direction and little of it has survived because of his own unhappiness with it. His collaboration with Pailthorpe and growing contact with the Surrealist movement over the next three years had a very noticeable effect on his confidence in his own imagery and style. Between 1935-40 he produced a substantial series of oil paintings that are highly original.

## How Surrealism Came to Britain

Mednikoff was involved in the first stirrings of Surrealism in England with his friend and fellow Surrealist poet David Gascoyne. During the early 1930s Gascoyne had lived in Paris, where he met many of the leading figures of the movement.

He was the author of the first English Surrealist Manifesto, published by Breton in *Cahiers d' Art* in May 1935. In it he set forth the basic conceptions of Surrealism as they were outlined in the first manifesto published in 1924.

After the publication of his manifesto he was asked to return to Paris to gather material for a book, *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, to introduce an English audience to the ideas and most important texts of the Surrealists. It was published in November 1935. He also translated Breton's *What is Surrealism?*, *Surrealism and Painting* and *The Communicating Vessel*.

At the end of his survey, Gascoyne remarked: "It is within the bounds of possibility that a Surrealist group may be founded shortly in London. André Breton and [poet] Paul Eluard have declared their intention of visiting England in the spring of 1936 and there is talk of a large Surrealist exhibition being held at the same time."

In 1933-34 there were five important Surrealist exhibitions held in London. In April 1933 the Mayor Gallery opened, with works by Francis Picabia, Paul Klee, Hans Arp, Joan Miro and Max Ernst, alongside works by British artists Henry Moore and Paul Nash. In 1934 Salvador Dali exhibited at the Zwemmer Gallery.

A group of talented artists began to form in England, dedicated to the Surrealist cause. Significant figures included Conroy Maddox, the Melville brothers, Robert and John, Roland Penrose and Henry Moore. Each of these artists had met leading Surrealists in Paris.

## The 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London

Acting on the idea of an international exhibition, Gascoyne and Penrose formed an organising committee with the art historian and defender of Surrealism, Herbert Read. The artists, poets and writers who participated were to influence the direction of art in Britain for decades.

ELT Mesnes, a Belgian Surrealist and close co-thinker of André Breton,

came to England to help with the exhibition. Mesnes remained in Britain after 1936 as the head of the Surrealist gallery in London and editor of the *London Bulletin* until 1940. He was at the heart of the attempt to bring ideological homogeneity to the English group.

Read, Penrose and others were given the responsibility for choosing the English exhibits. Breton, Eluard and Dali took responsibility for the Europeans. One question that confronted the organisers in England was—what precisely was Surrealism? Many of those chosen had to be informed by the selectors that they were in fact Surrealists. After Read had explained the Surrealist nature of Aileen Agar's work and declared her to be one of the movement's adherents, the artist herself replied, "Am I?" Painter Edward Burra declared himself opposed to all schools.

Pailthorpe and Mednikoff were asked to exhibit a number of their works. Unlike a number of the English entries, they were engaged in similar experiments to the Surrealists. It was at this exhibition that Pailthorpe met Breton. They exchanged ideas on the unconscious in science and artistic creativity.

The exhibition was held at the New Burlington Galleries on June 11, 1936. Breton opened the event with a speech. It included Surrealist dance and readings by Eluard of poetry by Lautréamont, Pablo Picasso, Arthur Rimbaud and Breton. Gascoyne, (poet and later film-maker) Humphrey Jennings and others read English poetry.

A debate was held at the Conway Hall in London, with the Stalinist-dominated Association of International Artists (AIA). Read explained the political beliefs of the Surrealists in England. He said; "The Surrealist is naturally a Marxian socialist and generally claims that he is a more consistent Communist than many who submit to all manner of compromise with the aesthetic culture and moral conventions of capitalism." Read, Henry Moore and Hugh Sykes Davies went on to attack the "Socialist Realist" school championed by the Stalin regime as bourgeois. They were ferociously denounced in return as "Trotskyite anarchists, individualist capitalists."

During the exhibition, Breton pointed to the English entries as "unsatisfactory" and "eclectic." His comments were not intended as criticisms of bad art; he was challenging whether the works were Surrealist in character at all. Herbert Read was the driving-force behind many non-Surrealist artists submitting works for exhibition.

However, Breton singled out the work of Pailthorpe and Mednikoff as "the best and most truly Surrealist of the works exhibited by the British artists." Yves Tanguy, another Surrealist artist, also expressed admiration for their work because of its originality and variety, which he said he found difficult to create in his own work.

The exhibition aroused great interest, attracting 25,000 visitors. Expressing the nervousness of the British ruling class, customs seized the paintings of Danish artist Wilhelm Freddie and threatened to destroy them.

## Breton and Read on the Roots of Surrealism

Breton cited many influences for the development of Surrealist ideas. He acknowledged a debt to the English Romantic tradition and writers such as Swift, Blake and Shelley. Breton wrote a letter of greetings to the English Surrealists in which he said, "Searching as we were and are, now more than ever, for a European consciousness, if not a world consciousness, it is, after all towards England that we Surrealists have turned. Taking into consideration the specifically English sources from which, for centuries, sensibility has sought refreshment, I was persuaded that Surrealism had drawn from them deeply enough to have nothing to fear.

“Sooner or later it will be discovered that it has sought to carry with it all that is most fecund in the art and literature of the past, so that necessarily it was obliged to pay a considerable tribute to the literature and art of England. Owing to the happy initiative of our English friends, the events justify this conjecture; the path now lies open for a mutual comprehension and collaboration which, at a distance as well as in their midst, I feel becoming closer every hour.”

Breton did not ignore national traditions, but sought to create an artistic tendency that was not rooted in the national soil. He aspired to a truly human culture that was inspired by the past achievements of all nations. He explained that Surrealism was a new artistic movement, but challenged tendencies inside Surrealism which declared the past was irrelevant to the artist when he or she was producing ‘automatic’ drawings directly from his or her unconscious.

Herbert Read had brought to the exhibition abstract artists such as Ben Nicholson and Henry Moore, and the abstract expressionist Paul Nash. The event seemed to many to be more of an exhibition of contemporary British art than that of the adherents of any particular school. The painter Conroy Maddox later commented:

“Invited to exhibit in the International Surrealist Exhibition in London I refused, and with Robert and John Melville, wrote a letter in which we drew attention to the fact that the British participation in this show was mainly made up of artists, who in their day to day habits and ethics could be called anti-Surrealist. The statement was sufficiently accurate, as a fair proportion of the artists involved exerted themselves to demonstrate. The effect of their contribution was to dilute rather than affirm Surrealist principles, and they were led by Herbert Read who saw the movement as merely a continuation of the English romantic tradition.”

A collection of essays published in 1936, *Surrealism*, contained texts from all the leading Surrealists along with Read and Hugh Sykes Davies. Their articles sought to make Surrealism more acceptable to the general public. Davies wrote: “...the Surrealist position is the inevitable outcome of the situation in England. To become a Surrealist, no violent act of conversion is necessary. It is enough to examine and understand the historical facts and to accept their implications.”

In a series of debates, the AIA was trying to court and control the Surrealist group in England, as they had attempted in France, without success. Differences deepened over Socialist Realism and the Surrealist critique was only answered with verbal denunciations. Despite these differences, Read participated with sections of the Surrealists exhibiting with the AIA. These same figures also participated in the Stalinist campaign to force the British government to intervene into the Spanish Civil War.

## The English group and Trotsky

The defeat of the Spanish Revolution of 1936-39 and the victory of Franco, the persecution of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition by Stalin in the Moscow Trials from 1936-38, and the march across Europe of the Nazi armies, created huge tensions in the Surrealist movement. Breton and other Surrealists defended the independence of art from both Stalinism and fascism. For them the only road to genuine revolutionary politics lay in the ideas of Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International founded in 1938.

In the summer of 1938, Breton published the “Manifesto Towards a Free Revolutionary Art” in collaboration with Leon Trotsky and Mexican painter, Diego Rivera. It stated: “In the contemporary world we must recognise the ever more widespread destruction of those conditions under which intellectual creation is possible. From this follows of necessity an increasingly manifest degradation not only of the work of art but also of

the specifically ‘artistic’ personality...”

“The regime of Hitler, now that it has rid Germany of all those artists whose work expressed the slightest sympathy for liberty, however superficial, has reduced those who still consent to take up the pen or brush to the status of domestic servants of the regime, whose task it is to glorify it on order, according to the worst possible aesthetic conventions. If reports may be believed it is the same in the Soviet Union, where Thermidorian reaction is now reaching it’s climax.”

In October 1938, Breton wrote “To Our Friends in London” seeking support and requesting from them a clear statement of their attitude towards Trotskyism. Only Read replied with a public defence of Trotsky. Why only Read? Breton was concerned at the orientation of the English Surrealists, who were exhibiting and debating with the AIA, without defining their position on the Stalinist bureaucracy.

During the same year, Pailthorpe received a copy of the manifesto, from Breton. It was a clear exposition of the relationship between art and freedom, and art and revolution. It was not long after that that Pailthorpe published her “Scientific Aspects of Surrealism,” in the *London Bulletin*.

Her article re-asserted two of her basic ideas, that it was not the world that needed changing to create freedom, but the mental state of human beings and that art could be subordinated to scientific aims.

She said “Surrealism can lead to a greater understanding of the world around and within us, and it is only a matter of time before this will be recognised. It is impossible to create a well organised external world unless at the same time the internal mental world is harmonised, since it is only through mental acquiescence on the part of the units that go to form the whole machinery of civilisation that it can function smoothly.”

In the following months, a number of replies to Pailthorpe’s essay were published in the pages of the *London Bulletin*. As the polemic developed, differences of emphasis became points of wider disagreement.

The first letter, entitled “Automatic Art,” by psychoanalyst, Werner Von Alven Sleben, was published on April 15, 1939. It dealt mainly with what he believed were Pailthorpe’s misinterpretation of Freud’s theories.

Challenging her interpretations of her own and Mednikoff’s work, he wrote: “I do not know whether it is possible for a man to be so detached as to be able to allow this direct reproduction of his innermost impulses. It seems hardly credible. But even if it is possible, there are other difficulties. The first is how can this contribute to the liberation of mankind? Dr. Pailthorpe says it can, and that both psychoanalysis and Surrealism, as she understands it, ostensibly strive towards psychic liberation from internal conflict.

“But that is, in the case of psychoanalysis, by no means so. Its aim is rather to make the conflict known. That does not mean that the dynamic operations of the original conflicts can be annihilated, nor yet that new conflicts can be prevented by it.”

A second letter, published on June 15, 1939, written by Parker Tyler dealt with the artistic problems raised by Pailthorpe’s conceptions;

“But one cannot escape noticing the great gap between the way in which she speaks of art and the way in which Freud speaks of art - the latter has infinitely more restraint and discretion. From an artistic point of view, it is not a primary question of establishing a logical connection between conscious and unconscious fantasy, but one of establishing a creative connection; in other words, not a question of psychology or philosophy or morals but of painting. Mrs. Pailthorpe’s interpretations say nothing about their painting values; she seems indirectly to understand that her own paintings are mere literary illusions.”

Pailthorpe’s reply in the *London Bulletin* reasserted her basic proposition on the function of Surrealism. Pailthorpe explained that she didn’t separate it from creativity, but sought to use it as a social policy to make the existing society function correctly. The “parallel” paths of her conceptions and Surrealist ideals now diverged.

Mednikoff and Pailthorpe’s ideas were common amongst the Surrealist

group. The differences emerging in England were not peculiar to the group but were international in nature. From 1933 onwards, Breton began to challenge tendencies to use Surrealist ideas as a style rather than a method. These struggles helped define the artistic aims of Surrealism; the basic content was the defence of artistic freedom and independence.

In his book, *André Breton and the First Principles of Surrealism*, Franklin Rosemont explains the ever-closer connection that Breton made between the struggle for artistic truth in creativity and the necessity for the socialist revolution and the emerging struggle against Stalinism. He explains the impact of this process on the artistic world:

“In 1938 the very idea of genuine creative autonomy was being menaced on all sides, art being regarded by Stalinists and fascists alike as mere propaganda. Yet, strange as it may seem now, legions of intellectuals were aligning themselves directly or indirectly with one or the other of these world-wide anti-proletarian tendencies. Opting for Stalinism were Hemingway, Dos Passos, Neruda, Vallejo, Léger, Malraux, Aragon and Tzara; adjusting to fascism were Eliot, Pound, Dali, Lawrence, Céline, Heidegger, Jung and Marinetti...” (Pluto Press, p 80.)

These conflicting political pressures rent the Surrealist movement asunder. Between 1939-40, the Zwemmer Gallery closed and the *London Bulletin* ceased production. Mednikoff and Pailthorpe attempted to resurrect the group with an exhibition at the British Arts Centre in Stafford. Mednikoff sent out invitations and all the artists who exhibited in 1936 supported the proposal. They also supported the refounding of a publication, *The Artist Speaks*. Mednikoff proposed a meeting at the Barcelona Restaurant in London. At this meeting they proposed, with Read, a constitution that was politically ‘non-biased.’

Mesnes sent a letter to Mednikoff insisting that their project had to reaffirm three fundamental points: first, adherence to the proletarian revolution, second, refusal to exhibit with any other artistic tendencies and, third, agreement not to join or work with any artistic organisation other than the Surrealist ones.

During a secret meeting held with Mesnes as chair, the expulsion of Mednikoff, Pailthorpe and Herbert Read was proposed. The issues underlying this are unclear, but what is known is that they objected to the politicisation of art and wanted to retain their independence from political ideology.

### Trotsky's Advice to Breton

In a letter to Breton and his newly founded International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (IFIRA), that was published in the organisation's short-lived monthly journal *Clé*, Trotsky wrote:

“The struggle for revolutionary ideas in art must begin once again with the struggle for artistic truth, not in terms of any single school, but in the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self. Without this there is no art. ‘You shall not lie!’- that is the formula for salvation. Properly understood, IFIRA is not an aesthetic or political school and cannot become one. But IFIRA can oxidise the atmosphere, in which artists breathe and create.

“In our epoch of convulsive reaction, of cultural decline and return to savagery, truly independent creation cannot but be revolutionary by its very nature, for it cannot but seek an outlet from intolerable social suffocation. But art as a whole, and each artist in particular, seeks this outlet in ways proper to himself - not relying on orders from outside, but rejecting such orders and heaping scorn on all who submit to them.”

In his remarks Trotsky was appealing to Breton to view the IFIRA as an international centre and organising focus for all genuinely independent artists. His standpoint was that the IFIRA should not drive artists away

because of political or artistic differences, but should maintain absolute freedom of artistic creativity, to allow art to flourish unhindered. It would be true to say that although Breton sided with Trotsky in principle, he retained a dismissive attitude towards non-Surrealist art. This position permeated into the English group.

Mednikoff and Pailthorpe were not in agreement with Trotsky, but they didn't deserve to be expelled. Whilst they refused to adhere to the proletarian revolution, neither of them sided with fascism or Stalinism. They continued with their project. But the severing of ties with the Surrealists coincided with a notable decline in their creative output.

The serious weakness in their work was rooted in their holding onto the Surrealist conceptions of 1924, while the Surrealist movement itself sought a path towards an independent revolutionary art. Breton was in the process of rejecting or modifying a number of his earlier conceptions because of their idealism, their inadequacy or their ever-greater misuse.

In 1940 the group splintered. Mednikoff volunteered for the army, but was rejected on medical grounds. Soon after he and Pailthorpe left for the United States, where they continued their investigations into the liberating power of the unconscious. They continued to exhibit and give lectures on their version of Surrealism at universities and galleries throughout America and Canada. While they defended the early conceptions of Surrealism, their main activity was the compilation of a manuscript challenging the political aims of the movement and claiming that its essential problem in England was its “extremism.”

Pailthorpe defined her own experiments as “positive psycho-realism.” Both artists certainly believed that Surrealism opened up endless creative possibilities that could form the basis for an entirely new form of culture.

The idea that the unconscious could be revealed in the form of conscious artistic creativity and be then scientifically interpreted is not convincing. It seems an attempt to create a short-cut in an extremely complex process. Breton described the connection between the conscious and the unconscious in creativity as a conduct wire. Such imagery suggests the continuous passage of influence between one and the other. An infinite number of connections exist. It is impossible, despite Pailthorpe's claims, to reveal the unconscious mind ‘free’ of conscious influence. The origin of genuine creativity, as Trotsky noted in his autobiography, is the creative union of the conscious with the unconscious.

In examining these questions, however, Pailthorpe and Mednikoff created a body of work that deserves serious examination.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**