A desire for what?

"Surrealism: Desire Unbound"— An exhibition at Tate Modern, London until 1 January 2002

30 November 2001

Surrealism, as an artistic movement, was concerned with the nature of the unconscious and its connection with creation. The surrealists sought to break the deadlock of conventional thinking: their experiments tried to highlight the role of the unconscious in creativity in order to break new ground.

Given the surrealists' interest in the workings and expression of the unconscious, and the pre-eminent place of desire in psychoanalytical theory, it was inevitable that eventually an attempt would be made to bring together surrealist work on the theme of desire.

This exhibition is such an attempt. It is a major undertaking; fourteen rooms are arranged by topic, focusing on specific works and highlighting individual artists. Most of the major and many of the lesser-known figures of the surrealist movement are represented here.

An antechamber sets the scene. A heartbeat accompanies Max Ernst's Men Shall Know Nothing of This. The curator's introduction explains, "A theme central to surrealism is its vision of man as a creature driven by desire. For the surrealists desire was the authentic voice of the inner self". In itself this is not problematic but it is not the whole story. Also, it means that representations of desire are seen primarily as biographical.

The first room proper is named after the Marcel Duchamp work which dominates it The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, (reconstructed by Richard Hamilton). Duchamp is by any reckoning a good place to start a survey of surrealism. From the earliest days of Dada, Duchamp's iconoclastic vision had been at the forefront of the avant-garde. André Breton wrote of Duchamp's enormous influence "[O]ne can ask oneself to what extent it will someday be considered legitimate to have continued painting as if *The Bride Stripped Bare* had never been produced".

From this great glasswork the room poses a mechanistic vision of sexual desire. Man Ray's photographs of domestic objects, which look like parts of the body, stand alongside Francis Picabia's paintings of mechanical devices representing some sort of liaison. The Fiancé, for example, is a cogwheel, while *Paroxysm of Desire* is a painful looking threaded device. There are early works here by Duchamp that are clearly futurist in conception, although they deal with emotional and sexual states (*The Bride* and *The Sad Young Man on the Train*) rather than the technology preoccupying the futurists.

The Child's Brain—named after Giorgio de Chirico's painting—begins to explore the surrealists' use of Freudian analysis and imagery. Specifically it looks at the use of oedipal notions and parent/child relations. The room features works by Salvador Dalí like William Tell in which Tell is shown as a vengeful father. It marks the beginning of the exhibition's use of Dalí as the most nakedly analysable of the surrealists.

Before The Mirror is a side room that offers some unfamiliar pleasures. Duchamp's bearded Mona Lisa LHOOQ (*Elle a chaud cul — She has a hot arse*) and Man Ray's photographs of Duchamp dressed as the poetess Rose Sélavy (*Eros, c'est la vie — Love, that's life*), are the starting point for a look at gender ambiguities. (Duchamp described his accidental discovery that the Mona Lisa was a painting of a man by having doodled a moustache on her). Alongside them are less well-known works by Man Ray, but the high points are the boxes made by Joseph Cornell. Some are homages to glamorous stars, but the best pieces are beguiling mixtures of imaginary narrative and historical fact like *Taglioni's Jewel Casket*, a jewel case retrieved from the ice with ice cubes still in it.

Paul Delvaux's Dawn Over the City, in the next room, introduces the idea of the city as a location for casual encounters (sexual, but not exclusively so), which can open new insights into the unconscious. (Delvaux's other piece here, *Street of Trams*, shows that he did conceive of it sexually, although *Dawn* suggests there is an element of regret at his inability to take advantage of such encounters).

Allied to this is the notion of chance. The surrealists followed Duchamp in exploring the *objet trouvé* (found object). Here the most striking piece was Cornell's Untitled (Bébé Marie), a Victorian doll in a box behind twigs. The use of found objects to reflect the unarticulated or hidden reaches its most consummate realisation in Ray's Enigma of Isidora Ducasse. A sewing machine wrapped in sackcloth, it is an intriguing homage to a man of whom we know nothing, except that as the Comte de Lautréamont he wrote one of the key texts for the surrealists, *Maldoror*. One of the factors in his deification by the surrealists was precisely his anonymity.

The *Imprint of Desires* room contained some of the most familiar images shown here. The works of Joan Miró—*Stars in the sexes of snails* and A star caresses the breast of a negress—André Masson and Jean Arp sought to bring to painting the automatism surrealist poets had already been experimenting with, as the next room explained.

Love, Poetry is a room containing artefacts of surrealism as a literary and international movement. There are publications and manuscripts. Most rewarding were the small handbills—"If you love love, you'll love surrealism", "Parents - tell your dreams to your children", and, most importantly, "Surrealism is literature denied". Here too was the first suggestion that there was any kind of organisation within surrealism, with photographs of international groupings and meetings.

Dalí's *Accommodations of Desire*, in the next room, deals with the sexual anxiety he felt about his father's disapproval of his relationship with Gala Eluard. Dalí's response was to look increasingly to "shocking" taboo subjects. "I consider perversion and vice to be the most revolutionary forms of thought and activity, just as I consider love to be the only attitude worthy of man's life," he said. The room records the fetishising of objects. Meret Oppenheim's Object (a fur covered cup, saucer and spoon) is famous, but not as fine a piece as My Nurse a pair of high-heeled shoes trussed like poultry and displayed in a sexual manner.

From here it is a short step to the more overtly violent imagination of the room centred on Alberto Giacometti's Woman With Her Throat Cut and the room devoted to Hans Bellmer's dolls. Bellmer's dolls were

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manipulable into violent and monstrous contortions. These images of the constructed female body are more disturbing than the pornographic work of the room *Eros*. Here is Georges Bataille's *Story of the Eye*, illustrated by Masson. Here are the Czech group's erotica, alongside Georges Hugnet's *Onan*. The room echoes to Radovan Ivsic's soundtrack to the EROS exhibition of 1959, a tape-loop of women's sexual sighs and moans.

The key to the room, though not very well explained, is the Marquis de Sade. Masson and Bellmer's illustrations for his works accompany a short display on his life and thought. There are the usual quotes about de Sade as the philosopher of personal liberation but this room, and this display particularly, highlight the problems with the exhibition as a whole. I will return to this.

The last two rooms feature more work by women artists. Ernst's The Robing of the Bride names a room apparently about the female muse, although it is not central. Here are Dorothea Tanning's Birthday (a self-portrait of the artist as enchantress) and some of Frida Kahlo's iconic self-portraits, alongside Eileen Agar's *Angel of Anarchy* and Roland Penrose's *Winged Domino*.

The last room is more coherent, although less interesting. It rounds off the exhibition neatly. *Erotic Objects* was part of Marcel Duchamp's last project, a realistic model of a naked female body that could only be viewed through a peephole. Dorothea Tanning's sculpture of a sofa with a woman's body merging into it is wonderful (and new to me). The last piece is Louise Bourgeois' *Fillette*, a phallic object combining male and female elements.

There is a huge amount of material here, some of it unfamiliar. It is attractively laid out, and the subject is a legitimate one in surrealism. So why is it ultimately disappointing? There are a number of reasons.

One is that whilst desire is "a theme central to surrealism" it is treated here as almost synonymous with surrealism. The question arises: desire for what? Desire here is seen in purely psychoanalytical terms. The connection between surrealism and psychoanalysis cannot be understated. Breton corresponded with Freud, and the surrealists defended him when he came under fascist attack in Vienna. However, not all of the surrealists saw psychoanalysis and the liberation of the human mind as an end in itself.

The problem is tied to the history of the surrealist movement itself. Emerging from the nihilism of Dada, surrealism tried to articulate and structure artistic rebellion. In Dada, rebellion for its own sake had reached an inevitable impasse, hence the more systematic attempt at tapping the unconscious element within art. That is why many of the most advanced figures within surrealism joined the French Communist Party and subsequently fought for the line advanced by Leon Trotsky in opposition to the Stalinist degeneration of the Third International. Much of the research into philosophy undertaken by the surrealists was aimed at assisting the revolutionary movement. (The break from Dalí came with the development of his paranoiac-critical method into a justification of support for Hitler). It was no accident that the chief vehicle of the surrealists was titled "Surrealism at the Service of the Revolution".

Equally, surrealism was not a homogeneous movement. There were disputes and disagreements. Some resulted in splits, some of which were highly political. (The defection of Aragon and Eluard into the Stalinist bureaucracy destroyed them artistically as well as politically). Some of the splits were artistic, yet the protagonists remained political. (Robert Desnos died in Theresienstadt concentration camp). Some fringe figures remained sympathetic either artistically (Leonora Carrington) or politically (Claude Cahun was jailed for assisting the Jersey resistance).

These differences matter. In the case of Dalí it is possible to see clear differences between his work of 1930 and his work of 1936. With a less well-known and well-represented artist, like Jacques-André Boiffard, it would help to have more background to his illustration for an article by Bataille, after the latter's departure from the group. The surrealists were exploring the unconscious, but they were doing so consciously.

This is not entirely missing here. It is, however, treated as secondary and somehow not significant. The relationship between desire in the unconscious and desire in the conscious is not explored. The curators say correctly "The surrealists opposed what they saw as the stultifying and oppressive aspects of society, and celebrated a vision of the world in which men's imaginations and desires were set free". However, they do not draw conclusions about why this should be desirable, or why it might not be sufficient. There is little notion here of any social thought, yet the whole point of the foundation of the surrealist movement had been to accommodate exactly that.

This is why de Sade is an unexplained key to the exhibition. If the intention is to find a way of thinking which breaks the patterns of bourgeois thought, opens the possibilities of new ideas and (to quote the curators) bypasses "conventional reason and rationality in order to explore the mind's potentially limitless capacity to imagine, dream and invent" then de Sade is an extreme starting place. The critical question is the use to which that starting place gets put. He is either a means to open that door (and a somewhat limited one once it is open), or he is sufficient in himself. This is evident in Masson's illustrations. Rather than starting *from* de Sade, he is bogged down in him. This is where the glorification of the pornographic appears, and anything emancipatory in the thought-process vanishes. From examining one theme in surrealism, the curators elide everything into the biographies of men obsessed with sex.

Too much of this exhibition glorifies the weaker elements in surrealism while smoothing over the stronger. It is pitched at an audience that thinks it is familiar with surrealistic imagery from advertising and television. This is a slightly more sophisticated version of the nationalist arguments against surrealism advanced in the 1930s. (The art historian, critic and poet Herbert Read, for example, argued that Britain had no need of surrealism because it already had a developed imaginative art). The exhibition seeks to "dirty this up" by throwing in more sex, articulated and repressed. Surrealism is homogenised into one subject—desire—to make it palatable, diminishing the entire exhibition to one level. It reduces surrealism to a single theme when at its highest point surrealism saw the whole of the world as its subject.

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