Veteran British surrealist dies

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Conroy Maddox, who died aged 92 on January 14, occupies an important place in the history of surrealism in Britain. He was the last survivor of the surrealist group that formed before the Second World War. More significantly, he remained fiercely loyal to surrealism throughout his life. He was described by Silvano Levy, the author of a recent monograph on him, as "Britain's most committed, energetic, and enduring exponent of surrealism."

Maddox was born in 1912 in Herefordshire where his father ran the family agricultural seed business and was educated at a local elementary school, before going to grammar school. He did not go to art school, and had no formal training, although he was interested in painting from an early age. He was also already coming under some crucial early influences. His father, for example, loved to fill the house with artefacts bought at country auctions, beginning Maddox's long fascination with the object, and also with the inspiring quality of the glimpse of something new. As he later wrote about Louis Aragon's book, *Paris Peasant*, "[Aragon] waited for something to happen, something strange or abnormal, so as to permit him a glimpse of a new order of things. Such experiences were conducive to Surrealism's attraction to the marvellous."

From his father Maddox also learned the deep and abiding hostility to religion which inspired so much of his later work. ("No longer do I allow myself to see religion as anything but a brutal insignia of a slow moral decomposition," he was to write later).

The recollection of a hospital visit to his father, who was wounded in the First World War, inspired his anti-militarism. It was also significant later in driving him to look for forms of expression opposed to a militaristic world. (At the same time as this experience, recently demobbed artists from across Europe were converging on Paris, where they sought to express their disgust at the nationalist slaughter they had just survived. It was these artists—Aragon, Hans Arp, Paul Eluard, for example—who turned the outrage of Dada towards the revolutionary potential of surrealism). Witnessing a woman having an hysterical fit inspired in him a deep and lasting fascination with hysteria and psychological disorders.

In 1929, during the Depression, the family moved to Chipping Norton, where they ran a hotel. Increasingly interested in painting, Maddox converted a stable into a studio. In his free time he painted still life and landscapes. Several years later the family moved again, this time to the Birmingham suburb of Erdington, where his father started a company importing wine and spirits. Maddox also moved to Birmingham, which offered greater employment prospects than the Welsh marches. He worked through several clerical posts, and by 1935 was designing trade-fair exhibition stands.

Birmingham also offered him a wide range of cultural resources, and he continued to educate himself in art. He spent much time in the city's art galleries, although he was not much impressed. (This was reciprocated: Birmingham City Art Gallery only recently acquired any of his work). He spent longer in the city's public libraries, seeking out the available material on modern art. His modernism was self-taught; having found a copy of R.H. Wilenski's *The Modern Movement in Art* (1927), he copied the illustrations. It was during this period, studying library books, that he first came across surrealism. He later described it as "a turning point, one of those doors that suddenly swings open to reveal a totally new direction". From this point on he was committed to surrealism.

Alongside the commitment, though, Maddox's life was a demonstration that surrealism is a collective endeavour. His isolation ended in 1935, when he met the brothers John and Robert Melville, both active in the Birmingham avant-garde scene. John was a painter, Robert (later art critic of the *New Statesman*) a writer with an extensive knowledge of the work of Picasso. The Melvilles introduced Maddox to others interested in surrealism in Britain. Their collaboration was also the basis for the later formation of a Birmingham surrealist group.

The first major exhibition of surrealist work in Britain took place in 1936, with the "International Surrealist Exhibition" at the New Burlington Galleries. Neither Maddox nor Melville sent paintings. Instead, they criticised many of the established artists whose works were exhibited. The works of artists like Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland and Herbert Read were not, they argued, surrealist, nor indeed were they informed by surrealist thinking. (Both Moore and Read were on the organising committee of the exhibition). Maddox attacked some as simply presenting the acceptably picturesque.

Some of the artists they criticised quite obviously had only the most marginal connection with surrealism: Maddox's criticisms are more acute in the case of Read, who at this stage was prominent among British artists claiming to be surrealists. Read was sympathetic to some aspects of surrealism, but Maddox opposed to his parochialism a firm commitment to the internationalism of the movement.

At the 1936 exhibition Maddox met André Breton, Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí. Through them he received introductions to artists in Paris. He made his first trip in 1937. Over the next two years he made several visits to Paris, where he collaborated closely with the surrealist group including Man Ray and (particularly) Georges Hugnet. Back in London, he joined the English Surrealist

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Group in 1938, again with the Melvilles.

This was a period of sustained assault on surrealism, orchestrated internationally by the Stalinist Communist Parties. They accused it of being "anti-revolutionary" art, advocating instead socialist realism. After *Guernica* was shown in London, for example, Picasso was criticised for coming under the bad influence of surrealists. The painting itself was criticised for expressing disillusionment.

Against this, E.L.T. Mesens organised the "Living Art in England" exhibition early in 1939 at the London Gallery. His intention was to show surrealism as a movement capable of standing at the head of opposition to reaction. Of the non-surrealist artists displayed, many were constructivists already coming into exile from Europe. Alongside them were the works of British surrealists, including Maddox.

Maddox returned to Paris, but left for Britain again with war imminent. ("Seeing all the sandbags going up around the monuments, I decided it was time to get out"). He returned to Birmingham, where he was employed by the Ministry of Defence researching and designing parts for film projectors. He was also the focus for a predominantly surrealist group involving the Melvilles and Emmy Bridgwater.

The war years were among his most vital and productive, producing some of his finest works. He contributed an article on "The Object in Surrealism" to the 1940 triple issue of the *London Bulletin*, pursuing André Breton's prediction of "the crisis of the object". In the same year he produced "Onanistic Typewriter"—on each key a tack is fixed, point upwards, while the roller is streaked with blood. He was looking for the "disturbance and demoralisation against the commonplace and the rational". He also pioneered the technique of "ecremage", where paper is dragged over oil paint floating in a tray of water.

Although the surrealists were credited in the press with having foreseen the political crisis in some way, and having been critical of the society that produced it, there was a vigorous onslaught against any notion that their resistance was an option. The *Manchester Guardian*, for example, wrote of the 1940 "Surrealism Today" exhibition that "at a moment like this surrealism seems unnecessary—surrealism can be a good psychological cocktail, but cocktail time is over".

Under cover of pulling together for a national war effort, the revolutionary aims of surrealism were under fire, yet the surrealists themselves continued to voice them. The first page of the 1940 *London Bulletin* stated that "the enemies of desire and hope have risen in violence", and called for a fight against Hitler's ideology "wherever it appears".

However, the political pressures continued, and the betrayals within the ranks of social democracy and Stalinism continued to disorient. As weaknesses became apparent within the London surrealist group, Maddox worked closely with Toni del Renzio, an Italian who had fought for the POUM in Spain. Del Renzio provided a valuable fillip to British surrealism, and enabled Maddox to continue his work. In 1945 several of his collages, along with works by other surrealists, were seized by Special Branch on suspicion of undermining the war effort.

The political disorientation of the war years pushed Maddox in a more libertarian direction "as an expression of indifference to the pettifogging activities of politicians and art merchants"; to quote Michel Remy's authoritative *Surrealism in Britain* (1999). It is to Maddox's credit, though, that he continued to pursue his quest for a transformed world, even though he acknowledged that it might not happen during his lifetime. "The work of Surrealism can never be conclusive. It is more of an exploration, a journey, and a struggle. Paintings are signposts. To find where they lead I will have to carry on following them despite the continual obstacles that block the way. For that reason I will remain on my quest for surrealism until my last breath."

He continued to return to the same subjects. His extraordinary collage-painting "Warehouses of Convulsion" (1946), for example, shows panic-stricken women rising from coffin shaped boxes. (Although lost, the piece is reproduced in Remy, p.288). He also began staging pieces involving seducing a woman dressed as a nun. (Birmingham City Council deterred him from staging the pieces in shop windows).

In the early 1960s he moved to London. Solo shows became regular occurrences after 1963. They brought him a little money, but the main thrust of his work was to defend the legacy of surrealism, both in his new work and also in retrospectives. In 1978, for example, he was so angry at the misrepresentation of surrealism in the Hayward Gallery's "Dada and Surrealism Reviewed" exhibition that he launched a counter-exhibition as a corrective.

One obituarist suggested that "His surrealist convictions kept Maddox apart from the London art world—young artists annoyed him". This is to misunderstand the nature of surrealism, and his ongoing commitment to it. He was generous of his time for those who were trying to develop surrealism and adhere to it. Michel Remy, for example, stayed with him during the writing of *Surrealism in Britain*. Maddox remained hostile, though, to those whose work had nothing to do with surrealist transformation.

"Surrealism", he once said, "is a difficult outlook to propose, but it offers a way out of the type of society in which we live". He deserves tribute for his continued belief that "society will change one day and we will escape from our incessant monotony, from this kind of life where we don't link our dreams to reality."

Three of Conroy Maddox's pictures can be seen at the Tate Gallery:

http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/WorksList?searchid=18956&page=1\\

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