

▲ EXHIBITION

IN WONDERLAND THE SURREALIST ADVENTURES OF WOMEN ARTISTS IN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

7 JUNE TO 3 SEPTEMBER 2012



Québec City, Wednesday June 6 2012 □ This summer, the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec has the privilege of being the sole Canadian venue to host an international exhibition spotlighting the tremendous contribution of women to the Surrealist movement in Mexico and the United States.

In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States is the first large-scale international survey of women surrealist artists in North America. Spanning more than five decades, *In Wonderland* brings together 179 works – paintings, sculptures, films, works on paper and photographs – from nearly 75 public and private collections in the United States, Mexico and Europe.

The public is invited to discover the world of Frida Kahlo (an outstanding figure in Mexican modern art), Louise Bourgeois (one of the major artists of the latter half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century), Jacqueline Lamba (a painter and André Breton's muse), Lee Miller (a photographer and Man Ray's Egeria), Dorothea Tanning (a painter, sculptor and the wife of Max Ernst), Remedios Varo (one of the most important Mexican Surrealists) and another forty women artists who explored Surrealism between 1930 and the late 1970s. Among the fantasies and phantasms expressed can be found questions of identity, sexuality, witchcraft, creativity, psychoanalysis, memory, dreams, sentimentality, politics and war, indigenous culture, Mother Earth and universal mythology. An extraordinary journey, like that of Alice in Wonderland, dotted with strange and fabulous encounters...

This exhibition is organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and the Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM), Mexico. It was made possible through a generous grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art. The organizers are grateful for the special collaboration of the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CONACULTA) and National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA), Mexico.

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PRESENTATION

This is the first exhibition devoted to the female surrealist artists who worked in Mexico and the United States. Surrealism, one of the most influential avant-garde aesthetics of the twentieth century, has almost always been characterized as a movement based in France, involving male artists. Yet within a decade of its formation in Paris in 1924, the movement had taken root beyond Europe. North America was a logical forum, because ideals of freedom, liberty, and the equality of the sexes held sway here, and women played a significant role in surrealism from the beginning.

The surrealists extolled dreams and the unconscious as sources of creativity while they also advocated for the destruction of what they considered sterile, bourgeois institutions—the church, the family. According to the founder of surrealism, French artist André Breton, women served as muses for men. But the forty-seven artists represented here demonstrate that women were independent creators, as bold, imaginative, and innovative as the men. The women adopted a personal stance, often utilizing their art as a means of psychological and spiritual exploration and catharsis, liberating them from the confines of patriarchal societies as well as from their own personal tragedies. Ultimately, surrealism empowered women and encouraged the rise of the feminist movement.

GALLERY 1

▲ ALICE IN WONDERLAND



Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* book resonated with the surrealists. Although initially intended as fiction for children, her stories have been hailed as the finest nonsense literature for adults. Female surrealist artists felt a kinship with Alice: they also experienced chaos and the irrational, and had their lives disrupted by people or events over which they had no control. Many had suffered tragic childhoods (molestation, abandonment by their parents), or they had faced disappointing adult years that included divorce, infertility, a struggle against traditional roles of wife and mother, and mental illness. Several women chose to represent specific themes based on the books, while others referred to themselves as Alice. The dreams they delineated were their personal nightmares, and much of their art is disturbing and harrowing. Yet surrealism also offered a path toward the “marvelous,” a surrealist concept about the disruption of identity and the disorientation of reality in pursuit of the revelatory. These bold and remarkable women passed through many doors and roles, often traveling to distant places, to find their independent voices.

IDENTITY: PORTRAITURE

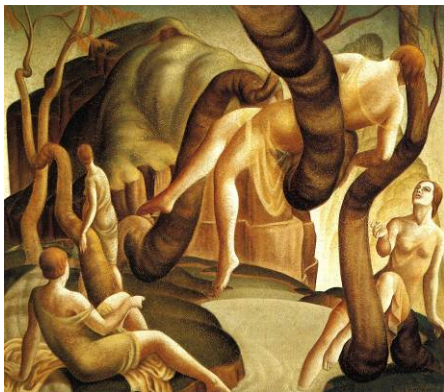


The women artists, unlike their male counterparts, sought to reconstruct their identities through the strategy of self-representation. Both the European exiles and the artists born in the United States and Mexico produced an astonishing number of powerful images of themselves, friends, and lovers, creating a pictorial narrative that enabled them to investigate their bodies, their minds, their life experiences, and ultimately their own reality. Some conceived straightforward and autobiographical portraits that refer to specific and often traumatic events and childhood memories, while others were more oblique and conveyed their fantasies and spiritual beliefs. Some of the portraits imply, through the strategy of doubling, the idea of alter egos or multiple alternate personalities; other portraits refer

to the absence of self through empty landscapes or isolated objects that manifest a feeling of alienation and self-effacement. Symbolic portraits in the form of still lifes were an important strategy for representing difficult gender roles and issues such as sexuality. The masquerade, with its transformative power, became a perfect device for these artists either to conceal their identity or gender.

GALLERY 5

THE BODY



The female artists transformed their bodies from a male fetish to a site of resistance and creative energy; they rarely presented the nude male body. Unlike the male artists, who represented women as a personification of their sexual desires and fantasies, the female surrealists used their bodies to explore their emotions and creative powers as well as the complex relationship between their physical selves and their identities. Their approach to their bodies was not erotic: usually they are clothed and, when naked, they explore their anatomy and the potential to conceive life

almost poetically. Some artists focused on their heads and eyes to reveal their inner life and dreams. Confronting the traditional representation of nude women in art history, they created scenarios where the body became part of the landscape or was partially hidden or trapped. They resisted the objectification of the female figure by constructing symbolic images from asexual body parts: heads, eyes, or hands. While breasts remained the supreme male fetish, female artists produced disturbing images that addressed their dramatic experiences with breasts, such as a mastectomy.

▲ THE CREATIVE WOMAN



In the mid-twentieth century, when marriage and children were extolled in middle-class American and Mexican cultures as a woman's supreme objective, those who pursued alternative paths were considered outsiders and at times labeled mentally unbalanced. Intelligent, creative women have long been considered a threat to the stability of patriarchal societies. Surrealists of both genders, however, believed that women had special powers: that they had visionary capabilities and were more attuned to emotions and the imagination. As such, female surrealists portrayed themselves and other women as witches and goddesses, and domestic spaces were often depicted as alchemical laboratories where magical rituals were performed. The women also favored the representation of enigmatic figures from the tarot that symbolize personal power and creativity. They often chose animal avatars that embodied different intuitive, intellectual, and sexual potentials. Deeply interested in the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, they conceived of fantastic works of art inspired by dreams and memories and they explored the profound and obscure meanings of human relationships. In Mexico in the 1940s, a confluence of groups based on the esoteric mystical teachings of the Russians George Gurdjieff and P. D. Ouspensky encouraged works about the potential to transform the universe. Many of the works of art here reveal personal journeys of transformation and spiritual rebirth.

▲ ROMANCE AND DOMESTICITY



Surrealism provided women with a sense of liberation from traditional roles, and many of them considered marriage and children secondary to their artistic careers. Issues of romance, domesticity, and family appeared repeatedly, sometimes in humorous ways that challenged established social mores and gender boundaries. The female artists often began their artistic careers as wives, lovers, or friends of male artists, and they produced symbolic portraits in which they used discrepancies in size and scale to draw attention to traditional gender roles within a patriarchal society. The representation of domestic spaces was important: the house, the kitchen, and the dining room sometimes became sites of feminine drudgery and confinement. The few portraits of children convey a feeling of isolation. The doll was a subject favored by the male surrealists as an incarnation of the concept of the uncanny (something that is simultaneously familiar and strange), and it signified male fantasies about eroticism. Women, however, often avoided sexual connotations, using doll heads or entire doll bodies to create disconcerting imagery that conveys anxieties and fears. Some had experienced parental abandonment, sexual abuse, or other traumatic childhood experiences that would later haunt their work.

▲ GAMES AND TECHNICAL INNOVATIONS



From the beginning of the movement, surrealists created games and innovative techniques, often involving chance or accident, to express the irrationalities of life and the workings of the unconscious. Some games were played collectively, such as the exquisite corpse, in which an image is composed by several participants who cannot see the previous contributions, leading to unusual juxtapositions. Chess also became a common motif in their works of art.

While women surrealist artists in North America tended to take a more solitary approach, they sometimes used these games and techniques in addition to inventing new methods to express their fantasies and fascinations. The exquisite corpses created by Frida Kahlo and Lucienne Bloch underscored gender issues in a reversal of masculine and feminine attributes. Photographers created otherworldly female forms through the techniques of solarization (the reversal of tones through light exposure), the photogram (the placement of objects on photosensitive paper), and photomontage (an image shot from a collage of multiple photographs). Remedios Varo made masterful use of the surrealist techniques of fumage (the use of smoke as a medium) and decalcomania (pressing paint from one surface onto another). A number of women first experienced surrealist art at Atelier 17, a print workshop in New York founded by artist Stanley William Hayter. There, New York-based artists such as Louise Bourgeois explored automatism (spontaneous artistic activity as an expression of the unconscious) and printmaking.

▲ POLITICS

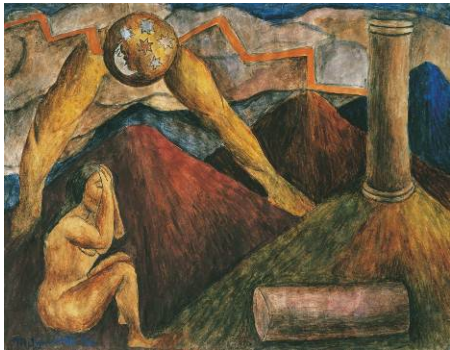


The radical nature of surrealism involved politics as well as aesthetics. Shortly after its foundation in 1924, the official French surrealist group issued two journals with titles that referred to their “revolution.” These activist leanings also led the male artists to express Marxist ideals, advocate general strikes, join the French Communist Party, and ally with Leon Trotsky in Mexico in 1938. The female artists, however, tended not to agitate for larger political or social causes.

They occasionally depicted the effects of the Depression, poverty, and capitalism, as well as the growing militarism, war, and displacement of people, yet they rarely criticized such conditions. Because of its documentary character, photography was the medium most often used for these portrayals. The technique of photocollage, in which an image is removed from its original source and placed within a new context, literally paralleled the physical disruption of normal life and could be the reason the women used it so often. It was Lee Miller, working as a war

correspondent for Vogue, who realized the surreal nature of current events; scenes that she seems to have accidentally come across during her many trips demonstrate the surrealist concept of the uncanny while underscoring the nightmare of battle. Kay Sage conveyed Europe's loss of its intelligentsia in her barren landscapes, while Margaret Tomkins and Janet Sobel suggested through their palettes and imagery the despair, frenzy, and horror of the Holocaust.

▲ NORTH AMERICA – THE LAND, NATIVE PEOPLE, AND MYTHS



North America's ancient and indigenous cultures intrigued many women surrealists, who viewed pre-Columbian, American Indian, and Oceanic artifacts as direct links to the subconscious and the dream state. The vast terrains of the United States and Mexico not only inspired artists from these countries but also the Europeans who had arrived as refugees. These artists, through their marginalization as women and exiles, felt an affinity with living indigenous groups, and their research into other cultures and locales turned into a search for personal identity. Representations of indigenous objects often appeared in works of art; for example, pre-Columbian sculptures in Frida Kahlo's canvases, and Native American kachina dolls and teepees in Jacqueline Lamba's drawings. Myths and ancient codices also provided important symbolism for many artists. Others borrowed the construction techniques of ritual art: Isabelle Waldberg's sculptures, for example, were inspired by the Yup'ik masks of Alaska, and Jeanne Reynal's mosaics reference Navajo sand painting rituals. Abstract and symbolic representations of landscapes were also imbued with a mysterious spiritual quality.

▲ ABSTRACT SURREALISM AND THE NEW UNIVERSAL MYTH



During the 1940s and 1950s, surrealists increasingly explored abstraction. A widespread interest in biomorphism (the use of organic shapes that reference natural life forms) was accompanied by a heightened emphasis on automatism. Investigations into abstraction paralleled the search for a new "universal myth," seen in Roberto Matta's painterly investigations of the fourth dimension. The avant-garde's familiarity with the concepts of German philosopher Carl Jung had set the stage for this interest in myth, symbol, archetype, and the collective unconscious.

The work of women surrealists explored abstraction and concepts of a universal myth from many different perspectives. In San Francisco, Adaline Kent and Madge Knight were predominantly inspired by the mysteries of nature, while Helen Phillips created anthropomorphic figures locked in perpetual motion. In New York, the Old Testament and Jewish mysticism informed the work of Janet Sobel and Lee Krasner, respectively. Jacqueline Lamba traveled in Mexico and across the

United States in 1946 and began to explore light and landscapes in her images. Mexican painter Lilia Carrillo would be one of many women artists inspired by the canvases of Arshile Gorky, whom she cited as having a decisive impact on the lyrical abstraction of her work.

▲ POSTSCRIPT – FEMINIST REVOLUTION



The female voice did not enter the mainstream until women founded their own movement. In the late 1960s, feminism both took on and advanced the surrealist revolution in the battle of gender politics. Women artists at last became politically engaged in a public and organized way. The body remained their dominant motif, but now they reappropriated themselves as the subject within new visual strategies. Sexually charged imagery was transformed from the suggestive and socially acceptable into the blatant and transgressive. Artists turned to new materials that had a greater sense of physicality—rubber, latex, found wooden objects from houses, and cloth—for their media and process. Whereas Dorothea Tanning’s soft sculptures continued the fascination with a woman’s body by exploring her softly swelling curvature, Louis Bourgeois’s urethane sculptures (a kind of very strong plastic), hanging from the ceiling, thrust anatomical parts in the face of the viewer. Less coded, the issues faced by women became both the subject and the object of artistic expression.

CREDITS

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Tere Arcq, Adjunct Curator, MAM

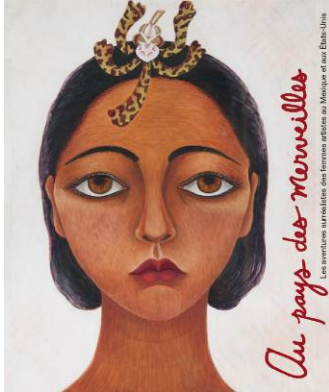
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The Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec is a government corporation funded by the Ministère de la Culture, des Communications et de la Condition féminine du Québec.

PUBLICATION



The catalogue *In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States*, published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and DelMonico/Prestel, offers a fresh perspective on surrealism as it spotlights the important role that North American women artists played in the movement. Thematically arranged, *In Wonderland* includes 9 essays stressing the significance of women art in surrealism and the unique character of the phenomenon in America, completed by biographical notes on 48 artists. The publication is available (French version only) at the Boutique du Musée for \$59.95.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Opening Hours

Monday through Sunday, from 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Wednesday until 9:00 p.m.

Admission

Adults: **\$15** ▪ Seniors: **\$12** ▪ CAA-Québec members: **\$13** ▪ Students: **\$7** (under 30) ▪ Youth (12-17): **\$4** ▪ Members-Friends and children under 12: **free**

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