

Dreaming with Open Eyes

The cover of a recent New York Times Magazine claims that “When reality is surreal, only fiction can make sense of it.” While this refers the contemporary moment, Surrealism has been a mode of political artistic engagement since the 1920s, emerging from Dada and Freudian psychoanalysis in direct response to post World War I social landscape. In the 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*, André Breton argued that the only way to reveal some truth about modern life – and isn’t that the goal of art? – was to replicate the experience of the individual consciousness, rather than perpetuate homogenous objectivity.

It is only in the absence of aesthetic and moral concerns, Breton posits, that one can hope to truly express free thought and the only way to bypass those cognitive mechanisms is to act compulsively. Breton associated this freedom of impulse with dreams. He argued that realism “enslaved” imagination, and that we must unshackle ourselves from the “reign of logic” under which we are oppressed. “In our day and age,” Breton wrote, “logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest.” In the “day and age” Breton wrote, Europe was still reeling from the Great War, a senseless affair predated by a high period of industrial and scientific advance. It is as if Breton was saying: Logic persists and yet, as the devastation of the war suggests, logic has failed us.

Artists today find themselves in a similarly illogical, surreal moment. In America alone, we are at the epicenter of a global pandemic; watching our Black citizens murdered by members of the so-called law enforcement; under the near-dictatorial leadership of a mafioso television star playing the role of a cowboy president. What is the response to irrational life? Breton says it is to respond irrationally, to meet reality on reality’s terms: with madness; with dreams. In the words of Brassai, “there is nothing more surreal than reality itself. If reality fails to fill us with wonder, it is because we have fallen into the habit of seeing it as ordinary.” Wonder does not necessarily connote whimsy – it can also be a form of bewilderment or shock. While the strains of revolution are audible in today’s political soundscape, we are always in grave danger of falling into the habit Brassai warns against.

By returning to Surrealism, the artists in *Slumber with A Key* encourage us to wake up and face reality on realities terms. The participating artists have played a form of exquisite corpse, swapping and interpreting one another's dreams. This process is an extreme example of Breton's theory of automation, each piece truly out of the control of both the person who conceived it and the maker. The last bit of interpretation is up to the viewer, introducing a tertiary element of chance. The experience of this exhibition is one of association – equipped with the linguistic referent of the dream diary, this *key*, we pass through a series of psyches turned inside out. This mode of engagement is a model of consciousness for the way in which we might interface with the surreal world we find ourselves living in: the world we step into when we leave the gallery.

Take for example my own interpretation of Gina Pearlin's *After the Rainbows*. It is impossible to distinguish if the three fingers emerging from a black ground belong to the same hand, two hands, or three hands. This visual puzzle presents a direct correlate to the Freudian model of consciousness: a small portion is visible, the rest submerged in the unconscious mind. My own interpretation – and make of this whatever Freudian phallocentrism you will – is that the fingers are three middle fingers. Of course, the fingers belong to no single, definitive source and surely not everyone will interpret the piece this way. Why am I so sure that the fingers in Pearlin's painting are giving me the bird and not pointing toward the heavens or casting votes (the I's have it)? What does it say about me and my unconscious mind that I see the heads of penises in each fingernail? Victoria May's sculpture, *I Couldn't Reach Him*, points back to the unconscious as well, although here it is a more literal signifier: the bed. A repurposed theater curtain plays the part of roiling bedsheets, presenting its own play on interpretation: When is a sheet not a sheet? When it is a theater curtain. And it is behind this curtain, on the stage of the unconscious, that our dreams play out. (As for the fake fur bristling between the folds – this must be the hair of my lover, or else some abhorrent pubic growth.)

Marc D'Estout's sculpture *More Or Less Imperceptible*, also evokes the physical location of dreams. A pillow piled with pennies, each pressed with the letters, the topmost grouping of which spell out "FLATTEN." Upon closer inspection, other words emerge: "COINS," and the title of the piece, too. Here, language is found to be a product of chance as meaning springs from the glittering pool in the center of the pillow. Language is our main mode of interpreting the

world, and recently we have seen several public figures play fast and loose with meaning, (on Twitter, in the “fake news”) contributing to the current surreal moment.

In some cases, the artists’ interpretations are equally loose. Martin Scholten’s *Ocker 1-3*, for instance, is an abstraction of Walter Robinson’s strikingly visual dream of a group of children running in panic on a patch of bubbling earth. But it is the return to abstraction that reinfuses this interpretation with a surreal, dreamlike quality. We aren’t quite sure what we’re looking at, a feeling familiar as the experience of trying to assess our surroundings in a dream – with each approach toward recognition, the object seems to escape us. The less literal the artists’ interpretation, the more expansive the viewers’ imaginings become. Abstraction is often referred to as a kind of Rorschach test, though what one “sees” here, what this visual abstraction evokes, is the dream state which feels, perhaps not surprisingly, similar to our normal mode of existence.

Balint Zsako’s and Robert Hardgrave’s paintings take a liberal approach to interpretation, each in their own ways. The figures depicted in Zsako’s *B&T55 (The Island)* are loose derivatives of the characters described in Beverly Rayner’s dream, but the artist has also incorporated the text of the dream description itself, swirling around the edges of a cartoon speech bubble harnessed a crawling female figure. (The bestial mask she wears incorporates a classic Surrealist trope.) While Hardgrave’s *Blackbeard* is the most abstract in its rendering the sense of malaise that comes from looking at the piece is certain, much like Scholten’s *Ocker 1-3*. If Zsako’s painting seems almost to be *of* the dreamer, Hardgrave’s is the most *dreamlike* in its representation of a landscape that is at once indiscernible and indisputably there, as though floating just beyond our cognitive reach.

Mari Andrews’s minimal wire sculpture evokes for me a winding cobblestone street. Immediately, I find myself wandering the slick streets of Brassai’s Paris, in pursuit of some object of desire – perhaps a phantasmal lover. Andrews’s second submission, another wire sculpture, strikes me as overtly vaginal. Here, perhaps, is the lover, or the Freudian, fetishistic reduction of her anatomy, that I am seeking in the Parisian streets. This experience of association, of locating meaning in a series of referents, is characteristic of not only the surreal experience but the human experience to begin with. And I am left wondering what this evocation

of fetishism in me says about my media-saturated experience, particular to modern life. Am I seeing what I want to see, as I wander through the dream world, or am I seeing what I have been subliminally programmed to see? If the world, along with its media and military, has become surreal, is free association still free?

In an interpretation reminiscent of the fictions of Borges, it is not the dream sequence Eiko Borcharding illustrates in his drawings – a whimsical narrative of a woman wearing red pants running to meet a seed collector at the library – nor even the seed collector themselves, but the collection, or even more specifically, what looks like a page from one of the library’s folios on seed collecting. Walter Robinson similarly extracts a detail from the dream of Victoria May – a bathing cap worn by the dreamer as she walks down a jewel encrusted asphalt street. These pieces act as props, artifacts extracted from travels in the unconscious. This serves to locate the dream back inside physical reality, creating an inextricable link between the two and blurring the fact/fiction boundary. Rather than being fantastical, this blur is exactly the condition of modern life, an uncertainty as to what is real and what isn’t as meaning deteriorates and more and more of our physical existence seems to slip into the virtual.

Other interpretations are strikingly literal. Take for example Beverly Rayner’s sculpture *To kill time* or Catie O’Leary’s collage *Perching Beaks*. In the former, the dream features panda bears doing a jigsaw puzzle and even the title of the sculpture is taken directly from a line spoken by one of the characters in the dream: “The pandas are in quarantine and have to kill time.” In the case of the latter, the collage illustrates the written description as though it were stage direction, several large birds gathered around the tiny figure of a man on a bridge. While Leif Low-Beer’s interpretation of Eiko Borcharding’s dream appears abstract, it is almost verbatim in its replication of the referent. It is in fact Borcharding’s dream that is an abstract nightmare of yarn unwinding from an underarm cavity, and Low-Beer’s only major contribution is a figurative one: the silhouettes of Beardsleyesque little men with enormous, phallic noses and cocks to match. As in the work of Borcharding and Robinson, it is this literality that inverts the dream world, that says, This, too, is a form of reality.

Curator Vanessa Woods's own submission is a collage, the medium in which the discrepancy between the literal and the abstract, the real and the unreal, is most taut. Woods collages using photographs, traditionally considered indisputable indices of things that once did or do exist. By recontextualizing these referents in service of the explicitly unreal – that is to say, the dream – Woods introduces a kind of nightmare logic to her interpretation of Mari Andrews's dream in which Andrews is "tired and scared [...] and can't get out of the building." The visual repetition of boxes within boxes works as an allegory for the Freudian model of consciousness, suggesting that the structure from which the dreamer is unable to escape is perhaps the mind itself.

The notion of being trapped within one's own mind is both frightening and emancipatory. Because interpretation mediates our experience of the outside world it is that very interpretation that constitutes reality, and not some secondary form of it. In other words: We are trapped in our minds and the sooner we realize it, the sooner we can change our reality – or surreality, as the case may be. Experience will only be surreal until we are able to adjust our perception to the collective shift in semiotics. Traditionally, it is the role of the artist to interpret the world, to make sense of their times, to wrestle with the present moment. Perhaps the present moment is most accurately portrayed by the artist's failure to reconcile it, by their defeat or slip into madness. Certainly, Breton's turn to the irrational and dream logic tells us more about the schizoid reality of post-war Europe than any of the positivistic records. The artist is not the victor, but the one who affords themselves the luxury to dream, to go mad – to face the reality on reality's terms and envision a different world. We invite you to join them.

Max Blue

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