"TINSELTOWN IN THE RAIN: THE SURREALIST DIASPORA IN LOS ANGELES 1935–1969"
CURATED BY MAX MASLANSKY
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It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession.
—André Breton

For the few artists that were serious, when they came out here, they had no audience, no patronage, and if they liked it out here, they'd better paint for their own satisfaction! So they did their best work, because there was no competition. They didn't walk along Fifty-seventh Street or the equivalent, or rue Boetie in Paris or rue de Seine, to see what is going on; or look in the art columns to see what is fashionable now, or who's getting the works, who's being lauded. It just didn't exist. You really had to love art. Therefore, you did the things for your own satisfaction, you worked on the same damn thing year in and year out until you got something to your satisfaction. And it ended there. This was the situation here.
—Lorser Feitelson

Since the birth of surrealism in the 1920s, whose founders were as fragmented as its inheritors, it has always been impossible to define it through the lens of one artist, group, or description, let alone one city. Akin to Alfred Jarry's *pataphysics*, it appears easier to define surrealism's legacy by its negation. As such, the clichés of European surrealism, primarily its oneiric irrationalities, serve as a good point of departure to understanding how these values developed into something deeply multifaceted and indigenous to Los Angeles when they arrived in California. In the 1920s, local painters, sculptors, and filmmakers in L.A. started to move beyond theatrical pictorialism, blending realism with the outlandish. They self-actualized their work through Bretonian estrangement tactics, combining these with pop-cultural references and other modernist tributaries, with some artists even practicing in the occult. But it was the architects of the movie studio system, who produced feverish cartoons and live-action dreams, that set the tone that was degraded or developed by younger generations well past the high tide of psychedelia. Most of all, everyone saw fit to absorb elements of the surrealist diaspora already immanent in the city itself: its juxtapositions of desert and ocean, glamour and banality, nonnative palms and earthquakes were enough to spur or confuse the imagination of anyone.

Some of the tangible elements of European surrealism had initially come to LA in the art collection of Walter and Louise Arensberg, when they settled in Hollywood in the 1920s. Marcel Duchamp, a close friend, advised the couple's acquisitions. The young Philip Goldstein (later Guston), who had visited the Arensberg's collection, was especially affected by paintings by Giorgio De Chirico, and would carry this influence for the rest of his life. In the ensuing decade, Guston and many others decamped for New York, the country's de facto art capital. Although local modernist gallery exhibitions started to appear, Los Angeles remained a regional backwater. This is partly evinced by the brisk demise of

Copley Galleries in Beverly Hills, founded by William Copley and his brother-in-law John Ployardt in the late ’40s. Folding his gallery after only six months of operation, Copley soon fled to Paris to pursue a career as an artist. Before caving to the “lamentations of the bookkeeper,” however, Copley Galleries staged the first West Coast exhibitions for Max Ernst, Roberto Matta, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, and René Magritte. Copley and Ployardt failed to attract collector support, but local artists—including Peter Krasnow, Man Ray (who lived in L.A. from 1940–1951), Knud Merrild, Eugene Berman, Helen Lundeberg, and Lorser Feitelson—visited their gallery regularly during its short tenure, as the gallery succeeded at aligning, if only momentarily, a scattered group of artists in an otherwise sleepy outpost.

Feitelson and Lundeberg, along with Harold Lehman, Reuben Kadish, Edward Weston, Philip Guston, Knud Merrild, and others, were arguably the first LA residents to absorb and produce their own critique of European surrealism, in the late ’20s to early ’30s. With Feitelson and Lundeberg in the lead, some of these artists sought to eliminate surrealism’s exoticism and intractable puzzles. They called themselves the “Post-Surrealists,” or, alternately, the “Subjective Classicists.” In a 1938 manifesto, Helen Lundeberg described the group’s focus as “the normal functioning of the mind: its meanderings, logical in sequence though not in ensemble, its perceptions of analogy and idea-content in forms and groups of forms unrelated to size, time or space.”

Contrary to the cliché of Hollywood as a hedonistic Gomorrah, the Post-Surrealists took an almost Calvinist approach against the affected eccentricity of European production. The painting in this exhibition by Lundeberg, *Untitled Composition (Landscape)* (1948), provokes a somber and symbolic comparison between a pockmarked stone and a defoliated plant in a desert landscape. Lundeberg forged such depictions as a subjective and structured chain of ideas, linking to overarching themes of human relationships, the natural world, and the metaphysical. Her works were defanged of Freud—giving scant acknowledgement to him, unconcerned with his theories of the libidinal unconscious. Many European surrealists, by contrast, felt directly indebted to Freud—in particular, to his concept of the fetish, upon which the viewer projected her sublimated sexual desires. Karl Marx had noticed the same cognitive mechanism at work in fetishized objects when their “values” became monetized. Breton’s aims, for example, were partly borne from both notions: he sought to spur the dialectic between the dream and reality, as well as expose the desiring machine in capitalist culture. For European surrealists, the surreal art object (or *any* art object) was a symptom: it was either a screen for the sublimated, or commodity-as-critique. L.A.’s Post-Surrealists bypassed this condition altogether, no

matter how political or social a work's message may have been, instead provoking the viewer's introspection to reverse course toward the macrocosmic.

A less polemical, but equally quasi-mystical vein of surrealism would also be found in the works of Lee Mullican, Agnes Pelton, Ynez Johnston, Claire Falkenstein, Peter Krasnow, Knud Merrild, Leonard Edmondson, and others. Each of these artists had differing tendencies, but they all strived for a sacred form of plastic dynamism, whose aim was to entrance the viewer into another realm by way of repetition, color, and primal imagery. They composed their works as detailed patterns and geometries, the origins of which were based in nature, nonobjective painting, and pre-Columbian art from the Americas, Africa, and South Pacific. Merrild, the second eldest of this group (born two years after Krasnow), differed from the others in his relatively minimal approach. Having channeled his efforts through hybrids of European modernist techniques over decades, Merrild's most unique works were his "flux" paintings of the 1940s, made by pouring house paint onto wood surfaces to form congealed patterns. Roughly contemporary with Jackson Pollock's drip paintings (incidentally, Pollack attended L.A.'s Manual Arts High School with Philip Guston), Merrild's chance-based works were analogs, though likely not consciously, of Georges Bataille's *l'informe*. Bataille's attempt to desublimate the operations within surrealism beyond the point Breton had, to erode the boundaries between figure and ground, to level the base with the exalted, later held sway in the work of future Los Angeles artists Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and others. Merrild's "flux" series would be the first harbinger of this generation until the opening of Ferus Gallery in 1957.

By the late 1930s, surrealism had fully incepted itself into American culture. Walt Disney was a leading recruiter of artistic émigrés from Europe, churning out surrealist tropes for family-friendly entertainment. Warner Bros.' *Looney Tunes*, headed by the American dandy Leon Schlesinger, was a competitor. One *Looney Tunes* short, *Porky in Wackyland* (1938), features Porky Pig piloting into Africa to find the last surviving dodo bird. Upon crashing into "Darkest Africa," rendered as an infantilized Dali-esque landscape, Porky is confronted by groups of bizarre creatures, including racial stereotypes of jazz musicians and other pop-cultural references, in comedic fashion. Here, even the domestic "other" is disturbingly equated with the phantasmagoria of the unconscious—or is figured, at best, as a vehicle for estrangement. Similar scenarios, both subtle and blatant, persist even to the present in all factions of

Hollywood. The alien character Jar Jar Binks in the *Star Wars* prequel *The Phantom Menace* (1999), who bared dread-like locks and a Jamaican accent, attests to this unfortunate legacy.

Prior to these idiosyncratic works of the 1930s, Walt Disney had been long been infatuated with early 20th century European illustration, such as that of German proto-surrealist Heinrich Kley (1863-194?), whose drawings of anthropomorphized animals cavorting with a genteel but industrialized society laid the groundwork for sequences in Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) and *Dumbo* (1941). Other European illustrators, like Albert Hurter and Gustaf Tenggren, would directly contribute to Disney productions, injecting dark humor (Hurter) and a labyrinthine sense of space (Tenggren), although many of these collaborations were short-lived: Walt was always on a restless quest for new innovation and talent. Fresh from a failed stint at Paramount, Oskar Fischinger was one such émigré recruit when he was hired to devise an ambitious sequence for *Fantasia*; sadly, Fischinger quit the project without credit due to the heavy alterations ordered by Disney. Frustrated by Hollywood's bureaucracy, he often painted on canvas and worked to patent a "color organ" called the Lumigraph. His paintings and abstract films show the influence of automatic drawing and even elements of synesthesia, the latter a form of "instinctual surrealism" whose aim, like Kandinsky's, was a complete reliance on the phenomenological interpretation of outside stimuli.

When LA's surrealist diaspora injected new concepts into Hollywood productions, often without credit to its original authors, its spirit was inherently found within film techniques that could layer photography and extend or compress time, rendering dreams as more real than life itself. These surrealists, like Breton, saw cinema as the form that could lead to the resolution of dream and reality, two realms that were often "so contradictory," in Breton's words. The relationship of the subject to the world, made either ego-syntonic or asyntonic, could be manipulated by cascading a menagerie of images that would clash and/or collude on screen—and do so more viscerally than ever could acting and dialogue alone, whose lineage from theater was based in mimesis. Disney's frenetic animation *The Three Caballeros* (1944) is one film that effectively heightened this dialectic between dreams, desires, and reality. It was advertised as the first production to blend live-action actors with animation, even though this technique was almost as old as animation itself. *The Three Caballeros* starred Donald Duck in an adventure through Latin America, engaging in various fantastic scenarios while compulsively seeking sexual fulfillment with live-action women, only to be frustrated at every turn. Intuitively aware that this would strike a chord with servicemen stationed overseas during the war (as well

as with their wives and girlfriends at home), Disney had a knack for spinal-tapping the mechanisms of prurient longing. This approach to depicting frantic drives had arguably begun with films like Buñuel and Dali's collaborations in the 1920s, but had also taken shape in the Los Angeles's underground cinema, invisible to the studio system.

In 1943, Maya Deren and her then husband Alexander Hammid conceived *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a film produced on a shoestring budget that not only critiqued staid Hollywood studio conventions, but also (ostensibly) the artists' own marriage. Especially radical for its use of match cuts, editing, and repetition, *Meshes of the Afternoon* later became a common staple of film courses, and has ever since introduced new generations to these devices while slowly filtering them into the mainstream. Filmed at a Hollywood bungalow, the film's protagonists, portrayed by Deren and Hammid, witness multiple versions of themselves in interwoven, elliptical scenarios. Both Freudian and feminist, its moody-broody ambience exposes the underlying death drive of Hollywood noir. Also overlaid in the film were Deren's occult interests, intimated by a menacing black-hooded figure bearing a mirrored face roaming the bungalow. Fascinated by Haitian vodou and believing she had been a cat in a past life, Deren's place in independent cinema as a shaman-auteur could be considered inseparable from Kenneth Anger's, though they never met. Anger's film *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1953), made exactly ten years after *Meshes of the Afternoon*, starring Cameron, Anaïs Nin, Samson De Brier, and Curtis Harrington, owed much to Thelema, the religion of Aleister Crowley, and other myths and mythological characters, real and imagined. Memorably focused on Cameron, as terrifying as she is captivating, Anger emphasized her mystical presence as a medium. Maya Deren encapsulated such depictions of ritualistic performance in her book, *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form, and Film*:

> The ritualistic form treats the human being not as the source of the dramatic action, but as a somewhat depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such depersonalization is not the deconstruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specializations and confines of personality. He becomes part of a dynamic whole, which, like all such creative relationships, in turn, endow its parts with a measure of its larger meaning.

Cameron embraced her role as a "witch" in Anger's film—and in her life—with unrivaled relish. Alongside her film roles, writings, and performances, she also created drawings and paintings portraying various entities and mind states. One of Cameron's drawings in *Tinseltown in the Rain* depicts Anger in the form of a reclining waif-goddess. That she borrowed elements from romantic symbolism and the surrealists almost becomes irrelevant in comparison to her work's Tantric energy, whose drives precede *any* historical art movement. Cameron's drawn daemonic goddesses stemmed from ritualist compulsion rather than stylistic continuum—and for this reason her work appears unusually

guileless. Cameron was even known to burn her own work in sacrifice—not as symbolic gesture, but as a means to reach deities. She later refused to exhibit in galleries entirely, following a police raid on a Wallace Berman exhibition containing her sexually explicit drawing at Ferus Gallery in 1957. These sexual "charges" (in several senses) reverberate with Bretonian surrealism, one of the mandates of which was to imbue art objects with the power to revolutionize social and/or psychic forces, destructive or otherwise.

Others who had shown at Ferus Gallery in the late '50s and early '60s, such as Wallace Berman, Ken Price, Ed Ruscha, Llyn Foulkes, John Altoon, and Ed Kienholz, continued to exhibit often within the local gallery system, political climate notwithstanding. Altoon's drawing in this exhibition, with its spindly, agile line work, reveal a restless id behind advertising illustration, as if every product for sale were doorway to a seedy bacchanal. Kienholz mined darker territory in his sculptures and installations using junk—the disjecta of American capitalism—finding a luxury value within waste that perhaps single-handedly spawned the whole genre of assemblage. The act of reassembling preexisting heterogeneous objects, altering their original contexts and use values, is one of surrealism's enduring legacies. Taking the Dadaists as an antecedent, surrealism activated the use of "low" materials as a form of resistance to the presumed nobility of traditional materials and the dominant symbolic order.

By the early 1960s, conceptualism and minimalism were on the rise as dominant avant-garde forms, and surrealism as it had been known in the '30s and '40s had become a colloquial language in mass culture. The young Robert Williams noticed as much while attending art school in early-'60s LA: surrealism was now officially a retrograde form. Starting his career as an illustrator for hot-rod culture under "Big Daddy" Roth, Williams embraced surrealism as a "low brow" language. While remnants of surrealism (i.e., the illogical) could be found in "elevated" forms like minimalism and conceptualism, its appearance there was primarily a red herring, almost a comedic aside for several of its practitioners, with few exceptions. William Leavitt, later known for his theatrically haunted installations, inflected his tripartite photo piece, *Random Selection: Bag, Glove, Fire, Mice,* 1969, with a mystery of the unexplained occurrence, in spite of its conceptual heritage that favored intellectual pleasure over the visceral. Robert Williams's embrace of the psychedelic and "realist" strain of surreal pictorialism, however, was conceptualism's Antichrist, as untimely to its practitioners as it was timely to the punk and post-punk scene that followed in the 1980s.

Surrealism and its baroque outgrowth, psychedelia, briefly emblemized a social counterculture in the mid-to-late-1960s, before seeing its final backlash in the ’70s. Arriving in Los Angeles in the mid-1970s, young artists Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw, like Williams and many others, saw surrealism as a period style, having degenerated “from a revolutionary force into an advertising gimmick.” It left nothing but “senseless imagery” behind. Shaw and Kelley accordingly endeavored to cut-up, appropriate, and decode this visual language that individuated their future work, hoping to see beyond what William S. Burroughs called the “grey veil” and into the invisible ordering structure of culture. Just as Lundeberg and Feitelson had critiqued surrealism with a sober and chaste intellect to reveal mystical truths, Kelley and Shaw parsed the phenomenon that psychedelic and low-brow surrealism had become. With a sober and deviant intellect, they sought to expose that reality, or any reality, as a social construct. This would be nothing new for Post-Surrealist (and postmodernist) culture of course, which had always borrowed old methods of estrangement for (hopefully) new applications.

The generations of artists that followed in Los Angeles after 1970, like those for most of its history, came from elsewhere in the country and world. The reason why this continues is apparent to most: every city, upon close examination, contains surrealist tendencies, but perhaps very few have such “nice weather” and (at least until ten years ago), jobs, and relatively cheap rent. But it was the surrealist-infused entertainment complex built in Los Angeles that had set the foundation for the diaspora in tandem with the mythos of “the West.” This hybrid had spurred the potential for self-aggrandizement in LA (Dali), the application of quasi-utopian ideals, whether mystical or occultish (Lundeberg, Cameron), yet in contrast to the city’s fierce class distinctions, traffic, ticky-tacky architecture, and drought. Perhaps this civic brew’s most ghoulish manifestation was the Black Dahlia murder in 1947, framed as an “exquisite corpse” in the real—allegedly by Dr. George Hodel, an art-savvy friend of Man Ray—while at its most perfunctory iteration, the current dominance of reality television, in which “average” protagonists are made stars by virtue of simply being filmed. Artists in Los Angeles continue to feed off this environmental feedback loop between dream and reality, making work reflecting this point in time in cultural history. Man Ray said it all, when he mused about his decade in LA: “There was more Surrealism rampant in Hollywood than all the surrealists could invent in a lifetime.”

–Max Maslansky

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