Visual Surrealism: A History and Analysis of the Surrealist Image

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IN HIS MANIFESTO OF SURREALISM, ANDRÉ BRETON DECLARED THAT THE MEDIUM OF SURREALIST PSYCHIC AUTOMATISM WAS AUTOMATIC WRITING. YET, DESPITE THE INITIAL RESISTANCE TO IT, IMAGE HAS SURPASSED TEXT AS THE PRIMARY EXPRESSION OF THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT. IN THIS ESSAY I DISCUSS THE DIVERSE VISUAL MEDIA AND METHODS THAT HAVE SUCCESSFULLY FIT UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF SURREALISM. I EXAMINE FOUR ARTISTS’ CONTRIBUTIONS: MAX ERNST’S LA FORÊT, RENE MAGRITTE’S THE KEY OF DREAMS, MAN RAY’S MARQUISE CASATI, AND RAOUl UBAC’S THE BATTLE OF THE AMAZONS.

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DESPITE the initial focus on automatic poetry as the central practice of Surrealism, André Breton’s Manifesto of Surrealism sparked the influential addition of visual art to the movement. The Manifesto outlined the underlying philosophy of Surrealism: it was to be a revolution opposed to bourgeois logic that resulted in wars and elitism—a movement that would extend beyond art with the goal of freeing the imagination.

Surrealism, as Breton explained it, valued the undervalued—“dreams, coincidences, correspondences, the marvelous, the uncanny; a reciprocal exchange, connecting conscious and unconscious thought.” The main medium of the movement was psychic automatism practiced through automatic writing. This technique involved allowing one to relax into a meditative state and write thoughts quickly without interference of the overactive mind. Breton and his collaborators believed that automatic writing enabled the free flow of imaginative thought from the mind to paper, eliminating the logical reflective aspects of thought.

Breton developed psychic automatism when the idea of a man cut in half by a window came suddenly to him—an evocative visual. Although it would be overly simplistic to cite this single point as the birth of Surrealism, this moment testifies to the importance of images in the beginning of Surrealism. Though the focus was on writing, Breton specifically noted the striking quality of visual descriptions in his praise of automatic text. In the Manifesto, he notes that his and Soupault’s writings in The Magnetic Fields contain “a considerable choice of images of a quality such that we would not have been capable of preparing a single one in longhand, a very special picturesque quality.” The initial exclusion of visual art could not have been an averse to the Surrealist image; his own praise is a testament to the importance of visual elements.

Despite this, visual art was not explicitly accepted as a valid Surrealist expression at first. The central concern was how to achieve the aims of automatic writing using images instead. Breton valued automatism in part because it presented thoughts directly, avoiding representation, which was “an invitation to deceit.” He and others wondered how paintings, which took careful planning and execution, or photographs, with their artistic manipulation and instantaneous representation of reality, could capture the quick flow of unfiltered thought. Visuals were present in Surrealist thought from the start, but could visual arts be a way to liberate the imagination in the way Breton believed automatic writing did? Many of these concerns were a result of mistak-
ing automatic writing as the sole and definitive practice of Surrealism. Although a defining characteristic of Surrealism is “psychic automa-
tion,” Breton recognized this was not limited to writing, as long as the artist “proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought.”

In painting and photography, images replaced words, although words were not necessarily excluded. Although an observer can not read through an image the way they could an auto-
matic text, s/he can still observe the product of direct thought in a way similar to automatic writing.” Surrealist visual art could have as much, if not more, depth as automatic writing and offer multiple levels. On one level, the viewer could observe the objects and their arrangement, or one could focus on the technique, the intellectual meaning, or the interpretation of symbols and their own impressions of the painting. In addition to presenting the artist’s own inner thought, visual automatism could engage the observer as well.

Once Surrealism moved past the initial privileging of text over image, Breton increased his interest in visual automatism. In various ways, Breton had always acknowledged the importance of photography. He used photographs in his own work, most notably his Surrealist novel Nadja. Breton also endorsed Man Ray’s work as Surreal-
ist and collaborated with him throughout the 1920s and 30s. Eventually, with Breton’s public approval, both photography and painting became closely associated with Surrealist art.

**VISUAL SURREALISM EXAMINED**

The painters Max Ernst and René Magritte, along with photographers Man Ray and Raoul Ubac, provide an interesting study of the diversity of Surrealist methods in the visual arts. In Max Ernst’s 1928 painting, *La Forêt*, a lone bird peeks out of the jagged, metallic trees that grate across the canvas and a large moon-like orb rises from the forest into the foreboding sky.14 A painting by René Magritte shows six panels with straightfor-
ward images—an egg, a shoe, a hat, a candle, a glass, and a hammer—each with a word written beside them that seems to not correspond.15 The two paintings show human shapes. Man Ray’s shows a woman’s face, double-exposed, con-
trontational; Ubac’s, a striking group of fighting female figures. Across media and methods, these four works are joined under the category of Sur-
realism. As we compare these images, we ask, what unifies them? In this section, we will show how these artists’ contributions, though different in style, technique, and their interpretation of the Surrealism, each qualify as Surrealist art.

Much of Max Ernst’s contribution to Surrealism is the expression of Breton’s first definition of Surrealism that referred to “psychic automa-
tion in its pure state.”16 Ernst responded to the challenges against Surrealist visual art by developing a series of automatic art techniques, such as frottage, grattage, decalcomania, and oscilla-
tion.17 Ernst describes his method as relying on nothing but the intensification of the instincts of the mind by appropriate technical means, excluding any conscious mental direction (of reason, taste, morals), reducing to the extreme the active part of the person who had been, until then, called “the author” of works. It’s as a specta-
tor that the author is present, indifferent or pas-
sionate, at the birth of his work, and watches the phases of its development...the role of the painter is to detect and project what is seen.18

Ernst’s description reminds us that the artist and writer utilize different tools, but to similar ends. Likewise the Surrealist artist and writer can use their tools to distance themselves from their skill and the premeditative aspects of their work. By doing so, Ernst was able to add more than one level of automatism, thus satisfying the main criterion of Surrealism.

La Forêt is an excellent example of Ernst’s automatic painting style. To create this piece, Ernst employed grattage. Similar to frottage,19 this technique involved placing a canvas thick with paint on top of a textured surface and scrap-
ing the paint over the canvas. For La Forêt, the result is crooked rows of rough edged metallic strips. In the center is a thin orange area that appears to rise out of the metallic strips. After this first step, Ernst interpreted the paint-
ning by observing it and embellishing details that he saw. The bird in the bottom center of the painting was added after the grattage stage was executed. Through these steps, frottage seems to provide greater access to the imagination than automatic writing. In the first step, Ernst freed himself from purpose-driven painting; without a plan and without his traditional painterly skills, he was able to engage in the automatism Breton described as a degree of automatism called for in a Breton’s definition of Surrealism. Unlike Ernst, René Magritte did not strive for automatism—at least not the same kind as Ernst. Instead he planned his paintings with a forethought and attention to their execution. In many of his paintings, he focused on juxtaposing ordinary objects to arouse the imagination and discover curious, mysterious, and unspoken associations. His interest for these objects often came from dreams and these turned into autobiographical riddles that he pre-
cented for viewers to work through. Magritte’s interest in automatism was perhaps the second explanation of the movement in the form of an encyclopedia entry: “Surrealism is based in the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the om-
nipotence of dream, in the disintegrated play of thought.”20 In “La Ligne de vie,” an autobiograph-
ical explanation of his work, Magritte explains the impetus behind his work. During the interpretive step, he made instantaneous automatic connections with the painting and thus allowed his imagination to guide him.

In addition to grattage and frottage, Ernst also used osculation and decalcomania. Decalco-
mania is a process that Ernst developed in 1925. It consisted of spreading paint onto what was usually a second painting, with the first one serving as a guide. He used osculation and decalcomania to free himself from purpose-driven painting in order to distance himself from his skill and the premeditative aspects of his work. This involved swinging a paint can by a string over a painting in order to free himself from paintbrush, pencil, or other traditional artist tools. This technique inspired later movements of abstract expressionism, particularly Jackson Pollock. With his evolving methods of painting, Ernst achieved a degree of automatism called for in Breton’s definition of Surrealism.

In order to achieve this freedom, Magritte “distanced himself from his skill and the premeditative aspects of his work.”21 In “The Key of Dreams,” a painting by Magritte, there are four objects, each with a word below it that does not always necessarily relate to the image: a suitcase reads “sky,” a penknife—“bird,” a leaf—“Table,” and a sponge—“sponge.” For

Image: La Forêt by René Barby

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Much of Max Ernst’s contribution to Surrealism is the expression of Breton’s first definition of Surrealism that referred to “psychic automatism in its pure state.” Ernst responded to the challenges against Surrealist visual art by developing a series of automatic art techniques, such as frottage, grattage, decalcomania, and oscillation. Ernst describes his method as relying on nothing but the intensification of the instincts of the mind by appropriate technical means, excluding any conscious mental direction (of reason, taste, morals), reducing to the extreme the active part of the person who had been, until then, called “the author” of works. It’s as a spectator that the author is present, indifferent or passionate, at the birth of his work, and watches the phases of its development...the role of the painter is to detect and project what is seen. Ernst’s description reminds us that the artist and writer utilize different tools, but to similar ends. Likewise the Surrealist artist and writer can use their tools to distance themselves from their skill and the premeditative aspects of their work. By doing so, Ernst was able to add more than one level of automatism, thus satisfying the main criterion of Surrealism.

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Man Ray’s photographs are an expression of automatism and the technique of double-exposure, both automatism and the technique of double-exposure, both of which aroused the imaginative thought. By using a simple style, somewhat evocative of children’s books, Man Ray worked to illustrate this belief in automatism by directing the viewer to make connections between the objects portrayed in his photographs and to reflect inward. The frame cut-out—edited—the world to get an altered view between reality and dreams. By focusing our attention to a specific area within the frame of the photo, the observer focuses on what s/he cannot normally see. Photography changes our experience of the normal.

Man Ray’s 1922 photograph, *Marquise Coeuriot*, aimed to present the world as symbol for our interpretation, which in turn revealed our unconscious thought. This photograph is best analyzed in terms of its effect on the viewer, although it can also be analyzed as an expression of Man Ray’s unconscious thought. The image is a woman staring straight into the camera. Her image is double-exposed; the result is a blurred, dreamy double- vision of her. Man Ray makes a Surrealist statement in his choice of both subject and method. As Rosalind Krauss suggests, the continual return to the female body as a subject supported Breton’s desire to join unconscious desire with reality. The subject’s penetrating yet seductive stare is enlarged by the double-exposure. By photographing the woman head-on, Man Ray forces us to acknowledge her as well as ourselves and our unconscious desires, whatever they may be. The image also serves as a gateway between mirror where both subject and viewer reflect one another. Within Man Ray’s frame, we find a double arrow pointing back into ourselves, indicating the real subject.

The photograph stands as a sign for ourselves. As in a dream, by decoding the image, we decode ourselves. This idea contributes to the Surreal- ist interest in the desires and thoughts of the unconscious. It takes a photograph—something outside of and produced by us—to exteriorize our thoughts and better understand the interior of our minds.

Man Ray’s oeuvre is diverse. Some of his photographic techniques achieved a greater degree of automatism, such as the rayogram. A rayogram is the already-established photogram technique renamed after Man Ray. Creating a rayogram involved placing objects onto photographic paper and exposing them to light to capture an imprint of the objects. Other Man Ray’s photographs were unpatented, “straight” images of female figures, often his lovers or assistants. Through his use of these techniques and others, Man Ray’s career proves that although we can find similarity between Surrealist works, there is no style distinct to Surrealism.

Raoul Ubac was most involved in the Surrealist movement from 1936–1939, and worked with photography until he returned to drawing and painting in 1945. His photographs serve as important contributions to Surrealist visual art in that they alter our perception of ordinary objects. Ubac joined the movement as a photographer who focused on “stretching the [object’s] poetic significance to the fullest.” He used various media and exposing them to light to capture an imprint of the objects. Others of Man Ray’s photographs are best analyzed in terms of its effect on the viewer, although it can also be analyzed as an expression of Man Ray’s unconscious thought. The image is a woman staring straight into the camera. Her image is double-exposed; the result is a blurred, dreamy double- vision of her.

Ubac also used automatic and non-automatic photos. Man Ray’s oeuvre is diverse. Some of his photographic techniques achieved a greater degree of automatism, such as the rayogram. A rayogram is the already-established photogram technique renamed after Man Ray. Creating a rayogram involved placing objects onto photographic paper and exposing them to light to capture an imprint of the objects. Other Man Ray’s photographs were unpatented, “straight” images of female figures, often his lovers or assistants. Through his use of these techniques and others, Man Ray’s career proves that although we can find similarity between Surrealist works, there is no style distinct to Surrealism.

Ubac joined the movement as a photographer who focused on “stretching the [object’s] poetic significance to the fullest.” He used various media and exposing them to light to capture an imprint of the objects. Ubac’s utilization of solarization, negative printing, and montaging of objects onto photographic paper, exist as examples of divergent yet successful approaches to achieving the aims of Surrealism. These artists’ differing techniques prove that Surrealism is more than a passing style; it is a movement that accommodates diverse technical approaches to utilizing the changes in light distribution give a sense of the violation of personal space. The distorted bodies conflict with our expectations of how photographed bodies should look. The effect is a disturbing, dream-like image that forces the viewer out of her/his ordinary experience.

Visual art was a successful endeavor for the Surrealist project and became the main expression associated with the movement. Ernst’s and Magritte’s paintings, and Man Ray’s and Ubac’s photographs, exist as examples of divergent yet successful approaches to achieving the aims of Surrealism. These artists’ differing techniques prove that Surrealism is more than a passing style; it is a movement that accommodates diverse technical approaches to utilizing the changes in light distribution give a sense of the violation of personal space. The distorted bodies conflict with our expectations of how photographed bodies should look. The effect is a disturbing, dream-like image that forces the viewer out of her/his ordinary experience.