

# Out of this World

*Surrealism may lose touch with reality—but never with its audience.*

BY SUE SPAID

**IF** YOU ENJOY EXPLORING YOUR FANTASY LIFE, INTERPRETING dreams, and/or provoking reactions, you might be a Surrealist at heart. Often working collaboratively, the Surrealists manifested an unprecedented obsession with imagination. Their standards for detail and craft seduced audiences into respecting radical artworks that diffuse reality and defy logic.

Inaugurated by André Breton's 1924 *Surrealist Manifesto*, artists popularized controversial subjects, such as gender-bending and erotic literature, and rarely looked back—except for fear of others' horrified responses to their efforts. This multicontinent movement, spanning

Europe and Central and South America, not only included women, but also heavily mined feminine imagery and harnessed erotic energy to charge viewers, male and female alike. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí created the dream-inspired film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), which contained ghastly, disturbing images reported to have nauseated Buñuel when he screened his own shocking scenes.

As the first generation to scour Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, the Surrealists experimented with automatic writing, delving deep within their subconscious and embracing their fears head-on. Given

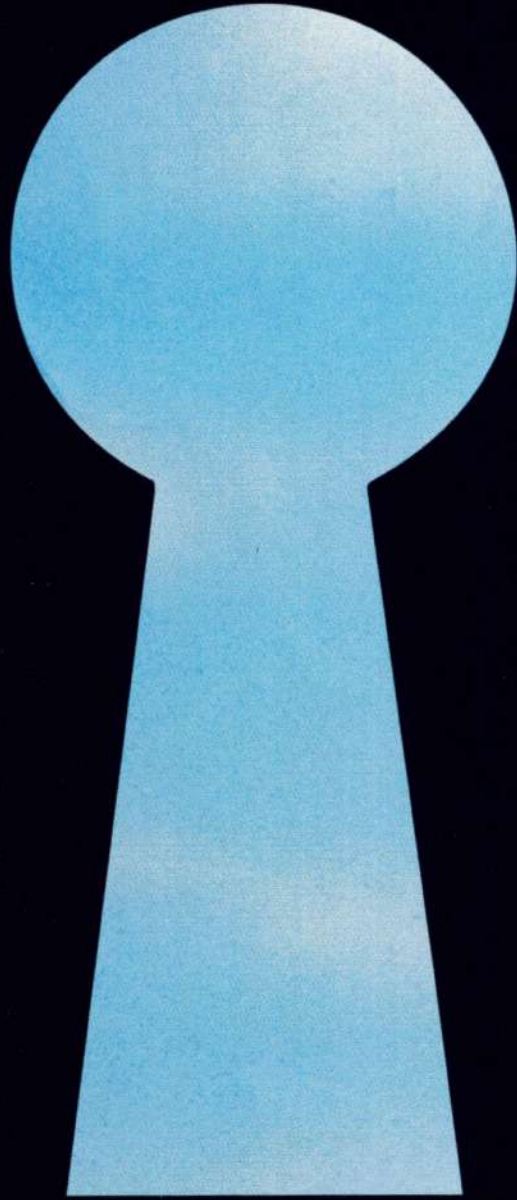
the sexual innuendos explicit in their paintings and photographs, it's no wonder spectators sometimes misjudge them as kinky sexual deviants. A short excursion through *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Research 1928–1932* rather reveals their bark to be louder than their bite. More

interested in titillating and exploring the power of suggestion, they acted out their fantasies in their art. They revered any object that provoked an emotion—especially something frightening or gruesome.


Unlike the sedate showings of Surrealist paintings typically on view in museums, Surrealist exhibitions were famous for spawning sensorial carnivals. Those who visited the 1938 Paris exhibition, which included more than 300 works by 60 artists, first encountered rain drizzling inside a taxi parked outside. Before entering the gallery, where paintings were hung on the revolving doors and a clump of 1,200 coal sacks floated above a man-made pond surrounded by four ornate beds, one came upon 16 female mannequins dressed in bizarre attire—their couturiers included artists Jean Arp, Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Marcel Jean, Joan Miró, Man Ray, and André Masson. For the 1942 "First Papers of Surrealism" exhibition in New York City, Duchamp stranded a line of string rumored to be 16 miles long from painting to painting, entangling viewers in a massive web. Children played ball during the opening to provoke as much mayhem as possible. Despite the 1938 exhibition's memorable smell of roasting coffee beans, plans to scent the 1942 show with cedar were inexplicably dropped.



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In 1947 the Galerie Maeght in Paris hosted the International Surrealist Exposition, literally inviting touch with Duchamp's work *Prière de Toucher*, a 3-D breast, which graced the exhibition's catalog cover. Set designer Frederick Kiesler oversaw construction of the Superstition Room, designed to explore and ward off encroaching anxieties. Ernst's black lake nourished anguish, while Miró's dry waterfall cascaded into David Hare's standing tormented man. Roberto Matta's sculpted *Whist* signaled good luck, and peepholes offered glimpses of Duchamp's green flash from a setting sun. Kiesler's anti-taboo figure, meant to protect against evil, lured people into a complex labyrinth that obscured Surrealist altars. Twelve years later, one entered "Exposition internationale du Surréalisme" (note the word "EROS" embedded in the title) via an orifice-like opening with an undulating pink ceiling that featured lips emanating moans and sighs. The next gallery was draped in green velvet to evoke a mosslike cavern replete with stalagmites and stalactites and faced a red room with a dining table where a nude woman displayed a sumptuous feast from head to toe.

Spanning some 35 years, Surrealism was one of Modernism's longest movements. While its reputation is debatable (indecent, magical, absurd, perverted, genius, whimsical), its wide-ranging influences are certain. Coinciding with the emergence of Art Deco architecture and furniture, Surrealist art and literature influenced myriad commercial practices, such as fashion, interior and set design, advertising, and, of course, film. Versed in psychoanalytic theories, the Surrealists not only recognized visual culture's role in stimulating acquisitive desires, but also embraced this phenomenon while employing it for their own purposes, which were rarely commercial. Canonical art-history books emphasize Surrealist paintings and objects but typically overlook its inventive installations, perhaps because existing documentation doesn't meet publication standards. Not until the late twentieth century, when artists started incorporating human bodies in their works, did Surrealism, especially its lively exhibitions, seem relevant once again.

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