INTERNATIONAL SURREALISM from TATE
Fifty Years of Dreams

It has now been over one hundred years since the publication in Paris of André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* (*Surrealist Manifesto*) in October 1924. What surrealism was (and remains) and what drew people to it are fundamental questions that are bound up with its extraordinary longevity. Beginning as a literary movement, surrealism's original position was associated with revitalizing the image in poetic language, but the most consistent aspiration over that century was towards *freedom*. Writing under the threat of European dictatorships after a decade of activity, Breton affirmed, "Today, more than ever before, *the liberation of the mind*, [which is] the express aim of surrealism, demands as a primary condition . . . *the liberation of man*."[1] This reconciliation of the intellectual and the material required a break with convention and constraints, a rejection of inherited authority and imposed authoritarianism (whether in religion or politics), and a critique of the social inequalities that resulted in the injustices of colonialism and the horrors of the World Wars.

The importance allotted to individual creativity allowed for variety within surrealism, and this may account for the movement's repeated regeneration over time and across many centers internationally. A countercurrent originally founded (not without contradictions) on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and the political theories of Karl Marx, surrealism opposed the conventions of European culture and society that favored rationalism and mechanization and instead offered a revolution in thought. In 1924 Breton provided his quasi-scientific "definition":

> SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Thought dictated, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.[2]

Figure 1

Addressing the question "what is surrealism?" in 1934, Breton identified the movement's activities as directed "against the whole series of intellectual, moral and social obligations that continually . . . weigh down on man."[3] He added:

> We have attempted to present interior reality and exterior reality as two elements in process of unification, of finally becoming *one*. The final unification is the supreme aim of surrealism . . . we have assigned to ourselves the task of confronting these two realities with one another on every possible occasion.[4]

The fortunes of the Parisian group fluctuated wildly in the period between these two statements, but they were balanced by far-reaching alliances with surrealist groups in Belgrade, Brussels, Prague, and elsewhere. While the writers remained central, the visual culture of surrealism—in painting, drawing, collage, photography, film, and object making—spread internationally. Always more an attitude than a style, surrealism's "disinterested play of thought" encompassed a wide range of artistic practices.[5] Many of the artists found potential in conjuring up unexpected juxtapositions of unrelated objects, notably anticipated in the talismanic phrase of the nineteenth-century writer Comte de Lautréamont: "As beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table."[6] Just as this was close to the imagery experienced in dreams to which surrealism allotted renewed value, artists like Dorothea Tanning used convincing illusionism to reveal dreamlike anxieties and repressed desires (fig. 1). Others sought the unexpected through free-flowing "automatic" techniques—such as those deployed by Joan Miró (fig. 2)—which broke with learned academic habits to release unheralded artistic forms. With the addition of experimental film and the assembling of materials into "surrealist

objects," surrealism proposed a comprehensive revolution of artistic practices that set the tone for ensuing generations.

After the first exhibition of surrealism, *La Peinture surréaliste*, was held in Paris in November 1925, surrealist exhibitions proliferated. The public notoriety of the London exhibition in 1936, in particular, encouraged increasingly complex and immersive installations. Through these exhibitions, surrealism promoted its activities and gathered new adherents, and, as a result, these events were controlled from within the movement so as to guard against fashionable simplification. Resisting compromise was especially pertinent in relation to Salvador Dalí, whose individual self-promotion led to him being identified with surrealism even as his attraction to right-wing politics ensured his expulsion from the movement.

In taking a wide view of surrealism to include those who passed through the movement as well as fellow travelers most readily associated with it, *International Surrealism from Tate: Fifty Years of Dreams* follows the larger-scale exhibition of *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (2021–22) and those that celebrated the anniversary of the movement in 2024. The question of how strict a view of surrealism, in its own terms, is offered by this approach must be addressed.[7]

A century on from its foundation, there are several reasons for adopting a more expansive view of the movement's visual culture. With the global reach of its influence, it is not surprising that most accounts have been reductive, confining themselves to familiar individuals and ignoring many who were directly involved

Figure 2

Figure 3

in historical surrealism. To this it should be added that extending the scope is a necessity for all those who seek to investigate the prejudices of the past that persisted even in such a progressive alignment. Most obvious for a long time was the habitual marginalization of women who were—despite this reception—drawn to surrealism. Added to this should be the recognition of the contributions of artists outside the habitual geographical confines of Western Europe and North America who have also been "overlooked." Countering these omissions continues to enrich the understanding of the complexity of surrealism, and it is in the spirit of the movement to address these blind spots, and to recognize that other blind spots remain to be uncovered.

In seeking to meet these aspirations, even partially and from within the substantial Tate collection, the current selection draws upon both the familiar figures and those deserving of further consideration. The selection encompasses major examples of the work of such contributors as Eileen Agar (cover) and Leonora Carrington, and the fellow travelers Louise Bourgeois and Wifredo Lam (fig. 3), while including established surrealists such as Max Ernst and René Magritte. A long trajectory has also allowed for examples of the work of significant later contributors from different geographical centers, including Enrico Baj and Malangatana Ngwenya, alongside such precursors as Paul Klee and Giorgio de Chirico. Many others could have been included.

The exhibition has been conceived in six loose transhistorical sections that provide the flexibility and openness appropriate to the innovative nature of surrealism. Two of these sections address the experimental techniques developed by individual artists either in response to producing works "automatically" and freed from conscious control (Automatism: Angel Images), or by assembling provocative

"surrealist objects" from disparate elements (Objects: The Future of Statues). The overpowering forces of desire liberated from received conventions (Desire: Sleeping Venus) or, by contrast, the natural world's forces of proliferation and decay (Uncanny Nature: The Invisibles) provide two other broad groupings. And the foundational reliance upon the theories of Freud and of Marx determine the sections reflecting the contrasting power of the unconscious mind (Dreams: The Reckless Sleeper) and the moral power of political liberation (Politics: Public Thirst). These rough groupings identify shared concerns, in full recognition of the fact that any single work might be understood in a variety of ways and cannot be limited by such imposed constrictions.

One of the great attractions of surrealism was its internationalism. In an era of violent nationalism, the recognition of a global association of like-minded creators was a lifeline, at different times connecting artists and writers in New York and Santiago de Chile, Paris and Prague, Mexico City and Tokyo. In Martinique, in the midst of the Second World War, the writer Suzanne Césaire described surrealism as "a total activity, which alone is able to free man by revealing his unconscious and . . . that will contribute to people's liberation by illuminating the blind myths that have brought humanity to this point."[8] This total activity and the liberation of the mind were rooted in specific historical conditions in the middle of the twentieth century, but surrealism's legacy continues because it opened a door between the rational and the irrational that gave access to timeless issues of the human condition.

Matthew Gale
Independent Curator

Notes

1. André Breton, "Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?," trans. David Gascoyne, in André Breton, *What is Surrealism?*, (Faber and Faber, 1936), 48.

2. André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (University of Michigan Press, 1969, repr. 1972), 26. Translation modified by Dawn Ades.

3. Breton, "Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?," 48.

4. Breton, "Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?," 49–50.

5. Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, 26.

6. Comte de Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, trans. Paul Knight as *Maldoror* (Penguin Books, 1978), 217.

7. See Stephanie D'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, "The World in the Time of the Surrealists," in *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, exh. cat. (Metropolitan Museum of Art and Tate Modern, 2021–22), 8–31.

8. Suzanne Césaire, "1943: Le Surréalisme et nous," trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (Verso, 1996), 126.

Figures

Cover: Eileen Agar. *Photograph of a figurehead and a wheel*, 1934. Photograph, inkjet print on paper; 2 3/4 x 2 1/2 in. Tate, Presented to Tate Archive by Eileen Agar in 1989 and transferred from the photograph collection in 2012. © Tate. Photo: Tate

Fig. 1: Dorothea Tanning. *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, 1943. Oil on canvas; 16 x 24 in. Tate, Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund and the American Fund for the Tate Gallery 1997. © 2026 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Tate

Fig. 2: Joan Miró. *Women and Bird in the Moonlight*, 1949. Oil on canvas; 41 3/8 x 35 3/8 in. Tate, Purchased 1951. © Successió Miró / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris 2026. Photo: Tate

Fig. 3: Wifredo Lam. *Ibaye*, 1950. Oil on canvas; 44 x 37 1/2 in. Tate, Purchased 1952. Photo: Tate

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