

Table of Contents

Clipped Wings? 1

Clipped Wings?

By Kenneth Cox

At Manchester Art Gallery's Angels of Anarchy exhibition, the academic processing of Surrealism clashed with some of the movement's defining disavowals. Kenneth Cox reports from the shipwreck of institutional PC

Entering the exhibition, passing into a plush, velvety dark red, angled antechamber, illuminated with a projection of the remarkable Claude Cahun's self-portrait of 1927, one of several projected slides, first impressions are good, building a genuine sense of anticipation. After all, this was to be a milestone exhibition, four years in preparation, of surrealist works that had been rarely seen in Britain, by women artists who are little known, if at all, outside of those few who ride the tail of the surrealist comet. After this symbolic act of passing over the threshold, there is an immediately deflating contrast with the conventionality of the gallery space. But what else might one expect? The 'realism' of being in an art gallery suitably restored, with its admittedly pleasant light and spaciousness, any misplaced disappointment is easily dissolved since there is much here to see. Then, like walking into a wall, one is flatly confronted by the first of several didactic notice boards, supposedly there to inform and contextualise, laying bare the curatorial agenda.

[IMAGE]

Image: Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait*, 1927, © Jersey Heritage Trust

The clumsily oversimplified narrative with which we are presented is that, historically, women were somehow denied an equal status within Surrealism and that, from the 1930s onwards, this male dominated 'art movement' was effectively appropriated by women, their strategies thereby taking Surrealism 'beyond itself' (whatever that might mean) in the cause of feminism. A bald quote from Valie Export is used as an ideological prop: 'In serving revolution, Surrealism also served feminism.' Were one to substitute the term 'women's liberation' for 'feminism', there would perhaps not be an issue. Surrealists, women amongst them, such as Annie Le Brun, being foremost in their critiques, have long had a problematic relationship with a feminism ('neo-feminism' as Le Brun terms it) that strives only for the granting of rights and demands, rather than for the total liberation of humankind. One thinks in particular of those middle class career professionals whose real aim is simply to gain parity with their male counterparts, but comfortably within a 'democratic' society that retains its statist power relationships of exploitation and domination. The genuinely radical impetus of Surrealism, perhaps for which the liberation of women is indeed a prerequisite, points towards a struggle by women *and* men together for a free and just society for all.

From the didactic presentation of the works exhibited, as well as in the show's curator Dr. Allmer's catalogue essay, there can be little doubt that its curation is grounded in a particularly outmoded, orthodox, academic-feminist critique of Surrealism advanced mainly in the 1990s by the likes of Georgiana Colville, Katherine Conley, Whitney Chadwick, Rudolf Kuenzli, and Robert Belton, amongst others only too happy to use their 'subject' as both punch bag and cash cow. Their *Blitzkrieg* assaults upon Surrealism in general, and André Breton in particular, are intellectually weak and historically inaccurate; grotesque misrepresentations that sometimes reach paroxysms of derangement. In short, their rabidly biased and often mendacious attacks attempt to characterise Surrealism as but one short step removed from misogyny. (A searing riposte is made by Guy Ducornet, in his *Les parasites du surréalisme*, laying into their calumnies unsparingly.)ⁱ It is disappointing to see similar surrealistophobic distortions being perpetuated in *Angels of Anarchy*, albeit in a somewhat diluted form, when much academic research has itself broadened its scope in revising such one dimensional views. Though we should not be surprised by this asphyxiation of thought in the closed-off world of academia, given its restrictive career hierarchies and adoption of shabby 'scholarship' as canonical, and nor is it particular to any attempted mangling of Surrealism; as Antonin Artaud expressed it in 1925, in his *Letter to the Chancellors of the European Universities*, 'In the narrow tank that you call 'thought', the rays of the spirit rot like old straw.'

It is not uncommon to find feminist academics of either gender claiming surrealist women for their own ideological cause, often to the blatant exclusion of a genuinely surrealist perspective and in contradiction to those women's participation and expressed views. One marvels at the conceited claims of these academics that they have somehow 'discovered' this or that female surrealist, as if they had journeyed to a far off rainforest and classified some unknown flora or fauna. In *Angels of Anarchy* we are told that these newly discovered women artists were previously overlooked or ignored (of course, until unearthed by our intrepid explorers). But ignored by whom? Certainly not within the surrealist movement - nor in its exhibitions, publications and interventions - but ignored by people very much like themselves: career driven academics, art historians, curators and cultural commissars of every stripe. Yet it is Surrealism that, by implication, gets the blame! As Penelope Rosemont has perceptively written in her introduction to *Surrealist Women: an International Anthology*:

Certain critics and curators have attempted to isolate women surrealists from the surrealist movement as a whole, not only by reducing their work to the traditional aesthetic frameworks that surrealists have always resisted but worse yet by relegating them to a subbasement of the art world known as 'Women's Art.' Ironically, the old (mostly male) critics who ignored or minimized women in their studies of surrealism are not that different from these newer (often female) critics who ignore or minimize surrealism itself in their studies of women who took part in it.ⁱⁱ

In an attempt to make sense of a subject, in this case the relationship between women artists and Surrealism itself by imposing such a narrow and oversimplified narrative, with a supporting thematic structure, one can all too easily make nonsense of that subject. As with many large exhibitions of disparate material (is it the 'Surrealism' that binds these works together or the fact that they are made by women?), the division into categories or themes can seem arbitrary and forced. The main themes into which the exhibition is divided – Portrait, Landscape, Still Life, Interior, Fantasy – are far removed from any surrealist context. Take them or leave them; a restrictive framework or a personal interpretation of the works selected? And in attempting to comprehend the exhibition's thematic arrangement, the question is raised of whether the works were selected and thus ordered merely to fit particular preconceptions? One of the main problems is that, in *Angels of Anarchy*, subjective interpretation or biased opinion is presented as incontrovertible fact: we are being told the meanings and intentions to be read into the works and, even worse, what to think, which comes across as patronising both to the artists themselves and to the viewing public. This imposition of a restricted reading, at the expense of encouraging the liberty of subjective interpretation, can occasionally become laughable, though the humour in some of the word salads served up is anything but intentional. This is exemplified by the po-faced blurb alongside Meret Oppenheim's work, *Squirrel*; a small mug of lager, which, instead of a handle, sports a squirrel's tail. We are told in no uncertain terms that the tail is phallic. Might not this tail be anything *other* than phallic; might it even be the pubis of a woman? Or perhaps I had inadvertently contaminated the object with my 'male gaze'? Interpretations could and should become delirious. Or this squirrel's tail might even just be... a squirrel's tail. There is a sense of humour conspicuously absent in the curation here, and not much in evidence elsewhere in the exhibition.

But what of the paintings, drawings, objects, and photographs themselves? Despite any attempt to clip their wings and cage them to serve a particular cause, they sometimes take flight and escape the bars of narrow interpretation in which they have been enclosed. There are some truly marvellous and memorable images, too many to enumerate, making a visit to the exhibition unmissable, despite everything. Pictures that one might only have seen in rare French or Czech surrealist publications come to life with a magical energy. But also, with the better-known and more widely reproduced paintings, familiarity does not diminish their power. For example, Leonora Carrington's self-portrait from 1937 is stunning: the transfixing gaze of its subject, with the crystalline blue of her eye throwing down a defiant challenge to the world's restrictive 'realism', daring us to imagine. Similarly, Dorothea Tanning's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* has a genuinely disturbing quality when viewed in the flesh, with a suggestion of what might be happening just beyond the confines of the frame; it is also what will happen next that intrigues, of the way the picture extends a ludic invitation to continue its dream narrative, making it more than a baroque exercise. What may come as something of a surprise to many visitors is the strength and range of the photography included, not least the documentary photographs, often of everyday situations, sifting for the marvellous in mundanity. There is one room in particular that is almost like a sanctuary from the ideological over-simplifications with which we are bombarded: a dimly lit, secret chamber with wonderful, almost mythological objects by Elisa Breton, Josette Exandier and Mimi Parent, whose *Maître-tresse* is outstanding in its poetic simplicity: an assemblage of two pig tails, her own hair cut off in a symbolic act and transformed into the twin lashes of a whip, with the caress of paradox, fetishism and philosophy in the boudoir.

In terms of the curator's criteria for inclusion, the merits of the works themselves notwithstanding, there is apparent confusion over whether these are works by women surrealists or by women artists 'influenced by' Surrealism, as if this was an aesthetic style or range of styles. This lack of clarity is shown by the inclusion of Francesca Woodman. Although her work has a youthfully mesmeric and poetic strength, which is very affecting, she had neither tangible connections to the surrealist movement nor adherence to its principles. The space would have been better used for women who have directly participated in the surrealist adventure. In too many cases, the links are tenuous at best, as with the collages of Penny Slinger, who was only briefly associated with the group around the magazine *Transformation*, and exhibited with them at the Angela Flowers Gallery in 1978. But at least therein a case could be supported, through making the selection criteria more visible, although somewhat weakening the integrity of the surrealist context to which the exhibition lays claim. Better known are the cases of Frida Kahlo and Leonor Fini who, although exhibiting with surrealists, had little sympathy with Surrealism itself. Greater clarity on criteria and integrity of context would have meant for a more intelligible exhibition.

[IMAGE]

Image: Mimi Parent, *Mistress*, 1996. Collection MONY VIBESCU, © Jean Benoit

What also disappointed me was that there is not more work by the Czech surrealists Toyen (Maria Cermánová) and Eva Krasková, although there is a wonderful 11 minute animation by the latter, which was a delightful surprise, despite it being shown on a domestic television with only one set of headphones. Above all, the exhibition would have greatly benefited from the inclusion of contemporary work by, for example, Kathleen Fox, Katerina Pinosová, and Ody Saban - glaring omissions - all having far stronger connections with Surrealism than many of those artists included. Their work is easily of a high enough quality (much better than some on display) and their exclusion raises questions as to why all but three of the artists selected for inclusion (one of whom had only fleeting connections with Surrealism) are dead, and of those living, all are in their later years. The exhibition thus gives the sense of something that is coming to an end, rather than of a continuity. It might be countered that a line needs to be drawn somewhere in putting together an exhibition of this size, but this fails to convince. When such lines are drawn, it is invariably to the exclusion of any evidence of Surrealism as a living movement that includes women who have their own voices and can answer back to those specialists who would speak on their behalf. But for that, one would need to visit exhibitions that in themselves are genuinely surrealist, collectively organised by surrealists and not by academics with their own agendas; and one would not find surrealists making curatorial separations by gender, any more than by ethnicity, sexuality, age, nationality, and so on.

Overall, what the curatorial agenda in *Angels of Anarchy* attempts to do and most likely succeeds in, to some degree, given the reviews in the mainstream press and cultural media is to set up an apparent division between 'female' and 'male' surrealists, to the point of a polarisation that denies our common bonds. Surrealist women have long denounced this segregationist manoeuvre, and it would thus be fitting that the last word here should go to a surrealist woman. As Annie Le Brun sharply expresses it in her 'Gynocratia Song':

One of the biggest ruts of the present era, which neo-feminism is making the effort to dig with an empire builder's frenzy, is the claim of an absolute feminine specificity. And to make us bear witness to the existence of an important current, industrious intellectuals are busy widening this rut into which blind and blinding misery does not fail to throw itself.ⁱⁱⁱ

Kenneth Cox <surrealism AT madasafish.com>, a founder member of Leeds Surrealist Group, is editor of the magazine Phosphor and co-directs the Surrealist Editions imprint: <http://leedssurrealistgroup.wordpress.com>

Info

Angels of Anarchy - Women Artists and Surrealism, Manchester Art Gallery, 26 September - 10 January

Footnotes

i Guy Ducornet, *Les parasites du surréalisme*, Éditions Talus d'approche, Mons, 2001. A shorter and re-edited version of his *Le Punching-Ball & la Vache-À-Lait*.

ii Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, The Athlone Press, London, 1998, p.xxx.

iii Annie Le Brun, 'Gynocratia Song', in *Vagit-prop, L'chez tout et autre texts*, Éditions Ramsay/J.J.Pauvert, Paris, 1990.