

## ***EXILIC PLEASURES***

Surrealism Refuged in America

April 27 to June 17, 2017



Salvador Dalí

*Cinq personnages surréalistes: Femmes à tête de fleurs, femme à tiroirs* (1937)

*There is no great expedition in art which is not undertaken at the risk of one's life...the road to take is obviously not the one with guard rails along its edge; each artist must take up the search for the golden fleece alone.*

André Breton

NEW YORK, NY—FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE—Leila Heller Gallery is pleased to present *Exilic Pleasures: Surrealism Refuged in America*, from April 27<sup>th</sup> to June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, curated in partnership with Rowland Weinstein. Arriving in New York as a refugee from the violence and mortal terror of the second world war in 1941, Surrealism's founder André Breton, along with a coterie of fellow artists espousing the value of the irrational, subconscious, psychic, avant-garde, experimental, and psychosexual, challenged a generation of American counterparts accustomed to the normalizing ideological conceits of Social Realism. This exhibition, based in part on the pioneering scholarship of Martica Sawin in her opus *Surrealism in Exile*, features the work of André Breton, Yves Tanguy, Salvador Dalí, Leonora Carrington, André Masson, Roberto Matta, Wolfgang Paalen, Kurt Seligmann, Max Ernst, Leonor Fini, Oscar Dominguez, Victor Brauner, Enrico Donati, Kay Sage, Gerome Kamrowski, William Baziotes, Federico Castellon, Jimmy Ernst, and David Hare. *Exilic Pleasures* explores the history and effects of the emigration of surrealism to the New World, which as Sawin states in her headline catalogue essay for the exhibition, "the radical transformation of American art that emerged in the post-war years."

Beginning as a literary movement and manifesto in 1924, surrealism announced itself in the words of André Breton as "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." Born from the ashes of World War I's apparent failure of rationality as the source for the technical destruction of mankind, not only did surrealists take it to task to rationalism and nationalism, but also sought to enact a social revolution by means of an aesthetic subversion of the conscious mind. However, the

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techniques of surrealist art—and their explorations of the oft dark, violent, desirous depth of the human psyche, all of which this exhibition ventures into—were not entirely divorced from their mode of presentation. “Desire, myth, poetry, taboo, and transgression,” Alyce Mahon reminds us, “these were the key ingredients of surrealism and of the surrealist exhibition. From the birth of surrealism in [the mid 1920s] to Jean Schuster’s announcement of its demise as a historical movement in 1969...surrealists transformed the notion of art work and dramatically revolutionized the concept of an art exhibition.... as a stage upon which as new reality could be pre-figured.”

Late surrealism, dating approximately from the late 1930s, is marked by two defining historical conditions: one an external exigency enforced upon a group of then so-called ‘degenerate’ artist in the rise of specter of war in Europe, and another the internal drive to extend the logic of the fetishizing of the figure towards the de-figuration of Surrealist space, in a series of exhibitions from 1936 to 1947, which also saw the center of Surrealist gravity move from Paris to New York (and perhaps back again). As Isabelle Dervaux points out, although in 1929, the capitalist, materialist image of America excluded the United States from the Surrealist Map of the World, following Alfred Barr’s exhibition at the MOMA in 1938, and the Salvador Dali’s outrageous *Dream of Venus* at the World’s Fair, not only was the US public rapt in the fantastic dreamlike imagery of a form Surrealism heralded by Dali, but surrealists themselves recognized not only the necessity, but also opportunity, presented by an avant-garde intervention into post-Depression era America. Revolution, it seemed, was possible on other shores.

Necessity is the soul of invention, but also intervention. In the former case, surrealists sought to interrupt the expected forms of exhibition, pushing the bounds of viewing practice into the level of the performance event, as avant-garde techniques, which we have sought to cite or make reference to in this exhibition, sought to challenge bourgeois ways of seeing. Notably, in 1942, an exhibition curated by a misanthropic André Breton with the aid of Marcel Duchamp, *The First Surrealist Papers*, held in midtown Manhattan, featured not only a labyrinthine web of one mile of twine, but also hanging bags of coal, and children playing ball between tableaux. In the former case, in the 1940s, the “idée génératrice” of surrealism, automatic writing, which sought to access and actualize the imaging of the subconscious, leading to a greater the greater development of abstract aesthetic.

Indeed, throughout this exhibition, the tension between abstraction and the surreal reveals itself as a touchpoint of artistic endeavor in 1940s America. Indeed, if at the beginning of the decade, the two European born aesthetics were seen as the antithesis of each other, by 1951, a gestural form of abstraction, under the influence of surrealist automatism had become known as Abstract Expressionism—the first properly American art movement, which would not have been possible with the refuting of surrealists in America.

This exhibition is presented and curated in partnership with Rowland Weinstein and Weinstein Gallery, San Francisco. For more information and images, please contact [press@leilahellergallery.com](mailto:press@leilahellergallery.com).