

The Surrealist Landscape: A Study Day

Beth Taylor – 17 May 2017



Max Ernst *Forest and Dove* 1927



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In this study day, we will consider a range of works depicting the land, the sea and the cityscape by some well known and less well known artists linked to the Surrealist movement. A theoretical and political (Marxist) movement developed in France by Andre Breton and his group, Surrealism was applied to finding new ways of using chance and psychological experiences like trance and dream narration, in order to abandon conscious control of the process of artistic creation – whether literary or visual. By accessing the subconscious, and our dreams, it was argued that men and women would be closer to a more truthful understanding of the world.

The metaphysical works of Giorgio de Chirico were seen as early examples of surrealism providing insight into a different reality by the use of unexpected juxtapositions, a form later used by Magritte. Andre Masson and Max Ernst produced works depicting the natural world of the forest and the sea using techniques which employed chance. Salvador Dali painted the shores and plains of Spain using a voluntary hallucinatory technique he named the ‘paranoiac-critical’ method. A number of British artists were associated with Surrealism: Paul Nash and Roland Penrose are perhaps the best known of this group. Their work will be considered along with that of other artists, including Eileen Agar, Ithell Colquhoun, and Leonora Carrington.

The study day will give us an opportunity to consider the context for the development of surrealism. We will consider the techniques used by these artists to explore key concepts of surrealism, like the *marvellous* and the *uncanny*, to point out some strange placements and shapes within the landscape itself, or to juxtapose elements in the landscape in a new way. In some cases we will contrast “traditional” landscapes, seascapes and cityscapes with the surrealist renditions and thus have an opportunity to discuss whether the inner vision – the alternative reality - of the surrealists has made us look at the art of the landscape and the landscape itself in a new way. We will also investigate the differences between surrealism in France and the work of the English artists associated with the movement.

Beginnings of Surrealism, Paris 1924-1929

Initially concerned with poetic experiments, Surrealists propagated their theories in documents such as the *Surrealist Manifesto* written by **Andre Breton(1896-1966)** in 1924. Influenced by Freudian theories, Breton defined Surrealism as

“Pure psychic automatism.....Thought expressed in the absence of any control exerted by reason, and outside all moral and aesthetic considerations”.

As well as automatism, which Breton considered the best means for tapping the unconscious, the manifesto also asserted the importance of dreams, which Freud had revealed to be a direct expression of the unconscious mind, and which Surrealists considered to be a pure expression of ‘the marvellous’. By effecting a psychic revolution, the Surrealists hoped to bring about a revolution in everyday life, a new Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Although the main interest of the Surrealist movement was in poetry, philosophy and radical politics, the manifesto did refer to the ‘surrealist image’ born by the chance juxtaposition of two different realities,

“As beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella”.

Collage, a modernist technique used by Braque and Picasso, remained an important method for realising these strange encounters and opening up new thoughts, but the importance placed on automatism in this early phase of surrealism, meant a continued search for an appropriate visual language.

Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) was an Italian artist who was of interest to Breton. Before and during the first World War, he had produced enigmatic “metaphysical paintings” in a style characterised by images conveying a sense of mystery and hallucination. His paintings of cityscapes used unreal perspectives and lighting, with strange iconography such as the use of tailor’s dummies and statues in place of human figures.



Giorgio de Chirico *The Song of Love* 1914

Max Ernst (1891-1976)

German painter and collagist, Ernst had been part of the Dada movement in Cologne. Ernst’s work reflected his university studies of art history and psychology as well as his battle experience, conjuring up dream worlds with contradictory images. He discovered **frottage** – creating a surface pattern by rubbing with pencil or charcoal on a piece of paper laid over a rough surface. He also adapted this to painting, using **grattage** - laying a

thickly painted canvas over a similar surface while the paint was still wet, and scraping off layers of paint. A pattern was created by the paint remaining in the indentations of the canvas. Both frottage and grattage provided him with involuntarily produced works out of which he could develop finished works. Ernst experimented with **decalcomania** in his dream paintings. This technique produced pictures by transferring an image from one surface to another. Paint was applied to paper which was then covered with another sheet of paper and rubbed gently. Applied to oil painting by Ernst, it meant that the picture was made without any preconceived idea of its subject or form.

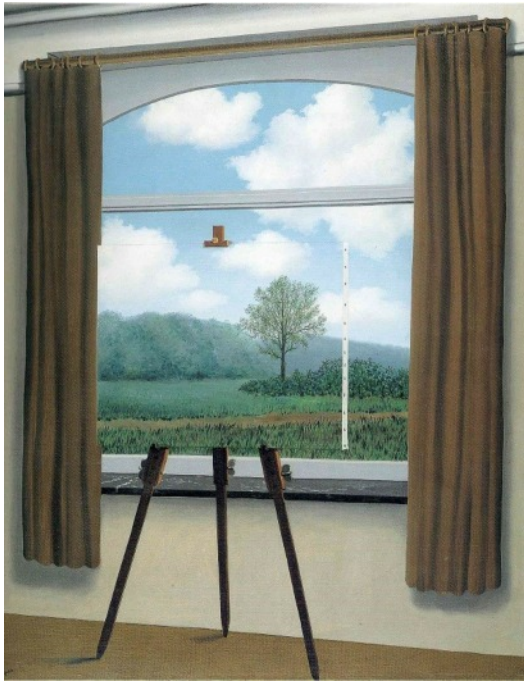
Andre Masson (1896-1987) pioneered **automatic drawing and sand painting**. He found he was able to draw in an abstracted state of mind. His pencil called marks from his unconscious and onto the paper. He then allowed his conscious mind to shape forms out of the marks. The sand painting technique began with the dripping or smearing of glue onto a piece of paper or canvas at random, sprinkling sand over the glue and using the resulting sand patches as pre-pictorial inspiration.

Joan Miro (1893-1983) was considered “the most surrealist of us all” by Breton. “I begin painting,” Miro said, “and **as I paint the picture begins to assert itself**, or suggest itself, under my brush. The form becomes a sign for a woman or a bird as I work...The first stage is free, unconscious....the second stage is carefully calculated”.

Salvador Dali (1904-1989) His **‘paranoic-critical method’** gave impetus to dream paintings. He described his work as ‘instantaneous and hand done colour photography of the super-fine, extravagant, extra-plastic, extra-pictorial, unexplored, super-pictorial, super-plastic, deceptive, hyper normal and sickly images of concrete irrationality’.

Dali’s illusionistic work was influential although he was to be expelled from the group for political ambiguity in 1936.

Rene Magritte (1898-1967) produced works which were disruptive: they questioned assumptions about the world, about the relationship between a painted and a real object, and they set up unforeseen analogies or juxtaposed completely unrelated things in a deliberately deadpan style.



Rene Magritte *The Human Condition* 1933

English Artists and International Surrealism

Roland Penrose (1908-84)

Born into a wealthy Quaker family, Penrose studied at Cambridge. On graduation he 'escaped' to Paris where, in 1926, he encountered the work of Max Ernst. This he regarded as a rebirth which led to his lifelong involvement with surrealism. A surrealist painter and collagist, he collected surrealist works and was instrumental in organising the First International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1935. He went on to help found and give financial backing to the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and to organise major retrospectives of Picasso, Ernst and Miro at the Tate.

Paul Nash (1889-1946)

Trained at the Slade, Nash is best known for the artworks he produced during World War 1. As a landscapist, he found inspiration in ancient sites like Wittenham Clumps and Avebury. Throughout the 1930s he made

increasingly abstract and surrealist works, placing everyday objects in to landscape to give them a new identity and symbolism or making *assemblages of found objects* and photographing the uncanny in the landscape. He was an important contributor to the 1935 International Surrealist Exhibition.

Eileen Agar (1899-1991)

Daughter of a wealthy Anglo-American family in Argentine, who moved back to England in 1911, Agar rebelled against her family's expectations and insisted on training to be an artist, first with Leon Underwood and at the Slade and then in Paris with the Czech Cubist, Foltyn. An affair with Paul Nash in 1935 introduced her to a surrealist approach to landscape. Some of her *assemblages and collages* were shown in the International Exhibition and at subsequent surrealist shows. After World War II, her interest in colour and structure informed works referencing myth and nature.

Leonora Carrington (1917-2011)

Painter, sculptor and writer of English birth. In 1936 she studied under Amedee Oxenfant in Paris. She met and became the lover of Max Ernst in 1937, living with him in Paris and Spain. Separated from Ernst by the war, she moved to the USA and then Mexico where she lived until her death. She remained committed to surrealism throughout her career, producing dream like images with fantastic creatures in surprising situations. The image of the horse and the hyena were important in the mythology of her inner world.

Ithell Colquhoun (1906-1988)

Born in India, Colquhoun studied at Cheltenham Art School and the Slade. In 1931-3, she had a studio in Paris, becoming aware of the Surrealist movement. In 1936 she developed the anthropomorphic qualities of her botanical works. In 1939 she exhibited with Roland Penrose, by which time automatism or *psychomorphologies* became the characteristic of her work. She was an acknowledged authority on the occult and her writing covered the esoteric and the surrealist.

Edward James (1907 – 1984).

A wealthy English patron of the surrealists Salvador Dali, Paul Nash and Rene Magritte. His homes in London and Sussex were furnished in the Surrealist style drawing on the parallel world of his imagination. He moved to Mexico in 1946 where he created Las Pozas, a surrealist landscape garden.

Brief Reading list

Patricia Allmer *Angles of Anarchy: Women Artist and Surrealism* Manchester Art Gallery 2009

Fiona Bradley *Surrealism* Tate Publishing 1997

Patrick Elliott *Another World: Dali, Magritte, Miro and the Surrealists* National Galleries of Scotland 2010

Michael Remy *Surrealism in Britain* Aldershot, 1999

The above have good bibliographies, including books on individual artists.



Ithell Colquhoun *Scylla* 1938