

Endless Enigma: Eight Centuries of Fantastic Art

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by Mary Ann Caws

DAVID ZWIRNER | SEPTEMBER 12 –
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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



Piero di Cosimo, *The Finding of Vulcan on the Island of Lemnos*, c. 1490. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. Courtesy Nicholas Hall and David Zwirner.

It is a fantastic feeling to have been here before, as we surely have, and to return here refreshed. In 1936 Alfred H. Barr, Jr. brought his *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* to the Museum of Modern Art, and traces of it survive and are now not just resurrected but, well, remembered. The present recall and revision set the same non-limits on the time and geographical framing, and so this exhibition is gratifyingly wide-ranging, from the twelfth-century to right now in

2018. The point of it all is of course how we re-look at something as squishy as the imagination and its inventions, and how we resituate the range of items we are considering in relation to the present moment and however we conceive of the contemporary avant-garde.

Here are some parts that riveted my walking about. First, the left eye of Gustave Moreau's *The Poet and the Siren* of 1893. That unblinking and totally domineering glance would transfix anyone, let alone a bedraggled exhausted poet so small by the gorgeous vine-wrapped right thigh of the siren, whose corresponding hand dangles over the poor poet's forehead, as that poetic finger immerses itself in the water, languid between the corals so vividly red on the left and right and all about the water. Beyond this, opens a bright lavender and blue play of waterfall, rocks, and river.

Extricating myself from the fronds, I felt towered over by Leonor Fini's two-part panel of *Painting and Architecture* of 1938–9. If the little palette on one figure's finger bespeaks the art part, the crisp angles of the five triangular forms on the other do the architectural measurement proud. Now her architectural title sends me off to de Chirico's 1927 *The Archaeologists* with the mannequin figure slumped over with columns and ruins all bedangling, the columns matching exactly the angle of the mannequin's fingers, a peculiar echo.

Among the more recent works, let me single out Sigmar Polke's play on the great Renaissance painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, here signaled as *Arcimi Boldi* (1984). What a complicated tribute in its colors: red, green, black, purple, etc, as in its wealth of materials, "acrylic, artificial resin, lacquer, and dispersion," the latter as in that great dark blob whose claws reach out wildly down and around.

Surrealism loves contrasts: take Piero di Cosimo's joyful, peaceful, flowery, leafy and fruity *Finding of Vulcan on the Island of Lemnos* of 1490 and from twenty-five years later, a follower of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, with its upside-down figures, extruding themselves from various vegetables, intermingling with the birds and large and small fish, some in improbable dwellings, and no one is in repose. Hands and feet and naked bodies and animals are crossed and writhing. Hundreds of tiny figures astride horses, pigs, donkeys, ostriches, camels, and goats form a procession around a central pond, where more assorted bodies are trapped.

Contemporary follower of Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, c. 1515. Private collection. Courtesy Nicholas Hall and David Zwirner.

We could dwell in the wet of some of these as in Roberto Matta's *In the Center of the Water* (1941), where the focus seems to come to rest on a bed-type shape so that the surrounding forms might well be part of dream, as in the celebrated surrealist position between night and day, sleep and waking.

Strangely calm is William Blake's *The Grave Personified* of 1805, both in the face and the feet of the angel, and also in the lovely wings spread out. 'Tis a truly sweet grave.



Salvador Dalí's preparatory drawing, *Vulcain et Vénus* of 1941, with multiple indications about the costumes and how the black is intertwined with the ivy on the legs, and its loud refusal of reproduction, is indicative of the care he took with detail, precisely a care we might miss in his extravaganzas.

Among my favorites was James Ensor's 1889 *Skeletons Warming Themselves*. Two standing figures, dressed in the elaborate theatrical costumes treasured by his family upstairs from his Ostend studio while skulls lie to the side, and one pokes engagingly out from the doorframe. Some skeletons too. The trappings of culture are not forgotten, as a violin and a palette lean against a stove as if to give the only heat possible.

My other favorite is Kay Sage's gorgeous and yet spare 1940 *I Walk Without Echo* where a bright road leads up between two dark hillsides to a cliff while a shadow slices into the brightness, quite like the melancholy that slices into Sage's writing and being, that sense of doom from even before she lost her beloved painter husband, Yves Tanguy, and her subsequent suicide.

How strangely and wonderfully does this eight-century experience end, with Francis Alÿs's skeleton quietly tiptoeing off sight and untitled, in a 2005 oil on canvas on panel, comparable to Michaël Borremans' *Fire from the Sun* (2017) with its tiny naked figures scurrying about on an immense stage-like scene, on oil on canvas and on cardboard, as if the material were, in both cases, to compensate for the quiet unliveness and the small size of the unadorned actors. The avant-garde here carries its own weight on tiptoe, continuing the enigma.

Contributor

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MARY ANN CAWS is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature, English, and French at

the Graduate School of the City University of New York. Her many areas of interest in twentieth-century avant-garde literature and art include Surrealism, poets René Char and André Breton, Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group, and artists Robert Motherwell, Joseph Cornell, and Pablo Picasso. Conceptually, one of her primary themes has been the relationship between image and text.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



Philippe Soupault, *Lost Profiles: Memoirs of Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism*

by Paul Auster

APR 2017 | Critics Page

As a glimpse into that time, these lost portraits are invaluable—and often deeply moving.



Outrageous Fortune: Jay DeFeo and Surrealism

by Jessica Holmes

APR 2018 | ArtSeen

Though more closely identified with the San Francisco Beat artists and poets of the late 1950s and early 1960s, DeFeo also looked to the Surrealists a generation older than she, and drew from artists such as Yves Tanguy, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray, whom she once called her “north star.”

INCONVERSATION