



cynthia cruz
SLUG
AND
SLAG

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Shape-Shifting Fingers and Saturn’s Dry Deserts: A Reflection on Reality

Sea snails with eyes, crab legs that tell time, women with torso hands, and shape-shifting fingers of shells, plants, and other critters—these are images associated with the work of surrealists, including Nadja, Edith Rimmington, Suzanne Roussy-Cesaire, Mimi Parent. Surrealists uncover unconscious dreamscapes through their drawings, paintings, poetry, and prose, claiming their creative process as body, voyage, and festival. They aimed to revolutionize the human experience, finding beauty in the strange and unexpected, drawing from the disregarded and unconventional. Their work is propositional. Asking first of themselves, and then the collective, to challenge the imposed values and norms of their time in search of a liberated mind and artistic expression. In this reflection, I bring into conversation a surrealist look at reality brought on by the unruly vivid paintings of Cynthia Cruz.

For many years I believed a common misconception that surrealism at its core is escapist, signifying unreality, a denial of the real, or even a refusal to accept reality. I understood it to mean the rejection of everydayness in search of fantasy and fetish tooled by their unconscious mind and dreams. Although their poetic representations are far from straightforward, surrealist women depict the uncanny, strange, unnerving visions of ordinary objects that defy reason. Their real is my dream. And my reality seems to be dictated by markets, data points, apocalyptic futures, and co-opted imaginations.

While my conscious and unconscious mind is fragmented across memes, emails, Instagram DMs, WhatsApp, in-person meetings, virtual meetings, gentle parenting, tears on subway cars, morning kisses, and soft laughter, surrealists would have refused the hyper-capitalist convention of work that drives me today. Instead, they would insist on a vibrant celebration of the everyday connection in a higher reality. In her book *Surrealist Women*, Penelope Rosemont describes the negation of all that “rationalizes misery” as a “practice of poetry” that is fundamental to surrealist research. Rosemont describes this practice as “discovery, risk, revelation, adventure, an activity of the mind, a method of knowledge leading to revolutionary solutions to the fundamental problems of life;” It is the opposite of numbing distraction, repression, and conformity.¹

The word “surrealist” suggests beyond reality. In his “Surrealist Manifesto” (1924), the poet and artist André Breton, one of the protagonist of surrealism in 1920s Paris, defined surrealism as:

(...) pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express, either verbally, in writing, or by any other manner, the real functioning of thought. Dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation.²

The surrealist movement intended to go from the individual unconscious release of ideas and images, to deconstructing a collective reality, then re-imagining it in a poem or picture. Many used automatic writing and hypnotic trance-speaking seances to question the established norms of the real. By looking to the personal and adopting a practice, as Breton did, of being outside of “all aesthetic and moral preoccupation,” surrealist expression shifted the dominant forms of cultural production and spread across historical and geographic contexts.

Surrealism begins with the recognition that the real includes many different voices and elements that are intentionally overlooked and suppressed in exploitative,

unequal societies. Based on the convergence between conscious and unconscious—not without its contradictions—surrealists point to a higher, open, and dynamic consciousness, from which no aspect of the real is rejected. It is the real beyond the reality of our lived environment. Far from irrational escapism, surrealism is an immeasurably expanded awareness. Its tenets proposed a holistic vision of living which considers human existence beyond the reductive modes of production toward a celebration of all the contradictions that come with being present in a moment.

The dissemination and practice of this radical awareness is the legacy the surrealists leave behind. I see it in the pages of publications like *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (Surrealism in the service of the revolution) and *Minotaure* (Minotaur), in the poetry of Jayne Cortez, and the paintings of Eva Švankmajerová. The earlier forms of distribution allowed the surrealists to circulate poetry, prose, and unnerving antirational images—like that of memes today—which disrupted restrictive ways of thinking and being, and especially challenged the idea that all knowledge is single-sourced and empirically true. As the movement thrived, these modes of circulation and resistance expanded with a sustained aim to provoke all who encountered them, to shift their own inner reality and its relation to their surrounding context.

The reality of time, space, and politics has changed since the days of early surrealism (and much has not), yet in Cynthia Cruz’s paintings the dialectical voices who reject the dogmatic structure of society in search of the play, dream, eros, revolt, and murmuration echo still.

SLUG AND SLAG, Cruz’s exhibition at [NAME], presents an *oeuvre with an absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation*. There is an absolute negation of cultural trends—less tech camp irony and more poetic humor of the real that stems from the vulnerability of the painting process. In this body of work I see the painter, not just the mastery of technique. Her sci-fi dreams are based on the beauty of the absurd and wasteful living in a drowning city wrought by capitalists’ nightmares. Cynthia’s paintings are reality remastered through the contradictions of the conscious and unconscious mind. Saturn’s dry green desert limbo, a bird in an alien sea, and rain in reverse, all appear as single images simultaneously depicting more than one subject—more than one reality.

¹ Rosemont, Penelope, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

² Breton, André. “Le Manifeste du Surréalisme” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969, originally published in 1924).

Cynthia Cruz is a multi-media artist working in painting and digital media. She received her MFA from Goldsmiths University of London in 2014. She is the recipient of the Knight Foundation’s 2022 New Work Award. Her work has been part of solo and group exhibitions at Thames-Side Studios Gallery (London); ACME Project Space (London); ASC Gallery (London); the Bass Museum of Art (Miami Beach); and Campo Garzon (Uruguay); David Castillo Gallery (Miami), and Fredric Snitzer Gallery (Miami).

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