

Our overseas co-editor Dr. Kelsey Ashe joins us from 15,000 kilometres away in Fremantle, Western Australia. From her uniquely Antipodean vantage point, Dr. Ashe writes here for The Debutante about Australian Feminist Surrealist artists and the context of her upcoming Curatorial project 'Imaginary Territories', at PS ArtSpace in October 2020.

From Far Away: Feminist Surrealism in the Antipodes



Kelsey Ashe, 2020. Sculpture Involontaires. Shell, Plastic, Leather and Metal. Dimensions Variable. Image courtesy the artist.

What are the implications of staging a Feminist Surrealist Exhibition in Australia in 2020? This is one of the questions 'The Debutante' editors asked me for this issue and it gave me great pause for thought.

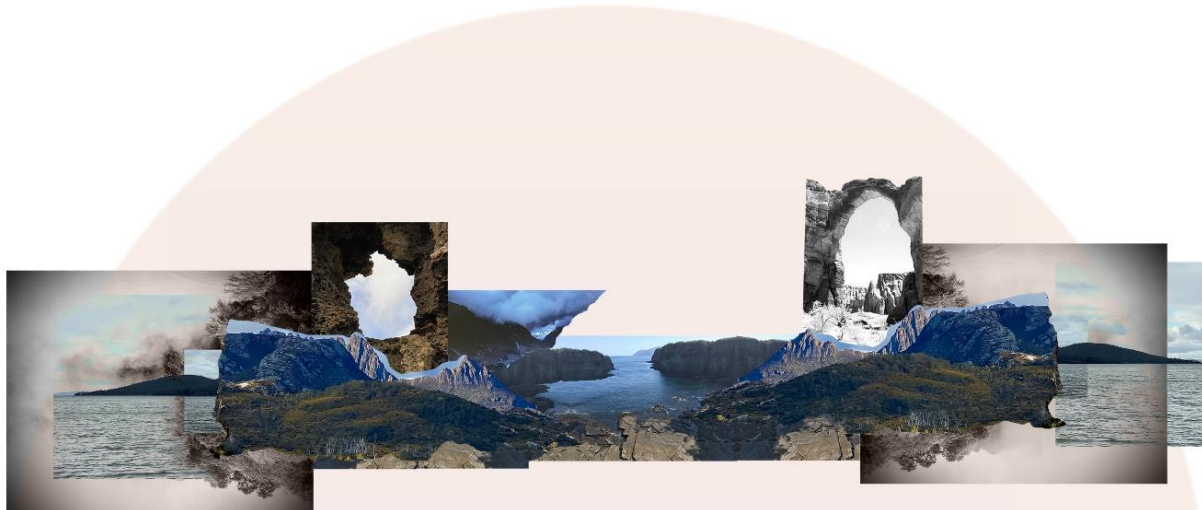
Certainly, it is stirred by the imminent centenary of the movements' emergence from Paris in the 1920s and an acknowledgement of the immense changes that it brought to modern art. Via Dadaist and Surrealist tactics, artists were drawn into completely new fields of thinking and making inherent to successive generations of contemporary art.

The exhibition is also timely in that 100 years on, its influence and legacy is experiencing unprecedented levels of revisionist attention from curators, artists and writers, particularly for women artists who have found its strategies for artistic enquiry essential to their practice. And why is that? Because engaging with Surrealism is a means to explore the threshold space where the sacred, hidden and uncanny, meets with the real and rational, mundane and earthly. It is a space deeply sought in the present era of environmental and COVID crisis and political divisiveness, just as it was initially a reactive movement in the 1920s, as the Surrealists opposed vehemently the horrors of war fought under the supposed banner of rationalism. If this is what rationalism brings to the world, then the Surrealists were determined to look in the opposite direction.

Surrealism in modern and contemporary art has been synonymous with manifestations of the sacred within the mundane. The philosophy has asked again and again since Andre Breton first wrote his Manifesto's in the 1920s; How can we access what is beyond our normal senses and merge it with our normal daily lives? How can this be represented in art? It relies on metaphor and symbol, the poetic messages of the unconscious, dreams, epiphanies and moments of awe in nature. It actively seeks the paradox of an understanding that transcends rational knowledge previously gleaned by conventional art historical approaches. The western concept of knowledge, based in Cartesian rationalism, has long relegated powers of insight, intuition or imagination to illegitimate experience – not so for the insightful surrealist mind.

This language of insight was developed many hundreds of years before Europeans by Chinese and Japanese scholar artists, where an invocation of transcendent perception was highly prized and sought after. This legitimate religious language encompassed a fathomless aesthetic and spiritual philosophy that many artists have used as avenues to engage with the surreal. The Romanticists and Symbolists in their pursuit of the sublime, provided the ground work for Surrealism, a well documented art history. As it has become increasingly more acceptable, if not imperative to seek other realities than what is 'fact' – via means such as Eastern and alternative religions, self-

psychology, theosophy, phenomenology or occultism, experiential knowledge is seen as a valid area of study in art. Surrealism has a commonality with these aforementioned pursuits in that the drive is to understand the modern experience beyond the Empirical rationalism. Infact we live in a society now where even the most acclaimed scientists and quantum physicists cannot agree, define or prove what is real or 'unreal', whether within our own minds, the solar system or here on earth.



Lucille Martin, 2020. *Landscape san Memiore Series, Connecting lands - Arcadia Vanishing*. Photomedia on Alupalux, 400 x 100cm.

The movement has been prone to many interpretations but at its centre is the drive to represent and evoke a special state of mind; the surreal – a term which can encompass many unusual states of knowing and being, in objects, moods, events, places and people. It has been used by artists to explore the revelatory, archaic myth, the enigmatic and ungraspable mystery. Author and Artist Celia Rabinovitch sites contemporary surrealism as a methodology in visual art that can embody a peculiar type of spiritual experience; a grasping of the unknown. She states; “[the] phenomenological elements of surrealism continue to compel the contemporary imagination and create forms to express the modern experience of the sacred...The Surrealist vision emerges from this peculiar sense of premonition infused with a longing or desire.”(Rabinovitch, 2004)

So, to answer that question, of the implications of staging a surrealist exhibition, I see it as a relevant and timely invitation to look within and conceive new realities on micro and macro levels from the view point of contemporary women. It also reserves the usual North to Southern Hemisphere trickle down theory and places ‘Far Away’ as the centre of activity. That surrealism has been central to some of Australia’s most acclaimed contemporary women artists, including Pat Brassington, Poxini Papapetrou and Petrina Hicks, to name a few does not surprise me. It is this ability to imagine, to interrogate one’s own mythic territories that I find so interesting and central for the curatorial planning of *Imaginary Territories*.

In setting out the parameters for curatorial content for this exhibition in Western Australia in 2020, amidst the turmoil of Australian bushfires, COVID closedowns and recessive economies, I asked artists to respond to the idea of a ‘territory’ as a domain of the inner world – a representation that expresses an ‘internal truth’. Through this Surrealist lens, the artists’ territories are simultaneously real and imagined, explored into being; a place where both conscious and subconscious realities are envisioned.



Jo Darbyshire, 2008. *Octopus and lady (after Hokusai)* Oil on canvas. 152 x 101 cm

The artists in *Imaginary Territories* were chosen for their practice related to surrealist enquiry, and also for their interest in the legacy of Feminist Surrealism established by iconic artists such as Dora Maar, Leonora Carrington, Louise Bourgeois, Frida Kahlo, Leonora Fini, Remedios Varo, Kay Sage, Hannah Hoch and Francesca Woodman.

Lucille Martin's cinematic scale Alumalux printed landscapes merge the artists practice in collage and photomedia with surrealist strategies associated with space in the landscape. Strange deserts and empty space have long been important references for Martin, who lists Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte's illusory landscapes as early influences. In work such as 'Landscape san Memiore -Connecting lands - Arcadia Vanishing' optical prompts, distorted or repeating backgrounds, negative space and constructed archways and paths shed with the necessity for a completely rational mode of thinking and depiction. These are landscapes that have slipped beyond 'realism'; where the distinction between real and imagined became blurred and spaces could be read as metaphors of inner space or the subconscious.

Revolutionary artists like Hannah Hoch have played an important role in Martins work and again, the role of water is essential; "Water has been a common visual link and theme through the majority of my career and is currently linked to my new body of work titled 'Connecting lands and Landscape sans Memoire'. Simply it is a wholistic connection of the body and the relationship to landscape and deep ecology. I look to the symbolism of water as a 'fluidity' to the Physical, spiritual and sexual transformation as frequent themes in my work and the work by the female Surrealists. Self-perception and self-affirmation is a spiritual journey of life connected through my surrealist lens and my search for a new way into reality and dream-like, visionary elements." (Lucille Martin, Interview with author, 2020).

Jo Darbyshire's career as an artist has been informed for decades by the work and lives of Surrealist women artists such as Toyen, Eileen Agar, Frida Kahlo and their fearless exploration of female eroticism,

the use of organic found objects such as feathers, hair and bone, painterly automatism and the abiding curiosity into the psychological worlds of women. As a Western Australian artist, the call of the sea and the warm waters of the Indian ocean beg invitation to explore the natural world. These themes comes to the surface frequently in Darbyshire's practice, most prescient in her *Floating World* (2008) series where the experience of a 'frisson of terror' while passing over a dark cavern snorkelling, and the next moment an experience of bliss, floating in freedom and ecstasy brings us into touch with the sublime. This series of works from Darbyshire's 'Floating World' series including 'Octopus and lady (after Hokusai)' are rich in symbols metaphoric of submerged feminine longing such as strings of pearls, figurines and rich and strange blurred coral-like surfaces. "These paintings didn't have a horizon line; they were a metaphor for the unconscious and for female desire. I was looking at Colquhoun, Agar and Varo and the Japanese 'Shunga' painters and I utilised many of the painterly techniques used by the Surrealists, especially Decalcomania." (Jo Darbyshire, Interview with author, 2020).



L to R: Toni Wilkinson, 2018, *In the sea*. Canson-photographique-archival-digital-print, 158-x-105cm. Image courtesy the artist.

For Dr. Toni Wilkinson, a photographer, again it is in moments of frisson, the threshold of ambiguity that produces the intriguing image. Wilkinson is interested in risk and possibility, beauty and menace and the ephemeral nature of memory and moment. In capturing lived experience, for example in witness to a maternal moment in 'In the Sea' (2018) where Wilkinson has candidly captured her own teenage son, we are swept into our own moments of the sublime, the ecstatic and momentary. That fleeting feeling that

fades as the sun does over the horizon. Tenderly holding this moment, we can dismantle rationality and look only to a bright future and hope to re-emerge refreshed.

My own artistic contribution, a film and 'Sculpture Involontaires' (2020) echoes all these sensibilities through dream like sequence and an invitation to be carried back to the sea via shell-audio shares the commonality of undertones that pervade all these works; the quest for the uncanny state of the human subconscious, of seeking an interconnectivity between nature, space, body and what may be beyond our grasp.

That the Visual Art exhibition is solely female oriented is of course also a statement in and of itself. To mark this, a special opening night performance on October 16th, 2020, will involve the 'birthing' of a life size female 'exquisite corpse.'* The performance will involve the above mentioned artists working on a section of a woman's body (Head, torso, womb, feet) independently for 3 months, only revealing the body in its entirety for the first time as a Live installation on opening night. The piece will capture the spirit of the original surrealists' motivations to access collective consciousness through collaborative making and highlight both individual and collective practice via an insight into the inner worlds, thoughts and imaginings of these women artists during an unprecedented era of global upheaval and change.

The surrealist impulse has circulated and dipped, been revived/buried and re-surfaced in successive waves as it has done in all parts of the globe, including here in Australia. The enthusiasm by artists to engage with the irrational has never abated as evidenced in the work of these Australian women artists in *Imaginary Territories*.

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July 2020

*In editorial collaboration with The Debutante this performance will be made available via IGTV.

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