

6-2017

Surrealism: Art of Subconscious

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Paung, YiTing, "Surrealism: Art of Subconscious" (2017). *Honors Theses*. 68.
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Thesis Project: Surrealism

Yi Ting Paung

Surrealism establishes a bridge between the physical realm and the domain of dreams and illusions. In the surreal world, logic is paradoxical; physical principles and rules are defied, only limited by imagination. The expression is a reflection of the personal experience and psychological state of the creator.

The term 'surrealism' was first introduced by the writer Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917. He used it to describe his own ballet, 'Les Mamelles de Tiresais' as well as another play by Jean Cocteau, 'Parade'. Apollinaire describes surrealism as truth beyond realism. In 1924, Andre Breton adopted the word in his work 'The Manifesto of Surrealism'. Thus began the dynasty of surrealism in art (Bowker, 1-6).

Surrealism gained popularity among artists after World War I mainly because of the hardship of life brought upon them by the war. This forced artists and intellectuals to look for an escape against the bleakness of reality. They wanted to reshape the world their own way; they wanted to create a paradise of their own. The work of Sigmund Freud proved to be influential in this regard, by helping artists tap into the subconscious aspects of their brains.

Artists were very interested with the subconscious; with dreams, hallucinations, and trances, as described in Sigmund Freud's works. Artists like Andre Breton, made artworks, poetry, and sketches under hypnosis and through automatic writing. Although

the works are in different form, they all share a similarity of producing a surreal, dream-like and unconscious world (Sanchez, 9-22).

Surrealism is the symbolic language of the subconscious; it is a universal language that doesn't depend on education, culture, or intelligence. The goal of the Surrealist movement was to revolt against the physical principles. It introduces a revolutionary idea that swept through the art world after branching off from Dadaism.

Imbued full of wonders, Surrealism was intertwined with revolutionary ideas that are abstract or symbolic through image. Surrealists wanted to liberate art from the constraints placed on it by society, purge politics from its corruptive influences, and free society from destructive forces (Zank, 99). As Surrealism grew more prosperous, two distinct groups arose: automatism and veristic surrealism.

In automatism, the artists interpret their work as referring to a suppression of consciousness in favor of the subconscious. Automatism concentrates more on feelings and is less analytical compared to veristic surrealism. As its name implies, automatism focuses on the automatic way in which the images of the subconscious reach the conscience; the images simply refer to the artists' psychological states rather than planned symbols. Like abstract paintings, these images should not be "burdened" with meaning (Bate, 70-80). Veristic surrealism concentrates on allowing images of the subconscious to surface undisturbed. Their meaning can then be interpreted through analysis--that is--all objects in the painting are well planned with specific meaning. The artists set a bridge between the spiritual realities and the material world through their images (Najmuldeen, 15-17).

The Surrealism art movement had a great impact in art, literature, culture and even extending to politics. This creative effort towards liberating the imagination is as dynamic as it is subtle. Surrealism is still alive and growing today. In the digital age, surrealism has leapt from canvas to electronics. Photo manipulation is a favorite technique of modern Surrealist artists. Surrealist digital art incorporates realistic, three-dimensional images that are recomposed and rearranged instead of drawn illustrations for creating a more realistic, magical and strange world (Najmuldeen, 47-48).

Since I was little, I have been obsessed with the story, "Alice in wonderland". The story depicts a fantastical world full of wonder and energy. Each character has its own unique characteristics. In this world, anything can happen, but always for a reason, even if the reason is illogical. The concept of the story is representative of a child's struggle to survive in the confusing world of adults. The author uses illogical plot arcs with bizarre creatures to create a metaphor of reality seen through a child's perspective. Aside from the plot, I was particularly impressed by the illustrations of Sir John Tenniel. He illustrated a dream like world with highly advanced skills, his exaggerative illustration style of the characters, besides Alice, greatly supports the idea that Alice in Wonderland is in reference to the world of adults in the eyes of children (Hollingsworth, 24-26). His illustrations invite the reader to travel along with Alice into this strange world, where there is a smiling cat that floats in midair, a turtle with a head of a cow, and many poker card guards. Although this world is filled with limitless imagination, it serves as a reflection of reality. In this realm, everything is illogical, but nothing is unreasonable. The surreal world has largely influenced my path as an artist, I began to look into artwork with compositions consisting of seemingly irrelevant structures, but with metaphoric

meaning. This is when I was first introduced to surrealism. I still remember the first surrealist artwork I experienced, Dali's piece: *Premonition of Civil War*.



Fig. 1. Salvador Dali, *Premonition of Civil War*, 1936, oil on canvas, 39.31 in x 39.37 in.

I was immediately drawn into the strange scene he created and found myself more in love with this painting over time. In this particular work, the two monstrous creatures look like deformed rocks at first glance, but upon closer inspection, the two entities appear to be fighting each other. This image parallels the self-destructive nature of the Spanish Civil War that was happening at the time. He played with metaphors to convey his agony indirectly. The boiled beans in the painting suggest that there were many hardships in the war so the Spanish citizens had to do their best to cope with their problems. He played with themes of love, eating, and the war, and how they are all related (Wach, 112-124). After this initial experience, I ventured deeper and found myself more attracted to the ideas of surrealism. The idea of visualization of the subconscious mind evokes my interest deeply; I could not help but to employ symbolism

into my artwork. I started to practice the concept of surrealism through my own art. In high school, I created a series of veristic surrealism pieces focusing on the volatility of the time. I used different symbols to represent the powerlessness of man under the never-ending march of time.

I furthered my relationship with surrealism in college. In my first printmaking class, I was able to explore ideas of automatic surrealism. Instead of giving my images a concrete meaning, I began to make obscure images with a vague or more abstract meaning; I started to illustrate the landscapes of my dreams, each image I created during the class had no firm particular meaning, but simply represented my subconscious mind. In this particular work, I illustrated a mechanical bird plodding along within a mechanical world.



Fig.2 Yi Ting Paung, *Puppet Show*, 2013, watercolor and printmaking, 20 in x 16 in.

During my sophomore year of college, I began an independent study on veristic and automatic surrealism under the instruction of Professor Hatke. I created a series of connected dream-like scenes using colored pencil.



Fig. 3 Yi Ting Paung, *Independent Study for Surrealism*, colored pencil, 3.5 in x 3.5 in.

From this independent study, I gained a deeper understanding of surrealism and was able to push my artwork even further by incorporating deeper metaphors and stranger objects into my paintings. It was during this project that I was introduced to the first artist to have a large influence on my thesis project, Hieronymus Bosch,

Hieronymus Bosch was a draughtsman and painter from Brabant, Netherlands. He is widely considered one of the most notable representatives of Early Dutch painting. His work is known for its fantastic imagery, detailed landscapes, and illustrations of religious concepts and narratives. His work has been celebrated throughout the world, and widely

referenced, especially his macabre and nightmarish depictions of hell (M. Ilsink; J. Koldeweij, 6-9). Bosch was considered to be one of the earliest surreal artists, as he often employed images of devils, human-like creature and mechanical forms to wake fear and confusion in his viewer's mind. These works contain complex, highly original, imaginative, and dense use of symbolic figures for portraying the evil of mankind, which was considered to be obscure in his time. The obscure yet imaginative images no doubt promote him to the throne as the earliest surreal painter. One of his most famous pieces is *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The image depicted is based on the bible: the Garden of Eden is depicted on the left panel and the scene of the Last Judgment is depicted on the right panel (Freanger, 10-15).



Fig.4 Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1490-1510, oil on oak panels, 87 in x 153 in.

I studied the composition and the creatures of his works. Drawn to his outlandish creations, I attempted to create my own version of fantastical beasts by combining objects, animals, and human figures.

Bosch's vision of hell established a new milestone in the artistic world and his work influenced many later surrealist artists. Salvador Dalí studied the works of Bosch, and recognized him as his predecessor. It has even been suggested that the unusual rock formation resembling a face in Dalí's famous painting, *The Great Masturbator*, of 1929 was inspired by a similar shape visible in the landscape in the left panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Sooke, 20).



Fig. 5 Salvador Dalí, *The Great Masturbator*, 1929, oil on canvas, 43.3 in x 59.1 in.

Salvador Dalí is one of the most versatile and prolific artists of the twentieth century. Dalí's works were largely influenced by his personal experiences: most of his works feature symbolism that reflect his life. His images are characterized by obsessive themes of eroticism, death, and decay. Dalí was classified as an automatism, but ultimately opted for his own self-created system of tapping the unconscious termed "paranoiac critical", a state in which one could simulate delusion while maintaining one's sanity. (Najmuldeen, 30-31). Dalí's painting style is unique. In his paintings, he incorporates lines and shapes that create strong movements, thereby making his painting more energetic and more dynamic. For example, in *The Great Masturbator*, he

incorporates lines and shadows to create a dynamic flow that leads the viewer's eyes around the painting and thereby helps the viewer's immersion into the piece.

I enjoy mimicking this use of lines and shadows, as well as color, to create a similar flow that circulates throughout an entire painting to lead the viewers to "travel" throughout the painting and therefore, feel more connected to the obscure world depicted.

Throughout the development of my thesis, I searched for many surrealist artists for reference and inspiration. There are a few that particularly resonated with me. Inka Essenhigh is one of them. I was attracted to her paintings in both style and content. Her paintings often incorporate imaginative forms that resemble the human figure and renders smooth color pallets with strong light and intense shadows. Unlike many surrealist painters who pursue a realistic perspective into the imaginative world, her style is closer to illustration: she often exaggerates the figures in her imaginative forms. They might be disproportionate or bent into an unrealistic angle. Her paintings flit between abstraction and representation. Populated by a cosmology of figures that appear surreal and distended. These images are constructed from her own very particular psycho-architectural interior world, (Goldsworthy, 1), her images convey her interpretations of mythologies and legends. They show figures frozen in the middle of actions and movements. In her piece, *Romantic Painting*, she depicts this style which resembles a man and woman kissing passionately. Her use of cold tones ties the entire painting together, while the dramatic lighting brings out the motifs depicted.



Fig.6 Inka Essenhigh, *Romantic Painting*, 2002, oil on panel, 52 in x 64 in.

Her excellent use of dramatic lighting and dynamic forms inspires me. In my thesis, I designed many dynamic forms using branches and smoke and placed them in a setting with dramatic light to create strong contrast.

Another artist who captures my attention is Julie Heffernan. Heffernan's paintings are characterized by her imaginative landscapes, featuring elements as exploding cities, castoff gods, garbage, falling torrents of animals, meteors, and gemstones. These elements reflect her view of the world after natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the BP Oil Spill. (Heffernan, 1) Her vision of the world shocking and exotic, she uses elements of reality and provides commentary of them through surrealist compositions. In the painting, *Self Portrait of Broken Home*, she presents a cut-out view of an apartment inside of a tree. The colorful rooms are each set with an individual tone and mood, and yet all of the rooms are unified by a common light source and color relationship within their surroundings. Her masterful use of contrast makes her artwork stand out.



Fig. 7 Julie Heffernan, *Self Portrait of Broken Home*, 2008, oil on canvas, 67 in x 57 in.

Her creation of surreal natural landscapes incorporates human constructions that invite us to witness the drama unfolding in this dreamlike world as they fall out of balance. From studying her work, I am fascinated with the power of contrast in painting. Her excellent use of contrasting colors to create mood and enhance the visual sensation of the painting is extraordinary. Her painting is a visual expression of a fantasy story.



Fig. 8 Yi Ting Paung, *First Thesis Painting*, 2016, watercolor, 12 in x 18 in.

With the inspiration of all the artists mentioned, I had started my thesis focused on surrealism. During my early works in thesis, I concentrated on studying the works of Hieronymus Bosch, Inka Essenhigh, and Julie Heffernan. In *First Thesis Painting*, I incorporated the creature in Bosch's vision of limbo from *Limbo* and the dynamic form from *Romantic Painting* (Fig. 6) created by Essenhigh. I set the combined creature in a dark forest to unify the different tones of the two objects and enhance the contrast between the darkness of the background with the brightness of the green form as a light source.



Fig 9. Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ in Limbo*, 1575, oil on wood, 22.9 in x 28.4 in.

Inspired by the imaginative world created by the artists mentioned above, I started to map out ideas of creating strange creatures in natural settings. During this time, I designed many forms of fantastical creatures. For example, in the painting, *Tree-man*, I depicted a tree man moving across a trail of mushrooms (Fig. 10). However, they all

shared one major flaw: the lack of a “real” element in the surreal world. To improve the “realness” of the make believe world, I studied real objects.



Fig. 10 Yi Ting Paung, *Tree-man*, 2016, watercolor, 12 in x 18 in.



Fig. 11 Yi Ting Paung, *Honey Bottle*, 2016, colored pencil, 7.9 in x 6.4 in.

In the painting, *Honey Bottle*, I set up a still life and observed the relationship between light and shadow, reflection, and color relationships—elements that make an object appear “real”. During this study, I found that surrealism does not have to be a make believe creature in a make believe world, it is merely a concept that suggests a scene which does not feel like the ordinary world. A surreal painting can be as

complicated as the ceiling of the Vatican, or as simple as an enlarged image of a broken egg. This inspired me to collect ordinary objects in everyday life and draw them. I then combined all the objects I had drawn during this series of study. (Fig. 12)



Fig. 12 Yi Ting Paung, *Combined Objects Painting*, 2017, watercolor, color pencil, and pastel, 19.8 in x 27.7 in.

To complete this painting (Fig. 12), I incorporated different mediums such as watercolor, color pencil, and pastel. I am pleased with the overall effect as I was able to keep all the characteristics of the different mediums without any one of them standing out awkwardly. In *Combined Object Painting*, I used watercolor to create the background, colored pencil to create the refined edges of the metallic reflection on the faucet, and pastel to create the smooth highlight on the honey bottle and wood texture.

Throughout these studies, I was able to improve my artistic ability. I developed a better understanding of color relationship, composition, and light/shadow relationship. All these techniques enhanced my ability to create a believable surreal world. For my

final project, I created a life-sized watercolor painting. Below is the rough draft of this painting (Fig. 13).



Fig. 13 Yi Ting Paung, *Rough Draft for Final Project*, watercolor, 9.9 in x 7.5 in.

Surrealism is a window between the outer world and inner-self; it visualizes the illusions and brings dreams into real life in the form of art. Surrealism is the art of the psychological state. Each surrealist depicts his/her own version of the world: Bosch created his vision of hell, Dali illustrated his life through suggestive imagery and symbolism, Essenhigh depicted her own mythologies in illustration, and Heffernan illustrates imaginative and exotic worlds as they fall apart. From studying the surrealist artists, I improved my artistic techniques in many ways. I gained a better understanding of the color relationships for establishing color harmony and I am able to design a composition with strong visual flow by incorporating multiple mediums and taking advantage of the special characteristics of each medium. Each improvement is one step closer to generating my own surreal realm, which is the ultimate goal of my thesis. In the future, I will continue to venture into the concepts of surrealism, and create my own tale using all the techniques I have acquired.

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Surrealism: Art of Subconciuous

by YiTing Paung



*"There are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes."
—W. William Shakespeare*

Art is subjective, it is interpreted differently in everyone's perspective, and it is a part of each one of us, which takes shape with our personal experiences throughout life. For me, art is the bridge between the physical realm and the domain of dreams and illusions. Instead of expressing pure feelings or depicting still life objects, I am more interested in the idea of "creating".

Since I was little, I have been obsessed with the story, "Alice in wonderland". The story depicts a fantastical world full of wonder and energy. Each character has its own unique characteristics. In this world, anything can happen, but always for a reason, even if the reason is illogical. I love to create surreal worlds filled with exotic and bizarre creatures and objects, most of the subjects derived from my dreams.

My interest in the subconscious mind eventually lead to my journey into surrealism. As I ventured deeper into this magical world, I found myself deeply attracted to the idea of surrealism. I was able to further my relationship with surrealism in my thesis project. Throughout the project, I explored ideas of automatic surrealism. I illustrate obscure images with a vague or more abstract meaning.

These landscapes are mostly inspired by my dreams, and each image I created is a reflection of my subconscious mind. Although this world is filled with limitless imagination, it serves as a reflection of reality. In this realm, everything is illogical, but nothing is unreasonable. The surreal world has largely influenced my path as an artist.

Surrealism: Art of Subconscious

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Yi Ting Paung, *First Thesis Painting*, 2016, watercolor,
12 in x 18 in.

This watercolor painting was inspired by the artists, Hieronymus Bosch and Inka Essenhigh. Bosch was famous for his depictions of hellscape. Essenhigh is a contemporary surrealist artist that is characterized by her imaginative and dynamic compositions. This painting combined the designs of the two artists. The purpose of the painting is to investigate and incorporate the characteristics of professional artists for improving my own concepts of light and shadow relationships.



Yi Ting Paung, *Tree-man*, 2016, watercolor, 12 in x 18 in.

I created this painting solely based on my imagination of what a forest in the morning would be like. I incorporate a tree-man walking under the first piercing light of early morning in between a trail of big mushrooms.



Yi Ting Paung, Tea Party, 2016, watercolor, 12 in x 18 in.

This painting was inspired by one of my favorite literature from childhood. In this painting, I try to depict a tea party in cave with illustrative art style.



Yi Ting Paung, *Kitchen*, 2016, colored pencil, 14 in x 11 in.

This colored pencil drawing was inspired by my kitchen. I incorporate common objects that can be associated with a kitchen. and put them into this drawing. In this drawing, I imagine what a kitchen would be like in the eyes and imagination of a mouse.



Yi Ting Paung, *Honey Bottle*, 2016, colored pencil,
7.9 in x 6.4 in.

This colored pencil drawing was originally intended as a study of natural light on objects for a better understanding of light and shadow relationship. However, the enlarged objects provides some extends of surrealism with their distorted scale.



Yi Ting Paung, *Egg*, 2016, colored pencil, 5.7 in x 4.2 in.

This colored pencil drawing was inspired by the previous work, *Honey Bottle*. I made the drawing from a still life, but instead of including the entire setting, I only incorporated part of the still life to enhance the surreal feeling given by scale distortion.



Yi Ting Paung, *Combined Objects Painting*, 2017,
watercolor, color pencil, and pastel, 19.8 in x 27.7 in.

This mixed media drawing was inspired by the previous color pencil drawings, *Honey Bottle* and *Egg*. I incorporated elements from both drawings and combined them into one painting. As in previous drawings, I played with the scale of objects to enhance the surreal aspect of the painting. In addition, I was able to incorporate different mediums such as watercolor, colored pencil, and pastel. I used watercolor to create the background, colored pencil to create the refined edges of the metallic reflection on the faucet, and pastel to create the smooth highlight on the honey bottle and wood texture.



Yi Ting Paung, *Final Project*, 2017, watercolor, Schenectady, NY

This life sized watercolor painting incorporates all the techniques I learned throughout my thesis. The painting was inspired by my vision of an underwater city. In the painting, I incorporate the dynamic forms such as paper and fluid to enhance the visual flow. The entire painting was rendered in an overall blue tone with a slight touch of an orange glow, to enhance contrast and indicate another light source behind the viewer.





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Surrealism provides a passage between reality and subconscious. It is an visualization of mind, indeed, it is the art of subconscious.