Exhibition Review, "Surrealism Beyond Borders" Metropolitan Museum of Art, October 2021-January 2022, Tate Modern, February-August, 2022

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Long-held misconceptions about Surrealism situate its core within France, and center it around André Breton and other predominantly white male philosophers, writers, artists, and other creatives. But the reality of Surrealism is something larger and more introspective. Recent exhibitions of Surrealism reconsider and reposition this notion. A consideration of Surrealism's revolutionary essence is necessary to dismantle preconceived notions of Surrealism that are centered in France and its influence on other locales throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. This movement spanned multiple decades–and some argue continues to the present day– across places and borders, in a manifestation of the dichotomy of permanence and impermanence. It is permanent as a literal, art historical category; it is impermanent in its capacity to fluctuate through a fluidity of form across time and place.

In seeking to produce a broad, revisionist-centered definition of Surrealism, the recent exhibition "Surrealism Beyond Borders" situates the surrealist movement within a conceptualization that defies style, loci, and temporalities. Stephanie D'Alessandro of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Matthew Gale of the Tate Modern curated the exhibition "Surrealism Beyond Borders." The exhibition opened at the Met from October 2021 through January 2022 before traveling to the Tate Modern where it was on display from February to August of 2022. "Surrealism Beyond Borders" sought to define Surrealism as an art movement that was about "collective interests shared by artists across regions, continents, and countries."[1] Importantly, the movement acknowledged a variety of material, social, and political aspects across the artists included, thus highlighting the fact that Surrealism was

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not monolithic. The use of the word movement is not distinctly developed in the exhibition catalogue. Rather, the curators term Surrealism "a movement, in the true sense of the word."[2] This approach advocates for Surrealism as a movement in its constant shifting and new modes of disclosure throughout time.

D'Alessandro and Gale divided the exhibition into twenty-one sections, delineated in wall labels and text. These included "Collective Identities," "Eva Sulzer," "Mexico City," and "Revolution, First and Always." Though these sections perhaps seem arbitrarily divided into places, people, and philosophies, they succeed in offering a new perspective onto the movement and in elaborating a revisionist methodology, retelling the history of Surrealism through a multitude of artists and locations. This method allows for the expansive scope of this project, including numerous artworks that span mediums. Further, D'Alessandro and Gale highlight the non-linear expansion of Surrealism across time.

"Surrealism Beyond Borders" first reconsiders the origins of Surrealism within André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism*, published in 1924. Though this may be the starting point for the use of the term Surrealism, in no way should the Paris Surrealists be considered most important. D'Alessandro and Gale break down the bias inherent to centering Surrealism in Paris. The art and artists they included in their exhibition present a Surrealism focused on "intellectual, creative, and political freedom" taking place across the world, in which "imposed values can be overturned."[3] Importantly, Surrealism was anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist; Surrealism was revolutionary.

As defined in this exhibition, Surrealism then provides a means to "question cultural traditions" and "interrogate structures of power."[4] This impetus is the basis for the curators's redefining of the movement across locations and time. D'Alessandro and Gale make the point that the exhibition does not highlight a style within Surrealism as a whole. Instead the visual manifestations of the movement become "powerful tools of communication, as instigations to arrive at shared ideas that can bridge class, race, language, and time," to this day. [5]

But in determining that Surrealism is without a distinct style, the exhibition does not really answer the question of why Surrealism is not considered a period style. The closest we get to an explanation is that the curators did not want to "impose concepts of wholeness and comprehensiveness" or propose a "global view of Surrealism," highlighting the colonial legacy of master narratives.[6] In this way, they reject an international view in favor of a universal one; as Effie Rentzou states, "Surrealism's universalism bypassed national structures."[7] But exactly how Surrealism became a name for a universal movement without a distinct style remains uncertain in the exhibition.

One of the most intriguing objects and beneficial curatorial decisions in "Surrealism Beyond Borders" is a centrally-positioned exquisite corpse drawing by Ted Joans, aptly titled *Long Distance* (1976-2005). A popular visual game in which

many Surrealists participated, the exquisite corpse starts in-person, within a group, or can be mailed between participants. The first participant draws on a portion of a paper before folding their contribution back to hide it from the second player. The next person adds to this drawing, not knowing what the first player drew. This process continues any number of times. The end product presents a cohesive drawing but with distinctly different parts. Ted Joans's example is likely the longest exquisite corpse of its time in terms of duration, with 123 artists participating. The exhibition's exquisite corpse highlights Surrealism's defiance of style and its connection between multiple people and places throughout time. Like this game, various members composed the surrealist movement and contributed in the way they best saw fit, forming the more-or-less cohesive unit of the surrealist group. In other words, members picked up "where another has left off, veering from, rather than determined by, what came before."[8] Unlike other art historical movements which defined style based on collective artistic techniques in order to achieve a similar visual result, Surrealism acts as an ideological vehicle driven on different routes, and at the ultimate discretion of the artistic driver.

"Surrealism Beyond Borders" puts forward a contemporary, revisionist definition of the surrealist movement. The artists and artwork included in this exhibition are integral to D'Alessandro and Gale's positioning of Surrealism not as a visual style or aesthetic but as a movement. The movement is situated in the common ideas artists express within this exhibition. The concerns of the unconscious, identity, dreams, the marvelous, the automatic, and of course, revolution, are the commonalities that tie the Surrealists together in "Surrealism Beyond Borders." Articulated by various artworks, the spirit of these elements culminates in an aesthetic that does not tie together to form a cohesive style as in prior artistic movements. The surrealist artist succeeded when they gave form to these certain commonalities. It no longer mattered that visual elements were not shared amongst artists; individuality as expressed through the unconscious mind was instead prized. The exhibition catalogue also forwards this argument. The catalogue essentially acts as a textbook on Surrealism, with fifty essays from contributing authors as well as a few by D'Alessandro and Gale. There are 321 plates included, highlighting the vast scope of this multifaceted project.

In determining the manifestations of the surrealist movement in Latin America, for example, Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel's essay "Haiti, Martinique, Cuba" evidences this idea that there was no unified style behind the Surrealists, but that a number of artists within the movement expressed similar concepts in their art related to the supernatural. Joseph-Gabriel focuses on Hector Hyppolite's painting *Damballah la flambeau* (Damballah the Flame, c. 1947) and Wifredo Lam's *La jungla* (The Jungle, 1943). Though visually different in terms of line, color, and use of space, the two artists express similar concepts. Hyppolite depicts the Sky Father Damballah, the oldest Iwa in Haitian vodou. Traditionally represented as a serpent,

Hyppolite uses feminine features and the feminine article "la" in the title to depict ambiguity, a spirit that defies convention. His intention is to display the supernatural and the marvelous. Lam also depicts the supernatural but through a contrasting method. In *La jungla* Lam explores symbols of Afro-diasporic religions, merging beauty and violence. Though these two artists differ aesthetically, what defines their Surrealism are the ideas of the supernatural expressed in their art.

Clare Davies confronts the issue of identity in her essay "Cairo," focusing on Amy Nimr's *Untitled (Anatomical Corpse,* 1940). The artist suggests a body, neither female or male, overtaken by the ocean. Its head has turned into a conglomerate of shells and coral as the arms liquify and the figure floats in a dark abyss. Nimr examines the idea that art could free the individual "from the 'artificial restrictions' of nationality, religion, and ethnicity" and even gender.[9] Though Davies mentions that Nimr seeks freedom from the restrictions of identity, *Untitled (Anatomical Corpse)* suggests a deeper, unfettered conflict.

Similarly, Joanna Pawlik writes in "Ted Joans: Overseas Surrealism" about how the artist confronts his identity in *The Real Black Power* (1967). Pawlik explains that Joans "negotiated multiple, hybrid identities that changed according to the context in which he found himself."[10] *The Real Black Power* expresses his experience as a black man living in the 1960s in a collage of individual photographs of influential black men intermixed with stenciled lettering, alongside a large, doubled phallus. Joans speaks to his identity as a black man and the struggle of those who live with the same experience. While both Nimr and Joans consider their identity within their art, the two evidence this surrealist struggle of the self with diverging visual means.

Zita Cristina Nunes discusses the visual depiction of revolution in the work of Otávio Araújo in her essay "Antropofagia and Surrealism in Brazil." For Araújo, "Blackness became a call to a revolutionary politics."[11] In his painting *A torre do capuchinho* (The Capuchin's Tower, 1998) Araújo confronts the dream state of Surrealism through the symbol of water, also associating the element with slave ports in Brazil. A black figure in profile melds into a landscape overgrown with flora and fauna and eroded by the ocean waves. Araújo combines naturalistic features in his painting to create an imaginary landscape that calls for "other ways of being in the world" that relate to the black experience.[12]

Though contrasting visual elements characterize these artists, what ties them together in this exhibition are the very ideas they consider in their art, and with which the art world had yet to truly engage. D'Alessandro and Gale argue that by embracing the revolutionary ideas of Surrealism through art, these artists became a part of a movement that hoped to dismantle colonial legacies. In doing so, these artists defied a surrealist style, instead becoming members in a longstanding surrealist movement.

"Surrealism Beyond Borders" is successful in its revisionist approach. It convinces the viewer that Surrealism was a movement that took place as a

conversation with many focal points in time and place. The large-scale approach taken by the curators however avoids a clear assessment of what exactly constitutes an art movement. But what remains most intriguing is D'Alessandro and Gale's presentation of the widespread twentieth-century tendency for artists to have been Surrealists.

1. Stephanie D'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, "The World in the Time of the Surrealists," in *Surrealism Beyond Border*s, ed. Stephanie D'Alessandro and Matthew Gale (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 10.
2. Ibid, 23.
3. Ibid, 14.
4. Ibid, 16.
5. Ibid, 18.
6. Ibid, 21.
7. Effie Rentzou, "Internationalism and Universalism," in *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, 309.
8. Christopher Bush, "Collective Identity," in *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, 307.
9. Clare Davies, "Cairo," in *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, 67.
10. Joanna Pawlik, "Ted Joans: Overseas Surrealism," in *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, 161.
11. Zita Cristina Nunes, "Antropofagia and Surrealism in Brazil," in *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, 126.
12. Ibid, 127.