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Monsters & manifestos

by Andrew L. Shea

On "Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s" at the Baltimore Museum of Art and "Joan Miró: Birth of the World" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In 1924 the French poet André Breton published his influential Manifeste du surréalisme (Surrealist Manifesto), a document that articulated the shared interests of a group of avant-garde poets, painters, and sculptors who would in short order alter the course of Western art. Breton's definition of Surrealism laid out the major positions of this new, radical aesthetic: "Pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations."

Complicating matters was the fact that just two weeks before Breton's manifesto hit the presses, the Franco-German poet Yvan Goll—the de facto leader of a rival Surrealist faction—published his own *Surrealist Manifesto* in Paris. The ensuing struggle to win exclusive intellectual control over the term culminated in a physical altercation. This wasn't the only time Breton and his allies resorted to the specter of violence in order to consolidate their movement: months later, Breton's recently formed "Bureau for Surrealist Research" ominously warned an offending author in a letter that "if you give yourself the right to use the word 'Surrealism' spontaneously and without notifying us, more than fifteen of us will be there to cruelly set you right."

The Surrealists' rather militant insistence on ideological conformity aligns with the spirit of Breton's original manifesto, which positions his Freudian aesthetics in explicitly political terms of power. "We live under the reign of logic," he begins the tract, later predicting that "[p]erhaps the imagination is on the verge of recovering its rights." For Breton and his fellow Surrealists, their art was their philosophy; their philosophy their politics. The movement demanded strict allegiance to its founding principles. Discord, maneuverings, fallings-out, and excommunications were all par for the course throughout the vast majority of its "Golden Age" existence.

The urgency with which Surrealism sought to define itself as an intellectual movement must also be understood within the greater geopolitical context of interwar Europe. A good number of Surrealists were veterans of the trenches. Many responded to the experience of war by turning to

socialism, and a number became communists. All were deeply interested in the destabilizing potential of Freud's theories on psychology and the human unconscious. As the 1930s brought the renewed threat of totalitarianism and war to Europe, the Surrealists believed that their knowledge of the mind and its processes were uniquely capable of combating the authoritarian belief systems that led to the rise of Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini.

At the Baltimore Museum of Art, "Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s" investigated Surrealist imagery and symbolism in precisely this context.1 With ninety works by Surrealist and Surrealist-adjacent artists such as Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, André Masson, Alberto Giacometti, and Pablo Picasso, as well as American artists initially influenced by Surrealism such as Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell, the exhibition was extensive, varied to the extreme, and chock-full of blockbuster names. The bma co-organized the exhibition with the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art; both institutions were early collectors and exhibitors of Surrealism, supporting its members in the '30s and '40s after many had fled Europe for the United States. The Baltimore presentation was curated by the bma's Associate Curator of European Art, Oliver Shell.

Pablo Picasso, Minotauromachy, *1935*, *Etching and engraving*, *The Baltimore Museum of Art*, *Gift of Israel and Selma Rosen*. *© Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

"Monsters & Myths" moved chronologically through the twenty-year period described in its subtitle, with sections named "Premonition of War," "The Spanish Civil War," "World War II," and "Surrealism in the Americas" that tracked the group as they traveled about (and out of)

Europe. The basic argument made by the curators for the show can be found in the Wadsworth curator Oliver Tostmann's introductory catalogue essay, which begins with an epigraph courtesy of Dalí: "According to Nostradamus the apparition of monsters presages the outbreak of war." Dalí's characteristically ridiculous proclamation has been essentially parroted by the curators, who point to the Surrealists' monsters and mythological creatures—giants, minotaurs, biomorphs, and birdpeople, most set within deep, vacant, post-apocalyptic landscapes—as unique, "premonitory" symbols which predicted the upcoming calamity of the Spanish Civil War and World War II.

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As eager as I'd be to gamble next month's rent on the airtight predictions of Nostradamus, I wonder if this uncritical acceptance of Surrealist mumbo-jumbo might have resulted in lending free gravitas to a range of subjects that would otherwise remind viewers only of the latest cgi-riddled sci-fi monster film. Would it be too cynical to ask if "Monsters & Myth" is the museum world's answer to *Avengers*, the mash-up comic-book-movie series whose most recent installation just grossed an inexplicable $1.2 billion over its opening weekend? Or how about stringing a line between the Surrealists' "automatism" and the intelligent automation graphics that have given us live-action dragons, dinosaurs, and King Kong, but most importantly Optimus Prime? Any number of Dalí and Ernst landscapes, as well as *Totemic Landscape*, an absurd 1937 work by the Austro-Mexican artist Wolfgang Paalen, could inspire settings for the eagerly anticipated *Transformers 17*.

Seeing this exhibition did little to break my suspicion that the Surrealists who conformed most rigidly to their movement's dogma—the Dada-esque repudiators of formal competence, the navel-gazing illustrators of the "deep" unconscious—generally made the shallowest and most surface-level pieces of the lot. When Dalí, after numerous attempts, met Freud, his intellectual hero, in 1938, the psychoanalyst reportedly told the artist that "in classic paintings I look for the unconscious, but in your paintings I look for the conscious." He might as well have sucker-punched Dalí in the gut. Conversely, represented artists such as Giacometti and Picasso who moved in, around, and out of Surrealist circles, ignoring the extremists but using what worked—as well as the younger Americans who picked up on automatism as a useful method for developing innovative modes of plastic form—point to better things ahead.

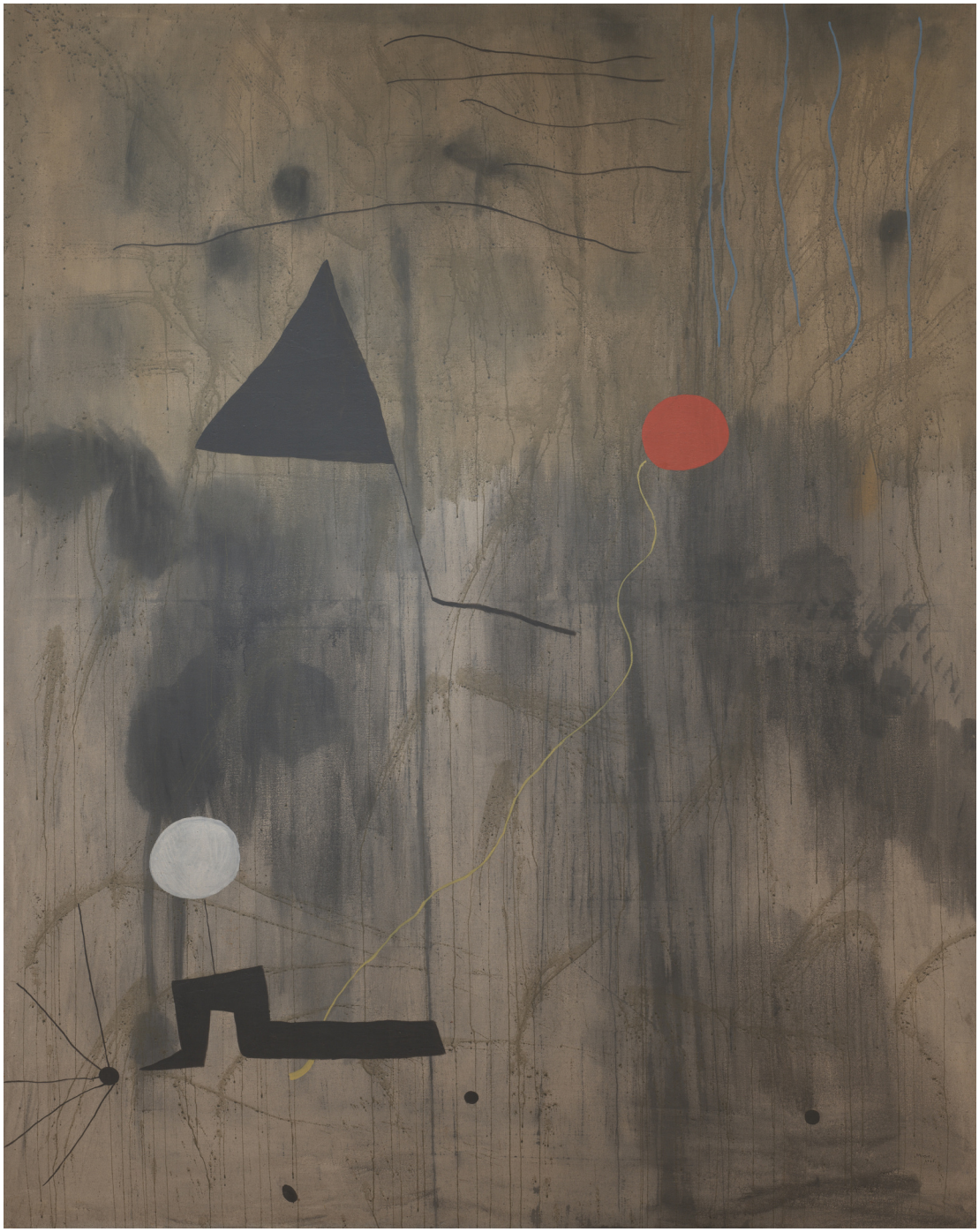
Salvador Dalí, Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of a Civil War), *1936, Oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection.*

Another artist who showed well in Baltimore is Joan Miró, represented by thirteen works that included a number of the exhibition's highlights. Miró is still thought to be the quintessential Surrealist, but like Picasso he never officially joined their ranks, preferring instead to remain unbound by its constricting influence. A more comprehensive examination of the Spaniard can be found at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, now host to a collection exhibition titled "Joan Miró: Birth of the World."2 The exhibition's subtitle comes from the landmark 1924 painting Birth of the World, which hangs in the third-floor galleries as a sort of anchor to the sixty-odd works that precede and follow it.

The exhibition begins with some of Miró's earliest paintings, which anticipate the expansive 1924 work. His 1917 *Portrait of Enric Cristòfol Ricart* combines thick black lines with rainbow hues that scream Fauvist influence. But the mysteriously floating, flattened painting palette to the left of the subject's head, outlined in green, and the Japanese print behind him that has been pasted on as collage clearly suggest an interest in Synthetic Cubism, and even point ahead to his Surrealist forms. By the time Miró arrived in Paris for the first time in 1920, he seems to have been unhappy

with the state of Cubism, which to his eyes had ossified into a rigidly formalized "look." Referring to a favorite subject of Picasso and the Cubists, Miró channeled John Blutarsky *avant la lettre* and proclaimed, "I will break their guitar."

An important transitional work in this mode is also one of the few paintings loaned to the museum for the exhibition: *The Table (Still Life with Rabbit)* (1920–21, Private collection). It's a garish affair, with its overcooked, almost sickly tones and its repeated juxtapositions of incongruous elements. The composition is full of small moments of strong contrasts in value, often appearing as "halos" around forms to artificially extricate them from their setting, at the expense of both tonal subtlety and a greater visual drama. And yet, there's something marvelous going on with these objects, among them a rather alive-looking rabbit, chicken, and fish. Miró upends his titular table in Cubist fashion, but whereas Cézanne's apples look like they might fall off their perch, Miró's objects risk no such event. Rather, they seem utterly immune to gravitational pull, and they hum with energy. In the context of Miró's later works, it's easy to see the incongruous, floating objects as stepping stones to more radically non-referential abstractions.



Joan Miró, Birth of the World, *1924, Oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.*

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Even still, it's shocking to think that Miró could have gone from making this relatively conventional work to something as radical and masterly as *Birth of the World* in only three short years. The stained ground of *Birth* achieves something more intense and natural-seeming than anything else in the exhibition. Before touching his canvas with oil, Miró primed it with a rough and uneven layer of glue sizing, so that the initial glazes of pigment would reflect and absorb into the canvas in irregular, unpredictable ways. Those cascading washes of gray, black, and ochre—along with a succession of faint brush splatters of ochre on the lower half—give the work a gritty atmosphere and mystical sense of space. Chromatically subtle but also moody and dramatic, the ground could have been a painting on its own. Miró must have sensed this, because the marks, lines, and shapes that he did then produce are restrained, light, and intelligently responsive to the undulations of existing tone.

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Later works would find Miró continuing to experiment with the relationship between figure and ground. In a rebuke of Cubist form, Miró doesn't seem to have been interested in democratizing (or obliterating) the relation between object and ground. Rather, he was figuring out how to isolate this dialectic and distill it into the essential conversation of his pictures. And moma's significant collection of works by the artist puts this profoundly inquisitive and experimental mind on display, showing knockout works as late as 1958 (he continued to make art until 1983) that descend in different ways from the founding creation of *Birth of the World*.

Miró famously boasted of "assassinating painting." Armed with a knowledge of his admiration of Duchamp and Dada, one could be forgiven for assuming iconoclastic intentions when first confronted with his most jarring and non-referential works. But, as it turns out, Miró was a committed fan of the old school—the really old school—declaring in 1947 that "my favorite schools of painting are as far back as possible: the cave painters—the primitives." Miró's revolution was not to destroy painting, but to redeem it by bringing painting back to something approaching its shamanistic origins. Whereas the manifesto movements of Dada and Surrealism, in their stated desire to subvert "the reign of reason," ended up exemplifying the most stultifying tendencies of rigid ideology, Miró's individualistic, experiential approach to art provided him an incalculably deep wellspring from which to draw his inspired ideas.

1 "Monsters & Myths: Surrealism and War in the 1930s and 1940s" was on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art from February 24 through May 26, 2019. It was previously on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art from October 20, 2018, through January 13, 2019.

2 "Joan Miró: Birth of the World" opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on February 24 and remains on view through June 26, 2019.

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