

The Allure of Surrealism

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When our reality has become an endless nightmare of isolation and anxiety, what better escape from it is there, then fashion, philosophy, and art? Or perhaps a mixing of all three? Surrealism incorporates all three of these topics while serving as a perpetual source of hope and freedom. Surrealism, an art movement born out of the confusion and disparity post World War I, has continuously questioned *what is reality* and how our hidden *unconscious* identities influence our daily lives and perceptions.

Surrealism is based strongly around Sigmund Freud's psychological studies on *the unconscious* mind. Freud believed that our conscious mind and what we are aware of, only encompasses a very small part of who we are. We are, according to Freud, most intensely influenced by our *unconscious* thoughts, raw emotions, and dreams. Renowned surrealist artists such as: Frida Kahlo, Man Ray, Max Ernst, Méret Oppenheim, René Magritte, and Salvador Dalí embraced these Freudian philosophies and beliefs through their various works. An additional typical trait of surrealism that developed was *juxtaposition*, which focused on combining dissimilar entities to generate visual contrast, humour, or an unsettling effect. However, psychologists and artists were not alone in their exploration of surrealism. Surrealistic art featured many characteristic fashion elements such as a men's bowler hat, a lady's corset, and whole fashion mannequins or solo parts of anatomical mannequins like a torso or a hand, inspiring fashion designers to take note.

Italian fashion designer and avid follower of surrealism, *Elsa Schiaparelli*, was one of the first fashion designers of the 20th century to effortlessly blur the lines of high fashion and high art through her designs as well as through her collaborations with Dalí, Oppenheim, and surrealist poet Jean Cocteau. Some of her most beloved and iconic looks included: the "Shoe Hat", the "Oversized Fly Brooch", and "the Skeleton Dress". *Schiaparelli* is considered the first official surrealist fashion designer, but she certainly was not the last.

Man Ray was another pioneer of surrealism in fashion, fashion photography that is. Ray elevated the importance of fashion photography both in the art and fashion world in the 1920's and 1930's, through his meaningful use of surrealism. He worked together with *Schiaparelli*, *Chanel*, and *Poiret*, creating artful editorials and radically surreal advertisements for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*.

Vivienne Westwood together with *Malcolm McLaren* opted for a feminist surrealistic message in 1977. The design duo created t-shirts and tops with painted female breasts across the chest. This anatomical imagery is typical of traditional surrealism, however *Westwood* and *McLaren* created it with the purpose of fighting female sexualization and letting women embrace and take charge of their own sexuality.

Jean-Charles de Castelbajac and *Franco Moschino* exemplified their surrealist take on fashion in 1988, with their individual Fall collections. Both designers replaced the traditional fur elements of their garments, with brown toy teddy bears. *Moschino* created a belted black dress with teddy bears lining the neckline and a matching hat covered in teddy bears to finish the look. *Moschino* was well known for questioning fashion norms and creating playful *juxtapositions* in his designs. *Castelbajac* on the other hand, constructed a winter coat made up entirely of teddy

bears. *Castelbajac* wanted to create an entirely new "fur coat" that was outrageous enough to both shock and impress fashion critics alike.

Japanese *Issey Miyake* cherished the bizarre and the outlandish possibilities of fashion. *Miyake* expands the concept and expectation of clothes through his designs, evaluating fashion's reality much like the famed surrealist artists did. Following *Miyake's* innovation and success of "Pleats Please", he created the super surrealistic "Flying Saucer Dress" as part of his Spring 1994 Collection. The dress transforms according to the body underneath it, as well as playfully changing shape completely from when it is worn to when it is taken off.

In *Christian Dior* Fall 1999 Couture compilation by *John Galliano*, a distinctive surrealism quality can be seen throughout the collection. *Galliano's* looks feature giant birds and foxes perched and draped around the model's heads reminiscent of a Magritte painting. Furthermore, towards the end of the closing of the fashion show, an orange magnificently layered ensemble that includes body paint and a mohawk hairstyle is presented. It prompts an immediate linking to Dalí's "The Burning Giraffe" painting.

Avant-garde Dutch designers *Viktor & Rolf* solved all of our fashion lethargy discontent with their refreshingly surreal Fall 2005 RTW collection. Models were sent down the runway in a dreamy way, literally.

Lee Alexander McQueen and *Philip Tracey* joined forces for a collaborative and very surreal fashion show for *Alexander McQueen's* Spring 2008 RTW collection. The two creatives were able to construct a dream like collection while precise tailoring endured. Milliner *Tracey's* bold designs added just the right amount of bizarre contrast to *McQueen's* strong looks.

Maison Martin Margiela's Spring 2009 RTW set featured a "Hair Coat" that even the great Oppenheim would be proud of, as well as various other highly creative and surprising looks. *Margiela's* warm embrace of surrealism gives both the fashion and the art world a sense of freedom and bliss.

Spanish fashion designer *Ágatha Ruiz de la Prada* exhibited her Fall 2009 garments with the bold title of "Tribute of the Surrealism". And she did not disappoint surrealism fans. A Dalí/ *Schiaparelli* inspired dress with drawers all down the front, an ensemble containing an up-side-down velvet umbrella as the skirt, and various glove motifs and patterns similar to the style of Man Ray were all seen.

In *Yohji Yamamoto* Fall 2014 collection, graffiti art and surrealism are met with extreme volume and varying proportions. *Yamamoto's* looks also showed unusual bright colours and a variety of collage styles, uniquely linking the diverse parts together.

Sustainability focused designer *Sindisok Humalo's* Spring 2019 creations for Durban Fashion Fair concentrated mainly on *Afrofuturism*, yet there was an undeniable underlying surrealism feel to the contrasting accessories and distinguishing colours.

Valentino's Pier Paolo Piccioli together with fashion photographer Nick Knight created a true escape from reality, with their dual digital and physical presentation of *Valentino* Couture Fall 2020. The performance showcased surreally proportioned stark white gowns and digital optical illusions of flowers and feathers.

Surrealism in fashion still continues to be a major trend that does not plan on leaving anytime soon. Emerging brand *Raw Mango* led by creative director Adityan Melekalam and art director Sanjay Garg, recently released a surrealist fashion film as part of their Spring 2021 collection. The film features ceramic art by Vikramadita Sharma and invites the audience to dream together with them.

Maybe surrealism still asks the right questions? And we just have to keep encouraging our *unconscious* selves to continue embracing the fantasy.