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The Real Deal With ‘Sixties Surreal’ at the Whitney

The show posits a radically different history of American art from the 1960s, and while it doesn’t deliver on its thesis it still offers plenty of great work.

By Brian P. Kelly

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Raymond Saunders's 'Untitled' (1968). WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

New York

“Words mean things” is a common retort thrown around online in response to pseudo-intellectual posts and egregiously inaccurate conflations. The phrase serves as an important reminder that the precision of language is important, never more so than when discussing serious topics like terrorism, fascism and sex. It’s also an apt response to “Sixties Surreal” at the Whitney.

Organized by Dan Nadel, Laura Phipps, Scott Rothkopf and Elisabeth Sussman with Kelly Long and Rowan Diaz-Toth, the show makes a bold attempt to reframe the artistic history of one of America's most turbulent decades, arguing in the exhibition texts that "surreal tendencies were among the most important forces shaping contemporary art across the United States" in that period, and that "artists from diverse backgrounds took license from the wildness of the Surrealist imagination to express the psychosexual, fantastical, spiritual, strange and revolutionary qualities of their time." The works by more than 100 artists in the show, however, do little to support this radical conjecture.

There is certainly evidence of Surrealism's legacy in this thematic presentation. Robert Arneson's "Call Me Lover" (1965), a ceramic telephone with a sensual mouth for the earpiece and female genitalia at the center of the dial, recalls Salvador Dalí's "Aphrodisiac Telephone," which featured a lobster as a receiver. William T. Wiley's "Shark's Dream" (1967), a painting of a piece of industrial construction with a thought bubble, is a Magritte-like take on late-period International architecture. And Barbara Hammer's photo "Tee Corinne Sleeping" (1972) could be mistaken for a shot by Maurice Tabard.

But the connection to anything surreal is absent from most of the art here, and occasionally there are conflicting narratives within the show. For instance, the first section of the exhibition frames this movement as one that "looked underneath the slick surfaces of consumer culture and Pop Art to expose the strange, alienating effect of the American Dream." But two galleries later we're given Warhol's grayscale "Marilyn" (1967), one of the most famous images in the Pop canon.



John Outterbridge's 'No Time for Jivin' (1969). WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

John Outterbridge's "No Time for Jivin'" (1969), a hefty wall-mounted assemblage with a jumble of address numbers, metal plates and a bright red "NO" affixed to its front, is a prime example of the ways artists in the '60s moved beyond the canvas in their compositions in order to question both physical and social spaces. But does doing something different from the norm qualify an artwork as surreal? An anti-violence section has deeply moving works that speak to the horrors of Vietnam (Peter Saul's 1967 "Saigon," which documents racist attitudes toward and atrocities against the Vietnamese); the sting of racism (Mel Casas's 1969 "Humanscape #56 [San Antonio Circus]," about a white-only group that hosted an annual festival in Texas); and the tragedy of assassination (Ralph Arnold's 1968 "Unfinished Collage," three panels honoring John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.). But in these works, trippy colors, exaggerated and expressionistic figures and unconventional arrangements seem to be enough to qualify them as surreal. A Jasper Johns flag work seems to be here for no other reason than name recognition. The overly inclusive approach undermines the curators' arguments, and examples of such miscategorizations are numerous. When everything is surreal, nothing is.



Mel Casas's 'Humanscape #56 (San Antonio Circus)' (1969). WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

While the show misfires in its thesis, however, it *is* a fantastic presentation of American art at a pivotal point in the nation's history—one that would have been largely unimpeachable if the curators had just played things straight. Like a high-schooler who uses the wrong equation but comes up with the right answer, this display does a superlative job of cataloging national anxieties during this period and revealing how artists embraced the newfound liberation that was sweeping the country to take more expansive approaches to forms, materials and creative expression.

Mind-bending psychedelia is present in the work of artists like Robert Crumb and Karl Wirsum. Representational painting is reinvented through abstraction and reduction by the likes of Raymond Saunders and Rupert Garcia. Sculpture embraces new materials and techniques in creations by H.C. Westermann and Lucas Samaras. Spirituality takes on previously unconsidered valences in the canvases of Wally Hedrick and Carlos Villa.



Carlos Villa's 'My Roots' (1970-71). WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Of the many movements we associate with the 1960s, feminism is particularly well represented here. Christina Ramberg and Martha Edelheit upend notions of sexiness in their paintings, thumbing their noses at the “male gaze.” Lynn Hershman Leeson’s wig-in-a-box that periodically giggles through a hidden speaker creepily drives home the notion that women were expected to perform as always-happy and put-together. And Marisol’s sculptures of “Women and Dog” (1963-64) prove that you don’t have to be dour to argue for a cause. While the view of surrealism may be hazy at the Whitney, the lasting impact of the ’60s has never been clearer.

Sixties Surreal

Whitney Museum of American Art, through Jan. 19

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