

SIXTIES SURREAL: THE WHITNEY MUSEUM REWRITES THE 1960S THROUGH A RADICALLY DREAMLIKE LENS

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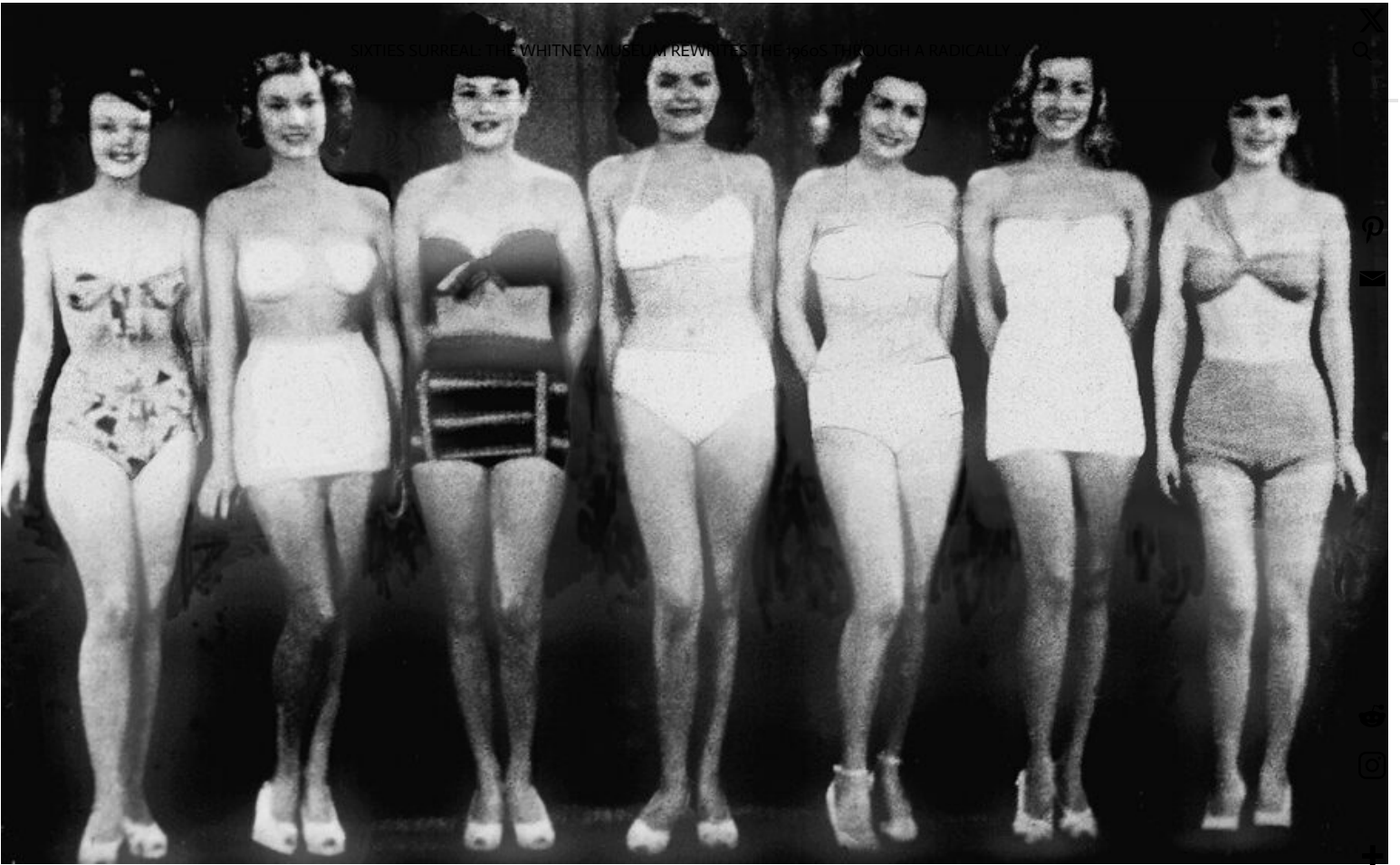
Whitney Museum "Sixties Surreal" Mel Casas, *Humanscape #56 (San Antonio Circus)*, 1969

SIXTIES SURREAL: THE WHITNEY REWRITES THE 1960S THROUGH A RADICALLY DREAMLIKE LENS

The **Whitney Museum** (<https://whitney.org/>) has unveiled a sweeping, revisionist chapter on the long '60s with *Sixties Surreal*, which opened to the public on September 24, 2025. Rather than rehashing the decade's familiar movements—Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism—the exhibition reframes 1958–1972 through the electricity of the “surreal”: the psychosexual, the fantastical, the insurgent, and the unabashedly strange. Bringing together 111 artists across painting, sculpture, photography, film, and assemblage—among them Diane Arbus, Yayoi Kusama, Andy Warhol, Romare Bearden, Jasper Johns, Nancy Grossman, David Hammons, Louise Bourgeois, and Faith Ringgold—the show argues that Surrealism in America wasn't merely inherited from Europe; it was weaponized, localized, and reborn to meet a country in upheaval.

“We all ‘grew up Surreal!’” poet John Ashbery once wrote of the era. The Whitney's curatorial team—Dan Nadel, Laura Phipps, Scott Rothkopf, and

Elisabeth Sussman, with Kelly Long and Rowan Diaz-Toth—mapped that feeling across cities and scenes: Los Angeles to Chicago, Houston to New York. Roughly one-fifth of the works are drawn from the Whitney's collection, foregrounding how artists navigated identity, sexuality, race, and power amid televised war, civil rights struggles, countercultural liberation, and the dawn of mass media.



Whitney Museum "Sixties Surreal" Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley, Schmeerguntz, 1966

The exhibition began with a sly apparition: three life-sized camels by Nancy Graves, first shown at the Whitney in 1969. Fabricated from natural and synthetic materials—neither living nor taxidermy—they immediately destabilize the real, setting a tone for galleries that embrace seductive confusion as critical strategy.

From there, *Sixties Surreal* threads together thematic chapters that unsettle the decade's glossy veneer. Pop's consumerist dream is punctured by Martha Rosler, Jim Nutt, and Lee Lozano, who laced domestic imagery with sex, violence, and psychological menace. Abstraction gets bodily and unruly—think the sensuous rigor of Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, alongside West Coast "Funk" provocateurs like Ken Price and Franklin Williams—all charged with protrusions, openings, and materials that pushed sculpture toward the flesh.



Whitney Museum "Sixties Surreal" Lynn Hershman Leeson, *Butterfly Woman Sleeping*, from *Breathing Machines*, 1967

Photography and moving image electrified the everyday into the uncanny. The advent of television turned living rooms into portals: *Dracula* at 6, *Vietnam* at 7. Artists such as Lee Friedlander, Paul Thek, and Luis Jimenez captured that whiplash, while a dedicated gallery to Edward Owens's *Private Imaginings and Narrative Facts* (1966) layered staged and documentary footage into a queer, lyrical portrait of family, where memory and fantasy coauthored the frame.

If the surreal can be escapist, here it was also a tool of dissent. Works by Fritz Scholder, Nancy Spero, Peter Saul, and Ralph Arnold channeled rage and grief into satire and fragmentation, echoing state violence and systemic racism back at their sources. Assemblage became a politics: Noah Purifoy, Bruce Conner, Melvin Edwards, and Ed Bernal reconfigured cultural debris into weapons of critique—post-riot, post-nuclear, post-illusion.



Whitney Museum "Sixties Surreal" Barbara Hammer, Tee Corinne #7, 1972

Long before "feminist art" became codified, artists including Martha Edelheit, Barbara Hammer, Luchita Hurtado, and Shigeko Kubota carved proto-feminist space with collage and performative interventions, confronting objectification and the mythologies imposed upon women's bodies. The show concluded with a turn to the mystical and the metaphysical—Jordan Belson, Ching Ho Cheng, Claes Oldenburg, Eduardo Carrillo, Oscar Howe, and Carlos Villa—where esotericism, ritual, and reappropriated iconography proposed alternative cosmologies to church, state, and status quo.

"Sixties Surreal has been decades in the making," reflected Whitney Director Scott Rothkopf, noting the project's origins in his student research. The result is a capacious remapping of the American sixties that feels uncannily of our present—another "roiling moment" where dream logic and reality collide.



Whitney Museum "Sixties Surreal" Linda Lomahaftewa, *Untitled Woman's Faces*, 1960s—