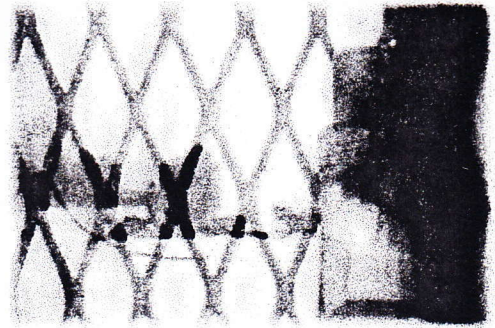


Post Sept. 11: The Real, Surreal and Metareal in New York



Arturo Cuenca Focus as
 space: Trash - Homeless -
 Focus Courtesy Galeria Nina
 Menocal h: 36 x w: 50 in / h:
 91.4 x w: 127 cm 2
 Encapsulated Layers on Ink
 Jet Transparencies 1999

L.P. Streitfeld

Could it just be coincidence that three exhibitions at Zabriskie, Ubu Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum of Art bring up the Surrealist movement as an antidote to the swift demise of postmodernism indicated by Sept. 11? What is remarkable about the Mets exhibition, Surrealism: Desire Unbound, is the inclusion of women, just as muses but participating artists. The theme of eroticism would not be complete without including the female half of the gender dialogue, for what made Surrealism so progressive as a movement was the exaltation of the newly liberated feminine. That these objects of male desire didn't take these passionate outpourings lying down is an indication of just how far both sexes had to go to in the 20th century to integrate independence with their eroticism. In fact, the retrospective clearly indicates that it was precisely the tension underlying the erotic dance between genders (projected onto external relationships by participants) that fueled the Surrealists abundant outpouring of creativity. The exhibition progresses through this erotic interchange between these revolutionary artists and their muses while adding a view into the rebellion against the patriarchy in the form of the father figure. It ends with the symbol of a liberated heart Marcel Duchamp created for the 1959 international surrealist exhibition, Eros. The final gallery is a culmination of the dance, allowing the viewer to draw the erotic lines between partners through the work. For example, Dorthea Tannings remarkable self-portrait before an endless series of open doors is juxtaposed with The Robing of the Bride by Max Ernst, who would become her husband. We also encounter a rare display of the ominous sculptures of Maria Martins, the love and inspiration for Marcel Duchamp. If these works hint into the unconscious terrain left unexplored by the erotic adventuring, curator Jennifer Mundys choice for the closing paintings, by Arshille Gorky, reveal the psychological torment behind doors loosened from their hinges.

The Real

In order to reassess the value of a Surrealist resurgence in the post Sept. 11 climate, it is essential to assess the state of the real. At Forum Gallery this month, a startling realism arrives in the form of figurative sculpture by Sean Henry, an accomplished British artist who is all of 37 years old. While Henrys sculpture mines everyday iconography in order to mirror the post Sept. 11 reality. With impoverishment imbedded in their features, these figures exude the souls quiet suffering, a missing ingredient in postmodernist art. This resurgence of the real makes perfect sense in light of the exaltation of the common man within the context of the World Trade Center crisis.

While postmodernism heralded the celebrity self-promoter as the bearer of the essential media label, the new focus on humanism in the collective consciousness favors the courage and humility of the

dedicated public servant epitomized by the firemen who gave their lives for others. The magic of Henry's stark realism is in the manner with which the artist plays with shifting scale, thereby adding to the collective dialogue between the heroic and common man. Having such downtrodden figures in such close proximity makes us voyeurs into their souls, thereby providing a mirror for our own unconscious suffering.

The Metareal

Two Cuban artists exhibiting in Chelsea utilize the photographic image to extend into the realm of the metareal. Carlos Betancourt, a

Cuban brought up in Puerto Rico by exiled parents and now distinguished as a Miami artist, had his first New York exhibition at

Robert Miller Gallery last month. Arturo Cuenca, a Cuban who escaped to America in the early 1990s, displayed New Work City at

Generous Miracles. The metareal is an expression of primordial experience ordered by an artistic language. Cuenca, in fact, had

anticipated the digital process through the imbedding his internal metaphysics in his aesthetic through the layering of transparent images. For example, he cut a hole in a photograph of a mountain in

order that the viewer may penetrate to the other side. While this alternative view proves to be a practical impossibility in a flat image, it

reflects Cuencas ambition to have the viewer perceive reality from both sides. While this struggle culminated in a breakthrough to the

metareal, it also led to the artist's expulsion from his homeland. Betancourt applies a large eye on his self-portrait as a symbol of

psychic penetration into the body. With this and other penetrating color photographs integrating the primordial with the contemporary,

the artist creates a language documenting the spiritual process by which words and symbols become the rituals of body decoration.

Cuenca, a resident of Manhattan, has a dark urban vision while Betancourt, who continues to draw on the Caribbean for inspiration, is

considerably more upbeat. Cuenca airbrushes the black and white photographic image and has the images hung like tapestries in order

to dramatize the interplay between light and shadow; Betancourt's paint is applied directly on the body and captured through mounting

photographic color prints on a huge scale. While the language of both artists rely on the power of the symbol, they arrive through a

diametrically opposing process. The Exaltation of the Symbol If the symbol, so exalted by the Surrealists, is rare in the art world today, it

is because of the risks that artists assume while working with multiple levels of meaning. As the Surrealists found out the hard way, the

symbol is dangerous; too many lost their lives from wandering through this door into the unconscious without sufficient preparation.

Utilizing the symbol without insight can lead to the fate of Narcissus, who drowned in the deadly pool of self-reflection without self-

knowledge. Betancourt's use of his body as a canvas for backward text leads us to a novel interpretation of the myth in which the

interpretation of the art object (the Self) is completed by gazing in the mirror. In this manner, subject and object become unified strictly

through mutual reflection. This unabashed display of self-eroticism by way of an invented language returns us to the sexual integration

promoted by the Surrealists in their fondness for hermaphroditic images (Ernst's Men Shall Know Nothing of This) and cross dressing

(Duchamp's female alter ego, Rose Selavy). The primordial beauty of the Betancourt image creates the unifying symbol as an erotic

ornament. This sums up an aesthetic that is acutely sexual even as it transcends the physical realm. Beyond such startlingly erotic

imagery, what made Betancourt's reputation in Miami is a public art integrating ritual with spectacle. On the eve of the 2000 vernal

equinox, the artist transformed 2,500 pieces of wooden figures into a huge sculpture directly on Miami Beach. Poets were invited into the

ceremony, thereby integrating the artists visual symbols with the spoken word. The narrative contained in Cuencas technically

proficient New Work City suggests a major leap in consciousness: the death of existential man by way of unity with the primordial mythos of

resurrection. Out of the artists shadowy vision of New York City a projection of the darkness at the interior of the human psyche – arise

golden crosses. Such an urban resurrection implies a unity containing the duality of the opposites. An ominous view of Manhattan as a ship

contains a lone tower of the World Trade Center as a smokestack and a large sign declaring: THE END, while a eulogy is typed across

the water: That's my race: transparent. The overall message suggests Manhattan Island as a latter day Noah's Ark in which all

aces and sects merge to become unified following a death and rebirth. Additional images provide an urban view of patterns forming out of chaos. Mandora shapes focus nature and the man-made object

against blurred cityscapes. Here we find the paradigm shifting into a web of interconnections integrating nature with humanity and technology. The unintentional irony contained in New York City is that a diligent process formulated by, as well as depicting, everyday life in the city has led Cuenca to a religious body of work. Having been alienated from both the communist and art world systems, Cuenca finds his faith through the daily process of working in the city. Unexpectedly, even the streetlights provide illumination to the goal of creating a language through the artists futile intersection of words and images. An actual lamp extends out of the surface of an image containing its likeness, thereby reinforcing the message of salvation. The light penetrates into the work just as consciousness penetrates into the brain.

The Future

The work of Betancourt, Cuenca and Henry is eerily prophetic. Like the sinking of the Titanic, the disaster of Sept. 11 marks the ending of an epoch. With psychic boundaries shattered by the fallen symbol of the World Trade Center towers, the doors have blasted open once again to the deeper erotic connections sought by the Surrealist movement. The present convergence in New York City between the real, the surreal and the metareal enters the culture through compelling art that provides perspective on the recent past and guides to an uncertain future. Sean Henry, Arturo Cuenca and Carlos Betancourt are young artists with revolution pulsing through their veins; it is no question they will signal others to penetrate into deeper archetypal meaning through their transformative imagery.