

Blame It on Magritte

The artist's entertaining perversity veils his broad influence **BY R.C. BAKER**



Museum of Modern Art

You might assume that the Photoshop fantasias of our age would make the visual conundrums of René Magritte's pre-war paintings feel quaint.

Certainly the beguiling originality of his fractured figures and enigmatic objects has been obscured over the decades by the bowdlerized surrealism of Madison Avenue and pop culture. Yet Magritte's conflation of the everyday with the otherworldly continues to resonate, a transformative aesthetic that destabilized the foundations of reality as determinedly as Einstein in physics and Heidegger in philosophy.

MOMA's exhibit focuses on the years 1926 to 1938, when Magritte worked as a commercial artist to supplement the uneven sales of his Surrealist paintings, an unsettling—and at times shocking—body of work that would influence generations of artists on both sides of the high/low divide. While in his early 20s, Magritte (1898–1967) explored Cubism, Futurism, and other modernisms, and eventually developed a style of figuration that presaged Andy Warhol's formal insights by including advertising graphics and typography.

Affecting the same bourgeois dress and provincial manner he assigned to the

bowler-crowned businessmen who populate his paintings, Magritte lived and worked mostly in the suburbs of Brussels, save for a few years spent in Paris seeking an official blessing from the pope of Surrealism, André Breton. Magritte's painting of a pipe accompanied by the text “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” (“This is not a pipe”) impressed Breton and other luminaries of the group, including Salvador Dalí and the poet Paul Éluard. The journey to this iconic 1929 canvas, titled *The Treachery of Images*, had begun a few years earlier, when Magritte experienced an epiphany in an “unpretentious” Brussels brasserie: “I was in a frame of mind such that the moldings on a door seemed to me to be imbued with a mysterious quality of existence and for a long time I stayed in contact with their reality.”

In the 1926 collage *The Lost Jockey*, antler-like limbs grow out of decorative wooden posts festooned with sheet music. A horseman gallops through this domestic forest, the entire scene viewed through parted curtains, the shifts in scale and texture creating a mesmerizing dreamscape. Like a physicist ramming particles into each other, Magritte choreographed collisions of homey objects—a large egg crammed into a small birdcage—and the resulting tableaux set off



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Top: *The Lovers* (1928)
Bottom: *The Human Condition* (1933)

elusive detonations in the brain.

The Light of Coincidences (1933) depicts a candle on a table, which illuminates an easel holding a framed painting of a statue reminiscent of the Venus de Milo. This deathly white human form casts a shadow corresponding to the candle in the foreground; in other words, a light source outside of its frame of existence. We are

looking at a two-dimensional rendering of a two-dimensional representation of a three-dimensional object placed within a realistically painted scene of a darkened room—multiple fictions begetting illusions. The mind parries the impossibility of a flat, painted canvas casting such volumetric shadows, which causes a conceptual tango to arise between the viewer's own body and those classically idealized breasts, belly, and mons.

Magritte's perturbing riddles hide in plain sight of his serviceable *trompe l'oeil* style—the imagery seduces the eye even as it batters the brain. The staid Belgian's febrile concepts laid the groundwork for all manner of intellectually driven artwork of the past century: “This is not a pipe” can be seen as the template for much of Jasper Johns's encaustic japery, as in using blue paint to slather the word “RED” on canvas. Freud proposed that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar; Magritte emphatically countered that neither a depiction nor a verbal description of a pipe, however precise, is truly a pipe. In 1927, he painted an image of deeply recessed shelves upon which lay a severed hand, bruised fruit, and a biomorphic blob; a fourth opening is obscured by a pink, perforated screen. Titled *One-Night Museum*, this painting anticipated by almost a decade Duchamp's “Box in a Valise,” a leather case containing reproductions of that conceptual artist's most famous works. And as compellingly weird as Neo Rauch's most recent paintings have been, they've got nothing on the sheer WTF bravado of Magritte's *The Secret Player* (1927), in which a huge sea turtle (headless, no less) levitates above a pair of ball players and a gagged woman in a closet. All of this is acted out in a formal garden of the artist's trademark wooden balusters.

Even now, in our porn-on-demand age, Magritte's 80-year-old canvas *The Rape* delivers a jolt. He replaced a woman's face with her torso, a brilliantly disturbing move that substitutes nipples for eyes, navel for nose, vagina for mouth. The painting asks a question those buttoned-down suburbanites Magritte specialized in would rather not hear, much less answer: When a man imagines undressing and having sex with a woman he is speaking to—or just passing on the street—has his mind's eye committed rape? How does the interplay of the physical and the imaginary in masturbatory fantasies affect the object of desire?

When he was 13, Magritte's mother committed suicide, and legend has it that he witnessed her exposed body being fished out of a Brussels river, her dress wrapped around her head. If *The Rape* is pure provocation, an earlier painting, *The Lovers* (1928), haunts us with its vision of a man and a woman kissing though their heads are swathed in white cloth—veils of propriety muting desire.

Magritte's imagery has been co-opted for everything from the CBS eye logo to album cover art, from Monty Python animations to James Cameron's floating *Avatar* landscapes, but this exhibition forcefully reminds us of its original power. Few artists before or since have so remorselessly exposed the simultaneous disconnection and entanglement of the ravenous meat and imaginative neurons that make up the human body.