The Surrealists' Vision Of The World

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Surrealism emerged in the late 1910s and extended through the 1920s, gaining fame as a literary movement that revolved around the notion of novel means of expression. To realize the boundless imagination of the subconscious, Surrealism was sanctified in 1924 in Paris. The Manifesto of Surrealism was published by Andre Breton, making it an important political and intellectual movement (Voorhies, 2004). The Surrealist movement emerged out of a disdain for literary realism and rationalism and was rooted in psychoanalysis and the power of dreams as postulated by Sigmund Freud. It tapped the unconscious, which was believed to be repressed by the rational mind. Disregarding taboos, the Surrealists' interest in primitivism, myth, and the unconscious has shaped many movements that emerged later as well. The "pure psychic automatism" seeks to release the psychic experiences drawn through everyday habits of mind and language (The Art Story Foundation, 2021). The work of many Surrealist artists such as Tanguy, Man Ray, Dali, de Chirico, and Magritte is inspired by the investigation of their dreams and their transcription into visual images. This essay explores the Surrealists' vision of the world while analyzing the concepts and symbols deployed in "The Persistence of Memory" and "Great Masturbator" by Salvador Dali. The essay further identifies the theoretical, geographical, and cultural influences that shaped his work.

Salvador Dali

Salvador Dali is one of the most versatile and innovative artists of the twentieth century. Considered the most famous Surrealist, his flamboyance and provocative nature are highlighted in his work. His hyper-realistic style, coupled with religious symbolism, provides evidence of his fascination with Renaissance and Classical artworks. Dali's artwork is based on highly personal paintings that are rich in Freudian analysis and present dreamlike imagery. According to Andre Breton's Manifesto, "It is perhaps with Dalí that for the first time, the windows of the mind are opened fully wide." Dali's fascination with the complexities of sexual neuroses, mortality, and phobias has laid a prolific foundation for future generations (The Art Story Foundation, 2021).

Dali's work was inspired by numerous factors, and Freud's work was especially novel to him as a loss impacted his early life. His parents named Dali after his older brother, Salvador, who died nine months after his birth, and they believed Dali to be a reincarnation of him. He suffered the loss of his mother during his teens, and in 1929, he was expelled from his family after he invited the wrath of his father by naming one of his paintings, "Sometimes I Spit with Pleasure on the Portrait of My Mother." The essence of these events resurfaced time and again in his work in the form of melting clocks, decaying food, and opened drawers. His life events have influenced the dark and disturbing elements of his work, and he also often depicted the landscape of his hometown in his work. His Catalan upbringing and hints of Roman Catholicism have also repeatedly surfaced in his art. His tendency to

transform various objects into food and present them as melting forms is often associated with his Catalan upbringing and his culture's passion for food. Even his appearance, especially his signature moustaches, was inspired by his passion for Spanish paintings (Gottesman, 2016).

The Persistence of Memory

In 1931, Dali painted "The Persistence of Memory," which is ripe with the Surrealist worldview through the incorporation of certain conceptions and the use of symbolism. The uncanny vision of surrealism is instilled in the painting through the drooping, distorting, and elongating clocks and a deformed face that presents the absolute countenance of the subconscious. Although the art piece is considered to be rooted in imagery, the cliffs painted in the background point towards the artist's hometown, Catalonia. The cliffs add reality to the otherwise dreamlike distorted image, with its ambiguous scenes of melting clocks and a barren tree. The whole landscape has the impact of a strange stillness. The element of melting clocks is often associated with the fluidity of time, and the three clocks are regarded as the past, present, and future, all of which are presented as arbitrary and subjective. The amorphous form in the painting is depicted as a self-portrait, while the surroundings represent an objective world or the unconscious mind. While many attribute the clock to Einstein's theory of relativity, Dali cited melting cheese as its inspiration, a reference to his culture. Ants have remained a recurrent theme in Dali's work and symbolize decomposition and decay. The title itself relates well to the painting, as "The Persistence of Memory" is associated with the time gone by and depicts a relationship between the actual and the remembered time (Dotson, 2020).

Great Masturbator

Dali painted the "Great Masturbator" in 1929, in which he positioned automatism and the fragmented conception of the psyche. A dreamscape created along the lines of Freudian principles, the Great Masturbator channels Dali's desires of the unconscious mind. Depicting a mouthless, waxy, large, yellow head with elongated eyelashes and rosy cheeks, a large grasshopper is seen clinging to it. Ants swarm over its belly and up the tortured face of the creature. This painting has been regarded as a self-portrait of the artist fuelled by his repressed childhood fears of insects. The title itself reflects the artist's id as a dominant influence and reflects his sexual orientation of onanism before meeting Gala, his wife, who is portrayed in the painting as a nude female bust. This erotic image symbolizes the fabricated fantasies of men while performing the act highlighted in the title. A lack of censorship indicates the representation of the artist's id on the canvas as he invites others to realize their repressed desires – the tabooed sexual wishes that are shared by all but seldom talked about. The elements of this painting portray stifled sexuality and sexual anxiety. The ants present an image of death and decay, while an egg represents fertility. Both life and death are depicted along with Dali's conflicted attitude towards his sexuality. A phobia of female genitalia had been instilled in the artist since childhood when his father exposed him to a book that associated morbidity with sex (Belhaj, 2014).

The paintings “The Persistence of Memory” and the “Great Masturbator” present the Surrealist worldview while depicting the concepts presented by Freud. The repressed sexual desires have been central to Freud’s work and have resurfaced time and again in the work of Surrealists. The omnipotence of dreams and their association with unconscious repressed desires can be viewed in the work of Surrealists. The paintings revolve around amorphous self-portraits, which reflect the unconscious mind and the world of dreams as opposed to the concrete realities of the real world where we exist. The themes of sex, death, decay, fluidity of time, and phobias stemming from childhood traumas are all reflections of Freudian theories and are central to Dali’s work. Influences such as his childhood losses and traumas, his relationship with his father, his culture, his homeland, and his muse have impacted his work and established him as one of the greatest Surrealist artists of all time – one whose work holds great importance in shaping the history of art.

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