

RENÉ MAGRITTE 1948 LA PÉRIODE VACHE

30 October 2008 – 4 January 2009

TEXT PANELS IN THE EXHIBITION

René Magritte 1948: La période vache

Hardly any other artist of Classic Modernism remained as untouched by the changing artistic currents of his time as did René Magritte. All his life, the Belgian Surrealist held to the realistic, almost impersonal painting style that lends his mysterious visual creations their unmistakable character. This exhibition on his période vache presents a group of works in which Magritte broke in a surprising way from the rigorous principles of creativity that he had set for himself. In 1948, he produced roughly thirty paintings and gouaches for his first solo exhibition in Paris that were strikingly different from his other work and were obviously intended to counter the dominant conception of high-quality modern painting that dominated in Paris at the time.

The pictures of what Magritte himself called his période vache (literally, “cow period”) are painted in garish colors, planar and caricature-like; their subjects are earthy, sometimes vulgar, and often of provocative banality. His sources of inspiration included not only popular visual media such as caricatures and comics, but also other artists, such as James Ensor and Henri Matisse, whose work he cited with wit and irony.

The exhibition was conceived in 1948 as a manifesto against the arrogance of the Parisian art world, where Magritte, despite his significant international success, could not gain a foothold either before the war—at the height of the Surrealist movement—or immediately thereafter. His provocation was, however, also aimed at the group of Parisian Surrealists around André Breton, with whom Magritte had fallen out in a debate over the future of Surrealism after they returned from exile in the United States. Magritte’s artistic attack did not miss its target: the public and the press were outraged. Not one of the paintings was sold. Even the Surrealists, who were familiar enough with scandals, kept their distance.

The période vache fell into oblivion after the Paris exhibition, until it gradually began to be rediscovered and assessed by art historians thirty years later. In the context of the new representational painting of the 1980s, Magritte’s break with norms suddenly seemed pioneering and highly relevant. Ever since, numerous artists have rediscovered for themselves this unique phase in Magritte’s oeuvre and increasingly interpreted it through these works.

In particular against the backdrop of the enormous fame of Magritte’s painting and his solid place in our visual culture, the paintings and gouaches of the période vache add unexpected facets to our picture of the artist. Magritte is revealed to be freer, more open, full of subversive humor, with a directness and spontaneity that he never permitted himself in his established, highly conceptual work.

1948 in Paris

While preparing for the exhibition of the *période vache* in Paris, Magritte was in constant contact with his friend, the writer Louis Scutenaire, and his wife, Irène Hamoir, who became the painter's accomplices in this project and made various suggestions for paintings. His letters to Irène and "Scut," some of which are included in this exhibition, contain numerous sketches and project outlines, though not all of them were realized.

"Dear Muses, It's a good idea to stick torches on the frames—and also the lizard-skin school and vermilion guy. I also thought about a hat with an electric light. . . . Send ideas, as many as possible. You'll get the sketches while waiting for better." (Letter dated March 11, 1948)

Scutenaire came up with the titles for several works; Irène did her part for the animated production by typing up the catalogue and list of works.

"Dear Irène, Yet another little bit of typing, the last I think to set your mind at rest. If possible, when you come Friday evening, see what remains of my work for Piras—bring me 2 copies of this lot of typing in double as usual see you soon and my best to you and Scut, M." (Letter dated April 6, 1948)

The text in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition was titled "Les Pieds dans le plat" (Putting One's Foot in It) and was written by Scutenaire: a literary outpouring in vulgar jargon that perfectly complemented Magritte's forthright pictorial idiom. Both of them aimed to provoke the Parisian scene.

"We've won this round and you can run away all you like—on foot, on horse, or in your car—you've been beaten on your home turf. . . . [Y]our hearts'll be in your mouths, your pupils facing inward and the whites of your eyes skyward, your fingers splayed out. . . . [P]ainting, like salt, trapezes, flowers, Madame's thighs, is a way of disrupting the universe and it's quite simply in this sense that Magritte takes it." (Louis Scutenaire, "Putting One's Foot in It")

The exhibition opened on May 11. The press reacted coolly. Nothing was sold. But Magritte was satisfied with his coup.

"To be exact, we have obtained zero results, as our knowledge might have enabled us to predict. (Zero if the results are quantifiable). Spiritually, I have, however, made some acquisitions: I think, for example (provisionally), that what distinguishes us from general thought (in spite of ourselves, for it would be out of the question to wish to distinguish oneself at any price) is, for example, our complete lack of belief in substance and form. Those who are very active here seem to cling to form, the only bone left for them to gnaw at. . . . There were visitors to the exhibition—(young girls tending to laugh but holding back as it's not done in art galleries), visitors who say the usual assholing rubbish: 'it's less profound than before,' it's the 'Belgian mentality,' 'you can sense it's not Parisian,' what a brushstroke! . . . A review has appeared in 'Arts' which you can get hold of in Brussels. Incapable of buying a copy and sending it to you. I feel sick just thinking about it." (Letter dated May 17, 1948)

The guestbook from the exhibition is little more than a collection of insults. The most vehement hostility came from the group around André Breton. Only Paul Éluard remained ambiguous, writing: "He who laughs last, laughs best."

Not least for commercial reasons, after this escapade, Magritte decided to revert to his earlier painting style.

“In future I’m going to exhibit painting from yore. I will find a way to slip in a great big incongruity from time to time.” (Letter dated May 24, 1948)

Yet he cannot refrain from developing new, subversive compositions.

“On the way up the Champs Elysées, I thought of a pretty good subject for a drawing. . . . Am I wrong to give up painting as I should?” (Letter dated June 7, 1948)

Magritte planned another project for drawings in the “esprit vache” but never executed them.

“Mister Iolas [his American gallerist] has commissioned gouaches and paintings which have to be magnificent (but not the same magnificent as those exhibited in Paris). (Letter dated June 7, 1948)

The *période vache* was definitively over.

CHRONOLOGY

René Magritte, 1898–1967

1898

René François Ghislain Magritte is born on November 21 in Lessines, near Charleroi, the first of three boys.

1910

Takes his first painting lessons.

1912

Mother drowns herself in the Sambre River.

1916

Magritte enrolls at the Académie royale des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Until 1920, though with several interruptions, he attends painting classes conducted by Émile Vandamme-Sylva, Gisbert Combaz, and Constantin Montald. Friendship with the abstract painter Victor Servranckx.

1919–20

Shares a studio with Pierre-Louis Flouquet. Paints first abstract works.

1920–21

Taken by Italian Futurism and the Dada movement; spends time at the Galerie Sélection in Brussels, where he gets to know the latest works by the Parisian avant-garde. Military service.

1921

Accepts position as pattern designer for the wallpaper manufacturer Peters-Lacroix.

1922

Marries Georgette Berger (1901–1986).

1923

Encounters Camille Goemans, one of the first writers in Brussels to take an interest in Surrealism.

1924

Resigns from his position at the wallpaper factory and works as a freelance advertising illustrator. Meets Paul Nougé, the brains behind Surrealist activities in Belgium.

1925

Distances himself from his formally abstract beginnings and executes his first Surrealist paintings, which are influenced by the visual idiom and spirit of Giorgio de Chirico and Max Ernst.

1926

Formation of the Belgian Surrealists with Magritte, Nougé, Goemans, as well as Marcel Lecomte, E. L. T. Mesens, and the composer André Souris as the core of the group.

1927

First solo exhibition, at the Galerie Le Centaure in Brussels.

Meets the writer and lawyer Louis Scutenaire, with whom he will remain friends for life.

In September, moves to Perreux-sur-Marne, a suburb of Paris. Attempts to get closer to the Parisian Surrealists around André Breton.

1929

After clashing with Breton, severs his ties with the French Surrealists.

1930

Returns to Brussels.

Scutenaire marries the writer and journalist Irène Hamoir, who is now also one of Magritte's closest and most loyal friends.

1933

Reconciles with the Parisian Surrealists.

1936

First solo exhibition in the United States, at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York.

1937

Sojourn in London, where he produces three large-format paintings for the banker and art collector Edward James.

1938

Participates in the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris, organized by Breton with Paul Éluard and Marcel Duchamp.

Retrospective at the London Gallery.

1940

When German troops invade Belgium, Magritte flees to France in early May. Spends three months with Scutenaire, Irène Hamoir, and other friends in Carcassonne before returning to Brussels.

1943

In reaction to the war, begins painting in a new, Impressionist style, the palette and technique of which is based in particular on the work of Pierre-Auguste Renoir. This marks the beginning of the so-called Renoir or sun period, which will last five years and meet almost exclusively with negative criticism.

1945

Joins the Belgian Communist Party.

1946

Together with Nougé and Mariën, organizes various scandalous actions. Distributes anonymous pamphlets with titles such as *The Imbecile*, *The Shitter*, and *The Butt Fucker* and announces a supposed series of lectures by a Bulgarian sexologist with "practical demonstrations by young intellectuals"—both prefigure the vulgar eroticism that will later be found in the *période vache* as well.

Works on a manifesto of his personal concept for the future of Surrealism: "Le Surréalisme en plein soleil" (Sunlit Surrealism). Breton rejects his concept and refuses to sign the manifesto, leading to a heated clash.

1947

Exhibits at the Hugo Gallery in New York for the first time; its director, Alexander Iolas, soon becomes his gallerist and remains so for the rest of Magritte's life.

Breton uses the occasion of the international Surrealist exhibition at the Galerie Maeght in Paris to condemn Magritte's "Sunlit Surrealism" publicly and to expel Magritte from the Surrealist movement.

1948

First solo exhibition in Paris, at the Galerie du Faubourg: presents new works produced especially for the exhibition, in a garishly colored, impulsive, and caricature-like style that he will later call his *période vache*. Subsequently reverts to his previous style of painting.

1952

Launches *La carte d'après nature*, a Surrealist journal, published in postcard format and containing contributions from the circle of his closest friends.

1953

For the chandelier hall of the Knokke Casino, he paints the panorama-like mural *Le domaine enchanté*.

1954

Participates in the exhibition *Word versus Image* at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York, which brings Magritte's word paintings to the attention of young American artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

First important retrospective at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.

1959

Filmmaker Luc de Heusch shoots the documentary film *Magritte, où La Leçon des choses*, in which Magritte's friends, such as Irène Hamoir and Louis Scutenaire, also appear.

1960

Extensive solo exhibition at the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts and the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

1961

Contributes to the journal *Rhétorique*, edited by the young Belgian writer André Bosmans, which will continue to be published until 1966.

1965

First sojourn in the United States on the occasion of his retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Patrick Waldberg publishes his Magritte monograph, which contains illustrations of three works from the *période vache*, the first since 1948.

1967

Succumbs to cancer on August 15 in his Brussels apartment.

Magritte as Filmmaker

In 1956, Magritte, who had always been a great fan of the cinema, purchased a movie camera. He began to make short films in 8mm and Super-8 formats in which he appeared with his wife, Georgette, and Louis Scutenaire, Irène Hamoir, and other friends. He occasionally came up with the scenarios himself; other times he based them on ideas supplied by his friends. Scutenaire gave a vivid description of the enthusiasm with which Magritte went to work as a filmmaker:

“When Magritte was painting, he was calm, often bored by having to ‘labor.’ . . . In complete contrast, as soon as he slipped on the skin of a filmmaker, he became restless, caustic, but all the same highly entertained: perhaps he’d never been as happy as with a camera in his hand except during the few month of his *période vache*.”

The selection from the total of forty of Magritte’s short films that have survived reveals not only the friendly intimacy and spiritual affinity, but also the pleasure found in the trivial and grotesque that Magritte and Scutenaire shared during the *période vache*.

Die Filme / The Films

Der Bücherschrank / The Bookcase, 1956, 3’55”

Le Dessert des Antilles, 1957, 2’29”

Der Kunsthändler / The Art Dealer, 1957, 2’02”

Le Scénario total, 1956/57, 2’39”

Innen – Außen René / Interior – Exterior René, 1957, 4’40”

Le Loup rouge (Tuba), 1960, 5’40”