

Review of Patricia Allmer, René Magritte: Beyond Painting
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Recent historical discussion of René Magritte has examined how early efforts to introduce the painter to an American audience were significantly less nuanced than they could have been.¹ Due to the complexities of positioning the artist's conceptual works within the European avant-garde, the savvy American gallerist Julien Levy categorized and promoted Magritte as a Surrealist, a movement that Magritte, as an artist disdainful of psychoanalysis and automatism, was highly ambivalent of. Many American critics responded to his first solo exhibition at the Levy Gallery in 1932 with "a veneer of sophistication that did not conceal a fear of being duped"; they fell back upon Freudian psychoanalysis in the effort to make sense of the paintings.² Even later in 1954 at Magritte's New York exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery, the first in the U.S. to present the artist's works thematically, some critics acknowledged the intricate strategies of revealing the gap between word and image, "but preferred to sidestep complexities for the ease of applying the surrealist or dada label."³

Magritte's images have been adopted and adapted everywhere from advertising to contemporary art in subsequent years. The most recent borrowing can be seen in the opening credits of the HBO show "Boardwalk Empire," in which the actor Steve Buscemi stands on the beach in suit and hat and contemplates rapidly moving, enigmatic clouds, a direct reference to Magritte's anonymous bowler hat figure in paintings such as *The Son of Man* (1964). However, while Magritte's imagery is deeply ingrained in the popular consciousness, the English-speaking audience's theoretical engagement with Magritte's painting has remained limited. Anglophone scholarship has been predominantly biographical, perhaps partially due to the fact

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that while Magritte was a prolific writer, his *Écrits complets* has still not been translated into English. In *René Magritte: Beyond Painting* Patricia Allmer addresses the lack of focused literature on the artist within contemporary art theory, noting that Magritte has become an “absent center.” Key paintings such as *The Treachery of Images* serve as reference points, examples that lead away to discussion of other things (7). Allmer suggests that Magritte’s “overt popular presence creates a corresponding absence from recent art historical discourse, rendering Magritte more marginal to the contemporary academy than some other artists” (8-9). Magritte has then become an important figure within the history of art without any in-depth investigation of his art.

However, as Allmer notes, “Critics face two potentially serious problems when writing on Magritte: firstly the artist’s stated rejection of interpretation; and secondly his denial of the influence of others” (13). Proposing to study Magritte’s work as a “discourse with and about art” (15), Allmer’s analysis emphasizes the fact that the artist’s message is one of incoherence and negation. Allmer is well-positioned to advance Magritte scholarship in the United States and Britain, having previously analyzed Belgian Surrealism as co-editor of *Collective Inventions: Surrealism in Belgium* (Leuven University Press, 2007). *René Magritte: Beyond Painting* is a closely considered, important discussion of the artist’s conceptual practices, exploring his recurrent imagery and appropriations that range from frames and coffins to the *Wunderkammer*, illuminated books, entries in the *Larousse* encyclopedia, Fantômas films, and the literature of Edgar Allan Poe. Running throughout the book—and one of its strongest contributions—is an analysis of Magritte’s dialogue with French Surrealism. Allmer asserts that Magritte’s work is a metadiscourse on the movement, amounting to a “metasurrealism” (104).

Magritte’s longstanding fascination with reproductions, postcards, and dictionaries formed the basis of his artistic responses to notions of originality. As Allmer puts it, the artist’s paraphrasing, plagiarism, and alleged forgery result in a continued delay of authenticity, a “negation of the aesthetic sublime” (68). This denial represents a key difference between Magritte and André Breton; the latter often drew strong connections between painting, nature, and revelation. In his key essay “Surrealism and Painting,” for example, Breton muses that a path from the painting of Picasso or Braque would lead to a lofty mountain riverhead where “the enchanting vapors of what is still unknown condense will be revealed to them in a lightning-flash, and they will fall in love with it.”⁴ As Allmer discusses in Chapter Two, the model of the *Wunderkammer* provided many Surrealists, including Breton with his “*mur*,” “a revelation of hidden connections,” and “new, unconscious and marvelous formations” (23), while in Magritte’s painting, the organizing function of the cabinet of curiosities instead exposes “the artificiality of that which is conventionally re-

garded as ‘natural’” (22). Chapter Six advances the discussion from the *Wunderkammer* to frames and framing devices within Magritte’s work, which ultimately points to the similarities between the frame and the coffin, as both “attempt to limit the unlimited and contain the uncontainable” (177).

Allmer expands her discussion of Magritte and Breton in Chapter Four, where she examines the artist’s adaptation of the writer’s titles as well as the content of his writing, leading to yet another erasure of originality. This is seen perhaps most intriguingly in Magritte’s series *The Art of Conversation*, where he presents the words that denote fundamental surrealist concepts such as *amour* and *rêve* as simple linguistic representations in scenes that resemble cheap postcards, or renders them as monolithic yet petrified (oppressive) stone forms. Allmer convincingly argues that such paintings demonstrate Magritte’s denunciation of the unconscious as a bourgeois construct, while his own images “attempt to ‘denaturalize’ this bourgeois order, through estranging everyday objects” (103).

In contrast to his critical position toward Breton, Magritte’s connection with Max Ernst is more in the nature of affinities or “correspondences” (108), as Allmer discusses in Chapter Five. Perhaps based upon a strongly shared interest in de Chirico and philosophy, Magritte reflected that Ernst was one of the few contemporary artists who did not leave him indifferent (108). Magritte’s admiration led to appropriation, with the artist “borrowing” elements of Ernst’s autobiographical details and simulating his collages and textures in paint, leading Ernst to note that Magritte’s “pictures are collages painted entirely by hand” (119; the construction of artistic identity is a theme greatly expanded upon in Chapter Seven). Unsurprisingly these appropriations also led to alleged forgeries. Allmer wonderfully details the most telling interchange between the artists: while Magritte may have forged a copy of Ernst’s painting *The Forest*—this version later turning up in the Ernst catalogue raisonné by Werner Spies—Ernst carried out his own manipulation of Magritte’s work when he painted a caged bird onto the image of an apple in Magritte’s *La force de l’habitude* (which Ernst owned), and signed the work “Ceci n’est pas un Magritte – signé Max Ernst” (53). Allmer surmises that through this action Ernst shifts the term “Ceci n’est pas” into “a specific discourse of forgery,” and “an inability not to forge” (53).

The book concludes with a chapter on the significance of photography to Magritte’s visual production. When painting portraits, Magritte often preferred to work from photographs rather than through sittings with his subject, as in the case of his portrait of the surrealist collector Edward James, *The Pleasure Principle*, which is based upon photographs of James by Man Ray. As Allmer discusses, Magritte also photographed *tableaux vivants* of himself, his wife and friends, which he would then use for the imagery of his paintings. For example, *La gravitation universelle*, a painting

of a hunter whose arm disappears into a brick wall, is based upon a photograph of the Belgian Surrealist Louis Scutenaire in which the poet enacts the scene that will later be painted, his arm disappearing into a shadowy space (in the photo, a mop serves slightly comically as a hunting weapon, while this is transformed into a rifle in the painting). Allmer writes that as templates for his paintings, Magritte's photographs "gesture backwards and forwards" and express an absence in both directions by replacing the past with an image of it, and highlighting the non-existence of a painting that is yet to be created (203). Magritte's use of photography is thus yet another key means of the negation which ultimately defines the artist.

Throughout *René Magritte: Beyond Painting*, Allmer manages to successfully carry out the difficult balancing act that she describes at the beginning of the book, analyzing Magritte's work while remaining aware of the artist's distaste for interpretation, making this distaste the basis of her analysis. Other recent projects have explored the importance of Magritte's painting on subsequent generations of artists in the United States, noting for example the significant impact that Magritte's 1954 Janis Gallery exhibition made upon Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and also asserting Magritte as a proto-postmodernist.⁵ Allmer continues to expand existing Magritte scholarship by focusing the dialogue directly onto the painter's imagery and dismantling the broad popular association of Magritte with Surrealism, highlighting his complex, ironic engagement with (and negation of) the movement. Rigorously researched, utilizing both archival sources and Magritte's own extensive writing, Allmer weaves these with thoughtful, engaging theory, and her work is sure to be essential reading for scholars of Magritte and Surrealism.

1 See Dickran Tashjian's "Magritte's Last Laugh: A Surrealist's Reception in America," in Stephanie Barron and Michel Draguet, eds., *Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images* (Los Angeles and Brussels: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and Ludion, 2007), 43-66.

2 Tashjian, 45.

3 Ibid., 54.

4 André Breton, "Surrealism and Painting," in André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, Simon Watson Taylor, trans. (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1972), 7.

5 See the catalogue listed above for the exhibition "Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images," organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2006.

Rene Magritte's illustrative skills would be developed early on from his professional work as a commercial artist, where he would produce advertising and literature displays for a nominal salary. At this stage he would not have expected to have risen to the heights that he did several decades later. There are many examples of notable artistic names who would earn their stripes in a 'normal' job early in their career. The likes of Roy Lichtenstein, Gustav Klimt and Alphonse Mucha would slowly build a reputation through their illustrations, American artist Norman Rockwell also followed. René François Ghislain Magritte (November 21, 1898 – August 15, 1967) was a surrealist artist of Belgian origin. He became famous for his surrealist artworks that were regarded as thought-provoking and witty. His art often challenges observers' perceptions of what is real. Learn more ».

Paintings by René Magritte in Chronological Order. Landscape, 1920. Portrait of Pierre Bourgeois, 1920. Patricia Allmer is a leading scholar of surrealism and senior lecturer in art history at the University of Edinburgh. Her books include René Magritte: Beyond Painting and Lee Miller: Photography, Surrealism, and Beyond, and she has curated major exhibitions such as Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism. Read more. Product details.

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