

NEW YORK

“Dada and Surrealist Objects”

Blain|DiDonna // October 24–December 13, 2013

SHOWCASING BOTH THE radicalism and the potential pitfalls of the avant-garde object, this impressive survey features 85 works by 27 artists associated with the Dada and Surrealist movements. Dada is represented primarily in its New York manifestation, with witty contributions by Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, artists who also bridge Surrealism. While the Dada readymade unsettled conventions of art and the artist's role by demonstrating the artwork's commonality with other types of commodities, the Surrealists invested such objects with a psychic charge.

In the most interesting works on view, a mixture of erotic pleasures and aggressive drives are at play. Such is the case with Joan Miró's quasi-Primitive assemblage *Femme Sculpture-objet*, 1950. The human figure here is articulated through four distinct stacked elements, the largest an ovenlike torso with twiggy arms and an elongated neck. More disruptively, a large hipbone fragment occupies the location of a head, while a face incised in terra-cotta is displaced to the pubic region. Meret Oppenheim's *The Ear of Giacometti*, 1933/1977, evokes Van Gogh's mutilation of his own body. The bronze casting of this severed organ is both sadistic relic and ambivalent sign of artistic creation, with the ornamental addition of a hand sprouting in the whorl of the ear.

But the revolutionary potential of objects that traffic in linguistic puns and materialize repressed desires can be undermined as they harden into clichés. Objects by René Magritte, Victor Brauner, and Maurice Henry repeatedly evoke the female body as vessel through a series of formal substitutions and transpositions: as denuded wine bottle, swathed violin, and veiled flask. Other works trade on phallic associations that are even more explicit.

It comes almost as a relief to encounter Kurt Schwitters's assemblage *Hölzerne Schlange (Wooden Snake)*, 1937, in which a gnarly serpentine piece of wood adds fecal connotations to the repertory of equivalences.

Along with the symbolic, reproduction is an important leitmotif of the show. Many works on view are postwar editions of earlier objects conceived at the height of interwar avant-garde activity. This preservation through repetition is apparent, for instance, in Man Ray's gold-plated lampshade earrings, *Pendants Pending*, 1967, which figures latency in its very title. Appropriating his own 1919 readymade of a lampshade (also evoked in the stunning Rayograph *Champs délicieux*, 1922), in which spiraling arabesques become surrogates for the female body, Man Ray comes to adorn the woman with an abstraction of her own form, swinging from her earlobes, returned as commodity.

Accordingly, a group of 21 photo-postcards produced by Georges Hugnet in 1937 depicting iconic Surrealist works—a number of which appear elsewhere in the gallery—greet the viewer at the entrance. Photography throughout the show, as in Raoul Ubac's pictures of the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealism and Hans Bellmer's manipulations of a doll for the camera, serves to promote the object as spectacle and to shock through its indexing of these things in the real world. The importance of photography for the readymade emerges from its Dada origin—with Duchamp's *Fountain*, a work never exhibited but rather made infamous through Alfred Stieglitz's image of it. Here, the Surrealist object's capacity for expressing unconscious desires comes to reconnect with its origins in the Dada readymade: bound to its status as reproducible, imbricating sexual and commodity fetishes. —Phil Taylor



ABOVE:
Salvador Dalí
*Vénus de Milo
aux Tiroirs*
(*Venus de Milo
with Drawers*),
1936/1964.
Painted bronze
and milk
pompoms,
39½ in. high.

RIGHT:
Gabriel Sierra
Detail of
Sin Ifruto
(*retruécano*)
(Untitled
[pun]), 2013.
Plumb pipes,
copper pipes,
paint, nylon.