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Exploring the ‘terrific potential’ of surrealism

By Kimberly Chun

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How does one parse the amorphous absurdities and bizarre visuals of surrealism? Psychology, politics and philosophy have historically provided touchstones, but Gavin Parkinson, senior lecturer of European modernism at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, has discussed a way of entering themovement’s landscapes through science, via his 2003 book, “Surrealism, Art and Modern Science,” and more recently an essay in the catalog for “Science in Surrealism” at Gallery WendiNorris. We spoke with Parkinson, 49, via Skype from London.

Q: What initially fascinated you about surrealism?

A: I think teenagers tend to get interested in Salvador Dali — his work is everywhere and seems to connect with people. I discovered a book by Jose Pierre — he wrote “A Dictionary of Surrealism” in the 1930s. It sounds like quite a boring book, but I became intoxicated by the potential of dreams, eros, psychoanalysis and hypnosis. It has so many strands that are speculative and exploratory that invest the mundane world with terrific potential. I got interested in the long story of surrealism. People think surrealism happenedbetween the two world wars. It still exists today.

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Q: In addition to works by Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy, the show includes interesting paintings by less-familiar artists like Gordon Onslow Ford.

A: Onslow Ford is a good example of a real interesting painter who's less known, but quite well known in San Francisco because he lived quite near by, in Inverness. He was quite close to (surrealist Roberto) Matta in the 1940s, and from 1939 to 1943, he was a really good painter, experimenting with ideas about the fourth dimension or a mystical space. This is the third generation of surrealism, at a time when surrealism became fascinated with the philosophy of science.

Q: Some surrealists went beyond simply reading about science discoveries in newspapers?

A: I think the best example is Wolfgang Paalen, who's on display in the exhibition. Paalen had an unusual knowledge of quantum physics. It reached the wider world through popularizing books, and one example is a book called "The New Scientific Spirit," which is written by Gaston Bachelard, who is friends with (Pierre) Mabilie, a friend of the surrealist group. Bachelard's book is read by most of the surrealists, and Paalen gained this impressive expertise of quantum physics. It comes out in his work. ... He's often trying to visualize matter in a language of waves and particles. When you think about painting in the 1870s, let's say the Impressionists, they're looking out innocently onto a landscape and painting what they see. What does nature look like under a microscope? That's what led Paalen to depict this visual landscape. There's an invisible world out there that science is telling us about.

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Science in Surrealism: Through Aug. 1. 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

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<http://www.sfgate.com/art/article/Exploring-the-terrific-potential-of-6320097.php>