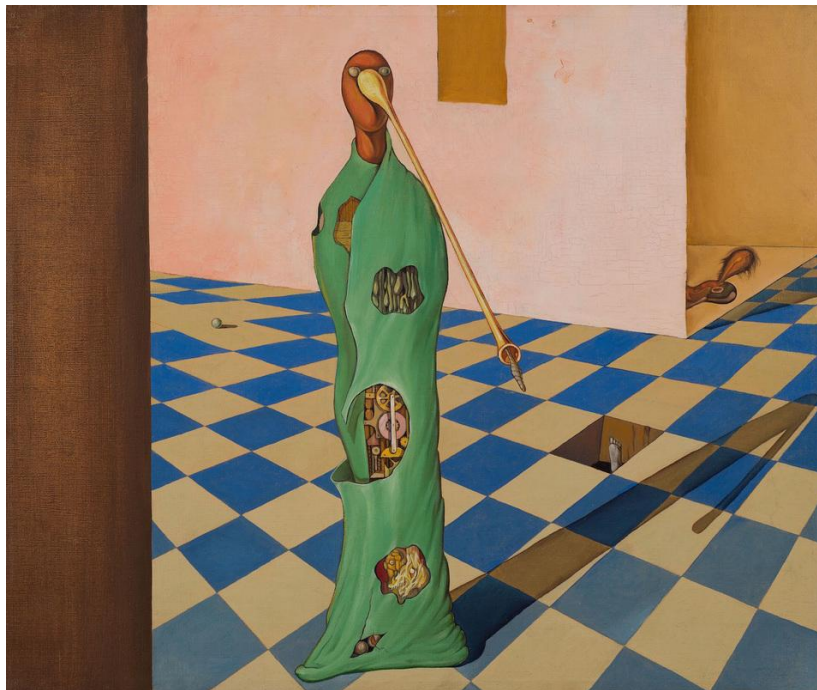


SciArt in America

REVIEW: "Science In Surrealism" At Gallery Wendi Norris In San Francisco Explores The Scientific Influences Of This Avant-Garde Movement

Victor Brauner, "Indicateur de l'Éspace," c. 1934. Oil on canvas 17 7/8 x 21 3/8 inches (55.8 x 54.3 cm)

6/1/2015, By Joe Ferguson

The term *SciArt* may have been coined in the 1980s, but the intermingling of science and art is much older. Early Greek statuary portrayed anatomy in representations that could have only come from careful examination. Italian Renaissance painters practiced human dissection as early as the 15th century. Many French impressionists explored the latest discoveries of visual science in their paintings. One movement, however, is rarely talked about--the surrealist painters and the influence of early 20th-century physicists.

For the first time, an exhibition devoted to science in surrealist paintings is on display at Gallery Wendi Norris in San Francisco. The exhibit *Science in Surrealism* includes rarely-seen works by Max Ernst, Marcel Jean, Roberto Matta, Victor Brauner, Gordon Onslow Ford, Wolfgang Paalen, Kurt

Seligmann, Yves Tanguy, and a selection of works on paper by František Janoušek. If you're unable to visit the gallery, there is a 70-page, hardbound catalog available that features an essay by Gavin Parkinson, Senior Lecturer of European Modernism at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. Parkinson is the author of *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science*.



Marcel Jean, "Sonde Magnétique," 1970. Gouache (flottage) on masonite board 9 9/16 x 10 5/8 inches (24.4 x 27 cm)

Surrealism's heyday was the period between the great wars, roughly the 1920s-30s. It is loosely defined as art that sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind. Freud's *psychoanalysis* influenced surrealist painters, but equally affecting were the works in the new physics of Bohr, Plank, Heisenberg, and Schrödinger, as well as the *Theory of Relativity* by Einstein. An unseen, powerfully-controlling world of subatomic phenomena, particle-wave duality, and Heisenberg's *Uncertainty Principle*, blended well with the European intelligentsia that courted pluralism and flexibility of thought in a time and place fractured by war. Intolerance of multiple viewpoints had divided the continent, and yet science--a discipline that was believed to be above

ideological beliefs and based on testable, observable truths--was suggesting there may be more than meets the eye. All of this was fodder for avant-garde artists looking to turn the world on its head.

Surrealist artists often accomplished their goals by juxtaposing rational with seemingly irrational images. A typical canvas contained strange, symbolic figures set in fantastical landscapes that were intended to be viewed as the products of uninhibited thought. Some surrealist artists painted familiar objects, sometimes warped and twisted, in otherworldly settings, suggesting that what we believe we know may be different than what really exists. The effect was Dada-esque in that when the objects were viewed again in real life, it was hard to shake the surrealist image, resulting in a lasting and unsettling experience.

Science in Surrealism is fascinating and mandatory for anyone interested in SciArt. The range of works is dizzying, and the ideas presented take some time to digest. Marcel Jean's *Sonde Magnetique* evokes the tension between the natural and scientific worlds by positioning opposed magnets binding two organic shapes. Roberto Matta's *Star Travel* seems to suggest dueling, intertwined particle/wave theories of light transmission.

The surrealists sought to prove that there is a view of the world free of rational thought that is just as valid as a representational perspective. Was Victor Brauner addressing the interdependency of contextuality in *Indicateur de l'Espace*? Maybe. At times, I wasn't sure if the images I was looking at were truly representative of the theories of quantum mechanics, or if the surrealists were attempting to corral any idea that supported their movement. It is clear, however, that they were influenced by the provocative scientific theories of the times, and that they were attempting to interpret and communicate them in ways that remain visually powerful to this day. Maybe it's what the late Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman meant when he said, "If you think you understand quantum mechanics, you don't understand quantum mechanics."

Science in Surrealism is on display at Gallery Wendi Norris through August 1st.

<http://www.sciartinamerica.com/blog/review-science-in-surrealism-at-gallery-wendi-norris-in-san-francisco-explores-the-scientific-influences-of-this-avant-garde-movement>