

In the Freewheeling World of the Mind

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Eleanor Antin, John Baldessari, Thomas Demand & Jeff Koons on René Magritte



Security guards at the opening of 'Magritte and Contemporary Art; The Treachery of Images' at LACMA 2006, photographed by Catherine Opie
Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles © Catherine Opie

René Magritte II — The Belgian Surrealist remains an influential figure among contemporary artists. Tate Etc.'s Mariko Finch spoke to four admirers. One shares his passion for Magritte's rarely seen postcards sent to a friend that he chose as a format for his magazine *La Carte d'après Nature*, while another recounts his time designing the space for a Magritte exhibition – and persuading the staff to dress in suits and bowler hats

Context:

'Rene Magritte: The Pleasure Principle', Tate Liverpool, 24th June- 16th October 2011



Eleanor Antin

100 BOOTS Turn the Corner

At Solana Beach, California, 17 May 1971, 2pm. Postcard mailed on 9 August 1971

Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York © Eleanor Antin

Eleanor Antin

Back in 1999, when my retrospective opened at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, I wanted to use a new image of my epistolary photographic hero 100 BOOTS on the announcement. I asked my curator, Howard Fox, what was the most famous painting in the museum's collection. It's a big collection, but, without blinking an eye, he came right back with Magritte's *This is not a pipe* (1928– 1929). It felt as if he were giving me a gift. For two and a half years, from 1971 to 1973, I had been mailing photographic images of 100 BOOTS on postcards to artists around the world – 51 images in all. The first, *100 BOOTS Facing the Sea*, set them up, all 100 of them on the sand looking out to sea. In the remaining 50 pictures, sometimes they were all there and sometimes they were merely sub-sets.

But regardless of the number, everybody knew that that guy, 100 BOOTS, was waiting for them in their mailbox. Just as everybody knew that the twenty boots looking up at Magritte's pipe that wasn't and was at the same time, was really 100 BOOTS that is and isn't at the same time. As a modernist, Magritte knew that a picture of a pipe is just that, a picture of a pipe, unlike, say, a Russian icon of St Theodosius the Great, which you better not turn your back on, or you might drown in the well. But he also knew, as we all know, that in the freewheeling world of the mind, the image of a pipe, as well as the word "pipe", is really a pipe. It can be dissected, yearned for, disapproved of, or even thrown up in the air like a ball, and in the world of the mind it may fall somewhere into a rose bush, break into pieces on a stone, or disappear forever into the air because the phone just rang.

John Baldessari

In 2006 I was invited by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to design the exhibition space for its Magritte exhibition. I decided to make a wallpaper and used the image of aerial views of the Los Angeles freeways. However, instead of covering the walls, I put it on the ceiling. For the floor I designed a carpet using Magritte-like clouds on a blue sky. In a sense I was inverting the space – the sky was on the floor, and the freeway was on the ceiling. It was very popular.

On one of the windows I put a colour transparency that showed an image of downtown Manhattan. When you looked through the window at night, or even during the day, you would get a composite view of Los Angeles and New York – like a double exposure. In the middle of the space I put up a large column, floor to ceiling, similar to that in one of Magritte's works. I also asked the security staff to wear bowler hats and suits – as if they'd stepped out of one of his paintings. I got a few complaints that I was being disrespectful to the artist, but it was actually more like a homage.

I don't make work that is in direct response to Magritte. I think he's influential enough that I don't have to try to attempt that, but sometimes it happens anyway. One of the things that interests me is how he uses language and imagery interchangeably. That is fascinating, and something I've explored in my own work. His art certainly arises out of a conscious sense of humour, but he didn't come up with that kind of view of the world by himself, and you see traces of him continually. I have a great amount of respect for him. He's one of those artists that I really have to think consciously about staying away from. If I have an idea, I have to say: "That's so much out of Magritte – what am I doing?"

Thomas Demand

It took me a long time to learn to like Magritte again. More often than not, his are the first artworks one encounters as a child. In my case it was the *The Great Family* (1963) – a picture of clouds in the shape of a dove hovering above a stormy

seascape. That's an OK picture. However, I wouldn't be surprised that if, as a child, you had in your room a poster of *The Red Model* (1934), the painting of shoes that are also feet, it might have been traumatic.

It also took me a while to understand that Magritte is not a particular friend of painting as an act. He just paints to have a painting, and accordingly it is his notion of representation. My reappraisal and return to his work came through his writing and his short and twisted conundrums, such as: "At about midnight the Ulm express, crammed with passengers, passes through the slumbering Mr Ruminau's bedroom and is reflected, for a split second, in the mirror on the cupboard."

He sent this out on a postcard, a format he also chose for his magazine *La Carte d'après Nature*. Published sporadically between 1951 and 1965, he wrote and drew it himself, but also asked friends and fellow artists for contributions. The print run was thought to be around 500, but no one really knows. Some of the fourteen cards are coloured by hand, but they aren't much of a printer's delight. In fact, they are rather plain. Poetry, short stories and some drawings by himself and his friends centre around a form of poetic defiance of reason. Twice he started a questionnaire among his readers. In 1954 he asked: "Does thought enlighten both us and our actions with the same indifference as the sun, or, what is our hope, and what is its value?" Guy Debord's answer was sobering: "Very little is to be expected of the strength and power of the mind."

Jeff Koons

Whenever I drive in any mountainous region in the world and look at the line against the sky, I always think of Magritte. And whenever I see beautiful, perfect clouds in the sky, he's the first thing that comes to mind.

I've always been very open to his work. I think there is a sense of humanity, a generosity and a kindness to others. He takes the viewer into account. And I have always found the economy in the creation of his images very moving. They communicate very purely and are very direct. They are painted with the minimum amount that would be needed, but he never labours a work.

I love the wide range of Magritte's art, including his sculptures. One of the most profound pieces of his that I've always enjoyed is *Discovery* (1928). It is an image of a woman whose flesh resembles the grains in wood. There is this aspect of Magritte about dealing with the world around us, and there is a certain materiality, a reality about that world that he creates, even though he makes these strange juxtapositions. There is always a sense of confrontation in his work too.

It is hard to imagine a lot of the computer programs that we work with in daily life, such as Photoshop, without the influence of Magritte. The many ways that we see the world through transparency or gradation, I believe we owe to Magritte. So I hold him in very high esteem for showing us how images can be overlapped on each other, or how they can be gradated into each other.

I wouldn't say that I have ever made a piece in direct response to his work, but I think I can see that there are themes that I have worked with and works that show an interest in what he was doing. For example, take *Les Idées Claires* (1955), one of the two Magritte paintings that I have loaned to the exhibition. Here you see a rock hovering over the ocean underneath a cloud. I can associate that with one of my *Equilibrium Tank* sculptures of basketballs suspended in vitrines of water.

Eleanor Antin lives and works in New York City

John Baldessari is an artist who lives and works in Venice, California

Thomas Demand lives and works in Berlin

Jeff Koons is an artist based in New York. His work *Three Ball Total Equilibrium Tank (Two Dr J Silver Series, Spalding NBA Tip-Off)* (1985) is on view at Tate Liverpool.