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Women Surrealist Photographers and Their Response to the Objectification of Women in Male Surrealist Art

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Objectification of women in Male Surrealist art depicted the male gaze in its darkest form, through the ideas of the uncanny, fetish, and convulsive beauty. Women were treated as objects throughout Surrealist photography and painting instead of as human subjects. Their femininity and beauty were valued to the extent of held belief by art, specifically art described through the male perspective. Instead Woodman’s work suggests that she is an artist-as-subject, and not an object to be visually taken advantage of.

In this study the Surrealist Movement is defined as the literary and artistic period of time that originated in the 1920’s, founded when André Breton wrote Le Manifeste du Surréalisme. Surrealist artists dealt with expressions of the unconscious and subconscious mind states, breaking through the restrictions of societal realities, the uncanny and convulsive beauty. The traditional organized Surrealist movement is comprised in majority of Western men from Europe and the Americas, given the need for another genre of artists, called the Women Surrealists. Women Surrealists in this study are defined as the female contemporaries of male Surrealist artists during the Surrealist Movement and accepted late female Surrealist artists who came post World War II.

**Claude Cahun and Francesca Woodman**

Claude Cahun was well known in the Surrealist movement due to her social and political involvement, allowing her an insiders view on the misogyny that existed inside the movement. Her presence as a minority female, and also a minority homosexual, influenced her gender-neutral approach in many of her works, portraying herself with a shaved cranium and flat bosom, a purely androgynous figure as in her 1920 Self-Portrait. Cahun in contrast also poses herself in exaggerated female positions, as in her 1927 Self-Portrait where she is dressed in heavy makeup and a satirical female hairstyle, criticizing while simulating the surrealist object of desire, the female for the male gaze. Further critiquing the male gaze, Cahun presents herself alongside a mask in several portraits such as Self-Portrait with Quilt and the 1928 Self-Portrait with Mask on Cloak, literally portraying an inability to return the gaze.

Francesca Woodman’s works demonstrate a particular influence from the automatic writing of André Breton and similarities to Claude Cahun even though there is no documented interest or connection to Cahun. Woodman’s works seek to defamiliarize her body within the spaces she takes her photographs in, another method of countering the male gaze. This tactic is visible in her series House where she took photographs in abandoned spaces in her hometown of Providence Rhode Island.

Francesca Woodman often referenced the works of other Women Surrealist artists, such as Frida Kahlo’s still lifes that exuded female sensuality through fruit, in her 1975 photographic work From the three kinds of melon in four kinds of light series.


**Discussion**

Claude Cahun and Francesca Woodman’s choice to use photography as their method of response reflects the Surrealist theme of examining the bizarreness that exists in the realities of society. Photography in its earliest form is regarded as the most honest art method, capturing the immediate now, but in which lies a dishonesty, that Claude Cahun notably took advantage of. Cahun’s use of photography to distort the truth, in distorting her presence as a female to appear completely neutral and ungendered demonstrates an understanding of art’s ability to alter history. Francesca Woodman’s works reflect a desire to camouflage the subject, contradicting photography’s purpose to capture the subject. Her work demonstrates a refusal to be defined by the viewer and to be framed by art, specifically art described through the male perspective. Instead Woodman’s work suggests that she is an artist-as-subject, and not an object to be visually taken advantage of.

**Conclusion**

Claude Cahun and Francesca Woodman used the tactics of male Surrealist artists to criticize the objectification of women in male Surrealist art, but also innovated in their approaches to photography, re-inventing the status of the female appearance in art as a living and empowered subject.

**Works Cited**


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