

## Mad Love // Puppy Love

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A strain of imaginative delirium shows up everywhere in this exhibition – how else can one explain the vision of a sphinx-machine, or the extreme cartoon-bright imagery, or strange and mysterious combinations of traditional figures and contemporary dream-scapes and nightmares in their wild abandon? We are in a passionate age of invention, and artists draw without reserve on many visual modes in our era of consumer excess and aesthetic mix-and-match pastiche. Nothing is not allowed, but artistic imagination still stretches our image horizon through surprising adventures and striking forms. Is this love or is it madness? Or some dizzying combination of the two?

A vital thread connects the work of this new generation of artists to the original impulse of the Surrealist's *l'amour fou*. The French expression was adopted by André Breton in the 1920s as a banner under which to initiate the most esoteric and arcane seeming practices of the then still-new avant-garde.<sup>i</sup> That idea of mad love that drives one to abandon everything else in pursuit of the object of desire embodied the late yearnings of romanticism taken to an extreme. For the mainly male surrealists in the circle around André Breton the idea provided a daring alternative to the bourgeois domestic life of Sunday walks in the park and family dinners with Papa. Passion held out the promise of a sublime experience meant to strike like lightning into the habits of daily life. *L'amour fou*, a kind of *un coup de foudre exstatique*, suggested that eroticism was both end and means. Art and life were to command new energies as a result of the encounter. And artists were dedicated to living a life according to the precepts of their art, blurring all distinctions between aesthetic passion and erotic creativity. Charging the ordinary so it became the marvelous, Surrealists aimed to be transformative in every way.

Remarkable transcripts of conversations among that inner circle around Breton the systematic examination of their erotic lives.<sup>ii</sup> These texts are shocking. Not because they reveal details of sybaritic pleasures and debauchery, but rather, the opposite. They provide the unexpected testimony that the longings of surrealist artists were based on the meager foundations. A few had experienced some gropings and kisses, or had an occasional glimpse of a nude figure or brief encounter with a prostitute. But these 20 and 30-something artists were relatively inexperienced, hemmed in by the conventions of their epoch. This explains the mystification of eroticism in the idea of mad love, and also its allure as a liberating force. These artists were not so much repressed (and struggling to break free of taboos within sexual practices) as eager to plunge into erotic realms to which they couldn't get access, driven by the faith belief that a leap into sublime, romantic sexuality could transform every aspect of intelligent life.

Almost a century later, in a culture far more permissive and among artists for whom taboos and limits are very different from those of the Surrealists, the overwhelming force of *l'amour fou* remains inspiring. More than expression of sexual longing, the idea carried – and still carries-- a utopian charge. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, eros remained the final emblem of unruly and unmanageable energy in a world of increasingly administered culture. The artists in *Mad Love* show the persistence of this belief, and also, how much it has changed over time. The Surrealists absorbed the idea of the unconscious as a zone of dream-life and desire where libidinal impulses and

hypnagogic imagery prevailed in a miasmic and hallucinatory terra incognita to which they ventured like early explorers finding their way in the far flung reaches of a once-uncharted globe. Inner life was the unknown territory, and the work of self-induced trance and automatic writing were meant to unleash the subject's wild imaginings from the constraints of conventional behavior. From the depth of such explorations the world of art was to be renewed by visions that were as far from academic or conventional ones as dreams were from the narratives of waking life. Taking up that charge in our current culture would be quaint if it were followed as an orthodoxy. But as a way of re-envisioning the marvelous for our own era, it is still vibrant.

Times and taboos have changed, but the need for aesthetic imagination remains. The Surrealists bequeathed *l'amour fou* as a tool of liberation that can be renewed in each generation. Unlike the composition exercises of the exquisite corpse or automatism, *l'amour fou* was a means to create ecstatic spaces at the intersection of the lived and imaginary realms, not just a technique for artistic expression. In that sense, it was primary, concerned with immediate experience rather than its mediated representation. But the liberatory potential of the concept shows itself in *Mad Love* in the artists' disregard for the rules of the art game as they chose to play intensely with the inexhaustible richness of current materials and motifs. *L'amour fou* granted permission to combine eros and aesthetics in a project of enlightened and enlightening creativity through which experience and expression, unfettered from convention, were to come up against no limits to constrain heart, flesh, and spirit. In our age, the notion of convention barely holds – and where surrealists had to leap across a threshold of restraint, contemporary artists struggle to find limits against which their own utopian projects can gain purchase through resistance. Luckily, *l'amour fou* has the charming quality of being unassimilable into a didactic practice, even in the hands of the most programmatic academic critics or historians. Unlike other principles of the early avant-garde, such as Viktor Shklovsky's "making strange" or Ezra Pound's "make it new" *l'amour fou* does not lend itself to a code of disciplined instructions. Nostalgic and quaint as it may be to imagine erotic experience as liberatory, in our current culture where desire is channeled into the pleasures of consumption rather than those of the sentient flesh, the concept retains its wild card character.

Witness the wide range of youthful exuberance demonstrated by the artists in this exhibition. Is it possible, as we look at the joy filled playful images and objects in this exhibition that mad love has become puppy love? An energetic enthusiasm is palpable in the approach to image making that is everywhere in this exhibition. True, the liberatory gestures that release libidinal flows into productive expression (hot sloppy paint and outrageously bright patterns and decorative excesses) are hardly a protest against constraint. Permissiveness so permeates our cultural and personal lives, at least as a mythic ideology, that getting past the censors is the least of an artist's struggles—and the costs of real confrontation with the rigid machine of our current state ideological apparatus remain high. In age of imperialist wars on what is termed terror, the revolutionary rhetoric of an earlier century seems as naïve as the desires for sexual experience expressed by those young surrealists—but just as essential. The task of the artist in our current culture is not to shock the bourgeoisie (even using a statement like "shock the bourgeoisie" with its odd archaic terms reveals the quaintness historical distance confers on the concept) but to remind us all of a still-present utopian possibility:

that artists can access incomparable pleasures and wonders that redeem the abuses our collective parochial vision engenders. Eclipsed and outmoded, revolution may have the same quality of historicism as the term “suffragette,” but the playful games of young artists prevail against the numbing monoculture.

Such abundantly lively new work calls for another kind of critical language than that of early 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary opposition. The imagery and artistry opens spaces within experience that are immediate: stickers and decorations, hot colors and cartoon forms, giant looming painterly archetypal figures exuding their own dripping sexuality, ordinary objects grotesquely transformed – all of these call for critical discussion to budge from its old academic roots.

In the historical transmigration of culture that has occurred in the last eighty years or so, ideas have crossed over many bridges between the old world of the avant-garde and the newly created territories of contemporary art. Each successive wave of innovation enriched the vocabulary of forms, materials, and concepts on which contemporary art can and does draw: *art informel*'s material richness, freed from subjugation to representational tasks, *art brut*'s investigation of the imagery of children, criminals, and mental patients, pre- and post-war abstract artists' engagement with archetypes found in archaeology and myth, post-war artists' attention to the brutalized condition to culture through engagement with battered and damaged material, the Situationists' direct involvement with culture and media, pop artists' fruitful play with the iconography and production methods of commercial imagery, conceptualism's fruitful attention to ideas as well as to the processes through which they are given form, the postmodern appropriative strategies and global/local artists practicing within and borrowing from an inexhaustible host of traditions. We are so far from the confines of academicism and convention that their forms hardly have a purchase on our visual vocabulary, let alone our frames of artistic reference.

Pop art calls closest attention to art as a value in itself, an attitude that the artists in *Mad Love* seem to take—fortunately—as an absolute tenet of belief and practice. From the moment that Andy Warhol made an art artifact out of a redrawn (at first hand-drawn and then screen printed) image of a Campbell's soup can or a Brillo box, the *only* characteristic that distinguished the mass produced original from its gallery counterpart is the art coefficient. That the object is made *as art*, is made at all, and that its making makes it distinct from other objects of culture – that is single strongest argument for aesthetic activity made by any artist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *After Warhol, art begins.*<sup>iii</sup> It is finally freed from the necessity of definition through any other kind of opposition. Art is artistry, the making of things as art. Because *Mad Love* comes after, long after, such a definitive crisis point in the history of art, the artists in this exhibit are all legatees of a tradition fully established. No conventions have to be overthrown in the current state of art culture. No restraints or taboos are encoded in our no longer bourgeois culture. Ours is an era of consumer permissiveness taboos (except those that set the limits on free speech and expression and don't show until exposed by an artist who hits that boundary and brings down the repressive force of the state). But limits of taste or propriety don't hold in our profit-driven world. Anything that can be sold will be, anything that might have a market will be made, the drive towards forms of consumption push production to any and every opportunistic expression. Nothing ventured, nothing gained in the world of art as in the broader culture. The profit margin of aesthetic activity gets a boost from the usual

frisson of slightly naughty content or wicked play, but that's all part of the game according to the rules.

What are the rules according to which these *Mad Love* artists engage? In Aldous Huxley's classic *Brave New World* he drew a picture of a culture in which little children were encouraged to indulge in amorous play.<sup>iv</sup> The ethos of that world was that if eros remained taboo, it would constrain growth – because the desire to have erotic experience would require young people to subject themselves to the constraints of marriage, managed relationships, authority structures just to get the experience on which to make judgments about experience itself. This insight was profound, but erotic activity remains subject to the laws of normativity even (especially?) in our times. The price paid for indulgence in mere sensuality and fleshly delights is often conscription into social relations bound by convention.

In a curious way, the works in *Mad Love* seem to fulfill Huxley's advocacy. The sheer youthfulness of its attitude rejuvenates the erotic cause. Puppies with three eyes, cartoon figures, oversized and too brightly colored motifs – the toys gone astray and playrooms on steroids sensibility that populates this exhibit has a kiddie-world-gone-wild feel to it. Archetypes and icons are supersized and sloppy, monsters loom and leer like zombie characters from a late night movie watched deliberately so one can squeal and squirm in response. An enormous bread slice goes moldy and its beauties are a celebration of irresponsibility. Goth figures and mythic landscapes populated by imaginary fog, a looming parasite and day-glo pastiche – the unconscious is not the dark continent inhabited by the interior life of dream, it is a populated by objects from the sale shelf at the mega-stores, the hypermarkets whose dross these artists patterned on as children, reaching for the bright, glossy, colored objects children respond to long in advance of aesthetic education. These objects and icons *were* their aesthetic education. The surprise effect of scale supersizes the effects, or miniaturizes them. The shift of perceptual frame introduced by these works acts with the same kind of affective impact as in any other era, but the means (matter and content) on which these artists draw have an all over the place no-holds-barred eclecticism that gives all the commodified culture on which they draw an erotic-aesthetic charge. That charge is the mad love puppy love basis for theorizing art in our era.

Whimsy and disturbance exist side by side in these works, but gravitas is conspicuously lacking. Humor, wry, ironic, perverse, and outrageous prevails. Points of view get disturbed through odd juxtapositions and ambiguities of scale. The world of virtual imagery produces its own peculiar forms of electronic frottage, and the unreal irreality of combinatoric landscapes is as dreamlike as ever, though we are drawn into it like android sheep finding our way through a tangle of simulacral forms. Hot bright colors abound. The presence of synthetic paints and pigments up the ante in a continual bid for our inattention. Aliens and thieves, flat one liner captions and on-screen statements, exist side by side with spray paint tags and sample patterns (I'll have that one for the upstairs bathroom, please). Baby dolls are of course tattooed and the vibrations from their little regions are no more shocking than the sight of cartoon language rendered in traditional media. Enameled porcelain or elegant glazes can't be put to any better purpose than to present little girls lost from anime cartoons and try to reconcile them with the dead dog pets whose hearts are borne aloft as a set of helium-filled balloons. Nothing is unacceptably grotesque or gratuitous in such a universe, and the completely

irresponsible embrace of unaccountability is the single most distinct expression of how far mad love has come from its source in the world of *l'amour fou*. Nothing seems to remain to be accountable *to* – except the causes of world peace, justice, and planetary preservation. But they are blunt instruments, kept deliberately out of sight in the playroom of ideas and art-making, even though they are the lurking subtext to much of this work and its utopian dreams. After all, the undercurrent of this exhibit is dark as well as light, the playfulness has a desperate aspect, as in the look of that sentient primate in Tony Matelli's sculpture. The recognition of us as artists and audience by a world that we seem to know only through manipulation of our familiar categories comes back with a telling shock in that piece, as the primate holding a rope perches on a cardboard carton with a look that might be accusatory malice and might be recognition on its face. *Mon semblable, mon frère*, the look suggests, calling the status of human identity into question. Mad love, we are reminded, can catch us in its gaze as well. We are objectified by a world we have been used to subjugating. An implicit threat of unruly activity, behaviors that may yet get out of bounds, moves not very far beneath the surface of this exhibit. So while the playfulness reigns, it also rages, and the inexpressible substance of such urges may yet come back to bite us. Mad indeed.

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<sup>i</sup> André Breton, *L'Amour Fou*, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); Mary Ann Caws, translator. Also, André Breton, *Nadja*, 1928.

<sup>ii</sup> Jose Pierre, *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Researches 1928-1932* (London and New York: Verso, 1992); Malcolm Imrie, translator.

<sup>iii</sup> My statement is meant as a direct contradiction of Arthur Danto's assertion that Warhol's sculpture exhibition in 1964 was the end of art. Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)

<sup>iv</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932)