

for Simone Leigh & Performa's conference on Black Surrealism

SKETCHY THOUGHTS ON MY ATTRACTION TO THE SURREALISTS*

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O'Grady taught a course on Futurism, Dada and Surrealism at SVA for 20 years but had not written of the movements' effect on her work. These rough notes made for a conference presenter indicate why she loved their methodologies more than their art.

Well, I taught the European Dadas and Surrealists at SVA for several years before making my own work. I loved the artists in those groups — especially Tzara and Duchamp, Ernst and Breton. Perhaps I was looking for a deeper understanding of my experience than the rational language of Western culture could give. But later I felt those artists were after something different than other Surrealists I loved more. . . like Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet. . . like the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam. . . and like the New York filmmaker Maya Deren.

It seemed as if the Europeans missed the boat by leaving the project at "play," albeit serious. As if they'd been content just to flip the bird at their parents, at the repressive and false rationality of the West. But if, instead of merely picturing rationality's opposite, they had pushed on to image a truer composite of both sides, perhaps they could have created that "changed life" they yearned for. Of course this is impossible. No

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one's ever done it or ever will. But failure can produce great goals.

As I look back, Maya Deren was the most important for me. Her move from Surrealist filmmaker to Vodoun initiate could not have been more perfect and inevitable. . . from *Meshes of the Afternoon* to *Divine Horsemen* (the book, not the film). . . I read it so many times. My own interests in Surrealism and Vodoun had totally overlapped. For me both were centrally pegged to "The Crossroad," that topos where above and below, rational and irrational and all other opposites merge and emerge again.

The European Surrealists weren't really *there*. I loved those guys (they were mostly guys), they were great fun. Still, I could see that I loved their methodologies more than their work. They rejoiced in the random and the middle finger they could use it for. But as I already lived in the random of Western culture, I hoped to bend the random to my will, make it yield a truer rationality than the one on view. I wanted to use their techniques to take me somewhere I couldn't go on my own, to help me get something new out of something old. I wanted a new vocabulary for a new situation.

I've always been a devotee of Jamaican proverbs, Greek myths and Grimm fairy tales — those repositories of understanding greater than the sum of human limitations. Of course they aren't the only way. I know that physics can be like that too — at the outer limits, where the greatest theories often arrive in poetic leaps on ground that's been properly prepared. And I love the demands Césaire and Lam made of European Surrealism, as they transformed themselves into perfect crossroads, stretching that idea and those techniques from the ludic to the spiritual and political, and then back again.

We haven't yet seen a fully-blown, non-European Surrealism. Let's hope we will. . . or at least an art as beautiful, as deranged and unstable as the other, but more complete and true. That would be marvelous!

(To be returned to. . .)

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