



Three Essays About Massurrealism

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ENGLISH EDITION • THE MUSEUM FOR MASSURREALIST ART

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Every artist responds to culture, whether that cultural input arrives via local history, media outlets, advertising billboards or the internet. Just as the world at large embraced blue jeans as a border-destroying icon of self-expression, all the myriad external influences conspire to take over the context in which an artist creates. The conditions for this takeover are the ubiquitous presence of mass media, global consumerism and globally conscious pop culture standing eye-to-eye with the inner spiritual life of the individual. So without further adieu, the essays. ☞



James Seehafer
A Free Association of Contemporary
Influences (1992)

James Seehafer (U.S.A.) originated the portmanteau expression ‘massurrealism’, meaning mass media related art + surrealism. Having an interest in media and television advertising early on, Seehafer soon developed an interest in art. He began exhibiting his paintings in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City in his late teens. Shortly after he then studied at Parsons School of Design, New York—the following statement is his original text written in 1992.

I will keep my statement as short and concise as I can—after all, art should speak for itself. Influences for artists are everywhere, and in the course of my work, the past traditions of my birthplace have become intellectual vignettes of numerous experiences. Being from New England, I developed an interest for the local history and folklore. Of course given the era that we live today one has to consider additional factors such as the continued progression of the entertainment industry. Movies, music videos and television are a dominant force on World culture and on today's contemporary artists. The components of the advertising industry's strategies, for example: ads, prints, billboards, are designed to entertain as well as capture, lead, and prompt the human psyche. While driven by the mass media [television, movies, music videos, and advertising] massurrealism is created through a cross combination of multiple tools which can include the traditional media [oils, acrylic, classic collage and classic photography] with the tools of the new and innovative technologies, digital media, digital photography, digital techniques and software.

Massurrealism coalesces mass media related art, including but not limited to Pop-Art and surrealism. All of these elements together became the foundation of this art form. Pop Art falls under the same classification of Mass-Media related art, as it is Marshall McLuhan's assertion that Pop is part of the same "technological fugue",* which arguably was the first step into the bringing about of New Media art. [*Marshall McLuhan, "Art As Anti Environment" ART NEWS, May 1966]



Literary mystery piqued my interest in surrealism, and additional influences came partially from the Pop artists, as well as the mass-media. Pop presents technology in imagery that we can understand instantly. In the final analysis, artists of yesterday are the same as artists of today, likewise for the artists to come; we use whatever tools, materials, and methodologies that are at our disposal during the time each has on the planet. As we pass the year 2000, the old media combines with the new media, which continues the evolution to the next level the way artists create. Massurrealism reflects the present moment, and as Rod Serling, who was the creator for the famous American television show The Twilight Zone once said: "The place is here, and the time is now." •





Michael Morris

Massurrealism – A More Realistic Way Of Seeing The World (1998)

Michael Morris (U.S.A.) is a graphic designer and artist whose paintings are published in limited editions. He received his Bachelor's of science degree in art education from Kansas State College at Pittsburg, and later earned his Bachelor's and Master's degree in fine arts from Yale University New Haven, Connecticut.

Massurrealism is the realization of a quest that explores the fertile ground that encompasses both reality and imagination, the conscious and the subconscious. In Massurrealism the artists combine images from the outer world (the Mass) and inner world (the Surreal).

Massurrealism thus brings disparate sides of our life into direct association, juxtaposing personal symbols with the imagery of mass culture, often combining the conflicts themselves -- the hard, pounding throb of a locomotive (mass transportation) charging forward and the soft, yielding form of a woman, swimming above and away; the trendy sophistication of a cocktail with the simple innocence of inquisitive goldfish. What is real, we might ask. What is imagined? These new images offer a glimpse into a universal hologram; a view that points at something beyond just images; a vision that may explain nothing -- yet might just explain everything. As such, Massurrealism pursues what is perhaps the ultimate realism.

Massurrealism Defined

First is the idea of mass, from the mass media of television, advertising and the Internet to the products of mass production: Alarm clocks, automobiles, trains, jet aircraft, etc. from mass culture: Soda cans, cocktails, beach balls, swimming pools, etc; to the inexplicable mass of particle physics, energy, and the oneness of the Universe. Like Rembrandt, the massurrealist immerses the viewer in the details of daily life. Like Van Gogh, expresses the energy and power of light, the shimmering reality of objects themselves and like Warhol shows the reality of the generic objects themselves. The surreal draws also from many sources -- from dreams and insights, hopes and fears, longings, half-explained desires and other subconscious mysteries. Yet it is surreal as well, because what stays behind after the fact is our individual remembrance, our own interpretation of that reality. This is where it becomes interesting, in the different personalities and techniques of each artist. Were Andrew Wyeth, Edward Hopper and Thomas Eakins mere realists? Or can we find something more than reality in the barrenness of a woman alone in a field, or the smoldering sexuality of a man and his secretary in a small office, or the vibrant highlights and deep shadows of rowers on the Schuylkill -- something remembered or dreamed, something surreal? The surreal is the visual narration of our subconscious. It is the creative force, the intuitive, the autonomic. It is our imagination. What is real is what is happening now. It is that which is agreed upon only now. Today, both of these thrusts -- the outside and the inside -- have begun to intrude even more violently into our minds. Music on the streets becomes louder, the broken beer bottles and wrappers from Burger King more invasive. Yet against these shouts and chaos there is also quiet and order -- Mozart and Bix Biederbecke are only the flick of a switch away. A peaceful sunset, the solemn waters of a lake ripple only steps away.

Each of us is attracted and yet frightened by this beginnings of a global culture, of new knowledge about the universes, large and small, the questions of our place within these. There is a new unavoidable unfolding of spirituality on the inside. A collective awareness of global awakening. And these are all ideas and realities that Massurrealism confronts, addresses and embraces. A raising of the unconsciousness to the surface.

The Art History That Leads To Massurrealism

Perhaps we can better understand what Massurrealism is by exploring what it came after, and how it fits into the truly mind-boggling stream of ideas and paintings that form the legacy of each of us today. It's a diverse and far reaching chronicle, yet one that we too often take for granted. This testimony includes such diverse geniuses as Van Gogh, and Michaelangelo, Ingres and Warhol, Courbet and Dali. Because in many ways, we are their heirs. We follow in the paths they, and many thousands of others, have opened for us.

The Impact of Photography

The impetus towards Modern Art really began after 1826 with the invention of photography. Before that, at least since the Renaissance, a primary goal of Western painting had been realism -- to accurately capture on canvas the "reality" that existed in the world around us. Some -- most often those we remember best -- went far beyond mere reproduction. Botticelli and Michaelangelo sought physical perfection; Vermeer and Frans Hals looked into the mind within. William Blake, like the Medievalists before him, pursued metaphysical and allegorical insights. Yet on the surface, an image of reality -- a human body, a face, a tiger -- was always the starting point. Then photography appeared, able to capture a realistic picture easily; and painting began to change forever. We see the first steps toward this change in Gustave

Courbet. He viewed nature and society in a dispassionate way, often with a critical eye. Rather than build the painting up in thin successive layers in the neo-classical style of the time, he applied paint thickly in a direct and straightforward manner. Courbet had a shockingly novel idea that painting should be contemporaneous. His concern was with that directly seen before one's eyes. He chose subjects from middle and working class provincial people and rural themes all of which upset and inflamed the public and critics alike.

Others, like Edouard Manet began to flatten perspective, to become more two dimensional in ways similar to the newly imported Japanese prints. Manet and the other artists involved in these new ideas that would lead to Impressionism upset the Art Establishment. He gradually became more concerned with shapes, design, and coloration -- with pure and simple colors, perhaps most importantly pure blacks. His subject matter in both *Luncheon on the Grass* and *Olympia* created shock and bewilderment with the public. This was after over 3000 works had been rejected by the Salon in 1863. This created such a public outcry that Napoleon III ordered an exhibition of the rejects. The Impressionists explored ways of capturing the atmospheric light. They began to experiment with colors: brilliant reds, bright yellows, blues, purples and tubes of white.

And we see a pattern developing: painters like, Claude Monet, became less concerned with the reality of what was actually "out there," and more concerned with how they saw that reality. Van Gogh turned the aims of the Impressionists into a powerhouse of expressiveness by applying vigorous brush strokes. He sold only one painting in his entire lifetime. Paul Cezanne took all of this a step further. Called the "Father of Modern Art," he gave enormous solidity to the forms he painted. They became almost geometric solids, shaped not so much with shadow and strict perspective as with what we today call color temperature -- warm rich colors in the foreground, colder, bluer colors as our vision recedes.

The public did not like his work any better. Cezanne is also important to us because he began to put into words what he was trying to do. Not only, he said, is the object out there changing constantly, as light and movement affect it, but our own vision of what we see is also in constant motion as we, viewer and painter, change -- our moods, our patience, our receptivity. Thus with Cezanne, images on canvas became a synthesis, a combining of what was "out there" and what was "in here." At the beginning of the twentieth century Matisse, Derain and the other Fauves (Wild Beasts) also shocked the public and the academies with an explosion of raw color. Like sticks of dynamite, pure primaries right out of the tube replacing all the mixed colors in an entire painting, combined with the expressiveness of violent brush work.

A Perspective Shifts

We leap ahead to Picasso and the Cubists, yet here too we see these same ideas take yet another step forward. Because Picasso came even further away from the object, from the real, into the reality he saw within, and wanted us to see with him. He abstracted form into planes and cubes, and in this abstraction sought to show us many views of a single "reality." He glanced too into the surreal, into the dreamlike visions that show us other, more personal truths. And in Picasso, we are suddenly aware that within a single image, many ideas, many visions, many insights are going on at the same time. Dadaism was started as a revolt against the barbarisms of war. It's first step was to attack the icons of the old culture. The target was the hypocrisy of those that felt art promoted spiritual values. Marcel Duchamp created a sensation, at the 1913 Armory Show in New York, with *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. The Dada artists adapted cubist collaging techniques to make incongruous

juxtapositions of images and letters from the garbage. They created Art by calling manufactured objects Art. Marcel Duchamps Porcelain urinal turned on it's back and titled Fountain signed by R. Mutt is an example of the outrageous directions that pushed the limits of Fine Art. Art became conceptual and witty. Surrealism joined the revolt and helped to thrust home the subversive attack on all those overly civilized standards. The surrealists wanted to create art that you would wonder about. Something away from reason and balance.

It was the Surrealists who began to focus almost totally on what was within, on the "reality" of the imagined, the unreal. Salvador Dali, Man Ray, Rene Magritte and others began to apply psychiatric influences by searching into dreams, into the subconscious, and combine the many discontinuous images found there into a new type of reality -- from melting watches and frightening, empty landscapes, to fireplaces with trains emerging. The concept of using automatic writing and other similar techniques to obtain access into the subconscious realities began with the Dadaists and was further developed by the surrealists.

More and more, we traveled in Art from an exploration of the out there to an investigation of in here. In the late 1940s came what is finally known as Modern Art, the Abstract Expressionists, and it almost totally ignored the out there. It also reduced and minimized the in here to the simple act of painting itself. Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Clyfford Still, Willem de Kooning and others left realism totally behind, and the "subject" of their work became the visceral process of applying paint and color to a surface. Fine Art became purified. Refined. Devoid of any extraneous content. The limits of Art became the new context. And, in the process Fine Art became a stunning success. The most modern became the accepted, the popular. It was studied and taught by the universities. Sales to collectors and museums reached all time highs. Every major corporation had to invest in a major Art collection to express their position and power. What had once been the acts of rebellion and revolt in the times leading up to this period, now became a frenzied search the best of the new, the most sought after. It was what Art had been aiming for since Courbet and Corot.

The artist became a cultural hero. A second wave of Modernism took this voyage to reach the limits of Art even further. With Richard Diebenkorne, Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, Frank Stella and many others, painting became not only divorced from outside reality, but also from all but the most basic inner emotions. Form, and color itself, became the ultimate abstraction, the only reality on the canvas. The explorations took place with increasing finesse as a search for pure beauty, simpler forms. Less is More. Art became a purely conceptual activity. Fine Art from the Renaissance until the Impressionists was always stimulated to become more complex, more meaningful and more powerful.

The history of Modern Art has been one of closing off and purifying itself until it no longer contained subject matter or stylistic conventions of any kind. Although I've been writing mainly about the movements that lead directly to Massurrealism or are background that helps to clarify this movement, all modern movements lead finally to this dead end.

The point where the artist is devoid of an ideology that would form the basis for creating further. We aren't to that point quite yet, but when we see Modern Art approved by the public and the academies alike, it can't be far off. As soon as they lose interest (the public and the schools) and Art becomes appreciated and understood by only the most sophisticated elite, it will be the time to reevaluate.

Reality Pops Back

Then came the revolution. It was called Pop Art. Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, James Rosenquist and others turned against the individualistic and often delicate inner sensibilities of the Abstractionists, and began to look outward for the ideal of democratic beauty in the commonplace and the banal. Brute images of popular culture -- hot dogs, cigarette butts, comic strips, off-register visions of Marilyn Monroe -- these became their aesthetic. Out there began again to be important.

The Future Of Massurrealism

So where have we been in this quick journey? We began with a focus on the outer world, with pictorial reality. Then came the camera to change that focus, and turn the artist inward to explore, in growing steps, the world he found there. Literal reality was swept aside, and the inner world began to dominate art until it seemed to become so individualistic, so personal, that any attempt at communication, at sharing beauty or insight with others, was stopped in its tracks.

Then the pendulum began to swing back. Vision was ripped unceremoniously away from inner feelings, and back outside to the harsh realities of hamburgers, coke bottles, and icons of Elizabeth Taylor or Marilyn. And here is Massurrealism, dealing with all of this, rejecting none of it, the realities outside, and the visions, emotions and realities inside. We see it in the paintings of such diverse talents as David Hockney, Ron Kitaj and Jennifer Bartlett.

Each attempts to find beauty and, dare we say, some sort of understanding in the diverse, discontinuous and often conflicting cacophony of modern life. For today, both the real and the surreal, the outside and the inside, have become very real components of waking up each morning. Massurrealism is more than a fad. It is rapidly becoming a return to the mainstream of art.

For it sets out to integrate all of our worlds into a more compelling and comprehensive image than we may have ever known before. And while many of us have been trained by Modernists, Massurrealism is also a rejection of the extremes and barrenness we were taught. Where Modernists reject history, sentiment, memory, ornament and almost any attempt at realism, we embrace them all, and search for both beauty and understanding in fields as diverse as particle physics and global communications.

No field is left out; all come to our canvas. The artist has become free again. The ideology needed to define artistic work is back: subject matter, stylistic convention, beauty, eclectic interest in Art from all sources past and present. Where Abstract Expressionism sought to eliminate and purify using cold abstraction and the rejection of all but aesthetics, we have struck out to enrich our work with wit, metaphor, ornament and coloration. We are concerned with symbolism, with technology, and an allegorical renewal of our relationships with past cultures. We are children of a mass culture defined by economics and pragmatism, and we are committed to a pluralism in the way we state ideas. The juxtaposition of images, and the ways we see those images (and the way we want our viewer to see them too), can be viewed as a return to Realism or Surrealism with added dimensions from the culture that shapes each of us. As we reach towards the next millennium, we have become aware of a new-age sensitivity awash in unparalleled technological inventiveness; of the quiet inside being bombarded by a violent and mysterious universe outside; of a growing acceptance of universal oneness clashing almost daily with battles between nations, races, sexes and personalities. In response, the age old questions continue to emerge:

"What is actually there? How does it all work? What does it all mean?" And for Surrealists, as for artists from every movement and every era back to the cave dwellers of Lascaux, these questions are the starting point. • 🖱️





Philip Kocsis
Massurrealism And The Concept Of Relative Reality (2002)

Philip Kocsis (U.S.A.) Works in digital and mixed media and has works in private and corporate collections in the United States.

Back in the early 20th century, Surrealism presented images of altered reality influenced in part by the artists dreams, overactive imaginations, drug induced hallucinations and was coveted for its cultural “shock” value. Those of us growing up in the 1980's and 1990's witnessed the influence of mass media, advertising, the advent of commercial uses for the web, and personal computing permeating every facet of our lives. Massurrealism addressed this technological, cultural and artistic shift and the debate, for Massurrealists anyway, was settled over using computers and technology to create fine art. Using technology was warmly embraced by the Massurrealist ideals. Massurrealism, though alive and well, will succumb to the fate of all art movements. It will meld, morph and grow.

Massurrealism’s major contribution to the art world is that it addressed and defeated many of the obstacles (and opinions) to computerized art and mixed contemporary media being accepted as an art form. The groundswell in the late 1990’s of the grass roots support for Massurrealism was empowered by the growth of the web, the first major movement to do so with such flagrant democracy, essentially circumventing the art elite. The beauty of Massurrealism is, by its nature, constantly evolving. It lends itself comfortably to absorbing and defining ongoing technological advancements.

I have been working on a concept that expands Massurrealism and forces consideration into yet another direction, which I call “Relative Reality”. Relative reality addresses results; changes in popular culture and the almost imperceptible shift in “acceptance” of ideas. Relative reality is not as concerned with the act of mixing technology and artistic vision or to prove that it can be real art, Massurrealists already accept that as fact, but how Massurrealist concepts become accepted daily reality. Madison Avenue and their mass media campaigns are the tools for permeating this acceptance. A problem with the pervasive use of dreamlike, Massurreal sequences in mass media advertising, to sell everything from pick-up trucks to online services, is that Madison Avenue is turning Massurrealist concepts into overused clichés. Though the technical mastery of the video / computer editors is impressive, it is becoming more and more difficult to qualify it as “art” because it is no longer

innovative. This seems to happen to every art movement once it is established and by mainstream. Art must be new and innovative. It is a continuous growth process. The definition of what “is” art has been greatly expanded in the last few years. Fueled by technology, this definition has recently grown faster and more diverse than any other time in history. Massurrealism is, in part, responsible for this.

Actuality vs. Reality

This is where “Relative Reality” begins to get complicated and difficult to explain. Relative reality is reflective and representative of what the “perceived reality” is at any point in time. For example, I will probably never visit L. L. Bean in Maine. To me, the reality of L. L. Bean is a little country store out in the woods of Maine far out on the other end of New England. The reality for me, at this point in time, is that I can call the friendly “store clerk” or visit their website and place an order. That is the real experience. It is “relative” reality based on my physical and mental proximity. And, it is the “majority” reality for a million visitors a year.

Actuality and reality don’t necessarily need to coincide in the physical realm anymore. L. L. Bean, in actuality, is likely to be a number of large, cold metal warehouses with large open truck bays and hundreds of computers “spitting out” logistics and shipping orders. Is this scenario more real than “my wholesome country store” reality of L. L. Bean, even though I don’t know for sure if these massive fulfillment centers exist? As you can see my “real” is a mass marketing projection of L. L. Bean, most likely a far cry from actuality. Advertisers have taken this perceived reality to the limits, and you buy into it. If you don’t believe me, how much did you pay for a .25 fl oz. bottle of “Obsession” perfume? Ancient mythology, although historically far richer and deeper than ad executives hocking stink water, worked the same way prior to modern life. The interesting thing is that if today you were to ask anyone “Where is Valhalla?” (The hall in which Odin received the souls of slain heroes, not the town in New York state) most people would say that “Valhalla does not exist, it is an ancient Norse myth created by an ancient people”. But, to them, it was very real.

Most Boolean minded scientists of the 20th and 21st century have disregarded anything that cannot be proven “real” as “not real”. (The question the relative reality artist needs to ask is “how do you prove something that is not real, does not exist. Next, how do you portray it in your art?”) These same scientists and engineers have built a fourth dimension for everyone in the world to play in (the Internet). Untouchable, yet it is a common place that can be experienced and shared to connect with other human beings.

The only difference between this reality and that of the myths of the ancient civilizations is that we have the power to create and subscribe to many realities instantaneously, as many as we can imagine. This brings us full circle from the mythological reality, which could only be experienced mentally and spiritually to the scientific revolution of experiencing everything through physical senses leading to scientific breakthroughs that allow for us to explore new realities, which, initially, can only be experienced mentally and spiritually. This circle exemplifies Massurrealism using ideas to create technology, then, using the technology to create art. Art is mental and spiritual. Relative reality is based on an acceptance of being totally open minded as an artist and that each thought is “real”. Everything that you can imagine exists. It exists in your imagination, this existence is potential, potential ideas are reality. I’ve always felt that when we dream we are experiencing our true selves. All of the feelings we experience when we are dreaming are amplified. Our brains perceive fantastic possibilities during the dream state. Our “awake” self is the dull, monotonous existence that allows our brains to rest from the

overcharged creative power released during dreams. This existence would seem to be reversed from normal preconceptions of reality. My “awake self” is real, my “dream self” is fiction. Are we really sure? It’s the same paradoxical realization that you find when bricks and concrete are used to build a room. What is the room? Is it the brick walls? Maybe, but it is the empty space between these solid walls that makes a room usable. Same with the hardened steel used to make wheels of a train. No matter how masterfully created, it’s the hole, the “nothing”, in the center that makes the wheel useful. We know these statements are obvious and true, yet it does seem strange at first. After all, if we can identify and name “nothingness” doesn’t that make it something? If I could use something like paint, music or even mathematics to describe this “nothingness” effectively, everyone who encounters and understands this art would experience a different, expanded reality. Nothingness is not a blank canvas, silence or the number 0. This type of exploration poses interesting difficulties for the Massurrealist artist to overcome



but opens great possibilities to innovation. Relative reality is Massurrealist art that reflects and represents what “perceived reality” is at this given point in time. Insane people who can paint are geniuses; insane people who can’t are just insane. When Vincent Van Gogh was alive, he was thought to be deranged and was placed in an

asylum. 50 years after his death, he slowly became the genius he is admired as today. His unique view of the world and the translation of this perception onto canvas forever changed the history of art.

Whose reality has changed? It is believed that he actually saw the green yellow glow around stars and gaslights depicted in his paintings, probably due to his absinthe abuse. His paintings have not changed, but now we perceive his works as masterpieces. 150 years ago they were the scribbling of a lunatic. Perceived reality has changed. The evolution of science, technology, media, and the web is influencing how we define reality. Reality is very fluid, very elusive. Relative reality is different, not only for every individual but for every individual at any given moment in time. People get “old” not by age, but by no longer responding to the dynamic fluidity of reality. They become rigid and comfortable in a particular point in time. It is the artists' duty to capture these snapshots and piece them together into the fluid, meaningful art of Massurrealism. By influencing people’s perceptions through mass media, Massurrealists of today may inadvertently be predicting and creating the reality of our future. How interesting would that be? •

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