

Print Article

**René Magritte***Decalcomania*

1966

Collection Dr. Noémi Perelman Mattis and Dr. Daniel C. Mattis



Installation view of the entrance to "Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images"

Photo courtesy Museum Associates/LACMA

EVERYTHING FITS

by Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

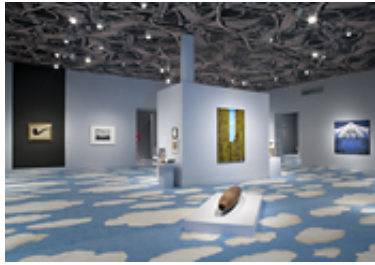
"Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images." Nov. 16, 2006-Mar. 4, 2007, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, Ca. 90036.

Art comes from art, but great artists can be inspired by the least obvious of sources. Certainly, that has been true of much contemporary art made in Los Angeles in general, and now in particular in the exhibition "Magritte and Contemporary Art: The Treachery of Images," currently on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Surrounded by work by Richard Artschwager, Vija Celmins, Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, Raymond Pettibon and Ed Ruscha, among others, the Belgian surrealist René Magritte appears elevated to a greater stature. Certainly, Magritte has fans, but as with Georgia O'Keeffe, the popularity of the work and its ubiquity in reproduction tends to drain it of wit and surprise. Not here, however.

Organized by LACMA senior curator Stephanie Barron and Michel Draguet, director of the *Musees Royaux des Beaux Arts de Belgique* in Brussels, this exhibition juxtaposes Magritte's men in bowler hats, train engines and super-sized apples with somehow-related works by contemporary artists. The result is a kind of visual fireworks and a concomitant intellectual wonderment. A great deal of the show's success is owed to California conceptualist John Baldessari, who is included in the exhibition but also masterminded the hanging of these disparate works. (He has also recently done an installation from the collection at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.)

LACMA's new director Michael Govan, who came to the museum earlier this year from the Dia Art Foundation in New York, gets credit for the idea of asking the artist to become involved, saying that Baldessari and Magritte had "the same twisted perspective." Twisted is an apt turn of phrase for Baldessari's ambitious decision to turn the entire show topsy-turvy. The gallery floors are carpeted with blue sky and white clouds while the ceilings are papered with a repeat pattern of a freeway cloverleaf. He had a scrim printed with a photograph of the New York City skyline at night hung over a window facing Wilshire Boulevard, effectively presenting a view of Manhattan with the outline of L.A. hovering in the background like a premonition.

It is something of a cliché that artists make work to see what it might look like. This enormous, site-specific installation by Baldessari offers that idea writ large. Baldessari, of all people, knew that it would be both hilarious and delightful to hang Joseph Kosuth's Conceptual Art definition of "Thing" (in both English and French) in a way that it would serve as a wall label for Ed Ruscha's large painting *SPAM*, Jeff Koons' shiny stainless steel cast of an inflatable rabbit, Vija Celmins' six-foot-tall sculpture of a tortoiseshell comb and Magritte's painting of a room containing many different things, including blue sky with puffy clouds and a giant comb. The installation is the



Installation view of "Magritte and Contemporary Art The Treachery of Images"
Photo courtesy Museum Associates/LACMA



Installation view of "Magritte and Contemporary Art The Treachery of Images": Charles Ray's *Fall '91* (1992) [left] and Barbara Kruger's *Untitled (It's a small world but not if you have to clean it)* (1990)
Photo courtesy Museum Associates/LACMA



Ed Ruscha
Lion in Oil
2002
Fischer Landau Center for Art

visual equivalent of a garage band covering a song by Neil Diamond, where each thing is enhanced by the presence of the other and the impact is electric.

The title of the show derives from one of Magritte's best-known paintings, LACMA's own *The Treachery of Images*, the famous image of a pipe with a script caption declaring "Ceci n'est past une pipe." It is, of course, not a pipe. It is a painting of a pipe. That slipstream between what is seen, what is written and what is meant (if anything!), has fueled generations of Dadaists, Surrealists, Pop and Conceptual artists. In this regard, the show includes several works of art that incorporate text, not least Baldessari's own photograph printed on canvas of a man standing in front of a palm tree, underlined by the single word "Wrong." Other examples are Ruscha's palindrome "Lion in Oil" hovering portentously in the pictorial space in front of a grand landscape of snow-capped mountains, gnomish texts by the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers and Raymond Pettibon's watercolor of clouds covered with poetic ruminations. What you see is not all of what you get. Art lies. Art makes you wonder.

One of LACMA's most ungainly galleries tapers to a point like the prow of a ship. Baldessari turns the spatial liability to advantage by filling it with marine-related art: Magritte's painting of a ship made of water, Ruscha's dark ship silhouettes cruising the horizon, Koons' bronzed life raft on the floor and Lawrence Weiner's wall text: "Illuminated by the lights of two ships passing in the night."

Gigantism is another theme. Magritte's big rocks, Jim Shaw's big rock. Pettibon's big rock. Mike Kelley's big heads, Robert Gober's big cigar, Charles Ray's big woman with big hair. Not examples of influence or inspiration per se, but evidence that Magritte's "twisted perspective" may be shared by more artists than Baldessari.

The show also includes certain works of art that don't quite make sense, but it doesn't matter in the end. Everything fits, somehow, like a great feast offering caviar and hot dogs. How can you care about details when the guards are walking around wearing bowler hats, a bit of costuming done to oblige Baldessari?

For the most part, synapses snap at the possibility of connections, making it seem as though these artists of different generations and backgrounds are indeed kindred spirits, if not blood brothers. Smart, sassy and sumptuous, it is one of the most rewarding shows in recent memory at LACMA, and will not travel.

HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA-PHILP is author of *Full Bloom: The Art and Life of Georgia O'Keeffe*, published by W.W. Norton.



René Magritte
Personal Values
1952
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



Vija Celmins
Untitled (Comb)

1970
Los Angeles County Museum of Art



René Magritte
The Listening Room
1952
Menil Collection