

A Study of Social Surrealism in Mika Rottenberg's Images

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Abstract: Surrealism emerged after the First World War. Surrealism advocates purely unconscious activities and records the authentic inner movements that are not controlled by reason or restricted by aesthetic ethics through oral language, writing, or other means. Surrealists care about the appearance of things but also pursue the inner supernatural and irrational spiritual self-expression. This article aims to study and discuss why and how Mika Rottenberg constructs and depicts a mysterious, absurd, and unique dream world in his video works through the comparative analysis of surrealist images and the study of related theories. Moreover, while explaining the cognition and understanding of this genre of video art, the article introduces it into personal video practice to realize the author's artistic pursuit and aesthetic ideal.

1. Introduction

Surrealism has always been an essential element throughout the history of contemporary video development, opening up a rich and explorable space for contemporary video technology and pushing it to new heights, which is also reflected in Mika Rottenberg's video works. This article takes Mika Rottenberg's images as the research object and discusses surrealism's presentation form and significance to society through relevant theoretical research and analysis of works. First, this article briefly introduces the author's understanding of society and the relationship between society and surrealist images. Second, discussing surrealism in the form of examples to conduct research and analyze the presentation forms of surrealist images. Then, this article analyzes the significance of surrealist images to society and explores their unique artistic connotation and aesthetic value from a multi-dimensional perspective. Finally, from the perspective of the combination of theory and time, the article expounds on the author's social perception in the study of the influence of surrealism.

2. Society and Surreal Images

2.1 The Formation of Surrealist Images

Surrealism originated in the depression and horror of social reality after the First World War. After the First World War, the social structure was dispersed, and the depression and terror of the social reality made people's hearts struggle and on the verge of madness. Personal ideals and beliefs about science became unstable. This unforgettable turmoil also gave birth to great rational, surreal literature and art. The first genre is Dadaism. In 1923, the Dadaist school, which advocated destroying everything and denying everything, was disbanded, and the Surrealist art school followed. In the "Manifesto of Surrealism" written by French writer Andre Breton, we can learn that surrealism advocates pure unconscious inner activities. People record their authentic inner movements that are not controlled by reason or restricted by aesthetic ethics through oral language, writing, or other methods. Surrealists care about the appearance of things but also pursue the inner supernatural and irrational spiritual self-expression. Surrealists believe that artists should rely on instinct to create. They should break through the control of reason and the confusion of appearances, integrate the objective world with the inner world, and present things that people's vision cannot trigger through artistic expression. The unexplored part of human beings is shown to the outside

world, which is the purpose of the surrealist genre.

Video technology has advantages over other art forms in expressing "reality" and has more vitality than other art forms. In terms of space processing, texture, perspective, and other forms of expression, images have formed a self-contained visual language system and laid a visual foundation for surreal painting.

2.2 Social Surrealism in Mika Rottenberg's Video Works

2.2.1 Research Background

As early as the 1990s, Matthew Barney used comprehensive artistic expressions such as performance, photography, video, installation, and film in his video works to express his surreal artistic concept. His work also provides a model for many artists and commercial visual artists. With the rise of VR and holographic projections in recent years, surrealist art has opened up a multi-dimensional development path, and excellent video artists like Mika Rottenberg have emerged. Her works are typical of social surrealism. New technologies provide diversified presentation forms for modern art creation and create a visual revolution for commercial film and television, such as movies, museums, and game experience rooms. Surrealism has always been an important element throughout the history of contemporary video development, opening up a rich and explorable space for contemporary video technology and pushing it to new heights, which is also reflected in Mika Rottenberg's video works. To study Mika Rottenberg's video works, we need to study their surreal artistic expression and dig out the social surrealism behind them. The study of social surrealism in the video can excavate new and meaningful artistic presentation methods in this field, whether in the field of art or in a practical sense. Using surrealism to make more breakthroughs in vision and experience and presenting a new aspect of the objective world to the public is a question that every video artist and practitioner should consider.

2.2.2 An Analysis of Social Surrealism in Mika Rottenberg's Video Works

Mika Rottenberg's surreal video works reflect her inner supernatural pursuit and show the unusual side of life to the public. Instead of immersing herself in dreams, she connects fictional scenes with social ones. By watching her video works, we can find that Mika Rottenberg pays attention to designing and interspersing some fictional scenes in the documentary images. For example, in her work "Cosmic Generator" in 2017, she presents an absurd global trade system, three worlds in different geographical spaces. However, due to the interspersing of documentary and fictional scenes, it falls into surreal absurdity. In a highly saturated picture, any scene seems to continue to change without end. This surreal spatial structure and narrative method allow people to see the economic connection of globalization contained in the seemingly irrelevant trade scene. Behind the author's surreal artistic approach is her concern about mass commodity production and human labor. In many of Mika Rottenberg's works, people can experience the themes of human destiny, commodity economy, and global circulation [1].

As an outstanding video artist, Mika Rottenberg incorporates different media such as film, sculpture, and installation into her creative practice, leading people to reflect on the value of commodity production and human labor in a hyper-capitalist world. Combining documentary scenes with artificial fiction, she skillfully exposes the hidden dynamics of everyday life and economic production. Mika Rottenberg's 2019 work "Spaghetti Blockchain" uses a single-channel 4K video installation, color images, and 7.1 surround sound. In this surreal video work and dynamic installation, the film and sculpture present specific production and business system scenarios. From a new potato picker on a potato farm in Maine to the most powerful particle collider in Geneva, the work shows humans' connection to the material world they produce. Mika Rottenberg also said she is interested in these human creations. In the beginning, things were clueless, but when a certain logic was imposed on them, they appeared crazy. Just like the blockchain in the visual works, Mika Rottenberg weaved together the hadron collider, Tuva guttural singer, potato picker, and ASMR sound interspersed to complete the rapid conversion and connection between different sources [2].

Most of Mika Rottenberg's kinetic sculptures need to be moved by human participation, such as turning a crank or pedal wheel. The object will magically move within a few feet of the transmission. These sculptures are a metaphor for the connection between human labor and mechanical labor, which is not transferred by human emotional energy.

3. Research on Surrealism at Home and Abroad

With the frequent cultural exchanges between China and the West, individuality and subjectivity are generally valued by people, and the works of some Chinese artists also contain anti-documentary and advocate individuality, thus promoting the research and exploration of surrealism in the field of Chinese art. However, the relevant theories of surrealism in China are still not perfect. In addition, some differences exist in the development of surrealism between China and foreign countries.

3.1 Surrealism in the West

Surrealist artists regard the subconscious mind as the source of their artistic creation, and they believe that only the "unconscious" mental state can free themselves from bondage and anxiety. They deny the rational world, get rid of the shackles of reality and return to the supernatural primitive. Among the three stages of the development of Western Surrealism, the most representative artists are Dali, Marcel Duchamp, and Joan Miró.

Salvador Dali is a Spanish painter. His paintings are intertwined with fantasy and dreams. Different elements and illogical combinations make the works present a kind of disordered beauty. The surrealism in Dali's works is reflected in making this irrational concept tangible and real, thus bringing people from the dreamscape to the objective reality [3].

Marcel Duchamp is known as the "patron saint of modern art". He is also one of the most representative figures of Dadaism after World War I. He questioned the essence and boundaries of art and encouraged people to dare to break the traditional ideas related to rationality and logic in artistic creation. Duchamp's works are also unique. For example, in the canvas oil painting "Nude Descending the Staircase", elements of the movement are incorporated into the painting. The movement accentuates the sense of disarray and disorder, detracting from the focus on the painting itself. In addition, he pioneered the Western installation artwork "Fountain", which put forward new thinking on the definition of art [4].

In the later period of surrealism, Joan Miro is undoubtedly the most representative figure. His works are full of curved lines and complex colors, using abstract patterns and colors to communicate with the audience beyond time and space. Usually, his works have a childlike innocence, which also embodies his pure inner emotion. His representative works include "Harlequin's Carnival".

3.2 Surrealism in China

Chinese surrealism began to develop gradually after the Cultural Revolution. Although it originated from the West, Chinese surrealism also developed very well in China, which can be roughly divided into three stages. In the first stage, the revival of literature and art after the Cultural Revolution provided convenient conditions for introducing Western ideas, and artists desired to express the most original ideas with brushstrokes. Just as Western surrealism was produced in the social environment of the horror and depression of World War II, Chinese surrealism was also produced amid the pain. The oppression and trauma that people suffered physically and mentally after the Cultural Revolution needed creative ideas like surrealism to heal them [5]. Surrealism explored the essence of things through dreams and subconsciousness. Representative surrealist painters at that time included Zhao Shou and Liang Xihong. However, the surrealism of this phase was short-lived and soon died out.

The second stage is the "85 Art Trend" that appeared in the mid-1980s. At that time, the country was in a period of reform and opening up, and Western modernism was gaining momentum. Many artists began combining surrealism techniques with China's social status, which promoted the rapid

development of surrealism in China. Representatives of major surrealist artists during this period include Luo Zhongli, Wang Xiangmin, Meng Luding, Feng Guodong, and others [6].

In the third stage, the emergence of information technology and new media industries opened up new paths for surrealist art creation, and individualized and personal artistic expressions became more intense, profoundly impacting the development of Chinese contemporary art. At this time, many surrealist artists emerged, such as Zhong Biao, Xu Manyao, Fang Lijun, and Yue Minjun.

Xu Manyao's surrealist works are deeply influenced by absurd literature and Marguerite's paintings. In his work "Sculpture Studio Series II - Mold Opening", he used misplaced surreal expression techniques to exchange sculpture figures with the sculptor's body parts, creating a bizarre, grotesque, mysterious, and surreal scene [7]. It brings people a strong visual and psychological shock. Zhong Biao's work "Park 1997" integrates different scenes and objects into one picture, and figures from different historical periods are placed on the modern street. The author uses ingenious designs to make people fall into the infinite reverie of history and arouse the collective resonance of their subconscious.

4. The Significance of Surrealist Images to Social Construction

4.1 The Expression of the Nature of Society

Surreal images, on the one hand, guide people to explore inwardly, communicate with creators through this visual language, examine their hearts, and bring infinite and prosperous power with strange beauty and imagination that is divorced from reality. On the other hand, it focuses on exploration and contains reality under the surface. Through this kind of surreal image, people's inner emotions can be stimulated, and they can also discover the weird side of society through metaphors [8]. Through this natural and authentic expression, surreal images arouse people's pursuit and exploration of the world. In "alienation", "disorder", and "absurd dreams", what is implied is the expression of the nature of the world and the thinking of social issues.

4.2 The Presentation of the Characteristics of the Times

The works of art in each era are a history of the development of the history of the period, so they have specific characteristics of the times, especially the surrealist images. Surrealist artists have a sharper sense of social context than ordinary people. From some excellent surrealist video works, we can glimpse the social status behind the works. A series of surrealist works are connected to present the imprint of an era. In the new era, social contradictions and instabilities still exist under the theme of seeking peace and development. However, the surreal expression that advocates the expression of subconscious desires and dreams can evoke the most accurate and profound expression in people's hearts. It also records and presents the social reality and the essential characteristics of the times [9].

4.3 Promotion of the Diversified Development of Social Culture and Art

Today, surrealism has extraordinarily influenced various visual art fields, such as painting, photography, sculpture, and graphic art. It has promoted intercommunication and diversified the development of various art fields. For example, many photographers have borrowed from the spatial expression techniques in surrealist paintings, and surrealist visual creativity can enrich artistic creation and change people's solidified and traditional aesthetic thinking. Many people also favor the novel and unique art form displayed by surreal images. Surrealist images have promoted the diversified development of culture and art in modern society in terms of creative ideas and artistic expressions.

5. Conclusion

By viewing Mika Rottenberg's image works, we can observe that Mika Rottenberg is good at using surreal artistic expressions to organize unconnected scenes and things together, presenting absurd and subversive visual effects. In her multi-dimensional images, one can find individual,

well-designed sculptures. The absurdity and inner beauty of contemporary society are intertwined in the seemingly fictional and nonsensical fables. The study of social surrealism in Mika Rottenberg's images is vital in helping people think deeply about artistic expressions and discover the significance of surrealist works to society.

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