

WFMU's Beware of the Blog

July 10, 2008

Greetings from Daliwood



The persistence of Dali's memory is a perplexing thing. As an artist, his craft paled against Rene Magritte, Joan Miro, Man Ray and other artists affiliated with the surrealists. His paintings at times can seem flat, as if he quit once he got the idea across. But some 75 years after the heyday of the movement, he's arguably the biggest celebrity of them all – likely enough because he wanted it so badly. He called himself the savior of painting; critic Jed Perl called him the “Liberace of modern art.” He was a paradox, and he wanted it that way.

Whatever one thinks of his work, he was one of the most enigmatic figures of the 20th Century – and again, that's the way he wanted it. And now, close to 20 years after his death, he's the subject of a new, major exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, as well as two newly released DVDs that cast him in very different lights.

If celebrity is an invention of the last century, Dali was one of its first instigators. With his flamboyant costumes and waxed moustache, he made his persona a part of his art, presaging Andy Warhol and Michael Jackson. In his 1942 autobiography *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*, he remembers contemplating his growing fame:

That I had reached fame I felt and knew the moment I landed at the Gare d'Orsay in Paris. But I had reached it without realizing it, and so quickly that I found myself all alone, without passport or baggage. I would therefore have to go back and fetch them, and hire porters. I would have to go back and have my documents visaed, and I realized that with all this bureaucratic red tape, I risked wasting the rest of my life. I therefore began to look around me, and from then on I regarded most of the people I met solely and exclusively as creatures I could use as porters in my voyages of ambition. Almost all these porters sooner or later became exhausted. Unable to endure the long marches that I forced on them at top speed and under all climactic conditions they died on the way. I took others. To attach them to my service, I promised to get them to where I myself was going, to that end station of glory which climbers desperately want to reach.

It's a ridiculous tome, much of which can be read on [Google Books](#). From his in utero memories to his adolescent confusions of sexual attraction and assault to the utter arrogance he displays as an ambitious young artist, he makes for a protagonist every bit as warm and cuddly as Louis-Ferdinand Celine's namesake hero. And like Celine, he's a good enough writer to make despicability engaging. How truthful he is in his writing is another question; publishing the book was clearly another step in the creation of his public persona.

Dali: Painting and Film, a touring exhibit that will be at MoMA through September 15 (with over 100 works on display and several programs of screenings), focuses on the artist's interest in moving pictures. On view are some of his actual works in film, including, of course, *Un chien andalou* and his longer work with Bunuel, *L'Age d'or*, as well as some later efforts: *Chaos and Creation*, a hilarious 1960 video address to a convention, and *Impressions of Upper Mongolia – Homage to Raymond Roussel*, a 1975 documentary made for Spanish television. There's also a realization of a planned collaboration with Walt Disney that was never completed but was created following Dali's notes in 2003.

But his populist streak is what really comes through in the exhibit. Included are his sketched studies and a painted backdrop for the dream sequence he created for Hitchcock's *Spellbound* and a moving portrait "screen test" he did with Andy Warhol. But the best discovery in the show involves Dali's adoration of the Marx Brothers. In a 1932 essay he called their movie *Animal Crackers* “the summit of the evolution of comic cinema” and praised their “concrete irrationality.”

Three years later, Dali sent Harpo a harp with the strings replaced by barbed wire. In return, Harpo sent him a photograph of bandaged hands. Soon, Dali began planning a vehicle for the brothers, to be titled *Giraffes on Horseback Salad*, which he said would rival the “biological, hysterical and cannibalistic frenzy” of their other movies. Sadly it never made it to production. It could have been his greatest work.

The last of MoMA's five film programs, scheduled for September, will include the 1966 Jack Bond documentary *Dali in New York*, which has also just been released on DVD by [Microcinema](#). It's a riotous chunk of flamboyance, with Dali overseeing sculptures being dragged down the street and covering himself with ants and \$1 million in cash. The artist also speaks about his relationships with his wife and Freud and is shown storming off screaming that everyone is his slave (at least porters get paid). But what it really shows is someone intensely concerned with taking Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and making it personal, crafting himself into a sensation.

Dali was criticized by his fellow surrealists for his attention-grabbing antics, and perhaps that's eclipsed his reputation as a creative and intellectually curious person. The 2004 film [The Dali Dimension: Decoding the Mind of a Genius](#) shows his art as the outgrowth of a lifelong fascination with scientific and psychoanalytic theory, drawing directly from Einstein, Freud and others. The film is centered around a small convention of scientists organized by Dali in his museum in 1985, and then watched on closed circuit television (illness prevented him from attending). Researchers who were at the meeting discuss Dali's interpolation of scientific figures (the double helix and four dimensional representations of space, for example), including Nobel Prize winner J. D. Watson, who discovered the structure of DNA. Intercut with that is footage of Dali working (his 1939 New York World's Fair Surrealist Pavilion is a highlight) and discussing scientific ideas, at one point telling an interviewer (in the third person, as he always spoke of himself), "Dali paints the nuclear age and the psychoanalytic age."

Ultimately his life work comes off as an attempt to merge art, science and religion, and to do so with an abundance of style. And, of course, to do so without ever being ignored.

Posted by Kurt Gottschalk on July 10, 2008 at 03:50 PM in [Art](#), [Listener Kurt's Posts](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Comments

I saw this show in LA some months back, primarily for the films, tho many of his most famous paintings were on display as well. "Un Chien Andalou" and the Disney film "Destino" are great, well worth seeing, but I'd say you can skip the too long and boring "L'Age d'or" ("L'Age d'bore?"), tho it does have a few striking images.

Posted by: [MrFab](#) | [July 10, 2008 at 05:51 PM](#)

British writer J.G. Ballard, author of one of the most transgressive novels ever published, *CRASH*, (the Cronenberg film was but an icy shadow of the fever dream of Ballard's book), has long admired Dali, and has stated that we are too superficially familiar with Dali's paintings through seeing them in reproduction to the point where we really fail to see them for their true achievement, for their unparalleled depiction of psychological space. He also considers Dali a brilliant writer, and his *AUTOBIOGRAPHY* a masterpiece.

I don't know that I can marshall quite the enthusiasm for Dali's work as Ballard, but he makes a good case for Dali--despite his celebrity--as an undervalued genius of art.

Posted by: [Robert1014](#) | [July 10, 2008 at 08:57 PM](#)

I went to the Dali Museum when it was in Cleveland. What struck me about his work was the scale. You always saw these incredibly detailed images reproduced in texts and imagined they were huge. More often the original paintings were smaller than the reproductions in the book! He must have painted with a mustache hair!

One of my favorite possessions is a Dali designed cravat I got at a Brooklyn thrift shop.

<http://vintageties.blogspot.com/2008/01/dali-brings-in-new-year.html>

Posted by: [Dale Hazelton](#) | [July 11, 2008 at 11:01 AM](#)

I agree with the post that talked about the exhibit. I visited twice while it was in town and would go again if it were still here. To see the original *Persistence of Memory* in person is exciting. Your blog is a nice read.

Dan

Posted by: [Dan](#) | [July 11, 2008 at 07:44 PM](#)

I think that Dali's work conveyed a depth far greater than Magritte's and particularly Miro's, although I like all three, as well as Man Ray, very much. "The Hallucinogenic Toreador" is one of the most impressive surrealist paintings around. He was incredibly skilled. Also, I believe that Dali's eccentricities have probably done more good than harm to his reputation... at least among non-art scholars. To me, that facet of his public life seems to amplify, and not diminish, public awareness of his creativity. Interestingly enough, Dali developed a kind of camouflage for warships that is still in use today.

Thanks for the links. I haven't seen the 2004 documentary you mentioned, but I'll be sure to pick up a copy if I can.

Posted by: [Jim](#) | [July 14, 2008 at 06:23 AM](#)

If you're interested in his technique and ideas about painting - as well as enjoying his blustery and fun prose style - look up 50 Secrets of Magic Craftsmanship

(Also in Google Books, but available from Dover books.)

Posted by: [Webhamster Henry](#) | [July 14, 2008 at 02:31 PM](#)

Oh, but let me put in a good word for L'Age D'or. One of my all-time favorite movies for sure.

Posted by: [Vic Perry](#) | [July 18, 2008 at 12:17 AM](#)