

Magritte et la photographie, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels
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Magritte and Photography, by *Patrick Roegiers*, trans. Mark Polizzotti, Lund Humphries, Aldershot, 2005, 168 pp, 30 colour and 220 duotone ill., £29.95, ISBN 0 85331 933 2 (hardback)

Exhibitions of René Magritte's works have largely focused on his paintings. Recent examples include the Magritte retrospective in the BA-CA Kunstforum in Vienna and the Fondation Beyeler in Basel. The display of other artistic media has been treated as not quite integral to Magritte's artistic creation, and his photography has, until now, not received any extensive curatorial and critical attention. *Magritte et la Photographie* at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, organised in collaboration with the Fondation Magritte and curated by Patrick Roegiers, changes all this. It forms one in a series of exhibitions to commemorate the 175th anniversary of Belgian independence and 25 years of federalism.

This exhibition is a monumental effort comprising over 330 photographs, leading the viewer into the labyrinthine exhibition space of the Palais des Beaux-Arts where unexpected turns reveal ever new rooms offering photographic, filmic and recorded reproductions by, and of, Magritte. The staccato rhythm of over 330 'snapshots' which, due to their small size, draw the viewer in close, is slightly broken, either by projections of short films displayed on large projector screens, or by the showing of larger photographs, capturing and maintaining the curiosity and attention of the viewer.

Magritte's short films are shown throughout the exhibition space, and the rooms are accompanied by different sound recordings which sometimes mix and overlap so that one can hear in one room the irrepressible chattering of Georgette and René Magritte, Louis Scutenaire, Marcel Mariën, Christian Dotremont, E. L. T. Mesens, Marcel Broodthaers, Paul Delvaux, Achille Chavée and others, together with the *Six Gnosiennes* by Erik Satie which echoes from another room. As with the photographs, we see not only Magritte's films but also films of him by other directors such as Christian Bussy, Patrick Roegiers, Jean Dyrpréau and Lucien Deroisy. These short films use surrealist juxtapositions and overlappings of Magritte's paintings and photographs to produce new, hybrid artistic images, smudging the boundaries between reality and representation, between painted fantasy and photographic reality, and ultimately between the artist and his œuvre.

This exhibition is a curatorial masterpiece, allowing the viewer to trace the all-too-often neglected, serious and deeply philosophical side of Magritte's œuvre as an engagement with the transience of life and with an artistic (self-)awareness of mortality. Magritte's photographic work extends the negative and negating character of his painterly productions, expressed in the titular sentences of his artworks such as 'Ceci n'est pas...' in *La Trahison des Images*



(1928), and 'Je ne vois pas...' in *La Femme Cachée* (1929), where negation is enforced by the similarity of the surrounding photographs to death masks. This negation returns in Magritte's photomaton images, in his so called *portraits manqués*, failed portraits, which deny the subjectifying glance of the model, showing only the back view, the missing or hidden face or a reflection in a mirror, and also in Duane Michals' photographs of Magritte, taken on a visit in 1965, two years before the artist's death. In one image Magritte is shown sitting before an unfinished sketch of *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, the glaze of his eyes reminiscent of the empty focus of those of a corpse. Another photograph of Magritte taking a nap on his sofa has, in its exhibited version, in a premonitory manner, a caption stating: 'Merci Monsieur Magritte, dormez bien.' The artist is, in Michals' photographs, repeatedly represented as threatened by his own absence, already resembling a cadaver, an image of himself.

RENE MAGRITTE ASLEEP



Duane Michals, *Magritte Asleep*, 1965 © Duane Michals, courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York

Magritte's absence is asserted throughout the exhibition – the photographs, films and sound recordings here are unable to commemorate or capture being, and repeatedly reveal their real character, namely the relentless assertion of reproductive media which try to capture or record the absence of life, confirming Roland Barthes' famous photographic *punctum*: 'the lacerating emphasis of the *noème* ("that-has-been") [...] the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future



of which death is the stake.¹ Here, the various recording media are revealed as a trace of something or somebody which is absent, a ghostly trace of the past through which the once present can only be experienced in and through its very absence. The danger of these themes becoming melodramatic and superficial is, in Magritte's art and photography, counteracted by his awareness of the deadly seriousness of the joke, and the comedy of the deadly serious: the most trivial of holiday snaps and amicable fooling, the most everyday of gestures, become also the most tragic and moving manifestations of the Barthesian *punctum*.

The exhibition repeatedly asks the question (also the title of one of the rooms) *Où est Magritte?* – a question double in its meaning, suggesting the self-awareness of Magritte's œuvre as a remainder and a reminder of its vanished creator. As the title of the exhibition, *Magritte et la photographie* implies, it concerns not only those images taken by Magritte, but brings them together with others of his taken by other photographers such as Georges Thiry, Christian Gibey, Daniel Frasnay, Maria Gilissen and Shunk Kender. These represent Magritte through his own artistic devices of doublings, impossible juxtapositions, sometimes echoing his painterly themes, suggesting and enforcing a major concern of Magritte's œuvre, namely the artist's melting and eventual absorption into his own work, an absorption which is closely bound to the vanishing of the artist. The vanishing here reveals not just a simple retreat from life into death, but also a retreat from life into art, in which art becomes the memory, the trace through which we can view the artist. Perhaps this is also the point where biography has to be transcended, where biography can no longer help to comprehend an artist, and the artworks' conceptualisations need to come to the fore – conceptualisations which no longer allow for linear narratives, but lead, like this exhibition, into intricate juxtapositions and mysterious labyrinthine structures.

The photographic evidence of Magritte's life in this exhibition does not stop with his death in 1967, but includes photographs such as those by Roger Dyckmans, taken in 1967, of a life without Magritte. In these, Georgette is shown surrounded by images of herself, indices of a creator who no longer exists. One of the most powerful of these is *Georgette seule avec une toile inachevée de Magritte*, showing Magritte's widow standing beside his final canvas. The painting revisits the theme of *La jockey perdu*, the lost jockey in the woods (Magritte's first surrealist painting in 1926), implying Magritte himself as the lost jockey. Reality, in this photograph, has been transformed into representation: even Georgette barely maintains her position in the photograph, squeezed out by the artwork beside her. All that remains are signifiers of Magritte, precisely because Magritte *is* no longer: a brush, glasses, the doubling of the image of the lost jockey in the glasses, all familiar elements of Magritte's œuvre. Even the last stage of Magritte-the-person is shared with the artwork; metonymies of Magritte collapse into the metonymic convention of the artist as his work. In Dyckmans' posthumous photograph, the image has taken over and replaced the artist's own being, which is lost in his work, becoming itself unworked. The inevitably unfinished painting in the photograph only



marks the last stage of the artist, not of his perishing, but of his final absorption into the artwork.

This and other photographs in this exhibition seem to function less as records of Magritte's life than to be concerned with how art and representation replace reality. This is also evident in the gradual loosening of the biographical and chronological approach of the first couple of exhibition rooms, entitled *Photos de Famille* and *La conquête de Paris*. Later rooms are titled *La peinture est un objet qui s'aime quand on y pose le regard* ('A painting is an object that you look at and fall in love with') and *La Peinture à l'épreuve de l'image fixe* ('Painting tested by the fixed image'), the surreal images demanding different sequences, no longer sustaining divisions between biographical document and artistic creation.

The exhibition is accompanied by Patrick Roegiers' catalogue *Magritte et la photographie*, which is now available as a book in English.² Translated by Mark Polizzotti, it is the first Anglophone publication on Magritte and photography, examining more than 200 previously unpublished photographs from Magritte's personal collection and tracing some features of his painterly œuvre back to photographic processes and practices. For example, Magritte's photographic self-portraits are offered as key elements in the establishment of the iconic bowler-hatted figure in his paintings. While it offers a thorough biographical overview and a wealth of previously unpublished photographs, the book also returns the photographs from their artistic, philosophical realm (insisted upon in the exhibition) to a more mundane function in which photographs are primarily and conventionally records of the artist's life. The biographical information given here reiterates information already available in many of the classic biographical writings on Magritte such as those by Suzi Gablik or David Sylvester.³ Even though it aims to attract a more popular audience, its analysis would have benefited from addressing recent theoretical discussions of Magritte such as those offered, for example, by Ben Stoltzfus and Silvano Levy.⁴

Titles of photographs such as *La Mort des fantômes* (1928), *L'Ombre et son ombre* (1932) and *L'Apparition* (1935) suggest avenues of theoretical inquiry that remain unexplored. There is no reference to the theory of photography – no account is taken of scholars such as Barthes, Susan Sontag or Walter Benjamin,⁵ nor is there any allusion to important explorations of photography and surrealism, such as Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston's seminal *L'Amour Fou*,⁶ or to recent theoretical developments in the understanding of surrealism. Instead of tracing photographic influences on Magritte, Roegiers attempts to establish Magritte as sole creator of his works. This is particularly evident in his noting that Magritte used an Agfa Synchro box camera without a timer, which means that somebody else took the pictures when Magritte appears in the image. Such a significant finding, however, does not lead to an exploration of Magritte's problematisation of authorship, but to comments such as: 'No matter! The person who pushes the button or focuses the lens is far less



important than the own who devises the composition. The same goes for the person who makes the print, especially when we're dealing with a photo booth picture.⁷

Roegiers tries to establish a coherent narrative of Magritte as the sole author of his work, despite asserting that: 'Belgian Surrealism was above all a collective activity.'⁸ 'Even if they are not by him,' he argues, 'in many cases these shots can be considered Magritte's photos: he directed them in his mind, planned the situations, arranged his own placement in the viewfinder.'⁹ This desire might also explain why several pressing questions are never addressed: which photographers influenced Magritte's photography? What are the relationships between his photographs and those of other surrealist photographers? What are the surrealist concerns in his photography? How do his photographs affect our understanding of Magritte as an authorial figure? The book offers, in places, an over-romanticised version of Magritte's life, which is sanitised to a level of respectability doing justice neither to Magritte nor to his relationship with Georgette. Further simplifications occur in the referential slippage between the Brussels Surrealist group and the 'Belgian Surrealist group.'¹⁰ Belgian Surrealism resists being seen as a unified, coherent whole. It was divided, exploring and being marked by the differences within its own history, and between Flemish and Walloon traditions and identities. Such differences triggered the formation and re-formation of different groupings such as the *Brussels Group*, the *Rupture Group*, the *Hainaut Surrealist Group* or the *Haute Nuit Group*. There is therefore arguably no such thing as the 'Belgian Surrealist group.'

However, Roegiers' attempt to establish a biographical understanding of the artist is broken and deconstructed through its own identification of the 'perishing of Magritte'¹¹ by analysing his clothes as signifiers of his self-presentation. These, according to Roegiers:

...envelop, adjust, protect, and dissimulate. Magritte the person is absent; he exists only through his garments. Banal to the extreme, the exact copy of a copy, as neutral as Belgium itself, the dark three-piece suit represents an exemplary will to pass unnoticed. Transparent in its simplicity and yet impenetrable, reliably playing its own part, the uniform makes him disappear behind the disguise of Mr. Everybody, even as it allows him to laugh, 'You'll never know who I am!'¹²

This not only counteracts the insistence on biographical explorations, but also adds another layer to the theme of Magritte as always already absent, to Magritte's absorption into his oeuvre. It seems that Magritte returns (perhaps precisely at this moment of Roegiers' recognition of his non-return): 'We don't know what he's thinking, who he is, what he feels, or what he believes. The same as everyone else, this faceless man is a perpetual stranger.'¹³ And this leads back to the exhibition's concern, to possibly the most capturing and touching attempt yet to ask the question 'where is Magritte?,' which is answered with the double-logic of ghosts: 'everywhere and nowhere.'



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¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (trans. Richard Howard), London 1984, 96.

² Patrick Roegiers, *Magritte et la photographie*, Ghent/Amsterdam 2005.

³ See Suzi Gablik, *Magritte*, London 1985, and David Sylvester, *Magritte*, London 1992.

⁴ See Ben Stoltzfus, 'The Elusive Heroine: An Interarts Essay' in Alain Robbe-Grillet and René Magritte, *La Belle Captive: A Novel* (trans. with an essay by Ben Stoltzfus), London 1995, 160-213, and Silvano Levy, 'Foucault on Magritte on Resemblance,' *The Modern Language Review*, 85:1, January 1990, 50-56.

⁵ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Harmondsworth 1979, and Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' (1929) and 'A Small History of Photography' (1931), in Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings* (trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter), London 1997.

⁶ Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*, New York 1985.

⁷ Roegiers, *Magritte and Photography*, 72.

⁸ Roegiers, *Magritte and Photography*, 120.

⁹ Roegiers, *Magritte and Photography*, 72.

¹⁰ Roegiers, *Magritte and Photography*, 121. A more detailed discussion on the impossibility of referring to a 'Belgian Surrealist group' can be found in An Paenhuysen's essay 'Surrealism in the Provinces: Flemish and Walloon Identity in the Interwar Period' in the special issue of *Image&Narrative* (December 2005), edited by Patricia Allmer and Hilde Van Gelder, <http://www.imageandnarrative.be>.

¹¹ Roegiers, *Magritte and Photography*, 133.

¹² Roegiers, *Magritte and Photography*, 133.

¹³ Roegiers, *Magritte and Photography*, 134.

