

“If ever one art movement consumed the entire illustration genre, it was surrealism’ (Heller: p70 2008)

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BA Course Title: Illustration

Word Count: 2376

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What inspires and continues to influence the world of illustration? This body of writing aims to discuss a very particular quote that talks about this. *'Illustration: A Visual History'* is a book written by Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast in 2008 is a visual insight into the history of illustration through the eyes of an illustrator and graphic designer. In this publication, Heller made a statement, "If ever one art movement consumed the entire illustration genre, it was surrealism" (Heller: 2008, p70), how true is this? While it can easily be seen why Heller came to this conclusion as illustration is very frequently described as 'surreal' however, to say it was ever considered to be consumed by it, seems doubtful. This quote will be discussed through exploring and understanding the context of what surrealism was as a movement, and what it was defined as, as well as what illustration means. An example from two artists following the movement, Salvador Dali and Frida Kahlo will be analysed, after, these works will be compared to an artwork of later artists, Jean-Michael Basquiat and Sanda (Broken isn't Bad). The aim being, to find similarities between their works and how they may have derived influence. Finally, a conclusion after exploring these topics, will be drawn up.

The original term "surrealist" was first "coined by the French avant-garde poet Guillaume Apollinaire" in 1903 for a play, the term in the is scenario, "suggesting 'beyond reality'" (Tate, 2020). However, in the Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, written by André Breton defined it as:

pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express, either verbally, in writing, or by any other manner, the real functioning of thought. Dictation of thought in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation. (Tate, 2020)

Which led to artist adopting the process of automatic drawings and/or writing into their artistic process so that they might be able to find inspiration from within their unconscious mind, no matter the idea, medium or meaning. Breton came to this idea after being introduced to “Freudian psychoanalysis in 1916 while serving as a medical aid in a psychiatric centre during World War I” (Davis, 2020). Sigmund Freud, for context, was an Austro- Hungarian, neurologist who “developed ground-breaking theories about the nature and workings of the human mind” (Burton, 2015). In combination of the works of Freud, Breton was also influenced by the Dada Movement which followed from the events of World War 1. Key artists from this period would include names such as André Breton, Max Ernst, Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dali, René Magritte, Frida Kahlo, and Man Ray just to name a few. To summarise, to be a surrealist artist your focus and artistic influences come from looking deep within one’s mind.

Illustration, as defined by Collins Dictionary (2011) is “an example or a story which is used to make a point clear”, commonly associated with book illustrators’, artists like Quentin Blake or Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr Seuss). The term is most commonly linked to book illustrators and cover artists alike, from the world of storytelling to detailed, scientific illustrations for education, being an illustrator requires someone to be able to make their point clear, most commonly through image making. However, this definition gets blurred between this and the lines of what defines fine art, for example some self-proclaimed illustrators, especially in social platforms such as Instagram, could arguably be considered fine artists as they make art for arts’ sake, which is often a description used in part for the classification of the fine artist.

With context and definitions established, how does Heller’s statement hold up now? At first glance, there are elements that could easily overlap, such as the illustrator’s ability to create

an image for the purpose of explanation and insight, combined with the surrealist way of depicting what they see and evoke from their inner mind.

To further Explore thus statement, and to recognise any truths behind it, it would make sense to now compare some of these surrealist artists to artists that came after the movement.



Figure 1

Salvador Dali, born May 11th, 1904, is an iconic figure in the art world, known for his surreal and mind-boggling artworks and personality and is arguably one of the most influential creatives, even to this day. One of his most famous pieces, that will be discussed further here, is “The Persistence of Time” made in 1931 (see figure 1). This bizarre scene was created using Dali’s “paranoiac- critical method” which is a technique he used where he would “self-induce psychotic hallucinations” (MoMA, 2015). This strange composition of melting clocks, unidentifiable masses, geometric platforms and eery backdrop, further described by MoMA (2015) as a “bleak and infinite dreamscape” and a scene where “hard objects become inexplicably limp”. In a discussion about this image, Sal Khan, and Dr. Steven Zucker (2015) consider what could be going on in the image and talk about what it could mean. It gets referenced to being a “visual brainteaser” and a “deep and lonely space... a quiet image” due

to its desert like appearance and eery calmness. One of the first ways Khan refers about the image is its likeness to that of album covers and posters in a dorm room, him visually seeing a connection between the art of that time still influencing the art that he sees now. The main point that these two individuals talk about is the whole concept of time within this painting how in this world that Dali has depicted, time “doesn’t carry weight” and how this concept of time is so “regimented” in our modern world that this piece contradicts this, time has just “melted away”.



Figure 2



broken_isnt_bad • Following

...



broken_isnt_bad "Making the Earth a better place for humans needs people with hearts full of mercy, full of love towards humanity, persons who have a high sense of responsibility, and live consciences. Be one of them, and support anyone who is like them."
~ Noora Ahmed Alsuwaidi

Figure 3

Sanda, a graduate from the Faculty of Graphic Arts, Croatia, is an artist who describes their art as being “minimal black and white line-based drawings combining geometric and nature-related elements, mostly influenced by monochromatic tattoo art.” (Broken isn’t Bad, 2018) and has been working under the alias ‘Broken isn’t bad’ since 2016. They have continued to expand their horizons through uploading their works through social platforms such as Instagram as well as making their work available to by on consumable goods such as prints, t-shirts and more. Sanda reveals on the ‘About’ page of their website, what influences them and what their goal with their works is. For them, their inspiration comes from their “own feelings and emotions”, “quotes from literature and poetry” while also deriving inspiration from “spirituality and astrology” particularly during their project designing of tarot cards. The artwork up for discussion here can be seen in Figure 2 and the inspiration behind it came from a quote shown in figure 3. A lightbulb being the primary shape, has a globe, flowers and a heart composed within it. These flowers have started to surround this globe, after growing from the arteries of the heart below. This combination of objects on their own, as individual elements, may not make much sense whoever, the composition and inspiration behind this piece allows for a pleasing juxtaposition of elements, creating a surreal but pleasing image. Similarly to Dali’s creation, the piece uses this metaphorical imagery to convey a piece of what has inspired it. On comparing these two very different artists, there are some similarities. Both of these artists have used a composition of imagery, to create a metaphorical image of a point. While one analysis of Dali’s ‘The Persistence of Time’ conveys a metaphorical view of time, a construct through clocks that we as a society have tried to measure when in reality it is immeasurable, for example, Sanda has created a piece to reflect and emphasise the point being made in the quote it was inspired from (figure 3). Both are surreal by definition, the juxtaposition of object that wouldn’t normally go together,

but one is influenced by the inner workings of the mind and one inspired by the world around it.



Figure 4

Up next for comparison is the Surrealism associated artist Frida Kahlo and the Graffiti/Pop Art artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat. Frida Kahlo was born on July 6th, 1907, Coyoacán, Mexico. In 1925, Kahlo suffered a “near- fatal bus accident that devastated her body and marked the beginnings of lifelong physical ordeals” (MoMA, 2016), leading to her creating painting about her life during the recovery process and beyond, creating some of the most recognisable pieces we know today. These paintings reflected herself, about how she was mentally, physically, “exploring, questioning, and staging herself and identity” (MoMA, 2016). Despite her associations with the Surrealism movement, it is important to recognise that Kahlo, never considered herself to be a Surrealist artist, saying “They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn’t... I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.” (TIME, 1953, P.92). ‘The Two Fridas’ (1939) is one of her most recognised pieces (see Figure 4), depicting two versions of herself, dressed in different types of clothing, holding hands, both with their

hearts exposed. The Frida on the left hand-side of the painting is the “unloved Frida” (Tate, 2012) whose hearts’ inner anatomy is exposed, broken, while wearing a “colonial-style wedding dress” (Tate, 2012) that is being stained by the blood coming from the severed artery that has been cut with scissors. Meanwhile, on the right side of the painting, sits a Frida dressed in “traditional Mexican costume” (Tate, 2012), holding a small picture of her then husband, Diego Rivera, as a young child. Unlike her counterpart, this depiction of Kahlo’s heart hasn’t got its inner anatomy exposed and is more ‘whole’. This piece was produced during the divorce between her and Rivera, symbolising the “duality of her personality” (Tate, 2012) while also being depicting a “cultural divide: the conflict implicit in mestizo race, neither fully European nor fully Mexican Indian.” (Tate, 2012).



Figure 5

Jean- Michel Basquiat was born in Brooklyn Hospital, New York on December 22nd, 1960. From an early age, Jean-Michel was exposed to creative influences, as his mother had a “strong interest in fashion design and sketching” (Basquiat, 2010) and would draw with her son frequently. Similarly, to Frida Kahlo, in 1968, Basquiat was involved in a vehicular accident, suffering from varying internal injuries and a broken arm. During his recovery, he received a copy of the book, Gray’s Anatomy, from his mother. This book ended up leaving a permanent imprint on the young Basquiat, of which can be seen in his

anatomical drawings, prints, even in “the band he co-founded in 1979, Gray” (Basquiat, 2010). He is also known for his early character SAMO (Same Old Shit) which he would tag as a signature on graffiti, during his early years. He used “social commentary in his paintings as a tool for introspection and for identifying with his experiences in the black community” (MoMA, 2016), while also using it as “attacks on power structures and systems of racism” (MoMA, 2016). “Dustheads” (1982), was one of Jean- Michel Basquiat’s best sellers in auction, hitting “headlines in 2013 when it sold at auction for \$48.8 million” (Jean-Michel-Basquiat, 2017), (see Figure 5). The artwork depicts two, abstract, bright in colour, stick-like figures, painted on a black background. The figure on the right-hand side looks like it has a crazed expression with its large smile, “eyes are like saucers and filled with concentric circles that make it appear as if spinning” (Jean-Michel-Basquiat, 2017). Meanwhile, the second figure on the left-hand side may not have as eccentric an expression, but still processes the large, saucer eyes. The extreme expressions give the faces a mask like appearance. The brushstrokes look to have been made quickly and confidently, giving the painting lot of movement, and filling it with chaotic visuals. According to one of Basquiat’s friends, nicknamed ‘Toxic’, recalled how two people from their friend group “were using PCP or Angel dust at the time” (Jean-Michel-Basquiat, 2017), their behaviour while on the substance, both good and ugly, influenced the painting and its title.

Looking at these two artists comparatively, there are some similarities amongst their many differences. They both paint from their emotions, creating these, surreal images. Frida Kahlo makes images based around her own emotions and physical wellbeing whereas Basquiat would paint how he felt about political topics in the world around him, including some of his own emotions.

Heller's statement, "If ever one art movement consumed the entire illustration genre, it was surrealism' (Heller: 2008, p70), was a conclusion Heller made, following research for his co-written book, *Illustration: A Visual History*'. How true is this statement? Following research made into the context of this quote, such as what it means to be a surrealist artist from the movement, what the word 'surreal' means by general definition and what illustration generally means, you would probably come to an initial conclusion that this statement could be entirely possible. However, if you compare artists from the movement to illustrators and other artists today, this quote, doesn't show the whole truth. While this may very well be what Heller believes themselves and many others may agree with, it can easily be argued to not be the complete truth.

To be a surrealist artist in 1924, creating artwork based on the deepest parts of the mind and everything that you could reach from the most bizarre of imagery to the most automatic of movements were your focus. This may apply to some very on a larger scale, something so in-depth and unpredictable just is not practiced like this today. In this modern society, proclaimed illustrators focus on the meaning behind an image, the story it tells or could tell, creation to create emotion. There is something written by the Tate on their web page covering this topic that sums up the work of illustration and art today:

While 'surreal' is often used loosely to mean simply 'strange' or 'dreamlike', it is not to be confused with 'surrealist' which describes a substantial connection with the philosophy and manifestations of the surrealist movement. (Tate 2020)

The art world loves to create images with surreal compositions. Heller's view is true to at least this extent, surrealism consumed the illustration genre by influencing the visual characteristics of the movement and aesthetic concepts, but the inner meanings and intentions did not consume illustration.

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Images

Figure 1. *The Persistence of Time* (1931) Available at:

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018>

Figure 2 and 3 *Unknown* (2020) Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B8MdbK2FUXJ/>

Figure 4 *The Two Fridas* (1939) Available at: https://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-two-fridas-1939/_wJCem8xJOWKLwhttps://artsandculture.google.com/story/the-two-fridas-1939/_wJCem8xJOWKLw

Figure 5 *Dustheads* (1982) Available at: <http://www.jean-michel-basquiat.org/dustheads/>