



BEKSINSKI, Zdzislaw, *Untitled* (1969) [Oil on canvas]

Research in Context (ADAD5003)

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Course: BA Illustration

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Question 4: From this semester's lectures, choose a theme or selection of illustrators that relate to your practice or interests. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Surrealism provides a gateway for illustrators to present ideas and ideologies of the weird and sometimes macabre. The movement in discussion is evident within latter periods;

from the geometric lens used to view the world through cubism to the bizarre depictions of political issues via dadaism. Surrealism acts as “a true bridge between the dream world, the unconscious and the political struggle,” (*The New Surrealist Artists*, Artsper Magazine, 2022). Despite being a genre that portrays the peculiar and possibilities of a fantasy-like world, it remains conscious of the happenings within our own societies and reflects the matters that the inhabitants yearn to escape from, giving the hope of an “eccentric and mysterious world.” (*The New Surrealist Artists*, Artsper Magazine, 2022) unlike our own.

Escapism is a prevalent aspect in recent surrealism, a reflection of the overall attitude towards the current societal and political state of the world – creators are “Disillusioned with reality and looking for a means to escape it, a preference for the surreal and phantasmagorical is what defines our twenty-first-century taste buds.” (*A Heavy Dose of Surrealism is What This Generation Prefers*, Vidana Abdel-Khalek, SOUK, 2015). Abdel-Khalek makes the point that illustrators refer to child-like fantasy, much like the work of Rackham for *Alice in Wonderland*, to create an imagined place of escape.

Moreover, Andre Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) suggests that surrealist illustrators commonly illustrate a place of peace and escape in writing “But it is true that we would not venture so far, it is not merely a question of distance.” Breton insinuates that artists illustrate and imagine realms of dreams but not the nightmares. Despite this insinuation remaining true for many notable surrealists; Giorgio De Chirico, Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, etc, darker paintings by creators such as Zdzislaw Beksinski and Frida Kahlo exist as a contradiction.



KAHLO, Frida, *Henry Ford Hospital (la cama volando)*, (1932) [Oil on Metal]

Henry Ford Hospital depicts its creator lying on a hospital bed in pain, sadness and blood surrounding her lower half, the aftermath of a haemorrhage, losing her child. Her legs are turned away from the viewer in shame although her anguish is apparent. The figure, Frida Kahlo, paints her suffering upon her portrait in the form of a solemn expression and a

large tear escaping her eye. She holds red twine against her stomach, to them six items are connected and surround her; a metal machine-like object, pelvic bone, diagram of the female reproductive system, an orchid, a fetus, and a snail. The mollusc possesses both negative and positive connotations as it is a symbolic representation of the death of the artist's child but also the miracle of birth itself, as witnessed since the Renaissance where "they were often used as symbols of resurrection, purity and our own mortality." (*Snails in art and the art of snails*, George Wigmore, University College London, 2012).

This piece by Kahlo opposes Breton's statement that surrealists do not dare to explore darker imagined worlds and illustrate an escape from the horrors of the world we live in. Kahlo's interpretation of how she felt while in hospital after losing her child is a direct contradiction as she takes from her real trauma and utilises that to create an uncanny scene, instead of trying to hide from it.

There is a strong unsettling feeling present in the painting, the bed in the middle of a stretch of land with the closest sign of life being a factory in the distance heightens this feeling and gives the impression that the artist is conveying her loneliness at the time as in the artwork there is no other person for miles. Although a hospital bed should be a place of comfort during challenging times, the placement is reminiscent of a liminal space, "It is a place of transition, a time of waiting and not knowing the future." (Liminal Space). This explanation from Liminal Space infers that the surrealist was in a state of grief and could not move past it, uncertain of what to do afterwards and uncertain of the future of having children.



JOHNSTON, Miles, *Survivor's Guilt* (2020) [Graphite on Paper]

Johnston's contemporary illustration depicts a figure burying their head in a body of water surrounded by reaching hands, fingers desperate to grasp something. The stiff nature of the subject suggests that they are aware and awake but choose to submerge themselves in the water. The ghostly disembodied hands surrounding him paired with the title, *Survivor's Guilt*, create the implication that the figure is haunted by a death, overcome with a sense of culpability for remaining.

The contrast in tone between the hands and the water amplifies their spectral appearance, they

also appear to harbour ill intention as their fingers reach and claw towards the subject.



BEKSINSKI, Zdzislaw, *Untitled* (1973) [Oil]

Contemporary surrealist illustration is also utilised as a mode of social or political commentary; exaggerating and twisting the current setting to create a hellish landscape or the lack of those familiar yet uncomfortable circumstances to construct a new realm. The subject matter presented signifies war – the nightmarish figures traverse the crimson land in

a helmet similar to a Nazi soldier's, with skeletal legs elevating it above the desolate ground.

This imagery paints a clear impression that its creator bears contentment for the perpetrators. Red is potent within this painting, the primary colour hangs over the figures with power, leaving connotations of danger looming, which furthers the impression that the

painter is portraying something or someone who is inherently evil. The connection between the colour of our own blood and this hellscape's sky points towards an undertone of immense suffering, which makes the scene "instantly familiar and heightening our association with danger, fear and intensity-" (*Symbolism in Art: Red*, Kitty Jackson, Art dependence Magazine, 2017). Jackson's theory regarding the negative implications that

follow the colour alludes that the menacing red clouds that loom over the subjects possess an apocalyptic air to them, this and the obsidian trees that appear as though they have been blackened and charred by flame are reminiscent of a world on fire and consequently the death of all beings caught in the destruction. Already there is a blatant symbol of death present; a bound figure in black is hung by the neck from the helmet, his tied hands suggest that he is a prisoner or opposition to the larger subjects.

The head protruding from the helmet that is being used by two haunting characters signifies someone being part of something macabre, but it is beyond their control- the face wears a mouth that gapes as though it is screaming however it has no limbs to escape or change their circumstance, they are powerless. A medal hangs below the face whose mouth is open

in anguish, seemingly a symbol of valour acclamation, points towards the thought that the riders of the helmet are responsible for the destruction, as they remain unscathed and are painted as illustrious. The smaller of the two eerie creatures is shrouded in Prussian blue, given the history of the shade, how a component of this paint also exists in the acid used in gas chambers in World War 2, where the residue of the horrors inflicted would be same blue. With this knowledge it can be inferred that Beksinski's surreal nightmare is a painted depiction of this time in history, the malnourished and drawn features of the blue figure nurtures the notion that the piece depicts connotations of the victims and horrors that occurred. Furthermore, the cool tone is a sharp contrast to the fiery sky- the eye is drawn to

the figure. Compared to the harsh tone of the orange red, the blue provides an atmosphere of solace, "As opposed to red that's warm, fiery and intense, blue is breezy, comforting, and majestic." (*Colour Blue in Art: What It Means And How To Utilize It In Artwork*, Ardek Kassenova, Zen Art Supplies) Which implies the idea that the blue skeletal figure is not a threat and is peaceful.

Both Johnston and Beksinski's work appear to depict tragedy- Johnston's figure is haunted by something whereas the Polish surrealist Beksinski illustrates a nightmarish scene

rich in symbolism. Although, the artists use different techniques to convey their theme, one notable contrast is the range in surrealism between the two- aside from the blackened trees

of Beksinski's untitled piece, there are few aspects which can be seen in our own world, yet Johnston's *Survivor's Guilt* consists of mundane subject matter that is composed in an otherworldly manner. This technique can be witnessed in Frida Kahlo's *Henry Ford Hospital*,

where the features are not necessarily out of the ordinary however the lone hospital bed resting against the backdrop of a faraway factory gives off a liminal feeling, the bed is familiar, but it should not be there. Moreover, the way in which the artist has incorporated her symbolism adds to the strange scene, the signifiers are bound by red thread and float around her as if controlled by someone or something, stressing the helplessness of her situation and how she felt powerless and unable to save her child.

In mentioning the floating objects, the connection between Kahlo's lack of control and the red twine is evident when reminded of the Red Thread of Fate in Chinese myth, despite originally meaning that two people tied together are destined for each other, "The two people connected by the thread are destined lovers, regardless of place, time, or circumstances. This magical cord may stretch or tangle but never break." (*The red string of fate*, Huza Shamsi, Medium, 2021). Shami's description of the red sting of fate in Medium conveys that those tied by the red thread are bound to be together, this could portray the fact that throughout their loss, Frida's husband Diego stuck with her and supported her even in challenging times. The red string may also symbolise fate in the sense of acceptance; the loss she suffered was predestined.

Shaun Tan and Zdzislaw Beksinski both illustrate character(s) or figure(s) that are not human, and personifies them, however there is a stark difference between their approaches. Tan places an insect in an impossibly human setting; an office workplace, creating an outcome that is peculiar and almost humorous. On the other hand, Beksinski personifies otherworldly, skeletal creatures and places them in world that could be our own,

making the thought of his nightmare being a reality even more frightening.



TAN, Shaun, *Desk Job* (2017) [acrylic and oil on paper]

Tan's illustration for the picture book *Cicada* emanates a feeling of autonomy. The illustrator uses dull, grey tones to portray an impression of melancholia, the lack of vibrancy results in a lack of life as "When depression is a part of our life...Sometimes it's as though we have grey-tinted glasses on, making everything appear grey, dull and colourless."

(*The Distorting Grey Lens of Depression*, Blurt Team, Blurt) The artist situates the insect in a dreary palette to create an imitation of a humdrum workplace which, despite being a surreal and imagined place, appears incredibly mundane.

Tan and Beksinski utilise colour and contrast to set their subjects apart from their surroundings, thus unveiling their character. Although it is still rather muted, Tan's green cicada stands out and seems out of place in its setting, the splash of colour leads the idea that it is restless in such a monotonous backdrop. On the other hand, Beksinski creates a deep contrast between a warm toned environment and a cool toned figure to show the difference in character; the crimson sky is menacing and powerful whereas the blue figure appears fearful, a victim and weaker.



TANNING, Dorothea, *La Truite Au Bleu (Poached Trout)* (1952) [Oil on canvas]

Similarly to the aforementioned work of Frida Kahlo, Tanning's *La Truite Au Blue* is comprised of ordinary aspects that are situated in an unlikely manner to create something surreal, to provoke confusion and questioning. The oil painting displays a young girl sitting alone at long dinner table, which is bare aside from the folds in the tablecloth and a white plate which holds a singular fish. The blue fish' body is curved upwards in order to look at the girl, its mouth open as if mid-wail. Underneath the table is fish swimming in and out of an array of shades of grey, above it, on the red wall sits a painting of a simple ocean. The inclusion of the painting provokes the thought that in Tanning's strange scene the fish escaped the frame, leaving the waters of the painting empty and thus emanating a sombre mood. The young girl wears a sombre expression which suits the dull grey tones of the fish that swim beneath her.

In summary, surrealism is a tool used by artists and illustrators to fabricate new worlds from their imagination, their subconscious reveals their desires for how they wish the world could be, in response to its issues now, or the darker lens they view it through now. Successful surrealism is typically illustrated in the creation of completely new, wondrous settings and beings, or through taking aspects of everyday life and pairing them with things that do not belong with them, Shaun Tan's *Cicada* for instance. The genre is

able to illicit a range of emotions, depending on the semiotics present and the way in which they are presented.

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