

Le surréalisme portugais

Le surréalisme portugais. An exhibition held at the Galerie UQAM, Montréal, 16 September — 9 October 1983

Hellmut Wohl

Volume 12, Number 1, 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073690ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073690ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Wohl, H. (1985). Review of [Le surréalisme portugais / *Le surréalisme portugais*. An exhibition held at the Galerie UQAM, Montréal, 16 September — 9 October 1983]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 12(1), 50–53. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1073690ar>

Le surréalisme portugais

Le surréalisme portugais. An exhibition held at the Galerie UQAM, Montréal, 16 September – 9 October 1983.

Catalogue: Luis de Moura Sobral, *Le surréalisme portugais*, Montréal, Université de Montréal, Département d'histoire de l'art, 1984. 142 pp., 148 illus., \$9.00 (paper). In French.

The exhibition under review, assembled in Lisbon in close cooperation with Dr. José Blanco of the Gulbenkian Foundation was a notable event – the first of its kind since the three Surrealist exhibitions of 1949 and 1950 in Lisbon. (More recently, there was significant Surrealist representation in the exhibitions *Portuguese Art since 1910* at the Royal Academy in London, 1978, and *Anos quarenta* at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, 1982.) At the Montreal exhibition 87 works of art were shown, the oldest dating from 1939 (Cândido Costa Pinto, *Drawing*, cat. 22), as well as fifteen 'cadavres-exquis' (cat. 74-87). Twenty documents, exhibition catalogues, posters, booklets, etc. were displayed in showcases (Fig. 1).

The exhibition was paralleled by an international symposium at the University of Montreal (September 16-18, 1983) on the subject *Portugal, Québec, Amérique latine: un surréalisme périphérique?* (Luis de Moura Sobral ed., *Surréalisme périphérique. Actes du colloque Portugal, Québec, Amérique latine: un surréalisme périphérique?*, Montreal, University of Montreal, Department of History of Art, 1984).

Professor Sobral's catalogue does full justice to the scope and interest of the exhibition. Including an essay on the political history of Portugal during the reign of António Oliveira Salazar by Alex MacLeod and an introduction to the role of Surrealism in Portuguese 20th-century art by Professor Sobral, it is the best and most informative scholarly study of Portuguese Surrealism to date. It thus takes its place with the discussion of Surrealism in José-Augusto França's fundamental *A arte em Portugal no século xx* (Lisbon, 1974).

The catalogue is arranged as a series of monographic studies on 20 artists, with all the works of the exhibition being reproduced in black-and-white. There also is an

FIGURE 1. Installation view of *Le surréalisme portugais*, Galerie UQAM, Montréal. To the right, painting by A. Dacosta, cat. 35 (Photo: Luis de Moura Sobral).



entry for the fifteen 'cadavres-exquis' and another one for the documents. All the latter are illustrated (sometimes both recto-verso), described and annotated. Special mention should be made of an hitherto unpublished letter from André Breton to C. Costa Pinto (dated May 12, 1947; Document 10). Its discussion by Professor Sobral brings out new insights on the history of the Portuguese movement. O'Neill's, *A Ampôla miraculosa* (Lisbon, 1948) is also fully discussed and its thirteen 'plates' illustrated, with their captions translated into French (cat. Document 11).

A number of years ago the Portuguese poet Alexandre O'Neill, one of the founders in 1947 of the Lisbon Surrealist Group, gave a reading of his poems in Rome. After the reading a member of the audience asked him what there was still of Surrealism in his poetry. 'My country', he replied. Given the surrealist temperament of the Portuguese – at the end of the eighteenth century Maria I appointed St. Anthony a colonel in the Portuguese army – it is not surprising that the majority of Portuguese modern art has been imagistic rather than abstract, and that its most interesting imagery has stressed the fantastic, the incongruous, the mysterious, the ambiguous, and the poetic. There is a natural disposition in Portugal to a surrealist view of things. Within this surrealist texture of the Portuguese imagination, there existed for a brief time – no more than six years (1947-1953) – two groups who called themselves Surrealists and who staged the exhibitions earlier referred to. In spite of their fragile, temporary existence, they represent the most significant intervention of Portugal in international modernism in the 20th century, and their activity, for reasons I have already suggested, had and still has an important impact on Portuguese artists.

The focus of the Lisbon Surrealists, as of all cultural activities during the Salazar regime, was political, and the seeds for the ephemeral life span of their movement were predicated upon the political conditions within which they were obliged to operate. 'Under any dictatorship,' their manifesto of 1950 reads, 'an organized surrealist intervention would inevitably meet with immediate police reprisals, and thus create martyrs and heroes. In our case surrealist activity is limited to a series of actions that can be qualified by the word guerilla, occasional forays into the unknown, sudden transmutations in which the serpent ceases to be the familiar little animal we all know and darts into the petrified forest inhabited by shadows and the glances of panthers.' (*Portuguese Art Since 1910*, Royal Academy, London, 1978, 126). As Pierre Rivas has pointed out, concerted group action with a revolutionary objective is at the heart of the Surrealist enterprise, and the absence of such collective activity in Portugal (as also, though for different reasons, in Latin America) guaranteed the short life of the Lisbon Surrealist groups (Pierre Rivas, 'Périphérie et marginalité dans les surréalismes d'expression romane: Portugal, Amérique latine,' *Surréalisme périphérique*, 12-20.) In fact, the most effective and memorable Surrealist manifestation of those years was not the large group exhibitions, but a show at the Casa

Jalco, a furniture store opposite Lisbon's venerable Grémio Literário, of drawings, paintings, collages, mannequins and installations by Fernando Azevedo, Fernando Lemos and Vespeira (Cat. Document 6).

Lisbon Surrealism is inseparable from the anti-Salazar activities organized at the end of World War II by the Communist Party which, in 1945, became the Movement of Democratic Unity. Artistically, opposition to the regime took the form of Neo-Realism, one of its leaders being Vespeira, an exhibitor in 1952 of violent, glowing erotic paintings at the Casa Jalco (cf. cat. 69, 73). Vespeira's shift from Neo-Realism to Surrealism was a question not of artistic but political motives. 'Any sort of socialist realism,' the 1950 Surrealist Manifesto declares, 'with its endless procession of party esthetics, party literature, party politics, is as hostile to human freedom as any fascist dictatorship, merely replacing one god by another that is equally absurd' (*Portuguese Art Since 1910*, loc. cit.). Because of this extremely close interweaving of politics and art, it would have been preferable if in the catalogue the introduction had treated the two subjects together instead of separately. Though valuable in themselves, these essays do not do justice to their subjects as well as they would do, had they been combined.

Neither essay mentions, for example, an event which had profound repercussions for the relationship between artists and the State during the Salazar years. In 1945 the Movement of Democratic Unity submitted to Salazar a petition with several thousand signatures demanding his resignation. Prominent among the signers were intellectuals, writers and artists, many among them having regularly exhibited their work at the exhibitions organized by António Ferro, the director of the National Secretariat for Information (SNI). In an effort to counteract the force of the anti-Salazar document, Ferro asked those artists whom he had supported to sign a telegram expressing solidarity with the regime. The large majority, as was to be expected, refused. From that time on the galleries and commissions of the SNI were closed to them, even though Ferro and his successors continued acquiring works by many of them for the SNI's permanent collection. As a direct result of Ferro's telegram, the National Society of Fine Arts (SNBA), which until then had been the stronghold of conservatism and academicism, took up the cause of modern art with the first of ten annual exhibitions, less on the grounds of artistic conviction than in political protest against Ferro's opposition to the Movement of Democratic Unity and his expulsion of the modernists from the SNI. The catalogue of the first general exhibition (1946), which was dominated by the Neo-Realist, proclaimed the need for a united front of artists, whatever their style or medium. The second exhibition, in 1947, was attacked by the press as being 'anti-national' and the 'voice of pessimism and disorder.' A number of works were confiscated by the police, but the exhibition was a success, and the SNBA continued until 1974 to maintain as effectively as possible its opposition to the regime. (Some of the foregoing is reported in França, *A arte em Portugal no século xx*.)



FIGURE 2. Fernando Azevedo. *Occultation*, 1952, black ink on photographic reproduction. Lisbon, coll. Carlos Baptista da Silva, cat. 9 (Photo: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon).

Among the works by the original Surrealists produced during the years of the movement's existence the exhibition contained (and the catalogue reproduces – as it does all works in the show) two lyrical erotic paintings by Fernando Azevedo and one of his *Occultations* (Fig. 2), a technique derived from an invention of Alexandre O'Neill. A page from a magazine or a photograph is covered with black gouache or ink so as to suggest, hide or reveal images in the spaces between the areas of black. Professor Sobral provides a suggestive analysis of the relationship between this technique and Azevedo's paintings, and rightly points out that in his *Occultations*, Azevedo made a distinct, original contribution to the repertory of international Surrealism. He also rightly claims this for the photographs that Fernando Lemos made between 1949 and 1952 by printing the images from several negatives at different ratios of enlargement on the same sheet of photographic paper. Six of

these (cat. 56-61) were in the exhibition, and as Professor Sobral points out, they are perhaps more centrally than anything else there – with the possible exception of the brilliant juxtaposition of texts and ready-made illustrations in the thirteen pages of Alexandre O'Neill's surrealist 'novel' *A Ampôla miraculosa* – in the spirit of Breton and Lautréamont (Fig. 3). *Vespeira*, the third artist in the Casa Jalco show of 1952, was represented by four paintings of which José-Augusto França wrote: 'The erotic scenario requires glowing lights, not a sensual, restful light, nor lightning or conflagration which destroy and recreate the world, but a glow both joyful and cruel, exciting, that is extinguished in fury and is then reborn, the glow from deep within the earth, crystalline, with all the complex facets of crystals' (José-Augusto França, 'Vinte (e um) anos depois de dez dias de [Janeiro de 1952], *Colóquio/artes* [1973], 12, 19).



Adormeci certamente por intervenção da misteriosa ampola que descia do teto...

— 3 —

FIGURE 3. Alexandre O'Neill. *A Ampôla miraculosa*, 1948, first 'plate', cat. doc. 11c (Photo: Département d'histoire de l'art, Université de Montréal).

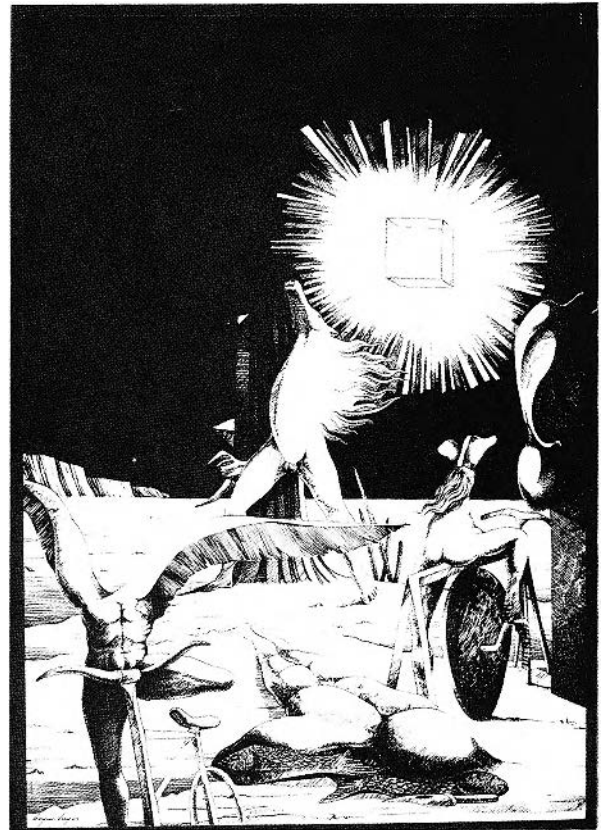


FIGURE 4. Cruzeiro Seixas, illustration for M. Cesariny's, *A cidade queimada*, 1965, cat. doc. 17d (Photo: Département d'histoire de l'art, Université de Montréal).

There are excellent entries on the two proto-Surrealists António Pedro and António Dacosta, who in 1940, the year of the official *Exhibition of the Portuguese World* staged by António Ferro, mounted a show of disquieting paintings in a store just off Lisbon's Chiado. Each was represented by two important paintings (and Pedro by a third, less significant one). Professor Sobral writes of the relationship between Dacosta and Magritte: but there would also seem to be an affinity between Dacosta's *Head of a Philosopher* of 1941-42 (cat. 36) and Man Ray's *Imaginary Portrait of D.A.F. de Sade* of 1938. One of the discoveries of the Lisbon Surrealists was collage, inspired by Futurist and Dada designs combining images and typography, as well as by the poetically evocative juxtaposition of incongruous, reassembled images of Max Ernst. The exhibition contained elegant examples of both categories, of the former by Mário Cesariny and Cruzeiro Seixas (who was also represented by six of his handsome, neo-Romantic drawings, Fig. 4), and of the latter by Mário Henrique Leiria. Other artists in the exhibition were António Areal, Carlos Calvet,

Cândido Costa Pinto, Fernando José Francisco, Gonçalo Duarte, Eurico Gonçalves, Júlio, António Maria Lisboa, António Quadros, and António Paulo Tomaz.

The merit of the exhibition as well as of the catalogue lies less in the individual examples shown or discussed, but rather in bringing together works and documents that suggest the diversity and the richness of Portuguese Surrealist and Surrealist-related activity, and recreate the inventiveness, playfulness and originality of the years around 1950. The exhibition rightly and wisely took a flexible, wide view of its subject, and included works made in a Surrealist vein in the three decades since the effective dissolution of the Lisbon Surrealist groups. In this way both show and catalogue were able to document the intersection of the two tracks I identified at the beginning of this review – of the inherent Portuguese surrealist disposition with the Surrealist intervention of the period 1947-1953.

HELLMUT WOHL
Boston University