

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
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AMERICAN SURREALIST PHOTOGRAPHY

April 14 - July 5, 1994

The unique and lasting influence of Surrealism on American photography is examined in an exhibition on view at The Museum of Modern Art from April 14 to July 5, 1994. Organized by Sheryl Conkelton, associate curator, Department of Photography, **AMERICAN SURREALIST PHOTOGRAPHY** presents some forty-five works, including both photographs and periodicals, dating from 1930 to the mid-1950s and representing more than twenty artists. The exhibition, which is drawn from the Museum's collection, reveals the ways in which American photographers turned the beliefs and techniques of Surrealism to their own uses, creating a range of personal, highly expressive works.

The works in **AMERICAN SURREALIST PHOTOGRAPHY** demonstrate the rich exchange between European and American artists; these included Americans who traveled to Europe and brought Surrealist ideas and techniques back with them, and, more importantly, Europeans who emigrated to the United States during the 1930s, as they fled the rise of Fascism. This exchange is shown in the exhibition through publications in which European and American Surrealist work was commingled, including Charles Henri Ford's *View* and *VVV*, edited by the artist David Hare.

American photographers such as Clarence John Laughlin and Frederick Sommer appropriated Surrealist motifs and techniques that made familiar subjects seem strange and that expressed a spirit of the ineffable. In

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pictures such as *Valise d'Adam* (1940), Sommer used found objects to create unconventional and disquieting collages that often had deformation and decay as their theme.

The effects of Surrealism on the work of Berenice Abbott, Walker Evans, Helen Levitt, and others primarily took the form of an openness to the uncanny to be found in everyday life. In Levitt's *New York* (ca. 1945), for example, a woman leans into a baby carriage, appearing to lose her head, while the child laughs frantically.

Photographers such as Minor White and Aaron Siskind borrowed the premises of Surrealist automatism in their attempts to make photographs that embodied their unconscious impulses. By becoming open and almost meditative in their looking, these artists discovered abstract shapes and personal symbolism in ordinary objects and in common landscapes. In White's *Celibate* (1958), a frosted window becomes a shadowy figure; in Siskind's *Chicago, Corrugated Surface* (1953), a decaying surface is transformed into an evocative abstraction.

Ms. Conkelton writes, "Surrealism injected a new energy into image-making; its incorporation into American photography was complex, and, while the ideas have long since moved beyond their Surrealist bounds, the consciousness of a photograph as an invention of experience continues to inspire photographers."

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For further information or photographic materials, contact Alexandra Partow, Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.

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