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Esther Buffler Residency Write-up

Between the Conscious and Subconscious

“Surrealism/Surrealist (n/adj)

movement introduced by a group of writers and artists led by French poet André Breton (1896-1966) in Paris in 1924. Surrealists embraced the act of spontaneous creation. To unleash their creativity, some used Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, probing the world of dreams, fantasies, and the subconscious in their art. Many Surrealists produced fantastic, meticulously rendered objects, while others combined ordinary objects in strange and startling ways. Some strayed from realism to work in abstract Surrealist styles that incorporated whimsical, organic forms.”

Because in my own work I write ekphrastic poems and dream poems, I decided to give the kids a lesson on Surrealism. After reading a couple of my poems to them, I gave a brief overview of the tenets of Surrealist writers and artists as described in the definition above. I showed them a powerpoint presentation of some surrealist paintings by Rene Magritte, Leonora Carrington, and Salvador Dali. “Time Transfixed” by Magritte, “Self-Portrait: The Inn of the Dawn Horse” by Carrington, and “Swans Reflecting Elephants” by Dali.

Alongside the paintings, I introduced them to some collaborative writing games the surrealists themselves played. After discussing the imagery in the paintings and using them as jumping off points, they played these writing games: “The Exquisite Corpse”, Question/Answer, Word/Definition, and automatic writing.

They were given a description of the game:

“Exquisite Corpse was a Surrealist game in which sentences were created by a group of people, each person unaware of what previous players had written. The Surrealists also played a similar game with drawings instead of words.

Steps for the Writing Game:

Gather a group of three to five classmates.

Decide on a sentence structure for the game. (For example: article + adjective/noun/verb/adjective/noun)

Write two words for the first part of the sentence (article + adjective).

Fold your piece of paper over to conceal the words and pass it to the next person.

The next person should write a word from the next part of speech (noun), conceal it, and pass the paper to the next person.

When a round has been completed, open the papers and read the sentences aloud. The results are often strange and humorous!

Similar to Exquisite Corpse, have one person write a word on a piece of paper and then fold the paper to disguise the original word. The next person then writes a definition.

An alternate version of this is for one person to write a question and the next person write an answer.”

Writing words or sentences, folding over the paper, and handing it to the next student, they came up with new associations that they might not have thought possible. They had fun doing the collaborations and were surprised and delighted by some of the surprising ways their ideas connected even though they were unaware of what the person before them had written. Even some students who had said they did not like to write poetry were excited and engaged.

For the next section of the workshop, we looked at surrealist poems by Pierre Unik, Paul Eluard, Dora Maar, and Joyce Mansour. We discussed ways in which the poets used surrealist or dream imagery, simile and metaphor, opposites, and surprising adjective/noun combinations to create their work. We also looked at more contemporary poems by Charles Simic (Stone) and Jeff Friedland (Bear Truth) to show them how surrealism has influenced contemporary poets and how they might use these poems as models for their own surreal poems.

We discussed narrative as a technique to tell a story that might not make logical sense as Friedland does in his poem “Bear Truth”. We discussed “entering a stone” as Simic does in his poem “Stone”. We came to the conclusion that the imagination is key when taking these leaps.

I explained the Surrealist technique of “automatic writing”:

“Practiced by most surrealist writers, automatic writing is about leaving free field in the brain, writing every spontaneous thought down on paper before logic takes over and rephrases it. The more passive the writer is, the more automatic the writing will be – that’s at least what Breton, who experimented with this process in 1913, affirms, almost a decade before the beginnings of Surrealism. His text *Magnetic Fields*, published in 1920, was also almost completely written according to the process of automatic writing.

Closely linked to the interest André Breton has on psychoanalysis and Freud's theories, automatic writing must make the subconscious speak, and even the unconscious, before the Id, ego, and superego, psychic portion of each man subject to pressures and social restrictions, take over it.

The resulting writing, sometimes transcendent, does not remain at least without an absurd side, which defies logic. In this sense, it approaches the 'Pataphysics of Alfred Jarry, science theorizing reconstruction of reality in the absurd. Jarry, held in high esteem by the Surrealists, and especially by André Breton - who said the playwright was a real surrealist, because of his absinthe consumption but also because of his vision of the world – it’s not so far from the surrealists in his deliberately absurd writing, which claims, for instance: ‘God is the shortest path from zero to infinity, in one way or another.’”

For this next writing exercise, I had students choose cards randomly from the “Dix it” deck I brought in. Dix It is a game with a deck of cards, each one with a surreal image that suggests a

story or idea they could use for a prompt. I told them to write without stopping as the surrealists did in automatic writing. Using the imagery on the cards, whether it was an object, animal, or person, I told them to enter that object or character and tell a story from that perspective. Don't worry about spelling or logic, I said. Try to use your senses as much as possible. If the card suggests a narrative, tell the story as if you're inside the scene. Most students dove right in and wrote some really energetic, imaginative, and wonderful poems from the cards.

Here are some examples of what they wrote. These are poems written without any revision:

The moon glares down at me
angry with what I have done.
I descend into a cellar
away from its gaze.
I feel the weight of the money in my pocket
that I've cheated from many people
with my magic tricks.
As much as I try,
I can't hide from the moon.

The old man caught in time.
Witness of everything.
The gift of wisdom
but the terror of eternity
suffocated and preserved
like a fish in a tank.
The universe of knowledge sits
upon his head
yet nothing to do with it

He arrived in the middle.
His insides removing his personality.
He took a sip, drank it all.
Outside was sunshine on the coldest night.
He was on his knees praying.
He left before he walked,
When he finally walked he cried two rivers of fear.
The stars speaking amongst themselves.
Hushed by his presence, they spun.
They spun until they could no more and so did he.

She stands frozen
chiseled from nickel
except for what she holds
clasped in her right hand.
On first glance it is cloth.
On second glance it is smoke
unfurling from her fingertips.
There must be fire within her
you think
but when you turn to look at her again
there is only fabric billowing in the wind.
Everything begins to swirl around her.
Dead fallen leaves like black butterflies
form a vortex.
Her polish is fading
almost as if she is covered in a sheen of dust.
Snowflakes on her eyelashes.
More and more butterflies
ripped from the dying bushes.
They cloud your vision.
For an instant you are blinded
by the millions of beating blackwings
circling around you.
Their wings like fluttering eyelids.
All at once they settle to the ground
like ashes.
You are surprised to see you are standing alone.
Only a pedestal where she once stood.
Still smoldering in the dying wind.

Insect World

The morning dew clung on each blade of grass
an impenetrable barrier protecting the world below.
The sound of singing and cheers vibrated the leaves of grass.
The drops of water trickled down to the ground.
Grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, and a mouse
scurried here and there.
A celebration was underway.
A cricket king stood mighty on a rock
preaching to his subjects
the creatures in finest clothes...

I dig a tunnel
into the crust of the Earth.
Like a clock striking down
each second
I relentlessly dig.
I don't know why
there is a tug of curiosity
that pulls me
deeper and deeper into the flesh
of the Earth.
I'm getting closer.
A light shines out from
around a bend.
I hadn't seen it before
but here it is
a beacon amongst the depths
of the tunnel.
As I gravitate towards the
corner
I know this is what
I was supposed to find.
My eyes are stinging
from the light
but I see my
best friend in the tunnel.
She wasn't here before
but she is here now.
I hear myself ask
how she got here
but she's already
gone.

The couple
has known each other
for what seems to be ages.
They went in together
through the big box of life.
They stayed strong
and went out together
even stronger.

People only realize
the beginnings and the ends
but what's so much more important
is what happens in between.

She is blue
In a world of green
a singular flower
She stands alone
surrounded by monsters
who prey on the weak
Fiending to capture a poor soul between their teeth
to fuel their selfish needs
In the sea of the green world she stands tall
The spikes and the fangs taunt her
But still she stands
radiating blue specks into the green

I am Senor Moose. I sit upon my ancestors. Phil the Eagle. Ricardo the Chameleon, and Chuck the Bull. They are all dead now. So I cry. And I cry. And I cry some more. I have no friends left in this world. Sure I may have fields of gold tokens and food to last me a lifetime, but so what? I have no one to share them with. I am alone. I can still hear Phil's caw echo in the air. And Ricardo's skin accidentally turning pink, in a bush of green leaves. And Chuck's horns glistening white under the valley's sun. This was our home, but now I am left here all alone. What else could I do but cry?

My feet are cold, but I must keep pace
There's nothing around but frigid ice
The taste of it as it burns my lungs
Rid me of this barren tundra
Take me away, Jesus. In your astrovan.
A leap from a running start
To my new home, among the stars

The Eye Jar

The jar sees all

Nothing is missed
Its hundred eyes are almost always closed, only open when
No soul is around
It seems innocent with its brownish, gold color and
small stature
But little does the owner know that information is being collected
24/7
All being sent back to the ruler of the free world
Amazon has already sold thousands of these seemingly normal
vases
All companies are in on it
Who knows, you might just have one in your own home

The carriage rolled through the dark night,
fumbling into a barely lit cave
A woman, no two, stand in the back
Eyeing the carriage, they took a step forward
Clocks on the wheels signifying time is ticking
They need to help this child now
The women stumble towards it
two sides converging
The illuminated half of the cave shone
The evil side teetered
A shriek burst
A woman or the child?
Deep shades of satin sweep over the cave
Evil was pulling ahead
Until a bright light shone
blinding evil, saving the child
A velvet blanket engulfed the carriage
Quickly, light pulled the cover off
revealing the face of the devil

As I looked down from
my tower I could see the
peasants.

I stood there thinking; reflecting.

Was I better than them? No.

We were all the same; equal.

As my husband pointed down
and yelled at a peasant to
do his job, it all became clear
to me. It was clear as day that
we saw things in different ways.

I turn my head away from the hunter who looks off into the obscure depths of the misty forest, unaware that we are here. The skunk looks up into the branches of the tree, surprised, bewildered, and curious. The turkey stares with large eyes, looking away from Thanksgiving and into the past. The mist covers everything. The hunter searches in the direction of a faint noise to attempt to reach towards his prey, unaware of the monster behind him. In the tree, the creature surveys the whole forest. I am not surprised; I have seen all of this before.

The waves crashed against the boat
It's been weeks, months, maybe years
The bags under my eyes hold a million pounds
Then, like a candle was lit, there it was
the end of the storm
We moved closer and closer and closer
and finally
we made it
Pure calm
there were no waves or wind
Utter silence
Then, pure white
fog?
No, something else
then, a door
We sped towards it
But just as it was opening
hands came up
black elongated hands
hundreds of them
hugged our ship
and pulled us under

Runaway Boy

I left at dusk to see the planets but
all I saw were crisscross stars.

My slacks were too large for a runaway boy

The oak trees looked over the vibrant,
green hills.

I climb down after my slumber
for I am a runaway boy
always planted on the soil.

Night falls and the planets are in sight.
I reach into my sack to grab my elixir.

I blow it into the air until my planets
appear
For they guide me on this ground
as a runaway boy.

Time is the looming man who's ready to take away dreams and whom you cannot ever control. Racing doesn't work, studying can help, crying gives a little relief, but mostly you must learn to embrace anything near you with all the love and understanding you have and you must also let go because holding onto too much hurts your arms and causes burns, too too many burns, so diving in is all that will fix this

As the crazy old man looks over the edge of his flying/magical boat. He thinks about how sad the moon looks in the net with lots of stars. The old man asks "Yo moon how you holding up down there?" The moon had no words. The moon gave up with trying to escape. The moon started to ask himself, I wonder how people/everyone is doing without a moon/no light. The moon was sad and waited for the end of his trip. The moon had no faith, no hope, no words, he was just waiting for time to go.

The one good flower left in the evil woods. The small blue flower is surrounded by all the tall evil venus flytraps. The flytraps aren't only human sized but they can eat people as well. So people stay out of these woods, no one can go in to save this flower. As the flower grows, it grows even more hoping for someone to see the bright glowing light peek out the woods. And so, the flower will be there and patiently wait to be rescued.

Feeding birds. How fun. Just to feed birds and think, how fun. Yes, that is the life. And the birds eat the bread and think, how delicious. Yes, this is the life. To feed birds during retirement. To have no obligations. Yes, that is the life. When the birds eat from your hand, oh yes, how good it feels, to feel the feeling, yes, that is the life. To die while feeding birds, yes, that is the way to die.

The boat was sinking
everyone was running inside
Waves crashed
but soon changed
the sound shifted
little rocks landed on the windows
eyes peeked out
waves turned to rocks
rocks shredded
Above all fingers emerged
a catapult exfoliated the earth's crest
light shined down
the mounds of grains
moved forever
with no singular end
When the souls stopped moving
and the children awakened
everything was normal
except for the limb of light
for everyone to cherish
while the boat left the sea.

There's a battle
on these dials
Fighting for more of what
we do not have
They wave their sliver of
metals
threatening each other
with slashes of death
Welded by magic
the soldiers dance
their bodies move by
mechanical wheels inside

The machine creaks
operating around them
They protect themselves
with shields resembling
the clock, but with no hands
Simply they have refused to allow
time to advance
Simply they will fight for
time to stand still

Two Rings

Bound to me,
Bound to it.
Grappling for a firmer grip on the other,
slowly choking one another.

Good and Evil.
Fundamentally opposed, I don't exist without
the other.

Swirling through space,
faster and faster.
Like a twisted carnival ride that seems
like it will never end.

Consuming itself, running out of rope, running
out of slack.
The pressure immense like the weight of
a planet.

I don't know who will crack first.

The old man gazed at the moon
the moon and its stars dimmed in the netting
for they did not realize their captivity
as one country claims a territory
the land proceeds to lose its individualistic values
space was never meant to be claimed
yet the greed of one planet led to this
the moon was the first to go

then, the planets followed
each country on the polluted planet hoping to own more
still not learning
everything they claim becomes destroyed by greed

A Trash-Filled Escape

The two black spots look toward a
blanket.

The unwashed corners are tied around the
fur that connects the head to the body.

The rising temperature is inevitable
As our young defender of trash looks
to the ground, he realizes there is no longer ground.

The tentacles of flame almost touch the
small paws, which grasp to the jerry rigged cape.

Memories of the best metal cans and
scariest stray cats flood the mind.

The leap of faith is over and the orange
light quivered for a moment.
Just a moment.