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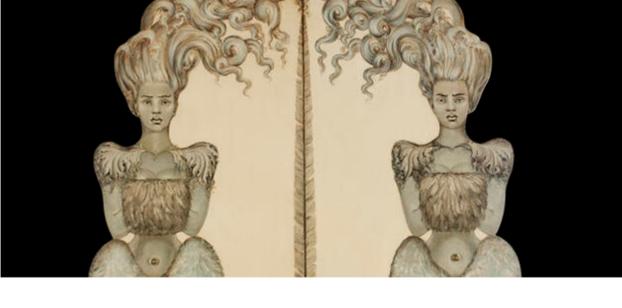
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Surreal Things

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BY DAVID BALZER May 13, 2009 21:05

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There is a missing final chapter at “Surreal Things,” the AGO’s fascinating summer exhibit borrowed from London’s V&A that looks at the influence of surrealism on 20th-century fashion, interior, industrial and set design. That chapter – the period of surrealism’s decline in the ‘60s and ‘70s, when Dalí, for one, made himself and his work into idiotic caricatures – would have provided a perfect foil for curator Ghislaine Wood’s beginning: André Breton’s equally idiotic protest against Max Ernst and Joan Miró’s 1926 collaboration with the Ballets Russes. Breton may have found his fellow surrealists’ dabbling in so-called bourgeois entertainment “inadmissible,” and so it arguably became with the mass-produced melting clocks and other dorm-room art we see today, but between these two moments lies the best example to date of the avant-garde forging a happy, fruitful relationship with commerce, its shadow self.

Granted, when it comes to populist incarnations of the avant garde, the surrealists are pretty much the *ne plus ultra*. One goes through “Surreal Things” envious and overwhelmed by the possibilities that were newly opened to designers because of these artists’ explorations, notably into the violent and erotic imagery of psychoanalysis. A Schiaparelli perfume bottle in the shape of a pipe, dressmaker’s dummy or candle? Sure. A wardrobe whose doors bear paintings of swan-women sentries (by Léonor Fini, pictured)? Why not? Obviously such tactics – making abstract or figurative concepts into functional objects that are fun and surprising to look at and touch – have not dated. That’s like saying the North American continent is so 15th-century.

It would be wrong, then, to pine too much for a golden age of surrealist design, for a lot of these “things” are one-offs or exclusives (millionaire patron Edward James commissioned Dalí’s lobster telephone and Mae West lips sofa, for instance), and what really went mainstream – abstract textile prints and a dreamlike language for advertising – is still with us. There is a rawness to the surrealists’ influence, however, which has gone into hiding. (Oh, for the jagged, boxy primitivism of Schiaparelli!) Indeed, if a stroll through Magic Pony is any indication, surrealism has taken on a form at which even Dalí’s fierce, late-period tackiness would have chafed: it’s become cute.

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