

Dalí's Legacy

By Melanie Thiel

There is an abundance of evidence that the values of the original surrealist movement have persisted beyond the founding members from the 20th century. Salvador Dalí's art is infamous for its shock, controversial imagery, and most notably, its combination of Surrealism and the unique style of Dada. Though he was not alone in these artistic movements, he was able to successfully create a brand for himself that has persisted for decades after his death. Today, surrealism remains a form of psychological exploration for artists of all mediums. Jonathan Meese, Julie Curtiss, and Michael Vincent Manalo are three contemporary artists who draw inspiration from Dalí's combination of Surrealism and Dada. Each artist's style differs greatly not only from each other's, but also from Dalí's recognizable style of art. This research seeks to explore how Dalí's specific use of symbols, desire for shock and outrage, and depiction of emotions have permeated the work of these artists.

Salvador Dalí was not the founder of Surrealism and only remained in the group from 1929-1939. However, to this day he is one of the primary figureheads of the surrealist movement. The paintings Dalí produced during his surrealist period are his most recognizable pieces, both at the time and today. Dalí believed that much of art is a replication of something that has been created before, something recognizable. The very idea that an artist would draw inspiration from Dalí's art and choose to recreate it is at its core—Dalí's legacy.

Jonathan Meese

One artist has cited many painters from the 20th century as inspiration, specifically mentioning Dalí as a favorite. Jonathan Meese is a contemporary artist from Germany who focuses on creating vivid, abstract paintings as well as controversial performance art.¹

Upon first glance, Meese's technical style differs greatly from Dalí's. Meese will often use entire tubes of paint, write made up words and draw crude drawings of people and animals. While Dalí is known for his vast technical skill and uncanny ability to turn a realistic setting into something strange and unsettling, he was also a master of the outright ridiculous. Most notably, in his anti-art phase, Dalí was fond of finding random objects not traditionally used in paintings and turning them into a piece of art.



Figure 1. Salvador Dalí, *Thumb, Beach, Moon and Decaying Bird*, 1928

Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

For example, *Dit Gros, Platja, Luna, i O'cell Pordrit (Thumb, Beach, Moon and Decaying Bird)* is composed of sand, gravel, and oil. Dalí sought to “[attack] the ‘putrefied’ state of traditional culture while praising... Futurism, Cubism and Dada.”² In short, this Anti-Art was a reaction to the state of the world, specifically the art world, surrounding Dalí at the time. A similar sentiment is shared with Meese, as the majority of his art is also a reaction to the world around him. Though Meese has a tendency to be more explicitly political, both artists

used their work as a means to critique. *Anthropomorphic Beach (fragment)* is another example of Dalí's use of collage during his Anti-Art period.



Figure 2. Salvador Dalí, *Anthropomorphic Beach (fragment)*, 1928.
Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí
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This period is particularly important when discussing Meese's work, as collage is a primary style of art for him. Many of his oil paintings even appear similar to that of a collage, due to his inconsistent and sporadic method of painting. Spreading entire tubes of paint and adding photography to his paintings makes the texture appear varied and collage-like. This is a part of his contrarian style, striving to deviate from the norm, and through this, make a statement on art and its perception. "On his canvas, Meese applies tubes of acrylics, crayons, graphite, ink, and watercolour with complete rejection to preconceived notions of painting." These paintings are often created using "found objects, original photographs of political figures (or of himself), and written as graffiti of political manifestos..."³



Figure 3. Jonathan Meese, *Untitled (Marzipanmädchen)*, 2008.

The painting above is an example of how Meese utilizes collage in his art. There is paint splattered around the paper, what appears to be a picture of Meese's mouth, and various photographs and magazine clippings. The title of the piece, *Marzipanmädchen*, is written almost incomprehensibly across the top of the paper. It appears to be utter nonsense. There is no clear meaning depicted in the painting, and the artist has given little or no explanation as to the inspiration behind these specific elements.

Meese strives to shock the viewer, aiming to evoke political and social change and possibly even to offend through his art. He has received criticism from the public on numerous occasions for his controversial behavior during performances, as well as his use of Nazi symbolism. In 2013, Meese faced legal trouble after a performance in Germany at which he gave a Nazi salute. Though Germany has laws protecting freedom of speech, there are also laws in place which prevent people from engaging in offensive behavior such as this.

In the end Meese was acquitted after making the claim that everything he does is in the name of artistic expression.⁴

In a similar fashion, Dalí fell into similar controversy over his fascination not only with Adolf Hitler, but also with the Spanish dictator of the time, Francisco Franco. Though Dalí remained strictly apolitical for the duration of his life, his interest in such a controversial figure led to his eventual removal from the surrealist movement. While one is not to make the case that these two artists had a similar reason for depicting Nazi symbols in their artwork, it is interesting to notice the commonality between their work. Dalí was living in Europe at the start of World War II and saw in real time the effects of fascism and dictatorship from both Hitler and Franco. Meese, however, was born in Germany decades after the war, living in the aftermath and collective shame Germany experienced following World War II. The argument is not to be made that these artists found interest in Hitler due to their ideological alignment, moreso with the controversy of being so outspoken about such a taboo topic.

Dalí's fascination with power, both his own and that of others, remained apparent in all of his artwork. Though he may have expressed ambivalence toward politics and political figures, there is no arguing that depicting Hitler in the late 1930s was a controversial and intentional act. This was the final straw for the rest of the surrealists, who kicked him out of the group shortly after *The Enigma of Hitler*.⁵



Figure 4. Salvador Dalí, *The Enigma of Hitler*, 1939.

Collection of Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid.

©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

Both artists seemingly felt absolved of any wrongdoings, given their behavior following such controversial acts and the relative fame and success that followed. Meese's use of Nazi symbolism and gestures is intended to make a statement that art is bigger than anything, including politics.

Julie Curtiss

An interesting look into contemporary Surrealism comes from Paris-born artist Julie Curtiss. Typical of those who identify as surrealists, Curtiss has expressed a fascination with depicting the female body, implicit sexuality, and dream-like scenarios. Her style is inspired primarily by that of European painters from the 18th and 19th centuries. Curtiss has a fascinating ability to take the traditional surrealist view of the female body and make it unique and even disturbing. In many of her paintings, the most feminine parts of a woman's body are distorted or changed, taking away from the inherent sexual desire usually implied when painting the naked body. The nails are long and pointy, breasts are painted with large

and pointed nipples, faces are always covered, and the skin is often covered in layers of braided hair. Sexuality and the female body are two recurring characteristics of Surrealism, though Curtiss's use of them reveals a new take on how sexual desire can be shown.⁶ Of femininity and Surrealism, Holly Black writes, "Surrealism has long been occupied with the idea of the female body, using it as a symbol for erotic desire or the inner workings of the unconscious mind. Too often these images employ the male gaze, fetishizing the woman and subjecting her to someone else's vision."⁷ In a way, Curtiss is reclaiming the female body, allowing it to be not just the object, but the participant of sexual desire. While much of Surrealism has a voyeuristic feel when depicting the female body, Curtiss leans into this in a different way. A majority of her work depicts intimate scenes that evoke a feeling of intrusion on the viewer. Curtiss takes this a step further and paints women as voyeurs; thus women are shown as participants of desire rather than simply being desired by others.



Figure 5. Julie Curtiss, *Vesica*, 2021.



Figure 6. Julie Curtiss, *Interstice*, 2020.



Figure 7. Julie Curtiss, *Party down*, 2016.



Figure 8. Julie Curtiss, *Cells*, 2021.

Vesica and *Interstice* are two examples of Curtiss showing how women can also be the spectator rather than the object. Pairing these two pieces with some of her other

paintings conveys the feeling of watching and being watched. In *Party Down* the two women pictured are hiding their faces. Though this is a common characteristic of surrealist art, their nudity and posture imply an unwanted viewer. Again, in *Cells* a spectator (this time the viewer of the piece) is looking down at a group of nude people, unaware that anyone else is around.

Bodily distortion and sexual exploration are two themes that are also essential to most of Dalí's surrealist work. As the majority of the surrealist perspective is derived from Sigmund Freud's research, much art created in this style implies or even clearly displays sexuality. Sexual desire and repression are the foundation of Freud's psychological research and those fascinated with Surrealism seek to explore this theme time and time again. Dalí was no stranger to bodily distortion, especially as it pertains to his own sexual fantasies. An example is *Girl with Curls*, which is painted by Dalí a few years before officially joining the surrealist movement.

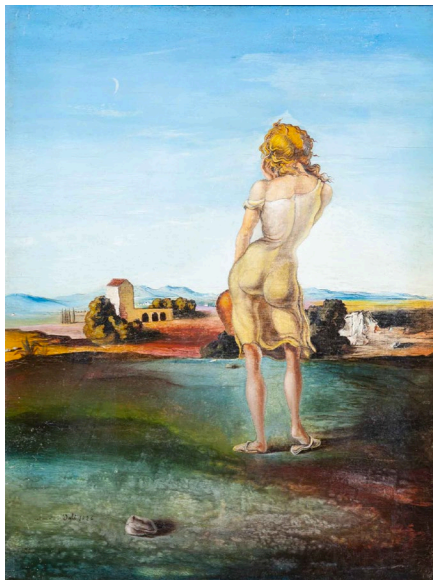


Figure 9. Salvador Dalí, *Girl with Curls*, 1926.

Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL.

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This painting is significant to Dalí's portfolio, as it depicts themes that become integral to his more famous work. The girl's body is wildly disproportionate, her curves are greatly exaggerated and her body is towering over the buildings in the landscape. In addition, her face is not visible. The landscape and the girl are painted with a technical clarity that emphasizes how distorted and unrealistic the bodily proportions are.



Figure 10. Salvador Dalí, *Enchanted Beach with Three Fluid Graces*, 1938.

Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL.

©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

Another example of this comes years later, in Dalí's *Enchanted Beach with Three Fluid Graces*. Again, the distortion of the bodies is very apparent. There is the implication of each figures' face, though no obvious facial features. One aspect worth noting is the feet. The style of the figures' anatomy suggests femininity, but the feet are painted with large, unrealistic arches and bulging muscles. These features are very similar to that of another Julie Curtiss piece, *Testing Ground*.



Figure 11. Julie Curtiss, *Testing ground*, 2015.

Curtiss has a tendency to zoom in on certain aspects of a scene, implying to the viewer that there is more just outside the frame. There is a very clear similarity between Curtiss's depiction of feet in *Testing Ground* and in *Enchanted Beach with Three Fluid Graces*. The arches are high, and the muscles in the calves and feet are protruding while stepping down on a hilly landscape. In typical Curtiss fashion, though, the skin is painted colorfully, the toenails are gnarled and long, and the surfaces have been given a hair-like texture. Curtiss chooses to focus on a small aspect of this scene, preventing the viewer from having any context as to what may be happening here. Her use of color here is also interesting, especially when compared to Dalí's painting. There are three graces in Dalí's painting, and in Curtiss's we see three legs with distinct colors. Though the viewer is unable to see the entire scene, it is assumed that perhaps the legs are representative of three different beings as well.

Julie Curtiss evokes the spirit of Dalí in her work through her passion for replication. In a 2021 interview, Curtiss was asked if any of her paintings are inspired by 19th century artist, George Seurat. Curtiss replied, "I like doing this pastiche kind of thing—not like the movies or remakes but overtly, and with no shame."⁸ Dalí once famously said, "those who do not want to imitate anything, produce nothing."⁹ There is no doubt that Dalí's art can stand alone, separate from comparison and entirely individual. Despite this, all artists are inspired by those who came before them. Dalí has been known to create renditions of other artists' work many times throughout his career. Most notably is his recreation of Jean-Francois Millet's *the Angelus*. Dalí's *Archeological Reminiscence of Millet's "Angelus"* specifically recalls the art and artist he seeks to imitate. Dalí's version of *The Angelus* elaborates on the story Millet started when he created the piece –rue to Dalí's signature style while expanding further on the persistence of grief displayed in Millet's painting. Curtiss models this style of replication, deriving inspiration from other artists' work while maintaining her signature style and further exploring specific themes from the original source.

Michael Vincent Manalo

Michael Vincent Manalo is an artist from the Philippines who specializes in photo manipulation and acrylic painting. Manalo's background in art is unique, as he didn't study it in school and relied on art as a form of self-expression. Early on in his career, he was inspired by the early surrealist movement, claiming Dalí's art specifically as a huge inspiration to him. Much of Manalo's work centers on dreams and the unconscious mind.¹⁰ The most noteworthy characteristic of surrealist art is the covering of faces. Manalo, like his surrealist counterparts, finds creative ways to obscure the faces of the subjects in his pieces. He will commonly use natural elements, such as rain or storm clouds, to hide faces. This is used primarily to convey the "ever-changing spectrum of human emotions." Manalo has created a unique style for himself, combining the hidden faces of individuals with "post-

apocalyptic dreamscapes.”¹¹ The idea of a post-apocalyptic dreamscape is arguably the most apt description of Dalí’s art as well.



Figure 12. Michael Vincent Manalo, *While we waited for the end*, 2015.



Figure 13. Michael Vincent Manalo, *The Fisherman*, 2013.



Figure 14. Salvador Dalí, *The Temptation of St Anthony*, 1946.
Collection of Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.
©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

There is an uncanny resemblance in Manalo's *The Fisherman* to a few of Dalí's paintings. One Dalínian symbol that is depicted multiple times over the course of his career are his elephants, often painted with tapered legs, similar to those of a fly. These elephants can be found in numerous Dalí paintings, most notably in *The Temptation of St Anthony*. The similarity between Dalí's work and Manalo's is undeniable. The piece from Manalo is part of a project titled "Chronicles from the Great Reveries II", which "features a collection of dreams and daydreams."¹²

One of Dalí's most recognizable symbols is the melting clock. It can be found in multiple Dalí creations and is continually reimagined in Dalí-themed merchandise and other re-creations. The melting clock is a trademark of his art. The knowledge of this is important when looking at Manalo's work as he, reimagines this well-known symbol in *Amnesia*.



Figure 15. Michael Vincent Manalo, *Amnesia*, 2010.



Figure 16. Salvador Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931.
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

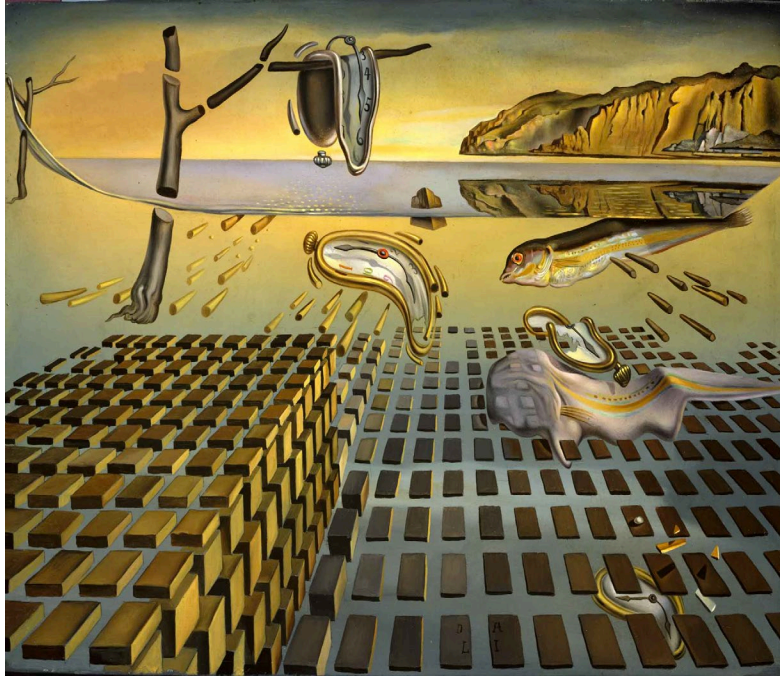


Figure 17. Salvador Dalí, *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, 1952-54. Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

This piece by Manalo is possibly his most obvious call out to Dalí. Similarly to Dalí's two pieces *The Persistence of Memory* and *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*, a melting clock is standing in the middle of a desert setting. Where Dalí's two pieces show multiple melting clocks as well as various other elements in the background, Manalo depicts a lone clock in an otherwise empty landscape. Even the title *Amnesia* is reminiscent of Dalí: amnesia, means the loss of memory. In *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* the components of the original painting are changing, disintegrating. Though Dalí painted this to convey how the world "[was] altered by the nuclear age" in the mid 1950s, the dissolution of memory remains the primary takeaway.¹³ Manalo's *Amnesia* therefore stands almost as an unofficial third part. The persistence of memory has been disintegrated and over time, lost. There remains nothing left besides one lone clock as the sole reminder of a forgotten time.



Figure 18. Michael Vincent Manalo, *Minds At Work*.

One element of art that Dalí often experimented with was the double-image. *Old Age, Adolescence, Infancy (The Three Ages)* is an example of this technique. Dalí painted in a way that allowed the viewer to see two different images, depending on how the painting is viewed. A common theme for Dalí is to combine random elements in his paintings to depict a face. This serves a second purpose at times, used to obscure the faces of his subjects, which is a common practice in surrealism. In Manalo's piece *Minds At Work* the use of double image is not as subtle as Dalí's. Rather than suggest an eye or a mouth, he has hidden them amongst the other elements in the piece. Using photo manipulation, Manalo includes features taken from real human faces.



Figure 19. Salvador Dalí. *Old Age, Adolescence, Infancy (The Three Ages)*, 1940.

Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL.

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“However, [Dalí] will always stand out as one of the very few twentieth-century painters who combines a profound respect for the traditions of the past with intensely modern feelings.” This is a sentiment expressed by Theodore Rousseau, former curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹⁴ Manalo has effectively achieved this as well, closely following the ideas of the original surrealist movement and citing Breton and Dalí as sources of inspiration, while incorporating modern ideas and emotions in his pieces.

One great example of how Manalo achieves this is through his AI collaborations. He has created several pieces using two well-known AI algorithms, VQGAN and CLIP.¹⁵ The collaborative aspect comes in during post-production, where Manalo paints over or uses Photoshop to change the art produced by AI algorithms. With the rise in popularity of AI generated art, Manalo is experimenting with the modern trends of the time while still

maintaining originality in his work. All of the works created within this project are still distinctly Manalo and explore themes similar to those of his previous work. He is incorporating the foundation of traditional surrealism into his art using modern tools.

Jonathan Meese, Julie Curtiss and Michael Vincent Manalo are only a few of those who have found inspiration from Dalí and his work in Surrealism. The comparison of their art to Dalí's displays how deeply his style and legacy have permeated the art world. Decades after his death, artists are repurposing Dalí's famous symbols, reimagining his pieces to fit modern narratives, and using their platforms to critique the world around them. As long as artists continue to create and allow themselves to feel inspired by those who came before them, Dalí's legacy will continue to live on.

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