

*Wearing Their Secrets on Their Sleeves:
Dalí's Surreal Legacy in 21st Century Art, Technology and Attitudes*

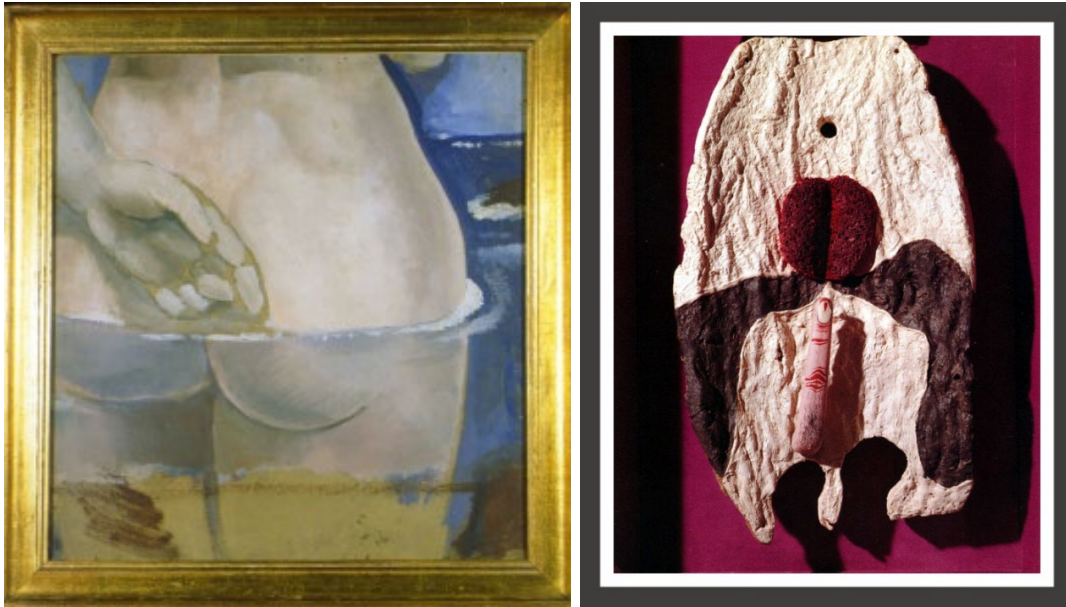
By Ellen Williams

At the crossroads of Freudian psychoanalysis and Surrealism's "omnipotence of dreams," Salvador Dalí embraced the "vice of self-interpretation" as few others have, or perhaps ever will. "Freud's writings gave [Dalí] access to his hidden fears, desires and obsessions.... it enabled him to give expression to them in pictorial form."¹ The results of his unabashed indulgence in self-analysis, coupled with his indoctrination into Surrealism, still ripple throughout the overlapping worlds of art, technology and merchandising today.

Rejecting his prior study of classical art styles, and even early modern movements he admired, Dalí immersed himself in a self-created world populated by dream imagery, festering fears, and raw surplus masturbatory imaginings, and, in the process, flung open a window to his subconscious. While Dalí was often inspired by the impulses most people were keen to suppress, and throughout his youth had exploited his own impulses to the chagrin of family and others close to him, it was in his early 20s that he mastered his natural ability to draw attention to both himself and his work.

In particular his work emphasized his attraction to all things taboo – his inclinations for voyeurism, his desires to expose and mortify, to masturbate, sodomize – all of which came together, clarified in full color for the delight and/or horror of the viewer. Surrealism gave theater to the subconscious Freud lauded, and Dalí brought his own subconscious to the center of that stage with the technical skills of a master. In a few short years he went from *Basket of Bread*, with its subtle symbolism of religiosity, to the unmistakably phallic *Anthropomorphic Bread – Catalanian Bread* and its indication of impotence in the face of time. From the demure hand of *Nude in the Water*, to *Anthropomorphic Beach* and its

pointing finger, pointing the way to the future of such freedom of expression in later 20th century works by contemporaries like Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe, and a diverse group of 21st century artists, including Isabel Samaras, Dalí's legacy is one of skill meeting imagination.



Figures 1. and 2. Salvador Dalí, *Nude in the Water*, c.1924, Collection of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Salvador Dalí, *Anthropomorphic Beach (fragment)*, 1928, Collection of The Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL. ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

In the process of his own artistic evolution, Dalí would blow open the range of possibilities for those whose desires and beliefs had no prior representation. While André Breton defined Surrealism, in part, as “dictation of thought.... exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern,”² Dalí gave vision, and thereby voice, to a future still unfurling with the flags of those who shape what we as a global society now consume, digest and cultivate.

Like Dalí, Andy Warhol stood out among his art world peers as an individual talent with unusual views and, like Dalí, he dabbled in a number of media, including film. Warhol being to Pop Art what Dalí is to Surrealism – while not necessarily the founders of the movements, they are frequently the first names quoted when, respectively, either movement

is mentioned. Their careers intersected on more than one occasion – Warhol even directed a 35 minute film titled *Salvador Dalí* in 1966, wherein Dalí visited Warhol's notorious Factory and met the rock band The Velvet Underground.

Isabelle Collin Dufresne (also known as Ultra Violet) was a French born artist, actress and author who was in her late 20s when she met Warhol. She was having tea at the St. Regis Hotel with Dalí, who at the time was her mentor, but also rumored to be a lover.

Andy and Dalí had been introduced by Ultra Violet in the sixties, and though neither of them saw much of Ultra anymore, they went on seeing each other through the seventies. Dalí spent every fall and winter in New York, at the St. Regis Hotel... Dalí's teas were regular Sunday-afternoon events and had nothing to do with Darjeeling and crumpets, and everything to do with champagne and strumpets... "I never know," Andy often said, "whether I copied transvestites from Dalí, or Dalí copied transvestites from me."³

While Dalí and Warhol sometimes overlapped in life and work, so did Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe, and in each case the individuals involved were not necessarily fans of one another. At times the relationships could be described as acrimonious, as indicated in the early Mapplethorpe mixed media piece titled *Andy Warhol* 1971:

"Mapplethorpe, spraying paint on a magazine page, leaves the outline of a penis over a portrait of Warhol as a child; the metaphor of superimposition hypothesizes the existence of a precocious homosexual desire."⁴



Figures 3. and 4. *Andy Warhol*, 1971; *Andy Warhol*, Mapplethorpe, 1983

While the catalog of Warhol films often blurred the line between documentary and imagination, the view from Robert Mapplethorpe's camera was particularly unflinching, despite beginning with forays into surrealistic collage. "It was not Mapplethorpe's original intention to be a photographer, and from 1970 to 1974, he mainly made assemblage constructions that incorporate images of men from pornographic magazines with found objects and painting. In order to create his own images for these collages, Mapplethorpe turned to photography, initially using a Polaroid SX-70 camera. Interested in portraiture, Mapplethorpe worked as a staff photographer for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine."⁵

The essence of Dalí's explorative spirit, and fearless tendency to fetishize the ordinary as well as standard sexual totems, became more visible in Mapplethorpe's photography as his artistic vision evolved. Whether or not it was his intention to shock, or to pierce the veil of longstanding tradition with his subjects, it was clear that Robert Mapplethorpe strove to formally master the art of photography.

Through his photographic oeuvre, Mapplethorpe crystallizes the utmost investment of sexual drives in people and things, he travels through the vertigo of the senses, from eyes to genitalia... In provoking and unifying the contraries that audaciously jumble the traditional system of the articulation of love, Mapplethorpe demonstrates his need to conquer the people who want to love one another – last but not least, the public at large. The disarray and dislocation of erotic knowing and seeing are instruments of seduction, because, in recurring to the strength and jurisdiction of a broadened sexuality (incorporating the feminine in the masculine and vice versa), they allow us to master a different conception of [Eros].

By the same token, the transcending of a prohibition flaunts and favors a repressed pleasure and a dynamic expression of the libido, making the human being more varied and versatile... It is an absence of any guilt for the indomitable and insatiable will to be and to accept love with no limits or prohibitions.⁶

While other works by Mapplethorpe drew inspiration from some of Dalí's most revisited themes, such as the great masturbator, still others echoed Dalí's ability to knit together objects as symbols for a glimpse inside the artist's mind. For instance the 1970 assemblage, *Untitled (Altarpiece)*, which "most strongly accentuates [Mapplethorpe's] debt to the artistic memory and provocative spirit of Dada and Surrealism..."

...a complex assemblage of various objects and materials, such as cloth and silk, shawls and furs, a table and a lamp, a statue and a photograph, candles and fringes. They add up to a kind of prie-dieu or altar, in which the sacred images – the Madonna and the Christ – wear black blindfolds, while several symbolic objects, such as the lamp and the hammer, are tied up in velvet or fringed silk.

This continent of vague but decidedly Catholic signs, which are characteristic of Mapplethorpe's education, produces the theatrical space of an image that is internal because it is veiled and not revealed – the image of a discourse on the 'interior'... The process he adopts was characteristic of Dada and Surrealism. In those movements, the artist appropriated objects, made them familiar, and then invested them narcissistically, so that the ensemble speaks of his/her 'elsewhere,' of an unknown, unfamiliar sensing, which, when assimilated, becomes a portrait of one's own self and one's own unconscious: the blind man sees.⁷



Figure 5. Robert Mapplethorpe, *Untitled (Altarpiece)*, 1970; © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Photo © Geoffrey Dicker



Figure 6. Still from *Dream of Venus Pavilion*, 1939

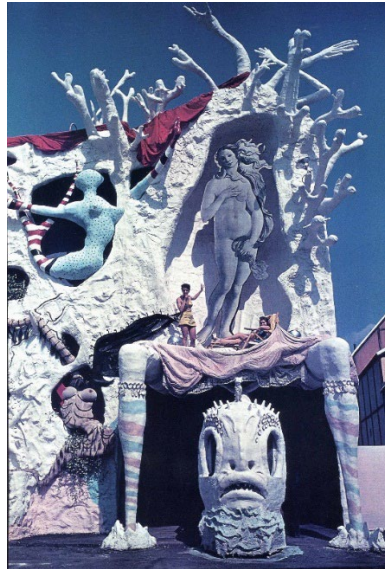
More so than in *Untitled/Altarpiece*, the direct influence of Dalí can be seen in the 1982 Mapplethorpe photo of Lisa Lyon with a scorpion covering her pubis, which echoes Dalí's "seafood" costume design for the *Dream of Venus* pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair. Photographed by pioneer of Avant-garde fashion photography Horst P. Horst, *Lobster Salvador II* captures a topless, blindfolded and collared female model, who holds up oyster shells as offerings while a lobster hugs her pelvis.



Figures 7. and 8. Horst P. Horst, *Lobster Salvador II*, 1939. © Condé Nast / Horst Estate; Robert Mapplethorpe, Photo of Lisa Lyon, 1982 © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

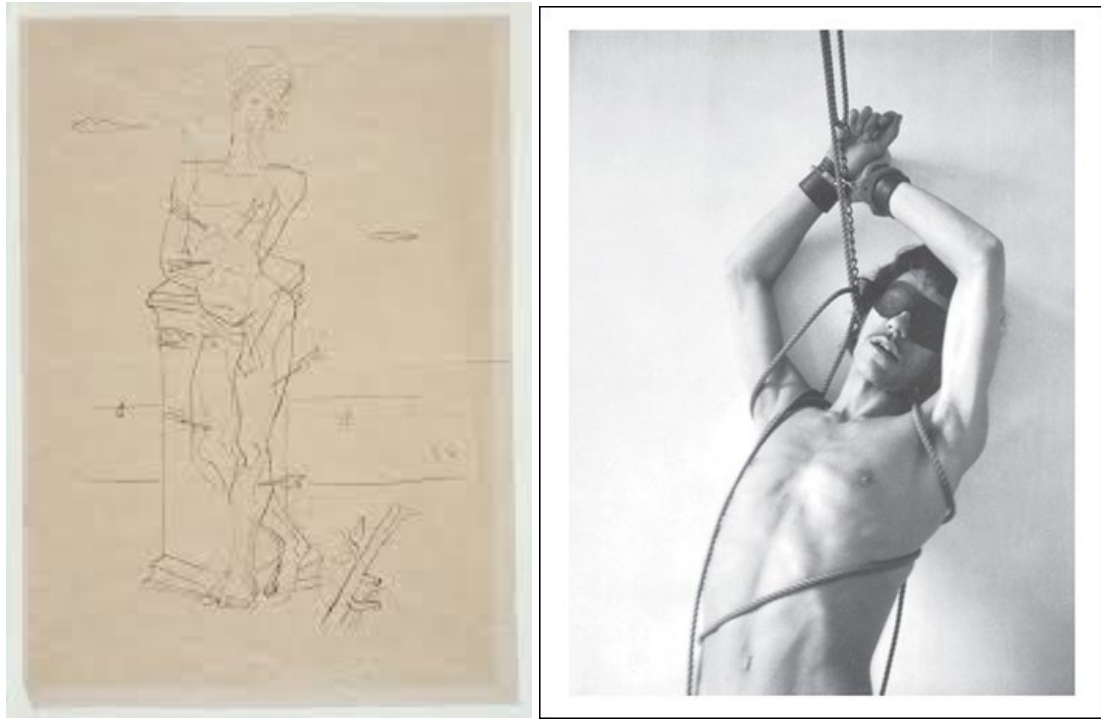
Of all Dalí's visions realized in the third dimension, the most elaborate could also be considered the first wholly immersive art experience, as well as an obvious influence on Mapplethorpe and others since: the hyper-scale and symbol-laden *Dream of Venus* pavilion itself.

A total surrealist environment, Salvador Dalí's *Dream of Venus* pavilion was an assemblage of images, objects, paintings, and sculptures, all erotically animated by seminude female performers and housed in a small stucco building that looked like a tangled, bleached mass of beach debris. In every way, from its antediluvian birthday cake of a façade to its mazy interior plan, Dalí's pavilion appears the overwrought, anxious antithesis of the fair's better-known architecture... Dalí's pavilion expressed a complex iconography based on avant-garde art and psychoanalytic precepts, showing a world turned upside down and backwards – the ruins of classical Pompeii submerged in an oneiric living room.⁸



Figures 9. And 10. Stills from Salvador Dalí's *Dream of Venus Pavilion*, New York World's Fair, 1939

Though the surviving images of models and decor are not altogether unappealing, the pavilion itself lacked little but the religious overtones for which Dalí's work is often known. Both sacrilege and piety were highlighted by Dalí in time, and in the flow of fetishizing religious imagery is the revisiting of the persecution of St. Sebastian by artists through the ages.



Figures 11. and 12. Salvador Dalí, *San Sebastián*, c.1927, Collection of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; ©Salvador Dalí. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí (Artists Rights Society), 2023.

Robert Mapplethorpe, from the series *Bondage*, 1974. © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation.

Many 20th century depictions of St. Sebastian represent the homoerotic nature of men communing in military and athletic environments, and some could be considered “coded” to LGBTQ symbolism including suffering, and fears relating to martyrdom, AIDS, or even “conversion.” While Robert Mapplethorpe’s 1974 Polaroid series titled *Bondage* evokes the image of the saint, Dalí would revisit the story of Sebastian and his image more than once during his career. Clearly the artist was not immune himself to eroticizing the figure and the symbolism it held for him, particularly as it related to his intimate relationship with poet Federico Garcia Lorca, long rumored to be more than a platonic friend.

In the pivotal text “Sant Sebastia”, published in the Catalan periodical *L’Amic de les Arts* in July 1927, Dalí established his aesthetic of “Saintly Objectivity”,

where pure objectivity becomes a point for psychological departure. Dedicated to Federico Garcia Lorca and clearly influenced by the poet, who had written to Dalí that “one of man’s most beautiful postures was that of St. Sebastian” the text is littered with allusions to precious and natural materials. Dalí writes of the “pink coral of skin”, the “halo of rock crystal” and “red coagulation, contained within two crystals”, prefiguring the imagery and materialization of the [Verdura] jewels...

In a use of symbolism and material exactly analogous to the St. Sebastian, rubies stud the surface of the bone as if oozing drops of blood, and establish a disturbing chain of associations from the idea of putrefaction to the fetishization of death. The play between the literal and metaphoric blood and bone is made all the more interesting by the use of the cigarette holder as something that enters the mouth...

Clearly, in turning to jewellery, where the confines of the medium literally necessitated the creation of miniature worlds, Dalí revisited St. Sebastian as the theoretical conceptualization of this idea...⁹



Figure 13. Verdura and Salvador Dalí, Cigarette Holder (Saint Sebastian), c.1941

No stranger to the creation of miniature worlds, or double entendre, celebrated Lowbrow/Pop Surrealism (also known as Lowbrow, and/or Pop Surrealism) artist Isabel Samaras shifted the focus of persecution in her 2004 oil on wood *The Martyrdom of Pee Wee* "...based on Peter Paul Rubens's 1618 portrait of the martyr St. Sebastian, [it] featured *Pee Wee's Playhouse* host Paul Reubens—who'd once been caught masturbating in a porn theater and was getting pilloried in the press for it—pierced with arrows and wailing in agony. Her subject, his predicament, his martyrdom, even the implied Rubens/Reubens wordplay—all linked Isabel's painting in humorous, cultural, artistic, and linguistic ways to a masterpiece painted four centuries earlier. *The Martyrdom of Pee Wee* typifies the refinement in her later works, which reveal themselves in layers and subtleties..."¹⁰



Figure 14. Isabel Samaras, *The Martyrdom of Pee Wee*, 2004

While the 21st century artist might reflect on Surrealism as a somewhat mainstream art movement—coming into favor between the first and second World Wars during their great-grandparents' prime—the ultimate goal of Lowbrow/Pop Surrealism, which took shape

largely in post-Viet Nam war era America, was “to infuriate anything considered to be traditional. While artists were aware of the ‘rules’ of fine art, many made their own up as they went along. This shameless disregard for the conventions of art allowed a raw, unrefined, and basic style of art to develop, which eventually paved the way for a more polished and refined type of Lowbrow Art to eventually emerge.”¹¹



Figure 15. Isabel Samaras, *Secrets of the Batcave*, 2002



Figure 16. Isabel Samaras, *Besame Mucho*

Initially Samaras was drawn to the Symbolists, “I far preferred the weird mysticism of Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington.”¹² In the 1990s she pursued her artistic oeuvre in acrylic on the surfaces of thrifted lunchboxes and TV trays, perfecting her technique and, as Dalí had, eventually proclaimed her uniqueness in oil on canvas and boards.

In her *Monster Ballads* series in 2007, Samaras explored the idea of monsters as martyrs. “Most of my paintings featuring monsters are usually about two things: the universal search for love and community, and the idea that it is often we who are the real monsters (especially in our fear of the ‘abnormal’).”¹³ The same year would see her *Songs of Leisure* series imagining “assorted creatures of the night just going about their evening, doing the things that made them feel good...”

“This series further explored my desire to humanize ‘monsters’ and bring tenderness and compassion to the idea of anyone who was feeling ‘othered’ or outside of the social norm.”¹⁴



Figures 17. and 18. Isabel Samaras, *Song of the Raven*, 2007;
Isabel Samaras, *Song of Leisure/the Reader*

Samaras related her impressions on Dalí and his influence on Lowbrow/Pop Surrealism in a recent email.

"I think the first piece of his that I ever saw was 'The Face of War' when I was a little kid, and it completely repelled me (which is probably the intended response, so Bravo Salvador!)."¹⁵ *The Face of War*, painted between the end of the Spanish Civil War and the start of the Second World War, depicts a corpse-like, disembodied head surrounded by serpents against a desert landscape. Within the mouth and eye sockets the image of the face repeats, implying an infinite number of corpses, echoing the lives lost in various battles.



Figure 19. Salvador Dalí working on his painting *The Face of War* in the US in 1940
Image Rights of Salvador Dalí reserved. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres, 2023.



Figure 20. Salvador Dalí walking his anteater in Paris, 1969
Image Rights of Salvador Dalí reserved. Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres, 2023.

When I was in art school there was definitely a crowd that loved Dalí... but at the time I was much more entranced by art that had a more messy, raw, emotional quality to it.... That said, I can see how an artist like Dalí could have at least partially paved the way for [Lowbrow], both by showing the rewards for leaning all in on your own personal obsessions (something I've always loved about [Lowbrow]) and for being a champion of The Weird, for making a space in the art world for the odd to be appreciated, admired and honored.... I was always charmed by the man (the man, the mustache, and all the bananas photos like the one of him taking his pet anteater for a walk).¹⁶

From the tides of the initial revolt of Dalí and the surrealists against all things traditional – in the art world and in general—to the over scale and hyper-chromatic bridge formed by Pop Art in its wake, we come to a place where the shores are embedded with images and objects awaiting discovery... and rediscovery. “Objects are triggers for memories, for unexpected encounters, and that brings us to the famous definition of Surrealism... we are constantly seeing chance encounters of objects.”¹⁷

The year 2020 brought with it new experiences for many an individual; some were plunged, unprepared, into the abyss of self-analysis. Inspired to view or create art they may never have been inspired to view or create in years before, some discovered, rediscovered – or finally faced – their fears, their triggers, and both intentionally and unintentionally, revealed their “secrets” in work as well as in personal relationships.

“Today, in the context of dizzying technological change, war and the Covid-19 global pandemic, the Surrealist spirit feels urgent and relevant once again. The torch has now been passed to contemporary artists and designers, and to all those who dare to shake up the creative process, discover new tools and think differently.”¹⁸

Dalí’s legacy is more apparent than ever in the visions of contemporary artists in the wake of 2020, as they strive to be seen for who they truly are, celebrating lifestyles and beliefs once marginalized and pursuing knowledge once obscured. As isolation took its toll and companionship, in its variety of forms, and new experiences were craved, the immersive exhibit that once bloomed from Dalí’s imagination evolved with the technology of its time (including Artificial Intelligence bearing his name, albeit phonetically) and the surrealists’ significance came into the light yet again.

“We are living in a time that is hard to explain, or understand. Surrealism doesn’t aim to understand everything, or to explain everything. It accepts the inexplicable... In fact, it was the same in the 1920s and 1930s when Surrealism came about. That was also a time of major tensions and conflicts in society; a lot of known or established values were shifting. I think we are living in a similar time. We are living in surreal times.”¹⁹

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- ¹ *Dalí – Freud, An Obsession*; various authors (Buchhandlung Walter und Franz Konig, 2022), 11
- ² André Breton; excerpt from the *First Manifesto of Surrealism* in *Art in Theory 1900-1990, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*; Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 87-88
- ³ *Holy Terror/Andy Warhol Close Up*; Bob Colacello (Harper Perennial, 1991), 172
- ⁴ *Mapplethorpe/Electa*; Germano Celant (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, published on occasion of the traveling retrospective Robert Mapplethorpe, 1992), 11-14
- ⁵ <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/robert-mapplethorpe> (paragraph 2)
- ⁶ *Mapplethorpe/Electa*; Germano Celant (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, published on occasion of the traveling retrospective Robert Mapplethorpe, 1992), 11
- ⁷ *Mapplethorpe/Electa*; Germano Celant (Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, published on occasion of the traveling retrospective Robert Mapplethorpe, 1992), 12-13
- ⁸ *Salvador Dalí's Dream of Venus/the Surrealist Funhouse from the 1939 World's Fair*; Ingrid Schaffner (Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2002), 30
- ⁹ *Surreal Things/Surrealism and Design*; edited by Ghislaine Wood (V&A Publications, 2011), 217-218
- ¹⁰ *On Tender Hooks, the Art of Isabel Samaras*; Colin Berry (Chronicle Books, 2009), 87-88
- ¹¹ <https://artincontext.org/lowbrow-pop-surrealism/> (paragraph 9)
- ¹² Email correspondence with Isabel Samaras
- ¹³ Isabel Samaras' Instagram: "Song of the Raven"
- ¹⁴ Isabel Samaras' Instagram: "Songs of Leisure: The Gardener"
- ¹⁵ Email correspondence with Isabel Samaras
- ¹⁶ Email correspondence with Isabel Samaras
- ¹⁷ *Surrealism and Design Now/From Dalí to AI* (accompanying the exhibition *Objects of Desire: Surrealism and Design 1924 – Today* at the Design museum/London 2022), 15, 11 & s
- ¹⁸ Ibid
- ¹⁹ Ibid