

AN INFINITE PLAY
OF EMPTY MIRRORS



WOMEN, SURREALISM, AND
SELF-REPRESENTATION

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Whitney Chadwick

But all her life the woman is to find the magic of her mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification. . . . Man, feeling and wishing himself active, subject, does not see himself in his fixed image; it has little attraction for him, since man's body does not seem to him an object of desire, while woman, knowing and making herself object, believes she really sees *herself* in the glass.

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR *The Second Sex*

Rare are the moments when we accept leaving our mirrors empty . . . still, we persist in trying to fix a fleeting image and spend our lifetime searching after that which does not exist. This object we love so, let us just turn away and it will immediately disappear.

TRIN T. MIN-HA *Woman, Native, Other*

Until the early 1980s women artists received little notice in histories of Surrealism, although they continued to play supporting roles in a few articles and memoirs.¹ "Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage" had opened at the Museum of Modern Art in 1966 with a single work by a woman—Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup—an object still widely believed to be the creation of a man. Frida Kahlo had yet to become a North American cult figure, though Hayden Herrera's biography, published in 1983, would have much to do with her subsequent near canonization.² I intended in *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985), the first full-length study in English devoted to the work of the women artists associated with the movement, to shift attention away from the Surrealist

“Woman”—a representational category shaped by the projections of the masculine heterosexual unconscious—and toward Surrealist *women*, a diverse group of individuals for whom Surrealism had played a significant role in their struggle to articulate an autonomous feminine subject.

In recent years the subject of women and Surrealism has gained academic currency. University courses are now devoted to women Surrealist writers and visual artists. Biographies, monographs, and anthologies of their writings have appeared; and the problematics of Woman/Surrealism/women, now increasingly viewed through the deconstructive lenses of post-structuralism and psychoanalytic theory, continue to be debated at conferences and in publications.³

We welcome the opportunity to reconsider the women of Surrealism as part of a larger project having to do with self-representation and intergenerational legacies. Indeed the subject is particularly timely today, for while postmodern theories have opened up new spaces for considerations of the feminine, they have often directed more attention to inscriptions of sexual difference in representation than to the practices of individual women.⁴ Yet outside the academy, women artists remain engaged in their own explorations of difference and agency and their own critiques of the structures that mark their difference.

In mobilizing the body as a primary signifier of its cultural politics, Surrealism established new parameters within which women artists might begin to explore the complex and ambiguous relationship between the female body and female identity. Women were not among Surrealism’s founding “fathers.” Although their significance to the movement continues to be debated, they left a collective body of self-portraits and other self-representations that in taking the artist’s own body as the starting point and in collapsing interior and exterior perceptions of the self (regardless of how that word was/is understood), continues to reverberate within contemporary practices by women that articulate how the body is marked by femininity as lived experience, subjectivity produced through new narratives, and the possibility of a feminine imaginary enacted. This body of work appears to have no parallel in the work of male Surrealists more inclined to project their desires outward, locating moments of rupture between conscious and unconscious, subject and object, in bodies Other to theirs, and almost exclusively of an otherness assigned to the feminine.

The complicated relationship that existed between the lives of individual women and the patriarchal ideologies of the feminine that dominated Surrealism continues to attract scholarly and critical debate, as does the question of Surrealist misogyny.⁵ Nevertheless, although the conflicts confronting women in the movement were great, they need not eclipse either the powerful attraction of Surrealism for a significant group of young women or its continuing appeal to subsequent generations of artists (male and female) who have sought to explore the unconscious as a site of meaning and to challenge rationalist distinctions between self and other, inside and outside, conscious and unconscious.

Putting the psychic life of the artist in the service of revolutionary politics, Surrealism publicly challenged vanguard modernism's insistence on "art for art's sake." But Surrealism also battled the social institutions—church, state, and family—that regulate the place of women within patriarchy. In offering some women their first locus for artistic and social resistance, it became the first modernist movement in which a group of women could explore female subjectivity and give form (however tentatively) to a feminine imaginary.

The young women who joined the Surrealist circle in Paris in the 1930s—or, in the cases of Leonor Fini and Frida Kahlo, declared themselves *not* Surrealist while nevertheless exhibiting with the group on occasion and adopting many of Surrealism's core tenets—saw Surrealism as supporting their desire to escape what they perceived as the inhibiting confines of middle-class marriage, domesticity, and motherhood. Although in many cases they lacked a clear sense of what being an artist meant (or perhaps they perceived all too clearly that the roles of women and those of artists are often incompatible), they thought of themselves as artists. And they saw Surrealism, rather than direct political action, as their best chance for social liberation.⁶

Women artists associated with the Surrealist movement came from widely different social and cultural backgrounds. Differences in political allegiances, sexual preferences, and social identifications shaped their self-images, as did a range of literary and artistic conventions: from Frida Kahlo's indebtedness to nineteenth-century Mexican portraiture, medical illustration, and the representational traditions of the *retablo* and Leonora Carrington's predilection for fourteenth-century Italian painting, Celtic literary sources, and English nursery

rhymes to Leonor Fini's cultivation of the Flemish primitives and German romantics. Even so, points of connection do exist among them, though we should not seek their effects too aggressively.

In general, the works of women associated with the Surrealists display an affinity for the structures of fabulist narrative rather than shocking rupture, a self-consciousness about social constructions of femininity as surface and image, a tendency toward the phantasmic and oneiric, a preoccupation with psychic powers assigned to the feminine, and an embrace of doubling, masking, and/or masquerade as defenses against fears of non-identity.

To explore the work of three generations of artists without essentializing (i.e., universalizing experience on the basis of some shared feminine "essence" or biological imperative) poses a number of challenges: the danger of colonizing women by producing generic descriptions of their productions, overplaying the effects of sexual difference, or being lulled into the mythology of "herstory" instead of struggling to clarify the messiness of sexual politics in a real world in which women may be marginalized *and* effective, excluded yet present.

The task is not to seek out a shared style, a similitude of politics or attitude, or a shared heritage predicated on sexual difference. Indeed intergenerational influences are more likely to have been transmitted, as have been the majority of artistic influences in Western art, through patrilineal channels. Yet this need not blind us to the variety of ways in which women have written their own legacies of transmission and effect or to parallels in how they have framed the particulars of women's experiences.

The words *surrealist* and *surrealism* appear frequently in discussions of the work of many contemporary women artists who employ strategies of disruption and/or images of the body fragmented, deformed, or doubled. Often references to specific antecedents (both male and female) appear: Cindy Sherman, Francesca Woodman, Kiki Smith (Hans Bellmer, Claude Cahun); Louise Bourgeois, Dorothy Cross, Michiko Kon, Yayoi Kusama (Meret Oppenheim); Ana Mendieta, Paula Santiago (Frida Kahlo); Lindee Climo (Leonora Carrington). Rarely, if at all, do observers move beyond formal likenesses, articulate the specifics of the assumed relationship between contemporary artist and historical predecessor, or elucidate

the differences between historical Surrealism and the complexity of its artistic legacy.

"Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation" explores the repercussions of Surrealist practices in the work of subsequent generations of women interested in testing the representational boundaries of self and body in ways that reference historical Surrealism. This entails negotiating theoretical models of female subjectivity that displace women from the sites of language and meaning and the continuing and significant presence of contemporary imagery by women that gives a central role, however provisional or unstable, to feminine subjectivity and female agency within current artistic practices.⁷

Reading the work of contemporary artists against the background of historical Surrealism clarifies formal and conceptual points of intersection between past and present, but it also may lock us into rigid structures of meaning. At the same time, rereading historical Surrealism through the lens of contemporary culture often strips images of their historical and cultural specificity, allowing them to circulate as Rorschach tests for today's social and cultural concerns. The "rediscovery" of both Frida Kahlo and Claude Cahun in the early 1980s has been accompanied by just such critical rereading. Kahlo's own dialogue with Mexican culture, politics, and history has been largely overlooked in the North American consumption of her images as icons of feminine angst. Likewise, the neatness with which Cahun's photographs have been annexed to postmodern concerns with the decentered subject and with identity as contingent and mutable has obscured the complexity and contradictions of her writings and blinded many to the works' representations of conflicted identities.

The work of historical women artists influenced by Surrealism raises questions about representational strategies that continue to resonate in the work of younger women artists. The categories outlined here—"Self as Other," "Self as Body," "Self as Masquerade or Absence"—are arbitrary, and the boundaries between them fluid and unstable. They serve only as broad frames within which to explore issues that shaped self-representations by women Surrealists, as well as a few of the dialogues that may have been enacted between contemporary women artists and Surrealism.

Self as Other

Beauty will be convulsive or it will not be at all. Convulsive beauty will be veiled erotic, fixed-explosive, magic circumstantial.

ANDRÉ BRETON *L'Amour fou*

The masculine can partly look at itself, speculate about itself, represent itself and describe itself for what it is, whilst the feminine can try to speak to itself through a new language, but cannot describe itself from outside or in formal terms, except by identifying itself with the masculine, thus by losing itself.

LUCE IRIGARAY "Women's Exile"

Even before 1936, when psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan first presented his paper arguing for the origins of selfhood in a "mirror stage" (the "misrecognition" of another in the mirror that produces the self, or subject), theories of subjectivity and sexual identity had revolved around seeing. Lacan's theory of subjectivity, which derives from Freud's concepts of narcissism and the "specular" ego (the formation of the subject around a dynamic of seeing/not-seeing that initiates the castration anxiety around which male sexuality is formed) left Woman in the position of signifier for the male other, her subjectivity (or "femininity") determined by the discourse of patriarchy.

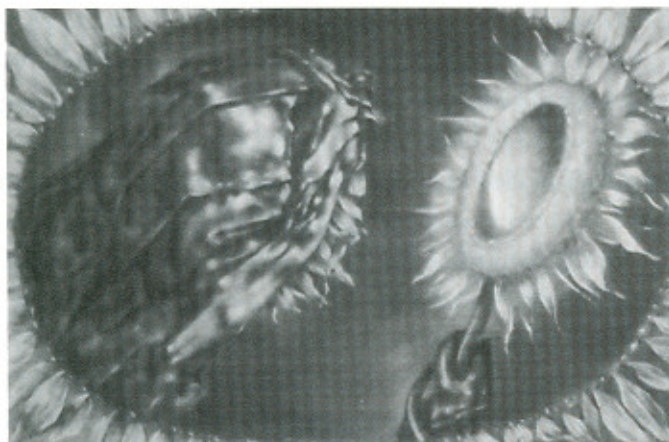
It is in the nature of the self-portrait to produce the subject as object, but, as Luce Irigaray has noted, the process of objectification that enables the woman to describe herself *as if from outside the body* also implicates her in a masculine dynamic that projects the woman as other. For women artists, the problematics of self-representation have remained inextricably bound up with the woman's internalization of the images of

her "otherness": "Mirror of male desire, a role, an image, a value, the fetishized woman attempts to locate herself, to affirm her subjectivity within the rectangular space of another fetish—ironically enough, the 'mirror of nature.'" Positioned to collude in their objectification, unable to differentiate their own subjectivity from the condition of being seen, women artists have struggled toward ways of framing the otherness of woman that direct attention to moments of rupture with—or resistance to—cultural constructions of femininity.

The Surrealists, like Irigaray, were indebted to Freud's and Lacan's theories of the connection between vision and sexuality. The female visionary—childlike, criminal, or mad—became the central figure in both Surrealism and the emerging literature of psychoanalysis after World War I, and the woman invoked in the poetry of André Breton, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Peret, and others is at once compelling, gifted, dangerous, nocturnal, and fragile, a composite being "drawn from the legacy of the Romantic and Symbolist imagination and reinterpreted through Freud." Her sister image in the visual arts remains more emphatically marked by the signs of psychoanalytic deviance: fetishism, sadism, voyeurism, etc.¹⁰

Dorothea Tanning's *The Mirror* (1952; fig. 1), a painting executed fifteen years after the artist first encountered Surrealism at the exhibition "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" at New York's Museum of Modern Art, illuminates some of the more problematic aspects of femininity and self-representation. In Tanning's painting, an anthropomorphic sunflower bud holds up an open flower, gazing into the petaled "mirror" in an apparently rapt contemplation of its own blossoming. This vegetal parody of the traditional *vanitas* image (in which the sin of vanity is represented by the image of a woman staring into a mirror) is frozen within a second "frame," an outer aureole of fiery petals that collapses the imagery of flower, mirror, and eye into an ironic meditation on femininity, nature, and artistic vision. No matter how intently one gazes into this compelling but disturbing image, there is nothing more to see. Tanning's sunflower/mirror remains opaque, the little vignette of looking and mirroring incomplete.¹¹

In Western culture the image of the mirror has signified the social construction of femininity as specular consumption and the narcissistic identification of the woman with her reflected image. Tanning's painting, however, resists such



Dorothea Tanning

The Mirror, 1952

Oil on canvas

12 x 18 in.

Private collection, New York

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overdetermined readings. It is not, after all, a woman who occupies the feminine position here but a hybrid, an anthropomorphic flower, a grotesque being that blurs the boundaries of animal/vegetal/human worlds and collapses the binaries of sexual difference. The careful structuring of the image to capture a gaze from outside the frame—the spectator's—and redirect it within the frame implicates the viewer in more than one kind of seeing and challenges the privileged link between seeing, knowing, and possessing as functions of the masculine.

It is too easy to suggest that Tanning merely reproduced the common trope that identifies Woman as the objectified other, the object of the male gaze, for the woman is both absence and presence here: unrepresented as Woman but evoked through the cultural association of femininity with narcissism and the self revealed in the mirror. Tanning's hybrid being, simultaneously self-reflexive and vegetal, stands at the boundary of nature and culture. In Surrealism, the mirror image, rather than confirming our assumptions about the nature of the real (and its replicability), defamiliarizes the real and opens it up to the forces of the dream, the irrational, and the unconscious.¹² Tanning's mirror both affirms and denies the self, like the mirror evoked by Claude Cahun in her autobiographical narrative *Aveux non avenus*:

A sheet of glass. Where shall I put the reflective silver? On this side or on the other: in front of or behind the pane?

Before. I imprison myself. I blind myself. What does it matter to me, Passer-by, to offer myself a mirror in which you recognize yourself, even if it is a deforming mirror and signed by my own hand? . . .

Behind, I am equally enclosed. I will not know anything of outside. At least I will recognize my own face—and maybe it will suffice enough to please me.¹³

As Tanning's painting suggests, women often produced self-representations that suggest a complex relationship to social ideologies of the feminine. Compelled either to submit to the public language of patriarchy or to invent private languages that kept them marginalized by asserting the uniqueness of their femininity, women often employed irony, humor, and confrontation to problematize their position within Surrealism.

Self-portraits by women associated with Surrealism often bear visible signs of the slippage between Woman and women and between nature and culture. Collapsing the projection of the body as sight or spectacle and the awareness of the body as site of meanings (assigned, fabricated, manipulated), the woman artist reproduced herself as a multiplicity of roles/identities within the signs of an elaborately coded femininity "which always derives from elsewhere."¹⁴ Many works by women Surrealists both recreate and resist the specular focus and voyeuristic gaze of Western representation. Others reimagine the Surrealist woman as a figure of agency and transformation. The unruly woman of the male Surrealist imagination—dismembered, mutable, eroticized—is recreated through women's eyes as self-possessed and capable of producing new narratives of the self. Leonor Fini's *Au bout du monde* (At the Ends of the Earth, 1949) and Remedios Varo's *Harmony*, painted in Mexico around 1955, share with many other self-images by women Surrealists ambivalent, or ambiguous, constructions of self.

In Fini's painting (pl. 4), the woman—isolated within the frame, her bare breasts partially exposed above the dark waters of a primordial swamp that is also home to rotting vegetation and bird and animal skulls—gazes directly out at the viewer. Narcissistic? Perhaps. Certainly references to the myth abound: watery reflections, invitations to the spectator, intimations of self-absorption. Yet Fini's painting replaces the

beautiful male body with that of a woman. Is this Echo perhaps, silenced and condemned to an eternal life of voiceless stone? Finally, Fini's female image, while linked to a darker, indistinct face—reflected back as an image of the mysterious, the animal, the repressed that is also the feminine in Western culture—is too commanding to slide easily into the position of passive object of contemplation.

Varo's painting, which depicts an artist/composer alone in a cell-like room manipulating her knowledge of science, art, nature, and mysticism into musical compositions, resists specularly by absorbing the central figure into a swarm of surface detail that deflects the gaze and interrupts the compositional hierarchies that dominate Western painting after the Renaissance. The figure itself, attenuated and androgynous in its cropped hair and baggy suit, is neither reducible to a single identity nor fixed within the signs of sexual difference.

Fini's and Varo's paintings suggest that the female self, no matter how relentlessly pursued in the images reflected back to it, can neither be fully captured by its representations nor escape them.¹⁵ Women Surrealists often astutely wove self-awareness into images of identity as a juggling of incompatible roles, a balancing act, a series of performances that leave the subject frayed around the edges, fragmented, not one but many, into complex narratives that simultaneously project and internalize the fragmented self, reproduce and resist dominant discourses.

In an unpublished manuscript written in 1939, Leonora Carrington, distraught over the incarceration of her lover Max Ernst, recalled Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare*, writing: "Tonight I was visited by some familiars from my childhood: Fear and Madness sit on my bed and look at me with their great horse-like eyes."¹⁶ In her *Self-Portrait* (c. 1940) and other paintings, these animal familiars give form to the instinctual, the sexual, the uncontained.

Carrington was not alone in projecting aspects of the self as animal surrogates, and her influence can be seen today in Lindee Climo's meticulously rendered repaintings of selected "masterpieces" of Western art as meditations on the relationship between human and animal, self and other. While one might argue that strategies such as these inevitably return us to conventional social constructions of the feminine, the images themselves suggest a more complex interweaving of self and other.

Many women—including Carrington, Fini, and Varo—adopted strategies that more recently have been referred to as “self-othering.” Identifying with moments prior to historical time and/or outside the “civilized” cultural spaces identified with patriarchy, they sought the sources of the “feminine” and “woman” in epochs and places in which women were believed to have exercised spiritual and psychic powers later repressed under patriarchy.¹⁷

Often women artists in the Surrealist movement wove the pieces of feminine self-awareness into fabulist narratives peopled with magical beasts and legendary characters. Carrington’s self-identification with the creatures of her stories and plays has been widely discussed elsewhere.¹⁸ Mythic beasts denoting aspects of the masculine and feminine self also appear in the work of Tanning, Fini, Oppenheim, and Kahlo. The success or failure of these strategies in relocating the sources of feminine subjectivity is perhaps less important than the fact that they served as enabling devices, in several cases fueling creative lives for sixty or more years.

Image of fecundity and barrenness, rich imaginings and fearful isolation, self and other, interior and exterior, the female body in the works of women Surrealists served as an important harbinger of women’s desire to image themselves by speaking through their own bodies. It is perhaps through their many and diverse images of embodied femininity that women Surrealists left their most powerful and pervasive legacy to subsequent generations of women artists.

Self as Body

For me, sculpture is the body. My body is my sculpture.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS

More so than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body.

HÉLÈNE CIXOUS “The Laugh of the Medusa”

In today's visual culture, images of the female body function as carriers of complex and contradictory messages while in feminist debates about essentialism and constructionism, the meaning of the body itself remains under intense debate. In the work of artists like Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman, Rona Pondick, Michiko Kon, Paula Santiago, Marta Maria Perez Bravo, Francesca Woodman, Dorothy Cross, and others, the body has become the site of cultural mediations, the sign of political and social challenges to assigned meanings, and an important measure of female subjectivity.¹⁹ Bodies and body parts swell, mutate, dissolve, double, and decompose before our eyes as the body registers cultural, as well as personal, fears and anxieties. Artists increasingly deploy the body as a site of resistance and a locus for expressions of death, disintegration, horror, and presymbolic forms of expression.

Breaking with the notion of unitary self that dominated post-Enlightenment thinking, the Surrealists embraced incoherence, disjunction, fragmentation. Women deeply internalized this refusal of bodily and psychic fixity, often representing themselves using images of doubling, fragmentation, projection. The defamiliarized body of Surrealism has become the unknown body of contemporary art, most often female and Other: threatening, uncontrollable, and uncontainable. "Beauty will be convulsive or it will not be at all," Breton wrote in 1937. "Convulsive beauty will be veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic circumstantial."²⁰ Breton's convulsive beauty located the disruptive force of Eros in the body of Woman, but the radical violations that collapsed the female body into parts "exploding with erotic energy" in the works of male Surrealists like Hans Bellmer or dissolved it into the insubstantial, the *informe*, in the writings of dissident Surrealist Georges Bataille, were often turned in different directions by women in the movement.

Kahlo exposed her own body, cutting it open to reveal its physical and psychic scars, transcending the specificities of its wounds by surmounting it with the masklike face of enduring sainthood. Tanning projected eroticism onto the bodies of children who, in works like *Children's Games* (1942; pl. 8) and *Palaestra* (1949), release an incendiary energy that shreds wallpaper and transforms interior spaces into highly charged environments. Oppenheim exposed her skull to radiation and captured the self as glowing skeletal frame. Claude Cahun—as well as Oppenheim and Kahlo—used her own body to destabilize the boundaries of gender and sexual identity.

Since the early 1970s, when women artists mobilized the female body as marker of a new sexual and cultural politics, they have continued to use the body to challenge social constructions of gender and sexuality. Although the body seems the logical point of departure from which to identify a sense of self, its location at the boundaries between the biological and the social, the natural and the cultural ensures that our relationship to its forms and processes is always mediated by cultural discourses. At the same time, the body—the object that each of us inhabits in the most intimate ways—has attracted growing critical attention in recent years because despite its positioning within cultural discourses and theories of spectatorship, it remains a primary source for the exploration of the presymbolic or nonsymbolic modes of expression through which many women hope to relocate feminine subjectivity.

Contemporary expressions of the artist's body that refuse the conventions of specular pleasure open the body to apprehension through other senses and often recall the visceral and tactile nature of certain Surrealist objects, like those of Meret Oppenheim, which shift from hard to soft, inorganic to organic (the fur-lined teacup), and exterior to interior (*Pair of Gloves* and *X-Ray of M.O.'s Skull*). Many current images of the body as unfamiliar, uncanny, grotesque, unbounded, transitional, etc. owe much to Surrealism's collapse of interior and exterior reality, its reimagining of the body as a signifier of absence and deformity. Distorting heads, erasing features, substituting parts—as René Magritte does in *Le Viol* (The Rape, 1934), a painting of a woman's head in which pubic hair replaces the mouth, and breasts the eyes—Surrealism challenged the rational ordering of the body and with it distinctions between mind and body, reason and sexuality, human and animal, higher and lower.

As feminist theorists have begun to seek less determinist and confining models of female subjectivity, the work of women artists has provided an important focus for attempts to move beyond the polarities of sexual difference. In many cases Surrealism has provided the starting point for works that challenge existing representations of the feminine through reimaginings of the female body as provisional and mutable, or at least intimating a shift away from the phallic organization of subjectivity.²¹

Louise Bourgeois is almost always positioned in some relationship to Surrealism, though she herself has disavowed

the connection, stating in 1993 that she is an existentialist not a surrealist.²² The disavowal hasn't silenced speculation about her artistic roots. She has been placed within the Surrealist tradition for her psychological motivations, for her use of the dream and the unconscious, for her adherence to Georges Bataille's notions of the transgressive and the *informe* (his anti-rationalist, anti-idealizing embrace of the shapeless detritus of being human, of excrement, filth, and decomposition).²³ An equally long list might be made of the connections that have been drawn between her work and that of other feminist artists (for Bourgeois, unlike some women of her generation, has been public in her commitment to the cause of women's art). Rather than reenter the broad territory of these affiliations, I would instead like to consider a single work/theme of hers (the *Femme-Maison* drawings) framed in relation to a single Surrealist example: André Masson's *Mannequin* from the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris.

Bourgeois's own accounts absorb the question of artistic parentage into the oedipal drama of a single family—hers—in France in the 1920s. It is unclear whether or not she attended the Surrealist exhibition of 1938, which opened at the Galerie des Beaux-Arts in January. Certainly she was in Paris at the time (she did not move to New York until October of that year). The exhibition attracted large crowds and extensive press coverage. As visitors paraded past the row of display mannequins transformed into Surrealist gorgons that guarded the portals of the Surrealist world within, one in particular stood out.

Masson's object included a female mannequin, nude, her head covered with a wicker bird cage, pansies tucked into her mouth and armpits, and her pubic area adorned with tiger's eyes (fig. 2). The figure, a recasting of another famous Surrealist image, also resonated with allusions to a historical circumscribing of middle-class femininity within images of cages and caging.²⁴ The Surrealists often took the metaphor one step further: "Headless. And also footless. Often armless too; and always unarmed, except with poetry and passion." So begins Mary Ann Caws's introduction to the volume *Surrealism and Women*.²⁵

In 1946 Bourgeois, now living in New York, married, and the mother of three sons, began a series of drawings titled *Femme-Maison* (pl. 10), in which an image of a house replaces a