

Women, Surrealism and Contemporary Visual Culture (Online, 1 Oct 26)

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Deadline: Apr 15, 2026

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The Surreal Body as Theatre of the Mind: Women, Surrealism and Contemporary Visual Culture.

Co-organisers: Mimi Kelly (University of Melbourne) and Victoria Souliman (University of Sydney).

This symposium invites research and reflection on art history and visual culture studies, as well as perspectives from artists, regarding the legacy of surrealism in contemporary visual culture. The project particularly foregrounds how women creatives working across image-based practices mobilise surrealist-inflected, body-focused strategies to articulate female and queer subjectivities, embodied experience, and alternative modes of seeing, feeling, and being in the world. We encourage contributions from global and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Surrealism's liberation of the unconscious was also a liberation of the body (Mahon, 2005). In probing the psyche through art and psychoanalytic thought, surrealists gave form to complex fears and desires—social, sexual and psychological—often mediated through bodily representation. In the modernist surrealist oeuvre, the body was often rendered as fragmented, hybrid, uncannily situated, or an ambiguous site of symbolic rupture.

These distorted forms challenged logic and coherence, evoking dream states and liminal or dissociative experiences. The doubled or mirrored figure suggested a fractured selfhood; the mask, doll and mannequin became emblems of projection, artifice and deferred identity. André Breton's concept of convulsive beauty extended to the body, proposing a form of beauty as both alluring and disturbing. Male artists often used the erotic body to mythologise female figures as muse or vessels of male desire. Yet women avant-garde surrealists have increasingly been recognised for their exploration of the body as a tool of resistance against conformity, rationalism, and the constraints of fixed gender and sexuality (Chadwick, 1985; Conley, 1996; Allmer, 2016). Natalya Lusty argues that surrealist women artists, such as Claude Cahun, established "a tenacious desire to recognise the importance of an inner psychic life to the external material world" and, through this, apply art in "self-determination" (Lusty, 2007, p.89).

From the late 20th century to the present, surrealism has persisted as a radical, adaptable aesthetic strategy across global art contexts. As a disruptive force, it continually challenges established paradigms while seeking new forms capable of sustaining its emotional intensity (Polizzotti, 2024, pp.6-7). Women and queer artists, especially since the rise of body-based and performative

practices in the 1960s and 1970s, have drawn on surrealist tropes (fragmentation, metamorphosis, masquerade and abjection, for instance) to challenge normative structures, explore eros, and articulate dissident subjectivities as seen in the work of Louise Bourgeois, Niki de Saint Phalle, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Cindy Sherman and Gillian Wearing. Recent studies have drawn attention to the persistence of surrealism across a wide range of visual and audiovisual forms, from photography, film (Richardson, 2006; Creed in Yue, Hoorn and Chare, 2019), performance and installation to music videos (Richardson, 2011; Kelly and Souliman, 2023) and social media platforms (François, 2022).

Surrealism's global legacies also extend far beyond its European origins. In contemporary art, surrealism offers a powerful visual language for engaging with colonial trauma and forced migration, and for expressing speculative futures and bodies that exceed neocolonial control. For many women artists, such as Shirin Neshat and Hayv Kahraman, surrealism offers a means of articulating intersubjective and diasporic experiences, allowing the expression of ineffable states that resist resolution, the constraints of national or cultural borders, and fixed identities.

Today, as threats to women's and LGBTQIA+ rights intensify globally, surrealism's psychic and political impetus remains urgent. By interrogating the enduring force of surrealism as an aesthetic philosophy, this symposium examines its legacy across contemporary visual culture, as it continues to unsettle, subvert, and inspire through its affective charge. We invite proposals for 20-minute papers, full panels and roundtables that explore surrealism and the body as a dynamic site where psychology, ideology and aesthetics converge, with particular attention to the practices of women and queer creatives across art as well as film, television, photography, fashion, performance, and other image-based media.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Surrealist strategies in self-representation and articulation of dissident subjectivities, the psychological and erotic through body-focused practices;
- Body abjection, monstrosity, hysteria and the grotesque;
- Surrealist aesthetics in expressing migratory, diasporic, or postcolonial experiences through fragmented or non-linear forms;
- Body-centred surrealist practices as reflection of the climate crisis;
- Surrealist exploration of the body in relation to scientific knowledge, digital culture and new technologies;
- Curatorial approaches foregrounding the body in surrealist-informed contemporary works.

This symposium will take place online on Thursday 1st October 2026. Please send an abstract of max 250 words and 100-word biblio-biography to mimi.kelly@uni.melb.edu.au and victoria.souliman@sydney.edu.au by Monday 15th April 2026. Proposals from postgraduate students, artists, curators, and early-career scholars are welcome. We will do our best to accommodate different time zones where possible and will consider flexible delivery options if needed. Please note that selected papers from the event will be considered for publication in a journal's special issue.

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