

PORTRAY

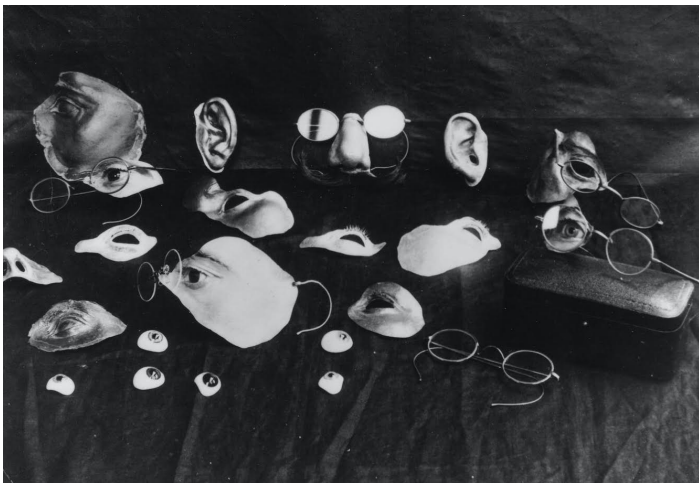
SUPERUNKNOWN Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy with Urs Fischer

Gregory de la Haba October 16, 2020 3:51 pm



SUPERKNOWN At Nahmad Contemporary Max Ernst, Tanguy and Urs Fisher Install Photo Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary

Nahmad Contemporary has, with their current exhibition SUPERUNKNOWN, given New Yorkers a reason to cheer. Featuring rarely exhibited and important paintings by surrealist masters Max Ernst and Yves Tanguy created between 1924 and the end of World War II, arguably some of humankind's most turbulent and barbaric times, these unsettlingly dark and foreboding surrealist gems are pitted against an immersive backdrop of bespoke, bright-colored wallpaper by contemporary artist Urs Fischer. This contrast is significant and as stark as the bewildering worlds created by each artist. And, according to the Press Release, the exhibition "is both a counterpoint to and expression of our own times." In truth, however, it is so much better and more than that.



Masks, the Face Transplants of World War II



Casts of maimed WW1 Soldiers

Both autodidactic artists, Ernst (b.1891, Brühl, Germany) and Tanguy (b.1900, Paris, France) experienced WWI first hand and—just as importantly—as mature men fully aware of and in-tune to their surroundings and the socio-political events unfolding before their eyes. Both were drafted, served in the army with their respective countries and were witness to the vast destruction and human toll this ‘Great War’ had on mankind with an estimated 40 million casualties. Ernst was so overwhelmed from the war he wrote in his journal that he died at the start of it and “was resurrected on the eleventh of November 1918” at its close. When the two met in Paris in the early 1920s and became part of André Breton’s circle of Surrealist artists fascinated with Freudian-like psychoanalysis (and from where many of their painting’s titles derived from such textbooks), maimed veterans, or as the French called them, *mutilés*, were a common sight in the cafes and on the city’s streets at the time. In previous wars, these men would have expired on the battlefield from their wounds by gunshot or grenade or from gangrene brought on by amputation or infection. But with improved advancements in medicine and surgery during the advent of the 20th century, many soldiers ended-up surviving these horrific bodily inflictions but often at an even greater psychological cost. For some, faces were so badly damaged their families could barely recognize them. Such daily visual reminders coupled with the ever-present psychological aftermath of war no doubt resonated deeply with both men. In fact, Tanguy’s amoebae like forms floating hopelessly in desolate, bleak-looking tableaux, imagined landscapes which have more semblance to the apocalyptic world Cormac McCarthy created in his Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *The Road*, than to a recognizable place in or around Paris, surprisingly mirror the custom masks and facial constructs of molded ears and noses (Images 1 & 2) that artists and sculptors were making to help in the healing process for the countless disfigured soldiers in their midst.



Tanguy, *Time of Foreboding*, 1929
Photo compliments of Nahmad Contemporary



Tanguy *Untitled* 1927
Photo compliments of Nahmad Contemporary

Reason enough, one could presume, for an artist like Tanguy to paint imagined worlds that carry with them an 'ominous sense of disquiet and isolation' executed in tonal scales of grays and ochre as in *Time of Foreboding* (1929). Or for Ernst to create baffling yet profound imagery like *Bird Cemetery* (1927) that conveys an air of dark and immense gravitas with thick, impenetrable and stoic, vertical delineations in paint that may indeed, as the Press Release states, defy any 'prescribed reality' but, moreover, it also most certainly portends to the extreme, brutal and sinister reality then gearing up to march on the horizon all across Europe.



Max Ernst Bird Cemetery, 1927
Photo Compliments of Nahmad Contemporary

By contrast, Urs Fischer (b.1973, Zurich) grew up in the most scenic of places, Switzerland, during peacetime when smaller and faraway wars were watched on CNN from the comfort of home. Yet true artists, no matter their upbringing, have an innate sense of breadth and scope for the world around them and like Ernst and Tanguy, Mr. Fischer is capable of finding and creating light where and when there is none. For SUPERUNKNOWN, the entire gallery's wall space is enveloped in his *Gap-toothed City*, a montage of photos he took of New York City's eyesores: graffiti, metal fencing, unsolicited ads, regulatory notices, boarded lots and the like. But Fischer enhances his photos by utilizing the photographic negative as a starting point before further manipulating the picture's color into their complementary counterparts with results that are both surreal yet familiar. Something that recalls, perhaps, an isolated yet heightened experience from a positive LSD trip.



SUPERUNKNOWN installation Photo Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary

Even though Urs Fischer's opus takes over the gallery's walls, he doesn't steal the show. He catapults it into the mind's eye and illuminates SUPERUNKNOWN's brilliant choreography of past and present, of light and darkness, of blight and beauty, of sharp contrast and polar opposites, and of survival and death. At once gratifyingly rich and visually stunning, SUPERUNKNOWN can also pleasingly be seen as an ideal case study as to why art and artists matter and, even more importantly during the pandemic's current, angst-filled climate, stresses—with the mind's eye fully dilated—how important living in the *now* truly is and why embracing the wisdom, experiences, and beauty of the past can help guide us on our continuing journey forward. Peacefully. Mindfully.