

La Carte D'Après Nature

by Cora Fisher

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Ten years ago in Belgium I was told that a flock of birds had migrated from Africa and settled in the rainy treetops of Brussels. Bright bits of color could be seen on spindly winter branches, the birds not out of place so much as forging a new outpost. The rumor struck me at the time as a little allegory of postcolonial diaspora in a Western European city. It also spoke to the moving forces of contemporary art: objects dislodged from their point of origin—the artist's studio—and spinning off unexpected contrasts in the world until those, too, become acclimated to new environs and familiar to new eyes.

The strange case of the Belgian birds sprang to mind as I entered *La Carte D'Après Nature*, an exhibition where René Magritte, the great Belgian Surrealist, is the genius loci to a flock of contemporary artists who use the natural world as their subject and who often engage in Surrealist-inspired play.

Upon entering, a glass vitrine of Magritte's mail art, his *Cartes D'Après Nature*, declares what could loosely be called the philosophical method that artist/curator Thomas Demand has borrowed for this group show. With Magritte as the locus, Demand contends that Surrealism and Cubism are vital points of origin for artists working now. In this context, Magritte's pictures are not regarded as stale and overly reproduced but as lasting thought-pieces.

The argument goes beyond a conventionally linear art historical reckoning of modern art movements. Rather, the relationship between earlier and more contemporary works is fractal and lateral, modeling connections between artists through natural forms and signal images where time is irrelevant. (Birds, as well as trees, landscapes, and mountains, are among them.)

The physical presence of three Magritte paintings on loan from the Menil Collection—the key to reading a variety of other contemporary works—is why the exhibition realizes its argument and ultimately should not be missed. Magritte paints the sky with a foreboding, dusky silence in “Parmi les bosquets legers” (“In the Airy Glades,” 1965) and “Le grand style” (“The Great Style,” 1951), in which the Earth sprouts from a plant stalk in a night sky speckled with yellow stars. “L'univers

Démasqué” (“The Universe Unmasked,” 1932), with a sky plane rendered as pivoting cubes, a house without a roof, and a mountainside sheared into a cross section, is less unmasked than artificially designed. Yet it is also a reference to Cubism’s turn toward free artistic interpretation as a means of unmasking observable phenomena. In the absence of human form, the painting’s tension between the landscape and the roofless abandoned house (a bereft human stand-in) is striking. Magritte’s paintings exude a disquieting, lingering aura of paradox: the smoothness of the paint flaunts their cool matter-of-factness, while his approach to rendering philosophical possibilities in pictures is generously approachable.

Demand presents a group of works referencing the “Cubist Trees” designed by brothers Jan and Joël Martel for the Garden of Paris’s 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*. It’s another instance of artists rendering nature anew—to the public’s bewilderment at its creative detour from verisimilitude. A scale model of the “Cubist Trees” is on display, along with photographs from 1925 of models wearing Sonia Delaunay’s Bauhaus-inspired fashions in front of the completed sculpture of geometric concrete planes. These clippings, which include a cartoon of a “perplexed” beholder of the trees, attest to the Cubist roots of radical innovation. The design of the gallery into nine angular environments mimics the Martel Brothers’ “Cubist Trees,” creating dark corners housing projectors, films, aural effects, and music, which bleed into the neighboring spaces. Demand’s grouping of photography, kinetic projections, and sculpture affirms that stylizations of nature and the wider inclusion of new media take cues from the same voracious impulses seen at the 1925 *Exposition*.

Wit is also in the mix, and renders the familiar strange. Sigmar Polke’s series, “Höhere Wesen befehlen” (“Higher Beings Ordain,” 1968), displaces objects from their everyday routines into Dadaesque diversions (like a palm tree made of buttons or of stacked shot glasses). Ger Van Elk’s short film, “The Well-Shaven Cactus” (1970), is an endearing example of human intervention to circumvent one of nature’s best defense mechanisms, while Léon Gimpel’s “Interior view of Bossons Cave” (“Vue Intérieur de la grotte des Bossons,” 1911) shows more sublime, yet equally unusual discoveries: the icy mouth of a cave opening onto a flat spread of green mountain. The alien characteristics of plants are exquisitely pronounced in Chris Garofalo’s meticulous and menacing ceramic plant specimen. Kudjoe Affutu’s mock “Fridge” (2010) shows that mimetic love can also be paid to the inanimate. To add to the sweep of the space and its range of witticisms, Demand wraps the one side of the gallery with a trompe l’oeil wallpaper of stage curtains that pass behind Magritte’s three paintings—a clever backdrop that provides dramatic unity.

Luigi Ghirri’s photographs scattered throughout the space capture our spectacular attempts to quote nature in the form of dioramas, simulated landscapes, photos within photos, and greenery smattered on postcards and billboards. Ghirri, like Magritte, probes the meaning of nature with a focus on photography and reproduction.

Surrealism unlocked the unconscious with recurring images that rupture the skin of reality. The contemporary works beside Magritte's use the same species of images to continue to playfully shift the terrain of art. Like the birds in unlikely trees, Magritte reorients our reading until the strange is familiar.