

OPTIC OCCULTATION: Visible invisibility at Beyond Baroque

written by Anthony Seidman | March 19, 2015



Perhaps no other movement of the 20th century in literature and art has been so susceptible to parody as *Surrealism*, nor has any other term been so abused and simply misused. Upon hearing the classification, the misinformed enthusiast conjures up a mishmash of images—a buried Venus de Milo, a clock, some fish—that would be best employed as decoration for a coffee house or clothing boutique. Although many are overly familiar with Dalí, few study the automatic drawings of Masson, the lunar wastelands of Tanguy, or the monsters of Brauner.

Will Alexander—whose poetry is like a taut, electric cable extending from atavistic shadows, Breton, the Francophone poets of Africa to Lamantia—has curated a gathering of resplendent visions from the boundaries of dream, imagination and that other life which is barely tangible, a presence that beckons us, and which Breton assures us, exists elsewhere. The exhibit is on display at Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center in Venice, and it is entitled [*OPTIC OCCULTATION: Visible invisibility*](#). The viewer is offered a molten bouquet of paintings and sketches; they demonstrate the exploration of Surrealism currently taking place by an eclectic gathering of contemporary North American poets and visual artists. The exhibit is free, and it runs until March 22nd.

Apart from Philip Lamantia, perhaps no other major contemporary North American poet has been so active about insisting upon the revolutionary qualities of Surrealism, and its perpetual relevancy, than Will Alexander. During his tenure as poet in residence at Beyond Baroque, he has curated readings and gatherings of poets who draw their electricity from the Surreal wire, and he has done so with the fervor of one on a mission. Apart from this current exhibit, some of the most significant events due to Will Alexander's efforts have included the publication and book presentation of the deceased Laurence Weisberg, a poet whose poetry was a marvelous example of innate, deep imagery. Weisberg, a Los Angeles native, was also a stunning artist whose sketches and drawings remind one of the fanged vegetation and feathers of Arshile Gorky.

It is deeply significant that the exhibit is being held at the Mike Kelly Gallery at Beyond Baroque. For decades, Beyond Baroque has been the center of underground poetry, art, and music in Los Angeles. The art of Los Angeles radiates in the imagination of many, yet more often than not for the work of Rusha and its iconography of desolate parking lots and stucco apartments, or the mayonnaise-lathered dolls in the videos of Paul McCarthy. *OPTIC OCCULTATION: Visible invisibility* insists on revealing how Los Angeles art and letters also crackled under the influence of Surrealism. Indeed, some of the poets from this "Non-Existent City," such as Gene Frumkin and Bert Meyers, tapped into Surrealism as an alternative to certain tendencies in the

poetry of New York or some of the Beats. One also thinks of Los Angeles poet and artist K. Curtis Lyle—one of the founding members of the Watts Writers Workshop—whose collection *Electric Church* was published by Beyond Baroque. It comes as no surprise that Los Angeles gave birth to equally vibrant Surrealist visual art.

The exhibit showcases the art of Will Alexander, Byron Baker, Thom Burns, Steve Locke, Brian Lucas, Samuel Ribitch, Richard Waâra, and Sheila Scott-Wilkinson. There's much to marvel the viewer: the art of Ribitch, for example, who edits Oyster Moon Press—a premiere publisher of Surrealist poetry—vibrates with creatures ripped from the pages of the most arcane volume of cryptozoology, and this provides a perfect contrast to the art of Brian Lucas, one which alternately reminds the viewer of Australian Aboriginal Art, cosmological maps, and even the paintings of Pousette-Dart. Ribitch has also provided us with several collages that engage in direct dialogue with the best of this past century's Surrealist explorations of chance and juxtaposition via cut-up images.

Byron Baker's images pour themselves into one's gaze relentlessly: dazzling, frantic lines worm and snake their way into the narrow space of the frame. Restless mandalas, one could say. His black and white works on display remind this particular viewer of the more organic and anthropomorphic drawings of de Kooning, such as his preparatory sketches for the sculpture *Clamdigger*. Apart from his poetry, Will Alexander has created a dynamic body of visual art: his medusas and radiation anemones scintillate in palates and shapes that have become uniquely his own. This is a unique, if not major, exploration in visual art. The other artists included offer equally fascinating work; most importantly, this is the first Surrealist-only exhibit to be held in Los Angeles. I can't imagine when we will have the opportunity to view such a dynamic gathering like this again.