

‘Sixties Surreal’ at the Whitney Explores a Forgotten Side of the 1960s

It’s more a vibe than a thesis—but what a vibe!

By Ben Davis
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L O C K S G A L L E R Y



Shigeko Kubota, Self-Portrait (c. 1970–71). Museum of Modern Art, New York; gift of the Shigeko Kubota Video Art Foundation. © 2025 Estate of Shigeko

The biggest treat comes right at the beginning of “Sixties Surreal,” just now opening at the Whitney. You emerge from the elevator, and right there are the camels.

These are full-sized sculptures by Nancy Graves, and on a first impression you might think they were actual taxidermy camels. They are not.

The beasts get stranger the more you look at them, discovering the seams where they have been Frankenstein-ed together. And your mind starts to second guess whether their gawky proportions are exaggerated or, on the contrary, faithful to a nature whose weirdness you are only seeing for the first time, through art.



Installation view of "Sixties Surreal" at the Whitney Museum of American Art featuring Nancy Graves, *Camel VI*, *Camel VII* and *Camel VIII* (all 1968–1969). Photograph by Matthew Carasella

After a bit of looking, your first impression of these sculptures as having been merely realistic camels is what comes to feel strange. You start thinking about how your mind smooths over real weirdness when you encounter it, when it comes in a package that looks like something you know, or think you know...

That effect is not exactly "surreal" in any classical sense, but it's at least in the region. To have any real meaning, calling something "surreal" can't just mean "weird." It has to involve a weirdness that means something, a secret truth pushing up beneath the everyday like a mutant flower through concrete.

"Sixties Surreal" is a fun show and a worthwhile show, even if it is a bit of a muddle. Its thesis seems clear enough. "Surrealism was in the groundwater of American culture, yet it was often seen as tasteless or passé, particularly by the New York-centric art world," the introductory text, posted right behind the camels, explains. "For many artists working in the 1960s, Surrealism—or the more general idea of the 'surreal'—became a liberating force."



Luis Jimenez, *Blond TV Image* (1967) in "Surreal Sixties." Photo by Ben Davis.



No doubt. But what does “the surreal” mean? With its 111 artists across the museum’s entire fifth floor, “Sixties Surreal” essentially proposes that it was... everything. Everything, that is, that was not part of a narrowly defined “New York-centric art world,” its foil. As one of the artists in the show, the painter Martha Edelheit, told Deborah Solomon at the Times, “The title of the show bewildered me because I don’t think of anything I do as Surreal.” Pretty much!

When you study the logic of its inclusions and absences, “Sixties Surreal” is not primarily a show telling a story about Surrealism in the 1960s. It invokes “the surreal” as a handy catch-all to include all that was left out by the old emphasis on Pop, Minimalism, and Conceptualism as the cardinal art movements of the 1960s—that is, it is another curatorial exercise in the formation of a counter-canon, to rewrite art history from the point of view of what was previously excluded.



From left to right: Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Confessions for Myself*, 1972; Jeremy Anderson, *Riverrun*, 1965; Hannah Wilke, *Teasel Cushion*, 1967; Yayoi Kusama, *Accumulation*, c. 1963; Louise Bourgeois, *Fée Couturière*, 1963; Deborah Remington, *Haddonfield*, 1965; Judy Chicago, *In My Mother’s House*, c. 1962-64; Franklin Williams, *Untitled*, 1967. Photograph by Matthew Carasella

And if the mission is just getting eyes on a lot of interesting art that might be new, it delivers. Some discoveries for me: I like the very odd *Riverrun* (1965) by the California artist Jeremy Anderson, a candy-colored thing that’s like a sawhorse crossbred with human viscera. I find Luis Jimenez’s cartoonish fiberglass sculptural combination of a woman’s head and TV box, *Blond TV Image* (1967), very memorable. The Kiowa Indian painter T.C. Cannon’s *Andrew Myrik — Let ‘Em Eat Grass* (1970) depicts a historical anecdote from the 1862 Dakota War—all the more haunting in the way that its grisly subject matter, a figure buried up to the neck with its mouth stuffed with grass, is belied by the loose prettiness of his color choices. Experimental San Francisco filmmaker Jordon Belson’s depiction of a transcendent meditative state in abstract movie form, *Samadhi* (1967), breezes past psychedelia towards something durably lovely.

I also like Rupert Garcia, Miyoko Ito, Deborah Reminton, Carlos Villa... and I could go on.



T.C. Cannon, *Andrew Myrick – Let Em Eat Grass* (1970). United States Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board, Southern Plains Indian Museum, Anadarko, OK. © US Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board

Apparently “Sixties Surreal” read as too counter-canonical for Whitney director Scott Rothkopf, who, Solomon also reports, suggested having a few more names people might know in the show. Thus, a grey-on-grey Andy Warhol Marilyn from 1967, which feels about as surreal as a pancake.

The odd thing is that Warhol could have been made to belong. There is, in fact, a meaty story about Surrealism’s relation to Pop Art in the Sixties to be told. The era saw a much-noted revival in fine-art interest in the Surrealist movement in the United States. Salvador Dalí and René Magritte both had big shows in New York in the mid-’60s, which drew crowds and were hotly debated. And if you read almost any U.S. review of a show featuring classic Surrealist art of any kind from the ‘60s, it will mention that the early-’60s Pop scene had paved the way for a rewriting of art history in favor of the Surrealists. That



Left to right: Andy Warhol, *Marilyn* (1967); Diane Arbus, *Bela Lugosi as “Dracula,”* close-up, 1958 (1958); Shawn Walker, *Tiffany’s Window on 57th Street, NYC* (c. 1968–72); and Diane Arbus, *Clouds on-screen at a drive-in movie, N.J.* 1961 (1961). Photo by Ben Davis.



Pop-to-Surrealism connection was art-critic commonsense then, but it's not at all obvious to viewers now (it wasn't obvious to me while I was at the "Sixties Surreal" show itself; reading art historian Sandra Zalman's book on the subject afterwards is what reminded me). Figurative Surrealism had been the bad object for a lot of the formalist criticism that had elevated Abstract Expressionism; Pop, however, was seen as the return of figurative art. Surrealism was big on the use of found objects; Pop focused on everyday stuff. Surrealism had been considered very commercial and way too close to the shock and fantasy that characterized the U.S. ad industry; Pop art celebrated the world of products and advertising. Dalí as a media personality very much presaged Warhol as one. The legendary 1963 ad for the Volkswagen Beetle, by the firm Doyle Dane Bernbach (inspiration for *Mad Men*), depicting the odd-shaped German car with the deliberately incongruous caption "Lemon," resonates more with Magritte's brain-puzzle art than any painting or sculpture in "Sixties Surreal."

I think all that is interesting! But "Sixties Surreal" specifically avoids any association with any canonical Surrealists and brackets out most of the direct associations with the mainstream of groovy-'60s commercial culture. Rather than Surrealism defined by any specific historical school or style or technique, this show prefers "surrealism" as a broad and inclusive vibe.

But then that leaves that Warhol Marilyn looking like what it was: an afterthought.



Karl Wirsum, *Screamin' Jay Hawkins* (1968). Art Institute of Chicago; Mr. and Mrs. Frank G. Logan Purchase Prize Fund, 1969.248. © The Estate of Karl Wirsum



No one's going to think too much about this, maybe. Perhaps this is just my personal preference for concrete narrative over vague themes. I'll try to convince you that it matters anyway.

As you wander at the Whitney, you get multiple paintings by the various members of the Hairy Who, the Chicago-based figurative painters such as Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, and Karl Wirsum, who specialized in various flavors of freaky hard-edged cartoon imagery, scattered about. You also happen upon samples of work by L.A.-area Black artists like John Outterbridge and Noah Purifoy, who spun up handsome, hard-hitting assemblage work in and out of the rubble of the Watts Rebellion.

These are groups the Whitney wants to give their due, and I like seeing both here—but compared to the good that simply dedicating an actual gallery in the show to either might have had, placing their works in galleries organized around loose surreal-ish themes offers much less to hold onto. The fuzziness that allows more stuff in inherently loses resolution.



Jordan Belson, *Samadhi* (1967). Image courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art.

Then there is an artwork like Harold Stevenson's *The New Adam* (1962), another discovery for me from this show (read my colleague William Van Meter's huge story about Stevenson for his full background). After the Nancy Graves camels, it's what everyone will remember. Stevenson's epic painting of a nude male figure sprawls languorously across multiple canvasses, gauzy with sensuality.

But the utility of calling this fine work "surreal" is not clear to me. What makes *The New Adam* so memorable is how monumentally direct it is about gay desire. There's nothing eerie or uncanny about this huge hunk, and its references are classical, to Michelangelo.



Franklin Williams, *Untitled* (1966). Collection of Franklin Williams; courtesy Parker Gallery, Los Angeles, CA. © Franklin Williams



The 1960s are recalled as an era of libidinal revolt after the repressive '50s, and French Surrealism was associated with a revolt against reason and authority that would resonate with the era's New Left. This progressive association is key to the Whitney's framing of a diffuse surrealist energy as a guide to the art of the era here.

No single art work might make this connection better than one that is shown high up on a wall in the show's first gallery: *Schmeerguntz* (1965), a stunner of a collage film co-directed by the duo of Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley. It was memorably described by the critic Ernest Callenbach as "one big, long raucous belch in the face of the American home," a 15-minute choreographed riot of images juxtaposing glam beauty ads and Miss America pageant footage with a bunch of messy images of domestic life—all the less seemly stuff that was stuffed down and not talked about in those pre-feminist times.

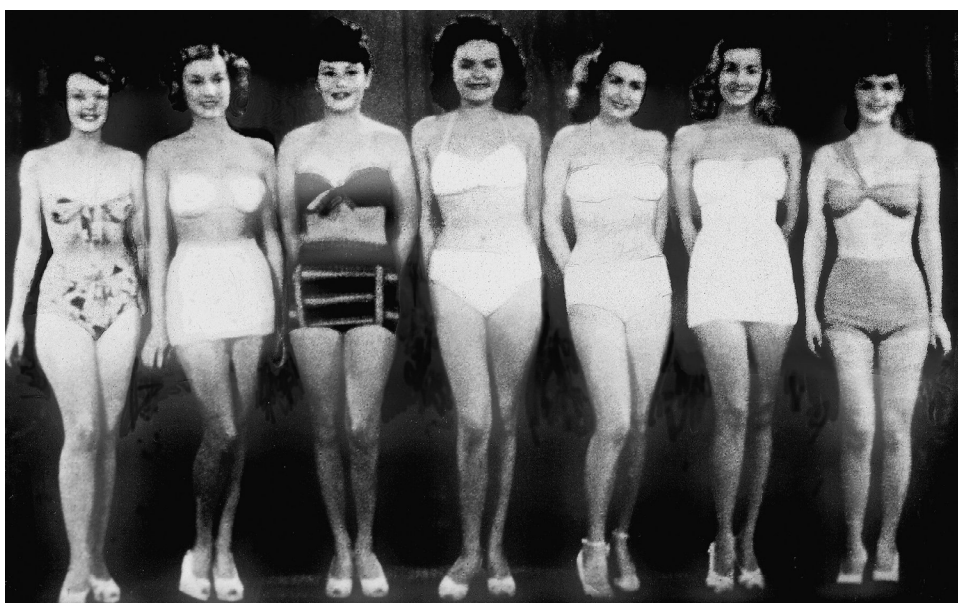


Image from Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley, *Schmeerguntz* (1966). Image courtesy the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Here is an artwork that legitimately can claim to have changed the world. "As I watched [the film]," feminist activist Carol Hanisch would remember later of seeing *Schmeerguntz*, "it dawned on me that the Miss America pageant would be a really great way to get women's liberation in the public consciousness." Nelson and Wiley's difficult artwork was thus inspiration for the 1968 protest of Miss America in Atlantic City that would vault feminism to being a national topic of discussion. In a creative protest that echoes the film's themes, protesters hurled "instruments of female torture" like high heels, girdles, and women's magazines into a Freedom Trash Can. Whether anyone burned a bra is still debated, but it's where the cliché comes from.

But was this type of action truly surreal, at its root?

In the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, Andre Breton wrote that the movement's goal was to "resolve the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality into an absolute reality, a super-reality"—hence Sur-realism. In their film, Nelson and Wiley were doing something that

almost reverses this: Callenbach was correct when he called Schmeerguntz a “nonstop counterpoint of the Ideal versus the Real.” It makes the fantasy look extra-fake and the reality look extra-dismal by the action of concentrated contrast.



Installation view of “Sixties Surreal” at the Whitney Museum of American Art. From left to right: Karl Wirsum, *Screamin’ Jay Hawkins* (1968); Claes Oldenburg, *Soft Toilet* (1966); Alex Hay, *Paper Bag* (1968); Lee Lozano, *No Title* (1964). Photograph by Matthew Carasella

Clearly seen, Schmeerguntz represents a form of deflationary anti-Pop realism. And given how consequential this artwork turns out to have been, I think it’s worth looking at how it actually works in a way that the surrounding “surreal” story slightly distracts from. Sometimes your mind smooths over real weirdness when you encounter it, when it’s presented in a package that looks like something you know, or think you know.

The narrative of “Sixties Surreal” falls apart in more ways than it hangs together, and maybe is even more interesting in how it falls apart. But I am truly glad to have the chance to get to know Schmeerguntz—don’t miss it. And I do love those camels.

“Sixties Surreal” is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, New York, New York, September 24, 2025–January 19, 2026