

2005

Review of *Dalí*, edited by Dawn Ades

Steven Z. Levine

Bryn Mawr College, slevine@brynmawr.edu

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs

 Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Custom Citation

Levine, Steven Z. Review of *Dalí*, edited by Dawn Ades. *CAA Reviews* 2005.54. <http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/762>.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/hart_pubs/24

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Review of *Dalí*, edited by Dawn Ades (exhibition catalogue). Philadelphia: Rizzoli in association with Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2003. 560 pp.; 500 ills. (0847826732)

Exhibition Schedule: Palazzo Grassi, Venice, September 12, 2004–January 16, 2005; Philadelphia Museum of Art, February 16–May 30, 2005

Steven Z. Levine

Published October 18, 2005

CrossRef DOI: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2005.54

The centennial exhibition of the works of Salvador Dalí (1904–1989) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art was a signal event for those interested in the past century of intimate relations between the visual arts and psychoanalysis. In *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (New York: Dial Press, 1942; 17–18), the painter reports that during their first meeting he and Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) were astonished at the congruence of their views on the primacy of paranoia as a form of active invention in contradistinction to the passive experience of the dream. Back-to-back articles in the Surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1933 expressed an exhilarating affinity between the doctoral research of the young Parisian psychiatrist on the systematic symbolic significance of the delusions and hallucinations of clinical paranoia and the self-styled paranoiac-critical method of the young Catalonian painter, whereby hallucinatory images were deliriously projected onto the sober perspectival coordinates of figurative art. During a lecture tour forty years later, the now-celebrated psychoanalyst chanced to run into the still-infamous painter at the St. Regis hotel in New York City. It is in the spirit of these early and late meetings in their respective careers that I will delineate a quasi-Lacanian itinerary as I dally through the Philadelphia Museum of Art's (PMA) unlaconic Dalinian show. My aim, as shared with Lacan and Dalí, and as articulated by the latter in a text entitled "The Rotting Donkey" (1930), is the total discrediting of any normative notion of objective perception unstained by the polymorphous emanations of embodied human desire.

Emblazoned with dozens of huge mustachioed banners up and down the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and all across Philadelphia's principal points of urban transit and trade, the City of Brotherly Love primped itself to the nines in order to welcome a national and international host of visitors to what its tourist website gophila.com called "The Dalí Experience, a lively dreamscape complete with Dalí-related menus and lavishly decorated retail window displays—all inspired by the startling and outrageous artistic vision that made Salvador Dalí a household name." Sponsored by Advanta, a small-business financial-services provider, the blockbuster exhibition was only the center of an orchestrated civic campaign to show off Philadelphia to its "surreal"-est advantage.

Not unlike the entrepreneurial self-promotion and esoteric self-reflection of the pandering and professorial painter's split persona, *Dalí* was, to again quote gophila.com, "a regionwide collection of promotions and events designed to celebrate Dalí and to maximize the positive economic impact the exhibition will have on our region," as well as a landmark scholarly event memorialized by a monumental catalogue illustrating every artwork in the exhibition, and designed to serve present and future generations. Also part of the overall proceedings was an international symposium, "The Dalí Renaissance," that aimed to consolidate renewed serious art-historical interest in this oft-maligned favorite of middlebrow illusionist taste. Sign-posted by wall texts containing sexually explicit language, the Philadelphia staging was the second and final installation of some two hundred of the two-hundred-and-fifty objects comprising the exhibition's inaugural display at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Italy. The works were procured from public and private lenders in Europe, the Americas, and

Asia, and their commentary expedited by the unmatched archival and curatorial resources of the Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation in Figueres, Spain, and the Salvador Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida. The rigorous scholarship of guest curator Dawn Ades of the University of Essex and the Philadelphia Museum's curator of modern art, Michael Taylor, is further fleshed out by a richly detailed and illustrated chronology compiled by Montse Aguer, Carme Ruiz, and Teresa Moner; an exhaustive bibliography of articles, monographs, and exhibitions compiled by Elliott H. King; a selective translation of many of the artist's hard-to-find writings from 1928 to 1961; and individual catalogue and encyclopedia entries by a distinguished Dalínian dozen of international scholars referencing a colorful cast of characters including Bachelard, Bataille, Breton, Franco, Freud, Gaudí, Heisenberg, Lacan, Lorca, Picasso, Schiapparelli, Velázquez, and Warhol, while also touching on such delirious topics as bread, cheese, crutches, disgust, jewels, nuclear mysticism, perversion, relativity theory, rhinoceros horn, simulacrum, and soft structures. In addition, the Philadelphia Museum supplemented the printed representation of the exhibition with an exemplary website by Bill Ristine and his staff that is full of educational materials for schools, scholars, and shoppers alike. The website features, for example, a fascinating animated reconstruction of the multiple overlapping images underlying *The Endless Enigma* (1938).

Visitors with timed tickets awaited admittance while a slideshow of black-and-white photographs played in continuous loops above the entrance to the exhibition and its copiously stocked shop of Dalí lobsters, loungewear, and lollies (though there were no Dalí llamas). Acoustiguides at the ready, ten thousand visitors a day traversed the fantasy of the Dalínian world until they themselves became the ineradicable framework of one's own perusal of the painter's seven decades of artistic work. Moving at a snail's pace (one of the artist's favored exoskeletal fetishes as seen in *The Sublime Moment* of 1938), the plugged-in visitors piously followed the audio stations en masse. I paranoiacally felt the brush of their breath and gaze on the back of my neck as I craned this way and that in an effort to glimpse the often tiny paintings selected for acoustic review.

The labyrinthine unwinding of the show was prefaced by an emblematic self-portrait, *Impressions of Africa* (1938), a place never visited by Dalí in person but here conjured in admonitory fashion. As the spectator is warned away from the back-turned painting on its easel by the painter's extended, foreshortened, and mirror-reversed left hand, there appears above Dalí's head an oscillating double image of his wife Gala and the African mud-brick architecture into which her own head seems to calcify. Later in the exhibition, there again appears this same paranoid double image separated into animate and inanimate components in *My Wife, Nude, Contemplating Her Own Flesh Becoming Stairs, Three Vertebrae of a Column, Sky and Architecture* (1945). This soft-hard bivalence of the world of things simultaneously seen and envisioned is the hallmark of Dalí's paranoiac-critical method wherein objects of eyesight are projectively reconfigured under the libidinal pressure of an autocentric, subjective gaze.

In *My Wife, Nude*, Gala is seen from the rear; in this rendering, the paranoid meaning of Dalí's back-turned figures could not be clearer. This is not the Romantic longing for a transcendental release beyond the world of earthly finitude as found in Casper David Friedrich's *Rückenfiguren*, but rather the fantasy of taking the world of the flesh from behind in a tragic and suicidal act of sodomy that Dalí reiterates across the span of his writings and paintings from the 1920s to his death in 1989. In the present age of fundamentalist repression of our irrepressibly sexual being, it is courageous of museum director Anne d'Harnoncourt to put such highly charged material so nakedly on view. This decision is a fitting pendant to her landmark 1973 exhibition of the works of Marcel Duchamp, whose peep-holed wooden doors framing *Etant donné*—a posthumous installation at PMA in which one peeks at the genitals of a supine and headless woman—come from Cadaqués, the seaside vacation town of his great friend Dalí.

Potentially sodomizing vectors of perverse desire reverberate throughout the Dalí exhibition. In an immaculate portrait of 1925, the painter's seventeen-year-old sister looks out a window in their Cadaqués home with an invisible seaward gaze that is later stripped bare in two pictures not seen in Philadelphia: *Young Virgin Auto-Sodomized by the Horns of Her Own Chastity* (1954) and its nail-studded "nuclear mystical" variant, *Goddess Leaning on Her Elbow—Continuum of the Four Buttocks or Five Rhinoceros Horns Making a Virgin or Birth of a Deity* (1960). The post-Hiroshima atomized anatomy of Dalí's Heisenbergian goddess of space-time indeterminacy recalls the disordered Freudian syntax of *Little Ashes* (1928), which features at its lower center margin the rear view of a naked female torso, headless and spouting blood. Dalí's scandalously pornographic "Rêverie" from *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1931) purports to record a masturbatory fantasy of sodomizing an eleven-year-old girl named Dullita. In the magnified posterior of the double portrait of Gala facing herself, *The Angelus of Gala* (1935), we find the visual correlative of a further published fantasy of sodomizing the woman he loves at the door of a museum. Velázquez's Rokeby Venus offers the reminiscence of her canonical backside in the knife-cut pages of the *Book Transforming Itself into a Nude Woman* as observed from above by the self-absorbed gaze of Dalí-Narcissus (1940). Twenty years later, Ingres's Louvre-enshrined *Bather of Valpinçon* provokes its own paranoid appropriation in *Gala Nude Seen from Behind* (1960). Finally, in the posthumously completed animated cartoon *Destino* (2003), a failed collaboration with Walt Disney dating from 1946, the sodomitical motif is transformed into the bowing of a living cello. On continuous view in the video gallery, this hallucinatory vision of taking the resonant body of the instrument between the legs appeared in three other versions: in a sadistic allegory of music, *The Red Orchestra* (1957); in a supporting performance bordering a paranoid reenactment of Millet's pious *Angelus* (1932), where the painter notoriously saw a female praying mantis primed to devour its copulatory counterpart just as Dalí imagined his mother wished to devour his own baby penis; and, most unexpectedly, in the very early *Portrait of the Cellist Ricard Pichot* (1920), whose instrument's f-holes form the erogenous rims that connect the inside and outside of the body in Dalí's final painting, *The Swallow's Tail* (1983), a livid veil of Veronica wherein the backside of a spectral cello and the f-holes of his trademark mustache converge in an invisible self-portrait plotting the mathematical theory of catastrophe as an uncanny rent in the fabric of space and time.

But wait, I should have started all this the other way around, from the front, not from the ambivalent infant's desire to be or not be the imaginary sodomitical phallus for the mother—whose square, loving portrait Dalí painted in *Untitled (Portrait of the Artist's Mother, Dona Felipa Domènech de Dalí)* (1920)—but from the adult's assumption of the symbolic mandate of the father, whose square, prohibitive portrait he painted in *Portrait of My Father* (1925), four years after the death of his mother and three years after his father's remarriage to his mother's younger sister. Husband to Felipa Domènech Ferrés, the redoubtable notary Salvador Dalí Cusí sired a first son upon whom he bestowed his name, Salvador Galo Anselme Dalí Domènech. This son died less than two years later and nine months before Dalí again inscribed his name on the certificate of birth of a second son, Salvador Felipe Jacinto Dalí Domènech, a posthumous naming that the artist later called a criminal act. Named Felipe Domènech after his mother and Salvador Dalí after his father and dead brother, whose second name of Galo he found again in the name of Gala his muse, and whose square, dematerialized, and paranoiically doubled vulture-visage he portrayed in *Portrait of My Dead Brother* (1963). This belated Savior with a lifelong Christ-identification, as seen in his stereoscopic crucifixions of 1978, *Gala's Christ*, this same Salvador Mundi was also Salvador Masturbator, whose seminal soft self-portrait as *The Great Masturbator* (1929) was for me the dominant picture of the show. Unwilling ever to leave the nursery of his mother, whose death leaves a hole in the real sinews of his being, Dalí narcissistically seeks to fill that void with the vain echo of a silently shrieking refrain, "ma mère, ma mère, ma mère," repeated thirty-six times in a second soft self-portrait of 1929 known as *The Enigma of Desire*. Culminating this solipsistic sequence is *Soft Self-Portrait with Fried Bacon* (1941), a tragicomic farce

of melting masculinity solemnly and hilariously supported by no less than eight phallic crutches—avatars of Dalí's mahlstick and walking-stick—which prop up soft organic excrescences throughout the exhibition and blasphemously blossom as the three crosses of the Gospels in the neo-Renaissance female portrait entitled *Melencolia* (1945).

“It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I would care to admit, or whether there is more truth in [Daniel Paul] Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe.” Freud's “Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia” (1911; in *Case Histories II*, London: Penguin Freud Library, 1991; 218) centers on a magistrate's elaborate fantasies of being impregnated from behind by God so as to bring about the salvation of the world. Quoted in the catalogue by Dawn Ades (1992), this is Freud's paranoid expression of fear for the persecutory reception of his theories of psychoanalysis—theories that provided the point of departure for Dalí and Lacan's delirious studies in paranoia. In his preface to the French translation of Schreber's memoirs, Lacan recalls the efficacy of Dalí's career in propagating the unwelcome truth of paranoid knowledge, which “among all that adorns itself as knowledge, is the least obscene” (*Cahiers pour l'analyse* 5, 1966: 69–72). In the sometimes X-rated *mise-en-scène* of the Dalí catalogue and exhibition, we have a salutary museological confrontation with the vexed primal scene of human sexuality and desire that will stand as a beacon for future scholars, curators, readers, and viewers wishing not to linger in the blind ignorance that willfully passes for knowledge in an increasingly censored public sphere.

Steven Z. Levine

Leslie Clark Professor in the Humanities and Professor of History of Art, Bryn Mawr College

slevine@brynmawr.edu