# Israel Museum's Exhibition Marking Surrealism's Centennial Is Absolutely Dreamy. But, Who Is the Dreamer?

**Art review | A comprehensive exhibition at the Israel Museum, inspired by the Surrealist art movement, provides a timely opportunity for reflection as reason has apparently fallen asleep around the world**


Les songes

**Yinka Shonibare. "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Asia)", 2008.** Credit: Yinka Shonibare CBE. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2024. Image courtesy James Cohan Gallery

**Avi Pitchon**
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The text at the entrance to the impressive Lucid Dreams exhibition proposes that the origin of dreams – and art – is human. That's quite likely. In the 14th episode of Twin Peaks: The Return, FBI agent Gordon Cole (played by David Lynch, the series' creator) dreams that he is sat in a café, facing actress Monica Bellucci. We're watching his dream; Bellucci tells him that they are like the dreamer who lives inside the dream. She then turns to the camera and asks us, the viewers: "But who is

the dreamer?"

This is a lucid dream. The dreamer knows that he is dreaming and can influence what is happening. Art is an act of lucid dreaming. But who is the dreamer? Is it the viewer? That is likely, but hard to believe. Imagination is too wild. We are reasonable people, people who make suppositions.

**This Israeli artist no longer believes in a global art community**

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**"Lying down" by Samah Shehadeh, 2020. Is everything human, or too human?** Credit: Samah Shehadeh

It's sufficient to be electrified by a magnificent and enchanting

volume of Carl Gustav Jung's "The Red Book," on display at the exhibition, in order to be reminded that even psychoanalysis knocked on the walls of that which is human, wondering if anything outside it would answer. Alongside Jung, the exhibition presents samples off an immense body of knowledge from around the world - from ancient manuscripts to Chinese dream-stones.

Within the scope of religion, the source of dreams is God and his helpers. In the Age of Reason, art gradually moved toward the human, the real, the mundane, the rational, the autonomous, creating a lucid dream which engendered democracy and socialism. Who is the dreamer? God is dead, but a mysterious engine continues to generate an inexplicable and transformative force situated at the core of artistic expression.



The abovementioned text recognizes this. This immense exhibition, unsurprisingly, finds it difficult to adopt a stable position: is everything human, or too human?

**Kimiko Yoshida. "The Birth of Reason Generates Beauty," 2004. What is reason? When and where was it born?** Credit: Kimiko Yoshida

Five large-scale photographs by British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare reenact Francisco Goya's seminal work, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," from the end of the 18th century: it depicts a man who fell asleep at his desk, a flock of threatening owls appearing behind him. Shonibare multiplied this scene five-fold in order to represent the five continents, with each photo featuring a different man, wearing a different set of garish, psychedelic attire.

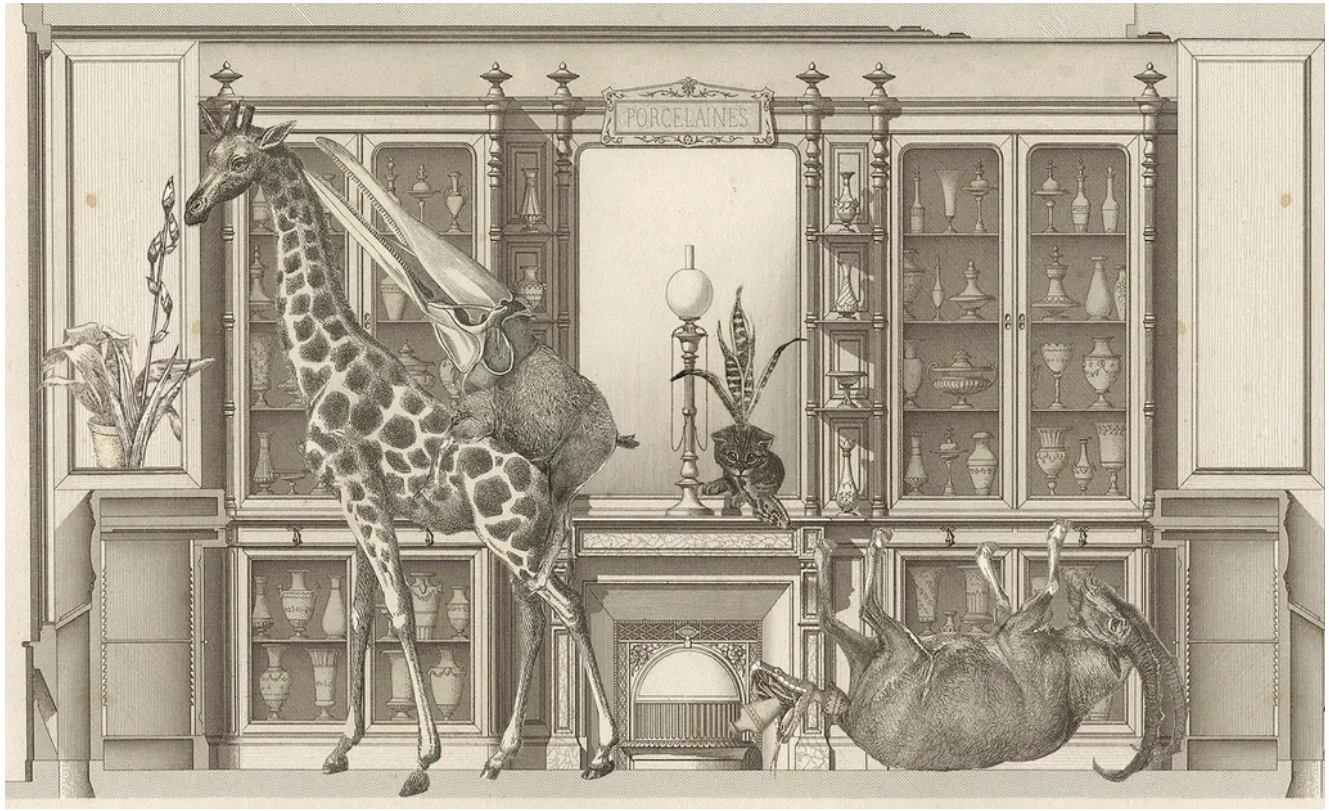
The exhibition offers additional tributes to Goya, such as Israeli artist David Ginaton's, who represents the 1970s in Israel as beset by a visual and spiritual poverty, or photographer Kimiko Yoshida, whose dark self-portrait, showing a frightened and tormented face, is entitled "The Birth of Reason Generates Beauty."

Yoshida subscribes to that title, however her teeth are blackened, as was the custom among women of the nobility and among samurai between the 10th and 20th centuries, an era in which the color black was considered in Japan to be exceptionally beautiful. We in the West take fright at that. So, what is reason? When and where was it born? Is surrealism (represented in this exhibition by Breton, Dali, Tanguy, Arp and others), in retrospect, only the inverse mirror image of Reason, or in other words, part of it? It's likely, but hard to believe.

**Salvador Dalí. Surrealistic Essay, 1934.** Credit: Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, VEGAP, Jerusalem, 2024.

It's difficult to think of anything more topical in an era in which reason has ostensibly fallen asleep across the globe, as various horrific events are taking place. But what have we been missing for some 200-odd years? The "who is the dreamer" part.

Shonibare severs the expected ethnographic link between his figures and the continents, changing the dreamers, with their absurd costumes, into the ones being dreamed about, liberating viewers so that they can enjoy or experience unbridled horror, in defiance of the comprehensive labor of research that went into this exhibition. It's inevitable: focusing on dreaming in an exhibition marking the centennial of the Surrealist movement is bound to evoke some tremors.




**Nelly Agassi. ARDOR, 2024.** Credit: Animation: Maya Raviv; voice: Nati Zeidenstadt/Nelly Agassi/Dvir Gallery, Tel Aviv; WHOISPOLA, Warsaw

One of the most wonderful rooms at the exhibition is labeled "In My Dream," containing a circus-like installation of collages by visual artist Dina Goldstein. We're looking at an Ashkenazi-style living room, which, as darkness falls, is taken over by images, animals, creatures, magical scenes and landscapes. The combination of technique (collage, silhouettes, a magic lantern of sorts) and aesthetics evokes associations of the "Belle Époque" and the "Fin de siècle" periods, which

followed the birth of the Enlightenment and the Romantic period which rebelled against it, followed by modernism in its first steps, leading up to World War I.

Another marvelous room features three screenings of collage-based (again!) animations by Nelly Agassi, this time in black and white, humorously winking at period aesthetics that touch on the ones displayed in the "In My Dream" room, such as zoological illustrations that come alive, in animated form, in an oh-so-civilized period salon. The screenings are shown alongside assemblage pieces, tiny Cabinets of Curiosities, created by Nelly's father, the late Meir Agassi. The dialogue between the various aesthetics and between daughter and father is captivating, tugging at one's heart.

**Lewis Carroll's 1874 photo of Xie Sleeping.** Credit: Vera and Arturo Schwarz Collection of Dada and Surrealist Art, Israel Museum

Another powerful room: Lewis Carroll's 1874 photograph "Xie

Sleeping", displayed alongside the unhinged "Queen Mariana" assemblage by Alberto Gironella, and the iconic "Black and White" by Man Ray. We, the sensible ones, are suspicious of Carroll's motives for photographing young girls, in a period during which children worked in coal mines. However, we are still displaying his photos 150 years later. The nature of his rather captivating photos is not unusual for his time. But what about Carroll himself?

Why did his stammer disappear only in the company of little girls? Is it possible that he understood the nature of childhood before it was "invented" as a distinct period of growing up, in the 20th century? It is. And how is this linked to the exhibition? "Alice in Wonderland," obviously, which he wrote at the request of the young Alice Liddell. And "Xie Sleeping," what is she dreaming about?

**Dina Goldstein. "In My Dream," 2024.** Credit: Dina Goldstein

Perhaps about fairies, which quite a few Victorian artists painted, wailing afterward that they had vanished from the world when World War I began – from behind the bars of insane asylums. One can get a partial and disturbing idea about the fate of young girls in the 21st century in a deliberately primitive 3-D animated movie entitled "Dream Journal," created in 2016 by Jon Rafman. A bit earlier, Carroll and Freud infiltrated the Soviet Union – which on paper at least was the ultimate rational regime – through the ingenious works of Alexander Aksinin, between 1977 and 1981.

"Lying down" by Samah Shehadeh from 2020 presents dreaming of a place of total freedom. The charcoal drawing is frightening; in it, a woman lying horizontal, floating in midair, as if possessed by demons. What is so frightening? That it's the demons that have liberated her. From what? From the binds of the Christian witch hunts and the Freudian taming of female hysteria. In Fatma Shanan's self-portrait, she is lying on the floor, surrounded by flowers. The setting is secular, but something is knocking on the same door Shehadeh has broken through. Both drawings are filled with restrained power.

**Queen Mariana assemblage by Alberto Gironella.** Credit: Zohar Shemesh

The transparent ghostly image in the self-portrait photograph by Michal Heiman from 1978, demands, in the words of Heiman herself, a foothold in the "monopoly on representing the symbolic order" which she would not forfeit, even for museums. The women eating apples, in a video by Raida Adon, appear to know all this already.

In two Kate Bush albums, "Never for Ever" and "The Dreaming", reason and monsters, science (the sound) and magic (the music) live in harmony. On the front cover of the former, Bush is shown releasing, under her dress of clouds, a multitude of animals and creatures (on the back she is photographed as a bat); the latter cover shows her about to kiss Houdini – the key to release him from his shackles on her tongue. Production and songs, tricks and magic. In the virtual reality work by new media artists Miri Segal and Nir Harel, there is a moment in which one must shut their eyes in order to see. When you open your eyes, you glimpse for a fraction of a second a vanishing scene. You have to shut your eyes in order to see it.

**Michal Heiman self-portrait from 1978.** Credit: Michal Heiman

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