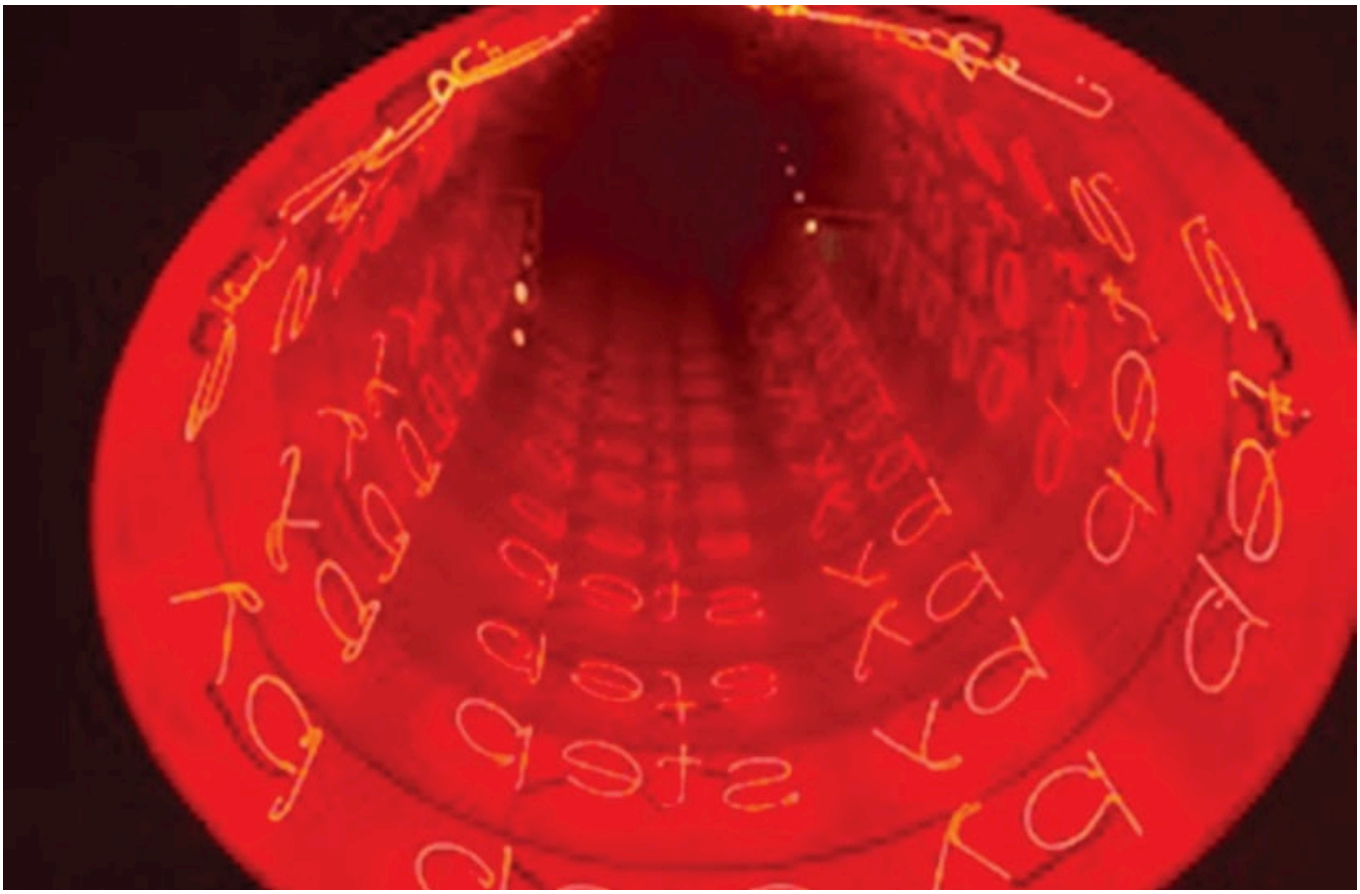

Multidisciplinary artist Guy Zagursky's 'Step by Step' references Jacob's biblical dream.
(photo credit: Warhaftig Venezian)

JP MUST.

Two new shows at the Israel Museum expound on the subconscious

By BARRY DAVIS JANUARY 12, 2025 22:48

inJerusalem

How often do we use the term "surreal"? In the everyday run of life, that naturally happens far more in mundane circumstances than in reference to the artistic genre, which recently reached a milestone anniversary.

"Dreams are fundamental to surrealism, which marks a centenary this year: 100 years since the publication of André Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924," notes Suzanne Landau, Anne and Jerome Fisher director of the Israel Museum. Breton, a French writer and poet, is considered a co-founder of surrealism and the movement's front line theorist.

With that wide-ranging thematic substratum set in place, one can then proceed to a broad sweep of fields and subject matter, as curator Adina Kamien has done with aplomb in assembling an expansive array of items for the "Lucid Dreams" exhibition, deftly designed by Shirly Yahalomi. It runs in tandem with the Alma Mater sound, video, and light installation devised by Milan-based Israeli artist and musician Yuval Avital, and curated by Talia Amar. Both opened at the Israel Museum last month and are due to run through to June.

Dreams at the Israel Museum

Rumor has it that we all have dreams, whether or not we recall them when we wake up. Pioneering psychiatrist, psychotherapist, and psychologist Carl Jung lends a sagacious pertinent observation to the display proceedings at the museum: "The dream is a little hidden door in the innermost and most secret recesses of the soul."

If that is indeed the case – and who would contest any comment by the venerated evolutionary theorist? – reveries are an invaluable source of inspiration for all artists. This can refer to nocturnal or diurnal sleeps – schlaff stunde-siesta snoozes included – or possibly dreamlike mindsets induced by various chemical or alcoholic substances.

'Lucid Dreams' surrealism exhibition. (credit: Zohar Shemesh/The Israel Museum)

Whatever the inducement to nod off, or the transition to a different state of consciousness, "Lucid Dreams" goes the whole historical, cultural, and artistic hog.

"Artists use dreams and their associated meanings, stories, and objects as liminal spaces of experimentation, creative vision, and illumination," Kamien posits. "Dream images call for interpretation and the unraveling of enigmatic symbols and word-image relationships."

The literary element has been around for eons, particularly in artifacts of yore such as a Jewish incantation bowl on display at the museum, with an Aramaic inscription that spirals upward and outward from the base. The religious content of the bowl, which dates back to somewhere between the 5th and 7th centuries, opens with the Shema Yisrael prayer, followed by a long text designed to ward off evil spirits. The wording took other unwanted predicaments into consideration too, and purported to serve as a panacea for ailments, as well as ensuring victory on the battlefield and guaranteeing success in various ventures. The tie-in to the exhibition theme transpires when one reads that the invocation addressed Babylonian Jewry's fears of "demons, spirits, and Liliths that were believed to threaten people not only when they were awake but also in their dreams."

The exhibition spans millennia, a lengthy art history timeline, faiths, cultural divides, and schools of artistic thought.

One can't, of course, mention dreams in a Jewish historical context without referencing Joseph and his reading of Pharaoh's nocturnal images. That duly appears at the museum in the form of an etching and drypoint work from 1894 by German artist and writer Lovis Corinth, whose oeuvre straddled impressionism and expressionism. The scene depicts an animated Joseph, complete with hook nose, clad only in a loincloth, as he illuminates the statuesque Egyptian ruler about the meaning of his dreams.

Again, any biblical mention of dreams has to feature Jacob, as in a page from a late-15th-century copy of the Yehuda Haggadah from Franconia, southern Germany.

There are all sorts of cultural, religious, and temporal bridges across the exhibition, which occupies a large number of display areas. Some links are more tenuous than others, but they all make for fascinating and even fun viewing.

The subject of tall structures is a case in point, particularly if you take the titular field of mindfulness to its farthest definitive extremes. The idea of elevated perspicacity, if taken in a literal sense, suggests a need to gain greater access to the celestial plane. The Tower of Babel is probably the most striking manifestation of that in the Old Testament, and a characteristically deceptive woodcut by Dutch graphic artist M.C. Escher of that very name is a requisite inclusion.

The universality of dreaming, regardless of cultural baggage, comes across in an alluring homonymous work by Japanese-American sculptor Shinkichi Tajiri. The 1.2-meter-high bronze piece conveys a sense of the East, as well as the foolhardy attempt by humankind to overreach its natural station here on planet Earth. An allusion to hubris-intoxicated politicians around the world perhaps?

This is a big show, on all sorts of levels. Yahalomi has done a good job with dispersing and compartmentalizing the multidisciplinary spread. There are conventional display spaces with plenty of room to observe and ponder the exhibits, video works in tailored viewing areas, and berths clearly crafted to offer the visitor an experiential vignette. Some are the product of cutting-edge technology, while others impart a blast-from-the-past simplicity vibe.

THERE ARE a number of leitmotifs dotted around the exhibition.

One such is the tale of the wolf-man's dream, which recurs in various guises. Odessa-born 20th-century painter Sergei Pankejeff's Wolves Sitting on a Tree from 1964, recalls a dream he had some seven decades earlier of his bedroom window suddenly blowing open and his seeing half a dozen snow-white wolves crouching on a walnut tree in the garden, with their eyes trained on him. Some 30 years after that momentous experience Pankejeff underwent psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud, who named his patient the Wolf-Man.

The arboreal-animal combo reappears in American painter Jim Dine's The Wolfman's Dream from 1993, and it resonates powerfully, at least in morphological terms, in Tal Shochat's work Untitled" from 2005. That, in turn, puts one in mind of the wish tree which features in many Eastern cultures and, specifically, a creation of that very name by Yoko Ono that was displayed in a large retrospective of her oeuvre at the Israel Museum some 25 years ago.

Kamien fully owns up to harboring generous curatorial aspirations. "We managed to open the exhibition in 2024, which marked 100 years of surrealism, although it covers a larger purview. There are 180 works from different cultures and different eras, which take a broader look at the dream."

The intercultural arcing is patently conveyed in a pentaptych from 2008 by British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare. His "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (America); (Europe); (Africa); (Asia); (Australia)" series of chromogenic prints alludes to the artificiality of the global village, and how people with different roots have become inured to their native environments. Each print shows the same collection of wildlife, including bats and owls and other animals of indeterminate kinds. However, the dozing men slumped over their desks vary in skin color and attire. The latter, tellingly, appears to reference various Western imperial eras. The work examines the idea of hybrid cultural identity, suggesting that the ideals of the 18th-century Enlightenment, in which human reason was seemingly wrested from the then-viselike grip of the religious hierarchy, also spawned its own evils. It is a blatant nod to Goya's late-18th-century aquatint The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters, which addresses the struggle between reason and imagination, and has an almost identical composition. The exhibition catalogue includes a poignant cautionary Goya quote: "Imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders."

“Surrealism was born out of Dadaism, an anti-war movement which began in 1915 in neutral Zurich,” Kamien explains. How sadly relevant that sounds today. “Artists were able to escape to Zurich in order to protest against the [First World] War. Surrealism emerged out of that, in Paris.”

The curator provides substantial collateral for the core theme. “Dreams are very similar to a work of art in that they involve conscious and unconscious processes. We also dream in pictures. We don’t know exactly why we dream, but it is probably in order to work through our day-to-day experiences.”

Breton’s Dream Object assemblage from 1936 spells out the philosophical lay of the land in charming fashion. “He imagines a sort of hotel with a red carpet, and we peek into different rooms where Breton placed a pom-pom, a mirror, and excerpts of poems. He called them ‘dream objects.’”

Surrealism, says Kamien, was run on pretty democratic lines. “Here we have a writer making art. In this movement, everyone does everything. They collaborate. They sit together and create together.” That sounds like a soothing, healthy state of affairs, and a far cry from today’s highly competitive art scene.

“Lucid Dreams” covers a sumptuous segment of art history, and Kamien has done her best to maintain clear lines of communication that span ostensibly disparate periods, with contrasting mores, politics, and modes of artistic expression.

The curator singles out Sharon Balaban’s mesmerizing video work Mascara, which is having its first airing in Jerusalem. “Here you see artificial eyelashes with mascara floating slowly on water. That is impacted by Chinese and Japanese ink sketches. There is a lot of reciprocity.”

The curved format also caught the eye. “I thought of the 150th anniversary of Impressionism, and I remembered Monet’s Water Lilies at the L’Orangerie museum in Paris on the curved wall.” Nice touch.

We also encounter the cradle of Zionism in a neon work which quaintly cites Theodor Herzl’s oft-quoted declaration: “If you will it, it is not a dream.” One wonders what the founder of modern political Zionism would have thought of our current predicament here.

Should we feel the need to get away from some depressing thoughts, “Alma Mater” might provide some respite, with its eclectic spread of liturgical and storytelling material from around the world. The work draws on thousands of hours of traditional chants, whispers, and tales by women from diverse cultures and time periods, marrying archival recordings with the sounds of Mother Nature to create a riveting piece.

As the museum background material puts it so succinctly, Alma Mater embodies “the spirit of the archetypal ‘Great Mother’ [that] envelops visitors in a metaphorical womb and offers hope and reconnection.”□

‘Lucid Dreams’ and Alma Mater close on June 7. For more information: https://www.imj.org.il/en

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