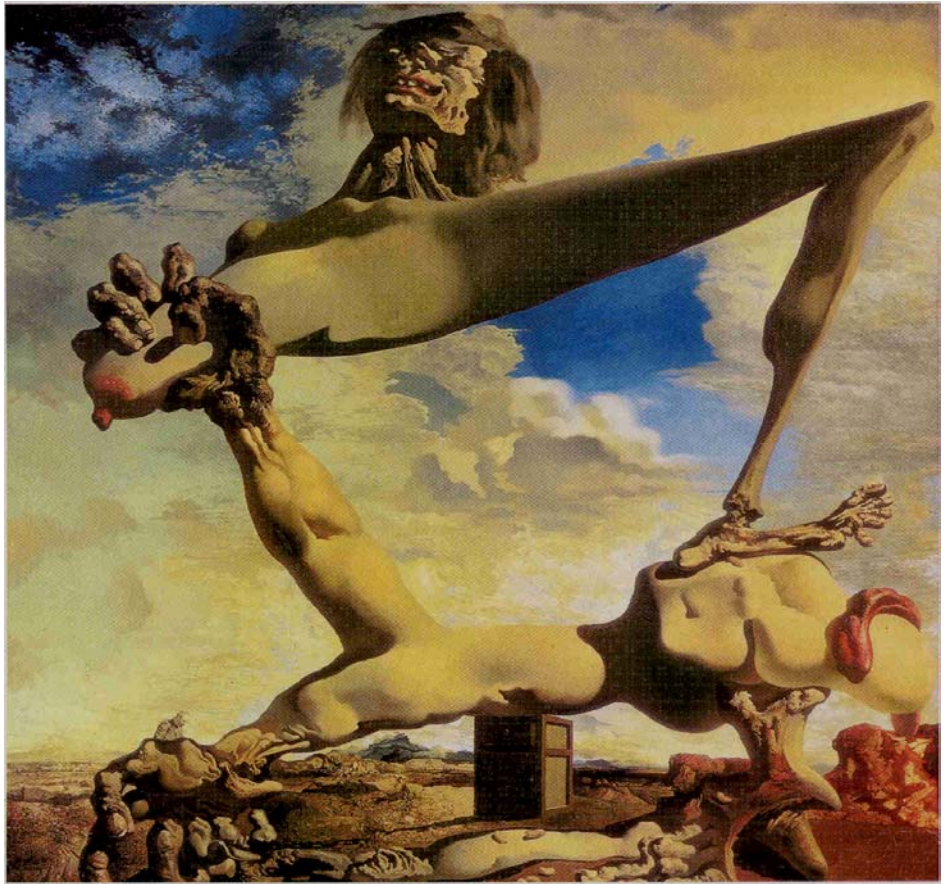


THE TWO FACES OF DALI

Both the young genius and the lying old fanatic are on display in a new show

By **ROBERT HUGHES**, *Time*, March 13, 2000

THE SHAMEFUL LIFE OF SALVADOR DALI—such was the title given to the 1997 book by Dali's most formidable biographer, Ian Gibson. It's a perfect title, because it drives home two nails at once. First, lovers of modernism have long regarded Dali (1904-1989), the obsessive and boasting narcissist from Catalonia, as a sort of mock-deranged but authentically disgraceful relative. Few could doubt the power and originality of his early work—up to, say, the Spanish Civil War. Equally, few would give the least credence to the recycling of old themes that he did, mainly for the American market, in the 1940s and '50s, or to the weird, pompous, huge and minutely detailed reflections on Baroque art, Spanish Catholicism and nuclear physics that filled his time later.



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Second, Dali was disgraceful because he was so confessional—and so untrustworthy. Perhaps no artist in history has told his viewers more about his secret life; certainly none invented more about it. It still seems pretty weird, that inventory of impotence and aggression, of bizarre terrors and fetishes. But in the '20s and '30s it was beyond mere weirdness. Dali must have enjoyed the worst relations with his father of anyone else since little Oedipus. In 1930 his parent wrote a frantic letter to Dali's friend, film director Luis Bunuel, begging him to prevent the artist's coming anywhere near him: "My son has no right to embitter my life," and his mother's health "will be destroyed if my son sullies it with his foul conduct." And his mother? At one point Dali exhibited an image of the Sacred Heart across which he had written *SOMETIMES I SPIT ON THE PORTRAIT OF MY MOTHER*.

But he was an incorrigible fabulist, and his autobiography, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dali*, is stuffed with lies, inventions and embroideries. Did he really, as he claimed, have to be restrained from throwing himself out of a window on seeing a locust in the room? Did he actually sit in the bar of the Ritz in Madrid and make cocktails out of his own blood? Did he truly associate animal glue, death and dung with sex? And how to square the youthful Dali—whom his fellow students at the Madrid Academy remembered as "bashful," "morbidly shy" and "literally sick with timidity"—with the self-corrupted publicity stunter, who would do almost anything for a headline?

BOTH DALIS—THE DISRUPTIVE youthful genius and the pretentious, whorish old fanatic—are on full view at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Conn., in a show of some 70 works titled "Dali's Optical Illusions." Its organizer, Dawn Ades, is one of the most distinguished historians of surrealism, the movement to which Dali's work was central. She has done an excellent job of showing and analyzing the ways in which illusion, the act of making marks that get read as "real," acts in his painting. No illusion, no Dali. This isn't true of other surrealists, or painters who went through a surrealist phase, like Joan Miro. But Dali's effort to make dreams concrete, to lead the viewer into a state of radical doubt about the supposedly fixed nature of reality, is the entire key to his art. And without the most obsessive and paralyzing exactness of detail, it couldn't have worked. Either you believe that the

soft watches are real and that the skull on the beach is—to cite one of his titles—sodomizing a grand piano, or you don't.

Since a great deal of the effort of modernist painting was devoted to expelling illusion as a fraud, a lie and a cheat on the deeper impulses of art, one can easily see why Dali's illusionism was so bitterly attacked as mere trickery—an imposture made even worse by Dali's flagrant preference for Raphael and even the arch-academic Meissonier over Matisse or Mondrian, and by his impertinent way of calling true-believer modernists *les cocus du vieil art moderne*, the cuckolds of old modern art. Dali flew into such flak right from the beginning of his career: in 1929 the avant-gardist critic Efstratios Teriade complained that Dali's talent was "the precise opposite of those qualities which make a painter." But without the power granted by illusion to overturn our sense of the world's plain factuality, his contribution to 20th century culture would have been slight.

It is wrong to suppose that the curiosity about the irrational that pervaded European culture in the '20s was an offshoot of surrealism; this puts the cart before the horse. The French film director Jean Epstein put the matter succinctly when he wrote of how "a host of techniques, from psychoanalysis to microphysics, has begun to describe a world where...reason no longer always seems right." Cinema "encourages us to think in a dreamlike way ...[it] slowly but surely filters the most basic of doubts throughout society: that of questioning the value of absolutes." Dali collaborated with Buñuel on two of the underground classics of 20th century film, *Un Chien Andalou* (An Andalusian Dog) and *L'Age d'Or* (The Golden Age); he was closer to cinema than any other painter of his day, partly because he was obsessed by the power of cinema to make dreams immediate.



When he achieved this in static pictorial terms, the results could be marvelous. The iconic example—*The Persistence of Memory*, 1929 (left), with its everlastingly famous soft watches—is not in this show, but another and equally beautiful small picture is:

Paranoiac Astral Image, 1934. On a vast and otherwise empty

plane of beach flat as a billiard table, four images are dispersed. A fragment of an amphora suggests "deep" time, the Greco-Roman past of the Catalan coast. A distant woman, perhaps the constantly remembered nurse of Dali's childhood, is almost bleached out by the sunlight. In a stranded boat, another woman, probably his muse and wife Gala, confronts a boy in a sailor suit who can be none other than Dali himself. And on the left, the hated figure of Dali's father strides along in a three-piece suit, casting a long shadow.



PARANOIAC-ASTRAL IMAGE. 1934

This show cannot be seen as a Dali retrospective, though it represents all phases of his career. In pursuit of all aspects of his illusionism, it contains a great deal of decidedly inferior work from his later years. However ingenious his pictorial puns, tropes and double meanings may be, they do not necessarily amount to much as painting. Nevertheless the show has some amazing pictures in it, and it contains what is certainly Dali's greatest and most frightening work: the *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans—Premonition of Civil War*, 1936.

With this single painting, Dali moved into the territory of Goya. This monstrous Titan in the act of tearing itself to pieces is the most powerful image of a country's anguish and dismemberment to issue from Spain (or anywhere else) since Goya's *Desastres and Disparates*. And every inch of it, from the sinister greenish clouds and electric-blue sky to the gnarled bone and putrescent flesh of the monster, is exquisitely painted. This, not Picasso's *Guernica*, is modern art's strongest testimony on the Spanish Civil War and on war in general. Not even the failures of Dali's later work can blur that fact.

Note: This reading assignment also includes [Dada, Surrealism, Fantasy, Adams 1](#)