

# The Surreal World of Hans Bellmer

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Marcel et David Fleiss

# Hans Bellmer and His Infinities

by  
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Are we humans surrogates for our own desire? Have we always been? The more immediate association for corporeal / libidinal surrogacy, beginning in childhood, is the doll, along with mannequins in shop windows, and, possibly most frightening, automatons, mechanical bodies come to life. Artists have long been fascinated by manufactured embodiments, none more so than the Surrealists of the 1920s and '30s, supreme among them Hans Bellmer, who may not have known he was one until being embraced by them in Paris in 1935. By then he had already created his major figure, *La Poupée* (the doll, his "artificial girl"), a sculpture that would perform in his photographs and animate his gossamer drawings, a doll convulsed, taken apart, and eroticized. Bellmer's are not merely representations of fantastical scenes, but of his obsessions, his unconscious. It was as if he had illustrated the Surrealist Manifesto before having read a single word. Even with his most otherworldly images we have to admit they were real, only too real, to him. For all the outrage in his time and after, almost one hundred years later, Bellmer's work is a clear reflection of a repressive society on one hand, while on the other, more disturbingly, of an evil propensity for those in power to puppet and destroy humans, or die trying. Who in Bellmer's day would denounce art as degenerate? Those most morally depraved.

Born in 1902, Bellmer would have been twelve, living with his family in Germany, at the start of the First World War. He would be thirty, on his own in Berlin when the National Socialists came to power. Among his artist friends there, George Grosz and John Heartfield, who had been deeply formed by the



*La poupée (The Doll), 1935*

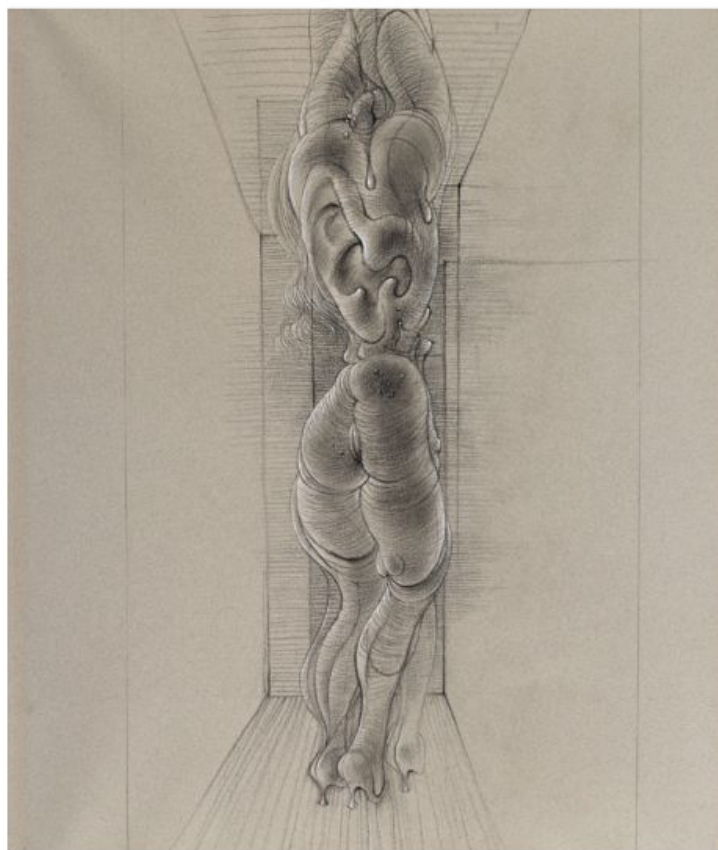
horrors of war. Bellmer would go on to imagine what might have otherwise been nightmarish images as strangely beautiful, mysterious, often erotic evocations, as he did in a later drawing, *Etude d'après La mitrailleuse en état de grâce*, circa 1961 (Study after The machine gun in a state of grace). Always true to himself, mirroring his inner world and turmoil, which allowed for the refraction of the world's cruelty, it is difficult to think of Bellmer, as many do, as perverse. Was he someone who acted unreasonably? On the contrary, he responded to a period in which reason would consequently collide with behavior that had no justification whatsoever, a world turned inside out and upside down. He was, as true for so many great artists of the 20th century—to borrow the phrasing of J.G. Ballard—a re-maker of reality. Bellmer's hand-colored photographs, with their pale pinks against acidic yellows and greens, lilacs and blues both incandescent and somber, amplify the irreality of their subjects. Nowhere is this more apparent than in a 1936 photo appropriately titled, *L'attente latente (The latent expectation)*. Here a female body seen from the waist down has been inverted, doubled and merged with the trunk of a tree. On each of four feet she wears white socks and little girls' shoes, Mary Janes. Two large limbs spread wide from a slender, central branch suggest arms and a neck, snapped as if a body was rendered headless. Below each "arm" is a small orb with a "nipple" that may also be seen as an eye. Latent: existing but not yet manifest; hidden or concealed. Or in Bellmer's case: revealed.

Of all the works in the present exhibition, among many fine examples of Bellmer's extraordinary sensibility, perhaps none is more unexpected than



Untitled, 1956

a large, rare canvas from 1956. Are these the attenuated fingers, knuckles, wrists and joints of so many disembodied hands, as if the artist attempted to map an abstract constellation in an unfolded sky, a network of skeletal caresses, anatomically though lovingly recalled? While this may not have been the artist's reading, the enigmatic quality of Bellmer's images surely accounts for their ongoing attraction, as do the affinities his art has with that of successive generations, notably in the 1980s with Robert Gober, Cindy Sherman and the Chapman brothers. Although a contemporary of Bellmer's, Louise Bourgeois would go on to create in her remarkable later years sculpture in correspondence with his transformed bodies of the 1930s. An untitled Bellmer photo from 1938, for example, in which a soft multi-legged body bent over itself seemingly floats through a doorway, is clearly attuned with, in mutual discordance, Bourgeois' sewn, often suspended, bulbous bodies and body parts of sixty years later. Both artists engaged in the entwinement and confusion of the human form, a body at times suggesting the extraterrestrial.



Untitled, 1953

Today, when humans increasingly question and transform gender, Bellmer's relevance remains undiminished. Even as his work may be received as problematic, hasn't this always been essential to its vitality? Bellmer's most libidinally charged images, subtly delivered, are not graphic in the way that an early influence such as Aubrey Beardsley's are, but elusive, compelling viewers to look closely, to probe intently, to insert themselves into the scene, and thus to admit, if only to themselves, that they want to see these images. In our antagonized period, Bellmer reminds us that for many a paramount duty to oneself is to repress one's repression. The ongoing radicality of Bellmer is undeniable. His works are from another time and place, but they hover in an otherworldly realm of their own, and into ours as well. Bellmer retains all his strangeness and power to disturb. He transports us. He takes us there.

1. Regarding the recurrent images of young girls in Bellmer's work, it's essential to note the artist's comment after the birth of his twin daughters, Doriane and Béatrice, in 1943. His admission, "Doriane totally fulfills the dream I've always had of being reincarnated as a little girl. She is me." (Biographical Notes, 1946.) From the Chronology in Hans Bellmer, Michael Semff and Anthony Spira, eds. Hatje Cantz/Centre Pompidou/Whitechapel, 2006, p. 244. These pubescent children drawn over and over again, Bellmer didn't want them; he wanted to be them.