Dali - Halsman

An exhibit featuring 26 photographs of Dali by the master photographer Philippe Halsman is on display at the Salvador Dali Museum September 10 through January 28, 1992. These photographs, from the Dali Museum’s permanent collection, span the years between 1941 and 1965, capturing some of the most creative images of Dali on film.

Halsman, who was born in Riga, Latvia (1906-1979), established himself as the leading portrait photographer in Paris in the 1930s. He remained there until the threat of German invasion became imminent. He chose to emigrate with his wife and child to America where he quickly reestablished his celebrated reputation.

Halsman started photographing celebrities for many of the leading magazines in the 1940s. His work is distinguished by its wit and humor, and his reputation as a great photographer is confirmed by the 97 cover shots he did for Life Magazine, the most famous public chronicle of the time which built its reputation through its photographers. In the following years Halsman met and photographed hundreds of celebrities including Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Marilyn Monroe, Pablo Picasso, John F. Kennedy and many more. His photographs of the great and famous have graced the pages of leading magazines literally hundreds of times, and his work is represented in the permanent collections of New York’s Museum of Modern Art and the Smithsonian Institution.

But of all the portraits he took, none are more startling or extraordinary than his photos of Salvador Dali. The first photo collaboration between Halsman and Dali was in 1941, when Halsman approached Dali with the idea of photographing the artist as an embryo. Such a concept appealed to Dali who was obsessed with prenatal visions. The resulting photo, known as Dali in an Egg, was an award-winning image of Dali curled in a fetal position as an embryo (this photo can be found in Dali’s Secret Life, p.70.) Another early photo collaboration featuring a ballerina on a New York city rooftop won Halsman the “Picture of the Week” award from Life Magazine. Because of these successful photo sessions, Dali was impressed by Halsman, and thus initiated a creative friendship that would span the next thirty-five years and would produce even more remarkable photos.

According to Yvonne Halsman, the two artists would arrange for annual collaborations which usually took place when Dali would arrive in New York just after Thanksgiving each year. Often, Dali would arrive prepared with a new idea for the collaboration, and immediately Halsman would begin envisioning ways to translate Dali’s idea into a photographic image. Halsman also had ideas for these collaborations that matched Dali’s visions. In his book Sight and Insight (Doubleday, 1972), Halsman wrote: “In the thirty years of our friendship I have made countless photographs showing the Surrealist painter in the most incredible situations. Whenever I needed a striking or famous protagonist for one of my wild ideas, Dali would graciously oblige.” The resulting photos reveal their mutual interest in the fantastic and the bizarre.

For example, Halsman published his highly entertaining book entitled Dali’s Mustache in 1954. Set up as a mock photographic interview between the artist and photographer, the book presents a mind-bending assortment of situations that celebrate Dali’s most distinctive feature, his waxed mustache. Dali’s mustache is saluted and abused simultaneously, demonstrating just how far the two artists could travel to outdo themselves. In Halsman’s photos, the mustache is quickly forced through a number of hoops, becoming in turns the horns of a bull, a dollar sign, and the hands of a clock. Elsewhere the mustache pokes through a block of Swiss cheese, serves as a statistical line on a graph and even graces the face of the Mona Lisa. Many of these images are on display in the Dali Museum exhibit.

Halsman was gifted with a
technical facility and penchant for visual experiments that enabled him to create whatever effect Dali's ideas would require. For instance, Dali wanted to place one of his paranoic-critical visions on film. He proposed the idea of creating a double image where a skull is created out of seven female bodies. For Dali Skull, Halsman was able to devise a scaffold that would allow him to obtain the desired effect using models whose bodies were the right proportion for the composition. Although the poses were difficult to hold for any length of time, Halsman said that the models only earned 25 dollars each for a full afternoon of work.

Even more remarkable is the photo Dali Atomicus from 1948, presenting Dali's obsession with molecular suspension. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Dali was interested in the concept that atoms were made up of smaller moving units such as protons and neutrons which exist with great amounts of space between them. His painting Leda and the Swan, which is seen in the background of Halsman's photo, is a metaphor for this atomic state where all of its elements are locked into mutual suspension, and nothing touches anything else.

In order to duplicate this effect, Halsman had two paintings and a chair suspended in the air. He then had four assistants help him arrange the scene by throwing three cats and a bucket of water repeatedly into the air while Dali jumped with them. There were 26 takes before they found a version of the shot that looked right. The resulting image is one of the most unforgettable photographs of the twentieth century.

Although Halsman died in 1979 and Dali in 1989, these photographs will forever preserve the shared genius of these two artists whose mutual visions were so unique yet so well matched. They also demonstrate that Dali's genius shines as brilliantly in photos as in his paintings.