



Social Surrealism and the Exploration of Identity

A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 112

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH

The visual aesthetics of Surrealism, from dream-like scenes to unexpected juxtapositions, allow artists to discuss sociopolitical issues and present aspects of identity and culture from a new perspective. Traditionally, surrealist works evoke a dreamlike and hallucinatory state dictated by the unconscious—presenting audiences with an insight into the artist’s personal interpretations of the world around them. *How could imagery that draws from the irrational and the unconscious convey social criticism?* Latin American artists Mika Rottenberg and Luis Gispert explore this question, and others, through their photography and video installations, which push beyond traditional boundaries and conventional narratives of Latinx communities to examine contemporary society.

Gispert’s work gravitates toward hyperbolic motifs of urban and hip-hop culture, drawn from his own Cuban-American heritage. Rottenberg, born in Argentina, explores identity through the absurdity of consumer culture. While Gispert and Rottenberg take different approaches to convey their sociopolitical beliefs, both their works often depict female subjects in hyperrealistic settings filled with saturated color. Often portrayed as an idealized object of desire, the female body became the central subject of the male fantasy that dominated the surrealist movement of the 1920s and 30s. While male artists often depicted female subjects as a projection of their desires,

women artists transformed their bodies, and that of their subjects, as a form of resistance—a rejection of traditional notions of both gender and society.

Gispert is best known for his staged photography in which he captures mundane scenes juxtaposed with elaborate elements, such as stylized furniture design and bejeweled subjects. His photographs and video installations contain large-scale objects, theatrical poses, and settings that are a stark contrast to the ordinary—producing images that require the viewer to interrogate their message. These works often contain references to hip-hop and urban culture and American stereotypes such as opulent gold chains, boom-boxes, green screens, and cheerleaders.

While drawing from youth culture and his own Cuban-American heritage, Gispert commonly features women at the forefront of his works to highlight Latinx experiences. In *Chain Mouth*, Gispert captures a young woman dressed in a cheerleading uniform. Her body is decorated with gold jewelry, likening her to historical representations of classical Baroque and Renaissance goddesses, such as Venus, Circe, and Flora. The subject’s hair, makeup, and elaborate jewelry are styled to resemble *chongas*—a Spanish-derived term prominent in the twenty-first century that coded Latinx women as hyper-visible, provocative, and aggressive.

The image makes reference to artist Bruce Nauman’s *Self-Portrait as Fountain* (1967–1970). Whereas Nauman depicts himself spurting a stream of water from his lips to mimic nude male statues commonly found in Roman and Greek fountains, the female figure in Gispert’s *Chain Mouth* expels a long gold chain. The photograph captures a sense of temporality and movement that is present throughout Gispert’s work.

The exuberant iconography in Gispert’s work marries Baroque and Renaissance aesthetics with contemporary pop culture. The composition



of his photographs and video pieces evoke Renaissance symmetry, while recalling both the excess and theatricality of the Baroque. Gispert's pieces shift between portraiture and complex narratives, using kinetic movement, artificiality, and exaggeration to explore cultural adaptation and assimilation as a Cuban-American in the United States.

Like Gispert, Rottenberg also blurs the lines between reality and fiction to reveal the absurdity of capitalism. The visual power of her installations intersects with the mundane to highlight the hidden labor of women in the production of goods. As an artist who has both lived in and traveled to many different countries, Rottenberg uses elements of documentary photography and Surrealism to create an exposé on the exhausting, exploitative, and often monotonous labor that goes into mass production.

Rottenberg's work examines issues surrounding immigration and assimilation, specifically the intersection between contemporary consumer culture and female labor. Fascinated by both the eccentric and absurd, her work often depicts predominantly female workers in factory-like settings. Rottenberg's unique narrative approach crosses into the realms of satire, as seen in *Performance Still (Kat Legs & Torso)*. Rather than mass-producing industrial items, her subjects create handmade objects. Through her claustrophobia-induced installations, Rottenberg comments on the oppressive and alienating working conditions to which corporations subject women. The women depicted in these dystopian-like settings often use their body to profit in some way. Rather than cater to Classical norms, Rottenberg strives to foster an inclusive space to women who defy the conventional expectations of beauty and gender. She hires women with diverse body types and at times changes their appearance through the addition of unconventional physical traits, such as a Pinocchio-like nose or bodybuilder physique. In so doing, Rottenberg draws attention to the ways in which women's bodies and labor has been marginalized throughout history. The machinery in Rottenberg's imaginary factories is operated by pedal, paddle, rubber band, or string—mechanisms that defy the technological standards of contemporary industrial production



and introduce humor to her narratives. The female figures engage in difficult and repetitive movements, often using multiple body parts at once to complete a singular task. The tasks themselves are bizarre, and the products that are manufactured do not have any clear value.

Both Gispert and Rottenberg produce extravagant and humorous works that go beyond the self to expose the absurdities of dominant social and political discourses. These two artists depict the world as it feels, rather than attempt to mimic reality. Even through still images, the artists beg active engagement by playing with the five senses and our sense of temporality. Gispert and Rottenberg's surrealist approach to discussing prevalent issues in today's climate invites audiences to question the misrepresentations of minority groups that are often mistaken for reality.

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CHECKLIST

Luis Gispert, Cuban-American, born 1972. *Bedroom*, 2003, Cibachrome print. Anonymous Gift; 2018.37.118

Luis Gispert, Cuban-American, born 1972. *Untitled (Chain Mouth)*, 2002, Fujiflex print. Anonymous Gift; 2018.37.122

Luis Gispert, Cuban-American, born 1972, Jeffrey Reed, American, born 1969. *Stereomongrel*, 2005, Super 35 mm transferred to HD. Anonymous Gift; 2018.37.124ab

Mika Rottenberg, Argentinian, born 1976. *One Second Sculpture with Ahtoy*, 2003, Digital chromogenic color print. Anonymous Gift; 2018.37.316

Mika Rottenberg, Argentinian, born 1976. *Performance Still (Kat Legs & Torso)*, 2008, Chromogenic color print. Anonymous Gift; 2018.37.317

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The exhibition *Social Surrealism and the Exploration of Identity*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, April 22–June 24, 2023.

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Cover image: Luis Gispert, *Untitled (Chain Mouth)*, 2002. © Luis Gispert. Photo by Sara Jamback.

Inside left: Luis Gispert, *Bedroom*, 2003, © Luis Gispert. Photo by Sara Jamback.

Inside right: Mika Rottenberg, *Performance Still (Kat Legs & Torso)*, 2008. © Mika Rottenberg. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo by Sara Jamback.

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