

LUSTFUL VISIONS, WITH A POLITICAL EDGE

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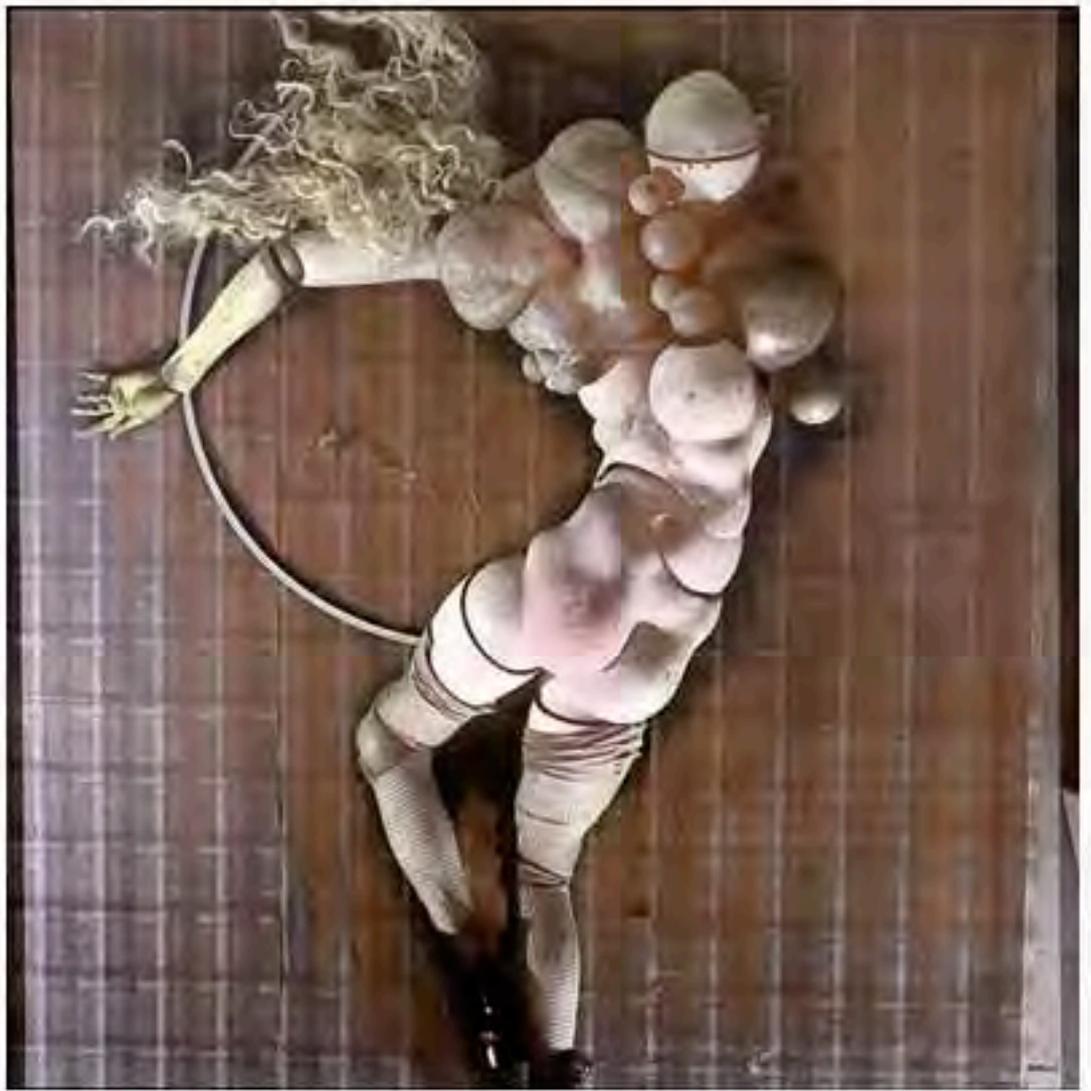
It's startling to learn that Hans Bellmer's grotesque dolls were crafted in the heart of Nazi Germany. Throughout the 1930s, Bellmer fashioned female mannequins from his studio in Berlin. The twisted bodies had detachable limbs, which he rearranged and photographed obsessively.

Several of the doll photographs can now be seen in Octopus Time, a show of Bellmer's work at Ubu Gallery. They are uncommonly disturbing. Legs merge into arms, joints bend into impossible positions, torsos swell with ambiguous protuberances. Human forms often merge with inanimate objects; "The Machine Gunnerress," a photograph from 1937, shows fleshy plaster affixed to metal limbs, like an interwar Terminator.

Bellmer's art from this period strikes an unnerving balance between the political and the personal. In one sense, the photographs were courageous political statements. The Nazi government, which preferred propagandistic images of fit Aryan bodies, deemed Bellmer's art "degenerate," and in 1938 he was forced to flee Germany for Paris. He spent World War II in a Nazi prison camp, drawing portraits of his roommate, the surrealist Max Ernst.

On the other hand, Bellmer's doll photographs express deeply personal, and very disturbing desires. Seen in isolation, they appear misogynistic. Bellmer's art doesn't just objectify women; it turns them into assemblages of body parts, without souls or psychology. The sculptures are often headless and bound—to chairs, trees and staircases. Severe lighting effects add to the sense of cruelty.

Octopus Time forces us to reconsider the photographs by placing them within a broad overview of Bellmer's career. Ubu has hosted two successful Bellmer shows in the past, but this is the first to include pieces from the collection of Herbert Lust, who owns many of the artist's drawings, paintings and photographs from the 1950s and 1960s. The results are illuminating. Although Bellmer was always drawn to nudity and sex, the later works reveal a more well-rounded erotic imagination. Granted, Bellmer's drawings aren't initially endearing. Large-scale compositions like "In Memory" and "Embryo Education" feature semen, pedophilia and incest. At first, you may wish to see them banished to the darkest corners of the Internet. But Bellmer's beautiful draftsmanship will win over most viewers. It's a strange treat to see classical technique put to such perverse use.



"La Poupée," 1935, by Hans Bellmer Hand-colored vintage gelatin silver print affixed to original mount and stretcher.

At other times, Bellmer's figures dissolve into charming abstractions. In "The Couple," an oil painting from 1954, a web of delicate white lines traces two reclining figures. The forms suggest constellations: anatomy sublimated into astronomy.

Perhaps most surprising are the pornographic photographs Bellmer took in the late 1940s and early 1950s. These works, which come from Lust's collection, are extremely graphic for their time, depicting unusual sex acts and menstruation.

Bellmer crops the photos with characteristic violence, emphasizing forms rather than faces. Yet the models here are prostitutes, not dolls. They're real women, engaged in consensual activities. The mood is no longer menacing, but joyful. Everyone seems to be having fun.

These later photographs make it easier to appreciate Bellmer's career as a whole. Throughout his life, he remained a free spirit. Even after both Nazism and surrealism were put to rest, his art continued to fight for liberation.

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Hans Bellmer: Octopus Time

Ubu Gallery, 416 E. 59th St.

Through April 11

Tuesdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

www.ubugallery.com