

pompom

The City That Swallowed the World

Once upon a time there was a very beautiful doll's house; it was red brick with white windows, and it had real muslin curtains and a front door and a chimney. It belonged to two Dolls called Lucinda and Jane; at least it belonged to Lucinda, but she never ordered meals. Jane was the cook; but she never did any cooking, because the dinner had been bought ready-made, in a box full of shavings. There were two red lobsters and a ham, a fish, a pudding, and some pears and oranges. They would not come off the plates, but they were extremely beautiful.¹

Tom Thumb and his wife Hunca Munca discover the Doll's house and are filled with joy by its petite proportions and perfect convenience. But as Tom Thumb carved the red-streaked ham, the tin knife crumpled with his effort; the ham was paint and plaster and the fish was glued to the dish! Their joy turned to rage. Frustrated, they threw the plates and plaster into the red-hot crinkly fire. But even it was made from cellophane, and the chimney produced no soot. They trashed the place, tore the feathers from the beds and squeezed everything they found useful back through their mouse-hole. Lucinda and Jane returned to the upset home; one stared, the other smiled, but neither of them made any remark. A doll dressed like a policeman appeared propped up at the front door.

Andre Breton defined 'the simplest Surrealist act' as 'going into the street, revolver in hand, and shooting at random into the crowd'.² For Breton and his acolytes, Surrealism was the breaking of codes. The poet Apollinaire, who first coined the term in his notes for a play, proposed surrealism as a rupture in the stupor of reality. Apollinaire set the stage, so to speak, for the appropriation of reality. 'When man wanted to imitate walking, he invented the wheel, which does not look like a leg. Without knowing it, he was a Surrealist.'³ By creating a new situation for familiar things, the surrealist reveals a thing's other, or many, truths.

Intolerable Leisure is based upon the city of Paris as the artist remembers it. In this iteration of the city its inhabitants and their decadent patrician and migrant histories mingle in the unconscious mind. Encased in memory, the city of Paris heaves with things: patisserie windows offering impossibly sweet glazed cakes and perfect golden breads; a Ferris wheel in a park buzzing with sparrows, avenues of Chestnut trees set in perfect perspective, manicured gardens of headless queens, stone plinths, marble pillars, gilded streetlights. Museum after museum, some with water lilies and great stones, and others with human heads. Such care is taken in all of its display. Each day the arrondissements are swept by hand by some 4,500 sweepers, most of them African or Arab immigrants. The *vertes*, in their mint green jumpsuits, deftly sweep with twig brooms of the type once used by peasants here, albeit with the 21st century update of long stemmed plastic bristles. Uncanny, hungry city. Nowhere else, save Las Vegas or Washington, does such a thin veneer of reality cover every thing. If the museum is not an artefact of our experience but rather an experience of artefacts, whose own particular lives as objects were severed at the moment of separation from their origins—person, family, community, society, culture, nation, world—then Paris is the museum of the West. A place where logical connections are made between disparate things. No other place has swallowed so much of the world and has held it in its mouth for so long. *Existence is elsewhere*.⁴

Written into being thirteen years before Surrealism entered the public consciousness, Tom Thumb and Hunca Munca would have been alternately confused by the objects the movement produced [imagine their fury at the apparent uselessness of Meret Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup (1936)], and sympathetic to the surrealist tendency to break through the stupor of a society and seize its core—trash the place, take the stuffing out and make something anew, and true.

Once upon a time there was a very beautiful city; it was green and grey, and it had real gardens. It belonged to its inhabitants; but they never did any gardening. There were many museums, filled with a great many things. They could not be touched, but they were extremely beautiful.

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¹ Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, Penguin, Frederick Warne, 1904.

² Ruth Brandon, *Surreal Lives, The Surrealists, 1917-1945*. New York: Grove Press, 2000.

³ Ibid.

⁴ André Breton, *Manifestoes Of Surrealism*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972.