

In Your Dreams  
Juror Statement  
By  
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Just what *are* the contents of Americans' dreams these days?

Having had considerable experience with my own, I can tell you that a lot of the imagery is pretty humdrum—it wouldn't make the cut for a Maya Deren film, for sure, or most other Surrealist art.

But then, that kind of personal-experience-recycled dream was described many centuries ago, in a Japanese poem that asserts, as Kenneth Rexroth translates it, "By day I hoe weeds. By night / I hoe again in dreams the weeds of the day." (paraphrased here from memory)

Then there are the dreams that spawn personal symbols of deep significance to the dreamer—far deeper than the manifest content of the image would suggest to an outside observer.

And then there are the culturally inflected high dreams—emotionally resonant narratives or scenes that contain images that are as significant in a culture's art and literature and folktales (or, latterly, popular culture) as in the dreamer's unconscious.

These archetypes are simultaneously cross-cultural and totally based in history. They can be both because the history of the human species contains a great deal of crossover experience, for reasons that the neurobiologists have been explaining a great deal lately.

When it comes to reading our dreams, we have a lot more to draw on these days than Freud, Jung, Marx, and Darwin. Yet everything the Freudians, Jungians, Marxists (Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, anyway) and latter-day evolutionary psychologists have to say remains in play—even when it no longer works. It is hard for ideas to take full retirement.

I really had no such thoughts when I began looking at the submissions for "In Your Dreams 2011" but as I went through the portfolio I began to see the making of two perfectly coherent, completely incompatible shows: one devoted to the personal unconscious, the other to the cultural unconscious. Some of the photographs seemed to address Nature in a rather straightforward manner that nevertheless was charged with the photographer's personal associations. Some of the photographs seemed so much about the layers of association and emotion that history leaves in human settlements that the personal element was hard to find, much less the dreamlike element.

It was in puzzling through these artifacts of seemingly fully awake perception that I began to think about the points where the cultural unconscious shapes the personal

unconscious, and the points where the two conflict, merge, diverge, and/or in general mutually contaminate one another.,

And that led to the realization that I had to include the funniest “I just want to take good pictures” piece of conceptualism I have seen recently. A surprising number of other works consisted of dreamlike but hilariously funny images, not an oxymoron as anyone can testify who has ever wakened from a dream laughing at the sense of humor of their own unconscious. (Why the various parts of ourselves should parcel themselves out so oddly is a topic to contemplate while reading David Eagleman’s new book *Incognito: The Hidden Lives of the Brain*,)

In the end, I couldn’t curate two shows, only one. I suspect that I have fallen back on my usual dual identity as cultural historian and critic determined to rehabilitate the notion of the value of formal integrity and the elusive, culturally inflected quality known as beauty. Beauty also has biological roots, but they arrive in our bodies by way of our particular upbringing as well as our inbuilt predilections. Some of these photos are reminders that people end up pursuing idiosyncratic ideas of the beautiful no matter how much their mamas tried to raise them right.

I’m also extremely interested in the idea of the aesthetic guilty pleasure—the influence of fairly blatant or lurid pop-culture imagery that is so ingrained into us as children that we ever thereafter look for examples of serious art that elevate the excess to some higher level—unless we take the easier route of being ironic and wallowing in the thing itself while showing that we know what the score really is.

So if I do this right, maybe there will be the makings of three shows instead of two. Watch this space for developments.

As it is, I think I have chosen images of nature that seem to embody ancient anxieties or hopes or wishes (a.k.a. “dreams”); images of history transmuted into inner visions and wishes of what might have been (a.k.a. “dreams”); straightforward images of inner desires for outer objects (I shall henceforward stop with the a.k.a.’ing—you get the picture); images that mirror the dreams of popular culture in an almost uncannily similar emotional register; images of the uncanny that suggest the elusive link between the felt strangeness of certain moments of reality and the emotional tone of certain moments of our dream lives; and the list goes on.

So don’t blame me for anything but choosing to be all over the lot in terms of aesthetics for the sake of revealing as much as possible about what is going on in 2011 “In Your Dreams.” I was pleasantly surprised to find out.

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