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Publication Date

2018

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

A Combination in Context:
Kay Sage and Surrealism

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In Art History

By

Molly Curtis

Thesis Committee:
Associate Professor James Nisbet, Chair
Chancellor's Professor Cécile Whiting
Associate Professor Amy Powell

2018

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my committee chair, Professor James Nisbet, for his guidance throughout the past several years. It has been a privilege to have the opportunity to learn from such a passionate, knowledgeable, and engaging professor during my time at UCI.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Professor Cécile Whiting and Professor Amy Powell, who have given me invaluable feedback on this thesis and have also cultivated exciting, engaging learning environments in each of the classes I have taken with them.

Next, I would like to thank the UCI Friends of Art History for choosing me for the Virginia Laddey Fellowship that has helped to fund my year of schooling in the Art History 4+1 program.

Lastly, thank you to my wonderful and supportive family and friends who have helped me through my undergraduate and graduate careers at UCI.

Abstract of the Thesis

A Combination in Context: Kay Sage and Surrealism

By

Molly Curtis

Master of Arts in Art History

University of California, Irvine, 2018

Professor James Nisbet, Chair

Kay Sage, a surrealist artist active from 1937 until her death in 1963, is a woman whose art and contributions to surrealism tend to be overlooked in literature on the Surrealist movement. In this paper, I contextualize the contributions that Sage made to help the spread of Surrealism from Europe to America, and why these efforts are important in shaping the movement in the United States. I argue for the re-contextualization of her work both as an advocate for Surrealism and as a Surrealist artist herself in order to understand the ways in which Sage has contributed to the history of art in America. This paper sheds a light on Kay Sage as a woman in Surrealism in an effort to showcase the importance of such female histories within art historical study.

Introduction

“I can’t reconcile the contradictions in your character.”

“Oh, those? They’re not really contradictions. They are just the two sides of a question. Sometimes they amalgamate and sometimes they don’t. When they do, they become a combination rather than a contradiction. That’s what I am. I’m a combination.”

-Kay Sage, *China Eggs*¹

Within the history of art, artists are integrated into the dialectical canon for being significant to others in their historical moment, or for making important strides in the development of art within a movement. When an artist is deemed relevant and integral within the trajectory of an artistic movement, we seem to delve into the details of their lives in order to understand the personal trials and triumphs that influenced them to create works that have become immortalized within our culture. Yet so often, female artists are not afforded the same luxury of being appreciated in a historical context for their contributions because people have been, historically, less interested in talking about women. When it comes to an artist like Kay Sage, we must re-contextualize her role within a movement whose participating women were not prioritized compared to the contributions of the primarily male figureheads of Surrealism. When we re-examine Sage, we begin to understand the true reach of her influence.

I feel that it is important to learn about and shine a light on women throughout history who have contributed to the art world—not with the intention of rewriting the history of art, or to further demarcate the differences between male and female artists, but instead to highlight the women producing art despite the fact that throughout history, the

¹ Kay Sage, *China Eggs* (unpublished, 1955, accessed through Archives of American Art) 13. Kay Sage’s unpublished memoir mostly features Sage’s own voice, but throughout there is also the implied presence of a second person commenting on her story and asking questions, although Sage does not indicate the identity of the speaker.

art world has focused upon and privileged male artists. We accept the work of so many men as being representative of the human experience, as being beautiful, or emotional, or truthful. I believe it is important to focus on and talk about female artists as the criticism and historicization of art continues, with the hope that in the future, the fact that an artist is a woman will not immediately place her into the category of “woman artist;” that her gender will not inherently provide us a lens with which to view her work, that she may be afforded the neutrality that male artists possess. Sage is not an obscure artist, nor is she an extremely well known one. In the history of Surrealism, she is sometimes mentioned, usually in the context of her contribution to the careers of other Surrealists. Indeed, she played a role in the spread of Surrealism from Europe to America and its subsequent promotion to audiences throughout the twentieth century, and in this paper I argue the significance of Sage’s contributions to both the art world and Surrealism, despite her relative anonymity compared to other Surrealists that are more commonly discussed when addressing the movement.

As I intend to discuss Kay Sage’s relationship to Surrealism, I will first provide some historical context concerning the movement. In 1917, French writer Guillaume Apollinaire coined the term ‘Surrealism.’ In 1924, two different Surrealist groups had formed under the influence of Apollinaire, one led by André Breton and the other led by Yvan Goll. Goll and Breton both wrote manifestoes of Surrealism, though ultimately, Breton’s concepts surrounding Surrealism ended up shaping the movement. Deeply influenced by the writings of Sigmund Freud, Breton believed that Surrealism could lead to a social revolution, spurred by the liberation of the unconscious mind from cultural psychological oppression. Surrealism gained popularity throughout the 1920s and 30s,

gaining major contributors to the movement such as Max Ernst, Roberto Matta, Joan Miro, Yves Tanguy, René Magritte, and Salvador Dali.

The methods of Surrealist expression depend upon Freud's psychological theories which posit that the unconscious mind contains one's unfettered desires and instincts, while the conscious mind is restrained by learned behavior, social rules, and logic. In Breton's *Manifesto of Surrealism*, he defines Surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern."² For Breton, psychic automatism is the key to tapping into the unconscious mind, and it is the method by which Surrealist artists are said to work, by attempting to allow their unconscious minds to lead their creative production, unfettered by conscious decision-making that may be influenced by learned societal norms or expectations. An example of such a mode of creation is stream-of-consciousness writing, with which Breton experimented early on in his exploration of Surrealism, including in a book of poetry, *Les Champs Magnetiques*, co-authored by Breton and Phillippe Soupault in 1919:

HOTELS

At midnight, you will still see the windows open and the doors closed. Music pours from the holes wherein the microbes and the majuscule worms can be seen dying. But further on, ever further, there are cries so blue that they cause death from emotion. Everything here is blue. The avenues and the main boulevards are deserted. The night is overcrowded with stars and the song of these people goes up to the sky as the sea retreats in search of the moon, light-heartedness so weighty and so seldom deceptive as regards the delicate souls of the waves.³

² André Breton, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969) 26.

³ André Breton, Paul Éluard, Philippe Soupault, David Gascoyne, Antony Melville & Jon Graham, *The Automatic Message: The Magnetic Fields; The Immaculate Conception* (London: Atlas Press, 1997) 103.

Immediately, the poem locates the reader in an architectural structure with windows and doors, an indication that the poem takes place within human civilization. Yet the streets are described as being deserted, and the focus turns to the imagery of the stars and the sky. Emotions and music are representative of the human presence, and at the end of the passage, these are described as going up into the sky, rhetorically joining the human and natural elements within the poem. This mode of writing lends itself to rich descriptions of the interactions between people, emotions, and natural surroundings, and sets a precedent for the types of concepts and images with which many Surrealist painters would later experiment. This paints a mental picture of a desolate landscape wherein human emotion and presence is suggested, but the scene is unusually devoid of any actual bodies or human activity. The visual qualities of this poem are apparent, as intangible things such as emotions and music are associated with visible elements, like the color blue and holes filled with dying organisms. This type of Surrealist imagery is taken up widely by painters—the use of empty, uncomfortably still landscapes similar to the one described in the poem are notably common within surrealist painting.

According to Mary Ann Caws, “Surrealism is above all about discovering the terrains of the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary, quotidian world.”⁴ This discovery of the extraordinary is manifested through embracing not only phenomena within the everyday world, but the ways in which the mind interprets and reflects upon these phenomena. For Breton, an important element of Surrealism was the representation of “the marvelous” in the natural world, which includes that which the mind interprets as

⁴ Ed. Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism*, (London: Phaidon, 2004) 24.

beautiful.⁵ As such, the interplay between the unconscious mind's interpretation of the natural world is inherently significant to Surrealist production. This idea of the marvelous is also applied to the figure of the woman and Freudian concepts of sexuality that placed women as points of focus.

It is likely, because male voices have largely historicized the movement, and male voices dominated the art world at the time as well, that women like Sage are not more actively discussed, despite the fact that many women besides Sage were involved in the movement. Although male surrealists did show some interest in the concept of the liberty of women, the leaders of the movement seemed to have little practical commitment to this idea.⁶ In her book *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, Whitney Chadwick laments the fact that histories of female artists, which went unrecorded in the past, are lost to us now. Additionally, the works of many of these artists has remained in private collections, making it more difficult to encounter Surrealist art by women in public cultural institutions.⁷ For this reason, it is necessary to re-contextualize contributions by women such as Sage who were integral to the development of this avant-garde movement.

Kay Sage was born Katherine Linn Sage in 1898 to wealthy parents Henry M. Sage and Anne Wheeler Sage. Though she was born in Albany, New York, her parents separated, and for most of her young life, Sage was raised in Italy in the company of her mother. Sage returned to America from 1919 to 1920 to attend the Corcoran Art School

⁵ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 14.

⁶ Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, (London: Brown, and Company, 1985) 7. Chadwick writes that Nicolas Calas remembers that although Breton states that “women should be free and adored,” he also disliked the wives of male artists he liked.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

in Washington D.C., and also received formal art education in Italy during her early adult years, studying oil painting individually with several different mentors. Though she would later claim that she was self-taught. In her biography of Sage, *A House of Her Own*, Judith Suther posits that this claim refers to the way in which she taught herself to artistically portray imaginary scenes, rather than those that could be observed in everyday life.⁸ Though Sage married in Italy, she found herself unsatisfied with her life there. She moved to Paris in 1937 on her own to pursue painting, and fell in love with Surrealism.

Sage's debut on the U.S. art scene began in 1940 with her first solo exhibition at the Matisse Gallery in New York City. Overall, her work was received in a positive light, and this critical reception continued the following year with two exhibitions in California, as well as with her next solo show at the Julian Levy Gallery in 1944.⁹ Generally, critics approved of Sage's work in spite of some having negative views of Surrealism, and praised her for producing work that avoids more shocking Surrealist elements. A reviewer for Time Magazine writes of Sage's show at the Matisse Gallery:

In spite of such titles as *Beyond the Wind*, *The World is Blue*, *My Room Has Two Doors*, her pictures were not calculated to scare anybody into convulsion fits or nightmares. Some of them, such as *Danger*, *Construction Ahead*, were even decorative. Though a psychoanalyst might have had an interesting quarter of an hour's detective work, to the layman artist Sage's subconscious showed all signs of being at peace with itself.¹⁰

This review is indicative of a somewhat negative attitude amongst some of Sage's critics towards Surrealism. However, here Sage is not associated with negative effects of Surrealist art like nightmares, and instead her work is deemed to even be decorative. The conclusions reached concerning Sage's artwork seem to align conveniently with a

⁸ Judith Suther, *A House of Her Own*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997) 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98, 110.

¹⁰ "Repatriated Surrealist," *Time*, 17 June 1940.

preconception of women that places them within the realm of decorative arts rather than fine arts.¹¹ Furthermore, the conclusion that these dreamscapes are indicative of a mind at peace despite their haunting and melancholic titles seems likely influenced by the knowledge that Sage is a woman, and the expectation that she must therefore be even-tempered. This notion is also in other reviews, such as one published in the *New York Times*, which compares her “dreamlike” scenes to “nightmarish” ones produced by artists like Salvador Dali.¹² So although the critical reception of Sage’s works throughout her career, especially early on, is positive, the public understanding of her works is likely affected by her identity as a woman.

¹¹ Alice Rawsthorn, “Female Pioneers of the Bauhaus,” *New York Times*, March 22, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/arts/25iht-design25.html?_r=0; Cheryl Buckley, “Made in Patriarchy: Toward a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design,” *Design Issues* 3 (1986) 3-14.

¹² “Diversified Shows of Art are Opened,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1940.

Kay Sage's Impact Upon Surrealism

Kay Sage was particularly influential in the spread of Surrealism from Europe to America, and her contributions to this movement made up a large part of her adult life. While she was not the public face of this movement, nor did she affect the public's perception of Surrealism to the same degree that Breton or Dali did, she was constantly providing financial resources to artists. Notably generous with the resources that came with being born to a wealthy family, Sage could be considered a contributor to the spread and growth of Surrealist art in America simply due to her role in motivating and aiding the relocation of several members of the Surrealist group to the United States. Sage moved from Paris back to America soon after the declaration of World War II, and after moving to New York, Sage began making plans with the French minister of education in order to coordinate a series of exhibitions in New York, from which the proceeds would be used to aid artists in France affected by the conflict. Tanguy was the first of his circle to follow Sage, and an exhibition of his work in New York inaugurated the series.

Sage's work coordinating these exhibits also led to the founding of The Society for the Preservation of European Culture. The society provided opportunities for French painters Jean Héliou and Gordon Onslow-Ford to travel to New York to exhibit and deliver lectures on Surrealism in the early 1940s.¹³ While not singularly responsible for the promotion of these artists in New York, Sage catalyzed the promotion of and interest in European Surrealists in New York by creating a line of communication and collaboration between New York and Paris. She was also integral in the migration of

¹³ Stephen Robeson-Miller, "In the Interim: The Constructivist Surrealism of Kay Sage," *Surrealism and Women*, ed. Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf Kuenzli, and Gwen Raaberg, (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass and London, 1990) 135.

several other key players within Surrealism and their families, providing financial support and coordinating travel, board, and social and professional connections for artists such as Roberto Matta, Max Ernst, as well as André Breton. Furthermore, Sage reportedly paid for several months of rent for the Bretons once they arrived in New York.¹⁴ Her apartment also served as a meeting place for the Surrealists, and she was constantly hosting gatherings. It is evident that by providing resources for so many artists to come to the United States, Sage's efforts directly influenced the spread of Surrealism from Europe to America. Even so, this is seldom detailed in histories of Surrealism and the movement's subsequent influence on artistic developments in America throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

In his extensive history of Surrealism in *A Boatload of Madmen*, Dickran Tashjian briefly mentions Sage when discussing Yves Tanguy, writing that Tanguy had “followed Kay Sage, an ‘American Princess’ who was just making her way in Paris as a painter attracted to Surrealism when the European hostilities erupted. They would soon be married in New York, after Tanguy’s Las Vegas divorce.”¹⁵ The quotation from Peggy Guggenheim in this passage that describes Sage as an “American Princess,” is without context, and therefore leaves the primary description of Sage up for interpretation—in truth, she was literally a princess after marrying an Italian prince, though Guggenheim could well have used the description in a derogatory sense nonetheless. Furthermore, here, Sage is primarily contextualized in relation to her romantic connection with her eventual husband, Yves Tanguy, and described as a painter attracted to surrealism as

¹⁴ Suther, 95.

¹⁵ Dickran Tashjian, *A Boatload of Madmen*, (Thames and Hudson, New York, 1995) 178.

opposed to a Surrealist artist. While this description is likely written in reference to Sage's status at the time of her meeting Tanguy, she still appears in the text as a detail in the history of the male artist, which does not work to credit her as a successful Surrealist artist, nor does it acknowledge her role as a promoter of the movement.

As I have established, Sage had a hand in the migration of Surrealism to New York throughout the 1940s, and as such, may have been a participant in the shaping of the style of Surrealism that was cultivated there, based on who she was able to help bring onto the scene. It seems, however, that Sage surrounded herself with artists who varied in their approach to Surrealism. She appears to have cast a wide net in terms of the Surrealist artists she supported and with whom she socialized. Furthermore, although Sage had spent little time familiarizing herself with the art scene in New York before she moved there in 1939, she was masterful at utilizing and maintaining the connections she did have in the city. After moving to Connecticut in 1945, Sage and Tanguy continued to see the Surrealist artists Breton, Calas, Duchamp, Ernst, Masson, Matta, and Seligmann.¹⁶ Sage's papers in the Archives of American Art also indicate her personal correspondences with professional and social contacts such as gallery owner Julien Levy and his wife well into the 1950s. She was also in contact with the Museum of Modern Art throughout the 1950s and 60s, corresponding with James Thrall Soby, an art critic and benefactor of the museum, and Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the first director of the museum.¹⁷

Sage continued to play a role in the proliferation of Surrealist art throughout the 1950s, as she was responsible for loaning and donating several pieces from her personal collection. These included works she produced herself, as well as pieces from her

¹⁶ Suther, 113.

¹⁷ Kay Sage Papers Box 1, Folder 12: Correspondence with the Museum of Modern Art.

husband and others, such as Tanguy, Breton, and Rene Magritte.¹⁸ In October and November of 1961, MoMA held an exhibition called “Art of Assemblage,” to which Sage provided Berton’s *Objet-Poem*. Featured in the exhibition were artworks produced from “unorthodox materials” such as wood, paper, cloth, and metal. The exhibit featured works from artists associated with Futurism, Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism, linking the common threads between these avant-garde movements.¹⁹

This exhibition was exemplary of the way in which artistic techniques used in Surrealist art were acknowledged as part of a larger artistic trend of assemblage art, indicating one way in which works in this movement were seen as influential in the American art world. Breton likely would not have been represented in the show without Sage’s contribution, and while it is impossible to track the direct affect something like this has on the trajectory of Breton’s and Surrealism’s legacy in the long run, it is evident that over the course of her life, she was influential in ways that generally go unnoticed in the history of Surrealism. There is no telling what the trajectory of Surrealism might have been had Sage not influenced the de facto leader of Surrealism to move to America during World War II; yet in scholarship, her contributions are often characterized as incidental. However, Kay Sage was also receiving public recognition for her work throughout nearly all of her career. In detailing her contributions to the spread of Surrealist art in America, the reception of her own art is not insignificant. Although perhaps the loudest voices in the literature on Surrealism have focused upon the male

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ William Seitz, *The Art Of Assemblage*, (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961).

members of the movement, Sage successfully continued to show and sell her works until her death in 1963.

The Art of Kay Sage

As she was seen as an artist with Surrealist leanings but slightly outside of the Surrealist movement, Sage's works provided a palatable way to view Surrealism that was generally well received. According to her papers in the Archives of American Art, Sage's awards include the Watson F. Blair Purchase prize from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1945 for *In the Third Sleep* (1950), the Corcoran Gallery's 1951 W.A. Clark prize for a work called *Nests of Lightning* (1950), which appeared in the gallery's Twenty-Second Biennial Exhibition, and the first prize for Connecticut Contemporary Painting, also in 1951, for a work entitled *All Soundings are Referred to High Water* (1947).²⁰ The committee for the Connecticut Contemporary Painting exhibition also wrote Sage to thank her for her contribution to the success of their exhibition in 1952, which was attended by over 400,000 visitors.²¹ These awards do not paint Sage as one of the most influential Surrealists on the scene in terms of her artistic reception, but they indicate that notable institutions recognized her throughout her career as a distinguished artist whose works were worth displaying, discussing, and owning.

Sage's oeuvre consists largely of landscapes that include strange yet familiar forms. The use of both empty, uncomfortably still landscapes and dynamic images of weather are notably common within surrealist painting. Many scholars have cited the influence of Giorgio De Chirico in Sage's works, who produced paintings such as *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* in 1913, where the flatness and high-contrast lighting contribute to a noticeable absence of any environmental presence or wind, leaving just the impression of placid air. Surrealist landscapes such as Dali's well-known *Persistence*

²⁰ Kay Sage Papers, Box 1, Folder 1, document 8.

²¹ Kay Sage Papers, Box 1, Folder 13, document 15.

of Memory from 1931 includes strange biomorphic and eerie forms presented in a fairly naturalistic landscape. In both of the paintings, the foreground takes up a majority of the canvas, and the presence of atmospheric detail is relegated to the faraway background, giving the impression that the scene being viewed in the current moment extends into both time and space, and the presence of change, such as with the movement of distant clouds, is a faraway thought.

Sage's 1937 work, *Monolith*, echoes elements of these aforementioned works. Though the foreground is not as expansive—the horizon falls just below the center of the canvas—there is a noticeable division between the atmospheric, foggy, gray background and the crisp fore- and middle-grounds. It is clear that Sage's work is in dialogue here with other surrealist works, and has taken on the abstracted landscape that many before and after her also utilize. Rather than being a faithful depiction of an outdoor landscape, however, the fogginess seems to enclose the scene and obscure anything outside of it, as though the mental picture that is depicted in the painting is being kept contained. The central form resembles a large, oval, obsidian-like stone standing straight up, with other rock-like shapes at its base, and surrounding this object are architectural forms that suggest the presence of civilization within this otherwise empty, lifeless scene.

Sage's *I Saw Three Cities*, painted in 1944, features a landscape littered with blocky, geometric and vaguely architectural forms, and also includes the familiar background with striations of what appear to be fog or clouds, with most of the foreground seemingly unaffected by any sort of weather. However, the large, totemic figure in the foreground, a pole or column wrapped in white fabric, draws immediate attention. The material is lifted and pulled to the left, as though blowing in the wind, yet

the fabric seems petrified. The folds on the bottom half of the object lean in the opposite direction, as if jostled by a much calmer force. The juxtaposition of the placidity of the environment and the unusually windblown material challenges the mind's interpretation of the forms, alluding to the natural occurrence of wind and the presence of atmosphere, but also evoking a sense of discomfort with these forms that do not quite subscribe to the laws of nature. Furthermore, the billowing material seems to conceal a form that alludes to the shape of the human body. On the right side of the object, the folds of the fabric delineate the curvature of a torso, though there are no head, legs or arms. Again, the suggestion of a human presence within this stoic, monochromatic landscape prevents the space from seeming completely devoid of life.

Here, I will provide a passage from *China Eggs*, Sage's unpublished 1955 memoir, as insight into the emotional motivation behind this painting (as well as others that incorporate similar abstracted yet totemic forms.) Though it is important to consider that this was written a decade after the production of this particular painting, I believe the sentiment gives us a way in which to interpret the emotional content of the work.

There is no such thing as pain. At best you can detach yourself from it. You can do this by taking the pain out of yourself, setting it up as a monument and walking around it. I can talk about it because I have done it. I have walked through entire parks of pain, observing each monument as one would observe a piece of sculpture—seeing the form with its sharp or rounded edges, the planes and the terrible points—but being quite apart from it.

While I do not wish to speculate about the specific emotional state in which Sage may have been while painting this, this particular explanation of pain is reminiscent of the visual and metaphorical nature of the Surrealist poetry by Breton and Soupalt. It creates a mental image of a landscape (a park) littered with pain that has been manifested in object forms. This description, like the scene in *I Saw Three Cities*, presents us with a

moment that is frozen or separate from the passage of time, and the geometric forms with both sharp and round edges correspond to the way in which Sage describes the monuments to pain that she imagines. While the uncanny stillness of the composition already casts a pall over the scene, an interpretation of the forms in the painting as monuments to pain further informs the emotional weight of such an image.

In her biography of Sage, Suther contends with the inclination of some scholars to conflate the biographical events of an artist's life with the analysis of their artwork. Though she is skeptical of this critical method, she concludes that in Sage's work, the personal is inherently tied to artistic production.²² While I don't believe that biographical information is inherently necessary for interpreting her work, I do believe that autobiographical accounts from Sage give insight into her mental state and inspiration for her work, as I have shown with the previously mentioned passage. The painting *Tomorrow is Never*, produced in 1955, was painted in a productive phase months after the death of her husband, Surrealist artist Yves Tanguy. The painting depicts a green-gray environment within which architectural structures resembling dilapidated scaffolding with fabric wrapped around their cores rise up through a cloudy mist. There is symmetry to the painting, wherein the middle is most light and visible, and at either end, the image recedes into darkness. The integration of the ruins of incomplete buildings with the dim, clouded sky creates an emotional dreamscape, wherein the wispy fog conceals anything that may lie beyond this desolate scene. When considered in relation to the grief experienced by Sage at the time of the painting's creation, the bleak structures and the

²² Suther, xvi.

imposing green fog reflect a sense of emotional devastation, the cloudiness preventing light and life from entering such a space.

As I have previously mentioned, in the New York Times review of Sage's solo show at the Matisse Gallery in 1940, the reviewer quotes the gallery head as saying her work has "a feeling of peace, a perspective leading toward infinity, that is peaceful and dreamlike, as contrasted with the 'nightmares' of another distinguished surrealist, Dali."²³ It is clear and perhaps unsurprising that those viewing Sage's work would interpret it in comparison to Dali, who was arguably the most well known of any artist associated with Surrealism. Yet the assumption that the placidity of Sage's environments in her paintings is representative of peace may be misguided. She produced *Tomorrow is Never* in the same year that she wrote *China Eggs*, and though she does not discuss her artwork specifically in the autobiography, the statements she makes about herself and the workings of her mind seem to align with that which is emotionally present in her paintings. In a chapter about her relationship with her sister throughout childhood, Sage writes,

I was much the same at eleven as I had been at three nor has my character changed radically since. In fact there is a corner of my mind which has never developed at all. I am still afraid of thunderstorms and all climatic phenomenae. I am still afraid of all things connected with the supernatural and my nightmares are still childish. ... I was and am still, more afraid of being afraid than I am of the actual thing that makes me afraid.²⁴

That Sage would reveal a lifelong fear of storms and climatic occurrences indicates the significance of the atmosphere in her works as emotionally significant. In all of the aforementioned works, Sage renders her skies with a thickness that indicates the presence

²³ "Diversified Shows of Art are Opened"

²⁴ Sage, 33.

of fog or clouds in a way that seems to contain each scene. The landscape simultaneously extends far into the distance and is also cut off, providing a soupy screen that keeps the space from seeming infinite. The implementation of total placidity in such expansive environments is unfamiliar and creates the impression that the things we observe in her paintings are moments frozen in time. The containment of these scenes with a dense, atmospheric sky imbues them with eeriness, with a constant threat of a potential weather shift and downpour. There is no indication that a storm is immediately imminent—there are no roiling clouds or sprinkles of precipitation. There is just an intimation of the discomfort that comes with a dark, overcast sky, keeping the viewer in an anticipatory state before the cathartic release of a true storm. Here, we can observe the way in which Sage’s fear is painted right onto the canvas. With the metaphorically threatening sky, these pieces communicate the anxious fear with which Sage contends.

My analysis of Sage’s writings alongside her paintings illuminate the intimacy with which Sage is working, interacting with the core concepts of Surrealism as taught by Breton, and yet, in her reception by critics, she is not completely associated with the Surrealists. The consideration of her works as not entirely Surrealist but rather influenced by Surrealism is potentially a product of the prioritization of male artists in this movement, as Sage is obviously working within the tenets of Bretonian Surrealism and developing her own automatist method of expression. Surrealist art is largely premised on the haunting, uncanny qualities they invoke, and as such, these works could be jarring in comparison to other popular art of the moment.²⁵ At the time that Sage and other expats were arriving in the New York art scene during World War II, Salvador Dali was the star

²⁵ American art movements prior to WWII often focused on naturalistic depictions of urban or rural life in the midst of the Great Depression.

of Surrealism. The Persistence of Memory was noticed by critics and the mass media, and was therefore representative of Surrealism for the American people. This is arguably still true today, as the melting clocks of this painting are still synonymous with the surrealist movement. Dali's surrealist landscapes set a precedent for automatist painting, and introduced audiences to this type of art. Though I will not argue that the original locus of the surreal landscape is a Dali canvas (I have discussed the earlier precursors to this type of landscape with De Chirico), wide reception of this dreamlike art in America seems to stem from Dali's success. Sage adopted techniques that Dali utilized such as Surrealist landscapes and abstracted forms, but she utilized them in a way that placed a larger emphasis on inanimate forms rather than biomorphic ones. Sage's work had the capacity to introduce audiences to new concepts, such as her monuments to pain and inanimate structures, within a genre made familiar to them by Dali, which may have helped to pave the way for acceptance of more abstracted forms in works by artists such as Hélon and Onslow-Ford.

Conclusion

Although Sage's contribution to the spread of Surrealism and her work to promote artists within the movement were tireless, she was not necessarily well liked or included by key members of the movement.²⁶ Furthermore, though she is associated with the movement and considered a Surrealist artist, her motivations for artistic production do not align entirely with Breton's ideas about Surrealism. Breton's surrealism has roots in his political stance surrounding freedom of expression for artists, it is unlikely that Sage's artwork and outreach is motivated by the same political underpinnings.²⁷ Suther asserts that "The financial help she gave to members of Tanguy's group was probably not motivated by the rather high-flown notion of championing artistic freedom threatened by totalitarian propaganda. In all likelihood it was motivated by her belief that the Surrealist espousal of dream states, the nonrational, and the individual's access to the unconscious held the key to authentic creativity."²⁸ Sage was passionate about the creative process and artistic production, and though she aligned herself with artists within a political artistic movement, this did not necessarily motivate her artistic or social activity. Sage's work for the Surrealist cause appears very unselfish, and she seems to have helped others out of the goodness of her heart without expectation of anything in return. However, in her memoir, Sage asserts that she has "a passionate love for things and a great intolerance of

²⁶ Suther, 125.

²⁷ "The First Papers of Surrealism" Catalogue, 1942. Breton and Marcel Duchamp put on an exhibition called "The First Papers of Surrealism" in 1942. The catalogue highlighted the artistic and political agenda of the movement: "The surrealist cause, in art as in life, is the cause of freedom itself. Today more than ever to speak abstractly in the name of freedom or to praise it in empty terms is to serve it ill. To light the world freedom must become flesh and to this end must always be reflected and recreated in the *word*."

²⁸ Suther, 91.

people—or perhaps indifference is a better word.”²⁹ This statement indicates that instead of Sage’s helpful actions towards her peers being motivated by her genuine enjoyment of these people, she supported them because of her love of the beautiful things that they created.

And though it is important to understand Sage’s role in promoting the dissemination of other artists’ work, her own artistic developments should also be prioritized as part of contextualizing her within an art historical narrative. In “Double Solitaire: Kay Sage’s Influence on Yves Tanguy,” Jonathan Stuhlman compares paintings made throughout the lives of Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy and discusses the ways in which Sage’s work likely influenced Tanguy. The essay was written for the exhibition catalogue for “Double Solitaire: the Surreal Worlds of Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy,” which featured work by both artists.³⁰ When discussing the work of lesser-known artists contributing work to artistic movements that are well known to this day, such a text attempts to supply its readers with a concrete reason to study the artist, for they directly contributed to other famous artists’ development.

Kay Sage is a particularly likely subject for this type of study because of her marriage to Yves Tanguy, who was close to Breton, included in the inner-circle of the Bretonian surrealists, and remains well documented and often mentioned in discussions of the movement. During their lives, Sage and Tanguy did exhibit their art together, and Sage was devoted to the promotion of her husband’s art. Because of the degree to which these artists’ lives were intertwined, it would be difficult to try to discuss Sage while

²⁹ Sage, 33.

³⁰ Jonathan Stuhlmann, “Double Solitaire: Kay Sage’s Influence on Yves Tanguy,” *Double Solitaire: The Surreal Worlds of Kay Sage and Yves Tanguy*, (Katonah, New York: Katonah Museum of Art, and Charlotte, North Carolina: The Mint Museum, 2011).

leaving Tanguy out of the picture completely. But contextualizing Sage through her contributions to the creative processes of other Surrealists, she is granted originality, rather than being positioned as derivative of artists such as Tanguy. Still, constantly comparing her to those artists close to her may prevent us from appreciating her as an artist on her own terms.

In *China Eggs*, the artist provides details and descriptions of herself that seem to point very clearly to her struggle to characterize herself as a “different” sort of girl. She aligns herself with the *enfant-terribles* of legend, describing her affinity for art from a very early age, coupled with a sort of intoxicating rage and selfishness that accompanied this passion. She describes her relationship with her mother as a mutually passionate one, seeming to border on obsession, though early on in the description she asserts that her mother’s feelings were “patently abnormal and surely sexual,” though she does not specify why she believes this.³¹ In these ways, Sage seems to align herself with masculinity, separating herself from the qualities considered feminine. Throughout her career, she uses the gender-ambiguous name Kay Sage, and continues to do so after her marriage to Yves Tanguy, though in personal correspondence and documentation, she uses the name Kay Sage-Tanguy, or Mrs. Yves Tanguy.³² She does not create the impression, in other aspects of her life, that she attempts to eschew her feminine qualities, as her role as a constant hostess and her almost maternal way of taking care of the personal and professional lives of other artists evidence, but as it pertains to her work as an artist, it seems that there is little room for embracing womanhood. In this way, Sage’s

³¹ Sage, 3.

³² Sage uses the name Mrs. Yves Tanguy to be credited for works she loaned to the Museum of Modern Art: Box 1, Folder 12, also *The Art of Assemblage*, 165.

public persona and her private, artistic one are split in two. It seems that in her efforts to characterize herself as an artist, she felt the need to align herself with the masculine to be recognized as an individual. This idea brings me back to the quote from *China Eggs* with which I began this paper:

“ I can’t reconcile the contradictions in your character.”

“Oh, those? They’re not really contradictions. They are just the two sides of a question. Sometimes they amalgamate and sometimes they don’t. When they do, they become a combination rather than a contradiction. That’s what I am. I’m a combination.”³³

In order to understand Sage’s influence on the history of Surrealism, it is necessary to understand the ways in which her personal and professional lives were intertwined, as each affected the other. It is the combination of her work as an artist and as a proponent of Surrealism in general that makes her an integral part of the movement.

³³ Sage, 13.

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