

Claude Cahun

24 May – 25 September 2011





Autoportrait, c.1926
IVAM, Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, Generalitat

Claude Cahun (1894-1954) has something approaching cult status in today's art world. However, her work was almost unknown until the early 1980s, when it was championed by the research of François Leperlier, after which exhibitions at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nantes (1994) and the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (1995) brought it to public attention. Her life and work (both literary and artistic) bespeak an extraordinary libertarian personality who defied sexual, social and ethical conventions in what was an age of avant-garde and moral upheaval. Among her many photographs, it is undoubtedly her self-portraits that have aroused the greatest interest in recent years. Throughout her life, Cahun used her own image to dismantle the clichés surrounding ideas of identity. She reinvented herself through photography, posing for the lens with a keen sense of performance and role-play, dressed as a woman or a man, as a maverick hero, with her hair long or very short, or even with a shaved head. This approach was extended in innovative ways in her photographs of objects and use of photomontages, which asserted the primacy of the imagination and of metamorphosis.

By exploring the many different analyses made of Cahun's work since the 1990s, and ranging across its different themes: from the subversive self-portraits that question identity, to her surrealist compositions, erotic metaphors and political forays, this exhibition confirms the modernity of a figure who, as a pioneer



Autoportrait, 1928 / Jersey Heritage Collection
© Jersey Heritage

of self-representation and the poetry of objects, has been an important influence for many contemporary artists.

Metamorphoses of identity and the subversion of gender (I)

This set of photographs, going from 1913 to the end of the 1920s, includes some of Cahun's major works, in which she staged her own persona, emphasising disguise and masks, and working through variations on gender: feminine, masculine, androgyne, undifferentiated. Sexual ambiguity is consciously cultivated and calls into question established norms and conventions. In 1928, she even represented herself with her head shaved, wearing a singlet, in profile, or with her hands against her face, or wearing a loose man's jacket. Some of the *mise-en-scènes* from this period seem to anticipate contemporary performance.

Poetics of the object

The "assemblages of objects," which make their appearance in around 1925, inventively explore what at the time was still a rather new form. This work came to wider attention in the Surrealist exhibition at the Charles Ratton gallery, in May 1936, and then with the commissioning of 22 photographic plates to illustrate a book of poems by Lise Deharme, *Le Cœur de Pic* (1937), prefaced



Autoportrait, c.1929 / Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes
© RMN / Gérard Blot

by Paul Eluard. These photographs capture ephemeral set-ups, often in a natural setting (garden, beach). Each “sketch” is a composition of heterogeneous elements, both found and made, such as knickknacks in spun glass, sewing items, twigs, bones, insects, feathers, gloves, pieces of fabric, shoes, tools, etc. This “theatre of objects” has both a visual and symbolic significance, which Cahun explained in her text *Prenez garde aux objets domestiques* (1936).

Metamorphoses of identity and the subversion of gender (continued)

The 1930s saw Cahun continuing to explore images of the self. However, questions of sexual difference and its social and cultural construction were now less to the fore as she went deeper into the potential of situations and disguises and experimented with duplication in a way that extended the work of the photomontages from the late 1920s.

Metaphors of desire

Eschewing the direct and sometimes reifying display of the female body found in many paintings and photographs, Cahun opted for a more subtle kind of “veiled eroticism” using distance and irony. Here we find some very evocative examples of her calculating games with desire. Whether through the contained display of the body, allegory



Combat de pierre, 1931 / Private collection
© Photo Béatrice Hatala

(the bacchante or faun, surrounded by sensuous vegetation), or anthropomorphic objects (the hermaphroditic “père”), she aimed to capture the essence of desire, to bring out its essential grounding in fantasy.

The two of us. Claude Cahun and Suzanne Malherbe (Marcel Moore)

The photograph *Entre nous* (1926) clearly establishes the spirit of this section, which evokes various aspects of Claude Cahun’s intimate relationship and artistic collaboration with her partner, Suzanne Malherbe. In fact, a number of the photographs here were taken by Suzanne following Claude’s suggestions. A double portrait from 1921 shows a surprising parallel which could be read as a metaphor of their relationship, a deep closeness and understanding between two strong personalities. The linchpin of this section is constituted by the four photomontages used to illustrate *Aveux non avenue* (1930), Cahun’s most significant literary work, gathering together all the artist’s main themes and obsessive metaphors. The plates were executed by Moore in collaboration with Claude Cahun.

Elective encounters

This series of portraits, which reflect the importance of friendship in the development of Cahun’s work, gives an idea of the figures who were important to



Sans titre, 1936 / Private collection
© Photo Béatrice Hatala

her and influenced her, or to whom she felt close, among them Henri Michaux, Robert Desnos, André Breton, Jacqueline Lamba and Suzanne Malherbe. There are also two photographs from performances at Pierre Albert-Birot's theatre Le Plateau (1929). They attest Cahun's keen interest in theatre and acting.

Poetry and politics

In the 1930s Cahun's positions grew increasingly radical in response to the rise of totalitarianism. She joined the Surrealists and associated with a number of groups on the left and far left. This radicalisation is reflected in her aesthetic. In line with the ideas put forward in her pamphlet *Les Paris sont ouverts* (1934), she exploited the subversive qualities of "indirect action" in the sphere of symbolic expression, making a number of objects in which poetry and politics are intimately intertwined. This process culminated when she used these pieces for two big series of photographs dominated by a mood of irony, revolt and provocation: "La Poupée" (The Doll), a figure fashioned out of newspaper, and "Le Théâtre" (The Theatre), a wooden mannequin surrounded by various elements and placed under a glass dome.

Beyond the visible. The last self-portraits

Close study of Cahun's photographs reveals the presence of allusions to non-visible phenomena,



Poupée I, 1936
Richard and Ronay Menschel

pointing the way to other realities – and perhaps, too, beyond death. Her attraction to symbolism, her interest in Eastern doctrines and her closeness to Surrealism only confirmed the primacy of fantasy and metamorphosis evidenced in the intellectual and aesthetic approaches she took throughout her life. The series *Le Chemin des chats* (The Way of Cats, around 1949 and 1953), suggests a mediation on and questioning of reality and appearance. Cahun was a true cat lover: for her, this animal was the great intercessor, the medium of an intuitive contact between the visible and the invisible, leading to sensorial worlds that are both unfamiliar and yet very near.

Juan Vicente Aliaga and François Leperlier,
curators of the exhibition



Aveux non avenues, plate 1, 1929-30
Private collection – © Photo Béatrice Hatala

some dates

- 1894** Lucy Schwob born in Nantes on 25 October.
- 1909** Meets Suzanne Malherbe.
- 1912-1915** First writings and first photographs. Publication of *Vues et Visions* in *Le Mercure de France*.
- 1917** Lucy adopts the pseudonym Claude Cahun. Studies literature and philosophy.
- 1922-1925** Contributes to various journals. Meets Henri Michaux.
- 1929** Acts in several productions at the Le Plateau theatre.
- 1930** Publishes *Aveux non avenues* (Disavowals) with a preface by Mac Orlan and illustrated by photomontages made with Suzanne (who signs as "Moore").
- 1932** Meets André Breton and joins the Surrealist movement.
- 1934** Publishes a polemical essay, *Les Paris sont ouverts*, in which she attacks the cultural policies of the Communist Party. Close friendship with René Crevel.
- 1936** Has several objects in the Surrealist exhibition at the Charles Rattou gallery.
- 1937** Publication of *Le Cœur de Pic*, a volume of poems by Lise Deharme illustrated by Claude Cahun's photographs. Moves to Jersey.
- 1940-1945** Having been politically active against the German occupying forces in Jersey, Cahun is arrested by the Gestapo. She is not released until 8 May 1945.
- 1954** Dies in Jersey on 8 December.



Robert Desnos, 1930, Jersey Heritage Collection
© Jersey Heritage

around the exhibition

- I reading/performance** by the Théâtre du Chat Huant company around excerpts from *Héroïnes*, the book published by Claude Cahun in 1925.
Friday 27 May 2011, 7pm
Saturday 24 September, 5pm
- I symposium** "Art, history, politics: contemporary interactions and reflections," moderated by art historian Elvan Zabunyan.
session 2: "Deconstructing clichés," with Angela Ferreira, artist, Thierry Hoquet, philosopher, Griselda Pollock, art historian and critic, and Santu Mofokeng, artist.
Claude Cahun and Santu Mofokeng are two avant-garde photographers from totally different historical and cultural backgrounds, but both show a way of going beyond sexual and racial clichés. This symposium will refer to their experiences in order to deconstruct the stereotypes that beset all thinking on "gender" and "race."
Friday 17 June, 6pm
- I guided tour** with Juan Vicente Aliaga.
Tuesday 6 September 2011, 7pm
- I projection** of *La Dame masquée* by Victor Tourjansky (1924, B/W, 87'), with costumes designed by Claude Cahun. Presented by François Leperlier and Danièle Higon.
Tuesday 20 September 2011, 7pm

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■ **publication:** *Claude Cahun*

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Tirza T. Latimer and François Leperlier
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