

WHITNEY

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PRESS RELEASE

THE WHITNEY MUSEUM PRESENTS *SIXTIES SURREAL*, A BOLD REAPPRAISAL OF AMERICAN ART



Opening September 24, this exhibition features work by Diane Arbus, Yayoi Kusama, Andy Warhol, Romare Bearden, Jasper Johns, Nancy Grossman, David Hammons, Louise Bourgeois, Faith Ringgold, and many more.

New York, NY, August 20, 2025 — This fall, the Whitney Museum of American Art presents [*Sixties Surreal*](#), a sweeping, ambitious, revisionist look at American art from 1958 to 1972 through the lens of the “surreal,” both inherited and reinvented. Opening on September 24, the exhibition features the work of 111 artists who embraced the psychosexual, fantastical, and revolutionary energy of an era shaped by civil unrest, cultural upheaval, and boundless experimentation.

Rather than adhering to familiar movements of the 1960s like Pop Art, Conceptualism, or Minimalism, *Sixties Surreal* uncovers alternate histories and recontextualizes some of the decade’s best-known figures alongside those only recently rediscovered. The exhibition considers how artists turned to Surrealism, not as a European import, but as a way to navigate the strange, turbulent realities of American life. Featuring iconic works by Diane Arbus, Yayoi

Kusama, Romare Bearden, Judy Chicago, Nancy Grossman, Christina Ramberg, David Hammons, Louise Bourgeois, Jasper Johns, Fritz Scholder, Peter Saul, Marisol, Robert Crumb, Faith Ringgold, H.C. Westermann, Jack Whitten, and many others, the exhibition brings new visibility to a generation of artists who challenged mainstream narratives in pursuit of radical freedom.

"Sixties Surreal has been nearly three decades in the making, dating to my time as a Whitney intern and subsequent college thesis. Through intense collaboration with curatorial colleagues Dan Nadel, Laura Phipps, and Elisabeth Sussman, the project has grown into a sweeping reexamination of a turbulent and transformative chapter in American life and art," said Scott Rothkopf, the Alice Pratt Brown Director of the Whitney. *"Sixties Surreal* reveals how artists across the country embraced and reinvented surreal tendencies to challenge conventions and mirror the strangeness of a time marked by radical political, social, and cultural change. By bringing their visionary contributions into fuller view, this exhibition helps to reshape how we understand the art and spirit of the 1960s, as well as our own roiling moment."

"Our years of conversations and research showed us a new map of the 1960s, one that sprawls out across the country and includes networks of artists and ideas that have too often been left out of institutional histories," said curators Laura Phipps, Dan Nadel, and Elisabeth Sussman. "We hope that this view of the long sixties will offer a vibrant and capacious new version of the decade and leave visitors with ideas for how to build a new future."

"Sixties Surreal is the perfect embodiment of the Whitney's longtime commitment to reexamining art histories and celebrating understudied narratives in art of the United States," added Kim Conaty, Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator of the Whitney. "We're excited to highlight this ambitious historical retelling as part of a dynamic fall program featuring much-anticipated presentations of iconic Whitney collection works, such as Alexander Calder's *Circus*, and bold emerging talents like Grace Rosario Perkins."

Spanning painting, sculpture, photography, film, and assemblage, twenty percent of the works on view in *Sixties Surreal* are drawn from the Whitney's collection. The exhibition traces how artists working in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, and New York grappled with identity, sexuality, race, and power in ways often overlooked in canonical art histories. Influenced by, and taking permission from, the ethos of historical Surrealism—dream logic, eroticism, irrationality—these artists channeled that spirit into new and localized forms, producing work that is deeply personal and politically pointed.

From the experimental films of Jordan Belson to the biomorphic sculptures of Barbara Chase-Riboud and the visionary imagery of Jay DeFeo, the show unites diverse voices under a shared impulse to depict the world as it felt at the time, and still today—surreal.

Sixties Surreal is organized by Dan Nadel, Steven and Ann Ames Curator of Drawings and Prints; Laura Phipps, Associate Curator; Scott Rothkopf, Alice Pratt Brown Director; and Elisabeth Sussman, Curator; with Kelly Long, Senior Curatorial Assistant, and Rowan Diaz-Toth, Curatorial Project Assistant, at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Exhibition Overview – *Sixties Surreal*

Organized thematically rather than chronologically, *Sixties Surreal* invites visitors to move through immersive galleries that explore how artists across the U.S. responded to a decade in which the world itself felt increasingly surreal. In an era marked by political unrest, radical liberation movements, shifting social norms, and an expanding media and technology landscape, the poet John Ashbery wrote, “We all ‘grew up Surreal’ without even being aware of it.” By the late 1960s, the Surrealist movement, which began in 1920s Paris and inspired artists such as Salvador Dalí and René Magritte to explore dreams and the unconscious, had influenced everything from film and dance to design and advertising. Surrealism was pervasive throughout American popular culture, yet it was often seen as tasteless or passé, particularly by a New York-centric art world. However, for many artists working in the 1960s, Surrealism—or the more general idea of the “surreal”—became a liberating force. It offered a way to make art amidst profound cultural changes.

Sixties Surreal opens with an installation of three life-sized, lifelike camel sculptures by artist Nancy Graves. Initially exhibited in Graves’s solo exhibition at the Whitney’s Breuer Building uptown in 1969, the three camels in this gallery are not true taxidermy but are patchworked together out of natural and synthetic materials. They serve as a reminder for visitors as they enter the exhibition that reality is strange and that even what is real may not be quite what it seems.

While Pop Art was a predominant artistic movement of the 1960s, artists like Martha Rosler, Jim Nutt, and Lee Lozano were dismantling the consumerist promises of the American Dream in their work by blending domestic imagery with violent, sexual, and psychological associations. The works on display here can be understood in terms of their destabilizing effect on the viewer. They question the reciprocal relationship between consumption and identity, a relationship that was increasingly fraught in the consumerist boom of the post-World War II era. In 1966, curator Gene Swenson organized *The Other Tradition*, an exhibition in Philadelphia that included many of the artists in this gallery alongside historic Surrealists like Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst. The works presented in *The Other Tradition* and in this gallery highlight how surreal sensibilities infiltrated Pop’s sheen with undercurrents of dread and critique.

Abstraction through a surreal lens is explored and becomes embodied through the work of artists who forged new forms to reckon with the tactile and emotional reality of inhabiting a body. Some works on view in this section of the exhibition are erotic, while others are anxious, but they all evoke physicality through unorthodox materials. Bridging East and West Coast practices, many of the featured artists were included in two 1967 exhibitions: *Eccentric Abstraction* in New York and *Funk* in Berkeley, California. *Eccentric Abstraction*, curated by Lucy Lippard, presented artists, including Bruce Nauman, Don Potts, Louise Bourgeois, and Eva Hesse, whose work was rigorously abstract yet retained a sensuous quality. The artists whose work was shown by the curator Peter Selz in *Funk*, among them Jeremy Anderson, Ken Price, and Franklin Williams, were more explicit in their references to guts, fingers, and anthropomorphic forms. The objects these West Coast artists produced may seem innocuous at first glance, but the subtle protrusions and openings of works such as Price’s *S. L. Green* (1963)

or Williams's *Untitled* (1966) evoke both the anxieties and the ecstasies of our physical being. Looking beyond these historic exhibitions, the works on view in this portion of *Sixties Surreal* bring together artists from across the country who worked with unorthodox materials to create objects of embodied abstraction.

Many artists in the 1960s presented everyday American life as being off-kilter, uncanny, or unexpected—in other words, surreal. This was particularly true of photographers who increasingly found that if they looked at the world from a certain angle, the disorientation of modern life became evident. Images and videos capturing the strangeness of postwar American life became even more ubiquitous as television sets transmitted this novel visual language directly into American homes. Artists such as Lee Friedlander, Paul Thek, and Luis Jimenez were unnerved by television's presence—the oddity of bringing this technology into a domestic space, an object that might confront you with images of Count Dracula one moment and the Vietnam War the next.

In a dedicated gallery, Edward Owens's work, *Private Imaginings and Narrative Facts* (1966) is showcased. This lush, lyrical film offers a layered portrait of the artist's mother and aunt that combines staged and documentary footage to create complementary visions of reality and fantasy. This work showcases Owens's queer, avant-garde sensibility and reveals how personal memory can be reshaped through surreal cinematic techniques.

Violence and oppression confronted American households of the 1960s head-on as imagery of war, state violence, and systemic racism played on television for the first time. Artists such as Fritz Scholder, Nancy Spero, Peter Saul, and Ralph Arnold channel rage, grief, and resistance in works that echo this brutality and inequity. Drawing from mass media and protest, their works use surreal exaggeration, satire, and fragmentation as forms of social critique. Here, the surreal is not escapist, but rather a tool of dissent.

The Surrealist tradition of collage and utilizing found objects is reclaimed in the 1960s by artists like Noah Purifoy, Bruce Conner, Melvin Edwards, and Ed Bernal, who employed assemblage to engage directly with contemporary political conditions. Whether responding to the Watts Rebellion, racism, war, or nuclear anxiety, these artists reconfigure cultural debris into poetic and provocative forms. The gallery emphasizes how assemblage became a language of protest and renewal during a period of social rupture.

Before the women's liberation movement entered wider public consciousness in the early 1970s, women artists were creating an early feminist aesthetic and imagining new fields of possibility for themselves and their work. For historic Surrealists, the radical juxtapositions made possible by collage were appealing for their apparent capacity to communicate unconscious thoughts and desires. For the Proto feminists of the 1960s, like Martha Edelheit, Barbara Hammer, Luchita Hurtado, and Shigeko Kubota, collage techniques offered a way to highlight the myriad social, political, and psychological expectations for women. Although the presence of sexual content meant their work was often sensationalized as "erotic art," such artists held an expansive set of concerns, from gender and sexuality to objectification and artifice.

Sixties Surreal concludes with a turn toward the spiritual and mystical. Organized religion was one of the many institutions that came under question in the 1960s. For many artists, the search for alternatives led to the exploration of expansive forms of spirituality, influenced by cultural roots, ancestral knowledge, and the occult. Many practitioners of historic Surrealism promoted esotericism and the magical sciences as tools for unlocking the subconscious mind and critiquing the dominant institutions of the period, like family, church, and state. Artists followed that line of thinking to various critical ends. Some, such as Jordan Belson and Ching Ho Cheng, sought spiritual knowledge by using meditation, psychedelic drugs, and divination as tools for elevating consciousness. Others, including Claes Oldenburg and Eduardo Carrillo, looked outward, questioning the dominance of religious institutions and reappropriating conventional iconography for new ends. Still others, such as Oscar Howe and Carlos Villa, evoked ritual practice in their work to assert claims to cultural identity and counter the destabilizing effects of colonization and Christianity upon Indigenous systems of belief.

Exhibition Tickets

Starting August 19, visitors can purchase timed tickets for *Sixties Surreal*, opening September 24, 2025. [More ticketing information is available on the Museum's website.](#)

Press Preview

The Whitney Museum will host a press preview on Wednesday, September 17, 10 am–2 pm. [RSVP to the press preview by filling out this form.](#) A photography and broadcast hour will start at 9 am and requires advance registration. Please reach out to pressoffice@whitney.org with any questions about the photography and broadcast hour. Press Preview remarks will begin in the third-floor theater at 10:30 am.

Member Previews

The Whitney will host member previews Thursday, September 18 to Monday, September 22. Learn more about the Whitney's membership program and be one of the first to see this exhibition at whitney.org/support/membership.

Catalogue

Sixties Surreal is accompanied by a scholarly publication that complements the exhibition and aims to reevaluate American art of the 1960s by foregrounding the role of Surrealism during a period of social and political upheaval. By challenging what we think we know about art of the 1960s, this volume moves beyond the established movements of Pop art, Minimalism, and Conceptualism to shine a light on how American artists created a unique type of Surrealism, making works suffused with eroticism, dread, wonder, violence, and liberation. A series of essays reveals how this new Surrealism enabled artists to reconnect art to an increasingly untethered reality following the period of rapid postwar transformation and to imagine new worlds and models for art rooted in political and social change. Presenting a new framework to understand the work of artists such as Lee Bontecou, Franklin Williams, Nancy Grossman, Mel Casas, Yayoi Kusama, Jim Nutt, John Outterbridge, Ralph Arnold, H. C. Westermann, Romare Bearden, Louise Bourgeois, Christina Ramberg, and Robert Arneson, this study features an expansive chronology that highlights how a broad group of artists across the United States

connected to each other through exhibitions, galleries, and collectives, offering a fresh perspective on how artists in the 1960s harnessed psychoanalysis, wordplay, and assemblage, among other strategies, to create new horizons for subject matter and form that continue to reverberate in American art today. *Sixties Surreal* is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Yale University Press. [Copies are available for purchase online](#) and in the Whitney Shop (\$50.00).

Free Public Programs

A series of free in-person and virtual public programs will be offered in conjunction with *Sixties Surreal*. More information about these programs and how to register will be available on the Museum's [website](#) as details are confirmed.

PRESS CONTACT

For press materials and image requests, please visit our press site at whitney.org/press or contact:

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ABOUT THE WHITNEY

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney’s mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Whitney Museum Land Acknowledgment

The Whitney is located in Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape. The name Manhattan comes from their word Mannahatta, meaning “island of many hills.” The Museum’s current site is close to land that was a Lenape fishing and planting site called Sapponckanikan (“tobacco field”). The Whitney acknowledges the displacement of this region’s original inhabitants and the Lenape diaspora that exists today.

As a museum of American art in a city with vital and diverse communities of Indigenous people, the Whitney recognizes the historical exclusion of Indigenous artists from its collection and program. The Museum is committed to addressing these erasures and honoring the perspectives of Indigenous artists and communities as we work for a more equitable future. To read more about the Museum’s Land Acknowledgment, [visit the Museum’s website](#).

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm; Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 am–6 pm. Closed Tuesday. Visitors twenty-five years and under and Whitney members: FREE. The Museum offers FREE admission and special programming for visitors of all ages every Friday evening from 5–10 pm and on the second Sunday of every month.

Image credit:

Linda Lomahaftewa, *Untitled Woman’s Faces*, 1960s. Oil on canvas, 36 × 48 in. (91.4 × 121.9 cm). Heard Museum, Phoenix; Gift of the artist. © Linda Lomahaftewa

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