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Getting surreal

By Charles Desmarais

Art starts with René Magritte. Ask anyone who was a teenager in 1969, when the Jeff Beck Group released the rock album "Beck-Ola." Baptism in the waters of Rod Stewart's hard-rock vocal technique was the album's aural achievement. But visual faith sprung from Magritte's uncanny description of a single, grotesquely swollen apple, entrapped in a stone-walled chamber.

The work is one of many happily recalled, if timeworn, pictures in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's newest exhibition, "Re-

Magritte's late work pops at SFMOMA

René Magritte, "Son of Man" (1964)

né Magritte: The Fifth Season," opening Saturday, May 19. The show runs through Oct. 28.

The version of Magritte's "The Listening Room" reproduced on that album cover had been painted in 1958, well after the Belgian artist had secured his reputation in the art world. To kids whose "worlds" were defined largely by the confines of their bedroom walls, however, the absurdity of a room-size green apple was potent and new.

As bold as it is, it's a simplistic image, nicely matched to the sensibilities of its age and the audience for that music. It might have to do

Magritte continues on E3

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



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René Magritte, "The Kiss" (1951)

Exploring Magritte's comfort zone

Magritte from page E1

with our domestication of nature, our attempts at taming what once was wild. It might be Mother Earth herself, imprisoned. Or perhaps it is our minds, our perceptions that have shrunk, no longer able to contain life's plain truths.

From there, the beginner might speculate about what other visual metaphor might be at work in culture.

The painting opens the way, going forward, to the excitement of Pop Art, and then to the conundrums of Conceptualism. Going back, to the delicious artifice of niches and compact, busy rooms, ceremoniously presented in Renaissance perspective. We all have to start somewhere, and Magritte's casual freightage of every image with allegorical puzzles and jokes offers an enticing gateway.

The exhibition confines itself to Magritte's late works, which tend to be those best loved by a broad public but less valued by art historians. It is SFMOMA curator Caitlin Haskell's final project for the museum before she decamps to a new position as curator of international modern art at the Art Institute of Chicago. The show is a grand success on its own terms: a well chosen, carefully researched, beautifully designed reconsideration of an artist we thought we knew. Of some 70 works included, 20 have never before been shown in the U.S.

Still, there is no getting away from the sense that most of the works, as ingenious as they are as illustrations, are basically one-liners. Their power is striking and blatant, much like that of the advertising flyers and billboards Magritte made throughout much of his career to pay the bills. What we thought we knew about Magritte, it turns out, was pretty much all we needed to know, easily accessible in dorm-room posters and ubiquitous reproduction.

The exhibition points to efforts the artist made to introduce nuance into his work. It opens with a 1943 painting called "La préméditation" ("Forethought"), which depicts a quivering plant

sporting a dozen or more different species of flower branching from a single, thick stem. The work's debt to Impressionism is clear, and clearly deliberate. But if the broken color brushstrokes of Impressionism were meant to make works glimmer, this picture quivers with unease.

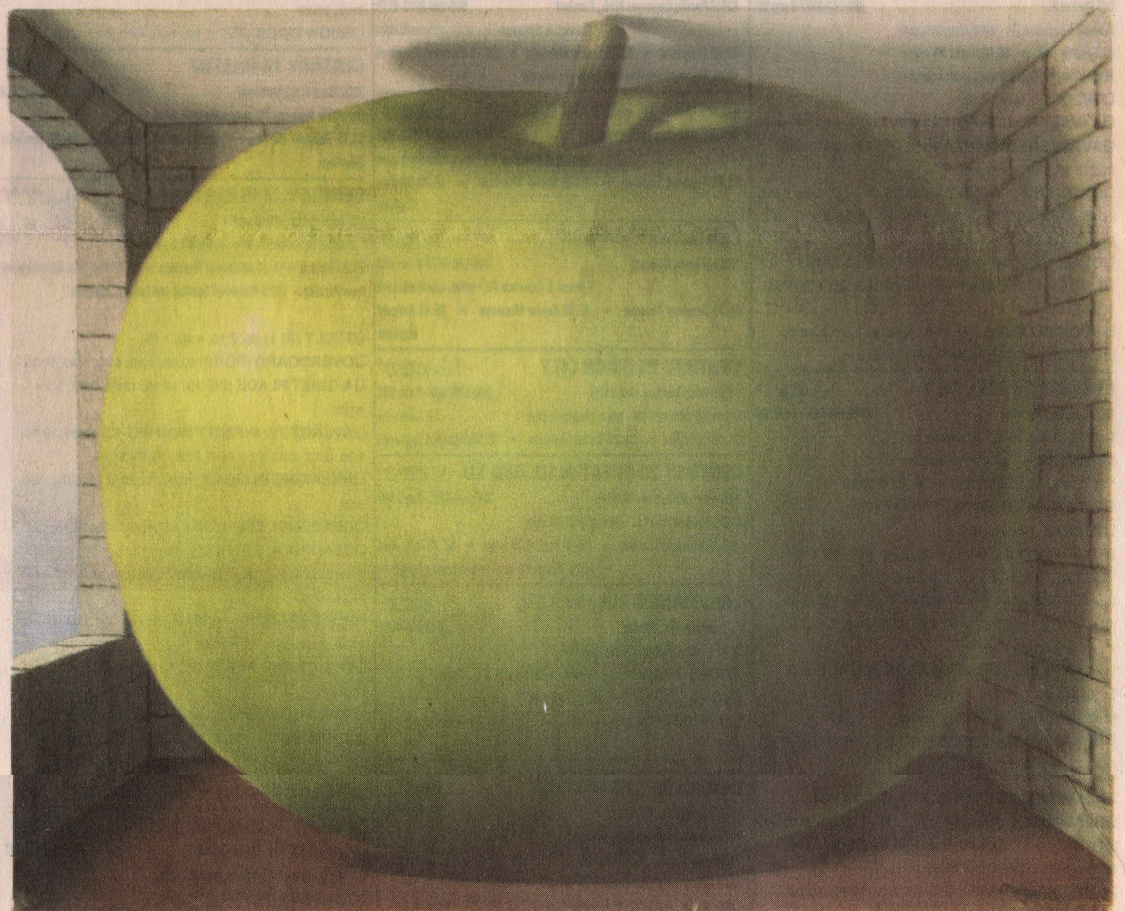
The Magritte specialist Michel Draguet, in an essay in the exhibition catalog, makes a credible case that the end of World War II unleashed in the artist "a richer use of color" and a wish "to bring fresh air into (his) painting" to replace the "disturbing poetry" of his prewar work. Many works of this so-called "sunlit surrealism" borrowed consciously from the ever-optimistic French master Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Magritte himself, a wall text tells us, felt that the nihilistic, absurdist ideas of prewar surrealism were "achieved much better by the Nazi idiots than us."

Digging deeper, the artist produced a short-lived series of intensely angry, often grotesque paintings. These are epitomized by "La famine" ("Famine"), a cartoonish 1948 depiction in intense primary colors of five men

gleefully chewing hunks from each other's heads and faces. The negative reception of these uncharacteristic works led Magritte to abruptly return to his comfort zone of flat paint, careful delineation and narrative subject matter. What might have been, had he continued to test his boundaries, we cannot know. It is to the credit of this presentation that such works were included at all. Yet, though they fill the opening galleries of the show, logically they remain a footnote.

Most people will be pleased to find that in "The Fifth Season" we are left with the works we know and learned from and could not help but love. Like the songs of our youth, like the books we read and carried until the pages fell out, they are our foundation. Not of our knowledge of the world and of art, but of our way of knowing.

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René Magritte, "The Listening Room" (1958).



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René Magritte, "La famine" ("Famine") (1948)