fantasy & reality

Johnny Winter in concert. Photograph Norman See, courtesy Columbia Records.

COVER:
Detail of painting on pages 8-9.
Picture yourself in a boat by the river
With tangerine trees and marmalade skies.
Somebody calls you, you answer quite slowly
A girl with kaleidoscope eyes.
Cellophane flowers of yellow and green
Towering over your head,
Look for the girl with the sun in her eyes
And she's gone.
Lucy in the sky with diamonds...
Lucy in the sky with diamonds...

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“People came up and said cunningly, ’Right, I get it, LSD,’ but we never thought about it. What happened was that John’s son Julian did a drawing at school and brought it home, and he has a schoolmate named Lucy. John said, ‘What’s that?’ and he said, ‘Lucy in the sky with diamonds.’”

—Paul McCartney

The words of the song don’t make sense, not common everyday sense at any rate. But they do what the authors apparently intended: Basically this is a bittersweet, nostalgic song about the lost world of childhood. And it is expressed in the freewheeling language typical of children, the language of fantasy.

Fantasy is a major element of popular culture today. It may be expressed in the lyrics of a song, or in the gaudy costumes of a rock group, or in the high colors and kooky graphics of a poster. Fantasy reflects a deep yearning for freedom, for the ability to capture thoughts and feelings that lie beyond the limits of familiar experience. To be “far out” is to escape from what is boring and ordinary, and to enter a richer world of the imagination.

But is fantasy just escape from reality? Is it all just daydreams? It can be much more. Fantasy has always played an essential part in man’s life, not just as an escape from reality, but as a way to a different kind of reality. This is the reality of man’s inmost feelings—his dearest wishes and his deepest fears. Fantasy can bring out truths that would otherwise remain hidden and unknown. This is why we can learn as much about a nation from its myths as from its history. This is why men can give their lives to an ideal vision, in stubborn disregard of facts. This is why dreams can tell us secrets about ourselves that our waking minds might never guess. The inner world suggested by fantasy is no less important than the outer world revealed by his senses. “Far out,” in fact, often means “far in.”

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On the wall of a cave in southern France is a faint drawing reproduced twice above, which is well over 10,000 years old. It shows a weird, staring figure of a man, dressed in skins and wearing the antlers of a deer. His arms are raised, and his legs are bent, clearly engaged in a magic dance that he is doing to bring success to the hunter man, at least in imagination, and thus gained power over the spirits of the living animals.

Fantasy is especially as man has been able to think, by nature, central to his life. Fantasy is greatly to rely on invisible spirits, where man is surrounded with the powers of his spirit helpers. He feared losing one or another, and to protect him from harm. The Eskimo, one-eyed man, represents his personal emblem. He believed, and then carved it, to help him perform supernatural feats. For instance, he might think or otherwise feel himself to be more powerful, or more clever, or more a powerful spirit than he really was. As any shaman can tell you, chains and the 12th, 13th, and 14th steps of the door, or watch our step on Friday, only work if you believe in them.
"a famish'd eagle raging in the vast expanse"

In the sooty midst of England’s Industrial Revolution, William Blake, poet, painter, and printer by trade, unleashed the “wild furies” of his art against the materialism of the new machine age. What inspired this sublime revolutionary? He looked around. He saw people brutally exploited in the “dark satanic mills” of the new factory system, and many other impoverished casualties of so-called human progress. Blake was so incensed by these abuses that he became a recluse from society, calling himself “mad, as a refuge from unbelief.” His soul became an altar for a marriage of Love and Rage. Its offspring was an imagination that soared “like a famish’d eagle raging in the vast expanse.”

Of the many literary works Blake illustrated, the visionary books of the Bible were among his favorites. In an illustration for Revelation (left), the dragon, or Satan, is shown hovering above the woman clothed with the sun, about to devour her child as it is born. In the ensuing Bible passage, there is a great battle in heaven. The dragon is beaten and cast down to earth, and the woman gives birth to a Savior. For Blake, the dragon symbolized the devilish “spectre” of materialism, which manacled man’s imagination and destroyed his liberty. The woman was for him the opposing force of imagination and inspiration.

Blake also illustrated many scenes from Dante’s Inferno. But his own ideas of evil were quite different. He showed where his sympathies lay in his dynamic vision of the story of Paolo and Francesca. Dante is shown in a dead faint, while the lovers, who have sown the wind with their passion, reap the whirlwind and steal the show.

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown with twelve stars.

... And behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.

The Book of Revelation
And this, I learned, was the never-ending flight of those who sinned in the flesh, the carnal and lusty, who betrayed reason to their appetite.

As cranes go over sounding their harsh cry, leaving the long streak of their flight in air, so come these spirits, wailing as they fly.

Dante, Inferno, translated by John Ciardi
tour of hell

One was a toll collector for the French government. The other was an Italian immigrant in Los Angeles who worked as a tile setter and telephone repairman. Neither had much education, and none at all in art. Yet both Henri Rousseau and Simon Rodia, created works that went far beyond the limits of their everyday lives.

Once it was thought that Henri Rousseau might have visited the tropical jungles that turn up so often in his paintings (left). But it seems that he saw such exotic trees and plants only at botanical gardens or in books. Every leaf, branch, blossom, and fruit is individually and lovingly drawn, and a few wild animals peer gently from the underbrush. The impression is of serenity and innocence—a world in which you can freely enjoy your senses and feelings.

Simon Rodia never thought of himself as an artist at all. "I was a poor man," he once told a friend. "Nobody helped me. I think if I hire a man he don't know what to do. A million times I don't know what to do myself." Without preliminary plans, without materials except cement and castoff junk, he spent over thirty years building a group of open towers (far left), 100 feet high, on a tiny lot adjoining his house. He made their framework of steel rods and wires, which he encased in stucco. Then, while the stucco was still wet, he pressed into it bits of tile, old dishes, seashells, even broken bottles (7-Up and Phillips Milk of Magnesia were favorites).

The result is a light, airy fantasy, reaching into the sky and seeming to glow almost from inside with a brilliant glitter of color. It's a ship, a castle, a cathedral, a carnival—whatever your own fancy chooses.

Rousseau's paintings and the Watts Towers are eloquent testimony to the power of fantasy to transform the world. These two men, working alone, and without preconceived ideas, used the liberating force of art to turn their private visions into a gift to us all.
the stuff of dreams
Like dreams, the number of associations, ideas, memories, emotions, and notions is almost infinite. They may be on a single meaning, but they may suggest a multiple meaning of the works. A single dream may be divided into parts, each part passing through different stages of the dream's life. Some dreams may be remembered in their entirety, while others may fade away and be forgotten. The interpretation of dreams is complex and subjective, depending on the individual's perspective and experience. Some dreams may be influenced by external factors, such as the environment or the dreamer's current state of mind. The dream's meaning may be discovered through various techniques, such as free association or the use of tools like a dream dictionary. Dreams may hold important insights into the dreamer's subconscious mind and can provide guidance or warning signals. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to our dreams and try to understand their significance.

When waking from sleep, we merge our dreams into our waking lives, which may be remembered or forgotten. Our dreams may influence our thoughts and actions, and may also provide an escape from reality. Dreams can be a source of inspiration, creativity, and insight, and can help us cope with stress and emotional challenges. Through the study of dreams, we may gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us.
Lucas Samaras has created a really dangerous book. Its covers bristle with pins and needles, while from its pages protrude scissors and razor blades. Its air of zany menace seems to be a parody of the unfortunately widespread distrust of words and ideas that exists in the modern world.

The interest in fantasy, dreams, and the subconscious continues among many artists of today. Like Samaras, they often combine this interest with wry comment upon our society. For example, there are several artists who are particularly interested in ceramics, but do not employ the medium in the ordinary way, to make objects for use or decoration. For them, clay is a flexible material for making fantastic, satirical sculpture. Clayton Bailey’s owl (right) still has traces of utility: it is wired as a table lamp. But the brooding scowl of its humanized features turn it into a kind of mock idol, dedicated to some mischievous god of the electric age.

If you were going to put up a monument to commemorate our times, what would you choose? Claes Oldenburg, with deadpan seriousness, has suggested a series of huge monuments for sites around the world, made in the form of familiar manufactured objects—the things we use every day, and never really look at. On the back cover is shown a design for that home of monuments, Washington, D.C. It would be a gigantic pair of scissors, its blades rhythmically gnashing together. The obvious spot for it, he thinks, is the one now inconveniently occupied by the Washington Monument.

These modern artists follow a long tradition, going back to the dawn of history, and occurring all over the world. They do not consider fantasy merely an escape, or an illusion, or a childish game. They know the power of imagination to explore the far edges of truth. Pursuing the seemingly unreal, they reach a new reality.
PAGE 14:
Lucas Samaras (b. 1936).
Untitled, 1962. Museum of Modern Art,
Gift of Philip Johnson.

LEFT:
Clayton Bailey (b. 1939).
Lee Nordness Galleries.

BACK COVER:
Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929).
Proposed Colossal Monument to Replace
Philip Johnson Collection.
Photograph Fellett Publishing Company.