

Man Ray



In a novel by Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, *Le feu follet* (1931), the protagonist carefully collects objects which he comes to value over people, along with two photographs: in one, a woman leaning backwards, ‘montrait les émouvantes liaisons de son menton avec son cou tendues à se rompre’, while in the other a man performs the same action but is seen from the back. These are highly reminiscent of *Le Cou* (1929) and *Head with cigarette* (1920) which can be seen in the Man Ray exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery. It is significant that Drieu’s fashionable, dissolute character, much subject to depression, chose such photographs to decorate his room, for Man Ray’s work is modishly modern and often wears on its sleeve a wistful melancholy. Between these photographs is stuck a news item, ‘collé par quatre timbres réduisait l’esprit humain à deux dimensions et ne lui laissait pas d’issues’.

Man Ray is of course best known as the house photographer of Surrealism and, if this rôle is considered in isolation, much can be made of the headless torsos, the Bataillean overturning of bodily hierarchies and (when images are doubled or printed as negatives) references to the photographic process itself. A monographic exhibition, however, will broaden and compromise this view: the photographs alone include commissioned portraits, high society shots, advertising pictures, and work made for publications as diverse as *La Révolution Surréaliste* and *Vogue*. The exhibition also contains a room

full of paintings spanning Man Ray’s entire career, drawings, objects and videos of his films. In an interview of 1930, Jean Vidal asked Man Ray why, since he thought the medium outmoded, he continued to paint. He replied that he did so only intermittently and ‘only to persuade myself of the inanity of it’. The paintings are unfortunately persuasive in this respect. Drawing, too, was apparently taken as a game, and many of the works shown contain visual puzzles which would not be out of place in advertisements.

Yet beneath this diversity there are unifying trends. The display of Man Ray’s photographs documents the common ground between Surrealism and the burgeoning world of high-society commodity culture. In a room largely devoted to fine portraits of inter-war celebrities, including literary and artistic figures and assorted millionaires, the social arena of this shared ground is presented. Furthermore, there is no great divide between the objectification and fragmentation of the female body in the service of Surrealism and its use as an alluring object for fashion and commerce. Not that Surrealism was alone in this: the distinction often made between Man Ray and the modernist photographers

of, say, the *f64* group is dubious in this respect. Upturned, headless nudes are as prevalent in Edward Weston's pictures as they are in Man Ray or Brassai.

So many of the works displayed at the Serpentine are extreme only in their convention, as the female figure is reproduced over and over, bound always by a prominent and continuous contour. Man Ray applied an academic style to photography in which modulated grey tones are contained by a perfect, governing line: in this light *Le Violon d'Ingres* (1924) appears as an homage as well as a joke. The technique of solarisation only increases this emphasis on line, and where this would not serve, the contours are earnestly worked around with pencil.

The use of contour to mark the object as a discrete presence is of great use to commerce. Figures are often transformed into objects, as cold and classical as statuary; this is made explicit in the armless and headless torso of *Salle de Bain* (1931), an advertising work made for an electricity firm, and the head of the *Vénus de Milo* (1930) complete with make-up. In the rayographs, objects often disport themselves as figures. In each case, it is the object that gains, augmenting its presence and character: Man Ray's own objects, seen in display cases, appear lost outside the photographs which made them known. While the emphasis on line is evident in all the photographs, it is overwhelmingly the naked female body that receives this attention, being fetishised, commodified, and occasionally treated with overt sadism. Yet even this is only an index of the treatment of all objects, dissolved at once in light and fungibility, and subject to a new ordering; this is a process which finds perfection in rayographs which directly receive the impress of opacity and transparency, combine linear precision and disembodiment, and so summon ghosts in sharpest focus.

There is an early moment in Man Ray's work, at the time of his collaboration with Duchamp and Picabia, of much experimentation and humour: a tiny vintage print shows dust gathering on Duchamp's *Large Glass* and another makes sculpture from laundry. Yet the closure of the studio, the concentration on the objectified female form and on a delineation which controls all contingency comes all too quickly: one picture of 1923 shows the light through a net curtain mapping the contours of a female torso emerging from deep shadow. It is related to a sequence in the film *Retour à la Raison* and bears the same title: this is not, I think, pure irony.



Man Ray is at the Serpentine Gallery from 18th January to 12th March. It was selected from an exhibition at Ronny Van de Velde, Antwerp.