

"Wonderful Things": Surrealism and Egypt

Hugnet, Georges, La Vie amoureuse des Spumifères ... The Love Life of the Spumifers

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HUGNET, GEORGES. *La Vie amoureuse des Spumifères*. Paris: Biro & Cohen, 2010. ISBN: 978-2-35119-092-0. 96 pages.

HUGNET, GEORGES. *The Love Life of the Spumifiers*. Translated by Michael Fineberg. New York: Ubu Gallery, 2011.

La Vie amoureuse des Spumifères (The Love Life of the Spumifiers) is a posthumous book by the prolific and multi-faceted French artist Georges Hugnet (1911-1974). A member of the surrealist group from 1932 to 1939, Hugnet was a protean figure: poet, painter, editor, graphic designer, collage artist, filmmaker, literary critic, and creator of innovative collages with Max Ernst and Oscar Dominguez. Close to Max Jacob, Tristan Tzara (who introduced him to Breton in 1927), Jean Cocteau, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Éluard, he wrote articles on the avant-garde and, notably, the first critical study devoted to Dadaism, *L'Esprit Dada dans la peinture* (later expanded as *L'Aventure Dada, 1916-1922*). Between the wars, he was actively involved in all of the international surrealist exhibitions and published several volumes of poems, plays, and photomontages. His graphic talent was especially visible in his automatic decalcomanias, which he continued to create throughout his life. The English-speaking literary world is acquainted with him because of his short-lived friendship and ensuing falling out with Gertrude Stein, whose poems he first accurately translated into French in 1929 (while she mistranslated his). We also find him deeply engaged in the surrealist preoccupation with eroticism and the female body. A 1934 book he dedicated to the god Onan has illustrations by Salvador Dalí. During World War Two, he forged permits for those who wanted to escape the Gestapo and flee from France, and he published *Non Vouloir*, one of the first documents of the Resistance. Hugnet experimented further with the art of the collage in the 1960s when he collaborated with the women's magazines *Elle* and *Marie Claire*. Finally, as an editor and a bookbinder, he created a few book objects that are now collectors' items.

Nevertheless, Georges Hugnet is little-known today. The publication in 2010 of his illustrated volume *La Vie amoureuse des Spumifères*, the 2012 exhibition at the Ubu Art Gallery in New York, and the ensuing translation by Michael Fineberg have brought new attention to this undeservedly forgotten artist. Hugnet constantly revised the book from the 1940s to the late 1960s. The protagonists of the book, creatures that need women to exist, are shapes born out of chance but also from recurrent obsessions in the artist's drawings – they are polychromatic compositions looking like abstract, elongated, angular skeletons and myriapods. The etymology of their name (close to “foamers”) may be traced back to foam/*aphos*, the sexual medium of the goddess Aphrodite. They bear interjectional and composed names that jocularly allude to their libidinal drive and identity: The Puyu-Puyu/*Le Pouyou-Pouyou*, The Hesitant Minosis/*Le Minoseur Hésitant*, The Conceited Woolleton/*Le Purlaine Orgueilleux*, The Odoriferous

Matricoll/*Le Matricol Odorant*, The Sugary Gypsop/*La Romanèche Sucrée*, The Cave Bopstarch/*L'Opamidon des Cavernes*, The Corsetted Oru-Boru/*L'Oru-Boru à Corset*, The Night Frimmage/*La Firouillette Nocturne*, The Foopoo/*Le Foulpougne*, and so on.

If we are to place the spumifiers in an iconographical tradition, they remind us of the demons in the work of the Belgian illustrator Félicien Rops, the dark specters of the Austrian printmaker Alfred Kubin, the fetish objects of the German symbolist painter Max Klinger, and the spiders and forest spirits painted by Odilon Redon. They are the forefathers of all aliens and monsters who trouble and torment beautiful women in popular culture.

The book combines text, photography and drawing in the manner of early avant-garde *livres d'artiste* and illustrated books such as Hans Arp's *Die Wolkenpumpe*, Francis Picabia's *Poèmes et dessins de la fille née sans mère*, and Fernand Léger's *La fin du monde*. It also falls into the tradition of late surrealist visual experiments and books published after World War Two: Ghérasim Luca's *cubomanies*, Péret's and Ernst's *La Brebis galante* as well as Éluard's and Miró's *A toute Épreuve*. This is a hybrid work, provocatively open-ended, keeping with the principles generally promoted by surrealism. For instance, in a text from 1937 called "Gradiva," André Breton discussed notions such as "natural object," "interpreted natural object," "incorporated natural object," and "perturbed object". Hugnet's creatures and women comply with such descriptions.

The book is impudent, with a comic personal trademark. The photomontages superimposing monsters on half-naked women from vintage postcards are humorous in their intent. Flirtatious ladies passively lean back or watch themselves in the mirror while they let themselves dominated by colorful bizarre creatures. The same kind of playfulness appears in Man Ray's *Portemanteau* (1920), a series of photographs in which the boundary between a human body and an object is blurred and women are obscured by mannequins. Such merging of inanimate and animate can also be seen in André Kertész's photography or Max Ernst's collages, and is especially present in Ray's *Retour à la Raison* (*Return to Reason*, 1923), a short movie in which he uses the torso of Kiki of Montparnasse.

Printed more than a quarter of a century after its author's passing, *The Love Life of the Spumifiers* wishes to be a *roman à clef* that withholds the basic information readers expect. It is a mysterious volume, for it captures in a published form the intimacy of a private universe. Caught in the complex mutuality of production and viewing and as iconoclastic as any other surrealist, Hugnet staged his own interpretive reading of the text. As his wife and editor, Myrtille, claims in her foreword, the 40 *Spumifères*, equivalent to the 40 *Immortels* of the *Académie Française*, are key figures from the artist's entourage, and some of them are famous surrealists. Thus, we are naturally tempted to identify the originals. However, in his critical and creative approach, Hugnet would not allow us to start the exploration

in this way. In each carefully crafted instance, the words printed on the left page accompany the bodies on the facing page in a prescribed progression of the literary and visual. The reader faces two uncanny entities that simply refuse to be regarded separately, the woman and its corresponding spumifer. They amorously forever share the frame and shape one another in a domain of intimacy, love, and dream. A descriptive text about each creature and its sexual behavior adds the eroticism of the author to that of the image and makes them contiguous. The majestic and ferocious creatures are keen on perfume and lace, combine methods of seduction with airs of insolence, cry in Spanish, "dither," "friskadoodle away," "praxiteen," "gnoll," "tootlish," or "gammapoddle," and are attractive to society women. (The inventive translator leaves in the original some of the interjectional verbs and beautifully renders in English the semantic plasticity of each description.)

Hugnet neglects the materiality of the female body only to remain faithful to it in spirit, especially when he conjures it up in relation to a spumifer and its perverse lurking. What constitutes femininity is a subordinated province of the *Spumifère*-Land. As readers, we have no choice but to become privileged scopophiliacs. Each time the black-and-white female body opens itself to the tentacles of the colorful monster, it seems to wither like a flower crushed in a cruel hand or wriggle and become convulsive as if summoned by a torturous *jouissance*. As in the famous surrealist exhibitions devoted to eroticism in the late 1950s, these women are defined only through absence of will. Silent objects of desire, they are eclipses, obliterations, and dispersions. While the universe of the creature expands, theirs is reduced to one gesture, smile or shoe tip. They may be born women but become monster-oriented creatures, relishing in the spumifers' attention. Mannequin, doll or automaton endowed with titillating gaze and limbs, they take part in the condensed image. The fetishized female body has no identity outside the relation with its symbiont. Couples are glued together and transformed into androgynous beings in this new mythology that lures us into reading the metamorphoses of desire in each contorted anagram.

Like the collage, the *calligramme*, the poem-object, the *tableau-poème*, and concrete poetry, the illustrated book manifests the tensions engendered in the interaction between verbal and visual elements. In Hugnet's volume, standard conventions, such as the separation of text and image, are preserved. The series of sketches and watercolors featuring humorously shaped monsters becomes an approximation that expresses what is erotically left unsaid. Conversely, words on the facing page assault the morphous oneiric embraces between the spumifers and women. The resulting book, with its juxtaposed photographic, painterly, and textual realities, becomes a communicative vessel whose shape and consistency remain elusive. Lacking a methodology that would shift attention from a linguistically oriented book, the reader has to ascribe equal status to image

and drawing. *The Love Life of the Spumifers* complicates the notion of *livre d'artiste*; it combines drawing with photography in a way that anticipates the subversive postmodern juxtapositions between various media. It also successfully uncovers a new path towards the rich erotic realm of surrealism.

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