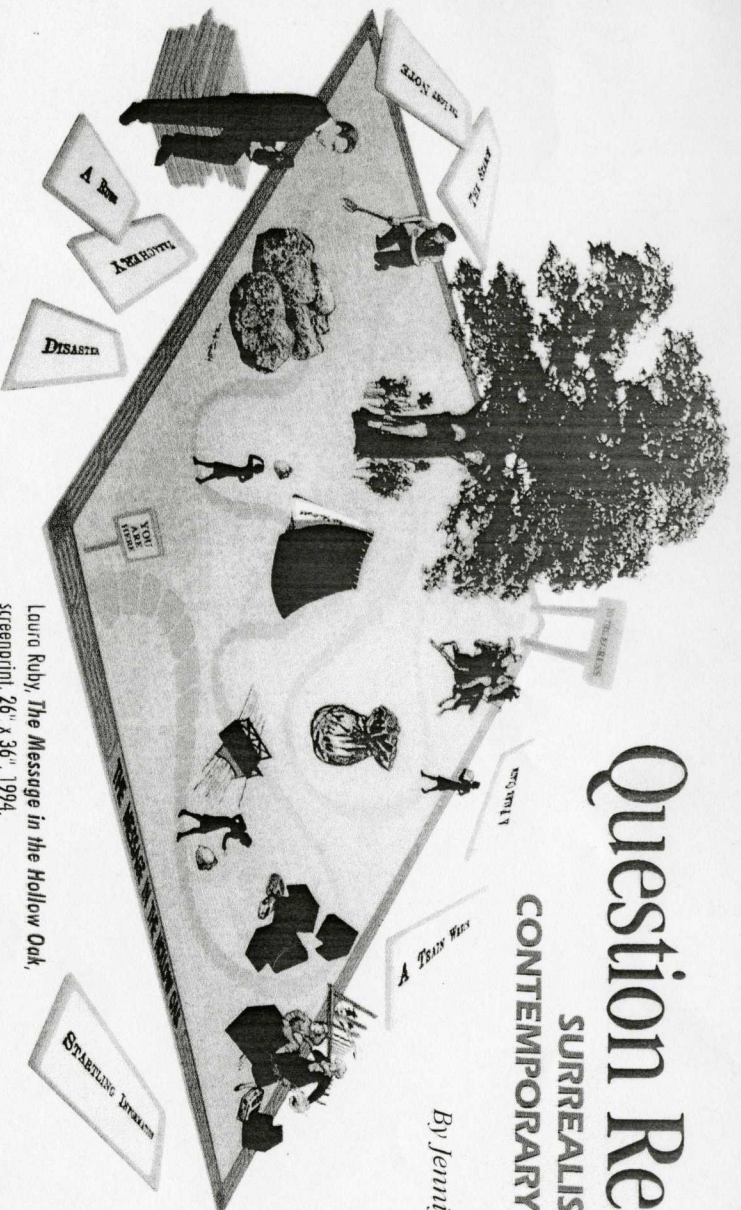


# Question Reality

SURREALISM IN  
CONTEMPORARY ART

By Jennifer Reis



Laura Ruby, *The Message in the Hollow Oak*,  
screenprint, 26" x 36", 1994.

Since the beginning of this century, surrealism seems to be in vogue as currency for describing aspects of contemporary life. In the monumental to the minivita, our life is populated with the surreal, meaning the unreal or the inconceivable interacting with the known. Think of elements of daily life such as technologies in telecommunication that enable us to wander around in public seemingly talking to ourselves, this with the advent of the ubiquitous cell phone and its offspring, the headset, and mass media's bodily

manipulation of celebrities, such as Martha Stewart's image on the cover of *Newsweek* last spring—her head, but whose body? Strange days, indeed.

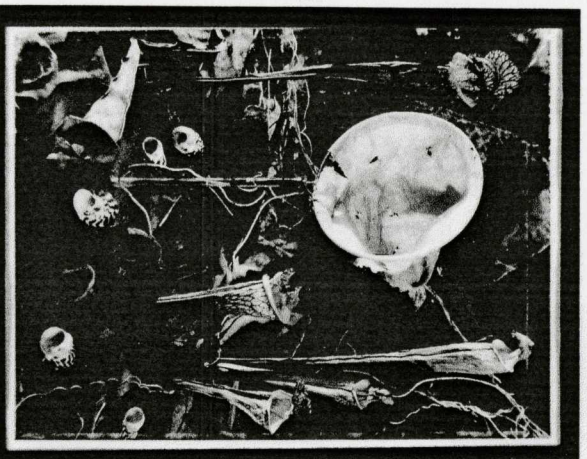
Surrealism, while oft thought as exclusively within the purview of the visual arts, was actually a wider cultural and intellectual movement that encompassed literature, the performing arts, and fine and popular art and objects. Situated historically from the 1920s through the 1940s, surrealism was primarily European, but the unfortunate political environs in Europe that resulted in the migrations of many artists, writers, and intellectuals and their ideas brought reverberations to the United States, especially to New York. According to Mike

"a truth beyond the real, 'a kind of sur-realism.'"

The vernacular use of surrealism reflects the intent of the artists, writers, and performers who originally adopted the term surreal: to make the familiar strange. The writings of Freud, which reveal concepts of the unconscious, led writers and artists who wanted a more immediate and direct mode of creation to develop automatism, a method of expression aimed at removing the role of the conscious mind from the act of creation.

Automatic drawing, for instance, might be the type of doodling one does absent-mindedly while on the phone; the artist is creating while mentally disengaged from the act.

Some of these automatic activities were borrowed from surrealism's precursor, Dadaism, an early-20th-century art movement based on an anarchistic spirit that embraced chance and chaotic forces in art making. The excellent volume *A Book of Surrealist Games*, compiled by Alastair Brotchie, features numerous examples of methods by which artists and writers attempted to remove rational thinking from the creative process. One example, invented by the collage artist Hans Arp, is the "Tom



Felicia Stord, *Bloom*, Stirling, copper, bronze,  
and enamel, 10" x 8" x 7", 2000.

O'Mahony in the book *Essential Surrealism*, the French writer and surrealist front-runner André Breton appropriated the movement's defining title from his fellow countryman and author Guillaume Apollinaire, who described a 1917 performance of Jean Cocteau's ballet *Parade* as revealing

Paper Collage (According to the Rules of Chance)," in which the artist tears up pieces of paper—with or without images—and drops them onto a piece of paper on the floor. The artist then glues the torn pieces down wherever they land; the artist may, if desired, work the collage with pencils and paint.