

Snapshots of a surrealist in stockings

IN 1993, to mark the 100th anniversary of Joan Miro's birth, New York's Museum of Modern Art held a major exhibition of the celebrated Spanish surrealist's work. It closed last month, but the impressive book/catalogue is still available.

It's a handsome, well-illustrated record of an event which was visited by more than 150,000 people in its first three months. Besides providing the above statistics, the January 1994 issue of Artforum also features the responses of a small group of American artists, art historians and critics who were invited to "share their impressions" of the Miro show.

For the writers Robert Rosenblum and Dan Cameron it was an excuse to reminisce about first encounters with Miro's pictures as "a precocious kid in New York" or during years of teenage angst as "a frustrated small-town kid for whom the hills of Catalonia might as well have been as distant as the moon".

Others were more critical. For instance, to the sculptor Louise Bourgeois, Miro was "a true naive, trusting, unable to take two steps without his supporting family" and "out of his league" as a sculptor. All the same, a much younger Bourgeois is pictured on her knees before the master, her hands clasped together as though in animated worship.

However, art historian Rosalind Krauss, who was partly responsible for the 1972 Guggenheim Museum survey, Joan Miro: *Magnetic Fields*, concentrates her attention on the painting *Musique-Seine-Michel, Bataille et Moi* (1927). She observes that although it is "indelibly inscribed" with the name Bataille, no writer up until the MOMA's Carolyn Lanchner had explored Miro's work in relation to Georges Bataille's thinking, including herself. Whereupon Krauss, following Lanchner's example, launches into a discussion of the two men's "same but different" interest in the big toe. The inevitable connection between show and toe is made with references to Bataille's remark about the fetishist "loving the shoe more than any art lover could love a painting"; while he asks us "to consider staring wide-eyed before the erotic sight of the big toe".

Fetishism and surrealism, not an uncommon conjunction, also get a look in elsewhere — in the Artforum review of an exhibition of Pierre Molinier's photographs at London's Cabinet Gallery. As he was an artist of rather limited outlook, one can assume that the photographic survey, Pierre Molinier (1900-1976), which has stopped off briefly at the

MELBOURNE: Pierre Molinier (1900-1976)/Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

By Robert Rooney

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art before travelling to Sydney, contains much the same images.

Surrealism, or one should say its "Pope", Andre Breton, gathered some of 20th-century art's major figures — such as Miro — into its fold (before those seemingly unavoidable quarrels which led to bitter excommunications). But for every giant there were hosts of others, from minor luminaries to absolute no-hopers. Molinier, a latecomer to surrealism (he first met Breton in the early 50s), is positioned somewhere between the two. Exactly where depends a lot on one's sympathies and personal obsessions.

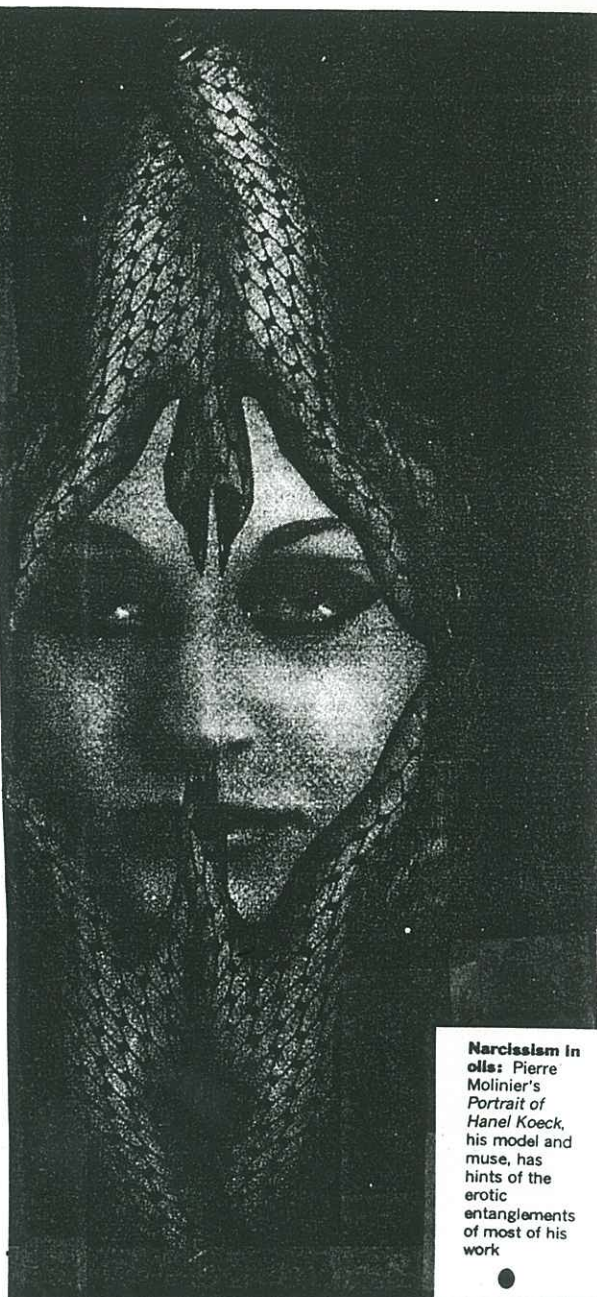
If there were times before and after World War II when the world seemed overpopulated with surrealists and numerous hangers-on, some small relief was occasioned by the tendency among their number to commit suicide. Rene Crevel, the author of *Difficult Death*, chose to do so in 1935. But the 40s, 50s and 60s were the darkest decades with the suicides of Gorky, Dominguez, Kay Sage, Seligman and others.

Molinier was to make a late departure in 1976 when, aged 76, he shot himself. It was all so methodical, so matter of fact. "I'm taking my life. The key is at the concierge's," read the message on his door. He had rehearsed it 25 years before.

SHOULD one believe the publicity material which claims that Molinier's photographs and photographic images — mostly erotic self-portraits as the "divine hermaphrodite" — were never exhibited during his lifetime? A rather obscure French surrealist he may have been, but his work would not be entirely unknown to anyone familiar with the literature on surrealist art.

Several of Molinier's oil paintings, particularly *Skin d'Amourdo* and *La Fleur de Paradis*, which are in the exhibition as small black-and-white photographs, and the photomontage *L'Enfant-Homme de la Nuit*, which is also entitled *Portrait of Hanel Koeck*, are in books published while he was alive.

However, it is in the recent Lapis Press edition of Roger Caillos's *The Necessity of the Mind* that one uncovers images more typical of the montages in which Molinier gives free rein to his obsessive desire to blend transvestism with fetishism.



Narcissism in oil: Pierre Molinier's *Portrait of Hanel Koeck*, his model and muse, has hints of the erotic entanglements of most of his work

Sometimes compared to the "libidinous" works of the surrealist Hans Bellmer, these "fierce erotic entanglements" as Rene Passeron called them — are near-symmetrical puzzles tricked up with pale casts of women's legs which,

like the artist himself, are dressed in black silk or fishnet stockings and shoes with spike heels and phallus-like attachments.

In some of his staged tableaux, Molinier was assisted by Koeck, his model,

muse and mirror of his other narcissistic self. While one can certainly admire Molinier's ingenuity and the seamless perfection of his montaging, there is no ignoring his imagery's frequent descent into "perverse" silliness.