

STYLE

Not such an odd couple

Surrealism has moved from the museum to the department store, says **Bettina von Hase**

The designer Elsa Schiaparelli, with whom Salvador Dalí sometimes collaborated, once said life was “a-musing”, and though I have known the aphorism for years, I never experienced its impact – until recently. The moment of enlightenment? When my art consultancy, Nine AM, organised a collaboration between department store Selfridges and the Victoria and Albert Museum to mark the V&A’s upcoming show *Surreal Things*, about the influence of surrealism on architecture, design and the decorative arts.

It may seem an odd leap for a consumer emporium to become a content partner of a museum show but, in truth, it was almost pre-ordained. Surrealism used the department store and its windows as a canvas. In the late 1930s and 1940s, Dalí, Marcel Vertès, Tanguy, Man Ray and Jean Cocteau saw

in the store window a ready-made day-dream upon which to unleash their fantasies. Dalí famously created windows for Bonwit Teller in New York in 1936 and 1939, the second series being particularly memorable, partly thanks to Dalí’s fit of temper when the management thought some of the installation too risqué.

Selfridges thus seemed the ideal place to stage a contemporary response to the V&A’s historical investigation, particularly because the influence of surrealism and its preoccupation with illusion, dreams, escapism and the bizarre still reverberates strongly in art, fashion, film, architecture, design and advertising. Signature motifs are a change of scale, displacement of objects (like Dalí’s lobster on a telephone), the use of eyes and *trompe l’oeil*.

“Art is to the community

what the dream is to the individual,” said Thomas Mann and one of the brand missions of Selfridges is to create a situation where shopping acts like a dream, located in a treasure trove of contrasts. The move from dream to reality began five months ago when Selfridges

decided to dedicate all 14 windows on Oxford Street – where 123,000 people walk on an average day – to the surrealist theme for six weeks. It also arranged “spontaneous” happenings in the store (which has about 35,000 customers a day) and set up a temporary “shop within a

shop”, which is what Schiaparelli did before the second world war at her headquarters on the Place Vendôme in Paris. Ours was created by architecture and design practice FAT – Fashion Architecture Taste.

The store did not want to exhibit existing surrealist objects – that is the V&A’s expertise – but to work with artists and designers who were influenced by surrealism and who could transform the store into a kaleidoscope of projects, performances and products. Among those who got the green light were artist duo and art-brand Dadadandy (Simon Moretti and Paul Heber-Percy), who called Selfridges a “temple of desire” and created *Les Palais des Etoiles*, a whole art programme of events with surreal titles. Of these, “The Fountain of Innocence” is the largest, a fantasy palace on the lower ground floor

inspired by set designs from films such as Cocteau’s *La Belle et La Bête* and *Orphée*, to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001*.

For the surreal windows, commissioned designers included John Galliano, Viktor & Rolf, Maison Martin Margiela, Moschino, Rodnik, Agent Provocateur, furniture designer Rolf Sachs and the V&A, which is displaying an image of its logo for the show, the giant pink Dalí lip sofa on a green lawn. The Selfridges surrealist logo is equally arresting: an image of the store hovering on a white cloud in a clear-blue sky, with the words underneath: “This is not a shop.”

Untrue, but very a-musing.

‘Surreal Things’ runs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, SW7, from March 29 to July 22, tel: +44 (0)20-7942 2000; www.vam.ac.uk. The Selfridges commissions run from March 16 to June 24



Shop till you dream: one of the surrealist windows at Selfridges