

Under the skin – the life and work of Claude Cahun

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Cobra Museum of Modern Art Amstelveen

www.cobra-museum.nl

This autumn the Cobra Museum of Modern Art will have the first retrospective in the Netherlands of the work of the French artist, activist and writer Claude Cahun (1894 - 1954). Over 70 photographs and photomontages, mainly from the Jersey Heritage Trust, will be shown in Amstelveen, along with publications and archive material. The exhibition shows how diverse, progressive and activist Cahun's work is. While her striking oeuvre remained largely undiscovered by the general public for a long time, she has been a source of inspiration for renowned photographers such as Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin. David Bowie was a fan too and made a multimedia installation about her. Not only Cahun's work, but also her progressive attitude to life in terms of gender and politics is an example to many.



Under the skin

The exhibition introduces the visitor to the world of Cahun on the basis of important themes in her life and work. She was a versatile artist, had an enormous network within the Parisian avant-garde, joined the Jewish resistance, and Cahun had outspoken ideas about the world around her, all of which she expressed through her art.

A special feature of the exhibition is that only new prints were used for it. In this way, the Cobra Museum makes use of contemporary possibilities to bring Cahun's special, and at times moving, work closer to the public. We do this by printing the photographs in an unusually large format, thus optimally highlighting the often theatrical and penetrating character of the work. The extensive selection of works from the period 1914-1947 gives the visitor the opportunity to become well acquainted with the distinctive oeuvre of a bold and courageous individual.

Theatricality

Some of the photographs shown are the result of her involvement in various Parisian theatre companies. Other photos were taken in the private sphere. In those we see Cahun in staged situations in which she explored various (gender) roles, identities and sexualities, from worldly dandy to sailor.

Surrealism

The photomontages by Marcel Moore, Cahun's life partner, are remarkable. These were originally used as illustrations for Cahun's literary work *Aveux non avenues*. The influence of surrealism on Cahun's work can be seen in, among other things, photographs of assemblages they made from all kinds of materials.

Jewish resistance

Using photographs taken by Cahun (of Jewish descent) on the British island of Jersey during the Nazi occupation in the Second World War, the exhibition tells the story of the courageous acts of resistance that led to her death penalty - which, incidentally, was never carried out thanks to the liberation. The film *Confessions To The Mirror* (68 min., 2016) by the renowned filmmaker Sarah Pucill will be

screened as well. On the basis of a text written by Cahun, this film reflects on the artist's political involvement and imprisonment.

Her life

Claude Cahun was born as Lucy Renée Mathilde Schwob. In reference to her great-uncle, who was an author, she adopted the gender-neutral name Claude Cahun. Cahun grew up in a prosperous, intellectual family. Her father was publisher of the newspaper *Le Phare de la Loire* and her uncle was a French symbolist writer and journalist who was friends with many artists and intellectuals. This gave Cahun the opportunity to publish her work at a young age and gave her access to avant-garde circles in Paris. The surrealists were a great inspiration to her. Just before she died, for instance, she wrote to a friend: 'All my life, I have always been surrealistic in essence'.

In her teens, Cahun fell in love with illustrator Marcel Moore (born Suzanne Malherbe). After Cahun's father divorced her mother, he married Marcel Moore's mother. Thus, the two lovers also became stepsisters. The lovers stayed together their entire lives, working together on publications, photographs and photomontages.

Just before the Second World War broke out, Cahun and Moore left for Jersey. After the Nazis arrived on the island, they joined the resistance and used art as a means to undermine the occupier.

Masterclass Gerrit Rietveld Academy & Utrecht University

From 4 to 7 January 2021, the Cobra Museum is hosting a four-day workshop with students of the Master's programme in Gender Studies at Utrecht University and fashion students from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy. This workshop is a unique collaboration between these two groups of students. In this performative workshop – led by artists Marnie Slater and Jessica Gysel – the students work from their own expertise with texts and photographs by Claude Cahun from the Jersey Heritage Trust.

We are setting up an exciting programme of activities together with partners. In the course of the year we will inform you about this through our (online) channels, keep an eye on our website for updates.

Woman or man?

Our society is very fixated on gender. Claude Cahun challenged us to think differently. Cahun said: 'neuter is the only gender that always suits me'. Nowadays we could interpret this as the non-binary gender: not fitting into the boxes man or woman. Some people who today identify with non-binary gender prefer the pronouns 'them' and/or 'they'. However, Cahun's texts do not show that she preferred pronouns other than feminine ones. That is why the Cobra Museum also chooses female pronouns when referring to Cahun.

About the museum

The Cobra Museum focuses on the art and philosophy of the Cobra movement. Cobra belongs to the canon of art history, but the 'spirit' of Cobra is still very much alive. An alternative culture, based on international solidarity and creativity, is perhaps more relevant than ever in the world we live in today. The Cobra Museum therefore actively links the collection and history of Cobra to contemporary artists, modern art movements and current affairs.

'Our programming focuses on the values of Cobra, which have not lost any of their topical relevance in this day and age. We look at our collection through the eyes of contemporary artists, such as Aziz Bekkaoui. In addition, we will present exhibitions with the intimate photography and writings of the non-binary artist Claude Cahun, and in 2021 we will put the taboo-breaking Frida Kahlo centre stage', says Lillian Bóza, director of the Cobra Museum.

Donors

Cobra Museum of Modern Art Amstelveen would like to thank partners, companies and private donors who make our exhibition programme and activities at the Cobra Museum possible. In particular the City of Amstelveen, BankGiro Lottery, Cobra Business Club, BPD, Trebbe, Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, and Kickstart Cultuurfonds.