Surrealism In Salvador Dali's Artwork

The artist I've chosen to discuss is Salvador Dali. I stumbled upon his creative process while researching artists for this assignment. His creative process stood out to me because it relates to a concept I am currently studying in my psychology liberal course.

In this essay I will give a short description about who Salvador Dali is, his past, my favourite of his prominent works, his creative process and why I personally find it interesting. Salvador Dali; full name - Salvador Felipe Jacinto Dali y Domenech, was born in Figueras, Spain on May 11, 1904. He was Spanish Surrealist painter who was influential for his investigations and experimentations of subconscious imagery. Salvador Dalí was encouraged from an early age to practice his art, after going to Paris in the 1920s, where he interacted with artists such as Picasso, Magritte and Miró, as said to have led to Dalí's first Surrealist phase.

Surrealism was an art movement where artists made dream-like scenes shown in their work, which were situations which would be impossible in real life. Surrealist artists were usually influenced by a famous psychoanalyst; Sigmund Freud. He was also one of the first people to study the unconscious mind, the struggle with the conscious and unconscious mind and its effects on human behaviour. Rejecting rationalism and literary realism, and powerfully influenced by psychoanalysis, surrealists sought to channel the unconscious as a way to reveal and unlock the power of the imaginative mind. Believing that the logical mind suppressed and stifled the power of the imagination, Dalí tried to access the unconscious mind for his painting.

The Interpretation of Dreams, a book by Sigmund Freud was another very greatly influential source for surrealists by legitimizing the significance of the unconscious mind and dreams as effective communication of human emotion and desires. As well as through the exposure of the complex and suppressed unconscious emotions of sexuality, desire, and violence, Freud helped set an abstract foundation for Surrealism.

In Dali’s work he depicted a dream world in which ordinary everyday objects are “juxtaposed”, distorted, warped, misshapen or else morphed in a peculiar and illogical style. Dalí portrayed those objects in detailed and extremely realistic and lifelike detail they were also typically set within drab or dreary sunlit backgrounds.

One of my favourites and one of his best-known paintings made in 1931, ‘The Persistence of Memory’, where he shows drooping, melting clocks in a landscape setting in which the drooping clocks rest in a disconcertingly still landscape.

I will be discussing two methods Salvador Dali used in his creative process. The first, ‘Slumber with key’, a nap that lasted less than a second. In this method Dali would sit in a chair with his arms resting on the armrests as his wrists dangled over. While doing this, between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand rested a heavy metal key and directly under the key on the floor, was an upside-down metal plate. Then the second Dali dozed off, the heavy metal key would slip through his fingers and come crashing down onto the plate, awakening him from his emerging nap.

Dali observed that during that instant one walked in balance on the unseen line that separates sleep from waking. Dali actually even suggested this method for anyone who worked with their mind, believing that the “nap” rejuvenated your complete ‘physical and psychic being” and in turn would leave you feeling energized, motivated and inspired for creative activity. According to Salvatore Dali, he had learned this tactic from the Capuchin monks and that other artists who used it.

This method Dali uses actually involves entering a state called hypnagogia, “The experience of a transitional state between wakefulness and sleep”. Here you are suspended on the verge of consciousness, your mind is slipping into sleep yet there are still parts of consciousness and awareness present, at this moment you are “half-asleep”.

When you are in this state you might see visions and hallucinations usually in the form of shapes or patterns, and you may even hear noises or feel virtually physical sensations. Further, you could even feel like you’re falling, which is why you sometimes suddenly wake up with a jolt.

Another method Dali would use to get into hypnagogic-like state was that he would balance on his head till the point of almost passing out to put himself into a semi-lucid state in order to spark creativity.

The second method was one actually developed by Dali himself. It is called The Paranoiac-critical method. It involves creating a self-induced paranoid state. The Paranoiac Critical method was a way of perceiving reality, Dali himself defined it as 'irrational knowledge' based on a 'delirium of interpretation'. In much simpler words, it means the process during which the artist was able to find new and unique means to see and perceive the world around them. It is also the capability of the artist or the observer to notice multiple images within the same design.

Dali was not actually paranoid but was able to simulate or imitate a self-induced paranoid state, without the use of drugs. He once even said “I don’t do drugs, I am drugs”, and then when he came back to a normal state he would paint what he saw. He called what he created 'hand painted dream photographs', which were painted representations of the hallucinations and imageries he would see while in his paranoid state.

The Paranoiac-critical method is a sort of extension of the method of simulation into the field of visual illusion. Based on the idea of the 'double-image' illusion, for example, a common image of the double image illusion is the duck-rabbit image. Dali said by simulating or replicating paranoia one can thoroughly challenge one's rational and logical view of the world. It can be similar to see shapes in the clouds and saying that we see a dragon, a face or animal, etc. Just like that an object of the physical world can be looked at similarly and therefore according to Marcel Jean, it would be impossible to grant any value to immediate reality since it could represent or mean literally anything. The idea of this method is to convince oneself or others of the realism of these “transformations” in such a way that it loses its legitimacy from the 'real' world in which they occur. This eccentric reasoning of Dali’s technique leads to a world in continuous change. His paintings show objects dissolving from one state to another, items with no substance gain a new form, solid things becoming transparent and physical items appearing juxtaposed or warped.

A famous quote by Salvador Dali on his view about surrealism; “Surrealism is destructive, but it

destroys only what it considers to be shackles limiting our vision.”

Salvador Dali’s creative methods really stood out to me and interested me. Firstly because of the unique and imaginative perspective it brings with it when viewing the world around you as well as how it gives you a chance and a new way to reach into your subconscious and express yourself. As I mentioned above, I took a particular interest in Salvador Dali’s creative process as it relates to a psychology liberal I am currently taking as well as one of my major subjects in high school, psychology. It also showed how creative process can stem from almost anywhere from something as simple as listening to certain music while you work or being in a certain kind of work space to even being inspired by scientific influencer like Freud, whose theories we still refer to today. Another thing that interested me is how Dali and Freud both explored the unconscious mind instead of the conscious unlike most other. In fact, as mentioned above, Freud was one of the first to study the unconscious mind, Dali being able to take inspiration from Freud's theory and integrated them into his creative process is something I found truly amazing. His paintings can have multiple interpretations depending on the viewer and their personal experiences, subconsciousness and expectations.

Salvador was also not only influenced by other artists but also influenced many others in accordance with his own words “A true artist is not one who is inspired, but one who inspires others.”