

Metamorphosis After the Machine: The Surreal Worlds of Zhou Song

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Zhou Song's works imagine a reality where the real and the natural intermingle with the surreal, forming scenes that feel both recognizable and otherworldly, and ultimately creating a new, unsettled world. Organic life merges with mechanical systems, while human consciousness confronts artificial intelligence and virtual environments. His artworks invite a deep reflection on the evolving relationship between humanity, nature, and technology. In exploring this, Zhou builds on the Surrealist tradition—particularly its application of uncanny, hybrid forms, seen, among other examples, in Max Ernst's mechanomorphic collages, Hans Bellmer's transgressive dolls, and Leonora Carrington's transforming shapes—but reinterprets this approach for a post-industrial, algorithmically influenced world. Zhou's work resonates with one of Surrealism's most enduring pursuits: the marvelous, a quality that eludes rational explanation yet profoundly stirs the psyche. While his visual language is rooted in digital aesthetics, he extends Surrealism's exploration of the unseen, the unknowable, and the uncanny, revealing forms that are both strange and visionary.

Surrealism, founded by the French writer and poet André Breton in the 1920s, aimed to free the mind from the constraints of rationality, allowing imagination and the unconscious to guide creation. Its primary method, psychic automatism, encouraged artists to produce works in an unfiltered way, letting words and images—often incongruent and bizarre—emerge directly from the unconscious rather than from deliberate thought. At first glance, Zhou Song's meticulously crafted hyperreal visual language might seem at odds with this spontaneous spirit, aligning instead with the highly controlled, carefully composed dreamlike scenes of Salvador Dalí and René Magritte. However, Zhou reinterprets this approach for the twenty-first century. While classic Surrealist automatism sought to bypass conscious control, today automation and algorithms routinely override human decision-making altogether. Zhou's art embodies this condition: his meticulous clarity mirrors the cold logic of machines, yet his images remain imbued with ambiguity, mystery, and unease. This paradox-precision employed to imagine futures that resist control—might perhaps be called “algorithm-driven automatism,” where mechanical rigour becomes a tool for revealing a technologically shaped unconscious.

Like the early Surrealists who responded to global tragedies and upheaval with visionary and transformative art, Zhou engages with the defining anxieties of our time: technological

acceleration, ecological instability, nuclear threat, and the algorithmic shaping of identity. Drawing from art history, religious iconography, and speculative visions of artificial intelligence: a mirror reflecting a world where dreams, nightmares, and simulated realities collapse into one. His works do not offer definitive answers, but pose urgent questions: How is nature being redefined by machines? Can spiritual meaning endure in a post-biological world? What does it mean to be human today and tomorrow? How might art help us navigate the sweeping changes reshaping society? Zhou's art shows how the Surrealist vocabulary—through hybridity, metamorphosis, and calling forth the marvellous—sheds light on the intricate ways our minds, bodies, and environments are entangled in a world shaped by technology. In doing so, he extends Surrealism's legacy and invites us to reconsider the future of both art and human experience. Instead of merely dwelling on the threats of an unpredictable future, Zhou's art also encourages us to meet the unknown with creativity, openness, and even optimism. As the Surrealist painter Remedios Varo observed, "(Surrealism) can (never) go into decline in its essence, given that it is inherent in humankind."¹

Beyond metamorphosis, the idea of interconnectedness was also central to many European Surrealists, who believed in cosmic "correspondences" and the unity of body, nature, and mind (of the visible and the invisible realms). Zhou continues this lineage while situating it in today's world. His new species and imagined universes function as metaphors for transformations driven by often invisible and unpredictable forces such as data flows and technological mediation, and even climate change. These changes, often startling, are not only bodily but also have a powerful effect on the mind and the spirit, reshaping how we perceive ourselves and the world around us.

In this context, Zhou's images suggest the emergence of a new cosmological order and novel forms of life, a world where creation and progress coexist with destruction and collapse. A contemporary artist-seer, he conjures speculative futures that are uncanny yet strangely familiar, blending the imagined with the real. His approach echoes Breton's vision of Surrealism as the merging of dream and reality: in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), Breton wrote, "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality..."² Yet Zhou reinterprets this fusion for the digital age. His works depict morphing bodies, mutating trees, and pencils transformed into totems, evoking a future shaped by data, biotechnology, and immersive digital spectacle. He depicts a world where identity can be reconfigured, nature simulated, and reality rewritten by algorithms.

Ultimately, Zhou Song's art reminds us that Surrealism was not merely a historical movement but that it can also offer a philosophy of life. What began as a rebellion against the rationalist horrors of industrialized war has evolved into a lens for understanding the disorienting press-

1 Remedios Varo, *Letters, Dreams & Other Writings*, translated by Margaret Carson (Cambridge, Mass.: Wakefield Press, 2018), p.4.

2 André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), p.14.

ures of the digital and posthuman condition. In Zhou's hands, the surreal becomes a confrontation: a mirror reflecting a world where dreams, nightmares, and simulated realities collapse into one. His works do not offer fixed answers but raise pressing questions: How is nature being redefined by machines? Can spiritual meaning endure in a post-biological world? What does it mean to be human today and tomorrow? How might art help us navigate the sweeping changes reshaping society? Zhou's art shows how the Surrealist vocabulary—through hybridity, metamorphosis, and the evocation of the marvelous—sheds light on the intricate ways our minds, bodies, and environments are entangled in a world shaped by technology. In doing so, he extends Surrealism's legacy while encouraging us to rethink the future of both art and human experience. Instead of merely dwelling on the threats of an unpredictable future, Zhou's art also encourages us to meet the unknown with creativity, openness, and even optimism.

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