Dali exhibit captures the artist â€¦ and the showman

by Robert L. Pincus

LOS ANGELES - Salvador Dali, the seminal surrealist, was an erudite artist with a love of mainstream movies. In hindsight, it seems inevitable that the Spanish-born painter, who lived from 1904 until 1989, would have a considerable involvement with the cinema. He was as much showman and celebrity as artist.

'THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY' - The crisp look of Salvador Dali's classic paintings, prime among them 'The Persistence of Memory' (1931), appealed to Alfred Hitchcock. CNS Photo courtesy of Museum of Modern Art. When he first arrived in Los Angeles in 1937, having already gained fame in Europe, Dali wrote in a postcard addressed to the kingpin of the surrealist movement, Andre Breton: "I'm in Hollywood where I've made contact with the three American surrealists, Harpo Marx, Disney and Cecil B. DeMille."

Dali himself was never truly a filmmaker, though late in his career he experimented with video on a mock documentary called "Impressions of Upper Mongolia," about a search for hallucinogenic mushrooms. But he collaborated in various ways on movies, both in the first flush of a career as a surrealist in Spain and France and later in Hollywood, when his once-shocking imagery had gained an audience beyond the art world.

These collaborations get a full treatment in "Dali & Film," the lavishly installed exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art that was organized by London's Tate Modern. And a couple of those collaborations are central to Dali lore.

In 1928, shortly before he was to ally himself with the surrealist movement, there was "Un chien andalou," the groundbreaking short film made with Luis Bunuel. Even people who have never seen the 16-minute surrealistic movie - which screens continuously in the galleries - know its grimace-inducing opening scene: A razor blade slices across an eye. You're set up to believe it's a woman's eye, even though they used one from a dead calf.

There is no sequential plot, by design, though you get the idea that the man and woman who repeatedly appear on screen have a thing for each other. Mostly, what lingers in the mind are images, like that of ants swarming on the man's hand. (This moment likely refers to the French expression "ants in the palm," which refers to the notion of itching to kill or sexual desire.)

Sixteen years later, Hitchcock enlisted Dali to design a dream sequence for his 1945 film "Spellbound." The drawings, paintings and large-scale backdrop he made for that scene get a room all their own, with atmospheric gray walls. These visuals reveal that Dali was just as meticulous about this scene as he was in rendering any of his famed paintings. The relevant moments, in which Dr. Anthony Edwardes (Gregory Peck) describes his dream to fellow psychiatrist Dr. Constance Petersen (Ingrid Bergman) as it materializes is screening continuously in the same gallery.

One look at the painting of multiple eyes Dali did for "Spellbound" and you know he remained a potent image-maker well into the 1940s. The rendering is seductive, the image itself crisply dreamlike.

Dali's involvements with the Marx brothers and the Walt Disney Studios - rooted in his friendships with Harpo and Walt - never came to fruition. But drawings and paintings give us some idea of what he was up to. And in the case of the animated sequence for Walt, Roy Disney asked Disney Studios France to complete it, with help from the original animator, John Hench. "Destino," as it is titled, screens in the galleries, too.

Dali loved to think of himself as a man of all mediums. He wrote a novel, contributed to the screenplay of "Un chien andalou" and a major second effort with Bunuel, "L'age d'or" (also screening) as well as penning autobiographical works. And he could offer up some enticing purple prose, as he did in a piece for Harper's Bazaar, "Surrealism in Hollywood." (It's reprinted in the exhibition catalog.)

"Nothing seems to be more suited to be devoured by the surrealist fire than those mysterious strips of 'hallucinatory celluloid' turned out so unconsciously in Hollywood," declares Dali, "and in which we have already seen appear, stupified, so many images of authentic delirium, chance and dream."

But Dali was at his core a painter, at least in the 1930s and 1940s, before his pictures started to look like Cecil B. DeMille productions on canvas. Fortunately for Dali and for us, the team of curators and Dali scholars concentrate on his best decades.

Some pictures, like the studies for "Spellbound," have an obvious connection to the show's theme. Others are linked by the repetition of imagery. The crowd of ants that appear on a hand in "Un chien andalou" recur in a collage of 1929 and also make their way onto the pocket watch in Dali's most famous painting, done in 1931.

That iconic image, "The Persistence of Memory," has made its way from the Museum of Modern Art for this show. Its soft clocks, set in a landscape with tablelike mesas, has exerted a collective pull on viewers ever since its debut. Its space is so vividly conceived that it is like a cinematic hallucination. And it is this stylistic clarity, a sort of hyper-realism that owes much to Flemish and Dutch old masters, that appealed to Hitchcock when he wanted an artist for a dream scene.

It's also at the core of Dali's popularity. No matter how repulsive the imagery becomes, people still marvel at how detailed these nightmarish apparitions look.

As engrossing as his paintings can sometimes be, his work just doesn't rise to the level of Rene Magritte's, who explored similar territory in his meticulously realistic images of impossible sights. Dali's surreality was often more contrived, as in paintings like "Book Transforming Itself Into a Nude Woman" (1940), whose title hints at its overly calculated effects.

By the mid-1940s, his pictures were becoming bloated kitsch parodies of his earlier paintings. But there were exceptions. In his painting of a studio head, "Portrait of Colonel Jack Warner" (1951), another powerful Hollywood friend, he set aside overt surrealism - and his art is better for it.

Warner's dog wears the dignified expression that you might think Warner would, while Warner himself displays a silly grin. The dog looks a little too large and the sky and background are a little too perfect, as Warner and his dog were posing against a painted backdrop in a studio space.

Dali's embrace of Hollywood was tied up with his love of being a public figure. His face became as much of an icon as any of his paintings because he knew how to charm the press (see some of the clippings included in one display case).

Is it any wonder that Andy Warhol made it a point to get to know him and used Dali as something of a model for his own public career? In his Factory, Warhol filmed nearly every notable, including Dali, who came by, in deadpan fashion, and gave these short film clips the droll title "Screen Tests."

It's a deft curatorial touch to have Dali's "test" on view, which shows him both right-side-up and upside-down. It seems like another performance from a man who always appeared to enjoy being Dali.

The exhibit, "Dali: Painting & Film," runs through Jan. 6, 2008, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles. After that, it moves to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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