

# LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

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HANS BELLMER

1902 Katowice, German Empire (now Poland) – Paris 1975

*Désarticulation sur fond rayé*

Oil paint, pen and black ink, pencil on canvas; 1958

Signed in pen and black ink lower right: *Bellmer*, dated lower left: *1958*.

65.3 x 65.3 cm

PROVENANCE: René Rasmussen, Paris (1911-79) – Thence by descent (until 2016)

EXHIBITION: *Hans Bellmer*, Centre national d'art contemporain, Paris 1971 (untitled) Kat.-Nr. 108.

*If the origin of my work is scandalous,  
it is because, for me, the world is a scandal.* (Hans Bellmer)

I The drawings, etchings, engravings, paintings, photographs and sculptures of Hans Bellmer rank as one of the twentieth century's most significant bodies of erotic art. Bellmer was a trained draughtsman endowed with an exceptional talent for razor-sharp detail and equipped with obsessive, irrepressible imaginative powers. He was able to transpose the manifestations and visions of his fertile imagination into a powerful, uncompromising body of work.

Bellmer gained early recognition in the mid 1930s when André Breton and the Surrealists became aware of him and his seductive, disquieting photographs of the dismembered female dolls he had constructed and set up in his private studio in the Karlshorst district of Berlin. He published a series of ten photographs of his first doll in a small book titled *Die Puppe* [The Doll] in 1934. A French edition of the book appeared in 1936 under the title *La Poupée*. In 1949, the Paris art dealer Berggruen published a series of partly hand-coloured gelatin silver prints of a second doll, titled *Les Jeux de la Poupée. Illustrés de textes par Paul Éluard*. Bellmer enjoyed lasting friendships with many of the key figures in the Dada and Surrealist movements, such as Yves Tanguy, Hans (Jean) Arp and Max Ernst, and contributed regularly to Surrealist exhibitions. Nevertheless, his intense personal lifestyle coupled with long periods of absence from Paris largely prevented him from participating in the group's activities.

Two major museum retrospectives of Bellmer's work were staged in his lifetime – not until the mid 1960s could his work be shown to the public free of constraints. The first retrospective was held at the Kestnervesellschaft in Hanover in 1967 and the second at the Centre national d'art contemporain in Paris in 1971 – where the present oil was exhibited, albeit as an untitled work.

Until Bellmer's death in 1975 he was considered to be something of a peripheral figure in the Surrealist movement. But in the decades that followed, his photographs of the dolls were repeatedly shown at international exhibitions and began to change hands for large sums of money. His role as a

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central figure in Surrealism and the importance of his doll as a Surrealist icon thus finally came to be recognized.

In 2006, a major exhibition of his work was held at the Centre Pompidou in Paris – the most extensive Bellmer retrospective to date – before travelling to Munich and London. However London viewers had only limited access to some sections of the show.

An exhibition titled *Hans Bellmer - Louise Bourgeois* held in Berlin in 2010 revealed remarkable parallels between the two artists' oeuvres – as though they had known each other's work, which, for Bellmer, is demonstrably not the case.

The photographic oeuvre of the American artist Cindy Sherman explicitly references Bellmer's doll theme – her own statements acknowledge the important influence of his photographs.

II Oil paintings constitute the second smallest category in Bellmer's oeuvre after the sculptures. Since an authoritative catalogue raisonné of Bellmer's work is still outstanding (with the exception of his photographs), the quantity of his paintings can only be estimated. There are probably no more than thirty. That Bellmer was active as an oil painter early on in his career is evidenced by photographs from the 1930s taken in his studios in Karlsruhe and Berlin. They show oil paintings in the style of Grosz, Dix and Schlichter. Bellmer was a friend of all three artists and his painting was clearly influenced by them. Regrettably, paintings from this early period of his career are now lost.

The present oil on canvas, titled *Désarticulation sur fond rayé* [Dismantlement on Striped Background], was executed in 1958. It belongs to a group of large-format oils commissioned by the art dealer Daniel Cordier, who represented Bellmer from 1958 onwards. Two other works in the group are *Les Bas rayés*, painted in 1959 or 1960 [Fig. 1], and *La Chaise Napoleon III* (1959). The Paris gallerist, art dealer and collector René Rasmussen (1911-79) acquired the present painting either directly from Bellmer, whom he knew personally, or from Cordier. In the 1960s, Rasmussen produced an edition of Bellmer's metal sculpture, *Le Mobile de Cardano*.

III This oil depicts an imaginary creature with a reptile-like double head that merges into one of its own limbs, while at the centre, the creature's womb-like belly appears to give birth to a smaller version of itself, and its sharp-fingered right hand, which resembles a metallic prosthetic component, clasps a truncated limb. The mutated, claw-like left hand attempts to lift the upper of the two heads like a visor and separate it from the lower head. The image derives its extraordinary power and urgency from the sweep and flow of Bellmer's highly idiosyncratic linear style, outlining in pen, black ink and pencil. Accentuated with black ink, the ball joints of the limbs contrast with the grey and yellow of the creature's body, worked with oil in a delicate, pastel-like palette. The painting combines three separate motifs – the cephalopod, the human hand and the reptilian head. All three were to define Bellmer's work both visually and stylistically.

The tentacular cephalopod<sup>1</sup> motif recurs in Bellmer's drawings, paintings and prints from the 1930s onwards. It is found, for example, in the mixed-media work *Céphalopode 1900*, executed in 1939/40 [Fig. 2], the two *Céphalopode* drawings of 1942 [Fig. 3] and 1960/61 [Fig. 4] and the pencil drawing titled *Céphalopode sur une table* of 1942 [Fig. 5]. The cephalopod motif was the ideal vehicle for him to reconfigure his representation of the body according to the central principle of his programmatic text, *Petite anatomie de l'inconscient physique ou l'Anatomie de l'image*, published by Éric Losfeld in Paris in 1957: 'THE BODY RESEMBLES A SENTENCE THAT SEEMS TO INVITE US TO DISMANTLE IT INTO ITS COMPONENT LETTERS, SO THAT ITS TRUE MEANINGS MAY BE REVEALED THROUGH AN ENDLESS STREAM OF ANAGRAMS.'<sup>2</sup>

In Bellmer's drawings and prints it is chiefly the eye and the hands, along with the head, legs, arms, feet and genitals that serve as iconographic devices in his representation of the human body. In the course of time, however, a very radical transformation manifested itself in his treatment of hands. In an early drawing dating from 1934 [Fig. 6] they strongly recall the draughtsmanship of the German Renaissance artists Dürer and Baldung Grien, only to evolve later into sinister vehicles of expression, emaciated bundles of fingers with exposed hinge joints, fleshless pincers, claws with horny, pointed, over-dimensional nails, as in a black chalk drawing of 1950 [Fig. 7], where they emanate malevolence and savagery. The most extreme expression of this is found in an untitled drawing of 1959 [Fig. 8], where the menacing automaton hands constitute a direct reference to Vanitas.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1950s, a strange, dead-eyed reptilian head made its appearance in Bellmer's work. It features in the ink and bodycolour drawing titled *Le Monstre rouge* of 1952 [Fig. 9] – which bears a certain resemblance to the present painting – and in the oil *La Toupie* of 1952-56? [Fig. 10]. The motif appears in its ultimate form in *Gravure reptiligne*, an engraving of 1957 [Fig. 11]. Its presence dominates the present painting, although here the doubling of the motif triggers a strange, heightened sense of bewilderment in the viewer.

IV An untitled preliminary drawing for the present painting executed in the same year [Fig. 12] is recorded. In 1969, Bellmer produced a colour engraving after the painting. It was published by Editions George Visat in Paris in a portfolio of eleven sheets titled *Heinrich von Kleist, Les Marionnettes* [Fig. 13].

*Desarticulation sur fond rayé* may be unsettling in its combination of motifs but at the same time it fascinates with its combination of delicate tonal values. It emanates a dark, enigmatic eroticism yet is not erotic in any superficial sense, as individual erotic detail would be.<sup>4</sup> It is charged with erotic energy as a whole, and thus loyal to the fabric of Bellmer's entire thinking and artistic creativity – a chef d'oeuvre within Bellmer's unique aesthetic universe.

Thomas C. Garbe

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<sup>1</sup> Cephalopoda: 'A large class of active predatory molluscs comprising octopuses, squids, and cuttlefish. They have a distinct head with large eyes and a ring of tentacles around a beaked mouth, and are able to release a cloud of inky fluid to confuse predators.' *Oxford Dictionary of English*, OUP, 3rd edn., 2010, p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> 'Le corps est comparable à une phrase qui vous inviterait à la désarticuler, pour que se recomposent, à travers une série d'anagrammes sans fin, ses contenus véritables', Hans Bellmer, 1957.

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Rothe, *Bellmer. Anatomie der Lust. Erinnerungen an einen Erotomanen*, Frankfurt 1991, p.23 and p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> See Wieland Schmied, *Hans Bellmer*, Hanover 1967, p. 12.

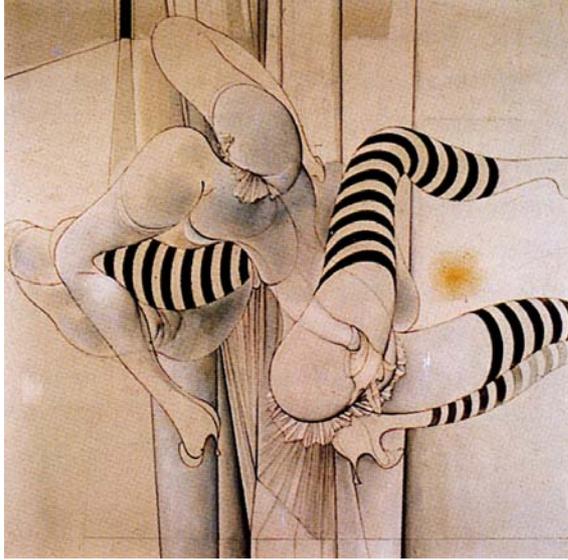


Fig. 1: *Les Bas rayés*, 1959 or 1960, oil on canvas, Size and location unknown

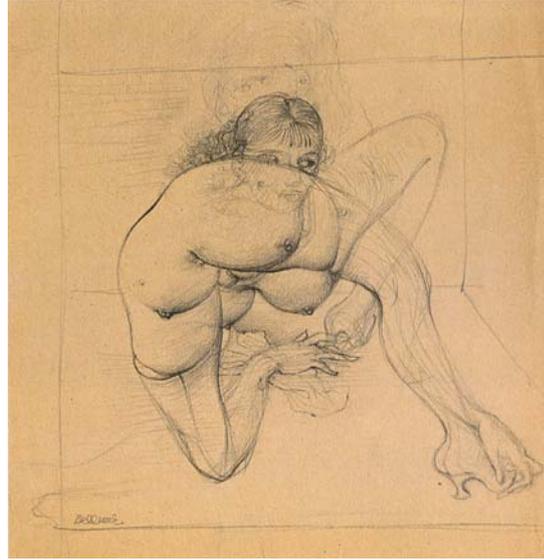


Fig. 3: *Untitled (Céphalopode)*, 1942, black chalk, 32 x 24.4 cm.  
Private collection



Fig. 2: *Céphalopode 1900*, 1939/40, bodycolour, pen and brown ink, watercolour, pencil, 49.5 x 46.3 cm.  
Private collection, Switzerland



Fig. 4: *Untitled (Céphalopode)*, 1960/61, white ink and brush on black cardboard, 32 x 26 cm.  
Hegewisch collection, Hamburg

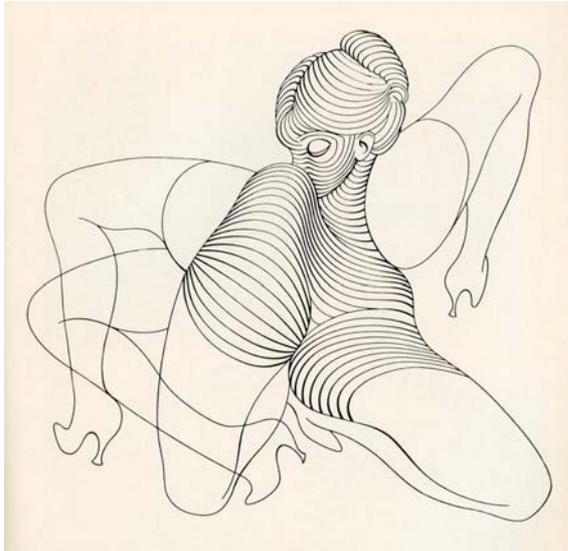


Fig. 5: *Céphalopode sur une table*, 1942,  
pencil, 13.5 x 19.5 cm.  
Galerie André-François Petit, Paris

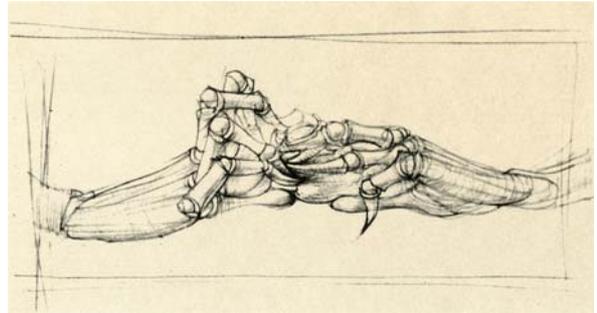


Fig. 7: *Untitled*, 1950,  
black chalk, Size unknown,  
Private collection



Fig. 6: *Mains de demi-mijaurée*, 1934,  
black chalk, bodycolour in white, 30 x 25 cm.  
Private collection



Fig. 8: *Untitled*, 1959,  
black chalk and bodycolour in white, size unknown.  
Private collection

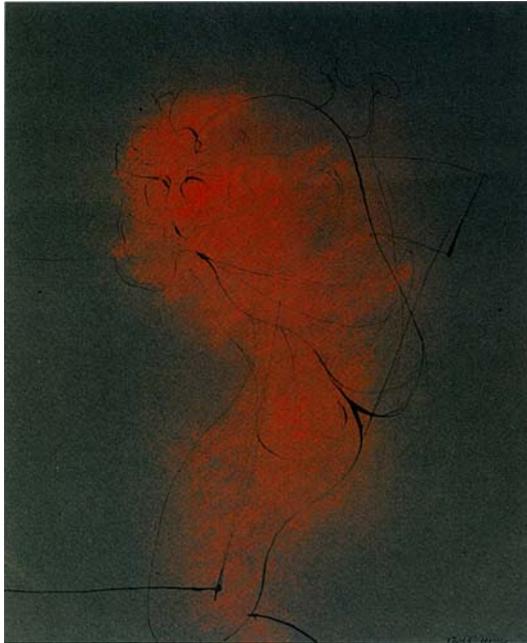


Fig. 9: *Le Monstre rouge*, 1952, pen and black ink, bodycolour in red, 21 x 17 cm.  
Private collection

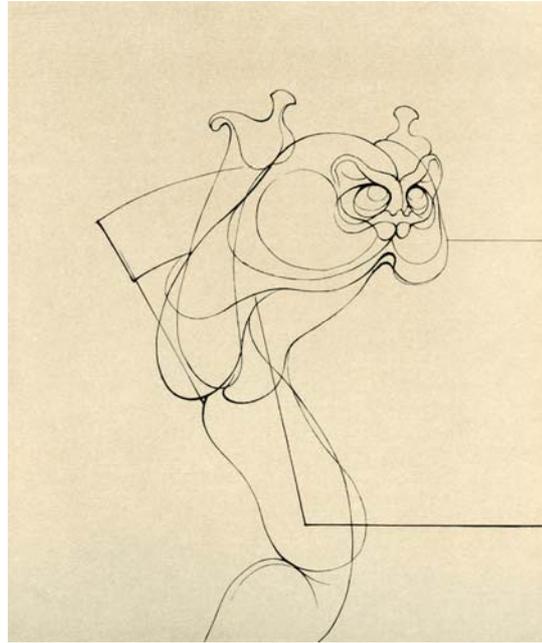


Fig. 11: *Gravure reptiligne*, 1957, engraving, 20.5 x 17 cm.  
Editions George Visat, Paris.



Fig. 10: *La Toupie*, 1952-56, oil on canvas, 64.8 x 648 cm.  
Tate, London



Fig. 12: *Untitled*, 1958, black and red chalk, 21 x 21 cm.  
Location unknown.



Fig. 13: *Untitled (Les Marionnettes)*, 1969,  
engraving in black and pale red, from the portfolio  
*Heinrich von Kleist, Les Marionnettes*.  
Editions Georges Visat, Paris