Fig. 1. Eric Schaal, Salvador Dalí’s *Dream of Venus* Pavilion, Façade at Night, World’s Fair, 1939
Fig. 2. Murray Korman with Salvador Dali, *Dream of Venus*, 1939
Weingrow Collection
“There is only one difference between a madman and me. The madman thinks he is sane. I know I am mad.” ~ Salvador Dalí
Dalí’s *Dream of Venus*: The Surrealist Funhouse of the 1939 World’s Fair . . .

Fig. 4. Eric Schaal, Detail of Salvador Dalí’s *Dream of Venus*, Interior, 1939

Fig. 3. Previous slide: Jean Dieuzaide, Salvador Dalí, 1953
“On 30 April 1939, not long before the Second World War broke out, a new world fair opened in New York. Intended as a final effort to overcome the Great Depression, the fair was presented largely as a platform for the future and was heralded under the slogan of ‘the world of tomorrow.’ After ten years of hardship, the fair offered visitors a dazzling spectacle of shining technology, unexpectedly streamlined architecture and magical attractions. Conceived as an expression of the triumph of industrial progress and the capitalist order, it announced a new era, the age of technology, which the war interrupted for a short time. On offer were washing machines and dishwashers, the miracle of television, which broadcast live for the first time to mark the opening of the event, the first colour photographs from Kodak, synthetic fabrics such as nylon, etc. In short, a world of comforts and modern conveniences, technological luxuries and new forms of entertainment. In other words, a world of merchandise. The fair was divided into three main sectors. Firstly, there was the Central Theme, based on the proposal of the ‘World of Tomorrow.’ Secondly, there was the States Area, where 33 states and 58 countries were represented. Germany and Spain, which had just emerged from its civil war, did not take part, while the presence of Japan, Italy and the USSR was curious, bearing in mind that the fair aimed to promote democracy as a form of government and way of life. Lastly, the Amusements Area, conceived as an added extra to the main area and purpose of the fair. Dali’s pavilion was located in the Amusements Area.”
Fig. 5. Salvador Dalí, Detail of Sketch for Exterior of the Dream of Venus Pavilion, World’s Fair, 1939
“Salvador Dalí spent considerable time in New York in the 1930s, cultivating an audience and a market. These efforts culminated at the 1939 World’s Fair in a giant Surrealist folly containing a grotto with erotic all-female tableaux vivants, some of them staged underwater. His pavilion, the Dream of Venus, was an astonishing realization of what Dalí had termed the “terrifying and edible beauty” of surrealist architecture, then unprecedented on American shores. Entered through a spread-leg archway, it contained such features as a ceiling of inverted umbrellas and a new version of the artist’s famous Rainy Taxi (1938). Its bulbous, writhing façade, riven with holes and cracks, opposed the polished, streamlined Art Deco architecture of the national and corporate pavilions of the fair’s optimistic ‘World of Tomorrow.’”
As visitors entered the pavilion, they were warned that what they were about to see would be not only unsettling, but even disturbing. Dalí’s focus and main objective was to stage the dreams of Venus. He displayed the goddess “lying on an ardent couch, consumed by the fever of love, dreaming burning dreams.”

“Enter here men of all kinds and races, victims of reality, you who have the thirst for dreams.”

Fig. 7. Eric Schaal, Salvador Dalí’s Dream of Venus, Interior, 1939
The “wet” part of the pavilion represented Venus’s dream of water. “There was a large number of objects inside the tank: a piano with a woman’s body for the keyboard, clusters of telephone earpieces, typewriters, fireplaces, mummified cows and seaweed turned into chains, etc. As these objects were made of flexible rubber, it is to be supposed that they undulated rhythmically, as did the ‘living mermaids wearing crustacean flippers and little else’ that swam underwater, playing the piano, making phone calls, using the typewriter, lighting the fire and occasionally milking the cow. The immersed girls, swimming against a backdrop of a painted underwater Pompeii (Gradiva again?), ‘wear the scanty clothing that Dali has designed, consisting of corsets and fishnet stockings from the last century.’”

Fig. 8. Eric Schaal, Salvador Dalí’s Dream of Venus, Interior, 1939
For Dalí, the “dry” part expressed the primary theme of the pavilion: the Dream of Venus. “There was a ten-meter-long couch upholstered in red satin on which a girl lay, acting the part of the sleeping (that is to say, dreaming) goddess. Next to her was another girl, a finger raised to her lips, making gestures to visitors, indicating to them that they should not wake the goddess. A large mirror reflected and so duplicated the image.”

Fig. 10. Eric Schaal, Salvador Dalí’s *Dream of Venus*, Interior, 1939
“Painted on the other side were enchanted beaches, soft watches and groups of giraffes, their necks in flames.”

Fig. 11. Eric Schaal, Salvador Dalí’s Dream of Venus, Interior, 1939
The Weingrow Collection contains a group of six publicity photographs for Salvador Dalí’s *Dream of Venus* pavilion by Murray Korman, in which Dalí assumed the role of art director. These are the only explicitly extant prints (four are reproduced throughout this presentation). While Korman’s stark, theatrical style is apparent, Dalí was the innovator for these images, conjuring up the incongruous poses and costumes that provocatively promoted the *Dream of Venus* and surrealism. Dalí was fascinated by fashion, as evidenced by his collaborations with designers such as Elsa Schiaparelli, and brought his ideas from that realm to these photographs. Most of the women are wearing what could be described as Dalí-designed bathing suits that take the form of strategically placed lobsters, seashells, and crustaceans.
Murray Korman was best known for creating glamorous images of aspiring and established entertainers; his photographs were commonly used in promotions. In the context of the *Dream of Venus*, Korman’s work has been contrasted with Horst’s photographs, which are situated in a more artistic realm. Korman has been characterized as a publicity photographer and his studio “more mass than class.”9 Yet Korman put his study at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City to good use by creating memorable, and sometimes sensual, photographs of many of the top entertainers of the mid-twentieth century, such as Josephine Baker, who is pictured here in a classical pose, loosely draped and heavily bejeweled.10 Korman’s popular appeal and distinctive lighting were joined with Salvador Dalí’s imaginative, esoteric, and startling expressions to create an intriguing set of images for the *Dream of Venus*.

Fig. 13. Murray Korman, *Josephine Baker in “En Super Folies,”* 1937
“Moving to New York; for the Fair, Dalí runs around in photo studios in Queens doing shots for publicity purposes that had no other function. Dalí again, with the lobster symbol, dressing the nude model, who seems to me to be posing as if she were lifeless or mannequin-like. Even stranger Gala joins Dalí in the contrast between nude and clothed. It’s very striking and reminds me of some of those Lucas Samaras portraits of the ’70s, where he peeks in at the side—he can’t resist being in the photo himself—even though it’s supposed to be a portrait of somebody else.”

Fig. 14. Murray Korman with Salvador Dalí, Dream of Venus, 1939
Weingrow Collection
There was no shortage of interest among other photographers besides Murray Korman in Dalí’s well-publicized project. “Black-and-white and color photographs by Horst P. Horst, George Platt Lynes, Eric Schaal, Carl van Vechten, and others document the architectural space as well as the artists who created it, and the actors and models who swam and sunbathed throughout.”\(^{12}\)
“The first thing you saw as you came down the boardwalk and into the Fair was its dominating symbols, the Trylon and Perisphere, the former a triangular spire fifteen stories high, the latter a gigantic globe a city block across. . . .

“They did not spring suddenly from the brains of their designers, the architectural firm Harrison and Fouilhoux. They belonged to a continuous tradition in modern art. . . .

“The two gleaming structures were of course male and female symbols. Inside the female globe, the designers had gestated their vision of the World of Tomorrow. They called it Democracity, and it was the most popular exhibit at the Fair.”¹³
Dalí’s intuitive ideas were not aligned with the measured geometry of modernist structures, as exemplified by the Trylon and Perisphere; however, he related to the tension between their gendered forms.

As a commentary, he borrowed the fair’s main symbol as a prop in one of the Dream of Venus publicity photographs by Murray Koman. In it, Dalí both emphasized the phallic aspect of the Trylon by angling it in front of the Perisphere (a view not often photographed) and diminished its size and significance by having one of his “Venus” models tower above it—and symbolically the entire fair—in a provocative and thoughtful pose.

Calling into question the progressive thematic stance of the fair, and after having had to negotiate the controversial content of his pavilion, Dalí published his infamous Declaration of Independence of the Imagination and the Right of Man to His Own Madness.

Fig. 19. Murray Korman with Salvador Dalí, Dream of Venus, 1939, Weingrow Collection
“Contemporary press remarked that the pavilion ‘shrewdly combine[d] Surrealism and sex,’ delighting the organizers of Dalí’s Dream of Venus pavilion, who believed that it would do more to advance the understanding of Surrealism in America than ‘a dozen high-brow exhibitions.’”\(^{14}\)

“Filled with nude women, mermaids, melting clocks, and underwater dreamscapes, it was a sexually charged creation that served, for most visitors of the World’s Fair, as an introduction to the Surrealist Movement by its most famous figure.”\(^{15, 16}\)
Notes

Christine Trotter

6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. Murray Korman began his studies at the Cooper Union at age 16 in 1919. After his first year of “freehand,” he was promoted to third year. Institutional records show he attended until 1921. His occupation was listed as “painter.” I would like to thank Ellen Dorsey, Associate Registrar, Office of Admissions and Records at the Cooper Union for providing this information.

2. Murray Korman with Salvador Dalí, Dream of Venus, 1939, Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Howard L. and Muriel Weingrow Collection of Avant-Garde Art and Literature at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY.


12. Murray Korman with Salvador Dalí, Dream of Venus, 1939, Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Howard L. and Muriel Weingrow Collection of Avant-Garde Art and Literature at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY.


19. Murray Korman with Salvador Dalí, Dream of Venus, 1939, Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Howard L. and Muriel Weingrow Collection of Avant-Garde Art and Literature at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY.

20. Murray Korman with Salvador Dalí, Dream of Venus, 1939, Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 1/4 in. Courtesy of the Howard L. and Muriel Weingrow Collection of Avant-Garde Art and Literature at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY.