

University Galleries of Illinois State University (Normal, IL)

Ilse Bing: Doublings

5/20/2024-8/6/2024

Introduction

Born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1899, Ilse Bing was among the most inventive photographers of the 20th century's first half. She spent her most artistically productive decade—the 1930s—in Paris. In the early 1940s she was displaced by the Nazis and moved to New York City, where she continued making and exhibiting photographs. Equally a commercial and a fine art photographer, Bing produced magazine commissions and hazy atmospheric scenes, professional portraits and near-abstract formal studies. While she was never exclusively connected to a particular movement or group, she associated with and was influenced by several: the Bauhaus, New Photography, and Surrealism.

This small exhibition focuses on the artistic technique of "doubling," which Bing adopted from Surrealism. Surrealism was an artistic movement established in Paris in the years following World War I. The movement sought to liberate people's unconscious thoughts and desires from repressive social structures. Inspired by modern psychology, Surrealists developed a host of artistic methods whose aim was to make common objects and experiences seem uncommon. Doubling was one such method. It refers to the act of representing the same object in two or more ways, whether from different angles, in different settings, or in slightly altered forms.

Such dual depictions remind us of the unimaginable complexity of even the simplest objects, and of the ways we tend to ignore or suppress this complexity in our day-to-day experiences of things. While Bing did not intend the paired photographs here to be exhibited as pairs, seeing them as such allows us to consider their involvement in her broader modernist project of estranging the subjects of her photographs from any easy notions of what they are or what they mean. An unpaired photograph of a reflection in water displays Bing's use of doubling in a single image.