During my visit to the San Diego Museum of Art, I found myself especially intrigued by a René Magritte painting, *The Shadows*, executed by the artist during his last year of life in 1966, is an oil on canvas painting showing us Magritte’s continuous interest in Surrealism. Magritte plays with dark colors and a limited palette, while also revisiting a shape from one of his most famous paintings, *The Treachery of Images*. As the work’s title suggests, Magritte seems to be playing with the idea of shadows, presenting it to us in a dream-like setting, while also transmitting a dark and emotional tone to the viewers. Magritte uses his specific choice of colors and seemingly unrelated shapes to transport us to a world of an illogical, non-reality reality; a world in our subconscious. His choices for rendering this work of art were meant to further his own exploration with surrealism in painting, while also addressing a dark reality: his own mortality.

Magritte worked with a limited color palette on this work, with dark shades dominating most of the canvas. The upper part of the background is rendered in a gray shade mixed with purple hues. The center part has a more warm tone, maintaining the dark gray shade but this time with predominately orange and yellow hues. The bottom of the painting contrasts the top half with a rich and bright blue color. This creates an effect of land and sky, the land being blue and bright and the sky dark and gray, giving us what could be interpreted as a sunset. Magritte’s use
of unrealistic colors, making the land blue instead of the sky, portrays the surrealists ideas of creating unrealistic scenes, presenting us a world unlike our own; one that could be within our dreams. His use of dark shades to represent a sunset might also go further than just presenting us a subconscious world, but of presenting us one with a dark emotion. He was not only interested in showing us these imaginary scenes but in helping his viewers feel them as well. Magritte also gives us a source of light, or at least a depiction of it. The figures placed in the center of the painting, the black tree and the faded pipe behind it, both are casting a shadow in the same direction. While keeping the painting dark, in a seemingly overall shadow effect, he still adds the idea of light through the use of these shadows.

The shapes are the focus of the painting, placed directly in the middle and one behind the other. They’re both drawn in a big scale, taking up most of the canvas. The tree reaches to the top of the canvas and almost to the bottom most part, while the pipe extends from left to right also taking up most of the horizontal space. The shapes seem to be making the composition a balanced act of horizontal and vertical aspects, making the painting oriented in every direction instead of either vertically or horizontally. As a viewer, seeing that the painting doesn’t have a defined direction it personally adds to the idea of a dream-like world. Where you’re completely surrounded and things don’t have to follow one specific orientation. Additionally, the pipe was rendered to be of the same scale as the tree, adding to the unrealistic part of his surrealist style: a pipe just as big as a tree. The tree is completely black yet still features a lot of details, like the individual leaves and branches. It is the only thing in the painting that doesn’t appear hazy or
shadowy. The pipe behind the tree, alluding at his earlier painting *The Treachery of Images,* is painted in a hazy style using grey shades, making it look like it is fading away behind the tree.

However, Magritte still shows us detailed volume of the pipe (like he did in the original painting), as well as of the tree, making it more realistic facets of this work. As a viewer, having the shapes right behind each other and taking up most of the space of the canvas causes me to think of them as the main part of the painting; not so much his choice of colors or use of shadows as the title might suggest. It also leads me to really wonder about what Magritte was trying to tell us, or show us, with this arrangement. It makes me think that the objects are meant to be interpreted as a pair and not as separate entities. In a sense, it causes me confusion. As a Surrealist artist, I don’t think Magritte would’ve been angry at this reaction.

Although the painting doesn’t have a clear subject, we are just presented with shadowy shapes, the work does give us a certain emotional tone achieved through the color palette. The colors used, even brightest and the darkest, are slightly hazy. The background not only gives us a sense of a sunset, but the way he mixed the colors to create this hazy, foggy effect adds to the almost sad and dark tone of the painting. It seems like the sunset is accompanied by fog, and it gives the painting an eery feeling. The shapes being so prominent and dark, fading away or standing strongly alone in the center, is very strong and striking. In terms of dreams, as surrealist paintings almost always were presented, Magritte might have actually been trying to present the viewers with a nightmare. A fading landscape with no identifiable end or beginning, not matter in what direction you look. He may also be showing us an allusion to the past, the pipe seen in one of his first famous paintings, that is quickly fading. Considering he created this work during the
last year of his life, after being diagnosed with cancer, Magritte might have been confronting his own mortality. Seeing himself, represented by his famous pipe figure, fade into a never ending shadow. The tree standing strongly in the center being the tree of life, always present and never dying; even though one shape fades (signifying his own death), life continues.