

The true child of the intermedia

By JOAN LOWNDES

"Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for the truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices."

This quotation from the first surrealist manifesto published in 1924 by Andre Breton, the leader of the movement, has not become outdated.

It is especially applicable to Gregg Simpson, a student of the occult whose work in the visual field has been profoundly influenced by surrealism. A true child of intermedia — drummer, composer and writer as well as artist — he will leave Vancouver next month on a Canada Council bursary to establish links between local artists inspired by the magical tradition and those in the European underground. From his researches he hopes that an exhibition of international scope will result at the UBC Gallery early in 1972.

His first stop will be Paris, then on to Amsterdam and London and finally, for his own psychic development, to Morocco, where he speaks of burning away his surface personality in the desert.

In Paris he will try to make contact with two of the great survivors of original surrealism: Max Ernst and Man Ray, both now in their eighties. Ernst, who is presently being honored by the French state with a retrospective at the Orangerie, is in Gregg's eyes the supreme master of surrealism, the equal in terms of handling fantasy and dreams of Bosch and Fuseli.

It would be one of the great moments of his life if he could meet him. He is armed with two talismanic letters: one from the Canada Council, the other from William Rubin, who organized the mammoth exhibition Dada, Surrealism and their Heritage for the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1968.

Gregg hopes that he could obtain some small things of Ernst to give the UBC show a certain class, or at the very least photograph his work as a juxtaposition to what is going on here.

With photographer and collagist Man Ray there will be no problem: he is American and very approachable. Gregg plans also, through the little known Galerie du Dragon, to get the names and addresses of artists still pursuing the surrealist ideal of "pure psychic automation."

At the same time he will be able to provide them with a full documentation of his own work — no use going without your medicine show, he says. He is now putting together a loose-leaf notebook of five-inch by seven-inch photos covering his paintings, drawings, collages and decalcomanias. The latter were an invention of the surrealist Oscar Dominguez, very popular as a way of invoking chance. You simply spread gouache on a sheet of paper, lay another on top of it, press here and there, then peel off your second sheet.

Its markings suggest exotic, spongy growths or fantastic caves. Since no special technical ability is required, there is no reason why Gregg Simpson's decalcomanias should not equal those of Dominguez. But he



CARD TRICK

SURREALIST HAS DESERT MISSION



DENI ENGLAND PHOTO

GREGG SIMPSON

... student of the occult

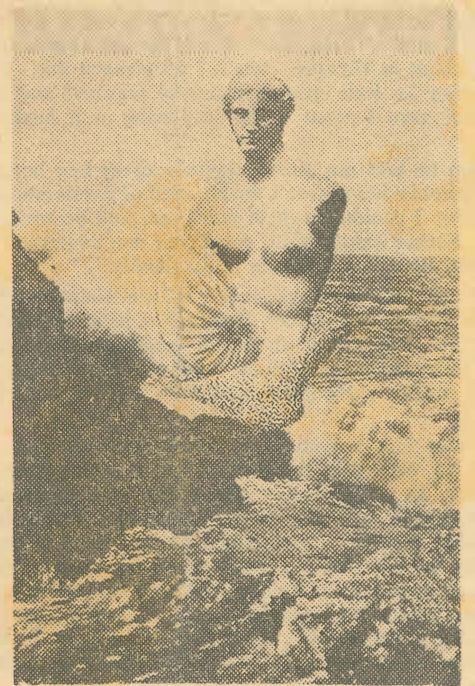
has yet to use them as a springboard for compositions in oil, as did Max Ernst.

A selection of Gregg's collages was included in the recent show at the UBC Gallery devoted to this type of work. Some of them have a disturbing incongruity — an organ like a liver pasted over a woman's head — while others are hauntingly poetic.

Of his drawings Gregg says: "I was right on a peyote trip at that time, really putting person and paper together and essentially letting them draw themselves. I really didn't do much at all to help. They're crazy distorted faces, a Francis Bacon sort of influence and some Claude Breeze too."

He talks of his paintings creating themselves on the canvas in much the same terms. His finest is Summer, dedicated to Max Ernst, a lush, tangled jungle full of erotic allusions.

A stranger painting, evocative of some of Ernst's



PSYCHE COLLAGE

sculpture, represents a figure in a long black robe wearing a golden mask with horns. Equally hermetic is a triangular canvas covered with cabalistic and alchemical signs which hangs in Gregg's studio behind his drums.

Here one enters upon what is to most of us completely foreign territory: Gregg's firm belief in alchemy. Andre Breton referred to it in some of his later writings and Gregg is convinced he will find adherents in Europe.

Certainly on the West Coast he is not alone. Al Neil, of the Al Neil Trio for which Gregg played, introduced him to alchemy, while Jack Wise frequently uses alchemical symbols in his paintings.

Gregg recently formed the Divine Order of the Lodge, which consists beside himself of Gary Lee-Nova, Gilles Foisy and David Yu (a pseudonym which this concrete poet and collagist is soon to make legal.) They have all read deeply in metaphysics including alchemy, and are scheduled to have a show together in the late fall at the Avelles Gallery.

Webster's International Dictionary defines alchemy as follows: "The medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy whose great objects were the transmutation of the base metals into gold and the discovery of the universal cure for diseases and means of indefinitely prolonging life . . . alchemy as a science produced discoveries which led the way to modern chemistry."

Gregg says: "The definition of alchemy to me would be like any process that has a physical side and a spiritual side as well.

"A painting is very much like it, mixing pigments and oils together — in that sense transmuting. Art is alchemy because it has a physical manifestation and the individual is going through a spiritual process in doing it. My Summer painting went through so many changes before it ended up as it was and I went through so many too — like a duplicate process.

"Music is uniting the sacred and the profane. When I sit down to play the drums people say: 'How wonderful, you can work off your tensions!' But if it's successful again it's a transmutation. I'm right in the test tube when I'm playing.

"Alchemy is pretty well documented. People only hear of the myth. Modern science has done almost everything alchemists did but by black magic. Like black magicians today are the atomic scientists — sell-out scientists I call them.

"By means of cyclotrons they can change elements and that's alchemy. In a sense all western science can do is prove that occult science is true, but their motives are things that I would question.

"Tarot, the mysteries of the Grail, the pagan mysteries, astrology, Rosicrucian teachings, masonry, all these systems cross-reference and you find they are talking about the same thing, trying to get to the essential order that exists in the universe. But we're coming so close to chaos that people now are really looking for a spiritual path. If there's not a spiritual rebirth, we're not going to be here to the turn of the century."