

# Retour à Magritte ou comment l'Ouest canadien a été conquis

## Magritte Revisited

### Or How the West Was Won

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# Retour à Magritte

## ou comment l'Ouest canadien a été conquis

S'il vous arrivait de juger de la peinture des provinces de la Prairie d'après la récente exposition intitulée *The Canadian Canvas*, vous pourriez facilement imaginer que l'Ouest regorge de disciples de Greenberg qui s'efforcent en diable de peindre des toiles majeures — quel que soit le sens de ce mot — et, s'il vous advenait, en outre, de lire dans la préface du catalogue de cette exposition ce que Karen Wilkin<sup>1</sup> dit de cette partie du pays, vous seriez encore davantage ancré dans cette idée. Justement, il n'en est rien. Certes, on n'y manque pas, notamment dans la région d'Edmonton, d'artistes qui peignent dans une manière qui pourrait s'appeler couleur lyrique inspirée de New-York. Abstraction faite de cela, qu'on me permette d'ajouter que les artistes choisis par Mlle Wilkin sont fort bons mais qu'ils ne représentent vraiment pas la Prairie. Ce qui me tracasse, c'est l'absence de certains peintres. Bien des gens, y compris Mlle Wilkin, paraissent très désireux de démontrer que nous tous, habitants de la Prairie, nous ne sommes pas des provinciaux, c'est-à-dire des rustauds, tandis que je suis persuadé, pour ma part, que notre provincialisme constitue une de nos plus solides qualités. Certes, nous sommes nombreux, grâce au livre et aux visites aux centres mondiaux de l'art, à nous tenir au courant des dernières orientations artistiques d'Europe et des États-Unis, mais je connais très peu de praticiens d'ici qui puissent se payer un tel luxe, et, Dieu leur pardonne, il en est même quelques-uns qui n'ont aucun souci de ce qui se passe à New-York. C'est une absurdité évidente, je crois, que d'ignorer l'importance de notre environnement pour notre art, comme le fait Mlle Wilkin dans sa présentation, cet art fût-il majeur ou mineur, ce dernier étant en l'occurrence, j'imagine, tout ce qu'elle ne considère pas comme majeur. Je n'arrive pas à comprendre le sens d'une exposition qui prétend rendre compte de l'état de la peinture de la Prairie et qui exclut des artistes comme Ivan Eyre<sup>2</sup>, Esther Warkov, Ernest Linder, Eli Bornstein ou John Hall, dont les ouvrages vont du surréalisme au constructivisme et au réalisme photographique, à moins que cela ne soit dû au fait que leur travail ne s'adapte pas aux standards rigides du *grand art* que semblent approuver le Musée d'Edmonton et Mlle Wilkin.

Un cas d'espèce m'est fourni par Arthur Horsfall — artiste et objet du présent article. On pourrait, faute d'une meilleure définition, le qualifier de surréaliste de la Prairie, et c'est ce qui me reste à prouver. Horsfall est natif de Winnipeg, et, sauf pendant de courtes périodes, c'est dans cette ville qu'il a passé sa vie. Il est maintenant l'aîné (il naquit en 1915) d'un groupe de jeunes artistes — dont la plupart habitent Winnipeg — qui s'appelle *Subway*<sup>3</sup>. Tous ont étudié à l'école d'art de l'Université du Manitoba. Horsfall, beaucoup plus tôt, a

lui-même fréquenté cette école, à la fin des années trente et au début des années quarante, quand elle portait le nom d'École d'Art de Winnipeg, et il a étudié avec L. L. FitzGerald, qui en était alors directeur. Plusieurs des membres de *Subway* (sauf Horsfall) ont été directement ou indirectement influencés par Ivan Eyre, professeur à cette école, qui, depuis nombre d'années, a joué un rôle de puissant catalyseur à Winnipeg et qui, contrairement à d'autres artistes influents et à d'autres artistes enseignants de notre région, met l'accent sur le contenu de l'œuvre. Ce en quoi Horsfall diffère de ses jeunes collègues, c'est que la plupart d'entre eux abordent leur sujet sous l'angle du grotesque tandis qu'il utilise l'ironie et l'humour, qualités qui font presque totalement défaut dans leurs ouvrages. (A propos, Ivan Eyre semble s'éloigner, dans ses dernières œuvres, de la manière de Bacon pour se diriger vers un paysage de style direct et, qu'on me permette de le dire, fort beau.) Peut-être, la maturité permet-elle à Horsfall de s'offrir le luxe de l'humour, alors que tant de jeunes artistes sont uniquement occupés de leur propre sérieux, qui frise parfois l'emphase.

Comme la plupart des artistes canadiens de sa génération (et même avant lui), Horsfall, à sa sortie de l'école, a opté pour l'art commercial. A cette époque, les possibilités d'accès à la réussite dans les beaux-arts étaient rares au pays, particulièrement dans une ville comme Winnipeg. Entre les deux guerres, Paris a été le lieu du Surréalisme, et Winnipeg, c'est sûr, n'était pas Paris. Nulle part, littéralement, un artiste pouvait-il y voir des œuvres d'art. Il y avait bien le Musée de Winnipeg, mais c'était celui d'une seule personne et il n'était aucunement comparable à ce qu'il est devenu. Il n'y avait pas de galeries, sauf une ou deux qui importaient de mauvaises peintures anglaises. Quand on se souvient que ce n'est pas antérieurement à l'avènement du Groupe des Peintres Eleven, dans les années cinquante, que les artistes canadiens ont pu vivre uniquement de leur art, il n'est pas surprenant qu'Horsfall soit demeuré dans l'art commercial pendant trente ans avant de pouvoir se lancer comme artiste. Pendant ces longues années, il avait certes peint, surtout en fin de semaine ou quand il en avait le temps, soit en son particulier, soit avec des groupes comme le Winnipeg Sketch Club. Même FitzGerald, au cours de sa longue carrière comme directeur, en fut réduit à n'être qu'un peintre du dimanche à cause des lourdes obligations de son poste, et c'est seulement quand il fut à la retraite qu'il a pu se consacrer entièrement à l'art. Si la Crise a été une période particulièrement difficile pour l'art canadien, elle a marqué, par contre, le commencement de la grandeur pour l'art américain, et c'est grâce aux initiatives de la W.P.A. (War Projects Administration, 1935-1943) que la vie

culturelle a pu fleurir dans ce pays tandis que la nôtre pataugeait, mais c'est là matière à un autre article. Inutile de dire qu'avec un pareil handicap il est heureux que nous ayons pu alors avoir quelques artistes. (Voir à ce sujet le catalogue de Charles C. Hill pour l'exposition *La Peinture canadienne des années trente* préparée par la Galerie Nationale.)

Comment, dans ces conditions, un artiste comme Horsfall a-t-il pu être influencé à un tel point par Magritte? La réponse est simple: les livres. En fait, Horsfall n'a jamais vu un original de Magritte. Il ne s'est jamais beaucoup éloigné de Winnipeg, sauf pendant une partie de son enfance passée aux États-Unis et en Angleterre, et un voyage de groupe en Italie organisé par le Musée de Winnipeg. Toutefois, je ne voudrais donner à personne l'impression qu'Horsfall est une sorte de rustique. En fait, il est bien documenté sur le Surréalisme, notamment sur Magritte, mais sa façon d'aborder le surréalisme est personnelle — c'est celle d'un Canadien de l'Ouest. Le Bruxelles de Magritte n'est pas le Winnipeg d'Horsfall. C'est l'humour du Belge qui intéresse Horsfall plutôt que toute vision énigmatique que l'on pourrait associer à l'art de Magritte. Je crois que le surréalisme convient tout autant à la Prairie qu'à Paris, ce n'est que l'ensemble des circonstances qui diffère. Ce n'est pas le bistrot mais les espaces à perte de vue qui influencent l'esprit de nos artistes surréalistes, et la résultante peut fort bien se ressembler. A Winnipeg même, on trouve, dans le travail des collègues mieux connus qu'Horsfall que sont Ivan Eyre et Esther Warkov, une conception en quelque sorte surréaliste, mais il faudrait dire que le sujet est traité par eux d'une manière plus classique, c'est-à-dire que les inquiétants sous-entendus du surréalisme sont plus apparents dans leurs œuvres que dans celles d'Horsfall. Je désirerais dire clairement que, pour moi, le surréalisme est plus un état d'esprit qu'une philosophie française en règle et que je n'ignore pas la définition classique que Breton en a donné, en 1924: «SURREALISME, n. m., Automatisme psychique pur par lequel on se propose d'exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale»<sup>4</sup>. Dans le Canada actuel, du moins dans le Canada anglais, la politique marxiste des initiateurs français du surréalisme échappe généralement aux tenants, dans l'ordre visuel, de cette philosophie. Du point de vue des arts

1. Arthur HORSFALL.  
*A Midsummer Night*, 1975.  
Acrylique; 152 cm. x 122.  
(Phot. Ernest Mayer)



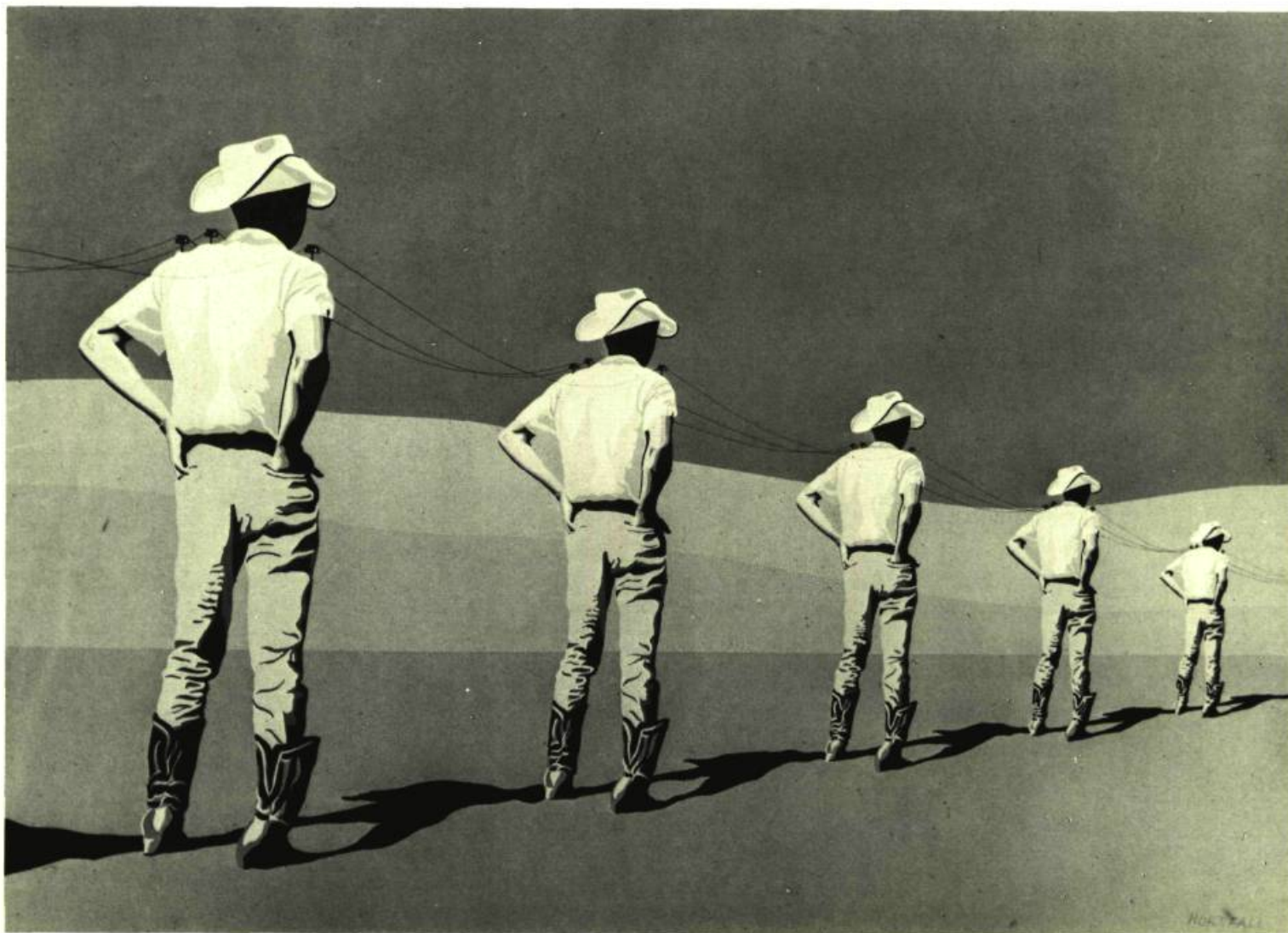


visuels, l'un des problèmes majeurs du surréalisme a toujours été son origine littéraire. A ma connaissance, comme la plupart des artistes de notre région qui manifestent une commune qualité surréelle dans leurs ouvrages, Horsfall est ce que j'appellerais un surréaliste inconscient. L'utilisation de la philosophie de Breton et de la plupart de ses autres définitions classiques fait d'Horsfall un surréaliste plus authentique que ceux qui, dans les années trente, consciemment s'appellent, ou se sont appelés, surréalistes. Ce qui est intéressant, c'est qu'Horsfall, quand je lui ai demandé s'il avait été influencé par la philosophie surréaliste, m'a répondu que non, parce qu'il n'est pas d'accord avec son côté morbide. Et pourtant, il constitue, je crois, un bon exemple du pragmatisme d'un Canadien anglophone qui mesure mal les aspects d'un surréalisme d'origine française. Plus je lui parlais de son travail et de ce qu'il signifie pour lui, et plus il me paraissait qu'Horsfall est un surréaliste classique.

Dieu sait quel grand rôle joue l'humour dans le surréalisme. Il n'est que de regarder la Jo-

2. *Lake Louise*, 1972.  
Acrylique; 122 cm. x 154.

3. *Alberta Telephone*, 1974.  
Acrylique; 81 cm. x 86.  
(Phot. Ernest Mayer)



conde moustachue de Duchamp, avec le chiffre vulgaire L.H.O.O.Q., son urinoir signé *Fontaine*, le dessin d'une tache d'encre, de 1920, de Picabia, intitulé *La Sainte Vierge* ou, enfin, les titres inconcevables de plusieurs peintures de Dali, telle *Construction molle avec Haricots bouillis* dite plus tard *Prémonition de la Guerre civile*, sans oublier l'humour du mentor d'Horsfall, Magritte. Dans le surréalisme, l'humour, dans l'ensemble, est hautement ironique, n'est pas limité aux arts visuels et assaisonne la prose, la poésie, la musique et tous les aspects de cette philosophie.

Examinons l'une des peintures d'Horsfall, *Alberta Telephone*. Oeuvre récente — elle date de 1974 —, le sujet lui en a été inspiré par une photographie d'un cow-boy solitaire prise d'en bas. La verticalité du personnage lui plut instantanément à cause du rapport avec l'horizontalité du paysage, et il imagina ce cow-boy à la place de poteaux de téléphone, comme cela se trouve dans la peinture. Quiconque, dans l'Ouest, a conduit sur de longues distances se remémorera l'interminable alignement de poteaux, le long de la route, comme le seul élément vertical sur l'horizon apparemment sans limite du paysage de la Prairie. Plus que pour les provinces voisines de la Saskatchewan et du Manitoba, le cow-boy est, pour l'Alberta, un symbole, un mythe, et, pour terminer sur un jeu de mots, Alberta Telephone est le nom de la compagnie provinciale de téléphone. Malgré les objections qu'un puriste pourrait présenter contre un symbolisme de cette sorte — et le symbolisme, en fait, est l'unique élément important de l'art surréaliste — ce symbole a autant de valeur que celui qu'on peut trouver dans l'art surréaliste parisien, et il contient certainement plus de signification pour ceux d'entre nous qui vivent dans l'Ouest canadien. Si l'un des objectifs du surréalisme est de rendre réel l'irréel, et ce l'est, alors l'art qui, au Canada, exploite la formule surréaliste s'exprimera plus facilement en utilisant son propre fonds de symboles. C'est là la raison profonde qui me fait croire qu'Horsfall est d'instinct un surréaliste.

Toutes les peintures récentes d'Horsfall ont un fond ironique. Assurément, beaucoup de surréalistes authentiques utilisent l'ironie mais, encore une fois, les Européens le pratiquent à leur façon et non selon la nôtre. Quoiqu'on puisse soutenir que certaines peintures abstraites, contemporaines ou modernes, débordent les frontières et constituent ce que Mlle Wilkin appelle du grand art — ce que moi je qualifierais, en général, d'art ennuyeux —, les symboles utilisés par l'homme ont plus de chance de lui être personnels, lui sont plus proches, et, si le cow-boy est sans doute un symbole pour un Français, il n'a pas pour lui la même signification que pour un Canadien de l'Ouest.

Autre trait particulièrement surréaliste, beaucoup de peintures d'Horsfall se rapportent à des expériences personnelles. Voici comment il explique son tableau *Jet* (1973), qui représente un avion 747 d'Air Canada voguant dans un beau ciel bleu, suspendu par un fil passé autour de la carlingue. L'artiste avait bien voyagé en avion au pays mais il n'avait jamais survolé l'Atlantique. Au cours de son unique voyage en Europe, il prit soudain conscience de l'effet cocasse produit par deux centaines de personnes volant à des milliers de pieds d'altitude, à des centaines de milles à l'heure, sans apparence d'aucun point d'appui. La seule explication possible pour Horsfall: un fil tenu par une main ou par un pouvoir inconnu, d'où le tableau.

*The Mountain* (1972), une des premières peintures surréalistes d'Horsfall, marque le commencement de ses pensées actuelles. Au cours de l'été, il suivit des cours de peinture avec Roy Kiyooka à l'École des Arts de Banff. Avant de quitter Winnipeg, il ramassa deux livres sur Magritte. La combinaison de ces livres et des montagnes devrait changer sa vision. Horsfall m'a dit que Kiyooka, peintre aussi bien que poète, ne lui avait rien enseigné en peinture mais qu'il lui avait appris quelque chose de plus important — d'être lui-même. Jusqu'alors il s'était efforcé de faire du grand art dans la manière hard-edge. Son professeur, ayant remarqué son sens inné de l'humour, lui recommanda fortement de l'utiliser dans sa peinture. *The Mountain* en est résultée. Je vous laisse le soin de juger si cette figuration d'une montagne couronnée de crème fouettée et d'une cerise n'est que l'innocente représentation d'une glace aux fruits ou celle, plus indécente, d'un sein de femme. Mais n'est-ce pas là la beauté de l'imagerie surréaliste? Il y a bien des manières et bien des niveaux de lecture dans la façon de la regarder.

Un autre résultat du voyage à Banff: les peintures d'un œuf et d'une montagne, tels *Lake Louise* (1972) et *Moraine Lake* (1973). Dans cette série d'œuvres de grandes coquilles d'œuf, hors d'échelle, brisées et vides, flottent avec une grâce surréelle dans des paysages de montagne qui alimentent les souvenirs des touristes. Ce sujet, comme beaucoup d'autres, lui est venu bien innocemment. Tous les matins, à l'École de Banff, des coquilles d'œuf vides jonchaient les tables du déjeuner. L'artiste nota la discordance produite par le lissé des coquilles et les rugueuses aspérités des Montagnes Rocheuses. Pour en mieux juger l'effet, il se procura des cartes postales — un moyen favori de l'artiste pour se documenter — représentant le lac Louise, la Mecque des touristes, et d'autres lieux connus et colla sur elles des photographies de coquilles d'œuf qu'il avait prises, obtenant ainsi des collages qui lui servirent ensuite de points de départ pour ses peintures. Toutefois, l'impression qu'elles produisent ne provient pas seulement de la simple juxtaposition de leurs composantes: les coquilles prennent l'apparence de mystérieux visiteurs de l'espace flottant d'un air menaçant au-dessus des lacs.

Horsfall admet volontiers sa dette envers ses prédécesseurs surréalistes mais il dit que «ce qu'il essaie vraiment de faire, c'est de mettre le surréalisme à jour, de l'amener aux particularités actuelles: le centre d'achat, la télévision, la société du plastique». Mais il ne faudrait pas confondre son travail avec celui des artistes pops qui glorifie le quotidien banal alors que, pour Horsfall, c'est le contraire. Il souhaite souligner le ridicule de la médiocrité fondamentale de notre société actuelle. Si la Prairie apporte quelque chose à ses artistes, c'est bien une clarté de vision qui prévient les complications. La vision d'Horsfall est honnête; elle nous permet de voir le Canada tel qu'il est. Il est vrai que pour ce faire, il utilise les moyens d'une école internationale, le surréalisme, mais teintés de provincialisme, de sorte que celui à qui ses symboles sont familiers comprendra plus aisément ses peintures que celui qui les ignore. Cela est vrai, d'ailleurs, dans tous les domaines des arts visuels. Cela ne signifie pas, cependant, que presque tout le monde peut prendre plaisir aux toiles d'Horsfall, tout comme un de mes étudiants, qui n'a jamais quitté Winnipeg, peut avoir quelque mal à pénétrer toutes les subtilités d'une toile de Magritte mais n'en aurait pas à saisir le sens de celles

d'Horsfall. Que, si le même étudiant doit comparer un tableau coloré de Lochhead avec une peinture de Noland, il n'hésitera pas à leur trouver une ressemblance grâce à certains standards internationaux. Remarque que, dans certaines parties du pays, les étudiants de la grande peinture américaine souffrent des mêmes déficiences que celui qui étudie le surréalisme, c'est-à-dire qu'il leur est impossible de se rapporter aux originaux. Tandis qu'Horsfall peint en se référant à Magritte sans avoir jamais vu une toile de ce maître, et l'œuvre qui en résulte diffère grandement des travaux de Magritte, tant sous le rapport du sujet que de la technique picturale. Dans la Prairie, beaucoup d'adeptes de la peinture américaine contemporaine travaillent d'après des reproductions de revues parce que la peinture américaine est proprement picturale (qualité de la matière, échelle, etc.) et que celle des surréalistes de la Prairie, dont le traitement est plastique, se rapporte aussi par le sujet à la forme (illusions, rêves, etc.).

Le travail actuel d'Horsfall fait suite, depuis 1972, à une période hard-edge, et l'artiste a conservé ce goût dans sa peinture surréaliste. La technique soignée qu'il utilise lui vient de Ken Lochhead, avec qui il a étudié à Emma Lake. Et ceci constitue une des différences intéressantes entre l'art d'Horsfall et celui de Magritte. Si Magritte reste dans la tradition flamande, Horsfall, de son côté, adopte les méthodes de la peinture contemporaine. Les surfaces colorées s'opposent bord à bord comme chez Molinari mais sont traitées en aplats, et la peinture dont il se sert est à l'acrylique plutôt qu'à l'huile. Naturellement, certaines de ces particularités proviennent d'un manque de familiarité avec les peintures originales de Magritte et, en fait, avec une grande partie de l'art européen de qualité. Il ne faudrait pas oublier que de tout temps les historiens, à leur grand bénéfice, ont mal interprété l'histoire. Il en est de même pour l'art si on pense, par exemple, à la conception que la Renaissance se faisait de l'Antiquité, Rembrandt, d'après des gravures, de la peinture italienne, l'amateur d'art, d'après des gravures au trait, des plus belles toiles de Turner. Et pourtant, en architecture et en sculpture, cette fausse interprétation a produit un Michel-Ange. Je ne veux pas donner à croire qu'Horsfall et d'autres, que j'appellerais des artistes surréalistes de l'Ouest canadien, soient comparables à un nouveau Michel-Ange, mais je soutiens que mal interpréter une philosophie ou un mouvement artistique ne conduit pas nécessairement au désastre et, dans bien des cas, peut devenir bénéfique. Je me rends bien compte que beaucoup de mes collègues de langue française ne seront pas d'accord parce que le surréalisme est devenu pour plusieurs d'entre eux vérité d'évangile. Mais les temps qui ont vu naître le Surréalisme ont changé. Il y a maintenant en nous tous un peu de surréalisme et cela, c'est l'héritage qui nous en reste.

1. Karen Wilkin est un des conservateurs du Musée d'Edmonton.
2. Je crois savoir qu'Ivan Eyre avait été prié d'exposer mais qu'il a décliné l'invitation.
3. Tony Allison, David Anderson, Noel Bebee, Arthur Horsfall, Ted Howorth, Mark Kenkyns, Wade Jones, Larry Kissick, John Mair, Luther Pokrant, William Putko, Stan Taniwa.
4. Maurice NADEAU, Histoire du Surréalisme, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1964, p. 59.

from doubt, from differences and from internal quarrels is, word for word, the fulfilment of the Marquis de Sade's will; but not the never-executed clauses of the real will, those clauses, on the contrary, of the fictitious testament of Sade to the surrealists, his legitimate heirs in the eyes of Jean Benoît: Live in the manner of Sade, live to the utmost and defy any other law than that of *desire!*

By doing this, Benoît also implicitly denounces as the cause of division among surrealists certain nationalist factors (adherence to political watchwords, for example, or even to structuring ideas, even if they were as little academic as the notion of *automatism*) as well as what, in his eyes, remains in Surrealism of attachment to traditional and repressive ethics. From this point of view, it is not without interest to recall that during the famous party of December 2, 1959, at Joyce Mansour's, where this possession actually took place, one of the guests, Matta, reacted spontaneously to Jean Benoît's message by taking from the latter's hand the red-hot iron with which he had just marked his left breast and branding himself with it. Matta, who had rightly been excluded from the surrealist group ten years before for deliberately conducting himself in a Sadian manner... In order to properly appreciate the effectiveness of the language of possession in Benoît, I must explain that, in another connection, there is really not the slightest affinity between the latter and the Chilean painter.

Six years later, minor in comparison to that which had called upon the intervention of the author of *120 journées de Sodome*, but still significant, the possession of Jean Benoît by Sergeant Bertrand, the famous necrophile of the 19th century, was completed by the simultaneous, or almost, production of the *Bouledogue de Maldoror*. This last monster, violator of girls already degraded by his master, became indeed the ideal companion for the necrophile. Did not both of them carry to the extreme the law of desire without restraint? I would, however, read in these same excesses a more secret clue: just as one must not fear violating the laws already flouted by Maldoror, that is, by Lautréamont (whose example thus came to take turns with Sade's, without annulling it), neither must one fear any longer to make love with the dead, that is to say, with the *Exquisite Corpse of Surrealism*; or, in other terms, with its disgraceful tradition, that, very exactly, is what everyone (or almost everyone) holds as incurably obsolete in Surrealism...<sup>1</sup>

In large measure the significance of Jean Benoît's possessions goes beyond his conscious intentions. But this is in the nature of things...

#### The Spectre of Mimi Parent

The point where Jean Benoît's artistic activity and Mimi Parent's blend is in an identical *reading*, it seems to me, of Alfred Pellán's work. Where I would be led to consider only ornamental paintings, they discern ritual paintings whose network introduces the human being and the cosmos in a same lyrical continuity. In such a way that, in comparison to them, I find myself in the same situation as an uninformed observer at some African, Amerindian or Oceanic ritual festival, who would appreciate of the body paintings only the single aesthetic and decorative merits, compared with the *initiated* who are thoroughly informed about the mythical implications of each of the ornamental elements used.

It is in this way, for example, that a very Pellanian drawing by Jean Benoît, published

in Number 10-11 of *Bief*, «Surrealist Junction», gives a vision of the human being and more particularly of woman, that I would call leafed through and similar, on the vegetable kingdom plan, to the well-known structure of an artichoke, or even an onion. Now, such a superposition of coverings irresistibly reminds us of defoliation, at first that of the artichoke or the onion, but just as much that of strip-tease artists, a process from which the *big ceremony* of the *Exécution du testament du marquis de Sade* is copied. The similar system set up by Pellán, notably between the vegetable kingdom and the human being, will in this way have permitted Jean Benoît to invite us to a voyage into the depths, at the end of which rises, in a desperate erection, the Man of Absolute Desire.

It seems to me that Mimi Parent retains more, and this is very natural, the Penelope side of the Pellanian industry (if I speak of industry it is because I am thinking suddenly of bees). In many of her paintings and drawings, everything is arranged according to the same rhythmic regularity as a rich spider's web whose centre is the Star of Venus, or the look of a fairy or a witch, or else the *solar anus*. But this spider's web appears woven of sufficiently sensitive fibres to enmesh in its toils, beyond ordinary appearances, the creatures of the least tangible and least perceptible dreams, those that would slip through the mesh of any other net.

There is, indeed, something of the trapper in Mimi Parent, but a trapper anxious to track strange beasts that wander about only at night, and further! not anywhere at all... Nothing sums her up better, doubtless, than Breton's famous aphorism: «In Mimi's thistle-like eyes shine the gardens of Armid at midnight». The object-painting that inspired the title for this article, *J'habite au choc* (1956), seems to me to answer much more exactly the definition of a *trap-picture* than the works of Daniel Spoerri, the inventor of this term. *J'habite au choc* presents to us, indeed, something intermediate between the haunted house and the bordello, so that the marvel remains deeply impregnated with carnal covetousness. Moreover, the fact that doors and windows can actually open to reveal to us what is going on behind them irresistibly evokes the *nine doors* that the gallant imagination of poets has always taken pleasure in enumerating in woman...

Trap-pictures, and also Mimi Parent's last object-paintings, like *Échec et mat*, a sort of funereal echo to Max Ernst's *Jardins gobe-avions* (facing this, it seems to me that I am looking at the Waterloo of phallocracy, the ground of cemeteries mockingly dug up by the latest erections of masters dispossessed of life) or, in an untitled work, this lovely young girl at her window toward whom mount the white rats of lust that a mysterious visitor sends her (if one looks carefully, one discovers that the very legs of the girl form the steps of the ladder giving access to her window). If I tell, at least in part, the base of my thought, I must confess that I consider most of Mimi Parent's recent works a sort of Jean Benoît's *stations of the Cross*. But I do not claim to be right...

#### Conclusion

I have been very careful not to examine these two works so-rebellious, as is known, to the critical approach as, more usually, to that of the general public. I wanted only to submit them to a partial and prejudiced illumination, as subjective as possible. If I was bent on doing it, it is because this seemed important to me, at a time when false values

are causing them to be discussed in the five minutes following their leaving the factory, to remember that the most delicious fruits ripen in the shade.

1. A more recent work seems to confirm this assumption. It concerns the object-chest made by Jean Benoît in 1974 to hold the original manuscript of *Champs magnétiques* (1919) by André Breton and Philippe Soupault, the first surrealist book, as we know. Under a death's head is revealed the head of a sage, wrinkled but smiling... as another little skeleton masturbates while bursting out in a laugh. Surrealism, from its birth, is a challenge thrown at death.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

## MAGRITTE REVISITED — OR HOW THE WEST WAS WON

By Virgil G. HAMMOCK

If you were to judge painting in the Prairies from the recent exhibition *The Canadian Canvas*, you might very well come away with the idea that the west was full of loyal 'Greenbergians' trying their damndest to paint 'Major' art, whatever that might be, and if you read Karen Wilkin's foreword to the Prairie section in the exhibition catalogue, the idea would be reinforced. It just isn't so. To be sure there is no shortage of artists in this part of Canada who paint in what might be called a New York-inspired lyrical colour method, especially those in the Edmonton area. All that aside, let me add that the artists Ms. Wilkin picked are very good, but plainly not representative of the region. It is what was left out of the Prairie section of *The Canadian Canvas* that concerns me. Many people, Ms. Wilkin included, seem anxious to prove that all us prairie folks aren't provincials (i.e., Hayseeds). I, on the other hand, believe that our provincialism is one of our strongest qualities. Certainly many of us keep up with the latest trends in Europe and the U.S.A. either through the literature or by trips to the world's art centres, but there are very few working artists in the Prairies that I know who are able to afford such luxuries and, heaven forbid, some are not even interested in what is going on in New York. I believe that it is patent nonsense to deny the importance, as is done in Ms. Wilkin's essay, of the prairie environment to our art, be it 'Major' or minor (minor is, in this case, I assume, all that is not in Ms. Wilkin's considered opinion 'Major'). I fail to understand any exhibition which reports to be about the state of painting in the Prairies that excludes the likes of Ivan Eyre<sup>2</sup>, Esther Warkov, Ernest Linder, Eli Bornstein, or John Hall, artists whose work run the gambit from Surrealism to Structuralism to Photo Realism, unless it is due to the fact that they fail to fit into the tight structure of High art that the Edmonton Art Gallery and Ms. Wilkin seem to favour.

A case in point is Arthur Horsfall — artist and subject of this article. For a lack of a better definition he might be called a Prairie Surrealist, but that is for me to prove. Arthur is a native of Winnipeg and, except for short

periods, has lived here all his life. He is, at present, the senior member (he was born in 1915) of a group of young artists, mainly residing in Winnipeg, who call themselves *Subway*<sup>3</sup>. These artists are all products of the School of Art at the University of Manitoba. Arthur attended the School much earlier, in the late Thirties and early Forties, when it was still called the Winnipeg School of Art, and studied under L.L. Fitzgerald, who was then its director. Many of the members of *Subway* (*Horsfall excluded*) are influenced either directly or indirectly by Ivan Eyre, who teaches at the School and has been a powerful catalyst in Winnipeg for a number of years and who, unlike other influential artists and artist teachers in the area, emphasizes subject matter. Where Arthur differs from his younger colleagues in the group is that while most of them approach their subject matter with an eye for the grotesque, he utilizes whimsy and humour, qualities almost totally lacking in their work. (Ivan Eyre, by the way, in his most recent work seems to be steering away from the Bacon-like quality that marked his earlier work and moving toward straight, and let me say very fine, landscape.) Perhaps it is Horsfall's maturity. He can afford the luxury of humour, while many young artists remain so preoccupied with their own seriousness that it sometimes borders on the pompous. I am reminded directly of Erik Satie who, in an earlier time and place (Paris from 1910 to 1925), as a mature man, played a major role in the original development of Surrealism through the use of humour in music. It remains a fact, however, that it is much more difficult to bring off a humorous work of art than a serious or even pseudo-serious one. Take Robert Motherwell's series *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, a dull group of paintings if there ever was one compared to a witty work of Robert Rauschenberg such as *Monogram*. On one hand we are supposed to take Motherwell's dull paintings seriously because of their thematic title while, on the other hand, Rauschenberg presents us with a stuffed goat with a tire around its middle, standing on what appears to be an abstract-expressionist painting, which he calls *Monogram*. What is one to think? One place where I don't have any real problems is understanding that Rauschenberg is the better artist; it is only that he picked a more difficult way of making art-humour.

Arthur Horsfall, like most Canadian artists of his generation, (and for that matter before) chose a career in commercial art upon completion of art school. The opportunities for a 'fine' artist to make a go of it in this country were few indeed and this was especially true in a city like Winnipeg in the late Thirties and early Forties. Paris was the city of Surrealism in the period between the wars and Winnipeg was certainly no Paris. There was in this city literally no place for budding artists to see art. There was the Winnipeg Art Gallery, but it was pretty much a one-man operation and nothing like it is to-day. There were no commercial galleries, with the exception of one or two that imported bad British paintings. When one remembers that it was not until *The Painters Eleven* in the Fifties that artists in Canada could really think of making a living as full-time artists, it is not surprising that Arthur remained a commercial artist for thirty years before striking out on his own. It was not until the early Sixties that he decided that enough was enough and became a full-time artist. Mind you, during those thirty long years he had painted, mainly on week-ends and other times

he could afford, either by himself or with such groups as the *Winnipeg Sketch Club*. Even FirtzGerald, during his long career as principal of the Winnipeg School of Art, was reduced to a week-end painter because of the heavy load of duties at the school. It was only after Fitzgerald's retirement that he was able to devote his full time to being an artist. The Depression was particularly hard on Canadian art. By contrast it was really the beginning of greatness in American art. It was the efforts there of the W.P.A. (Work Projects Administration, 1935-43, something like a proto-Canada Council, only on a larger scale) that allowed the cultural life in the U.S. to flourish while ours floundered. Indeed, had it not been for the W.P.A., I doubt if there would have been the Abstract Expressionist Movement in America when it happened, but that is for another article. Needless to say with odds like these, we are lucky to have any Canadian artists at all from this period. (For information on art from this period see the catalogue of Charles Hill's exhibition for the National Gallery — *Canadian Painting in the Thirties*).

How then, you ask, was an artist like Horsfall so influenced by René Magritte? The answer is simple — books. In fact, Arthur has never seen an actual Magritte painting. He has really never travelled much outside Winnipeg, except for part of his childhood spent in the United States and England and one trip, a few years back, with a group formed by the Winnipeg Art Gallery to Italy. I wouldn't want to give anyone, however, the impression that Arthur is some sort of rustic. He is, in fact, well read on the subject of Surrealism, particularly Magritte, but he approaches Surrealism from his own point of view — that of a western Canadian. Magritte's Brussels is not Horsfall's Winnipeg. It is the Belgian's humour that appeals to Arthur rather than any dark vision that might be associated with Magritte's art. I believe that Surrealism is as natural to the Prairies as it is to Paris, only it is to a different set of circumstances. It is not the bistro, but our broad open spaces that affect the mentality of our Surrealist artists. The results can be very similar. There is a Surrealist vision of sorts in the work of Horsfall's better-known Winnipeg colleagues, Ivan Eyre and Esther Warbov. One would have to say that they deal in the imagery in a more classical way, that is, that the sinister overtones of Surrealism are more apparent in their work than in Arthur's. I should make it clear that Surrealism to me is more of a state of mind than a formal French philosophy and I am quite aware of André Breton's classic definition of Surrealism from 1924:

"SURREALISM. n. masc. Pure psychic automatism, by which an attempt is made to express, either verbally, in writing or in any other manner, the true functioning of thought. The dictation of thought, in the absence of all control by the reason, excluding any esthetic or moral preoccupation."<sup>4</sup> The Marxist politics of the French originators of Surrealism tend to be overlooked by the visual practitioners of the philosophy in Canada to-day; at least that is the case in English-speaking Canada. One of Surrealism's major problems as a visual art form has always been its literary base. Horsfall, like most of the visual artists that I am aware of in this part of Canada who share a common Surreal-like quality in their work, is what I would call an unconscious Surrealist. Using Breton's and most other classic definitions of the philosophy makes him even more of a Surrealist than those who consciously call, or called, themselves Surrealists in the Thirties. What was interesting was that when I asked

Arthur if he was influenced by the philosophy of Surrealism he said no because he disagreed with the morbid side of the philosophy. Here, however, I think we have a case of the pragmatic thinking of an English-speaking Canadian misjudging the emotional aspects of the French-based Surrealism. The more I talked to him about his work and what it meant to him, the more he sounded like a classic Surrealist.

Lord knows humour is very much a part of Surrealism. One need only look at Duchamp's mustachioed *Mona Lisa*, with its vulgar coded caption "L.H.O.O.Q." or his signed urinal *Fountain*, or Picabia's ink blot drawing of 1920 entitled *The Holy Virgin*, or the incredible titles of many Dali paintings such as *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans; Premonitions of Civil War*, not to mention the humour in much of the work of Horsfall's mentor, Magritte. The humour in Surrealism is, in the main, highly ironic and is not limited to the visual arts, but is a mainstay in the prose, poetry, music and all aspects of the philosophy.

Let us examine one of Horsfall's paintings, *Alberta Telephone*. This is a recent work, 1974, and the image relates to a photograph that caught his eye of a lone cowboy shot from a low angle. He immediately liked the verticalness of the image in relation to the horizontalness of the landscape and, in his mind's eye, saw the figure repeated forming, as they do here, replacements for telephone poles. Anyone who has driven long miles of highways out west would recognize the image of the repeated telephone poles along the road as the only vertical break in the seemingly endless horizontal landscape of the Prairies. The cowboy is a symbol, and a myth, more of Alberta than either of its Prairie neighbours, Saskatchewan or Manitoba, and, as a final pun, *Alberta Telephone* is also the name of the provincial telephone company. Now, while a purist might object to symbolism such as this, and symbolism is the single most important element in Surrealist art, it is just as valid as any found in Parisian Surrealist art and certainly more to the point of those of us living in Western Canada. If one of the points of Surrealism is to make the unreal real, and it is, then art dealing with Surrealism in Canada will be more comfortable when it deals in its own set of symbols. This is basic to why I believe Horsfall to be an unconscious Surrealist.

All of Arthur's recent paintings deal with irony, certainly a quality of many of the classic Surrealists, but, once again, the Europeans deal with the philosophy in their terms and not ours. While it can be argued that certain contemporary or modernist abstract paintings transcend national borders producing what Ms. Wilkin calls 'Major', and what I would generally describe as 'boring', art, man's symbols are likely to be more personal, closer to home, and while a cowboy is certainly a symbol to a Frenchman its meaning to a Western Canadian would be much different. The cowboy is a mythical image in the minds of nearly everyone in the world, with the possible exception of one or two remote tribes in New Guinea, but they would have to be damned remote to escape the romantic vision that cowboy presents to those outside North America, and many inside North America, of the 'West'. I am afraid that the archetype of this image that most non-North Americans have is about as true as that of many English Canadians of the typical Frenchman as an 'Apache' dancer or a smooth-talking great lover with a goatee. It is the ironic image that Horsfall portrays and not the European stereotype of the cowboy as hero. Magritte, on the other hand, uses over and

over again his European stereotype, a bowler-hatted bourgeois businessman, a foreign image, especially in all its subtle implications, to most western Canadians. Indeed, in order to make this stereotype even more strongly felt in his own work Magritte often dressed like the stuffy businessmen he portrayed. In fact, he acted more like Hermann Hesse's hero Steppenwolf, from the novel of the same name, than your bohemian stereotype of the artist. While Horsfall doesn't dress up like a cowboy, and I can think of several North American artists who do, he is the product of a strong Prairie environment.

Many of Horsfall's pictures relate to personal experiences, another strong Surrealist trait. He explains his painting *Jet* (1973), a work portraying an Air Canada 747 in a clear blue sky held in the air by a string around its middle, this way: although he had flown in Canada he had never flown over an ocean before. It occurred to him somewhere over the mid-Atlantic during that single trip to Europe how ludicrous the whole idea was of a couple hundred people flying thousands of feet above surfaces of the earth at hundreds of miles per hour with no visible means of support. The simplest answer seemed, to Arthur, a string held by some unknown hand, or power, and hence the picture.

*The Mountain* (1972) is one of Arthur's earliest Surrealist paintings and marks the beginning of his current thinking. During the summer of 1972 Arthur attended the Banff School of Fine Arts to study painting with Roy Kiyooka. Just before leaving Winnipeg Horsfall picked up two books on Magritte. It was the combination of this and the mountains that was to change his vision. He told me Kiyooka, a poet as well as a painter, didn't teach him more about painting, but something much more important — to be himself. Up until this time Arthur had been trying to paint High (i.e., Major!) Art in a Hard-Edge manner. Kiyooka recognized Arthur's natural sense of humour and strongly suggested that this is what should be in his painting. *The Mountain* was the result. I leave it to you whether you see in this image of a mountain topped with whipped cream and a cherry the innocent vision of an ice-cream sundae or the more licentious one of a woman's breast. However, isn't this the beauty of the Surrealist image? There are many ways, and many levels, of looking at them.

Another product of the Banff trip is his egg and mountain pictures such as *Lake Louise* (1972) and *Moraine Lake* (1973). In this series of paintings large, out of scale, broken empty egg shells float tranquilly over tourist mountain vistas in a Surreal-like grace. This image, like many others of the artist, came about innocently enough. Each morning at the Banff School the breakfast tables were littered with empty egg shells. Horsfall thought how incongruous their smooth shape was against the rough texture of the Rocky Mountains. To study the effect he bought picture postcards, a favourite source for the artist, of tourist meccas like Lake Louise and pasted photographs he had taken of the egg shells on them and used these collages as the basis for later paintings. What transpires in the paintings, however, is more than this simple combination of elements. The egg shells take on the quality of some vaguely mysterious visitors from outer space hovering menacingly over the mountain lakes.

Arthur freely admits his debt to his Surrealist predecessors, but says, "What I'm really trying to do is bring it (Surrealism) up to date. Trying to bring it up to the now; the shopping centre, the television set, the plastic society."

One shouldn't confuse Horsfall's work with that of the 'Pop' artists who celebrate the banal in our life, but rather the contrary. He wants to point out the irony in what is essentially the mediocrity of our present day society. If the Prairies provide their artists with anything it is a clarity of vision unclouded by quasi-sophistication. Horsfall's vision is an honest vision. It allows us to see Canada through his eyes. It is true that he uses an international school, that of Surrealism, to tell his story, but it is modified by his provincialism and his paintings will mean much more to someone familiar with his symbolism than to one who is not. This is true, of course, in any area of the visual arts. It doesn't mean that nearly anyone can't delight in one of Arthur's pictures, however, just as one of my students, who has never left Winnipeg, may have trouble in really understanding the subtle elements in a Magritte picture; they would have very little trouble in understanding Horsfall. Now the same student when faced with comparing a colour painting by Lochhead with one by Noland would not hesitate to find them comparable by some set of international standards. Mind you, in some parts of Canada the students of 'Major' American painting suffer under much the same set of privations as the student of Surrealism does. Namely a lack of reference to the original. While Horsfall paints with reference to Magritte without ever seeing a painting by the master they end up quite different both in subject and technique. Many followers of contemporary American painting in the Prairies do so only from magazine reproductions. Their weakness is more apparent as American colour painting is about painting (surface quality, scale, etc.) than the Prairie Surrealists as Surrealist painting is about something — it is subject-oriented (illusions, dreams, and so on).

Horsfall's current work comes out of the Hard-Edge painting that he did before 1972 and he carries these sympathies into his Surrealist painting. The painstaking technique he employs is credited to Ken Lochhead, with whom he studied at Emma Lake. This, of course, is one of the very interesting differences between Horsfall and Magritte. Magritte works directly in the tradition of his Flemish predecessors such as van Eyck, van der Weyden or van der Goes, with meticulous oil technique, attention to detail, and a generally moderate scale, while Horsfall, on the other hand, works in the new tradition of contemporary painting. He is interested in the edge. Colour areas meet edge to edge, as in a painting by Molinari, the surface is flat, and he uses acrylic rather than oil. Naturally enough some of this comes from Arthur's unfamiliarity with Magritte's original paintings, or much other first-rate European art for that matter. One should remember, however, that many ideas of the Renaissance, both North and South, came about through misunderstandings on both sides, but that did not stop quality art from being produced in either area. Rembrandt's ideas on much of what was going on, and had gone on, in Italy were from engravings of Italian paintings that entirely missed the point of some of the more painterly Italian masters. I am reminded of a set of line engravings owned by the University of Manitoba of William Turner's most famous paintings. I would hate to try and understand what the originals looked like from these small prints! Time and time again history is misread to history's benefit. The very art of the Renaissance was based on the ruins of a civilization and was horribly misinterpreted at the time. The whiteness and purity of the temples and sculpture that was copied by the fifteenth century

artist really never existed *except* in their minds yet, God help us, it gave us Michelangelo. I am not suggesting that Horsfall, and others that I would call western Canadian Surrealist artists are the equal of a new Michelangelo, but what I am arguing for is that a misreading of a philosophy or movement is not necessarily a disaster and in many cases it can be a blessing. I realize that many of my French-speaking colleagues would disagree, but to many of them Surrealism has taken on the character of a Holy Writ. The times that spawned Surrealism have changed. There is a little of the Surrealist in us all now and that is the heritage of Surrealism.

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## CANADIAN WEST COAST HERMETICS

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By Bradford R. COLLINS

"Everything leads us to believe that there is a certain state of mind from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, height and depth are no longer perceived as contradictory."<sup>1</sup>

André Breton's remarks from the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929) recently found an echo in a statement made by Jack Wise in the catalogue for Canadian West Coast Hermetics:

"In the main, my work is neither important nor unimportant — it is neither deep expression nor shallow fashion. It is not meant to be instructive, nor is it meant to be entertaining. It is both obsolete and reactionary, hence it has little value in the ordinary affairs of men. I desire my work to be hidden, yet constantly present it to the public."<sup>2</sup>

Equally reminiscent of Surrealism are a large number of collages by the various participants in the show. Unlike the original collagists, the Cubists, whose concerns were formal, the artists who displayed in this show were interested in the marriage of seemingly incongruous thematic elements, a characteristic of surrealist collagists and painters alike. A huge Indian sculpture rising from an ordinary lake in *Pleasure Dome of Kubla Khan* (1971) by David uu (pronounced "w") recalls countless similar juxtapositions in works by the surrealists. In the images and in the writings which accompanied them there was a persistent suggestion that what we were presented with in the show was a late flowering of Surrealism. Other works and statements, however, seemed incompatible with the aims of that movement and the spectator was left with the suspicion that the surrealist quality of the show was often merely apparent.

The artist whose works most suggested direct ties with Surrealism was Gary Lee Nova. The use of images from late nineteenth-century popular prints and the presentation of those images in their original harsh linear style, as in *Immense Stone at Baalbec* (1967), was admittedly intended as a tribute to Max Ernst and his collage books like *La Femme 100 Têtes* (1929) and *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934). Lee Nova pays homage in such works as the above to Ernst and his imaginative accomplishment,