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Abstract

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Keywords

continuum:, sharp, martin, modernism, psychedelic, confrontational, art

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ABSTRACT: The Australian artist Martin Sharp (1942-2013) produced a series of psychedelic artworks in London between 1966-8, the most famous of which were the *Disraeli Gears* record cover for rock group Cream and the Bob Dylan *Blowin' in the Mind* poster. Sharp's work exemplifies the connection between early twentieth century Modernist art movements, Pop art and acid-induced psychedelia of the 1960s. In addition, the poster *Max Ernst: The Birdman* from 1967, represents a *homage* to Dada and Surrealism, with special reference to anarchy, desire, and freedom of expression. In the spirit of Dada, the poster is meaningfully confrontational, exposing the darker side of the 1960s countercultural revolution in Western societies. This aspect of the youth movements of the 1960s is part of a continuum, drawing upon ideas and activities championed during the late 1910s and early 1920s by proponents of Dada and Surrealism. These resurfaced within the multifaceted counterculture of the 1960s, spurred on by Cold War tensions, rejection of 1950s conservative mores, opposition to nuclear proliferation, the conflict in Vietnam, an explosion in popular music, and the widespread use of psychedelic drugs such as LSD. Sharp's art is part of this confrontational continuum.

Keywords: Martin Sharp, psychedelia, posters, Modernism, Dada, Surrealism, counterculture, *OZ* magazine

Martin Sharp, *Disraeli Gears*, Reaction Records, London, May 1967. Copyright: Estate of Martin Sharp.

Dada must have something to do with Pop ... the names are really synonyms.

- Andy Warhol, 1963¹

Want to know what the 60s were like? Then look at Martin Sharp's work. ... Everybody who can remember anything about the 60s can remember Martin's poster of Dylan as Mr Tambourine Man, printed in red and black on gold paper.'

- Germaine Greer, 2009²

Introduction – Mind blowing art

This essay places the artwork of Australian artist Martin Sharp (1942-2013) within a broad historic and aesthetic continuum linking 1960s-era psychedelia with important forms of Modernism, principally Dada and Surrealism. It argues that in the specific case of Sharp, but also more broadly, the anarchic, confrontational, provocative and dream-vision elements defining those early twentieth-century Modernist art movements were influential in the graphic design, pictorial content, and materials used by pop culture artists of the 1960s. This lineage is evident in arguably the signature works of the era's psychedelic art — the concert posters and records covers, which appeared during the second half of the decade.

Sharp was responsible for some of the most iconic of these. Notable amongst his contemporaries were the San Francisco-based group producing Fillmore and Avalon Ballroom posters between 1966-70, including Wes Wilson, Alton Kelly, Bonnie MacLean, Lee Conklin, Victor Moscoso, Rick Griffin and Stanley Mouse. Also active was the Dutch collective lead by Marijke Koger and known as The Fool, which in 1967-8 worked with the Beatles; and, from that same period, London-based artists and graphic designers Michael English, Nigel Waymouth, Michael McInnerney, David Vaughan and Jon Goodchild.³ Many of the London group collaborated with Sharp on the countercultural magazine *OZ*.

Alongside this explosion of art, so-called “head shops” sprang up in the United States, the UK, and beyond to sell drug paraphernalia, psychedelic accoutrements, clothing, posters and a broad range of underground press publications. Their stock was often decidedly international due to the work of the Underground Press Syndicate and Liberation News Service, which made material available to a global network of alternative publications, as well as the global circulation of record albums and other rock imagery.⁴ As a result, there was ample opportunity for the cross-pollination of influences by artists and graphic designers

working in a similar milieu. Martin Sharp's first published standalone British poster, for example, was *Legalise Cannabis: the putting together of the heads*. Though made for posting around London to announce an event in Hyde Park on 16 July 1967, it was instead illegally shipped to the United States for resale in head shops or through mail order.⁵ Subsequent to this, the Australian Sharp worked on a series of celebrated psychedelic artworks from his base in London, where he lived from July 1966 to the end of 1968. The most famous were the LP covers for rock group Cream's *Disraeli Gears* (November 1967) and *Wheels of Fire* (August 1968), as well as the Bob Dylan *Blowin' in the Mind* poster (1967).⁶

The *Disraeli Gears* cover exemplifies Sharp's method at the time, which in turn reflected the sensibility of much contemporary psychedelic art. It comprises a collage of images by Sharp's Australian friend and Beatles photographer Robert Whitaker, obscure cuttings from art history texts, and original drawing and overpainting. In the completed work, Sharp has surrounded the three Mount Rushmore-like headshots of the band members — Ginger Baker, Jack Bruce and Eric Clapton — with his typically psychedelic motifs of bubbles, swirling lines, lighting bolts and flowers. A Giorgio de Chirico boulevard of ancient columns with peacocks is buried within the lower central part of the work, flanked by surreal artefacts such as a broken stopwatch and bicycle wheel, horses galloping, a brass tap, a cabinet of daffodils and opposing feathered wings, and floral elements from a 1523 Albrecht Durer engraving. The album cover successfully combines the brightly coloured world of the hallucinogenic drug experience with that of the band's like-minded, powerful live performances. The rear cover is primarily a photomontage, once again featuring the band members, various heads, an all-seeing eye, and brightly coloured floral motifs drawn in the broad style of Middle Eastern art.

The *Blowin' in the Mind* poster first appeared in August 1967. Its title combines the slang term for a psychedelic experience — 'Blowing your mind' — with the title of Dylan's

song “Blowing in the Wind.” The poster featured a photographic head shot from a 1965 New York concert amidst a mass of perfectly formed circles reflecting an acid-induced hallucinogenic trip. Printed in black and red on gold foil on card, the image portrayed, according to Sharp, “another dimension of reality” accessed through the drug trip.⁷ Interspersed are words from Dylan’s songs, with the title “Mister Tambourine Man,” a Sharp favourite, most prominent. A Buddhist-like mandala sits above Dylan’s head, based on a Leonardo da Vinci drawing, while Aubrey Beardsley swirls and intersecting lines appear in the background. An ancient sun symbol sits at the extreme top left.

Martin Sharp, *Blowin' in the Mind*, Big O Posters, London, July 1967. Copyright: Estate of Martin Sharp.

Sharp produced a distinct group of psychedelic posters in a relatively brief period between the middle of 1967 and the end of the following year. They featured at once pop icons of the day like Dylan, Donovan, and Jimi Hendrix, nods to major artists like Vincent van Gogh and Michelangelo, and highly experimental, mixed-media graphic techniques aligned with the aesthetic vision of psychedelia.⁸ The posters were also filled with art historical references, as was common with Sharp, though never present as antiquated curios or as pretension.

Martin Sharp, *Jimi Hendrix*, offset lithograph, Sydney, [1968] 2002. Copyright: Estate of Martin Sharp.

Sharp's 1968 *Jimi Hendrix Explosion* poster is a final, initial example of his eclecticism and daring. Its central image is drawn from a contemporary live concert photograph of Hendrix by Linda Eastman.⁹ In the application of paint to the mylar surface of the original 1968 painting, Sharp referenced American post-war splatter artist Jackson Pollock. Yet the work remains uniquely his in its psychedelia and contemporary sensibility. The artist had both dined with Hendrix and seen him in performance on numerous occasions during his initial breakthrough period in London between September 1966 and July 1967. The explosive intensity of Hendrix's guitar playing, and the psychedelic experience often associated with his live performances, is mirrored in the finished artwork.

Themes of music and spirituality permeate the Sharp poster series and again reflect the changing times. These works — with their bright colours, collage-based Pop art stylings, liquefied psychedelic imagery, and contemporary pop culture focus — encapsulate aspects of the prevailing zeitgeist.¹⁰ A Sydney newspaper predicted in 1967 that "Sharp's posters will avoid the great flaw to this current, swirling, psychedelic op-pop-art nouveau trend – that what shocks today will fail to attract attention tomorrow."¹¹ Attesting to both the timeliness and durability of Sharp's work, a 2016 retrospective of 1960s art at New York's Museum of Modern Art, noted that *Blowin' in the Mind* "evokes the psychedelic fusion of music, colour, mind-expanding drugs and youth culture that peaked in 1967."¹² Assisting in the reassessment of Sharp's oeuvre, two recent biographies have provided much needed context to an artist who was not easily understood or categorised during his lifetime.¹³ Joyce Morgan's journalistic approach presents a lively, chronological outline, interspersed with personal anecdotes from friends and colleagues. Lowell Tarling's intimate biography is based on interviews conducted with the artist over an extensive period from the 1980s through to his death in 2013. The work reads almost as autobiography, interspersed as it is with frequent

quotes by Sharp. Both publications, however, lack in-depth analysis of his art. This essay aims to address that, through consideration of the pictorial content, discovery of art historical context, and reference to issues Sharp sought to address during his years in London. This is done primarily through looking at selected works and identifying specific elements and themes which the artist combined to produce something new and unique. The ‘looking’ is revelatory, for, whilst decidedly of their time, Sharp’s output exhibits a debt to early twentieth century Modernist art movements, and to specific artists such as Max Ernst. Such an assessment has not, to date, been discussed in any detail, though Stanley Krippner, in reassessing his late 1960s interviews with artists and writers who used psychedelics, concluded in 2017 that ‘psychedelic art ... is indebted to the modern movements of abstraction and surrealism.’ Krippner did not provide any specific examples to support this.¹⁴ Subsequent studies revealed the existence, over an extended period of time, of art which evidenced expanded consciousness and, specifically since the late nineteenth century, was related to the use of hallucinogenic drugs.¹⁵

Relevant published surveys of 1960s art invariably include Sharp as one of the leading exponents of psychedelia, though publications which place psychedelic and pop culture artwork in an art historical context are rare. Ted Owen’s *High Art: A History of the Psychedelic Poster* and Christopher Grunenberg’s exhibition catalogue *Summer of Love: Art of the Psychedelic Era* are two exceptions.¹⁶ Broader histories of 1960s art usually focus on Pop and Abstract Expressionism, highlighting luminaries such as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and Jackson Pollock.¹⁷ Individual works are often presented as examples of “low art” in contrast to the so-called classical “high art” tradition of galleries and museums. Sharp largely steered clear of these institutions during his lifetime and, in turn, was ignored by them and the art establishment in general.¹⁸ The reason for this exclusion is that Sharp’s art, like that of many of his colleagues, was populist, democratic, ephemeral, anti-establishment, and

at least quasi-commercial. Posters, record covers, magazine and newspaper illustrations, shop fronts, clothing, movie and theatre set design and the like were not, at that time, generally considered appropriate for gallery exhibition and institutional purchase, yet Sharp worked in all these areas. Recently this critical avoidance has been addressed, with psychedelic art receiving credible treatment from art historians and other shapers of artistic canons. Through an understanding of the extent of Sharp's art historical knowledge, and identifying specific links to Modernism in his work, this essay reveals a collection of psychedelic artworks which were more than simply the expression of hallucinogenic experiences, but which sought to celebrate the past whilst embracing the present.

Sharp psychedelia: Modernism meets the Sixties

The emergence of Pop art within Britain, Europe and America in the late 1950s and early 1960s, with its emphasis on vivid colors, the use of collage, and incorporation of everyday commodities and events, laid the foundation for an outpouring of artistic innovation later in the decade. This was most evident in rock concert posters, which were saturated with Pop, Art Nouveau, Jugendstil, Dada and Surrealist influences. Martin Sharp's psychedelic vision saw expression through his work as graphics editor for the Australian and English editions of *OZ* between 1963-8.¹⁹ In that role, he produced a series of images and cartoons which both reflected the times and very particularly drew inspiration from the form and content of Dada and Surrealist art of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, Sharp was an avid student of art history, consciously mixing surrealistic aesthetics with contemporary Pop to produce a distinct version of 1960s psychedelia.

Born in Sydney, Australia, on 21 January 1942, Martin Sharp was primarily influenced in his youth and at art school by European and Modernist art movements. As a

result, he exhibited closer ties to the English and Continental expression of psychedelia rather than the American, though the movement was very much an international one, with LSD experiences a common link. Sharp's London residency coincided with the northern hemisphere - and primarily American - Summer of Love. This was highlighted by events such as the January 1967 Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, the Monterey Pop Festival in Los Angeles the following June, and the Legalise Cannabis rally in Hyde Park, London, on 16 July. In England, the decade was more generally referred to as the 'Swinging Sixties' and defined in many ways by the evolutionary path of the Beatles, as opposed to single events.²⁰ However, the widespread introduction of LSD after 1965 was to have an impact on both sides of the Atlantic.

The surreal and colourful works included in Sharp's first one-man show held in Sydney during December 1965, just prior to his leaving for London, included the oil painting *Seven Minutes to Four* (1965), which was created prior to his discovery and use of such drugs, and at a time when the word 'psychedelic' was largely unknown in Australia.²¹ The painting is nothing less than a precursor to the surreal collage artwork and animations of Terry Gilliam which became so much a part of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* from 1969.²² Its dazzling colour, crazed intensity, use of disembodied heads, eyes and hand, and background of interspersed lines of colour and dots made it an obvious Pop art piece, which referenced those early Modernists whilst also foreshadowing psychedelia. By the beginning of 1967 Sharp was ready to make use of a decade of study and practice to develop a new, psychedelic version of what had come before.

Sharp experienced his first acid trip during a Pink Floyd concert at the UFO Club, London, in December 1966. As a result, the transformation of his art from simple black and white line drawings and surrealistic collage into an intense form of psychedelia during 1967 was set in train. The impact of the drug on his work was noticeable, adhering to many of the

traits identified by fellow artists in studies such as those undertaken during the 1960s by researchers Masters and Huston.²³ They defined a psychedelic artist as “one whose work has been significantly influenced by the psychedelic experience and who acknowledges the impact of the experience in his [or her] work.” Whilst additional studies found that psychedelics could vary from having a minimal to profound effect on one’s art, Sharp was in the latter category during the period 1967-8. He noted, like others, that he could not work when he was stoned on marijuana. But LSD, he confessed, expanded his approach from “local scenarios to cosmic mythologies”, revealed “a greater ability to use colour”, enhanced his productivity, improved his ability to concentrate, “provided access to unconscious material” and had long term effects beyond the immediate period of the trip. It also allowed him to accept “illogical, irrational and non-linear” experiences; this in turn assisted his natural proclivity to juxtapose imagery, steered him towards the revelation of beauty through art, and expanded the complexity of his non-visual, textual output.²⁴ This latter element can be seen in the words accompanying many of his *OZ* magazine graphics, and his lyrics for Cream’s “Tales of Brave Ulysses.” (Sharp and Cream guitarist Eric Clapton were friends and occasional collaborators.) Whilst not overtly referring to drug taking, the song can be classed as psychedelic due to its inventive structure, sonic texture, and lyrics blending mythology with uncanny, phantasmagoric imagery.

It is often quoted in regard to hallucinogenic experiences, that they open “the doors of perception”, and such seems the case with Martin Sharp.²⁵ His initial experience with LSD was followed by a frenetic 18 month period during which his productivity and creativity was heightened, and artistic influences in the form of Modernist precursors came to the fore. An early interest in Vincent Van Gogh and German Expressionism had brought to Sharp’s attention the poster work of French artists such as Jules Chéret and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec from the latter part of the nineteenth century. In fact, his first Australian poster

featured a cartoon of the diminutive Frenchman.²⁶ German and Russian graphic design and technique through to the 1920s also figured in Sharp's work, including the Russian constructivist use of collage as exemplified in movie posters.²⁷ Sharp gained experience during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a cartoonist and graphic designer for publications such as the University of Sydney student newspaper *Honi Soit*, University of New South Wales's *Tharunka*, media newspapers and magazines including the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, the *Bulletin* and *OZ* (Australia). His work also appeared in books such as Craig McGregor's *People, Politics and Pop – Australia in the Sixties* and Peter Draffin's *Pop – a novelty*.²⁸

As an individual Sharp was colourful, carefree, libertarian, critical and above all modern. His debt to the past was revealed in motifs oft repeated through painting, drawing, collage, photomontage and print. He noted in a 1979 interview that he made use of this art historical background to create within his work “a fairly elaborate sort of maze,” thereby providing an ongoing challenge for those seeking a deeper understanding of it.²⁹ Sharp's art was on the surface lyrical, joyful, topical, witty, accessible, full of colour, intense in its detail, and ambiguous. It was also noted of his London-period works that they were “electric, eclectic, acid, cynical and mystic [and] have a staggering intensity put over in an almost insultingly casual style.”³⁰

According to fellow Australian painter and art critic Elwyn Lynn, Sharp was adept in the production of parodies and the plundering of past styles, whilst steering clear of abstraction.³¹ He was a quiet, introverted individual who nevertheless sought engagement with a host of friends and colleagues. Coming from a relatively wealthy Sydney family and attuned to the changing times, he was fortunate enough to be able to embrace life with vigour, unencumbered by the need to earn a living. His art was often visually explosive, confrontational and in direct opposition to the strident conservatism of the era. It was, by its

very nature, modern, though allocating it to specific categories such as Pop, Op or even the arcane Surreal is not easily done. Sharp was reverential towards *fin de siècle* artists and the later proponents of Dada and Surrealism, including Giorgio de Chirico, Hannah Höch, Max Ernst, Jean Miro and Marcel Duchamp. This reverence was not constrained, for he revealed a willingness to apply wit and humour to their work in the form of juxtaposed collages derived from the plundering of artist books.³²

To parody and lampoon was the norm for this young Australian during the 1960s, building on the irreverent buffoonery of British radio show *The Goons* (1951-1960) and an exciting new group of Oxbridge comedians, beginning with the stage show *Beyond the Fringe* (1960-4) and culminating in the television program *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-74).³³ Alongside this was the English satirical publication *Private Eye*, first published in 1961 and the model for the early issues of the Australian edition of *OZ*, which appeared two years later. The appropriation of imagery, contemporary or historic, was a feature of this period of history, as artists, graphic designers and performers sought to shock, entertain and be noticed.

Surrealadelic: exposing the *Birdman*

Martin Sharp's biting wit and sardonic humour was expressed through his art, reflecting a special affinity with key elements of Dada and Surrealism. This included a tendency towards the absurd, the use of ridicule and satire, the uninhibited expression of desire and sensuality, and an affinity for revolution — not necessarily manifest as street activism but rather a revolt against those revolting aspects of contemporary society and culture, including war, censorship and prudery. All were evident in Sharp's art direction of the Sydney and London editions of counterculture magazine *OZ* between 1963-73.³⁴ Therein he and various co-

editors pushed the artistic, literary and moral boundaries set by a generally conservative post-war society in Australia and England, amid restrictive censorship regimes. They did not specifically model their behaviour on that of the post-World War I followers of Dada and Surrealism, but their rebellious attitude towards life and art, and its expression through print and graphics within the underground press movement, was along similar lines.

A good example is the shocking cover of *OZ* number 13 from March 1968, featuring a well-known black and white photograph of a Vietcong suspect being shot in the head on a Vietnam street, with a splash of red paint by Sharp representing the splatter of blood. He titled the image 'The Great Society Blows Another Mind', with a subheading for the issue of 'The Pornography of Violence.' British cartoonists and Sharp contemporaries Ralph Steadman and Gerald Scarfe made use of similarly confronting splatter techniques around this time and may have been an influence.

Martin Sharp, 'The Great Society blows another mind', OZ, London, March 1968. Copyright:

Estate of Martin Sharp.

One of Sharp's most direct references to Dada and Surrealism was the psychedelic poster *Max Ernst: The Birdman*, issued by Big O Posters of London during the second half of 1967.³⁵

Martin Sharp, *Max Ernst: The Birdman*, coloured photolithograph on silver foil on card, Big O Posters, London, 1967. Copyright: Estate of Martin Sharp.

In others of Sharp's works — above all his 1967 *Birdman* poster — the homage to Surrealism and reworking of its elements was abundantly clear. If a label were to be attached to it, perhaps “surrealadelic” best describes its combination of modern and past influences. It was simple in its execution. Sharp took an image - engraved plate 141 - from German artist Max Ernst's 1934 surrealist collage novel *Une Semaine de Bonté*.³⁶ This was then enlarged, printed on bright silver foil on card with pink highlights and a blue base. The use of a silver foil background enhanced the impact when posted on the street, stuck on a bedroom wall, offered for sale in a poster shop, or subject to fluorescence-inducing blue light. Sharp noted in his 1979 interview with Australian Surrealist James Gleeson that he felt the foil gave the work an illusory, mythical aspect, with the mirror-like surface containing often disjointed and disconnected elements, in part reflecting the viewer.³⁷

Typical of psychedelic art, the content was eclectic, colourful, otherworldly and incomprehensible, but nevertheless of potential interest to the observer, whether a person in the street, a user of hallucinogenic drugs, a concert attendee, a fellow artist, or a student of art history. Any of these might enter into the maze of motifs and meaning created by both Sharp and Ernst. The Australian writer and artist Jim Anderson, also one of the editors of the London edition of *OZ* magazine between 1968-71, recalled an extended acid trip during 1970 in a London apartment room whose walls were covered with *Birdman* posters.³⁸ The combination of hallucinogenic drugs and this visually intense graphic, he reports, had a profound effect on him and his own subsequent artistic endeavours.³⁹

Birdman was not connected with any specific event such as a concert, exhibition or meeting, as was common for the production of posters during this period. Its creation was purely the whim of the artist. Sharp's use of the original collage engraving was unaltered apart from the addition of the aforementioned brightly coloured highlights and a large, flowery penned title below the reproduction. The image defies superficial interpretation - as

does the graphic novel from which it was taken. Ernst never provided one, just as Sharp's application of pink to beak, eyes, body and bird's nest is erratic, emphatic, inexplicable and ultimately engaging. Then, as now, the work presents the viewer with a disturbing mystery. The subject of *Birdman* was intense and sado-masochistic. Just as Dada reflected, in part, the seamier side of Weimar Germany and neighbouring countries during the immediate post-World War I years, so also Sharp found himself reacting to both the utopian dreams of London's youth in the 1960s and the contemporary, baser activities of violent criminals such as the Kray brothers, instances of police corruption, the excesses of the sexual revolution, and growing attraction to the occult. The original Ernst collage engraving readily elicits a negative emotional response. It predates the horror of modern cinematic fantasy such as the 1958 B-movie *The Fly*, wherein a man's body is fused with the head of an insect and vice versa.

Sharp was never overtly a student of the Salvador Dali school of visceral, surrealistic imagery, preferring instead to reference the German Expressionists and earlier Dadaists. Nonetheless, his early ink drawings such as the Binkies Burgers advertisements which appeared on the rear covers of *OZ* magazine during 1966, reference Dali's 1929 works *The Lugubrious Game* and *The First Days of Spring*.⁴⁰ Indeed, Sharp commonly rifled through old and antiquated texts and modern illustrated tomes in search of inspiration and collage elements.⁴¹ His attraction to the strangeness and oddity of out-of-context printed illustrations foreshadowed entry into the world of the Surrealists, at a time when the movement's end was being pronounced following the death of Andre Breton in Paris on 28 September 1966. In fact, Surrealism was not dead at all. Dali continued to work in this style, and young artists such as Sharp were both paying homage to, and breathing new life into, the movement within a contemporary pop cultural context. The spirit of Dada was also evident.

Sharp followed a Dada and Surrealist philosophy in his attitude to life – he was anarchic, irreverent, anti-establishment and a fan of the absurd and intellectual confrontation. For example, his drawing of a bare-breasted Mona Lisa graced the cover of Sydney *OZ* number 11 of July 1964 and arose out of a story in the Sydney newspapers regarding the invention of the ‘topless skirt’ and its modelling by a well-known, local stripper.⁴²

Martin Sharp, Mona Lisa, *OZ*, Sydney, No. 11, July 1964.

Sharp's black and white ink drawing was very much contemporary, following in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp's moustachioed, readymade *Mona Lisa L.H.O.O.Q.* from 1919. In applying his pen to perhaps the most celebrated of all female portraits in the Western canon, Sharp was straying from Duchamp's definition of a readymade as 'a point of indifference' — as something that was neither attractive because of its beauty, nor repulsive as a result of ugliness. The *OZ* cover is a thing of beauty, eliciting the very antithesis of indifference. Perhaps the indifference lies within the medium of transmission — *OZ* was an ephemeral item created in an environment of quickly produced, and cheap, student newspapers.

Sharp again made reference to Leonardo da Vinci's masterwork in April 1967, on the brightly coloured cover of London *OZ* magazine number three.⁴³

Martin Sharp, 'Love Me – I'm an ugly failure', *OZ*, London, May 1967. Copyright: Estate of

Martin Sharp.

This time the image comprised a psychedelic, reefer smoking Mona Lisa and was part of a 3-page fold-out collage poster dealing with issues of female beauty. The use of a pink, purple and blue palette as opposed to the muted green and brown tones of the original painting is a reflection of the impact of day glo colours in poster and print design during the period 1966-8. The swirling lines and bubble text is pure psychedelia, with the two bananas on either side of the central photographic reproduction of the Mona Lisa reflecting the view at the time that banana skins were hallucinogenic.⁴⁴ The content is, on the surface, playfully satirical, as in the speech bubble comment ‘Love me – I’m an ugly failure’ coming from what is considered the most beautiful woman depicted in Western art. In opposition to this is the all-seeing eye at the top of the image and surrounding comment ‘We are watching big brother’, both of which reveal the associated paranoia experienced by youth of the day as they fought the conservative establishment, with Sharp and his *OZ* colleagues at the forefront of this battle.

The rear side of the fold-out cover featured a complex drawing of Surrealist motifs representing the feminine - disembodied eyes on sticks, mouths and lips, and a very modern polished fingernail on a background of wavy lines - all printed in the most vivid pink and bluish-purple. The upper central large image of an eye with lid uplifted by pink fingernail references the iconic scene from the 1928 Surrealist film by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali, *Un Chien Andalou*, in which a razor blade is applied to the exposed eyeball of a young woman. Sharp herein combines Surrealism and psychedelia with a typical late 1960s sardonic humour and youthful energy. As ever, there is a sting in the tail, for the dope smoking Mona Lisa, despite her beauty – something which misogynistic elements of the counterculture placed a high premium upon – could still be an “ugly failure” by establishment standards and see no value in mere superficial beauty.

Collage, alchemy, and the confrontational continuum

Artists and graphic designers made extensive use of collage during the 1960s, and Martin Sharp was no exception. The technique's application in the modern era ostensibly started with Pablo Picasso around 1905. In the 1910s Max Ernst developed collage as an integral part of his work, as did Hannah Höch and John Heartfield in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁵ British artists Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi continued to develop the technique during the second half of the 1950s and through to the next decade. Encouraged by his artistic mother, Sharp was a fan of collage from childhood. His adept hand in the technique helped him to master the offset lithographic printing process so crucial to poster production during the late 1960s, when limitations of stone lithography were being realised. Sharp later said of collage that: “the art is not in the physical process of putting the images together, but is in the selection, and combination of them into new contexts”.⁴⁶ Collage was very much a free-form, improvisational technique – like Dada performance and Surrealist automatic writing - and as such reflected the innovative jazz and rock music scene of the late 1960s. Tapping into the unconscious in this way sat well with artists who made use of “mind-expanding” psychedelics.

According to Max Ernst, “Collage represents ... the alchemy of the visual image.”⁴⁷ The most substantial manifestation of Sharp’s interest in the esoteric, in “alchemy,” is the set of tarot card designs he made to illustrate the reverse side of the foldout cover of *OZ* London magazine number 4, from June 1967.⁴⁸ Interest in tarot card reading and the art of the cards themselves was revived during the 1960s. That renaissance also entailed fascination with occult iconography and practices, and in particular the fabled English magician Alistair Crowley. Somewhat earlier, the interest of the Surrealists in automatism and the attainment of trance states led them from the 1920s on to engage in tarot readings, séances, and astrological

musings as sources of inspiration. It was believed by tarot adherents that the striking tarot images could be used to discover the future by intuition — through prophetic images drawn from the vaults of the subconscious, read in particular, time-honored ways.

Drugs such as LSD held for a new generation a similar promise: a kind of divination of personal destiny based on the expansion of the subconscious and unlocking of its latent capacities. It appeared to deliver on this promise for many individuals, including, for a period, Martin Sharp. Long term effects were more difficult to identify. Crowley's famous slogan 'Do what thou wilt' resonated with Sharp's generation as they experimented with alternative lifestyles and non-traditional behaviours. For many, the pursuit of peace and love meant also a search for the meaning of life or even access to an earthly Garden of Eden. This quest typically extended into the spiritual realm, understood in syncretic terms. Just as early Modernists and Pop artists used collage and other artistic devices to induce a personal awakening, so too, in theory, could the tarot cards be used in the post-war West to heighten hallucinogenic faculties and spark visions in the mind's eye. Practices such as tarot, along with the East Asian I-Ching (which had similar elements of sooth-saying), were therefore of interest to the hippie movement and other groups within the burgeoning counterculture. Martin Sharp, as both participant in the counterculture and an artist, was able to chronicle his journey and its various stages through his work, from the point of leaving Australia in February 1966 through to his departure from London at the end of 1968. It was expressed most forcefully with issue 16 of London *OZ* from November 1968.⁴⁹ Titled *The Magic Theatre*, it consisted almost entirely of collage and was a clear departure from the standard magazine format of the previous edition, whose cover brought together icons of the past and present important to Sharp, including a strutting Mick Jagger, the Hindu god Ganesha, and Muybridge's Running Man of 1887.⁵⁰ Sharp used as his *materia prima* copyright-free prints from old books and magazines, photographs, and text. These he cut and pasted to form

something new, adding paint and ink to complement the final product. *The Magic Theatre* edition was immediately recognised by Australian art critic Robert Hughes as a landmark in graphic design and magazine production, breaking the rules of both commercial and underground press publishing norms. The latter noted that it was ‘one of the first serious, though flawed, attempts to apply the idea of simultaneity of experience not just to a picture of a wall but to a whole magazine.’⁵¹ There was no table of contents, editorial, feature articles, or advertisements in Sharp’s *Magic Theatre* edition. Unfortunately, the often-incomprehensible nature of the content made for poor sales; the edition proved the worst seller in *OZ*’s history.

Sharp’s fascination with Max Ernst was earlier revealed in the cover of London *OZ* number 9, July 1967. It presented a plate from Ernst’s first collage novel of 1929, *La femme 100 têtes* (commonly referred to in English as *The Hundred Headless Woman*), partially coloured in bright orange to highlight what appeared to be a UFO attacking a town and killing humans.⁵² Alongside the esoteric, this was one of his abiding interests at the time and the theme of that particular issue of *OZ*. Sharp edited the magazine in a manner much to the chagrin of his friend and principal editor Richard Neville who did not see the subject as relevant to the counterculture.⁵³ Neville was obviously insufficiently aware that UFOs — and space travel more broadly — were a common motif associated with the use of hallucinogenic drugs during the 1950s and 1960s, as an individual’s perception was opened to elements of the universe beyond the purely physical realm.⁵⁴ Many of the English underground press publications made references to UFOs, cosmology, alien life and seemingly inexplicable designs such as crop circles, whilst individuals were also drawn to places such as Stonehenge for inspiration and ceremony. Paul Kantner of the Jefferson Airplane rock group – famous for their 1967 album *Surrealistic Pillow* and himself a heavy user of LSD during this period -

went down a similar path, writing songs about flying saucers and eventually renaming the band Jefferson Starship.

Conclusion: Pop, posters and psychedelia

The red and golden *Blowin' in the Mind* poster; the *Birdman's* grotesque appearance and abhorrent behaviour; the rich colours and art historical elements of *Disraeli Gears* and *Jimi Hendrix Explosion* — all draw the viewer into Martin Sharp's complex world of 1960s libertarianism, witty topicality, drug-induced psychedelia, and pronounced Modernist inheritance. The confrontational continuum connects his art of the late 1960s primarily with that of Dada and Surrealism from the early twentieth century, but also late nineteenth century Impressionism. What was originally viewed as mere populist ephemera is now also seen in the context of late 1950s and 1960s Pop art. The critical avoidance of the psychedelic art movement in general, and of artists such as Martin Sharp who catered to a mass audience through the production of posters and underground press publications, is also revealed, as is Sharp's referencing of Modernist art movements. Yet, as Krippner has recently highlighted, perhaps like the painter Tom Blackwell, 'psychedelics catapulted [Sharp] in a direction toward which [he] was already headed.'⁵⁵ He meaningfully took the graphic design path in seeking to bring his art to the masses, working communally as a proliferation of countercultural promotional materials provided opportunities for uninhibited expression and, to a limited degree, reimbursement. While works such as *Disraeli Gears* are now considered psychedelic icons, Sharp's name is largely unknown to fans of the image and of the band Cream, even though he shared a central London studio with his friend and legendary guitarist Eric Clapton, and co-wrote *Tales of Brave Ulysses* and *Anyone for Tennis*. The *Blowin' in the Mind* poster sold in the hundreds of thousands, and *Disraeli Gears* in the millions, resulting

in their present status. This has not been matched, however, by more refined aesthetic appreciation of the works and their creator. As early as 1975 artist Ingo Swann noted the lack of “overzealous applaudings from the art establishment” for such works.⁵⁶ The general lack of interest in the historic richness and aesthetic sophistication of psychedelic art overlooks a great deal — in the case of Sharp especially. He was both tuned in and turned on, working intensely at his craft, whilst allowing a libertine lifestyle and myriad of visual, intellectual, physical and chemical stimulants and influences to take effect. The result was a collection of psychedelic artworks which, with a degree of subtly and mischievousness on the part of the artist, paid due homage to early Modern artists whilst reflecting an intimate engagement with 1960s pop culture. The so-called “low-art” of Martin Sharp and his colleagues was often, in fact, based upon intense study and exposure to a broad range of influences arising out of the explosion of Pop art early in the decade, and with that a renewed interest in Modernist art and its incorporation in their work through the avenue of collage. The proliferation of offset lithographically printed posters in association with pop culture events provided an avenue for experimentation by young artists working in commercial environments such as graphic design and underground press publication. Experimentation in new techniques and the use of fluorescent inks and foil coated papers resulted in a blended mix of art school influences with hallucinogenic experience to produce what is often classified as psychedelia. Martin Sharp’s posters for Big O and record covers for Cream are prime examples of this combination of commodification and contemporary art practice. His transformation from student newspaper cartoonist in early 1960s Sydney to one of London’s most influential graphic designers by the end of the decade can be seen to be the result of a broad art education, interest in Modernist art movements, natural talent in regard to sketching and layout, and an ability to tune into the prevailing zeitgeist and reflect it back to the community at large. Sharp was not alone in

following this unconventional path and abandoning the Academy for the street, though he was one of its most adept practitioners.

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