

BBC WORLD NEWS

January 1993

BBC World News, Seattle, interview by David Jay Brown

David Jay Brown: What were you like as a child?

Alex Grey: The first memories that I have as a child are of textures. I remember lying in bed and seeing textures. First of all I would see just a pure field, like white light, and this was like bliss, a kind of ecstatic space. Then I remember this kind of narley snaggle-branched, brownish, ugly dark force moving into that space from the periphery of the perception, and sort of a coming in clumps, and then basically taking over. This very dynamic, ugly sharp texture would terrify me, and it seemed to consume me. I guess it was the primordial chaos or something, and then little islands of purity would crop up. The pools would tend to get a little bit bigger, and then they would eventually clear away again, and you'd have your white light ocean again. I remember going through those kinds of spaces, and I don't know how old I was, but I was probably two or something like that. Some kind of textures. Very strange.

David: So your earliest memories are tactile then, not really visual?

Alex: Well, they were visual memories, but they appeared to be visions just of texture. They were internally-based visions, I'm sure, but I don't really know what they were. I think that they were just like these yin-yang energies, like the constant flux of repose and motion, or darkness and light.

David: Your unique brain's interpretation of the universal energies.

Alex: Funny, I don't know what it was. But as I got a little older, I became interested in dead animals. I was interested in live animals too, of course. I started a small pet cemetery in the back yard, and buried numerous animals back there.

David: Were you dissecting any of them?

Alex: I didn't really do much dissection. I wasn't so interested in that. It was more or less just being aware of a dead animal, and seeing them close up. I wasn't that fascinated with what made them tick so much.

David: Were you fascinated by the differences between a living and a dead animal?

Alex: Yes, absolutely. That was the thing that just was so strange. They were so still. One day some kid said, "oh look there's a dead bird." So I came to take it home. I picked it up, but it wasn't a dead bird, it was like a rabbid bat, and it bit me on the hand (laughter). So then I took it home. I didn't know it was rabbid, but it had evidently fallen

out of a tree, and so I went and tried to hang it up in a tree. I took it home to show my mom, and she goes, "Aaah, get it out of the house!" Then I took it to a tree to hang it up, because I knew that they hung upside down, and it was hanging there. So I left it, and I came back maybe an hour later to draw a picture of "Bobbie" the bat, but it had fallen out of the tree again. My mom said that was probably a bad sign. So we put it in a shoe box.

The next day people in like radioactive suits came out with tongs to pick up the thing. They put it in a big metal canister and took it away. Sure enough, it was rabbid, and I had to go through all these shots in the fleshy parts of the stomach area, and then in the back as well. They would rotate you from one side to another. The antitoxin that they injected you with contained dead dried duck embryo. And so, it was really weird, because it would leave a lump under your skin, and it was very painful. I think that was a turning point. I don't know exactly what it did to my head, but I think it sort of stopped me from picking up dead animals for awhile.

David: Was your mother scolding you, saying things like, "Alex, enough with the dead animals already!" ?

Alex: No, not that much. It wasn't a continual obsession. I think she was more worried about my interest in monster magazines, or monsters in general and things like that.

David: You mean like Famous Monsters of Filmland ?

Alex: Right, and I had a lot of nightmares about devil-dogs. There was a recurring dream of a devil-dog that would kill me in various ways. And so I don't know, maybe that was some kind of a shamanic beast or something, or just like the fears of childhood. I don't really know. But one of my first performance pieces then later had to do with a dog.

David: Do you think that your early childhood interest in monsters and death lead to an interest in the occult, which later lead to an interest in altered states and mystical visions?

Alex: I think that any of these peripheral, or out-of-the-norm kind of strange things, caught my attention. Whatever was strange, I think, had a particular interest. Monstrosities, fetal abnormalities, genetic malformations, and things like that became a strong interest, because they were like real monsters. Just the caprice of God, as a designer in these various genetic strains, was quite an amazing and fascinating thing-- that we could have two heads, or flippers instead of feet. And it's miraculous that we don't really. But yeah, I think that all those things are in some way related to the fringes of normalcy.

But it's more or less that one tends to live their life within normal routines, out of just like habits of having to eat, sleep, and things like that. So altered states of consciousness are altered because they're more unusual, and maybe more condensed kinds of experiences that crystalize things. Like the dream experiences, they run a little bit counter to normal experience. They give us the opportunity to see our life in another context, from the vantage point of the altered state. And so likewise, if reality isn't what you thought it was, the monster gives one that recontextualization of reality. You know it could be this way. It's another alternative being, rather than an alternative state of being.

David: What was your religious upbringing like?

Alex: My family went to Methodist church. I think that during all the time that we went to church-- although I always liked the pictures of Jesus, you know, I always admired the dude-- I never really got hooked into a sincere spiritual search, I think, until they left the church. My family left the church in a huff at one period, and my orientation became agnostic-atheist. So then God really started to interest me as a subject, as well as spirituality in general.

David: What age were you?

Alex: Let's see, I was probably about twelve. Yeah, the teenage existential years had started to come on heavy. So I knew there was something there that lie undiscovered, but I had to get through a lot of depression before I could find it.

David: So the age of twelve is when you first started to really question how we got here?

Alex: Well, it's more like a couple years earlier, when my grandmother died and I was around ten. I saw her get progressively yellower from jaundice, and eventually die. When I asked my father, when is she going to get better?, I remember my father saying, that she's not going to get better. So I knew what dead animals were like, but I hadn't had a person who was close to me die until that time. I guess I was lucky in a way, but it made a big impact I think.

David: In what way?

Alex: Well, I just started to get a feeling of the impermanance of life, that this body is temporary. So I don't know whether it fueled the committment to my work or not. Maybe indirectly it has. I think that every artist who is trying to do something with their work has the specter of death grinning over their shoulder, or anybody who's trying to accomplish anything before their own personal death.

David: Meaning the sense of urgency that death gives you because you feel the constraint of the time-limit on your life's work?

Alex: Yeah, right. You have to appreciate the day, and do what you can while you're still here.

David: What was it like working as an embalmer in a morgue?

Alex: I worked in a morgue and a museum of anatomy. So I would create displays on different kinds of things like bladder stones.

David: What's a bladder stone?

Alex: Well, it's like mineral deposits in the bladder.

David: Like a kidney stone?

Alex: Yeah, like kidney stones and things like that. They can get rather large, and they used to before ultra-sound and things like that. They would have different ways of cutting for the stone. So the museum had a collection of bladder stones, kidney stones, and gall stones-- all kinds of strange things. So they had collections of all kinds of

weird stuff, like a hairball the size of a human stomach. Some guy worked in a wig factory and ate hair. Then there was a guy who had ricketts, and used to like push himself around in something like a big wooden salad bowl. So we had his bones in the bowl that he used to scooch around in. We had the kinds of malformations that you rarely see today because, like with simease twins, they try and separate them now. But we had jars filled with simease twins of all different kinds-- connected at the head, connected at the thorax, connected every which way. And so that was a collection that was quite astonishing.

Then there was work with the bodies. I would accept bodies when the funeral home would bring them. It was a medical school, so then we prepared the bodies. After I would accept them, and then if no one else was there, I would do a kind of simplified Tibetan Book of the Dead kind of ritual, calling their name, and encouraging them to go toward the light.

David: Wait, was this on your own that you did this?

Alex: Yeah, not with the permission (laughter) of the medical school. Oh, he's over there reading the Bardo to the dead guy. No, it wasn't standard operating procedure there at the morgue, but I just thought I couldn't with full consciousness accept it as a piece of meat. There might be a being still hovering around the physical body. It's hard to say, but sometimes I felt it was not so hard to say. They definitely were hovering around you.

David: You definitely felt presences around you?

Alex: Oh definitely, yeah. Well, it's hard to say whether or not it's a total projection of your own psychic paranoia of your own death. You're projecting that that still body on the slab there is me when I don't know. You know it's going to happen sometime. It might happen today. It might happen tomorrow. It might not happen for fifty years, but it's going to happen. So there's this projection of one's self onto the dead body, and there's also a simultaneous repugnance and fear-- terror in a way-- so all that kind of awesome energy, or the *Mysterium Tremendum* of one's life, and the limitedness of it, or the unlimitedness of it, confronts one. The questions of consciousness arise-- Who are we? What are we? If the vitality can go on, then where does it go? All those questions just come like a freight train through your mind whenever you're with dead people.

So, but then there was just the work-a-day kind of stuff that I had to do, which was basically pump them full of fenal and fermaldehyde, a kind of embalming fluid. It was not a hotsy totsy kind of a morgue where you drain the blood, and then they put in the embalming fluid. We just pumped in the embalming fluid. They'd be gallons and gallons of embalming fluid that would saturate the body, and so it would puff up, and all kinds of nauseating substances would ooze from every orifice during that process. Then it would drain off a little bit, and then you'd wrap it up, put a little lannolin on the hands and face, wrap them like a mummy, and stick them in the freezer. Occasionally there would be a request for only particular organs, or particular appendages, like limbs which might be used by hand surgeons, people who operate only on hands. So I used to hacksaw off dozens of pairs of hands.

David: I don't understand. Why did you have to do that?

Alex: Well, there was a convention of surgeons who only did surgery with hands. So they would sometimes need to do a study or a workshop for surgeons where they would dissect hands, and so they would need hands.

David: These are people who had prior donated their bodies.

Alex: Right, these are all people who donated their bodies. But there wouldn't be the whole body that they would pay for. So somebody had to go and hacksaw off the hands, or the head. Now the head, that was a more intense thing. They had a kind of chainsaw-like device that you could basically create kind of a sculpture bust, down the shoulders, and then across the middle. And then you'd have a head, which you'd stick on a tray, and take to the place. That was wild. That was too much.

David: How old were you when you were doing this?

Alex: Around twenty to twenty four.

David: And how did this affect you emotionally?

Alex: It was unforgettable as an experience. I felt like I probably could have declined, but then I would never have had that experience in this lifetime. It's doubtful, except in the case of a psychotic murderer or something, that anyone would have that experience besides in a medical school, where dismemberment is part and parcel of the daily kinds of activity. Or maybe if you were a funeral director in Tibet, where they do sky-burial or something, you could chop up the bodies and stuff.

David: Have you gotten to hold a human brain in your hand?

Alex: Oh yeah, plenty of times. And to me that's like the most amazing thing, just to hold the brain. I teach anatomy now for artists at NYU, and we go to a medical school anatomy lab. They always have the brains with the spinal cord there.

David: I used to do brain research at NYU when I was working on my master's degree.

Alex: Really? Well, we're at Hunter, because I teach it in the Spring, and they don't have the bodies in the Spring for some reason. But we're at Hunter, right across the street or something. So they have the whole spinal column, with all the little dangling nerves and things. It's a complete mystery.

David: To hold a brain in your hands, and know that's where the person's whole life experience took place.

Alex: It least it came through there.

David: Have you noticed that when you look at a dead body, and compare it to them when they were alive, it doesn't even look like them anymore without the animating muscles?

Alex: Yeah, I've noticed that.

David: As though the animating force, which tenses and holds together the facial muscles, just isn't there anymore.

Alex: Right. Yeah, because there's complete relaxation and no tension at all left, they're likely to look very different. And then there's the different ways that they would come in. Like maybe if they would be dead for a few days in the Summer, you're going to have a completely different coloration than if they were to you in Winter. So

that can look different. But bodies prepared by funeral directors are quite often made to match a little bit more of the person you might have known.

David: So would you use a photograph to work from?

Alex: We never got into that. Although I used to do make-up work, and worked with morticians wax, and various things like that, that was not part of the job description there. The medical school deaner just really embalms, and prepares the bodies for dissection, or for burial afterwards.

David: How did you become involved in performance art?

Alex: Well, that happened when I went to art school in 1970-71.

David: Which was where?

Alex: Columbus College of Art and Design in Columbus, Ohio. I was there for two years. I started reading art magazines, and there were artists like Vito Acconci and Chris Burden, and a number of the so-called "body artists." There were also a number of Vienesse actionists, who worked over in Austria. I got to meet one of those guys, a fellow named Otto Muehl. In the Sixties they did a series of performances that were very violently sexual. They would use swans to violate women with, and then cut off their heads in orgiastic displays of passion, throwing the blood around. Herman Niche, one of the Vienesse actionists, continues to do these kinds of performances where they slaughter lambs, and let the entrails fall all over nude figures strapped up underneath a sort of crucified lamb.

They're very grizzly, and supposedly cathartic kind of displays of performance energy. This fellow Muehl started a place called Actions Analysis Organization. It was very much based on LSD, and Wilhielm Reich's kind of bodywork stuff. He was sort of like a cross between Charlie Manson and a Neo-Reichien kind of bodyworker. He was a very charismatic character, and was really my introduction to performance work. So soon after that-- that was in '72-- I started working with dead animals myself, because it seemed appropriate since I had earlier worked with dead animals, and that I should get back to my roots of examining the subject of mortality. So those themes were easy to address, and even all the subject matter, or content-driven artwork, was easier to do in performance. And you'll find that today it's so-- artists who have any legitimacy in the so-called real and legitimate artworld, who are working with meaning and content very often, are dealing with performance or installation kind of art, not with painting. Content-driven work and painting has been given short shrift during this century, since modernism.

David: Are you including people like Laurie Anderson?

Alex: Well, she's maybe more aesthetic, but she does have some kind of content-driven work. I think people like Chris Burden, Acconci, Paul McCarthy, Rachel Rosenthal, Diamanda Galas, and all the people who are working with very strong content kind of work maybe wind up in that. Maybe not all of them.

David: There was a dark quality to your early performance art pieces, unlike your contemporary paintings which have a more positive transcendent quality to them. Can you tell me what caused the shift of focus in your creative work?

Alex: Well, I had a fairly dramatic series of vision states that occurred after doing certain performances. They were performances that were done in the morgue there where I worked, using the dead bodies. In a way I was trespassing on the being who was no longer there, but their body was there. So using people's bodies for your own kind of artwork, I think, has questionable ethical ramifications basically. And those were coming to a head. During one circumstance there was kind of a courtroom that I found myself in, where I was being judged. I couldn't see the face of the judge, but I knew the accuser was a woman's body who I sort of trespassed on in the morgue work, and she was accusing me of this sin. And I was saying it was for art's sake, and things like that, but it didn't wash. It didn't really hold up under scrutiny for the judge, and so I was put on lifetime probation and not forgiven. It was just kind of like I would be scrutinized from that point on, as to the content of my work and how I was orienting it. It made me really consider the ethical intentions of art in general, and the will that empowers work I think is critical.

David: In terms of the consequences?

Alex: Yeah. What does one intend for the viewer to take with them from the work? All that came up really strongly during that experience where my intentions were to be scrutinized. Then also there was an experience I had after I shot some photographs of about thirty malformed fetuses from this collection. One night after taking photographs of all of them, I saw one of them hovering in front of me. I was lying in bed, but I was awake, and it was a holographic projection of a hovering being in space. It spoke through many voices. There were like a lot of voices, all saying the same thing, but deep and high. And what these many voices were basically saying was, "It's time for you to come with us, I've come to take you." And the being itself, as the creature in the jar that I took the photograph of, was not an evil being, but somehow, in this holographic hallucination was a personification of malevolence. It was threatening me, seeking to take over, take control in a way, and I felt like I was on the edge of a precipice, like the edge of sanity, or something, and I felt like I could go over that edge.

So I started calling on divine love. I said, "Divine love is the strongest power," and I just kept reaffirming that in the face of this being who was calling. And so it was a commitment from that point on of reorienting myself, and after calling that out for several times the being did dissolve. It was banished in a way, and it was replaced by a bluish light that spoke. It identified itself as Mr. Lewis, an interplanetary angel, and that he was going to watch over things for a little while, be a little helpful and guide me. So that was mind-changing and life-changing.

David: Have you any experiences with Mr. Lewis since?

Alex: Ah, I'm not sure. I think sometimes he's been working back-stage, and manipulating things, but I've had other contacts with other kinds of guide beings and stuff. So I'm never sure exactly who it is.

David: Well other kinds of experiences have you had?

Alex: Well, the Tibetan Buddhist practices are projecting these deity forms and guru forms like a Garap Dorje, one of the founders of the Nyingma lineage of Dzogchen teachings, who is a very strong spiritual archetype and guru. And although he lived over two thousand years ago, he seems to, because he attained rainbow body, he's accessible as a helper-being, and the same thing with Padmasambhava, the great master. So those are the kind of beings that accessible, with the right kind of prayer and stuff, and you're never sure whether it's your own projection.

But there's a certain point where the imation is so boundless, and it's like those interference patterns-- you're brainwaves, and the brainwaves or mindwaves of other beings who may be sharing the boundless. So there is a certain point at which those things converge. Whether you're only accessing your own "higher mind," or whether there actually is the arrival of the beings who you are calling upon is kind of hard to distinguish, and maybe not so necessary. But they seem like these, or they can be experienced as transdimensional beings that show up when called upon, and sometimes when you don't even call upon them.

David: What type of relationship do you see between sex and death?

Alex: Well, that's a well-mined territory, I'm sure. I think that I may have had a strong interest in both subjects because of their involuntary nature, that they're crystalizations of our vitality and our loss of vitality. And certainly in the sex act, orgasms have been described by many as mini-deaths in a way. Certainly it's death to the ego if you do it right, and there is this union that takes place. So one would hope that death would be like a cosmic orgasm, where you're released into the one, the infinite one. So in that way of the death to the ego, and convergence of experience of union, I'd say that there's certainly strong similarities.

David: And both sex and individual death appeared simultaneously in the course of biological evolution. Do you view yourself as a shaman?

Alex: I don't know, I can't really claim that pedigree.

David: In Carlo McCormick's essay in your book, he compares you to a shaman, and that it was a necessary part of your journey to go through the darkness.

Alex: I think that at least metaphorically, the path of the wounded healer, or the journey of the shaman has very important implications for the future of spirituality. Because there's no other metaphor that really suffices to deal with what you, the journey of humanity as of this point. We are wounded, and whether we're going to be the wounded victim, or the wounded healer is our choice. We have wounded the planet. We have wounded our genes. We've wounded the next generations acoming, and there's a lot on our heads. And whether we pull it off, and make some remediation to the environment, and to our psyches, is something that only time will tell.

David: To promote healing, the shamanic approach is to reach into the higher spheres, into the invisible world, into something more than the material universe, in order to gain information or some kind of knowledge to help deal with the problems here.

Alex: Right, and I think that that's really a critical function at this point. We need the transcendent vision to guide us, the vision of the common good to motivate and drive our creative efforts. We need to get back to ethics. You have to get with the Bodhicitta program, and have the well-attended motivation for benefit. So I love the shamanic path as a metaphor, and looking back on a lot of my work I see it as related to that path. Like my early performance work started with the animal, with the dead dogs, and that was like a power animal in a sense that lead me like Toto leads Dorothy in her adventures in The Wizard of Oz. Toto was her power animal, taking her in her strange journey to another land.

In the same way that the dog opened me up to the world of death, mortality, and decay-- the underworld in a sense-- so I too then entered into the more fully-rounded, the mortuary realm and things like that. Then my

performances had a lot to do after that with the possibilities of global death and catastrophe. So from the dog, the lone animal to the human, to the more global ecotastrophe and the nuclear threat work started coming out in the performances. I think that everybody carries that around with them. My daughter at age five did a little book about the earth, and it had the progression of the earth from the earliest times when Adam and Eve were around, and it was happy. She had the globe with a happy face on it, until the progressive trashing of the earth, and the trees and people were dying. The earth was dying.

It kind of hangs as a goony bird around every body's neck. You know, when you think of throwing away a cup or something, like where is away? You know you can't obsess about it constantly, but it's in the back of everybody's mind.

David: How and when did you start painting?

Alex: Chops, just like my ability to paint. Well, some say, hasn't got the chops. So but I do the best I can, and the work is very much about drawing, more than I think painting. So my technique is very "drawerly" I say.

David: When you say drawerly, do you mean realistic, as opposed to expressionistic? Your work seems almost photographic to me.

Alex: I suppose.

David: Even when you're painting transcendent realms, it appears anatomically accurate.

Alex: Right. I like to have the effect of simultaneous x-ray and Kirlean photograph. Well, my intentions are not that different, I don't think, than like Malevich, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and the early Modernists. They were very interested in trying to create a new spiritual image, after the Twentieth Century, and their work resulted in Modernism. They were trying to basically get rid of representation. They felt like their reliance on nature had been a real impediment to the development of art, and so now there were mental forms that could take precedence over the just sorted drudgery of representing nature. But the thing is when you get rid of the body and references to the body, it's very difficult for people to make the shift in identification from themselves to the aesthetic object of contemplation. So if you ask Joe Six-pack whether Kandinsky's work is spiritual, that thought might never occur to him.

So I wanted to make work that was obviously spiritually oriented, and that anybody with half a mind working could see that. Even if they didn't understand what was going on, that there was something going on, that was pointing towards either altered states of consciousness or clairvoyant states-- states where the mind was being expanded into sacred spaces. I wanted to make visible the body, mind, and spirit on a two dimensional canvas. Take this multi-dimensional experience, and collapse it into a two-dimensional framework. So what started me painting really was having visions that I thought were strong enough to want to represent.

Some of them are in the book. One of them was very strong. I was feeling miserable for awhile, depressed about the break-up of a relationship, and having not slept in a few days. I was tossing and turning, and having this vision of a two-headed person. One side was pulling off the other. The healthy side was trying to pull off the sick side, and the sick side was laughing, because that action was self-destructive, trying to remove the shadow. And it knew the fruitlessness of that action. So the so-called healthy guy was sort of noticing that he was destroying

himself in that attempt, so it was about the tension of these forces within. But it was also coming to some knowledge about them, and it came up just as a vision, sort of just like bang!

So it was strong enough, and although it was probably adolescent in its origins-- you know, existentialist adolescent hubris in a way-- it was significant enough to me that I wanted to make a painting of it. It was kind of a visionary self-portrait. So the process of vision started to interest me I think at that point, and working with the imagination. But it was never really just surrealism or fantasy art for its own sake. It had to directly relate to the nature of the self-- who one is, what one is, on as profound a level as possible. So that's been the orientation towards making the work, and the work then gets lumped in with surrealist work, just because it's not traditional representational art.

David: Right, that's really a good point. There's a big difference between surrealist and visionary art, and many people confuse them.

Alex: I think the intentions are different. But I think that there were other artists who were motivated similarly. Pavel Tchelitchew, for example.

David: And in fact, it should more aptly be termed as a form of realism.

Alex: Well, there were artists like Ivan Albright, and they used to call his work magic realism.

David: Or spiritual realism.

Alex: Yeah, I haven't seen that word spiritual realism, but that's really what it's sort of about. I've struggled with words that would describe it-- a metaphysical realism. There's never been an adequate sort of thing. John Delville was a great symbolist painter. I'm not uncomfortable with symbolism, because I think everything is symbolic in a sense. But he was also an idealist in the German Romantic philosophical tradition, like Shelling and Schopenhauer. Those Neo-Platanic idealists. I think that my work in some ways relates to that because of the projection of an ideal archetype. Since this kind of ethical confrontation in the court room scene, I've had to think about positive archetypes, and ideals in a sense. The wounded healer has to have an image of health in order to heal, and has to fight that duality game I guess, or hopefully get to the non-dual.

David: Who are some of the other artists who have influenced you?

Alex: Well, during this century there's been like two artists who I feel strongly related to, maybe three. First of all there's Jean Delville, the symbolist painter. A lot of his works were done in the 1890's. He's a Belgium symbolist, and he had strong connections with the dualisms of spirit and matter. He was trying to manifest those different dimensions in his work. And the second artist is Pavel Tchelitchew, who's most famous painting is "Hide and Seek". It's in the Museum of Modern Art, and well-known to many psychedelic affecianados. People have staggered away from that painting after observing it for hours, still incomplete in their assessment of it. It's a magnificent piece. He really started looking at the human anatomy, and the subtle anatomy, after doing that painting in 1941-42. The remainder of his life was spent working out his relationship to the physical anatomy and subtle anatomy, and then on to sort of spiritual networks of energy.

David: I like that phrase subtle anatomy, because that's what I really feel that you're capturing. I've never seen anybody do what you've done. Was he doing something similar?

Alex: Well, in some ways it was related. I started having visions after acid trips of glowing bodies, and inter-relating the acupuncture meridians and points with chakras, auras, and things like that. I started doing it and a friend of mine said, look Pavel Tchelitchew was doing this kind of thing forty years ago, you know, look at this. And sure enough he was starting to do translucent bodies that I think was also related to having seen "The Visible Man" or "Visible Woman" in the New York World's Fair, because those things were going on exhibit in the 30's and 40's. Also through the use of x-rays and things like that, we were starting to get that orientation towards the body. Then he would sometimes have kind of a glow, an auric glow around the body as well. He was well-versed in Pythagoreanism and alchemy and things like that. He was deeply into the occult, and so he was starting to weave together this kind of thing.

Whether he ever took mescaline, I don't know. He was dead before too much of the acid I think was available. But he died in 56, and I think he appears to be a psychedelically related artist. His career has really hit the skids in a way. After his death, he got a retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in the early Fourties. Then after that, what I would think of as psychedelic work and dealing with the anatomy and stuff was really what made people scratch their heads. Because it wasn't related to what was going on with people like Jackson Pollack. Jackson Pollack was, Jack the dripper, he was like big news on Life magazine, and everything. So there was a tidal wave of abstract expressionist work that just completely swamped the magic realists, the people like Tchelitchew. I think the 21st Century will go back, sort it out, and see that here was a significant link with the symbolists-- somebody who was content-driven in their work, somebody who was making sacred art, but in a totally idiosyncratic and personal way. I think his career will be reassessed, and accorded more value. At any rate I see him as a forefather to what I've been doing.

David: How long does it take you on average to complete a painting? There's so much incredible detail.

Alex: It can take a year or more, and sometimes just a few months.

David: Do you ever do several pieces simultaneously?

Alex: No, I focus on one piece at a time. So the pieces absorb me. But meanwhile, a-mile-a-minute, there's like visions circling overhead wanting to land on the easel. So my notebooks are filled with fairly extensive little scribbles of potential pieces.

David: Your painting style demonstrates extensive knowledge of human anatomy. Have you ever given thought to the fact that you share the last name with the man who wrote and illustrated Gray's Anatomy?

Alex: Well, it's funny. I changed my name to Grey at a time when I was doing a lot of performance works about the resolution of polarities or about exploring polarities. Like when I went to the North Magnetic Pole, I shaved half my head of hair, in alignment with the rational and intuitive hemispheres of the brain.

David: So Grey represents a merging of the light and dark.

Alex: Exactly, Grey as the middle way. So I took it not thinking about that relationship with the Grey's Anatomy. But then it was a fortuitous kind of thing, and who knows what energies a name will draw into itself. So my project has been related to revisioning the human anatomy, and asking what is it that makes a person? Because all the medical texts and things that we find really are limited to the material body, and don't address the soul level. If you dissect down the body you can't come up with a soul.

David: I'm curious. What do you personally think happens to human consciousness after biological death?

Alex: Well, I'm prone to accepting some of the near-death research and Tibetan bardo kind of stuff. I think it's a good bet that soon after physical death, and the shutting down of all the senses and doors of input, the transition into these other realms occurs. It isn't a blank slate at that point, and you do have this potential to reach the clear light, the void, if you recognize it as the truth of the mind. And if don't, then you're probably going to get engaged in other dimensions and progressively less appealing dimensions. And I'm not sure exactly what happens. I don't think anybody does. Some people may say they know, and they're very certain about it. They may have had experiences which give them certainty, and that's fine. But trying to second guess the real mystery of consciousness is a fruitless and disappointing kind of task. So I wish to be able to surrender to the process on it's deepest level when it occurs, and will probably fail miserably, and be back to have to interview you in the next lifetime. (laughter) How did we get here again? (alien voice)

David: What's your concept of God?

Alex: Well, it's interesting. My daughter said the other day, God must think it smells down in the sewer, and I thought, that's an interesting statement. And she said, well because God's everywhere, and God's everything, and so he'd be in the stinky places down in the sewer too. So I didn't have a whole lot to say, but I was just interested in hearing her. I think our orientation to God is also akin to the nature of mind, the non-dual orientation of various different schools of spirituality and that God is the infinite oneness. So it is oneness, but it's infinite. You can't say God is one or the other. You can't just like let your oneness go, and just have the infinitude and plenitude, and you can't have just the infinitude and plenitude and not the oneness, or something like that. It's both. It's all of that. God is love also. We thought of this while we were tripping-- that God is the part of the all that's all of the all.

And if you have that direct channel of love there's access to the infinitude of divine love. In fact, it is divine love just steps down to whatever level you're receiving or emanating it from. So I don't think that that's different than the completely atheistic Buddhist relationship to the highest levels of mind, which have to do with voidness, clarity, and infinite compassion. You know, that ground is the ground, and then everything else is also it. It's like Ken Wilber uses the ladder metaphor-- that there are different rungs, the material realm, the emotional, the mental, then the psychical, and progressively more spiritual hierarchies of states of consciousness and awareness. And the highest rungs of the ladder give one the highest context, wherein the entire ladder is seen. And so the experience of God is like highest rung, and also the entire ladder. So that's the transcendent and the eminent aspects of God-- that one without the other is not the full picture. I wouldn't want to just have the eminent aspect.

David: You're describing God then simply as a state of consciousness. Do you see there being an intelligent design in the universe.

Alex: Absolutely. Of course. Definitely. I think that, as Wilber puts it, the materialists can't offer more than a kind of a "whoops!" theory for the universe manifesting. Whoops it occurred by some chance, and that that's a fairly infantile orientation to the complexity and beauty of the design that's been wrought on this planet and throughout the cosmos. I think we can come up with something better, and the Great Spirit, God, Primordial Nature of the Mind, whatever you want to call it, is the rootedness of it all. And that however you get back to your true nature, it's most always healing and orienting you towards doing good actions.

David: How have your experiences with psychedelics influenced both your work and your perspective?

Alex: Well, keeping on the God theme, when I came back from the North Magnetic Pole, I knew I was looking for something.

David: You were how old?

Alex: I was maybe 19 or 20, and I said, I'm searching for God, whatever that is. I didn't know what that was. I was pretty much of an existentialist in a way, but I said okay, I'm looking for God. I don't know what that is, but I know I'm looking for something like that. And so within twenty four hours my college art professor was taking me to a party that this girl had invited us to. She had seen me along with this professor, and said why don't you come to my party tonight. So the professor picked me up. He had a bottle of Kalooa that had a lot of LSD in it. He said, "It's LSD." It was the end of school, and I decided to celebrate. I drank a good deal of it, and that was my first LSD experience. It wasn't until I was nearly twenty, and my wife-to-be-- Allyson-- was the person who had invited us to this party. And she drank the other part of the bottle.

So that night I went through a spiritual rebirth canal I felt inside of my head. I was in the dark and going towards the light, spinning in this tunnel, a kind of an opalescent or pearl-essent, living mother-of-pearl kind of tube or tunnel inside of the head. In the dark and spiraling towards the light, there was this resolution of all these paradoxes, of the dark and light, male and female, life and death, and all these things seemed to be resolved in this process of moving toward the light. It was just a very strong archetypal experience, and I spent a little time talking with Alyson. But the next day, because it had been my first trip, I just called her up, because she was the other person tripping there. And I said, "Are you okay? How you doing?" I basically asked her out that night, and we've been together ever since. Its been like twenty one years.

So within twenty four hours of announcing that I'm looking for God, I had this LSD experience and had met my wife. So, divine love in human form, in the form of Alyson, and this catalyst for consciousness, blowing away all those boundaries that I had built up in my mind, and opening me up towards a spiritual evolutionary path. So that was kind of miraculous. Alyson and I have then maintained a psychedelic sacramental relationship which is always going on. A lot of trips have been spent just laying in bed, heavily tripping, and then sometimes coming out of blindfolds, and writing down things, or making little annotations and drawings, stuff like that.

David: Oh wait, you were the person who put together those little isolation masks.

Alex: The Mindfold.

David: Yeah, right. I've see them advertised in High Times.

Alex: (Laughter) Uh, yeah.

David: Yeah, that's a brilliant idea, putting ear plugs and eye shades together. Sort of a portable isolation tank. I made my own pair actually.

Alex: Oh really. Yeah, the isolation mask.

David: So you'd wear those when you were tripping?

Alex: Yeah. We'd wear those, and it was like a blank screen to project your imagination on to. I saw it as an art object, and we made those sort of in a limited edition of twenty five hundred, and sold them all over the world. Then we sold the business.

David: You've tried one of John Lilly's isolation tanks haven't you?

Alex: Oh yeah, isolation tanks are great. It's just I couldn't afford to build one in our place, and this is like a poor man's answer to that. But you know with the immersion stuff, I mean you have different senses from that too.

David: Have you ever actually tried to do any work while you were tripping?

Alex: Yeah, some. I don't think it's my most successful work, but, like music, the pieces can give you flashbacks to certain experiences. Seeing certain drawings that I've done can put me back a little bit into those spaces. So the psychedelic I think was really important in helping me to access the infinitude of the imagination, and allowing me to see that there are all these various dimensions. It's like William James talks about, no model of reality can be complete without taking these dimensions of consciousness into account. And so somehow visually, since I wanted to make work that dealt with the nature of consciousness, I had to start representing in some way, attempting to evoke, or point to these higher dimensions of consciousness.

So many times during a trip there will be a vision that will come, and it will be the crystalization of your life experience, or something completely surprising, or you just go to another dimension that you had never been aware of before, and it seems very real, more real than this kind of phenomenal world. In a sense, it may like the enchanted loom working behind-the-scenes in a way, and so once you get a sense of that other reality that seems to be tinkering with this one, or acting like a puppet-master to this one, then you in some way want to evoke it, or try to show the inter-relationships between the different dimensions. And so that's what I try to do.

David: To act as a bridge between dimensions?

Alex: Well, consciousness is that bridge, and so by attempting to visualize it in some way you're making it accessible to other people who have had that experience. They can then point to it, and say it was something like this. You know, I'm not crazy. It was very similar to this, and there's plenty of people who've had those experiences. Then the work can be useful in a way. It can almost be a tool to accessing those dimensions. I mean some people trip and look at the book, or look at the art, and key into those states that are symbolized in it. And I see that as the real usefulness of the work, and that I think is one of the greatest things about sacred art.

David: To act as something like an access code, or a doorway to a particular dimension, reality, or vibration.

Alex: Exactly. Yeah. If you can make a portal to the mystical experience, it's like using music or something to key experiences in the psychedelic state as well, which has long been recognized as a beneficial technology for orienting the mind in a way.

David: How has your wife influenced your work? You say that you met her on that night you both did psychedelics for the first time. Has she remained as powerful of an influence?

Alex: Oh totally. Together we are a third mind that neither one of us alone could be, and so we each guide the other one's art. I did a performance called "Life Energy", back in around 1978, and I had made these charts-- of the Eastern model of Life Energy, and of the Western nervous system, as just an anatomical model, where consciousness is seen as a by-product of the nervous system. And contrasting those two charts I even had a little area set off in front of the image, so that a person could stand in that. They were life-size charts, and you would stand in that zone and then try to mirror the system within your own body. I did many variations of this during Life Energy performance. But as we were walking away afterwards, Alyson said, "You know it would really be great if you did fully detailed oil paintings of these different systems that people could stand in front of." Because that was really the most successful thing about that performance. So at that moment I felt doomed to doing the "Sacred Mirrors", because that was really the inspiration behind it. So she's inspired me to do numerous paintings, I think, some of my best work. She's a great designer in her own work.

David: And you've worked on paintings together as well.

Alex: Yeah. Alyson did the halo in the "Sophia" painting. And, as a friend was noticing last night, my most recent works-- such as "Transfiguration" and the "Prostration"-- have elements of Alyson's geometric grid systems, that are very related to the DMT complexities of kaleidoscopic kinds of sacred geometries. So her own work is very strong, and I'm influenced by being around it.

David: Have your dreams inspired you? If so, how have they influenced your work?

Alex: Sure. With the "Transfiguration" painting, I had a dream that I was painting it before I actually did, and I saw this painting that I had yet to do. So that was my first contact with that painting. And then I happened to do DMT a few weeks later, and I was immediately thrust into the space of that painting that I had dreamt of. I was experiencing it from the inside. I wasn't just painting it then, I was experiencing what it would be like inside of the painting, and what state of being I was trying to project. And I could colorfy elements that I was a little uncertain of, having seen it in a dream-- what was down here, what was down there, and so on. It became a little bit more clear, though not all questions were solved at that point. It kind of nailed it in a way. Now I'm going to have to do this painting. It's come up twice, and very strongly. So I got other kinds of information later, but that was a painting that relied on both. Doing the "Half My-Hair Shaved" piece came in a dream as well. I saw myself in a garbage can with this haircut. You know, open up the can, and there I was. Numerous kinds of images and things come in dreams. I've had other dreams where I'm doing certain paintings, and they've given me information about the way they look.

David: Are there any other avenues that you use to access the unconscious, and what else has inspired you?

Alex: Oh sure, the creative visualization stuff, I think, is surprisingly effective. Also shamanic drumming. All that stuff can be pathways to expanded, imaginative territories. Sometimes even just like nothing can do it, you know, you're just standing there. I'm sure that same thing happens with musicians, where they just get wowed by a musical piece or something. Likewise you can get wowed with a vision. It's just like I'm waiting for the subway, and whomp, something comes along. That happened with the "World Soul" piece. I was waiting for a subway, and Ba-whoom! I was in no altered state. I was not anticipating anything in particular, and just-- complooeey! It was there striking my mind, and it led to two years working on a sculpture. So it's not always in the psychedelic state that these things are accessed. Once the door is open, you're permeable to these transdimensional blow-darts of vision. And you see that you're just a grunt-- you're really being used by the Logos. It's kind of the whipping boy to spend time doing this picture. They're sent from somewhere.

David: So you feel like sometimes you're not really doing it, like it's just happening though you?

Alex: No, I think I'm physically creating it. But as far as where the vision comes from, that I think is seeing into something else, or it's like one is being given a gift-- like here's this one for you. We're giving somebody else this other one, but here's yours, and now you're supposed to do this. But I think that's the way with all the arts probably. It's not that different.

David: In the beginning of Sacred Mirrors you say that you and your wife actually shared the same vision of the energy fountains and drains.

Alex: Right. The Universal Mind Lattice. Yeah, that was an extraordinary trip that really convinced me of the reality of the transpersonal dimensions, because she had experienced the same transpersonal space at the same time. And it seemed also, to both of us, more real than the phenomenal world-- the connectedness with all beings and things through this kind of love energy. It changed our work. Now we had to make art about that. How could you say that making a political protest work was more important than that? There was nothing more important than that. And so it changed our orientation.

David: Was there anything else in particular that inspired you?

Alex: Besides that?

David: Well, beside all these things we just talked about-- psychedelics, relationship, dreams.

Alex: Oh well, I think there's art of all different cultures. There's the shamanic art from various world cultures. Not only Tchelitchew was doing this translucent bodies in a way, but shamanic art from all world cultures has had this kind of "x-ray" art, where they see into the body and stuff. I think that has to do with a clairvoyant perception of the body, and also the Huichol paintings will deal with the x-ray, and energies surrounding the body. So in their yarn paintings and things they'll have great jets of light and things surrounding the bodies. And there's a whole tradition of subtle energy art.

David: Like Pablo Amaringo's work.

Alex: Ayahuasca visions. Yeah, terrific stuff. So I'm inspired by psychedelic art of all kinds, like Ernst Fuchs and Mati Klairwein, those kind of painters who are still painting today. Tanaka painting has been an influence. I feel like we

now have access to the spiritual traditions and the cultures of many of the world's great civilizations which artists have never had before. It's almost like the seals of the apocolypse are opening and during the Twentieth Century we get to see our past, like this cave art thing that was recently revealed in France, and new access to our ancient roots of our art. The oldest art of tens of thousands of years ago, and the magic that inspired that. Then all the different world cultures, and their kind of art. So, we're in a unique position at the end of the Twentieth Century to access all those traditions, and synthesize them in a sense to a continuing and evolving spiritual tradition.

David: It seems to me that the past will be available to us even more so in the future. Now there's a paradox. You spoke a little bit about what inspired the "Sacred Mirrors" project before. Did you want to say a little bit more about what the concept behind it was?

Alex: Well, The "Sacred Mirrors," being this series of twenty one panels that examine in fine detail the human anatomy-- on a physical and a metaphysical level of the body. It examined the individual being in high detail on these various levels of body, mind, spirit. And I think of them really as kind of a grounding tool. The last time I experienced them all as a group I had the opportunity to trip and to be with them, and they do a kind of subtle body work. By standing in front of them they perform an act of alignment I think with the subtle body. I'm not exactly sure what it does, but when I was standing in front of the "Psychic Energy System" my vitality or vital essence was pulled out through my eyes, and pulled into the painting, like a magnet or something. And it went into this glowing body, and like electrons zipping around a hard drive or something, was being reformatted by it.

I felt like this vital essence was somehow being reformatted or something. Then it was like the place back, it kind of like oozed back into my body, and that was something very parculiar. It felt like a real tool, like there was some kind of subtle body manipulation that was going on. Like some kind of body work, and these were tools to do that, to perform some task of catalyzing the evolution of consciousness. And that they weren't something that I did, but they were something that I was given to do. It seemed like they were a gift from the future, that was projected to my mind state. Maybe these things all sound really silly.

David: Not to me.

Alex: But it seemed like that was what they were. They were like one of the little lifejackets or little life-savers that were tossed back into the time stream to yank it towards...

David: The Omega Point.

Alex: Yeah, right. So that was odd. But I felt even more committed to making them accessible to people in the form of a chapal. And that's what I'd really like to be able to create is their accessability, and what I'm looking for now is sight and support to create this chapel that the "Sacred Mirrors" would be part of. There's other elements as well that I have a design that I'd like to create. I'd like to create original architecture. But I think that it could also possibly become part of some existing architecture. It depends on the funding, and where it could be. So we're looking to perhaps have it be within a community.

David: I'm curious about your views on the evolution of consciousness.

Alex: It seems that to me the universe was made to become self-aware. It's like a self-awareness machine, and maybe that's because I'm a human being, but I think that the world was created just for little old me to manifest

the boundless experiences of identity with the entire universe, and also with the pregnant void that gives birth to the phenomenal universe. That's the Logos, that's the point of a universe, for this increasing complexity and increasing self-awareness. The evolution of consciousness is the counter-force to the entropic laws of thermodynamics that end in stasis, heat death, and the loss of order and things. Whereas the evolution of consciousness appears to gain complexity, mastery, and wisdom.

Lessons are learned over a lifetime-- maybe sometimes, some lifetimes. And the soul grows and hopefully attains a form of Buddhahood and awakenedness. Buddha was the "Awakened One". To be able to access all these simultaneous parallel dimensions, and come from that ground of loving, the ground of infinite compassion that the Buddha awakenedness comes from. I think that's a good goal for the evolution of consciousness. I see that as the projected spiritual goal or fruit in a lot of the different spiritual paths-- the growth in compassion, the growth in wisdom, and that those things are simultaneously developed.

David: So as a result are you optimistic about the future evolution of humanity?

Alex: That's kind of a big leap. (laughter) I suppose if you're professing those goals, at least part of me has some optimism about the potential that human beings have for manifesting these buddhic qualities of compassion, spiritual heroism, and reverence for all life. There's always problems in this phenomenal world, but if we were coming from those ideal ethical points of view as best we can, we can cause less harm. Then there's hope. There's hope for a future to hand our children, and their children, but you also hold a kind despair. I can't deny the despair over the catastrophic disasters that human beings have wrought to the planet and to each other, and the kind of deludedness that seems part and parcel of this culture and many cultures.

When you live in New York City you really wonder whether there's much hope for humanity, I must say. But then there's bright rays of hope. I don't like to be in this vacillation between fear and hope. The Buddhist teachings really caution against the entrapment in those kinds of emotions. But hey, we're in samsara, and so you're subject to those emotions. Ultimately you could say I'm optimistic because the primordial nature of mind will never change no matter what happens, and that this show may change. We may appear in another universe, or in another dimension, but in some form the energy will be around. So there's no reason to get too upset about it. A friend of mine and I were talking about how maybe the plants are hoping to get rid of us, and then just evolve a new species themselves, that is, if they're able to survive this ozone depletion and other things we've created.

David: Well, but plants can't survive without animals.

Alex: Yeah, I know, there's a real symbiosis there. But some other new evolute will occur, even on this petri dish of a planet. You never know what's going happen.

David: Has raising a family at all interfered with your creative work? Maybe I should ask that differently. How has raising a family affected you creatively?

Alex: (Laughter) Well, I have a daughter. When you spend time with your family, sure you could say that, gee whiz, I could be painting. But it's my opportunity during her youth to spend time with her. She's going to be probably our only child during this lifetime together with my wife and I. If I don't avail myself or take the opportunity to spend time with her now, I feel I'll regret it later. And it's like she's our only one, so we take full advantage of it, of the opportunity, and see the stages of growth in her mind as she develops. Her art development too is wonderful

to witness and to interact with. So she teaches us, and she's a great teacher. You need to spend time with your teachers in order to learn new things, and those things can find their way into my work.

Wherever I'm at in my life is going to come through in my work, or influence it. Hopefully it's deepening to my work. So the experience of having a family, and having profound loving relationships, is one of things that give one a tremendous feeling of joy in life. And that happiness and joy, that you can bounce off of each other is good energy. The world needs it. And to manifest that in my work, on some level, I think is a healthy thing. So I think that it has altered it in that, yes I accomplish less in terms of overall production now, because I spend more time with my family. But I appreciate them, and I try to make work that uses the experiences that we've had together to make more profound work hopefully. So there.

David: Can you tell me a little bit about the projects that you're currently at work on?

Alex: I'm soon to start a painting called "Nature of Mind", a piece being commissioned. It's something I've been thinking about for a long time, a way of visualizing those Dzogchen teachings of the sky-like nature of mind. And that's an alter piece, a seven paneled work. So that's a piece that's going to occupy a good part of my time. I'm trying to create more architectural models of the chapel space that I mentioned, and so this Chapel of World Spirit is something that I'm deeply committed to and trying to also develop, when I have the time, as far as a space goes. I'd like to create a virtual chapel on a CD-ROM, to make the space more viable, more real, so as to eventually create the physical chapel. Perhaps this would be a way of creating another step towards its development. So those are potential possibilities. But I don't have a definite contract to produce the CD-ROM, whereas I'm in the process of doing the paintings. And I got a show coming up in LA in the summer.

David: Where?

Alex: La Luz de Jesus.

David: On Melrose in Hollywood. That's a great place.

Alex: Yeah right, so that'll be fun. I've got a lot of other potential projects, but it's too soon to really talk about them. Of course, I'm working on my next book-- Transfigurations. It will include the work about the World Soul sculpture that I spent a few years working on, a lot of recent paintings, and probably a chapter on self-portrait work, which is something I've done from the earliest time. From the time I was fifteen years old I was doing a serious series of self-portraits. I have hundreds and hundreds of these things. And along with it I've done a lot of thinking about the nature of the self and stuff like that. So I wanted to bring those together. It'll be a little bit different than the Sacred Mirrors book, more like chapters covering different subjects. But that's a book in the works.

Featured Art 'Prostration' by Alex Grey



Copyright © 2024 Alex Grey
All Rights Reserved

Built with ♥ in Wappinger, New York