

BL!SSS

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Alex Grey - Quest for Truth

Visionary art guru and mystic, Alex Grey takes a few moments to discuss his work and thoughts on art before jetting out to give a lecture at the Museum H.R. Giger in Gruyères, Switzerland.

A Conversation with Alex Grey by Greg Escalante and Nathan Spoor for BL!SSS Magazine.

Alex Grey: BL!SSS is great. Our daughter has exposed me to your exalted publication.

Greg Escalante and Nathan Spoor: So Alex, when did you know that you were, in fact, an artist?

Alex Grey: There wasn't a time that I was not an artist. Most kids start out drawing and at some point decided "it's not for me" or "I can't do it as good as Johnny." Some kids give it up. For me it was always the most fun thing, the thing I could do.

Greg & Nathan: So when were you actually "acknowledged" as an artist officially, or at what point do you feel that that happens for an artist?

Alex Grey: I received early "strokes." My first grade teacher, Mrs. Kessler allowed me to continue drawing my portrait of Abraham Lincoln while the rest of class went on to reading circle. She said, "Alex is going to be a great artist someday!" It was a lot to live up to and it made a big difference. Even then, I was drawing at a level beyond my age.

A few years ago, my mother gave me a box of my childhood drawings. Lo and behold, at 5 years old I was drawing skeletons. At ten I painted a grim reaper. Bones and the subject of death have always been a focus in my work.

Greg & Nathan: Did you attend any art school or have any formal training?

Alex Grey: From high school I was offered a full four-year scholarship to Columbus College of Art and Design in Ohio. Only one was offered annually. I attended CCAD for two years but in the mid-70's the art world had it that "painting is dead." So, I became interested in dead things and took up performance art. For my first performance, "Secret Dog," I stopped and picked up a dead dog in the road, took it down to a river and documented its decay.

Decades later I learned of the Tibetan Buddhist practice of "Charnal Grounds Meditation" where seekers contemplate the decay of corpses in order to experience the impermanence of the flesh. "Secret Dog," done in 1973 in Columbus, Ohio. I related the smelly decay and goo with the ribs sticking out to be a projection of my own human illness, and in a more worldly sense to be related to the Vietnam War and the pathologies of our government.

Performance artists that intrigued me at that time were the Viennese Actionists who created pageants that included animal sacrifice and inter-special sex, Chris Burden who shot himself and had himself crucified to the top of a Volkswagen Beetle, and other transgressive types that I found more interesting than the Minimalists or the Color Field painters popular at that time.

Reading avant-garde art magazines like *Avalanche* and the early *Art Forum* became my art school education and I decided to leave school, to the great dismay of my parents, purchase a huge box of every back issue of those magazines and read them. I got a job as an artist for Columbus Outdoor Advertising and worked on giant oil painted billboards for Coca Cola, banks, ice cream companies and politicians. I called this period of my art Capitalist Realism.

After working hard for a year and saving my money, I sent myself to art school for one year at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston where a conceptual/performance artist I admired, Jay Jaraslov, was a professor. I studied with him and was his studio assistant that year and then felt that my money would not be well spent to continue there, but rather to invest in a loft space where I could simply live and pursue my performances.

Greg & Nathan: How did you move from those early performances into painting?

Alex Grey: My performances included a trip to the North Magnetic Pole to study polarities and the phenomenon called "Polar Wandering." I was fascinated that geomagnetic North, the place where all compass needlepoint, the place we use to get our bearings, is in constant motion. I came back from this trip having spent all of my money and still looking for answers. As a committed existentialist in the past, I, for the first time in memory, asked God for a sign. I said "If you are there, I need you now." Within 24 hours I had taken my first dose of LSD, made contact with the divine unity of all polarities and met my wife, Allyson, who has been for me divinity in the flesh for 33 years.

Allyson was someone I could talk to about all future performances and artwork, being a wonderful artist herself, and soon we planned performances together. At a performance we called "Life Energy," participants were invited to stand before life-sized charts, one of the nervous system and one of the esoteric systems of the body -- the chakras, acupuncture meridians and points, the auras, etc., and meditate or reflect on their own personal bodily systems. We led the group to experience their "life energy" in a variety of exercises. To end the performance, for the purpose of experiencing the passing of life energy, I sacrificed a rat for art in the manner that rats are sacrificed daily in science labs, using a special guillotine made for that purpose.

Heading home, feeling terrible about the rat, Allyson turned to me and said, "You know, people really loved the charts. It would be great if you'd make life sized oil paintings of the physical and esoteric systems of the body."

That was in 1978, and I began painting again. Not long after, Allyson came up with the title of the series, the "Sacred Mirrors."

Greg & Nathan: Tell us more about the Sacred Mirrors. You have created a chapel in New York City for the series.

Alex Grey: The Chapel of Sacred Mirrors opened in the heart of the gallery district of New York City on the autumnal equinox, 2004. Thousands from all over the world have visited. On December 31, 2008 our lease expires and we've decided not to renew that lease but rather to move on to the next phase. Our goal has always been to build a sacred temple and to do that the Chapel must have land. Allyson and I found a 40-acre lot about an hour's drive from the city, accessible by public transportation. It's a 15-minute walk from the New Hamburg stop on the Metro North Train from mid-town Manhattan.

It's beautifully private and wooded, inclining up a hill from the Hudson River. A gradual incline is a recommended approach to a sacred place. Shinto shrines are always built on a hill. CoSM bought the site from The United Church of Christ who operated it as a retreat center. A chapel once stood on the crest of the hill, but it is no longer there. Massive stone steps leading up the hill to an empty meadow signal its past existence.

First, we will renovate an existing brick building to house the CoSM collection. People will be again invited to enjoy the work and we will hold moon ceremonies, workshops and conferences while we raise money to build an astonishing twenty-first century sacred sanctuary to visionary art.

Sadly, this last year saw the passing of two great men in my life. My dad died in March at age 90. He was an artist all his life and inspired me that a man could be a working artist. He was my first art teacher. Although I gave him reason to doubt my artistic pursuits during my more transgressive performance period, he later acknowledged my artwork and our relationship felt really complete when he told me how proud he was of my accomplishments and my ability to make manifest my artistic dreams.

In April of 2008, Dr. Albert Hofmann, the inventor of LSD passed at age 102. We had the good fortune to spend time with Dr. Hofmann on several occasions and in many ways, he has been like a spiritual father, having sourced my contact with the divine. We were in Basel, Switzerland for Dr. Hofmann's 102nd birthday at which time I spoke with his son and made a special bond. In correspondence with his son, I asked if there might be a special "relic" of Dr. Hofmann's that we could include in our Chapel. A few years before Allyson and I traveled to Chartres Cathedral outside of Paris, a sacred place built around a relic, the garment Mary wore when she gave birth to Jesus. Chartres Cathedral is considered the originator of a Cathedral movement in Europe where sacred places were built around a relic - a piece of the cross, the bones of a saint, etc.

We hoped to acquire a relic from Dr. Hofmann, as his studies and advances in medicine and psychotherapy using lysergic acid diethylamide were of the greatest contribution to our own studies and progress and the reported opening to a great many people's creative and spiritual lives. Our request for a magic relic was enthusiastically granted by Dr. Hofmann's son, who sent us the glasses that Albert wore when he discovered/invented LSD, and during his famous bicycle ride, the first LSD trip. His glasses are a lens through which Dr. Hofmann saw reality,

and are a true relic in every aspect.

Greg & Nathan: Speaking of sacred places, could you tell us more about that place you recently did the book on – Damanhur in Turin, Italy?

Alex Grey: The late Mati Klarwein, a great visionary painter, sent an article to Allyson and I many years ago about the intentional community of Damanhur. Friends of ours, Wendy Grace and Michael Honack later offered to sponsor a book project on the temple created by this group and we worked with our designers, Eli Morgan and Marisa Scirocco on a beautiful large format pictorial book. This extraordinary spiritual community began, 30 years ago, building an exquisite temple inside a mountain in the pre-Alps in Italy. The Damanhur temple is a five-story structure filled with outstanding pictorial mosaic flooring, sculptures, muralled walls and the largest stained glass domes in the world (all underground and back lit). The symbolism and imagery is encyclopedic with an alchemical purpose. Damanhurians prepare visitors with rituals before entering the temple and guests must be led on a tour of the sacred spaces. The book published by CoSM Press is entitled Damanhur: Temples of Humankind. It is in its second edition and makes a beautiful gift. Visiting Damanhur is an unforgettable experience, as well.

Greg & Nathan: So with your connection to your work with the Chapel and your upcoming Temple opening, do you still show work in traditional art galleries?

Alex Grey: The Chapel of Sacred Mirrors is the finest installation of my art that's ever been mounted. It took nine full months and great expense to create the exhibition from a raw loft space. Allyson's work is on view also, as well as other visionary artists. CoSM occupies 12,000 sq.ft. That includes, not only the Chapel, but also a dance studio, an art studio and office and a gallery for rotating shows of other visionary artists and art projects. I have shown my work at many galleries. The work seems to attract artists and gallery folks as well as those that ordinarily don't give a hang about the art world.

Greg & Nathan: Have museums of mainstream audiences come to accept your work?

Alex Grey: I introduced Deepak Chopra to the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (MCASD) when they worked down the street from one another and had never met. Deepak, on the Board of Advisors of CoSM, helped sponsor a mid-career retrospective at MCASD and spoke at that opening. Before opening CoSM in New York City I also showed at Feature Gallery, a fixture here in Chelsea, the art district of Manhattan. When CoSM moves upstate I'll be working on future exhibitions at other galleries and museums.

I have worked with the band TOOL on two albums and this has exposed my art to literally millions of young people. Last year, I worked on the music video for the song "Vicarious" on their 10,000 Days album. When the work is pretty highly recognized and seems to be appreciated, I'm not sure who the mainstream audiences are.

Greg & Nathan: What are some of the influences on you and your work?

Alex Grey: My wife Allyson, is my greatest influence. She advises me on every work of art and inspires all that I've

done. She is an awesome artist and amazing abstract painter. We've made several pilgrimages in the past few years to see every Michelangelo sculpture and painting and to compile drawings that I do standing before his work. Aside from my wife, Michelangelo has always been my favorite master artist, offering the pinnacle of technique, meaning and emotion.

Studying Tibetan Buddhism has been important to my training where transmission occurs in relation to teachers. To be a true practitioner, one must receive that transmission which cannot come from reading or practice on ones own. For me, Michelangelo is that teacher, present in his artworks and sending me a transmission when I face a work of his art and draw it. I recommend that experience to all artists who can be enriched by drawing the art of their most inspiring teachers. My new book, Art Psalms, has a chapter "Meditations on the Masters" that includes writing and drawings from those experiences.

Greg & Nathan: What new knowledge did you gain from spending time with Michelangelo?

Alex Grey: My favorite work of art in the world is probably Michelangelo's "The Last Judgement" (mid 1500's fresco in the Sistine Chapel, Rome, Italy). A meat storm of fleshy bodies is flying around Jesus who floats in the hub of a kind of Taoist yin yang of heaven and hell. In his face, there's no anger at all. The forms are all twisted, yet he is a placid observer saying, "Some are going up and some are going down."

Greg & Nathan: What are some of the major thoughts that you would like to pass on to the readers?

Alex Grey: Painting the Sacred Mirrors ('79 - '80) I invented a translucent approach to the human body, which I call "transfiguration." This approach brings information to the surface via a level of truth that is, in fact, realism, bypassing the typical race and sometimes gender. By removing the skin, there is a transpersonalizing universality to the human figure that brings it into the realm of the sacred.

A more integral religious approach to truth would embrace the insights and knowledge based on science. An integration of science and spirituality is a goal in my work, as well as an examination into the nature of consciousness.

ALEX GREY



Use of Art

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