

## LUXURY MAGAZINE

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## Cosmic Creator

Visionary artist Alex Grey paints psychedelic canvases that reveal the union of body, mind and spirit, and with his wife, Allyson has co- founded an Art church devoted to sharing their mystic world view.

Conventional wisdom tells us to stay away from drugs and New Age religions, but artist Alex Grey is not conventional. LSD has taken him on mystical journeys that have inspired his mind-bending paintings and led him and his wife, the artist Allyson Rymland Grey, to co-found a “Art Church” centered on awakening the creative spirit in everyone. They call it CoSM, short for Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, a reference to Alex Grey’s most celebrated series of paintings. (<http://cosm.org>)

Grey’s “Sacred Mirrors” and other works have brought him renown among healers and members of the international psychedelic community. The Watkins Review named him one of the top twenty spiritual leaders of our day. Deepak Chopra, Ken Wilber, and Jean Houston have all served as advisors to CoSM. Wilber, director of the Integral Institute, praises Grey’s transcendental art as “not merely symbolic or imaginary: it is a direct invitation to recognize and realize a deeper dimension of our very own being.”

Born into a middle-class family in Columbus, Ohio in 1953, Grey’s father was a graphic designer who encouraged his son’s drawing. He attended Columbus College of Art and Design before dropping out to paint billboards. In 1974 he moved to Boston to study with conceptual artist Jay Jaroslav, a professor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. There he met fellow student Allyson Rymland, with whom he experimented with hallucinogens and collaborated on conceptual art performances.

He worked in a morgue, preparing cadavers for Harvard medical students, as a medical illustrator, and briefly as a research technologist at Harvard’s department of Mind/Body Medicine. In 1979 he began painting “The Sacred Mirrors,” 21 life-sized paintings of the human body that include depictions of internal physiology and abstract energy fields inspired by his acid trips. Grey says that the sequence “takes the viewer on a journey toward their own divine nature by examining the anatomy of body, mind, and spirit.”

A subsequent series, “The Progress of the Soul,” shows light-emitting translucent figures engaged in archetypal human experiences -- kissing, copulating, pregnancy, birth, nursing, praying, meditation, and dying. His more recent work explores consciousness from the perspective of “universal beings” whose bodies are grids of fire, eyes, and infinite galactic swirls.

In 1986, The “Sacred Mirrors” were shown at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. A mid-career retrospective was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego in 1999. His works have also been exhibited at Tibet House, Stux Gallery, and PS1 in New York, at the Grand Palais in Paris, and the Sao Paulo Bienal in Brazil. He and his wife, Allyson Grey, have collaborated on installations at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore.

Larger paintings, some more than seven feet high, have sold for as much as \$175,000. And he sells posters, books and other merchandise at CoSM and on the Internet. ([www.alexgrey.com](http://www.alexgrey.com))

The rock bands TOOL, SCI, the Beastie Boys and Nirvana have featured his paintings as album art, other works have been published in Time and Newsweek and appeared on the Discovery Channel. His art and ideas are the subject of several illustrated monographs, CDs, and videos. His book, The Mission of Art, explores creativity and spirituality throughout history. He co-edited (with writer Allan Hunt Badiner) Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics.

The couple – whose daughter Zena Grey is a Los Angeles-based actress who has appeared in Snow Day and The Bone Collector -- divide their time between a loft in Brooklyn and CoSM’s spiritual retreat in Wappinger, a town in the Hudson River Valley 65 miles north of Manhattan. The 40-acre campus includes the studio that they share, and a mansion where they conduct visionary art workshops, sessions on interfaith spirituality, meditation, yoga, and monthly Full Moon Festivals that attract hundreds of visitors for lectures, artmaking, music, poetry, and dancing, culminating in a great bonfire. They consider the project a “social sculpture.”

CoSM began in 1996 as a gathering of friends in the couple’s apartment. In 2000 they established a nonprofit to raise funds for a permanent home, and in 2004 expanded to a 12,000 square-foot space on a rented floor of a nightclub building in the Chelsea district of New York. They continued to host ceremonial gatherings there, surrounded by a number of their artworks, and in 2008 CoSM gained IRS recognition as an interdenominational church. The following year the couple acquired their wooded estate.

Currently under construction on the site is Entheon, an elaborately designed three-story 12,000-square-foot museum that will contain artwork by the Greys and other visionary artists. “The Sacred Mirrors” will be on display in a vaulted room where the couple will conduct weddings until a separate chapel is created to house the series. The galleries will feature the work of Allyson Grey -- whose colorful paintings of patterns and grids often include her own invented alphabet -- a chronicle of the history of visionary art, and a Psychedelic Reliquary including the spectacles of LSD discoverer Dr. Albert Hofmann and the ashes of Timothy Leary. The Greys no longer regularly consume psychedelic drugs, but continue to promote the spiritual and potentially therapeutic experiences that such mind-expanding substances can induce.

We spoke with Alex Grey in the Greys’ studio in the woods near the main house at CoSM. He told us about his career, how LSD changed his life, the mystical visions that have inspired his paintings, and live painting performances at the Burning Man festival in Nevada.

*Luxury: What was your childhood like in Ohio?*

Alex Grey: My father was a graphic designer who worked for North American Rockwell, a missile supplier. He was an artist for the military-industrial complex. I don't think I completely understood that until we were in the midst of the Vietnam War, and as a young child I was seeing the Vietnamese people being bombed on television at dinnertime. Going through the '60s, my brother and I were alarmed and disturbed by our government, and even by our family's entrenchment in the whole military operation. My father had been part of rescuing occupied Europe, and opening up some of the concentration camps in World War II, so his idea of the military was, "We're the good guys, and we do good things around the world to help people." My brother and I had a totally different perspective on that. So there was a kind of tension in the house.

*Luxury: Were you drafted?*

Alex: I was, but I got a low number, and then the war was over. We had a lot of friends who were on the run to Canada. But all of those shadows of childhood leave their mark.

*Luxury: Is your father the reason you became an artist?*

Alex: My father taught me how to draw, and I was encouraged and very excited to learn anything about art. But while he was a graphic designer for selling missiles, I feel like unconsciously -- or maybe consciously -- what I'm trying to do with my art is wage peace, to see that ethical decisions are bound up in the kinds of works that we do and the kind of energy that we put into the world.

*Luxury: Did you rebel against your father?*

Alex: Oh, yeah. When I was 21, I changed my name. His is "Velzy," so I kept "Velzy" as a middle name and added "Grey." By renaming myself, I thought I was fulfilling my purpose as an artist and becoming my true self, but I can see now that probably unconsciously I was rebelling, turning my back on my family in some way. I couldn't emotionally face that I was doing that, so I had this maybe equally legitimate excuse that I felt like a different person. I felt like I had died and been reborn as this other new person.

*Luxury: How did you decide that you wanted to study art?*

Alex: I always felt like an artist. I never felt not like an artist or that there were some other thing that I might do instead. It was just kind of, "Well, duh. That's what I'm doing." How best to do that and what did that mean was a whole other can of worms.

*Luxury: You went to the Columbus College of Art and Design. Were you thinking you would become a graphic designer like your father?*

Alex: No way. I wanted to be a fine artist. I wanted to be a painter, whatever a painter was. When I was in high school, I started to see Art in America and other magazines, and the artists I felt closest to were the Photorealists. Chuck Close, for example. Even though he treated his subjects very straightforwardly, the subjects were always important to him. Then I saw people like Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, and all the performance artists. I really connected with them in art school because they were making art about stuff that meant something to them, or questioning the nature of art on very deep levels. And there were elements of shamanism in their work, when art

making becomes like a ritual theater and the art itself becomes ceremonial. That became really interesting for me because that was where your ethical perspective on putting energy out into the world all comes together.

How do we work as artists? Is it the self as a bundle of fears and upsets and psychodynamics, or clear seeing? What is the focus of the artist? What's their subject? And so for me, it was always the self. The self is practically the only subject. But what is it? And how can we understand it in its greatest nature? You read the Quran and Muhammad says, "To know one's self is to know Allah" So this brings it into a religious dimension that self-knowledge is ultimately knowledge of the higher dimensions of self, the eternal self, the Godself.

*Luxury: Why did you leave school?*

Alex: My illustration professors were saying, "Oh, Alex, you could be doing TV Guide covers straight out of art school." That was their aspiration for me. Look, they meant me well, but I was repelled by their dreams for me. That was not what I aspired to be. Maybe I didn't even know what I wanted, but I knew that wasn't what I was aspiring to.

I left art school and then went to work for a billboard company. So, in rejection of a life of doing illustration, I go into making billboards! There's probably nothing more ugly and gross on the landscape, large oil paintings of things like Coke bottles and such. But I had to make money because I wanted to leave town and I wanted to go to Boston and study with a teacher there.

*Luxury: How did you know about this teacher?*

Alex: I read about him in *Avalanche*, a performance-art journal from the seventies. They did some of the first interviews with Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, William Wegman, all the characters from that era. I got excited by all those crazy, wonderful, inventive artists and one of them was Jay Jaroslav, who was profiled in one of those magazines. He was teaching at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and I applied. I went for one year and studied with Jay—an amazing artist and inspirational guide. He taught me a lot.

*Luxury: Was it during that year that you met your future wife, Allyson?*

Alex: Yes. She was dating Jay! According to her, they just went out to dinner, and he was taking me out to dinner as well. We were in a couple of his classes together. She was getting her MFA and we started talking because of the context of the class. We were both fairly intense characters, and I just really admired her artwork, and she voiced interest in what I was doing too. I guess we were destined to meet, and Jay brought us together.

*Luxury: When did you first take LSD and how did it affect your life and your art?*

Alex: I did not take LSD until I was 21. It was the end of that school year in Boston, and I was suicidally depressed. Basically, I dared God to appear in my life or I would find a way out. I was saying goodbye to my professor on the street corner and Allyson drove around the corner in a yellow VW and says, "Hey, I'm having a party later tonight. You guys want to come?"

I was on that street corner for two minutes. It might never have happened. My life would be entirely different. I may not even be alive if it weren't for that. I was desperate. I had broken up with my girlfriend right around that time, and I'd spent all my money. I'd been doing crazy things like cutting off the hair on half my head. I was

exploring polarities that year, and the half-hair was like the hemispheres of the brain, intuitive and logical. It was like I had nothing left to live for anyway and nothing left to lose, so why not take some acid? What could go wrong? And at the party I took LSD, I learned God exists, and I got together with Allyson. I discovered that love exists and I could be happy. All of that happened within about 24 hours of daring God to appear.

*Luxury: What was the trip like, and why was it so transformative?*

Alex: My first acid trip, when I closed my eyes I was in a tunnel and I was spiraling. It was like being inside of a seashell, something mother-of-pearly. And right around the corner there was intense light. I was in the dark and spiraling toward the light. There were shades of all the values of grey in that tunnel that brought the opposites together, resolving the polarities. That's when I decided to rename myself "Grey." I saw grey uniting spirit and matter. That's the great combo that sacred art has always been built from. That would be my quest as an artist.

I called Allyson the next day and said, "Wow. Something happened to me and I'd love to talk to you about it." Because I knew she had taken the LSD, too, though that was not her first journey. She had kind of met God on acid a few years earlier.

You must have been grateful that you had someone to share that experience with and help you make sense of it.

I had seen a shockingly positive transcendental light inside myself. Allyson helped me see the same divine love and light in the world, in the flesh. I realized I could be happy.

*Luxury: You and Allyson continued to take acid together?*

Alex: Yes, and on some of those journeys I would see worlds. It was June 3rd, 1976 that Allyson and I had a journey together that really changed our lives and artwork. We were lying together in our bed having taken LSD and wearing blindfolds, listening to Bach organ music played by Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer was a Bach scholar before he became a doctor, and he would play concerts to raise money to finance his medical center in Africa. I loved Schweitzer and I loved his altruism, and we would imagine this great being sharing the amazing organ works of that other great being, Bach, and it was a very healing space.

*Luxury: What was so special about that experience?*

Alex: We entered an infinite dimension of light and love. Our bodies became toroidal balls of light. Every being was a fountain of love energy linked with every other.

*Luxury: Toroidal?*

Alex: If you cut an apple in half it's almost like a circle on each side, and in the center is a space like a donut or a bagel. It's basically the same form in a bar magnet if you look at the lines of force. The earth's geomagnetic field is a toroidal energy field. I felt like that's what I was, too, part of an infinite mirrored cord made of light. Think of a sphere, and down the center of it there was this cord. But then it comes out in lines of force that seemed to go around and in like a fountain. And they were also coming out the bottom and going back in, so it was both directions. It was light, and within it had been encoded every lifetime and being. It was like there wasn't any more

physical world. It was like we are living a flesh dream and the more real realm is made of light and love that transcends the flesh and is throwing off little sparks to experience dimensions of reality.

*Luxury: How do you know that she had a similar vision?*

Alex: I came out of the mind fold and said, “Oh my God.” And she said she had been there, too. So I said, “I’m going to draw it. You draw it.” And what we separately drew was very similar, a network of curving lines. We talked about the circulating bands of light, and that at a certain point it seemed like you could see an infinite vista of them.

*Luxury: Could that be related to the architectural structure of the Bach organ pieces?*

Alex: That’s an interesting thought. It could well have been elicited by that. But there are two other incidents which are remarkably similar. First, a guy came to my show in Japan in the early 2000s and he lifted up his shirt and showed me an elliptical welt raised maybe a quarter of an inch. He had been struck by lightning — and died, and then was revived. When he died he experienced this place that he was mad about telling all of his friends about. One of them showed him my painting and he burst into tears and said, “That’s it!” He traveled to Tokyo to tell me this story.

In looking for other references, Allyson found the “Jewel Net of Indra”, which is a myth of how the Hindu God Indra creates space. The net is spun throughout all space, and at every node in the net there’s a jewel that reflects every other jewel. We had a very similar sense of that infinite net of nodes, and being one of those nodes.

The first near-death experience reported in mainstream media was in Reader’s Digest in the early ‘70s. Victor Solow described something very similar. He had a heart attack, and wound up in this network of light that was all love.

I found one other reference to something similar in “Varieties of Psychedelic Experience,” a book by Jean Houston. Since then, I’ve met other people who’ve said they had visited a place like this. It felt very much like a kind of computer drawing of infinite spaces. There was only light and space and kind of rainbow hues, so it felt like liquid, but it was light. I call it the “universal mind lattice.”

*Luxury: That’s quite a vision. Modern science has explained that reality is, on one level, fields of energy, and that the world as we know it is held together by various forces. But to call that love – and not, say, conflict -- sounds like an optimistic interpretation, almost like faith.*

When you have the experience, then you will know what I mean. It’s just like when you experience orgasm, or you hear the most astonishing piece of music or something that sends you into an ecstatic rapture and a boundary-dissolving oneness. In that flow of oneness and positivity, the most affirmative yes of life itself, your heart is beating. It’s not deciding, “Should I?” You have a body and a life, and in that positive affirmation of existence is creative energy that I feel is our soul.

Our blindness to seeing life as a positive gift from God, that’s the jihad of everyday life -- a holy war we fight inside ourselves to come to God, to open up to the positive love that surrounds us.

*Luxury: I have felt that kind of ebullience and sense of joyous love. I imagine that some people live with that all the time, but I find it is unsustainable. Is that a state that just befalls someone, or is it a choice? Is it actually representative of the true nature of things, or is it simply an advisable perspective to have on existence?*

Such awesome questions. I think that it's up to everybody to make those decisions themselves. My perspective shifted -- from a suicidally depressed young man I became a mystic, more or less. And my artwork is a way of sharing the highest perspectives that I can glimpse. If you're an artist, you're always working to make a thing better. And that's ultimately the nature of our consciousness. We're trying to see our shadows and not pretend we don't have them, and find out how we can integrate that information as best we can and try to get some measure of truth about things.

I think truth, goodness, and beauty are the foundations of a right civilization, and these are elements hard to find reflected in American culture. For people who are looking outside of themselves for an anchor, it's very difficult in today's world to find any kind of trustworthy media. It's why I'm a painter. Painting can share the still, small voice of conscience that we hear in our soul. It's not like the shrill media, it's possible to capture and share the whispers of spirit. This is why Allyson and I felt that we had to create a new place to see these visions in.

*Luxury: How did you do that?*

Alex: In creating performances, finding new venues and new places to explore new ideas. We did performances together for numerous years. One of them was a piece called Prayer Wheel that took place in a square gallery where my "Sacred Mirrors" series were exhibited. In the center we built an eight foot high and wide prayer wheel that glowed from the inside, and there were these big Tibetan letters, "Om Mani Padme Hum." For the performance, Allyson and I were painted gold, she was holding a realistic gold baby doll, and I had a skeleton attached to my back. I was standing behind Allyson and we were roped together, so as we walked our legs moved together. The goal was to express the unity of polarities. We are both male and female, 23 chromosomes from each, and we're somewhere between birth and death. It was at UMass Amherst and hundreds of people came. Most people didn't know what to make of it.

## Visionary Painting

*Luxury: It's one thing to have visions, and another to be able to realize it in a visual image. How did you translate your ideas into paintings?*

Alex: Inspired by my LSD journeys, I wanted to make art about consciousness. But I felt like the best way to do that would be to portray the body, because it's the box that consciousness comes in. I wanted to do X-rayed figures because that's more universal, not like realism where you're seeing a particular person, of a particular race and time. And creating a translucent anatomy meant that I could allude to a world unseen. I could introduce material like auras and energy fields around the body, because we're open to the idea that our visions are seeing things that are there but normally hidden. The intention was to get at the human experience, the things that unite us.

*Luxury: It sounds like you are describing "The Sacred Mirrors" series. How did you conceive that project?*

Alex: In 1978 Allyson and I did this performance called Life Energy. I put some charts of anatomical systems up on the wall and invited people to stand in front of them and see if they could sense the systems in their body. It was a kind of a performative painting to stimulate awareness of our vital forces. Part of that performance was really transgressive. I thought that at the end we should witness the passing of life energy, too, and to do that I sacrificed a rat. I decapitated it with a medical device. We warned people, and some left, but afterwards we thought we had lost all of our friends. Nobody wanted to talk, everybody was like, "Oh, geez." We left there thinking, "What have we done? Oh my god." Then Allyson says, "You know, Alex, people really loved the charts. What you ought to do is maybe a whole series based on that -- body, mind, and spirit." And that was the birth of "The Sacred Mirrors." She also named the series.

The charts were outlines of a figure containing internal anatomical systems, and also with the Indian chakras indicated.

That's what "The Sacred Mirrors" were all about. They were about the various systems of the anatomy. This was the way I taught myself medical illustration. I was working at the morgue preparing the bodies for Harvard medical students, so I could see bodies and how they are dissected. One of the doctors at Harvard had seen my "Sacred Mirror" paintings, and it had gotten around among some of my doctor friends to look at the paintings. So a call came in from a pharmaceutical company asking for a medical illustrator, and they said, "Hey, what about this kid?" They gave them my name instead of Harvard's medical illustrator, so I got out of the morgue business! I also worked for the Psychoneuroimmunology Department, the early mind-body medicine department at Harvard that was doing experiments in healing energy and consciousness research.

*Luxury: The figures in your paintings are always idealized in proportion. No one's plump or ugly.*

Alex: I idealize them because I am inviting people to stand in front and feel the healing energy and have the most positive relationship with these images. They are put forward not as realistic presentations, but as models of the ideal that we could identify and lean toward in our identity. We hold ideals in ourselves and for ourselves, and this comes back to the ethical thing.

*Luxury: Do you think that representing ideals could create a barrier to people who do not have the same body type?*

Alex: That's why we did a show called "Everybody is a Sacred Mirror" [2005]. For about half a year, we invited people who wanted to get naked in front of a black wall. Allyson or I would take a photograph of them, and put the pictures inside of a little arched frame. We had over 130 different people wanting to be part of it – every race, massively tattooed people, a one-legged guy, a really big woman with her children. So we had diversity. When you're promoting some kind of ideal thing, you definitely want to break that down and say, "No, we're trying to say this applies to everybody," and we're just trying to look for universals to emphasize.

*Luxury: Your figures often are embedded in patterns of repeating lines and vibrant colors that call to mind abstraction. How do you think of your work in relation to modernist abstraction?*

Alex: Jackson Pollock is one of my favorite painters. And Mark Rothko. I think of both of them as very spiritual painters. For me, Pollock's drip paintings show the face of God, the network, the web. I try to put the web in my

work in various ways. You can see in the Eco Atlas and other paintings that there's a web of interconnectedness. There are veins and all sorts of webbing that hold things together. For Pollock to make that the subject was unprecedented. And for Rothko to remove all things -- to rub out everything but leave the emotional, the trauma and doom, the big emotions -- I feel resonant with that.

*Luxury: A number of your works include the earth, the sea, mountains and landscapes. What do you think distinguishes your take on these traditional subjects?*

Alex: When I point to the earth or the planet as a subject, it's the web of life. It's the environment that forms us and that we're a part of. I try to indicate the universal, that there's a web of intelligence over the earth and spread throughout the cosmos and that we can unite with that intelligence. That provides access to a conscious earth or the Gaia, or to the living well of intelligence that I think Gaia, as a metaphor or an archetype, is referring to.

## Teaching and Performing at Burning Man

*Luxury: You teach classes at the Omega Institute, at your spiritual retreat CoSM, and at other venues. How did you become a teacher, and what is it that you teach in your classes?*

Alex: I first became a teacher when I taught anatomy and figurative sculpture at NYU back in the '90s. Allyson and I have been teaching the Visionary Art Intensive for 27 years at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York. We lead workshops occasionally in other places, as well. One of our favorite Vision Practices is to spend the day drawing a beautiful yogini model in a pose evocative of each of the seven "chakra" energy centers of the body. You use a color resonant with that energy center and listen to music supporting that state of being. Afterwards, it's like you've done a purification and an activation of your "light-body" through art.

*Luxury: You also do painting performances at Burning Man. What are those projects?*

Alex: Burning Man is just one of the most phenomenal places on earth. A Mecca for creative freaks. You could say that it's a result of life-as-art. It's an artist-run operation outside of existing cultural institutions, for pressing the artist's and society's personal edge.

Last year we painted a 32' mural of dancing people that I called Star Dancers. It's like dozens of dancing skeletons but with rainbow auras around them. Allyson and I have been working on it for several years, and at Burning Man we worked on it in the tent where people are invited to shower. About 20 at a time, they take their clothes off, get in line, and go into a huge glass box to shower together, foam jets of Dr. Bronner's magic soap is sprayed all over them, they either wash themselves or each other, then get hosed off. It's like a carwash for people and sooo much fun. Transfoamation! Afterwards they come out, and there are DJs playing music. They have coconut oil and other body oils to apply and then you can dance for as long as you like. I've never seen that many dancing naked people. I mean it was astonishing - 100 naked dancing people. It's the most fun and most awesome ecstatic experience. We're painting dancing naked people, and it's just the perfect marriage of an environment and the painting. David Bronner is a genius and has devised the most amazing camp at Burning Man that we are honored to be part of.

## Painting Process

*Luxury: How long have you and Allyson been sharing the studio and home at CoSM?*

Alex: Allyson and I have shared our studio home since 1975. In 2010, we built the studio of our dreams on the CoSM property.

*Luxury: What medium do you use in the paintings?*

Alex: Either oil or acrylic. I make a drawing usually on the canvas, and then start painting. For some, I'll start with a darker ground and raise light out of it, and for others I'll just start with a blank canvas and keep painting.

*Do you use photographs as reference?*

Alex: Yes, but if it's a portrait of somebody, like the Dalai Lama, I usually try to rely on multiple images and try to make an image that doesn't correspond exactly to one existing thing, but to a combination of photographs and kind of a persona that I'm trying to get at.

*Luxury: Some of your paintings are fiery orange, and others are blue and green. How do you choose your palette?*

Alex: It's interesting. I was doing a lot of fiery colors around 1999 to 2012. I was doing a lot of ayahuasca those years and I think the orange elements correspond to the fiery vision that I had of The Net of Being. The recent paintings have a cooler palette. In the Tibetan system blue is the color of space, and for us it's like the sky. But there's also "the blues," the element of sadness and maleness wrapped up in blue. I had a vision of Atlas, an Eco Atlas that sensed the gravity of his relationship with the planet he supports. There's an element of sadness in that because of the way that we're treating the earth. So the blue points to an emotional character, too. But, for most of my life I've had a love affair with primaries – red, yellow and blue.

*Luxury: Do you think all colors have individual symbolism?*

Alex: Yes. The recent painting Vajra Guru – that's Padmasambhava, the teacher who brought Buddhism to Tibet in the 8th century – is a red painting, with other primaries in smaller doses. The blue is "space" and yellow-gold is the vajra light, the life energy. I think of the red as the lifeblood, like fire at the center of things animating the flesh.

*Luxury: You're working on a portrait of Albert Hofmann, the discoverer of LSD. How did you meet him?*

Alex: We met at various psychedelic gatherings around the world. He was a scientist and a mystic too. I made an earlier painting of Dr. Hofmann based on a famous picture of him holding the LSD molecule, and on his 100th birthday in 2006, he signed the back of it. He also wrote the foreword for one of my books. After he died, his family gave us the eyeglasses he was wearing in the portrait, which we'll display in the Enttheon gallery we are building.

## **Commercial Ventures**

*Luxury: Marijuana plants appear in many of your works. You made the logo for Higher Vision Cannabis?*

Alex: Cannabis is the most beneficial plant in the world and has been cultivated as a sacrament and medicine and hemp for over 10,000 years. The American government has had an evil racist crusade against this benign boon

for decades. Read the science and you will understand.

I support the cannabis and hemp industry as a way to heal the world. I invented the Higher Vision logo and then sold the rights to my friend Adam so he could use it to forward his very pure medicine.

*Luxury: You did the album art for the rock band Tool. Can you talk about your relationship with the music world?*

Alex: My most important relationship is with Tool. The lead guitarist, Adam Jones, loved my work and asked me to work on the Lateralus album they released in 2001. We met in 1999 and formed a friendship. They used Net of Being for the album 10,000 Days [2006] and as a backdrop for their live shows. I'm very grateful they used my work and made it famous. People started tattooing it all over their body, and it was crazy.

*Luxury: You're not a traditional artist who has gallery shows every couple of years. Do you wish you had a commercial gallery to regularly exhibit your work?*

Alex: I don't aspire to it anymore. Now my interest is in growing Entheon and trying to support the art that I don't see supported by the commercial art world. The values that I'm putting forward in the artwork are not chiefly in line with that world, and I think that's the main reason that you won't find my work in many of these commercial art venues.

*Luxury: You produce posters and all sorts of merchandise such as books, clothing, and jewelry?*

Alex: That's true. We've had to find ways to raise money for our projects. My artwork is aimed at the 99%, not the 1%. It's art for people who care about meaning and many of them have had contact with the visionary worlds. They don't find a traditional context that supports those revelations, and since my work is more for initiates into that dimension, it doesn't make much sense to people who are still living in a very materialistic mind frame. They're not buying it just because of colors or something like that. They're buying it because it means something to them. People will get tattoos of my artwork, thousands of people. Name another contemporary artist who's got miles of ink on people's skin.

*Luxury: Do people have to license it?*

Alex: No. They just do it. They buy my books and take them to a tattoo artist. People also print my paintings on sheets of blotter acid – one of them Timothy Leary signed for me and it will be exhibited in the psychedelic reliquary of Entheon.

*Luxury: You don't mind that people pirate your work?*

Alex: I don't regard someone who is tattooing my work on their skin as a pirate, they are making a deep bond with the art. It's a totally different thing when anonymous pirate organizations in China and elsewhere print my art on every conceivable piece of crap to be sold out of Hong Kong. It's not just me. There's an unprecedented rape of artists by this system, brought to you by Amazon, eBay and Alibaba. They could make laws that would protect American artists, like demanding proof that sellers have authorized products. None of "my" stuff shipping from Hong Kong is legit. It just makes me sad because we are trying to build Entheon. But it is challenging us to sell our own stuff on Amazon now, perhaps this is the pressure we need to expand ourselves into that world market.

*Luxury: What other products are coming out?*

Alex: We have a new CoSM Journal number ten coming out featuring extraordinary spiritual leaders like Amma, Jean Houston, Michael Beckwith and Ken Wilber, sharing their evolutionary perspectives on Love.

Both Allyson and I have new print editions available, and CoSM is offering these little sculptures related to our Sanctuary of Visionary Art now under construction, like the Steeplehead and a plaque of Creating a Better World, the relief for the doors of Entheon. There's a "Sacred Mirrors" picture frame, a card set of all 21 "Sacred Mirrors" that you can put in the frame, and a hologram of three "Sacred Mirrors." A variety of things like that.

*Luxury: How much do the original paintings sell for, and who buys them?*

Alex: They are some amazing and independent-minded collectors, some of whom are billionaires. There are works on their estates over in England and in the United States. Some even buy several. The biggest sale so far was \$175,000. New paintings like the Albert Hofmann portrait and Eco Atlas are both \$150,000.

*Luxury: You painted the Dalai Lama?*

Alex: I love the Dalai Lama. That was just out of my own interest. Actually, there was a friend who wanted me to work on a graphic novel with him about the life of the Dalai Lama. I started working on that project, and did the cover for him to be able to get supporters and interest for the project. The painting was done a long time ago, but the book just came out, it is a graphic novel about His Holiness called Man of Peace by Robert Thurman and William Meyers. It is a beautiful book about the tragic occupation of Tibet by China and the heroic efforts by His Holiness to spiritually guide his people and millions of seekers to lives of wisdom and compassion.

## **The Chapel of Sacred Mirrors**

*Luxury: How did the idea of the church come about?*

Alex: Throughout history, synagogues, mosques, cathedrals and churches have displayed and memorialized the world-view of a spiritual community. It is in the hands of visionary artists today to evolve our image of God. We are building sacred places of peace, love, unity and ceremony to activate healing and harmony with the cosmos. A temple is a holy creation built by a community. When people feel enormous gratitude for existence they wish to thank God. Building sacred space has always been part of humanity's spiritual response to life. We say the inevitable consequence of love is the building of Temples.

In 1985, Allyson and I had a simultaneous vision of the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors during our first MDMA journey. We understood that God wanted us to build it to house the Sacred Mirrors. We co-founded a Church now serving thousands. The concept of "Sacred Mirrors" goes far beyond the name of a series of paintings and is part of our philosophy. Can we recognize the sacred mirrors all around us?

From 2004 to 2009, the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors in New York City offered an installation of our visionary paintings on a rented floor in Chelsea, near the High-Line. Tens of thousands of visitors to CoSM came to experience the transformational power of art and attend our Full Moon ceremonies and psychedelic cultural

events. Since CoSM NYC closed its doors, the paintings have been in storage and unavailable to the public. With the money we saved from the New York City space, we put a down-payment on a retreat center upstate.

In 2009, we moved from New York City, 65 miles north to the scenic Hudson Valley Town of Wappinger, to build a permanent center for the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors. Easily accessible by Metro-North, forty wooded acres allow CoSM community to attune with regenerative creative forces in the tranquil beauty of nature. The nature-field allows us to study Permaculture at CoSM and recover our connection with the land, trees and sky. Practically everyone who visits CoSM has felt the uncanny uplifting vibrations of this stunning property as they walk the wisdom trail.

It is CoSM's mission to build an enduring Sanctuary of Visionary Art to uplift the global community. There are great Visionary Artists from around the world who have visited, taught and muraled at CoSM since 2004. These painters, sculptors, digital magicians, musicians and dancers are creating visionary culture based on mystical consciousness. We believe sharing these precious glimpses of the infinite can help bring people closer to their own divinity.

Two successful Kickstarters later, CoSM is crowd funding the building of Entheon, Sanctuary of Visionary Art. Over five thousand people from around the world have joined the campaigns to build Entheon and there is ongoing need for support. Look for an opening in 2018. Or come to Art Church at CoSM, after which Allyson and I always give a tour of Entheon, as we have for years now. Hundreds of people have already prayed in Entheon and even left written blessings on the walls, sacred graffiti to be later covered by paint.

On April 19, 2017, Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps made a lead contribution of \$250,000 to CoSM, Chapel of Sacred Mirrors. This benevolent gift is offered to complete the interior exhibition of Entheon, CoSM's Sanctuary of Visionary Art, targeted to open 2018. At CoSM, an 1882 carriage house is being transformed into a three-story, 12,000 sq. ft. series of galleries to share the CoSM collection of art plus the finest works of the International Visionary Art Movement.

The magnanimous donation from Dr Bronner's Soaps, Inc. was generously offered by David Bronner and the entire Bronner family and will be acknowledged with the naming of the All One Gallery. Dr. Bronner's labeled his superb ecological soaps with his mission and warning that Humanity must foster unity across religious and ethnic divides or perish. "We are All-One or None!" is printed on all Dr. Bronner's socially & environmentally responsible products of the highest quality.

The All One Gallery is a grand two-story entryway hall that will exhibit iconic works by accomplished international artists. The All One Gallery exhibit will change annually and will continue to feature original paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture and animations by recognized Visionary masters from around the world.

The Entheon exhibition is being created to highlight a worldwide underground of visionary artists who are portraying their mystic awareness and sharing glimpses from their divine imagination, sacred art that reflects heavenly light.

All-One Gallery of Entheon will feature painting, sculpture, animation and projection art. A VR nook and an intimate screening room will present the digital and animated mediums emerging from the Visionary realm, a Wm. Blake Memorial and a Psychedelic Reliquary to preserve and share precious artifacts and ephemera of

psychedelic culture. The spectacles of Dr. Albert Hofmann will be displayed along with my painting, St. Albert & the LSD Revelation Revolution, signed by Dr. Hoffman on his 100th birthday. Tool fans will be pleased to see a shrine of sketches photos and sculptures from my association with their favorite band.

We are looking forward to getting the art on view again and being able to tour people through Allyson's amazing body of work in drawings and spectral paintings of Chaos, Order and Secret Writing. Entheon will contain the Progress of the Soul paintings and weave visitors on a journey toward the Sacred Mirrors. Anyone wishing to be part of the project can help. [www.Buildentheon.com](http://www.Buildentheon.com)

*Luxury: Do you think of yourself and Allyson as leaders of a church?*

Alex: Well, yes, because we are!

*Luxury: Are you affiliated with any other organized religion?*

Alex: No, this is a new interfaith church. We believe love and creativity unite all wisdom paths. I grew up Methodist until my parents left the church, and Allyson was Jewish and still gives Jewish prayers at our Full Moon Festivals. We both regard the Chapel project as an extension of our love of God and earlier performance installations. It's a social spiritual sculpture, an evolving artwork created by a community along with us.

*Luxury: People tend to be suspicious of non-traditional churches and religious associations.*

We are an Art Church. We encourage everyone to recognize themselves as reflections of the divine and to cultivate their unique creative path to greater meaning. Come visit the many visionary artists beautiful work, they point to a Heavenly beyond within us all. No one has to be a member to visit or stay over at CoSM. The members are the ones who have been called to join Allyson and I and the CoSM team in our mission to build a temple of visions. Rewards for members, along with CoSM Journal, and free attendance to many events, is the knowledge they are building sacred space with a creative, visionary worldwide congregation. We are artists focused on leaving a trace of integral spiritual understanding in Sacred Architecture. Entheon points to the transcendent unity of all wisdom paths. Humanity needs to build beacons of love and Worldspirit. New ways of seeing can lead to new ways of being.

## **The Sacred Mirrors (1979-89)**

*Grey's most famous achievement is a series of works called "The Sacred Mirrors" (1979-89). The ambitious cycle is the artist's summa of knowledge, a visual synthesis of a worldview based on experimentation with psychedelics and deep study of the diverse history of spirituality. The sequence consists of 19 paintings and two etched mirrors -- each 84 x 46 inches -- showing a lifesize figure standing with arms at the side and palms out. The images allow the viewer to "mirror" the pose and proceed from one to the next as the series evokes ideas about mind, body and spirit. "It's an attempt at universalizing the human experience of identity," says Grey, "and to take a person beyond their physical body, beyond identity with race and gender, into a spiritual identity beyond those elements."*

*The first figure is a silhouette made of lead on a mirrored background on which the periodic table of elements represents the Material World. Subsequent figures are x-ray-like renderings of the skeletal, nervous,*

*cardiovascular, lymphatic, visceral, and muscular systems of the body. Next are representations of the Caucasian, African, and Asian races that Grey associates with cognitive processes and socio-political dimensions of the mind. And then figures contain the yogic chakras and radiating linear patterns that represent psychic and spiritual energy.*

*The body then dissolves into abstraction, rendered as a bilaterally symmetrical field of luminous rays that Grey calls the Universal Mind Lattice, and as a vertical band of clear light that hovers in a void above a nocturnal landscape surrounded by Chinese symbols of water, clouds and fire. The concluding canvases are a mandala of the Buddhist deity Avalokiteshvara, an iconic resurrected Christ, and Sophia, goddess of wisdom. The culminating panel, titled Spiritual World, is a mirror on which a radiant solar disk takes the place of the viewer's reflected face.*

*Each of the panels is set within a 5 x 10 ½-foot arched frame studded with symbols in gilded relief. At the base is a glowing golden orb representing the Big Bang or Genesis. Rising along the sides are DNA-like double helixes, the spaces within the spirals containing vignettes representing biological evolution -- from galaxies to dinosaurs to mammals and humans -- and technological evolution -- from the ape brain to fire, agriculture, navigation, printing, the industrial revolution, the atomic age, and neuroscience. In the upper part of the frame, figures represent social organization and fields of knowledge -- family, friendship, art, law, education, psychology, business and sports-- and symbols of various religions. The apex is a stained-glass Eye of God flanked by a fetus and a skull representing birth and death above a couple in tantric embrace signifying the union of polarities.*

*Luxury: You represent Gaia, the earth goddess, as a great tree whose canopy flourishes on one side and burns on the other. It's birth and death, creation and destruction, heaven and hell?*

Alex: I had the vision for this painting on the day our daughter was born, November 15th, 1988. I made little drawings, but didn't get to start the painting and finish it until the next year.

The image reminds me of the great tree in the James Cameron film, Avatar.

That's interesting. It was painted some years before that film, but I think the tree has been a common metaphor, from Buddha to the Norse gods, and the Tree of Life.

*Luxury: That movie conveyed a cosmic unity in which the earth and all living creatures are part of the same benevolent spirit.*

Absolutely. Avatar is taking the truth of, say, the mycelial webs that weave our woods together. It's taking the energies that many people speak about, and made it very visual and real for people. It's a beautiful visionary film. It's one of my favorite movies ever, for sure.

You made this painting more than a decade before 9/11. How do you account for the vignette in the bottom right that shows two airplanes near the World Trade Center towers, and a figure that looks like George W. Bush standing with an armed man?

That scene in the shadow of Gaia is humankind's impact on the environment, the horror of what we're doing. We're destroying the web of life. The diseased phallus behind those two figures is the male ego destroying itself.

There are a number of artists that remembered 9-11 before it happened. Most famously there was a sculptor named Michael Richards who had a studio in the World Trade Center and was killed in the attack. Most of his artwork was destroyed, but weeks later a work was returned from a museum where it had been on loan. It was a self-portrait as St. Sebastian, but instead of arrows going through his body there were airplanes.

*Luxury: Your new portrait of Dr. Albert Hofmann, the discoverer of LSD, has a halo and a little figure on a bicycle that forms the knot in his necktie. What's that about?*

Alex: It was 1938 when LSD was first synthesized by Dr. Hofmann at Sandoz Pharmaceuticals in Basel, Switzerland. They tried it on animals – to see if it changed their heart rate or stimulated their uterus -- and nothing happened, so it was put on a shelf. Hofmann recalled that on April 16th, 1943, he had a “peculiar presentiment” of the importance of this substance. So he mixed up the molecule and had a phantasmagoric flow of his imagination that lasted a couple of hours. Later, he thought, “Maybe it was that stuff I had been working with. I should really look into it.” On April 19th he gave himself 250 micrograms, or millionths of a gram. That amount of anything else you would not feel at all, but he had found the most potent psychoactive force on the planet. Soon he was having the world's first acid trip. Within an hour he wanted to leave the lab and go home because he thought he was dying. Terrified, he gets onto his bicycle -- because it's wartime and nobody can drive - - and he rides from Sandoz all the way home, tripping. That's why acidheads call April 19th “Bicycle Day.” So I put a bicycle in the painting with the date.

His portrait is overlaid with a diagram of the molecule surrounded with images that tell the history of the drug. Can you elaborate on the composition?

The LSD molecule is laid out flat like a subway map, and I adapted eye symbols from Greek drinking vessels to place on the atoms. There is a small portrait of Socrates because Greek philosophers were initiates into the Eleusinian Mysteries, a cult centered in the town of Eleusis, represented at the bottom of the canvas. Every spring the Athenians would come to Eleusis and ritually reenact the mythical abduction of Persephone by Hades and the sequestering of her underground as the queen of the underworld. She was identified with agriculture, and in the spring she would burst out of the underworld and life would return to the fields.

The wheat fields around Eleusis were known to have the grain mold ergot, which is the root of LSD. Classical scholars know that there was a sacramental drink called the “kykeon,” but they don't know what it was. Hofmann and other scholars were trying to determine what substance would enable philosophers to see the realm of the gods. Plato's theory of the ideal forms comes out of this visionary religion. The thinking is that the Eleusinian Mysteries -- the civic religion of Greece that was at the basis of Western civilization -- was a psychedelic cult that finally was stomped out by the Catholic church.

In Eastern civilization you'll find the hallucinogen soma written about in the Rig Veda, the earliest religious text. Whatever Soma was, Cannabis continues to be a sacrament amongst the Shaivites in humanity's oldest religion, Hinduism. Cannabis is regarded as a gift of Shiva, you say prayers to Shiva when you smoke. So the foundations of both Eastern and Western civilization are psychedelic. And the Aztec and Mayan cultures were psychedelic through the use of psilocybin mushrooms. The Aztec Codex shows a shaman and a participant eating mushrooms, and in Guatemala, thousands of years ago, they were carving mushroom stones. Maria Sabina, a Oaxacan shaman or what they called a “curandera,” finally broke the silence and gave the psychedelic mushroom to Gordon

Wasson in 1955. Wasson gave it to Albert Hofmann who analyzed it and in 1958 discovered and named the psychedelic mushroom alkaloid, psilocybin. They all appear in the painting.

There's also a portrait of Walter Pahnke who performed the Good Friday Experiment at Boston University on April 20, 1962. His experiment was the first to determine whether a psychedelic could induce a mystical experience. He was both a psychiatrist and a doctor of Divinity, and studied and categorized what constitutes a mystical experience. He created a questionnaire and surveyed participants before they took the psychedelic. In 2006, Dr. Roland Griffiths replicated the experiment at Johns Hopkins and reported the same results: that 65% of people who are spiritually inclined would have a full-blown mystical experience on psychedelics. That means that the mystical experience is repeatable and is something normal people can have stimulated in the right setting. This was the basis of research that's been helping heal traumatized vets and rape victims. Psychedelics now have a proven scientific track record for healing people and saving lives from addictions and alcoholism. There are also portraits of Rick Doblin who runs the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) that promotes psychedelic research and legalization of MDMA as a therapeutic treatment, Amanda Fielding of the Beckley Foundation who has been doing brain neuro-imaging with psychedelics. The painting is a telling of the hidden history of LSD, the most important and revolutionary discovery ever made.

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**ALEX GREY**



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