

BIONEERS

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The World Spirit Awaits Its Portrait by Alex Grey

Excerpt of a talk given by Alex Grey at the 2003 Bioneers Conference edited by J.P. Harpignies

Alex Grey is a NY-based artist who has achieved worldwide renown, especially for his extraordinary x-ray-like portraits of the human body's physiological and energetic systems and for his search for a common mystical experience underlying all the world's spiritual traditions. He has also courageously and unhesitatingly acknowledged his deep debt to vision-inducing substances in helping shape his artistic vision.

Alex bonded with his life-long partner, the artist, Allyson Rymland Grey in Boston in 1976 when they had a life-changing, joint, simultaneousentheogenically induced mystical experience, which transformed Alex's agnostic existentialism to a radical transcendentalism. The Grey couple continued to take "sacramental journeys" on LSD. For five years, Alex worked in the Anatomy Department at Harvard Medical School preparing cadavers for dissection while he studied the body on his own. He later worked for Dr. Herbert Benson and Dr. Joan Borysenko as a research technologist at Harvard's Department of Mind/Body Medicine, conducting scientific experiments to investigate subtle healing energies. Alex's anatomical training prepared him for painting the Sacred Mirrors series of paintings and for working as a medical illustrator.

Alex's paintings, which have appeared as album art for such leading musicians' as the bands TOOL, the Beastie Boys and Nirvana, have been exhibited throughout the world and are chronicled in a number of monographs: Sacred Mirrors: The Visionary Art of Alex Grey, Transfigurations, and Net of Being. He is also the author of The Mission of Art and co-editor of a book about the conjunction of Buddhism and Psychedelics, Zig Zag Zen.

In 2004, Alex and Allyson Grey founded the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors in New York, a cultural center and refuge for contemplation that celebrates a new alliance between divinity and creativity. A five-year installation of Grey's best-loved artworks was exhibited at the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, CoSM, in New York City from 2004-9. The Chapel moved to its permanent home in Wappinger Falls, New York in February 2009.

In this talk, Alex recounts some of the artistic experiments from a "middle period" that bridged some of his earlier, truly transgressive work with social awareness and his nascent spiritual awakening. He then goes on to describe some of his later, now famous works and how the psychedelic experience informed their creation.

Alex Grey : A few years back in New York, I was sitting in a pool of black, tar-like liquid in a performance called "The Beast." As people entered the space they would see a hydrogen bomb blast projected on one wall that was to

my side. If they wanted me to, I would stamp their hand with the number of the beast – 666. Quite a few people wanted me to stamp their hands, and a few of them wanted me to stamp their foreheads. About ten feet away from me was my painting called “Nuclear Crucifixion.”

My wife, Allyson, joined me in another performance piece I called “The Wasteland,” in which we represented the nuclear family. On each one of the seats there, we had written “Mr. and Mrs. X were on their way to dinner when they were surprised by a nuclear blast. They arrived at a dinner table in hell to feast on money.” We sat at the table, drinking “blood” and eating “money,” and there was an alarm bell going off in the heart of a skeleton in the piece and bomb blast sounds in the background. As the clock approached nuclear midnight, Mrs. X got up (Allyson was a gifted bulimic for years) and she puked up the money onto a table. Then she jammed her fingers down my throat and I did the same.

Another piece I did was called “Human Race.” I had had a vision of a piece involving a machine/vehicle of sorts that had a motor and a wheel and a little clutch that was a kind of hand throttle that would engage it to the side in such a way that it could go round and round inside a room. I put steel rods down into concrete in the floor to anchor the thing. The audience was sitting about a foot and a half away from the wheel as it came around, and when I started it up, the engine had a little trouble starting. When it finally did, I lay down in the contraption and it started going round. I originally thought this would kind of be a boring piece in which I would just go around and around. There might be noxious fumes that would eventually drive the audience out, or it would run out of gas. Either of those endings would have made a point. I wasn’t sure how it would end. But the wheel started picking up way more speed than I had anticipated, and it then occurred to me I hadn’t put a brake on the thing. It got going faster and faster until it was going really fast. I guess I should have paid more attention in physics in high school. It sheared the steel rods right off, and pulled itself right out of the concrete and went careening toward the audience. Fortunately, I was able to fall off of the thing and stop it before it hit anyone. Everyone jumped up in wild applause, thinking that’s what it was supposed to do.

We later did several pieces that were early attempts on our part to look at different religions, trying to get to some essence in all of them. In one called “Burnt Offering” I read scripture from three different holy books from three different traditions, the Baghavad Gita, the Bible and the Koran. Then I set them all on fire in a kind of totem urn, then after they had burned down a bit, I mashed their ashes together and then rubbed it on my body. After I was ashen, I lit seven skulls and a skeleton behind me. Another of these, in about 1982, was called “Prayer Wheel,” named after the Tibetan device that can be either large or handheld and is spun as a way of generating good will and furthering your own spiritual evolution. It was a piece about the life cycle. I imagine all of us, somehow, as this combination of polarities: male and female, between birth and death, and so on, so to embody this I tied a skeleton on my back while Allyson carried a baby doll, and we were painted gold. This is a way to look at the soul externalized, that’s why I painted us gold, to represent something of great value. As we walked we intoned the national mantra of Tibet (“Oh hail the jewel in the lotus”—the jewel is our spiritual essence). I tend to have visions of these things and do them, and then years later I start to think that they’re about something.

In another of these pieces, “Living Cross,” Allyson and I were once again trying to bring together the polarities, referencing different world religions. We used universal symbols, the yin/yang symbol, the cross, and the Star of David, to highlight polar opposites: heaven and earth, matter and spirit, etc. We made a giant cross out of 500 apples and lay in the center of it surrounded by roses. Above us was this angel of death and transcendence while

Gregorian chants were going on in the background. We used apples again (about 5000) to make a 55-foot effigy of a goddess on the ground outside at Lincoln Center. I did a hundred prostrations at the foot of the Goddess as Allyson was in its heart center nursing our daughter Zena. It was up for about an hour or two; then we boxed all the apples and donated them to homeless shelters.

To me, most of the time, babies imply some kind of hopefulness. I created a piece called “Heart Net” that represented this. It had many flowers creating a heart shape and an eye in the center that was crying into a pool that a child looked like it had crawled out of. People were encouraged to write prayers or good wishes for the planet, their own healing, loved ones’ healing and so on and hang them on the net. This was at the American Visionary Art Museum. A Buddha figure was positioned at the top, so it was going from the earth to a transcendental realm. A world map was painted on the wall and by the end of the year the piece was up, thousands of prayers had accumulated on the heart net.

I made an eleven-foot high (with a six-foot wing span) sculpture called “World Soul” that took two years to finish. It’s a hybrid, divine mutant, multi-faced, hermaphroditic kind of character, perched on the world globe. It has a fish tail, claw-like paws grasping the earth, and eagle wings. You can look at it as a kind of shamanic combination of the various elements, wings indicative of the super conscious, perhaps. After an exhausting day of teaching, I was standing on a subway platform and sort of saw this thing in a vision on the platform, and I thought: “Oh, what a nice painting image,” but then it opened up its wings and turned around and I could see it was a sculpture. It points to its own heart center, which is a mirror, saying: “See yourself reflected in me; I am you.” It has eyes above, seeing all around. One of its faces has a wrathful aspect, but in front it has a peaceful aspect and cradles new life, an infant. Years after examining this sculpture, I’ve come to regard the infant as a symbol that implies: “Consider the generations to come before you ruin this gem of a world.” Before we welded the head onto that bronze piece and sealed it, I encased a number of things inside its heart: written prayers of many different world religions and shamanic invocations, objects that had been blessed by different religious leaders, and a number of plant and other entheogenic substances and medicines from all around the world as well. This is a trick I learned from some African sculptures whose creators also sealed magical elements inside of the figures to bring them to life.

Not all my projects are on that level of intensity. High Times asked me to do a poster for their “Cannabis Cup,” an event in Amsterdam in which the best pot in the world is judged and awards are given out. My wife and I were invited to be celebrity judges. We’re still recovering. It was a difficult job, but someone had to do it. Obviously, entheogens have been central themes in my work and life. I did a painting portraying Adam and Eve as early humans eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the forbidden fruit as an entheogen. The earliest religious books ever written – the Vedas – contain hundreds and hundreds of references to hallucinogenic plants that would allow one to see God, and we know of the shamanic use of consciousness altering plants from all over Central and South America and the world. I hope that in the future our society will once again find a place for those of us who are called and attuned to their gifts to be able to partake of the power of entheogens in our spiritual lives without risk of harassment and incarceration.

The Sacred Mirrors series, which is now my most well known body of work, began out of a performance called “Life Energy” we did in 1978. I had this idea that I needed to look at life energy in various ways. We did a series of performances exploring that concept, and as part of this process we created two charts of human figures – one was of the nervous system and the other was of auras, chakras and meridian points. We demarcated a little zone

in front and suggested that people stand in front of the charts and see if they could identify with the figure and use it as a mirror to start to imagine the systems in their own bodies.

At the end of the performance, I executed a rat to show the passing of life energy. We really felt like we had lost all of our friends because of that. It didn't go over too well at all. But as Allyson and I were walking home and a little despondent, she said: "You know, Alex, people really liked the charts. You should do a whole series based on them." That was the birth of the Sacred Mirrors. It evolved, and eventually I did an exhibition at the New Museum in New York with life size pieces that were roughly six-foot high figures in five-foot wide frames, ten and a half feet high. They all had stained glass in them. There were 21 of them. The idea was to trace the body-mind-spirit trajectory.

The first one called "The Material World" was made of dozens and dozens of mirrors that were sandblasted with the periodic table of the elements and a figure filled with biochemical data about what goes into a human body. This was a representation of the first step on the journey, the material plane of elements and chemistry. It had a rather elaborate frame that Allyson and I had carved that was packed with many symbolic elements. On one side were representations of biological evolution and on the other side technological evolution. There was a kind of big bang at the bottom of the frame and then evolution ascended narrowly up the sides. At the bottom there was a globe with a DNA chain rising out of it that had unicellular life forms, algae and little flagellates and things, and it moved up to the higher mammals. At the top were the elements of the polarities of male and female. The eye of God or eye of the cosmos or eye of the spirit, whatever you want to call it, was in the very center to express the universe's coming to be aware of itself, the evolution of consciousness.

I basically taught myself anatomy by painting the skeletons and bodily systems in the Sacred Mirror pieces. I wanted people to be able to stand in front of them and start to feel the systems in their own bodies and their infinite complexity and relationships with each other. The eyes are always open and staring, so one can have a focal point to fix upon when standing in front of each piece. The first few pieces look below the skin, inside the body, at the skeletal, nervous, lymphatic and other systems. The next few have skin, and once there is skin on the body, you've got specific gender and race. There are portraits of male and female humans of various races, painted on linen. I called this part of the series the "Mind Area" of the Sacred Mirrors because the mind is constantly differentiating between self and other. All of these differences are visible, but in the context of the Sacred Mirrors what is suggested is that we see ourselves reflected in each other.

After the "Mind Area," the series leaves the purely physical realm and takes us to the layer of subtle anatomy with representations of the invisible psychic energy system with various chakras and acupuncture meridians and auras and chronic energetic wisps surrounding the figures. These were painted in 1980. The series then continues into a look at the "Spiritual Energy System," and we see the increasing breakdown of the boundaries between the self and the surroundings. After that comes the "Universal Mind Lattice," a depiction of an acid trip experience that my wife and I had back in 1976. I met my wife while I was tripping. For us LSD served as a kind of magical elixir that brought us together, and in those days we would lie in bed and take a mega-dose and put on blindfolds to see what would happen. On one of those forays the physical reality I was familiar with completely dissolved. We became toroidal fountains of light interconnected in an omni-directional field that extended boundlessly. It seemed like every other being and thing in the cosmos was one of these fountains of light, these cells of energy, and the energy that was going through all of us was the same, and the energy was love. We were part of a vast

love circuit made of the same stuff, yet each of us was a distinct point in this field. You could stare endlessly into space and see that everyone and everything was connected, even though you were unique. It was truly one of the weirdest experiences I've ever had and one of the most beautiful.

I took off my blindfold and Allyson was staring at me. She said: "I was in the most amazing place," and she started drawing, and she drew exactly what I had seen. Even though we had both had blindfolds on and hadn't communicated, we had shared an identical vision of the same transpersonal reality at the same time. It totally changed our work. From then on we wanted to make art about interconnectedness. The "Universal Mind Lattice" tries to capture that vision.

After the Universal Mind Lattice, the next few pieces try to reference the void and clarity at the core of all the different mystical teachings. Most all of them point to a space beyond depiction, which I try to suggest symbolically. I wanted to bring in the elements – fire, water, earth, air – and the Kalachakra, the Tibetan Buddhist symbol of the wheel of time and the principle of the transmutation of the elements by the principle of emptiness. I also did a version of Avalokiteshvara, the thousand-armed Buddha of active compassion because I thought it made a nice segue from the pieces about "voidness" and clarity. All those hands are reaching out like activists. It's the activist Buddha with an eye of unobstructed vision in each palm so it can see what needs to be done around the world to relieve suffering and help living beings.

By playing with different mystical traditions and bringing them into the Sacred Mirrors, I'm hoping to point beyond dogma and trying to look for some common threads, so also I did a picture of Sophia, the goddess of wisdom. There aren't that many conventional portrayals of Sophia, so it was kind of up to the imagination to bring me one. It came out as an archetype of the feminine aspect of the godhead that is made out of eyes. I love eyes. The eye is a symbol, to me, of awareness. If you're going to make art about consciousness, how do you do it? Consciousness has no color; it has no weight or form, so I use symbols, and multiple eyes point to infinite consciousness. The final piece in the Sacred Mirror series is called "The Spiritual World." It is, in fact, an actual mirror. When you stand in front of it, depending on where you're standing, a sun that I've sandblasted in the center radiates out from your heart. The whole point of the Sacred Mirrors is to help us see ourselves and each other and the world as a reflection of the divine.

Besides the Sacred Mirrors, I've done a number of other paintings that look below and beyond the skin at human physical and energetic systems. I painted a series that seeks to depict the spiritual and esoteric dimensions of the human trajectory from conception to death. It begins with "Kissing" and "Copulation" which shows two very physical bodily systems embracing, the coming together of mortal flesh as genitalia, bones, muscles and nervous systems entwine, but it also points to an infinite element of consciousness. Along with eyes, I like to use gold and golden flames to indicate consciousness, so I placed bands of golden infinity symbols looping through the minds and hearts of the lovers in that painting. Vortices shoot out from the lovers, alerting the souls in the other dimensions that this might be their opportunity for incarnation. Various mystical systems describe souls hovering and looking at couples mating, hoping for the right opportunity for physical incarnation. The painting draws from the Tantric tradition the image of the lovers connecting with each other not only through the skin but, in a sense, fusing together at the heart level and dissolving into each other.

The result of that intense fucking is in the next painting in that series, which depicts pregnancy and uses a lotus as a symbol of the soul. Quite logically, a really dynamic painting called "Birth" follows. In it I tried to capture the

incredible channeling of almost explosive energy that goes through a mother during childbirth as well as the ultimate compassion inherent in giving birth, which I use Tibetan seed syllables that say, in essence: “Here is a birthing Buddha” to express.

A painting about nursing once again captures the physicality of the act but alludes to subtle fields of interconnectedness between mother and child that forge invisible but powerful emotional and spiritual bonds. My daughter, Zena, is the subject of that and several other paintings at different stages of her life. The Dzogchen teachings in Tibetan Buddhism state that our inherent Buddha nature is one of primordial perfection, but that it gets more or less obscured. It’s sometimes easier to see it in children and the young. I tried to express different ideas relating to family bonds, the passing on of culture and knowledge and the development of conscious awareness in those paintings with Zena.

I’ve also done paintings that deal with archetypal figures and themes. One is “The Painter” which depicts a sort of cosmic funnel of inspiration entering the artist’s brain, a phantasm suggesting that he better get to work because he’s not going to be around here forever, and a peanut gallery of demanding critics including Van Gogh, Michelangelo, William Blake, Rembrandt, Frida Kahlo, and other renowned artists in the background. I do tend to pack in a lot of symbols, so that piece also refers to the paintbrush as a spiritual tool, referencing the image of the Tibetan Vajra scepter, and there are allusions to prehistoric and other artworks to imply that our individual creative energy draws from a collective field of humanity’s shared consciousness and traditions.

Art has been for me a way to integrate both the most difficult and the most uplifting material in my life. I don’t feel complete unless my art can express that full emotional range. I experience darkness and the shadowy sides of life all too often. Those are components of all great works of art, no matter how exalted, and that’s why I point to them in my work as well. I depicted the dying process in two pieces, “Caring” and “Dying” (in which consciousness is again symbolized by eyes, one of my recurring motifs). A 1989 painting called “Gaia” contains (unfortunately realistic) depictions of the planet’s current environmental and political crises. It has many dark elements, and one background detail I had forgotten but was later jolted to re-discover is an image of two airplanes flying over the twin towers...

Another category of my paintings depicts the human spiritual quest. One of these called “Holy Fire” portrays a pilgrim on a mountain receiving divine grace in the form of a lightning bolt into his heart and his physical body melting into a sun-like form or radiant fire. It describes the dislodging of the identity from the material body. Another called “Nature of Mind” follows a pilgrim on life’s path and portrays a number of episodes in that journey, from the discovery of sacred texts to the appearance of a teacher to an experience of enlightenment to a return to society to share his newfound wisdom. Though this is not a fashionable view today, I think that is one of the artist’s functions as well: to fearlessly probe behind appearances and illusions in a quest to experience clarity and universal truths and to then seek to communicate those experiences.

I will end with this statement from my book *The Mission of Art*, which captures some of what I feel art can be:

“Art can be a form of worship and service. The incandescent core of an artist’s soul, a glowing God’s eye, infinitely aware of the beauty of creation, is interlocked with a network of souls, part of one vast group soul. The group soul of art beyond time comes into time by projecting symbols through the artist’s imagination. God’s radiant grace fills the heart and mind with these gifts of vision. The artist honors the vision gifts by weaving them into works of

art and sharing them with the community. The community uses them as wings to soar to the same shining vistas and beyond. Translucent wings team with eyes of flame on the mighty cherub of art. Arabesques of fractal cherub wings enfold and uplift the world. The loom of creation is anointed with fresh spirit and blood... Transfusions from living primordial traditions empower the artist – shaman, yogi, devotional prayer – all break through with the visionary cure and take the artist to the heights and depths needed to find the medicine of the moment, a new image of the infinite one, the God of creation manifesting effulgently, multi-dimensionally, with the same empty fullness that Buddha knew and the same compassionate healing that Jesus spread. Krishna plays his flute, the Goddess dances, and the whole tree of life vibrates with the power of love. A mosaic and tile maker, inspired by Rumi, finds infinite patterns of connectivity in the garden of spiritual interplay as the World Spirit awaits its portrait.”

ALEX GREY



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