

Resources for Body, Mind and Spirit

COMMON GROUND

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THE ART ISSUE FEATURING:

- The Art of Transcendence:
An Interview with Alex Gray
- Metamorphosis:
The Fiber Art of Judith Scott
- Unlocking the Mind's Eye: Art as a Key
- Art and the Challenge of Change

When I first learned that the theme of this issue was art, my mind was a blank canvas. Without any preconceived notion of who would be interviewed for this issue of Common Ground, I went to my local independent bookstore, uttered a silent prayer and asked that the right person reveal him or herself to me as I perused the bookshelves.

After cruising the aisles for probably ten or fifteen minutes, a book called *The Mission of Art (Shambhala)* virtually leapt off the shelves. With a vibrancy and honesty I hadn't seen anywhere else, this book endeavored to embrace all of human history through the vehicle of art, a vehicle that was human consciousness itself. Intrigued, I bought the book and read on. Only when I got home did I realize that its author, Alex Grey, was the very same artist who had graced the cover of *Common Ground* for our Millennium issue in Winter 2000.

Coincidence or not, it soon became apparent that Alex Grey was the perfect choice for this interview. Not only is his art beyond description (some call it transcendental, while others call it visionary), he is remarkably articulate as well. Having interviewed a number of artists and musicians in my time, Alex Grey's facility with language more than gained my respect. (Apparently his wife, Allyson, gets some credit for this.) Grey's analysis of cultural history through the lenses of spirit, mind and matter resonate at an intellectually challenging level, while his artistic images transport the viewer to the level of the eternal.

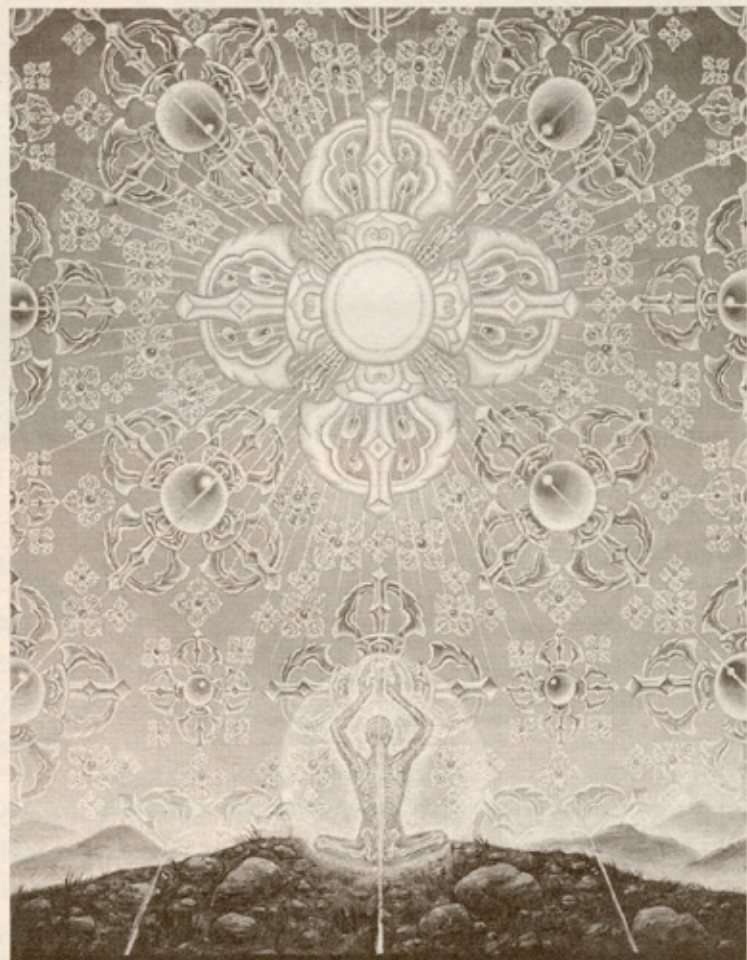
Best described as a transcendental x-ray (or a good acid trip), Alex Grey's art emulates what it means to be human on all levels. He calls it a "prolonged meditation" on the nature of life and consciousness. An earlier book called *Sacred Mirrors* (published by Inner Traditions) is full of his reflections on art as a spiritual practice, "alluding to the process of becoming transparent to the sacred ground." A sequel to *Sacred Mirrors*, called *Transfigurations*, is due to be published by Inner Traditions in fall 2001.

Alex Grey's artwork has been exhibited worldwide in New York, Paris and São Paulo, Brazil, as well as having been featured in *Newsweek* magazine. As this interview was being completed, he spent several weeks at a gallery showing in Los Angeles during April-May 2001. As well as having been an instructor in *Artistic Anatomy and Figure Sculpture* for seven years at New York University, he has taught a course on *Visionary Art* with his wife, Allyson Grey, at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York. You can see Alex Grey's artwork online at www.alexgrey.com.

CG: Although you have written an entire book about this, would you briefly describe the "mission of art"?

AG: The mission of art, I believe, expresses the condition of the soul. Art is a developmental map of the

The Art of Transcendence A Spark of the Eternal



To Alex Gray, art reflects the evolution of human consciousness

by Virginia Bee



human experience from prehistoric, primitive cave art through various techniques of modern and postmodern art. While abstractionists make rational and logical attempts to understand the world, devotional artists have preserved the sacred art traditions that so beautifully express the heart of humanity. Sacred art rises to express the highest states of contemplative and mystical union with the divine.

What art shows us are humanity's inner worlds of belief, emotion, vision and beauty, the intersubjective worlds of meaning for each person, tribe and nation. Everything — the entire spectrum of human experience — is the fabric of art. The mission of art is to get outside what is inside, so that it can be shared. Visual art is a nonverbal language, like music, that can be shared and appreciated by all cultures of the world. I believe that everyone is connected by their divine imagination, making art one of the best ways to transcend linguistic barriers.

CG: What role does the individual artist play?

AG: The individual artist is at the core of the mission of art, because there isn't any art without artists. The individual artist — and people in general — are compelled to create something in their lives. We have all been given a life and have a chance to do something with it while we are here. Certain people are just on fire with this creative energy. Take a dynamo like Picasso, who was a turbulent Old Faithful of creativity. Every day he was cranking out something new, and for the most part it was exceptional. His work was inventive and relentless. He was a force of nature.

When you see an artist of that caliber, you know that it's the individual who drives the collective. Because of certain leaders in the world, certain things get done. We probably wouldn't have gone to the moon by the end of the '60s if it hadn't been for President Kennedy's vision to get us there. Similarly, Picasso pointed modern art in incredible directions.

Individual artists have a tremendous responsibility (first of all to themselves) to understand who they are and make their art directly out of that understanding. If the mission of art is the externalization of the soul of humanity, then each individual artist is a hologram representing the whole. Within what we think of as our creative isolation, the individual artist is simply getting to the core of what the collective really needs to hear or see. The more real and true artists are to themselves, the more they represent humanity. That even includes people who make false, outlandish and superficial artistic statements, because they do reflect the true condition of the soul, even if the image is Andy Warhol's Campbell's soup can. Our American soul is often shallow with no depth. Warhol showed us that.

CG: How do you define "post-

modernism"?

AG: Postmodernism is a class of studies, and an understanding, that takes into account multiple perspectives on any subject. In cultural studies, I would say that it is more applicable than in the scientific field, where the attempt is to describe something we all can look at and agree is real. The scientific approach is based on the ability to repeat an experiment, an understanding of truth based on facts.

To the postmodernists, there is no stable truth. Everyone has their own opinion about any given thing, and to a degree, everyone feels right. It shatters any sense of unity — a fragmentation of individuals existing on islands of their own opinions. This disassociation from the whole is characteristic of a number of works of art. In architecture, you can see a pastiche of multiple different styles that come together in one structure that is no longer based on an understanding of modernism and "progress." Essentially, postmodernism is like a train wreck signifying the end of history when all the cars start piling up and emptying their historical passengers onto one another. It's a breakdown of what we understand the train of history to be, leading to a state of intellectual chaos.

Postmodernism is important, though, because it honors and embraces multiple points of view. And that is the first step to gaining any real perspective of justice. That perspective includes civil rights, women's/feminist studies, gay culture, psychedelic consciousness, a whole spectrum of human awareness that has been marginalized by our culture. These "hidden" people have traditionally been left out of our cultural dialogue. Postmodernism becomes a doorway to accepting all of humanity. Ultimately, I believe this is leading us toward a more integral culture which will emerge from its current state of fragmentation.

CG: How do you define "transpersonal"?

AG: Human consciousness develops from "pre-personal" to "personal" to "transpersonal." The pre-personal and pre-rational phase is early childhood, prior to solidification into a stable personality. By the age of seven, the rational mind begins to take over and our thinking is less magical and more rational. We stop believing in Santa. The rational mind helps crystallize the teenage and adult personality. Beyond the rational, there are the transpersonal, psychic and spiritual modes of knowing, states that connect us to each other and to the universal mind. "Trans" means beyond, so transpersonal refers to what is beyond the ego, beyond the limits of the individual personality. It's the Higher Self, one's Buddha-nature, the Atman in the Brahman — all the names that refer to the God or Spirit within.

CG: How do you relate to visionary artists like Michelangelo,

Hieronymous Bosch, William Blake and Vincent Van Gogh?

AG: These were people who manifested their divine creativity with such astonishing capacity that it is an undying source of inspiration to people throughout the ages.

CG: What do you think of the work of Salvador Dali?

AG: The name "Salvador" means "savior." He very much believed himself to be the savior of modern art because he hadn't rejected classical drawing and a relationship with the old masters like Vermeer and Michelangelo. Dali also understood the self-mythology of the artist and how to use it in marketing his work. He was a genius. (Only people like Andy Warhol understood this after him.) Dali would do publicity stunts that were very much like the performance art we see today. He was truly one of the greatest artists of the 20th century and was revered all over the world. Within the next decade we will probably see a major retrospective of his work at some place like the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

CG: What do you think of abstract art?

AG: As much as figurative and representational art is half of the art equation, abstract art is the other half. It's that big. It's that important. Our capacity to map consciousness and to decorate our environment is completely related to our sense of abstraction.

All of the mandalas that are part of the great sacred art tradition are coming out of an abstract consciousness. The word "cosmos" is related to "cosmetic," which has to do with meaningful patterns. The patterns that connect us to the divine can be seen in Islamic architecture and Hebrew temples, which both have an anti-iconic edict that they must abide by, meaning they are not allowed to portray any figures or images of God. Patterning is what links everything together in this sacred geometry, and it's an unbelievably effective way to evoke the divine.

We seem to think that Western civilization invented abstraction, which is a completely bogus idea. The more I understand world culture, I understand this. For example, in the '60s, minimalism was the big thing. And then I find that they did this centuries ago in India, painting huge blank canvases that reflected awareness without an object. There's nothing new about abstract art.

CG: Is "mandala" a form of meditation?

AG: Yes, that's pretty well understood. It is the soul as a target. And drawing a mandala is something anyone can do. It's a very healing activity to work within the circle, and see how things naturally emerge. No two

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