

RAW VISIONⁿ

OUTSIDER ART
ART BRUT
CONTEMPORARY
FOLK ART

ALEX
GREY

SAVA
SEKULIC

THE
LACEMAKER

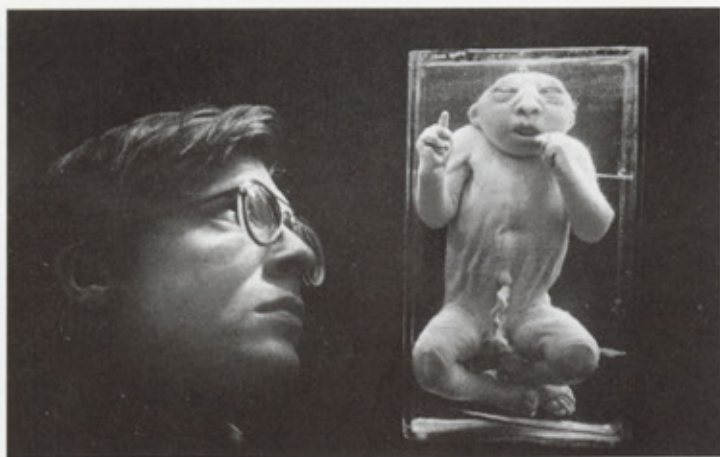
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VOTED WORLD'S BEST
ART MAGAZINE



BODY OF LIGHT



KAREN ELLIS EXAMINES THE VISIONARY PAINTINGS OF ALEX GREY

above
Grey with specimen in a jar: from his photo essay 'Monsters'.

opposite
'Over-Soul'
oil on linen
30 x 40 inches,
1998-99.



Karen Ellis, a painter, has a M.A. from New York University's Gallatin School where she researched the relationship between creative development and the evolution of consciousness. She is currently editing the writing of the late Sr. Lucia Wiley, a WPA muralist.

1. Brown, David Jay, unpublished interview with Alex Grey.

Historically, art and the sacred have always been intertwined. In early Shamanic societies the artist/healer/priest/shaman was the creative source of culture. From East to West up to the Industrial Revolution, the creation of art and the work of art itself has been understood as occurring at a juncture between the spiritual and physical worlds. Alex Grey has said that the purpose of his art is to examine the relationship of mind and body and to awaken the spirit. It is a rare occurrence for an artist to explore directly and explicitly the cycle of the transformation of human consciousness as Grey has done in such works as his 'Sacred Mirrors'. Grey's visionary approach to integrating the physical and metaphysical worlds has labeled him as an Outsider in relation to the concerns of much contemporary art, but the sacred light and content of his work shares affinities with such diverse artists as Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Blake, Van Gogh and Rothko.

Grey's earliest memories predict the course that his life will follow. While lying in his crib, he remembers watching textures unfold, first, a boundless blissful white light. Then a gnarly, snaggle-branched, ugly, dark force moved into that space, coming in clumps, and taking over. This terrifying, shadowy swarm would obliterate the white

light. Little islands of luminosity would crop up and clear away the gnarly texture until the pure white light reappeared. Grey interprets these early 'texture' visions as perceptions of primordial universal energies, the ongoing flux of repose and motion, yin and yang, darkness and light, good and evil, life and death. (1) His artworks point to this early vision by their constant reference to the theme of polarities and their visionary perception of subtle light.

When questioned further about his childhood, Grey identifies two more specific memories. One was his sadness over the sickness and eventual death of his grandmother. The second was his preoccupation with dead animals. As the neighborhood mortician when aged ten, Grey was bitten by a rabid bat which he had mistaken for dead. He was forced to endure a cycle of painful rabies vaccinations before abandoning his animal graveyard activities. As a young artist, his interest in mortality was not limited to metaphysical speculations, but his near-obsession launched him into an investigation of the physical properties of death. He secured a job in a medical school morgue and his earliest performances were on dead animals and human corpses.

Grey's anatomical studies follow the precedent set by Michelangelo, who risked excommunication to secretly study



anatomy in a morgue. Psychologically, we might look on the morgue environment as an underworld or 'land of the dead.' In a shaman's life, there is an initiatory period where his soul descends (while his body is near death or gravely ill) into a demonic lower realm where he is physically dismembered and then reconstructed by spirits. Grey's years in the morgue parallel a descent into the shamanic underworld.

In one piece, 'Inner Ear', Grey removed the head of a dead woman, then poured hot lead into her ear to make a model of the delicate spiral labyrinth. It was a violent way to make contact with the woman's spirit, and she spoke to his inner ear later when her spirit angrily confronted him in a vision. In another piece, entitled 'Life, Death and God', Grey tied a rope around his ankle, tied the other end of the rope around a cadaver's ankle and hung suspended on a wall, with a drawing of a crucifix pinned up in between.

For his photo essay, 'Monsters', Grey found thirty malformed babies preserved and tucked away in corners of locked rooms at the local museum of anatomy. Each specimen seemed to express unique insights about human nature. There was a brainless wise one, a double-headed messiah, a wrinkled siren, a cyclops. He photographed them, and a few weeks later, was awakened in the middle of the night, drenched in anxious sweat. A translucent hallucination of a malformed fetus hovered in front of him. Demonic voices spoke from it threatening to take possession of his soul. A presence of evil emanated from the ghostly monster.

'Trembling in fear, I saw myself on the edge of an abyss, which appeared to fall endlessly into darkness and insanity. From my depths, my voice repeated, 'I know that Divine Love is the strongest power'. A blue light dispelled the apparition of the monster, and the voice of an angel told me his name was Mr. Lewis and that he would watch over me for a while. With his reassuring protection, I went back to sleep...

'Around this time in 1976, while sitting in my studio one night, a vision of an ominously menacing courtroom appeared. Before a judge I could not see and an angry jury, I faced a woman who accused me of trespassing her body in my morgue work. I tried to explain that I was making art, but there was absolutely no forgiveness. The judge told me that from now on I must do more positive work, putting me on lifetime probation'. (2)

Grey's visions were a turning point which shattered his negativity and darkness and began to uplift his artistic focus. In 1979, he began his seminal paintings – the 'Sacred Mirrors', charting the spiritual transformation of the soul by creating a series



of life-size paintings of human figures. The canvases were painted as if they were mirrors reflecting the viewer's body. The mirror is a symbol of human consciousness because it reflects that which is before it. By choosing the mirror as a metaphor, Grey examines two lines of enquiry at the heart of every mystical tradition: the sacred nature of light and the phenomenon of consciousness. Light makes visible the image in a mirror and, cross-culturally throughout history, light has been a symbol of the divine. Spiritual consciousness and light are the subjects of Grey's art. To understand the scope of his message, it is necessary to journey through the 'Sacred Mirrors' sequentially.

In the first seven 'Sacred Mirrors', Grey draws from his years in the morgue,



portraying the wonder of the natural world by painting the human anatomy. Because the works are called 'mirrors', the viewer is invited to stand before them and reflect on their own internal structures. Using the brush with the precision of a scalpel, Grey paints the various systems of the body (nervous, cardiovascular, skeletal, etc.) with the detail of medical charts. Consciousness of our own anatomy, as reflected in these paintings, is sensitized to the delicate networks and interwoven fabrics of our physical vehicle.

While the anatomical and socio-political 'Sacred Mirrors' contain fleshly bodies upon dense black backgrounds, in the next phase of the mirrors, the darkness is illumined by a fragile net of light. Now the flesh becomes transparent and the luminescent

net in the background reveals a continuity with the anatomical networks, like the cardiovascular system. The boundary between the individual soul and the rest of the universe is dissolving. This is the third transformation of consciousness, as the soul, formerly identified with body and mind, surrenders to an ecstatic union with the vastness of spirit – the Alpha and Omega of Being. Grey paints his vision of the human body and soul as an organism of congealed luminescence. An organism whose heart is light.

Returning to Grey's earliest memories, we recall how he watched in horror as a dark, 'gnarly texture' invaded the light. Now he defeats the terrifying darkness, which threatened him as a child, with the light of spirit. 'Universal Mind Lattice' shows the

above Part of the 'Sacred Mirrors' installation, showing:

left to right 'Psychic Energy System' 'Spiritual Energy System' 'Universal Mind Lattice' each 5 x 10.5 feet, 1980-81.

2. Grey, Alex. Sacred Mirrors: The Visionary Art of Alex Grey, Inner Traditions, Rochester, VT, 1990.



complete dissolution of the fleshly body and asks viewers to see themselves transformed into a luminous fountain, part of an infinite network of light. The painting was inspired by a mystical experience Grey recounts below:

'In 1976, my wife Allyson and I had an experience which changed our lives and our art. We sacramentally ingested a large dose of LSD and lay in bed. Eventually, a heightened state of consciousness emerged where I was no longer aware of physical reality or my body in any conventional sense. I felt and saw my interconnectedness with all beings and things in a vast and brilliant 'Universal Mind Lattice'. Every being and thing in the universe was a toroidal fountain and drain of self-illuminating love energy, a cellular node or jewel in a network which linked omni-directionally without end. All duality of self and other was overcome in this infinite dimension of spiritual light. I felt I had been there before, or perhaps in some way was always there. This was the state beyond birth and death, beyond time, our true nature which seemed more real than any physical surrounding and more real even than my physical body. The clear light matrix arose out of a field of pure emptiness. As utterly convincing as it was, when the light receded, I opened my eyes to behold Allyson and our bedroom once again. I was somewhat shocked to learn that she had experienced the exact same transpersonal dimension at the same time, which we determined by our descriptive drawings and discussion of the awesome beauty of the state. This experience of the infinite net of spirit transformed our lives and gave us a subject which became the focus of our art and our mission'. (3)

In Grey's painted progression of spiritual development, he portrays the transformation of the soul to its most exalted state. In his 'Void/Clear Light', both flesh and light vanish into subtle vapor. The soul, in the last of the 'Sacred Mirrors', returns to form as an emissary of love and wisdom from three religious traditions, Avalokitesvara Buddha, Christ, and Sophia. To mirror these images is to see one's own divine potential. The final mirror, 'Spiritual World', is an actual reflective mirror which brings the viewer into the work. The mirror is etched with a sun-like circle of white light in the heart center emanating into a faint web, asking viewers to consider themselves and their surroundings as sacred.

In the years since the completion of the 'Sacred Mirrors', Grey's work has continued to focus on the evolution of the human soul and the subject of transcendental light. He chronicles the soul's journey of awakening to divine love and the return to share that love with others. In some works, the flesh is violently ravished by the transcendent,

as in his triptych 'Holy Fire'. While the yogi's body parts are scattered in a ring of fire, the golden wings of the yogi's soul arch and ascend as a seraphim from the volcanic flames of contemplative transformation.

In other works, Grey's transparent-skinned figures manifest spiritual life in simple acts of human love. 'Kissing' shows infinite bands of golden flames looping through the hearts and minds of a couple, suggesting the bond of infinite love which transcends the impermanence of the flesh.

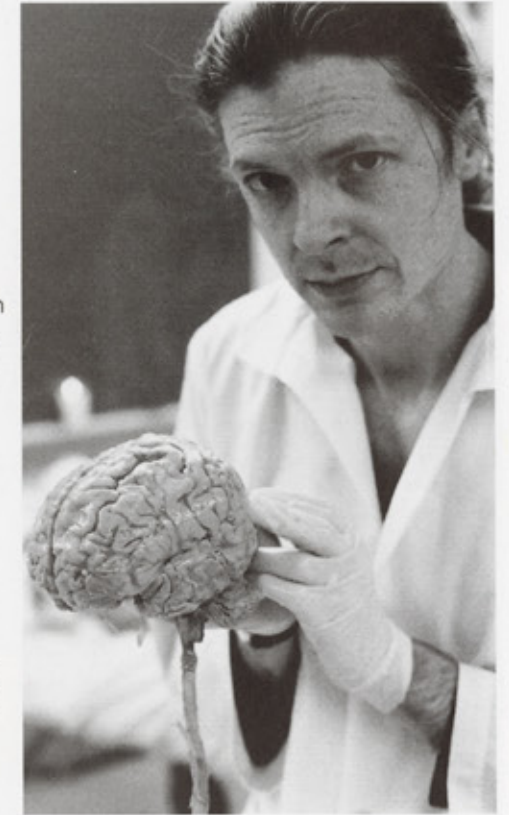
In the painting 'Transfiguration', the body appears to be solid flesh starting at the feet and, moving up the legs, becomes increasingly transparent until the body enters a glowing rainbow lattice of light. Within the luminous sphere, the body appears to be a glowing grid, seeing in all directions, with jewel-like energy centers suspended inside. The center of the sphere is the crown jewel, a radiant spiritual diamond.

Most recently, Grey has created a large Buddhist altar entitled 'Nature of Mind'. A cycle of seven oil panels, mounted in a large gilded freestanding frame, depict, once again, the spiritual journey. Grey's ability to transform solid material into spiritual light makes him seem like an alchemist. If it were possible to shave sapphires, rubies, and topaz to the thickness of sheets of mica, and then float them over a sea of light, one might achieve the brilliance Grey has achieved in this altar. It glows like an ancient amulet encrusted with fire opals.

All Grey's work is both personal and universal, intending to provoke an experience of the divine in the viewer. He realizes, probably more than most contemporary artists, that art also transforms the artist. His recent book *The Mission of Art*, is an extensive commentary on the transformative relationship of art and the sacred. For him, art is spiritual practice, as well as a life's calling.

He sees through the surface of things and paints the soul like a seraphim, a pure consciousness, a body of light. This is Grey's message and the magic of his art: the human being is called to live not only in the light, but as the light. The transcendent source of the body of light is love itself, and Grey's hope for his art, himself, and his viewer is that each can live as that light.

3. Grey, Alex. *The Mission of Art*, Shambhala Publications, Boston, MA, 1998.



above Alex Grey with a human brain.

opposite top 'Nature of Mind' – seven panel altarpiece, oil on wood in sculpted gilded frame, 68 inches x 78 inches 1995-96.

opposite bottom left 'Nature of Mind', detail.

opposite bottom right 'Praying', detail, oil on linen 36 x 48 inches 1984.

Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, a non-profit organization is actively seeking a site to create a permanent Chapel of Sacred Mirrors. All enquiries and suggestions to: Members of the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, 725 Union Street, Brooklyn, NY 11215, USA.

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'Transfiguration'

ALEX GREY

"SACRED MIRRORS" 1979-1999

April 10th - May 30th

Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego
700 Prospect St, La Jolla, CA 92037 Tel: 619 454 3541

A lecture by Deepak Chopra M.D. entitled "Exploring the submanifest order of being through art" will be given at the opening on April 10th at 4pm.