

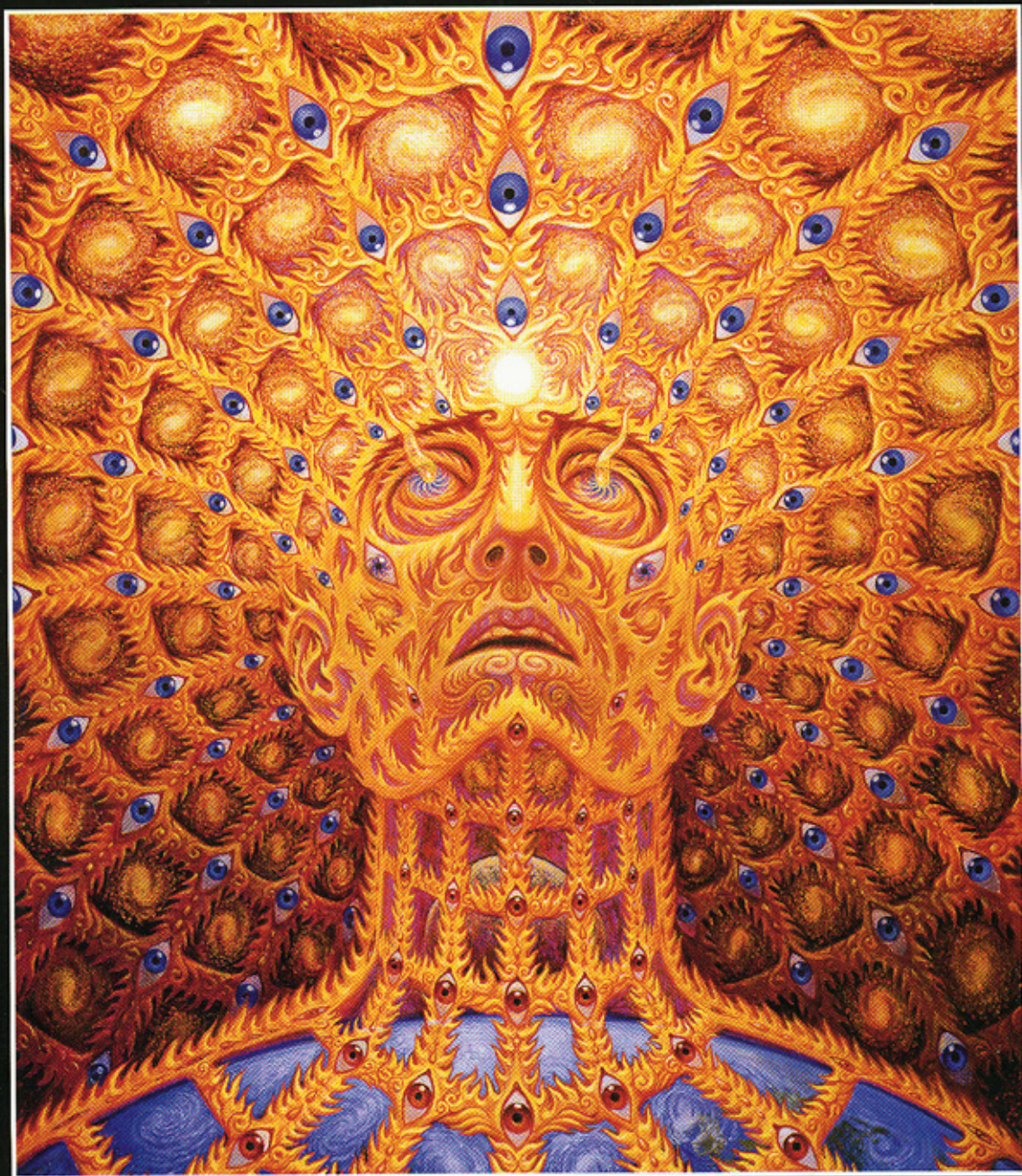
Special Issue on Psychedelic Mysticism

SHAMAN'S DRUM



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Oversoul

by Alex Grey

Transfigurations: The Mystic Art of Alex Grey by Stephen Larsen

Psychedelics and Consciousness: Conversations with Terence McKenna by Charles Hayes

Renewing Ta Hiera, the Holy Mystery Rites of Eleusis by Rosemarie Taylor-Perry

Disinherited: The Plight of Brazil's Native Peoples by F. Watson, S. Corry, and C. Pearce

The Spirit Doctors of Ayahuasca by Constance Grauds



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Holy Fire, Panel 1 (detail), 1987, oil on linen, 70 x 90 in.

Transfigurations: The Mystic Art of Alex Grey

by Stephen Larsen

From his earliest paintings of skeletons and self-portraits to his depictions of translucent biologies and universal beings networked with fire and eyes, Alex Grey has sustained an ever-deepening visual contemplation on the nature of personal and transpersonal identity. His artwork maps the soul's journey from material-world encasement to recovery of the divinely illumined core. Images of becoming, existential pain, confusion, love and family, and death and transcendence are presented as icons down the long corridors of his creative odyssey.

Grey's early forays into dark, transgressive performance art, his long stint working in a morgue, and his use of consciousness-altering drugs led him through stages of psychological and moral chaos to increasingly worldcentric and theocentric self-integration. As Grey explores the subject of polarities, the lights and shadows of his own character become more pronounced, and we understand the strange logic unfolding through his art. His works have a power and authenticity that can spring only from a soul who has plunged into the darker realms and come out whole.

Perhaps best known for his depictions of the human body that "X-ray" the multiple layers of reality, Grey uses the word *transfiguration* to characterize how his paintings interweave the medically accurate anatomical body with subtle energies and the light

of Spirit. The occurrence of beholding and becoming "light" is a phenomenon described in all religions and wisdom paths. It is illustrated in shamanic X-ray art: the artwork of twelfth-century abbess Hildegard von Bingen, Michelangelo, Bosch, Blake, Delville, Tchelitchev, and Fuchs; psychic "outsider" art; Hindu tantric art; Chinese acupuncture cartography; Native American peyote art; and the paintings of Buddhist *thangka* artists. Based on his own meditative and psychedelic visions, Grey's work carries on the diverse lineage of visionary artists who depict the subtle realms of mystical experience. Grey, who taught anatomy in the Fine Arts Department at New York University for ten years and who was once a professional medical illustrator, informs his paintings with an almost hyperrealistic accuracy. This combination of perennial wisdom and scientific exactitude makes for a most fruitful marriage of ancient spiritual and modern analytic world views.

Grey's quest is to create an integrative art that visually unites body, mind, soul, and spirit and helps heal the alienation and fragmentation experienced by individuals and the world. For many people, his artwork is helping to kindle a new vision where scientific truth meets mystic insight and where individual nature meets the collective universal being. He carries Blake's fire of the divine imagination to the world of contem-

porary art, pointing past the fragmented terrain of postmodernism to a spiritual art with an absence of religious dogma.

Grey's paintings offer the viewer unforgettable glimpses of transfiguration, as flesh becomes clear and incandescent. The *trans-* prefix refers to a movement through, or a crossing over and going beyond. *Transfiguration*, then, means to go beyond the conventional image and identity of one's body, a process central to this artist's journey.

The Sacred Mirrors

In 1979, the twenty-five-year-old Grey began his *Sacred Mirrors* paintings, examining the human body organ by organ, system by system, so that, in his words, he could "redeem his art" and provide a healing tool for viewers. The *Sacred Mirrors* life-sized depictions of the anatomy of body, mind, and spirit are meant to be faced as "mirrors" to help viewers connect deeply with the tangible and subtle aspects of their own being. One of Grey's *Sacred Mirrors* paintings, *Universal Mind Lattice*, shows the complete dissolution of the material body into a luminous fountain, part of an infinite network of light. Grey recounts the mystical experience that inspired the painting:

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

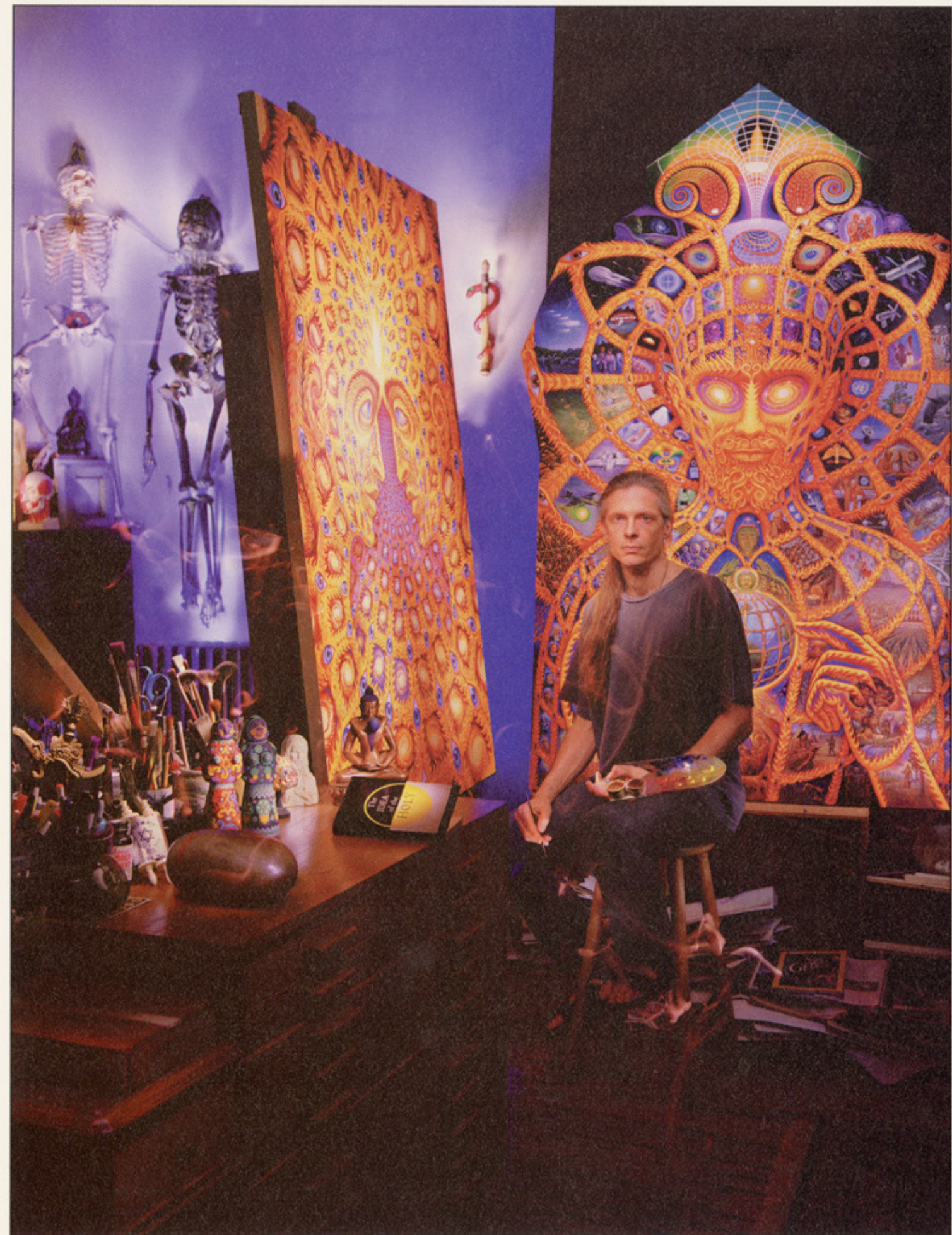
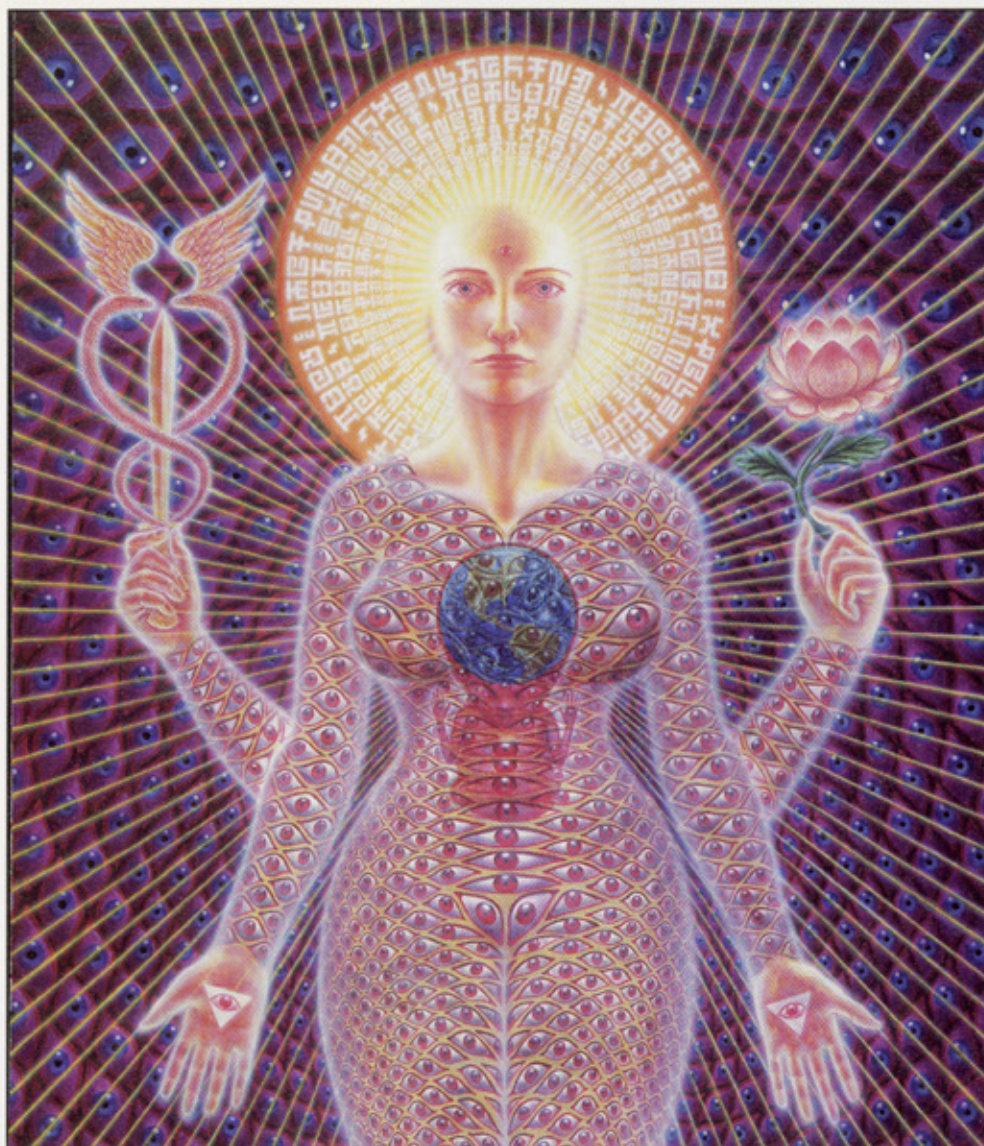


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Sophia (detail), 1989, acrylic on canvas, 46 x 84 in.

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 omnidirectionally 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.

As a result of their continuing sacramental psychedelic sojourns together, the Greys accomplished a disidentification of their souls from the merely corporeal aspects of incarnation and realized they would always be connected in spirit.

In the years since the completion of the *Sacred Mirrors*, Grey's work has increasingly focused on the evolution of the human soul and the subject of transcendental light. While painting *Psychic Energy System* in 1980, Grey discovered a new approach to viewing the human figure, a body radiant with mystic light informed by multicultural systems of medicine and transcendence. He began investigating the history of the portrayal of divine light, and light in relation to the body. This led to his lecturing on the subject of

transfiguration, with an accompanying slide show of portraits of solarized shamans, Egyptian sun gods, and haloed saints from various cultures.

Transfiguration

The poet W. B. Yeats prophetically stated, "The artists are now about to take upon themselves the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests ... filling our minds, not with things, but with the essences of things." When art transmits an essential truth or realization, then that truth or realization becomes essential to us. When our minds embrace "the essence of things," we approach the state of transfiguration.

Transfiguration is an ancient word meaning "to glorify and exalt," predating the well-known biblical transfiguration witnessed by the apostles Peter, James, and John. On a mountain "high and apart," Jesus, the Galilean carpenter's son, glowed with a light so supernal that it streamed through his physical pores, his face glowing "like the sun" and his raiment exceedingly white (Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2, 3).

Myth, religion, and art are full of transfigurations that go beyond the conventional body image. The transcendental Buddhist *bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara sprouted eleven heads and one thousand hands in order to uplift a suffering world. Transfigurations involve not only this type of divine illumination and shapeshifting, but also the encounter between the ordinary and the sacred, the earthly and the divine. The world's great religions hinge on the nature of this relationship. Perhaps one of the greatest transfigurations of world mythology is in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The young nobleman Arjuna is existentially troubled on the threshold of a terrible battle in which he will fight his own kinsmen. He asks his spiritual friend and charioteer Krishna to reveal his divine form. Arjuna then beholds Krishna as encompassing the infinite dimensions of the entire cosmos, with continents and civilizations undergoing vast transformation, armies falling upon one another, and millions of beings, stars, and galaxies dying and being reborn. Arjuna's karmic path becomes clear to him in the face of the immensity of the divine plan. Grey's recent *Cosmic Christ* painting alludes to this passage in the *Bhagavad Gita*, for it portrays a spiritual being that embraces all worlds.

Grey's *Transfiguration* painting maps the span of our collective being in one figure. The feet encompass the gross physical realm, the legs become increasingly translucent in the subtle psychic dimensions of reality, and, at the groin, the body pops into hyperdimensional lightwebs. Above the torso and



Nature of Mind, Panel 6, 1996, 8 x 10 in.

head, the painting and magnificent frame allude to causal realms beyond all form and representation. The mystic visionary eye "sees" as the human mind merges with the divine mind and receives revelatory understanding. *Transfiguration* recounts one of Grey's own mystical experiences. The reality of these "higher visions" is central to understanding his work, and the following section will examine briefly some routes to mystical experience, including clairvoyance, shamanic vision, near-death experience, and psychedelic inebriation. There is a compelling body of evidence preserved by mystics from every culture, indicating certain commonly held basic truths. Aldous Huxley summarized many of these points in his book *The Perennial Philosophy*. The field of transpersonal psychology has also analyzed the insights of such mystics. The essence of these findings is that the ego is just one aspect of the psyche; with appropriate spiritual practice, it may be transcended and the individual identity can merge with Universal Awareness coextensive with the All.

Shamanistic Motifs in Grey's Art

Grey brings to his images a translucent organic intricacy that relates to clairvoyant X-ray vision. Numerous psychics, including the renowned healer Rosalyn Bruyere, have commented that his X-ray and light-flooded art resembles the images they see with heightened sense perception during diagnosis and healing. Wilhelm Röntgen revolutionized diagnostic medicine with the discovery of the mysterious X-ray and forever altered the way people think of the body. Now, with X-rays, CAT scans, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), broken bones and hidden tumor masses can be vi-



Transfiguration, 1993, oil on linen, 60 x 90 in.

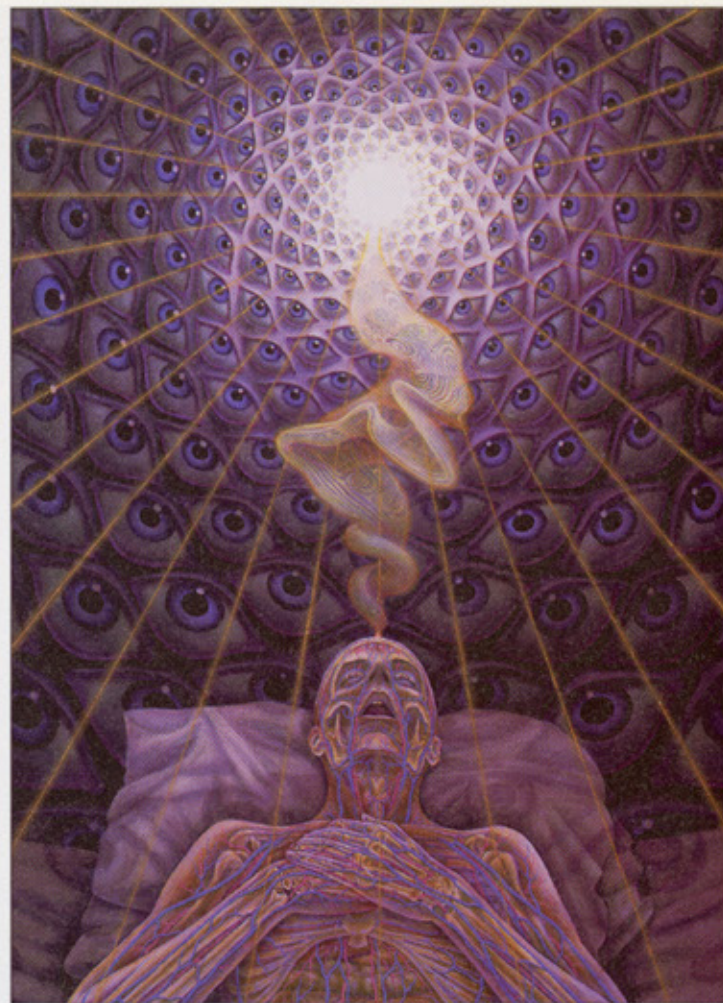
sualized for better treatment. Remarkably few artists have explored this new approach to viewing the figure.

In the twentieth century, the metaphysical visionary painters Frantisek Kupka and Pavel Tchelitchew, painters with whom Grey feels a strong mystical kinship, explored artistic renderings of vitreous flesh. Yet as early as the Paleolithic period, a curious X-ray style of art in which bones and internal organs are represented was associated with shamanism. Examples of shamanic X-ray art depicting animals can be found throughout the world, from ancient rock engravings in Europe, Norway, Russia, and India to

Native American art, Mexican Huichol yarn paintings, Australian Aboriginal bark paintings, and the strange symbolic renderings found in New Guinea and Oceania. An obvious explanation of the widespread similarity of X-ray art would be that it is a direct expression of a universal way of seeing, a specialized shamanic vision of the psychic and subtle realms. Aboriginal shamans speak of the "strong eye," a capacity to see inside a patient to the root of his or her illness. Among the Inuit of the polar north, *angakut* means "to be initiated," and *angakoq* is the ability of the initiate to see with X-ray vision. The shaman or clairvoyant healer



Wounded Healer, Panel 1, 1984-85, oil on linen, 70 x 90 in.



Dying, 1990, oil on linen, 44 x 60 in.

looks into the very marrow of the bones, discerning one's alliances, friendly and unfriendly, with the world of spirits.

Though world literature and mythology are full of accounts of the afterlife, it was not until the twentieth century that psychologists studied and interviewed people who'd had near-death experiences and accompanying visions. The surgical patient who dies on the operating table and who is returned to life with CPR is the classic case study, and Raymond Moody and Kenneth Ring have documented and analyzed hundreds of profound near-death experiences.

In South America, the drinking of the tea made of the vision vine, ayahuasca, bestows the ability to see into the spirit world. (Whereas in our Western model, the doctor gives drugs to the patient, in the shamanic model, the doctor takes them himself—so that he may learn to see.) The vision vine bestows the power to see the landscape of the other world, to which we are usually oblivious, and realize that it penetrates this one. Some of the first European and American ethnographers referred to ayahuasca as "telepathine," the drug that opens the inner eye of clairvoyance.

Perhaps the primary benefit of psychedelics is their capacity to make the brightly colored, visionary inner worlds explicit. To a consciousness familiar only with perception of the gross physical world, an immersion in the dynamic, overwhelming, and uncontrollable visionary imagination can result in ontological panic. Fear and paranoia can be magnified infinitely to hell-realm proportions, resulting in the classic "bad trip." But given the proper set-and-setting, a vast panorama of mysterious archetypal beings and highly articulated heavenly realms becomes accessible. For this reason, the class of substances known as "psychedelics" has recently been renamed "entheogens" by scholars and researchers who consider them to be sacraments for voyaging into the Godhead.

Much of Grey's work is related to the depiction of these interpenetrating dimensions of reality. The visionary artist cultivates a sensibility that can shift from the eyes of the flesh to the eyes of the soul. Grey's work has become associated with the contemporary psychedelic, or entheogenic, culture. He has made numerous appearances at conferences, sharing his work and

recounting the psychedelic, visionary, and meditative experiences that are the basis of his art.

In the face of unjust laws, the acts of ingesting an entheogen, painting the experience, and speaking openly about it become political acts and protests against the repression of what should be a basic freedom of religion. Grey says, "It is the prayer of the entheogenic community that these sacramental substances, as old as religion itself, find appropriate contexts for their legal use in the new millennium, and that these substances be used along with other spiritual practices to transfigure the consciousness of humanity toward a compassionate ecstatic recognition of our unity with each other and the web of life on our beleaguered planet."

Steven Larsen is a practicing psychotherapist and director of the Stone Mountain Counseling Center. He is codirector of the Center for Symbolic Studies and is Professor Emeritus at SUNY. He is the author of *The Shaman's Doorway* and *The Mythic Imagination*, and coauthor of *Fire in the Mind*, the biography of his friend and mentor Joseph Campbell.



Cosmic Christ, 1999-2000, oil on wood with gilded wood frame, 50 x 102 in.

The Vision of the Cosmic Christ

by Alex Grey

The mystics speak of unitive and infinite awareness. The possibility of realizing this infinitude of love and interconnectedness with everything is right here, right now. If an artist is awake to the mystical experience, his or her art can evoke these potentials in the viewers. We can encourage an embrace of the world with less of a feeling of fragmentation and more of a feeling of empathy, engagement, and love.

I had a vision of the Cosmic Christ as a flaming grid of golden light. Inside the windows created by the flaming grid were infinite scenes, all different aspects of our collective being—the story of humanity. The *Cosmic Christ* painting correlates pictorial messages about the evolution or as-

cession of human consciousness with the theme of mastering and transcending gravity. Gravity relates to heaviness and weight—the weight of matter. When consciousness enters matter—in the body—it lifts matter. We rise. Spirit uplifts matter. Consciousness masters and overcomes gravity.

Both literally and symbolically, humanity is evolving from crawling to walking and then to flying—physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually. This painting includes barbarities such as slavery and the Holocaust, because some aspects of our collective being are abominations—humanity is drowning in the depths of greed, hatred, unconsciousness, and the denial of basic compassion. But, from

prehistory to now, humanity has been "moving up."

Loosely sequential imagery of the soul ascending starts at the bottom of the painting. Then, by some form of feminized divine grace, the being is pulled out of unconsciousness, out of the water. To continue the metaphor, we have Christ walking on water, demonstrating his mastery of the depths—the unconscious—and his mastery of gravity. Christ represents the potential and the realization of superconsciousness, the uplifting power of spirit. The next image is an angel taking flight. Then there are images of Christ's transfiguration and ascension.

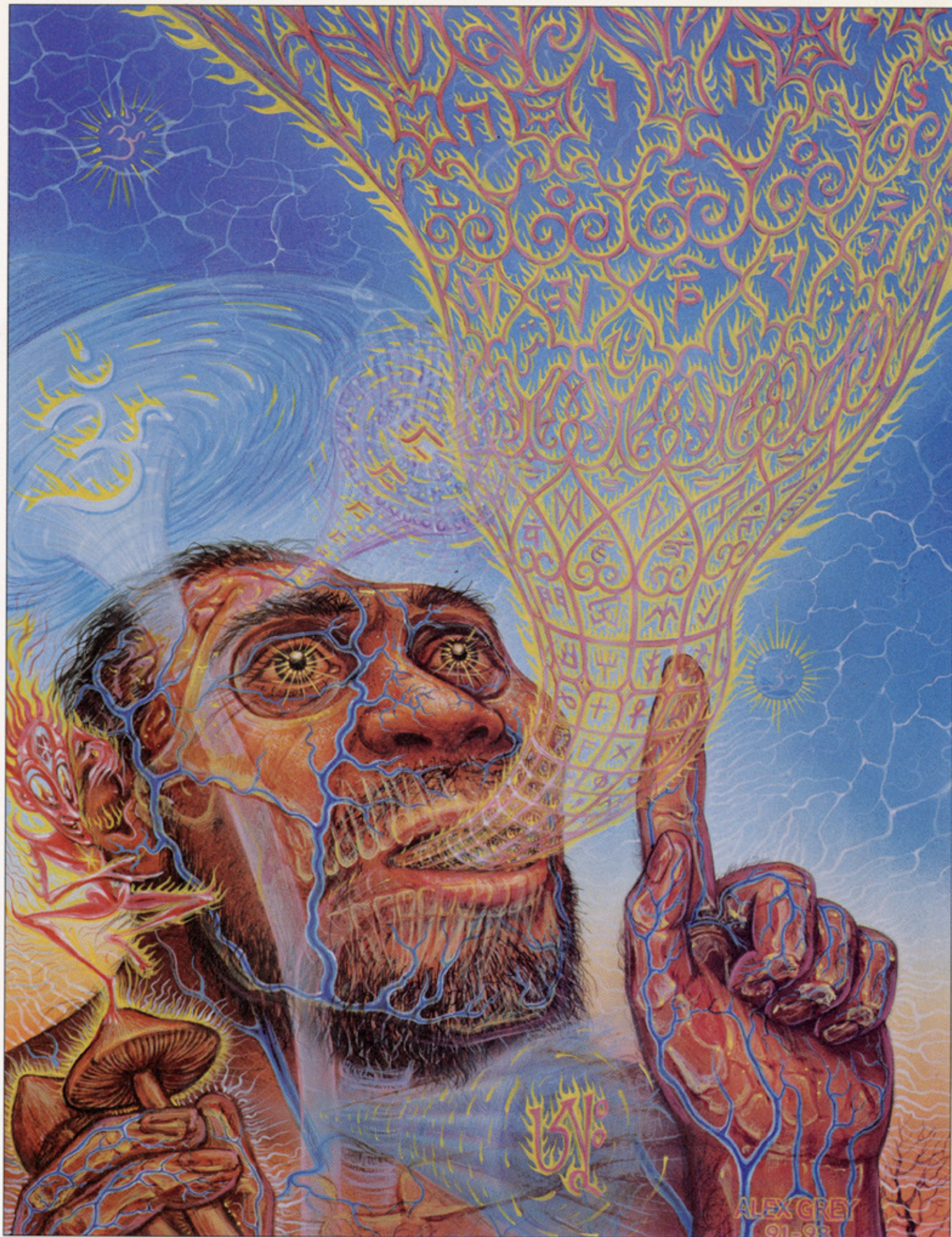
Ascending metaphors work throughout the piece, from the mythic and religious themes of the upraised spirit to the science of aviation and space travel—the Wright brothers, the Apollo moon landings, space stations and the Hubble telescope, and so on. At the top of the painting, consciousness is symbolized as a point of light, and light is sucked up into the black hole-y spirit. This sweep of images is about the antigravitational trajectory of life and spirit.

In the heart of the Cosmic Christ is the planet Earth. A longitude and latitude grid over Earth becomes a planetary crucifixion; everybody's nailed together in collective suffering. The planetary crucifixion transforms into a green Christ child, a planetary child, a green tree of life with all the plants and animals as one being. The child is crying, because the birth of our planetary identity is a difficult birth. There is pain in the realization that we are all connected when we see how badly we have treated the web of life.

The Cosmic Christ points to the world in its heart, the immanent Divine, and upward to the transcendent, beyond all forms. As I was painting this image, I heard an inner voice that I thought was the Cosmic Christ. I inscribed what it said on the base that supports the altarpiece:

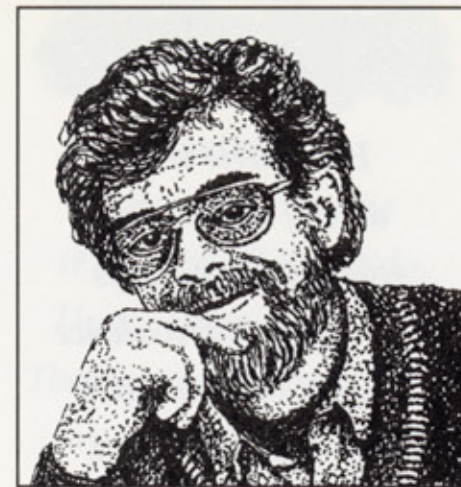
*You can never be lost.
When have you ever been apart from me?
You can never depart and never return,
for we are continuous, indistinguishable.*

The idea behind *Cosmic Christ* is that our own boundless spirit includes every being and thing as a facet of a universal Being, a meshwork of ongoing multiple realities. The human story with its many cultural world views is as important as our physical anatomy in defining who and what we are. The *Cosmic Christ* also suggests that we can embrace all truths—from physics and biology to psychology, theology, and mysticism.



The Visionary Origin of Language

by Alex Grey



Terence McKenna

Psychedelics and Consciousness: Conversations with Terence McKenna

by Charles Hayes

Shamanologist, lecturer, and author or co-author of seven books, including *The Invisible Landscape* (1975), *The Archaic Revival* (1991), and *True Hallucinations* (1993), Terence McKenna (1946-2000) was a most eloquent and persuasive spokesman for the psychedelic experience and the plant kingdom from which it emanates. The very purpose of these plants, he insisted, is to reveal to us the wisdom of the gnosis, the esoteric truths held by the Gnostics to be essential to salvation, and the logos, the divine mind at the heart of all Creation.

The astonishing—and most promising—aspect of McKenna's scholarly and poetic rant is that he believed that psychedelics, particularly the serotonergic tryptamines (e.g., psilocybin mushrooms and DMT in its various forms), actually *mean* something, that there's something *intended* for us within their frontiers, and that we really ought to cautiously but intrepidly cross over and check it out. He wasn't merely suggesting that psychedelics offer cool visuals and groovy love vibrations. He was confident that what they impart is ultimate.

The focus of McKenna's quest wasn't so much to manifest the tripper's soul per se as to unveil the ineffable Other, the revelation of which might help put his or her soul in ontological context. Ever partial to tryp-

tamines, McKenna maintained that the psilocybin mushrooms conjure "the greeny engines of Creation," as compared to the psychoanalytic glass house manufactured by LSD. Far beyond the gentle pulsing of color and softness in the soul reported by most mycelial mystics, McKenna described mushroom-related phenomena that are quite literally out of this world.

During an Amazon expedition in 1971, described in *True Hallucinations*, McKenna and his brother Dennis discovered (or "intuited," as Dennis told me in a recent correspondence) that the tryptamine in the native *Psilocybe cubensis* mushroom attaches itself to the user's DNA, causing the two strands of the double helix to vibrate intensely. The McKennas believed that the tryptamine had sprung loose the secrets of the universe embedded in the DNA, the two spiral staircases of which move in opposite temporal directions, one toward the past and one toward the future. (Interestingly enough, the McKennas aren't alone in fashioning something useful out of a psychedelic-honed fascination with DNA. Kary Mullis, the 1993 Nobel Prize Laureate for Chemistry for his invention of polymerase chain reaction [PCR], a system for multiplying minute amounts of DNA for research, has said that he probably would not have made the dis-

covery if he hadn't taken LSD, which had shown him a way to get "down there ... with the molecules.")

Upon their return to the United States, McKenna found that the structure of DNA resembles the sixty-four-part sequence of the *I Ching*, so he set about to compute the ancient Chinese divination guide into a huge fractal equation for all human history. According to McKenna's intricate mathematical formulations, time will work in an ever-tightening spiral of events toward "maximum ingress or novelty," leading to the final time, or eschaton, on December 22, 2012, a date that happens to coincide with the end of the Mayan calendar. According to McKenna's theory, life on Earth will then transform into a paradise more pagan and Dionysian than the dour life after Armageddon conceived of by Christians.

Like any prophetic vision of an end time set to occur within its author's presumed lifetime, McKenna's was somewhat ripe and overwrought, by my sights. Never mind the chances for hot-wiring a planetwide fusion of spirit, culture, and technology in little more than a decade. It'll be hard enough for either high-definition television or the World Trade Organization to coalesce and evolve by the year 2012. Even so, the sheer optimism of McKenna's predictions—and the

This interview is adapted from "Conversations with Terence McKenna" by Charles Hayes, featured in *TRIPPING: AN ANTHOLOGY OF TRUE-LIFE PSYCHEDELIC ADVENTURES*, edited by Charles Hayes, Penguin Compass, © 2000. Printed here with permission of the publisher. For more information, visit <http://www.psychedelicaadventures.com>.

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Holy Fire, Panel 1, 1987, oil on linen, 70 x 90 in.

by Alex Grey