

# *Portals*



of the

# L u m i n o u s :



## THE VISIONARY ART OF ALEX GREY

BY ELIEZER SOBEL

*Listen to Hafiz:*

*The  
Difference  
Between a good artist  
And a great one*

*Is:*

*The novice  
Will often lay down his tool or brush*

*Then pick up an invisible club  
On the mind's table*

*And helplessly smash the easels and  
Jade.*

*Whereas the vintage man  
No longer hurts himself or anyone*

*And keeps on  
Sculpting*

*Light.\**

### Alex Grey is a light-sculptor,

although he appears to use oil on canvas. He paints *energy*—giving form to the invisible, color and shape to the ethereal, texture to angelic and demonic forces and thought forms, and making tangible the intangible soul's imagination. His astonishing "x-ray" view of the human form—down to each anatomically accurate muscle and artery—reveals that we are each composed of worlds within worlds, matter within spirit within mystery. Grey's work radiates in all directions. If you stand close, you can feel the heat, and if you listen quietly, you will hear Blake's music of the spheres. Certainly Blake would agree with Alex that "God has ordained that imagination be stronger than reason in the soul of the artist, which allows the artist to build bridges between the possible and the seemingly impossible."

Alex has traversed mystical dimensions of reality through both deep meditation practices and entheogenic sacraments,

and unlike so many who return empty-handed, able to neither remember nor convey any of the visionary vistas they have experienced, Alex is able to translate non-physical realms directly into thought-arresting, brilliant works that inherently contain and transmit a gift of spirit, energy, love and light that serve the viewer with a very loud reminder that there is more here than meets the eye. Ken Wilber writes that Grey's art calls us beyond ourselves "to a transpersonal land where Spirit is real, where God is alive, where Buddha smiles and the Tao sings, where our own original face shines with a glory that time forgot and space cannot recall. We are confronted with the best that we can be, the deepest we can feel, the highest we can see, and so we go away from Alex's vision a little better than we were a minute before."

His paintings blast us with a flash of surprise, simultaneously reminding us that yes, we are but naked, mortal creatures

↑ "Collective Vision" 1995, oil on linen 38 x 38 in.

← "Nursing" 1985, oil on linen 40 x 30 in.



with rotting entrails, bound for death, yet in the very same moment we are also radiant, infinite beings of pure spirit, one with the Infinite Source. The work celebrates an ecstatic union of light and dark in an infinite embrace that transcends the Great Opposites—life and death, male and female, body and Spirit—through overflowing emanations of wholeness. As he writes, “Visionary art is the creative expression of glimpses into the sacred unconscious, spanning the most searing shadow imagery of tortured souls in hell, the mythic archetypes of demonic and heroically compassionate forces that seem to guide and influence our feelings, and the luminous transpersonal heaven realms. Visionary art offers bizarre and unsettling insights, convincing us by its compelling internal truth.”

Grey’s work emerges from a dimension of reality that will be familiar to those who have had experiences, drug-induced or not, of being momentarily lifted out of one’s familiar “I”-identity and transported into the Presence of the Divine, like a glimpse of the Promised Land. And he *intends* to catalyze such moments of self-transcendence in the viewer; it is, for

him, the mission of art. “Mystic art is a window to the transformed view, which reveals all phenomena as inherently sacred... When we gaze in to great works, mundane thoughts dissolve for a moment and we stare into spirit’s timeless presence.”

But nobody comes into the light without passing through darkness, and in his early days as a performance artist, Alex reached deep into the very bowels of human experience and put it on display for all to confront. Among the pieces he created during his five-year stint working in a morgue were “Life, Death and God,” in which he was suspended upside-down, along with a cadaver, roped together at the ankles and flanking a drawing of a crucifix; “Inner Ear,” in which he poured molten lead into the ear of a dead woman; “God’s Art” in which he and his wife Allyson made love inside a large glass case in a museum. His descent into the netherworlds included works involving excrement, urine, vomit, deformed babies, blood, fire and nuclear holocaust. Often the living nightmares he presented transmuted into frightening visitations and voices that invaded his sleep and ultimately steered him, from within, down a more life-affirming path.

And then...he met Allyson and they took LSD together and tapped into a vision of unity, a seamless, interdependent web they would call the 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 that linked omnidirectionally without end. All duality of self and other was overcome in this infinite dimension of spiritual light.” That experience has informed all their work since. (Allyson is a visionary painter in her own right, and they often teach together.)

Given all the imagery, media, information, songs books movies newspapers internet e-mail fax and cell phone communications we are bombarded by continuously, it is crucial to keep in mind that each and every bit of it carries the energy and intention of its source, and makes its mark accordingly. And as Alex has said, “it only takes one drop of tincture to change a whole glass of water.” May all of our creative expressions be outpourings of our true nature and loving kindness, works that leave, like the paintings of Alex Grey, a trail of light in their wake.

★ from *The Gift, Poems by Hafiz*, reprinted with permission from Daniel Ladinsky, translator.

↑ “Holy Fire” 1986-87, oil on linen, from a 90 x 216 in. triptych

**WHJ:** *Do you have any hope for us?*

**ALEX:** I think there is always hope where there is love. Because I try to spend a portion of my day translating visions that are coming out of my love experience with my wife Allyson and our daughter Zena, and my own relationship with whatever the Mysterious Presence of Spirit is, those are the sources of hope and life and centeredness that underscore the meaning and value of life for me. Love is the kind of compass—as long as we’re pointing in that direction, then we’re not going too far of course.

And part of being in love is being full of hope. And so the more we can radiate that, and bring it into whatever little things we do day to day, the more *that* can catch, I think, rather than underscoring the Ministry of Fear, as I like to call our current administration. We’re filled with a kind of psychic terrorism that I think comes out of Washington. We’re now the biggest bullies in the world; we can swing our missiles around and swagger into any pipsqueak nation that we don’t like. It’s a very offensive image to me, compared to what I would hope America could stand for: a vision of true hope and survivorship and stewardship of the planet. Instead we have the raping of nature as the behavior of the most “advanced” nation or super power. So we’ve become a super bully and I’m super sad about that, but the things that are of true value continue to be true. The love that we can share has not been made false. The potential of humanity has not changed.

**WHJ:** *And when you’re creating your work, do you have a sense or a hope that it’s making a dent in all that?*

**ALEX:** I’ve been really honored to receive the attention and support of a lot of people, so I get letters and e-mails and so forth that kind of affirm that the message got through, and that they felt moved, or it underscored their understanding of what makes life worthwhile, or that now they’re seeing in a way that they hadn’t seen before and “thank you very much”—what more can an artist ask for? I mean Van Gogh has brightened so many of our lives, and he had to die not knowing that he had contributed this mighty sun of radiance into millions of people’s lives. So I feel very lucky...and some people have even bought some of my work!

So this isn’t making a real dent in the consciousness of the planet like pronouncements on CNN that are constantly broadcast, but there is a subtle dent I suppose—I like to think of it as another voice in the choir, reminding us that we have the potential to activate a spiritual power in our lives through our creative actions that will help to make the world a better place, that will serve “the true, → page 31



His paintings blast us with a flash of surprise, simultaneously reminding us that yes, we are but naked, mortal creatures with rotting entrails, bound for death, yet in the very same moment we are also radiant, infinite beings of pure spirit, one with the Infinite Source.

↑ “Birth”, 1990, oil on linen 44 x 60 in.

...from page 5 and the good, and the beautiful,” and that those are values worth preserving and worth maintaining in our own hearts and in the hearts of the nation and the world. And so, it’s a good fight. I think of New York as the real trenches of the spiritual war—sort of the psychic battle for the truth about life. Is it only about money and materialism? Or is there something more?

**WHJ:** *You raised the question in your book that if we consider art to be a spiritual practice, then we kind of need to measure it by...*

**ALEX:** The exemplars—and where are they? Van Gogh was one, I think.

**WHJ:** *But not in terms of being a peaceful person...where are the ones that found spiritual results?*

**ALEX:** I think Blake was a little more in that camp. And Michelangelo—although I don’t think he was a peaceful man. People described him as almost a terrible presence—they were scared of him. But there was a power that he was able to channel and knew about, in the same way that Van Gogh did. You see, these are not the same standards as you would apply to the saints. But some of the mystics were called crazy, and they were doing outrageous things, or walking around naked, or talking with God in the village square...

**WHJ:** *Da Vinci used to dig up bodies from the graveyard to study anatomy.*

**ALEX:** He was an inspiration to me. I studied anatomy at Harvard Medical School: I worked in the morgue and prepared bodies for five years, and that’s how I got into the anatomical work I do.

**WHJ:** *I know that you’re a student of Dzogchen. (Note: Dzogchen is a Tibetan Buddhist practice concerning primordial, non-dual, empty awareness and innate wakefulness.) Are you able to translate the emptiness teachings of Dzogchen into a visual place, or are they distinct from your art for you?*

**ALEX:** I think that that’s one of the biggest challenges that I’ve faced as a painter, translating that understanding and view of Dzogchen.

**WHJ:** *You’d almost think of a blank canvas.*

**ALEX:** Yes, that would be suitable, really, given the correct kind of intention. I’ve been so much of a symbolist that I’m kind of loathe to have just blankness there. But I do have areas of white light or clarity or something like that often at the center of my paintings. Because the thing about Dzogchen is not that everything is just emptiness, although that’s part of it. Dzogchen is about non-duality, and it’s about the continuity of samsara and nirvana, and being able to glimpse what some would say is liberation or nirvana through the everyday immersion in samsara.

So that’s what attracted me to Dzogchen. It wasn’t its separation or the high view in terms of getting beyond everything,

↓ “Despair”, 1996, acrylic on linen 16 x 20 in.



“At the beginning of our path as artists we often have to deal with upsets and negativities. You may have to cry, you may have to dance, you may have to get the energy moving whatever way you can. If you need to scream as you work, that’s as much of a prayer as the more refined kind of artist’s prayers. It’s more direct: you can scream in rage, you can scream your need for God...whatever’s there for you. You’ve got to start where you’re at. You can’t just start making spiritual art without addressing all the build-up of shadow material that you may be carrying around with you and that’s leaking out at the borders. You’ve got to be true. So wherever you’re at, that’s where you start.”

To experience art fully, viewers must go through a mini ego-death, entering the mind of the artist, who is himself out of his mind.



although there is that transcendental aspect—it's the integration aspect that always fascinated me the most, the inclusion of the visionary realm and the actual working with it as a practice. That's the thing that I never got growing up in a Christian household, the idea that there are spiritual practices that one could do to prove for themselves the existence of these dimensions.

**WHJ:** *Do you think someone approaching art as practice also needs a separate, more specifically spiritual or meditative practice?*

**ALEX:** I think they probably need to at least examine that at some phase of their artistic career or endeavors. Being the best Zen practitioner or becoming a priest may not be necessary, but at least they should become familiar with what meditation is. Because it's not exactly the same thing. Sitting on the cushion has not been the same thing for me as painting my paintings. There are similarities, and I've tried to note them where I could...

**WHJ:** *There would have to be a similarity, at least, with the practice of one-pointed concentration.*

**ALEX:** Sure. But how often are we able to achieve that either on the cushion or in the studio? That's the ideal.

**WHJ:** *Well for example, when you are painting one of those hundreds of identical hands in your painting of Avalokiteshvara—did boredom arise? Or tediousness?*

**ALEX:** No, I'm not really bored with the work. Because when I'm working on a painting like that, I'm painting it because I love the subject. I'm a very subject-driven and content-driven artist. So the Avalokiteshvara—the Buddha of Active Compassion—is all about the devotion this Buddha has for the suffering world, and so my feeling in working on it is "Oh my God, how mind-blowing, how amazing!" And you have to have devotion to paint it accurately, too. So it's that devotional energy that I bring to the work, rather than one-pointed concentration. I know when I start working on a painting, it may take me months, and so I have to have a kind of commitment to the vision and to the piece, and that translates as a kind of devotedness.

**WHJ:** *Two hundred more hands to go, but each one...*

**ALEX:** It's like mantra, in a way, and in that way you could say that it's akin to meditation. Because a lot of my works do involve patterning that is somewhat repetitious. At the same time, they are not *simply* repetitious. There is variation within everything, and that's intentional, to keep me sharp and thinking and working with it. So you can see [pointing to a painting] all those eyes are somewhat similar but they're all different sizes, they all have different light hitting them at different trajectories, and so forth.

↑ *Contemplation*, 2002, oil on wood, 20 x 20 in.

**WHJ:** *Do you smoke grass while you're working?*

**ALEX:** I smoke dope when I need a new perspective on the work. And I can paint some things under the influence—flow patterns or something like that, or it can be very helpful in order to have insightful, new eyes on something. But I'm not the most skillful in terms of doing very careful details and things like that during that time—so I wouldn't choose to work in a detailed way. More often I'd tend to think of the overall perspective: how does it need to change? Am I going in the right direction? Because for me, a lot of times being stoned allows me to quiet the conceptual mind a little bit and have a little more intuitive and aesthetic pleasure—response to things. I can see a thing deeply, sometimes, and appreciate it on a different level, and get insights about things. So that's what dope has been helpful for.

**WHJ:** *And do you frequently turn to psychedelics for new vision?*

**ALEX:** Not that frequently. I try to dose myself every year, sometimes several times a year, so I've continued to investigate those realms and I don't feel near the end of that investigation. Because I think for a visual artist, it's like looking through a window or a telescope or microscope into another dimension of reality that is the source of all pattern and languages and it's an aesthetic gumbo of all the collective unconscious that you're able to access through your own personal, archetypal vision.

I personally think that psychedelics can be a very handy tool for some artists—not everybody, obviously, should even get involved with them. But for those that it has provided meaningful and not so dangerous experiences, I think they're a way to see a kind of integration and unity...like, where did all the religions come from? What was it that inspired them? Not every trip is going to be a mind-blowing, mystical experience, but there are enough of them that reinforce that insight so that the entheogenically-inspired artist will be

someone in the future that will really help art. So I see psychedelics having a role, in being catalysts for the visions, but they're not the only way that I've gotten the visions.

And there are also frightening, terrifying realms people can find themselves in. My last trip was a couple months ago and I scrawled into one of my notebooks, "It's reassuring to know that there is such a thing as conventional reality." I was lost in a swirl—my mind was like a bowl of mercury that had been splattered into a 200-yard radius. I was a bug crawling on a leaf, something slithering on the ground, a hedgehog—which sounds very nice and non-dual in a certain way, but when there's no center to it...I had totally lost my personality and in some ways it was very beautiful, but in others it was like, "Oh my gosh, I've dissolved into this web of life and I'm not sure I can find my way back to my physical body."

**WHJ:** *How do you work with people in your workshops to help them tap into deeper dimensions and inspiration, without using those "helpers"?*

**ALEX:** We do a variety of what I call "vision practices"—ways of boosting the unconscious into delivering some kind of insight, and it's different for different people. Someone might get just a hint—like a color, or just a little shape, and think "oh that's not a vision," but if they honor that, and start working with it, it can be the seed that everything sprouts from, and something *does* develop. So there are artists for whom that's their process—sort of an improvisational thing, but it looks afterward as if it was fated to be.

And then there are other people who have these very symphonic, amazing visionary experiences, and some are able to translate them with some degree of care. But a lot of times they are overwhelming to people and they feel like they already failed before they even begin because it was much too complex and rich to translate. Or they don't feel up to it skill-wise. In a case like that, I always look to the outsider

artist—the various kinds of visionaries who took up pen and brush because "God told them to," and even if it was somewhat elementary and crude, they still are translating their direct experience, and something, some kind of energy or authenticity of the contact with the visionary realm translates in their work, and you feel that presence, or that contact, because of the passion that they brought to the thing, not necessarily because of the way they can make a jewel reflection or some kind of refined compositional piece.

**WHJ:** *You wrote, "To experience art fully, viewers must go through a mini ego-death, entering the inspired mind of the artist, who is himself out of his mind."*



↑ Eliezer Sobel (left), publisher of *Wild Heart Journal*, with Alex Grey

Artworks can be the reminders, like little lighthouses in our journey through chaos, that say, “Oh yeah, that’s what life’s about!”

**ALEX:** For me that summarizes what the aesthetic experience is. When you see an astonishing work of art, somehow your defenses and your ego kind of collapses. You’re just drawn magnetically into the contemplation of that object, and it’s as though you have an experience of the Beloved right there, where you’re not invested in keeping your own boundaries defined, you’re opened into another space, another mind.

**WHJ:** *That kind of implies there’s a space of Being where the artist and the viewer are going to meet, with the painting serving just as the telephone line...*

**ALEX:** Exactly. I’ve often felt that the painting itself can be a conduit into shared presence, common heartedness, unitive being, the “sky-like nature of mind,” or whatever metaphor you’d prefer for the aesthetic meeting place. Sacred art is anointed with spiritual presence and becomes a means for delivering it to an open, receptive viewer. A viewer could just be looking at the night sky or a rock or a tree or another person and have an experience of mystical presence, but it’s also possible to have the presence underscored and validated through great works of art. Artworks can be the reminders, like little lighthouses in our journey through chaos, that say, “Oh yeah, that’s what life’s about!”

See [www.alexgrey.com](http://www.alexgrey.com) for information on Alex’s teaching schedule and exhibitions. His work is available in two oversized books, *Sacred Mirrors* (1990) and *Transfigurations* (2001), both from Inner Traditions international, Rochester, Vt, and he is also the author of *The Mission of Art*, Shambhala Publications, Boston, Ma.



↑ *Caring*, 2001 oil on linen 20 x 24 inches



↑ *The Artist's Hand (detail)*, 1997, oil on wood 16 x 16 in.