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Visionary Art as Evolving Consciousness

Azul DelGrasso¹

Abstract:

Visionary art is art that is not confined by form, it argues that the artist who creates spiritual art allows the spirit to guide them, rather than relying on traditional form or technique. This can result in art that is incredibly unique and expressive, as it comes from a place of pure creativity and intuition. It also examines the visionary art of Alex Grey whose works offer a gateway into a different state of consciousness, where the viewer can access new insights and perspectives. In a world that is becoming increasingly disconnected from the creative body, visionary art can be a source of hope and inspiration.

Keywords: transpersonal psychology, visionary art, psychedelics, ecopsychology, spirituality, Alex Grey

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Introduction

What if art was a way to reliably instigate an experience that goes beyond the self?

“Beyond the self” refers to experiences in which individuals are able to see themselves as part of the greater whole, which have the potential for personal transformation and self-expansion of spirit by deepening connections to everything, including humans, *more-than-humans*, and Spirit—the seen and unseen, the inner world. How can this inner world be experienced through art? The term “more-than-human” (Abram, 1996, p. 7) acknowledges that the nonhuman other contains a significant and subjective center of experience that is also part of the human experience. When one begins to remember their connection to the human and more-than-human worlds, they may tell the story with words or paint. Moving beyond the individual soul involves observing the collective spiritual beliefs, practices, and attitudes that humans experience in relationship to the whole through the lens of connection, which can include a spiritual paradigm and art-making process. This is often referred to this spiritual paradigm and process as spiritual art difficult to understand, as it often lacks a clear structure or meaning. However, this is precisely what makes it so special - it allows us to explore the formless and mysterious aspects of the spirit realm. In a world that is increasingly dominated by rationalism and structure, spiritual art provides a much-needed gateway into the infinite possibilities of the imagination (James, 2001).

To illustrate this, Frida Kahlo (as quoted in “Art,” 1953) once said, “They thought I was a surrealist, but I wasn't. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality” (para. 5). Like Kahlo, Alex Grey has done just that: painting his reality influenced by the divine, spirit, shamanic, and other worlds. Visionary

art looks inward as if searching for the eyes of the soul, taking shape in landscapes of heaven, hell, formlessness, and the experience of the inner being (Grey, 2021). It examines sacred traditions and shamanic practices while working with mythic archetypes that have shaped how humans interact with the world. Visionary art allows the audience to ponder their mortality and spirituality while wrapping it around the questions so many generations have asked before: Why am I here? What is my purpose? What happens when we die? Many visionary artists know that there will be a level of conflict inherent in the self-creative process, and from that conflict, something beautiful can be birthed into being that helps humankind be at peace with these questions.

The creative exploration of creating visionary art can activate something deep inside: the yearning to be more awake, which helps bring these enduring questions into flesh. Visionary art can offer insight on how disconnected from the creative body modern humans have become. As a photographer, I understand the creative process, and as a transpersonal photographer, I understand that visionary art's intention is a transpersonal process. I define transpersonal photography as bringing forth the multidimensionality of a person. With the camera as a tool for soul-understanding, I explore beyond the veil of the participant so that they are fully revealed. I bring my passion and sensitivity to ultimately open up the subject; thus, the individual in front of the camera sees themselves as a magnificent person to be acknowledged through self-reflection in the form of their multidimensional image, allowing their voice to ascend. Clients say the gifts from the photoshoot are equally as valuable as the beautiful and diverse images they receive. It does not matter if I have a subject, model, or theme in front of me—the

idea of creating and playing with the light is enough to invoke the intention of transpersonal photography.

Magic Structure: Creative Flux and Dreaming Consciousness

In August of 2020, author and psychedelic researcher James Oroc passed away during a paragliding accident. Although I had only briefly met him during the 2018 Los Angeles Psychedelic Symposium after his panel discussion on 5-methoxy-*N,N*-dimethyltryptamine (5-MeO-DMT), his work has been very influential on my inquiry into psychedelics' potential to connect people to the more-than-human world. Particularly influential have been his references to Carl Jung and other humanistic theorists' exploration of the collective unconsciousness and visionary states. Forty-nine days after his passing, I had the honour of attending the celebration of life ceremony that was held for him. Oroc (2009) explained that in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the *bardo* is the state between life and death where the soul stays for 49 days. Oroc (2009) offered his own experience with the *bardo* during his first 5-MeO-DMT experience,

The next morning, I went into town to check out the bookstores. I saw a calendar of Alex Grey's artwork on display, and as I flipped through it, I suddenly recognized with a shock one of the paintings, titled Bardo [see Figure 1], from my own journey the night before. Of course, I bought it and took it home. When my friend came home from work, he checked out the calendar I had left on the table. From where I was in the other room, I heard him

excitedly shout out: "That was what I saw last night!" (p. 119)

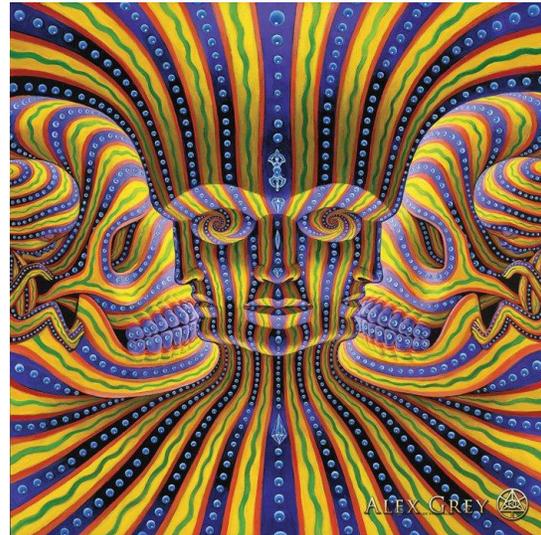


Figure 1: BardoBeing by Alex Grey

During the ceremony, I listened to Oroc's childhood friends speak of who he was and who had influenced him. To my surprise, Henry Miller was mentioned as an influencer of visionary art; he has also been cited as an influence for Alex Grey. In Miller's (1997) essay "Why don't you try to write?," he described how writing allowed him to get to the heart of what he wanted to say, which showed him how he could use writing as a tool to remove any differences between him and his fellow humans. This is something I have always strived for in my photography and art: to remove the veil of illusory separateness by utilizing the transcendent lens. In addition to complementing the visionary artist, it assists in peeling back resistance from the subject, rendering them vulnerable to revealing their transcendent beauty. Miller offered further inspiration for the visionary artist regarding the primal flux of writing, stating,

In this preliminary state,
which is creation and not
birth, what disappears suffers

no destruction; something which was already there, something imperishable, like memory, or matter, or God, is summoned and in it, one flings himself like a twig into a torrent. (p. 28).

In this passage, he describes the creative primordial flux similar to the bardo. The imaginative inquiry begins in the in-between, waiting to be birthed into the world. Ideas are waiting to be embodied in this life, and through the creative process described by Miller, we are gifted the ability to birth, nurture, and dream them into reality. Miller stated that “the art of dreaming when wide awake will be in the power of every man one day” (p. 28).

Visionary art can also mirror dream consciousness. It can reflect what is waiting to be realized or manifested. Combs (2002) wrote that in the dream state, “we can experience any of the structures of consciousness that have emerged. We can be rational, and we can have magical and mythical experiences” (p. 194). When one allows themselves to be immersed in dreams, many ideas can come forth from the intellectual bardo. It is bringing the above and below together (Miller, 1997). Dreaming compliments the notion of creative process as they both allow the experiencer to enter a flow state and examine what comes up in that process. Cameron (1992) referred to dreaming as the detective work that allows us to break free from our destructive thought processes. Jung (1997) faced his fears about his dreams and allowed it to flow into his passion, granting the most generous amount of light possible the ability to shine over the darkness. Dreaming is part of the path that leads the artist into creating and is a considerable tool to inform their process. This is supported by

Simpson (2014), who stated, “knowledge originates in the spiritual realm, coming to individuals through dreams, visions, ceremony and through the process of gaa-izhi-zhaawendaagoziyaang—that which is given lovingly to us by the spirits” (p. 10). This is the method that inspires the artist to dive soul-first into the visionary creative process.

Visionary Structure

Dreaming is only part of the process of birthing new ideas. There is also a need to know the structure that will help support and nurture this creative process. Receiving the dream or creative vision does not necessarily mean the receiver will act upon it unless they have systems in place for that vision to thrive. Grey (2001) has inspired artists to let the artwork arrive as a vision, as also outlined by Oroc (2018). Grey's (2001) process can not only resonate with the creator; it can also help develop inquiry for receiving the vision. Grey (2001) wrote, “The artist's mission begins with full-bodied enthusiasm. The passion and delight of the making art seduces a young artist into an unknowing alliance with primal forces of creativity” (p. 18). Grey's (2001) method of seeing and creating gives the experiencer permission to simply develop and not be exact. It will not be perfect, but the intention is to make and let the transpersonal process unfold. Grey (2001) explained that art can be a spiritual practice when it is the intention of the artist that what is being created is spiritual in nature, whether the artist brings spirit into the work or not. Both Grey (2001) and Cameron (1992) have given guidance to explore art and find the gold in the chaos of the artistic process after its done. The modern world seems to have lost its way concerning the creative process, the planet, and one another. Visionary art can be a means by which we examine the

transcendental and transpersonal. As McKenna (1993) stated,

Without the escape hatch into the transcendental and transpersonal realm that is provided by plant-based indole hallucinogens, the human future would be bleak indeed. We have lost the ability to be swayed by the power of myths, and our history should convince us of the fallacy of dogma. What we require is a new dimension of self-experience that individually and collectively authenticates democratic social forms and our stewardship of this small part of the larger universe.(p. 273)

Mythic Structure: *BardoBeing* by Alex Grey

For some, visionary art is the perfect escape hatch into the transcendental and transpersonal realm as described by McKenna (1993). Looking at Grey's (22) painting *BardoBeing* (see Figure 1), the central being is formed of multicolored energy bands representing existence outside of time. It is reminiscent of images of Norse mythology and the Bifröst, the rainbow bridge connecting worlds yet not of one single world, Midgard and Asgard, the dominion of the gods. The bardo could very well be the waystation between worlds, and Grey's (2002) work captures the presence of being within that in-between. The skull/fetus, connecting the "infinite one," depicts undeviating time and designates the temporality of being. Challenged by the restrictions of time, every moment offers the capacity to realize our eternal reality. The painting represents traditional Tibetan ritual practices as the Dorje Vajra Phurpa is

located near the forehead of the being with many faces in the center of the painting. This location is also known as the third eye or the pineal gland, also represented by a diamond just below the Dorje Vajra Phurpa. It has been suggested that this area of the brain produces *N,N*-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) that is released at birth, during dreaming, and at near-death to produce altered states of consciousness. However, more research needs to be done in this area to confirm the hypothesis (Nichols, 2018; Oroc, 2009).

The state depicted by Grey's (2002) painting, the bardo, has been described as entering a cosmic wormhole at unknown speeds to a point of shattering Hausdorff's dimension into a never-ending fractal (Fernández-Martínez & Sánchez-Granero, 2014). Buddhists refer to the bardo as the space between death and rebirth (Oroc, 2009). In this place, there is no ego or sense of self, and instead there is a sense of both all and nothing. In the bardo, the body is no longer attached to the psychical connection. *BardoBeing* (Grey, 2002) represents a rite of passage that all will experience at some point. This rite of passage follows a sequence of stages that begins with severance, during which attachments are released and the soul enters a second phase, the threshold or liminal state. In this phase is the space of the bardo, which represents the attainment of a new life stage of the soul and the passing through of different worlds. It is the way station towards where one might experience a third stage, incorporation (Foster, 1987). In this context of the bardo and visionary art that dissolves the boundaries of perceptions, Combs & Holland (2001) wrote, "For the inner, archetypal Trickster, play includes a synchronistic taking hold of whatever matters come to hand in order to break the

boundaries of our usual perceptions of reality” (p. 133).

Using the Four Shields model, which draws on seasonal cycles and the mythos surrounding them as a model for the human life and death experience, the painting and these concepts align with the East Shield (Foster & Little, 1999). As Foster and Little (1999) described for the East Shield, “The Bardo Thotrol makes the meaning of the initiatory passage very clear. In the death passage toward spring, the summer body that must die encounters the ghost of its karma in the dark memory (fall)” (p. 88). It is also said that the Spring Shield is the shield of the spirit, the trickster who holds the gate of death at the entrance of birth (Foster & Little, 1999). Like spring, *BardoBeing* (Grey, 2002) represents the place of illumination and release into the spirit world. What is most striking about Grey’s (2002) image of this spirit world is that the painting differs from other visionary artworks by the simple use of primary colors, with green being the exception, a color for spring. The simple color palette demonstrates how humans are connected to their inner being, removed from the complexity of daily life, in the waystation of the afterlife. This is the space where one begins to remember and develop their connection to the human, spirit, and more-than-human worlds.

Conclusion

It was the summer of 2016, and I found myself at Burning Man. Burning Man is an annual gather of 70,000 people who make the pilgrimage to the desert as a form of radical expression and inclusion, a utopic imagining of what the world would be like if psychedelics, music, and creativity were part of everyone’s daily life. Burning Man is famously known for its synchronicity. Tales

have been shared about people simply speaking and something or someone they have spoken of appearing. One such experience took place on a Tuesday afternoon. Several of my close friends and I decided we would use some psychedelics, a blend of 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) and lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD). Grof (2006) described this blend as taking the Rainbow Bridge, also known as Bifröst from Norse mythology. As we sat in a circle setting our intentions, we consumed the magical blend, and within moments, the twelve of us bicycled like disciples to the other side of Black Rock Desert, otherwise known as Playa. There, we were invited in by David Bronner, CEO of Dr. Bronner’s soap, who has been a long-time participant in Burning Man. At this camp was a semi-truck trailer made of plexiglass in which dozens of nude participants were getting hosed off with water and shot with foam, for some the only time they would get a proper cleansing while attending the 7-day event. As we got the VIP treatment and entered the foam experience, sensations from the psychedelics started to kick in. Finally, the foam hit our naked bodies, and the journey had begun. Reminiscent of a birthing process, we were bathed off as newborns before the journey of life began.

In the heat of the desert, starting to feel the effects of the psychedelic bardo, I stood half-naked in the doorway getting my clothes. As I completed those tasks, I raised my head to realize I was standing in front of Alex and Allyson Grey, who gently smiled and laughed. There before me, they were painting a mural for Dr. Bronner’s camp entitled *Star Dancers* (see Figure 2). Seeing the mural, I was aware that the psychedelics had indeed taken their hold, and for the next 8 hours, I found myself in a prolonged 5-MeO-DMT experience of the bardo and

Alex's (2002) painting, *BardoBeing*, an experience that usually only lasts 15 to 45 minutes. Only by opening my eyes would I see the fractal world in front of me as our group journeyed throughout the day. My psychologically altered experience of that day has impacted my relationship with nonduality and, most importantly, my relationship with visionary art. The experience of that altered state of consciousness gave more animation and soul to art and now magnifies the knowledge I have regarding art and my inner calling.



Figure 2: Star Dancers (details) by Alex and Allyson Grey

Grey's work, with or without psychedelics, is an attempt to remind us that most humans are disconnected from their inner calling. This is observable in the majority of modern Western people's daily lives, which involve the mass consumption of capitalist goods and destruction of the natural world to create these goods. The abnormal separation from one's calling and creative self contributes to poor societal health. This duality adds to the fuel for social uprisings and movements,

which are occurring at increasing rates. Visionary art can be influential in dismantling inner oppressive systems and having a sense of return to soul or source. Crowley (2016) wrote that Timothy Leary used the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a guidebook to navigate the psychedelic experience; perhaps there are lessons from the bardo for navigating the complexity of visionary art and the artistic process, thus learning to live a more prosperous life without the uncertainty of the bardo. Whether it is visionary art as evolving consciousness or psychedelics, it should be examined not as a process of revolution, but an evolution of our very own consciousness. It could be inferred, that *BardoBeing* (Grey, 2002) and *Star Dancers* (Grey & Grey, 2016–2017) are two examples of how art can be a living mirror of consciousness not only for the artist, but also for the audience, representing various stages of life and the transitions between them.

“There is a need for individuals to find ways of transcending their limiting identities, of periodically committing egocide. The submission to God by following transformative spiritual practices can more safely engage the death-rebirth transcendence axis. Some cultures have elaborate and cathartic rites of passage for every stage of life. Our culture has not fostered safe death and rebirth rituals. So people create their own, consciously or unconsciously.” (Grey, 2001, p. 144)

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1. Grey, A 2002, *BardoBeing* [Painting, oil on wood] Source:
<https://www.alexgrey.com/art/transcendental/bardo-being>
2. Grey & A. Grey, 2016–2017, *Star dancers* [Painting, acrylic on canvas], Mesa Arts Center, Mesa, AZ, United States. Source:
<https://www.facebook.com/AlexGreyCoSM/photos/the-artists-mission-begins-with-full-bodied-enthusiasm-the-passion-and-delight-o/10156603494006086/>