

# COSMIC CREATOR

Our cover artist, **ALEX GREY**, paints psychedelic canvases that express the union of mind, body, and spirit. ▸

by Jason Edward Kaufman

*Nature of Mind*, 1996,  
78 x 68 inches, seven oil  
paintings on wood with  
sculpted gold leaf frame.







Conventional wisdom tells us to stay away from drugs and New Age religions, but artist Alex Grey is not conventional. LSD has taken him on mystical journeys that have inspired his mind-bending paintings and led him and his wife, the artist Allyson Grey, to cofound the art church—**CoSM** ([cosm.org](http://cosm.org)), short for Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, a reference to Alex's most celebrated series of paintings—centered on awakening the creative spirit in everyone. He began painting *The Sacred Mirrors* series, 21 life-sized paintings of the human body that include

depictions of internal physiology and abstract energy fields, in 1979. The series and subsequent works have brought him renown among healers and members of the international psychedelic community. *Watkins* magazine has four times named him one of the top 20 spiritual leaders of our day. Deepak Chopra, Jean Houston, and Ken Wilber have all served as advisors to CoSM. Wilber, director of the Integral Institute, praises Grey's transcendental art as "not merely symbolic or imaginary: It is a direct invitation to recognize and realize a deeper dimension of our very own being."

Grey's works, some more than 7 feet tall, have sold for prices exceeding \$100,000. The rock bands Tool, the String Cheese Incident, the Beastie Boys, and Nirvana have featured his paintings as album art; other works have been published in *Time* and *Newsweek* and appeared on the Discovery Channel. His art and ideas are the subject of several illustrated monographs, CDs, and videos. His book, *The Mission of Art*, explores creativity and spirituality throughout history, and he co-edited (with writer Allan Hunt Badiner) *Zig Zag Zen: Buddhism and Psychedelics*.



From left: *Psychic Energy System*, 1980, 84 x 46 inches, acrylic on linen; *Spiritual Energy System*, 1981, 84 x 46 inches, acrylic on linen; a rendering of Entheon.

We spoke with Grey in his studio at CoSM, where an old carriage house on the site is currently being transformed into **Entheon** ([buildentheon.com](http://buildentheon.com)), a three-story 12,000-square-foot museum for artwork by the Greys and other visionary artists, including a Psychedelic Reliquary containing the spectacles of LSD discoverer Dr. Albert Hofmann and the ashes of Timothy Leary. Plans call for construction of a separate chapel to house the Greys' works, leaving Entheon to solely feature the work of other visionary artists. Grey tells us about his career, how LSD changed his life, the mystical visions that have inspired his paintings, and live painting performances at the Burning Man festival in Nevada. ▶







*Clockwise from left:* Alex Grey leading a tour of the Entheon museum, currently in construction; portrait of Albert Hoffman, a work in progress; *Eco Atlas*, 2017, 60 x 84, acrylic on canvas; *Artist's Hand*, 1997, 16 x 16 inches, oil on wood; work table in Grey's studio at CoSM.

**When did you first take LSD and how did it affect your life and your art?**

I took LSD for the first time when I was 21. It was the end of the school year in Boston, and I was suicidal and depressed. Basically, I dared God to appear in my life or I would find a way out. I was saying goodbye to my professor on the street corner and [my now wife] Allyson drove around the corner in a yellow Volkswagen and invited us both to her end-of-year party at her apartment.

If I had not been on that street corner for those two minutes, my life would be entirely different. I may not even be alive if it weren't for that. I was desperate. I had broken up with my girlfriend right around that time, and I'd spent all my money. I'd been doing crazy things like shaving all of my hair on one side in an exploration of polarities, experiencing the hemispheres of the brain, intuitive and logical. It felt like I had nothing to live for and nothing left to lose. Why not take acid? What could go wrong? At the party I drank half a bottle of Kahlua with LSD and handed the other half to Allyson, who drank it. There in her studio, with my eyes closed, I saw the light of infinite love in my own soul. Within a day, Allyson and I had declared our love for each other. We've been together ever since. All of that happened within 24 hours of daring God to appear.

**What was the trip like, and why was it so transformative?**

When I closed my eyes I was in a helical vortex, like being inside of a curving mother-of-pearl seashell tunnel. I was in absolute darkness, spiraling toward a brilliant light just around the corner. I could see all the shades of gray connected the opposites. That's when I decided to rename myself "Grey." It would become my quest to unite the polarities in my art. I called Allyson the next day and said, "Wow. Something happened to me last night and I'd love to talk to you about it." Allyson shared for the first time the God contact she had experienced a few years earlier but never dared to tell anyone. God contact was not a well-accepted subject in art circles.

Jason Edward Kaufman

**You must have been grateful that you had someone to share that experience.**

The LSD opened a shockingly positive transcendental light inside myself. Allyson was divine love and light in the flesh, now in my world. I realized I could be happy.

**You and Allyson continued to take acid together?**

Yes. We had visions together. June 3, 1976, a journey Allyson and I had together changed our lives and artwork. Lying together in our bed, we took LSD and put on blindfolds, listened to Bach organ music played

by Albert Schweitzer. Schweitzer was a Bach scholar who became a doctor. He would play concerts at Carnegie Hall to finance his medical center in Africa. We both loved Schweitzer's altruism and imagined this great being sharing his talent playing the work of another great being, Bach, to serve and heal suffering.

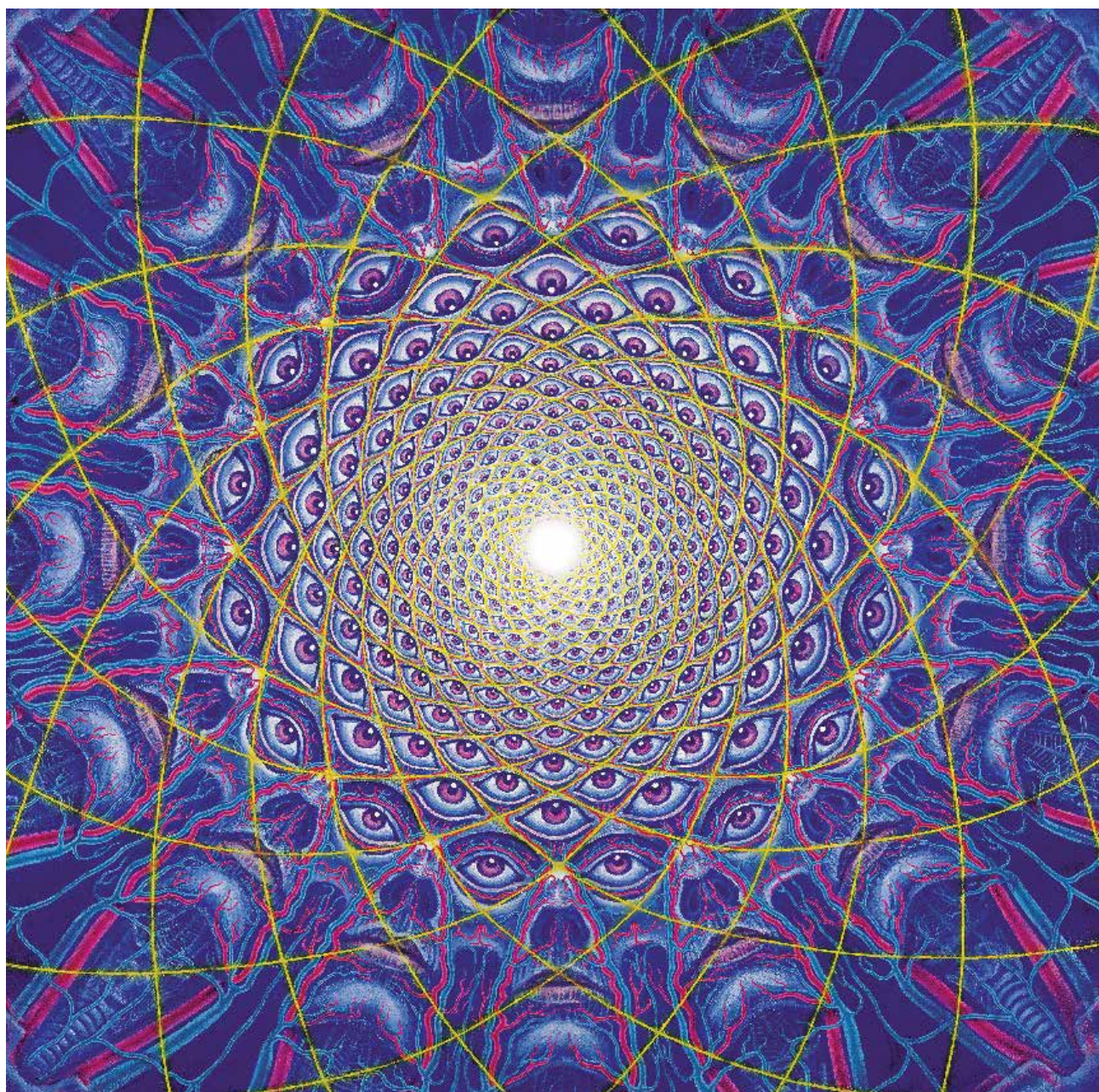
**What was so special about that it?**

We entered an infinite dimension of light and love. Our bodies became toroidal balls of light. Every being was a fountain of love energy linked with every other.

**Toroidal?**

Imagine the inner and outer shape of an apple, a donut, or a bagel. That shape is called a torus. When a bar magnet reveals its lines of force in iron filings it's the same shape. Earth's geomagnetic field is a toroidal energy field. Every being was a fountain of spiritual energy shaped like a torus, and each ball was connected with every other in an infinite web beyond time. Physical reality was an illusion from which the veil had been lifted. Our physical bodies seemed like dream bodies. The light seemed more real. ▶





**How do you know that Allyson had the same vision?**

We both knew we were with each other and all beings in this net of souls. We each made drawings of our own versions of this vast vista of toroidal fountains and drains of light energy. Our drawings, in our own styles, portrayed very similar patterns of circulating bands of light.

**Could that be related to the structure of the Bach organ pieces?**

That's an interesting thought. But remarkably similar incidents have

been reported by other people.

A man came to my show in Japan and lifted his shirt to show me a raised elliptical scar from having been struck by lightning. When he died he saw the infinite light of heaven and told all of his friends about it. One of them showed him my painting and he burst into tears and said, "That's it!" He traveled to Tokyo to tell me this story.

In the early '70s, *Reader's Digest* published the first near-death experience reported in mainstream media, and the account by Victor Solow described his near-death

heart attack where he experienced a similar network of light that was all love. Through the years I have collected accounts of what we call the "Universal Mind Lattice," which is the name of a key *Sacred Mirror* painting. Allyson's painting *Jewel Net of Indra* was named for the Hindu image of the Abode of Indra, the God of Space, where a net stretches infinitely in all directions and at every crossing of the net there is a jewel so highly polished that it infinitely reflects every other jewel in the net.



**That's quite a vision. Modern science has explained that reality is, on one level, fields of energy, and that the world as we know it is held together by various forces. But to call that love—and not, say, conflict—sounds like an optimistic interpretation, almost like faith.**

God contact has nothing at all to do with faith or belief. A vision of God that I see within cannot be proved to any other person, but it cannot be unseen or denied by the experiencer. Overcoming our blindness to seeing our life as a positive gift from God is

the jihad of everyday life—a holy war we fight inside ourselves to wake up to the love that surrounds us. Once in touch with ecstatic joy and wonder, we become grateful for the precious gift life is.

From a suicidally depressed young man, my perspective shifted and I became a mystic, one who is initiated into "the mystery." In my artwork, I intend to share the highest perspectives that I can glimpse. The nature of an artist's consciousness and purpose is to reveal mystic truths, the shadows and the light.

Truth, goodness, and beauty are the foundations of a right civilization, and these elements are hard to find reflected in American culture. Those who look outside of themselves for an anchor find it difficult in today's world to trust the media.

As a painter, I can share the still, small voice of conscience that I hear in my soul. Unlike the shrill media, art can capture and share the whispers of spirit. This motivates Allyson and me to create a "sacred container" for having and expressing our visions. ▸





*Previous page left: Collective Vision, 1995, 38 x 38 inches, oil on linen.*

*Previous page right: Vision Crystal, 1997, 16 x 16 inches, oil on wood.*

*Clockwise from above: Diamond Being, 2003, 24 x 24 inches, oil on wood; Net of Being, 2002–2007, 180 x 90 inches, oil on linen; Time and Space Being, collaboration with Allyson Grey.*



#### How did you do that?

Throughout the years, while we continued painting our own bodies of work, we also co-created performances at new venues, exploring new ideas. One performance was called *Prayer Wheel* in which we built a giant prayer wheel in the center

of a large gallery surrounded by an early version of *The Sacred Mirrors* series. The prayer wheel, 8 feet high and wide with a Plexiglas exterior, glowed from the inside through gigantic Tibetan letters reading, "Om Mani Padme Hum." For the performance, Allyson and I were both painted gold. Allyson cradled a realistic gold baby doll while I wore

a skeleton tied to my back. Roped together, we walked in unison, pulling around the Prayer Wheel and chanting the Tibetan prayer. To express the unity of polarities, we expressed both male and female and represented our station between birth and death. This took place at the UMass Amherst Gallery and hundreds of people came to see it. ▸





## VISIONARY PAINTING

**It's one thing to have visions, and another to be able to realize it in a visual image. How did you translate your ideas into paintings?**

Inspired by my LSD journeys, I wanted to make art about consciousness—but it is invisible. By portraying the body, I would at least indicate the container in which consciousness lives. X-rayed figures appear more universal, unlike realism where a person of a particular race and time is portrayed. Depicting translucent anatomy alludes to a world unseen. Auras and energy fields could be introduced around

the body, since we may be open to the idea that X-ray visions reveal what is normally hidden. My intention was to add the light of the soul and transfigure my painted human forms.

**It sounds like you are describing *The Sacred Mirrors* series. How did you conceive that project?**

In 1978 Allyson and I did a performance called *Life Energy* at a gallery in Boston. I put some charts of anatomical systems up on the wall and invited people to stand in front of them and see if they could sense the systems in their body. They were life-

size ink drawings meant to stimulate awareness of our vital forces. At the end of the performance we thought we should honor—through witnessing—the *passing* of life energy. I was working daily next to a rat lab, and I borrowed a medical instrument, a rat guillotine. After warning the audience, I used the medical device and sacrificed one rat for art. Afterward, we were sure we had lost all of our friends. Nobody wanted to talk to us and they just left. Walking home, Allyson said, “You know, Alex, people really loved the charts. They were so well done. You should do a whole series based on the body, mind, and spirit.” That was the birth of *The Sacred Mirrors* series. A little later Allyson came up with the perfect name for the series.

*The Sacred Mirrors* described the various systems of the anatomy. I taught myself medical illustration working in the morgue preparing the bodies for Harvard medical students. I had access to whole bodies dissected in every phase. Doctors at Harvard saw pictures of my *Sacred Mirror* paintings, and when a call came in from a pharmaceutical company asking for a medical illustrator they gave my contact information instead of a Harvard's medical illustrator's. The pay was four times what I was making and I got out of the morgue business!

**The figures in your paintings are always idealized in proportion. No one's plump or ugly.**

That is true. I invite viewers to mirror the painting and sense healing energy in the most positive relationship possible with these images. They are put forward not as realistic presentations but as models we could lean toward in our positive identity.

**Do you think that representing ideals could create a barrier to people who do not have the same body type?**

I'm just emphasizing universals. Some people might reflect on their own judgment of their body or on the body of another. That's part of a valid introspective experience, but we always hope people can transcend limiting beliefs. At CoSM in NYC we created an exhibition project called *Everybody Is a Sacred Mirror* [2005].



*From left: Ocean of Love Bliss, 2009, 30 x 40 inches, acrylic on linen; Kissing, 1983, 66 x 44 inches, oil on linen.*

We invited people to pose nude in front of a black wall and have their full-length photographic portrait placed inside a 12-inch *Sacred Mirrors* frame replica. We had over 130 participants of diverse body types—every race, heavily tattooed people, a one-legged guy, a really big woman, a pregnant woman with her diapered baby. The point is we are all reflections of divinity.

**Your figures often are embedded in patterns of repeating lines and vibrant colors that call to mind abstraction. How do you think of your work in relation to modernist abstraction?**

Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko are two of my favorite painters and I consider both of them very spiritual painters. For me, Pollock's drip paintings show the face of God, the web. I include the web in many of my works. *Eco-Atlas* and other paintings portray veins, nerves, grids, and webs of interconnectedness. For Pollock to make that his subject was unprecedented. Rothko removed and essentialized forms, leaving raw clouds of emotion, trauma, even doom. I feel resonant with their passion.

## THE SACRED MIRRORS (1979–89)

Grey's most famous achievement is a series of works called *The Sacred Mirrors* (1979–89). The ambitious cycle is the artist's summa of knowledge, a visual synthesis of a worldview based on experimentation with psychedelics and deep study of the diverse history of spirituality. The sequence consists of 19 paintings and two etched mirrors—each 84 x 46 inches—showing a life-sized figure standing with arms at the side and palms out. The images allow the viewer to “mirror” the pose and proceed from one to the next as the series evokes ideas about mind, body, and spirit. “It's an attempt at universalizing the human experience of identity,” says Grey, “and to take a person beyond their physical body, beyond identity with race and gender, into a spiritual identity beyond those elements.”

The first figure is a silhouette made of lead on a mirrored background on which the periodic table of elements represents the Material World. Subsequent figures are X-ray-like renderings of the skeletal, nervous, cardiovascular, lymphatic, visceral, and muscular systems of the body. Next are representations of the Caucasian, African, and Asian races that Grey associates with cognitive processes and socio-political dimensions of the mind. And then figures contain the yogic chakras and radiating linear patterns that represent psychic and spiritual energy.

The body then dissolves into abstraction, rendered as a bilaterally symmetrical field of luminous rays that Grey calls the Universal Mind Lattice, and as a vertical band of clear light that hovers in a void above a nocturnal landscape surrounded by Chinese symbols of water, clouds, and fire. The concluding canvases are a mandala of the Buddhist deity Avalokiteshvara, an iconic resurrected Christ, and Sophia, goddess of wisdom. The culminating panel, titled *Spiritual World*, is a mirror on which a radiant solar disk takes the place of the viewer's reflected face.

Each of the panels is set within a 5-by-10.5-foot arched frame studded with symbols in gilded relief. At the base is a glowing golden orb representing the Big Bang or Genesis. Rising along the sides are DNA-like double helixes, the spaces within the spirals containing vignettes representing biological evolution, from galaxies to dinosaurs to mammals and humans, and technological evolution, from the ape brain to fire, agriculture, navigation, printing, the Industrial Revolution, the Atomic Age, and neuroscience. In the upper part of the frame, figures represent social organization and fields of knowledge—family, friendship, art, law, education, psychology, business, and sports—and symbols of various religions. The apex is a stained-glass Eye of God flanked by a fetus and a skull representing birth and death above a couple in tantric embrace, signifying the union of polarities. >





**A number of your works include Earth, the sea, mountains, and landscapes. What do you think distinguishes your take on these traditional subjects?**

When I point to Earth as a subject, I refer to the web of life. We're a part of the environment that forms us. I intend to indicate the universal, a web of intelligence over Earth and spread throughout the cosmos, an intelligence with which we can unite, providing access to a conscious Earth, the living well of intelligence that refers to the archetype, Gaia.



**TEACHING AND PERFORMING AT BURNING MAN**

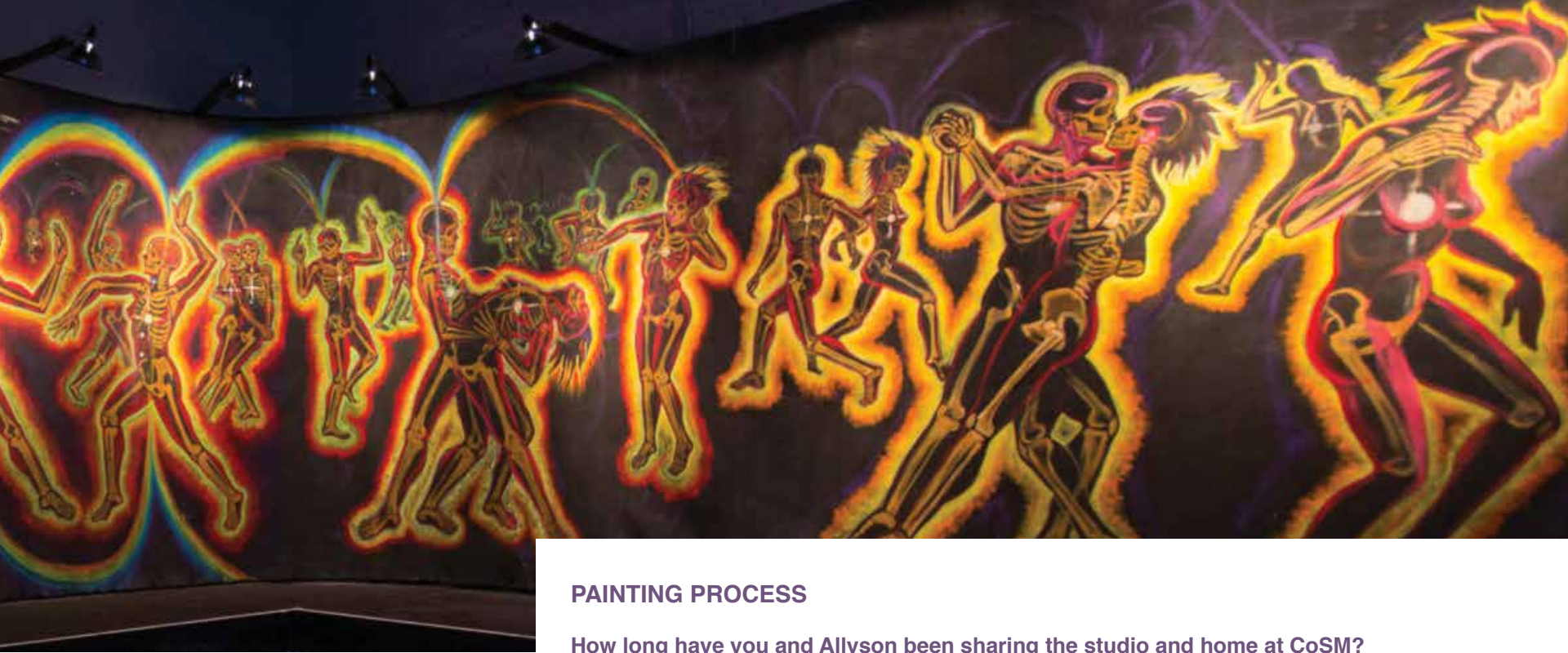
**You teach classes at your spiritual retreat CoSM, at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, NY, and at other venues. How did you become a teacher, and what is it that you teach in your classes?**

Allyson and I have taught the Visionary Art Intensive for 27 years at Omega Institute. We lead workshops occasionally in other places, as well. One of our favorite Vision Practices is to spend the day drawing a beautiful yogini model in a pose evocative of each of the seven "chakra" energy centers of the body. We suggest the color resonant with the energy center on which we are focusing and listen to music supporting that state of being. The exercise is more like a ritual, a purification, and an activation of our own "light-body" through art. For 10 years in the '90s, I also taught anatomy and figurative sculpture at New York University.

**You also do painting performances at Burning Man. What are those projects?**

Burning Man is just one of the most phenomenal experiences on Earth—a mecca for creative freaks. It's an artist-run operation outside of existing cultural institutions that presses the artist's and society's edge. It's group living in a harsh environment celebrating monumental sculpture, creativity, and full self-expression.

Last year at Burning Man we painted our 32-foot mural of dancing naked people called *Star Dancers*—dozens of dancing skeletons with rainbow auras. Allyson and



**PAINTING PROCESS**

**How long have you and Allyson been sharing the studio and home at CoSM?**

For 42 years; Allyson and I built our first loft together in downtown Boston in 1975 where we lived and loved for nine years. In 1983 we purchased a raw loft in Park Slope, Brooklyn, where we've shared a studio for over 32 years. In 2010, we built the studio of our dreams on the CoSM property in upstate New York.

**What medium do you use in your paintings?**

Either oil or acrylic. I make a drawing on the canvas, and then start painting. For some, I'll start with a darker ground and raise light out of it, and for others I'll just start with a blank canvas and keep painting.

**Do you use photographs as reference?**

Yes, definitely. In the case of a portrait of a known person, like the Dalai Lama, I will rely on multiple images and make sure my portrayal mixes aspects of all photographs rather than corresponding primarily to any preexisting image. A combination of photographs offers a depth in the persona I'd like to reveal.

**Some of your paintings are fiery orange, and others are blue and green. How do you choose your palette?**

From 1999 to 2012 I was journeying frequently with the vegetal hallucinogenic ayahuasca, and that may have influenced the appearance of fiery colors, like in *Net of Being* [2002–2007]. Recent paintings show a cooler palette. In the Tibetan system, blue is the color of space, as it appears in the sky. Blues also indicate an element of sadness and maleness. My vision of *Eco-Atlas* supporting the globe shows the gravity of our human relationship with the planet. Many feel tremendous sadness over the way we are treating Earth.

**Do you think all colors have individual symbolism?**

Yes. My recent painting, *Vajra Guru* [2016], portrays Padmasambhava, the eighth-century teacher who brought Buddhism to Tibet. It is a red painting, with other primaries in smaller doses. Blue represents space and yellow-gold is the vajra light, the life energy. Red is the lifeblood, like fire at the center of things animating the flesh.

**You're working on a portrait of Albert Hofmann, the discoverer of LSD. How did you meet him?**

We met several times at psychedelic gatherings around the world. Dr. Hofmann was a scientist and a mystic. I made an earlier painting of Dr. Hofmann based on a famous picture of him holding a model of the LSD molecule, and on his 100th birthday in 2006, he signed the back of it. He also wrote the foreword for one of my books. After he died, his family gave us the eyeglasses he was wearing in the portrait, which we'll display in the Entheon gallery we are building. The current painting of Dr. Hofmann is an illustrated history of psychedelics as they have been honored sacramentally in ancient religions and studied by science. ▶

*Left, top to bottom: Air and Mountain Consciousness, 2000, 5 x 7 inches, oil on wood; Forest Consciousness, 2000, 5 x 7 inches, oil on wood; Earth Consciousness, 2000, 5 x 7 inches, oil on wood.*

*Above: Star Dancers at Burning Man 2016.*

I have been working on it at a number of venues over the past decade. At Burning Man 2017 we will again be painting the mural in the Dr. Bronner attraction. David Bronner, whose family makes Dr. Bronner's soap, is a genius and has devised the most incredible camp at Burning Man, and we are honored to be part of it. This year it's called "TransFOAMation." It's the shower you will never forget. Twenty-five naked people enter a tunnel of spraying foam, scrubbing and dancing to the best daytime DJs at Burning Man. The soapy people move down the tunnel where they rinse with clean water and douse with coconut oil as they exit to the dance floor. It's the most fun and most awesome ecstatic experience, and there we are, painting dancing naked people. It's just the perfect marriage of an environment and a painting.



COMMERCIAL VENTURES

**Marijuana plants appear in many of your works. You made the logo for Higher Vision Cannabis.**

Cannabis is the most beneficial plant in the world and has been cultivated as a sacrament and medicine and hemp for over 10,000 years. The American government has had an evil, racist crusade against this benign boon for decades. Read the science and you will understand. I support the cannabis and hemp industry as a way to heal the world. I invented the Higher Vision logo and then sold the rights to my friend Adam Lustig, the founder, so he could use it to advance his very pure medicine. Allyson and I donate all proceeds toward building a temple at CoSM.

**You did the album art for the rock band Tool. Can you talk about your relationship with the music world?**

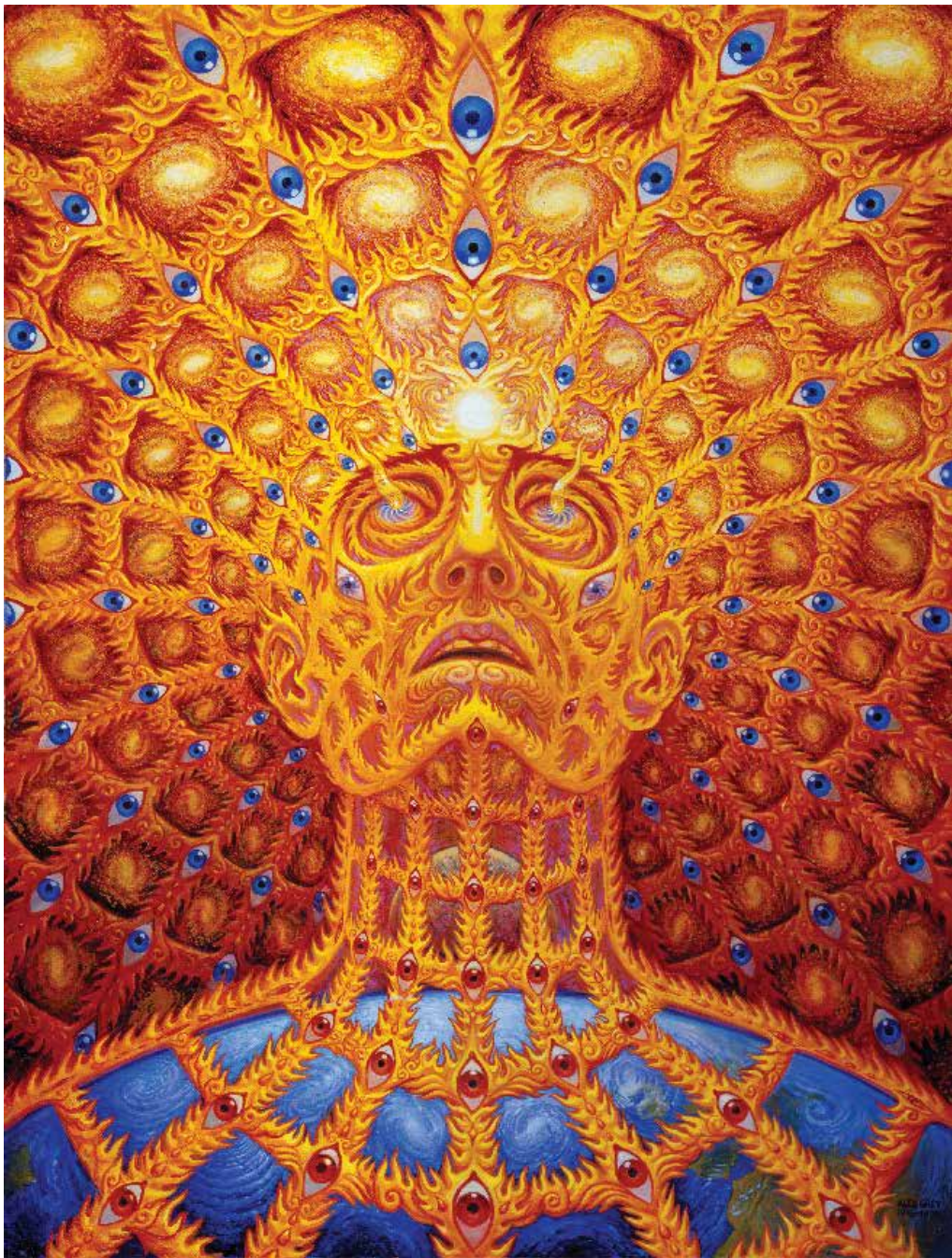
My most important musical relationship is with Tool. The lead guitarist, Adam Jones, loved my work and asked me to work on the *Lateralus* album they released in 2001. We met in 1999 and formed a friendship. Tool used *Net of Being* for the album *10,000 Days* [2006] and as a backdrop for their live shows. I'm very grateful they used my work and made it known to millions of people.

**You're not a traditional artist who has gallery shows every couple of years. Do you wish you had a commercial gallery to regularly exhibit your work?**

I have shown in fine galleries and don't aspire to it anymore. Now, my interest is in growing and sustaining CoSM, building Entheon, and supporting the art of visions still unembraced by a commercial art world. The values I represent in the artwork, teaching, and writing are not chiefly aligned with that world of traditional commercial art venues.

**You produce posters and all sorts of merchandise such as books, clothing, and jewelry.**

That's true. In this way people all over the world have been able to see a glimpse of the mystic realm. Buy the poster, get the worldview. We seek ways to create the most uplifting art and raise money to sustain CoSM. My artwork is aimed at the 99 percent, art for people looking for meaning, many



of whom have had contact with the visionary worlds. A traditional museum context may not support those revelations. My work is aimed for initiates into a visionary dimension and may not attract those who live in a materialistic mind frame. My work is not bought because of an attraction to a pleasing arrangement of colors and form. Thousands of people wear tattoos of my artwork, because it means something to them. The art literally "left an impression" on them.

**Do people have to license it?**

No. They just do it. They buy my books and take them to a tattoo artist. There is unbridled piracy throughout the art world. People also print my paintings on sheets of

blotter acid—one of them Timothy Leary signed for me and it will be exhibited in the psychedelic reliquary of Entheon.

**You don't mind that people pirate your work?**

I don't regard someone tattooing my work on their skin as a pirate. They are making a deep bond with the art. It's a totally different thing when anonymous pirate organizations in China and elsewhere print my art on every conceivable piece of crap to be sold out of Hong Kong. It's not just me. There's an unprecedented rape of artists by this system, brought to you by Amazon, eBay, and Alibaba. They could make laws that would protect American artists, like

demanding proof that sellers have authorized products. None of "my" stuff shipping from Hong Kong is legit. It just makes me sad because we are trying to build Entheon. But it is challenging for us to sell our own stuff on Amazon now. Perhaps this is the pressure we need to expand ourselves into that world market.

**What other products are coming out?**

The next *CoSM Journal of Visionary Culture*, volume 10, will be on LOVE, featuring extraordinary spiritual leaders like Amma, Jean Houston, Michael Beckwith, and Ken Wilber sharing their evolutionary perspectives on love. Both Allyson and I have new print editions available. CoSM offers small models of sculptures that will appear full-size on the façade and roof of Entheon, like the Steeplehead and a plaque of *Creating a Better World*, the relief for the doors of the building. There's a *Sacred Mirrors* frame replica for displaying cards from *The Sacred Mirrors* card set or lenticulars. New items are released every few weeks, including new poster images and fabric banners of the best-loved images.

**How much do the original paintings sell for, and who buys them?**

They are some amazing and independent-minded collectors, some are billionaires, some ex-cons, some advocates of cognitive liberty. Live paintings started on stage and finished in the studio often sell for less than \$100,000, but commissions are generally more than that.

**How did you come to paint the Dalai Lama?**

I love the Dalai Lama. A friend wanted me to work with him on a graphic novel about the life of the Dalai Lama. I did the cover and several spreads to help get support and interest for the project. The painting was done a long time ago, but the graphic novel just came out. It is called *Man of Peace* by Robert Thurman and William Meyers. It is a beautiful book about the tragic occupation of Tibet by China and the heroic efforts by His Holiness to spiritually guide his people and millions of seekers to lives of wisdom and compassion. ♦

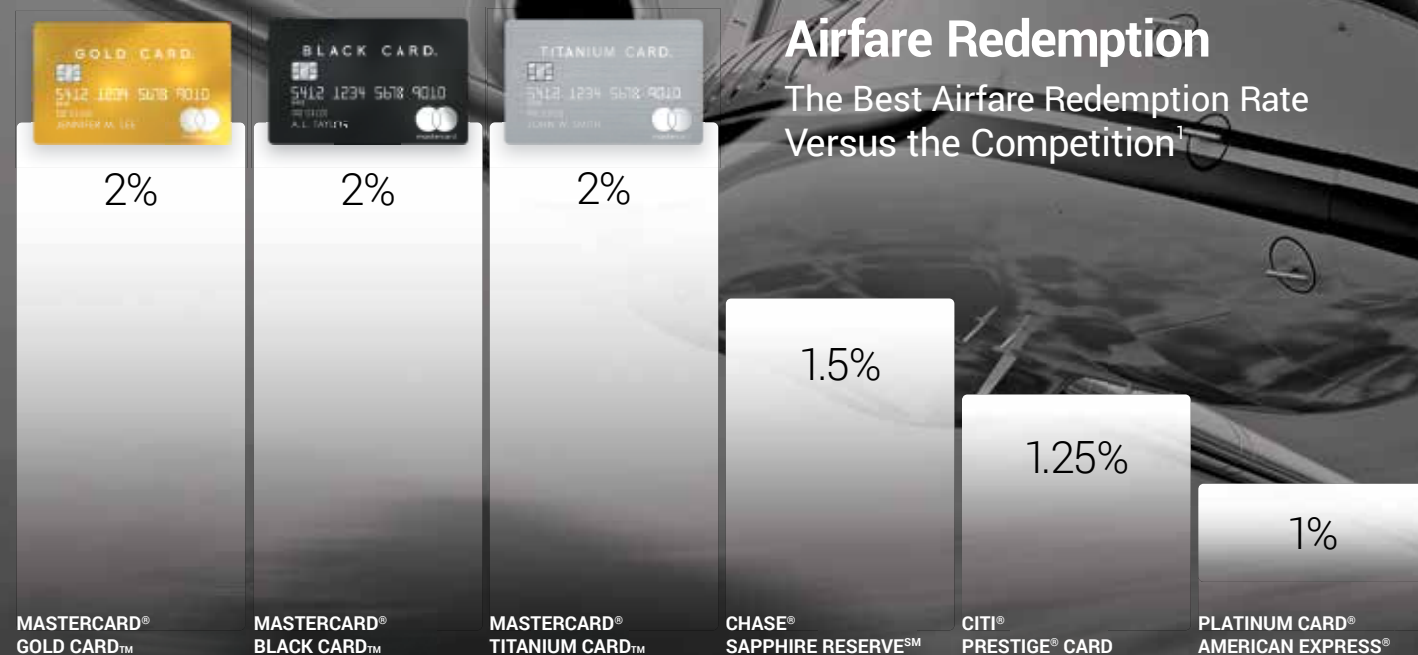


*Clockwise from left: Over Soul, 1997, 30 x 40 inches, oil on linen; Big Bang, 2000, 5 x 14 inches, oil on wood; Holy Fire Panel 2, 1986–1987, 90 x 216 inches, oil on linen.*

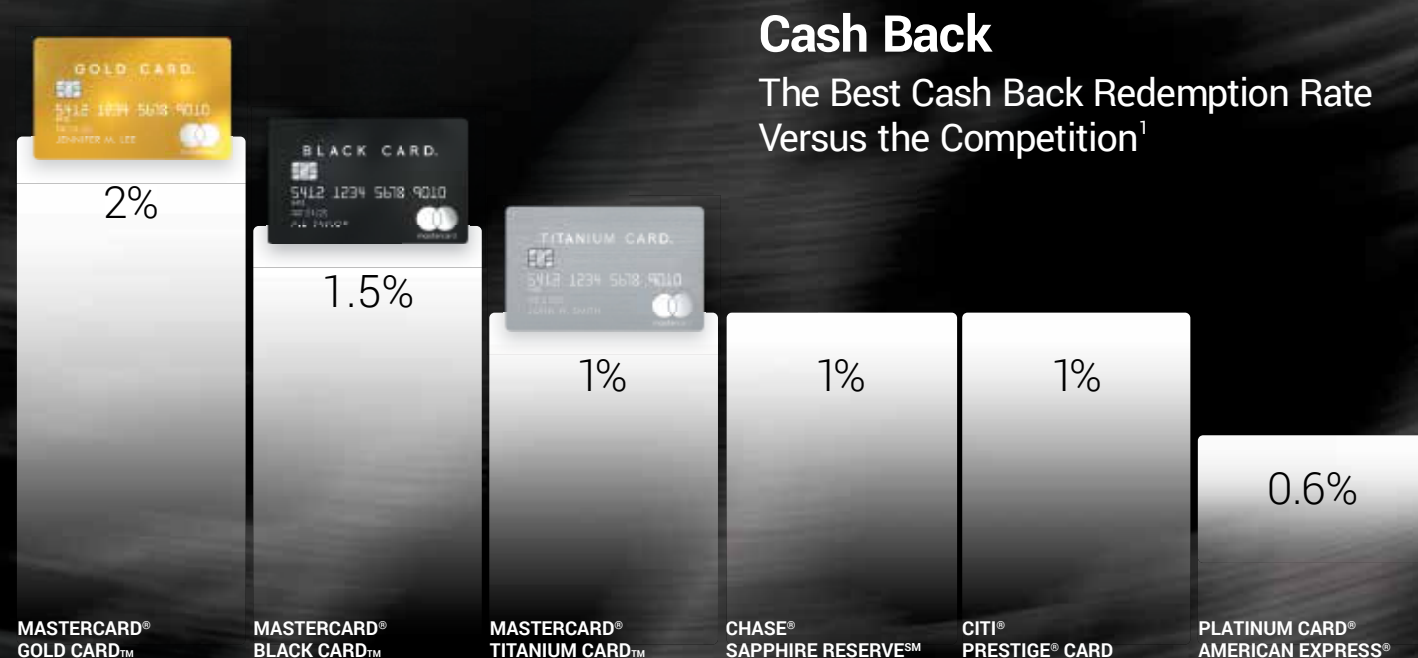


# “BEST IN CLASS”\*

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