

THE BAY AREA'S MAGAZINE FOR CONSCIOUSNESS AND CREATIVITY SINCE 1974

# common ground

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## The Creativity Issue

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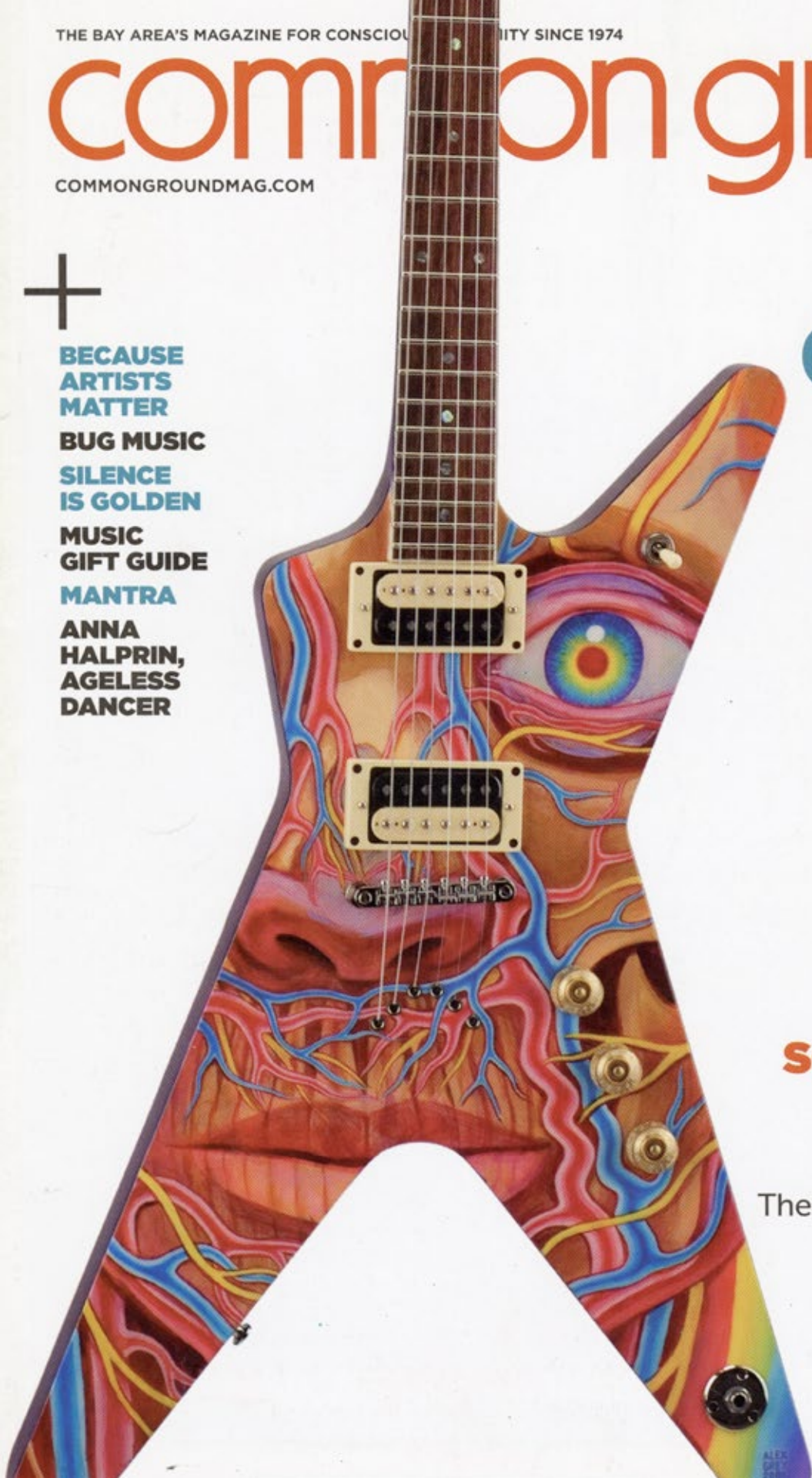
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The *Common Ground* Interview

**ALEX GREY**

Visionary Art, Divinity,  
and the Creative Process





# Alex Grey

Visionary Art, Divinity, and the Creative Process { BY ROB SIDON }

"God is the Divine Artist, and the cosmos is the continually evolving masterpiece of creation." —Alex Grey

ALEX GREY HAILS FROM COLUMBUS, OHIO, WHERE HIS FATHER, a graphic designer, encouraged drawing. Depressively suicidal, Alex moved to Boston to study at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1974 where shortly thereafter he met Allyson Rymland, a fellow student with whom he experienced psychedelics on their first date. That encounter led to a lifelong committed partnership as well as a personal transformation from agnostic existentialist to radical transcendentalist.

Ever intrigued by the mystical, Alex worked at Harvard Medical School, preparing cadavers for anatomical dissection and later for Dr. Herbert Benson and Dr. Joan Borysenko at the university's Department of Mind-Body Medicine, conducting scientific experiments on subtle healing energies. A series of 21 life-sized portraits called Sacred Mirrors launched Alex into the public eye.

The latest resurgence of interest in this phenomenon has occurred in the psychedelic community because visionary experiences are inescapable to anyone who closes their eyes during the psychedelic experience. These dimensions are currently under examination by a huge population of psychonauts. Among them are thousands of visionary artists attempting to depict these transpersonal dimensions and becoming a worldwide movement. Considering the world's sacred art, the Egyptian, Hindu, or Tibetan Buddhist pantheon of archetypes are multiheaded, multilimbed, gargantuan, diminutive, inhabiting realms of the visionary imagination. These are beings that exist in an intermediate subtle dimension dismissed by the general materialist orientation of current American society.

**This being our Creativity issue, might you share insights on your creative process?**

The creative process is all that is happening. Our current wave of consciousness comes from the creator. The visionary artist evolves their craft or technique in order to represent most clearly the visionary mystical experience received from the highest inspiration possible. Ideal conditions for a great work of art would include a visionary mystical experience as the basis for the art. A vision is a treasure of life that can change a life. All religions are founded on visions—Krishna revealing his true form, Buddha sprouting infinite arms of compassion, Barack riding on a mule to the seventh heaven, Moses and the burning bush.

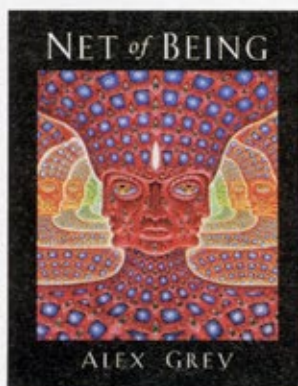
An experience like that must be shared. To honor a vision, we can devote creative energy that respects the magic and craft of bringing that vision, a thing of heaven, down to earth through discipline and creative practice. Like any meditation, except with evidence. I've always admired craft that demonstrates mental focus, mindfulness. »

Inspired by a blazing vision of an infinite grid of Godheads, *Net of Being* shows how Alex's visionary art has evolved the cultural body through icons of interconnectedness. The namesake image is one of many he has created that have resulted in a chain reaction of uses—from apparel and jewelry to tattoos and music collaborations, most notably with the cult band TOOL. These were compiled into a 2012 book by Inner Traditions.

We caught up with Alex by phone. He lives on a 40-acre "social structure" called Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, in Wappinger, New York. When our conversation led to the "old fashioned" nature of his marriage, Allyson Grey's attention was piqued, and she weighed in briefly.

**Common Ground: For those who have never heard of Alex Grey, how would you define yourself?**

**Alex Grey:** I think of myself as an artist and a mystic. The dimensions I depict in my paintings refer to the visionary mystical experience people have encountered through spiritual disciplines and shamanic journeying.



Alex Grey in his studio





Private Subway, 1974

**Can you elaborate on how the spiritual path and the creative process are intertwined?**

The creative process of mystic artists join an extensive and expansive evolutionary chain of events and become a temporary channel of the flow of God Force, stardust, and consciousness. If there is only One, and it is all of us, then we are the creative force that brought forth the universe on day one. We are one with that force.

**Can you advise readers how to awaken their own creative processes?**

Creativity is not a rare thing at all. Everyone is inherently creative. You can't escape from it because it's all that's going on. Otto Rank said in *Art and Artist* that neurosis is caused by unexpressed creativity.

Each person must find their own creative path. Creativity is what turns us on. Burning Man is a brilliant display of unity and individual creative expression. Awaken your creative process by knowing yourself first, which involves a spiritual quest. How can your art make you a better person? Art can be a spiritual practice. In your art, point to a spiritual dimension universal enough to be inclusive of all wisdom traditions, one that is recognizable as iconic.

**Your mom raised you Methodist, reading Bible stories every night until one day she gave up, disillusioned by hypocrisy. Can you recall the effect of that on your creative process?**

My parent's sudden lack of interest in the church turned on my interest. In my 30s, I learned that what had driven them away from the church was the racism they experienced in the congregation, just as the civil rights movement was taking hold in America. Now, I really respect that. They gave up on God, but it opened up a philosophical quest for me that later led to a spiritual journey.



A young Alex Grey in Ohio

**Your most recent book is titled *Net of Being*. What is its underlying message?**

Everything and everyone is connected. We are one great Net of Being, each with unique nodes in an infinite web. That we are connected via the Internet from the other side of the world is evidence that we're a planetary civilization in formation. What sort of spirituality would be embraced by a planetary civilization? My vote is for creativity in the service of love. Sacred art and architecture are what remain from every ancient civilization.

**When you see people, do you see them with x-ray vision as they appear in your paintings?**

I do not see with x-ray vision. I see that everybody is a unique thimbleful of God Force. Every person is a Sacred Mirror. Seeing the inside of the body universalizes the human material form. That we are all one is the cornerstone of practically every religious orientation.

**You depict musculature, bones, etc. Is that the way you see life every day?**

That imagery comes as a vision. I am infrequently able to glimpse an x-ray-like dimension. I imagine in glass like layers of anatomy because it portrays universal qualities of the human being, vitreous or translucent, avoiding the designation of race or gender. Depicting a more androgynous figure as a Sacred Mirror dislodges the viewer from their limited "selfhood."

**At this stage of your life, spiritually speaking, do you consider yourself more of a seeker or a finder?**

God is looking for us only as committedly as we are looking for God. Yearning, seeking, and discovering are all part of the cycle of the visionary dilemma. Access to higher dimensions sometimes comes from a great search or can also come effortlessly and on the natch [without drugs].

**Does your art more reflect questions or discoveries or both?**

My art represents discoveries and revelations. My art is based on what I saw, and I try to depict that vision as clearly as possible. The deeper the discoveries we make, the more questions they elicit. I intend the purest interpretation of revelatory visions that stick in my memory because I believe they point to a sacred reality. I believe that is what sacred art should do.

**As a young man with long hair, you shaved half your head. You have said that this action was a depiction of polarity. Was it also a protest?**

I had a dream I did not understand in which I saw myself with my hair half shaved. Whenever I would look in the mirror, I would imagine this half-shaved look. Without really knowing what it meant, I felt compelled to enact it. So I kept half my head shaved for half a year. During that time I discovered the science author Robert Ornstein, who was researching the polarity of the

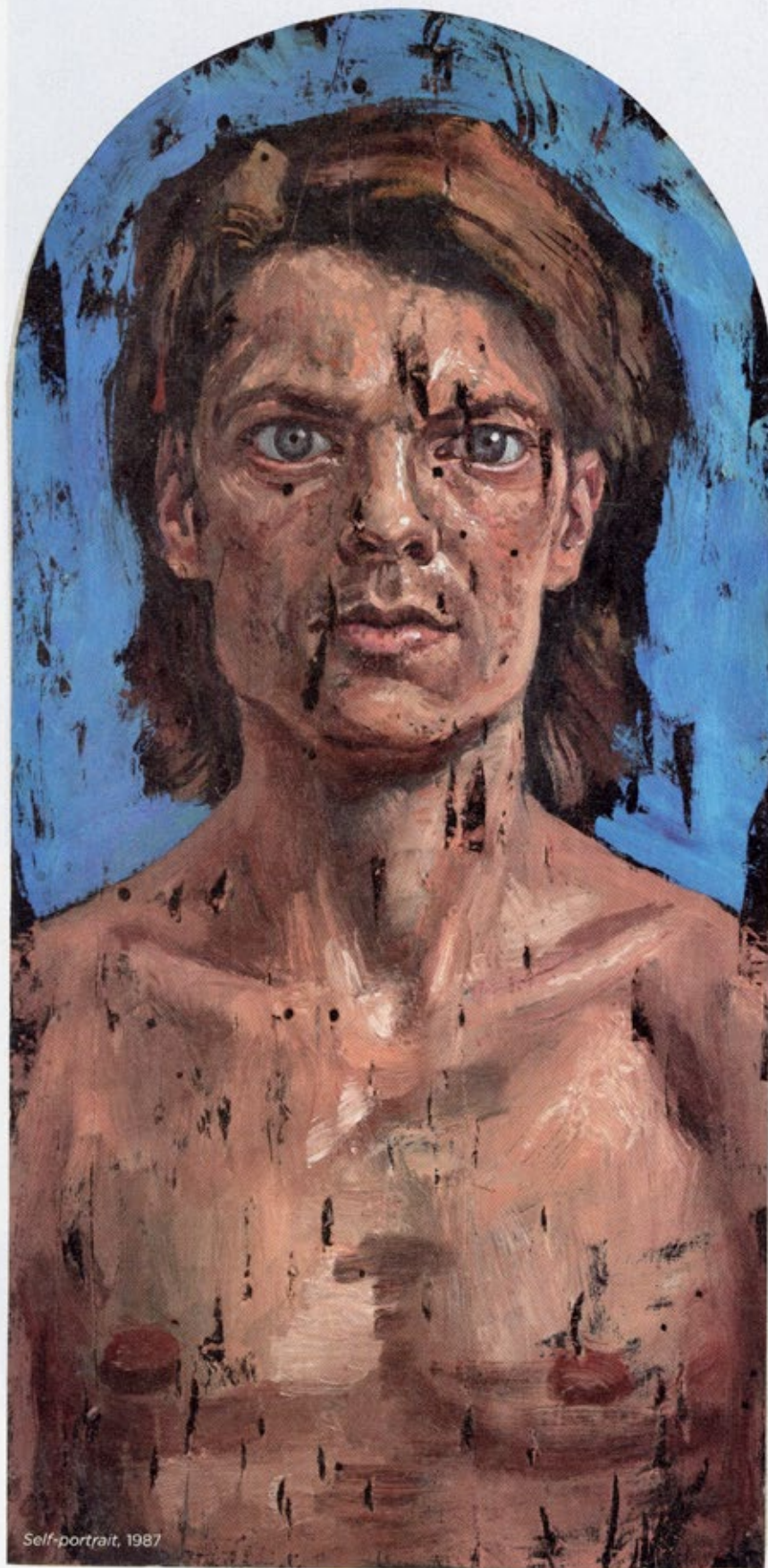


PHOTO: DEAN CHAMBERLAIN

Alex, Allyson, and Zena Grey in the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, 2004  
Praying, 2004







Self-portrait, 1987

hemispheres of the brain. This hemispheric split, portrayed in my haircut, had me thinking about the intuitive rather than the rational polarities of personality. The subject of my art examined life and death, spirit and matter, etc. These polarities represent constructs within which we are defined. What's acceptable for a man? What's acceptable for a woman? An adult? A child? Thoughts of boundaries and polarities pervaded my mind. I had just become a new student in a new city, and my alien appearance, no doubt, reflected a feeling of alienation in polar contrast with a desire to stand out, to emerge. After shaving half my hair, nobody in art school wanted to talk to me. Only one person asked me why I did it, and that was Allyson. We were in a conceptual art class together. That class changed our lives.

**Weren't you also depressed then, even suicidal?**

Yes. Polarities maintain a dualistic and unhappy reality. Exhausted with life at the age of 21, I challenged God: "If you exist, give me a sign before I end it all." Within 24 hours I had taken my first LSD trip and found true love in Allyson.

**Let's talk about your relationship with Allyson. Your connection seems to be profoundly rare and constructive. Is she more of a muse or a collaborator?**

Meeting divine love in the flesh meant that I was not interested in killing myself anymore. Love potentially existed. There was somebody who I suddenly cared about. Suddenly, I have a meaning for existence. Fate had me standing on the street corner for a couple of minutes when Allyson drove by to invite me and our professor to an end-of-the-school-year celebration. That professor provided me with my first LSD trip in a bottle of Kahlua that I shared with Allyson that night.

We've shared a studio for 39 years, first in Boston and then for 28 years in Brooklyn. We inspire each other's work and are muses for each other. Allyson's work is extraordinary, and it has been a privilege to watch it unfold and to be part of that process all these years.

Interestingly, right now I am completing a painting titled *Kiss of the Muse*. The Sacred Mirrors were inspired by Allyson, and she also came up with the name. Allyson is my best advisor on all subjects. She's my spiritual teacher and soulmate. I am very blessed. Our love and mutual respect has given us a foundation to have a family and a spiritual community. Today more than ever, sexual balance and successful partnership represents transformative possibilities.

**For many, marriage is an overwhelming challenge—hence the high divorce rate. What can you tell us about relationship?**

If the divorce rate is 50 percent or so, that leaves quite a few couples that do stay together. Being a committed couple, we meet many other committed couples. Communication is, of course, essential. Betrayal disappoints the hopes and expectations in a relationship and is the

lowest level of unconsciousness. Some partners act out their own deep-seeded psychological problems, expecting their mates to fulfill some deficit. Noticing our responsibility in every conflict and developing compassion for another are both opportunities for personal betterment. A committed partner is a Sacred Mirror, and seeing ourselves in the face of love helps us to be the best we can be.

If a partner is not in your life, it can still be an awesome adventure. Life is a gift every day. Love is a possibility and a story we tell ourselves and others. We author our story. We can be creative and tell the story however we choose.

**Is sheer truth—nothing but the truth—the cornerstone of your relationship?**

Yeah, pretty merciless truth. Willingness to hear the truth and to share deeply in the context of love and healing, a path of transformation.

**How do you feel about polyamory or open relationship? In this respect, are you progressive or old-fashioned?**

Allyson and I never went the route of polyamory because we were committed to each other and weren't really that curious. We've seen many friends crash their relationships, so we just weren't interested. We have other things to do and a lot to accomplish. The continual polyamory drama holds no attraction and seems more like a distraction. Few polyamorous relationships last.

People choose different paths. There's no right or wrong. If you want to shop around, go polyamorous. If you want to be with your best friend in your old age, we recommend working on one relationship.

**Aww. So kind of old-fashioned?**

The label *old-fashioned* is pejorative. Monogamy will always be a choice accepted by some and rejected by others. Allyson and I met each other on LSD, yet we could also be Norman Rockwell's couple next door.

[Allyson, overhearing the conversation, jumps on the phone.]

**Allyson Grey:** Our commitment to each other elicits trust in others. We aspire to build a temple and would like a community to join with us.

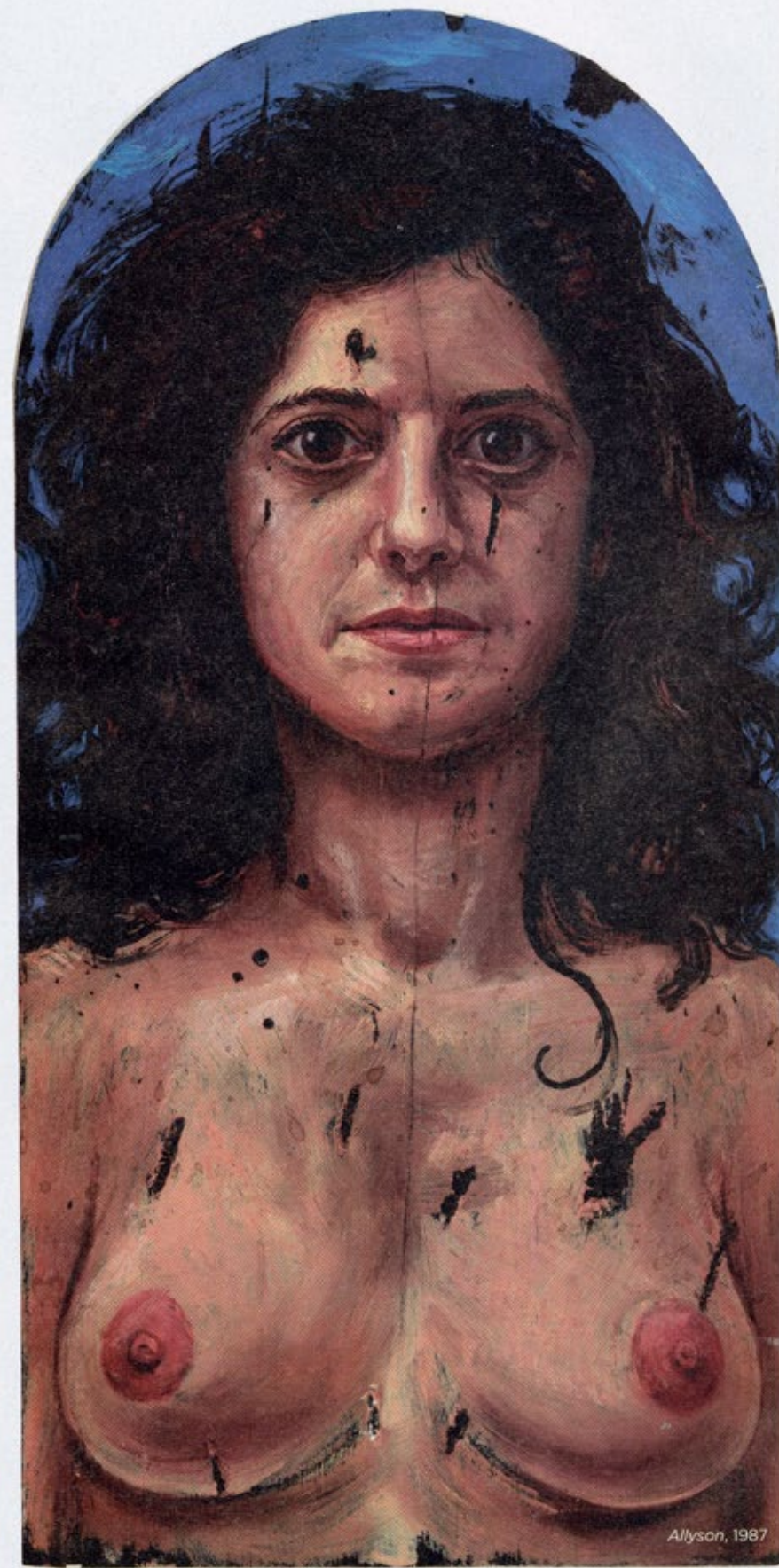
**Alex:** Building a sacred space is the job of a sacred community that shares basic truths and feels united as a tribe.

**Allyson:** A committed relationship can support a creative life. When we answer to a higher calling, something of service, something of noble purpose, betrayal and seeking love elsewhere can seem trivial.

**Looking at the precedent of famous artists and musicians, well, they don't tend to reflect the pinnacle of fidelity.**

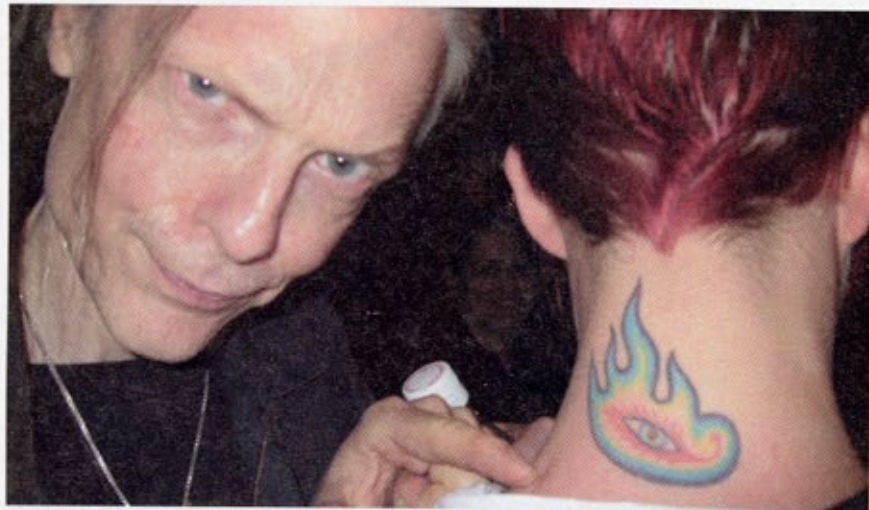
**Allyson:** Infidelity is very common, of course. Being extraordinary is transformative.

**Alex:** Finding common ground means finding unity in all humanity, in the ecosystem and in the cosmos. »



Allyson, 1987





Tattoo art

**Alex, what painters have been your greatest influences?**

Jean Delville, Pavel Tchelitchew, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Ernst Fuchs, Mati Klarwein, all of them mystics.

**You mention Rothko and such. Think of Picasso, any of the Impressionists, the great masters. Do you think the work of these artists is a reflection of spirituality or just that these painters had exceptional talent or a gift?**

God is both the highest rung of the ladder and the entire ladder. There are many approaches by different schools of artists. Creative manifestation is a wave of creative expression that pushes its way through culture during a particular "time sausage." Culture is like a gumbo with lots of different elements occurring concurrently. An artist emerges from this creative stew and gives rise to a particular individual vision. The individual floating in this gumbo of time within a given time sausage is also an individual node, evolving toward enlightenment. As artists evolve, so too their souls offer expanded aliveness and creative possibilities. Creativity is the handmaiden of love. Art intended as a spiritual practice is the highest aspiration. Marrying the practice of spirituality and creativity gives us a record of our own states of awareness that point heavenward.

**What's been the effect of fame on you?**

People are interested in what you have to say.

**One expression of interest is tattoos. Hundreds of people have indelibly replicated your art onto their bodies. How does that make you feel?**

Honored to see my work embodied by a generation.

**Do you have a message—cautionary or otherwise—particularly to young people, about drug experimentation?**

The highest function of psychedelics is in their use as a sacrament. The foundation of both Eastern and Western civilization—that is, Hinduism and the ancient Greek culture—were based on sacramental rites using mind-altering substances to connect the pilgrim with divine reality. Psychedelics are powerful tools for accessing the highest and deepest dimensions of consciousness. These sacraments should be used with the utmost caution within a sacred mindset and in a sacred setting. Those with any history of schizophrenia and borderline personality can potentially become impaired by the use of these substances. In the proper context with trained support, many breakthroughs are being made in mental illness, especially PTSD, cluster headaches, and palliative care, through new treatments using psychedelics.

**Your work has been known principally via books—you've sold many—particularly at meta-**



Clockwise from left:  
Metamorphosis, 2005;  
Avalokitesvara, 1982-1983;  
Net of Being, 2002-2007







**physical bookstores. Do you have any reflections about the digital era in relation to books?**  
 Far more people have experienced my work online. Mega-millions online versus hundreds of thousands of books. Since my intention is to transform consciousness, reaching more people is better. But I will always paint one-of-a-kind paintings and create books.

**What is the Chapel of Sacred Mirrors?**  
 The Chapel of Sacred Mirrors, CoSM, is a sanctuary for seeing ourselves, the world, and our cosmos as reflections of the Divine. CoSM's mission is to build a temple to preserve and share a collection of visionary art beloved by a global community. Forty acres of beautiful woods and newly renovated buildings invite the contemplation of art and nature, and provide a center for events encouraging the creative spirit. CoSM honors the mystic core of love uniting all wisdom traditions and the transformative power of art to awaken human potential.

**You were born in the Midwest, live in New York, and have traveled a lot. What is the effect of location on your work?**  
 I was born in Columbus, Ohio, and have lived in Boston and New York. My greatest pleasure is being in my studio, which I have shared with my wife and partner for 39 years. We love to travel when called to meet with the "Love Tribe" all over the world.

**How do you distinguish the Bay Area?**  
 Love the Bay Area. Haight Ashbury is ground zero for psychedelic culture, but so are Harvard and Millbrook. We started a Bicycle Day celebration in San Francisco four years ago, and it has grown. We look forward to next year's event on Bicycle Day, April 19.

**Some believe that the wildly creative and collaborative Burning Man culture could only have originated in the Bay Area. What do you think?**  
 I agree with reality. It happened that way.

**What makes you especially happy?**  
 Solving *big* problems. Achieving our Entheon Kickstarter goal makes us especially happy because it meant that over 1,000 people (and growing as we speak) care about building a temple with us at CoSM.

**What pisses you off?**  
 Humanity's unconsciousness about the unfolding eco-catastrophe pisses me off. Limits to cognitive liberty piss me off.

**Any final message to our readers?**  
 Help us build Entheon, a visionary art sanctuary offering an experience of sacred interconnectedness. 🐾

*Rob Sidon is Common Ground's publisher and editor in chief.*

