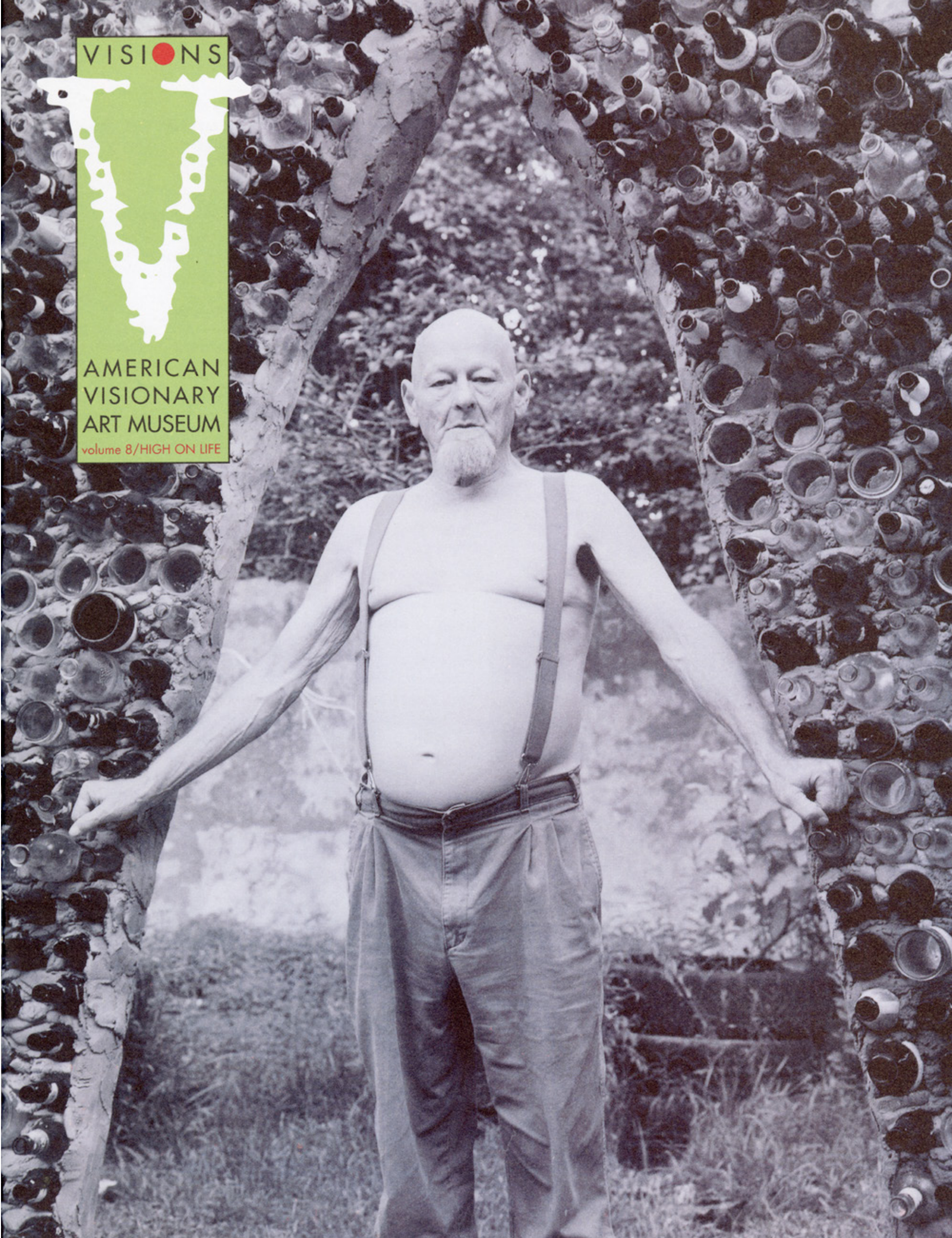


VISIONS



AMERICAN
VISIONARY
ART MUSEUM

volume 8/HIGH ON LIFE





just say know

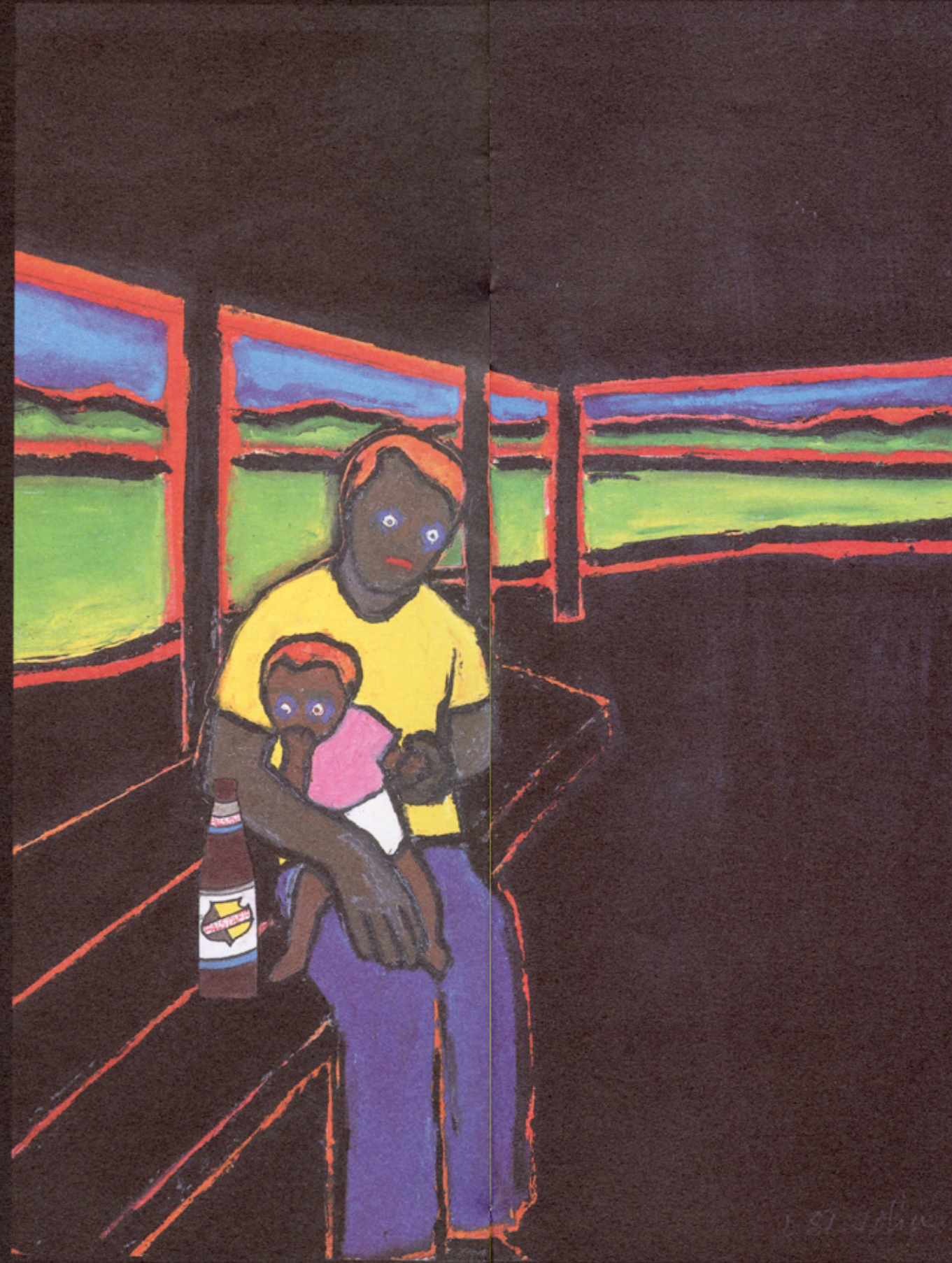
If there is a war on drugs, then many of our family members are the enemy. And I don't know how you wage war on your own family.
—Michael Douglas as the newly appointed Drug Czar Robert Wakefield in *TRAFFIC*

Former Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke called the war on drugs “our domestic Vietnam.” Like the Vietnam War, Schmoke said, the War on Drugs has “lasted too long and cost too many lives It’s time to bring this enervating war to an end. It’s time for peace.”

Few topics of public discourse since the Vietnam War have proven more contentious than drugs. Several U.S. Presidents in a row have supported the heavily financed, highly publicized war, with results that have been, in the most generous

estimation, dubious. The phrase most often associated with the endeavor is the slogan coined by former First Lady Nancy Reagan to discourage young people from using illegal drugs: “Just say no.” However, when it comes to drugs, as with sex, young people tend to be curious, inquisitive, unwilling to settle for oversimplified answers, and suspicious of the advice offered by their elders. As Ogden Nash put it: “Oh, what a tangled web do parents weave/When they think that their children are naive.” The millions of young people and adults who regularly consume illegal drugs aren’t the only ones who have rejected the “Just say no” approach and questioned the wisdom of the War on Drugs. Increasing numbers of ordinary, non-using citizens, as well as respected leaders from across the political spectrum have urged rethinking our society’s punishment-orient-

ed approach to drugs in favor of a “harm reduction” approach that acknowledges that there is no ultimate solution to the problem of drugs in a free society, and advocates lessening the harm of drugs through education, prevention, and treatment. The works in the gallery *Just*



Say Know embody with imagery and texts just a few of the many arguments that have been offered to support various positions in this ongoing societal debate.



constant craving

Junk is the ideal product . . . the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy
—William S. Burroughs, Introduction to *NAKED LUNCH*

What makes one continue to push the pleasure pedal long after pleasure has turned to pain? In a 1954 *Bulletin on Narcotics*, the U.N. Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention defines the Spanish word for drug addiction—*toxico-mania*—as “an irresistible urge towards poisons, in particular narcotic substances.” A drug is commonly defined as any substance that in small amounts produces significant changes in the body, mind or both. Definitions of addiction vary,

but most include the element of loss of control over use. Essentially, drugs overwhelm the body. The issue is less one of free choice: An addicted person is biologically reprogrammed and will continue to use even when recurring physical or psychological problems outweigh the pleasure.

In a speech titled “Why We Are All Addicted,” Andrew Weil, M.D., describes a patient with a six-gram-a day cocaine habit. The only pleasure shooting up gave her was in the first few minutes immediately after the day’s first injection. The next five or six hours were filled with paranoia, violent shaking, insomnia, and palpitations. Describing her addiction, she said “I want not to want it.” Weil traces the root of the craving to the origins of the universe and the evolution of human consciousness. “It’s that

fundamental. It's that much a part of our humanness. Not only is addiction universal, not only are all of us in it, but it's the essence of our being as humans." Given that addiction is part of who are, Weil says, the only solutions are to try to shift it so that the forms of its expression are less harmful—substituting exercise for cigarettes or a 12-step program for heroin—or to try to get at the root of the problem through intense introspection and meditation.

The primary drugs referenced in this gallery—heroin and cocaine—are derivatives of plants whose pharmaceutical properties have been known and exploited by human beings for millennia. Dependency on these drugs is probably just as old, but modern techniques for chemically refining them and self-administering them by intravenous injection are relatively new, developed only in the last two centuries. These highly efficient methods of concentrating and administering these drugs at very powerful dosages have substantially exacerbated the problem of dependency and abuse.

plants of the gods

The shamanic plants and the worlds that they reveal are the worlds from which we

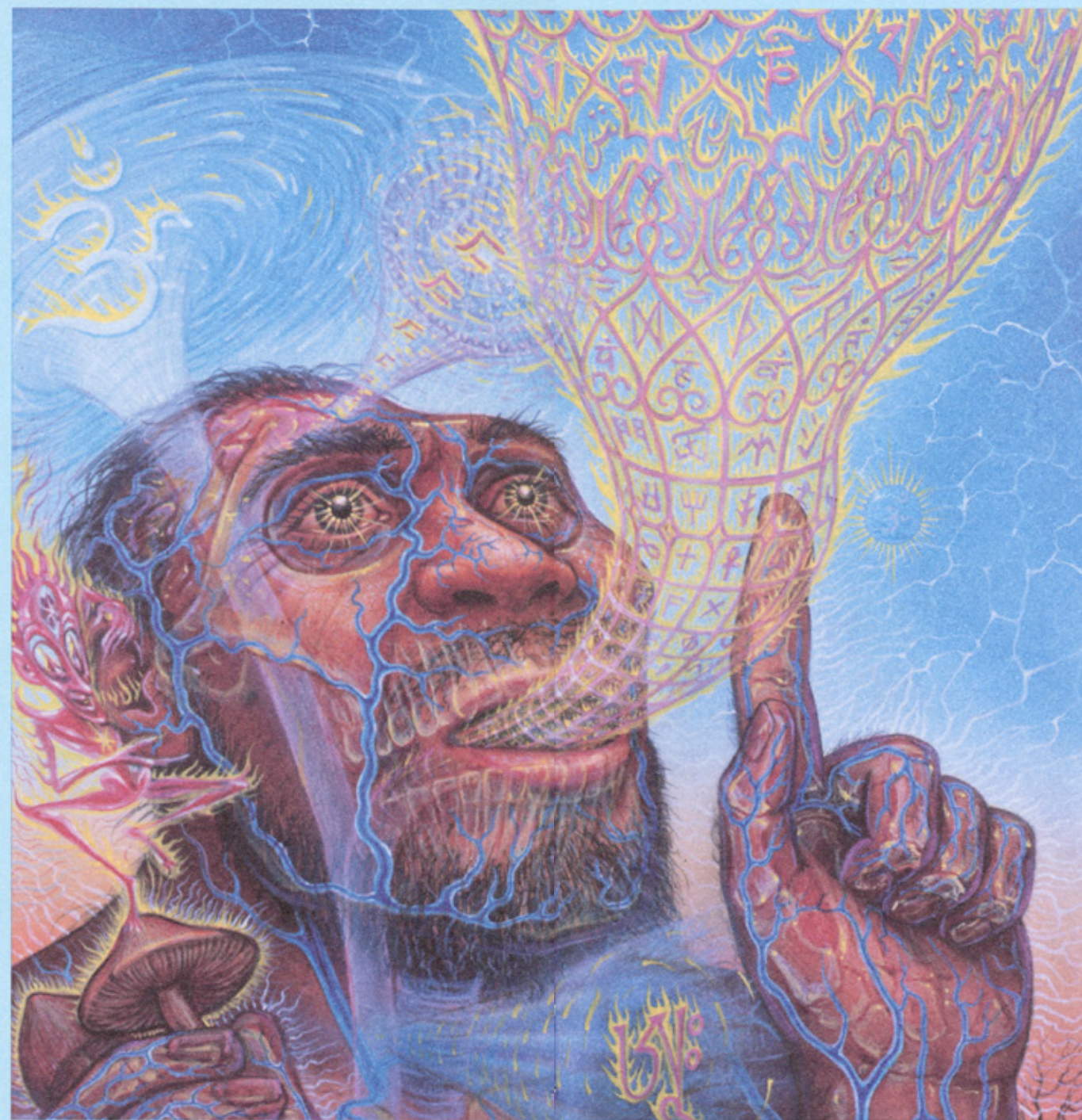
imagine that we came long ago, worlds of light and power and beauty that in some form or another lie behind the eschatological visions of all of the world's great religions. —Terence McKenna, *FOOD OF THE GODS: THE SEARCH FOR THE ORIGINAL TREE OF KNOWLEDGE* (1992)

Shamanic use of plant-based hallucinogens—including cannabis, mushrooms, peyote, and ayahuasca—was central to the religious lives of people in parts of Africa, China, India, Tibet, Siberia, Mediterranean Europe, and the Americas. To the shaman with expertise in their use, the experience that rational science interprets as hallucination is an interdimensional interaction with supernatural beings and visible, sometimes audible energy forms—in other words, nothing short of a direct encounter with God or gods. For this reason, some modern students of these drugs have termed them “entheogens”—activators of inner divinity.

The widespread ritual use of these substances was demonized in Europe and in other parts of the world with the rise of the monotheistic religions and dominator cultures whose prevailing drugs of choice were alcoholic. European explorers and the missionary clergymen who accompanied them to the Americas—home to the widest variety of plant hallucinogens in the world—continued the campaign of suppression. They were so successful that the existence

of most of these naturally occurring drugs—cannabis being a notable exception—remained virtually unknown to the modern Western world until their rediscovery in the mid-twentieth century.

This rediscovery took place



first in the scientific and therapeutic communities, then spread quickly during the 1960s into the popular arena. The suddenly widespread, indiscriminate, and uncontrolled use of plant-based hallucinogens and

their synthetically produced chemical derivatives—such as psilocybin, mescaline, DMT, and LSD—resulted in occasional public incidents and innumerable “bad trips.” The ensuing sensationalizing by the mass media, and prompted a fierce

prohibition didn't dampen the public fascination with and inclination to use them. While the U.S. government put an end to virtually all legitimate experimental tests of these drugs, they continue to be used for private recreational, psychotherapeutic, and spiritual purposes, as reflected in the contemporary artworks that dominate this gallery.

the third eye

The third eye is the director of energy or force, and thus an instrument of the will or Spirit . . . It is the eye of the inner vision, and he who has opened it can direct and control the energy of matter, see all things in the Eternal Now, and therefore be in touch with causes more than with effects, read the akashic records, and see clairvoyantly. —Alice A. Bailey, *A TREATISE ON COSMIC FIRE* (1925)

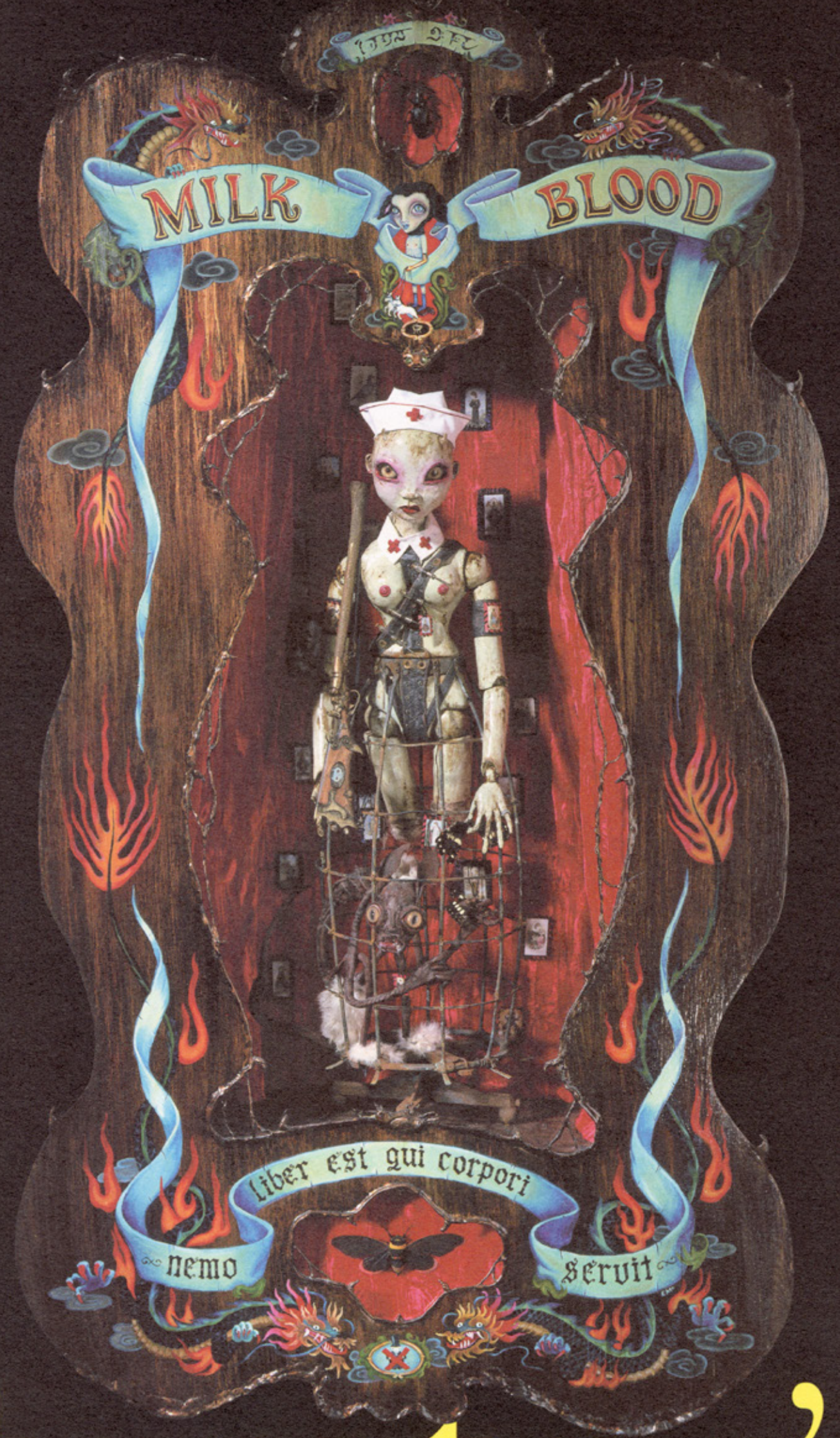
Drugs precipitate changes in brain chemistry. Such changes have also been associated with visionary states of consciousness achieved solely through mystical disciplines, without the aid of drugs. For many centuries adepts in spiritual disciplines ranging across virtually all religions have spoken of the transcendent, ecstatic states of consciousness achieved through the dedicated pursuit of meditation, fasting, dancing, and other arduous spiritual practices.

The enlightenment or divine illumination experience is perhaps most poetically character-

ized in the image of the newly opened “third eye”—a metaphor rooted in the pre-Ayurvedic oral and visual traditions of India, typically illustrated by an image of an eye positioned in the central forehead. This is the Ajna-Chakra of Tantric yoga, which teaches that this chakra, or energy center, forms the boundary between human and divine consciousness. Its actual location is within the brain, at the upper center of the skull, anatomically corresponding to the pineal gland, directly above one of the crucial byways for cerebrospinal fluid and in close proximity to the crucial emotional and sensory brain centers. Recent neurochemical theories have suggested a correspondence between the mystical enlightenment experience and the spontaneous release of the hallucinogen DMT, or N,N-dimethyltryptamine, within the pineal gland, and have also connected such endogenous DMT production with the spirit's departure from the body at the moment of physical death.

The works in this gallery allude in various ways to the precipitation of spiritually beneficial changes in brain chemistry in the absence of drugs, and point to the possibility that each of us has the innate capacity to self-regulate our brain chemistry in order to produce such changes and gain regular access to visionary consciousness or divine wisdom.

(left) ELIZABETH McGRATH, *Frankie Machine*, no. Collection of Jaime and Angie Scarappa. Photo by Norman Watkins. (right) WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS, *X-Ray Man*, 1992. Courtesy of the Estate of William S. Burroughs. Published by Lococo Fine Arts, St. Louis. Photo by Norman Watkins



HIGH ON LIFE: TRANSCENDING ADDICTION presents a broad spectrum of artists' perspectives on drug use and abuse, altered states of consciousness, addiction recovery, compulsive pleasure-seeking, other forms of compulsive behavior, and related social taboos. The artists come from a wide range of age groups, cultural backgrounds, and social categories, and they address issues of drug use and consciousness in a variety of stimulating, thought-provoking, challenging, and entertaining ways.

Toward either end of the generational span are the late **WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS** and **LIZ McGRATH**—two artists who play crucial roles in defining the overall tone of the exhibition. Burroughs, who died at 83 in 1997, is known more for his writings than for the visual art-making that increasingly occupied his attention during his last decade, and he has had a lot to say about drugs, addiction, altered consciousness, and the social crusade against drugs. His works combine abstract forms with collaged or stenciled figural imagery and tersely poetic titles in order to directly address those issues—as in the case of his works on paper, *Drug Hysteria* and *Rx—Morphine at Dawn*—or allude to them in the more metaphorical terms of his three paintings and small silkscreen print (above), with their shadowy forms and figures that suggest an exploration of multilayered realities.



profound disaffection for mainstream society, a dark sense of humor, a deep interest in the socio-cultural impact of drug use and abuse, and a strong literary bent. McGrath's hauntingly intense sculptural piece, *Frankie Machine* (p. 18), was partially inspired by and named for the morphine-addicted central character in Nelson Algren's 1949 novel, *The Man with the Golden Arm*. McGrath, who has just entered her thirties, represents a new breed of artist working in a broad range of media and without regard to outmoded definitions of high and low culture. In contrast to the loosely experimental, chance-influenced methods that Burroughs employed as a visual artist, she opts for a meticulous, craftsmanlike approach in creating her humorously macabre, mock-sinister portraits of fictional and non-fictional characters. Her five richly detailed, finely crafted, theatrical-format dioramas in the exhibit combine the shrine and reliquary traditions of Roman Catholicism with the traditions of dollmaking, dollhouses, and shadowbox displays. The texts painted on them recall circus

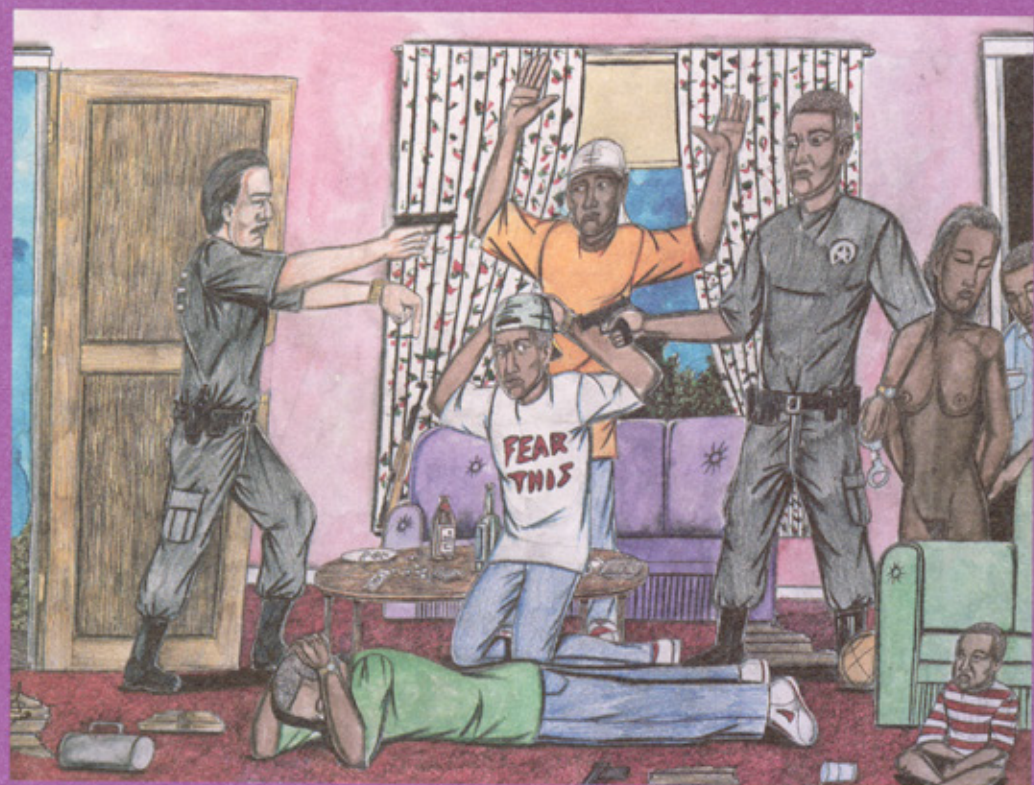
If only Burroughs were still around, it would have been intriguing to witness a meeting between him and McGrath. Despite the half-century age gap and vast stylistic and technical differences, their respective bodies of work share a

Curator's notebook

TOM PATTERSON

sideshow banners, and some are in Sanskrit, lending them an added sense of mystery. McGrath brings a similar sense of lurid theatricality to her painting, *Winter*, a portrait of a friend who runs a custom lingerie shop, here in the guise of a wicked temptress. McGrath's works are remarkable not only for their visually compelling combination of beauty and grotesquerie, but also for the insightful commentaries they provide on the allure of drugs and the perils of drug abuse.

ROY FERDINAND is well-acquainted with the latter issues, but his identity as an African-American rooted in black urban street culture lends his work a grittier perspective. A high-school dropout now in his early forties, Ferdinand has spent more than 15 years creating a substantial, ongoing body of compositionally sophisticated posterboard drawings that provide an unflinching,



close-up view of street life in the predominantly black neighborhoods in his hometown of New Orleans. The desperate scenes he depicts closely replicate the violent pedestrian dramas that unfold daily in economically marginal African-American communities across the country—the battlefields where drug abuse and the government “War on Drugs” take their severest toll. Emphasizing the civilian violence, police brutality, prostitution, illicit drug commerce, and economic desperation that plague these areas, his works provide a stark picture of the squalor and desperation from which so many denizens of poor urban neighborhoods in the United States

seek relief and escape through the use of readily available, often illicit drugs. Personal experience has made Ferdinand all too familiar with the problems that can result from overreliance on drugs, and he clearly maintains a sense of sympathy and shared identity with all of the real-life characters who populate his work.

Acknowledging the prevalence of gang rivalries and the polarized relationship between the police and the citizens of the neighborhoods where his works are set, he has aptly compared his project to that of a battlefield sketch artist.

A sympathetic sociological and aesthetic complement to Ferdinand's work is provided by the intimately scaled fiber art of **RAY MATERSON**. Born into a white, middle-class family in the Midwest, Materson earned a college degree in philosophy and performing arts. But several years later he found himself roaming urban mean streets

much like those Ferdinand depicts, desperate to score the cocaine and heroin to which he had become addicted. Like many junkies, Materson eventually turned to petty crime in order to finance his habit, and a botched hold-up attempt



with a toy gun earned him a stiff prison sentence. While doing time, he took up the unlikely art of embroidery and began creating a series of tiny narrative scenes, mostly



drawn from his own experience, stitched together with salvaged threads from multicolored socks. Clean of drugs for more than a decade and out of prison since 1995, Materson chronicled and illustrated his life in the recently published memoir, *Sins & Needles: A Story of Spiritual Mending*, co-authored by his wife Melanie. Some of his embroidered images—such as *Down on the Corner*, *Little Green Bags*, and *Waiting for the Man*—depict scenes in a relatively journalistic manner akin to what Ferdinand does. In several other works, Materson uses visual metaphors and surrealist techniques of distortion and disjunctive juxtapositions to dramatize his themes. The prime example is the image that is arguably his most powerful to date—*Getting Pulled In (Don't Get Pulled In)* (p. 20), in which the hapless junkie finds his naked body being sucked up from a giant spoon through the hollow needle of a monumental hypodermic syringe wielded by a fearsome-looking red-faced demon.

Although she hasn't directly experienced the kind of hard-core addiction that Materson and Burroughs endured, **ALISON ELIZABETH TAYLOR**—another artist of Liz McGrath's generation—used methamphetamine when she was in high school. While the immediate inspiration for *Delusional Parasitosis* was her rental of an apartment previously occupied by an elderly woman who covered the floors in mattresses to protect herself from insects, Taylor identified with the woman's paranoia from her own experience of palpable drug-induced hallucinations involving crawling insects. Her painting, *Stop Pleasure Receptor Burnout* (above), uses the image of a contemporary



young superheroine as a vigilant neurological guardian to dramatize her observation that many recovering addicts seem emotionally desensitized.

Like Taylor, **DAVID SANDLIN** has cultural roots in Alabama, an affinity for comic-book-style narrative imagery, and a thematic interest in drug use and abuse. Sandlin's paintings (right) of the last two decades typically cast alcohol and sex as major sources of temptation in a barbed critique of the guilt, puritanism, and self-righteousness that he saw during his residency in a “dry” Alabama county “full of Bible-toting

southern Baptists that was nevertheless fraught with alcoholism, adultery, and other tawdry aspects of the human condition.” Sandlin fuses luminescent comic-book imagery with illusionistic, classical-painting techniques to create visual allegories that manifest both heaven and hell

within the earthly realm of a human existence polarized on one end by the “dull cares” of quotidian reality and on the other by the seductive temptations of the flesh.

Alcoholic overindulgence is also a key theme in the work of **CHRIS MARS**. During the late 1970s and '80s, Mars played drums for the influential punk-rock band, the Replacements. In touring with the group during those years, he spent much of his time drinking in bars with his band-

time-honored, illusionistic techniques that Sandlin favors, Mars creates technically refined paintings and drawings in which surrealistic distortion also plays a crucial role. His works typically depict grotesque, sickly hued individuals interacting with each other or taking flight from nightmare scenarios in bleak, forbidding landscapes and claustrophobic architectural interiors. A number of them depict hospital scenes in which demented-looking medical professionals



mates and their fans. Those experiences have visually informed much of his subsequent artwork, which reflects, in his words, “how the world looks when you’re drunk looking at drunk people.” Another driving influence on his art was witnessing, as a child, the ordeals of an older brother who was repeatedly institutionalized and heavily drugged in an attempt to treat a condition diagnosed as schizophrenia. This experience generated in Mars an abiding sympathy for other social misfits. Using many of the same

seem to be performing lobotomies or other cruel experiments on their drugged and disoriented patients.

Sharing an affinity for the freaks and monsters that appear in the work of McGrath and Mars are the creations of **WILLIAM ALLEN**, who generally works on a larger scale and exclusively in the medium of welded metal sculpture. While Allen has had his share of drug-related experiences and problems, his sculptures don’t overtly address the subjects of drug use and abuse, but

rather serve as psychologically unsettling metaphors for the sort of inner demons that can drive one to drug dependency. His horrific, long-limbed *Boogie Man*—a piece that suggests the Tasmanian Devil of Warner Brothers cartoons reinterpreted by Ridley Scott or David Cronenberg—can be seen as a far more imposingly scaled, close relative of the syringe-wielding demon in the previously described embroidery piece by Ray Materson. Allen’s *Sleepwalker* and *Lost Soul*, on the other hand, suggest beings who have been psychologically dulled to the edge of oblivion, if not by overindulgence in drugs, then by constant overexposure to television and other compulsions of the kind that a hyperconsumerist society promotes. *Walking Head* (p. 29), Allen’s life-size replica of a human skull that appears to be skittering across the floor on oversized insect legs, is similarly unsettling in its metaphorical implications regarding human psychology.

Now in his mid-thirties, **CHARLES BENEFIEL** can cite an extensive litany of personal, drug-related horror stories going back to his childhood. His nervous breakdown in 1997 and the onset of a condition diagnosed as obsessive-compulsive disorder would suggest that he might be living with an imbalance of naturally occurring neurochemicals or brain drugs. Like Allen, he doesn’t directly address these experiences in his

art, but his labor-intensive, tea-stained stipple drawings are strongly informed by the difficult psychological issues these realities have stirred up in him, and they serve as apt metaphors for

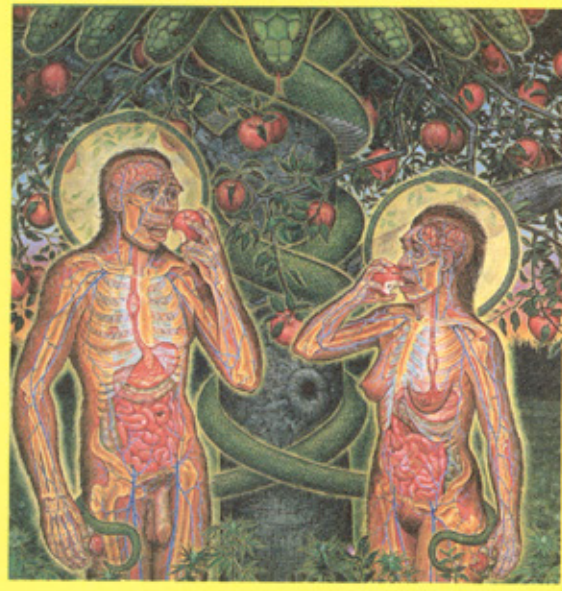
related fears and obsessions that are perhaps more common than many of us would care to admit. The self-taught Benefiel is a consummate technician, and he uses his finely honed stipple and staining techniques to vividly conjure a realm of paralyzing psychological distress.

Combining imagery appropriated from antique dolls, old photographs of corpses, and electrical or industrial hardware with target shapes and dense grids of numbers that appear to be mechanically printed, he presents a series of sepia-toned windows onto a claustrophobically compartmentalized nightmareland in which individuals are systematically dehumanized and reduced to components in an endless and meaningless numerology.

Whether by evoking delusional horror, chronicling real-life drug-abuse tragedies, or poking fun at the human proclivity for addictive behavior, much of the art in **HIGH ON LIFE** strikes something of a cautionary note. A very different kind of attitude emerges in the galleries devoted to art about hallucinogenic plants

and plant-derived chemicals, otherwise known as psychedelics. The latter works tend to stress the spectacular visual sensations, profound mys-





tical feelings, and personal psychological insights that these substances are capable of revealing when approached in a spirit of reverence

modeled on that of the indigenous cultures in

which such plants have been ritually used for centuries. Two of many such traditional cultures, in both cases Native American, are represented here. The array of richly ornamented beadwork and fiber arts made by contemporary **HUICHOL INDIANS** from Mexico is inspired by visions experienced under the influence of the peyote cactus. And in two color-pencil drawings by shaman-artist **PABLO AMARINGO** (right), we're given a view into the spectacular visionary realms that Peru's



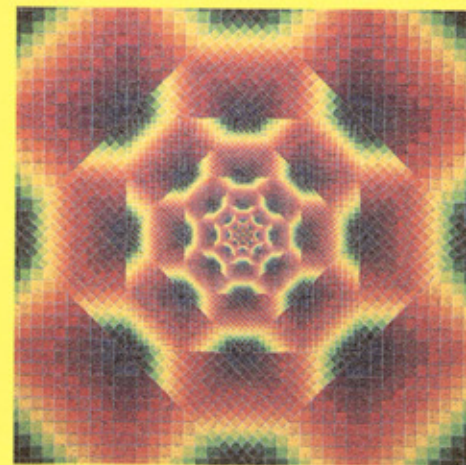
Quechua Indians have long visited under the influence of the profoundly hallucinogenic ayahuasca brew, made from an Amazonian jungle vine containing DMT intermixed with other related plant compounds.

In the United States, many people still associate psychedelics largely with the widely publicized hippie subculture of the late 1960s and early '70s. But most of this exhibition's non-traditional artworks inspired by these "plants of the gods" reflect the fact that psychedelic exploration

of the inner landscape remains an ongoing concern for a number of artists. Prominent among the latter are **ALEX GREY** and his wife, **ALLYSON RYMLAND GREY**, who for the last 25 years have used psychedelics as tools for personal exploration and creative inspiration, resulting in two very different but complementary bodies of work. In paintings such as his psychedelic-revisionist portrait of Adam and Eve (left)—in which the original human couple is depicted standing among cannabis plants, haloed by green snakes biting their own tails, and clutching handfuls of hallucinogenic mushrooms while a huge, seven-headed

kundalini serpent entwined in the branches of the Tree of Knowledge watches them munch on ripe apples—Alex employs his skills as a meticulous representational painter and medical illustrator to vividly envision the beginnings of human interaction with plant hallucinogens. Allyson, by contrast, takes a fundamentally abstract approach (below) to conveying the nature of psychedelic insight. Her painstakingly constructed, kaleidoscopic compositions are essentially man-

dalas whose central elements are chaos, order, and a "secret language" that is intentionally uninterpretable and therefore incapable of causing the kinds of social and cultural divisions that comparisons between different



faiths' sacred writings have often brought about. Each of her works is composed of many tiny painted squares in a gradation of sizes and colors, and all of the resultant grids are based on a ten-by-ten-inch model, with each grid running through the spectrum from corner to corner. What she terms "chaos grids" explode and overlap in a "planned randomness" in which all of the grids deconstruct or "entropize" in ever various ways. Order in this system results from the joining together of the spectral squares in a seamless fabric of pulsing color.

HIGH ON LIFE is structured as a journey, guiding viewers through a series of realms associated with several fairly broad classes of the more widely consumed drugs and related mind states. The journey concludes with a small group of

works that in various ways allude to the human potential for attaining "high" states of consciousness without the involvement of drugs other than those produced in our own brains. The ultimate such state is the enlightenment experience that's central to, if differently described by, virtually all religions. Among the works in this culminating section are the late **BRION GYSIN'S** legendary *Dreamachine* (below), which Gysin envisioned 40 years ago as a "drugless turn-on"; **PHOENIX & ARABETH'S** precisely rendered visionary paintings rooted in the traditions of Ayurvedic mythology and Tantric yoga; and **WILLIAM FIELDS'** idiosyncratic, richly hued color-pencil renderings of the visionary worlds and spirit beings he has learned to access through many years of study and meditation in those same traditions, as well as in other spiritual disciplines and occult sciences (left). The works in **HIGH ON LIFE** remind us that the initial years of a new century offer a fitting occasion to take a fresh, critical look at old assumptions, and to consider ways in which our society



might more constructively address the issues of drug use and abuse in light of our eternal, unstoppable, biological urge to chemically change our minds.

TOM PATTERSON is an independent writer, critic, and curator who has been writing about art for more than twenty years. He is the author of several books and art-exhibition catalogs, including *ST. EDM IN THE LAND OF PASAQUAN* (Jargon Society, 1987), *HOWARD FINSTER, STRANGER FROM ANOTHER WORLD* (Abbeville Press, 1989), *RECLAMATION AND TRANSFORMATION: THREE SELF-TAUGHT CHICAGO ARTISTS* (Terra Museum of American Art, 1994), and *CONTEMPORARY FOLK ART: TREASURES FROM THE SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM* (Watson-Guption Publications, 2001). He has served in editorial capacities for several art magazines, most recently the London-based *RAW VISION*.

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