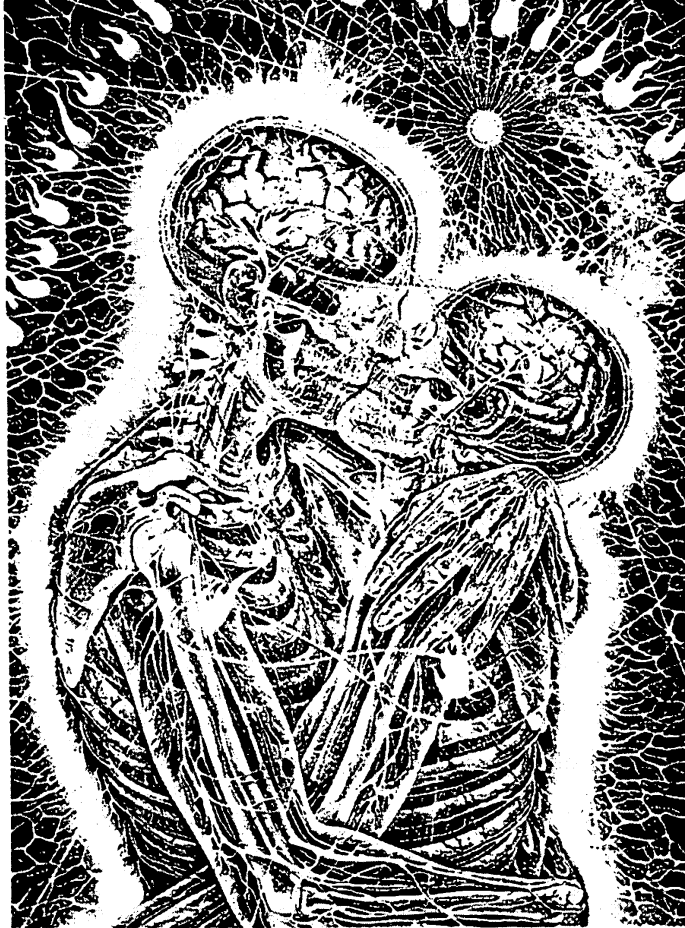


ALTERED STATES: AN EXHIBITION OF PSYCHEDELICALLY INFORMED FINE ART

Earl Davis, 400 Allaire Avenue, Leonia, NJ 07605

VISUAL
EVIDENCE
OF THE
RICH
FRONTIERS
OF INNER
EXPLORATION



"Kissing" - Alex Grey, 1983

IN THE MONTHS preceding the April 17th, 1993 MAPS Benefit Celebration for the 50th Anniversary of the Discovery of LSD,

I became involved in putting together an exhibition and silent auction of art works that would be appropriate for the occasion. From the outset, however, I was startled to learn how generally fragmented, undefined and unappreciated the genre of psychedelically informed fine art actually is. Instead of being held forth by our culture, like Aztec gold, as visual evidence of the rich frontiers of inner exploration, psychedelically inspired art making seems to languish in a peculiar obscurity not only within the "art world" at large but, rather incredibly, even within the already self-selected psychedelic community as well.

SOMEHOW, the seething internally-lit spectacle of significance that is encountered in psychedelic dimensions has been safely relegated within the pop psyche to simple characterized expressions on souped-up sixties style posters, comic-books, tee-shirts and cd/album covers which are found for sale at Grateful Dead concerts and in head shops throughout the land. A viable economic sub-culture supports and thrives upon this milieu, and in this context, the rampant psychedelic Genie has been successfully enslaved to the universal laws of supply and demand. It is remarkable that, beyond this forum, psychedelic art attracts little serious consideration.

How is it possible, we have to wonder, that the profoundly powerful mind-manifesting molecules which have been made available over the last fifty years have not had more of an impact in the field of fine art? As windows into the sheer creativity of the natural psyche there simply is no parallel. Is there a conspiracy by the established art world to keep novelty at bay? I think not, since the current art scene essentially thrives on the continual production and consumption of the New. Rather, it seems that, while countless artists have experimented with and have been irreversibly modified by their experiences in altered states, very few have successfully chosen to make it the actual focus of their aesthetic aspirations. The reasons for this are individual and complex and, as well, cannot be considered outside the context of the rapidly evolving issues of modern art. But the fact remains, those who have devoted themselves to this path are few indeed.

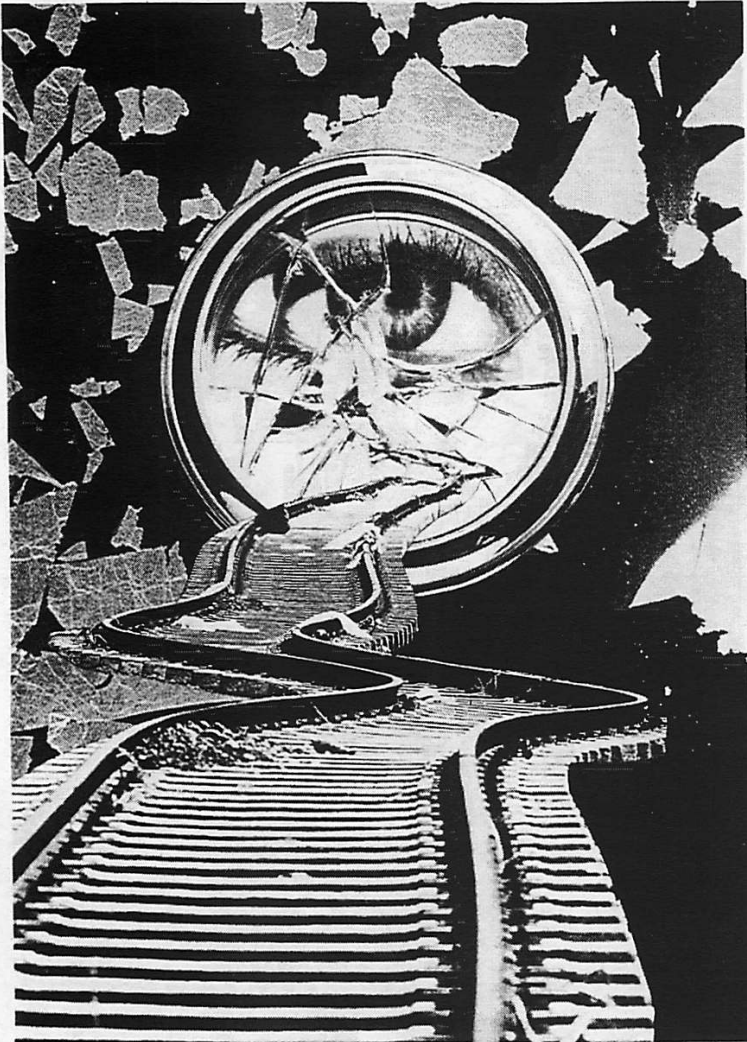
It was quite rewarding therefore to have an opportunity to become acquainted with a small number of people who have grappled with the personal and artistic implications of the psychedelic state through various expressive mediums. While the exhibition made no pretense to be definitive, an attempt was made to choose the most evocative and as challenging works as possible. Once embarked upon, however, this noble curatorial aspiration immediately collapsed into the real-world role of having to make decisions concerning quality, style and craft. Before I knew it, I was aswim in the imagery of

→



"Eye Pie" - Nick Hyde

BEFORE I KNEW IT, I WAS ASWIM IN THE
IMAGERY OF OTHER PEOPLE'S PSYCHES,
TRYING TO DETERMINE WHAT QUALIFIED
AS PSYCHEDELIC ART



*"The Derailment of Habitual Perception",
© Robyn Sean Peterson*

THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE INTEGRITY AND
POWER OF THE PSYCHEDELIC ECSTASY IS CON-
VEYED SEEMS VERY MUCH TO BE DEPENDENT
UPON THE ARTIST'S ABILITY TO EXPRESS THIS
ELEMENT OF UNANTICIPATED AND OFTEN ASTON-
ISHINGLY POIGNANT SURPRISE.

other people's psyches, trying to determine what qualified as psychedelic art and what did not, and what of it was any "good". It was fast apparent, therefore, that some sort of working definition of "psychedelic art" was required.

Because the styles of many of the artists who were recommended to be considered for the show often seemed to easily fit into more established existing categories such as Surrealism, Fantastic Realism, New Age, Abstract, or Visionary art, it became clear that any clarification of the psychedelic genre would have to distinguish itself in some manner from those. That the artist had a history of ingesting sacramental chemicals was unfortunately simply not enough to qualify the work as particularly "psychedelic".

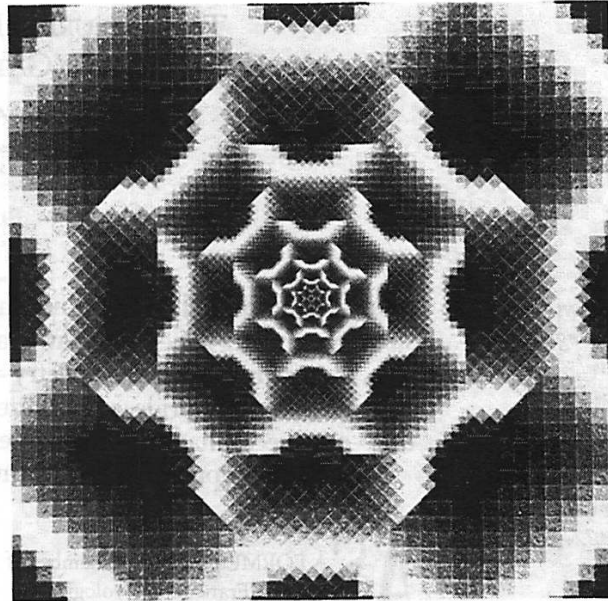
While most of the artists who were contacted had obviously had their doors of perception pried open, more often than not the psychedelic content of their work was ambiguous. It seemed that, in the same way that each excursion into an altered state is an unpredictably unique experience, so the psychedelic quality of a work of art is a rogue factor that gets modified to varying degrees by each artist as they filter it through their pre-existing psychological and aesthetic structures. The extent to which the integrity and power of the psychedelic ecstasy is conveyed seems very much to be dependent upon the artist's ability to express this element of unanticipated and often astonishingly poignant surprise. Something intrudes into their otherwise established artistic temperament.

WHAT I also soon came to appreciate was that good art is not something that can be chemically induced. In fact, it seems that the very choice of psychedelic subject matter requires a self-imposed rigor and vision for which only the truly chosen need apply. The profound attention that it takes to concretize a throbbing transformational internal vista in any coherent fashion is a process that quickly weeds out the timid. Like a dream, it is composed of elusive primordial meanings that tear through the morphological matrix of the self at alarming speed.

In retrospect, therefore, the final selection of 59 works for the exhibition was based as much upon a response to what did NOT feel psychedelic as upon any coherent notion of what they should look like. In fact, the works chosen spanned such a wide spectrum of style that it was only when they were all finally together in the room for the show that one could consider what in fact they might have in common. Walking through the exhibition gave a distinct impression of it all as an early aesthetic expedition into an unknown living dimension that is filled with agendas which far transcend our own. Here, as in a jungle, beauty seemed co-present with hidden danger. Spirit comingled with Shadow. There was a visual intuition of the non-human nature of reality and of a potentially cannibalistic alien lover with whom the psychedelic allows one to dance. The unique creativity of the work revealed a hint of a visual proto-language with which nature may speak and think.

Unlike much of the contemporary art now displayed in galleries, these works dripped with internal significance. Like ancient cave-paintings, they captured experience. There was a numinous feeling that many of these images had never been represented before and one could taste the artist's vulnerability, discovery and wonderment. A steady crowd of upwards of 1,000 visitors who passed through the exhibition had an alternately enthusiastic and hushed respect.

THE SHOW was therefore a sampling of a relatively little known area of art making today and it was a testament to each of the twenty-four artists represented who have managed to bring something back from the frontiers to show the rest of us. Their work demonstrates the existential challenge that transpersonal states present to the human psyche and, in this sense, this art is vital for our culture. It embodies the heroic curiosity of human consciousness as it probes its own potential. While global culture is being gently ravaged by the homogenizing forces of consumerism and decoration, the psychedelic experience offers a direct personal encounter with the often forgotten meaningful miracle of it all. ●●●



*"Square Root",
Allyson Grey, 1987,
Oil on wood, 48" x 48"*

*"Adam and Eve",
Alex Grey, 1988,
Oil on linen, 60" x 60"*

