

# PSYCHEDELIC

OPTICAL AND VISIONARY ART SINCE THE 1960S

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OPTICAL AND VISIONARY ART  
SINCE THE 1960S

edited by David S. Rubin

This eye-popping book offers a visual history of the psychedelic sensibility. In pop culture, that sensibility is associated with lava lamps, album covers, and "teashades," but its first manifestations of 1960s op artists. The psychedelic sensibility did not die at the end of the 1960s; *Psychedelic* traces it through the Day-Glo colors of painters Peter Saul, Alex Grey, and Kenny Scharf, the pill and hemp-leaf paintings of Fred Tomaselli, the intensified palettes of Douglas Bourgeois and Sharon Ellis, and mixed-media and new media works by younger artists in the new millennium.

Although the term "psychedelic" was coined to describe hallucinatory experiences produced by drugs used psychotherapeutically, the story these images tell is about the influence of psychedelic culture on the art world—not necessarily the influence of drugs. As contemporary art evolved into a diverse and pluralistic discipline, the psychedelic evolved into a language of color and light. In *Psychedelic*, more than seventy-five vivid color images chart this development, exploring the art from early op art through recent work using digital technology. The book, which accompanies an exhibition organized by the San Antonio Museum of Art, includes three essays that set the works in historical and cultural context.

Artists include Isaac Abrams, Jan Albers, Martha Alf, Albert Alvarez, Jose Alvarez, Richard Anuszkiewicz, Chiho Aoshima, Kamrooz Aram, Lisa Beck, Carlos Betancourt, Jeremy Blake, Douglas Bourgeois, Richie Budd, Dean Byington, Gordon Cheung, Judy Chicago, George Cisneros, James Cobb, Mark Dagley, Lorenzo De Los Angeles, Steve DiBenedetto, Troy Dugas, Sharon Ellis, Carole Feuerman, William Fields, Wendell Gladstone, Jack Goldstein, Alex Grey, Peter Halley, Al Held, Mark Hogensen, Mark Howard, Mala Iqbal, Bill Komoski, Yayoi Kusama, Constance Lowe, Ati Maier, Gean Moreno, Jim Morphesis, John J. O'Connor, Gary Panter, Erik Parker, Ed Paschke, Bruce Pearson, Lari Pittman, Paul Henry Ramirez, Roy Rapp, Deborah Remington, Bruce Richards, Bridget Riley, Susie Rosmarin, Alex Rubio, Sterling Ruby, Peter Saul, Kenny Scharf, Christian Schumann, John T. Scott, David Shaw, Jim Shaw, Ben Snead, Julian Stanczak, Jennifer Steinkamp, Frank Stella, Don Suggs, Phillip Taaffe, Barbara Takenaga, Gordon Terry, Fred Tomaselli, Victor Vasarely, Michael Velliquette, Leo Villareal, Andy Warhol, Robert Williams, Zachary Wollard, and Saya Woolfalk.

Essays by

David S. Rubin, Robert C. Morgan, and Daniel Pinchbeck



with distant sunlit horizon lines, Komoski works strictly from memory and personal experience. As an avid surfer, he has known feelings of awe and wonder while riding the ocean waves, sensations that undoubtedly inform his quest to capture “a visual realm that represents the unfixed, unsettled nature of things: patterns shifting, shifting focus, light dissolving form, slippage, fluid states, decay.”<sup>110</sup> Lisa Beck (b. 1958) likewise planned her installation *Both* (2002; plate 49) with the intention of appealing to the viewer’s perceptual faculties. The installation consists of a wall painting with unpainted areas in the composition and, in front of it, suspended from the ceiling, a strand of Lucite balls. When viewers approach the clear spheres, they witness distorted reflections of different parts of the wall composition and the room. Beck considers the spherical forms as being analogous to atoms and molecules, and she is interested in the fact that the reflected images will shift as the viewer moves about the space. According to the artist, the effect is “akin to certain forms of psychedelic experience—being able to see the material of the world in its molecular form, without a microscope.”<sup>111</sup>

Artists’ consciousness of atomization has had a notable history, and there are many precedents—such as pointillism and analytical cubism—for breaking a composition into particles. In the current decade, however, there appears to be renewed interest in such pictorial fragmentation among mixed-media artists who build kaleidoscopic compositions for optical impact. Troy Dugas (b. 1970), Gean Moreno (b. 1972), and Michael Velliquette (b. 1971), for example, recycle found or common materials to such effect. Influenced in part by his grandmother’s practice of quilting, Dugas’ collage works often resemble intricately woven carpets or mandalas. For *Landscape I* (2005–06; plate 50), the artist cut up twenty-five copies of the identical vintage postcard and assembled the pieces to create a shimmering, prismatic abstraction. In a similar manner, Moreno arranged strips of patterned fabric to build an opulent composition organized around a gemlike sphere—a disco ball perhaps—enveloped within a multicolored backdrop of cosmic rays (2004; plate 51). Velliquette’s chosen medium is archival colored card stock, a normally mundane material. His process is to cut the card stock into small fragments, which then become building blocks for evocative imagery, such as the visionary landscape depicted in *Breakthrough* (2007; plate 52).

Related practices may be observed in the art of Carlos Betancourt (b. 1966), Jan Albers (b. 1952), and Dean Byington (b. 1958). Betancourt’s *Re-Collection VII* (2008; plate 53) is a digital collage produced on the computer using assorted images relating to the artist’s Caribbean heritage. The composition is an explosive bouquet of exotic flowers, seashells, and other symbolic references. Albers’s *M. RUSHMORE. O. COCTEAU. A. FRIENDS. J.P.P.* (2006; plate 54) was developed through a process of layering sheets of paper that are cut or punched to create detailed matrices of crosshatched lines. Based on an image of Mount Rushmore and featuring the likenesses of Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, and Picasso’s son Paolo, the composition seems to morph in and out of space like a smoky hallucination amidst rays of light akin to those in Moreno’s collage. Byington’s process is similarly complex and involves an elaborate series of steps. To make a painting, the artist begins by photocopying his own drawings, book illustrations, prints, or objects and then creates a collage from the copies. Next, the collage is developed further, scanned into a computer, and printed on a silkscreen panel, which is then printed onto canvas using oil paint, with final details painted by hand. This labor-intensive procedure seems aptly suited to the dense labyrinthine landscape imagery in paintings such as *Greenhouses* (2007; plate 55). Byington envisions the viewer as an excavator, explaining that he is “most interested in . . . telling stories, but you have to look hard inside the paintings to find them.”<sup>112</sup>

Invented universes like those depicted in Byington’s paintings have indeed become prevalent in the current decade. Whether to provide points of departure for viewers to

in the previous century present a case in favor of time, but so did many important scientists and mathematicians.<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, the argument conceded the presence of time as a coordinate of space. Put another way, time was realized within space, as space existed within time. From the position of psychedelic art, the spectrum of creative activity moves between the two.

Some artists arbitrate the presence of time within space by using abstract forms of painting. They would include Carlos Betancourt (2008; plate 53), George Cisneros (1978/1986; plate 12), Mark Dagley (1999; plate 37a, b), Troy Dugas (2005-06; plate 50), Jack Goldstein (1987; plate 18), Ati Maier (2004; plate 58), Philip Taaffe (1985; plate 16), and Barbara Takenaga (2005; plate 42). Other artists produce work that posits the existence of space within time. This approach is evidenced in the DVD works of Jeremy Blake (2003; plate 73), the LEDs of Leo Villareal (2002; plate 44), the computer animations of Jennifer Steinkamp (1995; plate 26), and the digital video installations of Ray Rapp (2006; plate 47). In either case, both coordinates are ineluctably present. The emphasis given to space-time (a term employed by Moholy-Nagy in his important book *Vision in Motion*, published posthumously in 1947) is read according to medium, process, concept, and formal articulation. The paradox of motion is again related to the question of art and experience. Some works of art require our presence more than others. There is a different psychology in viewing works that move in contrast to those that do not move. Whether we are conscious of it or not, our bodies discern the effect. It is simply a different kind of experience, a different mode of attention. In either case, we exist as perceivers within a space-time continuum gathering fragments of meaning that come to us in the process. Do we become visionaries in the process? Perhaps, but the important task is making contact with the work of art as a vehicle of transmission between the artist and ourselves. From a psychedelic perspective, this would naturally involve the ability of the artist to expand the parameters of painting in a way that permits us as viewers to enlarge our vision and, once again, to reopen the doors of perception—and the windows as well.

#### EXPANDING CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH COLOR AND FORM

Applying the term “psychedelic art,” which, like “op art,” originated in the sixties, is a tough call simply because few artists want to be labeled or categorized according to a fleeting cultural phenomenon. One question this publication raises is whether these forms are fleeting or substantial in their potential to open doors of perception that viewers may find beneficial. While much of this essay dwells on abstract form as seen from either an optical or a visionary perspective, there is yet a third aspect to psychedelic art and culture that is more geared toward the narrative or possibly the allegorical. Here I refer to Albert Alvarez’s painting *Karma and Death Pervade My Consciousness* (2006; plate 67). In looking at this painting, one may wonder whether it would qualify as outsider art. There is something purposefully naïve about the evolution and construction of these distorted humanoids and pagans who crowd the space with their vibrant colors. Kamrooz Aram is more orderly in his painting *The Gleam of the Morning’s First Beam* (2005; plate 64), in which the central bursting sun illuminates the five carefully ordered and symmetrical flowers beneath it. Gordon Cheung’s *Mycloptic Shift* (2004; plate 63) is a landscape with a single large palm tree, created with ink and acrylic gel. The lack of color is reminiscent of William Blake’s idea that the placement of darks and lights in a painting is more important than saturating the forms with color. On a different note, Steve DiBenedetto (2001-03; plate 57), Lari Pittman (1991; plate 19), Jim Morphesis (1994; plate 32), and Fred Tomaselli, who



ROBERT C. MORGAN

# ETERNAL MOMENTS

ARTISTS WHO EXPLORE THE PROSPECT FOR HAPPINESS

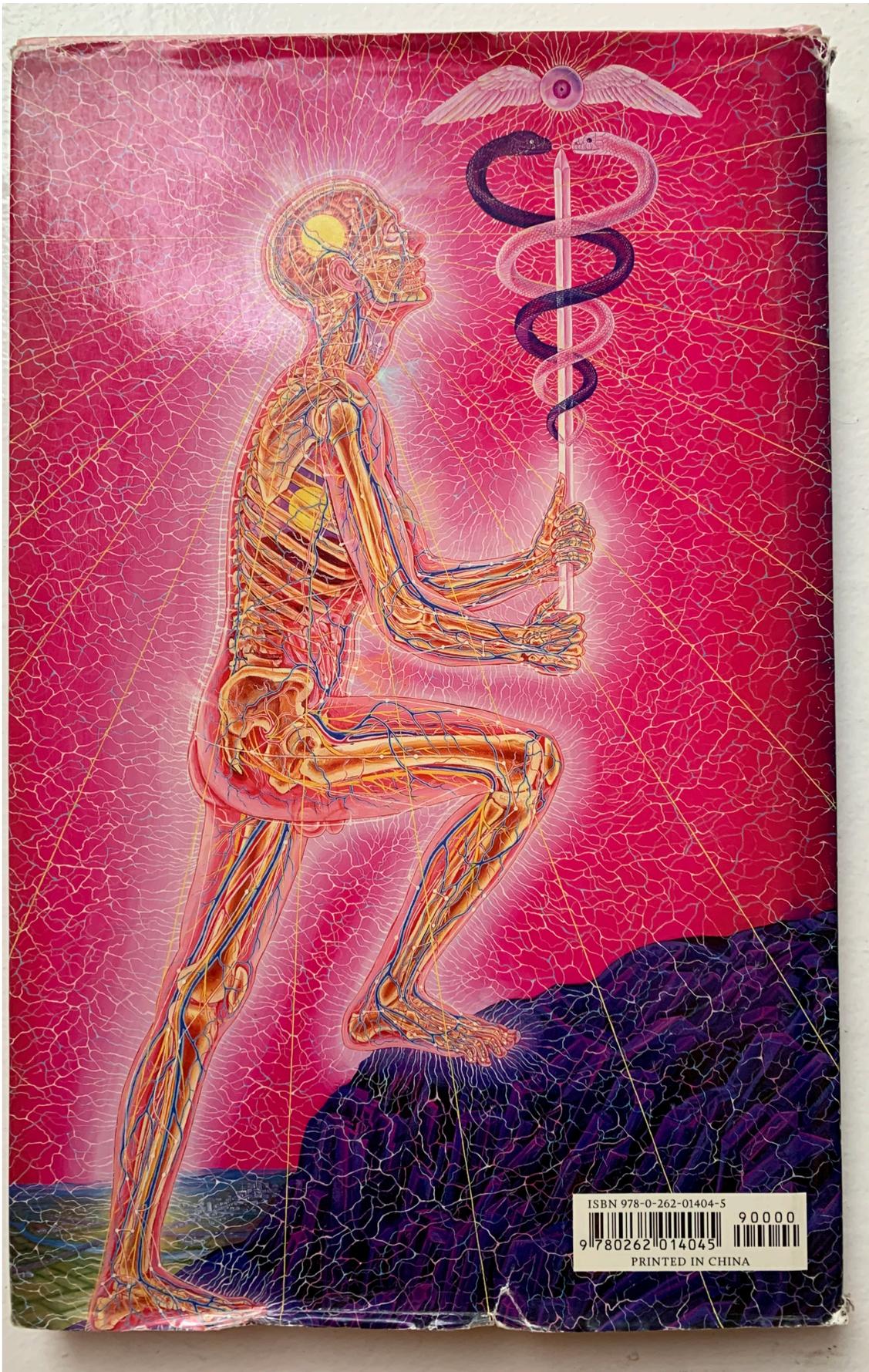
For many readers interested in the subject matter of this publication, the word “psychedelic” recalls a period of intense cultural transition in the late 1960s, specifically associated with young people whom the American news media identified as “hippies.” Exactly what is “psychedelic”? And who are the “hippies”? In the late sixties, the American press offered a nearly indelible connection between the two. Anyone who was psychedelic was also a hippie, and any hippie who was worth his dreadlocks was also psychedelic. In retrospect, this appears too simplistic: psychedelic is not only related to American hippies, nor is it a purely visual phenomenon expressed solely by avant-garde artists. The use of nature-derived, mind-altering hallucinogenic herbs and related substances has an extensive history that goes back much further than the 1960s. Early atavistic psychedelic experiences may have occurred with the dawn of civilization among people living in Paleolithic and Neolithic tribal communities—people who made habitats in jungles, mountains, deserts, prairies, forests, and islands, where they lived for centuries, antedating the existence of a systematic written language. Before moving into a critical analysis of this cultural phenomenon vis-à-vis the works selected by David Rubin, it would seem prudent to define what is central to this mind-expanding art, as I have grown to understand it.

## THE JAZZ FIFTIES, THE PSYCHEDELIC SIXTIES, AND BEYOND

My understanding of “psychedelic” is in its function as a quasi-scientific term, referring to an altered state of consciousness—usually drug-induced—that results in a heightened sensory and/or cognitive awareness. This may include deeply spiritual and emotional experiences, ranging from what may feel like an eternal moment within time to a more intensely conflicted or imaginative distortion of external reality. The remarkably influential series of books by Carlos Castaneda published in the late sixties and seventies describes some indigenous Americans’ longtime involvement in peyote (derived from cacti) rituals and truly captured the imaginations of many artists and others who hoped to meaningfully participate in what today we identify as the psychedelic experience. In contrast to those penetrating spiritual evocations, however, the term “hippie” refers to a more vernacular, media-generated, psychedelic lifestyle based on the thrill of the moment. Digging deeper, we find a connection to hipsterism, which had evolved earlier in



CARLOS BETANCOURT  
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