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A New Way of Approaching the Absolute through Art:

The Sacred Mirrors of Alex Grey

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Julie M. Gilbert

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Julie Gilbert

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

Dr. Donald Kuspit – Thesis Advisor

Distinguished Professor of Art and Philosophy

Helen Harrison – Committee Member

Lecturer of Art History and Director of Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

Dr. Gary Mar – Committee Member

Associate Professor of Philosophy

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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A connection with the viewer is a crucial aspect of art which addresses the spiritual. In order for this type of art to be successful, it must transform its viewer, enabling them to see the ultimate truth, of the Absolute nature of all things. Contemporary artist Alex Grey sees himself as a visionary, believing that the purpose of his art is to reunite humanity with its own collective spirituality—to help people realize their true nondual nature and interconnectedness. The spiritual aspect of Grey’s art places him in the tradition of twentieth-century abstract artists, such as Kandinsky and the American Abstract Expressionists. This thesis examines how Grey employs innovative methods to ensure communication with the viewer, surpassing the efforts of abstraction, and creating a new spiritual art that has the potential to even more powerfully affect the receptive viewer.

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Introduction

The progression of art since the early 20th century has been one of many movements in varying directions: Modernism, Post-modernism, Cubism, Dada, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop, and so on – each one with a different objective and a different style to express that objective. Among these artistic inquiries into what constitutes art and what its purpose should be stands the art of those concerned with exploring the realm of the mystical – the artists concerned with spirituality in art.

Spirituality and mysticism have been explored by many artists throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries, but by none so famously as the abstract artists. While abstraction maintains a definite connection between artist and artwork, it may still have a missing link between the spirituality felt by the artist and the way that spirituality engages the viewer, due to the very nature of abstraction itself. To make this unification of art and viewer more feasible requires a new style of art; a truly spiritual art that not only returns to representation and the image, but also one that involves *participation* – a participation that instills in the viewer the understanding of the unitary consciousness that encompasses all of reality. It requires an artist like Alex Grey.

Contemporary author and integral theorist Ken Wilber states, “A spiritual art must transform the artist and the viewer. In order for art to be transformative, it has to undo you.”¹ To be considered “spiritual,” art must execute a dual task; it must not only alter the

¹Ken Wilber and Alex Grey, “Art and the Integral Vision.” In *Transfigurations*, by Alex Grey, p. 99-107. (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2001), 101.

consciousness and being of the artist who is creating it, it must also alter the consciousness of a viewer. This third party in the creative process becomes the most crucial and determining factor of whether or not an art can truly call itself “spiritual.” Without the involvement of the viewer, the work is stopped short and becomes only for itself. By implicating the viewer, however, the art transcends its physical boundaries and completes its purpose as a truly transformative work of art.

Alex Grey, an American artist and visionary, has created a style that resolves the detachment between artist, art, and viewer. His images, which largely depict human figures with transparent skin and anatomically exact bodily systems, combine precision of technique with bright colors and swirling representations of energies. One of the characteristics of Grey’s art that makes it so forceful and intriguing is his reconciling of opposites and his endeavoring to portray reality in a profoundly interconnected way. This concept – that everything is interconnected with everything else, and that the world of separation we perceive is merely an illusion constructed by our mind – is *nonduality*.

The concept of nonduality is the idea that all is one, or more accurately, that all is “not two,” or not many. It is this idea that is the apex of the search for truth, reality and enlightenment in most Eastern religions, and even in certain Western mystical traditions. Nonduality in its most basic definition is also indicative of Hegel’s philosophy of the whole being more crucial than its individual parts are separately. As Hegel notes immediately in the preface of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “The True is the whole.”²

²Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, J.N. Findlay, and A.V. Miller. *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11.

Using Wilber's criteria for the definition of spiritual art, I intend to demonstrate that while both the art of Alex Grey and abstract art can be read as having mystical and spiritual potential, only Grey's art has the power to provide the viewer with a transformative experience and thus can appropriately be identified as a truly "spiritual art." The works which most forcefully exemplify this idea of transforming the viewer are part of a series called the *Sacred Mirrors*, and are the main works by Grey that I will explore here. I will also show that what enables the viewer to become more easily integrated in Grey's art is, in large part, his incorporation of nonduality, not just as an end in itself, but also as a means by which he and the viewer of his art can achieve that end.

In chapter one, I will explore the basic role of nonduality in Alex Grey's *Sacred Mirror* series. Through this exposition, I intend to illustrate how central nonduality is, not only to each of Grey's mirrors individually, but also to the series as a whole.

Chapter two of my thesis will examine Grey's art as evolving out of the tradition of several abstract artists from the beginning of the 20th century, whose work also focused on the idea of the spiritual, and often strove to understand the Absolute through their art. I will demonstrate many of the similarities between Grey's influences and theories on art, and those of the artists in the abstract tradition. For instance, Grey's focus on the metaphysical and on the ideas of Eastern religions is consistent with that of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian in the early part of the 20th century, and with many of the American abstract painters working after World War II. I will also give a definition of the mystical experience and show how the art of both Alex Grey and the abstract artists can sufficiently be seen as suggestive of a mystical experience.

In chapter three, I will show that the methods employed by Grey in his art, particularly in the *Sacred Mirror* series, uniquely allow for the viewer to more easily comprehend the higher spiritual purpose of his art. I will also explain why the methods of abstract art could potentially inhibit its audience from getting a true understanding of the spiritual message many abstract artists were attempting to convey.

Chapter 1: Nonduality

The idea of collective unity is present in many religious and mystical traditions throughout the world. It exists in the Advaita Vedanta teaching that *atman* is identical to *Brahman*; it is found in Plotinus's theory of the One and it is seen in the kabbalistic idea of God as "one without two."³ Nonduality is also touched upon by secular fields such as psychoanalysis.

Many scholars consider a state of nonduality to be innate in our nature. According to Erich Fromm, the need to return to a nondual state is inherent in humanity. He states, "The disharmony of man's existence generates needs which transcend those of his animal origin. These needs result in an imperative drive to restore a unity and equilibrium between himself and the rest of nature."⁴

In Christianity, the story of Adam and Eve can be seen as illustrating humanity's innate nonduality. In the beginning, Adam and Eve were in perfect bliss and paradise with God in the Garden of Eden. But after they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, they saw themselves as separate from each other and also from God. As punishment for their disobedience, God expelled them forever from the Garden. Their "fall" is seen by some

³ Jerry Katz, *One: Essential Writings on Nonduality* (Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications, 2007), 64.

⁴Erich Fromm, *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), 25, from Fromm's *Man for Himself*.

scholars not just in terms of their defiance of God, but also as symbolic of humanity's "fall" from nonduality into an illusory state of separation.⁵

For Ken Wilber, nonduality is not only the state that predated humanity as a whole, but moreover a state that originates in all of us while we are in the womb and for a short time after birth. He states, "By almost all accounts, neither the fetus in the womb nor the infant at birth possesses a developed self-sense. For the neonate there is no real separation whatsoever between inside and outside, subject and object, body and environment."⁶

The nonduality present in these numerous traditions and fields of study is consistent with the nonduality utilized by Alex Grey in his artworks – particularly in his *Sacred Mirrors* series. The nonduality in Grey's art also mimics the presence of nonduality in mystical experiences, as I shall show, enabling Grey to provide the viewer with a way to embark on an awareness of a unitary consciousness.

The *Sacred Mirror* series consists of twenty-one pieces, or "mirrors," on each of which Grey has painted a human figure. The pose of the human figure is intended to be mimicked by the viewer, which further promotes the nondual relationship between the viewer and the figure in the work. The series is divided into three groups: *Body*, *Mind*, and *Spirit*.

Body, which includes the first thirteen paintings, explores the physicality of the human form. It begins with a metal silhouette of a human figure, onto which the symbols

⁵For further information on the nondual reading of story of Adam and Eve, see Joseph Campbell, *Occidental Mythology: The Masks of God* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964).

⁶Ken Wilber, *The Atman Project: A Transpersonal View of Human Development* (Wheaton, Ill: Theosophical Pub. House, 1980), 7.

for the chemical make-up of the body are inscribed. The following six mirrors take the viewer through each of the systems of the body—from the skeletal system to the muscular system. Grey then depicts three different races: Caucasian, African, and Asian, each represented by a man and a woman.

The next group of paintings, called *Mind*, consists of three works. Titled *Psychic Energy System*, *Spiritual Energy System*, and *The Universal Mind Lattice*, these paintings represent the psychic and spiritual energies that flow through and around us that we cannot physically see and at best can only sense.

The last set of “mirrors” is referred to as *Spirit*. These five paintings represent the spiritual or Absolute reality, as it is understood by several different mystical traditions. One of the paintings, for example, depicts Avalokitesvara, an important bodhisattva figure in Tibetan Buddhism; another depicts Christ, the messianic figure in Christianity, with surrounding images and symbols from the Christian religion and its mystical sects. Also depicted is Sophia, wisdom personified and mother goddess in the Gnostic mystical tradition. The last mirror in this group, and also the final mirror of the series is literally a mirror on which Grey has inscribed the word “GOD,” representing the pinnacle of the viewer’s spiritual journey.

Grey’s goal for the viewer of his art is what he calls “deeply seeing,” which is the process that will lead to the nonduality of viewer and painting; subject and object. He writes, “When deeply seeing, the object of our contemplation enters our heart and mind directly. In the act of deeply seeing, we transcend the egoic boundaries between the self

and the otherness of the world, momentarily merging with the thing seen.”⁷ This oneness experienced by the viewer is crucial for the progression of the viewer through the *Sacred Mirror* series.

Nonduality defines the intention of the viewer’s progression through Grey’s *Sacred Mirrors*. With each mirror, the viewer is meant to imitate the pose of the figure pictured before them, as though literally staring at a reflection in an actual mirror.⁸ As Grey writes, “The purpose of the *Sacred Mirrors* is to reflect on and appreciate the sacredness of the individual self, one’s unity with other people and cultures, and one’s connectedness with the earth and universe.”⁹ Through “deeply seeing,” viewers are meant to merge themselves with the image in front of them, and thus experience the identification of themselves with each of the represented ideas: from the basic, physical nature of the human body, to the ultimately divine unity, the viewer experiences what it would be like to be unified with these images.

Psychotherapy

Alex Grey’s process of creating a nondual experience between the viewer and each of the paintings in the *Sacred Mirror* series resembles the psychotherapeutic technique that shares a similar name. “Sacred mirroring” is a technique in psychotherapy

⁷ Alex Grey, *The Mission of Art* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1998), 72.

⁸ Grey is not the first artist to use the mirror or the idea of reflection in art: for example, artists such as Robert Rauschenberg (discussed later) and Howard Kanovitz are among those who also incorporated the idea of reflection into their art.

⁹ Carlo McCormick, “Through Darkness to Light: The Art Path of Alex Grey.” In *The Sacred Mirrors*, by Alex Grey, Ken Wilber, and Carlo McCormick, pp. 17 – 29 (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1990), 38.

used to create a nondual connection between therapist and client.¹⁰ In describing how this technique first emerged, psychotherapist John Prendergast recounts, “I first discovered this function of *being together* or sacred mirroring in 1988 while working with a very sensitive client with whom I shared an intimate rapport. There were several moments in our work together when there was a natural stop to our conventional thinking and feeling and we simultaneously dropped into a shared sense of Being.”¹¹ Used as part of what is referred to as nondual wisdom, sacred mirroring allows the therapist and client to reach a point where they no longer feel themselves as separate, individual identities, but rather as intimately joined in Being. They find the relationship between themselves as nondual, or not two. Prendergast notes, “When presence arises during therapy, both therapist and client have the felt-understanding that they simply are. The conditioned sense of separation between a discrete self and other falls away and leaves the felt-sense of nonseparateness or nonduality.”¹²

In the act of sacred mirroring, there can be no distinction between the one who is “mirroring,” and the one who is “being mirrored.” To assign a title to one or the other creates a duality, to make a distinction or separation into tasks or responsibilities, where the goal is to achieve nonduality. As Prendergast observes, “The apparent subject (me) is seen to be no different than the apparent object (you) at an essential level. However, if we

¹⁰ The technique of sacred mirroring will be discussed here only briefly, in accordance with its relationship to Grey’s *Sacred Mirrors*. For more detailed information on sacred mirroring and nondual wisdom, see John J. Prendergast, Peter G. Fenner, and Sheila Krystal, *The Sacred Mirror: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy* (St. Paul, MN: Omega Books, 2003) and Jerry Katz, *One: Essential Writings on Nonduality* (Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications, 2007).

¹¹ John J. Prendergast, “The Sacred Mirror: Being Together.” In *The Sacred Mirror: Nondual Wisdom and Psychotherapy*, by John J. Prendergast, Peter G. Fenner, Sheila Krystal, pp. 89-115 (St. Paul, MN: Omega Books, 2003), 94.

¹² *Ibid.*, 90.

begin to identify with this function and take our self as special mirroring somebody, we impose duality upon what is an essentially nondual relationship with our clients. From this perspective, no one can be a sacred mirror or be sacredly mirrored! Being itself is the mirror.”¹³ As soon as one sees oneself as “the mirror” or “the mirrored,” the process fails because by identifying oneself as such, one inadvertently creates the illusion of an “other,” which in turn creates a duality where there should be none.

It could be said that Grey seems to be applying the sacred mirror technique of psychotherapy in his Sacred Mirror series in order to help the viewer find their own nondual experience.¹⁴ He is translating the practice into literal terms, using actual mirrors and paintings that could serve as the “therapist,” in order to facilitate the mirroring, or “being with” experience. Thus, the nondual relationship that occurs during the client-therapist session of “being with,” likewise occurs between the viewer and each Sacred Mirror painting during the process Grey refers to as “deeply seeing.”

The way that viewers are to interact with Alex Grey’s paintings and the intended goal of that interaction is very similar to the idea of sacred mirroring. “When we look into an ordinary mirror, we see how we appear. When we look into a sacred mirror, we see who we are. In the first kind of looking, we find an object – our face or body—and take it to be our self. In the second kind of looking, we see *through* a mental object (our self images and stories) and find no one.”¹⁵ This is not just implied or metaphorical but literally physically demonstrated in Grey’s series. As we progress through the mirrors, we

¹³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁴ Whether Mr. Grey was intentionally thinking of this technique during the creation/titling of his series is unclear.

¹⁵ Prendergast, “The Sacred Mirror,” 89.

are gradually stripped of our physical appearance until at the very end, what we are left with is the divine or the absolute – what we *really* are.

The attitude of giving no distinctions between “mirror” and “mirrored” seen in sacred mirroring is the same one that should be brought to the viewing of Grey’s *Sacred Mirrors*. To successfully achieve the nonduality of viewer and art, viewers must *not* make the distinction of the work as the “mirror” and themselves as the “mirrored.” The process of mirroring must be reciprocal in order to allow the division of viewer and artwork – subject and object—to disappear, and to permit the viewer to enter into the state of “deeply seeing.”

Sacred mirroring also includes the idea of the nonduality between subject and object as being already present, and that the process of “being with” is merely a tool with which to recognize it. There is nothing that either therapist or client must actively do in order to achieve the nonduality of “being with” – they must simply allow it to come to light. “The ego will tend to appropriate the sacred mirroring function as a special skill,” quotes Prendergast, “It is humbling to discover that this capacity is inherent in all individuals. Not surprisingly, the less attached to and identified with sacred mirroring we are, the more freely it functions.”¹⁶ The nondual connection of all things already implicitly exists, therefore there is no effort required on the part of the viewer to make it happen. In the process of sacred mirroring, it simply will reveal itself. As Prendergast states, “Paradoxically, the effort to become a sacred mirror takes one farther from it. Trying to be present, open and available is like trying to make the sun rise (or the earth

¹⁶ Ibid., 96.

turn) – it happens of its own.”¹⁷ This idea is similar to the viewer’s role in Grey’s art; all the viewer is meant to do is to stand before the mirror, mimicking its pose, and just *be*. The viewer must allow the connection to happen without putting forth any type of effort of their own.¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid., 96.

¹⁸ The role of the mirror and mirroring can take many forms besides those described here. The idea behind Grey’s use of the mirror encourages the viewer to look through and beyond it to transcend the world of ordinary appearance. However, the mirror can also be seen as a place where the viewer’s reflection can consume him or her, preventing the move through and beyond the mirror and stopping only at reflection, as seen in the story of Narcissus as well as Lacan’s “mirror stage.”

Chapter 2: Grey and the Abstract Spiritual Art Legacy

Alex Grey's art can be read as continuing in the legacy of the spiritual art of the non-objective artists working in the beginning and middle of the 20th century. During that time, abstraction was used by artists as a means by which to understand the Absolute, which can here be understood according to Huston Smith as being the Infinite, which both "includes and transcends everything else."¹⁹ Many abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian in the early part of the century, and the American Abstract Expressionists in the 1950s, sought to imbue their works with a kind of mysticism reflective of their inner emotional spirituality. Mondrian was aware of the capacity of art to, as he stated, "provide a transition to the finer regions, which I call the spiritual realm."²⁰ Their goal was to create a work that was transcendent, one that would leave this world behind and move forward into that which is beyond it.

There are many shared theories, intentions and influences between Grey and the abstract artists who considered their work to be a reflection of the Absolute. Their similarities also extend to their respective art as being considered suggestive of a true mystical experience.

¹⁹ Huston Smith, "Is There a Perennial Philosophy?" (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 553-566. Available from JSTOR. [Http://www.jstor.org/stable/1464070](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1464070). Accessed 1 April 2010), 563.

²⁰ Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1996), 34.

Focus on Eastern Traditions

Alex Grey's theories on the spiritual and on nonduality reflect those of many Eastern religions. Grey himself is a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, and often incorporates not only ideas, but also symbols and images from this and other various monistic Eastern religions and traditions in his paintings. In the *Sacred Mirror* series, for example, one of the mirrors in the category Grey deems "Spirit," represents Avalokitesvara, also called the "Lotus Bearer." A very important figure in Tibetan Buddhism, Avalokitesvara "represents the Great Bodhisattva as a tantric manifestation of active compassion,"²¹ and it is also said that the Dalai Lama is his manifestation on Earth.²² Grey's use of religious figures and symbols from Eastern traditions reflects his profound interest in ideas from these various traditions.

Grey's interest in the monistic theories of Eastern thought reflects similar interests held by the early non-objective painters, such as Mondrian, who became familiar with Eastern philosophy through their involvement in Theosophy.²³ The Theosophical Society was begun in 1875 by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky to create a sort of "universal religion," mixing wisdoms of Eastern traditions with those of the West.²⁴ Mondrian was a particularly loyal member of Theosophy, as was Kandinsky. In his famous grid paintings, Mondrian made use of the Eastern notion of the nonduality of all things, where the notion of separation is merely an illusion. Peter Fingesten relates in his article "Spirituality,

²¹ McCormick, "Through Darkness to Light," 37.

²² Ibid., 37.

²³ Peter Fingesten, "Spirituality, Mysticism and Non-Objective Art," (*Art Journal* 21, no. 2 (Autumn 1961): 2-6. Available from JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/7774289>. Accessed 29 October 2009), 4.

²⁴ Fingesten, "Spirituality, Mysticism and Non-Objective Art, 2.

Mysticism and Abstract Art,” that Mondrian’s “neutral background is the undifferentiated continuum, the void, or nirvana. Within this cosmic void the Absolute plays its cosmic game of creating and destroying, manifesting and disappearing, becoming and resting.”²⁵

American abstract painters also showed awareness of Eastern thought and applied it in their artistic theories—particularly Ad Reinhardt, who displayed an interest in combining Eastern and Western philosophies, studying Buddhism as well as the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, a twentieth-century philosopher from Sri Lanka who focused on Indian art and culture.²⁶

The Visionary Artist

Grey and the abstract artists also share in common a type of visionary method of creating their works. In his article, “Abstract Expressionism: The Mystical Experience,” Edward Levine considers how artists who attempt to depict the spiritual in their art naturally receive the form and physicality for their depictions from a place beyond themselves, as though they are creating on behalf of the Divine. He writes, “To arrive at this content [the spiritual] the artist must go a step beyond the individual personality, to a supracosmic self; in order to achieve this step the artist must become a sort of medium through which the spirit operates.”²⁷ It is this description of an artist as mediator for the Divine that can be used to define the term “visionary artist,” as I will apply it here.

²⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁶ Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1988), 328, 332.

²⁷ Edward Levine, “Abstract Expressionism: The Mystical Experience,” (*Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 22-25. Available from JSTOR. [Http://www.jstor.org/stable/775629](http://www.jstor.org/stable/775629). Accessed 29 October 2009), 22.

Grey considers himself, and many others also consider him to be a visionary artist. A visionary artist, in this sense, is an artist who gains inspiration from visions – the experiences of altered states of consciousness that can occur either involuntarily or spontaneously during dreams, or through self-induced activities, such as meditation, shamanic drumming, or the use of entheogenic substances.²⁸

One particular vision Grey often recounts in his writings which led to the creation of the work entitled *Universal Mind Lattice*, occurred during his first experience of LSD in 1976, during which he saw himself as interconnected with everything and everyone around him. What made the incident even more inspiring for Grey was that his wife, who had also taken LSD at the same time, described having an identical experience. This shared experience between the two of them seemed to convince Grey that the interconnectedness of all things was irrefutable; that the world we experience daily—the life of the phenomenal world characterized by separation—is just an illusion and the nondual connectedness experienced during his journey on LSD was the ultimate reality.²⁹

Some of the 20th century abstract artists also considered themselves visionaries, or vehicles through which the divine could act. Kandinsky said, “I could not think up forms, and it repels me when I see such forms. All the forms which I ever use came ‘from themselves,’ they presented themselves complete before my eyes, and it only remained to me to copy them, or they created themselves while I was working, often surprising me.”³⁰ Kandinsky felt that the art he was creating was coming from a force beyond himself—

²⁸Grey, *The Mission of Art*, 17.

²⁹Ibid., 21-4.

³⁰Levine, “Abstract Expressionism,” 22.

that the forms that ended up on the canvas were not of his own imagining, but rather part of an experience of the Absolute outside of his conscious control.

Likewise, American abstractionist Mark Rothko expressed a desire to be a visionary. In an article he wrote for the short-lived journal, *Possibilities*, he states, “I think of my pictures as dramatic....Ideas and plans that existed in the mind at the start were simply the doorway through which one left the world in which they occur....The presentation of this drama in the familiar world was never possible, unless everyday acts belonged to a ritual accepted as referring to a transcendent realm.”³¹ What began as simple ideas for Rothko allowed him to escape into a world beyond this one, in which he would have perceived true reality. His task, like that of other visionaries, was then to reveal that reality through his art.

Grey considers himself a sort of intermediary for Divine action, as did many of the artists in the abstract tradition equally interested in the spiritual. As prophets for the world that exists beyond the world which we inhabit, the job of the visionary artist is to take what is perceived in a vision and translate it into the arena of art, in order to show the rest of humanity the ultimate truth of reality, and ultimately encompass them in it.

Nonduality and Reconciling Opposites

The idea of a cosmic unity of all things or a unitary consciousness is also shared by Grey and many abstract artists. For example, Levine describes the aim of American Abstract Expressionism as a “passionate search for value and meaning in the universe

³¹ Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own*, 312.

and... [a] desire to find mystic unification.”³² Just as Grey is trying to reconcile opposites into a total nonduality within his paintings, so, too, was Mondrian attempting to convey this idea in his abstract works: “The positive and negative break up oneness, they are the cause of all unhappiness....The union of the positive and negative is happiness....Since modern science has confirmed the Theosophical doctrine according to which matter and force (mind) are one, there is no reason to separate them.”³³ This shared interest in nonduality also leads to the implication of both forms of art as being inherently *mystical*.

The Mystical Experience

Although the definitions of mysticism are numerous, all seem to agree that the basis of mystical experience is the awareness of unity, of nonduality. Mystical experiences have been defined in many ways, by many different people. Evelyn Underhill, a Christian mystic, defined mysticism as, “the science of union with the Absolute and nothing else,” with the mystic being “the person who attains this union.”³⁴ According to philosopher William James, “in mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness.”³⁵ In his article, *Mysticism and Religious Experience*, Jerome I. Gellman presents a narrow definition of the mystical experience as being “a (purportedly :) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual *unitive* experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not

³² Levine, “Abstract Expressionism,” 25.

³³ Fingesten, “Spirituality, Mysticism and Non-Objective Art,” 4.

³⁴ Dan Merkur, *Gnosis: An Esoteric Tradition of Mystical Visions and Unions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 4.

³⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature: Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (Modern Library classics. New York: Modern Library, 2002), 457.

accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.”³⁶ This definition by Gellman is the one I will use to explore the mystical potentiality of the works by Grey, as well as those by the abstract artists.

Because Grey communicates an experience of nonduality in his paintings, the experience one has of those paintings is suggestive of a mystical one, according to the definition provided by Gellman, where a mystical experience is one in which there is an experience of unity.³⁷ The purpose of the *Sacred Mirror* series, for example, is to allow viewers to gradually, with each piece, transcend their own reality in order to realize a greater unity with everything around them.³⁸ Grey states, “I wanted my paintings to visually chart the spectrum of consciousness from material perception to spiritual insight; and to function, if possible, as symbolic portals to the mystical dimension.”³⁹ Unity with “the All” is a common factor in mystical experiences, whether related to a particular religious tradition or not. This idea of unity is also consistent with Grey’s works, which do not focus on one specific religion but rather incorporate ideas, symbols, and images from several different religions and mystical traditions.

In narrowing his definition even further, Gellman outlines specifically *theistic* mystical experiences. The theistic mystical experience is one in which, according to

³⁶ Jerome I Gellman, “Mysticism and Religious Experience,” in William J. Wainwright, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2005), 140.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 140. Gellman refers to this as the “narrow” definition of a mystical experience.

³⁸ Alex Grey, “The Sacred Mirrors.” In *The Sacred Mirrors*, by Alex Grey, Ken Wilber, and Carlo McCormick, pp. 31 – 38 (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1990), 31.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

Gellman, there is an experience of unity, or further, identification specifically with God.⁴⁰ The theistic mystical experience is exemplified most clearly by Grey's mirror, *Spiritual World*. In this piece, Grey has pictured a sun with rays of light emanating from it that extend to, and seemingly beyond, the mirror itself. In the center of the sun, Grey has etched the word "GOD," which, when the viewer stands in front of the panel, appears at heart-level with the viewer. To emphasize the identity of the viewer with God even more powerfully, Grey has created this piece, from an *actual* mirror. The inclusion of the mirror allows viewers to experience "God" literally at the center of themselves. The ability of the viewer to not only imagine, but now also physically see him or herself in the work as identical with "God," reinforces the theistic mystical experience of not merely a union with God, where the viewer and God are simply "not separate," but an identity with God—an understanding that the viewer and God are identical.

An important and common attribute of mystical experience is *ineffability*. Ineffability is the inability to describe a concept, such as God or the Absolute, or an experience of such a concept, due to the fact that our languages are of the phenomenal world that we experience and are therefore insufficient to describe something that extends beyond the phenomenal world and into the realm of the Real or Absolute.

The early abstract artists of the twentieth century felt that the only way to accurately inspire the emotions and spirituality they wanted to convey was through abstract or non-representational art. Since the realm of the spiritual has an ineffable quality that cannot be expressed by language or imagery of the phenomenal world, the abstract artists continued in that vein by using abstract forms that also do not refer to

⁴⁰Gellman, "Mysticism and Religious Experience," 142.

anything known in the phenomenal world. Instead of using recognizable imagery that appealed to the viewer's intellect to describe the ideas that they wanted to convey, the abstract artists relied on the basic formal elements of their abstract forms, such as color, shape and intensity, to appeal to the viewer's emotions. As Grey's *Sacred Mirrors* can be understood as mystical due to the sense of unity he is conveying, abstract artists can share that title with him as a result of their use of the ineffable.

A mystical experience can only be truly understood by an individual through personal experience of it.⁴¹ As William James wrote, "This incommunicableness of the transport is the keynote of all mysticism. Mystical truth exists for the individual who has the transport, but for no one else. In this...it resembles the knowledge given to us in sensations more than that given by conceptual thought."⁴² The idea of a direct experience is present both in the artistic process of the abstractionists, as well as in Grey's *Sacred Mirrors*.

Direct experience is essential for art that claims to be spiritual or mystical in nature. Many of the abstract artists who wanted to explore the spiritual in their works felt that the very process of creating the work allowed them to better explore their own spirituality through the connection to the material. Jackson Pollock, for example, as an action painter, was deeply involved in the very physical process of the creation of his art. The dripping and splattering of the paint was just as much, if not more, a part of the work as the final product.

⁴¹James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 414.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 442.

The same can be said of Grey's creative process. Though the process of painting the image is not quite as physical as Pollock's, Grey instead experiences the mysticism of his art through his visions. Grey transcribes his visionary experiences in his paintings. The visions are Grey's way of directly experiencing the mystical, and his incorporation of them into his work, is his way of communicating the mystical to the rest of humanity.

While I have attempted to demonstrate that abstraction, like Grey's art, sufficiently fits the definition of a mystical experience and can even be seen as being, in itself, a literal display of the idea of the Absolute, there are some aspects of abstraction—such as its ineffable quality—that can conceivably inhibit it in its task to convey its spirituality to an audience. Grey, on the other hand, utilizes several methods in order to overcome these obstacles and maintain a direct interchange with the viewer.

Chapter 3: **The Methods Utilized by Alex Grey to Facilitate Communication with the Viewer**

One predicament that Grey could possibly encounter with trying to convey his spiritual message to his viewer is the ineffability associated with the mystical experience. As we saw above, the fact that a mystical experience is defined by its ineffability, or inability to be communicated, seems to suggest that there is no way for the artist to be able to relay the mystical experience to the viewer. However, as I intend to show, Grey employs several different methods in his works in order to overcome this obstacle. The first of these methods is the technique of *apophasis*.

Apophasis

The closest way to get to some kind of description of an ineffable mystical experience is by describing it negatively, employing a technique referred to as *apophasis*. In using apophasis to describe something, one takes qualities *away from*, instead of attributing qualities to the thing being described. In other words, you are describing what something is *not*, rather than what it *is*. For example, because the idea of nonduality is ineffably, or beyond the descriptions available to us in our phenomenal language, many describe nonduality as being “not two,” rather than trying to positively attribute any qualities to it. To describe nonduality as meaning that “everything is one,” would be inadequate, because although we can understand nonduality as a unitary state, saying that it is “one” would still fall short of what it really is. Thus, apophatically describing nonduality as “not two” allows us to start with a concept we understand (the concept of

something being “not two”), yet allowing space for a more accurate, truer understanding of what nonduality is that cannot be expressed in words.

For a mystical ineffable concept such as God or the Absolute, apophatic description begins with something that is familiar from the phenomenal world, to point us in the right direction, and then reveals it as something that is opposite to the thing being described. This negative way of describing helps to give us a more accurate understanding of an object, concept or experience, since positively attributing qualities to something, especially something held to be ineffable, will always fall short of its true nature due to the limitations of phenomenally-based language. As in Hegel’s notion of “determinate negation”, apophasis must take us through all of the things which the Absolute is *not* in order to get us to the point where we can go no further and have finally reached the ultimate understanding of what the Absolute *is*, which is something that we can just know, as opposed to something that can be described.

Grey’s works resemble apophasis in that the imagery and symbolism he uses help to point the viewer in the direction of a truer realization of the ineffable understanding he is trying to convey. Instead of attempting to picture those ideas that are beyond the phenomenal realm with which we are familiar, he begins with recognizable imagery with which we can ground ourselves and use as a stepping-off point toward our own realization of the mystical experience. Take for example the three mirrors representing the “mind” in Grey’s *Sacred Mirror* series: *Psychic Energy System*, *Spiritual Energy System*, and *Universal Mind Lattice*. Grey begins in the *Spiritual Energy System* by depicting a human figure – something all people can immediately identify with and understand. The figure has all of its internal organs and bones and is clearly distinct from

its background, illustrating a duality between figure and ground. In the next mirror, the *Spiritual Energy System*, the human figure is still present, but is slowly losing its organic form. The bones and organ systems are no longer evident, and the figure is gradually becoming integrated with its background. The head, feet and even the fingertips are no longer closed off and separated from the background but flow into it, shown through the thick white lines that run through the figure and continue to its surrounding area. The barrier between the figure and background is slowly being broken down.

The *Universal Mind Lattice* is Grey's description of the figure's unitive mystical experience. In the last of the three, the *Universal Mind Lattice*, Grey depicts the ultimate nonduality of the mystical experience. The human figure is no longer visible, understood by the viewer to now be totally integrated into the intricately woven web of thick white lines that seems to continue infinitely, beyond the edges of the painting and well into the background.

However, without the first two mirrors, this idea would be incomprehensible to the viewer. Grey had to first show the human figure and its dualistic relation to its surroundings, which can be immediately understood by the viewer. He then had to proceed gradually from this understanding of what the mystical experience was *not* (a duality), to a closer understanding of what an experience of it would be, the experience of the figure and background as completely integrated and identical.

Looking beyond these three paintings, Grey's *Sacred Mirror* series as a whole can be read as progressively apophatic. Grey begins the series with a piece called *Material World*, for which he has constructed the human figure out of lead and etched onto it the symbols of the chemicals and elements that make up the physical human body. The piece

itself is created from an actual mirror, but the nature of the mirror distorts the image of that which it reflects. The breaking down of the body into its separate, organic elements, as well as the disconnection perceived in the distortion of the mirror, mimic for the viewer the separation that they perceive in everyday life. Thus in this first piece, Grey is showing the duality of the phenomenal world at its most obvious.

Grey proceeds next through the systems of the body, still keeping with the theme of our bodies as made of separate parts: separate organs, separate bones, and so on. He then moves on to the mirrors depicting men and women from three different races: Caucasian, African, and Asian. These mirrors no longer show the separation within our own bodies, but the duality we experience in relation to other people, particularly people of genders and races other than our own. These mirrors also mark the end of the grouping of mirrors Grey refers to as representing the “body.”

In the next three mirrors, as previously discussed, Grey explores the realm of the “mind,” depicting the human figure as gradually losing the sense of duality with its surrounding environment. In the last set of mirrors, the group representing the “spirit,” Grey evolves from the figure understanding its nonduality with merely itself and its surroundings, to a nonduality of the figure with the spiritual world. He depicts spiritual leaders from several religions and traditions, such as *Avalokitesvara*, the bodhisattva representing compassion in Tibetan Buddhism, *Christ*, the savior and son of God in Christianity, and *Sophia*, the female aspect of the Godhead in Gnosticism. In these mirrors, one can comprehend a union with divine figures from various religions. The second to last mirror, *Void/Clear Light*, represents the Tibetan Buddhist idea of the Clear Light as that which illuminates the Void; the state that directly precedes enlightenment,

the realization of the nonduality of all things. It is only fitting, then, that *Void/Clear Light* directly precedes *Spiritual World*, which, as seen above, is Grey's most assertive attempt at showing not only the viewer's union with the spirit, but also the ultimate identification of the viewer with the Absolute, or God.

In the *Sacred Mirror* series, Grey takes the viewer on a journey from the most dualistic aspect of the world which we experience, to the ultimate goal of nonduality in the identification of oneself with God. By beginning the series with extreme dualism and gradually progressing toward ultimate nondualism, Grey begins with that with which we are all familiar in our phenomenal existence, but gradually moves away from it to approach a closer understanding of ultimate nondual reality.

Ineffability as a Predicament of Abstraction

Conversely, abstraction maintains the ineffable quality as a necessary component of the mystical experience. Some abstract artists strove to create paintings of forms and lines and color that had no reference as objects in the phenomenal world specifically because they wanted to separate the idea of the phenomenal world, which is an illusion, from the idea of the Absolute or spiritual world, which is the true reality. For example, Malevich felt that at a certain point his art reached a level of being "pure," for him, excluding any object with reference in phenomenal reality.⁴³ As Mark Rosenthal notes, the "subjectivist principle [of abstract art] relies on the expression of feelings to convey a

⁴³ Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*, 21.

realm of experience unconnected to the surrounding world and independent of the demands of representation.”⁴⁴

This separation of worlds, however, works conversely to the goal of abstraction. By separating this phenomenal world from the world of ultimate reality, the abstract artists are actually creating a duality instead of removing it. The world of the Absolute, as many Eastern traditions acknowledge, is not separate from the phenomenal world, but merely veiled by illusion. When one reaches a true realization of reality, or enlightenment, one does not physically leave one world and enter another – it is their perception of the world that changes. As Wilber states, “...the ‘other world’ of Spirit and ‘this world’ of separate phenomena are deeply and profoundly “not-two,” and this nonduality is a direct and immediate realization which occurs in certain meditative states...”⁴⁵ By incorporating only the content of one world and strictly excluding the content of another, abstraction maintains the dualism of worlds, making it that much harder for the viewer to get an understanding of the truth.

That the abstract artists wanted to convey their ideas in a manner and style that is consistent with the ineffable quality of a true mystical experience, creating an art that is exemplary of such an experience, points to the art of abstraction as actually *being* the Absolute. The works by artists such as Kandinsky or Mondrian were full of forms and colors that expressed the ineffable, as we saw previously, which is a trait of the ultimately spiritual—something which cannot be expressed by words from the languages of our world because it is not from our world.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁵ Ken Wilber, *The Essential Ken Wilber: An Introductory Reader* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1998), 12.

However, the ineffable quality of abstract art that arises from its Absolute nature can cause difficulties in its ability to always express that nature because, as we have seen, the nature of being Absolute does not permit itself to be communicated or transferable in terms of experience from the world in which we live. As Donald Kuspit states in his article, “The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art,” “...the abstract work of art is equally non-objective and non-subjective; it neither ‘constitutes’ objects nor shows the subject of experience. In this sense, it is absolute, for there is no knowing it concretely.”⁴⁶ Because abstraction is comprised of forms that most often have no grounding in this world, or in our experience of this world, it can presumably be unknowable to the viewer whose knowledge is, and can only be, of this world.

This form of spiritual art, like Hegel’s sense-certainty as Kuspit supposes, can often fall short of bringing the viewer to a true understanding of the Absolute through art *because of its striving for ineffability*. The ineffable nature of the early abstract works, while accurately emulating the idea of the Absolute, can many times leave them unable to communicate that idea with an audience. Most often, a viewer of an abstract work can only know that the work is meant to convey the spiritual if they are told by an outside party that this was the case, or if they read the many writings of the earlier abstractionists detailing the purpose of their paintings. The fact that the only way for one to truly understand the intentions of the works of artists like Kandinsky and Mondrian is to read about them also undermines the works’ ultimate attempt to be ineffable. In order to make sure that their works are fully comprehended, the abstract artists needed to incorporate some form of outside written or oral language. Thus, like Hegel’s *Phenomenology of*

⁴⁶ Donald B. Kuspit, “The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art,” (*Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 26-30. Available from JSTOR. [Http://www.jstor.org/stable/775630](http://www.jstor.org/stable/775630). Accessed 4 November 2009), 26.

Spirit, where one must determinately negate sense-certainty in order to move on to another form of consciousness that can more properly express itself, we find that, while crucial to the progression of spiritual art, abstraction, too, cannot stand on its own.

Edward Levine describes Mondrian's view of the work as "a plastic object which manifests in visual terms the invisible, objective laws of the universe, much as a mathematical equation does in science."⁴⁷ We can see even more clearly now, using Levine's comparison, that the abstract work of art is the manifestation of the Absolute – a mere continuation of it rather than something that can help the viewer understand it—visually metonymical rather than metaphorical. Instead of giving us a comprehensible characterization as to what it is, it merely restates itself as the same thing. In contrast, Grey's mirrors could be understood as a metaphor, replacing a difficult concept with something that is more easily comprehensible. Grey's art uses what we recognize to explain to us a concept beyond our understanding, while abstraction simply shows us the concept itself.

Abstraction's use of ineffability unintentionally encourages the duality of viewer and artwork. Grey uses the nondualistic approach of apophasis to convey his message, whereas abstract art *maintains* an ineffable quality, which can cause a dualistic split between viewer and artwork. The viewer may be unable to connect to the work which has no reference in the viewer's world, and thus a detachment or duality is imposed between viewer and artwork.

⁴⁷ Levine, "Abstract Expressionism," 22.

Nondual perception

It is the viewer whom Grey ultimately seeks to affect—whose experience of reality should be influenced by the experience of Grey’s works. Grey’s mission for his art is incomplete until it is received by an audience, which then takes part in Grey’s mystical experience. Thus, in the role of the viewer, we find Grey’s most crucial use of nonduality—that of perception.

Nondual perception is an important aspect of many religious and mystical traditions. A quotation from the Hindu text, the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* reads, “...for there is no cessation of the vision of the seer, because the seer is imperishable. There is then, however, no second thing separate from the seer that it could see.”⁴⁸ Taoism is also concerned with the nonduality of subject and object, as seen in the quotation from Chuang Tzu: “Thereupon the ‘self’ is also the ‘other’; the ‘other’ is the ‘self’...But really are there such distinctions as ‘self’ and ‘other,’ or are there no such distinctions? When ‘self’ and ‘other’ lose their contrariety, there we have the very essence of the Tao.”⁴⁹ The goal of Grey’s art, specifically in the *Sacred Mirror* series, is to establish a nondual relationship of subject and object, both emotionally and physically, between the viewer and the artwork.

Grey realizes that the role of the viewer could not be more crucial to his art. The entire purpose of his artistic process depends on its reception by the viewer—only then is the process really complete. Grey writes: “Part of the function of the vision and the creative process is the *integration* of the inspired moment, via the art object or event, into

⁴⁸David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

the world beyond the studio...”⁵⁰ The communication of Grey’s visions to the viewer is what makes the creation of the work worthwhile. Without a viewer, the art, in effect would lose its purpose, for its goal is to transform the viewer in a very powerful way. As Kuspit notes, “His pictures are meant to awaken and catalyze the viewer’s mystical potential and thus transfigure his consciousness and body.”⁵¹

When confronting one of his *Sacred Mirrors*, the viewer is invited by Grey to actively participate in the nondual experience of the artwork by standing before the life-size image and mimicking its pose: arms outstretched low with palm facing out toward the image. In this act, the viewer is meant to mentally merge with the image, thereby emotionally breaking down the separation of viewer and artwork – the dualism of subject and object. This process, as noted earlier, is what Grey refers to as “deeply seeing.”⁵²

In his *Sacred Mirrors*, Grey is achieving subject/object nonduality between the viewer and physical artwork, attempting to create for the viewer a simulation of what it would be like to *actually* unify oneself with those beings and concepts that he is merely representing; for instance, in standing in front of one of the mirrors depicting a man or woman of a race different from one’s own, one begins to be able to simulate what it would be like to unify oneself with that person. Commenting on his intentions for these six mirrors, Grey states, “Even though they are painted as individuals, whenever they are exhibited together they form the sociopolitical or collective aspect of the *Sacred Mirrors*. This idea is to see yourself in relation to other races and sexes, but also, because they are

⁵⁰ Grey, *The Mission of Art*, 79.

⁵¹ Donald Kuspit, “Alex Grey’s Mysticism.” In *Transfigurations*, by Alex Grey, p. 47-51 (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2001), 49.

⁵² Grey, *The Mission of Art*, 72.

supposed to be ‘mirrors,’ to see yourself reflected in each person.”⁵³ The duality between the people of different races and sexes occurs because people automatically perceive the outward physical differences in skin tone and male or female traits. As the viewer simulates his or her identity with the mirrored image, however, the viewer recognizes that the difference originally perceived as being *between* people of different races and sexes is in actuality a difference created *within* the individual. Thus the duality of opposites, such as black and white, male and female, become a nondual whole. This application by the viewer of the unity that Grey attempts to communicate through the *Sacred Mirror* series is a step toward the viewer’s realization of the nonduality of all things.

The use of the actual mirror in Grey’s *Spiritual World* to allow viewers to physically see themselves within the artwork is not only important in reinforcing the viewer’s identification with God, as previously explained, but also a crucial move by Grey to physically break down the duality of subject and object. In seeing themselves in the artwork, there is no longer a barrier between viewer and art, seer and seen, because the two are now the same. Thus, not only has Grey successfully simulated the experience of the viewer’s identity with God, he has also physically removed the duality of subject and object.

Abstract art can often fall short in its attempt to prove itself as an ultimately spiritual art because its own pure form – while it can be seen as having the qualities of the Absolute – cannot sufficiently convey itself to the viewer, whose inclusion in the artistic process is necessary to fulfill the criteria for spiritual art. Kuspit writes: “In any case, as Hegel notes, absolute or pure being is abstract, being that has not yet begun to live

⁵³Wilber and Grey, “Art and the Integral Vision,”¹⁰⁴, in an interview with Ken Wilber.

concretely in the world, and so is empty of content. It is majestic only in that it is charged with potentiality, monumental only in that it is sublimely mute, having nothing to say about phenomena.”⁵⁴ It is abstraction’s lack of communication with an audience that could ultimately keep it from enduring as a truly spiritual art.

In commenting on the mute nature of Absolute abstraction, Kuspit declares, “Indeed, to be, and simply be, is on the whole what the abstract work of art ‘communicates.’ Beyond that, it has no ascertainable message and meaning, for it neither talks in terms of the world nor appeals to an interpreter.”⁵⁵

As we saw, one could reasonably assert that all the qualities of abstract art could suggest that abstract art *is* the Absolute, manifest in art. There can be difficulties, however, when its Absolute nature prevents the art from actively incorporating the viewer. As Kuspit stated, it can only *be*—as a static, silent work, unable to move freely among the world of the viewer, as if confined to a cage. This stationary nature of abstract art makes it a difficult means for knowing the Absolute because it is not always able to express itself in terms understandable to us.

A Return to Representation

If verbal description is inadequate for conveying the mystical and the nondual due to its phenomenal origins and dependence on rationality and logic, and abstraction goes too far into the realm of the Absolute to be able to properly express its meaning to the viewer, then a return to representational art, the recognizably visual, which is free from both reason and conceptual thought, seems to be a better way to begin to convey these

⁵⁴ Kuspit, “The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art,” 27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

otherwise incommunicable ideas. Grey's art effectively expresses his mystical messages in this manner by appealing to the viewer's visual senses instead of their rational senses. For example, in reference to the depiction of energy in Grey's art, Donald Kuspit comments that, "it is necessarily represented imagistically, for awareness of it exists below the threshold of verbal language. It is something we know in our bodies, which is the only way to truly know it. Images have visceral appeal, unlike verbal language, which appeals to our intellect."⁵⁶ Visual imagery provides a way for the viewer to immediately internalize an idea that cannot be understood by conceptual or intellectual processes.

One of most crucial moves in Grey's art toward a truer connection between art and viewer is his decision to return to a representational image, as opposed to abstraction, in order to convey his idea of an Absolute reality. This decision also speaks to the nondual interest of Grey's works. Kuspit writes: "Abstract and conceptual artworks exist to be contemplated disinterestedly as wholes; imagistic artworks are grasped by means of conscious or unconscious interest in the image, which is always partial—at least until the image is experienced as basic. Even then, the image is never contemplated as though it were a whole distanced from the viewer, existing at the end of some ideal perspective; it is always experienced as part of the viewer – the more a part, the more a whole in itself. But it is never so whole in itself that it stands apart."⁵⁷ Whereas the abstract work creates itself as a self-contained whole that is separate and distinct from the world in which it exists, the work that maintains the representational image, such as Grey's, continues to maintain a connection with the viewer – a nonduality of viewer and art work.

⁵⁶ Kuspit, "Alex Grey's Mysticism," 49.

⁵⁷ Donald Kuspit, "In Search of the Visionary Image," (*Art Journal* 45, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 319-322. Available from JSTOR. [Http://www.jstor.org/stable/776806](http://www.jstor.org/stable/776806). Accessed 6 February 2010), 320.

It is the return to a recognizable image that most forcefully reestablishes the connection between the viewer and the artwork in Grey's *Sacred Mirrors*. The figure of the human being for example, serves as an icon in the sense that it denotes "any object having certain properties it possesses itself."⁵⁸ Thus the viewer can understand the icon of the human figure as denoting him or herself and therefore can more clearly place him or herself in the situation of the image. The use of the icon allows the viewers of Grey's *Sacred Mirrors* to connect with the figures in the paintings, which helps them more efficiently understand the purpose of the series as they move through it.

But Grey does more than merely using representational images of things we recognize from nature and our phenomenal world. He takes it one step further and also depicts aspects of our being and consciousness that are not immediately visible to us: energy fields, auras, light – the things that we can understand as "felt" on a more subtle level, but cannot necessarily give physical form to. By including these representations of more abstract notions, Grey is further helping the viewer through their progression toward the Absolute. He is bridging the gap between pure abstraction and pure representation by juxtaposing that which we know physically and visually from life, such as the human body, with that which we understand on a more subtle level of our consciousness. Wilber states, "It's easier to make representational art, but when you get into subjective states, which means states you can feel and see yourself, but only internally, how do you make art actually depict these interior states?...that's what's great

⁵⁸ Charles Morris, *Signification and Significance: A Study of the Relations of Signs and Values*. (Cambridge, MA: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1964), 68.

and pioneering about [Grey's] art."⁵⁹ By giving representational form to these more abstract notions, the viewer is even more likely grasp the intention that Grey has in mind, and can more easily allow him or herself to surrender to it.

The Necessity of the Image

Because abstraction relies solely on the feeling evoked in the viewer by the forms, there is a risk of the viewer being unable to adequately internalize the idea that the artist is attempting to convey. There is a detachment in the connection of the artwork to the viewer, which completes the artistic process. A viewer could stand before the abstract work and never truly grasp what the artist is trying to express.

In abstract art, there is no recognizable image to connect the viewer to an intellectual understanding of what the artist is trying to convey. The ultimate effects of the totally imageless abstract work of art are likely to evade understanding and become halted at the level of emotion.⁶⁰ An abstract work may cause a particular emotional response in a viewer, but the emotional responses among several viewers may vary, and may likewise vary from that of the artist, or that which the artist was attempting to convey. At some point, an abstract work of art can become sealed off from its audience. Although the artist may have intended for the viewer to experience the spirituality the

⁵⁹Wilber and Grey, "Art and the Integral Vision," 105, in an interview with Alex Grey.

⁶⁰ Edward S. Casey, *Spirit and Soul: Essays in Philosophical Psychology* (Dallas: Spring Publications, Inc., 1991), 60. In Dr. Casey's examining of the role of imagination in perception in Mikel Dufrenne's theory, for ordinary perception, Dr. Casey states that it is likely that Dufrenne would consider imagination to be a crucial middle point between sensible presence and understanding. Dr. Casey explains, "On the one hand, imagination...is necessary to the presentation of presence in perception....On the other hand, imagination is equally crucial for understanding... 'understanding can do nothing without imagination.'"(p.60). In terms of aesthetic experience, imagination is shown as less important to Dufrenne, but this seems to depend on the condition that the "aesthetic object suffices for itself [and] there is no need for empirical imagination to fill it out."(p.60). Dufrenne states that "the work succeeds precisely when it restricts imagination within the work's limits, discouraging any further elaboration"(p.60), as in Grey's art, where the representational aesthetic object indeed suffices for itself.

artist himself was experiencing during the work's creation, without an image to allow the viewer to connect him or herself intellectually with the work, the best the artist can hope for is a purely emotional effect on most viewers.

Without an image to give the viewer some kind of visual clue as to exactly what the artist's original intention was, the work of art can become meaningless for the viewer—nothing more than forms on a canvas. As Kuspit notes, “Not grounded in the image, art at best becomes a virtuoso demonstration of means – an ultimately vacuous technical feat propped by vague “spiritual” aspirations.”⁶¹ The recognizable image serves as an important connection between the viewer and the work. Without it, the intention or meaning of the painting becomes subjective and open to various interpretations.

The exclusion of recognizable imagery in abstract works of art gives rise to many interpretations of their intentions. Roger Lipsey, in accordance with Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, noted that, with abstract art, “One feels threatened...by the possibilities of needing as many theories as there are artists.”⁶² There have been many various readings of abstraction, not all of which acknowledge the goal of a higher realization, or search for the spiritual. For example, the art critic Clement Greenberg saw abstract art only in terms of its formalism – its purity of form and its effort to be true to its mediums, as opposed to being a “window of reality.” As Suzi Gablik notes, “Greenberg in particular rejected the notion that there is any higher purpose to art, or any “spiritual” point to its production.”⁶³ Greenberg was not the only critic to misunderstand abstraction:

⁶¹ Kuspit, “In Search of the Visionary Image,” 319.

⁶² Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own*, 21.

⁶³ Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1984), 22.

Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the main dealer for the Cubist artists, commented that Mondrian's work was "purely ornamental."⁶⁴

Because it could not consistently and clearly communicate its message to those intended to receive it, abstraction was largely misread, and therefore often misinterpreted. As Peter Fingesten notes in his article, "Spirituality, Mysticism and Non-Objective Art," "It is regrettable that some critics have attacked non-objective art as expressions of 'terror,' 'chaos,' 'perverted visual trends,' 'spectacles of a continuous nervous breakdown,' 'nihilistic automatism,' 'mechanical arrangements,' and so forth."⁶⁵ If the viewer is missing the point of the work of art more often than not, then the work is not able to uphold its position as an art that is consistently able to communicate spirituality to its audience.

In his article, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," Kuspit writes, "The problem with the spiritual symbolism used by such painting is that it tends to become a communicative cliché by reason of its cultural familiarity or traditional character or else tends not to communicate spirituality at all, simply becoming a boring, empty shape."⁶⁶ Abstraction hangs in the balance between its spirituality and its form. At any given point, it can be understood equally as one or the other, as there is nothing to solidify it as unquestionably, definitively spiritual.

⁶⁴ Mark Rosenthal, *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century*, 41.

⁶⁵ Fingesten, "Spirituality, Mysticism and Non-Objective Art," 5.

⁶⁶ Donald Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art." In *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, edited by Maurice Tuchman, Judy Freeman, and Carol Blotkamp, p. 313-325 (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 319.

Another predicament of abstract art that arises from its lack of a recognizable image is that it becomes too individual—to the point where only the artist can, with certainty, fully comprehend the meaning of the work. For example, Robert Motherwell, one of the American Abstract Expressionists, is recorded as having said, “...I’m interested in expressing basic human emotions....And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows....they are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.”⁶⁷ There is no guarantee, however, that anyone is having the same religious experience that Motherwell had when he created his works. Due to the lack of representation present in his and the other abstractionists’ works, the possibility of any one viewer knowing exactly the experience that consumed Motherwell during the creation of his paintings, and then replicating it in him or herself, although possible, is unlikely, given the nature of the art.

Motherwell, who understood without a doubt the mysticism of abstract art, also felt that abstract art was, as he said, “an effort to close the void that modern men feel.”⁶⁸ However, this mysticism has the potential to be confined solely to the artist. It does not always extend into the realm of the viewer, because the spiritual aspect for the artist is most often in the creation. By the time the work reaches the viewer, the act of creation is complete and what remains are empty forms that most often hold no real meaning for the viewer.

The individualized nature of the abstract art is also a symptom of the artists’ decisions to look within themselves in order to find the right form of expression of the

⁶⁷ Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?*, 22.

⁶⁸ Fingesten, “Spirituality, Mysticism and Non-Objective Art,” 4.

Absolute. Gablik, in her book, *Has Modernism Failed?*, notes, “In opposition to materialist values, and because of the spiritual breakdown which followed the collapse of religion in modern society, the early modernists turned inward, away from the world, to concentrate on the self and its inner life. If valid meaning could no longer be found in the social world, they would seek it instead within themselves.”⁶⁹ It is possible that this turn inward, away from what was happening around them, could produce an art that may not be able to relate to the society for which it was originally created.

Conversely, abstraction can also be read as spiritual when the artists had no such intention in mind. Abstract works cannot consistently be taken to be representative of the spiritual because a spiritual connection is not always the objective of the artist. Robert Rauschenberg, for instance, did several monochromatic works, such as his series of *White Paintings*, which were seen as having at least an initial spiritual implication. However, the idea of inserting a mystical meaning into a painting runs counter to the theories Rauschenberg actually had on creating art. Rauschenberg preferred to create his works spontaneously, with no prior idea in mind. He also preferred to keep himself as an artist out of the work as completely as possible, which would include keeping any religious or spiritual ideas he might employ out of the work as well. Rather than exhibit a display of spirituality, Rauschenberg’s intentions were to use materials from life to express life as art, and to encourage his viewers to experience his works in the same manner. Thus, although some critics have read a spiritual intention into the abstract works of artist Robert Rauschenberg, the purpose of works such as the *White Paintings* was not to

⁶⁹ Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?*, 21.

explore the realm of the spiritual at all. It was merely to engage the viewer in the work, to encourage a sort of audience participation.⁷⁰

The Need for a New Approach to the Spiritual

Another predicament that abstraction encounters as a communicator of the spiritual is that its effectiveness as a new style conveying a new message seems to have been due largely to its existence in its particular time period. Now, in our time, abstraction is no longer an innovative style. As Kuspit points out, contemporary abstract works are simply recycling the same ideas in a form to which we have become desensitized.⁷¹

While the same basic notion of nondual spirituality is still relevant today, the means by which we receive that idea need to reflect our own moment in history. With the *Sacred Mirrors*, Grey has reinvented the vehicle by which the idea of knowing and understanding the Absolute, our true nature, is communicated to the viewers of art today, in the 21st century.⁷²

⁷⁰ For further information on Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*, see Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-garde*, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003); Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, (Houston: Menil Foundation, Inc., 1991); Robert S. Mattison, *Robert Rauschenberg: Breaking Boundaries*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁷¹Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," 313-14.

⁷² The above argument is not meant to imply that abstract art cannot have a spiritual effect on a receptive viewer. Although I suggest that representation and the recognizable image are methods that can more easily allow the viewer to make a connection to the art and thus more easily become transformed by it, there are some people for whom abstraction is just as, if not more, effective in producing the same result.

Conclusion

Thus far we have explored the mystical qualities of both abstract art and the art of Alex Grey, and have shown that while abstract art often falls short of the definition of spiritual art that I am using for the purpose of this paper, Grey has created an art that can simultaneously be considered mystical, while still able to convey its spiritual message to the willing viewer. Perhaps, though, it is better to look at abstraction not so much as insufficient in its attempt to be a truly spiritual art, but rather as misplaced in the spiritual progression of art. Kuspit concurs with Meyer Schapiro that, “Authentically spiritual abstract art does not so much ‘communicate’ as ‘induce an attitude of communion and contemplation.’ It offers ‘an equivalent of what is regarded as part of religious life: a sincere and humble submission to a spiritual object, an experience which is not given automatically, but requires preparation and purity of spirit.’”⁷³ If abstract art can be seen to be the Absolute in itself, as we have seen, then it seems that the “preparation” Schapiro is referring to could be the experience of Grey’s art. Grey’s *Sacred Mirrors* take the viewer to a closer knowledge of what the Absolute *is*, after which the viewer is better prepared to view abstract art and understand its purely Absolute nature.

If it is the case that one must progress through phases of art in order to reach the moment of art history that allows one to arrive at the understanding of the ultimate reality, then it seems it could be said that there is a natural development of art toward this

⁷³ Kuspit, “Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art.” 314; Dr. Kuspit quoting Meyer Schapiro.

moment. We receive each artistic style or movement fully, only to realize it is not fulfilling all of the needs of humanity, and thus we must reject it while, in a quasi-Hegelian manner, still retaining it within the canon of art history, and focus our attention on the next art historical moment.

Let us return for a moment to Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*. Their solid white color and simple square shape qualifies them as abstract pieces, and while I argued earlier that they were not intended as spiritual representations in the way the works of earlier abstractionists' were, they seem to me to represent a new phase in the progression of art towards the Absolute. By encouraging participation from the viewer in his art, Rauschenberg is directly communicating with the viewer and encouraging them to develop their own direct experience of his works. Take for example Rauschenberg's interactive work, *Soundings*.⁷⁴ In this work, Rauschenberg invites the viewer to participate in his art by making noise, for which they are rewarded with flashing lights that reveal the image of chairs on the work.

Although there is no overtly spiritual or mystical message communicated or even intended by the artist, Rauschenberg's work can be seen at once to bypass abstraction's inability to communicate and reach the viewer, and also to foreshadow Grey's techniques in the *Sacred Mirrors*. By encouraging participation and allowing the viewer to become actively involved in the work, Rauschenberg has already destroyed the impasse between viewer and artwork, creating the nonduality between viewer and viewed that is missing in abstract art. At the same time, Rauschenberg even breaks down the physical barrier between viewer and artwork by utilizing reflection in his work. Whether it is the viewer's

⁷⁴For further information on Rauschenberg's *Soundings*, see Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990).

shadow on the blank canvases of the *White Paintings*, or their mirrored reflection on the silvered surface of *Soundings*, Rauschenberg is anticipating Grey's use of the idea of "mirrors," to create the physical nonduality between viewer and art.

Despite the fact that no spiritual message was intended, Rauschenberg's art can be seen as an example of an artistic moment that is advancing art in the direction of the truly spiritual. As in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, it is only through Grey's art that we can really know the Absolute, and thus it is only on this understanding of the Absolute that we can return to abstraction and understand it for its true nature.

All of the nondual traditions and religions emphasize the fact the Absolute or the Real world is not separate from the phenomenal world that we experience. All we need to do is realize it, to "awaken" to it. This occurs when one transcends the idea of separateness and understands that all there is, *is* nonduality.

This idea of awakening can be seen in the Tibetan Buddhism idea of the "clear light," which is what occurs when you approach the recognition of true Reality, and which, as seen previously, Grey utilizes this idea in his mirror, *Void/Clear Light*. In this work, Grey has stylized the four elements—earth, wind, fire and water—and placed them around the borders of the painting. The rest of the panel is pure black. However, in the center Grey had depicted a thin vertical white glow, which represents the clear light. In Buddhism, the Absolute is seen as the Void, a way of expressing that there is no-self, only object. The clear light leads one to the realization of the Void. The Void was there the entire time—but now the clear light illuminates it, just as the light illuminates the darkness in Grey's mirror, so that the void can be seen and realized as Absolute Reality.

In each of Grey's mirrors, from the first showing our inner organic, chemical similarities, to the last revealing our union and identification with God, Grey is trying to get the viewer to actively realize the nonduality and thus true nature of all things. It is already there inside us—we just need to awaken to it. To attain enlightenment is simply to recognize the true nature of reality, to see it through the ignorance of phenomena that mask it. Just as this recognition is a crucial part of reaching enlightenment in many religious traditions, likewise is Grey trying to show us that Reality, the Absolute, the true nondual nature of all things is right there in front of us, waiting to be recognized.

Perhaps to see most clearly of all the ultimate answer to knowing and understanding the Absolute, we must turn once again to Grey's final mirror, *Spiritual World*. Here, as previously noted, Grey attempts to equate God with the viewer by creating an actual mirror into which the viewer is reflected and by putting the word "God" within a sunburst at level with the viewer's heart. The viewers can literally see "God" within themselves, thus reinforcing the idea of being one with God. However, even though placing "God" within the viewer is important in itself, the role of the mirror is of equal and arguably more significance in the viewer's progression toward an understanding of the Absolute through art.

The mirror consumes the majority of the piece; the sunburst and its rays span the entire piece, but do not occupy a large surface area; what the viewers mostly see is themselves and their immediate surroundings. By doing this, Grey is even more powerfully suggesting that the key to knowledge and understanding of the Absolute is already in our immediate grasp: it is in our surroundings and within us, which is what one sees reflected in the 21st mirror. The only thing that seems to be in the way of our actual

realization of the Absolute through art is *the art*. Grey is beginning to take away the concept of the “painting” by replacing it with a mirror, exposing more and more of our immediate surroundings and less and less of art itself. By beginning to remove the concept of the painting and at the same time the art, Grey is coming closer to Wittgenstein’s notion of “taking away the ladder.” Perhaps the solution to reaching the ultimate realization of the Absolute through art, is to remove the art itself, completing the Hegelian cycle, and showing us that the Absolute really was there the entire time.

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