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Jesus on LSD

When California blotter acid got religion

The sounds of the Grateful Dead rang out through the clear summer evening sky during another magnificent show at Mountain View's Shoreline Amphitheater. It was the early 1990s. Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, academics, businesspeople, teachers, Gen-Xers, Boomers, old hippies, and all kinds of folks from the Bay Area mixed in the concert, and many more out in the parking lot, all having a good time or looking for one. On the minds—and tongues—of many was Purple Jesus blotter acid. Often referred to simply as “Jesus Christs” or “Purple Jesuses,” this was the LSD people wanted to trip on.

This acid was made possible by San Francisco-based art collector and printer, Mark McCloud, well known in California's psychedelic community. The Jesus acid was personal for McCloud, a way to display his own theology in the form of something that both was and was not religion properly defined. It reflected a lifestyle. Perhaps this is what happens with ordinary and extraordinary artifacts in California, religious or not, but treated as religious in some respects, ritualized in ways that enjoy varying degrees of success and sustainability, innovation, and meaning. The art didn't originate in California, but was reappropriated and reconstituted in California as something else. And California is where it popped, took on a life of its own, and then went out from here in a quasi-religious fashion inasmuch as acid has been taken in communities seeking to enjoy its religious benefits, inducing religious experience, and affirming religious sensibilities.

The art on the blotter paper was created by the psychedelic artist Alex Grey, whose work is familiar to West Coast artists from Venice to North Beach. At one time employed by Harvard Medical School's anatomy department to prepare cadavers for dissection and, later, as an illustrator, Alex Grey's fascination with the body and his new age sensibilities informed his art. They combined in his *Sacred Mirrors* project,

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Purple Jesus by Alex Grey.

which developed images of the human body that represent both physical and metaphysical anatomy, which for Grey embody deeper connection to astral bodies.

In 1976, Grey had a psychedelic vision of Christ going up in an atomic mushroom cloud towering over a burning city. Four years later he painted *Nuclear Crucifixion*, a 114-inch by 124-inch representation of that vision, which he later interpreted as signifying that “Christ stood for what is good in

us, and that same brutality and ignorance that murdered Jesus could someday be responsible for a nuclear war.”¹

More Jesus paintings followed. Part of his twenty-one image Sacred Mirrors series, Alex Grey rendered *Christ* (1982–1985) in oil on linen, drawing from the Gnostic Gospel tradition to depict a Yogi-like Jesus as mystical teacher.² Later, he painted the *Cosmic Christ* (1999–2000), a 50-inch by 102-inch oil on wood with gilded wood frame, meant to

show how Christ transcends nature yet exists in every part of it together with the planet and collective story of humanity.³ Grey, who was Jewish, continually came back to Jesus in his art because he saw Jesus as one of the first Western teachers to realize the truth that he was “the Word made flesh.” Grey saw in this a direct channel for the love and healing energy of God to all of humanity.⁴

The 20-inch by 20-inch oil on wood *Purple Jesus* (1987) may be the most successful of Grey’s Jesus paintings, both for its simplicity and for the popularity it achieved throughout California’s underground psychedelic community. With green, magenta, and blue droplets representing LSD transferred onto blotter paper surrounding him, Jesus hangs suspended on the cross—eyes closed, countenance resigned, bowels and skeleton in full view, bones and circulatory system visible, crucified surrounded by a flowering halo of blotter acid.

The humanity of Jesus juxtaposed with astral glory radiating from his body and shining through his heart, along with the explicit connection of Jesus to LSD and the psychedelic community, a psychedelic communion, made *Purple Jesus* emblematic of a particular time in California. The image came to prominence in the early 1990s when California—especially its youth—was in serious trouble, with increasing violence and a ballooning prison population jam-packed with adults and minors. The so-called “war on drugs” was at its peak.

Mark McCloud, who has been called the “father of blotter art,” was responsible for getting Grey’s *Purple Jesus* on blotter paper. He first saw Alex Grey’s work at the San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery show *Retrospectacle*, curated by Carlo McCormick in 1987, which celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the Summer of Love. The gallery hosted psychedelic art from artists old and new, including *Purple Jesus*, which Grey painted for the show. McCloud paid \$1,000 for the painting—more than the asking price—as a gesture of kindness and respect to Grey, and gave it to his mother, who was living in Argentina’s Patagonia region. The original painting is still there.

McCloud grew up in a Catholic family in Argentina. His father was knighted by the Pope in the Order of St. Gregory (Mark possesses the sword from the knighting ceremony). In 1966, amid ongoing political unrest in Argentina, McCloud’s parents sent him at age twelve to Webb School, a boarding school in Claremont, California. At a hotel in

Santa Barbara the following summer—as the Summer of Love flowered in Haight Ashbury—McCloud took LSD for the first time with a friend. The acid-infused sugar cubes came from the Timothy Leary-associated, Laguna Beach-based Brotherhood of Eternal Love.⁵ About his first trip, at the tender age of thirteen, McCloud has said, “I was blind, but then I could see.”

The winter after graduating from Webb, McCloud took 300 milligrams, an ordinary dose, of Orange Sunshine LSD while a student at Santa Clara University. During this trip, McCloud fell out of a window from the seventh-floor of his dorm room. When describing it later, he said he experienced “rapture” and an ontological change, in which the “basic fabric” of his existence changed. McCloud left Santa Clara the following year, continuing his education at l’Ecole du Louvre in Paris before returning to finish his undergraduate degree and then an MFA at the University of California, Davis.

After graduation, he moved to the San Francisco Bay Area, worked as a curator and an artist, lecturing from time to time at Santa Clara University, and became immersed in the Bay Area art scene. A two-time recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, McCloud served on a number of boards and became a noted art collector.

After buying *Purple Jesus* and sending it to Argentina, McCloud turned the painting into a print. The print was reproduced on 7.5-inch-square blotter paper (a special kind of absorbent paper), which was then perforated so the paper could be torn into 900 small square tablets. McCloud printed around 3,000 sheets and distributed the perforated prints far and wide.

This yielded another San Francisco invention, in effect a new kind of communion, when an underground chemist put the LSD liquid substance (the “alchemical presence” or the “Holy Ghost,” in McCloud’s terms) on the back side of the blotter paper. The paper was then sold, broken along the perforations, and distributed for consumption. The chemist who worked with these particular sheets was arrested and sent to prison in the mid-1990s and his LSD-activated sheets became government evidence in the case.

Grey found out about this alchemical transmogrification of his art after giving a lecture in Boston in the mid-1990s, and a young attendee later showed a sheet of *Purple Jesus* blotter to the artist. Grey was upset at first that McCloud had transformed his art into a commercial vehicle for the



delivery of a drug, but he eventually forgave McCloud. He later numbered and signed 500 copies of the blotter sheets, and included images of McCloud's blotter sheet—one signed by Timothy Leary—in published volumes of his work.⁶

Purple Jesus blotter was very popular in California in the early 1990s. Jesus was not a new presence in the California psychedelic community. In fact, the community had a lengthy relationship with Jesus.⁷ LSD played a role in the birth of Jesus Freaks.⁸ It was at the center of the early Calvary Chapel, in which Lonnie Frisbee would sometimes carry on about Jesus and flying saucers after tripping on acid.⁹

Another well-known psychedelic artist, Rick Griffin became a born-again Christian in the 1970s. Having illustrated for *Surfer* magazine, Jimi Hendrix, and the Grateful Dead, Griffin started illustrating for groups associated with Calvary Chapel. In 1973, he released his classic *Surfing Jesus*, and over the next seven years he worked with pastor Chuck

Smith of Calvary Chapel in Santa Ana and Costa Mesa to illustrate *The Gospel of John*.¹⁰

McCloud's current collection contains a copy of Griffin's *Surfing Jesus* as well as *The Gospel of John*. He has images on perforated blotter paper of Jesus and Judas—two of which bear markings indicating they were confiscated by the FBI at some point—and a Berkeley Bonaparte print by Griffin called "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," depicting a Jesus-looking Zig-Zag man smoking a joint while standing next to a Native American also smoking a joint. The same Indian is found in a '66 Family Dog poster with a banner offering a prayer, "May the baby Jesus shut your mouth and open your mind." Jesus was somewhere in Griffin's mind even before he converted to Christianity. McCloud remarked, "If you take acid long enough, you've gotta' deal with Jesus."

McCloud's gallery, "The Institute of Illegal Images," boasts the largest private collection of blotter art in the world, tucked inside his Victorian home in San Francisco's



Mission District. “Illegal” is a misnomer, because the prints are no longer illegal; any LSD residue remaining on the framed blotter sheets became inactive long ago. But the collection does show the role Jesus played in the psychedelic community. The Jesus in this collection stands on the edge, in the way of danger, a Jesus of and for freaks.

McCloud sees his own role as participating intentionally in a movement, facilitating in a small, artistic way what acid could do for people. In the process of dispensing acid to Californians, McCloud developed his own liberation theology with LSD as the host. His people were trapped and looking for meaning. LSD could help them see and set them free, as it had done for him. On the perforated paper, a sheet of acid looks oddly like the “host” in many other congregational settings—like Jewish matzah or Christian communion cracker sheets. But in McCloud’s theology, it only assumes this special property when properly activated with the LSD, similar to the actualizing of the miracle in Roman Catholic theology, when a priest consecrates and gives

thanks during mass, and an inert substance miraculously is transformed to become the divine host.

One gram of LSD is broken into ten thousand hosts when applied to blotter paper. McCloud calls this “the new currency.” One host equals one unit. As such he views his role, as a “Roman Catholic,” as having the duty of “bringing Jesus back to Catholics in full-fledged state, which is the honor of anybody.”

Albert Hofmann, who discovered LSD, once said that “psychedelic substances are best used only with proper sacred or psychological guidance and support.” He hoped that “in the dawn of this new millennium people will use the full range of spiritual practices to help transform the worldview of our materially fixated culture.” Hofmann went on: “Such a change in values will lead us toward a greater feeling of interconnectedness with all of God’s creatures and a deeper appreciation for the infinite richness and wonder of the cosmos and the equally infinite inner realms of being.”¹¹ He noted, “given the proper set and setting, a vast



panorama of mysterious archetypal beings and highly articulated heaven realms become accessible.” In a similar vein, psychedelics have been renamed “entheogens” by scholars who consider them to be “sacraments for voyaging into the Godhead.”¹²

According to McCloud, art displayed on the blotter sheet, including the tiny fragment on a partitioned hit of acid, affects one’s trip. Even if the effect is subconscious, the “premise of alchemy” remains: any experiment can achieve any desired result. Bad trips happen, too, breeding fear, hellish, and sometimes demonic experiences, which have destroyed some people. I’ve strangely never heard anyone talk about having a bad trip on Purple Jesus. But “be careful with Jesus,” McCloud warns. He “came to correct an injustice.”

Here McCloud’s story takes another strange turn. In McCloud’s theology, Jesus came to correct the “mistake” of his father, God, who McCloud says was incorrectly forcing people into hell, hence the injustice. McCloud preaches

this gospel as a member of the so-called Church of the Little Green Man. McCloud claims Jesus was also part of this church, which meets in New York. The Church of the Little Green Man has two requirements: trip with the brothers and sisters once a week, and turn someone on who hasn’t tripped. Here, again, McCloud sees the host returning to the people, carrying the people through a tunnel, journeying to heaven through hell. An oft-quoted phrase among the psychedelic community, and one used by McCloud is this: “If you want to soar angelic, take a pinch of psychedelic.” But, again, McCloud warns of potential danger taking LSD: “Do you want a one-on-one with your Maker?”

Duke ethicist Luke Bretherton has argued that the desire to engineer an ampliative experience may not entirely be about drugs (like LSD) at all, but perhaps a more fundamental longing for the eschaton, which people might truly feel, even if they’re only willing to pay five bucks for it, searching for the transcendent but in a banal, cheap way.¹³

The cost of a hit of acid may be quite discounted considering the goal—a new way of seeing the world and a new way of existence. But the dealer, still, makes the participant pay for a hit of the host in order to experience the trip. It doesn't come free, which is the price of the living substance Jesus promises in Revelation 22:17.¹⁴ The significance of Jesus' relevance remains on display precisely at this point. When the Grateful Dead end their electrifying Shoreline show, friends go home. The trip is over. But Jesus remains, the same first century figure from the Gospels, the one identified by the church throughout the ages as the mystery of God incarnate, who has scandalized and brought hope to all kinds of people in every age in churches of all kinds throughout California and the world. **B**

Notes

Photographs by Hannah Chu.

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- ¹ Carlo McCormick, "Through Darkness to Light: The Art Path of Alex Grey," in Alex Grey, *Sacred Mirrors: The Visionary Art of Alex Grey* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1990), 24.
- ² Alex Grey, "The Sacred Mirrors," in *op cit.*, 37–8, 64–5.
- ³ Alex Grey, *Transfigurations* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2001), 158–65.
- ⁴ Grey, "The Sacred Mirrors," 37.
- ⁵ Nicholas Schou, *Orange Sunshine: The Brotherhood of Eternal Love and Its Quest to Spread Peace, Love, and Acid to the World* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2010).
- ⁶ Alex Grey, *Transfigurations* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner traditions, 2012), 39; Alex Grey with Allyson Grey, *Net of Being* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner traditions, 2012), 115.
- ⁷ See James Stewart Bell, "Christ Came to Me in a Drug-Induced Haze: The conversion of an original Jesus freak," *Christianity Today*, 2 March 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/march/lsd-revolution-buddhism-then-jesus.html> (accessed 28 August 2015).
- ⁸ See Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10–53.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 33, 73.
- ¹⁰ See the more recent hardcover reprint, Chuck Smith and Rick Griffin, *The Gospel of John* (Costa Mesa: The Word for Today, 2008).
- ¹¹ Albert Hofmann, "Foreword," in Grey, *Transfigurations*, vii.
- ¹² Stephen Larsen, "Transfigurations" in *Transfigurations*, 39.
- ¹³ Luke Bretherton, "Consuming the Body: Contemporary Patterns of Drug Use and Theological Anthropology," in *Public Theology in Cultural Engagement*, ed. Stephen R. Holmes (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 94–130.
- ¹⁴ "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let the one who hears say, 'Come!' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life" (NIV).