HIGH ART FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM: Notes on Contemporary Art about Drugs, Addictions, Addiction Recovery, and Altered Consciousness

Drugs are ubiquitous in our society, and virtually everyone uses them. Whether on heroin, cocaine, alcohol, anti-depressants, sedatives, diet pills, tobacco, coffee, tea, caffeine-laced soft drinks, chocolate, analgesics, over-the-counter cold medicines, or antibiotics, most of us are hooked, as it were. The subject of drugs, then, would seem to be one on which none of us can honestly afford to take a holier-than-thou attitude. But there are few other issues which have so polarized modern society, especially in the United States, and a vocal, politically powerful segment of the population has spent the last century instituting puritanical laws that severely limit personal liberty in matters of drug use. Despite the legislative success of such efforts--and the resultant vast increase in this country's prison population--the years spanning the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are like any other time in recorded human history to the extent that people enjoy altering their consciousness and continue to take advantage of the fact that drugs offer the most expedient means of doing so.

Artists make up a sector of society in which interest in such altered states tends to be especially high (so to speak), if only by virtue of the fact that by trade they're involved in creatively responding to conscious experience. All art in some sense constitutes such a response and results from an investigation or exploration of consciousness in one or more of its aspects. Despite social taboos, drugs have long been viewed in artistic circles as legitimate tools for advancing such work--and for relaxing when the work is done.

Statistics measuring the proportion of artists among the larger population of drug users are hard to come by. Regardless of how those numbers might stack up, my own research has revealed that a great many contemporary artists in the United States and elsewhere are making work that overtly addresses issues of drug use, drug abuse, altered states of consciousness, addiction recovery, compulsive pleasure-seeking, other forms of compulsive behavior, and related social taboos.

The collective picture their work paints is evidenced in “High on Life: Transcending Addiction,” and it’s a very different one from the official picture painted by the politically powerful advocates of a “drug war” whose main victims are relatively powerless individuals caught using the “wrong” drugs of choice. The exhibition presents a broad spectrum of artists’ perspective on these issues that have so preoccupied and divided our society. The artists represented here come from a wide range of age groups, cultural backgrounds, and social categories, and they address issues of drug use and consciousness in a variety of stimulating, thought-provoking, challenging, and entertaining ways.

Toward either end of the exhibition’s generational span are the late **William S. Burroughs** and **Liz McGrath**--two artists who play crucial roles in defining the tone of the overall selection through their six works each on view here. Burroughs, who died at eighty-three in 1997, is of course known more for his writings than for the visual art-making that increasingly occupied his attention during his last decade, and he has had a lot to say about drugs, addiction, altered consciousness, and the social crusade against drugs. The works by which he’s represented in “High on Life” combine abstract forms with collaged or stenciled figural imagery and tersely poetic titles in order to directly

address those issues--as in the case of his works on paper, *Drug Hysteria* and *Morphine at Dawn*--or allude to them in the more metaphorical terms of his three paintings and small silkscreen print, with their shadowy forms and figures that suggest an exploration of multilayered realities.

If only Burroughs were still around, it would have been intriguing to witness a meeting between him and McGrath, because despite the half-century age gap between them and vast stylistic and technical differences, their respective bodies of work share a lot in common. Both reflect a profound disaffection for mainstream society, a dark sense of humor, a deep interest in the socio-cultural impact of drug use and abuse, an affinity for the jaded sensibilities of punk-rock, and a strong literary bent. (X-Ray Man, Burroughs' screenprint in this show, was used as the cover for Sonic Youth's recent album, NYC Ghosts) McGrath's hauntingly intense sculptural piece, *Frankie Machine*, was partially inspired by and named for the heroin-addicted central character in Nelson Algren's 1949 novel, *The Man with the Golden Arm*.) McGrath, who has just entered her thirties, represents a new breed of artist working in a broad range of mediums (including fashion and rock-music videos) and without regard to outmoded definitions of high and low culture, to say nothing of "insider" and "outsider" art. In contrast to the loosely experimental, chance-influenced methods that Burroughs employed as a visual artist, she opts for a meticulous, craftsmanlike approach in creating her humorously macabre, mock-sinister portraits of fictional and non-fictional characters. Her five richly detailed, finely crafted, theatrical-format dioramas in the exhibit combine the shrine and reliquary traditions of Roman Catholicism with the traditions of dollmaking, dollhouses, and shadowbox displays. The texts painted on them, meanwhile, recall circus sideshow

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

Roy Ferdinand is well-acquainted with the latter issues, but his identity as an African-American rooted in black urban street culture lends his work a grittier perspective. A high-school dropout now in his early forties, Ferdinand has spent more than fifteen years creating a substantial, ongoing body of compositionally sophisticated posterboard drawings that provide an unflinching, close-up view of street life in the predominantly black neighborhoods in his hometown of New Orleans. Except for a few details, the desperate scenes he depicts closely replicate the violent pedestrian dramas that unfold daily in economically marginal African-American communities across the country--the battlefields where drug abuse and the government "War on Drugs" take their severest toll. Emphasizing the civilian violence, police brutality, prostitution, illicit drug commerce, and economic desperation that plague these areas, these works provide a stark picture of the squalor and desperation from which so many denizens of poor urban neighborhoods in the United States seek relief and escape through the use of readily available, often illicit drugs. Personal experience has made Ferdinand all too familiar with the problems that can result from overreliance on drugs, and he clearly maintains a level of sympathy for and identity with all of the real-life characters who populate his work. Acknowledging the prevalence of gang rivalries and the polarized

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

A sympathetic sociologial and aesthetic complement to Ferdinand's work is provided by the intimately scaled fiber art of **Ray Materson**. Roughly the same age but from a very different social background, Materson is like Ferdinand in that he most often takes a fairly straightforward approach to his subject matter. Born into a white, middle-class family in the Midwest, Materson distinguished himself early on for his acting talent, and he went on to earn a college degree in philosophy and performing arts. But several years later he found himself roaming urban mean streets much like those Ferdinand depicts, desperate to score the cocaine and heroin to which he had become addicted through repeated intravenous injections. Like many junkies hooked on outlawed substances, Materson eventually turned to petty crimes in order to finance his habit, and a botched hold-up attempt he staged with a toy gun earned him a stiff prison sentence. While doing time, he took up the unlikely-seeming art of embroidery and began creating a series of tiny narrative scenes, mostly drawn from his own experience, stitched together with salvaged threads from multicolored socks. (Clean of drugs for more than a decade and out of prison since 1995, Materson chronicled and illustrated his story in the recently published *Sins & Needles: A Story of Spiritual Mending*, co-authored by his wife Melanie.) Some of his embroidered images--such as *Down on the Corner*, *Little Green Bags*, and *Waiting for the Man*--depict scenes in a relatively journalistic manner akin to what Ferdinand does. In several other works, Materson uses visual metaphors and surrealist techniques of distortion and disjunctive juxtapositions to dramatize his themes. The prime example is the image that is arguably his most powerful to date--

Getting Pulled In (Don't Get Pulled In), in which the hapless junkie finds his naked body being sucked up from a giant spoon through the hollow needle of a monumental hypodermic syringe wielded by a fearsome-looking red-faced demon.

Although she hasn't directly experienced the kind of hard-core addiction that Materson, Burroughs, and a number of the other artists represented in "High on Life" have endured, **Alison Elizabeth Taylor**--another artist of Liz McGrath's generation--enjoyed getting stoked on methamphetamine when she was in high school, and in more recent years she has been personally acquainted with a number of serious addicts in various stages of recovery. Those experiences inform two of her three small paintings here. Although the immediate inspiration for *Delusional Parasitosis* was her rental of an apartment previously occupied by an elderly woman who covered the floors in mattresses to protect herself from insects, Taylor identified with the woman's paranoia from her own experience of palpable hallucinations involving crawling insects while high on meth. Her painting, *Stop Pleasure Receptor Burnout*, uses the image of a contemporary young superheroine as a vigilant neurological guardian in order to humorously dramatize her observation that many recovering addicts seem to have deadened their endorphin receptors and thereby emotionally desensitized themselves.

He's nearly a generation older, but **David Sandlin** shares several points in common with Taylor, including cultural roots in Alabama (where Taylor was born, as was Sandlin's father, and where Sandlin studied art as an undergraduate), an affinity for comic-book-style narrative imagery, and a thematic interest in drug use and abuse. Sandlin's paintings of the last two decades--typically casting alcohol and sex as major sources of temptation--have engaged those issues as part of a humorously barbed

critique of the guilt, puritanism, and self-righteousness that characterize traditional, white Bible-Belt culture and the moralizers of the national religious right. The three large, thematically related paintings and smaller lightbox piece by which Sandlin is represented in “High on Life” exemplify his approach, which fuses luminescent comic-book imagery with illusionistic, classical-painting techniques to create visual allegories that manifest both heaven and hell within the earthly realm of a human existence polarized on one end by the “dull cares” of quotidian reality and on the other by the seductive temptations of the flesh.

As in Sandlin’s case, alcoholic overindulgence is also a key theme in the work of **Chris Mars**, now in his early forties. Like Liz McGrath and a number of other artists represented in “High on Life,” Mars is also a rock musician, and during the late 1970s and ‘80s he played drums for the influential punk-rock band, the Replacements. In touring with the group during those years, he spent much of his time drinking in bars with his bandmates and their fans, and those experiences have visually informed much of his subsequent artwork, which reflects, in his words, “how the world looks when you’re drunk looking at drunk people.” Another driving influence on his art was witnessing, as a child, the ordeals of an older brother who was repeatedly institutionalized and heavily drugged in an attempt to treat a condition diagnosed as schizophrenia. This experience generated an abiding sympathy in Mars for other social misfits. Using many of the same time-honored, illusionistic techniques that Sandlin favors, Mars creates technically refined paintings and drawings in which surrealistic distortion also plays a crucial role. His works typically depict grotesque, malformed, sickly-hued individuals interacting with each other or taking flight from nightmare

scenarios in bleak, forbidding landscapes and claustrophobic architectural interiors. A number of them depict hospital scenes in which demented-looking medical professionals seem to be performing lobotomies or other cruel experiments on their drugged and disoriented patients. The latter images are harshly effective in lampooning the notion that administration of drugs by doctors is necessasrily any safer than self-administration.

Sharing an affinity for the freaks and monsters that appear in the work of McGrath and Mars are the creations of **William Allen**, who generally works on a larger scale and exclusively in the medium of welded metal sculpture. Now in his early fifties, Allen has had his share of drug-related experiences and problems, and these have indirectly informed his work. Unlike much of the art in “High on Life,” though, his sculptures don’t overtly address the subjects of drug use and abuse, but rather serve as psychologically unsettling metaphors for inner demons of the kind that some forms of drug dependency can come to represent. His horrific, long-limbed *Boogie Man*, --a piece that suggests the Tasmanian Devil of Warner Brothers cartoons reinterpreted by Ridley Scott or David Cronenberg--can be seen as a far more imposingly scaled, close relative of the syringe-wielding demon in the previously described embroidery piece by Ray Materson, or it might remind some viewers of a bad-trip hallucination induced by the wild, solanaceous plant commonly known as Jimsonweed (*Datura stramonium*). Allen’s *Sleepwalker* and *Lost Soul*, on the other hand, suggest beings who have been psychologically dulled to the edge of oblivion, if not by overindulgence in drugs, then by constant overexposure to television and other compulsions of the kind that a hyperconsumerist society promotes. Despite its much smaller size, *Walking Head*,

Allen's life-size replica of a human skull that appears to be skittering across the floor on oversized insect legs, is similarly unsettling in its metaphorical implications regarding human psychology.

Now in his mid-thirties, **Charles Benefiel** can cite an extensive litany of personal, drug-related horror stories going back to his childhood. His more recent experiences of a nervous breakdown and the onset of a condition diagnosed as obsessive-compulsive disorder would suggest that he might be living with an imbalance of naturally occurring neurochemicals or brain drugs. Like Allen, he doesn't directly address these experiences in his art, but his labor-intensive, tea-stained stipple drawings are strongly informed by the difficult psychological issues these realities have stirred up in him, and they serve as apt metaphors for related fears and obsessions that are perhaps more common than many of us would care to admit. Like several of the previously mentioned artists, Benefiel is a consummate technician, even though he's entirely self-taught, and he uses his finely honed stipple and staining techniques to vividly conjure a realm of paralyzing psychological distress, which might be correlated with bad drug experiences or other kinds of severely negative psychological input. Combining imagery appropriated from antique dolls, old photographs of corpses, and electrical or industrial hardware with target shapes and dense grids of numbers that appear to be mechanically printed, he presents a series of sepia-toned windows onto a claustrophobically compartmentalized nightmareland in which individuals are systematically dehumanized and reduced to components in an endless and meaningless numerology.

In counterbalance to the disturbing visions and real-life scenarios evoked by Benefiel, Allen, and several of the other artists whose works have been previously discussed is a strong current of humor that runs through much of the art in the exhibition, including that of McGrath, Taylor, and Sandlin, as well as works by **Daniel Belardinelli**, **Ron English**, **Victor Faccinto**, **Mary Fleener**, **Tim Fowler**, **Camille Holvoet**, the late **Frank Johnson**, and **Oliver Williams**, among others represented here.

Another kind of counterbalance is offered by the exhibition's works dealing with the plants and plant-derived chemical drugs that have been designated as hallucinogenic or psychedelic (from the Greek *psyche* and *delos*, or mind-manifesting). In contrast to the cautionary tone of much of the other art in the exhibition, these works tend to stress the spectacular visual sensations, profound mystical feelings, and personal psychological insights that these substances are capable of generating when judiciously used under optimum conditions of "set and setting." To be sure, in some circumstances psychedelics can induce highly unpleasant, "bad-trip" experiences, as exemplified by a harrowing account that artist **Norbert Kox** relates in recalling the time he took a large dose of LSD at a gathering of rowdy, drunken bikers--a setting that virtually guaranteed disastrous results, as any veteran tripper might have warned Kox. Other artists who are represented here by works inspired by psychedelics have experienced more positive results when approaching these substances in a spirit of reverence modeled on that of the indigenous cultures in which such plants have been ritually used for centuries. Two of many such traditional groups are represented here--Mexico's Huichol Indians, by an array of richy ornamented beadwork and fiber arts

inspired by visions experienced under the influence of the peyote cactus, and northern Peru's Quechua Indians, by two paintings in which shaman-artist **Pablo Amaringo** has depicted spectacular visions induced by the profoundly hallucinogenic *ayahuasca* brew, made from an Amazonian jungle vine containing DMT intermixed with other related plant compounds.

In the United States, many people still associate psychedelics largely with a bygone cultural era, namely the late 1960s and early '70s, when they became the principal drugs of choice in the widely publicized hippie subculture. But most of this exhibition's non-traditional artworks inspired by these "plants of the gods" reflect the fact that psychedelic exploration of the inner landscape remains an ongoing concern for a number of contemporary artists. Prominent among the latter are **Alex Grey** and his wife, **Allyson Rymland Grey**, who for the last twenty-five years--roughly half their lives--have used psychedelics as tools for personal exploration and creative inspiration, resulting in two very different but complementary bodies of work. In paintings such as his psychedelic-revisionist portrait of *Adam and Eve*--in which the original human couple is depicted standing among cannabis plants, haloed by green snakes biting their own tails, and clutching handfuls of hallucinogenic mushrooms while a huge, seven-headed kundalini serpent entwined in the branches of the Tree of Knowledge watches them munch on ripe apples--Alex employs his skills as a meticulous representational painter and medical illustrator to vividly envision the beginnings of human interaction with plant hallucinogens. Allyson, by contrast, takes a fundamentally abstract approach to conveying the nature of psychedelic insight. Her painstakingly constructed, kaleidoscopic compositions are essentially mandalas whose central elements are

chaos, order, and a “secret language” that is intentionally uninterpretable and therefore incapable of causing the kinds of social and cultural divisions that comparisons between different faiths’ sacred writings have often brought about. Each of her works is composed of many tiny painted squares in a gradation of sizes and colors, and all of the resultant grids are based on a ten-by-ten-inch model, with each grid running through the spectrum from corner to corner. What she terms “chaos grids” explode and overlap in a "planned randomness" in which all of the grids deconstruct or "entropize" in ever various ways. Order in this system results from the joining together of the spectral squares in a seamless fabric of pulsing color.

“High on Life” is structured as a journey, guiding viewers through a series of realms associated with several fairly broad classes of the more widely consumed drugs and related mind states. The journey concludes with a small group of works that in various ways allude to the human potential for attaining “high” states of consciousness without the involvement of drugs other than those produced in our own brains. The ultimate such state is the enlightenment experience that’s central to, if differently described by, virtually all religions. Among the works in this culminating section are the late **Brion Gysin**’s legendary *Dreamachine*, which Gysin envisioned forty years ago as a “drugless turn-on;” **Phoenix & Arabeth**’s precisely rendered visionary paintings rooted in the traditions of Ayurvedic mythology and Tantric yoga; and **William Fields**’ distinctively idiosyncratic, richly hued color-pencil renderings of the visionary worlds and spirit beings he has learned to access through many years of study and meditation in those same traditions, as well as in other spiritual disciplines and occult sciences.

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In the preceding paragraphs I've enjoyed the opportunity of briefly discussing works by some of the artists represented in "High on Life," and I regret that space and time limitations prevent discussion of the other remarkable, provocative pieces that many others have contributed to this exhibition. Although far from comprehensive in representing the broad range of human experience with drugs and "high" consciousness, the selection assembled here at least evocatively hints at the breadth of that experience, and the individual works carry a host of valuable, related insights.

These works remind us that the initial years of a new century and a new millennium offer a fitting occasion to take a fresh, critical look at old assumptions, and to consider ways in which our society might more constructively and compassionately address the issues of drug use and abuse in light of our eternal, unstoppable, biological urge to chemically change our minds.

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