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The Divine Feminine, Unveiled
Will women-centered spirituality take us beyond patriarchy?

Mr. Olympia Does Dream Yoga
An unusual interview with bodybuilding legend Frank Zane

Ken Wilber & Andrew Cohen
On time & eternity, spiritual immortality, and life after fifty
The Heart Was Released From Images
07_FROM AN EARLY AGE, WHEN I discovered a reproduction of a painting by Paul Gauguin on the wall of a family friend’s home and was transported to another realm by the beauty and exoticism of the image, I’ve been roaming the halls of art museums and the pathways of spirituality in search of more visions of radiance. The two pursuits—artistic and spiritual—fed each other for many years, an encounter with a painting fueling my interest in the source of the sublimity I had beheld, and vice versa. Things began to change in the sixties as pop art started filling the walls of art galleries and pop culture was revolutionizing the lives of my rebellious peers. By the time the New Age took hold and the posturing of postmodern art became ubiquitous, a separation between art and any kind of eloquence or deeper meaning appeared complete.

Over the years, there have been few signs that the split between art and spiritual content would end. Only an occasional exhibit such as The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985, curated by Maurice Tuchman; an inspiring book such as Roger Lipsey’s lucid history, An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art; or the work of an occasional artist such as Bill Viola, a video artist...
whose work is fueled by his knowledge of several religious traditions, held the promise of anything different. So when I heard that Adi Da Samraj, one of the more notable (and notorious) spiritual teachers of our time, had been chosen as a collateral artist at this year’s prestigious Venice Biennale, I was eager to make my way to the famed city of canals.

The Venice Biennale has been attracting lovers of art for more than 110 years. In fact, the Biennale is such a fixture in the city’s cultural life that it is housed in permanent quarters on parklike grounds on which a large Italian pavilion and twenty-nine smaller national pavilions were built exclusively to showcase art. Today, the Biennale—an exhibition that lasts for five months every two years—has expanded to other sites, including the nearby naval shipyard, where fleets of the Venetian Republic were once built, and many temporary venues throughout the city. The scope of the festival has also grown. Historically, only artists selected by the country of their origin or invited by a guest curator for a theme show were able to participate. Now artists not affiliated with a country can undergo a jury process and be invited to exhibit. It is in this capacity as a collateral artist that Adi Da Samraj is showing his work in Venice.

My knowledge of the American-born Adi Da was less extensive than my familiarity with the Biennale, which I had attended twice before. It was only after I had viewed his exhibit, entitled Transcendental Realism, that I delved into who he was and what had shaped the course of his life and relationship with art.

Adi Da has written voluminously about his life, about his spiritual awakening, and about the ultimate nature of Reality. He has gone by several names during the course of his lifetime: his given name, Franklin Albert Jones; Bubba Free John; Da Free John; and others. The first thirty years of his life were dedicated, according to him, to two fundamental activities: an investigation of the means by which one can realize truth and the development of the ability to communicate truth via literary and artistic means. These two pursuits took him through the channels of traditional academic study and on an independent quest for spiritual knowledge, under the.
Stretching the entire length of the room, Alberti’s Window is an extended meditation on the changes of light that occur during the passage of a day and during a week. Against the blackened walls of the gallery, it actually becomes the source of light itself, much like the rays of the sun entering a window. The title refers to the great Renaissance architect and theoretician Leone Battista Alberti, who was the first to codify the laws of perspective that transformed how space was depicted two-dimensionally.

This detail shows the elaborate geometry, precision of execution, and bold colors of Alberti’s Window. Based on the observation of the migrating sun outside the artist’s island studio, it does not replicate a moment in time but presents an equivalent of it.
guidance, at times, of several spiritual teachers in the East and West. Today Adi Da is recognized as much for his spiritual brilliance as for his radical and often controversial methods as guru to many devotees around the world.

Like many artists who came of age in the 1950s, Adi Da’s artistic and literary formation was shaped by the giants of Modernism, those writers and artists (mostly European) who defined a movement in culture that sought to break with the realist traditions and bourgeois conventions of the nineteenth century. They embraced all that was new, from motor cars to abstraction, from the unconscious to stream of consciousness. They were progenitors of the avant-garde, valuing experimentation and free expression. Adi Da wrote his master’s thesis at Stanford University on the innovative writings of Gertrude Stein and the circle of artists and intellectuals who frequented her legendary salon in Paris during the 1920s. He references the work of Paul Cézanne, the painter who unmoored geometry from realistic
In The First Room Trilogy, color is a force to be reckoned with. It reads both as a flat surface and as a container of space. The iconic chair is Adi Da’s symbol for the seat of consciousness. The intractable red stripe splits the piece into dark and light, black and white, night and day. For all its seeming simplicity, this “fabrication” demands attention.

Venice is always crowded with tourists, but during the five months every two years that the Biennale is held, it swells even more. As many as 320,000 visitors attend the Biennale, and with all the associated events and exhibits, many free of charge, scattered throughout the city, the numbers of art enthusiasts who are drawn to the city during its tenure is surely larger. Making my way, therefore, through the crowded “streets” in the August heat required considerable finesse and no small amount of patience. Arriving at the Palazzo Bollani, the site of Adi Da’s exhibit, which is not far from Piazza San Marco, Venice’s main square, I entered the cool, darkened foyer with a mixture of relief and anticipation.

What I encountered in the entry was not merely a welcome respite from

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representation, and he inherited the heroic sensibility of those idealistic artists who “aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society,” as stated in a manifesto written in 1938.

The evolution of Adi Da’s artistic output began in the early 1960s when he started working with still photography, both black-and-white and color. He also produced a body of drawings, paintings, and sculptural forms up to the mid-1990s. In 1998, after redirecting his primary creative focus away from verbal communication to visual expression (Adi Da has written over sixty books, including an epic drama, or “prose opera,” entitled The Mummery Book), he entered a period of concentrated work using photography and video to produce more than sixty thousand images. The images themselves, now almost all digitally generated, then become the basis for what he calls “fabrications,” which can be anything from a photographic print to a multimedia projected performance event.
chaotic tourism. It was part of a meticulously crafted stage set, or environment, in which to view the artwork. Adi Da, I learned, gives a lot of consideration to the circumstances in which his work is seen. He says that "any environment in which the art I make and do is exhibited should be a truly (and not merely 'officially') 'sacred enclosure' [or a unique comprehensive environment...]. He wants to "surround people with art, to bring them into a space that is dazzling color, seemingly glowing from within."

The individual pieces are monumental in size and this, too, is intentional. "My images are not merely intellectual images. They are not merely 'mind-sized' or 'head-sized.'... My art is beyond your own scale. You cannot put it in your hand. You cannot fit it into your mind. You have to deal with it."

I chose to deal with it by getting an overall sense of the exhibit: three modest-sized rooms, three or four works in each room, a total of ten "fabrications," one of which was an LCD screen that immediately pulled me in. I spent a bit of time at the screen and was quickly immersed in its mesmerizing images, but I decided to begin at the beginning while making a mental note to allow plenty of time for that installation.

1 All quotes are presented as they appear in Adi Da’s writings.

THE PIECE OPENS ONTO WHAT LOOKS LIKE INFINITY, AS IF ONE WERE GAZING UP INTO THE HEAVENS.

the art-work I make." The walls of the main exhibition rooms, one flight up a narrow staircase, had been sheathed in black, covering all windows and creating a "black box" in which the work was installed. The first impact was of...
Beyond limits

80

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The first room is dominated by the horizontal reach of a piece entitled Alberti’s Window, a radiant profusion of geometric shapes of bright, saturated color batten down by regularly spaced verticals. Their spacing, I later learned, referenced the upright members of the sliding glass door, with sidelights, in Adi Da’s studio on the Fijian island where he lives. There are seven of these “windows” in the mural-like piece, each documenting the changing light over the course of a day and, simultaneously, over the course of a week. Light is a central theme in Adi Da’s work. He explains, “My images are created to be a means for any and every perceiving, feeling, and fully participating viewer to ‘Locate’ Fundamental and Really Perfect Light—the world As Light, all relations As Light, conditional (or naturally perceived) light As Absolute Light.”

The quality of light in a work in the second room caught my eye. Entitled Quanda Contemplating the Fruits of Perfect Knowledge, this kaleidoscopic collage is built on an azure blue field, the color of the sky on a sunny day. Though hung parallel to the plane of the wall, the piece opens onto what looks like infinity, as if one were gazing up into the heavens. Peering up at Michelangelo’s masterpiece in the Sistine Chapel or the trompe l’oeil ceiling frescoes of Baroque painters such as Guido Reni came to mind. Quanda is the main female character in Adi Da’s allegory The Mummery Book—his name for the beloved, the beautiful lover, the “other.” Many of the images are individually recognizable as a pear or a mango, a woman’s face or an arm, yet they are assembled in such a way that they are subsumed by the geometry of the field in which they lie.

Two other works in room two consist of composite images and are from the Spectra suite (spectra as in spectrum of color). Other images, such as a leg or a lute, are recognizable, and the palette
Entitled The Pastimes of Narcissus, this piece is from the Spectra suite. It is composed of many small pieces of images from photographs that the artist has freely assembled into a “complex configuration.” The subject refers to the unenlightened person who is absorbed in self-concern, seeing only the image of him- or herself in the encounter with life. In case there is any doubt who Adi Da is addressing, an oversized hand mirror is attached to the bottom of the piece.

of strong, clear color is the same. The Pastimes of Narcissus deals with a theme that has engaged Adi Da since his days as a young man fresh out of college when he “had located the source of suffering and misadventure in myself and recognized it as the pattern and drama of Narcissus.” Narcissus is the Greek god who was condemned to contemplate his own reflection eternally and signified for Adi Da the state of separation and self-absorption that constitutes “ordinary consciousness.” “I sought an encounter with Reality that would release me from Narcissus,” a pursuit that monopolized Adi Da’s life until the age of thirty when he underwent what he calls “my Divine re-Awakening.”

The other multiple-image piece in room two, The Room Itself Is the Only Witness to the Three Common States, has a chair floating in the wide girth of the white border that surrounds the central image. The chair, in Adi Da’s lexicon, is the seat of consciousness, and the room indicates the space and the condition of nonduality, where subject and object are one. The fourth piece has only a single image—an unadorned straight-backed chair—several of which are placed in simple room-like spaces defined by broad bands of rainbow color, the “fundamental room of human awareness” in Adi Da’s symbolism.

Room three contains the riveting sequence of 899 images projected on the LCD screen, a veritable twenty-first-century mandala. After checking out...
Beyond limits

What Is Enlightenment?

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the companion works in this smallest of the exhibition rooms—works that elaborate the same visual ideas of the geometric shapes that constitute the screen’s unfolding imagery—I gave myself over to the meditative allure of the screen and quickly entered a state of visual bliss.

Leaving Palazzo Bollani—

le palazzo refers to a building, usually urban, but not necessarily a palace as we Anglophones often mistakenly assume—I was surprised to discover nearly two hours had elapsed. In my history of going to art exhibits, I can usually get the gist of a show fairly quickly; twenty minutes for such a small one would usually suffice. Clearly, something different was going on this time.

For sure, I was able to place Adi Da’s work in the context of twentieth-century art history. I could see his indebtedness to Modernism. The tubular appendages of the figures in the two most recent works, for example, are distant relatives of Fernand Léger’s stylized humans. Or the syncopations of Alberti’s Window recalled Stuart Davis’s boldly colored abstractions. His dependence on the structure of geometry and the freedom with color owe much to his Modernist predecessors, and the powerful physical presence of his work furthers the aspirations of the Russian Constructivist and Dutch De Stijl artists for “concrete” art. With the smallest work being more than 7.5 feet by 13 feet and Alberti’s Window exceeding 46 feet in length, the impact of the fabrications belies the fact that they consist of paper printed with pigmented inks mounted on aluminum substructures.

But there was more. Something else was coming through, and as intangible as it was, its power and implications are

ADI DA SEeks TO TRANSMIt THat WhICh Is prior TO All EXPERIenCe, OR THE GROUND OF EXPERIenCE ITSELF.
Adi Da says in his artist’s statement, “My image-art is not (in any instance) merely a ‘something’ in and of itself, or an ‘objective something’ that has, in the conventional sense, ‘subjective’ meaning that only I can understand or know. My images are about how Reality is (in and of and as itself), . . .” Certainly, other modern artists have been interested in art’s capacity to convey the immaterial. Piet Mondrian, one of the first artists to paint a purely abstract painting at the beginning of the twentieth century, wrote about the “mature” artist who “will be open to the universal and will tend more and more to unite with it.” And the great Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi proclaimed that “art is reality itself.” Yet what Adi Da is manifesting in his work goes significantly beyond these earlier realizations.

Adi Da writes a lot about point of view in relationship to the art he makes. “My image-art,” he says, “can be characterized as paradoxical space that undermines ‘point of view.’” He defines point of view as the “essence of ego-life,” that day-to-day awareness of our conditioned lives. He is not, like his Modernist forefathers, trying to go beyond the conventions of three-dimensional perspective by depicting multiple points of view. Rather, he is attempting to reveal experience without point of view altogether. He seeks to transmit that which is prior to all experience, in other words, the ground of experience itself.

That he is even attempting to do this via the manipulation of two-dimensional
Adi Da did a series of photographs, the Quandra Loka suite, of a nude woman in water. The refractions created by shooting with his camera partially or entirely submerged in water resulted in images in which bodily forms and patterns of the water merge into a unified field of abstraction. In this black-and-white print composed of nine individual images, shapes, and patterns, light and shadow continually dissolve and reemerge in a transparent sea.

shapes on a flat surface is impressive. To create a “Self-Portrait of Reality Itself” with only color and shape is an audacious task. Brancusi said that “one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself by approaching the real sense of things.” What Adi Da is doing, though, is not really simple, either visually or metaphysically. His imagery is both highly complex, in terms of its composition and its execution, and startling pure or uncomplicated at the same time. Remarkably, he is attempting to transmit the totality of pure consciousness by participation in reality altogether, to draw the participant into sublimity.”

Sublime and beautiful are welcome qualities in today’s indifferent postmodern landscape. Adi Da rightfully says that beauty is a “human necessity.” He equates it with Reality and Truth itself. In fact, he goes so far as to state, “Mere (or pre-mental, and thought-free) perception is an inherently sacred . . . event of Reality-participation.”

You may not become enlightened by viewing Adi Da’s artwork, but it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say

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means of the specificity of the manifest world—and he’s succeeding.

I read in Adi Da’s autobiography, *The Knee of Listening*, that he found, early on in his quest, his devotion to the images of the “heart’s mind” had been “replaced by a direct Realization of the Heart Itself.” That realization has come full circle, one could say, in the fact that he is now creating imagery himself of great beauty and power to stir the heart. His art—these stunning formidable fabrications—is not for the eyes alone. It operates on other levels and perhaps can even be transformative, as Adi Da intends. “I work to have the images serve the participant’s transformative that you could have an encounter with profundity and meaning. In that place of “deepest aloneness” and silence that his carefully crafted visual environment induces, there is the possibility for a shift in consciousness to occur. As Mondrian once said, “If we cannot free ourselves, we can free our vision.” That’s what started me going to art exhibits in the first place—that vision of another world where the promise of a distant ideal becomes realized.