

Art, Being, and Self-Discovery

Michael Brown



Editor's note:

After we settled on "Focus" for the front cover of this issue, we invited its creator, the artist Michael Brown, to write an article on psychedelics, self-discovery, and art. We were amazed at Michael's profound response, and to learn that "Focus" was actually Michael's first painting.

SOMETIMES, MY WORK SEEMS to beg the question of people: Where does this come from? And the answer may be: from a process of self-discovery and personal inquisitiveness. Aren't there visionary states involved? Don't you get high? I mean, how does anybody think this stuff up? In short: Yes and no. Mostly just breathing and being.

Psychedelics have helped to open me up to the possibilities contained within my own psyche, have helped me to gain some understanding of the presence that is outside of myself, and have given more than just a little push toward understanding that those two things are one in the same. Of course, yoga has helped this too. As has meditation, walks along the beach, dancing, painting, in short: Living Consciously. My work is born from a practice of continual self-discovery and being open to the messages that are being spoken by the universe.

Psychedelics are helpful in uncovering the layers of the self. In my early twenties they helped to blast open the doors. But, so did the music, the dancing and the intense motivations. What I mean to say is what has already been said before: set and setting are as important to the process as the drug itself. Your very own mind helps to provide that set and setting. This is where intentions find importance. A solid spiritual practice based on compassion and wisdom (not dogma) is more than just useful, it is intrinsic to the process. Once that self, that identity, has been uncovered, the actual work of deconditioning and deconstructing can begin. Until we have pulled the wool away from our eyes and truly looked at our minds and hearts as they are and not as we would like them to be can we really begin to make any progress on this path of self discovery.

Focus was the first painting I painted. I'd done nothing but move, party, see people, women, etc, for months and I was a frenzied burning flame that needed to settle, ground out, and, well, get focused. I had grand visions inside myself, I could

feel them reeling about in there, all screaming to be let out, but that process requires stillness and presence of mind. In an exercise in catharsis, I let loose into the canvas, and all the fire and wind poured out until the clear line appeared. The writing on the wall, in the flames, emerged and dashed itself across my vision.

Shortly thereafter I went to New York City for a business trip with a business partner of mine. We stayed in downtown Manhattan at the Sheraton way up above the noisy city streets. After a couple days of work we each took a liberal amount of LSD and went to the MOMA, that vault of Modern Art, to pay homage to the masters of the previous century.

The acid came on strong and pretty soon I was standing in awe before Monet's three panels of clouds and water lilies. At that time it was located in the five story atrium opposite Barnett Newmans' "Broken Obelisk." I went to the third, fourth and fifth floors so I could get a better view of the painting, only to have to head back down to standing 12 inches in front of it again just to examine the texture and details. It opened up before me, blasting open my mind. I saw the true depth of this masterpiece, the vast lifetimes contained within it, the multiple moments of NOW. The sadness and awe, romance, war, faces, memories, French powder rooms and uptight summer garden parties, every face of every person I have ever known. It was a jaw-droppingly inspiring experience because this artist, in a painting with a subject matter so simple, managed to capture the infinite.

But it opened my mind a bit TOO much. I was cracked open, and, by doing so, the demons that had been hiding, lurking in dungeons, locked away for too long, were set loose in the corridors of my mind. I spent the next six hours in our hotel room, dying, being reborn, passing out to fall slam! to the floor, living through multiple realities, coming back,

still in the hotel room, going nuts with the demons of my mind. I always dropped back inside, back to breathing, back to focusing on the path.

Afterwards, while room service didn't have too difficult of a time cleaning up the room, it took me a while to pick up the pieces of my mind. While some might find such an experience frightening enough to never touch psychedelics again, this is where I find psychedelics to be the most use and where they inform my creative process the most. There are many people who decide that, since some demon reared its head, or they saw some ugly part of themselves they would rather forget about, then the 'fun' isn't there, and, therefore, the drug is not a good thing to take. Or, they say, "I had a bad trip once..." or "It was too much once." I bet it was. It takes some time to really lift the veil, and, if we don't go in with the right intentions, it is liable to happen against our will. After all, it is our will holding down the veil to begin with. Many times, people dive into psychedelics because they promise diversion.

WE COULD go all over the place out there in the world, and completely deny that any of it has to do with us. But when it comes to our own minds, there is no denying what lies there. That inability to disassociate from the actual stuff making up our identities is where it gets scary for some people. In reality, this is when the medicine is finally working.

Psychedelics are a tool to help unlock doorways that seem otherwise obscured or even hidden. Once opened it takes a strong will to work with what is uncovered. When we come back here, to this now, we cannot always assume that the work we did while high is complete. We will uncover a demon perhaps that has lurked there since before we were even born. Or we may uncover vast untold treasures of bliss. One way or another, it is up to us to integrate these newfound concepts into our lives.

Here is where my work as an artist is most relevant to my spiritual path. The creative process helps me to explore my self, my visions, my personal experiences and my relationship to the divine. I don't make artwork as a recreation of some hallucination. And I don't take psychedelics merely to have a vision while in an altered state. Rather, psychedelics are tools to help with the uncovering of the layers of the self and their relationships to the rest of the world. Art is a way to both continue exploring those layers and relationships and to seek out new ones.

Still, though, there is a third component that, without it, the other two of art and psychedelics are like a map and a compass without any North or South poles to align themselves to. That third tool is meditation. In meditation, we set intentions, we dig up our dirt, we explore relationships of thoughts and emotions and reactions, we pay attention to ourselves and our relationship to the world at large. Painting and psychedelics are a part of the same path for me, but both are useless as forms of self-discovery without the simple practice of meditation. Meditation is how we learn to relate to ourselves at a very simple level.

If we just take our body, plop it down on a pillow, sit for a while, all sorts of things come up in our minds. Now, if we were to do that for two, three, four days — suddenly we have some food for thought. Suddenly, it won't quiet down. And who can keep a straight face then?

So we learn how to breathe. How to sit. How to walk or stand still. Through yoga we learn how to hold ourselves, how to sit, how to stand. Through meditation we learn how to navigate our minds. Then, once in a while, it's good to rock the boat a little, see what is hiding in there, and remind ourselves why we do what we do.

This process of learning how to be a human being: that is the process of self-discovery. •

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