

Forever Altered: Robert Venosa and the Visionary Art World

By Martina Hoffmann and Robert Venosa (in his own words)
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The late visionary artist Robert Venosa describes an early childhood dream “in which a large, demonic-looking bird tried to enter my body by forcing its way through my eyes. However, a large, brilliantly glowing sword, floating in the air, sliced off the demon’s head just in time, and in doing so saved my sight. When I awoke, there was a dead dragonfly next to my head. I couldn’t have been more than four years old at the time.”

It was at the Lincoln Hall Boy’s School that I started to awaken to my artistic abilities by sketching. The deeper gift, however, would remain dormant for the next fifteen or so years until the mid-Sixties, at which time, thanks to Lysergic Acid, my mind and consciousness were psychotropically—and forever—altered.

The beginning of the “consciousness revolution” proved to be a time of great change and transformation for many, including Robert Venosa. In 1964, living in Manhattan, he became an art director for Columbia Records and directed one of the first music videos ever made for The Temptations, called “Runaway Child, Running Wild.”

Later Venosa founded his own commercial art and advertising agency in the city. Here he designed an abundance of award-winning cover art for jazz label Blue Note Records, as well as for a number of up-and-coming musicians of the time, including Carlos Santana.

Walking away from the extremely comfortable lifestyle offered by the multi-million dollar-a-year agency to pursue a path of existentialist struggle and near-poverty would seem, in the eyes of many, to be reaching towards the heights of lunacy. But such were the demands made by an expanded consciousness in conjunction with the Muse of Painting.

It was during this cross-burning re-birth that the perceptions and values of art took on a dimensional change for me. Having had little or no previous experience in

the finer arts, I quite suddenly became attracted to oil painting, especially as exemplified in the works of the Visionary artists such as Ernst Fuchs, Mati Klarwein, William Blake, and Gustave Moreau.

Upon seeing the work of Mati Klarwein and Ernst Fuchs in the book *Psychedelic Art* in 1967, I knew that this was the world that I also desired to paint. They were, after all, painting the visions that I had been having since my first LSD journeys in the mid-60s. As a result of the mind-expanding influences of the entheogens, I was absolutely attracted to Fantastic Realism for its potential of allowing transcendent, otherworldly visions.



Robert Venosa and
Martina Hoffmann

In late 1969 I had gone to a Tim Leary lecture one evening in NY, and noticed a few very interesting looking guests sitting behind Tim on stage. A few days later, a friend asked if I wanted to go see the work of Mati Klarwein at his 17th Street loft. Having seen Mati’s work in a number of publications—and having been absolutely inspired by it—I jumped at the opportunity. Upon walking into the loft, there was the couple I had seen at Tim Leary’s lecture! It was Mati and his lovely Catherine Milinaire. We immediately became friends, and, as I was still doing my commercial art to survive, we worked on a number of album cover projects together, most notably Santana’s “Abraxas,” for

which I designed the Santana logo, which is considered somewhat of a music icon today.

In April 1972, Venosa put his Dodge van filled with a concise selection of belongings on a boat, and headed back to Europe. In June of the same year he discovered the small Catalan fishing village of Cadaqués, Spain, situated on the Mediterranean coast, renowned for the fact that it was the home of Salvador Dali.

Dali was quite accessible, especially to his fellow artists. Venosa, who, over time, cultivated a close friendship with the maestro, spent many a memorable evening in the Port Lligat casa, enjoying the spectacle that surrounded Dali. Rather “hallucinate” in personality, the maestro made sure that his visitors understood that “Dali does not take drugs, he is the drug!”

I met Dali in 1972 on my first visit to Cadaqués, Spain, where the Maestro lived. Actually, I looked in the phone book and there was his listing! When I called the house, his servant handed him the phone and his first question was, “Are you beautiful?” With measured confidence I answered “yes,” and he invited me over that evening. I subsequently spent much time with him during my 17 years in Cadaqués. My relationship with him was based on our absorbing conversations regarding art, and my introducing him, through books, articles, catalogs to new and unique artists whom I knew Dali would enjoy.”

In 1981 Robert Venosa met the German artist Martina Hoffmann, in the wee hours of Beltane morning in a café on the Mediterranean shore. She had come down to Cadaqués on a visit from Paris. They recognized each other on a deep level instantly and stayed together for the next 30 years until Venosa’s recent graduation to the next level of existence. From 1982 on the couple lived and worked together in Cadaqués, traveling to the U.S. regularly and eventually splitting their time between both places.

In 1992 I first met Terence McKenna at a seminar he was giving in Boulder, CO. He dazzled me with his intellect, as well as his knowledge and explanation of the sacramental world of psychedelic substances. We bonded as friends when he visited my studio and saw that I was painting what he was talking about. It was a friendship that culminated in the collaboration of my book *Illuminatus*, for which Terence wrote the text. Actually that text, which is more like poetry, was the last he wrote before his untimely death in 2000.

It was also during this period that Venosa and Hoffmann were introduced to the Amazonian psychedelic ayahuasca. Throughout the years they regularly explored the far reaches beyond the veil during shamanic journeys in the Amazonian rainforest of South America. With excitement they became familiar with the visual language that is so inherent to "the mother's realm," and found immense inspiration for their art therein. Often during this time, while spending weeks with the dieta and medicina they also taught fellow travelers painting techniques and methods for manifesting their visions on canvas.

The ayahuasca experience is mostly inexplicable, and the only word that does come to mind is "Holy."

Those images, perceived in ayahuasca space, were profoundly inspirational, and provided the initial stimulus for me to attempt my own interpretations of the inexplicable, divinely mysterious, sometimes terrifying, but gloriously beautiful visual world of ayahuasca. I, myself, as an artist, know it would take numerous lifetimes to

be able to paint the visions from just one aya journey. There is just too much, a delicious abundance, of heretofore unknown forms and colors that inundate the inner eye during the journey. I have throughout the years discussed this with Pablo Amaringo, and he agrees that there is not a canvas or palette large enough to capture the smallest iota of the overall ayahuasca visual storm.



"Celestial Tree" by Robert Venosa. Oil on masonite (1976).
Prints available at www.venosa.com.

Venosa's personal transformation, initiated in the 60's, came full circle during a pilgrimage to Dr. Albert Hofmann's home in Switzerland in the mid-90's: "After ringing the doorbell, Albert himself opened the door and Robert, with open arms, gave him a contagious smile shouting "Father!"

The good doctor reciprocated the smile, as well as the hug, and a natural familiarity was established between them right there and then. Hofmann showed great appreciation for the arts and always enjoyed seeing Venosa's and Martina Hoffmann's latest creations during their annual visits that became a tradition until Albert Hofmann's transition in 2008.

In my own experience, I must say that an abundance of inspiration and consciousness expansion has been transmitted to me in the form of the various sacramental entheogens. Psychedelics have probably had the most profound influence on my life since the zygote selected my gender. They have catapulted me from the most banal of deep-sleep consciousness levels up to the authentic Sun King's hall of light, life, and oil paint. There can be little doubt that altered states of consciousness have a profound effect on the creative quality and productive output of the visionary artist.

Visionary art is subversive in its message to the world...in the sense that the common mind cannot entirely escape the subliminal force planted in the creation that will affect, superconsciously, whomever confronts the art. The form, color, imagery, energy and spirit in the work, contain the seeds of an awakening and, unbeknownst to the observer, the first stages of allowing experi-

ence to follow suit. And from experience comes knowledge, followed ultimately by wisdom.

While Robert was still alive, he and I both started dreaming a vision that he named "VIVA" (Venosa Initiative for Visionary Art). Now, after his transition I feel called to keep this dream alive and will work towards creating the future location for a permanent Venosa museum collection and visionary cultural center in order to keep his vision alive in the memory of future generations. •