

Name

Course Number/Section

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Psychic Energy System: A Systematic View of Human Psyche Through Artistic Persona

This visual analysis is based on the painting “Psychic Energy System”, one of the artworks of Alex Grey’s 21 paintings series: The Sacred Mirrors. Initially a 46 by 84 inches acrylic painting on linen (fig. 1), the Psychic Energy System was created in 1981 and later made into hologram and paper print and poster with various sizes¹. Done by a person who is well-versed in spiritual pursuit and medical practice, Psychic Energy System connects the seemingly unrestrained nature of psychedelia to the divine nature of human beings as esoteric Buddhism entails.

Alex Grey is known for his avant-garde creativity in the realm of psychedelia. The subjects of his painting often involve the portrayal of human body in a way that precisely shows human organs, bones, flesh, and nerves as well as their connections to transcendental human experience and divine, infinite spirituality². It could be partly attributed to his experience working as a medical illustrator in the Anatomy Department at Harvard Medical School in his younger years³. Besides, Grey practices

¹ Alex Grey, “Psychic Energy System by Alex Grey,” Alex Grey, 2020.

² Allen Abrams, “Transcending Being the Art of Alex Grey,” Relix Media, October 10, 2006.

³ “Mystic Eye: The Story of Alex Grey,” Alex Grey, 2023.

Buddhism earnestly, which is another reason that the theme of spirituality is often embedded in the fabric of many of his works and carries an Eastern tonality⁴. The Psychic Energy System was no exception to his quintessential artistic persona.

In the painting, viewers are able to see an anatomical , 3D, X-ray-like portrayal of a human body that consists of several chakra system alongside nerves and bones, as illustrated by circles of different colors along the spine, all of which are surrounded by a embryonic germ layer-like white shroud. In the background, viewers can see a magnified, transparent human head-shaped stroke surrounding the human body in the center, with numerous white lines spanning out from the human head, white electricity lines filling up the whole painting. The background is painted with a dark blue and blackish color, which resembles the universe based on what the major themes of the painting entail.

Now, it is essential for us to acquire a basic understanding of the concept of the chakra system and the relevant context because otherwise, the painting may come across as confusing to viewers. Basically, the chakra system is an energy system composed of seven points/centers of energy located along the human spine, each point corresponding to different functions of mind and body, such as the root chakra system, located at lower spine, being responsible for thoughts governing familial relationships and the functioning of orthopedic system⁵. The whole idea of chakra system came

⁴ Steve Rayle and Laura Tennen, "Shades of Grey: An Interview with a Visionary Artist," *Inquiring Mind*, 2002.

⁵ Suzanne McMurray, "Chakra Talk: Exploring Human Energy Systems : Holistic Nursing Practice," *LWW*, March 2005.

about with the development of esoteric Buddhism and Hinduism, which hold that subtle energy, an invisible force, governs every aspect of human life⁶. Humans attract energy of similar frequencies to their internal energy, which in turn affects the well-being of body, mind, and spirit. Through meditation and mindfulness, we are able to cleanse energy within us. This is essentially the whole idea between the theme of chakra system in the Psychic Energy System.

Adopting a descriptive style of narrative, Psychic Energy System mainly reflects the omnipotent role that chakra and energy play in human life and psyche as well as Grey's firm belief in this esoteric Buddhist doctrine. While the anatomical portrayal of human body is major theme, the fact that Grey painted numerous white lines transmitting and spanning outward from the figure's head and white, head-shaped strokes surrounding the figure also demonstrates a another central theme: everything starts with our mind. Mind can be seen as a portal and origin of everything else in the painting. In addition, given that the chakra system functions based on subtle energy, it may be safe to speculate that the irregular, electricity-like curves filling the whole painting symbolize the omnipresence of energy. The dark blue and blackish background presumably represents universe because universe is seen as the ultimate infinite being in Buddhism and the conduit through which the energy flows.

Although Grey has never mentioned a specific segment of the audience he targets,

⁶ Taweesak Malimas et al., "Exploring the Interconnection between Chakras and the Nervous System through the Buddhist Meditation Approach and a Revised Understanding of the Chakras System," *Zenodo (CERN European Organization for Nuclear Research)*, April 12, 2023.

it is rather obvious that his work mainly appeals to people practicing mindfulness and meditation and seeking transcendental experience deeply rooted in Eastern philosophical and religious school of thoughts. Besides, given that Grey is a fond promoter of psychedelic culture, his work has also attracted attention from psychedelic community at large. Grey even went as far as building a psychedelic museum in Wappinger, New York to display his artworks alongside many psychedelic items, such as the glasses of Dr. Hofmann, the inventor of LSD, and ancient mushroom stones⁷. Grey's work has made the album covers of several famous bands, namely the American progressive metal band Tool and punk band Nirvana, which also sparked interest of his artworks among music communities. Therefore, when Grey's work is brought up, some of the words that immediately come to people's mind are psychedelics, meditation, Yoga, Buddhism, Eastern, mindfulness, and probably psychedelic drugs, as he explicitly mentioned in an interview that he uses psychedelics regularly for spiritual and artistic purposes⁸.

Interestingly, it seems as though there are stigmas associated with the whole psychedelics culture because of war on drugs and media portrayal⁹. Grey also seems to be well aware of this stigmatization and commented in an interview that people may say that his art establishment in New York is a drug cult, but it is important to

⁷ Noah Eckstein, "A Sanctuary for Psychedelic Art Opens in the Hudson Valley," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2023, sec. Arts,

⁸ Abrams, October 10, 2006, p. 3.

⁹ Alan K. Davis et al., "Attitudes and Beliefs about the Therapeutic Use of Psychedelic Drugs among Psychologists in the United States," *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 54, no. 4 (September 1, 2021): 1–10,

attend to the impacts of psychedelics on “human consciousness over millennia”¹⁰. The main function that the Psychic Energy System serves is possibly decoration. As mentioned before, the painting has later been adapted to poster and hologram, which also serve the function of decoration. Grey’s artworks go from several hundred dollars to as much as five figures, which, although not comparable to some of the most renowned artworks, speaks for their status in the psychedelia where the price is generally low. It could also be that psychedelia is sort of a marginalized area of art with a small number of audience. Generally, Grey’s artworks serve as decoration as opposed to propaganda or devotion.

In conclusion, Psychic Energy System is a perfect example of how psychedelia connects the visionary consciousness aspect of it to the Eastern philosophy and religion. Exuding a metallic, mysterious, dreamy scent, the painting illustrates the idea that human beings are governed by energy and the chakra system. Grey combined his medical illustrator’s experience with his pursuit of spirituality, creating a mixture of abstraction and realism.

¹⁰ Eckstein, May 23, 2023, p.4.

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Fig . 1. Alex Grey. *Psychic Energy System*. Acrylic on Linen. 46 x 84 in. 1981.