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"If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite." William Blake



AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

A NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS EXPLORE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ART-MAKING AND THE DIVINE

STORY BY FRANKLIN MELENDEZ

IT IS SAID THAT ON HIS DEATHBED, William Blake, the visionary English artist and poet, continued working furiously, sketching a portrait of his wife, Kate, who sat tearfully by his side. "I will remain with you always," he cried out. It was a fitting final gesture for the man who earnestly proclaimed: it is the "Imagination that Liveth for ever."

Throughout his life — leaden with debt and frequently on the verge of poverty — Blake chipped away at his otherworldly engravings and illustrations, largely oblivious to the artistic legacy he was leaving behind. Since his death in 1827, his influence on successive generations of mystically inclined artists, writers, poets, and even rock stars, has left an indelible imprint on popular culture — as well as the notion of discovering divinity through art. Dismissed by his contemporaries as an eccentric, Blake sought, and then championed, a metaphysics that departed from institutional Christianity. He found transcendence, not in some distant ether, but in the here and now, simply through the magic of artistic creation. That's the Blake revolution. Verging on heresy, this new spirituality embraced the terror and delight of nature, unlocking the raw splendor of the material world. His patrimony — which passed down through Walt Whitman, Aldous Huxley, and even The Doors — forged a balance between mind and instinct, artifice and nature, and allowed for fleeting glimpses of the infinite.

Mike Park: Stay High, 2005



**“THIS ISN'T APPROPRIATION BY CHOICE,
BUT BY LIVED EXPERIENCE. IT'S AN ATTEMPT TO
COME TO TERMS WITH THE CLUTTER OF THE UNIVERSE”**

Call it Mystical Art? Not quite. Blake's is less an art of seers than of seekers. Taken up as sword by the Romantics, the Blakean spirit rediscovered the transcendent in art, finding in creativity the connection to that intangible something outside ourselves. Art no longer embellished the world with beauty, it uncovered the hidden glimmers within. Blake inaugurated a lineage whose roots seep down through numerous counter-movements, linking commune to commune. Rejected by the Moderns, the spirit wandered the 20th century, taking various avatars and incarnations. Under the glittering lights of Paris, the Surrealists experimented with automatism and divination, seeking out murmurs of different voices, other worlds of creation. In Vienna, the Actionists fused ritual with pagan rites, attempting to repair the link between Spirit and the quotidian. Trickle through Fluxus and the Happenings, this gave way to psychedelics whose swirling colors opened doors to altered states. And no history is complete without Joseph Beuys, the shaman himself, harnessing the totemic in fat and felt, investing objects with wonder and magic.

There's something to be said about simply considering these horizons — particularly now in our technology-saturated material world. The Blakean project seems once again relevant, echoing through history and prompting us to wonder: Can art move us beyond the electronic buzz?

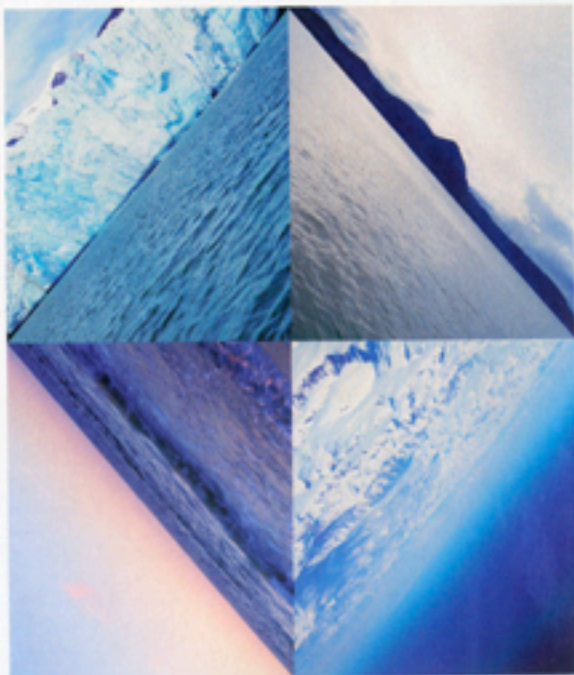
This is precisely the question pursued by the new show at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center, *Cosmic Wonder*, running from July 14 through November 5. The exhibition touts the improbable arrival of a generation reared on Atari and cartoons. Of course, as postmodern skeptics, it's easy to dismiss this street-y psychedelia as Vice-flavored granola mysticism, resulting from an organic diet, too much skateboarding, and a good dose of hallucinogens. But the show's curator, Betty Nguyen, begs to differ: "It's not about escape, but having an intuitive connection to art that's still embedded in intelligence. I mean, we're not living on the beach, worshipping the sun."

Instead of crystal revelations, the show attempts to extend art's ongoing search for the mystical and the divine. But before trumpeting the resurgence of a Romantic inheritance reinvigorated by urban energy, we must pause. In tackling our era's white noise, these artists come upon unexpected limits.

Take Paperrad. Known for their kaleidoscopic appropriations of pop culture, the Pittsburg-based group constructs spiritual narratives, piecemealed from fragments of Nintendo graphics and cartoon effects. But their approach differs significantly from Blake's and other mystically inclined artists. Paperrad hesitates to reject an ever-encroaching industry,

opting instead to hijack its syntax, integrating it into their very process. In doing so they encounter a new set of challenges in this manga-tinted universe — it's difficult to know if we are encountering divine inspiration or plain old marketing.

If nothing else, this uncertainty captures our present plight, caught between radiant consumer logos and the unexamined need for something else. Paperrad's creations humorously stage a crisis that is part of everyday living. Jacob Ciocci, the group's emissary, notes, "This isn't appropriation by choice, but by lived experience. It's an attempt to come to terms with the clutter of the universe." And these aren't just slacker graphics or



Doug Aitken. *New Opposition II*, 2001