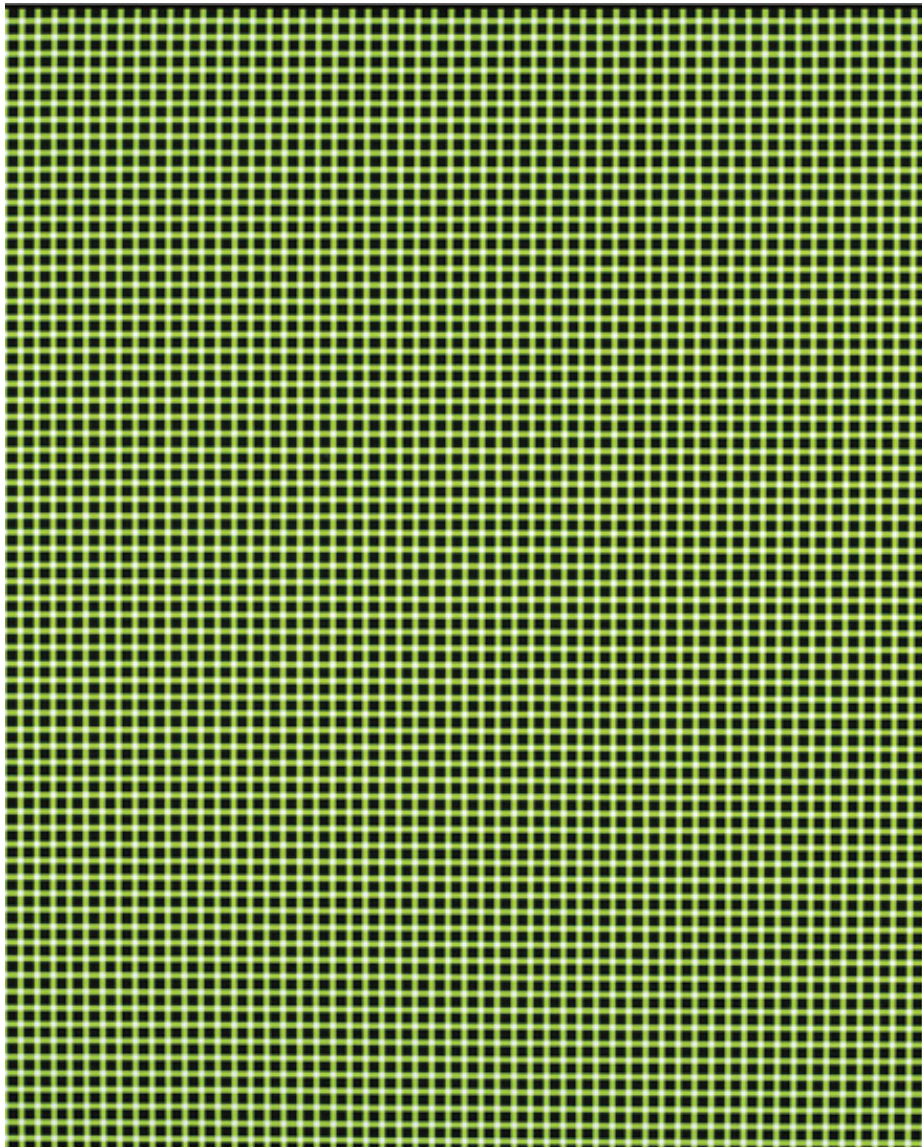


Psychedelic: Optical and Visionary Art since the 1960s  
San Antonio Museum of Art  
Artlies 65, 2010.



Alex Grey, *Journey of the Wounded Healer*, 1985; oil on linen; triptych; overall dimensions, 90 x 224 x 2 inches; collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego; gift of Linda and Stefan Stux; courtesy of San Antonio Museum of Art



Susie Rosmarin, *Chartreuse Gingham Check #4* (detail), 2001; acrylic on canvas; 40 x 40 inches; collection of Georgia and Chris Erck, San Antonio; courtesy San Antonio Museum of Art

The exhibition title *Psychedelic: Optical and Visionary Art since the 1960s* would seem to imply a retrospective of quintessential psychedelic motifs, mind-altered visions and Op Art from a diverse group of artists spanning the whole of the past forty years. Instead curator David Rubin's major exhibition at the San Antonio Museum of Art amounts to a collection of too many works by too few artists from too short a time period, a stunted display by an almost exclusive cast of San Antonio locals. Of the exhibition's forty-nine works, only eleven predate 1995. Among the twenty-four artists only three are women. At least twenty-nine of the works are by San Antonio artists, and the majority of these have been shown time and again in other exhibitions without being labeled as psychedelic. For such a broad scope of potential in curatorial conception, the results are limited and lackluster. The works included are undoubtedly vibrant and colorful, but the omissions and oversights are glaring and puzzling. Significant artistic developments from the 1960s to the 1990s are underrepresented, giving the contemporary works on display a spotty connection to their historical counterparts on view. Based on appearance, the show should have been called "The San Antonio Not-So-Metaphysical Circus: Colorful Art Since 2000."

According to the catalogue and wall text, "psychedelic" refers to a sensibility rooted in 1960s graphic representations of hallucinatory trips, as evidenced by Iron Butterfly album covers, black-light posters and tie-dye. These didactic texts attempt to establish an art-historical connection between the visionary and graphic work formulated in the hippie era with contemporary works of art featuring bright colors or sensory illusions. The exhibition takes what is little more than a design fad popularized forty years ago and attempts to recontextualize it as a cultural mindset influencing two generations of artists. Accordingly, one would think the exhibition would present a totalizing survey of everything deemed psychedelic, from the Timothy Leary years to the present. However, a solid demonstration of the originators or the progression of the genre is lacking.

Instead, the exhibition distills the memes of psychedelia exclusively in the realm of fine art. The notion that a popular phenomenon could be found in diverse works of art spanning a period of decades is an admirable exploration, but to take this proposal seriously by considering the works displayed at SAMA is a stretch. Presenting a Frank Stella painting of multicolored, concentric squares with Richie Budd's multimedia installation leaves a lot to be desired for understanding both pieces. Elsewhere, one must factor in Susie Rosmarin's contemporary grids with a Philip Taaffe mid-eighties riff on Bridget Riley's geometry. Albert Alvarez' hyper-political-outsideresque paintings (with no historical referent presented) and Michael Velliquette's delicately cut paper compositions must be considered in relation to a Fred Tomaselli painting incorporating actual drugs. This concomitance leads to little more than incoherence. To follow Rubin's thesis, one must negate the historical predecessors that influenced these works and accept instead that they issued forth from the fount of Electric Kool-Aid. Minimalism's struggles against Greenbergian Modernism, as well as installation art's relationship to viewer interaction, must be put aside in order to understand the role of these works within the parameters of a subcultural phenomenon. And, without the evidence of popular culture in the form of album covers, posters and T-shirts, one is forced to interpret these contemporary artworks based on preconceived ideas of what "psychedelia" is all about.

Categorizing the contemporary works presented in this exhibition as psychedelic does little more than belittle and debase them. The label effectively strips them of their vitality of being contemporary. The open-ended term "psychedelic" limits their connection to the radical shifts of thought and art of the last forty years. Instead the exhibition relegates these works to a popular

classification that conjures up images of LSD and dusty black-light posters. By strict definition, anything involving an intense sensory perception or response could be considered psychedelic. So why not an exhibition of video games, wind, extreme temperatures, kissing and a forced reading of Heidegger's *Being and Time*?

Mounting an exhibition to legitimize a subcultural aesthetic as having a direct art-historical significance cheapens the artworks presented by ignoring the myriad influences on the artists who made them. Moreover, the word "psychedelic" used to blanket this show is particularly heavy with pejorative connotations and, at the same time, utterly hollow as it has become so malleable as to include almost anything. Conversely, an attempt to defy such an understanding of this term by using it to signal an art-historical shift falls flat here due to a lack of connectivity between the objects presented. Catalogues and lectures cannot make up for the shortcomings of a weak exhibition. I missed the strawberry alarm clock, but I know a bad trip.

*Chad Dawkins is an artist and critic based in San Antonio.*