

OUR FEATURED ARTIST:

hanging out with asha greer

aAsha Greer is perhaps most notable for her role in creating, and helping to sustain, the Lama Foundation in New Mexico, the 31-year old spiritual community which originally published Ram Dass's famed *Be Here Now*, for which she actually did many of the illustrations. She is the mother of four daughters, and currently resides in Batesville, Virginia, where she works several shifts a week as a nurse. She was the founder of the Hospice program in Charlottesville, and is apparently a wonderful person to have around if you happen to be dying. Asha also teaches Japanese Tea Ceremony, maintains a beautiful garden, and serves as a home base and support system for many pilgrims on their way—her house is literally open at all times: there is no lock, and no key. She is a Murshida in the Sufi world, and travels the country teaching in that capacity. And finally, or perhaps primarily, she is a painter. She had her first public show a year or so ago in Charlottesville.

I first met Asha in Jerusalem in 1988. She was at the tail end of a solo trip around the world, triggered by her mother's death and a subsequent 40-day retreat. We walked the streets of the Old City and the desert wadis together, and I came to recognize in her both a kindred spirit, an inspirational, positive force, and what I sensed would be a life-long connection. A year later I showed up at her door to do my own 40-day retreat in the cabin atop the mountain across from her house, (where *Wild Heart Dancing* was largely created) and in February of '91 I turned up again, and essentially never left. I lived in her home for four years, and now have my own place about ten minutes away.

It was an exciting creative time: we'd each seclude ourselves in our studios for long hours, and then meet for tea and conversation, sitting on the funky old couch on her porch which looks out on the pristine silence of the mountains. In the spaciousness of that vista, she would invariably raise the level of any conversation out of the merely individual point of view to an all-inclusive perspective; like her wall-sized canvases, she likes to look at the Big Picture. She is one of those rare beings who seems to be joyfully connected to her life and work and the Great Mystery in a very real, down-to-earth way that is a magnet for the wandering souls, minstrels and poets who often appear in her orbit. We had the following conversation about spirituality and art in her studio early last summer. Asha has a tendency to free-associate. As an editor, I've decided to share her mind-streams with you as they occur, rather than trying to cut and paste her into a more linear discourse. Don't think of this as an interview, think of this as hanging out with Asha in her studio.



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ASHA: First of all, I have to talk about what I think spirituality is—which is not something that focuses on anything that isn't right here. I.e., spirituality is not about getting to heaven, going to hell—heaven and hell are right here—there is always and only this moment. So we stride along kind of creating a reality, but mostly it's a mystery, okay? And it seems to me that what we're all looking for is what is called "calm and peace," and often we don't know what it looks like, but we know when we're in it. So I know I'm in it most of the time now, and I'm very happy because I'm 62 years old and I never thought that it would be like this—so great, and totally not dependent on external circumstances, but probably a little bit dependent on my passion for something. I don't think it matters what you have a passion for, but there has to be engagement. Engagement causes concentration and concentration causes happiness, and if you don't get your dose of happiness everyday something always feels a little wrong, so I think maybe as I'm getting older my doses of happiness come not so much from formal sitting practice—I really need something to do, so making paintings is a good thing for me to do.

So that's where spirituality and art come in for me. I've done tons and tons of what are called spiritual practices and when I get depressed I use them. Mostly the ones that work are based on the breath, so for one, I try to make paintings about, you know, air going in the nose, air going down the spine, air coming up the spine—graphic descriptions of what worked and happened for me. And then I'd done that enough and I got bored with it, and then I did my 40-day retreat and I did a drawing every day—and the drawings that I liked and which were the most fun were either funny or beautiful. In terms of beautiful, I was concentrated and engaged and looking at what I was looking at and doing the eye-hand coordination to get it down on paper, and I had that interior excitement that demands total calm—it's kind of like getting down into your deep deep deep belly so that you can make a good note on the Shakuuchi—it was like that. But it doesn't seem to me that the subject matter particularly matters—and that what one does in art is no different than what one does in the garden, or cooking, or driving to work—I work in a hospital as a nurse, so it's how I work with the patients.

WILD HEART JOURNAL: If subject matter truly didn't matter, you could be doing a picture of the dark forces, equally demanding of concentration, and therefore, a spiritual exercise.

ASHA: Well...one of the things I have learned over my life is that if you invite dark forces in, they come in, and I've never had much of an attraction for dark forces—I don't like them. So basically, the whole astral plane is one that I think you move through into a much more subtle light plane, so I don't get into the dark forces. And every so often I'll make the mistake of going to a movie that has an indifferent idea towards how people act with one another, where there's a kind of indifference about everything—"Who cares? Who cares if we kill somebody? Who cares if we rape somebody? Who cares if we treat somebody bad—it doesn't matter." Although I realize all that comes out of pain, the media doesn't treat it as that—the media treats it as something glamorous and it always brings me down. I always have these awful images in my head afterward. So I don't like dark images. I don't like all that stuff, so I don't invite it in. Like this painting here is white: I'm looking at light, I'm trying to see what's it like to have it all white. Is it too boring? For six months now it has been fascinating to me, because it's white but it's also completely full, but it's not luminous yet. I have to keep working on it until I can make it truly luminous without using direct light. Like you could do windows with light coming through the windows—that's luminous and everybody recognizes it's luminous, but I'm trying to get more abstract luminosity with pure white.

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WHJ: Getting back to something you said before—about what occurs when you’re gardening with concentration, cooking with concentration, or painting with concentration...

ASHA: Engagement. For me, I can’t concentrate unless I’m really engaged. And my attention span is about an hour, so basically, you know, if I’m driven...obsessive is the best, because then you’re just totally driven and having a great time doing something. It’s like eating a fabulous meal when you’re also hungry—it’s just, “mmmmmm.” So I like it when all the motors are going, but I like it when they’re stopped too, because there’s this interior place where the motors are also going and it has a kind of an internal song. And I guess that’s what this painting is trying to deal with—what is the texture of the internal song, where it’s calm and peaceful, but not boring? Because that’s the edge, the edge that everybody who sits has to deal with, it’s the edge people are dealing with all the time. I’m sitting, I’m watching my breath go in and out, “boring, boring, boring, boring”—but it’s not boring, it’s never boring, there’s always the heartbeat, or the thrill of the massage of the breath as it comes in and it opens up the ribcage, or the hurting leg—you know when you’re sitting the hurting leg is like seven trains going by in Grand Central Station—I mean it isn’t boring. But we have these ideas about it, so basically I’m just trying to explore the place that I feel is really peaceful and calm but not necessarily still, and not stopped—it’s all verb, everything. So, how to catch that in things that don’t grab you and make stories? Like if you look at this painting here, which is all white, and it’s horizontal, it implies land and sea and mountains and sky, but only if you want to see those. It doesn’t really imply anything. Basically, you can read into it anything you want—or you can read what it is, which is white paint on a canvas that is just enough stimulus for the eye to rest on. And there’s depth, because there are lots of layers on it.

WHJ: How does this kind of technique which doesn’t involve careful brushwork or realistic representation, but is more just applying paint with a big, gloppy old brush and then blotting it with paper—how does that get you concentrated? Does it?

ASHA: Yeah it does—it engages the whole body. I guess it’s kind of gross, the engagement of it. Basically I can look at it for maybe ten or fifteen minutes at a time, then I put it on a wall somewhere in the house and forget about it, then I look at it, then I come to another coat. To get concentrated on a more refined level I do small oil paintings, copying little things—there’s a whole range.

WHJ: There’s a quality of mindfulness that one might aspire to in sitting practice, where you’re mindful of the breath, mindful of every mind moment, being aware—and then there’s this quality you’re talking about, when all the motors are going and there’s obsessive engagement and concentration. Is there a relationship between that and mindfulness? Because in the Buddhist world some might say one is to remain mindful at all times, and not, so to speak, “lose yourself” in your work. And then I’ve heard certain artists say, “No, I don’t want to be being mindful, I want to be lost in it.”

ASHA: Well, we’re working with words: there’s “conscious,” there’s “mindful,” there’s “lost in it,” there’s all of them, and in any inbreath and outbreath there are probably a hundred of those variations going on, because mindfulness is a really relative term. Do you know what you’re doing? Do you have a clear intention? Actually mindfulness, as far as I understand it, is being with what’s happening, so if you’re obsessive, you’re with “being obsessive”....I keep going back to the great image I got from a Tibetan Geshe. He gave us this really crummy drawing of an elephant winding up a page. It starts out with this guy walking behind the elephant, pretty soon he’s holding the tail of the elephant, then he’s on the elephant, and then he’s on the head of the elephant, and then he’s on the trunk, and then he’s sitting and the elephant is tamed beside him,



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and that elephant is the mind, or the untamed mind, and mindfulness is the guy sitting. So when I'm talking about obsession, I'm not talking about obsessive unconscious, I'm talking about being totally engaged and having a great time. I think the goal of all meditation and all practices is to be totally engaged as a vassal of whatever you want to call what it is that made us.

WHJ: Vassal or vessel?

ASHA: Vassal—you know, you work for the boss! But vessel also. There's all kinds of words, but when the current is going through you, you know.

WHJ: You were saying the purpose on some level is to be engaged and having a great time. I don't think that anybody would say that that's the purpose of meditation.

ASHA: I think it is. I see fun and a great time as being engagement and concentration.

WHJ: Even if it's focussed on some negative aspect of oneself?

ASHA: What is negative?

WHJ: Many people sitting are being mindful of pain, suffering, tragic memories etc. They wouldn't call it fun. But you're suggesting perhaps it is if you're fully engaged with it?

ASHA: I guess I'm using the term fun rather loosely. I don't mean "la la." I was taught a practice by Bhante Gunaratana: first you think, then you sustain the thought, then you concentrate, and then you add joy. What totally surprised me was how easy it was to turn on joy and rapture, but they are the pre-state to bliss, and bliss is pretty empty. Bliss is more like a ventilation, a space between the molecules. So I'm always trying to think of ways to paint that reflects this. What communicates this? My angel paintings were extremely popular because angels sort of imply for everybody the luminous world. But I don't experience the luminous world as angels. I experience, to tell you the truth, the luminous world as your face, the staircase, the filthy rug, the light coming through the windows, and that enormous growth going on wild and uncontrolled outside as the trees fill up with water and the air empties of it and then refills, the whole cycle—it's all luminous. Either you're here and it's all luminous, or you're dissatisfied and waiting for it to get luminous again. Or, if you haven't dropped as many hormones as I have, then you're lusting. That's a big part of everybody between 12 and 55 I think, and men I guess longer, and some women have never stopped. But I stopped, and basically what I've replaced sex with is painting, which is easier—it's not so complicated! Painting is just a practice, something to do, you have to do something between breakfast and dinner.

WHJ: Okay, but I think most people engage in a spiritual practice because they begin from a sense of confinement or suffering, or an awareness of mental prison, or separation from God, or whatever metaphor you want to use, and they engage in the practice in order to address that contraction.

ASHA: Yeah but I never was separated from God. What was hard for me was finding out that people were separated from God—it seemed so dumb.

WHJ: Well can you hypothetically address this question: if most people engage in a spiritual



not good,
not bad,
not right,
not on a
not here,
not there,
not real,
not not,
real, not,
this, not,
that, not,
God, not,
not, God,
not, void,
not, a,
not... you
know,
nothing!

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practice in order to get somewhere, even it's to find out that there's nowhere to get...

ASHA: Yeah well that's good. When people get to where there is no where to get, then they're welcome in my studio. And, the people who know that there's no place to get also like these paintings. They're the only people who like them. I can tell who my spiritual buddies are by the people who like these really "boring" paintings, or what one friend called my "muzak paintings"—they go with everything. But I just love them. I love this white painting. I love it better now than I did an hour ago. Whatever I did to it while we've been speaking, putting that texture on, although it's very subtle, it has increased its luminosity. And so anything that amps up the spirit...When I did a three-day retreat in a totally dark room, I got to nothing, to blank, to a place of "not good, not bad, not right, not wrong, not here, not there, not real, not not real, not this, not that, not God, not not God, not void, not not..."—you know, nothing! It was so blank, and I understood that practice is about allowing—Allahing, allow Allah.

WHJ: Have you considered just buying canvases and not doing anything to them?

ASHA: Somebody just had a show at the Museum of Modern Art that was all just straight white paintings.

WHJ: Why bother putting the white on it? Why not just put up canvases with nothing on them, to do the real Zen art exhibit?

ASHA: Well, because it's not to be a Zen art exhibit, I'm actually trying to express something.

WHJ: You are trying to express the Zen moment.

ASHA: It's not even the Zen moment—it's more of a handle on it, it's a statement about it, saying it's the Zen moment—it's much more of a direct thing than that. It's just what I want to see. I want to be able to see it, to look at it. Sometimes when I'm in a bad mood, which does occur from time to time, and I come in here and I think, "Oh my God, what a waste of time, why don't I just sit and enjoy what's already given? You know, the lilies of the field. Why don't I be a lily of the field? And I realize it's because I have an enormous amount of energy and I have to do something with it, and, this is a fun kind of thing to do: you know, you paint an ocean and then you're at the sea. Plus, people like them. They go on people's walls and there's something that happens. I think this one is quite beautiful actually—it might be finished. Then, how to frame it, where to put it—it's so white that if you put it on a white wall, the wall looks dirty, or it looks just like another texture on the white wall, so it probably has to go on something like a beige wall. Maybe I'll have to paint a wall.