

BEGIN

Alexander: I was thinking today about the themes in your photography and your multi-media projects. For some reason, the visit of D.D. Home to Troy, New York pops into my head. I don't know if you've ever read much about him. But he was a 19th century medium who spent a brief amount of time just across the Hudson River from Albany, and it's there that he had—according to his memoir—his first encounter with a spirit.

I think this depiction of an encounter feels very familiar to us now in 2022, but I wonder how much of that is because Home was describing this experience in language already shaped by the culture and how much of this feeling of familiarity is that his language has shaped *our* expectations of an event like this.

Has place influence your work? And when I say place, I mean both the geography of this part of the Hudson

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until through the darkness there seemed to be a gleam of light, which I cannot describe, but it was similar to those which I and many others have since seen when the room has been illuminated by spiritual presence. This light increased, and my attention was drawn to the foot of my bed, where stood my friend Edwin. He appeared as in a cloud of brightness illuminating his face with a distinctness more than mortal. His features were unchanged except in brightness, and the only difference I saw was that his hair was long and that it fell in heavy ringlets upon his shoulders. He looked on me with a smile of ineffable sweetness, then slowly raising the right arm, he pointed upwards and making with it three circles in the air, the head began slowly to disappear and then the arm, and finally the whole body melted away. The natural light of the room was then again apparent. I was speechless and could not move, though I retained all my reasoning faculties. As soon as the power of movement was restored, I rang the bell, and the family, thinking I was ill, came to my room, when my first words were, "I have seen Edwin—he died three days ago at this very hour." This was found to be perfectly correct by a letter which came a few days afterwards, announcing that after only a few hours illness, he had died of malignant dysentery.

Excerpted from *Incidents in My Life* by D.D. Home

FOUR PARALLEL (||) THREADS FOLLOW



Three Studies for a Figure Touched by the Spirit of Wonder, 2022 c-prints on Fuji archival paper, 24x36" each (edition of 3)

Alexander: This is an image from your Wonder project. I like this series a lot because we have no location given to us and yet the narrative very easily establishes a sense of place for me, even if it's an unnamed place. Is this an example of you using the accumulation of incidents to create a place?

Milt: I think place is connected to the open-ended aspect of my work. Ambiguity, gray areas, and raising questions that can also be read as more universal, but that's not something on my mind. It just happens that way, and it comes out of the context of who I am, where I grew up, my immediate surroundings, middle America and that sort of thing... I suppose it's also linked to authenticity of the work, as more genuine. I think emotionally, as a Romantic, that it has to come from who you are, or keeping with what you know best. As such, it extends to how I also reference toys in a lot of my pieces. That's conscious, and they are actual toys that I actually had in the 70s. The Wonder Bread came out of that approach. I'm still sort of playing with them but in a more meaningful and subversive way now.

Alexander: Does this expand our conversation about place? Is place also a reflection of who we are? It's location and events but also filtered through our being?

Milt: We do tend to come back to the place where we grew up, but that's more likened to familiarity and memory and maybe not as much to other places that, as you say, we filter through our being. I like that way of saying it. For example, I mentioned Prague before, and I'm convinced something keeps drawing me to that place, in a combination of ways. Early on in my college days being intrigued by Prague because of my love of Kafka, then reading about how it was the largest German occupied city not bombed during WWII, similar to St. Paul's in London, then reading about Jan Hus who came long before Martin Luther and how Czechs, Germans, Jews lived within the same city coexisting peacefully. More recently I began reading a copy of Prague: The Mystical City by Joseph Wechsberg. It's a classic. When I got it, I noticed it was once a library book from Troy, NY—which is my birthplace—but beyond that, it's more about a calling, at certain time.

Alexander: It feels like the categories of imagining/creating and uncovering/discovering are blurring here. Is there a relationship between the Wonder Bread in Wonder: Pictures On a Transient Plane and the Wechsberg book and footpath/carry/bridge at Crescent Bridge; are these the mundane objects that open cosmic windows?

Milt: I think so. It's the objects themselves, or how old they may be, in my view they can be purposeful like early Christian or Byzantine icons. These are some of the most exquisitely hand-crafted masterpieces in the history of western art. If you include Flemish altarpieces and Renaissance masters it's very convincing that they are more than just pretty pictures; to me, there's something sublime about these works that set them apart. Around 2013 I saw such an icon in Goodwill. It was a beautiful, hinged triptych sitting there among all the discarded misfits of consumer past. I was immediately drawn to it, even when I picked it up. It spoke to me more than just aesthetically; it just felt perfect in my hands. The size. The weight. I sensed something speaking to me through this object, then looking closer it reminded me of Flemish altarpieces. There was a similar attention to detail and craft, gold leaf and hand painted, the central image is by Botticelli and the flanking angels (appropriately) by Fra Angelico. Almost immediately I knew I had to have it even though I've never purchased a religious icon in my life. It was the last thing I would have expected to walk out with. Then I found later it was actually a small travel icon made in Florence around 1940 or 50s. You can notice a kind of respectful patina, the devout hands it must have passed through. Discovered by complete serendipity.



Photo Courtesy of Milt Connors

and also the events that have accumulated here. Many of them seem to be events concerned with the metaphysical or with mediumship.

Milt: Absolutely. It's a loaded question in terms of the scientific, but I believe place, geography and the cosmic—as a micro/macro thing—are linked. There are enough real life "incidents" to suggest the possibility of cosmic windows (so to speak), and Albany is an odd city historically. There is a confluence of things here spiritually. It is a significant location where a native American presence can be felt. It's also sort of a junction, just to name the Mohawk and Hudson Rivers. Probably the best comparison is Prague, a proclaimed mystical city. Actually, I've been thinking about and working on a project based on Bernini's Ecstasy of St. Teresa under the title "The Ecstasy of Praha." It's only in the notebook stage, but it's something I plan to realize eventually.

Conversation with Milt Connors

Alexander: I've been totally unaware of the Native American history of this area. But you've raised my curiosity about that history and also again about place. Tell me more about your idea of the cosmic window and how it relates to place.

Milt: Someone once told me they had a paranormal experience crossing the Crescent Bridge near Clifton Park. The experience was one where you have two people in the same car looking at each other at the same time and asking, "Did we just cross that bridge? I don't remember crossing it." Later, I read about that location and found that type of unusual activity historically on and around the bridge. It was a significant Indian carry point, so there's obviously something elusive going on at this very specific, very small geographical place. When my betta fish, Karlos, passed away on March 27, I gently tossed him into the Mohawk River underneath the bridge, but he lingered there in an odd way and for a long moment. Then all of a sudden, he drifted down peacefully, slowly out of sight to a big blue hereafter. I felt it was a sign or a message of comfort directed to me. Before I left took a picture of the marker.

Alexander: I have this feeling of layers forming the ground beneath us. But thinking in terms of layers implies linear time. Do you ever imagine other events unknown to you occurring in this place? Past events? Future events?

Milt: I like how you suggest layers in a cosmic sense and that a larger history itself is a series of progressive layers of time, maybe in relation to the evolution of everything in our universe. Not just human centered but that everything is connected in one eternal evolutionary process. That, I think, is also linked to the idea of reincarnation. I think Einstein, Darwin, or others can point us to a lot of concrete scientific evidence for this view of ourselves and the world we are privileged to be a part of? Also, more recently there are theories of ontological objectivity. I have a special place, a productive studio space. It's quiet, peaceful, comfortable, spacious with tall windows and ceilings, little to no distractions, a place I feel has encouraged contemplation and inspiration, especially the way the morning sun fills the front room. This place has a history being a brownstone in the Ten Broeck triangle in the Arbor Hill neighborhood in Albany. Built in 1873, there is a spiritual essence that is palpable. I can feel a positive ethereal energy and a sense of well-being as soon as I walk in the door. Old buildings can have that and retain a presence of those who have passed through them. The same could be said for places where the cultural/social essence is based on the people who live or work there. I've lived here for almost 17 years. It's a place I look forward to going back to every day. If it wasn't for these things, life might have been more difficult or different, or not where I am in life right now, which I like. I've never experienced this protective sense of well being and felt like it was coming from a physical location or building.



Photo Courtesy of Milt Connors

Alexander: Prague has an interesting relationship to the occult and alchemy which is on the surface an attempt at transmutation (in this context turning less precious metals into gold). Bernini is interesting in this context—thinking about the idea of using art to transform stone into flesh. I know you mentioned this project is only starting; is there anything you'd be willing to say about it or about Bernini's work?

Milt: His is a complicated work. It's the spiritual/mystical experience of Teresa of Avila. Bernini based the piece on her own description, which uses poetic language and metaphor. It's an attempt to capture something complicated, esoteric, and elusive. In Christian art you find a lot of use of metaphor, or the neo-platonic way of making art. For me (dyslexia notwithstanding) metaphor is what I feel comfortable working with. It's about making connections to understand or even provide concrete evidence of something that is elusive and can transcend language or our ability to understand it. We do it with finding new ways to communicate through art. I've found it's usually something happening on a psychological, intuitive, or even neurological plane. When I'm working on a project, I have a lot of layers going on and they are all connected, so the complex ideas in my head that I can't get down or explain as well in words come out in the finished art. What's also complicating things is that the ideas are open ended as well. They can be speculative, or sometimes more experimental. When I was thinking about Prague and how it's affectionately referred to as a she, or Praha, Bernini's sculpture came to mind. And she appears in my current Adelphina project as Pulchra Praha... beautiful Prague, but sadly she is a martyr, neglected, marginalized by the advancement of technology.



Midday (On An Empty Street)

Alexander: This raises a question for me. How do you imagine/understand individual consciousness? Unified? Asynchronous? Divided and competing? Are your layers working together?

Milt: Well, at least AI would definitely have its layers working together for optimal performance. But it's a relevant question for us today. The question is inherently timeless. It's definitely all of the above. With my Adelphina project, there's a sub-theme of human vs. machine consciousness where it's all speculative. I read an article where researchers have successfully created an algorithm that has emulated 1% of the human mind. It took 100 supercomputers, the equivalent of 100,000 current high-speed PCs. We also hear a lot about how our brains are wired differently, unique to who we are, which also relates to your question. So, if you throw that into the equation, it puts things into perspective a little more.

With Adelphina especially, the book is rooted more in fantasy but underlying everything is what the future may look like in 2121. When I first started the research, it just got exhausting. I essentially went down the largest rabbit hole that currently exists. So, I focused more on the premise of a paradoxical transhuman period where humanism and homo sapiens are on the decline, existential crisis has set in, even possible extinction. We are down, but not out. It keeps everything as open-ended meditation on where things can go wrong, very wrong very fast. It's not really anti-technology. It presents a central conflict with an ironic twist, between humans and the technology humans have created. Neuro-simulated AI being a central protagonist, a sort of Frankenstein's monster.

Alexander: We've started off talking about events, individuals, and communities that occupied this place at the juncture of two rivers but in a different time. Your most current project involving Adelphina also has a nonlinear timeline to it. How does time work for you in your projects?

Milt: Time is also ambiguous in the sense that it's not fixed even though it appears to be. I guess it comes out to my interest in transcendentalism and the unseen, esoteric knowledge and truth seeking, the protagonist(s) are usually sibyl-like or clairvoyant. Objects like Wonder Bread, or a 1970s View-Master act as oracles or in general as new ways of seeing ourselves and our larger/infinite world. It partly comes from my continuous interests in the psychology of Surrealism and the subversive aspects of Dada. For example, the Wonder Bread I thought could be similar to how the sibyls of ancient Greece would enter caves and believed the toxic fissures induced visions. Same idea with Wonder Bread, except its monosodium glutamate (in a long list of others) and not the natural fissures that are inducing the visions.

Alexander: So mundane objects are transformed into special tools for reorganizing reality by your protagonists? Am I understanding? What aspects of Dada resonate for you? From this I'm thinking of the readymades.

Milt: I think you just hit a tripartite of significant relational factors to how I select and use objects for my pieces. I love how you say "reorganizing reality" because that's pretty much exactly what I have in mind. The objects make sense of reality, or are a way of reorienting yourself to reality through subverting the original function of real objects that we are familiar with. It's very Dada, or Duchampian. It's nothing new. I guess it's something also linked to deconstructionism, of installing the thing you want to subvert. There's the irony and raising provocative, open-ended questions in order to see things, or aspects of reality in new ways, and from as many other perspectives as you can. So, meaning or reality is never really fixed. Whether it's a social construct overlooked for centuries, or a more obscure, previously unknown truth revealed.

It can be an exciting way of working for an artist especially. I tried to do this with earlier photo-based collage works called Automatism Experiments that were basically Dada/Surrealist inspired. I tried to capture and induce an emotional/psychological state or feeling that was unique, something never felt before using subconscious and chance methods. Then stepping back, looking at the results more rationally, and creating montages of images and juxtapositions. I think I was successful on rare occasions. I can point to a few pieces, especially the ones that incorporate an object. The rest sort of end as being provocative or are defined more by what they are not.



Photo Courtesy of Wikipedia

Design by C.A. Lynn