



KEVIN ARROW STEAL YOUR FACE

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THE MODERN DANCE (Mantra, Mantra) / In praise of Kevin Arrow

Mike McGonigal

Kevin Arrow’s work is tied to the threads of the world. Suffused with spiritual yearning and possibilities, and informed by years of spiritual research. Anchored in humor, and in obsession, and in work. Distorted by American popular imagery, fucked up by late capitalism, as we all are. Tied to his communities, to the South Florida art world he has tirelessly worked for and with and among. Obsessed with the discarded, thousands of orphaned 35mm slides before you ever thought this was a thing to even do. Arrow is also a bit of a trickster. He will steal your face. Naturally, his art is as oil and water as you can get, as it wrestles with how to combine the popular and the sacred.

Here’s something that Arrow figured out about South Florida decades ago: When hardly anyone cares what you’re doing, but you do have a few solid compadres, when the culture at large could absolutely not give one single fuck about what you are doing, then you have a path towards a fertile scene, if not general ideas for success. This is how all real cultural scenes develop. Not from grants (though, seriously, nothing against them), because no one thought that his psychedelic projections might be part of an art practice evolved over decades when he was doing them.

There were not many art collectives on Miami Beach in the 1980s when he helped start CultivEight. No one in the art scene even noticed when he mixed arcane technology—nearly dead machines that made magical light—with random and psychedelic imagery in the 1990s, in clubs and at the planetarium, of all places. That work was made with no hope for coverage in local or national press. The hundreds of hours doing weird things for almost no one. Nobody with money cared.

Arrow has worked his ass off in the beating actual heart of the art world, doing both the lofty stuff and the menial things, organizing shows, and dreaming them up. And working on new ways to get the community involved or teach kids about new ways of seeing. I am so grateful to know Kevin and remain in awe of both his work and his work ethic. He and Alexander Ross are the only artists who I asked to do the cover art for my first fanzine, *Chemical Imbalance*, which started in South Florida. I can’t imagine the cultural landscape here without him.

Arrow has traveled the world on spiritual quests and I feel like it’s up to him to get into that but it obviously informs his work. One of my favorite stories of his, from an early trip to India, was of seeing two kids playing in the road with two dark puppets. He was struck by the universality of gestures and play, how he could tell exactly what sort of story they were enacting despite the language barrier. It was only when he stepped closer that he realized the kids were actually playing with two dead rats while their mother was building a small fire.

Kevin Arrow’s art has so much concentrated energy; the works are like psychic magnets and have the ability to charge the viewer as well, particularly the mandala-based works. A mandala is simply a geometric configuration of symbols. They are tools, and primarily they are spiritual guidance tools (aids in meditation and even trance induction).

Because of how Arrow weaves in popular iconography, they become ironic and iconic. A mandala generally represents the spiritual journey, starting from outside to the inner core, through layers. Arrow’s mandalas are paeans to overconsumption, sure, but they’re also fun.

The new works are playful and free, and a bit strange. There’s an element of Playskool and construction paper vibes, but also the shapes and swirls of your deco hotel lobbies and Little Haiti color palette. I like how they don’t look right when you first see them. They’re some kind of mashup of alien sightings and string figures and neon-lit Tiki lounges. Less concerned with sacred geometry or vernacular pastiche, they’re some part of a path towards a new start, towards who knows what.

MIKE MCGONIGAL lives in Detroit, Michigan. He has edited and written fanzines since 1984: first *Chemical Imbalance*, then *Yeti*, and now the full color quarterly *Maggot Brain* for Third Man Records + Books. He’s compiled multiple reissues of gospel music including *Fire in My Bones*, does a weekly radio show called “Buked + Scorned,” and is currently finishing up the gospel history book *Walk Around Heaven All Day* for MCD/FSG.

[WORKS ON VIEW]

Untitled (White Flower), September 17, 1994 2:15pm
Oil on wood; 46 x 46 inches

Untitled (White Flower), [Detail study], 2024
Hand cut paper and glue; 8 ½ x 11 inches

Untitled (Tiger & Elk/Clockwise), 1994/2008, Thursday December 28, 2008 6:42pm EST
Oil on wood; 48 x 48 inches

Untitled (Tiger & Elk), Deuteronomy 4:31 [Detail study], February 13, 2009
Oil on wood; 12 ½ x 18 inches

Untitled (Four Weeping Mice), November 27, 1993, Daytime
Oil on wood; 48 x 48 inches

Untitled (Four Weeping Mice/Stop DeSantis), [Detail study], Thursday, September 1, 2022
Hand cut paper and glue; 8 ½ x 11 inches

Untitled (Space Earth 1), 1983
Oil on Masonite with plastic jewel; 20 x 21 inches

Untitled (Space Earth 2), 1983
Oil on Masonite; 20 x 21 inches

Untitled (Space Earth 3), 1983
Oil on Masonite; 21 x 20 inches

Untitled (Milarepa), 2023
Acrylic on wood; 62 x 48 inches

Untitled (Eight), 1982
Oil, and aluminum on Masonite; 22 x 17 inches

[FLAT FILES]

Untitled, 2022–2024
Hand cut paper and glue; Variable sizes

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