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Art

Abuse Your Illusion

At the Kitchen, artist and fake guru Jose Alvarez plays wily games with belief



Don't stare too hard at this:
Psilocybin Initiation, 2007

Jose Alvarez: 'The Visitors'
The Kitchen
512 West 19 Street
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Through December 22

BY DANIEL KUNITZ

Jose Alvarez began his artistic life with a spectacular hoax. In 1988, an audience packed the Sydney Opera House to witness him—at age 19—decked out like a prophet, channeling a 2,000-year-old spirit named Carlos. Instigated by Alvarez's mentor, James Randi, a magician and debunker of paranormal phenomena, the event aimed to expose charismatic charlatans. For Alvarez, however, it became the basis of an ongoing performance-art project exploring, in the words of the 2002 Whitney Biennial catalog, the ways that “belief—artistic, religious, political, and scientific—intersect.” He soon took the show on the road, appearing before large audiences and on television in Asia, South America,

Europe, and the United States. In a sense, Alvarez became the Stephen Colbert of art, laying bare the foibles of psychics, preachers, and faith healers by embodying them.

Alvarez has since given up live performance. His first New York solo exhibition, ably curated by Debra Singer at the Kitchen, brings together videos, psychedelic collage works, and crystal paintings. Called “The Visitors,” the show tries to play both sides of the field: inhabiting belief while at the same time exposing the flimsiness of it.

A Separate Reality (2007), a video, serves as an introduction to both aspects of the Carlos phenomenon: the performer playing a psychic guru and the artist commenting on the performance. As the psychic guru, for instance, he sits on

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the Great Wall of China, robed in white, his hair shorn like a monk's, surrounded by dancers; on a TV show, his hair grown out to an Afro, he groans like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, thrusting his arms aloft and proclaiming, "I am Carlos!" He then appears in clips from CNN, *Larry King Live*, the *Today* show, and *60 Minutes* explaining that in reality he's a conceptual artist, that he only plays a guru to make a point. Although *A Separate Reality* merely documents performances for which Alvarez considered television the medium, the video is considerably more engaging than most records of performance art, largely because Alvarez exudes such magnetism in channeling Carlos, and because he brings an obvious intelligence to exposing the self-delusion of belief.

Like the Carlos performances, the best work in "The Visitors" interrogates belief systems by playing into them. The range of pieces also reflects Alvarez's dual allegiances, to skepticism and to art. And yet the two impulses—to expose and to enchant—don't always meld easily in a work. In the 15-minute video *The Guessing Game* (2004), he ingeniously strips a psychic medium of his pretensions to special powers by stringing together clips of the psychic on talk shows. But, funny as the piece is, its thoroughness feels like overkill: It doesn't take too many repetitions of the "channeler" trying every common name until he hits the right one for us to understand that he's not in touch with the spirits of any of his victim's dead relatives. Similarly,

one could argue that in *Déjeuner sur le Dish* (2007) Alvarez overindulges his arty side. At a trancelike pace, the video follows the robed Carlos character walking through the NASA Space Flight Center's lunar lab and over Australia's enormous Parkes Observatory telescope dish, upon which he plays chess with a black-robed, white-bearded Randi. While tasty, I'd say the bewitching imagery of *Déjeuner* overwhelms the tartness that makes *The Guessing Game* so incisive. Achieving a perfectly balanced meal of enchantment and doubt proves a difficult trick.

Some might feel that he comes closest in the paintings on view. A number of exuberantly decorative psychedelic collages deploy porcupine quills, feathers, and mica—objects of power for the Central American shamans described by Carlos Castaneda, a key influence—along with beads and watercolors to form patterned works that resemble a pleasing hybrid of Fred Tomaselli's abstract botanical paintings and trippy '60s poster art. In collage paintings such as *Where They Come From* (2007), with its purple and white watercolor cosmos seen through a halo of porcupine quills surrounded by an array of feathers, Alvarez seems fruitfully caught between his skepticism of religious or New Age mysticism on the one hand and, on the other, being ensorcelled by the magic of art. This ironic awe reaches its two-faced apogee in three large "crystal" paintings, slabs and plates of mica—in bronze or gold or black—layered and built up into wonderfully physical abstractions. When asked—in *A Separate Reality*—what, if anything, he believes in, he says: "I believe in the transformative powers of art." But it's the artist's conviction in these paintings' beauty that, in part, causes them to succeed.

Of course, Alvarez's belief is twofold: He invests it in the power of the artist to transform basic materials into something enchanting, and in the power of art to transform its audience into more thoughtful people.