

Violet

Interview with Artist Lia Chavez

Interview and Photography by Rosie Anne Footitt

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Interdisciplinary artist Lia Chavez is an explorer of the inner cosmos. She has built an accomplished, rigorous body of work founded upon her keen interest in the aesthetic characteristics of deep consciousness and the light therein. Meditating in the caves of the Himalayas, creating art and collaborating with cognitive neuroscientists in the lab are, for her, one and the same. Chavez is passionate about crafting compelling encounters with physical light that usher in deeper forms of enlightenment. Her critically acclaimed performances and interactive installations harness the power of emerging science and technology to ask probing questions about the nature of mystical experience, scientific discovery, and the timeless challenge of balancing mental awareness with embodied existence.

For Lia, Art is Life and Life Is Art. As she tells me, "I spent my 30's developing the understanding that life is art, aligning my life with my creative principles, and closing the gap between art and life. I can respect that not everyone would want this. There is some art which you wouldn't want to embody in your life as it could be too intense to live with."





Rosie

How did your artistic process develop in your performance work, *True Light* (2012) into your current artistic practice of devotion? Can you talk us through it?

Lia

I was meditating in my Manhattan studio in July of 2012 and a little dragonfly visited me. My studio at the time was in the heart of the Financial District so you can imagine how uncanny that would have been for a delicate, ethereal creature like a dragonfly.

The creature rested on my studio wall and I enjoyed his company. It was the first of many times a dragonfly presented itself to me. I have come to see this insect as a harbinger of inspiration.

Shortly after that, I went into a deep meditation and suddenly a commanding voice of inspiration said to me,

"... devote the next 90 days of your life to exploring complete surrender: listen with your whole being. Fast, pray, meditate in darkness and be silent. This will open the door to your artistic process. This journey will show you what you're looking for."

So I began that process and for the next 90 days I fasted. It was here my first performance *True Light* (2012) was fleshed out. The first month was devoted to exploring prayer as embodied art form; the second month was devoted to meditation; and final third devoted to silence. These combined practices led me through the experience of offering my whole being to creative inquiry. That performance was designed to teach me how to inhabit my being in a way so that I become a finely tuned instrument of creative inspiration. The urgency of it was similar to the sort of assertive inspiration you read about in historical accounts, such as that of Rilke when he was told to write *Sonnets of Orpheus*. The kind of inspiration that's given by a voice that is not your own but also resonates with the deepest part of you. I knew I needed to obey it because it was calling me across a new creative threshold.

In *Sonnets*, Rilke discusses the ever-flowing song that springs forth from the earth that is an embodiment of eternal presence -- the "font of the inexhaustible one" he calls it. He describes this fountain as perpetually listening to itself and when we partake of it by filling our pitchers, this presence experiences itself as being interrupted, in a sense. It calls to mind the idea that the



creative presence that catalyzes our artistic adventures is also in the process of understanding itself through its dialogue with us. This would suggest that, at a high level of human artistic activity, there is a kind of divine curiosity that is actually in the process of expanding its knowledge of itself. This notion certainly points beyond wooden ideas of determinism and toward a far more relational and dynamic universe.

Rosie

Can you explain the relationship with this Muse, this eternal light you receive in the artistic meditations and how you call this forth in your art?

Lia

The reason I love being an artist is that I get to experience the wonder of discovery, as opposed to mere expression. It's a privilege to experience something come through me that I did not cobble together from appropriated elements of the material universe. I approach art more like an explorer in this way. To experience the life of something from the more mysterious reaches of our reality being bodied forth in material form and getting to be a part of its birth and lineage is deeply sacred. When I get to create in this mode, I weep like a baby. It's such a gift.

My goal is to allow the prime and mysterious creative presence to inspire and direct me entirely. Every time I get to create an artwork in collaboration with this presence, the art itself becomes a signifier of intimacy we experience together.

Life in its fully realized form so far surpasses our wildest imaginings and I believe that art can serve as a way of recouping our innate capacities for living fully. Life in its tender and severe ways trains the imagination to expand, certainly, but it also, if we are paying attention, teaches us how to remember who we truly are. And that's where wonder and humility become so important. Art, when treated as a mode of divine inspiration and communion, can connect us with the source of Creation and our own magnificence. This is why this ancient model of creativity - the notion of a vessel being filled and emptied - is so attractive to me. There is potential for genius to flow when you do that. I think the beginning of this process involves the mental, physical and spiritual hygiene of contemplative practice, which gets you out of your own way and into a state where you can hold something larger than yourself. But I think it is also quite important to note that the disciplines are not an end in themselves;



rather, they clear the way for a deeper action to transpire.

I desire for everyone to experience life on this level and if art can carry this message into the world and show people how they can encounter the wonder of being, then it has an additive value.

My artworks aren't illustrative or particularly solid, but they function more as refractions of inner light. They act as contemplative devices which invite you to encounter the phenomenon of beauty itself when it enters into the world. Beauty is not static; it's strange, other, dynamic, and ultimately, interior. I want to aid people in locating the immaterial origins of the beautiful.

Rosie

It's kind of like a whisper. Beauty travels through the person and the other person interprets it, in a new way..

Lia

Definitely. Beauty is irreplaceably inventive and fecund that every time it's perceived, it shape-shifts. It's intensively didactic. Beauty, if conceived as an extension of that Divinity which is ever in the creative process of gaining knowledge of itself, is free of the need to imitate. Its underlying structure is an intelligence in a constant state of wonder.

We tend to underestimate the domain that is available to us as humans, because we have forgotten who we are. Alongside this, we underestimate the domain of the divine consciousness. Beauty has a funny way of reminding us of how little we understand.

Rosie

How would you differentiate the methodological approach itself from contemporary art?

Lia

Contemporary art is pervaded by the ideology of commodification and with that, the focus falls upon the production of art objects which mark the separation between methodology and outcome. Within this current framework, even live art and

performance art have come to be measured by the physical artifacts they produce.

The embodied art that I aim to create functions in the mode of exploring the unification of matter and spirit and how the artist, in a priestly sense, can serve as a bridge between these two things. Dissolving that division between matter and spirit, methodology and outcome is an important frontier of my art. The notion that life itself is the greatest artwork of all is as fundamental to me as it is elusive. The art that I create is more closely aligned with what we think of as "being," which you could say is a lost art. It's a current which runs through me in a deep, ancestral way.

Rosie

**Do you see the world anew each time you come out of the meditative art process?
Would you liken it to a sense of rebirth?**

Lia

It's important to remember that when you lose your egotistic specificity, your personhood is not only upheld, it is clarified. When so many masks that are thought to be signifiers or qualifiers of our true selves fall away, you get to bask in the beauty of a deepened sense of your humanity.

I experience radiant visions in my mind's eye when I meditate deeply and these visions have provided me a great deal of inspiration as an artist. One intriguing thing I've noticed is that I cannot inhabit this creatively inspiring meditative space with a transactional mentality. A transactional intentionality would never enable me to enter that sacred place. It's like many things in life. When you start to idolize a gift, then you alienate yourself from the source of that gift. When I go there I go to that meditative place, I go there to bask in that sweet and mysterious presence. Quite naturally, the luminous visions eventually appear, but I've noticed the moment I become enamored with them, they go away. It's quite telling. Ironically, my deepest gaze unfurls with those blazing creative flourishes only when it is centered on something else that is divine in nature.

The state of consciousness that I must hone for the visions to appear is one of tender, blissful devotion. If I start paying too much attention to the lights, they stop because I've entered into an objectifying disposition which creates separateness between myself and my experience. So this process has facilitated

a wonderful conversation with my own mind and I am able to know tell when my consciousness has slipped into the mode of separation.

The dignity of the human being is located in this concentrated form of presence which connects us with the essence of life.

Rosie

Can you talk about your neuroscience research at Goldsmiths College?

Lia

Art should not be subverted to philosophical materialism. Artistic intelligence is a form of dynamic and integrative knowing - the intelligence of sensation. It's a valid mode of exploring the nature of reality, just as science and spirituality are, and is probably more open to novel discoveries than both of them.

I draw many parallels between the neuroscience lab and the caves that mystics and sages have frequented for millennia. These are radically different settings but I'm able to explore the same lineage of ideas in both places. *What is the nature of visual perception? How are darkness and light indelibly linked? How might we excavate the most delicate and liminal aspects of sensory perception, and indeed, thought?* The neuroscience lab is a similar environment to a Himalayan cave in that the conditions of its functioning thrive on sensory deprivation and extreme conceptual restraint. This is fascinating.

Professors Joydeep Bhattacharya and Caroline di Bernardi Luft (both cognitive psychologists in the neuroscience of creativity) and I found co-explorers in one another. They found in me a subject who has a systematic creative methodology that can be studied with EEG technology. I approached them with the concept for generating a scientific language for superconscious visual perception. They agreed to embark on this research with me, and together we have created a discourse validated by rigorous research around the phenomenon of mystical visions.

Rosie

Where do you want this research to go? The change you want to see it make?

Lia

It's critical that we excavate more embodied forms of knowledge that have been subordinated and give them space to be talked about seriously. More integrative forms of knowledge incorporate the body and intuition and interrogate current scientific methodologies, which of course is a very good and healthy thing.

Central to my work is revealing how vital holistic ways of knowing can be. With some help from some adventurous scientists, I hope to recast the human being as an access point of interdimensional knowledge.