

He once toured the world as a fake psychic and performance artist. Now, his art is hanging in the Norton Museum.

THE MYSTIC TRANSFORMATION OF JOSE ALVAREZ



Bruce R. Bennett/The Palm Beach Post

Artist Jose Alvarez poses with one of his pieces, 'Zeno and the Paradox' at Gaviak Gallery.

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Among the four gifted artists featured in the Norton Museum of Art's new "Altered States" exhibit, there is only one who started out on an entirely different career path.

How different? Extremely different.

Jose Alvarez of Fort Lauderdale was a fake psychic. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was a fake channeler, a fake seer.

He traveled all over the world, claiming to be inhabited by a 2,000-year-old spirit named Carlos, in order to expose con artists and refute mystic beliefs.

Today, Alvarez has a thriving career creating artworks with vivid colors and glossy surfaces, including a custom mural that stretches nearly 60 feet across the Norton's lobby.

But 25 years ago, the Venezuelan native was on another path. Fired up after an overly literal reading of '60s pop-religious author Carlos Castenada, the then-18-year-old Alvarez went to one of James Randi's rationalist lectures, prepared to show him the myriad ways he was wrong.

Randi is the famous 82-year-old Fort Lauderdale magician who evolved into a professional skeptic with a specialty in exposing fraudulent metaphysicians.

Performance art aside, formal art was Alvarez's true passion



Jose Alvarez, *We Came from the Stars*, 2011, acrylic, enamel, ink, colored pencil, organdy, feathers, and mixed media on archival Epson UltraChrome print, 72 x 176 inches. Gavlak Gallery.

Alvarez listened and got an education, as Randi convinced him his entire belief system was predicated on an appalling credulousness – shamans were frauds and psychics were con artists.

Gradually, the two men created a character that Randi and Alvarez believed would demonstrate the gullibility of both the public and the media. Alvarez would say he was possessed by a 2,000-year-old spirit called Carlos.

The tapes in Alvarez's studio tell the story. Alvarez would come on stage as Alvarez, and at the moment Carlos took over, his heart would stop, as verified by a nurse.

In conventional shows of this would-be miraculous kind, the nurse would almost certainly be a plant, but that was too obvious to Randi and Alvarez. In Carlos' case, the nurse was authentic, but Alvarez used a trick

from Indian yogis: he had a tennis ball stuck in his armpit. With some pressure, the pulse in his arm would slow, then stop, blocked by the tennis ball, giving the impression that his heart had stopped.

It was the sell that made everything else believable.

After that semi-factual opening, the rest of the act was gibberish. "The earth is a magic crystal," Alvarez would intone, while audiences hung raptly on the incoherent message. At the end of the show, Alvarez would explain the con, and show how he did what he did.

In many respects, the act – Alvarez prefers the term "performance art" – was similar to that of Randi's friends Penn & Teller, who will do a trick, then show how it was done. Of course, Penn & Teller always conclude with a breathtaking trick for which there is no reveal offered, as a final

assertion of their magical bona fides, but that wasn't possible given the purpose behind the creation of Carlos.

"For me," says Alvarez, "the performance got interesting when I would ask the audience just why they had come to see me. I never left anybody thinking I was a channeler."

It's a wonder he wasn't lynched. As Mark Twain said, "If you're going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh or they'll kill you."

China bought his act. So did Australia, where he performed at the Sydney Opera House, and his trick was revealed only later on the Aussie version of 60 Minutes. The character took him to the Teatro Verdi in Venice, to the Whitney Biennale in New York, all over the world. Everywhere, people fell for it.

Alvarez did Carlos for about 15 years. He took no money. The purpose of the performance was the interchange between the audience and the charismatic performer, as well as the reveal about (cont.)



Jose Alvarez, *Vibrating Strands of Energy*, 2011, printed vinyl mural, Norton Museum of Art

how easy it was to provoke mystical belief.

Today, Alvarez's life is very different; his high-ceilinged studio, at Randi's headquarters in Fort Lauderdale, used to be a racquetball court, and it's decorated with pictures of him with other renowned skeptics such as Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins and Penn & Teller.

"I was 18 or 19 when I started, very green," says Alvarez, who's now 42. "It was a great opportunity to create something, and it became a phenomenon, limited only by the fact that I would expose the tricks at the end of the show.

But the answers were not relevant to me anymore."

To Alvarez, his performance art as Carlos was a bit of a put-on, while his long-standing interest in more formal art eventually became his true passion.

"Art is authentic spiritual fulfillment as opposed to Carlos' inauthenticity," he

says. "The performances were taking something away from people and not replacing it with anything. I wanted to give. I think my work gets more generous as I go along. I see it as a vehicle of hope. I work more with this (a gesture toward his heart) and less with this (his head)."

Alvarez's exuberant art is laced with feathers, black and gold mica, all manner of textures and colors. "Sometimes I have specific ideas. The painting with the peacock feather that's at the Norton, I had in my head – a very precise image."

Much of his work involves the careful layering of color and texture. He describes the process as "tedious," so he always has several different projects in several different media to keep from getting bored – a painting here, a video animation there.

All are finding increasing success; he's represented by Gavlak Gallery in Palm Beach, with his prices now up to about \$24,000 a painting.

"He's really brilliant," says Sarah Gavlak. "He's smart intellectually, and his work is beautiful and well done."

Randi is proud of his associate's second career.

"I've watched him grow as an artist and at the same time keep his feet on the ground. There's always a wow factor to Jose's art, another presentation, another direction, from the relatively simple to the more exciting and provocative."

Was Alvarez ever tempted to go into the mystic business seriously?

"That would be horrendous," he says. "To dupe people? No, never."

Has Alvarez ever seen any mystic who struck him as authentic, who has made him question his certainties in the same way Randi did all those years ago?

He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter if it's a yogi or Uri Geller or John Edward. It's always a trick. If it's not a trick, then the laws of physics would be different."