

# FLORIDA

INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE

## PEOPLE 2011

25 INDIVIDUALS  
TAKING FLORIDA  
FORWARD

BRUNELLO  
CUCINELLI  
ONE-ON-ONE WITH  
THE CASHMERE KING

FASHION STRONG  
ELEGANCE WITHOUT FEAR  
+HOT SPRING ACCESSORIES

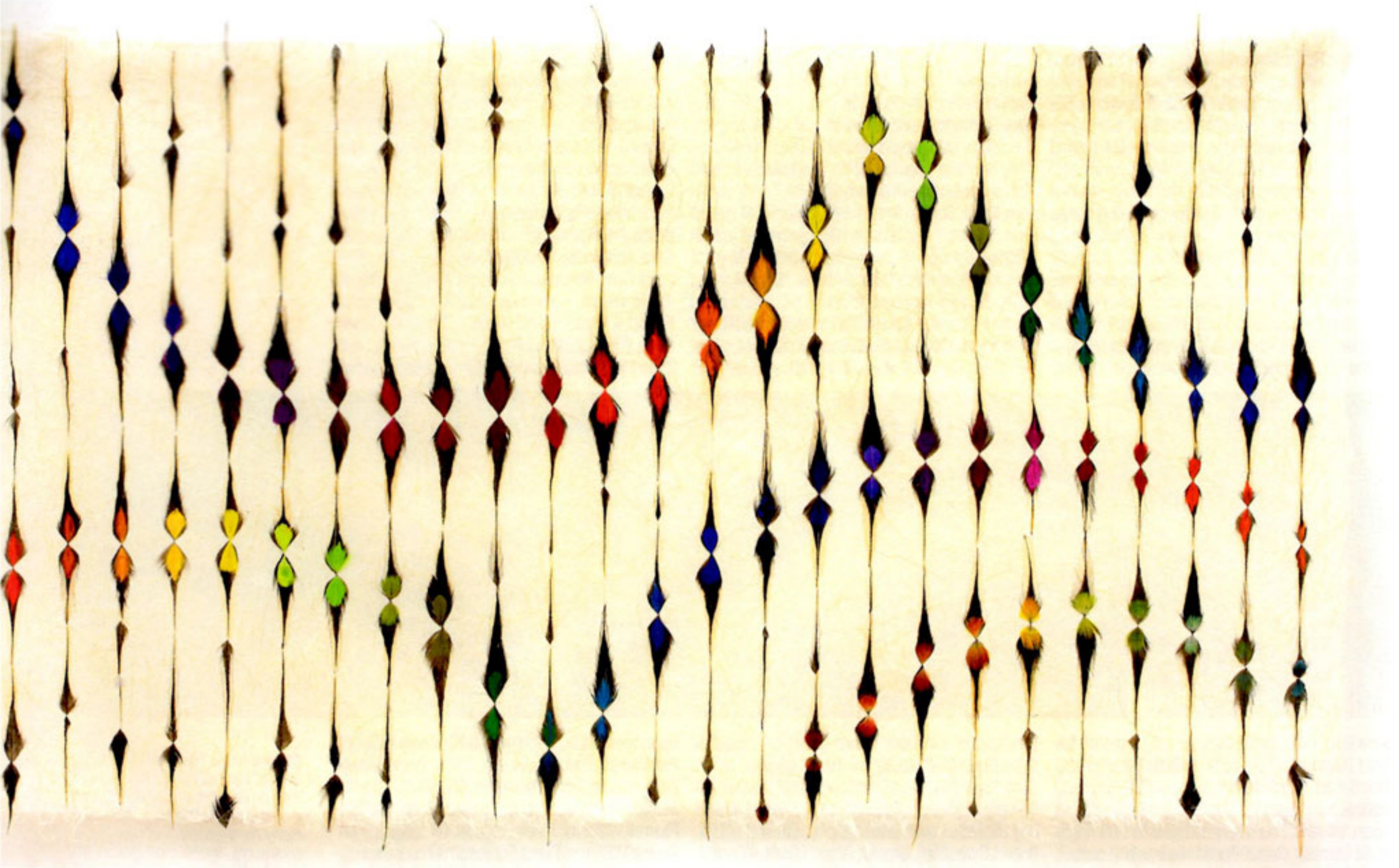
CHARACTER  
FURNITURE  
DESIGN THAT TAKES  
THE SPOTLIGHT

# THE POWER ISSUE

# TRANSCENDENT VISIONS

Artist Jose Alvarez continues exploring the transformative power of art at two new exhibits this month

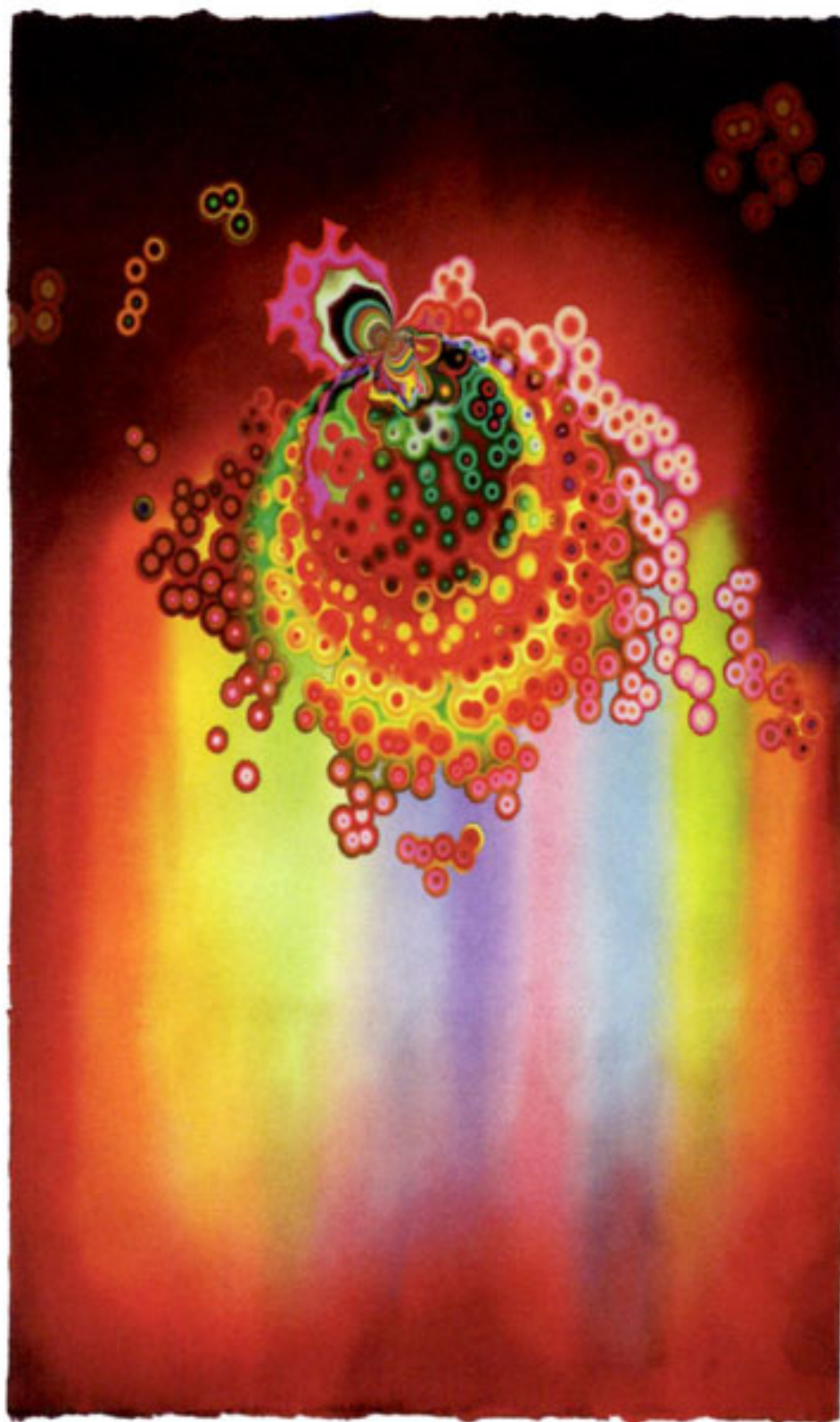
INTERVIEW BY OMAR SOMMEREYNS



Above: *In and Out of Phase # 2*, feathers on handmade paper, 2007-2008.

As elusive as it may be, seeking truth is an integral part of the creative journey for many artists. Jose Alvarez — whose work has long explored notions of mysticism, levels of consciousness, truth versus illusion, scientific discovery, and belief systems — has been pursuing that search in both the realms of the spirit and the scientific. An early part of his career was actually spent debunking the malarkey and exposing the falsehoods of so-called psychic gurus and faith healers, when he embarked on his first performance in 1988 at the Sydney Opera House as a robed prophet convincingly channeling a 2,000-year-old spirit named Carlos. More performances soon followed worldwide, yet his goal was not to fool his viewers, but rather encourage them to question their beliefs and think more critically. These ideas were also examined in later videos, such as 2007's *A Separate Reality*, which features the artist both as Carlos (e.g. surrounded by dancers and sitting on the Great Wall of China) and on TV shows like *60 Minutes* and *Larry King Live*, where he clarified his position.

Alvarez, who has studios in Fort Lauderdale, has furthered his inner exploration and existential quest with dazzling, multihued and multimedia physical works, including marvelous, abstracted "paintings" made from arrangements of mineral crystals; delicate compositions created from feathers placed on handmade paper; explosive, often mesmerizing collages featuring a number of different materials (from pieces of mica and porcupine quills to watercolors, beads, velum, and enamel); and eye-popping animation. He was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and has shown at major fairs such as The Armory Show in New York and Art Basel Miami Beach, with the Gavlak Gallery based in Palm Beach. This month, he will be showcasing, among other pieces, a new 14-foot-long and 6-foot-tall painting/collage — his largest to date — at a group show at the Norton Museum of Art, as well as new works in a solo show at Gavlak. *FIM* caught up with the artist to discuss the nature of belief systems, his works as vehicles of hope, and the possibility of alternate realities.



**FIM: Are you still doing those psychic guru hoaxes?**

**JA:** No, the last public performance was in 2000 in China, and the cycle was closed in 2001 in Australia, where it originally started, with a private performance in the Parkes Observatory. I thought it would be good to close there since it's a powerful place that represents possibilities for mankind. Space exploration has always been a propelling aspect of my work in how it mirrors my inner exploration — trying to find truth, the meaning of existence, consciousness, where we come from and all that. But I stopped the performances because I said everything I had to say. I was communicating on a massive scale — on television and in large theaters — and I felt it was time for me to go back in the studio and explore inwardly.

**FIM: Did it feel strange to have such control and power over your audience?**

**JA:** I don't want to come across as having power over people. That's not what the performances were about. It was exactly the opposite. The performances were done with the intention

of empowering people, of creating the right environment to foster a more thoughtful and critical attitude towards unquestioning belief. In the end, it was done with the intention of exposing the anatomy of that relationship and the potential for personal growth — if they claim their power back.

**FIM: How do the physical artworks relate to the performances?**

**JA:** I was actually using a crystal in my performances, so I then started thinking conceptually about a crystal painting, and I was completely seduced by the material. I was also a bird breeder for years, so I started using bird feathers. And early on, I was impressed by the writings of [Peruvian-born anthropologist/author] Carlos Castaneda. In one of his books, the old Yaqui Indian Don Juan says that in order to obtain knowledge and power — while in alternate states of consciousness and to be protected from certain spirits — one needs feathers, porcupine quills and crystals, so I started working with all those materials together. ▷

Above, from left: *Going Home*, collage, watercolor and gouache on watercolor paper, 2008; *The Secret Place (Always Returning)*, porcupine quills, feathers, mineral crystals, enamel, beads, ink, vellum, and collage in inkjet print, 2008; artist Jose Alvarez in front of one of his works (portrait by Warren Flagler).

**FIM: Why do you think people can be so susceptible? Is it because they want or perhaps need to believe in the supernatural or paranormal?**

**JA:** Yes, I feel it provides very easy, quick answers to questions about the universe or your existence. But once you start really analyzing those beliefs, it will lead to more questions. That's the thing with faith, it asks no questions. Eventually, when going into my artistic investigation, I just felt that I needed to provide a different kind of information in the equation. I think it came from a very dear friend of mine dying, but it changed the way I was feeling at the time, and I wanted to make the works combine as much eloquence as those visionary states, and have my works become vehicles of hope, rather than ironic presentations or performances.

**FIM: How easily do you feel belief systems can be changed?**

**JA:** I think that everyone, presented with compelling enough evidence, can change his or her belief systems. I feel like I'm still in the gap, that tension between the shamanistic and scientific ways of seeing things, because in the end it's all about exploring things as a whole.

**FIM: In your paintings, how do you come up with your motifs? Do they come to you in visions?**

**JA:** It all depends on the model that I'm using, and then it's about manipulating that [model]. It's a very organic process: as I work, the forms present themselves, and I just keep moving forward with them.

**FIM: What do you want to most achieve with your paintings and collages?**

**JA:** I try to create the most generous environment visually on every level, and if in the beauty of that experience, the viewer finds something inspirational, something that contributes to their life and understanding, then the work has become, as I mentioned before, an instrument of hope. It's about finding a common ground with the viewer, not making people jump through hoops, but allowing him or her and me to be at one in the same place — sharing one very specific moment.

**FIM: In your video, *A Separate Reality*, you say you believe in the “transformative powers of art”? What exactly is a transformative experience to you?**

**JA:** Well, it's a healing experience mostly, but it's also about creating order out of chaos, and being able to organize and create meaning out of the things happening around you. Making the art heals me, and I hope the viewer feels that kind of essence too.

**FIM: Do you believe in alternate realities?**

**JA:** I do. All kinds of mystical paths have been shown throughout history. It can be nirvana, or some way of alternating your everyday consciousness. Or it can just be a way of trying to let in more information, and moving away from your conditioning. Once you're more aware of that, then you may be able to investigate it more. Like the Buddhists, everyone wants to find that perfect place...

**FIM: Have you ever found yourself in an alternate reality?**

**JA:** I'll plead the fifth [laughs].

**FIM: Do you consider yourself a mystic at all? Or a spiritual healer of sorts?**

**JA:** Never! I'm first and foremost an artist. I use art as a vehicle

to investigate my concerns and interests. I'm a seeker of truth. Science, space exploration, inner exploration, art, the spiritual and the magical, are all recurring themes in my work. They all answer and activate my philosophical space in different ways. I try to express my findings in the work. The healing qualities of the pieces, for my own purposes, come as a side effect of their making — the belief in the action that creates meaning and hope.

**FIM: How do you see your work evolving?**

**JA:** My work is constantly expanding. It's a total reflection of my journey. Right now I'm focusing more on the paintings, but it's a whole process, and the current work will inform what needs to be explored next. □

*Surfaces Of Constant Simultaneity is on view April 2-26 at Gavlak Gallery, 249B Worth Avenue, Palm Beach, 561/833-0583, gavlakgallery.com. Altered States: Jose Alvarez, Yayoi Kusama, Fred Tomaselli and Leo Villareal is on view April 2-July 17 at the Norton Museum of Art, 1451 S. Olive Avenue, West Palm Beach, 561/832.5196, norton.org.*

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