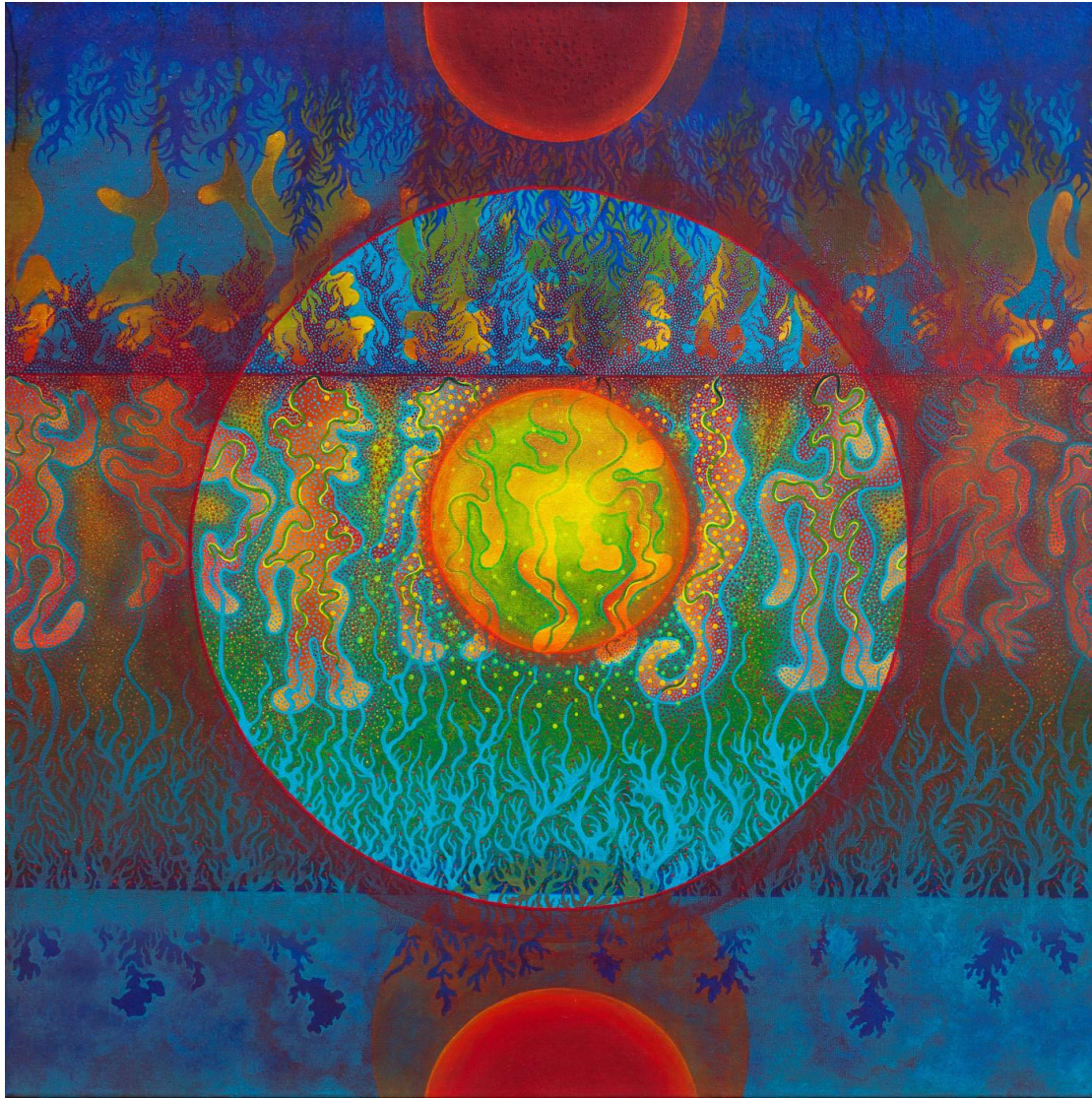


Visionary Art & Shamanism: An Interview with Nana Nauwald

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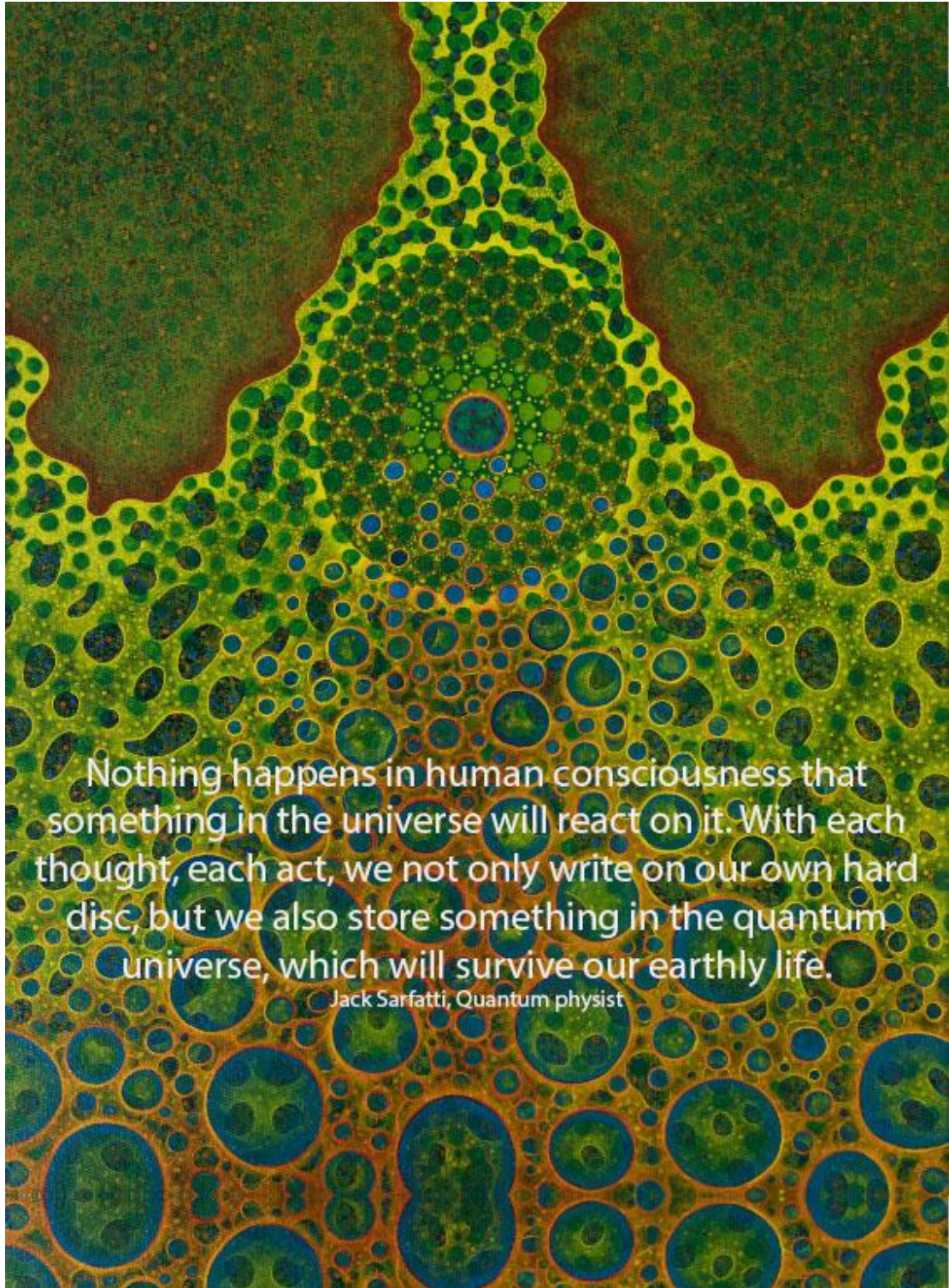
Nana Nauwald is an internationally recognized visual artist and worldwide expert on shamanism. For more than thirty years she has studied different forms of shamanism around the planet, particularly in the Peruvian Amazon and Nepal, as well as in Europe, Siberia and other indigenous ethnic groups. Nauwald has also researched and practiced ritual body postures, and is the author of twelve books about shamanism—including *Flying with Shamans in Fairy Tales and Myths*, *Under the Sign of the Jaguar (Im Zeichen Jes Jaguar)*, and *The Laughter of the Spirits (Das Lachen der Geister)*.



THREE IS ONE

Nauwald is also a masterful painter who specializes in visionary artwork. Before doing her own artwork she served in an apprenticeship restoring old paintings. Her beautiful visionary paintings, which pulse with vibrating shamanic energies, have been shown at galleries around the world, including exhibitions in Germany, Switzerland, Holland, and the United States. Nauwald is a guest professor at the University of Art in Braunschweig, Germany, and she teaches workshops about shamanism and art around the world.

Nauwald lives in the countryside of North-Germany. We interviewed Nana by email on January 4, 2017. Even through our digital communications, Nana's warm, vivacious and bountiful energies came through. We spoke with her about the relationship between shamanism and creativity, ritual body postures and ecstatic trance states, and how altered states of consciousness can influence painting.



GREEN FAY

David: How did you first become interested in the interface between shamanism and

creative expression, and what sort of connection do you see between these two areas of human activity?

Nana: I grew up in world that was signified through art and experiences in nature, and imbedded in a world of fairy tales. My father was an artist, and most of the ceilings of our rooms he painted with deer, birds and plants. On the material side, we had been poor, because our family was refugees from former East Germany, an area that belongs to Russia today. So it was normal for us children to go out with our grandmother into the forest to collect wood, mushrooms, and berries. Fairy tales and myths have been the companions of my childhood, so it was always natural for me to notice that there is an unseen life behind every appearance in nature. These "unseen worlds" expressed themselves easily for me to "see" in sparkling, changing colors and forms.

I first came in contact with the expression "shamanism"—as the interface of art and the spirit of nature, the spirit of life—as a "hippie" when I studied art. For a long time I was irritated by the expression "shamanism," and by anthropologists who were seeking this worldview. This was because at the time, for me, it seemed to be a "normal" way of life, to be in contact with the manifold "spirit-worlds" in nature, and inside of me—because I am nature, too. Step-by-step, through teachers from indigenous tribes, which still live in a shamanic worldview, the colorful and multiple consciousness fields of shamanism opened up for me.

Today, after more than thirty years of exploring and experiencing fields of shamanic consciousness, after finding more and more ways of making this field visible, for me these "two areas for humanity" are "one" inside of me.

Rebecca: Shamanism is a vast subject that you've dedicated your life to studying. Can you briefly summarize what shamanism is, and can you speak a little about how the different shamanic traditions around the world are similar to and different from one another?

Nana: Shamanism worldwide has its roots in the knowledge that all existing has a spirit, and corresponding to its nature, a certain consciousness. All appearances of life—visible or not visible—have a spirit and consciousness, and everything is interconnected. Human beings are standing in a circle with all of the other living creatures. Shamanism isn't a "religion." It is grounded in a holistic worldview, and is based on experience of the manifold realities sensed by our perception. *Experience* is the key to understanding, to insight.

If you've experienced something then you don't have to believe! In Shamanism there is the knowledge about the triadic powers of creation, preservation and destruction, so that new life can always grow. Shamans—female and male—work with their special abilities, and from their connections with the spirit worlds, for the wellness of every person, and so also for the wellbeing of the community. Their work helps to bring into balance these three powers.

The work of traditional shamans is always connected to the life forms of their communities, who are living in the same energy field. To be a shaman (female or male) includes the ability to intentionally enter into altered states of consciousness, free from "ego," with the purpose of helping the wellbeing of each person and the community.

Shamanism isn't a religion. It is the oldest spiritual tradition of humanity; it's a "science of experience." In this sense the shaman is a holistic specialist in an egalitarian society, who uses his knowledge for the welfare of his community. Shamanic rituals performed in a community of people have the potential to act in such a way, so that events you cannot control move into a healing order and more coherence. Dividing and exchanging one's experience and insight is a strengthening principle for the community in shamanic worlds.

The he- or she-shaman knows the oral tradition, and lore of the tribe, and preserves it. He or she is a healer, and uses different ways of ecstatic trance for altered states of

consciousness to make soul journeys. The shaman can talk and work with spiritual entities in the field of consciousness, and in the old traditions mostly, has also been an artist. I myself only met two shamans in Peru, who worked as spiritual healers for their community and also have been woodcarvers. In Siberia the different shamanic-rooted nations still have to work hard, to get back to their shamanic practice, which was not possible to do during the Soviet time. I didn't personally meet a shaman-artist there, and I didn't meet one in Nepal.

For thirty years I have been exploring the inner and outer worlds of living shamanism in indigenous cultures—Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Nepal, Peru, and Siberia. For eighteen years, every year I stayed in the Peruvian Amazon region, especially with the Shipibo people, in a little village where I am the guest in a family of a very old, traditionally working shaman—not for tourists, but for his community. This old man still lives with the reality of spirits. From him I learned that I knew nothing about the spirit-reality of shamans in indigenous worlds.



AMAZON DANCING

The hardest work I had to do was to get rid from my preconceptions, my ideas and

thoughts about what shamanism should be—my judgment, imitation and book-knowledge. His response, when I stood for the first time in his village, and announced to him that I wanted to learn from him about shamanism, and about his spirits, was, "How can you know anything about my spirit-world, when you do not know anything about my daily life?"

So after six years of visiting him he said, "Now we can trust you." Step-by-step, I went into the reality of healthful spirits, and also into the reality of "bad" spirits in this culture. I experienced powerful healings, as well as bad spells, love-magic, and the deadly effect of an old traditional song, an *icaro*, which brings someone to death, if the death-*icaro* is sung in his name. The longer I have been a guest in this world, and experienced their daily life and their spiritual reality, the more my respect for this spirit-reality began to grow.

The more I learned the more I realized that wherever I go, I carry the spirit of my culture with me, and I started to sing the healing-*icaros* in his language. The old shaman said, "You are from another spirit, you should sing the *icaros* in your own words, in your own language. Don't the spirits in your country have songs?" Since then, my work has been to get in contact with the often forgotten roots of our own old shamanic traditions here in Germany and the rest of Europe.

I have transferred the methods that I learned—especially those from shamans in Peru, Nepal and Siberia—into my reality here in Northern Germany. I stood outside one night in the forest, and listened to the sound of the leaves, of the water, the wind and the fire, the life-vibrations of plants and animals—and *the sounds became songs*, first inside of me, and then outside of me.

Step-by-step, I could transform the purification-rituals with fire and water that I learned from a Siberian she-shaman, as well as the offering-rituals and drumming-rhythms that a Nepalese she-shaman had taught me. This was not for myself, but always in community, and new spirit-leaves grew out from our old roots of wisdom—wisdom about the intelligence of the unlimited web of life.

This community of people grows constantly, and in our society today these people work on themselves, on their inner connection to the spirit of life, to the spirit of all appearances in nature. We can call this "shamanism." But what is most important for me is to inspire people, not to imitate indigenous cultures, but to learn from them, and to find our way with the support of their wisdom—our own, authentic shamanic grounded spirit-way, in our home-nature, *our culture*. I try to do this through rituals in nature. So we cannot listen to the sound of "father bear" here, because he doesn't live in our forest—but luckily, for some years, wolves have come back in the forest nearby my village. So we started to listen to their sounds. Maybe one day I can call on the spirit of the wolf, to learn from him, with which life-quality he may support us.

David: How has your study of shamanism affected your worldview, as well as how you express yourself creatively?

Nana: Conscious perception—and the readiness, the openness to be touched by the unexpected, to receive information from the unknown—is "key" to entering the spirit fields of consciousness, especially in shamanism. This "key" is made out of one's own experiences. This is, while the shamanic worldview is my spirit-home, I do not have to believe anything; I can experience it with all my senses. Everything I need to open myself to get in contact with this spirit-field, I already have in myself—in my body, my mind and my soul—because I am a living part of this consciousness field, a part of the first creation.

Conscious perception is a creative process, an interplay of sensation, feeling, reflection and interpretation. Conscious insight can open up our inner gaze, allowing us to have a varied perspective. From this multiplicity emerges 'in-sight' into the nature of that which appears as form and expression—the in-formation, the spirit. My paintings

express my interpretation of this shamanic worldview: as manifold, interwoven worlds of consciousness, as a colorful sound of life-information.

Therefore my paintings are visible “songs,” which are weaving my own life information into this always new and renewing net of consciousness. So, through my painted songs, I immerse myself in the harmony and cacophony of the universe. Based on this insight, visionary art can be an expression of a non-personal quality of life, and can lead into deeper contact with the inner cosmos and the universe. I agree with the words of Paul Cézanne, “Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet.”

David: How would you describe your creative process when you’re painting?

Nana: When I am in the process of painting, “I am.” I am without “thinking.” I am a part of the color, which wants to be seen.

I am the painting, which already came up in my mind. For me, this is the deepest state of being connected to my “essence.” When I paint my brain begins to dance. In this dance I understand my being, without thinking.

Rebecca: During your creative process, do you ever listen to music or podcasts? If so, can you recommend some of your favorites?



THE BLUE ROOM

Nana: Strange, but true for me—there are only two musical pieces that I can listen to while painting. These two are the only sounds which calm down my very vivid brain-garden—Anouar Brahem, *Le Pas du Chat Noir*, and another piece of piano music. I often listen to the same music for hours, to get into a trance-state. I also often listen to audio books while painting. To listen to someone reading totally stops my left-brain. I stop ‘thinking’ and shift out of ‘time’. Listening to this kind of music, or to a reader, opens up the field of creativity for me, the visual part of holistic awareness.

Creativity is mysterious. Even today, science doesn't know exactly what is happening in the brain when a human being is being creative. It cannot be said which areas of the brain work together. Creativity remains a riddle, as researchers have tried for many years to understand more. With their measurements they have shown that the creative brain is fluctuating between daydreams and the sleep state.

The prefrontal cortex, with which men evaluate thoughts and impulses, is mostly deactivated during this process. New information is melted uninhibitedly with old information—and in this way new ideas are generated. Brain researchers describe the creative process as a "flow" experience—a transcendental state of joy or bliss. But the researchers are not able to tell which areas in the brain are working together. Creativity remains a riddle for science—but not for the artist. *Artists just do it.*

Rebecca: Your artwork is so beautiful, and as an artist myself, I'm most curious about how you achieve the unique effects that you do. How would describe the type of artwork that you create, and can you share some of your artistic secrets, like what specific types of paints and tools you use when you work?

Nana: Thank you, Rebecca, for honoring my artwork. Before I studied art, I served in an apprenticeship as a restorer for paintings, especially for paintings in churches. Sometimes I had to work for days to re-paint some centimeters of a painting. So I not only learned how to be patient, I learned profound knowledge about color and technique. I explored the secrets of some visual effects the old masters used—to build up a "color-body."

To create this "color-body" one uses some transparent layers of color above the ground-layer, which in the old paintings mainly have been composed from white stuff in the nature-pigments of red or brown ocher. I paint in this "old" way. For me, the color black is the essence, the quality of the first creation. All sounds, colors, movements, forms, and possibilities of being unfold out of this basic ground.

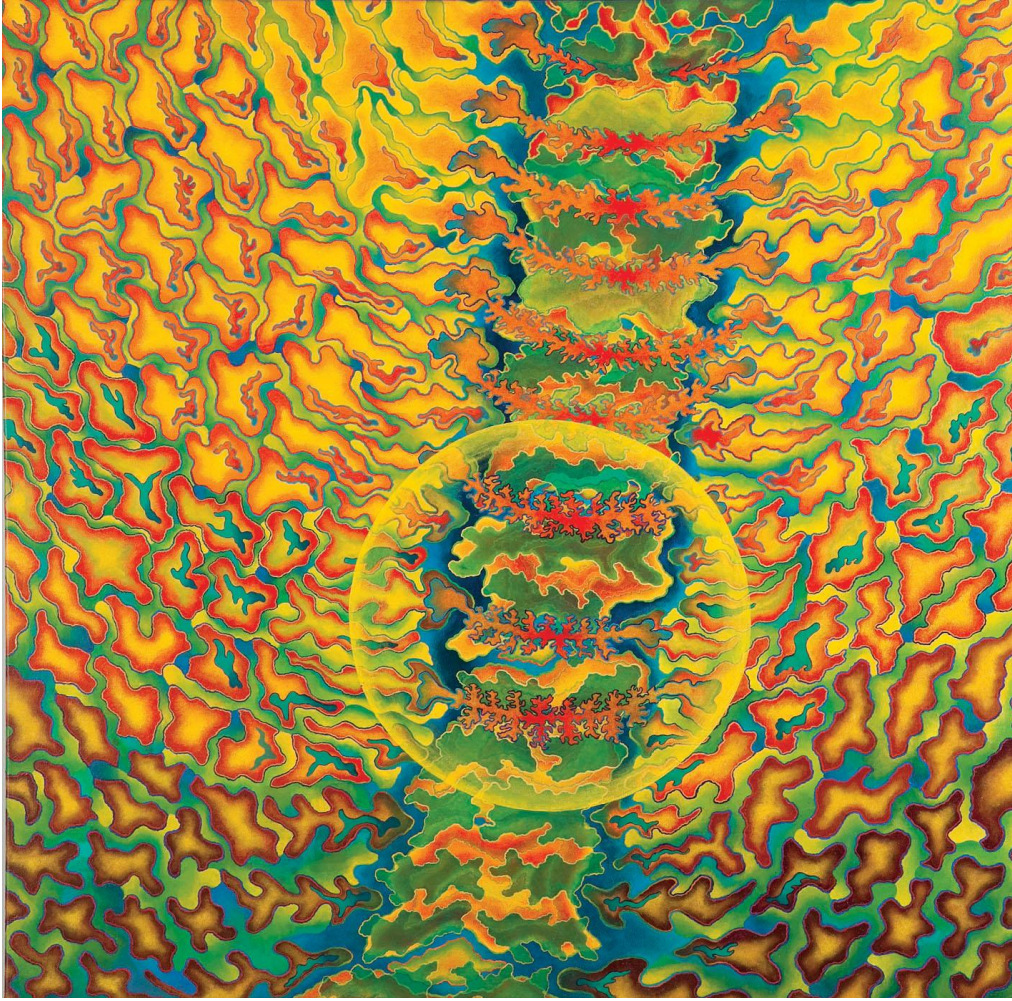
It is from this endless depth of blackness that the colorful light comes rising up. So I let my paintings wake up into their colorful life only on a black canvas. It's an interesting experiment to bring the same color on a white, black or red-grounded canvas, and to notice the difference in how the color appears. I only paint with the primary colors red, yellow and blue—no white.

A side effect is that if you look at the painting with 3-D glasses you can see the painting in three dimensions. This is because in the classical chromatics the color red always stands "before" blue, because of their different wavelengths. I only paint with pigments, which I mix with an acrylic emulsion. A long time ago I got a strong intoxication while using solvents like toluene, when I did the restoration work with the paintings, and this damaged my bronchia. Since then I also do not paint with oil colors or turpentine.

I refuse to paint with colors out of tubes. Colors that are "ready-made" for me are like using a "packet soup," in contrast to a soup cooked out of fresh ingredients, which I myself chose and composed. So I mostly do it like the "old masters." In the process I am building up the "color-body," which in the end has a depth that is developed through different layers of colors—so that the different colors do shine through.

For a long time I tried to find out how to bring a vibration into the painting. I went after this using a technique from the Impressionists, who did work with tiny "points." Now I sometimes do the same; I bring movement into some parts of my paintings by covering the surface with tiny points—often done with a toothpick—so color starts to dance.

David: How do you think that being a woman has influenced the type of artwork that you create, as well as the shamanic work that you do?



INNER COSMOS

Nana: I am a woman, so there is no other way than to bring myself, my female energy into everything I am doing. It is interesting to observe that it is mostly men who search for ways of using psychoactive plants and substances to get into an altered state of consciousness and see visions. Women often choose a softer way of being in contact with the “inner and outer” universe, as in a trance-state.

Once an old, traditional shaman, working for his people in the Amazon, told me, “Before you tourists from other cultures came to drink our sacred plants. Women didn’t drink it, only some she-shamans did. Women do not need this, because they are so closely connected to life, because they can give birth to life. Men need strong door-openers to the spirits. They need plant-medicine to get in contact with themselves.”

It would be interesting to do an exhibition of Visionary Art, with paintings by both men and women, but without putting their names by the paintings. Then let people guess whether each painting was done by a woman or by a man. Maybe there is no difference to see?

David: Have dreams affected your creative work?

Nana: Dreams do not influence my artwork. I am glad if I do not remember a dream when I wake up. My “brain-garden” is always overcrowded with impressions. When I “hear” a sound, or a word, I immediately see a “picture,” a color. There’s enough work to do to clean my inner “brain-garden” again and again, so that there is always space for new impressions and new insights. So I prefer a picture-less night’s sleep!

David: How have your psychedelic experiences influenced your creative work and spiritual perspective?

Nana: Psychedelic experiences influenced my life-work deeply. My experiences in those altered states of consciousness bring me with all my senses into the insight, that there is more than only what I can see with my biological eyes. I can get an insight into creation, which doesn't depend on us humans, and is like the colorful sound of life-information, appearing in dancing colors and shifting forms.

Rebecca: Did you start painting before you ever had any shamanic experiences?

Nana: How do I separate the expression “shamanism” from the expression “nature-experiences?” Ever since childhood I have been close to nature-experiences, when the expression “shamanism” was not in my life, and I'm sure that my “nature-awareness” did influence my first artwork. Later, the life-long diving into the fields of shamanism took part in all my life-system—into my cells, my mind, my soul—and so it's inseparable from my artwork.

Rebecca: Why do you think plant medicines and psychedelics are here on this planet? What do you think they are here to show and teach us?

Nana: This is my deep inner, experienced life-wisdom: *plant medicine and psychedelics are our teachers, our reminders*. They remind us about the essence of our being—that we are a part of creation. We wouldn't be able to experience anything through plant-medicines and psychedelics if there wasn't in ourselves this consciousness field of “knowledge,” to which special medicine-plants can open the door. We wouldn't be able to experience these rooms of alternate realities if we couldn't be a part of these rooms, as molecular relatives.

Like the wise scientist and philosopher Albert Hofmann, father of LSD, said, “The highest level of seeing is reached, when the frontier between subject and object, between observer and observed, between me and the outer world is nullified in consciousness. This means that I'm one with the world and the spiritual basic ground. This is the state of love.”

David: Do you ever feel like you're receiving invisible guidance with your creative work, or that invisible entities or forces are playing a role in your creative process?

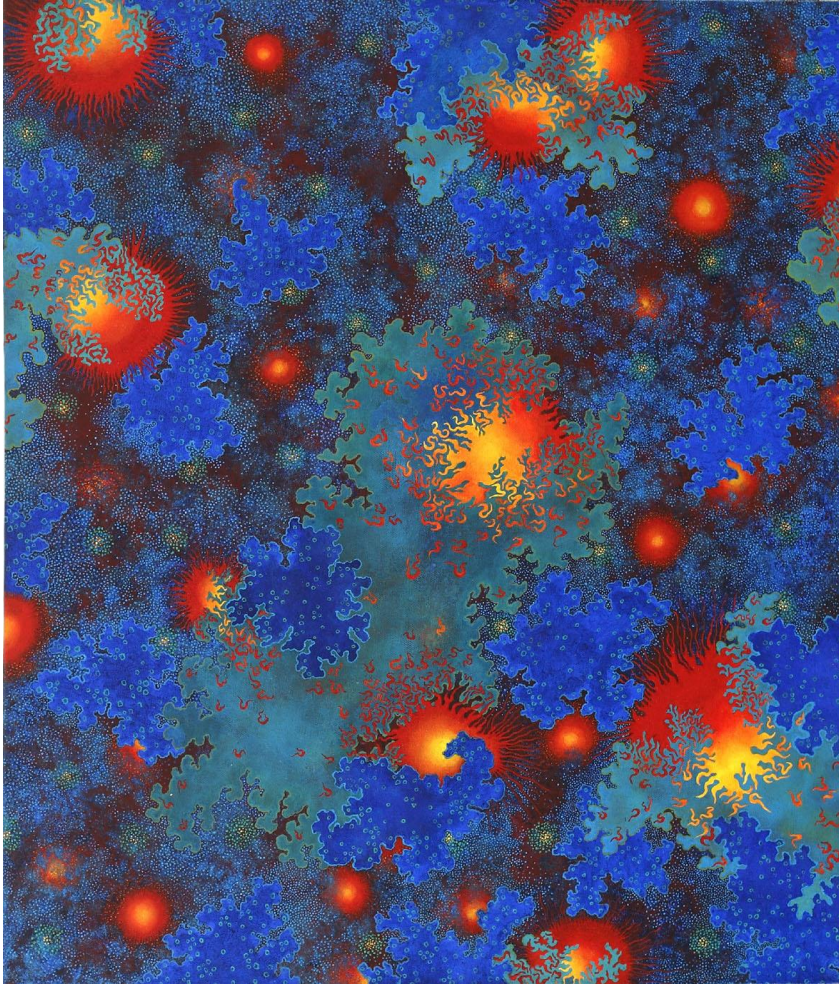
Nana: Because of my way of inner and outer life I am always connected to the “invisible” forces of life. I am part of them and they are part of me. So the conscious connection with the spirit-world, the “unseen realities” does nourish me, does guide me, does challenge me, every day anew.

David: What do you think happens to consciousness after physical death?

Nana: This question has been my life-long companion. This question is the main ‘motor’ which keeps me awake in everything I am doing—painting, writing, teaching seminars, and also in my so-called “daily life.” This question may be the reason I try through all my life-work to lift up the curtains of this secret. And I didn't find an answer. But the older I get, the closer I come to the insight, that maybe I do create my “spirit-home” after death now, through my life.

There are no limitation to creativity in my visions and feelings, in this kind of “heaven” which belongs to me. I know I will not join any “church heaven.” We humans are not able to have abstract perceptions. Even to think that there will be “nothing” or “emptiness” after death is connected with a visual perception, we humans cannot imagine “nothing,” and also “white light” is an image.

I like what 13th century poet and Sufi-Master Rumi said, “This place is a dream. Only a sleeper considers it real. Then death comes like dawn, and you wake up laughing at what you thought was your grief.”



ACTUS

I like what 13th century poet and Sufi-Master Rumi said, "This place is a dream. Only a sleeper considers it real. Then death comes like dawn, and you wake up laughing at what you thought was your grief."

So, why to put up limits and borders when thinking about what is "after death?" Why not try to imagine—as many traditional shamanic societies believe—that there will be a "home" where I go. Going home. One of my paintings has this inner background.

So, I would like to sit on a beach, facing calm, sunny water, surrounded by birds and all my human-friends, smoking a cigar and drinking a Campari. Every evening I would be painting the sky orange-red, and sometimes supporting someone on earth who is longing for an answer to this question. I do have nothing against a "paradise" after death, because I am not able to imagine being dust in this endless universe. Going home. Maybe death is like going home to the spirit of the mother of the first creation, like a child going back into the arms of a grandmother.

Rebecca: What is your perspective on the concept of God, and what role does spirituality play in your creative process?

Nana: I do not have a concept of a god. For me, I am a part, like a child, of the spirit of the mother of the first creation. So I am spirit, too. That is, while the shamanic worldview is my spirit-home, I do not have to believe anything, I can experience it with all my senses. Everything I need to open myself up to get in contact with this spirit-field, I already have in myself, in my body, my mind and my soul.

Rebecca: Can you speak a little bit about your research and practice with ritual body

postures and ecstatic trance?

Nana: I first met the anthropologist Dr. Felicitas D. Goodman in 1991. Deeply impressed by her and the method "Ritual Body Postures and Ecstatic Trance" I took part in Felicitas' seminars in New Mexico in 1992. Since then, I worked with Felicitas until her death in 2005. She was my teacher, she was a courageous bridge between the worlds of science and shamanic-worlds, and she was my friend.



Nana Nauwald and Dr. Felicitas Goodman, 1997

By doing research in the field of altered states of consciousness at the University of Ohio in Columbus—during the 1960s, while in the U.S.—the movement of the free use of marijuana and other psychoactive substances grew, and Felicitas turned her attention to “unusual” body postures in different cultures, related to ecstatic trance states. Some of these were found in prehistoric cave paintings and with indigenous effigies. The oldest of such postures discovered to date is believed to be approximately 32,000 years old.

Also, looking into the importance of rhythmic stimulation in the rituals of some indigenous shamanic cultures she found out that a fast rhythmic stimulation (210-240 bpm) of the human body, combined with ritual body postures, can produce a profound change in consciousness. This “ecstatic experience” can lead not only to changes in somatic perceptions, but also to visions, and this can bring one into a “clear view.” The ecstatic trance state is part of our genetic endowment. Rather than constituting or promoting a particular belief system, or a dogma, the body postures wholly incorporate the shamanic worldview.

After twenty-five years of practicing and teaching this method, I can say that this trance-state not only activates one’s own healing energies, but it can help us to access and energize our own creativity. Sometimes, after a trance-experience through ritual body posture, the participants paint these experiences—without talking—onto a black canvas. All of these often very bright, vivid images in the trance state also appear out of the “black,” the life-ground that contains all colors.

Rebecca: Do you have any thoughts on the importance of ecological awareness that you

would like to share, and what is the main message you are trying to communicate with your work?

Nana: For me, spiritual traditions like shamanism, and also every kind of artwork, is always connected with a responsibility for our community. Although when the artist is at work, she/he is a “lone wolf,” her/his work really only comes alive when its been “seen,” when it touches people. And this “touching” can change something in people. So I am also a “messenger” of a special “message” I want to bring into the world. I see it like this, not an art-ego-trip to make myself a “star” on stage. We can only change destructive qualities in this world when we are deeply touched in ourselves by the constructive, peaceful qualities that we think are important and necessary for our world. I think of these words by Picasso, “Art has to touch the soul.”



IMPULSE

Rebecca: I’m fascinated with, what seem to be, past-life memories, and I suspect that these memories can become unlocked during psychedelic or shamanic experiences. What are your thoughts on past life memories and have you ever had any?

Nana: It’s not my way to get stuck on personal past life memories.

What I experienced in many visionary states, with shamanic methods and rituals, is that I am more than the sum or result of my bloodline or human genes. I did experience

that information in my life—or however you may name it—and there is still information from animals and plants in my being. That's why I can also connect to them in “ordinary life,” and can listen to them and talk to them.

Again I want to quote words of Mevlana Rumi:

“I died as a mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose as animal,
I died as animal and I was Man.

Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?”

David: How do you envision the future of visionary art?

Nana: While being in different cultures, in nations with open-hearted and open-minded people—from Russia to Peru—I can see that there is a growing understanding of the importance of visions and visionary-art. We need “visible visions” to remember ourselves, and our facility to enter the multiple fields of consciousness, that always create our own reality anew. Visionary art can give us a taste of the *reality of the unseen realities*, to encourage us to realize our visions.

Rebecca: What are you currently working on?

Nana: How to describe a painting in process? This I can't do. I always have problems when I'm trying to describe a painting. Also, the titles of my paintings I only do for the observer, to give a “hint” on a possible entrance into the painting. For me, when a painting is “finished,” it is a “being” unto itself, in a way that is independent from me as the “creator.” Therefore, I never sign my paintings on the front, only on the back of the canvas. It feels to me as if I hurt the “being” of the painting if I put my name on it. In this way I am close to the “old” painters, that it's not so important that “I” painted it. It is important that the painting expresses a special “message,” and that it is not the name of the artist that produces the “importance.”

This interview was made for the publication “Women of Visionary Art” by David Jay Brown and Rebecca Ann Hill, Park Street Press, 2018