

(At the end of the text there are links to the pertinent parts of the website, and at certain points in the text itself.)

Mandalas by Allen Schill – Their Evolution, and Long Production Notes:

Introduction: tangled threads

– I have wanted to somehow comb out the tangled threads of my early experience and activities in visual art, particularly the ones that brought me, in a few short years, to the mandala, the principal motif with which I was involved for several years, and my first body of work that I would say was inspired or original, rather than derivative or imitative. I also wish to mention some of the influences and concerns that have continued to influence my work right up to the present day. Since I include a good deal of background in a story that is ostensibly focused on mandalas, the following may ramble a bit. I have relegated the more tangential material, the detours and polemics, to a series of footnotes or codas that will be found at the end. I have also left paragraph headings to make a long text easier to scan.

The mandala: an old tradition reinvented

– By original, I certainly don't mean that I invented the motif – after all, the mandala is an ancient and widespread, nearly universal motif – but with my personal development and philosophical concerns, adopting it was something perfectly authentic for me. My mandalas were original in the sense that I didn't imitate mandalas of particular religious traditions. Mine were based on organic forms and other forms derived from the physical world. They are (or were) contemporary, an attempt to recreate the mandala for our time, in accord with a new sensibility of non-sectarian spirituality, that came with the attitudes that flowered in the 1960's and later.¹ To do this work seemed, under the circumstances of 30 years ago, an artistic imperative. I refer generally to the mandalas and mandala-like images I made in drawing, painting, printmaking, and photography from about 1972 until 1984.

Very early photographic work: textures and surfaces

– I had already made a bit of a specialty, in my early photographic work, of textures and surfaces, seen directly and close up, such that it was difficult to have much sense of the scale of the image, or to know exactly what the subject was. I had been taking pictures since my childhood, showing a serious intent that went beyond snapshots. (Even my first roll of film, exposed with a toy camera when I was seven, included several shots of the grass at my feet, filling the frame to create a flat field and to concentrate the attention on the pure surface. Somehow even then it was important to do it in just that way.)

Adolescence and non-objective photography

– As I became more seriously involved with photography in my late teens, my main fascination was still with textures in nature. And here, by nature I mean also to include man-made elements.² The subjects might be single, homogeneous surfaces, or juxtapositions of two or more distinct materials, composed in a certain way. These more or less classic non-objective images tried to take the viewer beyond the subject itself, like the image of a stain in the corner of a room that struck me at the age of ten, offered in a photo encyclopedia as an example of non-objective photography: this interested me precisely because – unlike practically all other photography – it had no clear purpose, no function, other than to show an image for its own sake, as an abstract form. (As in an abstract painting, there was something under the surface.)³ Compared to most non-objective imagery which tends towards a symbolist formalism applied to recognizable subjects (Minor White is a good example), however, my photography of surfaces has always tended toward less recognizable subjects and more towards pure abstraction.

The beauty of nature, manifestations of the divine

– I wanted to show the beauty of nature – its structures, patterns, and (by implication) the natural laws that are fundamental to everything in the universe.⁴ I had always been fascinated by photomicrography, crystallography, electron microscopy, and all sorts of scientific imagery

and illustration. They were not only immensely arresting as pure images, they also demonstrated many very interesting aspects of nature.⁵ Even more significantly, there was an underlying aspect that was the most exciting of all. It was very important to me that my images of patterns were manifestations – that was the word – of something that was, for me, equivalent to the divine.⁶

Early ambitions

– I adopted the mandala for essentially the same reasons, gravitating towards it directly in my sketches of 1971-73, while I was still an Art History student at Columbia, and using it for the next ten years or so as my overarching motif. By the time I was finishing at Columbia, I had decided on a career as a visual artist. Ever mindful of the importance of career and the need to sustain myself and my activity, I had also studied art education and had a license to teach art. I planned to enter a Master of Fine Arts program to further my own work and to qualify myself for teaching at the university level. Especially enamored of the more spiritually-oriented of artists of many historic eras⁷, of modernism, and of the newest artists of the New York School, I saw myself as carrying forward the tradition of the Abstract Sublime. Pollock and Rothko were my heroes. The mandala was, for me, the motif that would be the newest manifestation of this tradition, bringing it up to date with the (it seemed) radically new sensibility of the 1960's.

Early work in painting and graphics

– Independently, from 1973 to 1975, I made a series of acrylic paintings which were mandalas – a small number, but highly detailed. I continued in this direction in painting in my work for the M.F.A. program at Lehman College (of the City University of N.Y.) from 1975 to 1977. I also became involved then, and for some years thereafter on my own, with various forms of printmaking as well. These included etchings (from zinc plates), linoleum block relief prints, and inkless embossments made from the same plates and blocks. They also were essentially mandalas or mandala-like images. There were also experiments along these lines in watercolor and drawing of various kinds. They represented the same sensibility that motivated my fascination with texture and pattern: an interest in the laws inherent in existence, that govern matter and energy and all natural phenomena, and the conviction that these things were of immense spiritual significance.

Printmaking: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S6b>

Painting: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S6a>

Drawing: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S6c>

Stylization in representation

– The paintings, graphics, and drawings were all of course done by hand, working from the imagination, sometimes inspired by other particular sources. One was a Dover edition of *Kunstformen der Natur* by Ernst Haeckel – the biologist and contemporary of Darwin – whose very title (“Art Forms in Nature”) shows that Haeckel, saw the artistic potential or value of these forms. My works were essentially schematic as images, very graphic, and at first intensely colorful. I had been inspired by a view of the world that I could express in a stylized fashion, reducing the world to its simplest elements like outlines and contours (as in the work of early animators like Max Fleischer and many other graphic artists), something within my technical capacities, because I had at least the imagination and the tenacity to do highly detailed, time-intensive work.

More subtle effects; near-invisibility

– This was convenient for me, but only up to a point. I was evolving towards ever subtler, more complicated effects. My last paintings of that period used carefully modulated, subdued colors in close harmonies (as opposed to the intense palette of a few years earlier), or were actually textured surfaces, overpainted with washes of varying transparency. The graphics, though minutely detailed, bordered on – or even aspired to – invisibility, a sort of visual silence, such as in the inkless embossments, thus creating a contrast between the intricacy of the design and the

unobtrusive subtlety of the image, a sort of whispered shout. (If they were musical compositions, they would be barely audible, or like the diffuse sounds of nature.) But this also meant that I was beginning to encounter the limitations of my skills in representation.

Lack of formal training

– I had never had any formal training in illustration or academic realism, only a few classes in drawing from the nude. In drawing still life, interiors, or the figure, I was able to render simple subjects in a clumsily realistic fashion, but only by dogged observation and patience, not by skill or talent, and with none of the graceful touch of the masters; my naturalistic drawings were like things put together with bricks. My fallback representational style tended accordingly towards a highly interpretive mode, something like Van Gogh or the energized watercolors of Charles Burchfield, a style that didn't require the skill of a Van Eyck or a Brueghel. With the mandalas, on the other hand, this was never an issue. As I did them, they did not require very sophisticated technique. I never attempted much in the way of sfumatura or shading, or to render textured surfaces in a sort of trompe-l'oeil. I wasn't trying to represent nature in all its richness of color, texture, tonality, and detail.

Limitations of drawing and painting; back to photography

– To do what I wanted to do now with brush or pencil would have required the capacities of Leonardo and the obsessiveness of H.R. Giger or Ernst Fuchs. I knew this was beyond me to learn in an ordinary life span. Still, I wanted to make mandalas that rivaled the richness of nature itself. I wanted an image of rich texture that would flow like water, mud, or lava from the center of the mandala on outward. Unfortunately, the limitations of painting and drawing are essentially the limits of the hand. The obvious solution in my case was to use photography, but in service of an imagery that was essentially abstract, symbolic, and non-photographic. Although in my youth I had started out as a photographer, I was no longer interested in photographs that looked like conventional photographs, even most non-objective ones. I wanted instead to use photography as a visual artist rather than as a photographer, and to take photography out of the realm of the mere representation of the real as we ordinarily recognize it.

Power of photography to render texture and detail

– I realized I could use photographic means to create mandalas of a subtlety, a level of detail, and a tonality far beyond what I could achieve by hand. Late in 1976, more or less, I started to make photographic mandalas, thus bringing my visual arts work together with my photography, and taking both into new territory.⁸ It was important to me not only that they were made by photographic means, but that their derivation was also photographic, so that these abstract images that were still rooted, however covertly, in the real world.

Method – selection, mirrors

– First I selected a series of 35mm black and white negatives of textural images, such as surfaces of stone or ice, and made small enlargements of them. Then, with a pair of rectangular mirrors hinged together with tape, I studied the kaleidoscopic possibilities – which sections of which photographs yielded the most interesting results. (I was amazed at all I could see in the symmetries thus created – figures angelic and demonic, geological formations, and much more. Even though this all was, psychologically speaking, pure projection, like one's response to a Rorschach blot, there was no denying the impact of these images.) A mirror angle of 45° showed me what I would have in a montage composed of eight sections, and angle of 30° likewise one of twelve sections, 22.5° one of sixteen sections, and so on. (I never went beyond an eighteen-sectioned piece, each section 20°, because the precision required for a neat job became simply too much.)

Method – printing in quantities

– From this I planned what to print in quantities sufficient to create photographic mandalas. I exposed an equal number of sheets of paper with the negative in the normal position and with

the negative inverted, to yield mirror images, and developed them simultaneously. Since it was problematic to get consistent results with the usual shallow developing trays and “flipping” awkwardly through a big handful of prints, I designed and built a processing rack of wood and fiberglass mesh, with eighteen vertical spaces, and a set of deep tanks for processing. At first I used fiber-based paper as I always did for making exhibition prints, but then switched to resin-coated paper, because it dries flat and thus is easier to handle in the cutting and assembling of the prototype mandala, the most demanding part of the process.

Method – measuring, cutting, assembling

– Measuring and cutting the prints with the utmost of care, I obtained the sections to be assembled. (Sometimes the leftover portions of a given image could also be used.) First drawing on the mounting board a precise grid of the requisite number of radial sections, I glued or dry-mounted the sections to the board, trying to keep the joins as tight and neat as possible. I then cut an opening of the right shape – hexagonal, octagonal, etc. – in a piece of mat board, and mounted all together. This was the prototype.

Prototypes as works in themselves and for photosilkscreen

– The prototypes were also works in themselves in a sense – they were exhibited a few times – but my ulterior purpose was to use them as starting points for various graphic arts processes involving photosensitive materials. Along with my work in etching, I had read up on things like photoetching on metal and glass. To make photosilkscreen prints, I first made large negatives of the prototypes, using 16”x20” Kodalith film and the large-format graphic arts camera available at Lehman. From the high-contrast negatives I made diapositives. Exposing by contact a photosensitive material to these negatives and diapositives, I made stencils which were then applied to the silkscreen itself.

Mandalas in photosilkscreen and as backlit film pieces

– Using a system of registration, I silkscreened a large number of prints by applying a number of coats of ink of different colors, varying the color scheme somewhat within the batch of prints. A stencil made from a negative allowed me to apply ink in what had been the highlights of the original subject, while the one made from a diapositive let me apply ink in what had been the shadows. With negatives and diapositives of different densities I was able to restrict the printing area to the extremes of the tonal scale, or to allow an extended range to print from the shadows all the way to the middle tones or from the highlights to the middle tones. I tried to exploit the semi-transparency of the inks to approximate a continuous-tone effect. The texture of the built-up ink deposit itself was often evident. (Aside from all this, the beauty of these pieces of film was itself impressive, and I made a number of pieces to be hung or affixed in a window and seen by transmitted light, this time making continuous-tone negatives by developing the Kodalith film in a soft formula instead of the usual high-contrast developer.)

Prototypes for continuous tone, historical processes

– A few years later, with a somewhat different aim in mind, I made another series of prototypes, similar to the first, but this time making large continuous-tone negatives directly from the prototypes, to be used in contact processes that render continuous tone. By this time I was getting interested in the old hand-processes better-known in earlier days of photography – platinum and palladium printing, kallitype, gum bichromate, and others. These all involve coating by hand a piece of artist’s paper with a photosensitive solution, and exposing it by contact to light, whether sunlight or an artificial source of ultraviolet light, and then developing the image. In some of these processes, the image is formed by highly stable pigments (black, brown, or colors).⁹ In the cases of platinum, palladium, and kallitype, the image is formed of a deposit of precious metal, much as the image of an ordinary black and white photographic print is formed of silver. But the tonality, which can vary from brownish to a warm black, is of a richness and a beauty that one can hardly compare to a conventional print.

Irving Penn and platinum printing

– From 1977 to 1979 I worked as an assistant to Irving Penn, who was personally making platinum and palladium prints of his important works. I say personally because, although he had people like me to do much of the ancillary work involved in this production, he personally coated the papers, exposed them by contact in a vacuum frame, and developed the prints. Using large sheets of artist's paper intended for watercolor or etching, usually Arches or Rives, he made many prints with single printings – that is, prints made with a single coating, exposure, and development.

Penn's multiple printing method

– Penn had also devised a special method for multiple printing – that is, to coat, expose, and develop on the same sheet two or more successive times, each time using a different negative of the same image, all kept in perfect register – by using sheets of paper mounted on thin sheets of rigid, dimensionally-stable aluminum. (Registration is virtually impossible with unmounted artist's paper, because it lacks dimensional stability – it expands and shrinks unpredictably when wet and then dried.) He employed different chemical solutions for different parts of the tonal range. He might use a medium contrast solution for the full-scale negative, a flat solution with a suitable negative to add subtle tonality to the highlights of an image, and a contrasty solution with a dense, contrasty negative to enrich the deposit of black in the deepest shadows. Borrowing from the methods of the highest-quality black and white photo-offset printing, in which different inks are used successively to build up an image, he obtained prints of unparalleled subtlety and depth of tone.

Irving Penn and Jean-Pierre Sudre

– From Penn I heard about the French artist, Jean-Pierre Sudre, who also used hand processes, and to whom Penn had paid a visit one summer. Two artists with a strong interest in the craft side of their activity, they must have talked shop; Penn came home with a Kallitype formula or two (which I duly copied down for myself, as if they were a prizewinning recipe for blueberry pie). When Penn described Sudre's work, I had to go and find a catalog immediately – Sudre was doing abstract symmetrical images that were very much in feeling like my mandalas. (Penn's personal opinion of Sudre's imagery was succinct – “beautiful but boring”, he said. Although I had never shown Penn any of my work – I felt it would have been importuning – after that I was sure his verdict on my work would have been similar.)

Historical and hand processes

– From these and other sources to which I was exposed at that time, such as the work of Steichen and the Pictorialists, as well as the work of many photographer-artists in the late 1970's (when there seems to have been a bit of a hand-processing revival), I was inspired to work with hand processes. First I experimented with a product called (unattractively) Kwik-Print, which was a process similar to gum-bichromate, in that both used a photosensitive bichromate solution with a pigment incorporated into it. The advantage of Kwik-Print, other than the fact that the solutions were already mixed and ready to use, was that it was meant to print on special sheets of dimensionally-stable vinyl, whereas gum-bichromate required one to size the artist's paper in hot baths of gelatin once or twice, and to hang it to dry, before coating – a lengthy procedure.

Kallitype and other alternative processes

– In a couple of classes at I.C.P. (the International Center of Photography) in New York, I dabbled in a variety of hand processes such as gum-bichromate (which I found very challenging and not well-suited to my needs), cyanotype (not difficult, but always the same monotonous blueprint blue), carbonyl and carbon printing (very sensitive, demanding processes, but extremely beautiful, in which carbon black pigment forms the image), and kallitype. Kallitype, which uses essentially a solution of silver nitrate, I liked more – fairly easy to mix and coat, not too difficult to control, with a brownish-black tonality.

Palladium printing

– Most of all I liked platinum and palladium, because the tonality, though still warm, was much closer to neutral than the Kallitype. On my own I ordered supplies for palladium printing (at that time, platinum chloride, the essential material, cost about four times what palladium chloride cost) from Bostick & Sullivan, obtained four-foot long ultraviolet tubes and fixtures, built an exposure table, and started to work in my home studio to make palladium prints of my photographic mandalas.

– (One doesn't do this kind of printing to save money. But the pace of production is such that, in a day's work, one may well spend less on materials than in the same time devoted to traditional gelatin-silver printing.)

Mandalas in Palladium: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S5d>

Color printing – variety within an edition

– At I.C.P., I was also learning to do conventional chromogenic (Type C) color printing, and I embarked upon a project to make mandalas in color on Type C paper. Using a printing frame fitted with a pin-registration system, I successively exposed my continuous-tone negatives and diapositives with complete freedom, using different light filtrations to get a variety of color combinations, making editions of dozens of prints, each one unique. The filtrations were targeted to a certain range of colors, within which they varied at regular intervals, to print suites or sequences of related colors, e.g. from deep red to magenta for the highlights, and violet to blue for the shadows. For example, for a series of eight prints to be developed simultaneously, I might use magenta and yellow settings of 40/100, 45/95, 50/90, 55/85, 60/80, 65/75, 70/70, and 75/75. At the time I likened this in my mind to schemes of musical counterpoint, as for example in the music of J.S. Bach, where a descending melodic line is put in counterpoint to a simultaneous ascending line.

Mandalas in Color: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S5e>

The music of Bach

– Bach's music, and his almost mathematical methods of composition, were very important to me at the time, and even several years before, when I was painting, drawing, and printmaking. His immense capacity for formal invention and the creation of harmonious relationships in a polyphonic work, and the impression of organic growth given by the forward-moving, ever-changing music – a form of play, joyful in its openness – this inspired me in my notion of organic growth within an image, and made me think of the idea of infinite variety, or of theme and variations. I was interested in making editions of images in which no two examples were alike, rather than the more conventional editions of virtually identical prints.

Growth in the image

– In the mandala, there is the feeling of constant rebirth and transformation (as in the music of Bach). The image seems to grow from its center, in a process ever unfolding, like a flower that unfolds from a bud that develops from a branch, which grows from a plant, which grows from a seed in the ground, which grew from the flower. The process is essentially the same at any level of existence, from the subatomic to the macrocosmic – a matter of constant growth and change. Growth is sensed or implied in the mandala even if the image itself is static. (For similar reasons, fractals and fractal theory were enormously fascinating to me when they came along.)¹⁰

Photographic mandalas the (relatively) easy way, with the computer

– After I'd been working for a while with Photoshop, I made a couple of brief experimental returns to the mandala, my motif of old, doing digitally what I used to do with a razor and glue. It's still laborious and requires a certain precision, but is not to be compared to the old method.

Recent Photographic Mandalas: <http://www.2you.it/levischill/slider.php?p=S5c>

FOOTNOTES:

¹ This sensibility might suggest things like modern pagan-pentheism and “New Age” ideas in general, hopefully in their less woolly manifestations, and was certainly influenced by psychedelic experience.

² I have always been fascinated with the way the natural and the artificial interact, especially with how nature exerts its slow and passive but inexorable force on the seemingly more durable man-made world, as if demonstrating its ultimate superiority, always tending to reassert itself despite the incursions of human activity and the frequent affronts of our hubris.

³ My favorite photographers back then were people like Minor White for the symbolism of his work, Eliot Porter, whose nature photographs (especially surfaces) were like color-field painting, and later (and especially) Frederick Sommer for his surrealism.

⁴ I regret that such concerns are likely to sound both banal and portentous to most people nowadays. Compared to a generation ago, people have little appreciation for nature, even less for science, and least of all for any spiritual or philosophical notions that I associate with such things. For the most part we are materialistic and utilitarian, egoistic, and boring.

⁵ It has long annoyed me that scientific and scientifically-inspired imagery has been so often the object of snobbish contempt on the part of the art world (as if it were somehow tainted by the association with hard science), and so rarely exploited for its own sake by contemporary artists. Perhaps such people are simply ignorant of, or strangely indifferent to, the mystical and philosophical implications, or somehow believe that such a thing is not a fit subject for art. Or that to take nature as one’s subject is categorically outdated, insufficiently sophisticated, and unconcerned with the postmodern theoretical dialog and esoteric concerns of most contemporary art. Is it too straightforward, too corny to show formally beautiful things, too mystical? In spite of my own (quite limited) predilections towards mysticism, I don’t think my mandalas are especially esoteric – one doesn’t need to be an adept or a secluded monk to appreciate them. Despite the depredation humans have subjected it to in recent times, nature is still pretty much the same, and the way we see it has roots deep in our consciousness. To help us get in touch with that level of our consciousness, ever more difficult with the distractions and hectic rhythm of modern life, and our nearly total desensitization from the primary act of seeing as a result of media bombardment, seems to me worthwhile.

⁶ Mystical dreams:

Dream 1 – dreamt when I was about 15 years old

– I was in our family’s house in Long Island. It seemed I had done something bad, because I was being chased around the house not by either of my parents, but by the actor Michael Rennie, dressed in an elegant white suit as he often was in his movies. After several quick rounds of the house, when I just managed to stay a few steps ahead of him, I escaped through the garage and into the back yard, where I stumbled and fell in the darkness of the night. He was right behind me. From the ground I looked back at him over my shoulder, knowing I’d finally been caught. But he was no longer chasing me. Instead, he just looked at me with an expression of compassion and wisdom, and pointed toward the sky. I looked up at the sky, which then burst into a colossal, amazing pattern of swirling shapes, dark but intensely colored. I knew it to be a vision of something holy and marvelous. I awoke in a sort of ecstasy.

Dream 2 – dreamt when I was about 25 years old

– I was wandering in winter in an athletic field of Lehman College with some of my fellow students in the M.F.A. program. There was a thin layer of smooth ice on the frozen mud and chewed-up grass of the field, and a light dusting of fine snow. We wandered over the field, perplexed and preoccupied, looking for something very important, but not knowing what it might be. I looked down at my feet, and there was a perfect rectangle not covered with snow, such as one would expect if there had been a box there which had then been removed, where

you could see the transparent layers of frozen material. I knew instantly that the rectangle was supernatural, a sign of divine importance. Awestruck, I fell to my knees in adoration.

I've had a few more mystical dreams, but these are the most memorable.

⁷ to name a few examples: Sassetta, the Van Eycks, Van Gogh, Caspar David Friedrich, the Luminists, the Pre-Raphaelites, Albert Pinkham Ryder, Pavel Tchelitchew, Mark Tobey, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko.

⁸ I came to call them photomandalas for convenience, but I find the term a crude shorthand.

⁹ As opposed to the cheap, unstable dyes of conventional color prints, or the better-quality dyes used in dye-transfer printing. While working as a type C color printer and technician in a series of photographic laboratories, I got to see how dye-transfer was done, a medium once much favored for the production of high-quality color prints for collectors and for the advertising business.

Pigment processes are very demanding, but the results can be exquisite. Generally, a photo-sensitive emulsion is exposed to a negative, thus hardening the emulsion in the areas exposed to light. To develop the image, the print is then bathed in water, which dissolves the part of the emulsion not exposed to light (and thus still soft), carrying away the unwanted pigment in the lighter areas of the image. Around this time I also learned of the Fresson process, a color pigment process that once was the proprietary secret of the French family that invented it, but which finally was disseminated to a small world of perfectionist printers. In the Fresson process, the key is that the development is accomplished by a bath of water to which has been added a fine sawdust that acts as a light abrasive, thus aiding in the removal of pigment from the less-exposed areas of the image. I was very interested, but at the time it was beyond my capabilities to carry out such a thing. I still hope one day to return to some of these special processes to print my newer work in view camera still life.

¹⁰ Most of this series of photographic mandalas are called generically "Mandala". "Kyo", however, the title of one of the few rectangular pieces, has an interesting derivation. It is a term of Japanese Buddhism that denotes "sound" or "vibration", but also the long dimension of a bolt of fabric, what we call the warp (as opposed to the weft, the part woven back and forth through the warp), which thus came to be used as a metaphor for the infinity of time. Thus the Buddhist mantra or daimoku, "Nam Myoho Renge Kyo", in which "rengé" or "lotus flower" stands for simultaneous cause and effect (because the lotus flowers and seeds at the same time), means "I devote myself to the mystic law of cause and effect through sound", that is, by chanting the mantra – which anyone who has ever known a Nichiren Buddhist will very likely have heard.

– Time warp, anyone?

Allen Schill

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