

Alexandra Eldridge's paintings explore the outer reaches of consciousness and signal the emergence of contemporary romanticism.

By Michael Gormley

romancing the dream

IN CONTEMPORARY ART SPEAK, THE TERM 'OUTSIDER ART' IMPLIES UNCONVENTIONAL OR NAÏVE CULTURAL artifacts created by artists having neither formal training nor gallery representation. Nearly always these artists lead anonymous, if not marginal, lives and garner critical acclaim long after they are dead—their true genius revealed upon the unexpected discovery of their life's work. Others, born ahead of their time, experience wholesale rejection and they achieve posthumous fame when their work suddenly aligns with major paradigm shifts in cultural ideologies.

William Blake, the 19th-century English poet, painter and printmaker, is a great example of the latter. A prescient genius, his works and teachings espoused on matters as broad and modern as women's rights and sexual liberation. Yet he was largely ignored in his lifetime; his work dismissed as the ranting product of a madman. Blake's insistence that since early childhood he regularly experienced celestial visions added credence to the charge of insanity. He claimed to have "seen

Now I Re-Member
(acrylic on board, 24x24) is an example of the artist's use of color in bold strokes and intentional drips.





Life Force (acrylic on board, 24x24) has a feeling of chaos created by the swirls and drips of color, but within the chaos is the strength and solid calm of the elephant.

God” when God, “put his head to the window.” In another vision he saw “a tree filled with angels.” Indeed, much of Blake’s life and art came under the influence of visions that were often incoherent, and he truthfully reported this quality in writings and images that were equally incomprehensible.

The Inner Life

Alexandra Eldridge, a contemporary mixed-media artist, came under Blake’s spell while attending Ohio University in the 1960s. She was introduced to Blake’s work by an art professor who, like Blake, was a poetic visionary. The professor eventually became her husband and together they formed

a community based on Blake’s teachings. Called Golgonooza, a name taken from Blake’s mythological texts that means Visionary City of Art, this self-sufficient commune situated on a 70-acre farm was both esoteric and practical in its pursuits. Eldridge, who recalls her 17 years spent at Golgonooza as idyllic, notes that the community built buildings, grew organic food, raised livestock and meditated on Blake for an hour every morning. Though Eldridge eventually left that marriage and the community, as she explains, to experience the world more widely, her artwork betrays a continuing engagement with Blake’s primary aesthetic concern or the imaginative reality of the inner life.



Eldridge uses found objects, snippets of paper to create her pieces as seen in **Pure Love** (acrylic, found objects on board, 14x14)

Like Blake, Eldridge is an imaginative realist, meaning she strives to cultivate the reality of her inner life through the depiction of archetypal imagery. Her paintings make no effort at imitation, they do not impart a literal narrative nor do they mirror the look of everyday people, places and things. Rather we are offered a graphic arrangement of seemingly unrelated elements, some representational, some abstract, that inhabit an unmoored space; the view is vertiginous and conjures the mad rush of a waking dream.

Eldridge has no aesthetic attachment to the real world—a world she views as largely impermanent (and likely just an illusion). She is not a Realist

but a true Romantic. Heightened states of being, the primacy of feelings and the individual journey of the soul are the ascendant subjects of her artistic discovery. We may think of Eldridge as an outsider artist whose works depict extraordinary phenomena experienced outside of objective reality. This otherworldly realm, the terrain of dreams and of magic and mystery, is molded into an artistic expression with content arising from the artist’s imagination. Eldridge’s paintings evince this cultivation of inner self with seeming random compositions that juxtapose line, graphic shapes, color and texture with representational imagery. The work, emblematic of a style unfettered by aesthetic rules

To Open the Eternal Worlds, (this page; acrylic, found objects on board, 60x48) is a bit unsettling with its onslaught of imagery.

The Shaman (opposite page; acrylic, found objects on board, 40x30), perhaps we are peering inside his mind and witnessing the spiritual allies that reside within.



and academic conventions, leads to the creation of artifacts that are original and genuine to the artist. This notion of authenticity, of art arising from and out of the depths of nothingness, is foundational to the understanding of Eldridge's work and the greater Romantic concept of artistic genius.

The Endless Round

Europe's Romantic period, occurring roughly between 1800 and 1850, was a complex artistic reaction to a range of social and economic displacements attributable to rapid industrialization,

the rise of rational thought and scientific inquiry and intermittent warfare that challenged centralized autocratic power. Romanticism's roots can be traced to an earlier German literary period called *Sturm und Drang*—which translates in English to Storm and Stress. I sense that we are living in a similar Storm and Stress period. Like the culture shocks experienced by a world undergoing rapid industrialization and urbanization, our existence feels unmoored and mutable. We experience time and space as an ever-shifting impermanence responding haphazardly to enormous technological





strides, cultural clashes and a globalized capitalist economy. Past history demonstrates that art's collective response to cultural flux is polarization; artists either work in an obsessively realist mode (creating static cultural artifacts) or the artist takes full flight from reality.

Eldridge notes, "I've never felt completely here, or entirely of this world. On my kindergarten report card my teacher wrote: Alexandra lives very much in her imagination. That is still my life's focus. My painting is a chronicling of that imaginative, dreaming life. With the act of painting I can access the unseen and the archetypal realms of the unconscious. Archetypal imagery emerges naturally from my unconscious; perhaps it comes easily because

I naturally cultivated my imagination from early on. Home was a large, old house full of books. My parents published children's books, my mother wrote the stories and my father illustrated them. Beginning in childhood I painted alongside my mother and read poetry, fairy tales and mythology in a wood-paneled library. Having grown up with five brothers and a sister, I needed to find refuge for my introverted nature. Climbing up a large copper beech tree in the front yard and talking to angels was a regular pastime."

Animals and birds, symbolizing the shape-shifting demons that accompany our souls, predominate in Eldridge's colorful cast of Jungian characters. In *The Divine Breath* (above) a ghostly white stag prances across a painterly color field that recalls a Helen Frankenthaler canvas—the classic Abstract Expressionist drips and splatters mapping a similar trek through the unconscious. A flock of collaged birds are vibrant astride the translucent scumble that Eldridge uses to indicate

the stag. All told, the work is graphically powerful yet obscure.

The Divine Breath is a recent work and was shown in Eldridge's last exhibition. The show, titled *To Open the Eternal Worlds* ran this past summer in Santa Fe—Eldridge's current abode. The painting is more gestural for Eldridge, and at 60x48 inches, is also larger than her previous works. *An Immense World of Delight* (see page XX) also displays Eldridge's new larger format and reinvigorated brushwork. "My painting seems to have freed up a lot in these last works," she adds. "The gestural backgrounds came first and then the animals. I

paint animals because they have a way of breaking through our consciousness into a deeper reality. They are our spiritual allies and a gateway to the unconscious. My work repeats certain elements. Birds for example reoccur throughout my paintings. I'm not sure why but I do recall an early childhood drawing of a bird I did being tacked up to the wall—so birds have been an important symbol for me for as long as I can remember."

Eldridge generally works with mixed media. The birds in *The Divine Breath* and *An Immense World of Delight* are collaged onto the painting surface. They were referenced from an old

The stag that haunted the artist after an Ayurvedic (traditional Hindu medicine) treatment is center in *The Divine Breath*. (left; acrylic, found objects on board, 60x48).

Birds, as that ones in *The Dream Beneath the Hill* (opposite; acrylic on board, 48x60) have reoccurred in the artist work for as long as she can remember.

Web prompt text to come. Web prompt text to come for extras found online at artistsnetwork.com/medium/acrylic/link-to-come.



In *An Immense World of Delight* (acrylic, found objects on board, 60x48) birds, a often referenced symbol in the work of Eldridge, seem to explore a chaotic environment.

French dictionary that featured superbly engraved illustrations. Eldridge adds, "The illustrations were beautifully done and represented the kind of Old World printing and craftsmanship that one rarely sees in books anymore. I photocopied the birds and manipulated them in various ways—flipping them, resizing, etc. I loved being able to give them a new life in another art form. For *The Divine Breath*

I left the bird bodies black and white but colored the heads to show that they were in the process of becoming life."

The stag in *The Divine Breath* refers to a trip Eldridge took to Hawaii. She recalls, "During an Ayurvedic (traditional Hindu medicine) treatment of oil being dripped on the third eye I experienced a very powerful and somewhat frightening vision of a



stone gray face and that image stayed with me well after the trip ended. When I returned to my studio I began working on this painting that led to a series comprising 16 works. I realized after painting the stag that its face was the face I'd seen—I painted it translucently because it was lightly there."

Cat (see page XX) is an earlier work by Eldridge and is significantly smaller in scale than the works noted above. Prior to these later gestural works, Eldridge worked with Venetian plaster that allowed her to create a variety of pigmented surfaces. She adds, "Venetian plaster contains a lot of marble dust, so it can be polished to a soft glow or burnished with steel wool. When the material

is still wet, I can carve into it or apply stencils and embroidered fabrics to get interesting textures. Because the plaster is dense, and dries quickly in the dry Santa Fe air, I need to work with smaller substrates—generally cradled boards or Masonite."

Affixing collaged or written text, often pulled from old journals or found books, evinces Eldridge's mindset while working—what she refers to as diffuse awareness. She notes that her studio is full of illustrated books and assorted ephemera from her travels. Something, such as a line of text on a book cover, will call out to her and eventually find its way into her work. Eldridge adds, "There is definitely the part of the creative process that feels

In *Cat* (venetian plaster, acrylic, fabric on board, 24x24), the artist hopes the birds flying from a bowl while being watched by a cat will illicit a series of "Why?" questions from the viewer.

Everything about ***Some Are Born to Sweet Delight*** (acrylic on board, 60x48) elicits a feeling of serenity; from the cozy sofa where nestled eggs rest to a bird with halo upon her nest.

If everything we see in ***The Soul of a Bird*** (acrylic, found objects on board, 48x60) is depicting just that, the soul of the bird, then even the tiniest of creatures are immensely complicated.



spontaneous. The deep rose pigment of the plaster, the sanded down gray bowl and the juicy black acrylic paint happened that way. I am like a vessel and the work comes through me. When a work is near to feeling complete, I take a more questioning stance and ponder what the piece needs. What will disrupt its stasis and call into question ideas about time and space? The cat and the birds were the final elements I added to *Cat*. They reference an altered state and allow for paradox. I want my work to ask questions beginning with, why does that

painting have birds flying out of a bowl over a cat staring off into the distance?"

Agreed, art must ask questions—the more disruptive the better. Cultures that are comfortable with paradox, and ask the right questions, move forward. Blake is now celebrated as a gifted philosopher, radical social thinker and genuine mystic, though it took the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s to assert that profile. In our present time, saturated as it is with all too many examples of artworks that aim to be unconventional



and shocking, it's easy to dismiss "outsider art" as a catchy marketing ploy rather than a notable art category. To be sure, history provides numerous examples of certifiably crazy artists, who like Blake, produced divinely inspired masterworks. The challenge is singling out these outsider geniuses from the self-important posers producing works that are certainly startling, but simply such for the sport of it. Eldridge may well warrant the "genius outsider"

tribute as well—only history can tell. Luckily however we've not waited a hundred years to appreciate her work or be open to the questions her works pose. /aa

Michael Gormley is a painter, arts writer and curator. He is a regular contributor to *The Artist Magazine* and is the former editorial director of *American Artist Magazine*. He lives in New York City and is currently the curator for *Portraits, Inc.*

Behind the Paint: Alexandra Eldridge

LATEST ACCOMPLISHMENTS: The solo show of my work that's entered new territory for me at Nüart Gallery in Santa Fe. Also, working as an Artist in Residence at Whittier College in Whittier, CA, and getting to collaborate with Tony Barnstone on a book about creativity tarot.

CURRENT GOAL: To open myself up to the creative spirit to see what will be revealed as I begin my next painting.

FAVORITE QUOTE: "Imagination is the real and eternal world." —William Blake

BEST ADVICE GIVEN: Trust in the ever renewing imaginable realms.

BEST ADVICE RECEIVED: You must go by the way you know not. —St. John of the Cross. I knew I was being advised when I read those words.

READING: *M Train* by Patti Smith

WEBSITE: alexandraeldridge.com



Art has given me the possibility of a spiritual path. —AE