The Mystical Arts:
On the Theory and Practice of Hermeneutics and Aesthetics

[W]hat turmoil William Blake’s insights would create for the methodological conceptualization of standard religious studies. How could any of them be fitted to any coherent scheme, or, if they were, would they remain what they were originally? Why is the mentality of the technician sanctioned in religious studies while the attitude of the artist is treated with suspicion?

Walter Capps, Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline

In consonance with the teachings of mystic visionaries in various traditions, kabbalists assent to the view that the primary task of the imaginative faculty is to depict imaginally what is without image, to embody that which is not a body, to give form to the formless. The imagination is not, as Hobbes put it, a "decaying sense," but it is, rather, in Henry Corbin's telling phrase, the "psychospiritual" faculty, usually identified in medieval sources as the heart, the "intermediate plane" of the "Imaginative Presence," the coincidentia oppositorum of the hidden and the manifest.

Elliot R. Wolfson, Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination

Course Description

Mystical texts and the visual arts have contributed immeasurably to shaping individual and collective conceptions of the spiritual in modern and postmodern culture. By integrating rigorous textual analysis with direct experiential practices, we will bring a multifaceted approach to bear on the relationship between aesthetic, intellectual and mystical creativity—that is, between the often conflicting domains of spiritual experience, intellectual analysis, and beauty—in order to gain insight into the ways in which these distinctive yet overlapping modalities of knowledge have integrally shaped developments in high culture, sacred practice and visual representation. Drawing on the combined methodological perspectives of Art History and Religious Studies, we will examine the ways in which the contemplative and experiential practices of museum viewing, ritual performances, trans-cultural encounter and focused reading and writing activities can all serve as powerful acts of human self-creation.

Requirements and Course Grades

This course carries a substantial reading load and is designed for graduate and highly motivated undergraduate students. Course readings and class participation are central components of this course. All readings are required unless otherwise indicated. Students will regularly present brief reports that focus on significant questions raised in the weekly readings. All of the readings, either the original texts or photocopies of the relevant chapters, will be placed on Course Reserve at the library or will be available for purchase at the bookstore.

In addition, a final paper of 15-20 pages is required. While the specific topic of the paper will vary depending on the interests of the student, the final essay should be critical and analytical in nature. A proposal for this paper and an accompanying bibliography will be due at mid-term. The essay will be due at the last class meeting, during which time each student will present a brief description of their research. This deadline is firm. Class preparation and participation, including in-class presentations, will count for two-thirds of the final grade; the essay will count for the remaining third.
Students must follow the honor code. If you directly quote or paraphrase a source, so indicate it with full citation. Any students with a documented disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with us during the first two weeks of class. All discussions will be confidential. Such students should also contact Disabled Student Services in the Ley Student Center.

Required Texts and Selections


Alex Grey, *Sacred Mirrors: The Visionary Art of Alex Grey* (Inner Traditions, 1990).


**Syllabus**

Week 1: Course Introduction and Overview

Week 2: Seeing Sex, Seeing Jesus  

Week 3: On Paradox, Inversion, Eros, Altered States and Liberalism in Text and Image  

Week 4: The Fiery Brook  
Reading: Kripal, The Serpent’s Gift, ch. 2, “Restoring the Adam of Light”

Week 5: Art, Democracy, and the Liberated Body  

Week 6: Mystical Harvard  

Week 7: Projection, Psychoanalysis and Mysticism  

Week 8: Reading as a Mystical Practice  
Reading: Kripal, *Roads of Excess*

Week 9: On the Mystical Arts of Kabbalistic Hermeneutics  
Reading: Selections from Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*

Week 10: On the Mystical Arts of Kabbalistic Hermeneutics  
Reading: Continue as above

Week 11: Flowering Light and Painted Poems  
Reading: Brennan, *The Painted Language of Flowering Light*; Fredman, *Semina Culture*
Week 12: The Mystic as Curator  
Reading: Brennan, *Curating Consciousness*, selections; Gaskell, *Art and its Publics*, pp. 149-62

Week 13: Illustrating Our Superpowers  
Reading: Grey, *Sacred Mirrors*; Kuspit, “Redeeming Art,” 251-57; Schumer, *The Silver Age*

Week 14: Your Turn  
Student Presentations

**Final Paper to be Handed in during Class**