



WHERE'S ALPHA?

How can an artist with 286K Instagram followers remain anonymous IRL? Michael Slenske pays a visit to **Alphachanneling**, a painter whose erotic yet ethereal output has collectors clamoring, to find out.

PORTRAIT BY BEC STUPAK

I'm sitting on the stoop of a nondescript apartment building in a hilly Oakland neighborhood waiting for the reclusive artist who goes by Alphachanneling. "I'm about 10 minutes away on the bus," reads the text from the artist's phone. Up until a couple of years ago, Alphachanneling was an anonymous Internet sensation who worked in design. But after *New York* magazine art critic Jerry Saltz made the artist the star of a December 2014 column ("Is There Great Art on Instagram?") and a raft of New York dealers (The Hole, Jack Hanley Gallery) came calling, the Bay Area upstart was poised to make that rare leap from social media stardom to critical success.

Kathy Grayson, director of New York-based gallery The Hole, started following @Alphachanneling after a recommendation from Taylor McKimens, a New York painter who shows with her. "Taylor was telling me how weird Instagram was, and how there were artists on it whom no one in the art world has heard of but who are really good," she recalls. She subsequently exhibited Alphachanneling's work in a September 2015 group show titled "Natural Selection." "After I Instagrammed one or two of them, collectors were like, 'Gimme!'"

Like Grayson, Hanley, who gave the artist a solo show titled "Utopian Erotic" at his Lower East Side gallery in March and featured him in his New Art Dealers Alliance Art Fair booth in New York in May, was still confused about Alphachanneling's true identity until the night of his opening.

"We weren't really sure whether he was there or whether it was a he, and every person I saw who was alone I would think, Is that the guy?" recalls Hanley. "But at the end of the



Dark Haired Women with Tan Lines, 2015.

"The exploration was personal. It wasn't to serve the work"
—Alphachanneling

opening I was in the basement in my man cave drinking a beer and talking to a friend of mine and he comes downstairs and says hi. It was funny."

The artist prefers to blur the lines. "I take that as a high compliment," says Alphachanneling about the impulse for most people to assume the artist is female. "But in another way I think, How can a woman make this? It feels male to me; maybe it's just the colors. People think it's a woman because it's a rare thing for a woman's pleasure to be focused on. They assume only a woman would want to speak about that."

When a tall, tan, soft-spoken stranger with sandy blond curls approaches the stoop, offers a hand and leads me into a greenhouse-like apartment—where cascading plants sprout or dangle from every surface—I'm less concerned about whether I'm hearing a female or male voice than with the fact that he says, "Wow, you're the first person I've ever let into this space."

"He seems really content with this little world he's set up," says Hanley, who became the second visitor a day later. "In the course of the discussion it was really clear that he doesn't especially need a gallery."

For the artist, who prefers the efficiency of selling prints direct as opposed to the "old world business" of the gallery system, Looney Tunes is the best model. "You can buy Bugs Bunny with a carrot, you can buy Bugs Bunny with a hat on. I want to create themes," says Alphachanneling, while sorting through stacks of sketches that are scattered about two desks in the studio space—"the madman's corner"—arranged in what seemed to be a dining room cluttered with guitars. "I actually take a lot of this stuff down in certain situations. It can be too much initially."

By too much, the artist is referring to the overflowing stacks, stands and file folders brimming with sketches and drawings done in marker, colored pencil and watercolor. There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of them filling the converted dining room studio. Some in plastic sheets, others framed, they depict everything from a woman urinating what appears to be golden vines around a Roman column ("blessing the phallus") to a foursome frolicking in a blue jungle under a smiling sun god ("who is just watching everything happening and is psyched about it like in children's books") to rows of buxom island beauties kneeling in some kind of Tantric prayer

group to a school of fetishistic yogis in various states of undress reaching for the perfect orgasmic pose. There are various iterations of pastel penises penetrating delicately flowering vaginas, all of which are vivisected like a cornucopia of exploding erotic mandalas. The simplicity and balance is eerily reminiscent of Matisse, if Matisse were a half-Turkish, Geneva-born, BDSM fan with a hankering for Islamic art, Swiss design and sexual shamanism. In other words, a bit much to reveal on a dinner/movie date.

"I'm pretty involved with shamanism in different forms and negotiating the difference between being an artist and a shaman," says Alphachanneling. While living in New York five years ago, the artist was busy drawing images of "power animals being liberated from the body through sexual domination" and seeing a dominatrix—just one of many sexual healers (think Tantric and body workers) the artist has had influential experiences with over the years.

"The exploration was personal. It wasn't to serve the work," explains Alphachanneling. "Yeah, it's a dominatrix, but really it's a sexual shaman, a person who is legitimately able to guide you through a space that only a person with that experience can. It's different than two people dabbling or experimenting



The Wrestlers, commissioned for *Cultured*, is an 11" X 14", two-color block, limited-edition print. It is available for \$300 exclusively at artsy.net/culturedmagazine.

with something. It's a place you would never arrive at socially or through your peers because it's a ritual. No one could stumble into it. You have to go there deliberately."

While some fans, perhaps most, gravitate to the drawings strictly for their soft sexual provocation, for the artist, all of the work relates back to a divine (if not necessarily religious) source. There are direct corollaries to the approach of Memphis Group designer Ettore Sottsass, another fan of Tantric art, after his life-changing journey to India in 1961.

"In India I found very strongly a sort of dimension of sacrality," Sottsass later remarked. "Every object could become something so related to your life that it becomes part of your vision of *la sacralità* [the sacred]."

Where some might channel these philosophical and cosmological access points through song, dance, pagan symbols, mandalas, Tibetan thangkas or yantras, Alphachanneling makes his moves via marker and brush. Born in Switzerland to Turkish and American parents, Alphachanneling's early years included impressionable trips to both Turkey and the States.

The family later moved to the East Coast and from there, Alphachanneling studied engineering and industrial design.

"I incidentally absorbed a lot of that language and way of working," says Alphachanneling. "It's more democratic. Everyone can have that image or thing they like because there are multiples of it."

During that time, Alphachanneling also began making digital 3D images of erotic desserts under a different pseudonym. "It's like Candyland meets Willy Wonka but with a more futurist thing, kind of like Wayne Thiebaud," he explains. But when the artist happened upon a copy of Federico Fellini's "The Book of Dreams" at a Manhattan bookstore, everything changed.

"It was, like, straight out of his psyche, unfiltered, and there's something about how crude and direct they were, like a childhood drawing or something out of a dream journal," says Alphachanneling. "I was really concerned with making things that were well-crafted, and then I saw this and thought technique was getting in the way. I see those sunset painters at the beach and that art is not cool, the tourist art, but I kind of identify with it. I'll just draw these people in these

situations endlessly and it's not going to get tiring to me. It will naturally innovate."

The next innovations are already afoot in the form of flora and fauna becoming characters, bodies reshaping and elongating in order to push the boundaries of realism, and costumes emerging amidst the erotic, animistic landscapes.

"I really love fashion illustration and clothing and costume," says Alphachanneling. "These plants are one expression of that, but I feel like people's clothing can carry a lot of my statement."

Whatever the case, don't expect to see the artist's face (or learn a true identity) anytime soon. "I don't see that serving my art," says Alphachanneling. While driving me to a nearby BART Station in a beat-up Jeep that seems to fit perfectly into the whole reclusive hermit motif, the artist holds forth on the puzzling pseudonym.

"In graphics you have your three colors—red, green and blue—and the alpha channel is the transparency layer in an image, so everything under it will show through," says Alphachanneling. "It's kind of cool because it's like this other invisible space that you're not going to see if you look for it. It's more about experiencing it."