

Interview with Rebecca Symons, 2011

You work has strong links and influences from the new age religions and movements. Do you feel that traditional ideas about the supernatural have influenced your work, and if so, how?

Yes, some of my work has been in part a response to various occult and esoteric groups, such as Spiritualism, witchcraft and shamanism. Aspects of these belief systems have become associated with 'new age'. I've worked closely, at different times, with individuals and groups, for example joining an evening class for trainee psychics, and attempting to genuinely have a clairvoyant experience in front of the group.

Our traditional ideas about the supernatural can be traced back to the start of the Spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth century. I am interested in how I might be able to suspend my disbelief, and challenge my preconceptions (coming from a sceptical, atheist position) and genuinely believe, through direct experience. My attempts to talk to the spirit world, or draw a spirit portrait, at an evening class, involved me following instructions to, for example, see a person's face in my mind. It was interesting how there seemed to not be a big difference between believing and not believing; we all see faces in our minds anyway - this just attributed a different meaning to those experiences (or 'visions').

There is a grey, unprovable area that is explored by such practices, something that is somewhat akin to the process of making and viewing art. We are encouraged to invest in an image or an object, and that image or object subsequently undergoes some kind of transformation. Describing the invisible at a seance or an artist suggesting the viewer enters another world are similar processes; both require a leap of faith and for us to use our imagination.

What affect do you think your I Will Heal You movement had on the people coming to the opening of the exhibition? Was this what you expected?

The exhibition was the culmination of a residency I completed in Colombia in 2007. Throughout the residency I had been developing the movement *I Will Heal You*, while simultaneously visiting and recording my encounters with various practitioners of subcultural belief systems, such as a parapsychologist, a witch, a Scientologist and Veronica Mardel, who had formed her own one-person belief system.

As the movement developed, I employed an architect, a fashion designer, a jewellery designer and a furniture maker to fabricate objects and artefacts to bring the movement to life. It also became gradually clearer that I should embody the movement's leader, by wearing the clothes and greeting visitors as they arrived. I was interested in the contradictory nature of the movement, and this was reflected in the manifesto, which I read out at the opening, and which encouraged visitors to join *I Will Heal You*, but also warned them that it was a sham.

I had also changed the signage, adding the movement's name and logo. Some

people seemed to genuinely believe in *I Will Heal You*, including Mardel, who stood up after the performance and said it had been the best day of her life! In some ways I was seeing what would happen if I pushed something to its logical conclusion. The movement was a construction, but what would happen if I believed in it - would it somehow come true for both me and the visitors?

Please tell me more about the jewellery designed for this work.

Oscar Montoya was a local jewellery designer, and I met with him and the other practitioners (furniture maker, fashion designer and architect) to discuss the aims of the movement, and to ask him to respond to the manifesto. Ultimately, the jewellery was intended to be worn by members of the movement during ceremony - at an event such as the exhibition opening.

I have compared the contradictory element in your work with the relationship people have with religion today. For example, the scientific information we have on evolution disproves the Christian idea of creation which puts religious people in a dilemma, ignore science and stick faithfully to the bibles teachings or adapt what is written in the bible to fit in with science. In a more spiritual approach to this idea, I have talked about how New Age religions pick and choose aspects from many religions, new and old, to suit their lifestyle. Some of these religions contradict each other, and more importantly have been in conflict through-out history. I wondered if you have any response to this comparison.

I agree, it's a dilemma that keeps changing and evolving. So many religions are interrelated - some Christians might regard Pagans as archaic heathens, but a large part of Christianity is based, often quite directly on pre-Christian belief systems such as Paganism. The Catholic act of transubstantiation has it's roots in Pagan magic.

New Age religions, that first emerged in the 1960s, are in many ways a patchwork of what at the time was considered to be alternative and exotic; such as Indian spiritualism. This could be seen as part of a wider story of the development of organised (or more minor) belief systems - that they are often adapted to suit social changes and the needs of the people. In other words (as I've found out through first hand experience), it's possible to see what you want to see, or experience what you want to experience, whether this involves a manipulating of various quasi-spiritual ideas and tendencies (as in *I Will Heal You*) or appearing to communicate with someone who has died, despite its apparent impossibility (as in my work with mediums).