

INTERVIEW

Soul Mapping

A Conversation with Alexandra Eldridge

KATHERINE OLIVETTI



Portrait of Alexandra (Courtesy of Jennifer Esperanza.)

ALEXANDRA ELDRIDGE (AE): I paint for self-revelation. That involves finding a means to access my unconscious. If I can do that, what is created is the possibility that something amazing may happen. Every painting has a story, so many stories, but with no beginning and no end. One collector, whose dog had just died, told me that after he bought my painting, which depicted a dog with a halo standing at the top of the stairs, he got another dog. The new dog goes up to the painting and barks at it all the time! I love when I hear these stories, love when people can connect to the work through their own dreams, images, or direct experiences. And energy, you know, the paintings have their own energy—that can even set a dog barking!



Spirit Dog, m/m, 36" × 24"

KATHERINE OLIVETTI (KO): Yes, the images carry energy. My impression of your work is especially that the paintings have a dreamy quality.

AE: A friend recently said, “I’ve finally figured you out. You are always floating—not completely here.” And she was right. I’ve never felt completely here, or entirely of this world. My kindergarten report card said, “Alexandra lives very much in her imagination.” Wandering the inner worlds is where I feel most at home. Sometimes the work precedes my knowing what my psyche has to tell me. Such as this one with the stag.



Stag of Many Tynes, m/m on panel, 36" × 48"

In this painting, I have inscribed a quote from Jung, “Who am I that this is happening to me?” Can you see; it begins at the bottom? At the time I felt very much in the unknown, suspended over the abyss, and the stag appeared in my painting with flames at the tips of his antlers. I discovered later that the Stag of Many Tynes, a stag with his antlers aflame, is the form the shaman takes when he is ready for his transformational journey. I knew nothing of this when I was working on this painting. And here he is, right on the edge of my own journey.

KO: As Jungian analysts we learn about the archetypes, but here it is—the image emerging naturally out of your own unconscious process.

AE: Perhaps it comes easily because I naturally cultivated my imagination from early on. I grew up in a large, old house full of books. Beginning in childhood I read poetry, fairy tales, and mythology in a wood-lined 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.

KO: What was family life like for you?

AE: Apart from the many children I mentioned, both parents were artists and writers. My mother and father wrote and illustrated twenty-seven children's books. They also created a nationally syndicated comic strip based on our family life, including our two poodles that commented on the crazy things that went on in the Devlin household. Our large Victorian house in Westfield, New Jersey, full of children coming and going, was one of beauty: flowers, paintings, antique carousel horses, and classical music. My mother's painting studio was downstairs and my father's upstairs. One year we got a donkey for Christmas! My father was also an architectural historian and wrote books about the Victorian period of architecture in America. New Jersey had many historical areas, and my father would drive us around, showing us different architectural styles. I had a fortunate start in life. From early on I understood that one could make a life as an artist. I also inherited a strong work ethic. As a child, I set up my easel next to my mother's and we would paint together. My parents' painting styles were more reality oriented, but they introduced me to the beauty of the outer world.

KO: Was it through your parents that you became interested in William Blake?

AE: No. It was my art professor husband who introduced me to that world. Through Blake I was returning to the world I had always inhabited, the inner world of deeper realities.

KO: Tell me about the Blake influence.

AE: I was part of an honors program at Ohio University that allowed you to create your own curriculum. Mine was Art and Literature. I took a figure drawing class called "Figure and Metaphor" and in the professor's teaching, I heard the voice of a poet and mystic and felt my soul had come home. I married my art professor not long after. He was twenty years older than me, divorced at the time. Blake had been his inspiration for many years. As an art professor, what he really taught was the Imagination. We bought and restored a log cabin that was 150 years old, situated on a 70 acre farm, and started a community we called *Golgonooza*, a name taken from Blake's mythology meaning the Visionary City of Art. For seventeen years we lived an idyllic life. People came from all over, busloads from universities to the Church and School of William Blake. Every Sunday we would gather to read and discuss the works of Blake. It was quite a beautiful existence: nature, art, psyche, life, all one and the same. We grew organic gardens, raised chickens, sheep, and geese, spun the wool of the sheep, and even made parchment from their hides. Wines were made from elderflowers, gooseberries, and other fruits we grew ourselves. There was a deep connection to both the Earth and the Heavens. We built our own buildings, put on plays and pageants, all inspired



Photo of theatrical event in Golgonooza

from the ideas of Blake. Marriages and baptisms took place there as well, in the name of the Divine Imagination. It was a fantastic time. We had an establishment called the Scriptorium, which was for the making of handmade books.

In the Scriptorium, I created my own illuminated manuscripts, not unlike a monastic scribe, but rather than being based on the Bible, I used the ideas and words of William Blake. We printed on an old platen press; we silk-screened, hand-colored, and hand-bound books. I wrote and illustrated a William Blake Bestiary and also a William Blake Emblem book with Blake's poetry and my symbolic imagery. This was done on a seventeenth antiphonal leave, a page from a songbook. I scraped off the notations and painted and gold leafed the parchment to try to comprehend Blake's cosmology.

And here twenty years later, on the island of Elba, I created a contemporary manuscript in a thirteenth-century hermitage where once manuscripts had been made! The text was a poem from Arseniy Tarkovsky.



Photo of Scriptorium



Blake's Cosmology (illuminated manuscript), watercolor on parchment, 24" x 18"



And the Sacrificial Urn (contemporary manuscript), m/m on panel, 12" x 24"

KO: It sounds as though it was a philosophically based life.

AE: We lived... It was a strong intimacy with the earth, but maybe more so it was about ideas, and Blake's were a stepping off point. In my garden I had painted a sign to influence the growth of the vegetables. "Every natural effect has a Spiritual Cause." Our morning meditation was reading from Blake for an hour. We were nourishing a visionary

relationship to the world. “Art is conversing with Eternity,” claims Blake, so the message was really about the interweaving of art and spirituality. Blake gave me the possibility of art as a spiritual path.

KO: What an incredible journey you’ve had!

AE: Yes. It’s so interesting how one experiences one’s life. You are just in it. I have felt very led all my life. There is a wonderful quote from Tarkovsky, “I would readily pay with my life for a safe place. . . . Were it not that life’s flying needle Leads me on through the world like a thread.” Ariadne’s red thread or Blake’s golden thread—

KO: What Blake articulated was what you were called to live, a convergence.

AE: Yes. You know Yeats said Blake was the first one to declare a religion of art, and I think that’s what we were doing.

KO: And what happened?

AE: Well, eventually I had to leave it. In 1986, I was thirty-six and had two little children. I lived this isolated, rarified existence, and I had to leave it to know more about the world. There was little adversity. Even in my growing up, we lived a separate kind of life. Perhaps it was a call to individuation. I had to know life on my own, and it’s been a wild journey since that time! Always, in a way, trying to return to that life, but it had to be of my own making. I had to leave my mentor and teacher. It was time to become my own teacher. I do have a radically alone soul, and I recognized that early on in my family. No matter how connected I felt, I also felt alone—being in the world but not quite of it. After I left, I’ve been in the world. I’ve traveled a great deal, set up studios in Paris and New York, having rich experiences along the way. I needed the outer world; that was what called me. I’ve gone through a long period of that. Right now, I’m trying to regulate the fires a bit.

KO: How brave of you to strike out on your own. You were called to this more individual challenge. Did that change your artwork?

AE: When I was in the Blake community, the images were floating. Everything had wings. After I left the angels came down to earth more. I began to see the extraordinary in the ordinary. The houses were still uprooted, but I started dealing with concrete things and seeing the spiritual in matter.

KO: It sounds like the inner and the outer were getting more connected.

AE: Yes. I think so. That’s a perfect way of saying it.

KO: It’s so interesting, looking at your art. It has that dreamy quality, but—it’s a dog, an egg, a chair, a ladder—grounded earthy images communicated in a dreamy way.

AE: Through the years I have created my own symbology, deconstructing the symbols continuously. Ladders, dresses, hourglasses, houses, eggs, swings, birds, deer, rabbits. They keep returning in various forms—always originating from a very personal place, but expanding into the universal.

KO: Now had your husband introduced you to Jung or did you find him on your own?

AE: Actually it was through him that I came to Jung. My husband had an extensive, diverse, and fabulous library—Jung, the mystics, mythology, poetry, books of magic and arcane literature, esoterica, etc. I give him so much credit for the foundation of my spiritual and creative life, my intellectual expansion, and my parents as well. I left Golgonooza with two young children, seven and four years old, a thousand dollars to my name, and an old beat up VW. I had a suitcase for each of us, my art supplies, and I took off. I had no choice in the matter. It was like there was a force running through me.

KO: Where did you go?

AE: We went to New York and lived on Roosevelt Island. I consulted my first psychic and told her my situation. I was thinking of moving to San Francisco. She told me that I was not going there, but going to the Southwest. She said I would be living there in a few months. This all came true, despite the fact that I had never been there. When I arrived in Santa Fe, I felt an intense familiarity. Immediately I found a great place to live, and just like the psychic said, within a month I'd be settled, but actually, it only took two weeks and I was at home in Santa Fe! It continues to be my home base. After the children went off to college, I started traveling and living all over the world. I was in Paris for six months and painted a mural in Place des Vosges. I took a pilgrimage to see the Black Madonnas in central France. I did residencies in Spain and Italy. India called me to explore Kali. I had shows in Paris, London, Slovenia, and Serbia.

KO: What would you say now fuels your creative instinct?

AE: This may sound strange, but more than anything, the word. I've been a reader of poetry all my life. Through poetry one uses words to be in the wordless. I think I have been trying to paint poetry. So much of my work is inspired by words and ideas. Blake. Rumi. Rilke. Tarkovsky. St. John of the Cross. T. S. Elliot, Emily Dickinson, and others. And then my dreams have always fed my paintings. Sometimes I try to paint the dreams just as I have experienced them. These days the waking dream is very available to me. Inspiration still comes like it did when I was a child: from mythology and poetry, and then having deep soul experiences like visiting the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii, and my encounters with people, and love—yes love—is highly inspiring for my work.

KO: Are there any of the images that are particularly inspired by a dream?

AE: Yes. This one, the chair with the big stone.



Life of the Soul, m/m on panel, 60" × 72"

I had a dream that there was a chair with a rock precariously balanced on it. Atop the rock was a beautiful, big fat mother bird and her egg. She seemed perfectly confident about where she was perched. It spoke to me of trust, and the way, even though her situation was precarious, she trusted it with her precious egg. Faith. Like life, right? This could be the trust that I have in the richness of the inner world, of the unconscious, of the Imagination. Blake would call it “the only real and eternal world.” It helps to give meaning to life. I placed this image in a room and had texts spinning around the chair. For me, it’s important to use old texts, or anything that has a history. My friend is always feeding me with old books, prophecies of Merlin, for example. These written pages are my intellectual, spiritual history. Here are other images that have personal meaning to me—feet.



Substance and Rapture, m/m on old Chinese scroll,
55" × 28"



Stepping into Destiny, m/m on panel, 40" × 30"

I have taken a number of pilgrimages. When I was in France looking at the Black Madonnas, I became intrigued with this aspect of Christianity, the heretical aspect of a more dimensional Mary. It gave me hope for the tradition in which I grew up. I spent time in churches that were built on pagan sites. During this time I painted many feet. You know, the Hindus say the spirit comes up through the feet. The one with the flower is actually a photo of a friend's feet on an old Chinese scroll. I wrote down the quote, "Art degraded, imagination denied, war governed the nations." You'll find Jung in here as well. I like to use old materials such as scrolls that have had a history. Who knows how long their life is. But their fragility speaks of the transience of life. I put old fragments or ephemera in my art because it carries energy of the time and place with it.

KO: (As we are looking over the images.) Oh, I love the rabbit!

AE: Yes, the rabbit is a favorite. Where the rabbit came from? Always, it represents, for me, vulnerability. I spent many years living alone by choice. When my parents died, I was able to buy a sweet little house about five miles outside of Santa Fe. I was an obsessive worker and felt married to my art. The act of painting long hours could easily create heightened sensations. I'd come home to my



Wild Hare, m/m on panel, 60" × 30"



Ascension and Descension, m/m on old Chinese scroll, 65" × 30"

fenced-in dwelling, and find beautiful rabbits looking up fearlessly. They greeted me nightly. Here they were—the most preyed upon of animals, staring at me in their utter vulnerability. We had a beautiful connection because I, too, felt so vulnerable. So I've done a lot of rabbit paintings, and often I've incorporated the adage: love is built on vulnerability. They have become very much a part of my symbol system. For me, the symbol must be unlimited and without restriction. Each has a life of its own. I just gathered a whole group of ladder paintings, maybe fifteen images from many years, all in different situations, but always the ladder. Jung said something like—I had to climb down many ladders to reach out to the clod of clay that I am. That's where the answer is. Do you know that quote?

KO: I understand the idea although I'm not sure where Jung said that. It's about really living. Symbols aren't just pretty pictures, they carry with them all the blood and sweat of lived life. Your relationship to certain images brings to mind a Camus quote. I know I'm not going to get it right, but he said that he was sure of one thing, that the work is nothing more than a slow journey through the winding path of art to discover over and over again the several simple and great images upon which the heart first opened.¹ There it is—the ladder.

AE: I love that part. I feel so fortunate when I go to the canvas, I'm not talking to that canvas; it speaks to me, through me. It's taken a long time to get here, to never really worry about what to paint. The sense of being a vessel is such a gift—that trust—that bird on the rock. We are all interconnected; there is this collective unconscious and the archetypes and they work through us. I don't know how it works, but some new arrangement of ideas comes through. In my latest painting there is a deer with colorful antlers looking into this vast emptiness, but the hope is that there is new growth in the expression of many colored leaves. On its head, there are antlers that are sprouting joyous foliage.



Leaves Eddied Over the Earth's Scar, m/m on panel, 16" × 16"

KO: It's so interesting; the images are coming through you and you're the servant who paints. Even though they have a personal quality, they also capture something so universal. I'm still looking at the rabbit. It's so vulnerable; it's looking at me. It's almost like my own vulnerability is looking back at me.

AE: Oh yes, how the images work on us!

KO: That state of vulnerability reminds me of an experience I had. I won't go into the whole story, but the short version is that I was at the beach in Amagansett one summer and my beloved cat escaped from the house and was lost. After a week, I was forlorn and grief stricken. I came home from the beach to find a note left by my husband that said he'd gone to look for the cat in a nearby neighborhood. A neighbor called to say she'd seen a Siamese cat—which my Samantha was. My husband returned from the search disappointed, but I decided to go back and search the neighborhood systematically. I was determined to find her. For the rest of the afternoon, I combed every yard, calling her, pssss-psss-psss-here-kitty-kitty-kitty-ing her. After several hours when I had not found her, I broke down. I collapsed on the front steps of a house and sobbed. As I wept, a black cat came and rubbed back and forth against my legs. Between heaves and tears, I told the cat my sad tale. Observing my behavior, my husband became deeply concerned. When I began talking to the cat, I think it seemed to him I was actually becoming psychotic! He pulled me into the car and began to drive away. As we did that, the black cat began to wander up the street. Totally on instinct, I jumped from the slow moving car to follow the cat. He led me about a quarter of a mile up the road, and then turned and wandered into a patch of woods with me trailing behind. And there crouched in the brush was Samantha! Somehow the cat knew. Somehow my vulnerability had reduced me to a state of instinct that was communicable. That's how the rabbit strikes me. I know that black cat was wordless, but somehow when I was brought to my knees, completely unguarded, something else came through.

AE: I love that story! When I talk about these big changes that I made, that's how it was. It was like a force was coming through me. I had no choice; I had to follow, just like you had to follow that cat. What an incredible place—what I value most in the act of painting—you can get there—it's so beyond you, so transcendental, so universal, yet you can get there. You connect to something so much greater and so far beyond yourself. I think that's why painting is essential to my life. It is revelation, therapy, confession, deep connection to the unknown. You do it with all the trust in the world, like you with the black cat. You don't know where you're going, you just trust, and follow something unknown.

KO: Yes. There wasn't even thought. I didn't have the thought—oh, I think that black cat knows where Samantha is. I just knew I had to get out of the car and follow. The cat and I were connected in some irresistible way.

AE: I love that. Sometimes I despair because so much of the art world does not deal with the emotional qualities of our lives, nor our inner lives. That landscape, what can be discovered

there, is so incredible. The issues of formality in art, they bore me. That's just not thrilling. But the great themes of life like love, fear, consciousness, birth, and death—now that's where the fascination lies for me.

KO: It's discovery.

AE: Yes, discovery! More than ever I am desperate to know why I am here. As Jung would say, "Who am I that this is happening to me?" I am just desperate to know. Every day I can engage in this work, I can learn more. When I go to paint, I don't really know what I'm painting, thank God, I'll just begin somewhere, and then I'll see something else. What could go there? Why not add this?

KO: So the painting unfolds.

AE: Yes. I'm always asking questions. I feel as a painter, like what the French call the *flaneur*, the aimless wanderer. This painting is a good example.



Everything Meets Up Continuously, m/m on panel, 48" × 54"

It began with the upper-right-hand corner with the book. Just before my mother died, she called me and said there was a book she wanted me to have. It was in the corner of the house, so I got the book. In it she had written all her ideas on art, poetry, philosophy. It was a real treasure. This was where she used to sit in the house every night after the seven kids were asleep, helping my father to think up gags for the comic strip or writing her own poetry. The whole painting began with that. Then over to the bed on the left—my dreams, which are always so important, and then I painted a house. But it didn't feel right, so I put up the screen to block it out. I strung this along here—there are words that say something like “everything meets up continuously, past and future”—so once again, what we are talking about—everything is interconnected. Part of the beauty of being an artist or a poet is that you can rupture time and space. That helps so much to get you to another level, the larger perspective of things. One of the revealing things I've done is to put images up on Facebook. I never promote what a painting means. The observer sees through their own lens and the responses are always so fascinating to me. Here is one of my houses. (Alexandra shows me another image.)



Winged Protection, m/m on panel 40" × 30"



My Father's House, m/m on panel 48" × 60"

My father was so knowledgeable about architecture and history. He painted beautiful images of houses, an image that figures largely in my symbology—giving a habitation for my soul's varied moods. After my father died, I placed his houses in my paintings. Here is one that I did after returning from India and learning of Ganesh, the remover of obstacles.

I was trying to paint my grief away. In this one I remember painting this line of butterflies. Then I opened a book on shamanism. It said something about butterflies protecting the home, so once again the work went out ahead of me.



Solutio, m/m on panel, 24" × 18"



Hanged Man Tarot Card, m/m panel, 24" × 18"

KO: What an image! Butterflies protecting you! I love it!

AE: (showing another painting, which appears on the cover of this issue) I started studying palmistry.

I started painting the hand, large, sometimes five feet tall. I researched the fingertips and found there are astrological correspondences. I used a Chinese scroll to build the hand. To me, it looks like the landscape of the soul, scripting destiny. As I was working on the piece, I heard a song that said, "Come sail your ships around me." A Nick Cave song. And while I was painting suddenly ships were sailing around the hand of destiny, old plat maps of Brooklyn, and eggs showed up. It just grew. I am interested in all the hermetic arts. I'm not a Tarot reader, but I got interested in the idea of it. It strikes me as the mapping of an archetypal journey. Actually I've begun a whole series of paintings on the major arcana of the Tarot in collaboration with a poet who is writing poems to each image and using the cards as creativity prompts. Here's one of the cards I've painted:

And this one (pointing to another painting) is about destroying the "made up mind."

KO: Wait a second! You've done a whole series on the Tarot?

AE: Not entirely finished, but yes.

KO: I think we might have to do a whole other series—maybe just the Tarot imagery.

AE: Wonderful! But about this other painting, the hourglass and the crow. It's a very large painting, and hard to see in the smaller reproduction, but in this hourglass, instead of sand, tiny words are spilling down through the glass, tiny words, broken up, and they fall down on the crow of wisdom. This is about destroying the made-up mind. Our ideas need to be deconstructed the minute they become fixed. The hourglass is a potent image for me. It also has the word *Solutio* written on the painting. I painted this when I began to read about alchemy, through Jung in particular.



We Are in the World to Love the World, m/m on panel, 24" × 18"

KO: What really strikes me about your work is that it connects the very concrete with the abstract or the earthly with the spiritual, matter with the ethereal. It runs through everything.

AE: Yes. I'm so glad you see that. The main thing I'm doing through the image is seeing the soul. That's my whole thrust. Through the image I realize the soul. My paintings are insights, acknowledgements, or if you will, a soul map of my journey through life. I use the work in a shamanic way. The images are markers along this journey of life. They are constantly revealing to me, spelling out, allowing me to step into my destiny along the way. I try to bridge the conscious and unconscious. Artists that inspire me—that's what they have done, and that's my aim—to expose the inner life in any way that I can. And to show the dark and the light. I'm hoping that both elements happen in my images.

KO: You've done that so successfully. I'm really awed.

AE: Actually, I'm humbled by your response. It's such a gift really. It has little to do with me.

KO: Alexandra, thank you so much for sharing so much about your work and your process with me, as you say, your soul mapping.

ENDNOTE

1. "... since at least I know this, with sure and certain knowledge: a man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover, through the detours of art, those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened."

Or in the French "...*qu'une oeuvre d'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce long cheminement pour retrouver par les detours de l'art les deux ou trois images simples et grandes sur lesquelles le coeur, une premiere fois, s'est ouvert.*"

From Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Thody, translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, New York: Vintage Books, 1970, 17.

ALEXANDRA ELDRIDGE, born of artist parents, received her BA in Art and Literature at Ohio University. She continued her education at Cambridge University in England, Santa Reparata Graphic Workshop in Florence, Penland College in North Carolina, and most recently at the Photographers' Formulary in Montana. She co-founded Golgonooza, an establishment for the arts based on the philosophies of William Blake. She has had over forty solo shows and has participated in many group shows throughout the United States (New York, California, and Santa Fe) and abroad (Paris, London, and Belgrade). Alexandra has been commissioned to paint murals in the Place des Vosges, Paris, and her work has been used on the cover of many books of poetry. Traveling, an important part of her inspiration, has taken her to artists' residencies in Elba, Italy, and the Valparaiso Foundation in Almeria, Spain. *Art News*, *Art on Paper*, *New American Painting*, and *One Hundred Painters of the Southwest* are just a few of the publications in which Alexandra has been featured. Alexandra Eldridge's paintings are in many prestigious collections, including those of William Hurt, Jo Andres and Steve Buscemi, and Edie Falco.

KATHERINE OLIVETTI, MA, MSSW, is a Jungian Analyst who practices in Woodside, California, and is a member of the C. G. Jung Institute of San Francisco and the New York Association for Analytical Psychology. A graduate of Columbia University; the C. G. Jung Institute of New York, where she taught, supervised, and served as President; and the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic where she was certified as a Family Therapist, she also served as a clinical instructor on the faculty of the Child Study Center at Yale University and was a member of the Board of Directors of the Philoctetes Center for the Study of the Imagination. She

has a longstanding interest in the creative process and issues of feminine psychology about which she has lectured, taught, and written. She is the editor of *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*. Her website is: katherineolivetti.com. *Correspondence*: 112 Marine Road, Woodside, CA 94062, USA. E-mail: katherineolivetti@gmail.com.

ABSTRACT

Alexandra Eldridge shares the circumstances of her early life, the factors that shaped her as an artist, and the processes that emerge as she goes to her canvas. She describes her time as a co-founder and long-time resident of an artistic community based on the principles of William Blake, a community that she and her husband called Golgonooza after Blake's City of Art. In her words, "My paintings are insights, acknowledgements, or if you will, a soul map of my journey through life."

KEY WORDS

William Blake, dreams, Alexandra Eldridge, Golgonooza, mythology, painting, poetry, soul, symbology, spirituality in art