

DAZED

The Life and Art of Salvador Dalí's Surrealist Disciple Steven F. Arnold

Uncovering the story behind the countercultural artist and photographer as his little-known work finally takes centre stage in a new exhibition



Dressed for Dalí

In 1974, American artist Steven F. Arnold travelled to Spain at the behest of Salvador Dalí, who was opening the Dalí Theatre and Museum in Catalonia that September and had embraced Arnold as his protégé.

The legendary surrealist, known to tire of people in a matter of minutes, was utterly enchanted with the 31-year-old artist and dubbed him the “prince” of his Court of Miracles – his eccentric, eclectic coterie that included Donyale Luna, David Bowie, Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithfull, Ultra Violet, and Amanda Lear, as well as Arnold’s dear friends Pandora and Kaisik Wong.

“They made a scene,” says Vishnu Dass, Director of the Steven Arnold Museum and Archive. “In Spain, Dalí was occupied with getting press. He would have them dress and take them to public events as his entourage for the months leading up to the museum. There are newspaper clippings from Spanish newspapers that talk about riots with Dalí’s transvestites.”

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Their cosmic connection was just one of the extraordinary relationships Arnold had throughout his life. “I call Steven a Queer Mystic,” Dass says. “His ultimate goal was to create a space where he himself and all those he loved could exist in a place that wasn’t binary or judging.”

As an artist who never pursued fame, status, or wealth, Arnold was an integral figure in the American counterculture for 30 years, a true influencer whose legacy is being reexamined now, 25 years after his untimely death from complications due to Aids. In advance of an exhibition of his work at Fahey/Klein Gallery during The Photography Show presented by AIPAD – which opens today – Dass takes us on a magical journey through Arnold’s life and art.

Born in Oakland, California in 1943, Arnold spent his formative years in the attic where he would create and stage elaborate puppet theatre shows, intuitively connecting with the cosmological possibilities of art.

In high school, he met two women who would change his life: his lifelong friend and collaborator, Pandora, and art teacher Violet Chew, who introduced him to Eastern spiritual traditions, art history, and fashion. “She believed artists should use their artwork to heal themselves and the world on a soul level,” Dass says.

“Steven was a deep mystic. That showed through the love and reverence he gave to his work. He encouraged everyone around him to be artists. He loved his friends so intently and that was his service.”

In 1961, Arnold won a full scholarship to the San Francisco Art Institute, then travelled to Paris to study at École des Beaux-Arts, but was bored with the constraints of classical instruction. Arnold decamped to a hippie commune on the Spanish island of Formentera, where he spent three months taking LSD.

When he came back from the trip, Arnold created his first student film, *Messages, Messages*, which was instantly recognised and shown at Cannes’ Directors’ Fortnight. Determined to make his hometown debut unforgettable, Arnold rented the Palace Theatre in San Francisco’s North Beach for the film’s hometown premiere in February 1968, selling 2,000 tickets on opening night.

After his stunning success, the theatre owners invited Arnold to return. One month later he launched the Nocturnal Dream Shows, the very first weekly midnight movies showcase in America – a cult phenomenon and counterculture sanctuary.

“They would screen old surrealist films, Betty Boop cartoons, turn of the century pornography, and sci-fi films like *Metropolis*. Every week had a theme and people started dressing for it. It was a happening,” Dass says.

“Steven ran the ticket booth and would dress in drag sometimes. There was a photograph of him from 1969 or 1970 that was widely spread in underground magazines and he looks like Frankenfurter from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (which was later released in 1973).”

Arnold also gave the Cockettes their start – before the avant-garde hippie theatre group even named themselves. Unable to afford tickets, Arnold struck a deal on Halloween 1969: they could attend for free if they were willing to perform on stage. Lo and behold, a constellation of stars was born in San Francisco that night.

When Arnold released *Luminous Procuress*, his first full-length feature film in 1971, he received his second invitation to Cannes’ Directors’ Fortnight. The film stars Arnold’s childhood friend Pandora as the procuress. It starts with the base levels of human experience, becoming increasingly surreal until gender is obliterated in a Fellini-esque romp.

Two years later, Arnold set his sights on Dalí, bringing a box of prints to the St. Regis Hotel in New York, where the surrealist held court. “Dalí’s head exploded,” Dass says.

“He arranged for it to be shown at the Rizzoli screening room. Their projector broke down and they had to reschedule, so Dalí rented the Versailles Room, the grand ballroom at the St. Regis, and they did a huge event for *Luminous Procuress*. Andy Warhol, Bob Colacello, and all of New York’s artistic elite came to see it.”

Arnold continued to visit Dalí at the St. Regis every day for three months, completely taken with his guru. Arnold would kneel at Dalí’s feet or by his side during dinner at Trader Vic’s. “Steven was able to hold his interest,” Dass says. “They went into worlds together for hours at a time, being in an alternate reality that they created in each other’s presence.”

The following year, Dalí invited him to Spain. Here, Arnold worked on the collages for the museum entry with Amanda Lear and on the Shrine Room with Kaisik Wong.

“A big difference between Steven and Dalí, was that Dalí was an alchemist. For him, gold was the highest manifestation,” Dass explains. “Whereas Steven would write, ‘Sell your gold for your art’. To Steven, the ultimate alchemy was creation. Gold was a means to further that.”

In the mid-1970s, Arnold rented an abandoned pretzel factory in east Los Angeles that had an old Victorian house in the back that he transformed into his studio and home. Here, he began his greatest series of work: a series of black and white tableau vivant photographs that allowed him to showcase his talents and cosmology simultaneously.

Arnold would work on two or three stages at a time, often setting up meditation cushions and a Tibetan singing bowl in front so he could sit before it and let it speak to him. Each photograph allowed Arnold the opportunity to execute his talents for painting, drawing, set design, costume, makeup, and casting in a single image. Shooting on black velvet so there would be no shadows, Arnold constructed intricate scenes crafted from found objects, detritus, and dime store products.

“The creation of each piece was a ritual. He would be drinking vermouth, bring in models, have them cut out shapes,” Dass says. “He thought of his work as thangkas, in the tradition of ancient Tibetan Buddhism, as objects for meditation. He was trying to bridge shadow and light with the all-encompassing love that he had.”

“There’s an interview of Steven on Haight-Asbury in 1965 when he was 17. He’s talking about how the old mythologies have gotten tired and people don’t want to engage with them because they have no point of reference in modern society,” Dass says.

“It’s our tendency as humans to divide everything into binaries, and he saw that within the container of spirit, all of those elements are present and no part is holier than any other. He was dissolving gender identity, instead of further separating and he saw that as a deeply spiritual mindset to inhabit because when we identify with one part of the binary everything else becomes other.”

With the advent of Aids in 1981, Los Angeles was hard hit as Arnold saw his friends begin to die of a virulent disease that was systemically ignored in the early years of the crisis. But rather than portray the holocaust happening on earth, Arnold focused his energy into sharing their ascension to heaven as ethereal spirits.

“When people started getting sick he began photographing male angels,” Dass reveals. “He said, ‘All my friends are taking their wings.’ He saw it was time, no matter how brutal and heartbreaking it was. When Steven was diagnosed in 1987, he started thinking of his art and wanting to use his art in a way that was healing to people.”

Knowing his time was limited, Arnold kept going as long as he could. But without any money, the dilapidated studio had fallen apart by 1993. His friends rallied together, renting a house near the Design Center where he could spend his final days, sketching portraits of his friends when they came to visit.

“I asked Ellen Burstyn what his reaction was when he got diagnosed, and she said, ‘He was like, “Now we’re here, this is what we’re doing, we’re dying of Aids,’” Dass says.

“Ellen showed me photographs of him after he died. They covered him in gold lame, jewels, and flowers. He looked like a holy man. There was a beautiful shrine they built around his body when he died. He was at peace. He had people he loved around him. He told her, ‘I have it all planned, my entrance into heaven’, and Ellen said, ‘What are you going to wear darling?’

Dass recently completed *Steven Arnold: Heavenly Bodies*, a documentary film currently being entered into film festivals that captures the luminous vision, exquisite sensitivity, and innovative spirit of the artist. The film opens with actress Ellen Burstyn reading from Arnold’s 1967 journal, sharing the words of a young visionary at the dawn of his career, sharing faith in the power of art, expression, and community:

“We belong to a special, secret order of angel creatures and our troop is a magic company, surrounded by a veil. We are delicate animals, creatures of beauty and elegance, easily wounded so we must join forces to remind each other, to stimulate, to entertain, to create together for in creation we are the happiest and highest light to the world. Let us take the gifts given us and astound the world in the wonder our creativity. It is our role.”