Lauren & Liam – Transcription

ICVA Podcast — Episode 2

Conversations at the Institute of Contemporary Visionary Arts, with Lauren McMahon.

Lauren: Hello. I have Sleepr in the studio with me today. Welcome.

Liam: Thank you so much.

Lauren: Thanks, Sleepr. Sleepr is an anonymous artist whose surrealist art explores the outer edges of perception and reality. His work draws on expanded states of consciousness and deep philosophical inquiry to reveal what usually lies just beyond reach. Sleepr has been an artist in residence at Art Basel Miami, he recently had a sold-out show in London called *Secrets*, and I believe that towards the end of last year he spent a month in the Amazon with a shaman. To start us off, I wanted you to come in today to talk about visionary art and what it means to you, because as a visionary artist currently practising within the art world, I think yours is a really vital perspective.

So my first question is: do you consider yourself a visionary artist? And within that, what does visionary art actually mean to you?

Liam: Yes, I do consider myself a visionary artist, perhaps in a technical sense of what the word really means. There are probably many interpretations of the term, but I take it to mean a person who is attempting to document information that is only accessible through visions. And I separate the term "visions" from mental imagery.

Within mental imagery there are a number of quadrants: dreams, memory, imagination and hallucination. Even within those four quadrants, there isn't a category for visions. By visions, I mean that you're perceiving a real source of information, real in the sense that it's really there, or it's really coming from somewhere else. We think of dreams, imagination and hallucinations as made-up things that come from within us, constructed mental representations of the things we've consumed and seen. And our memories are a kind of playback of the things we've perceived. But none of those are treated as a real source of information. Visions are a new

category of information. They're not well understood by the average person. Most people think of hallucinations as fireworks, or random firings in the brain. But as you dig down into that category, you realise there are more interesting complexities happening inside that space.

And so an interesting dilemma arises. When you experience visions, they feel so real, or they feel like they're coming from somewhere real, and you then go about the process of trying to document them. So I think the visionary artist is someone who is, first, experiencing those visions in their day-to-day world as a source of inspiration and a source of information, and second, trying to capture them. There are many variations and options in how you go about doing that. But I think those are the two key ideas: one, that you're experiencing these visionary states, and two, that you're trying to capture them and bring them back.

Lauren: Okay. So would you say visionary states are different to altered states of consciousness, or do they sit in the same category for you? And do you feel that, to access these visions, altered states of consciousness are a central part of visionary art? Do you have to be experiencing altered states of consciousness to be producing genuine visionary art?

Liam: I think "altered states of consciousness" is... I'm not quite sure of the full depth of what that term means. Any heightened state of consciousness could be—

Lauren: It could be meditation, for example.

Liam: Exactly. Or Wim Hof breathing. There's a lot of breathwork that produces visionary states. And if you dig deeper and deeper, you find that it may be producing an increase in DMT production, which is then the same as an altered state. They end up being two roads that lead to the same outcome, these visionary states, but they were triggered in different ways. On the surface, the term "altered state" maybe doesn't apply to something that feels very organic and natural, like meditation or breathing. But if you look at Tibetan Buddhism, these were very advanced meditators, and their writings are filled with extreme visions of extremely wild things. So I would say even those are highly altered states of consciousness.

But to answer your question generally, I think there are many different paths that can lead to these visionary states. It's not a prerequisite that the state is altered by chemicals or

psychedelic drugs; it could be through meditation, or through a divine bolt of lightning in a random moment. I don't think it matters too much. But I do think there's a consistency of destination that seems to recur across some of those different paths. It does seem quite difficult for some paths to reach other destinations. So although I just said all roads lead to the same place, I'm actually not sure, because it seems there are unique places that can be reached through some unique paths.

Lauren: It's really interesting that you said "destinations", because when I look at and experience your work, it feels otherworldly. So for somebody who's looking at a Sleepr piece and asking you where it's coming from, what would you say?

Liam: "Where is it coming from" as in where have I seen these things, or where is the style coming from?

Lauren: I think it's more the feeling of it being from another dimension. Is it coming from another dimension? Is it coming from somewhere other than this place?

Liam: I'm not sure, but I really think there's something interesting happening. These are just my opinions about my own work, but my work obviously sits on a gradient. Some works feel very resonant and some feel quite weak in resonance. But some of the works feel very potently like there's some place, thing, entity, being or force that's trying to come through, or that has been really inspiring in the creation of that work.

Lauren: Have you ever made work where the work was ahead of even your own understanding of what was happening?

Liam: Yes.

Lauren: Can you talk a little about an experience when that happened?

Liam: There are some pieces that are still unfolding for me.

Lauren: Pieces that you've completed?

Liam: Yes. From ten, maybe fifteen years ago, there are some works that I still can't wrap my head around.

Lauren: Which part of it can't you wrap your head around? Is it the message, or the essence, as you said? Or is it the information?

Liam: This is a really, really hard question. I think it gets to the heart of what's most interesting. When I really try to think about it and look at the piece, I'm thinking in particular of one piece called *The Cafe on Mount Kailash*. Even the title is curious. This was done probably 20 years ago, and I was really interested in a sacred mountain in the Himalayas called Mount Kailash. It's off limits; you're not allowed to go there.

Lauren: To climb?

Liam: No, you can't climb it. It's a very sacred mountain, and there are lots of otherworldly stories about what happens on Mount Kailash. So I had this idea that there would be a cafe at the top, and in that cafe there would be all these—

Lauren: An otherworldly cafe.

Liam: Yes, that's right. A congregation of spirits. The piece is so interesting, because what I can't get my mind around is how it hangs together and works. Often when you produce a piece of art, you're trying to communicate something that you've fully resolved inside yourself. You say, "I want to draw a monkey on a bicycle wearing Superman clothes," you come up with a complete idea, and then you go about recreating that complete message. But when you go through more of a channelling process, why and how it works, and what it's communicating, remains a bit of a mystery. I don't quite know what it is in that work yet. I can't put my finger on why it works or what is so attractive about it. Whenever I see it, I internally light up. I really love it.

It's a curious balance between form and non-form. To me it feels post-categorisation; I can't categorise it. I know abstract work tries to do that, but ironically it often just becomes a new category of abstract: "this is a really splashy work" or "this is a really rigid abstract work." Even anti-categorisation, unfortunately, quickly becomes categorisation. There's a whole, really

complex cognitive field around understanding what categorisation is, because categorisation is about pattern and novelty, likeness and similarity, essence and surface: some really rich, deep philosophical areas. So the most interesting works for me are the ones that slip between categories, where I can't put my finger on what they are.

And ironically, that really is the essence of many of my visionary experiences. I've seen so many incredible things that feel ineffable. If you break down what "ineffable" means, it's really saying there is no category for it. Language is really boxes and categories. If you can't put something in a box, initially you think it's because you don't have the word for it, but actually it's because you don't even understand it.

Lauren: It's because your brain is always trying to find ways to understand how something exists compared to what you already know. So if you're experiencing categories of phenomena that have nothing to compare to, how do you categorise something that has no grounding?

Liam: Exactly.

Lauren: It's really interesting that you brought that up, because something I'm really interested in is how you categorise what visionary art is. Often it's purely on aesthetics. When I talk to people who have an idea of what visionary art might be, but aren't deep into practising it themselves, it comes out as "it's like psychedelic art", or "it's very colourful", or "it has a particular look and style". But I think there's a deeper layer that goes beyond drawing likeness from aesthetics to define a whole field of art called visionary art. There's a lot to be said about the intent underneath it. So for you, how important is the mission of what visionary art, or in particular your visionary art, is aiming to do, compared to the product creation, the physical creation, the actual piece of art?

Liam: The mission is so important. I understand why so many individuals fall into an almost homogenisation of what they're trying to communicate, because it's the closest symbol they can reach for: "I'll use these geometric patterns," or "I'll—"

Lauren: It's the problem we were just talking about, right? You're trying to find the closest likeness to communicate the essence of the experience, so you're basically drawing from what

exists.

Liam: Yes, that's exactly right.

Lauren: I'd really love you to go a little further into that, because we mentioned the mission of visionary art. For you, what is the mission?

Liam: Well, I did my PhD for a few years on exactly this topic. I was trying to figure out what would be the best scientific method to document information from the other side. That came out of an initial need to begin to learn about and interact with this other side, once you realise that there is this whole hidden network, architecture and layer of living reality beyond your senses. And not just that you sense it's true, but that you begin to experience it hundreds of times, validating the truth of it.

Lauren: And you've experienced it hundreds of times?

Liam: Hundreds of times, yes. So it's no longer an intuitive sense that something is real. It's now a very real place that I'm trying to understand more about. The very first thing you realise when you're trying to understand that space is: how can we formally begin to understand this? How do you begin the formal process of mapping out the edges of that network? Who are these entities? What is this consciousness? What are the rooms I'm entering? Are there a billion rooms? Are there 500 rooms? Is it all one room? Are we going to the same place, or is this just part of my interior, interconnected mind, my space and not your space? How do we even begin to understand these questions?

So the mission of visionary art isn't the end; producing the art isn't the end. It's actually the beginning of the conversation, the beginning of a much larger mission. Art is just one arm, one faculty, one skill set we have as humans that can help support understanding it. It's in the title: visions. So you have to go to the field that does a lot of vision work, which is art. Suddenly art became really important for me. If the visions were playing tennis all the time, I'd be saying, "I need to go and play tennis a lot." I haven't tried to fit art into the mission. Art has naturally been the by-product of finding the best tool for the job.

Lauren: And has that come out of the inability to categorise through language alone?

Liam: Yes, that's right. Language suddenly becomes very problematic. It's probably very useful up to a certain point, but after that point it becomes extremely problematic, because one person says, "Oh my God, I just saw a room full of angels." Another person says, "I saw a room full of aliens." Another says, "I saw a room full of dead spirits," and another says, "I saw a whole room full of plant spirits." And you think there must be hundreds and hundreds of different types of things over there. But maybe they were all the same thing, filtered through the categories of how we perceive the world, which may be based on our language. Even when you get down to very primitive, non-lensed forms like geometric patterns, are we even seeing the same ones? The easiest way to check and compare notes with each other is to stop talking and move into a trans-universal language, which is vision.

Lauren: You mentioned that art was a natural extension of the visions, as a way to document them. Did art come after the visionary experiences, or had you always been creating art and the visionary side integrated into it? Which came first for you?

Liam: The art came second. I was never an artist growing up. Art was never important, it was never needed, it was never part of the story. Then, when I had all these visionary experiences, I became really stuck trying to find out what they were. I had a genuine, very simple question: what was that? No one could give me a straight answer, and I couldn't believe it. It soon became really apparent that I was going to have to begin taking notes on this.

Lauren: So for you, art was more a form of inquiry, a way of decoding an experience, or another place, or whatever you want to call it. Where do you think visionary art sits in the art world today overall? It feels like a lot of other visionary artists probably had a similar experience and needed to use art in the same way you did. Do you think it still sits on the fringes of the art world? What's your take?

Liam: Absolutely. I think it's actually seen as very low-brow.

Lauren: Why do you think that is?

Liam: I'm not too sure. Broadly, I think the root of it is that there's been so much tainting, even in the research field, around the illegality of—

Lauren: Of the way to the visions.

Liam: The illegality of the drug use, and the political war in the 60s. It spread such taboo over its use.

Lauren: So it's a cultural positioning of how we see psychedelics as perhaps the catalyst for producing this kind of art.

Liam: Yes, that's right. It feels drug-tainted, so it feels low-brow and problematic. And yet you can tell the tide is turning, because suddenly there's a functional need. Society is full of mental health issues, and psychedelics offer a great tool to help support improvement in that. So suddenly it's a helpful thing again, and a lot of the social taboo—

Lauren: Is starting to fade.

Liam: It's fading as well. So I do see an opportunity in the future for a resurgence, to see whether there is importance in the work being produced. But I also think that, generally, the work being produced isn't captivating collectors and galleries in the same way. Perhaps there are parallel roads running right now, where postmodern works, conceptual works and a whole range of other work have become interesting and moved in and out of hype in the art world, decoupled from such a motivated mission. I don't feel that many of those have such a motivated mission: one that feels all-encompassing and all-compelling, that compels a person to produce art as desperately as they need air.

Lauren: I wonder if people tend to shy away from its intensity.

Liam: I think so. The other thing is that unless you've experienced it, why would you care? It's like me telling you about a dream I had where a horse came into a house and was running around, and imagine I keep telling you that for years and years, and you're like—

Lauren: "Heard that one before."

Liam: Yes, "I don't care." You don't have the same connection I have to the horse dream. So I think there's a gap in connection to it. And I think there are prerequisites for people even to begin to build that connection. It doesn't mean they have to have experienced it. Perhaps

they're interested in the history of explorers, like Christopher Columbus, or someone who's traversed the universe, or the world. An interest in explorers may be an angle into understanding the concepts around such an artist.

Lauren: Often that's where the role of the curator and the gallerist comes in: to build the bridge of narrative and close that gap. In my experience, there's usually a gap between every piece of art and its story. That's why constructing a really clear narrative and understanding of your own work is so important, so that you can try to close that gap as best you can. But then there are challenges with language being the mode of creating the narrative beyond the artwork. I think you'll always run into roadblocks when you're producing art that sits outside the capacity of language. So there are challenges around that as well, in closing that gap of interest for people.

Liam: Yes, I agree.

Lauren: Well, thank you so much for coming in and having a conversation with me.

Liam: It's been a pleasure. I really appreciate it.