

# Ethereal

The work of José Hernandez takes curator PAUL CRAWFORD on a healing journey.

ETHEREAL IS THE COLLABORATION between the American–Canadian artist José Hernandez (b. 1953) and the celebrated Canadian printer and book designer Robert R. Reid (b. 1927). This slim, graceful volume serves on one hand as the launch of an emerging artist and on the other the culmination of a lifetime’s exploration of his art and craft.

For both artists, this project serves as an exploration of their deep and profound interest in spirituality, and a vehicle for exploring their own mortality and the eternal question of what lies in the great beyond.

The story has its beginnings in early 2017, shortly after José and his wife Anastasia relocated to Summerland, British Columbia from New York via Florida to be closer to Anastasia’s mother. I met José soon after his arrival and invited him to include an example of his digital paintings at *Grassland*, an exhibition at the Penticton Art Gallery (March 17–May 14, 2017) that was a timely presentation on the history, politics, art and culture of cannabis in Canada. José’s submission, *Kaleidoscope*, caught the attention and imagination of a number of attendees. As I watched one visitor in particular spend a solid hour standing in front of José’s work, I was curious to learn more about this outgoing but

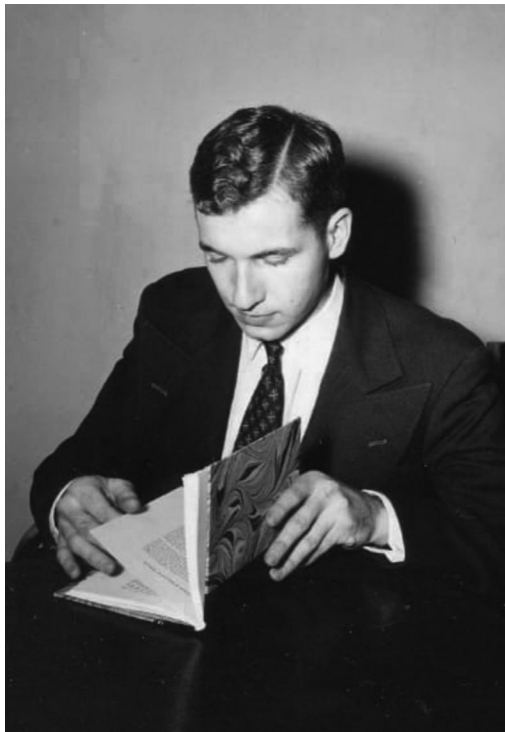
enigmatic immigrant in our midst and explore his provocative work.

After many conversations and the opportunity to view and learn about his work, I got to know José, the warm and extroverted New Yorker. He enthusiastically shared the story of his near-death experience and extended hospital stay, how he

believes colour helped him to heal and the importance of art in stressful environments. But I also discovered the contemplative, self-reflecting artist who spends hundreds of hours on a single piece, honing his craft in an attempt to share the journey he experienced in the five minutes he was clinically dead.

José’s work is created on a digital plane. He starts with a black ‘canvas’ which represents the whole of creation to him. Using digital photographs, he then incorporates layer upon layers of vibrant colour and he describes his process as a meditative experience which he attempts to share with the viewer

in the finished work. Some pieces have literally hundreds of layers, the importance of which can’t be overstated in José’s opinion: in his own words, “Creator is in the spaces between.” Once a piece is reproduced, whether on an 8 × 8-foot glass panel to hang in a conference room or an 8 × 8-inch giclee on watercolour paper, though you are looking at a two-dimensional painting, it was created in a three-dimensional



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*Robert R. Reid examines a copy of his first book,  
The Fraser Mines Vindicated (1949)*

digital plane. It's José's conviction that an aspect of the depth of the layers and the time it takes to travel that space remains.

José's work hangs in institutions across the U.S. such as the prestigious Cleveland Clinic in Ohio and the Nicklaus Children's Dan Marino Outpatient Center in Miami, Florida, among many others. He has shown in galleries in Miami, Las Vegas, Los Angeles and New York, and he has had the rare opportunity to show at Art Basel Miami Beach with Rush Arts, Russell Simmons' New York gallery. However, I realised José is a rare animal, a true outsider artist. With no traditional pedigree in art or real insight into the art world, José's success had been the serendipitous embrace of people with influence who personally experienced and collect his work. He himself had no plan outside of getting his work into spaces to support healing and integration, and his goal is primarily to ensure his work can be experienced by people who are under stress, in pain and the vulnerable, at-risk sector. José believes his art, originally created as meditations, have the ability to transmit some of the peace, love and healing he experienced during his hospital ordeal.

José and Anastasia have also donated works to institutions that may not have the budgets of the larger well-funded organisations.

When José expressed an interest in publishing a book of his work and his life's story to serve as an extension of his art, I immediately thought of approaching Robert R. Reid, whose work and career I greatly respect.

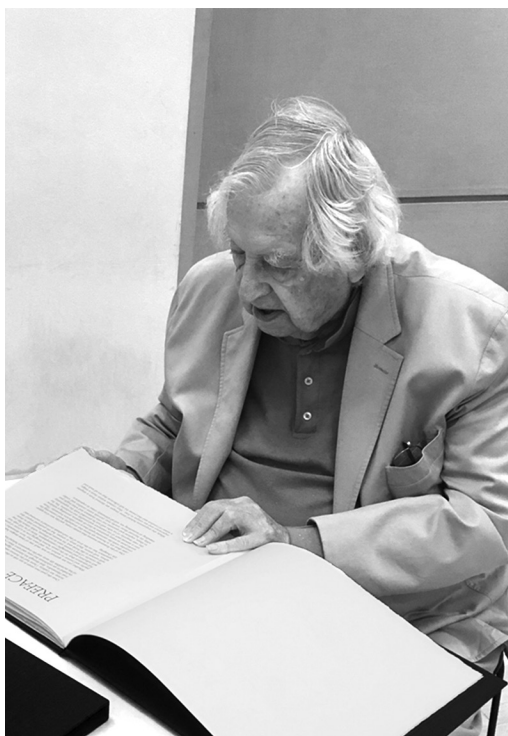
While he has worked across North America, Robert retired to Vancouver. Considered by

many to be one of Canada's finest printers and designers, his work is collected by universities and galleries the world over. His name adorns the Robert. R. Reid Medal for Lifetime Achievement in the Book Arts in Canada, awarded at the discretion of the Alcuin Society since 2007. I first came across Robert's work while preparing for *Love, Toni xox* at the Penticton Art Gallery (September 18–November 6, 2009). The exhibition comprised a series of deeply personal handwritten and illustrated letters he wrote to his estranged third wife Yukiko Onley shortly after their breakup. In support of this exhibition, Robert was commissioned to design and publish

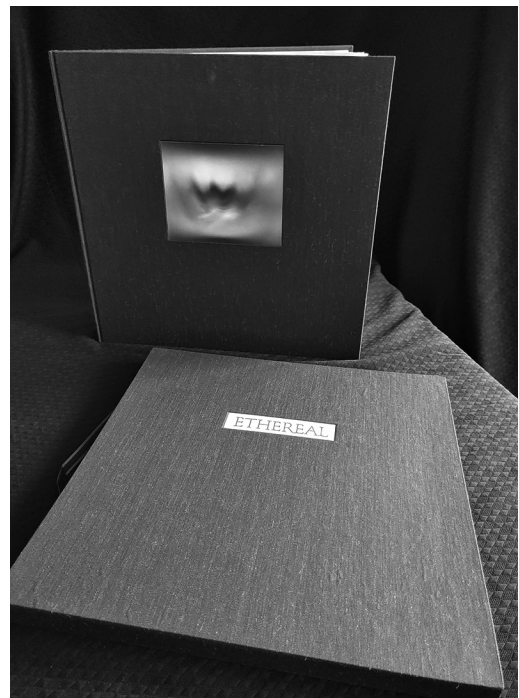
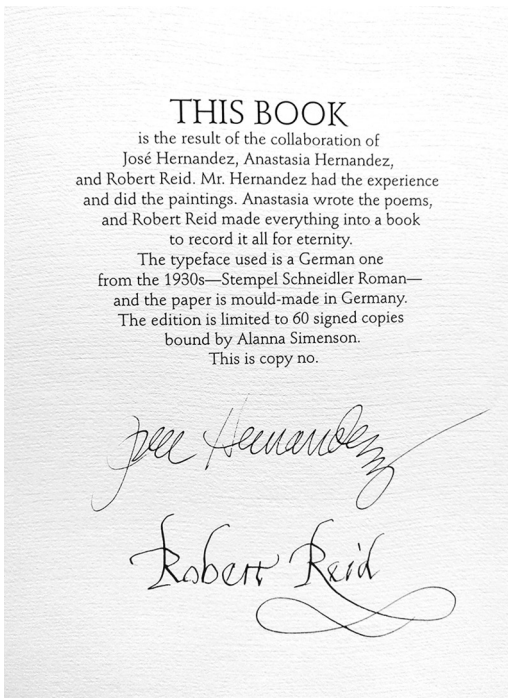
a limited edition book faithfully reproducing the original letters while maintaining the original feel of the works. This was achieved by printing all 19 copies of the book on handmade Japanese paper with the edition being dictated by how long it took for the lint from the paper to clog up the works of the machine. I got to meet Robert in person in 2008 through the artists Joseph Plaskett (1918–2014) and Takao Tanabe (b. 1926).

I made the introduction, and in another serendipitous turn discovered that Robert had recently been looking into accounts of near-death experi-

ences and explorations of consciousness. Largely housebound due to ill health, Robert is nonetheless still on top of his game, and embraced the project with passion. Much of the work was done remotely via Skype, with José making many trips to Vancouver to meet with Robert in person, carefully selecting the art for the book and poring over paper samples together. For both José and Robert, the collaboration on *Ethereal* was



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*Robert R. Reid leafs through *Ethereal* (2019), his collaboration with José and Anastasia Hernandez.*



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*The craftsmanship inherent in Ethereal was the result of a dynamic partnership.*

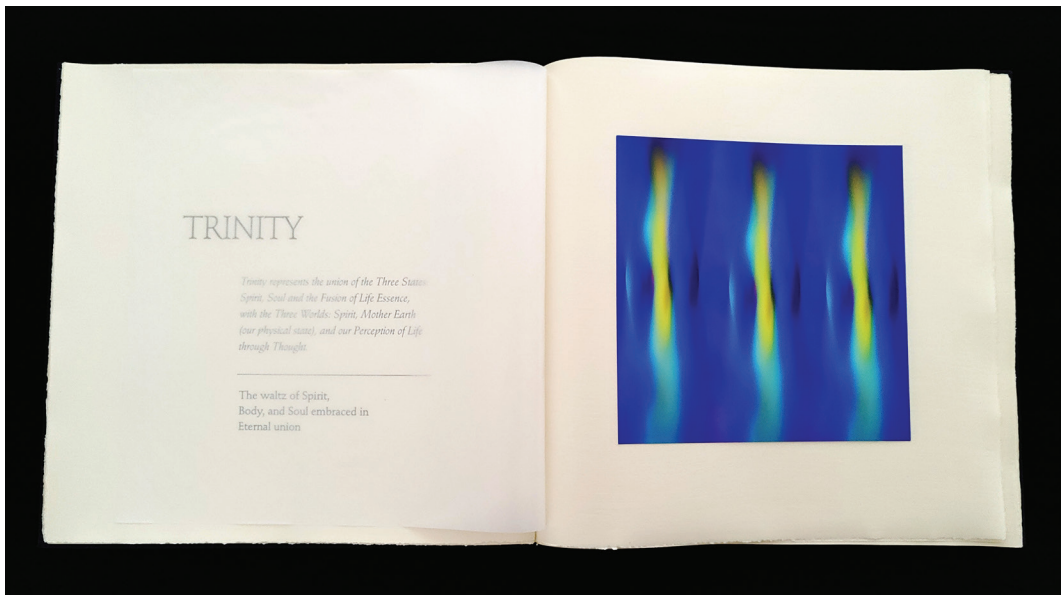
effortless and they have formed a lasting bond. Both larger-than-life personalities, their lives have encompassed a tremendous range of experiences—great highs as well as tragic lows. This work provides a glimpse of a contemplation of the essence of who we are as human beings at our core as the noise of life fades into the background.

The book itself, *Ethereal*, published in 2019, is privately printed in a limited edition of 60 books all signed by both Robert and José. The conscious decision to set the otherworldly work firmly in the land of the living was made by Robert and the book benefits from German craftsmanship, being printed on Zerkall Mould-made paper and set in Stempl Schneider type. At 13 × 13 inches with 40 pages, *Ethereal* is signature-sewn and hand-bound in navy book silk with a matching navy slipcase and ribbon. Twelve of José's paintings have been digitally reproduced beautifully on archival watercolour paper and the artwork throughout has been tipped in by hand, with an image inset into the front cover. The binding and slipcase and painstaking bookbinding work was done by Alanna Simenson at her bindery, Mad Hatter Bookbinding, on Vancouver Island, chosen for

her previous work on Robert's Toni Onley book and her meticulous care and attention to detail.

Glassine pages protect the artwork and separate the text from the images. The simple act of the reveal of these powerful works serves to further reinforce the feeling that you are lifting the veil between two worlds. Accompanying José's artwork are his written intentions for each piece. Alongside, his wife Anastasia's poetry explores each work, inviting the reader to pause and reflect. The book as a whole serves as a visual meditative experience. Every page has a focal point that engages the sense of sight and draws the viewer into a "fourth dimensional" journey through the layers of the painting. The effect leaves you with a sense of peace, which is José's primary goal.

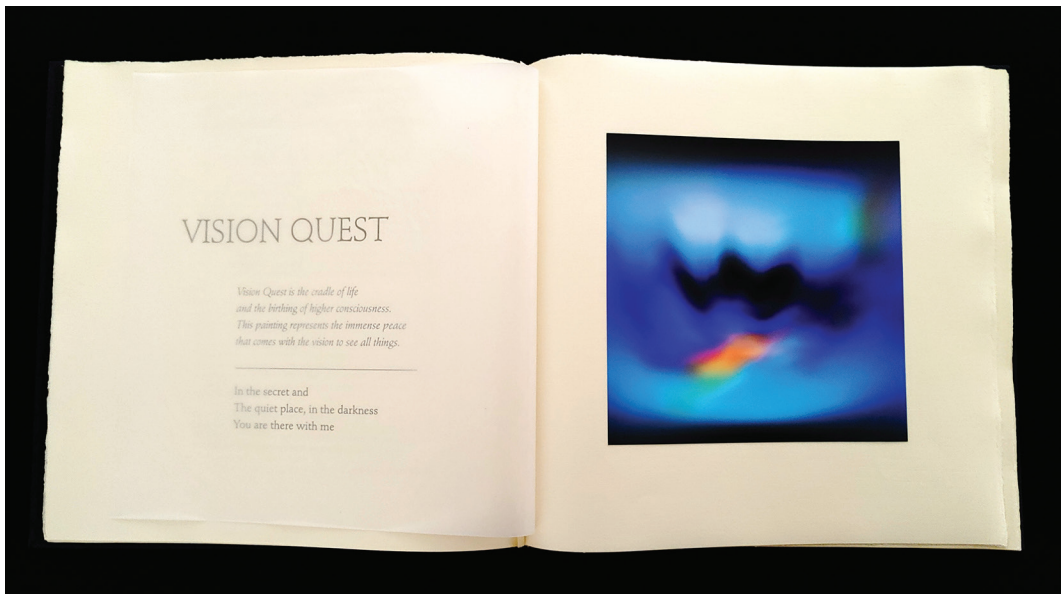
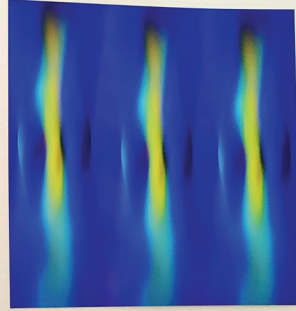
For José, the digital paintings that make up this body of the book are the result of a mundane workplace accident and a simple mistake by hospital staff in the emergency department which resulted in José being clinically dead for five minutes before being revived, and a gruelling three-month hospital stay. In addition to his art practice, the result of this near-death experience would have a profound impact on the previously



## TRINITY

*Trinity represents the union of the Three States: Spirit, Soul and the Fusion of Life Essence, with the Three Worlds: Spirit, Mother Earth (our physical state), and our Perception of Life through Thought.*

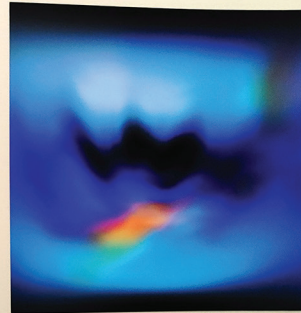
The waltz of Spirit,  
Body, and Soul embraced in  
Eternal union



## VISION QUEST

*Vision Quest is the cradle of life  
and the birthing of higher consciousness.  
This painting represents the immense peace  
that comes with the vision to see all things.*

In the secret and  
The quiet place, in the darkness  
You are there with me

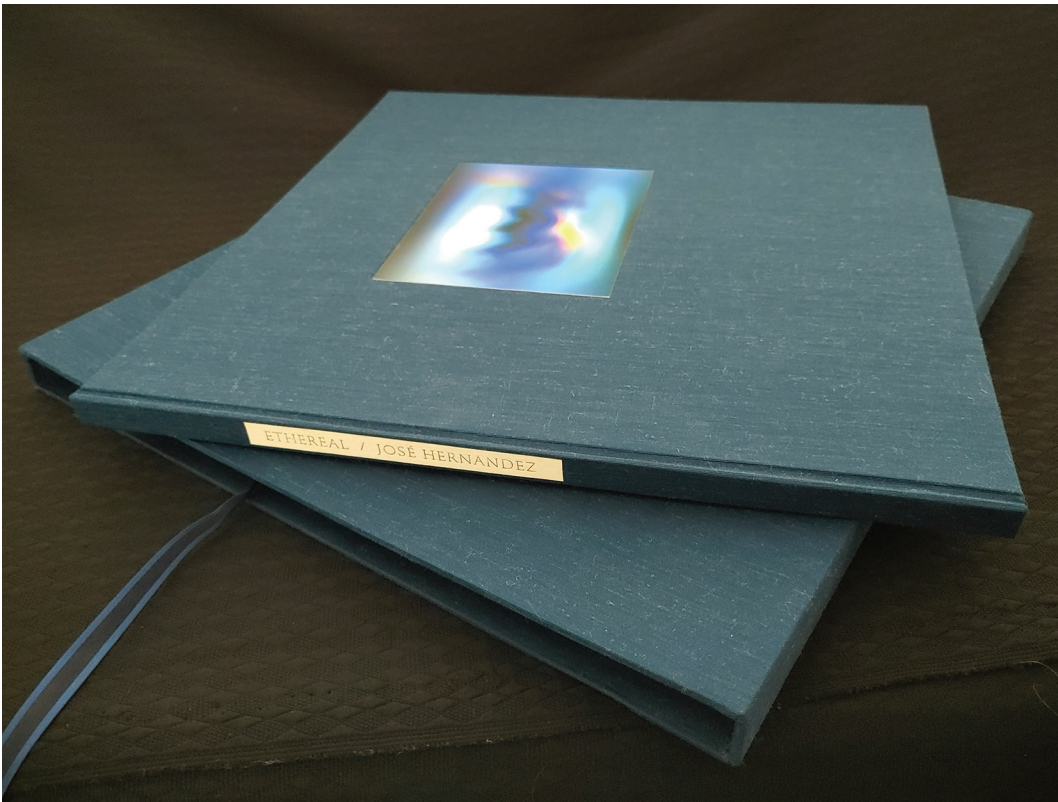


*Ethereal pairs poems with digital paintings, the focal point of each inviting readers into a fourth dimension.*

self-confessed atheist. In the years following his experience, the former electrical engineer and his wife Anastasia established Immersive Arts in an effort to go beyond simply placing art in healthcare settings. A collaborative of art, design and medical professionals, Immersive Arts creates sanctuaries and other contemplative spaces to foster a calming, centring and healing environment. Their first large project at the Penticton Regional Hospital is establishing a research incubator,

facilitating quantitative research on the impact of art on actual health outcomes to provide data beyond the current abundant qualitative studies. This project, comprising a glass installation in the lobby, two sanctuary spaces and digital displays in patient areas not previously accessible to art installations, will provide the tools for researchers to conduct controlled studies.

This body of art and the accompanying book is a journey, featuring the visions of José, whose life



*The binding and slipcase for Ethereal were undertaken by Alanna Simenson at Mad Hatter Bookbinding on Vancouver Island.*

was redefined through the unexpected confrontation with his mortality, and Robert, whose life will be defined by the nearly eight decades he has spent dedicated to innovation and honing his craft. Standing with José and Robert on the precipice of their lives, one is not only afforded a unique view of the world but also the gift of hindsight to colour and animate our perception, recollection, understanding and view of what has come before and what the future might hold. *Ethereal* is the culmination of a powerful artistic collaboration embodying the life's work and spiritual vision of two extraordinary artists. In the process they have created a complex, dynamic, and symbiotic expression, one which not only transports you into the unknown, but also presents a vision for a future, one bathed in light and the endless possibilities of life's great mystery.

José and Anastasia currently live in Summerland

with their youngest daughter Gabrielle. He travels regularly to speak about his near-death experience and on the subject of art as a conduit for healing. A profile of José's experience and work has also attracted the interest of the producers of the Netflix docu-series, *Surviving Death*. The episode is scheduled to air later this year.

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~ Paul Crawford has been the director-curator of the Penticton Art Gallery for the past 14 years and has been actively engaged in the visual arts community in British Columbia for the past 30 years as a collector, dealer, consultant, lecturer, juror, and for the past 20 years working in the public gallery sector. Over this time, he has worked with thousands of artists, handled tens of thousands of works of art, and curated over 300 exhibitions.