

# FOLLOW THE DOPAMINE

Meow Wolf is here to help alter your state of consciousness through immersive art.

TEXT STEPHANIE WILSON

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## My mind is blown.

I'm on the ground floor of a three-story space that's both biological and cosmic, larger than life, ethereal—and somehow swampy, too. Everything is alive. The walls breathe color and sound. It's an ineffable phantasmagorical landscape that seems to exist outside time and space. Not only are there sculptures all around, the room itself is a sculpture, floor to ceiling, visceral and vast. It feels like a sentient being. *I'm also on mushrooms.*

PHOTOS COURTESY MEOW WOLF







I'm a balloon floating in the sky. I'm spinning in space. And my face must show it, because while I whirl in place with my eyes upward trying to make sense of this complex, maximalist jungle, a costumed character known here as a "creative operator" arrives playing a guitar. He begins to circumnavigate me, singing something. I don't catch the lyrics at first, but as he gets closer his message is clear: "You are safe."

Indeed, I am. This is not some alien abduction. This is opening day at Meow Wolf's new Convergence Station in Denver. More than an art show, it's an emotional odyssey delivered through lights, sound, and visuals, summoning deep wells of emotion, vibrant hallucinatory

patterns, and an every-day-is-a-trip vibe in a building awash with technicolor and joy. You're meant to get a little lost in it all.

I did. I separated from my friends within minutes (only kinda-sorta on purpose). They were here to solve the mystery of the exhibition's narrative, which has something to do with four alien worlds joined together during a cosmic event. The bigger mystery to me was how the artists all collaborated to make these universes come alive.

### ALTERED STATE TRIPTYCH

"People often ask, 'Should I go on mushrooms? Should I go on weed?' But it's already mind-blowing on its own," says artist Andi Todoro. "You

don't really need to be on anything to feel like you might be on something when you're in there."

All I need to know is that I'm in Numina, one of four multidimensional universes inside the 90,000-square-foot Convergence Station in downtown Denver, close to Mile High Stadium, and, yes, I'm safe. The creative operator keeps reminding me. As he circles me, I spin in place with my head tilted back, jaw slightly dropped, eyebrows raised, eyes wide, trying to process the enormity and complexity of this sentient universe the Meow Wolf artists somehow created—in the middle of a pandemic.

Now where was I? Oh, right. In the midst of an immersive art world at Meow Wolf, traversing





three routes to altered states of consciousness (ASC) at once: on drugs, immersed in art, and in awe. Oh my.

While “on drugs” has such a negative connotation, psychedelic drugs are shedding that rep. We’re in a psychedelic renaissance, a time when people are increasingly turning to them not for recreation, but for healing. More and more studies are confirming what hippies and creative types have been saying for decades: psychedelic drugs have a way of shaking us out of our ordinary concerns and pointing our attention toward something higher, perhaps even greater versions of ourselves and others.

## AWE IMMERSION

Today, when we talk about psychedelics, we’re talking about a mental health movement. And after two years and colossal cultural changes—after seasons of isolation—taking mushrooms to facilitate

positive changes to one’s mindset feels like a power move.

It’s not a new one, nor is it the only means of accomplishing it. Contemplative practices have similar, albeit substance-free, effects. ASCs have been part of the human cognitive repertoire for at least 100,000 years, and these transcendent states can be achieved any number of ways:

through psychedelics, meditation, or breathing exercises (like holo-tropic breath work). Other methods include ecstatic dance, ritual drumming, fasting, and self-flagellation, which deactivate the brain’s default settings. Oh, and so can Meow Wolf.

But drugs offer a shortcut, promising “transcendence on demand,” as the late British neurologist Oliver Sacks noted in “Altered States,” his 2012 essay on self-experiments in chemistry published by *The New Yorker*—and the ability of art to transport us to other realms is outstanding.

Viewing extraordinary works of art can be a catalyst to experience awe. A 2012 Stanford study found that encounters with perceptual vastness triggers a self-negating, time-dilating sense of awe. “Experiences of awe bring people into the present moment, and being in the present moment underlies awe’s capacity to adjust time perception, influence decisions, and make life feel a little more satisfying than it would otherwise,” the study’s authors concluded.



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## EXPERIENCE THE AWE ▲

Three years in the making with art from 300 creatives (including over 110 from Colorado), this four-story maximalist playground features interactive exhibits interconnected through vertical travel and secret passageways. General admission is \$45 (\$35 for locals); make your reservations in advance to secure your entry date and time. It's a family-friendly attraction, so mentally prepare to mingle with all ages. Or look for tickets to the *Adulti-Verse*, Meow Wolf's adults-only evenings reserved for a 21-plus crowd. [meowwolf.com/visit/denver](https://meowwolf.com/visit/denver)

### OTHER LOCATIONS

◀ **House of Eternal Return, Santa Fe, est. 2016.** A mind-bending explorable art experience housed in an old bowling alley, the 20,000-square-foot exhibit changed the very notion of what immersive art can be. It's funky, raw, real, and really fun to explore.

◀ **Omega Mart, Las Vegas, est. 2021.** Set inside Area15, an entertainment district a few minutes off the Strip, this location is a surreal supermarket where you can discover portals leading to unexpected landscapes.

**Coming Soon to Texas.** In May, Meow Wolf announced its universe is expanding to Texas, where two new locations are in the works. Meow Wolf's portal in Grapevine Mills, part of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, is set to open next year, with another immersive spot coming to Houston's Fifth Ward neighborhood and historic district in 2024.



Experiencing awe puts you on a readily accessible path to self-transcendent experiences, or STEs, which include mindfulness and flow as well as peak and mystical experiences. These are the sorts of things that make the judgy voice in your head calm down and you feel more absorbed in whatever it is you are doing, and awe is the easiest way to get there.

## BACON FLOW

Denver-based multimedia artist Andi Todaro's work appears in Meow Wolf's original location in Santa Fe, as well as its latest outpost in Denver. Her installation, *Bacon Faces*, is an 1,800-square-foot mural depicting raw portrait paintings in the distinct, distorted style of British figurative painter Francis Bacon. The macabre depictions resemble figures you'd expect to meet in a fever dream—all distorted faces appearing on the edge of dissolution. Todaro's interpretations are made all the more ominous by her discomfiting palette marked by blood/organ reds and metallic browns—inspired by the colors of raw bacon, she says, “for the Meow Wolf twist.”

The portraits offer a lens through which we see Todaro's experience painting them in the middle of a construction zone amid a pandemic. Think: donning the full protective gear of a construction worker every day while submitting to pee tests to ensure you're not under the influence of any mind-altering substances, not even a beer. Constantly bombarded by a cacophony of screeching noise, endless concrete dust, suffocating fumes, and erratic temperatures making it unbearably

hot or freezing took a toll. “There were so many variables, and I didn't know how to handle them all at the same time,” she says. “I might get sick at any moment, I'm so frustrated with the lighting, I can't seem to pull this thing out of me. I'm under so much pressure, and I don't even know how to start... I absolutely had a mental breakdown during it.”

Todaro says the work is probably better because of it. “I just started painting, and I didn't stop until it was done. Every ounce of how I was feeling ended up in those brush strokes. It's like it actually flowed out of me,” she says.

She was experiencing the elusive and rewarding “flow”—a kind of intense focus and clarity where you forget yourself, lose track of time, and feel like you're part of something bigger.

While in the flow, the brain releases a highly potent cocktail

of neurochemicals like endorphins, norepinephrine, dopamine, serotonin, and anandamide, aka the “bliss molecule” cannabinoid that's similar to THC. These pleasure-inducing, performance-enhancing molecules combine forces to amp up focus, block out noise, boost imaginative possibilities, and improve our ability to link ideas together in new ways.

So, yes, I am on mushrooms and they are augmenting my experience of the flow here in the Convergence Station. But I don't have to be. This place is constructed to tap into creativity—the convergence. To make you safe in the best way possible.

“That's all that meditation or doing some kinds of drugs is getting to you: that place where you can see things newly from a different perspective, to jumpstart things you take for granted all the time.” ❧



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