



The Hidden Depth of Æmen Ededéen's Glass Dream Game | Q&A



Portrait of Æmen Ededéen

He grew up between Idaho, rural Illinois, and Arizona, in an environment shaped by conservative Christianity. It was a world structured by clear moral and metaphysical boundaries, yet even early on he seemed drawn towards a more inward and symbolic mode of experience. Following the loss of his youngest brother, drawing, storytelling, and self-invented mythologies became ways of navigating grief and interiority long before art was understood as a profession.

By his early twenties, he had left organised religion behind and moved west. San Francisco, and later Los Angeles, introduced him to entirely different cultural and artistic environments, though he became increasingly aware that ideological certainty could reappear in many forms. Over time, he became less concerned with any particular belief system than with the broader human tendency to organise

experience into rigid structures of meaning and identity. Years later, he would recognise the long irony of his rebellions against religion, seeing in the Glass Dream Game a kind of religious instinct rooted in faithfulness and inner alchemy.

When he left California for New Mexico in late 2017, he arrived exhausted creatively and psychologically, carrying with him a growing sense of alienation and dislocation. Yet the landscape itself altered something fundamental. Removed from the density and acceleration of the cities he had lived in for years, he began to develop a more contemplative relationship to both art and daily life. The New Mexican landscape became a stabilising force during a period marked by depression, uncertainty, and withdrawal.



Exterior of Aemen Ededéen's studio, New Mexico

Out of that period emerged Nihil, a multi-year project that took him repeatedly across New Mexico along a self-devised tree-shaped route. The work functioned less as documentation than as a prolonged psychological and symbolic excavation. Over time, recurring patterns, coincidences, emotional echoes, and synchronistic relationships began to emerge through the process itself. Rather than imposing meaning onto the material, Ededéen found himself increasingly attentive to what appeared unbidden: connections between places, images, memories, dreams, texts,

and states of mind that seemed to organise themselves independently of conscious intention.

By the conclusion of *Nihil*, it had become clear that he no longer wanted painting to function primarily as commentary or assertion. What interested him now was process — particularly the unstable space between perception, intuition, memory, chance, and symbolic recurrence. That shift became the foundation for *The Glass Dream Game*, a divination system Ededéen created and has practised daily since.

Drawing loosely from Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* — the novel for which Hesse received the Nobel Prize — the I Ching, Jungian ideas of synchronicity, and various systems of chance long explored within modern and contemporary art, the Game operates as an evolving symbolic framework through which paintings, texts, dreams, and archetypal motifs emerge in relation to one another over time.

The process begins with a simple cleromantic gesture. Using a random number generator, six books are selected from Ededéen's personal library of more than a thousand volumes — philosophy, theology, poetry, regional guidebooks, psychology, science fiction, art history, graphic novels, and esoteric texts among them. One page from each book is then selected in the same manner. Arranged together in a fixed sequence, these pages form what he calls a Hexagram: the generative nucleus from which each iteration of the Game unfolds.



Various books from Ededéen's personal library

From there, the process moves into the Trials: notes, sketches, observations, and symbolic correspondences recorded while studying the relationships between the six pages. Themes recur unexpectedly. Animals, colours, gestures, historical references, emotional tones, and fragments of language begin to echo across otherwise unrelated sources. The aim is not interpretation in the conventional sense, but sustained attention to recurrence and resonance.

The next stage is the Dream: a short written piece generated from the material gathered during the Trials. Neither explanatory nor strictly narrative, the Dream acts as a condensation of symbolic atmosphere before the process enters visual form. Only then does the Vision emerge — the painting itself. The Vision is not an illustration of the Dream, nor a direct translation of the Hexagram, but a parallel development arising from the same symbolic field. Text and image evolve alongside one another without collapsing into singular meaning.

Over time, recurring motifs across Dreams and Visions are catalogued as Archetypes, forming an expanding internal lexicon. Certain figures, colours, animals, and symbolic relationships repeat across multiple iterations, gradually generating what Ededéen has described as a kind of “Glass Dream Palace”: an accumulating psychological architecture built through recurrence, intuition, memory, and chance. The Game remains intentionally open-ended, capable of changing alongside the person moving through it.

Ededéen’s professional trajectory has remained consistent even as the conceptual foundations of his work have undergone a profound shift. The paintings that have emerged from the Game are built through contending layers of pigment, added, scraped back, and revealed, with figures and forms surfacing as echoes rather than statements. His work has been exhibited throughout Europe and the United States, with recent solo presentations at MARUANI MERCIER in Brussels and Cris Worley Fine Arts in Dallas. Group exhibitions include James Cohan in New York, K11 Musea in Hong Kong, and the Nassima Landau Foundation in Tel Aviv. His work is held in the collections of the Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art in Roswell, the Green Family Art Foundation in Dallas, the Longlati Foundation and Pond Society in Shanghai, and the Contemporary Art Foundation in Tokyo. He was awarded the Hopper Prize in 2026.

For Ededéen, The Glass Dream Game does not appear to function as a conclusion so much as an ongoing method of attention: a way of remaining open to uncertainty while continuing to work through it.

In conversation with The Exclusivist, he discusses the evolution of his practice and the structure of the Game, along with questions of synchronicity, dreams, and identity, and his gradual movement from certainty towards a more permissive and contemplative mode of artistic life.

Q&A with Æmen Ededéen

You've spoken about moving away from the religious tradition you grew up with, and later becoming disillusioned with aspects of the secular art and cultural environments in San Francisco and Los Angeles. You've described a symmetry between these two worlds — very different on the surface, yet similar in their pressures toward conformity. By contrast, the Glass Dream Game stays deliberately open, working with chance, the unconscious, and symbols without settling into fixed meanings. Do you think the Game emerged purely from the inner work you were doing after Nihil, or do you sense that stepping away from those earlier systems also played a role — perhaps even at an unconscious level?

That certainly sounds like something I said or wrote, but it doesn't matter now. If my observation has any real value, it's much less to do with any specific group and more to do with groups in general, the way in which all of us confuse language with reality itself. We generally don't imagine that we're all collaborating on a single chimerical Frankenstein's monster that thrives on this confusion and pulls us further and further into our individual and collective complexes. We are terribly afraid to be quiet and alone with ourselves.

When I arrived in New Mexico from California in late 2017, I was fighting a battle with depression. I brought that loneliness out onto the New Mexico landscape, and more or less improvised the statewide Nihil route as a kind of mostly unconscious way to give my experience of loss and lostness some space to breathe. At times, I could observe my own observations sharpening, and picked up on the increasingly frequent synchronicities that came about in these explorations. I seemed, over time, to develop a feeling for the conditions that bring about these kinds of events and coincidences. Perhaps it's enough to say that my intuitive grasp on the interconnectedness of things expanded.

In 2023, toward the end of Nihil, I read the Hermann Hesse novel *The Glass Bead Game*, the last he wrote before he died, and the one for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in the 1950s. The novel is a speculative fiction which imagines, as its historical backdrop, a period in time called the Feuilleton Age. It's a period described in terms of its excessive superficiality, frivolity, ego, vanity, and never-ending productivity and distraction for their own sakes. A vast decline in literacy is implied, among other things. A kind of "society of the spectacle", one sees our own moment in it. I think most of us agree, in a general sense at least, that the mass culture we find ourselves in today is corrosive and is making us sick.

In the novel, the *Glass Bead Game* is never explicitly described. It was said to have emerged from the Feuilleton Age, but survived the era and evolved since. One of the important institutions that came out of the collapse was called Castalia, which was sort of a network of monasteries for scholars. The *Glass Bead Game* enjoyed an elevated status among this class of scholar-monks and was one of Castalia's main draws. Neither Castalia nor the Game was explicitly religious, but I had a certain feeling about what the Game's symbolic ordering systems might have been like, their teleological undercurrents perhaps revealing, at the very least, a shared religious attitude or maybe a sense of the sacred, if not an explicit belief system as such. I could identify at least two spiritual undercurrents running beneath Castalia all the time: Christianity and Taoism, an interaction between East and West. There are many encounters in the book with characters dealing directly and explicitly with traditional Chinese philosophy, including use of the *Yijing* (I Ching), an ancient Chinese form of divination practised by Hermann Hesse in his own life.

So, from the immense influence the novel immediately had over me, I began to think about how this Game might actually have functioned, and how a visual art equivalent might work. It was mainly because of the book that I began to study and "throw" *Yijing* in earnest. The divination system simultaneously became a resource for how to structure my own *Glass Dream Game* as well as for how I sometimes make life decisions, apart from the Game. Because of the libraries described in Castalia, I decided I would use my own library through a chance-based type of bibliomancy to generate the material necessary to make a painting. The total effect this has had on the work, and on me, is that each new painting feels like an artefact from a certain stage or cycle of a nascent alchemical process. That has also meant that inner alchemy or transformation is, for me, the guiding force that attends and actuates the pieces of the Game. To think of all of this as one part of an overall way of life, that it contributes to my own contemplative practice, has provided a way forward. The availability of this kind of inner freedom in my creative life at this point is actually, in

itself, a kind of religious instinct, based principally on a certain faithfulness I can hardly describe, let alone defend. And so I have to acknowledge, in response to your question, the long-term irony of my little rebellions against religion in relation to where I am now. My former ideas about religion were probably a bit more simple-minded than they ought to have been.



21st Century Vision

When an artistic identity reaches its endpoint, the internal shift often precedes any outward change. In your case, did that sense of completion arrive gradually, or was there a specific moment when you recognised that the framework you'd been working within couldn't carry you any further?

I'm not sure I've ever had an identity that reached an endpoint, so much as I simply recognise the many vicissitudes which move through the body, the flux of life, calling whatever it is I think I know about myself or the world into question. When I was doing Nihil, I often sensed that wherever I was in the landscape had a kind of presence of its own, and that presence was also my presence. We can ascertain seasons of the soul, if you like, without there really being anything that ends or begins. And that means we're not really required to identify with or as anything in particular. Actually, we're more free to identify the Self in all things, or, to say the

same thing paradoxically, to identify no self among the “throng of selves.” What the question might be observing is the way in which I’ve tended to take inventory of what I’m doing at any given time and have tried, as best I can, to shed whatever’s not working, in order to uncover what might sit buried underneath.



Wild Twin

The name Æmen Ededéen came to you in a dream years earlier, but it wasn't fully embraced until the Game began. How has “playing” the game (and existing inside it) changed your sense of self or authorship compared to your previous work as Joshua Hagler?

I am often asked about my name, which I changed in September 2024 to Æmen Ededéen. This is a name I carried with me in my back pocket, so to speak, for over a decade. The name seemed to appear to me everywhere, which, as you mentioned, included seeing and hearing it in a dream once. But I was too afraid of negative judgment and harm to my career to use it.

As I finished the Nihil project here in New Mexico, I was quietly creating the Glass Dream Game. The characters in the Hesse novel had these kind of semi-fanciful, vaguely European names, including all those who played the Glass Bead Game. I thought I might now have an excuse and occasion to use my secret name. All those years, it had felt as if it were trying to push itself out from under my skin, and with this new thought, it became something salutary, something I couldn't keep buried any longer. I seemed simply to grow more bored of my repetitive fears and stories and to

lose the energy to care about the consequences. By freeing the name, I could free myself from the sense of antagonism, like a shard of glass in the ribs, I experienced so often. To type it out and say it aloud was an act of freedom and of self-compassion.

It does feel as if Josh Hagler has been allowed to go home and to learn how to be a real person, a husband and dad, and live a real life, to more deeply love and appreciate the ordinary, which often seems miraculous now.

I like that Æmen looks like “amen” on the page, like a kind of final agreement. And yet it’s also close to dæmon, something creatively charged and tricksterish. I like the paradox and the way it looks on the page. I like the sense I get that some people seem to infer something of what I must have gone through to do such a peculiar thing, and, in their kindness, accept it. I actually think people want opportunities to show kindness. We don’t know what others are going through. To know oneself as broken, that brokenness is ubiquitous and ordinary — not as a thing which needs fixing, but acceptance — is, finally, a relief and a great freedom. Perhaps all that needs said is that I changed my name because I gave myself, for the first time, the freedom to do so.



The Noise of Fear is Drifting down the River (You cannot Die) 2025

You’ve described the Game as a practice of “knowing less” — letting go of certainty, control, and fixed opinions. Yet over time, patterns, synchronicities, and recurring motifs begin to emerge. If it ever starts to feel too orderly, too comfortable, or too

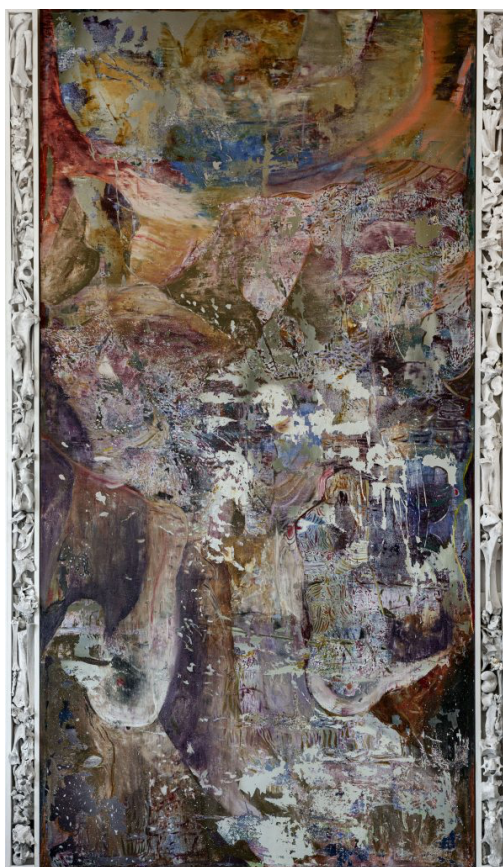
self-contained, how do you respond as both the architect of the Game and the player who surrenders? Would you deliberately change its rules, shake it up, or let it collapse and re-form itself? In other words, are you willing to alter or even dismantle elements of it if it stops generating uncertainty?

I think we find over time, when we're most open and honest with ourselves, that what has constituted our so-called knowledge isn't quite as impressive as we'd hoped. So-called knowledge, as a kind of pile or edifice, actually comes to mean less and less with age, or that has been my experience at least. But under the language and concepts and theories, I feel, is another kind of knowing, not asserted, but trusted. Truth not as object but process. I want the work to come from that trust, that process, and to be surprised by what I discover in it. A way of knowing, somehow, that is also a process of unknowing.

As for the Game, it has already evolved quite a bit since the first iterations, mostly because of my draw toward the Yijing and Taoist tradition. My study of the eight trigrams in Yijing, for example, led me to an idea about how page numbers can generate yin or yang lines, and these combinations can yield a colour palette. I developed that into a system I added to the Game. I figured out how to use numbers to allow for what are called "changing lines" in Yijing, so that a second page can come up in a book. Then I created a rule for the second page which is that I can only read it in a decontextualised way, as a kind of subliminal instruction to use a certain material in the piece, or a certain approach. I mix tiny glass beads into the paint in most of the work because of the Glass Bead Game, to give a sense of what I mean. None of it means anything in itself, but the process has developed into some kind of lexicon, and that might mean something to somebody somewhere.

Anyway, when I'm referring to "letting go" or "unknowing" it signals a shift in understanding how the mind works, from the idea of "productive mind" to that of "permissive mind." Rather than "say" something, I try to wait for something to "show up" and say something to me. It was actually a Zen teacher who once said to me, "try not to create" and I loved that so much.

Of course, the hand makes the painting, but it's also in collaboration with something which precedes the hand. I think most painters understand what I mean. In that way, it's really not a problem to worry that the Game could be too fixed, narrow, or predictable. The constraints are there so that the iterations are infinitely variable. That's the paradox of constraint. On my own, I have nothing further to say in painting, but what I have to discover still, as far as I can tell, is endless.



The Fountain

Hesse's Glass Bead Game imagines a symbolic language that only becomes fully understood through sustained, repeated engagement. In your own Game, the Archetypes — along with the Visions and patterns that emerge — seem to serve a similar role as they accumulate through repetition. As they recur, do you notice them beginning to relate to one another in new ways, or to you differently? And as these recurrences build, do you try to avoid interpreting them, or do you feel they're already beginning to reveal a trajectory of their own?

Yes! The archetypal contents and imagery that emerge from one iteration to the next do now seem to relate to each other, especially lately as the material has had enough time to accumulate. I actually do want each painting to hold a specific archetypal presence, whether or not it can be named.

I should explain there are four basic elements to the Game: Hexagram, Trials, Dream, and Vision (the painting). The relationships between things have as much to do with these other three facets as with the visual aspect. The way the six books relate to each other in synchronistic and decontextualised ways is to do with both the Hexagrams and Trials. The Dream is to do with the written component that comes out of that process, often appearing as a short fiction or poem. Additionally, my studio manager Samuel Staffan keeps a database of recurring symbols that arise and repeat through the Dreams, just as an analyst might do for real dreams. From this database, we can generate a kind of map of these recurring symbols. The whole purpose of my website is to show this. I think of what we're building as a kind of Glass Dream Palace from the iterative outcomes of gameplay. I like believing the psyche is at least partially mapped in that way.

I don't think the work benefits from fixed interpretations. I like the idea of others interpreting for themselves, but, for me, I'm much less interested in what it all means than in what it all seems to be doing. That's the bigger question in the work right now, I think: what is actually happening here? I do feel a sense of trajectory with it all but I couldn't tell you toward what end. I only know that the way it's unfolding seems oddly parallel to the way in which my life is doing the same: knowing less while witnessing more.



The Branches Fall from the Trees Sometimes

You've mentioned before that sometimes a symbol or recurrence in the Game shows up with a timing that feels oddly relevant — not predictive, but enough to make you take notice. Has there been a moment when a Hexagram, Archetype, or Dream caught you off guard in a way that changed how you responded to a situation, whether in the studio or in ordinary life? If so, could you share an example.

What you're describing happens constantly. The way in which several pages in a Hexagram — a chance result of six pages from six books in my 1,000-book library — having nothing to do with each other, will all point to a specific animal, say. Hexagrams with repeated descriptions and images of dogs, jackals, lions, sheep, and wolves have all come along. Certain colours: a black painting I made because every page in the Hexagram pointed to that colour, or a white painting because more than one page was blank, or talked about white, or snow, or erasure, etc. A recent one in which every page could be seen as relating to one or more of the seven stages of alchemy; another where pairs or twins are mentioned throughout. Other Hexagrams might have a page which seems to relate to a specific memory or aspect of my own life, and then the next page of an unrelated book seems to speak to another part of that same memory. It goes on and on.

Lately, I've been painting on canvases I finished in 2014/15 and recently completed a new diptych over a 2015 painting that had been originally made on two abutting canvases. A recent Hexagram included my own exhibition catalogue from 2015. The page it gave me was the one showing that original painting discussed above. That's a significant coincidence given all those pages in all those books. Along with my catalogue in the Hexagram was a poetry collection by Louise Glück, and specifically a parable about a pair of swans. It's too much to explain the entire Hexagram, but I can convey the gist. The books together showed me two figures in opposition, and a theme of forgiveness, and the repeated features of water birds. Forgiveness is a significant theme for any of us, but in this context, because the painting I had just painted over came up in the Hexagram itself, a phenomenon that never happened before, I understood it was to do with my past and present self. I decided to copy my own painting from the book, albeit in a much different way. Each layer was the same image, but in different palettes as determined by the colour system. With each addition and subtraction of each layer, the image degraded more and more. I decided that I wanted actual taxidermy goose wings in the painting. When it was finished, my studio assistant Lana Scholtz saw it. She looked through the original exhibition catalogue and then asked whether I had put the taxidermy wings in it because of the title of the original painting from 2015. I hadn't even noticed or remembered the title of the original painting. Then she showed me the 2015 title on the neighbouring page:

“The Taxidermic Initiant” — not a great title in itself, but, in a way, unsettling to look back on now.

I wonder a lot about these sorts of occurrences, about what’s really going on when it happens. Did some part of me actually remember the title of the original and somehow, unconsciously, that’s where the idea for the taxidermy wings came from? And to be honest, the wings themselves didn’t come directly from what the game “told” me to do. I followed the flash of an idea, a whim. I don’t know the answers, but what makes the whole process so rewarding is that I always get the feeling I’m onto something. It’s easy to demonstrate logical fallacies like retrospective cohesion in this case, but it seems to me such explanations themselves are a form of infinite regress; they still beg the questions they try to “explain away.” Why should the mind know what it knows, what is the nature of such experience? As you suggested in your question, this stuff does often run parallel to my life, or a world event, say, that I happen to be taken with, or bothered by, at the moment. Even sometimes my actual dreams will come into the written Dreams because they correlate with what the pages show me, and it does seem part of an overall alchemical process of some kind, a meaningful transformation, in which I have no explanation, but only trust.



The Soldier is Smiling

Since you formulated the Glass Dream Game, has your relationship with books evolved — does it influence the types of books you add to your library, or the ones

you choose not to keep? Beyond the thinkers and texts most commonly associated with the Glass Dream Game, are there particular books in your collection that have left the deepest impression on your imagination or way of thinking – ones that continue to matter to you personally, perhaps even standing out above the rest?

Yes, it causes me to buy more books than I can honestly read, given I must also raise a child, take care of household things, and make paintings. I've got a habit which has begun to spin out of control.

And yes, I have plenty of shitty books, but to remove them is against the rules. Dumb books adding to strange, burgeoning patterns just makes the Game more fun. It's all part of it.

As for favourite books, the two most important are obviously *The Glass Bead Game* and the *Yijing*. But, you know, there are a lot of other influences that run underneath and alongside these two books, as the two are already linked. Carl Jung is really the figure that bridges the two. The sinologist Richard Wilhelm translated the *Yijing* for the first time for Westerners, which is where my first English translation (from the German) came from. Jung wrote the essay which appears in that edition, as the two knew each other. Hesse consulted with Jung, and one of Jung's students was Hesse's psychoanalyst. Jung is everywhere in Hesse's work. Jung's influence extended to others in his circle, such as his student Marie-Louise von Franz, whose collected lecture series *On Divination and Synchronicity* I read in the process of working on the Game. Wilhelm translated other Chinese classics like *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, which has been an important addition to my meditation practice and introduced me to the concept of *neidan*, a form of inner alchemy distinct from the Western esoteric forms Jung wrote extensively about. At the base of it all, for me, is the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*) written by 6th-century Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu.

I'm narrowing it down to those books which have found their way into the Game in a permanent, structural sense, not so much other books that have been equally important to me in other ways throughout my life. But I'm very interested in consciousness generally, and am currently reading *The Master and His Emissary* by Iain McGilchrist, which deals with what's going on in the left and right hemispheres of the brain, and what that has to do with the turn that Western culture has taken over time.

Interestingly, the Game just brought in (as it often brings books in) what I knew would have to come up eventually: the Bible. Jeremiah and Matthew, in this case. It's

the first time I've read it in any careful or meaningful way in over twenty years, and it's as if I'm seeing it for the first time. I understand it so differently reading it now than I did back then, as a kid or teenager. I have to admit, it's a pretty great read. I have friends who will read my words here and smirk, religious and nonreligious alike. They'll look at me with suspicion, I know they will, and refuse to tell me why, as if afraid to ruin a surprise.



The Time Forgiveness Takes

End Note

What ultimately defines Aemen Ededéen's practice is not the complexity of the system behind it, but what that system makes possible: paintings that feel genuinely discovered rather than made. Their densely layered, physically weathered surfaces carry the marks of a process in which chance and intention are so thoroughly entangled that neither fully claims the result. As the Glass Dream Palace continues to expand across Visions, Dreams, and catalogued Archetypes, the work achieves a rare coherence — not the coherence of fixed meaning, but of a practice that remains courageously open to what it does not yet know.

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