

# Altered states

Michael Perin Wogenburg turned tragedy into triumph to create a new form of naked yoga therapy. Interview by **Paul Rouse**

**O**CCASIONALLY YOU COME ACROSS SOMEBODY WHOSE LIFE SOUNDS LIKE A FILM SCRIPT. If Michael Perin

Wogenburg's story were ever to make it to the screen, it would probably be titled *Out of the Darkness*.

When his wife died during childbirth 20 years ago, leaving him with a two-year-old daughter, Vienna-born digital designer Michael descended into what he describes as "a fog of anxiety and depression" and, feeling as if his world had crashed down around him, he became stuck in "a limbo of sadness, loneliness and addictions", including high-risk trading, alcohol and pornography. From the bottom, the only way was up. Turning to studying, Michael became a teacher and life coach, and inspired by the works of Carl Gustav Jung, Wilhelm Reich and the Indian mystics, his travels took him around the world and into psychoanalysis, neurotherapy, meditation, yoga, the occult and tantra.

Along the way, he collected a vast library of lost practices, spiritual exercises and rituals for the healing of the human condition. Now re-married and based – some might say inevitably – in Los Angeles, he has developed two new forms of naked-based therapy:



Fire: one of the five elements

## Forbidden Yoga and Sensual Liberation Camps (SLCs).

Before going on to explain more, however, let's address the "elephant in the room". Many naturists will tell you that social nudity has nothing to do with sex. Michael totally disagrees.

"Sex is an essential part of life," he maintains. "If you suppress sex you deny the human race the source of life itself. In the absence of sex, we not only lose physical pleasure but an essential source of spiritual growth, which is why I always teach yoga naked, and in relation to sexuality. I don't pigeonhole it by calling it tantric sex, but my yoga exercises do focus on sexual energy, and will help improve your sex life and your relationships. We draw our greatest inspiration from sexuality. Having said that, more than anybody else, I am fully aware that our life must be about more than sex. It's about our connection to nature, to ourselves, and the elements around us."

### Techniques

Far from claiming that Forbidden Yoga is "new", Michael is the first to acknowledge that it is more an evolution and a rediscovery of ancient styles, with the name coming not because of any particularly risqué element to it, but because it involves a series of lost, suppressed techniques ▶



**Spiritual growth:**  
the focus is on  
sexual energy



**Getting together:**  
Forbidden Yoga is  
usually based around  
group sessions

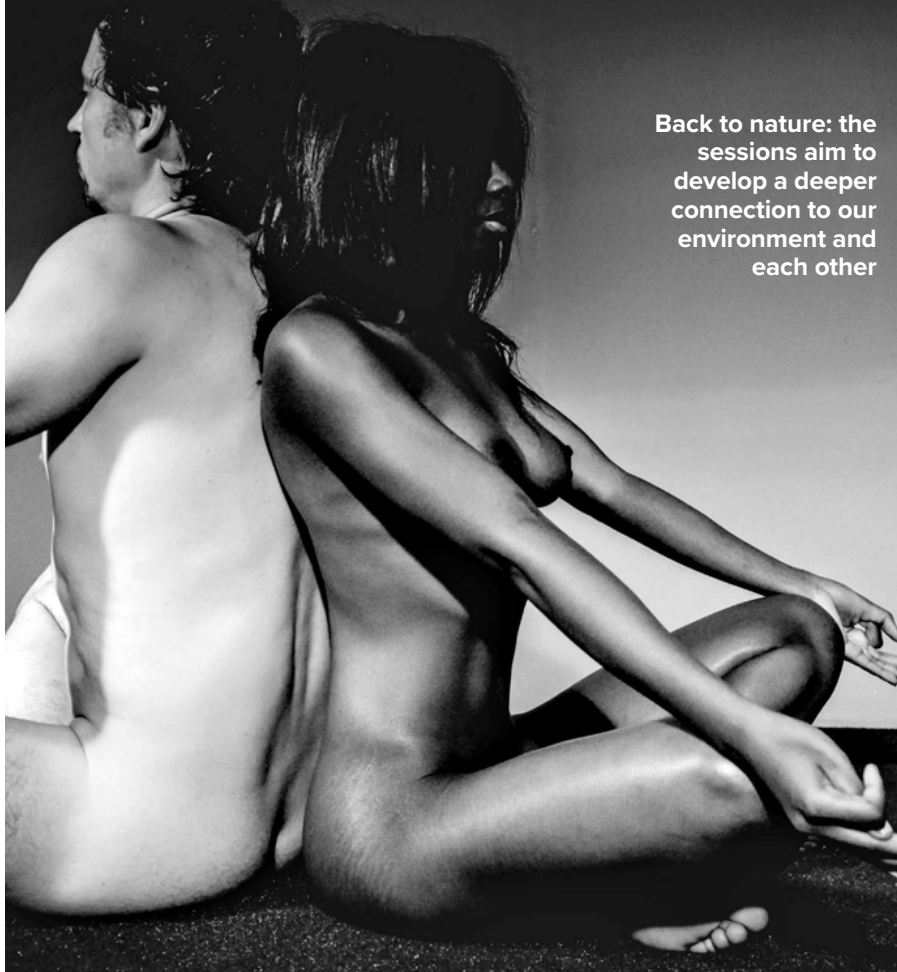
and rituals for accelerating movement through the body of the vital energy that is the raw power behind the senses. "Practised with sincerity and resolve," he explains, "they cause a profound shift in awareness that is accompanied by a deep healing of past traumas. Because of the power of these techniques to create deep psychological change, they have traditionally only been taught in secret, passed down from guru to disciple over years of dedicated practice. Other techniques have been prohibited for being too explicit, causing them to be virtually lost as society has become more repressed. I believe that in the correct environment, surrounded by the right people and with expert guidance, these techniques can be shared openly once again, and help with overcoming problems such as hidden beliefs, trauma and passive-aggressiveness."

Out of Forbidden Yoga sprang Michael's second initiative: the Sensual Liberation Camp. But if you think the name sounds like a euphemism for an orgy, think again.

"Forbidden Yoga is usually practised by couples or in classes," says Michael. "But a number of my clients felt they needed something more private and personal. I began with Skype sessions and an online course, and from there, developed the idea of SLC: tailored tuition and therapy for individuals designed to provide long-term solutions for change or for taking meaningful steps in their lives."

Essentially, an SLC is a customised private retreat. They can be held anywhere of the client's choosing, and are aimed equally at men or women, straight or gay. To create the right environment for transformation, previous SLCs have tended to be hosted in exotic locations in Asia or South America, often chosen for their natural beauty and spiritual power, places where access to the five elements is abundant and participants can indulge in a feast of the senses as they are gently guided towards a reawakening of their sensuality.

"Frequently people ask me if SLCs are of a sexual nature," says Michael. "I prefer to root the word sensual from senses and not from sex. SLCs are a liberation for, and from, the senses. The therapies have nothing much to do with modern western tantra techniques such as hugging and eye-gazing. They are an evolution of the ancient, mystical



**Back to nature: the sessions aim to develop a deeper connection to our environment and each other**

tantric traditions, combine breathwork, movement and meditation, and with the assistance of co-participants selected especially for the retreat, involve practices and encounters that go far beyond the simple act of lovemaking, and can result in a deep and lasting change in the way you experience the world and your relationship to yourself, your body, sex, sexuality and those you are attracted to."

## Rituals

While all SLCs are different, they do include some fundamental "building blocks". During the day, participants are guided through various tantric meditations and exercises to activate the body's energy and awaken the psychic senses. Michael's assistant Liya Navrotskaya hosts the daily exercise programme of Tantric Kriya and Kundalini Sadhana. At night, Michael will lead secret rituals for going deeper.

"Even those with no yoga background can experience profound shifts very quickly," says Michael. "As authentic tantra originates from animistic traditions, we work with the elements of nature and observe their manifestations through the five senses. At the more advanced level, these practices employ complex and intricate procedures

to access very specific states of consciousness. Rituals take place late at night, are practised in the nude, and can last for hours. They are highly intimate and challenging, with the ultimate goal being to pierce the veil of the natural world and come into direct contact with the divine. Through repeated encounters with the source of creation, we develop a deeper connection with nature, and our fellow human beings."

In short, both Forbidden Yoga and the Sensual Liberation Camps could be described as ways of getting back to nature. "As human beings," summarises Michael, "we exist somewhere on the spectrum of body, mind and spirit. To be truly at peace, we must find a balance between these worlds. But with the rise of modern society, mass media, the internet, mobile phones and 'reality' TV, we've been pulled further away from our connection with our animal nature and the natural world. We learn conditioned ways of behaving – around our work, within our families, and in our romantic relationships – that are safe, but not fully authentic, and therefore not connected with spirit. This leaves many of us feeling disconnected, depressed, lonely and without an authentic purpose. We believe we can change that."

Out of the darkness indeed... 