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mormonartist

COVERING THE LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS WORLD

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CONTACT US
WEB MORMONARTIST.NET
EMAIL EDITOR@MORMONARTIST.NET

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Editor's Note

BY **BEN CROWDER, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Toward the end of last year, Randy Astle emailed me and suggested we do a special themed issue focusing on Mormon artists in New York. It wasn't hard to see that this was a good idea — while we love Utah artists, one of the goals of the magazine has been to show how much is happening *outside* of Utah, where artistic activities aren't quite as well-known.

And, several months later, here we are with a gem of an issue. Special thanks to Randy for all of his work on this. We couldn't have done it without him. Thanks also to everyone else who helped make this one of our best issues ever. Enjoy.

One more thing: In preparation for our international artists issue in October, we're collecting suggestions for people to interview. If you're a Latter-day Saint artist, writer, musician, filmmaker, or any other type of artist who lives outside the United States, or if you know someone who is, please let us know. Thanks! ▪

Submission Guidelines

LITERATURE

PERSONAL ESSAYS, POETRY, SHORT STORIES
NO LONGER THAN 1,500 WORDS

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GENERAL NOTES

WORK IN ANY GENRE IS FINE AS LONG AS IT'S APPROPRIATE FOR AN LDS AUDIENCE.
ANYTHING YOU SUBMIT MUST BE YOUR OWN WORK.
SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSIONS ARE FINE.
IF YOUR SUBMISSION HAS BEEN PUBLISHED BEFORE, LET US KNOW.

QUESTIONS?
editor@mormonartist.net

Introduction

BY **RANDY ASTLE** | WEB: **RANDYASTLE.COM**

Randy Astle earned his master's degree from the London Film School and currently works as a children's television writer in Manhattan. His scholarly work has helped create the field of Mormon film studies, and his 2007 article "A History of Mormon Cinema" was recently named one of the ten best articles in the fifty-year history of BYU Studies.

He created an online social network for Mormon artists in New York City at http://nyldsan.ning.com *and another for all LDS filmmakers at* http://ldsfilmmakersnetwork.ning.com.

When I first learned about *Mormon Artist* magazine, I immediately thought about all of the LDS artists here in New York who ought to be profiled in its pages. I wanted to contribute an interview but knew so many spectacular artists that I couldn't decide which to propose to the editors, so I finally proposed doing an entire issue about Mormon artists in New York City. Ben Crowder enthusiastically agreed and graciously allowed me to guest edit this issue of *Mormon Artist*, the first issue in the magazine's short history dedicated exclusively to artists in a single location.

New York City has always been among the artistic capitals of the United States, and since at least the turn of the last century, it has drawn its share of LDS artists to study, teach, work, and live in its five boroughs. Most people interested in Mormon art associate the city with names like Mahonri Young and Minerva Teichert, yet a host of other artists followed, drawn here by the city's intellectual life and vibrant artistic culture. Besides those who have lived here, a great many more have visited to partake of New York's culture or give an exhibition or performance themselves.

Today, with a temple on Broadway right across the street from the largest performing arts center in the country, there are likely as many, if not more, Mormon artists working in New York than in any other city in the world. In fact, even with an entire issue at our disposal, we still didn't have room to include even a fraction of the individuals we felt merited attention. Mormon artists here have performed lead roles in shows like *Les Misérables* and *La Bohème*; performed at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, jazz clubs, and venues for new music; and had work acquired by the MoMA, Metropolitan Museum, and a host of other institutions, here and throughout the world. Their work stretches from Super Bowl commercials to *This American Life*, from modern dance companies to preschool television — and on and on. As Mormon art experiences a form of renaissance, New York City is destined to be at the center of much of it.

None of this is to discount the artistic work that's going on in other areas of high LDS concentration, and obviously great Mormon artists live everywhere — indeed, the geographic dispersion of contemporary artists is one of the things that makes the present moment in Mormon art and letters so exciting. But it's also satisfying to recognize a sort of modern-day gathering to certain places, and New York is certainly one of those. As one of our interviewees recently said to me, if Mormon artists have aspirations to be among the greatest in their fields, then they should live in a place that constantly forces them to prove it; New York City does just that. Please enjoy learning about the artists profiled here, a fantastic group of talented individuals who represent just a sampling of what this city has to offer. ▪

Set Apart, Drawn Together: The New York Stake Arts Festival

BY **MARIN LEGGAT, COORDINATOR**

Marin is a choreographer, modern dancer, instructor, and founder and director of the company M.E.L.D. Danceworks. Also see our interview with her on page 72.

Winter 2008: I'm sitting in sacrament meeting in my ward in uptown Manhattan, listening to strains of the opening hymn fill our chapel. Our numbers are not as large as Salt Lake City wards, but man, can this ward sing! I'm surrounded by professional opera singers, Broadway performers, musicians, dancers, writers, and artists. The song of the righteous is a prayer, and this morning, the prayer fills the air with zeal, faith, and near-perfect pitch.

Politics and religion are in the air this morning, too, with the recent passing of Prop 8 in California, the resulting protests at LDS temples — including our own Manhattan temple — and the diverse range of opinions and concerns being expressed within the LDS community.

I'm thinking about my own work as artistic director of M.E.L.D. Danceworks, a modern dance company committed to "dissolving religious and cultural barriers through the art of dance." I've just begun rehearsals for a new project with a cast of interfaith dancers exploring the foundations of our spirituality. Rehearsals thus far have been part dancing, part discussion, part debate about current events surrounding politics and "the Mormons."

Winter 2008 was a time of reflection, uneasiness and reconciliation for me as an LDS dance artist living in New York City.

Around this time, I suggested to a friend that our stake present an arts festival. The last arts festival presented by the New York, New

York Stake had been held in 2001. I wasn't alone in feeling the need at this particular time and place to step forward, open our doors, and say, "This is who we are! This is what we do! Come see!"

The three-day festival, *Set Apart, Drawn Together,* was held April 30–May 2, 2009 in the Lincoln Square Building on 65th and Columbus in midtown Manhattan. The festival showcased the work of over 100 LDS artists in all disciplines of visual, literary, and performing arts. Major events involved a film festival, dance concert, classical concert, musical theatre showcase, visual arts display, and children's concert. Each of these events had its own team of coordinators and curators working under the direction of President Buckner and Nathan Bowen, a coordinating member of the high council and a composer completing a PhD in music composition from the CUNY Graduate Center.

In addition to major events, classes for adults and children were taught by experts in the field. Children worked alongside professionals to compose original songs, draw objects in 3D, and take creative movement classes. For adults, classes such as Writings of C.S. Lewis, Drawing the Human Figure, Opera for Beginners, Indoor Photography, and Jive Dancing were offered. Panels on timely topics like "Arts and the Economy" provided resources and networking opportunities for LDS artists in the stake.

Living the life of an artist in NYC is not easy. Some work day jobs to support families while auditioning, others juggle multiple jobs to pay rent, and some finance their own art — whether it be writing, choreography, theatre, or painting — while waiting for the next commission to come through. For five months, I watched as these artists stepped forward to give a little more in order to assist in the missionary and fellowshipping aims of the festival: extra rehearsals requiring more evenings away from family; time spent curating, collecting, and properly hanging original artwork; and donations from individuals like Rich Bishop, who provided the Marley floor, lighting equipment, and manpower necessary to transform the floor of the cultural hall into a thirty-five by forty foot stage, complete with side lighting and a sound board.

It was important to festival organizers that LDS artists working and living in Manhattan come to know, associate with, and support each other. Through the festival, the New York Artists Network was established to assist LDS artists wishing to network and collaborate across disciplines.

The work of LDS artists was recognized and celebrated by members of the stake and community over this three-day event. *Set Apart, Drawn Together* also provided artists of other faiths opportunities to share their talents with our stake members. The indie-folk trio Pearl and the Beard, including Inwood First Ward member Emily Price, performed a forty-five minute set, and the Handcart Ensemble, under the direction of Scott Reynolds, performed a reading of *Odyssey,* a production that would eventually go on to a successful off-Broadway run.

The arts play an important role in building bridges of understanding among diverse groups of people. In a city as diverse as New York City, LDS artists can help create opportunities to share ideas and build respect among our neighbors.

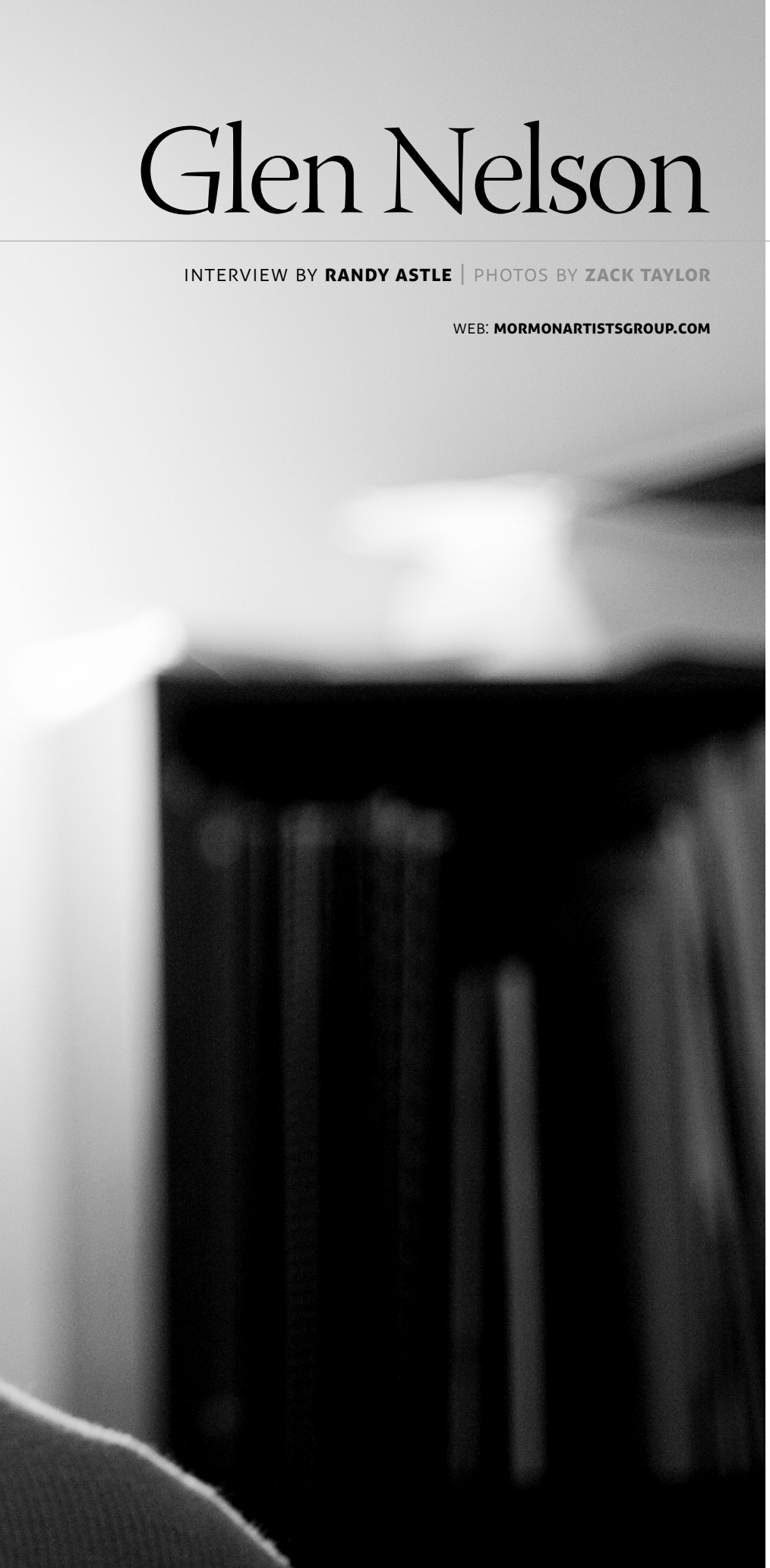
Set Apart, Drawn Together set a precedent for future arts festivals that will continue shedding positive light on the Church and its members. ▪

Living the life of an artist in NYC is not easy.

Glen Nelson

INTERVIEW BY **RANDY ASTLE** | PHOTOS BY **ZACK TAYLOR**

WEB: **MORMONARTISTSGROUP.COM**



Glen Nelson is a ghostwriter with several New York Times nonfiction bestsellers to his credit. He is also director of Mormon Artists Group which creates original works with LDS painters, composers, writers, photographers, designers, architects, choreographers, filmmakers, etc. MAG is currently celebrating its tenth anniversary.

What do you do for a living?

According to the IRS, I'm a writer. Recently, I've been doing a bit of ghostwriting, which is writing other people's books for them. I also play the role of manuscript doctor. I've been lucky in that I've had a couple of *New York Times* bestsellers in the last few years. A new book I've worked on comes out this week, and I just finished a manuscript in January for which the New York publishers have high hopes.

What about your own writing?

I've worn a lot of hats. My training is in literature. I'm a James Joyce scholar, but I opted out of the academic life after I graduated from NYU about twenty-five years ago. Most of the things I've written were in collaboration: I've written three operas, several song cycles, and individual art songs. But I've also had poetry, essays, a few articles, and some scholarship published. Those are things with my name on them.

What we found was that people didn't care about getting together once a month or year or decade. What they wanted was advocacy.

How much of those are Church work, and how much are on James Joyce and other things like that?

At one point I was the world authority on a certain page of *Ulysses* . . . for about fifteen minutes. Since then, I haven't done any really literary scholarship work.

Is much of the rest of it is about the Church?

I've written a few articles for the Church publications, but I didn't really write anything overtly LDS, aside from those publications, until I was forty. For a long time, I didn't think that I had anything to add to the dialogue of the Church. In 2005, BYU commissioned an opera from me — I'm the librettist, which means that I'm in charge of the plot and the dialogue — about Joseph Smith for the 100th birthday celebration.

That was a challenge because I didn't want to put words into Joseph's mouth, and to be honest, I couldn't really figure out what would be going on in his head, either. But I had an epiphany one day as my daughter lay in the hospital after brain surgery. I didn't understand the prophet in Nauvoo, but I did have insight into the struggling young father a decade earlier with sick and dying children, a farmer and man in love, a man trying to get a book published. So I scrapped the idea of the opera taking place in Nauvoo and instead concentrated on the period of him trying to get the Book of Mormon published.

Tell us about your collaboration with Murray Boren on that opera, *The Book of Gold.*

The music was written by Murray, who in my mind is one of the best composers ever to come from the Church. I was really happy with my contribution to the opera. It seemed to me well-researched and not just the facts.

What I mean is we decided to keep all of the action factual, so everything that happens on stage could be documented in the historical record. Also, the language itself was researched. I studied speech patterns of nineteenth-century literature; I guess my NYU days came back to help me there. Not just serious literature, but also pop literature, newspapers, and so forth, from the 1820s through the 1860s. I wanted to be sure that the characters used the vocabulary and cadence of Joseph's time.

One thing that often bothers me with projects that are historical in nature is when they use language that is phony. The surprise for me was how the literature of the time gave me insight into how the characters should express themselves and also how they think. In the opera, Joseph sounds like Emerson: stately and probing. Oliver sounds like Hawthorne: more susceptible to outside pressure, romantic. Martin Harris sounds like Poe: with a manic, dangerous energy. And so forth.

The opera characters sound like them because I used their sentence structure as a template and peppered their speech with words that were in usage then. Whether or not anyone in the audience made those connections, it didn't matter much to me. But since the librettist is essentially creating rhythms for the composer in the way that words come together, I felt I was pushing the opera to sound authentic without caving in to a pastiche sound. The project was satisfying for me in every way. And it certainly didn't hurt that the lead singers were from the Met Opera, either.

You had worked with Murray before. Did you work with him on all three of your previous operas and song cycles?

Yes, the first opera was performed here in New York when I was still a Joyce scholar-type. It was an opera

of "The Dead," a short story, which was the ideal vehicle for me at the time. It was a little chamber opera.

So there was that opera and there was another one called *The Singer's Romance*, which was a sort of mashup of several Willa Cather stories that I was very fond of. Together we have done a series of song cycles for concert performance, some just for piano accompaniment or for full orchestra. We've done five of those, and then I've worked with some other composers as well, either just editing texts that they wanted to set or creating original texts for them.

Do you approach adapting something like *Dubliners* differently from something like the history of Joseph Smith? Or did you use largely the same process?

Actually, it's an identical process. I was really happy with that first experience of adapting Joyce, with scholars coming to check out every detail for authenticity, but my anxiety about being correct was replayed when I did the BYU gig. I was quite nervous about going to BYU and having somebody yell at me because something wasn't historically right. I think that's what led me toward an authentic plot. For example, the historical record says that Joseph translated the plates by looking into a hat with a seer stone in the base. So in the libretto I had material like that.

Yet I was nervous about how that would be received. The producers never said a word to me about that. They staged it exactly like the libretto said. It did get a lot of questions in institute, apparently. Students would go to their teachers and ask, "What's this thing that I just saw?" and the teachers would say, "Well, actually, that was the real deal," and they would open up the history books and so forth. So it opened up a dialogue to turn some of our folk stories down a more authentic path, which I think is completely healthy. During that time, Richard Bushman was writing his biography of Joseph Smith, and he lived in New York near me. He was kind enough to look at the libretto before Murray started setting it.

Where did Mormon Artists Group come from? What are its origins?

We started Mormon Artists Group ten years ago. Initially it was sort of a social thing, and then that shifted over time to commerce. The initial impetus was that there were all these artists here, and by artists, I mean creative artists, rather than performing artists. They were all doing cool and professional things, but I didn't know that. I knew that this guy was my bishop and that that woman was my Relief Society president, but I didn't know that he was a photographer and she was a painter. And to be honest, it bothered me that we weren't open about what we really cared about artistically, either in our professional lives or off hours.

So I wanted to bring everybody together and do things that would showcase what it is that we really are about and what we care about. So we started doing things like exhibitions. We put together a little portfolio of stuff we were doing. There were painters, photographers, sculptors, poets, historians, playwrights, filmmakers, choreographers, and architects — it was open to everybody. What we found over time was that our social needs changed, and people, at an elite level especially, didn't care about getting together once a month or year or decade. What they wanted was advocacy. They wanted to learn more about people who were also aspiring to be really good because they would sometimes feel aesthetically isolated.

So we started doing publications, not just of books but also limited edition artworks. And we started commissioning projects. Some of them were really ambitious, actually, particularly with having people collaborate on different art forms together, which I thought was really fun to do. Over the track of this ten-year period we incorporated, so we are now a corporation in the state of New York. We essentially do limited edition artworks in lots of different kinds of media and sometimes we'll do commercial editions of those. A book might end up becoming a paperback, for example.

This recently happened with Richard Bushman's new book.

Richard was the historian I mentioned a moment ago. *Rough Stone Rolling* was his biography of Joseph Smith, and when it was about a year away from publication, I was in his house and said, "You know, it might be fun for you to keep a journal of what it's like for you to finish a project and put it out there and see how people respond." And he hemmed and hawed a little bit about it. But he came back to me and said, "I think this might work, but I'm not sure. I'll write and then we'll see what we get."

A year later the history book came out. Knopf published it. Then after three months or so, he showed me the manuscript that Mormon Artists Group eventually published. It came to be called *On the Road With Joseph Smith*. It was about Richard's journey, both his physical one — traipsing around the country speaking at academic conferences, Church groups, and giving lectures and radio and TV interviews — and it was also about the emotional journey of expectation and the question of what it's going to be like to receive criticism.

You know, you live with a character like Joseph for at least a decade to write a book like that, and then what happens when a critic

comes around and either loves it or hates it? In Richard's case, both things happened. So this book that we came out with was for me just an ideal project: it was personal, it had a Mormon component, but it wasn't about Mormonism, really. It was about someone who was a part of the culture and had something to say of his own experience.

Initially we released a limited edition. It was quite spectacular as an object. It was a handmade cherry wood slipcase with loose unbound sheets slid inside. It reminded me of Joseph Smith building the cherry wood box to hold the plates while he was translating them. It was really quite a beautiful volume, and it sold out in like a minute and a half. It's a collectible now. Then we were approached to do a paperback by a publisher. I had told Richard all along that I didn't want that, because when you are writing a book that you know a hundred people are going to see, it's different than if you are writing a book that a thousand people are going to see. You self-edit.

But the comments that he received from the publication of the book were intensely favorable. And he thought, "Well, I think that a paperback might be useful to other people," and that came out and is still in print.

Can you give us examples of one or two other Mormon Artists Group projects that you have been most pleased with?

We have done eighteen projects with eighty-six LDS artists. That fact is cool to me because when people try to start a publication or they form some group based on a common ideology, those usually don't last long. They tend to have a utopian feeling to them, but they aren't sustainable, or they need outside support to prop them up. So I am quite proud of our longevity and independence.

The other thing that really strikes me is the range of our projects. We did fine photographs when the Manhattan Temple came out. We've done film animation, poetry, etchings, songwriting, and personal essays. We've had artists from across the United States and abroad. This year we did a book, *On Sunday*, that simply had people all around the world who went to church and described everything that happened one day — from Kuwait, Singapore, Brazil, Harlem, Seattle, Chicago, Mesa, Provo, Australia, etc.

We did a beautiful sketchbook by a young artist who is making a lot of name for himself, Casey Jex Smith. I met this young guy, and I found out that he takes a little sketchbook to church with him every Sunday and he draws things he sees or imagines. So I felt, like with Richard's book, that it was a very intimate thing. It was a believing Mormon artist who was making stuff that expressed his own values. The title of it is *Church Drawings*. It wasn't propaganda, it wasn't commissioned to help the Church in any way; it was just a personal response, and I thought that it was quite beautiful.

One of our complex projects was called *Mormoniana*. I invited sixteen Mormon classical composers to take an LDS painting and write a piano piece based on it, like "Pictures at an Exhibition" by Mussorgsky. That was a very fun project because it showed that the compositional styles of fine Mormon composers were all over the map. Still, they had so much to say to each other. That was a successful book for us.

You have a monthly e-newsletter called *Glimpses* that contains some fascinating stuff. For instance, the most recent one was about an artist from Africa, and the one before that was about modern art by Mormons. Do you see your role to be an educator as much as a producer and promoter for these artists?

We came to the online party kind of late. Recently it struck me that a big segment of Mormon culture, people who would be predisposed to like contemporary work by other people in their culture, were underexposed to it. I use *Glimpses* as a communication tool. It comes out monthly. In addition to announcing our new projects, I've turned an eye to scholarship and also informal communication. It seems to me that scholarship, particularly on early modern Mormon work of the twentieth century and forward, is less known than it should be.

Also, sometimes people will write to me and say, "You should research so-and-so." That's the case of this last artist — he is a young painter named Hildebrando de Melo from Angola. He had a beautiful gallery show here in Chelsea of abstract painting; he's LDS and joined the Church in Portugal. So in that case, someone contacts me and I'll do an interview.

At other times, I'll ask people who are experts in a field or into something that I don't know much about if they would like to write an article for *Glimpses*. Sometimes I'll get with artists who want to explain what they do. I do this because with contemporary work, and I'm thinking mostly of music and visual art, artists often throw the stuff at the viewer or the

We have done eighteen projects with eighty-six LDS artists.

One of our scholarly activities recently was to track down as many Mormon operas as we could — and we found over fifty.

listener and hope that something sticks. There's really not any kind of place where they can learn about it. So we did one really cool newsletter that was simply a contemporary music recording with audio voiceover commentary by the composer on what was happening in the music.

People wrote me from all over saying, "I never would have listened to this music, but now I actually get it." So I think the newsletter can serve a purpose of education. But when you say "education," it sometimes has this sense that it's remedial or that I'm trying to push something on people who don't want it, and I don't think of it that way so much as exposure.

Relatives of mine, for example, live in places that are very, very far away from any museum that has any kind of contemporary work at all, so I think that a newsletter is a way that I can give them access to ideas that they wouldn't normally see. We keep all the back issues of *Glimpses* on our website.

In that vein of thought, do you think that Mormon artists and Mormons as art consumers can benefit from finding out about these people and about new types of works that they wouldn't otherwise be exposed to?

It's all about exposure, both for the artists themselves and for people trying to understand them.

At the turn of the twentieth century when the Mahonri Youngs and the Minerva Teicherts were coming to New York to study because they realized they couldn't get an education where they lived, the real education they got in New York was exposure. Not access to galleries that would sell their works, necessarily, but exposure to what was really happening with their peers on the East Coast and Europe. And it broadened their perception of what their art could be.

The other benefit is social. One of the things that I'm conscious of is that a lot of LDS artists live in congregations where they might be the only artist. I get this kind of e-mail frequently.

Might it be fair then to say that Mormon Artists Group is something akin to the twenty-first century version of John Hafen going on a mission to Paris to learn about art? You are able to use technology to bring people together and educate them more about art, whereas at that time they had to travel to do it. Or would that be a bit of a stretch?

The painter missionaries were such an interesting moment in our history. It's fascinating to me that those guys were set apart. They got down on a knee and the prophet said, '"I bless you. You're a missionary. Go off and learn." Crawford Gates mentioned in an earlier issue of *Mormon Artist* that when he did the music for the Palmyra Pageant, he was set apart. That's very cool.

Today, any artist who has a discernible gift has ways of getting out and finding education and a community that can support him or her. I mean, color photography in magazines is a relatively recent invention. Before that, imagine being a painter wanting to discover art long-distance.

Mormon Artists Group is not an education for artists. They don't need us for that. What they need is patronage and to feel like their attempts to communicate through the arts are falling on open eyes and ears. So our goals try to align with those needs.

As consumers, there are a lot of people who would be very happy knowing that there are LDS artists at the highest level, people who would be willing to purchase their work or go to their concerts or buy their books or commission projects from them. So, in an Oprah sort of way, I've been able to connect

artists with people who can give them dough, both as collectors and also in their businesses. It's been a common thread of our projects that an artist will work with us and then use that product as a kind of extravagant calling card and get corporate commissions or other works based on it.

Have you gotten a different reception from the mainstream community than from the LDS community?

Our works have been acquired by big institutions, and they have been very enthusiastic, both of the object that they have in front of them and of the communal aspect — that it's created by a group of like-believing people.

Some of our stuff is in the Museum of Modern Art, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, in Yale's library, and other major American libraries, and in collections of private collectors of importance who are and aren't LDS, both here and internationally. They have been super supportive of the concept of it.

It's not a new idea, a group of people gathering together. That's essentially how a school of work is created. It's not really your question, but I am starting to see a school of thought in contemporary Mormon art. There are commonalities that are very interesting, and I think the academic community will eventually connect the dots between genres and discover fascinating things.

Are you getting similar responses from Salt Lake and Provo and Mesa?

It does vary, but I don't think I could characterize it very clearly. I'm always surprised to discover pockets of patrons in unexpected places. The Pacific Northwest, for example, is unusually attentive to our projects. I have no idea why, but I'm all for it.

Are there people here in New York who have been with you from day one? Who else has made a large contribution?

There are, but in any genre, I get leery of going back to somebody too often because there are just so many. Even someone who follows Mormon art would be hard pressed, for example, to list five very accomplished composers, the kind of people who are getting big commissions, big awards, and who are being played by serious musicians around the country. But I can list fifty.

I try to maintain a mental database of LDS artists. Not just composers, but painters and writers and so forth.

Writers are pretty well served by Mormon scholarship, but I would dare to say that the other disciplines of Mormon art are not as well covered. Film, yes, recently, but heaven help you if you are an LDS jazz composer or a choreographer. Nobody would know who you are. And yet these LDS artists exist. So I do feel that I have a little bit of a stage to connect people who wouldn't know otherwise that there are LDS artists of distinction.

One of our scholarly activities recently was to track down as many Mormon operas as we could — and we found over fifty. That's a number big enough to attract scholarship and notice.

A few years ago we did a research project of serious LDS music that is on the shelves in New York libraries — the New York Public Library, Juilliard, and university libraries. And we found hundreds — hundreds of symphonies, string quartets, piano music, tons of choral music, as you'd imagine, and art songs, ballets.

I would dare say that only a handful of people in the Church might be aware of the true depth of LDS art. Let's just say that Mormon studies (outside of our history) is not a saturated field. For most of us, the problem is, how does somebody who is interested find these artists?

What are you doing to publicize that and get those names out there?

How much can one person do? What I try to do is tackle it from two vantage points.

One is to be historically aware and come up with reference volumes and articles that can be published and just be out there.

The other thing is that I really believe in being part of the commissioning process. I want to expand the library of Mormon art, so to speak. It's all well and good that you are a Church composer, for example, but the Church isn't going to commission a symphony. How would that be useful to it? (Although as soon as I say that, I can think of a way.)

So what we have done is approach artists to commission new works. What I want from them is their best work. I don't want them to write for a specific audience. I don't want them to dumb it down or to dilute it or to try to be commercial with it. I want them to make something that others can be passionate about collecting and enjoying. I want them to do their best work given the parameters of the marketplace, as in *X* amount of time to create something will give them *X* return.

For instance, take our new project. Last year I approached six composers and commissioned each of them to write a complete song cycle to LDS texts. I think it's commonly known that we're experiencing something like a golden age of Mormon poets. You have people in *The Paris Review* and *The New Yorker* and award winners, "name poets," as it were. Maybe they aren't in the *Ensign*. It's not really the *Ensign*'s goal to publish more cutting-edge work, and I don't have

a beef with that at all. But these poets are out there and they consider themselves to be very Mormon; their texts read as Mormon to me.

So I thought it would be quite cool to have composers do song cycles using their texts, and now the premieres of them are going to happen all over the country. We did a concert here in New York of four of the six cycles. Each is about fifteen to thirty minutes long, so they are significant, weighty works. The New York premieres were on March 20. Some of the premieres internationally were in public forums and others were salon settings in someone's house or in a community center.

This project has a couple of goals. One of them is to just give singers access to work. Let's say you're a serious singer. Right now at the Met, I think we have four or five LDS singers, and there are many professional concert artists out there. When they are asked sometimes to do recordings and recital work, they want to put something Mormon on their program because they want to convey what they are but they have no idea where they would find that.

One of the goals of this project is to have lots of singers performing these works. Usually when you have a performance of a premiere, and I sadly know this from my own experiences, it's "premiere then disappear." That's the way it works. You almost never have a second reading. So this is an extraordinary opportunity for composers to have their work performed by multiple people in multiple cities. I'm kind of excited about it. We are calling the project "Song/Cycles," and I have high hopes for it. I have a feeling a lot of people are going to be surprised by how emotionally connected they are to art songs.

Do you have other things in the works that you'd like to talk about?

We have three or four things every year that we are working on. We did a book about two months ago called *The Island of Bali Is Littered With Prayers*. It's by Jeremy Grimshaw, who is a musicologist, and it's about his experience in Bali.

And it talks about his bringing a gamelan to BYU?

That's a traditional Balinese percussion orchestra. Essentially, it's a culture clash book and an exploration of community, music, and spiritual values. It's also very smart and keenly poetic. I love it. That book was published in a limited edition, covered with imported batik fabric. It sold out in December, so it is going to be issued as a paperback in April.

We have more projects coming out. One that I can talk about is really ambitious. A painter is responding to the Book of Moses with a series of large paintings. I think there are nineteen altogether. They are incredible.

In the fall 2006 issue of *Dialogue*, you wrote, "Sometimes I am asked by journalists about the state of Mormon arts and what I think it means to be a Mormon artist today. To be honest, I do not have a satisfying answer." Why can that be such a difficult question to answer? What is it about Mormon art that is so hard to pin down?

This question points to many of my own insecurities. The bottom line is that I'm not a scholar. I'm not an original thinker. I have a hard time keeping track of people and of putting myself out there socially. Being honest here, I hate to play the role of an expert, because I know what that would really mean, and I'm not that. I'm not terribly entrepreneurial either. On the surface, that isn't a very promising picture.

And yet I kept waiting for somebody to come along and simply try to bring Mormon artists together, to see the big picture. Eventually I decided that maybe I couldn't define Mormon arts or speak for the artists, but I might be valuable as somebody who wanted more from them and in exchange served as a liaison with people who expect their best.

Do you think that Mormon artists' natural tendency is to cloister themselves, to put that part of their personality under a bushel, so to speak? Is there something cultural that makes us want to pull back?

There is fear, both of failure and of the scrutiny within the Church that would occur if they were successful. We haven't been kind to believing LDS artists who've made it big. It's been sad to watch.

The second thing is that in a post-Proposition 8 world, there is a certain danger in the label of "Mormon artist." This probably isn't the place to go into it more than to say that there are artists who have been blackballed, who have lost work, who have been frightened that announced events would be cancelled if they were found out to be LDS. That's a very difficult position to be in for someone who is paying the rent as an artist, because in the couple of cases that I am thinking about these are fully participating, believing, Church members who are essentially being asked to choose. Those two realities are sad but undeniable.

Perhaps there is something in the label of "Mormon art" that can still contribute to the establishment of the Church, either here in New York or in other cities. Do you think that the Mormon Artists Group is contributing to the building up of Zion or the growth of the Church? How is it adding to the reputation?

I would like to have projects that make some money for the artists who need it. As far as influence or reputation goes, I am leery of

[New York] is a good place for believing Mormons to be, period.

slipping into the trap of false importance. Personally, I've had some luck, but I don't think too highly of my own abilities.

Generally speaking about Mormon artists, I consider us to be like plumbers. We are good Mormon people who are plying our trade, and I don't think we have any kind of responsibility that's morally higher than a plumber's plumbing. It's just that the organization is there to help these artists and to also establish a basis for future scholarship, illustrating that at a certain point in Church history there were people who were trying to accomplish a certain thing and there were other people who were supportive of that.

This is a special issue about New York City. Do you think that New York has influenced your work?

Could you have established something like Mormon Artists Group if you had lived somewhere like Salt Lake or San Francisco or elsewhere?

Technology has really enabled boundary hopping, so I don't think there are limitations today. I grew up in a very small farm community, and I suppose someone there now could establish relationships with people if he or she really wanted to because of the Internet. So I don't think that it's a limiting factor any longer.

I do think that the city has affected me personally in profound ways. I like the idea of being a small fish in a big pond rather than a big fish in a small pond, as in where I grew up.

But the thing about New York and raising a family here — and of course considering it as a place where there's a strong artistic community — is that there is certain energy here all the time, as far as inspiration. I am swimming in that all the time here. There is less of a detachment of culture from daily life. That surprises me as far as how that feeds into the things that I'm working on, to pay the mortgage as a writer and also stuff that I'm producing with Mormon Artists Group.

Is this a good place for Mormon artists to come and live and try to build their careers?

It's a good place for believing Mormons to be, period.

There is a critical mass. They can have influence in their communities here. They can really show why the Church and their belief system matter.

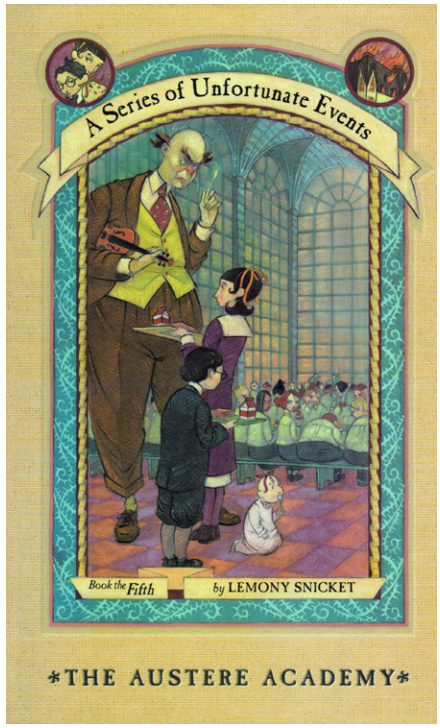
And I'm not talking about missionary work; I am talking about being a presence in a community. ▪

Brett Helquist

INTERVIEW BY **RANDY ASTLE** | PHOTOS BY **CHRIS LINDSAY**

WEB: **BRETTHELQUIST.COM**

Brett Helquist has illustrated dozens of children's and young adult books, most prominently the thirteen A Series of Unfortunate Events *books by Lemony Snicket. He has lived in New York since 1993 and currently has a studio in Brooklyn.*



But it kind of grabbed hold of me. It just felt good. Who knows why these things work—it just seemed like the thing to do for me.

Where are you from originally? What were some of your earliest artistic influences?

I grew up in Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. My earliest influences were the daily comic strips in the newspaper, specifically things like *Alley Oop,* which is a great strip about a time-traveling caveman. I just love those old comics. When I thought of becoming an artist, I thought of drawing comic strips. Then when I was about ten, my mother put me in an art class run at the local art supply store; that's where I started learning how to paint a little bit. After that I kind of dropped it and didn't do anything with it all through middle school and high school.

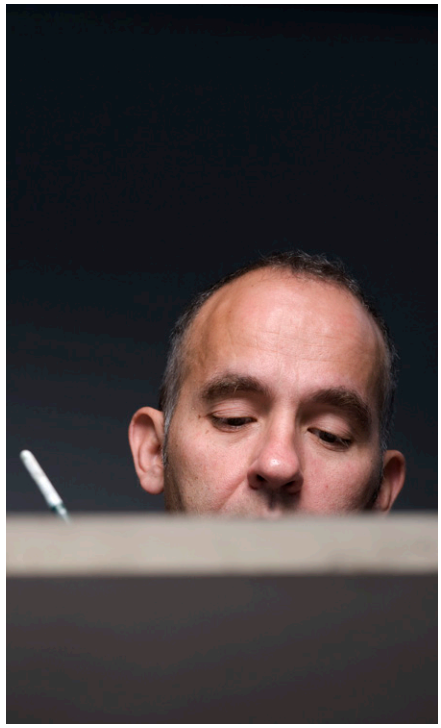
What prompted you to get back into it in college?

I served a mission in Hong Kong and fell in love with Chinese brush painting. I wasn't much of a letter writer, so I bought a brush and some paper, and on P-days while the others were writing multiple letters, I started trying to imitate these paintings. That sparked some interest again.

Then when I was back in school at BYU, I hit a point in my engineering curriculum where I just wasn't happy. I was doing well enough, but it didn't feel right for some reason. I took a painting class for one of my electives and found myself liking that more and more. Although I didn't really contemplate making a switch, it just kind of popped up.

One problem was that although I loved painting, I didn't really like what I saw coming out of the HFAC — the more abstract kind of expressionist work. I liked to look at it but could never see myself doing it.

But then I met someone who was in the illustration program, which was in the Brimhall Building at the time, separated from the art department. I just looked around at what they were hanging on the



walls and that seemed more like something that was of interest to me. I talked to Bob Barrett, the chair then, and learned they had an accelerated program that covered your first year of curriculum over a spring and summer term. This was winter semester, so I thought, "I'm just going to give the spring and summer to this to see how it feels. If I don't like it, I'll just slide back into my engineering classes and go on." But it kind of grabbed hold of me. It just felt good. Who knows why these things work — it just seemed like the thing to do for me.

You've said that some of your biggest influences are artists like N.C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle, and Dean Cornwell. What is it about their art that most inspires you?

Part of it is the subject matter. It comes from all the stories I loved to read when I was a kid: Robin Hood, old cowboy stories, the American West, *Treasure Island*, *Kidnapped*. When I first saw illustrations of stories like these, I really fell in love with them. These are the kind of stories that I would like to be illustrating. I still love a good pirate story more than anything.

Then beyond that, with all these guys, there's just a certain elegance to their design, the way the illustrations relate to the page. It's very classical in a way. There's a part of my mind that's quite scientific, and math has never been a problem for me.

So what I see in the drawings of Wyeth, Cornwell, and Pyle — who was called the father of American illustration — is discipline. Rather than just being creative and kind of loosely expressing themselves, they had a technique. There's an understanding of light, of basic form, and components like that. Early on I could see that and it really appealed to me.

There's a lot of science to drawing — back in the day, all the great scientists were artists too — and I think there's something in these illustrations that really appealed to me in that way.

How long would it take you to do a black-and-white illustration?

For the *Unfortunate Events*, those black-and-white drawings probably took one to two days to compose and then a good long day to get done. Most people don't know about the composition part, but that's really where all the work is: in the composition and making sure everything fits, getting all the details of costuming, and so forth.

So on those, it'd take a day or two, sometimes more for more complex ones. But generally I can execute those in about a day. It's a long day, though. A color painting like the one I'm just completing for a *Scary Stories 3* cover will take about a week to compose and then another to paint, so about two weeks all together from start to finish.

Do you have a favorite medium?

Do you prefer black-and-white or color?

Painting is probably where I feel most comfortable, but I like a good black-and-white drawing too. So I don't prefer one or the other, really.

I love colors, though. If I were doing all black and white, I'd get anxious about it. After a while, I'd want to do a color piece.

You don't often use live models, but you use books as your references for visuals.

Yeah, it helps to see it. I don't make anything up. I use pictures to get the detail of what things look like, and then I'm able to manipulate them and put them in the context I need them to be in.

Over the years, I've learned to see an object from one angle and then draw it from any point of view. When I was in high school, I didn't take any art, but I took a lot of mechanical drafting, so I learned about how things fit together, about their basic shapes.

Also, I frequently combine things, such as parts of costumes: I take part of one and add it to a detail from another one.

How did you get started after you finished school? Wasn't *The Bad Beginning*, the first in the *Unfortunate Events* series, your first book?

It was my first book, but I'd been illustrating for about seven years before that. After I graduated with my BFA, I got a job at the Waterford Institute in Provo, who hired a lot of illustration graduates. They were designing and producing educational software and using illustrators to animate their games. I got a fairly high-paying job there and thought, "If I buckle down, in two years I can pay off my student loans and have enough money to head to New York and give it a try." At the time, it seemed like every illustrator I admired either was living in New York or had for a time. Also, I wanted to do books, and this is where they make books. So I thought, "I have to go to New York as soon as I can." But a month and a half into that job, they lost the funding that they hired me on, and I was laid off.

I started making plans, working on my portfolio, and trying to market myself like they taught us in school. I kept working in my BYU studio space through the summer until the new students got there, so I was there when an illustrator here in New York named Robert Neubecker called the school and expressed some interest in having an intern for a few

months. Even though I'd graduated, I called him and said I'd take it.

So I left for New York way sooner than I had planned. I just figured I'd stay as long as I could. The internship was four months and didn't pay but did provide housing through a friend of his, so I didn't have any rent to pay. The work was only three days a week, so I had two days to get out there and hustle. And here I am, seventeen years later.

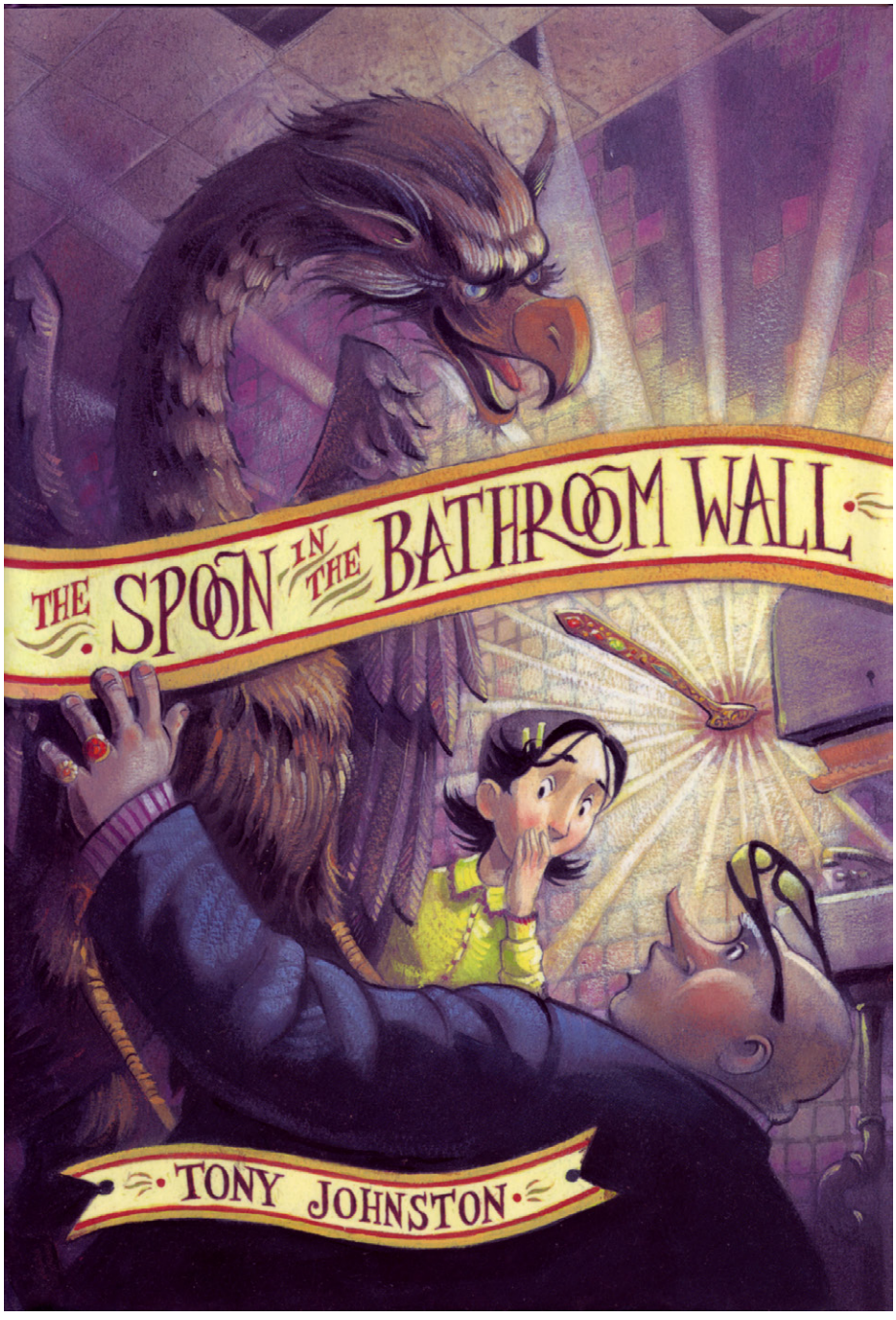
Congratulations. A lot of artists don't last here that long.

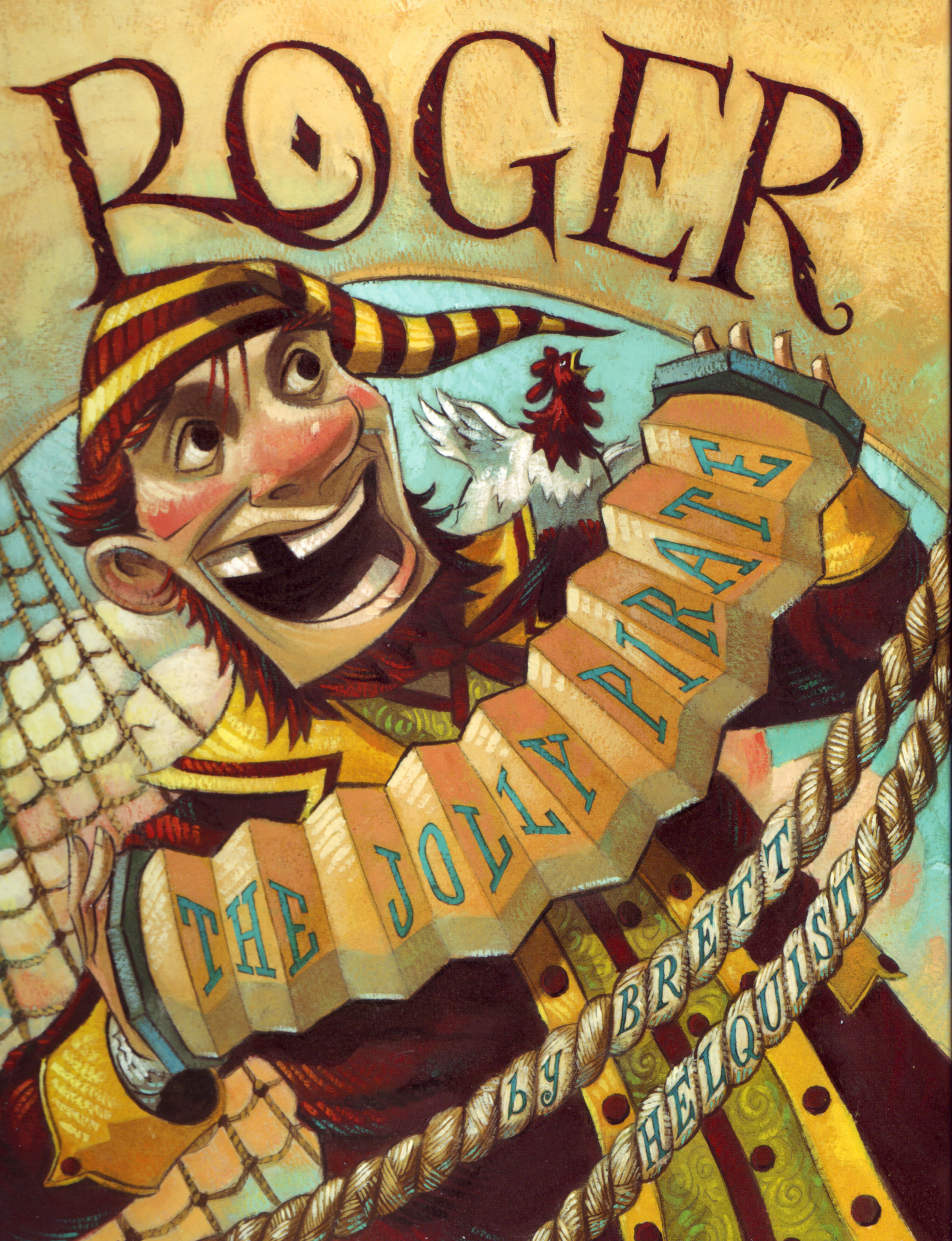
The first couple years were a little rough, but once I got here, I just fell in love with it. I'm not one of those people who had to get out of Utah; I love Utah. But once I got out, I realized how much I was missing in life; just cultural things like concerts in the park and street musicians and this cultural life that I'd never really known. So I determined that I was going to stay at all costs.

I had my dad sell my truck back home, I found a place, and I started getting illustrations out there. I burned through my savings in a few months and found some temporary work correcting copy at ad agencies late at night. That started leading to more and more work. It was weird because I had no real skill, but I showed up on time, I didn't complain, and I stayed until the job was done — utilizing the Mormon work ethic, I guess. Eventually that ended up becoming a full-time job at KPMG, the big accounting firm. They had an in-house design team that designed their presentations, and I helped with those for five or six years.

After three years, I started cutting down to three days a week, and by my fifth year I was just on call when they needed me and could illustrate the rest of the time. The drawings I was doing were for magazines and newspapers, though. Children's books are a little harder to break into because there's more at stake financially, and thus the publishers are less willing to take a risk on a new guy. With that barrier and the full-time job, I kind of got distracted from doing books. I found myself close to being this full-time editorial illustrator and just realized I was not really happy with it; I was burned out. There are some really great editorial illustrators, and I could see clearly that I wasn't going to be one of the great ones — I was competent is all.

I remembered I came here to do books and never really did anything with it. At that point, I took a month off from my job and didn't take any illustration assignments and just did a portfolio that was more suited to children's books. I started showing that around and within about a week I met the agent who two weeks later got me the Lemony Snicket job. It




ROGER
THE JOLLY PIRATE
BY BRETT HELQUIST

happened really fast. I guess I was just ready at the time.

Was that a hard job to get or was the Lemony Snicket thing still under the radar?

It was still under the radar. I mean, I was a nobody, the author at the time was a nobody, and the editor — you know, this was pretty much her first thing she brought in herself. We were all nobodies.

At first it got some attention — some nice reviews, and the sales were pretty good — but it was years later that it became the crazy thing that it is now. At the time it was just a job. I said, "Oh good, I've been trying to do books and here's my first book." I even read the thing and pretended to consider it, but when they called and said, "We've got a manuscript that you'd like," I immediately said, "I'll do it!"

Was it planned to be a thirteen-book series at that point or was it just to be a few books?

The first contract was for four books, and then we did another contract of four. Even at the time of the second contract, it was still low profile. But then by the third contract, for the last five books, it was pretty crazy. So it did take some time, yeah.

How has that series influenced your work or your reputation since?

It was night and day. Within a year of doing those I was able to quit my part-time job altogether. I was getting more offers to do books than I could say yes too.

I think my gut instinct was right about the editorial illustration, because, like I said, I was a competent illustrator and had a small group of clients who were happy to hire me regularly, but I was never going to excel. I'd never been in any of the annuals or had any real notice from the illustration community. I was just a kind of competent, reliable illustrator for a certain group of clients. But then with the Lemony Snicket job, suddenly within a year I was getting some professional praise. So I guess it was one of those rare cases where I trusted my instincts and they were right.

Since then you've done other young adult novels and picture books. Is there a format that you prefer, or do you like working in them all?

I've done two picture books and the rest are all novels in the Snicket age group.

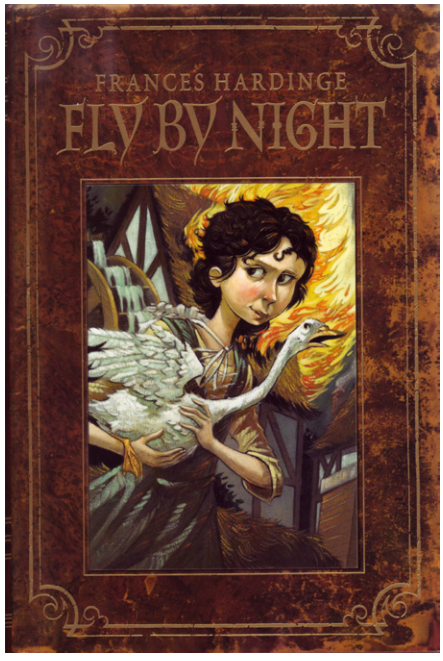
I love doing a picture book, but the amount of work compared to an illustrated novel is enormous. It's at least ten times the work and not ten times the money. Well, picture books usually pay off in the end — you just don't see it all in front of you. I get more royalty on a picture book than I do on a novel. So, if it's reasonably successful it eventually all will balance out, but the illustrated novels are better.

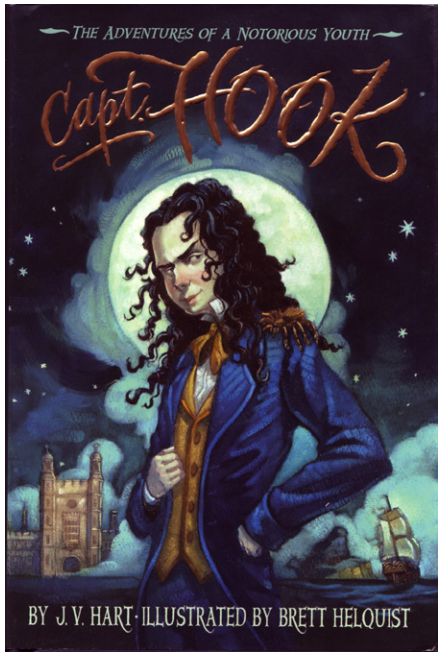
Like the Snicket books — I turned those around in six weeks from when I got the manuscript to completion, so that gives you some idea of a sense of the time involved. Economically that kind of thing is a lot better for me. A picture book is about the same amount of money up front, but it's six months to a year to get it done, so you can get a year's money in six weeks or take a year to do it.

And in something like *Roger, the Jolly Pirate*, a picture book you wrote and illustrated a few years ago, those are all full-spread illustrations.

Yes, and they're all color too. That's why it takes so long. So with *Roger,* I don't remember the exact count, but it was at least forty full-color illustrations. That's a lot of work. And with that one there's the writing too, so that adds another level of work to get done.

If there's something you really want to do, just find a way to keep on doing it.





What was it like being an author for the first time?

It was kind of scary. It took a little while to get into and I'm still not used to it. I just finished my second authored book, *Bedtime for Bear,* and it still hasn't changed that much.

Roger started because Susan Rich, the editor of the Snicket series, said, "I'd love to do a picture book with you. I'm looking for a manuscript, but sometimes they take a long time to find the right match. In the meantime, if you have any ideas for writing one yourself, I'd love to see it."

I had never thought of myself as a writer, but she said, "Don't worry about it. Just come up with the plot and the pictures, and I can help you polish the writing."

At the time, I didn't think anything would come of it, but I thought, "So many people would kill to have the ear of an editor on a story idea." So I decided to do it, thinking, "I'm just going to write a story, see if it's any good, and submit it to Susan to see if I could make it better."

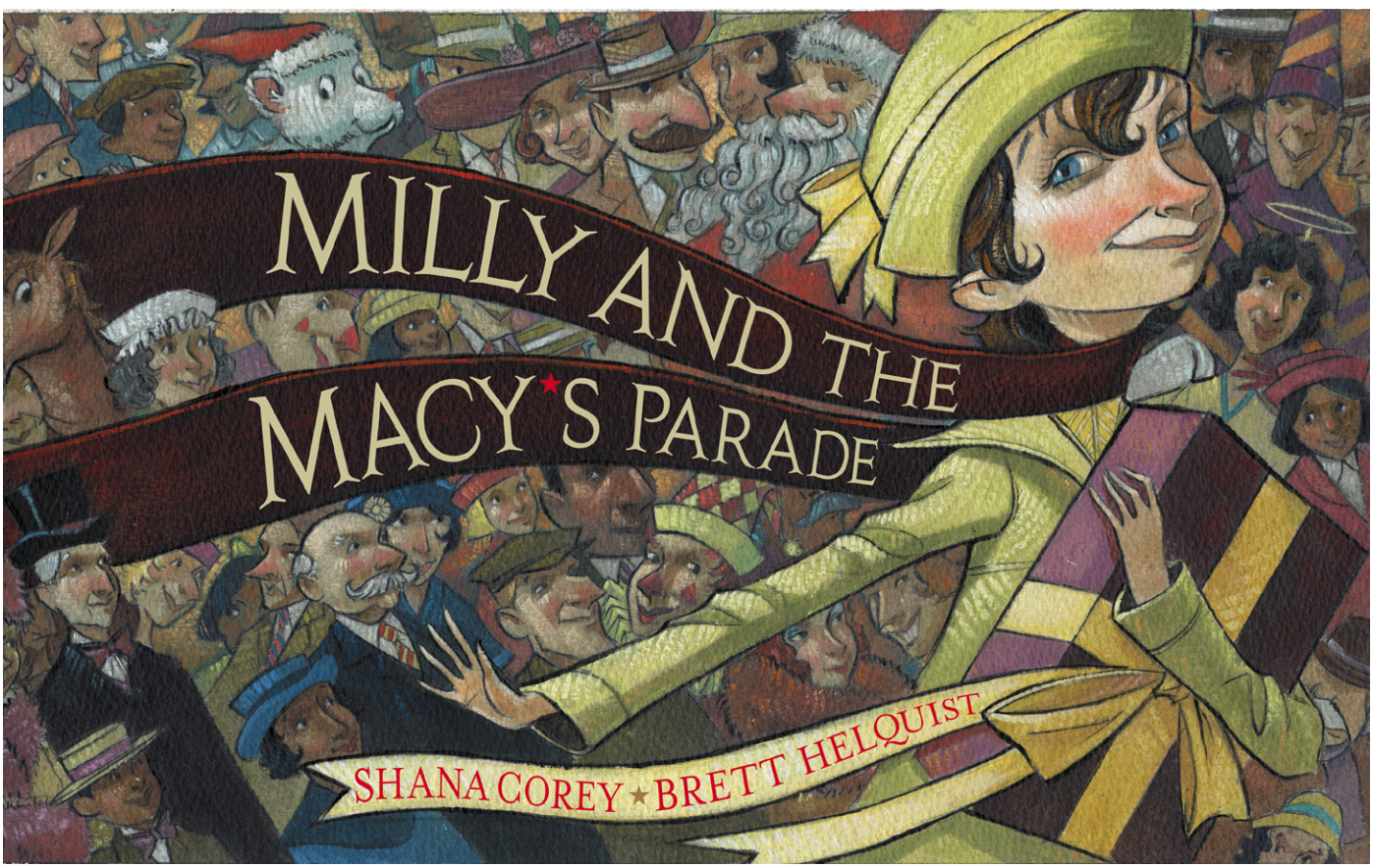
I thought it would either go on for years or just fizzle when they realized I couldn't write. But I approached it as a learning opportunity that would be foolish to pass up and started working on a story. I loved pirate stories when I was a kid, so I thought I'd write something there and came up with this idea of Roger. I gave it to Susan and she read it and gave me a contract. It was like, "Oh, geez, now what do I do? I don't know how to write a book." It was really sloppy when I first did it, but I'm getting more used to the idea of being a writer, though I still think of myself as an illustrator first.

Was it any different coming back to the process with your new book, *Bedtime for Bear*?

No, it was just as hard and took just as long. Both of those took me, all together, about four years each to get done, although that wasn't four years of working on them exclusively. With the illustration, I've been doing it long enough that I'm confident with it. I get a job, sit down, and know exactly how to start mentally, how to get right into it. If I run into a wall, I know how to think my way around it and solve the problem.

With writing, I don't have that skill, so there's a lot more give and take with Susan. Then all this anxiety sets in, and I start to tell myself, "I don't know how to fix it. I don't know what to do. I'm not a writer." And then months may go by before I even sit down and force myself to try to do something with it.

When it's your own book, nobody's waiting for it. I've got a contract to fulfill, but I'm doing so much work for them in the meantime that no one's going to call me and say, "We need a book next month."



Listening for Lions

Gloria Whelan

winner of the National Book Award

How do you like working for the children's market?

It's great because the subject matter is really appealing to me. I'm a rather lighthearted guy and would rather read a good funny story than heavy literature. I read a lot of children's literature for my own enjoyment because I'm a forty-year-old man but still love a good story. I love good adult literature too, but some people need art to be really deep and heavy, which just isn't where I find my greatest enjoyment. I appreciate it and know that it has its place, but for me, I just love a good story — and if it makes me laugh, all the better. So I feel that the children's book market is perfect for me.

Earlier you mentioned your work ethic coming from your Mormon background. Are there other ways that the gospel influences your work? Or does that ideal not apply too much because you're illustrating other people's stories?

Like with anything, if you're living your religion, it affects all aspects of your life — or it should. But I don't consciously think about putting any religious material into my pictures, because I'm illustrating a story. It does affect the kind of jobs I consider, though. There have been rare occasions when I've turned down jobs because of moral considerations. I took one job that was good for my career but which I questioned in hindsight: it was a *New York Times Book Review* cover for a story about some books that had come out that all had strange love triangles and things. Not that I did anything risqué, but I still wondered if I should show my mom the cover, which I did and she was fine. After that I thought, "Okay, from now on I need to make sure I'm not at all hesitant to show my mom what I'm doing."

Your work speaks about your values, indirectly if not

directly. Luckily I'm in children's books — and I'm at the younger end of that too, usually in the eight-to-twelve range. I'm not doing the teenage books, some of which can be rather risqué. But it's hard to market something I wouldn't approve of to eight-to-twelve-year-olds because parents just aren't going to buy that for those kids.

So I'm lucky that I'm where I am; it's rare that I ever even have to consider anything like that.

Do you think the converse is true? Is it fair to expect LDS artists' secular work to be contributing to the building up of Zion? Or is it sufficient for them just to do a good job?

I actually think that the best thing for Mormons is to just excel in what we do. If a Mormon artist is doing art of high quality, regardless of the subject matter, I think they're serving the Church well, just as an example of someone who's faithful and doing quality work. That's all I try to do. I don't feel the need to be the artist of the Mormon story.

Do you have any advice for young Mormon illustrators who might be reading this and who want to wind up where you are now?

People ask me that a lot, actually. The people I've met over the years who have succeeded have had varying degrees of talent — some with skills I'm still jealous of and others whose work is less impressive — but they actually all share one thing in common: persistence and a work ethic; work ethic in the sense of not just working hard but working at something until it works.

Out of the fifteen illustration majors who graduated with me at BYU, there are only three of us who actually succeeded in illustrating. The others all have good careers in creative fields, but

there are only three of us who are actually either illustrating or painting pictures for a living. We all started out about the same, putting together a little marketing material, sending it out to people and, of course, getting no response.

The only difference between me and those who left is that I did it again and still got no response. Then I did it again and still got no response. At some point, I just thought, "Well, this is what I'm trained to do. This is what I set out to do. So just do it, and keep doing it." I was lucky that I had the work that kept me going.

A few years ago I heard an interview with the national poet laureate that impressed me. In his professional career he worked as a high-level executive at a major investment firm. That was his day job for around twenty-five years. As he told the story, he said, "I had this job because I had a family to raise, but I wanted to be a poet."

So for twenty-five years, after working this high-level executive job, he went home and wrote poetry for two hours each night. Some nights he was so exhausted that he cut himself a little bit of slack — well, I say "slack," but he didn't slack. All he did those nights was take what he wrote the previous night and rewrite it. He did that for twenty-five years and ended up being the poet laureate.

When I heard that and was starting out, I thought, "That's what I'm going to do. I've got a job that pays the bills, so I'll just go home and work on my portfolio every day," and that's what I did. That's the only thing that works. The overnight sensation is rare. Most of us don't have that kind of talent.

If there's something you really want to do, just find a way to keep on doing it.

I think that kind of passionate commitment to something says something about how you feel about it. For me, they're not just pictures in a book; they're really something else, something extraordinary — even if they're not my illustrations.

Long before I even conceived that illustration as a career was possible, I always loved a book with a good picture in it. That kind of passion and connection say something about a person.

I like to think that even if my career had gone completely differently, I would still be doing illustration on some level just because it's what I like to do.

That's the advice I usually give. I think talent and ability really don't factor into it too much; persistence is much more important. You learn what you need talent-wise by doing it; at the end of a job you can't help but be that much better. Persistence and passion matter most. ▪

Kent Christensen

INTERVIEW BY **STEVE BENNETT** | PHOTO BY **ZACK TAYLOR**

WEB: **KENTCHRISTENSEN.COM**

Kent is a celebrated illustrator and fine artist. He has exhibited in the Northeast, Utah, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere, investigating themes such as the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane.

When did you first get interested in art, and how did that interest manifest itself?

My earliest art-making memories are associated with time I spent as a child with my Scottish grandparents who had immigrated to Los Angeles a few years before I was born. They must have recognized my early obsession with drawing. Each time I arrived at their apartment, I was greeted with a stack of cardstock that had been saved from my grandpa's shirts when they came back from the laundry. That tantalizingly blank cardstock was my favorite toy. I was lucky to have some very nurturing teachers from the very start. I still have my kindergarten drawing of "Cowboy Small," which hung in the principal's office at Lincoln School.

You grew up in Corona, California, the "Inland Empire." How did growing up there influence your work?

Ah, the Inland Empire (which is neither inland nor empire!). Growing up in Southern California in the sixties and seventies, we all had a kind of pre-technological hyper-consciousness of popular culture. The endless imagery of freeways, billboards, cars, surf culture, the orange, lemon and avocado groves, palm trees, fast food, music, movies, and advertising all provided very fertile ground for someone who was programmed to build a vast visual vocabulary. In thirty minutes I could drive from my house to the desert, the mountains, or the beach.

I suppose all of this, along with a close proximity to Los Angeles, gave my imagination a sense of never-ending possibility.

When you were a kid, did you imagine yourself as an artist when you grew up? What did you think being an artist would be like?

I wish I had been that forward-thinking as a kid. Instead, I was blissfully lost in my California childhood! Art was always the thing I excelled at in school, but it wasn't until I was in high school and attended Saturday classes at Art Center College of Design in

Spirituality is always there in the sense that all things are primarily spiritual.

Los Angeles that I started thinking about a career.

My aunt's brother was a well-known fashion illustrator and he encouraged me to apply to Art Center. I suppose I thought that being an artist would be more like play than work, and in a way it is. The work comes in the form of a work ethic that has to be pretty solid or things just don't happen.

Most of your work in the last few years has been painting, but for many of your years in New York you worked primarily in editorial illustration. How would you compare working in those two genres? What do you especially like or dislike about both?

There is an excitement and adrenaline rush about working on a high profile illustration job for a magazine like *TIME* or *Sports Illustrated* that is similar to working on a gallery show where you know you're going to be out there for everyone to see, only with illustration both the run-up and the exposure happen in a big, fast, and furious way over the course of days and hours, as opposed to months and weeks with an exhibition.

The things I like and dislike about working in both of those genres are essentially the same. My favorite part is the conceptual stage — realizing an idea I've worked up from a thumbnail sketch. I dislike having my process interrupted or managed in any way by well-meaning art directors or clients.

How was your education at the Art Center College of Design different from what you learned as an undergraduate at BYU?

Art Center was boot camp for would-be artists. Each day was one class, so you would have Life Drawing on Monday from 9 AM to 4 PM, Painting Techniques on Tuesday, Color Theory on Wednesday, and so forth. I got to know my teachers and fellow students really well because of this.

Sometimes we would also get together in the evening to do our homework for the next day in order to break up the endless hours of work (and keep each other awake!) while bracing ourselves for the next morning's often-brutal critique. Art Center was very small (about 1,000 students at that time) compared to BYU.

During my course of study at BYU, I became fascinated with art history to the point where I changed my major from studio art. This ended up serving me well after I decided to go back to Art Center since my BYU degree covered almost the entire academic requirement for Art Center and I was able to focus exclusively on studio classes.

You took a long break between finishing at Art Center and beginning your MFA at the University of Utah. How were you different as a student when you returned to school for your MFA?

I had a tremendous amount of experience as a working artist under my belt, which gained me very welcome peer status among the faculty at the U. Several of them were familiar with my work as an illustrator.

It was unsettling in a good way to be a student again. It forced me to get out of the inevitable ruts that exist after doing basically the same thing for fifteen or twenty years. The combination of confidence and vulnerability was strange, but it allowed me a sort of range of motion as a graduate student that I needed in order to create entirely new bodies of work.

It was also thrilling to be back in a community of artists again — and to appreciate it in a way I didn't when I was a younger student. After working in New


OREO
CHRISTENSEN
2008

York basically alone for all those years, it was great to have others nearby to bounce ideas off of and talk about art every day.

Who are some of the artists you most admire and how have you been influenced by their work?

A tough question for someone who loves art history and makes reference to artists ranging from Dürer to Smithson in his work!

I am particularly drawn to artists who have a strong sense of shape, color value and drama. I also love the human form and my favorite class to teach or take is Life Drawing.

Favorite artists include Caravaggio, Velázquez, Ribera, Thiebaud, Diebenkorn, Reinhardt, Kline, de Kooning, the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum and the contemporary New York painters Will Cotton and Walton Ford.

I just saw a terrific Van Gogh exhibit at the Royal Academy in London which was unusual because it included a lot of sketches he made in journals alongside the paintings he did from the sketches and vice versa. I am always amazed at the volume of work he produced in the final years of his short life.

What are some distinctive Kent Christensenian qualities that make your work unique?

I would say that figurative reference dominates my work. Paintings of food often imply a human interaction — a slice of cake, a plate of stacked Jell-O, nuts, or candy hearts have all been "played with" by someone.

Then there are the deeper layers of meaning and symbolism that are best discovered in a more intimate and personal way than by me telling those secrets. I would say that my sense of humor almost always creeps into the work, as it did with my illustrations, and that I am inclined to incorporate

multiple layers of meaning into my paintings. Some of those layers are more accessible than others.

I love it when people take something I've done and add their own experience to it, which is what makes art truly alive. It lives on in new ways with each new encounter. It changes the work, even for me, when they give me their take on a painting. It's like magic.

What are some of the continuities and discontinuities in all of the work that you have done over the years?

That's an interesting question, especially in light of my recent move to a new apartment, and the attendant rediscovery of work done decades before.

I designed a board game when I was living in L.A. in the mid eighties, and it was all based on food. That was the first time, right out of art school, when I did a bunch of food paintings. I also found several illustrations I did that involved food: an article about junk food for the *L.A. Times,* and a piece for the *Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International* magazine about cravings.

I haven't done much portraiture or paintings including people since the illustration years, and I've been looking to get back into that.

What role does spirituality play in your work?

Spirituality is always there in the sense that all things are primarily spiritual. Ever since I read Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* I think about spirituality in broader terms as an artist than I did growing up.

I like Kandinsky's take on the power of mystical elements and the spiritual language of form and color: that certain colors and shapes have inherent spiritual qualities, and how this is what connects all of the arts, especially music and art.

When you are spiritually aware as an artist, I think you realize you are simply a lens through which these broader spiritual ideas get refracted into the form of your work. It's like a light that doesn't come from you but you get to stand in its path and play with the lens and reconfigure things.

How do spirituality and creativity influence and shape each other? In what ways is creating a work of art a spiritual experience for you?

I think any time you are engaged in an activity that is what you feel you were put on this earth to do — in filling the measure of your creation — there is a certain amount of deep satisfaction involved. It is definitely a joyful spiritual experience.

I have always felt that drawing was the most cleansing and centering spiritual exercise. That is true of the creative process in general, I think. When you are "in the zone" creatively, it feels a lot like when you are "in the zone" spiritually. It becomes synergistic — the one enhancing the other.

I think people who have a spiritual awareness are always at an advantage creatively, and vice versa, no matter what their particular religious or spiritual background may be, whether or not they have one at all. We are all spiritual and creative beings. Some are simply more tuned in than others.

What do you find most frustrating about being a working artist, and most satisfying?

Life in the twenty-first century, with its attendant distractions and interruptions, is the most frustrating thing about being a working artist.

The idea that people are supposed to be reachable at all times and the need for constant multitasking in order to compensate for that level of availability are both at odds with an artist's most valuable resource: large blocks of time. The most satisfying thing about being a working artist is when I can carve those blocks of time out of my life.


CHRISTENSEN
2007

That is what allows me to really get lost in the process of creation.

I started spending more time at Sundance several years ago because it is easier to do that there, especially in the middle of the winter when I am snowed in. My goal is not to leave the studio for as many days in a row as possible. I have had to learn to make do with smaller and smaller blocks of time. I like Voltaire's words: "The happiest of all lives is a busy solitude."

How are your works spiritual, or expressions or explorations of your faith, in ways that are not readily apparent?

I am uncomfortable with the idea of having an overt preoccupation with making work that is "spiritual" or an exploration of my faith. That seems a little pretentious to me — not to mention an unnecessary and counter-productive burden on the creative process.

But the question is a good one in that it implies unselfconsciousness about spiritual expressions or explorations that may not be readily apparent. All things being spiritual, there will always be a spiritual component to any work. I just think it should simply be a by-product of the work, and not the ultimate objective.

For me, it would be a distraction to have some kind of voice constantly reminding me to "keep it spiritual." That seems forced and backwards to me.

I think work is much more interesting when you come to discover its spiritual nature in a kind of deep, soul-resonant way rather than being confronted with something that's trying too hard to be overtly spiritual for its own sake.

Your work has a playful quality to it, and you obviously enjoy chuckling at Mormons' (and your own) love of sugar. Beyond the good-natured teasing, are there metaphors or more serious issues that we may be missing as viewers?

I like to think that I'm skewering both sides of the health issue. Obsession knows no bounds. We spend as much time and money in our culture trying to tackle our desires, appetites, and passions as we do in pursuit of them.

It's the space in between those two extremes that really intrigues me — the space where we are supposed to actually live. It is full of tension — the same tension that provides the impetus for making art.

On another level, food works as a metaphor for almost everything in life — power, tradition, identity, love, sex, and intimacy. It provides an inexhaustible supply of material to work with.

I had only intended to build one body of work about this, and six years later the list of things that have either been suggested to me or that I have made on my own just gets longer and longer.

There is an increasing nuance and sophistication of the visual arts in contemporary Mormon culture. What is driving this increase, and where do you see it going?

I think it goes both ways. On the surface, especially in Utah, it would sometimes appear that visual arts as they relate to Mormon culture are becoming more and more shallow, sentimental, and clichéd. Dig a little deeper and yes, there is a vast, sophisticated world of Mormon-related art that is increasingly recognized and celebrated by blue-chip art institutions. I think this is the natural result of growth and diversity within the Mormon population itself, among Mormon artists in particular and especially with the increasing number of young collectors who have more nuanced and non-traditional taste. ▪


HOLLYWOODLAND

photographer profile

Natasha Layne Brien

WEB: **NATASHALAYNE.BLOGSPOT.COM**

Canadian-born photographer Natasha Layne Brien resides in New York City and has worked with photographers including Arnold Newman, William Abranowicz, Len Jenshel, and Joyce Tenneson. Her work has appeared in Manhattan Times *and* Oprah *and* HomeStyle *magazines, and she has exhibited in several group shows, including the Native American Community House Gallery. Through the lens of her camera, she delights in documenting her three adorable children. Together they are currently working on a washroom series.*

Jack Be Nimble

One, Two, Buckle My Shoe

Nursery rhyme photographs: Clothing design by Amanda Stewart; makeup by Jules. Headshot courtesy Lori Rucker

Jack & Jill

Super Sleep

Little Jack Horner

Little Miss Muffet

Little Jack Horner

Little Boy Blue

Georgie Porgie

Jack Be Nimble

photographer profile

Zack Taylor

WEB: **ZACK-TAYLOR.COM**

Zack Taylor studied photography at BYU. His personal work is documentary in style, and often seeks to establish social responsibility. His projects are largely process-based, consisting of equal parts photography and interviews with his subjects. Past projects include a portrait of Coney Island, a survey of the gentrification in Richmond, Virginia, and Mormon Ex-Convicts. *Zack lives with his wife, Brenda, in New York City.*

Artist's Statement

There is a certain social stigma that follows ex-cons. Many who have served time refer to themselves as being 'locked out' of mainstream society upon their release from prison. Using photography as a vehicle, I wanted to address this gap between society and its criminals within the scope of my religion. *Mormon Ex-Convicts* is a work that assesses the impact that a criminal history has upon church membership. It is a call to mainstream LDS society to extend a hand of fellowship to those who have been marginalized by our conservative culture.

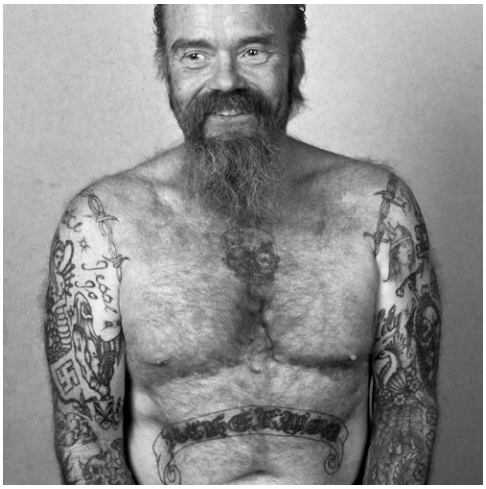
These portraits, with the exception of Red and Gordon, are of individuals who responded to flyers I placed with various rehabilitation groups and parole offices. I had no preconceptions about how my subjects should look; I simply photographed whoever called me. Their appearances vary greatly, as do their histories and current situations. They share the common task, however, of reconciling their criminal pasts with the LDS culture in which they live.

— Zack Taylor, April 2008

"I have a testimony. It took going to rock bottom to get it, but I have a testimony. It was in prison that I first felt that God was leading me. I still had to do my share of the work, but it was like a 70/30 arrangement, with God leading the way." — Bruce

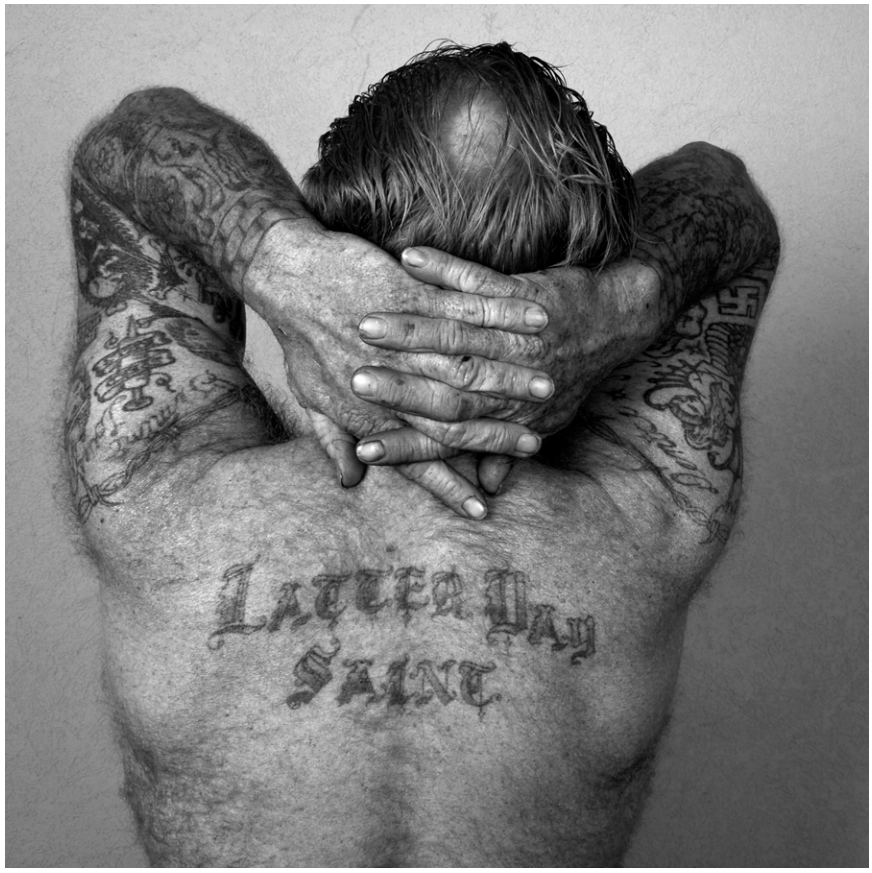
While in prison, Bruce was converted to the Book of Mormon. During his years in confinement, he read the book five times.

Regarding the ward he now attends, Bruce says, "They've been great. They've been a huge blessing."



"I became everything I ever wanted to be. Problem is I never wanted to be anything." — Red

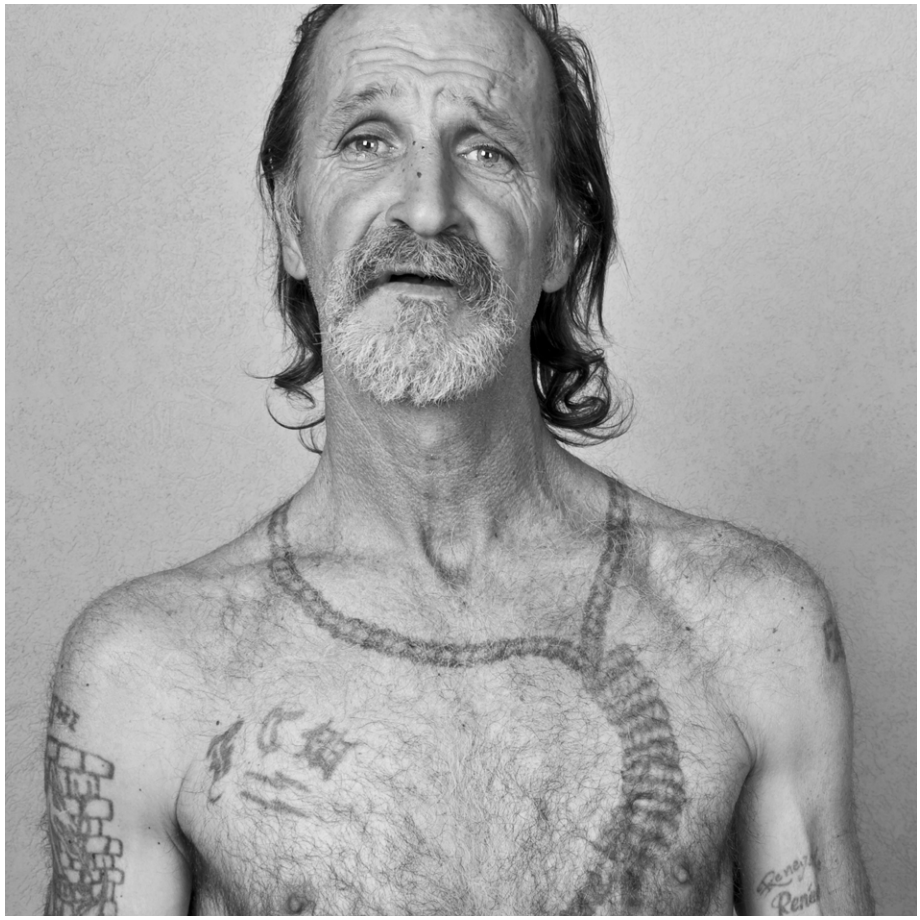
"I am an inactive Latter-day Saint. I don't exactly mainstream into the ward real well." — Red



"I'm active now. I went inactive because people treated me differently. They judged me for how I looked. If you have a certain look they don't treat you the same. I finally decided not to do it for anyone but myself. I'm active again for my own reasons." — Shauna

"The most spiritual place I've been is jail; in there you have nothing but time. My mental state was clear and I felt free from selfishness. I started praying, saying 'God, whatever you want.'" — Kevin

Gordon is not *a Mormon, but he's Red's best friend and has been in close contact with the Church for many years. He admits that he has never felt judged by the Church or its members. He jokes that if he ever did convert, God would give him a nice house and a pickup truck.*

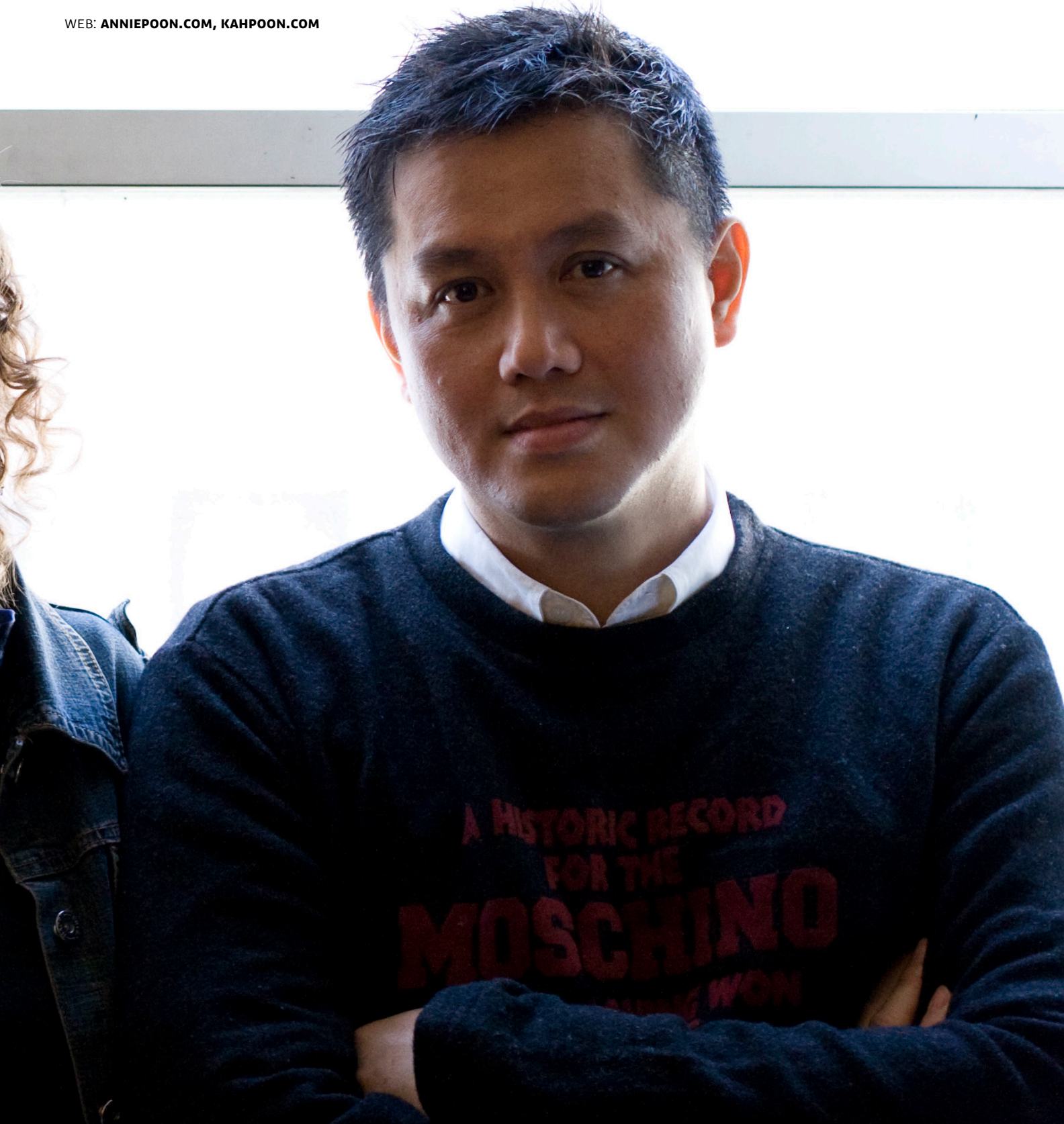


"I've been to church, I've been baptized, but once I started getting into trouble, people started looking at me differently. I got tattoos and people stopped talking to me."
— Mike

Annie & Kah Leong Poon

INTERVIEW BY **ERIC W. JEPSON** | PHOTOS BY **ZACK TAYLOR**

WEB: **ANNIEPOON.COM, KAHPOON.COM**



Annie Poon is an award-winning multimedia artist whose hand-crafted animations have shown at museums, galleries, television, art house cinemas, and film festivals, including one short acquired by the Museum of Modern Art for its permanent collection. She won the 2006 Best Film award from the Association for Mormon Letters for her short film "The Book of Visions."

Annie's husband Kah Leong Poon is a portrait, fashion, documentary, and artistic photographer who has worked with Joyce Tenneson and Annie Leibovitz and for numerous corporate clients from Fuji Film to the New York Times. He has won many awards and exhibited in several private galleries.

Describe each other's work.

Annie: Kah Leong creates killingly beautiful fashion photos. He is best known for his high contrast black-and-white portraits. He loves incorporating movement with lots of jumping and spinning and works with stylists to achieve rich textures through fabric patterns and materials. Kah Leong has the advantage of being a former ballroom dancer; with that he has a unique ability to "choreograph" the models into their various poses. It's very fun to watch.

Kah Leong: Annie creates what I call "papermation," like claymation, but with cut paper. She makes animated shorts, a lot of them drawing inspiration from childhood drawings. Her work is very childlike, very spontaneous, and they are all stop-motion. Her goal is to make it very rough and raw. It's all very free and spontaneous.

At least to an outsider, your aesthetics seem very different. Do they seem that way to you? If not, why not? If so, how do you reconcile their seeming differences?

Kah Leong: Absolutely. We do totally different things. We have very different tastes. Our occupations, though both artists, are very different. I deal primarily with fashion; Annie's work is related a lot to children. My work is a lot more planned, where Annie's is more spontaneous.

We are two people with different likes and dislikes. We view art very differently, especially in galleries; things I love, Annie might not take a second look at. I think it's very good to have a different point of view.

I come from a very graphically trained background, and Annie does not. My work tends to have a very strong graphic sense, is overly simplified, clear, and reposed. I'm not here to make a social statement; I'm more interested in going after beauty, pure and simple. Bold and basic.

Annie's work is not like that. Annie's aim is to express how she feels. I like to summarize things, putting them down to their bare minimum. My work is very visually oriented. I also like to provoke some emotions, but usually I do it with a very simple approach.

Annie: I have a really hard time visualizing Kah Leong's ideas before he executes them. I used to try to critique his concepts in advance and would try to dissuade him or change his ideas.

We might have walked on a particularly grimy block, for example, and Kah Leong would stop and gush over a random metal door or peeling brick wall. I would see the weeds and bottle caps on the ground and think, "Are you kidding me?" Sure enough, Kah Leong would bring a crew back to the site and place some gorgeous models in delicate dresses in front of that grimy wall, and suddenly the whole scene took on a wonderful, mysterious feeling!

When Kah Leong shoots, I just have to trust his vision.

How do you balance the commercial and artistic demands you face?

Annie: When I am working on a personal animation, I really isolate myself for a couple of months, even up to a year, and have little contact with anyone but Kah Leong. It gets very strange and lonely.

I'm not much of a businesswoman when it comes to fine art; I'd prefer to focus on the piece and not worry about where or how I will get compensated for it. Because of this, I feel like my fine art can take more risks and be more personal and effective. I balance out this idealist state of mind with commercial jobs on the side that focus completely on the client's needs. Because I'm already enjoying fulfillment in the "fine art" arena, I don't mind working on someone else's vision for a short period of time. It pays well, I learn new skills that I can apply in my personal work, and best of all, I make invaluable contacts.

Kah Leong: I have to be realistic. No one can just do artistic work and expect to make a living right away. My mentor, Joyce Tenneson, who I worked with for many years, told me that she had to work many years doing commercial work to make the money to support her fine art work, her first love. Fine art usually doesn't make you money unless you are very successful and established. Very few artists come right out and are successful with their fine art work right away. So I do a lot of commercial work, and in my free time I do fine art work. My fine art work includes working with Polaroid film. In the last four years, however, I feel like I have been able

God has made so many things that seem to exist just to delight the eye.

to blend and blur the line between my commercial and fine art.

I have had a lot of satisfaction lately with my commercial work, shooting it my own way and being able to implement some of the fine art feel. I hope one day that I won't have to distinguish between them.

Creation—particularly as a couple—seems to be a particularly Mormon pursuit in the sense that we believe that we will become capital "c" Creators someday. In that sense, how is your faith reflected in your work?

Kah Leong: First, we should strive to identify the talents that Heavenly Father has given us, then pursue them to the best of our ability. Magnify them.

Because I know that my talent is from Heavenly Father, I know that I can achieve great things — more than if I just relied on my own strength. When I am in the middle of a shoot and things are not going well, I will excuse myself and go to the corner to say a little prayer. Or, if I need to be inspired and need new ideas, I can ask Him for help.

Annie: For a little while, I stopped making art completely, because I was so worried that I did not have a specific message, and I wondered if it was important enough to spend my time on. It was a very depressing time. I spent a lot of time walking in Central Park and observing the trees, rocks, and hills.

And then I began to see that God has made so many things that seem to exist just to delight the eye. God did not see these creations as a waste of time. He carefully designed each maple leaf and joyfully colored every little tree frog. In reference to the lilies of the field, God said that "even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these" (see Matthew 6:29).

Thinking about things in this way helped me to feel wholly justified in creating art whose whole object is just to gladden the heart.

The artist's path is supposed to be a solitary one. How do you engage in such personal, individual work yet still find an identity as a couple?

Annie: Luckily, we really like each other's work. We have to work in separate spaces, or I will drive my husband crazy by curiously orbiting around him all day to peek on his work. At the end of the day we love to relax and talk all about our work, show each other pictures of what we have done, and rehearse the logistics of upcoming projects. Unless it's Sunday, when we give it all a break, it's all we ever seem to talk about.

Kah Leong plays a huge role in helping me write storylines; he's better at it than I am!

After his photo shoots, I want to help him go through every picture and try to rate them so he can pick the best ones for his clients. Out of hundreds of pictures, our top-fives are usually the same.

Our relationship revolves around our art right now, for better or for worse!

Kah Leong: Even if we work separately, we have the opportunity to see each other's end results. Every artist needs help, outside influence, and the ability to bounce ideas off another. I know Annie's aesthetic and can be helpful when giving constructive criticism.

Art is so subjective. We all see things so differently. "Everyone has a unique way of speaking, walking, writing. It can't be otherwise with photography or animation."

Also, work should be only one-fourth part of us. Family, church, and self should be given ample attention, too.

How do you maintain your faith?

Kah Leong: It's a very interesting question. Why should combining faith and art be a problem? I am a convert to the Church. I joined the Church because I know it's true. My ultimate goal is not to be the best fashion photographer in the world, but to someday live with Heavenly Father, again. I know He has given me talents here. I chose photography because it brings me lots of joy and happiness and the ability to express myself, which makes me happy. But I know it is temporary, while eternal life is . . . eternal. And I will try not to do anything to jeopardize that.

I also know other NY photographers, Mormon, who are very active. One is a bishop and one is a Relief Society president. Both are active members. I don't really see how this would be different from working as a lawyer or any other profession. I don't see any reason why an artist would be more inclined to leave the Church.

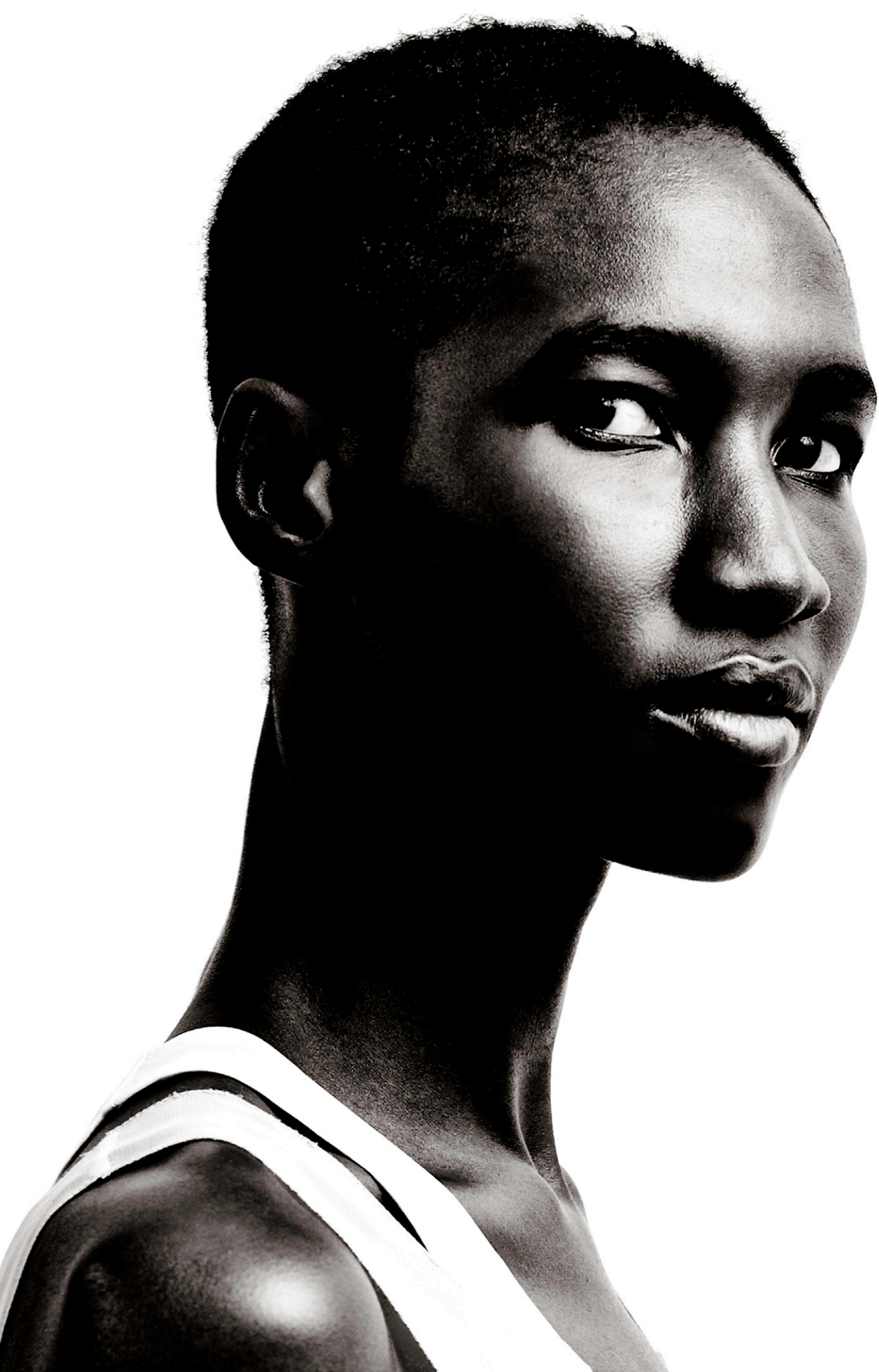
Kah Leong Poon

Annie: I find that I am most inspired and productive when I set aside time for the Lord. Being a member of the Church gives me a feeling of optimism, clarity, and confidence that I think translates into my work.

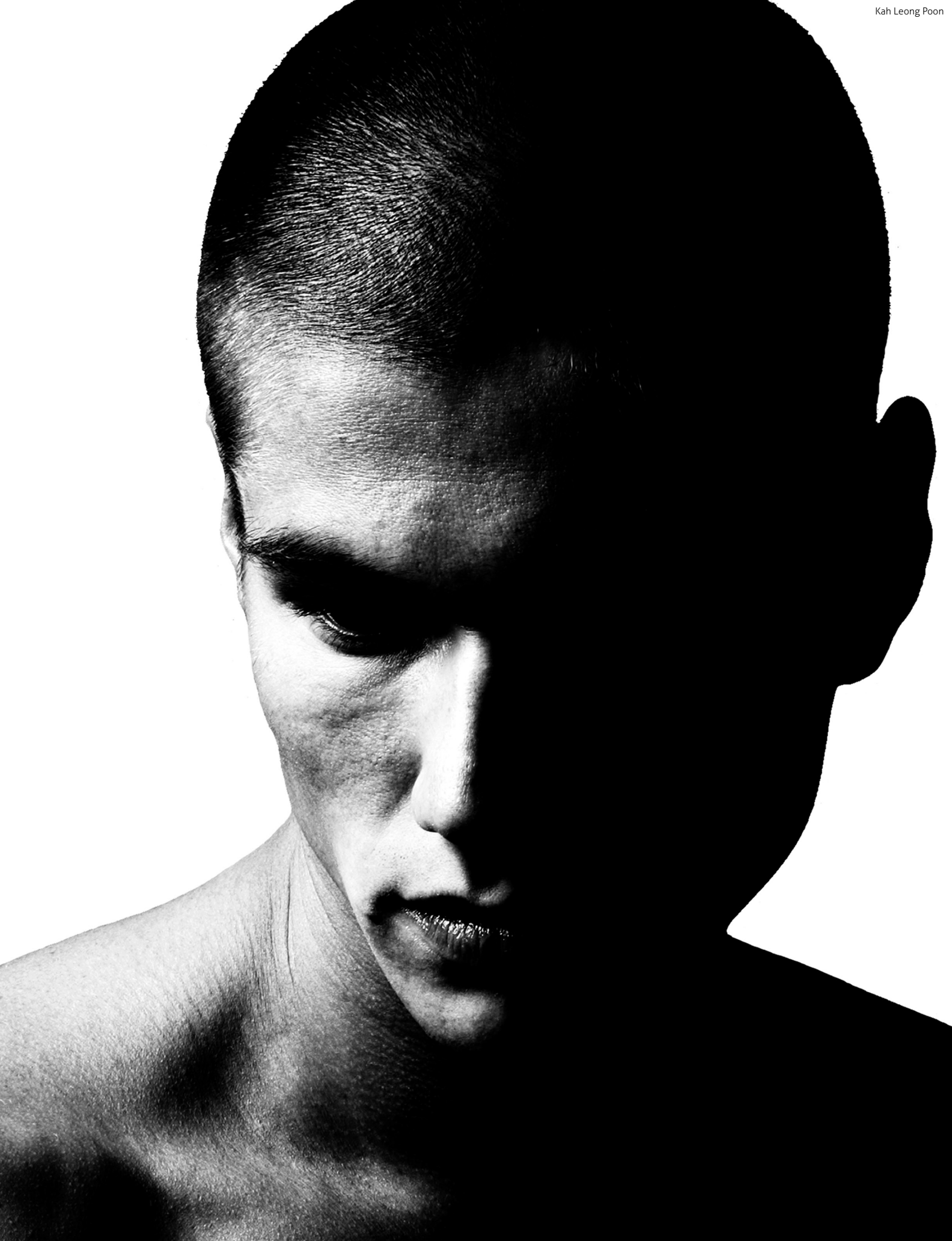
Those are traits that I don't really see a lot of in New York, which is so full of irony and seems to want to identify sharp and hard edges on everything. I feel like things go best when I mentally acknowledge my dependence on the Lord every step of the way.

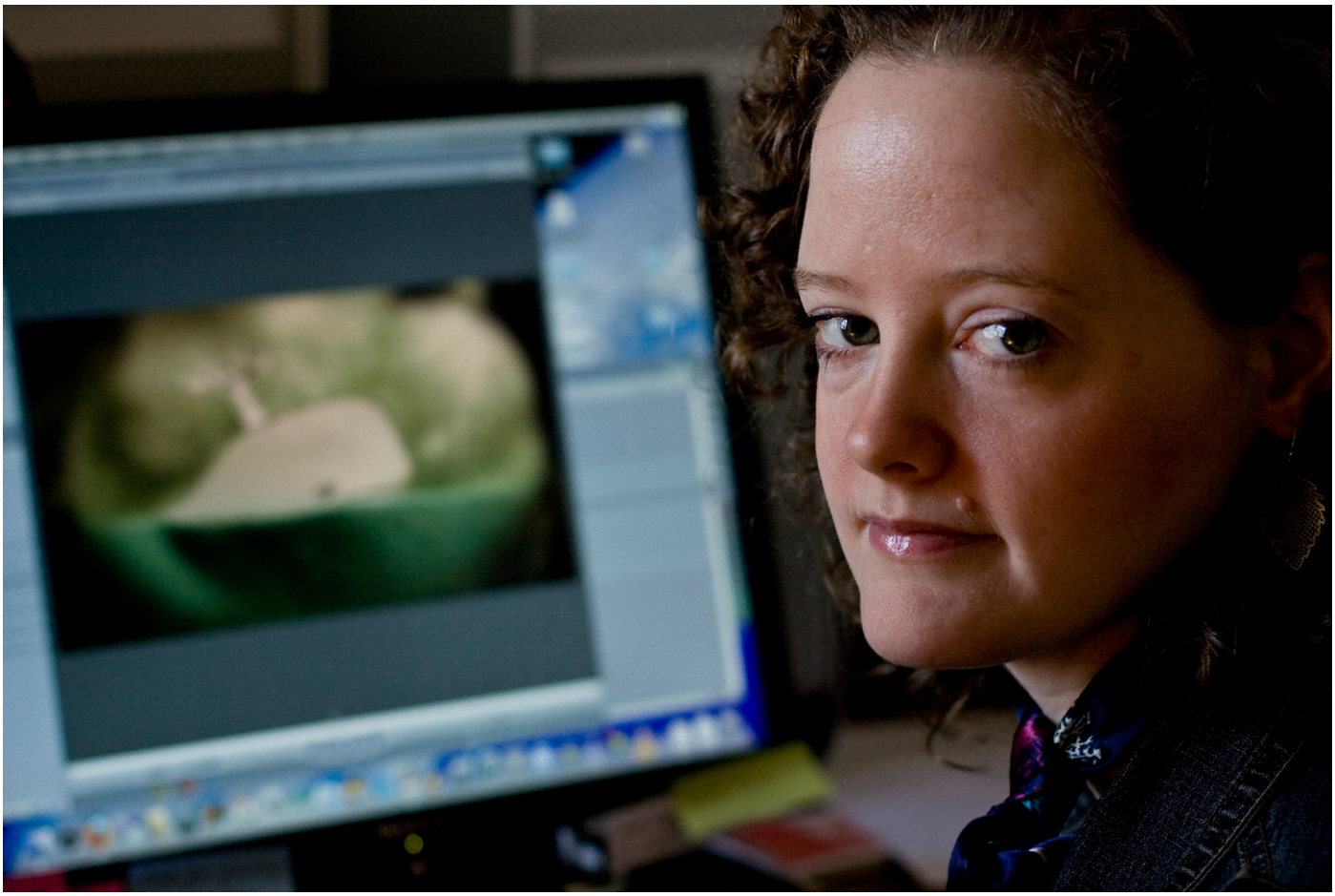
Annie, in Mormon circles you're probably best known for your short film "The Book of Visions." How did you choose which visionaries to accompany Joseph Smith, and how should we read the final metaphor of the man (the one studying the visions) flying away?

Annie: Well that piece wasn't about Joseph Smith per se, as much as it was a tribute to some of my spiritual heroes, including Joseph Smith. I read Mark Twain's account of Joan of Arc's life when

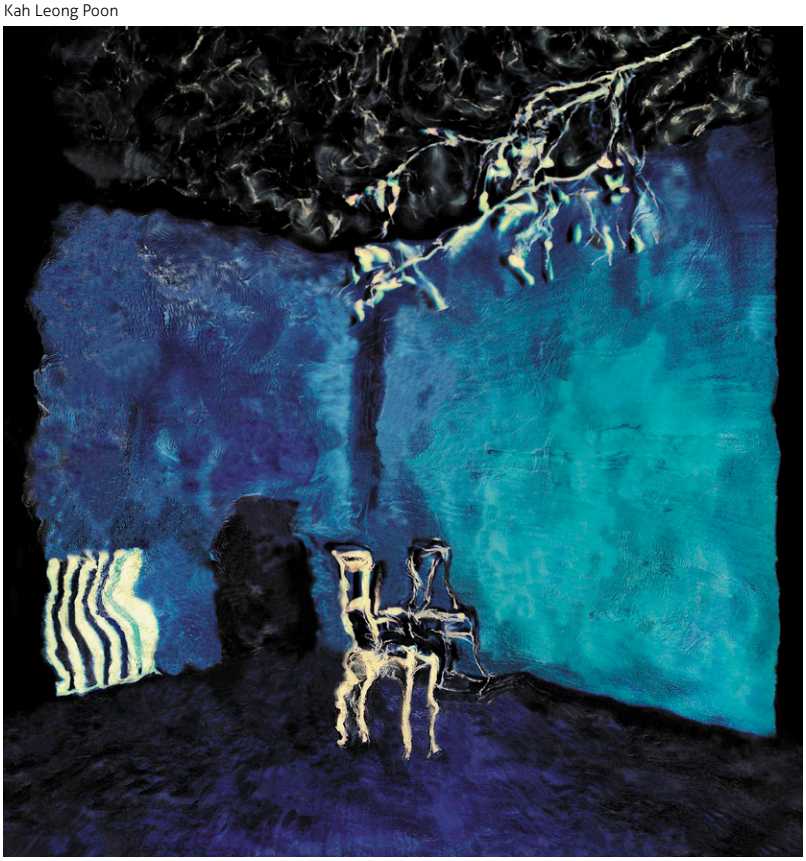


Kah Leong Poon





Kah Leong Poon



Annie Poon

I was sixteen — the same age she was when she started having her visions. I identified with her as a young woman. She had complete faith in the angels' words, faith enough to raise an army and raise her dying nation up out of chains.

Joseph Smith and Black Elk's stories were included because I was stunned at the similarities of their accounts. Black Elk gave gorgeous descriptions of angels descending like arrows of light that reminded me so much of Joseph's description of Moroni's visit.

These comparisons confirmed for me the veracity of their accounts and that one does not need to be Mormon to have a vision from God. God loves everyone equally, no matter what religion.

The little vignette at the end of "The Book of Visions," where the old man flies out the window into the starry sky, represents the possibility for any of us to travel into another spiritual state — be it through death, visions, or mental awakening.

Annie again, much of your work seems to focus on innocent characters, whether it's two young girls adventuring in a bathtub, or Puppy's sweet, optimistic crush on Duck. In "Me Good, Me Bad," you explore an Eve-like character's fall from innocence, yet she still seems pure and good. What's going on here?

Annie: I think it's because I admire the innocence of children so much and want to emulate their simplicity and purity. Sometimes people tell me that I seem like just a big kid. I hope that is true.

Adulthood has so many ugly realities; I try to simplify my experiences by boiling them down to "what can I do to solve this problem peacefully?" Keeping an upbeat attitude and trying to live the commandments is a simple recipe that makes me very happy.

About Eve, I don't really view her experience as much of a fall as it was a growth and a progression. I admire her bravery to step outside of her sheltered existence. She was fulfilling her destiny.

Kah Leong, based on your online portfolio, your goal seems to be to heighten realism to a point where it begins to seem patently artificial — almost with an underlying darkness. Is that fair? What do you see below the surface of your photography?

Kah Leong: If I have to exaggerate truth, I will, to make a point. Just as Warhol's green faces, blue hair, and yellow lips reveal something that was always there, but unseen. I find beauty in extremes. The process itself is extreme.

It starts with the lighting. You control the light. You bring in the most beautiful models you can find. With just a touch of makeup, hair color, extensions, and fashion styling, you continue to alter reality only to heighten it.

People do say they see a little darkness in the work, but I would say it's more moody than dark.

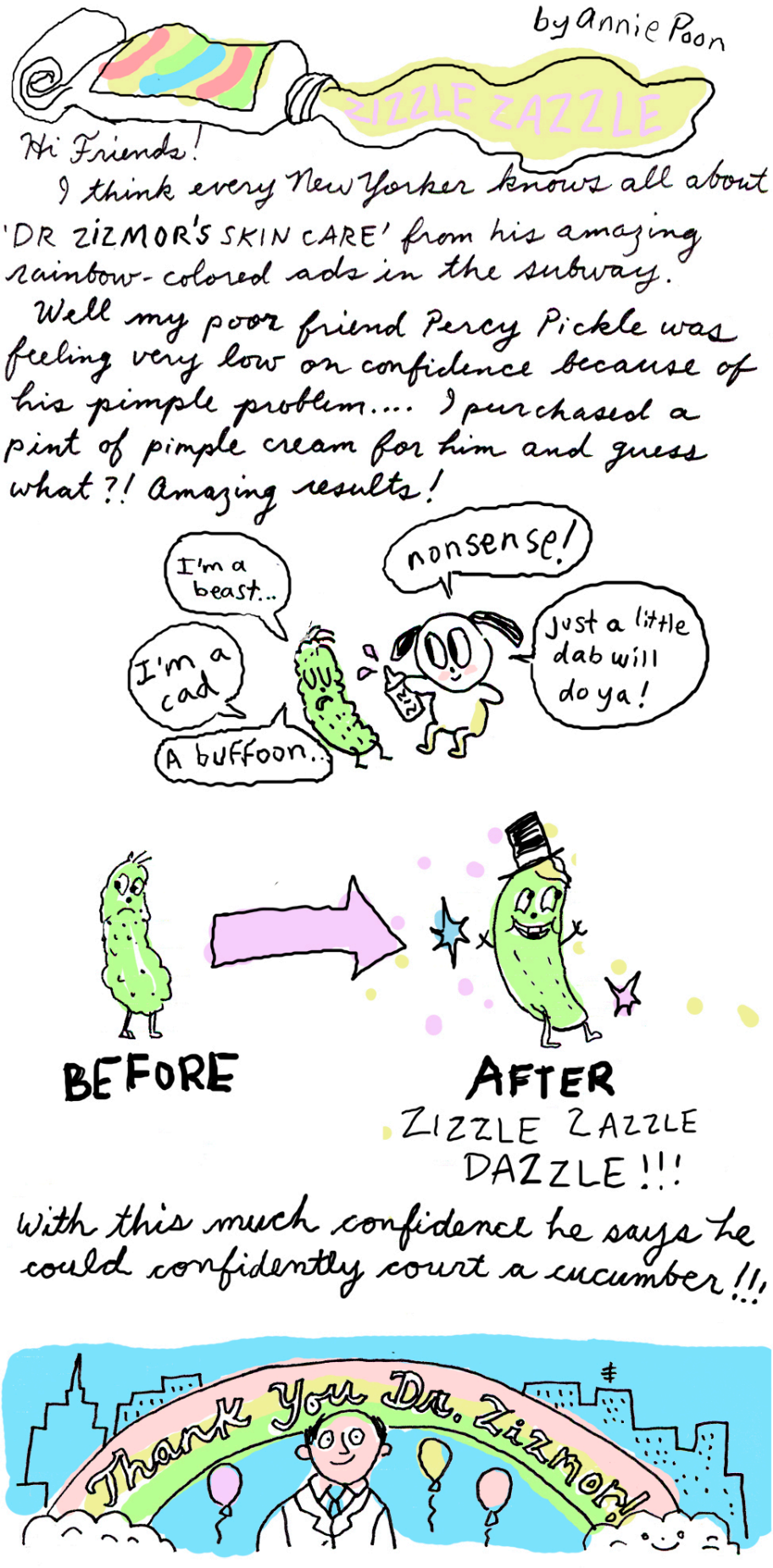
The underlying force in my photography is an interest in beauty and grace that starts back with my experience as a competitive swimmer. The ones who swam with grace had the more efficient stroke and were the most successful swimmers. Since then, I have had similar experiences with ballroom dancing and now photography. I am looking for grace.

When people hire Kah Leong Poon for a shoot, what is it they are expecting from you?

Kah Leong: I am not sure anymore. I think people expect to see strong, bold, black-and-white images with energy and movement.

Then again, just recently, *Essence Magazine* hired me for a couple of jobs because they liked

Photographing a beautiful sunrise, sunset, or others of God's beautiful creations, helps to remind others of Heavenly Father's hand in Earth's creation.



my black-and-white images shot against white seamless. But, interestingly enough, they hired me to shoot in color against a black background, which was a total opposite of what attracted them to my work in the first place.

How do you see the gospel in your respective work? And how does it influence your process?

Annie: I like the scriptures that say that there is no separation between the spiritual and the temporal. I feel like God is interested in the mundane details of my work, and I invite him to be a part of the process through prayer during the day. I want Him to be pleased with what I do.

It is an interesting line though, a constant question of what subjects can I/should I address as an LDS artist? I know it's important to explore life's grim realities, so my challenge is to explore them in a poetic way, so that people don't feel brought down by it. Of course, sometimes I want to just shock myself. I think every artist wants that, too.

Kah Leong: My senior year at BYU, one student asked my teacher how photography can help others. Doctors' and teachers' contributions are very obvious, but what about photography?

My teacher, John Telford, a landscape photographer, said photographing a beautiful sunrise, sunset, or others of God's beautiful creations, helps to remind others of Heavenly Father's hand in Earth's creation. That makes sense.

But I have always struggled with how fashion photography achieves that. I don't know. All I know is that I feel so alive and happy when I do what I do. Maybe fashion is a stepping-stone for something later in my life. I always wanted to photograph dancers, especially ballerinas. I hope to capture the beauty of dance, and

the hard work and dedication that are needed to prepare the body to move in such a graceful, controlled, and mesmerizing manner.

How do you promote your individual careers? And how do you support each other's career?

Kah Leong: I do online promotion, mostly. I have a list of art buyers, photo editors, and art directors of magazines and ad agencies that I contact periodically to keep them posted on my latest work. I will send them a couple of images and a link to my site, a site that I try to update regularly. If they like what they see, they will then request my portfolio book. I send out promo pieces twice a year, also.

As far as supporting Annie goes, she is very emotional, especially when she is working, and even though I think she's brilliant and has so much raw talent, she tends to doubt what she is working on. I have to try to make her see how talented she really is by constantly reminding her of what I see.

Annie: I do a little traditional self-promotion, such as having a website and sending my work to film festivals. Things like Twitter and YouTube are great.

But my main technique has been to focus on the quality of my work, then to build good friendships and just keep friends aware of what I am doing at all times. I don't have a rep, so I promote myself by showing my work to anyone and everyone who seems remotely interested, even people I meet in elevators. Word tends to spread fast.

So far that's been all I have needed. When people see my characters or movies, they tend to ask themselves, "How can I incorporate Annie's work into my company?" The rule of thumb for me is that *everyone* is a potential client, from family, to Church friends and beyond, so always present yourself accordingly. Also, be the type of person you would want to work with.

As far as promoting Kah Leong's work goes, I should be doing more! Whenever he has a

high-profile job, I tell my friends about it and show them copies of the images, just to keep in their minds what a talent he is. Friends tend to hire friends, first. I take advantage of this whenever I can.

What's next from the Poons?

Annie: I'm very excited about a short film I'm working on right now called "The Split House." It's an imaginative journey depicting a woman's search for mental healing and hope. It's very autobiographical. I'm very excited to have the opportunity to work with one of Kurt Bestor's beautiful songs, "The Olive Tree." This song touches me so much and will be a key force in the movie.

Kah Leong: Collaboration. I want to do a fashion/art shoot with Annie. She will design a collection of fashion wear made from paper and cardboard; I will photograph them. We may even animate the photos, or I may try to make a video of the shoot.

Also, like I had mentioned before, in the future I want to incorporate more dance movement in my fashion work.

Any advice for LDS couples looking to make it together in the arts?

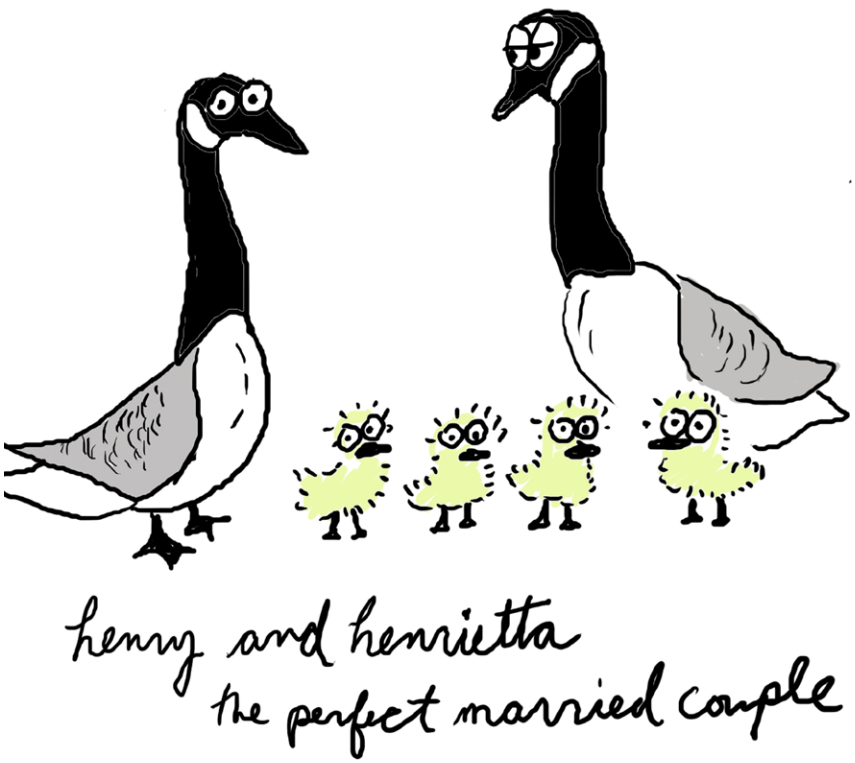
Kah Leong: Stay true to your passion. Art takes time to mature; it takes continual refinement.

There is not a lot of instant gratification in these things — it takes time. When I first started, I had to assist other photographers for many years, and shot a lot of portraits, weddings, etc. to make money.

But I was simultaneously continuing to hone my craft. I kept testing and experimenting to improve my lighting skills, etc.

Annie: I would say that the best thing is to give each other regular feedback, and try to apply your imaginations to help ease the other person's challenges, even if it's not your specialty.

Pool your talents and make sacrifices of your own time when the other person needs it. Remember that it's not all about you! This can be a hard one. ▪



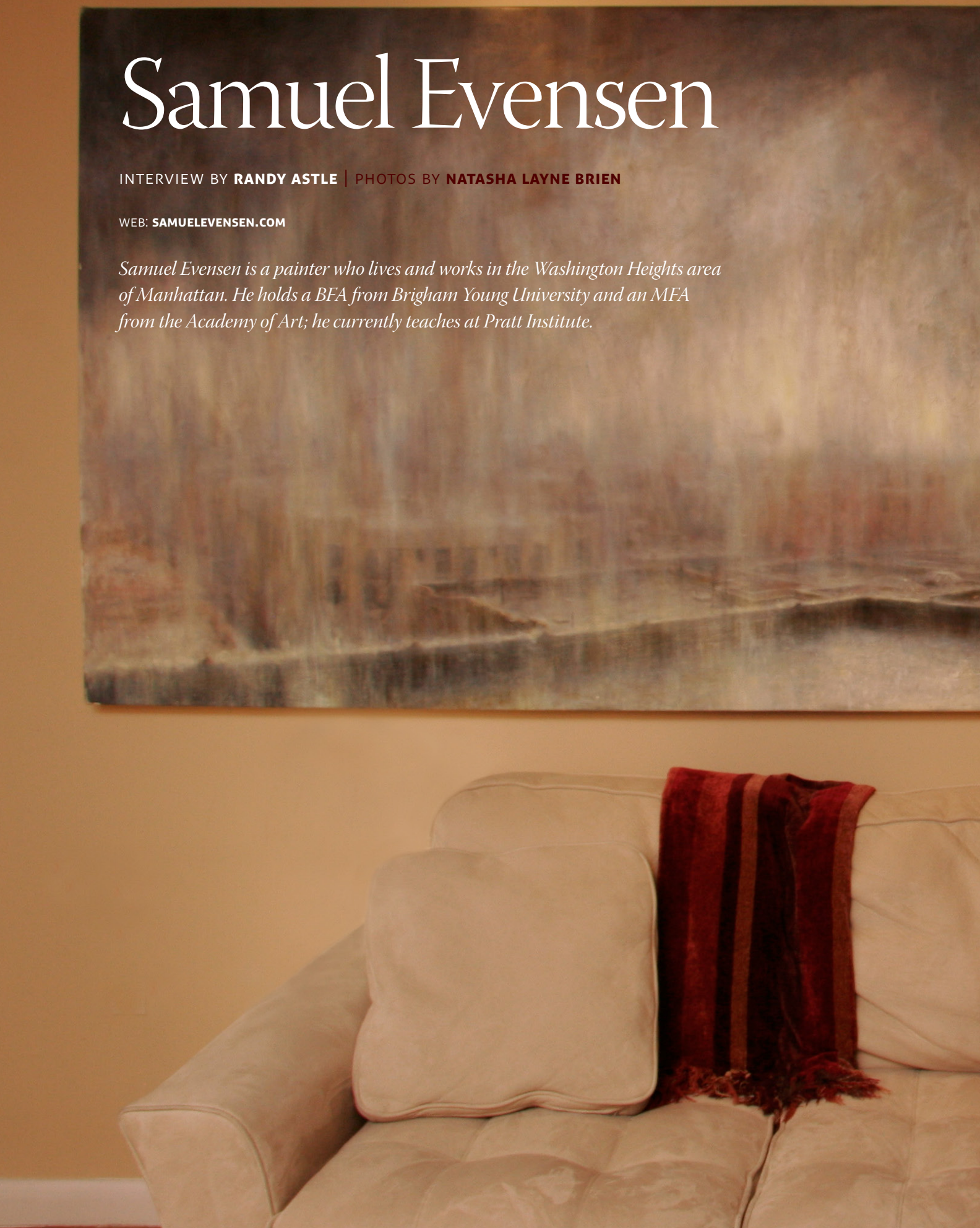
Both by Annie Poon

Samuel Evensen

INTERVIEW BY **RANDY ASTLE** | PHOTOS BY **NATASHA LAYNE BRIEN**

WEB: **SAMUELEVENSEN.COM**

Samuel Evensen is a painter who lives and works in the Washington Heights area of Manhattan. He holds a BFA from Brigham Young University and an MFA from the Academy of Art; he currently teaches at Pratt Institute.



Can you tell us a little bit about your background? Where are you from and how did you get interested in painting?

I was born in Orem, Utah. I grew up in Utah and started painting when I was a teenager, studying with Utah painter Joseph Brickey — a phenomenal painter. Eventually I went to BYU and studied in the illustration department.

I graduated there and came out to New York and studied at the New York Academy of Art, receiving an MFA in painting, a two-year program.

How did that compare to your education at BYU?

For me it was a real stepping-stone into the kinds of things I'm pursuing now. BYU's program was great. I studied in the illustration department because I was interested in working with the human figure. I had friends who had been through the program who encouraged me to do the same because of its emphasis on the human figure and focus on traditional methods of painting. Yet I always felt much more like a fine arts painter than an illustrator. I never really had serious interest in illustration, so some classes didn't fit me so well. When I came to New York and began studying at the New York Academy of Art I felt suddenly right at home.

The Academy's program is focused primarily on the human figure and more traditional methods of painting, drawing, and sculpture. They teach a comprehensive history of art practice and theory from pre-Renaissance to contemporary movements.

The goal there is to supply the artist with traditional skills of visual articulation and then encourage him or her to find a contemporary application for them. There's a lot of emphasis in contemporary relevance and I liked that a lot.

Not necessarily contemporary media and methods like abstract painting or new art, but just trying

to make the figure applicable to today's world, as in Richard Prince or similar artists?

Yes. The figure has become more and more popular in the broad art world in recent decades. Representational painting and using the human figure is quite ubiquitous in contemporary art.

Do you see that as a bit of a reactionary movement responding to several decades of abstraction or de-emphasis of the figure?

Maybe. Post-modernism is a really interesting phenomenon and the return to the figure is probably due to the fact that post-modernism really includes just about everything.

I believe art critic Arthur Danto defined it well when he wrote about how he views contemporary art as a post-historical era, meaning that a progressive linear development in art history was essentially dissolved following modernism. I don't subscribe to all his ideas, but that one does make sense. Basically he says we now live in an almost-anything-goes art world with no major stylistic imperative as has existed throughout most of art history.

That creates some confusion with an ever-expanding definition of art, quickly blurring the lines between traditional ideas of visual arts and other related or non-related fields.

The legitimization of so many varied forms of art affords contemporary artists liberty to do just about anything, including a return to figuration and traditional painting methods.

So maybe it's a reaction but I think of figuration more as a byproduct of that expansion of art from modernism, the era of manifestos and self-definitions, to post-modernism, the era of pluralism.

Given that pluralism, what do you personally like to go see in museums and galleries here in what is

arguably the artistic capital of the nation?

I like to go see the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Frick because of my interest in traditional methods of painting. I try to see a lot of what's happening at the other major museums — the MoMA, the Whitney, the Guggenheim, the New Museum, and so forth. I love going at least weekly to gallery openings around the city, particularly in Chelsea.

I love to see new work and what various artists are doing now. Some of it I love, some of it I hate, and some of it I'm kind of indifferent about, but it's always very engaging and stimulating for me to be able to see as much as possible. I've come to view my work as part of a dialogue that began hundreds of years ago. I try to create works that dialogue with both living and non-living artists. That's an idea that's grown out of academic scholarship, of course, and may sound a little goofy, but I think the idea is accurate — and it's exciting to think of my work as a response to a great artist of the past or present or as part of a contemporary debate of visual ideas. So I try to see as much as I can, really.

What were your early influences as you were starting out, as a teenager and as a student?

First, I have incredible parents who always encouraged me in my interests in the arts. Their love and support helped me feel like art was a legitimate career and worth pursuing.

As I said before, I studied with Joseph Brickey. During my time with him we studied a lot of nineteenth-century classical realists. I had an affinity for the masters throughout art history and studied a lot of artists from the middle and end of the nineteenth century, artists like Sargent, Bouguereau, Alma Tadema, and Waterhouse.

Since coming to New York my tastes have expanded dramatically. I realized that, almost as a default, I had been composing pictures through a very neo-classic modality. I was anxious to explore other compositional modes and visual languages. I now find myself ever more attracted to abstraction, expressionism, and other contemporary movements.

Really, I'm a painter at heart and find that I favor painting over other forms. I also think I will always be a representational figurative artist but I find myself more and more influenced by a broad spectrum of artists from Michelangelo, Velázquez, and Manet to Picasso, Philip Guston, Anselm Keifer, Cy Twombly, and Vincent Desiderio.

I'm most attracted to painting that explores the expressive and emotional qualities of the medium and artists who deal with an internal "innernecessity," as Kandinsky put it.

Tell us about your workspace.

My studio is a room in my apartment exclusively dedicated to my work. I'm here working in the studio usually six days a week — whenever I'm not teaching. I try to capitalize on the space by tacking paintings to the wall as opposed to using an easel.

I find that I prefer working on a variety of works concurrently for practical reasons like letting paint dry as well as for conceptual and creative ones — if I get stuck with an idea I can go to something else. So I try to fill my walls with paintings that are still in progress. I also have a wall covered with sketches and different ideas mulling around in my head.

I guess I kind of see my studio as an extension of my creative mind. I have works and ideas all around that I'm in the process of completing or figuring out. It's a great space for me.

Do you have a favorite medium? Do you like working with oil?

I almost exclusively work in oil paint. I can't put the stuff down — it's so exciting. I love the versatility of oil. You can do countless things with it. I really believe it's clearly the most versatile paint medium.

I'm attracted to painting and drawing specifically because it visualizes the individual voice of the artist. In fact, that's one of my concerns with contemporary art and new media.

New media art has the potential to hide the individual voice. In contrast, I feel like oil paint makes that voice very salient in the creation of art, the construction of a picture.

With most painting and drawing media the individual voice of the artist can be very conspicuous and very clear through an infinite application. That's very important to me as an artist.

Which you don't get if you look at a Duchamp urinal or something like that.

Right. That kind of masks the individual voice in a way. Duchampian thinking doesn't deal much with individuality and expression. It's more of a conceptual Gordian knot that is much more literary than visual. In essence, Duchamp created a world of ideas now supported by written theory.

Conversely, I seek to make work that reaches to some degree beyond the scope of words. I'm interested in art as experience — visceral experience, I suppose — that transcends the confines of literature. That's what makes the visual arts uniquely powerful for me.

Would you ever be tempted to do anything three-dimensional?

Probably in the future. I've done some sculpture in clay, but not enough to consider myself a real sculptor. I've always dreamed that in my other life, if I had another life, I would be a sculptor. But right now I'm dedicating myself to painting.

Let's talk about some of your specific paintings. You have a large canvas hanging in your living room of the skyline of Washington Heights as seen from the Columbia medical towers. It's a rainy scene and there are areas of very precise detail and others where it almost looks like a Turner in the blending of the tones and the wash over the buildings. How did you go about approaching that piece?

The work is called simply *Rain*. The idea originated with a choral piece about a rainstorm by composer Eric Whitacre entitled *Cloudburst*. A lot of my work is actually derived from music; in fact, a lot of formal ideas that I use in my work are derived from formal ideas I hear in music.

But this particular painting is derived from that song about

Every painting at its most basic level is a self-portrait of the artist, no matter the imagery or the style.

a cloudburst, a rainstorm, which is really arresting to me. I was thinking about rainstorms and the metaphor in that song; the lyrics talk about the earth being very dry and thirsty, yearning for water. At the end of the piece the singers mimic a rainstorm that comes and cleanses and renews the earth. It's an incredible moment and a very iconic idea, of course. And to me it's a metaphor for revelation and the interaction between heaven and earth.

In *Rain* I tried to translate those ideas into a visual form. A painting about revelation is really about the physical and the spiritual worlds and how they meet and interact with one another. In the painting itself there are passages that are very clear and other passages where the light and the imagery are diffused and refracted through the rain that's coming down. I wanted to create what rain felt like, not just what it looked like.

I really like that play between a concrete physical reality and a metaphysical, spiritual reality, or a kind of Turner-esque sublime reality. I was interested in portraying the intersection where the two realms meet and comingle — the essence of spiritual experience.

Overall, I tried to create the imagery so that the city and the sky and the rain coming down would interact with each other and there would be places where that interaction is blurred, where it's difficult to tell what is what. So there's a lot of representational painting as well as a lot of abstraction within this one piece.

To me the work also explores themes of faith. It's a fairly large piece — 50 × 132 inches — and I composed the imagery in such a way that when looking at it the viewer becomes enveloped in the picture — unable to take it all in at a reasonable distance.

I originally designed it with a male figure on the edge of the building in the foreground but finally removed him in an effort to allow the viewer to be the figure in the painting.

I wanted the rainstorm to be at once formidable and beautiful. I wanted the viewer to feel exposed and maybe a little vulnerable. It requires faith to trust in God and follow Him. Faith often asks us to proceed before we completely understand; it promises stability only through vulnerability. In this painting I'm exploring that state of coexisting vulnerability and stability — vulnerability because of the unknown and stability because of a spiritually discerned transcendent reality. A lot of my work actually has to do with the idea of finding or defining spirituality as the place where the physical and the spiritual worlds meet together and interact with one another.

Do you see that as one of the primary ways in which the gospel influences your work?

Absolutely. I fundamentally believe that every painting at its most basic level is a self-portrait of the artist, no matter the imagery or the style. It's impossible to not depict to some degree who we really are.

Because my worldview is defined so much by the gospel I think it's inevitable that those ideas will come forward . . . even without my having to consciously pursue them.

Are there any particular components of the gospel that draw you toward that type of subject matter? It seems to me that such doctrines, about spiritual manifestations in the physical world, could really influence an artist. The reason I like Turner, for instance, is that he helps you see beyond the flat surface of the painting. Is it fair to say that would be the dominant way in which you approach your painting?

Yeah, I think so. Not all my work begins with spiritual doctrines, but as I said before, it's difficult to remove those entirely from my work. I think of much of my work almost like sculpture. I like thinking about creating an object, not just creating an image. That physicality is important to me.

But as much as I'm interested in formal elements of making art, I believe I'll always be a representational artist, creating works with some degree of verisimilitude. I just think that way.

Those two ideas of physicality and illusionism are really interesting to negotiate in the same space. I think there are a lot of parallels to the gospel inherent in those ideas.

Tell us a bit about your painting *Veil*. It features the trunks of a grove of quaking aspens, essentially creating a field of white bark and dark knots and markings.

This painting began with just an image. It's derived from another piece I did called *Populus Tremuloides* with similar imagery. I wanted to create a painting of aspen trees where you couldn't see the roots and you couldn't see the tops or branches; it was just an infinite number of tree trunks. I wasn't exactly sure why I was so attracted to that image, so I decided to begin painting it and explore what it meant.

I really liked the idea of the aspen trees being one organism connected through a common network of roots so that technically the aspens were all branches of the same plant. I thought that was really engaging and struck at something fundamentally iconic.

I became fascinated with the formal design of the piece. I liked the long, horizontal format that encourages your eye to move back and forth and the vertical lines that encourage your eye to move up and down. Furthermore, I really

liked the play of the dark knots placed sporadically on a field of white trees that forces your eye to bounce around to different resting places in the painting. So, from a formal standpoint I really liked how activated the imagery was.

As I worked it seemed to me the image of scores of trees was exciting and inviting but also kind of prohibitive, almost like a wall. Still, the trees aren't lined one against the other to create a barrier. One can enter into the illusionism of the space. It occurred to me that this image was a metaphor for a veil.

The veil is a barrier which blocks vision but can also be passed through. That opened up the work in whole new ways for me. I tried to emphasize how a veil is something that separates the physical and the spiritual realms. And, because of that, it's also the place where the physical and spiritual world can interact with one another when the veil is breached.

So I tried to have areas where the paint is very flat and very modernist, where it asserts the two-dimensional plane of the canvas. In other areas the image is more illusionistic, implying a traditional perspectival space.

I tried to make that juxtaposition with an internal and external narrative: an internal narrative where there's a perspectival, illusionistic space and an external narrative where the painting again asserts its physicality as a flat object. This physicality is a bit like sculpture, or at least references sculpture. That play between a repellant flatness and an inviting illusionism is really what this painting is all about for me.

Additionally I like how this metaphor implies that a veil isn't something we pass through at once but by degrees just as you can enter the illusionistic space of the painting by passing through the trees one by one, sort of a visual

idea referring to the "line upon line" principle.

A lot of great religious painting has emphasized its flatness; that's one of the fundamental characteristics of icons, after all. Do you think it's easier to access a level of spirituality when emphasizing the flatness of the canvas, like the flatness of a veil? Or do you feel similar levels of spirituality with your figure drawings and other works that include perspective?

That's an interesting question. I didn't mean for this painting to function the same way as a devotional image. Icons similarly assert their flatness but are more emblematic, directing the viewer's spiritual gaze to the ineffable.

This painting, on the other hand, attempts to imply the path to the ineffable through implied classical perspective and illusionism. Originally this was part of the philosophy behind perspectival construction: creating a connection between the viewer and the infinite — in my case, God. To me this work is more about the play between the two worlds of flatness and illusionism — where I'm trying to capture the essence of both worlds, one that you can enter and one you cannot. I'm using both as metaphors. As we pursue faith and spiritual living we can pass through a veil and have an interaction with the Spirit, yet we're still living in a physical world that determines the majority of our sensory experience.

I don't want to sound too ascetic, like the physical body is evil. To me it's quite the opposite — that we have spiritual interactions with God while remaining in a mortal, physical existence. Those two can coexist and allow us to become more like God.

It's more about seeing things with a spiritual eye, even when you're in a physical world.

Right. And having the physical and spiritual interact — not necessarily that we strip ourselves of all things physical.

There is a longstanding tradition of asceticism in Christianity with the resulting debate over what role visual art should play. Some denominations have embraced art while others have shunned it, as in the historical conflict between icons and iconoclasm. How do you feel about the way visual art plays into the LDS culture and lifestyle?

I hope it plays a big part. I believe that with a worldwide church it's becoming increasingly difficult to wrap parameters around LDS culture. But I hope that visual art and all the arts are a big part of LDS pursuits.

LDS doctrine embraces the physical body and physical world as gifts from a loving God. Of course, the majesty and importance of the physical body is manifest in Christ's resurrection. So, unlike some denominations, LDS doctrine encourages full involvement in the physical world.

Still, our art objects aren't meant to function as devotional images of the past. We don't worship them, but hopefully they do to some degree direct our minds to higher levels of thinking about ourselves, others, and our world. I believe the greatest artists from all generations don't create work that is only a reflection of our world and the times we live in. Great artists create work that is more transcendent and revelatory — it reaches somehow beyond our current state to create a new vision of thinking and feeling and experience. I hope my work functions that way.

What is it like being an LDS artist working here in New York City, an environment some would say isn't conducive to creating moral or spiritual work?

It's great! It hasn't been my experience that the "New York art world" is entirely indifferent about moral and spiritual matters. I suppose different people have different perspectives. As an LDS artist I initially wondered how my faith, which was reflected in my work, would be accepted and treated. I've personally found a very warm reception to my work and interests, including pursuing my faith and LDS identity in my painting. I have found it very enlightening and a very positive experience.

Of course, because of technology that affords a global perspective and an ever-heightening sense of pluralism, there really is no longer one "art world." There are many art worlds and no doubt there are certain communities where my work wouldn't be valued as I hope it will. But the art communities I've interacted with have been very warm and receptive.

Overall I feel that what I do is appreciated, as long as the quality of the work not only matches the content but also functions well as visual art.

Are there other LDS artists, either historical or contemporary, that you highly regard?

I will always be in debt to Joseph Brickey for what he taught me as a painter. Virtually everything I've learned about painting itself came out of my years of study with him. I enjoy Minerva Teichert's work. I also think J. Kirk Richards thinks very creatively and is very innovative about composing historical narratives. I listen frequently to BYU Singers and feel my painting is somewhat influenced by the work Ronald Staheli does.

How do you relate to the community of LDS visual artists? Is it possible to say there even is such a thing?

It's possible to speak in terms of a community of artists because we

share common beliefs and interests concerning our religion even if we differ when it comes to our art.

That said, I see myself as a visual artist who doesn't paint exclusively for an LDS audience; I therefore see myself interacting both with LDS and non-LDS artists, and with LDS and non-LDS, even non-religious, audiences.

Some Mormons speak about a requirement or a kind of duty for LDS artists to be making specifically LDS art, or at least to be building up the kingdom of God with our art. It's my feeling that there's no one single way to approach that.

I mean, when we talk about building the kingdom of God I think that happens first and foremost in our families.

So being a loving husband and fulfilling my duties as a father in teaching and working to provide for my family is building the kingdom of God — the most important part of building the kingdom of God that I'll ever do.

My work is certainly a reflection of my LDS identity but also my identity as a child of God living in a mortal world.

As an LDS artist I pursue ideas that are universal, for example the ideas of spirituality and spiritual experience that I've been discussing. I think it's very rich to interact with both LDS and non-LDS audiences in regards to those types of experiences, but not necessarily in an overtly didactic sort of way.

I feel like we all have a universal shared experience as a human family and as children of God, and sharing that experience with one another is really rich and exciting, regardless of our denomination or our belief system. I suppose that common experience is what excites me so much.

So it helps broaden our scope when we have LDS artists doing things that are not overtly LDS in content but which can speak to doctrines, themes, and emotions that we have?

Yes, among other things. I also think one of the most exciting things about the Church is that we are nothing without our history, and I mean the history of the modern Church beginning with Joseph Smith as well as the history of the God's dealings with his children going back to Adam.

But we are also nothing without the present, without contemporary experience, because everything we strive to do is applied religion — the attempt to live our faith, to help and strengthen each other as a human family.

So I believe there's a place for historical narratives in the visual arts, but it's just as critical that there be a forum where artists can

also create works that are about contemporary life and what it means to be living now as a member of the LDS Church.

More universally, our art should deal with what it means to be a child of God living on the earth, sharing in a mortal experience; in that way we apply religion to our present condition, as opposed to solely examining its historical value.

Both are valid within and without the Church. I think both are important and support each other, but in my own work I'm drawn more and more to contemporary issues and imagery, more to universal themes than historical narratives or, as you put it, overtly LDS content.

What are you working on now?

As I said, I tend to have several projects underway at once.

But in general I continue to pursue this idea of spirituality and veils, so I'm actually doing a series of veils right now. I have one underway that depicts fish in a rather abstract fashion, painted on four panels. That's one work in a whole series of pieces about veils.

I also just recently began a figurative series in response to the earthquake in Haiti, as well as the earthquake that happened just this morning [February 27] in Chile.

This is something I've never really done before. I've never approached my work this way where I'm creating the bulk of the material out of my head. It's really not so much a depiction of the events of the Haitian earthquake as much as of my experience when I found out about it, as I watched CNN trying to get information.

I was in Spain that night and of course there were no real answers or images or communication at that point. Reporters continued to describe the event and talk about what it must have been like, but they were unable to do much more than guess — as we all were, so far removed from the event.

The work represents my response as I tried to imagine what it was like for the Haitian people. So the imagery is based on my imagination of the experience and my personal response as I felt so devastated about the event, urgently wanting to help in some way.

It's a very, very different approach from most of the other things I've done and I think the imagery is therefore very different. But I'm excited about it: there's a lot of potential for really arresting ideas. It's a little more horrific and terrifying than some of my other work, which is more contemplative. ▪

Marin Leggat

INTERVIEW BY **REBECCA JENNEJOHN** | PHOTOS BY **SCOTT MORRIS**

WEB: **MELDDANCEWORKS.ORG**

Photo courtesy Marin Leggat

Marin is a choreographer, modern dancer, instructor, and founder and director of the company M.E.L.D. Danceworks. The focus of this company is the relationship between dance and spirituality. Marin has taught and performed throughout New York City and the northeast and as a U.S. Cultural Envoy to India and Sri Lanka. She teaches dance at BYU.

The mission of M.E.L.D. Danceworks is to "dissolve religious and cultural differences through the art of dance."

How did you become involved as a dancer and a dance artist?

I grew up doing ballet, jazz, and tap like most girls did, and when I was in high school I had a teacher who introduced me to modern dance. I went to Hillcrest High School in Midvale, Utah, and my teacher's name was Robyn Mousley. She introduced me to modern dance, and I was just kind of converted right away.

Why did you start M.E.L.D. Danceworks?

In grad school I was really interested in the relationship between spiritual practices and creative processes — that's what my thesis was about.

When I was in grad school, or maybe a couple of years earlier, there was a conflict going on in Salt Lake when the Church bought Main Street.

I remember feeling for the first time a really clear division between those who are Mormon in Utah, and those who are not Mormon in Utah.

I remember wishing that there was something that could be done to bring people of different religious backgrounds together in some sort of common experience or common purpose. That specific event in Salt Lake sparked a desire to use dance and the arts as a way to bring diverse people together.

When I moved to New York, I just felt like it was the time and place to really try to start moving this mission forward. And what a better place to do it in than New York City? So I created this dance company in 2006.

What is the mission of M.E.L.D. Danceworks and how does it influence your work as an artist?

The mission of M.E.L.D. Danceworks is to "dissolve religious and cultural differences through the art of dance." Whether I'm choreographing as the artistic director of M.E.L.D. Danceworks or as a commissioned choreographer for some other group, organization, or university, those are the things that I'm interested in exploring right now through dance.

I would say that everything I'm doing right now, in some way or other, reflects that desire to not only get issues of religious involvement out in the open so we can talk about and celebrate them together, but also to give dance artists the opportunity to express and embody things that are of most importance to them: their religious and spiritual beliefs.

What inspired your *Foundations* piece?

The first dance I had done in New York was a piece called *Sydney Ann's Apple,* and it was an exploration and celebration of the creative spirit of women. It was performed in the Merce Cunningham studio in 2007. In that piece, I explored the themes of creation and womanhood through my own perspective as an LDS woman.

After that project was over, I wanted to honor the experiences of other dancers that may see their world differently than I do. So, I started thinking about a project I could do that would use dancers of various religious and spiritual backgrounds.

Then, in 2008, I took a two-week workshop from Liz Lerman in Washington, D.C. Her whole message and process involved bringing people of different backgrounds together and honoring their experiences. I felt like I really learned a lot from her about how I may be able to create a dance like this in New York City.

What were the technical aspects of pulling this piece together?

I held an audition in New York, and I was very clear about what my intention was and what the dancers would be asked to contribute in terms of being really open with their spirituality and honoring the different perspectives of other dancers. We held rehearsals once or twice a week for about six months before we started to perform *Foundations*. It was a dance that formed based on what the dancers brought to the process.

I had no preconceived ideas or agendas going into this project, and it was only once we got into it and listened to the dancers' stories, moved together, and discussed various topics together that the shape and the arc of the piece started to reveal itself. It was a really unique

Photo courtesy Marin Leggat

Photo courtesy Marin Leggat

process. *Really* fulfilling I think, for everyone involved.

In rehearsals we did a lot of different things: we talked a lot, we wrote a lot, and we moved a lot. I'd come to rehearsal sometimes with a specific question; one of the questions was, "What do I stand on?" We were talking about literal foundations — physical foundations, and then we were also talking about spiritual foundations. So that was one question that they responded to and created movements based on: "I stand on . . ." fill in the blank.

The dancers created movement phrases to reflect the various things that they "stand on." The final section of the piece is sort of a collection or amalgamation of all these different phrases; the dancers are dancing them in unison, while each of them is speaking aloud these statements of belief that they stand on.

One thing that I really love about the piece is the section where the dancers share passages of sacred texts that talk about foundation and building. In New York we had a chapter of second Kings that was recited by a Jewish dancer, talking about the building of King Solomon's temple. We had a Buddhist chant that was recited. We had passages of scripture from the Doctrine and Covenants. There's something that's really beautiful, I think, about involving sacred texts from various religious traditions.

I'm actually resetting *Foundations* here at BYU, this semester. It's a similar process, but it's different because I'm working with sixteen LDS dancers. This time around, the dance is completely different because it involves a different set of dancers' beliefs. It's a reflection of this particular group.

Here at BYU, the sacred texts are all coming from the Book of Mormon, so there's not quite as much diversity, but still, each dancer has their own unique journey that they've taken and their own experiences that have served as the foundation of their testimony.

What was it like to work so openly with the NYC dancers concerning their religious or spiritual beliefs?

Rehearsals became a really safe environment where dancers were able to share really, really sacred experiences. We were able to share trials, and dancers were able to talk about questions they have about their own faith and really receive a lot of compassion and support from dancers of different religious backgrounds. That was such a beautiful thing — I just loved that.

I really feel that the community that we created as dancers — the trust that we created among ourselves — was translated through our performances to our audiences. Audiences really responded positively to what they saw and what they felt. That was the most rewarding part to me.

You performed *Foundations* in several different venues throughout the city. What did your audiences know about the dancers or M.E.L.D. Danceworks?

We performed our first performance at the stake arts festival that our stake put on in May of last year. We did a couple of performances for the Jewish community, but they didn't necessarily have any personal connection to our Jewish dancer. We did a performance for an arts festival that wasn't a

religious festival, but was just a community arts festival up in northern Manhattan. Some people knew about us, but most people didn't really know who we were or what we were about.

Tell us about the work you did with the Terence Lewis Contemporary Dance Company in India during the summer of 2008.

Terence and I met in 2005. We were both in Sri Lanka volunteering with post-tsunami arts activities going on there. We crossed paths for about two days, and I felt at that time that I needed to maintain contact with Terence.

We communicated over the next two or three years before we decided to try to pursue the funding necessary to allow me to work with his company. Terence has a young contemporary dance company in Mumbai and was interested in exposing them to contemporary dance artists from different parts of the world.

We approached the US consulate in Mumbai and were able to get funding through the state department for me to take an assistant, Rebecca Jennejohn, and spend four weeks there choreographing a thirty-minute dance for his company, and teaching daily technique and composition classes.

I was the one who approached Terence with this project, and said, "This is the project I would be interested in . . ." or "These are the themes that I would be interested in exploring with your company."

Those themes involved spiritual traditions and religious background, and I was excited to work with a group of non-western, non-Christian dancers.

Did you find this project challenging coming from your Mormon background?

Those dancers were Hindu, Muslim, Jane, Zoroastrian, and Christian (i.e. Catholic). They really were a very diverse group. Because the dancers were so young, as well, we had to make defining a "spiritual experience" a really broad investigation for them. We would talk about what is most important to them in their lives.

I remember feeling prompted, really, to teach these dancers about the principles of faith; we talked about faith as a general principle, but I asked them the question, "What is something that you know to be real, even though you cannot see it?" They connected to that idea in a lot of different ways. I just really wanted to give these dancers an opportunity to come experience

Photo courtesy Marin Leggat

and embody ideas that were deeper than the flashy style of dancing their area is typically known for.

How did the mission of M.E.L.D. Danceworks come across in your daily work in India?

Oh boy, that's a good question. Part of me kind of thinks, well, technique is technique. But I also think there's something important about honoring individual dancers — honoring their learning process or their experience — as well as creating a learning environment that's not so teacher-directed.

Even though we're doing pliés, tendus, leg swings, and leaps across the floor, I'm always interested in bringing it back to "What does this mean for you individually? How does this relate to your life?" Addressing those larger life questions, I guess. That's what all modern dance teachers do.

Everyone comes closer to Heavenly Father in their own way. For me, it's been through making dances.

Describe a typical day working with the dancers.

When all was said and done, it was about five hours a day. The first couple of hours focused on technique and/or improvisation composition. Sometimes what we experienced in technique and improvisation composition would then translate into something I was trying to generate with them for the final dance. Then we'd work with them for three hours or so in the afternoon. Sometimes at night I'd work with some of the younger students. Rebecca would teach Pilates; we'd do different things like that.

The final creative project you did with the Terence Lewis Contemporary Dance Company was a piece called *Light Traces*, which had several sections. Can you talk specifically about a few of these sections and how they related to your mission at MELD Danceworks and/or the project you presented to Terence?

Sure. The second section was one of my favorite sections. It was the most chaotic section, but it was a section where each of the dancers created a solo — a small movement phrase that reflected their feelings about faith, "faith" meaning something they believed to be real even though they can't see it, as I mentioned before.

Each of these dancers created beautiful movement phrases, then I simply crafted them on stage: entrances and exits and groupings layering on top of each other. I loved that section. I thought the dancers were so committed because it was their own experience

Photo courtesy Marin Leggat

that they were embodying on stage. It was their belief and their ideas, and I think it's so beautiful when people have the opportunity to be creative and expressive that way. So the second section was always my favorite.

We used light as a metaphor for those things that we were searching for and things that we may not be able to see but that we know exist. There was a section in which the dancers held flashlights and sort of shined them into the darkness and shined them across the surfaces of their bodies. The final section had a huge kind of a center light that the dancers were all dancing around and moving in and out of.

The final image of the dance was of all twenty-six dancers looking at the light and walking around it, and that walk sped up into a run until they were all sprinting, sprinting around this center light as the curtains went down.

I thought it was a beautifully lit piece; the light was one of my favorite parts about it.

Tell us about the intersection of faith and art in your work and your everyday life.

One thing I've always believed in very strongly — sort of the root and basis of my testimony — is that creativity is an eternal principle. As members of the Church we have hope in the promise of being able to create eternally as gods and goddesses, don't we?

That's what draws me to dance. And that's why I'm LDS. This gospel celebrates creation, and we recognize that creating is a Godly attribute. Everyone comes closer to Heavenly Father in their own way. For me, it's been through making dances.

What a blessing it is to create anything: a dance, a lasting friendship, or especially, to create life. Everyone is endowed with this heavenly gift. We are all creators! ▪

Nathan Bowen

INTERVIEW BY **CAMERON KELLY** | PHOTOS BY **JOSH MAREADY**

WEB: **NB23.COM**

Nathan is a multidisciplinary composer and a co-founder of the Intermedia Arts Group, creating digital art, interactive digital compositions, and computer improvisations. He has composed for M.E.L.D. Danceworks and Handcart Ensemble, and he has also taught music theory, computer music, music history, solfege, and other topics at the CUNY Graduate Center's New Media Lab, Hunter College, and Purchase College.

This style can be sort of analogous to my own process of trying to receive revelation.

When did you decide that you wanted to do something with music?

Toward the end of my mission, I was in Leipzig and I was trying to determine what I would like to do for my career. I had thought about composing. I went to see a concert and the conductor stood up and conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony without a score in front of him. It was pretty cool, visually.

The beginning of Beethoven's Ninth is very powerful. The conductor just did this huge swing of the baton — whoosh — and a lot of the performers struck at once. It was a very powerful moment.

I was thinking: *Do I want to be a conductor? Do I want to be that person? Or do I want to be the one playing one of these instruments in the ensemble? Or do I want to be writing the music?*

That moment influenced my decision, but that evening there were more things going on. There was an atheist family I had taught who had never really been on board and believed that there was a God, and they were at the concert. I was up in the nosebleed section, but I could see them in the hall seated down below. It struck me that these people were able to take in this symphony and be open to its message.

Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a poem, "Ode to Joy" by Friedrich Schiller, set to music. My understanding is that the poem was written in response to the Napoleonic wars that were going on.

The poem says, first and foremost, do you believe there is a God? And if you do, then that would mean that we're all brothers and sisters; we're all from the same Father. And if that's the case, then we shouldn't be killing each other; we are brothers and sisters.

And that was the reason for celebration with the "Ode to Joy." It was very difficult to get that message across as a missionary knocking on doors, but as a composer, especially in this classical context, you get an audience who is seated there, and they're just trying to take it in and understand what's going on — they're much more of a captive audience. That's far more persuasive, I felt, at least for this couple. The audience is traveling a few hours to get to this concert and they're paying good money for it.

And I thought, *That's another venue. Music has a way of carrying messages*. That had an impact on me. I thought, *Maybe this is something I want to do.*

Initially it was for missionary purposes; I thought that composing was going to be a way that could help to be a conversion tool for truth. Since then, it's gone through all sorts of twists and turns.

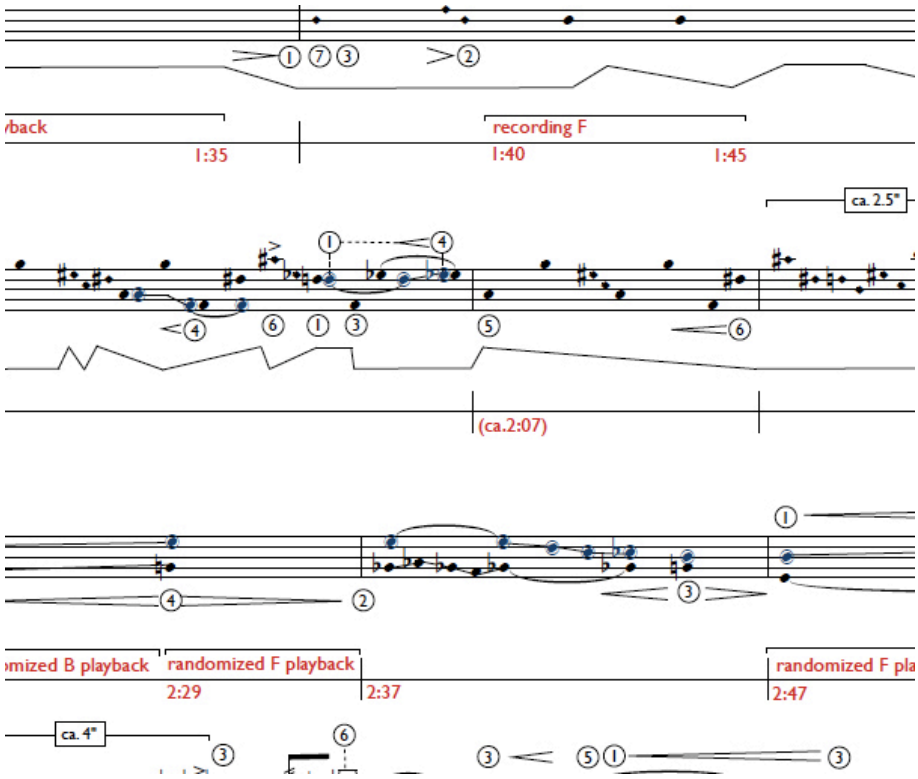
What is your process and how do you go about composing?

My favorite process that I have used was working in collaboration with Marin Leggat on *Sydney Ann's Apple*. Marin had approached me about doing this piece, and it was going to be a large-scale piece, so I knew I'd have to pace myself.

During the time leading up to the production, I spent an hour every morning — I just blocked out 7 AM to 8 AM — and I worked on stuff.

For this piece, I didn't write any notes down. I didn't write anything down. They needed a recording, so I composed it all using Logic. I would just play stuff and record myself playing it, and then I would tweak it and edit it. From there it just became a lot of cutting and pasting.

What are the similarities between storytelling and music? How does music tell a story?



First of all, I have to say that sometimes the music that I'm writing deliberately doesn't tell a story. It may be about a certain concept that I find interesting. I've written a piece that is not really about much except for the interaction of certain elements.

But with *Sydney Ann's Apple*, it was definitely a story. Marin gave me some very specific things that she was looking for. In the fifth movement of that piece, she was interested in the idea of multiplicity of creation and things being able to continue on for cycles. In the larger aspect, she was thinking about femininity and the role of women, and how that works within the gospel. I think she wanted to explore the idea starting off; her dancers would be one and one, then suddenly those break off into twos, and then those would break into more. And so for me, the whole idea of that one was to try to make a story of how you can split off, continuously.

Once you've started something and it starts to take on its own life, you have to give it its due. With *Sydney Ann's Apple*, what I was trying to do was start off with that idea of multiplication. It starts off with two different pianos. At the very beginning they split up with something like fractions of segments, which then turn into two different parts.

From there, I wanted to start having multiple voices going on simultaneously, and so there was a point where, in terms of the harmony, that was a secondary idea. I had to use harmonics to create a sense of direction, but the real concern was how I could get four different things going on at once.

You start to imagine the charts of the piece as a container, and you try to fit things around so that one voice is able to be prominent, and then it dies away and another voice emerges, within this container. That's a basic challenge of what we call "counterpoint" in music; it's the art of allowing multiple voices to coexist but also maintain a sense of independence from one to the other. For *Sydney Ann's Apple*, it

The gospel has made me a better person, and I naturally want my music to reflect that benefit in my life.

started out as two voices, and then I wanted to get to four. It was hard to actually get it to more than that, but I tried to do it by either changing the theme or coming back.

What are some personal projects that have really meant a lot to you?

The piece that I've felt was me putting myself out there the most and me challenging myself the most (and also a success in terms of where I felt I was in my level of writing to where I was afterward) was *When Spoken to in Dreams*.

I have a problem in my writing of not being able to begin a piece, plan it out, and then edit it retroactively — I would always write at the very beginning and just keep on going, pushing through it. I didn't have the ability to think about whether I had written something that should actually be in the middle of the piece rather than something earlier that hadn't been written yet. I had a teacher who noticed I had a problem writing large pieces, and he challenged me.

So this was my attempt to write a large piece. I began by saying I wanted to write about a ten-minute piece, to start. I had to plan it starting from the top down.

I decided to use the golden mean — the most basic formal trick that a lot of people had used — and I decided I would have my climax be about two thirds from the middle of the piece.

From there, I started to think about the idea of a Fibonacci sequence. I started to divide the piece into sections, and I tried to figure out if I was going to divide it into seconds or tenths of seconds, or what would compute out to around ten minutes. Ten minutes equals six hundred seconds, so I tried to figure out a Fibonacci number that was close to that. Then I started just dividing and compartmentalizing before I had written anything: *I want something cool to happen here. I really want this to happen.* And then I started to place sound events together.

That was a big deal for me, because I hadn't really done that before. In this piece I had created really complicated action, where I had to essentially create a timeline of cues that needed to execute certain things.

It was a big, involved process, and I really enjoyed its challenge from the compositional side.

It all seeds from the Fibonacci sequence, but for the visual component, I had fallen in love with a device that was used in a film called *Dreams* by Akira Kurosawa. I became interested in his directing and read that he treated sound and visuals like counterpoint. That caught my eye, because I'm familiar with that term.

A lot of composers and filmmakers in a big moment will have a lot of stuff visually and sonically happening — a big scene needs all these things. But Kurosawa would actually look to have music do something big in a place where visually not a whole lot was going on, and vice versa.

And so I wanted to create this moment where the climax visually was going to be at this golden mean. Sonically, there was a switch. It gets really loud and involved musically leading up to that point, but then it cuts out and becomes far more sparse at that climax, whereas visually it becomes more intense. For me that was really fun to try, and I felt like it was effective.

As I was developing this, I started to think about how this style can be sort of analogous to my own process of trying to receive revelation. And that's where inserting the title *When Spoken to in Dreams* comes from. I'm sure all of us as LDS artists, or just as people who are trying to find God, have given a lot of thought to the

fact that sometimes you put forth a lot of effort to find God and to know what you're supposed to do if you're searching for guidance.

As this piece was progressing, I imagined that the cello, which was part of this piece, was like us. You try harder and harder to find out what's going on, and then there's this moment, after all that effort, where God does speak, and you can be quiet enough to hear.

Sometimes that effort and His response don't seem to have any correlation other than that they didn't happen at the same time. I think that's how God talks to me; it's in a way that's quiet. Sometimes I really don't even want an answer and other times I do want an answer but it seems like a long time before I get it. I think that's how God works. Sometimes He can hit you over the head with something, but it will probably not be in a way that you could expect and anticipate and plan on.

For me, composing that was a success, because I had been urged to be a little forthright from my teachers, and if I had something religious to say then just to say it, and make my piece be about that. This piece really did become about that, and I didn't back away from that. I didn't back away from it in the program notes, either.

I think it's a lot easier to have a message that's hidden from the audience that only you know, because if it's something precious to you, then you have the luxury of not having to confront anyone.

But it doesn't really do anyone a service if you hide what it is that's on your mind and what your music is about. It doesn't do you any good, because you've written this thing that no one's ever going to get.

I think that's one thing that I'm even still trying to develop; music is used as a medium to carry a message, and I think as artists we have a certain responsibility to learn how to convey that message effectively.

What are you working on right now that you're really excited about?

I'm working on a piece called *The Iron Rod* for the trombone and also using electronics. One thing that the trombone can do really well — at least an advanced trombone player — is play multiple notes simultaneously.

If you sing into the trombone while also playing a note, then it

will yield what are called multiphonics. And it's a cool effect. If you are humming the same pitch and playing the same pitch, and then you start to hum out of tune with it, you can create some really dissonant sounds.

I'm really excited about this piece. I also am excited from the standpoint of electronics. My programming will not use any prerecorded material and it will only record him as he's playing and then reinsert itself later on.

And that's how you can then expand on this idea, the trombone playing multiple notes simultaneously. If I'm recording it and playing back something that he's already played, then that allows me to have just one line going out while another line can be going on. You've created a counterpoint or chords or harmonies, whatever you want.

How does the gospel affect you as an artist?

I think the gospel affects me as an artist in that, for most everything that I'm writing, I try to couple it with some sort of gospel-related thing, because that's what my life is — it's hard to separate the gospel and my beliefs from my basic mode of operating.

And so my pursuit of creating art that is close to who I am tends to also be creating art that is close to the gospel, because I'm a believer.

The gospel has made me a better person, and I naturally want my music, as a sort of tool to spread the news, to reflect that benefit in my life.

Also, I'm going to be creating art that's authentic. I find myself wanting to be really true to who I am as a person — what I believe in, and what I think. That could refer to my own personality traits, not necessarily just gospel things. I also find that I want the things that I care about to somehow be fused into what's coming out of me musically.

How do you see your work building the kingdom?

I don't tend to have the opportunity to speak to the masses, and so I find that more and more, communicating the gospel, or building the kingdom, tends to be a fairly small, person-to-person endeavor.

For me, building the kingdom would mean creating a work of art that can be discussed if people choose to talk about the gospel.

In this piece that I have called *The Iron Rod,* I've referred to the Book of Mormon in my program notes. But I'm not trying to beat people over the head. I want to create an invitation for discussion if people are interested.

I think that we as Mormons run into the issue of "we've got this burden and task of building the kingdom of God and we're supposed to spread the gospel to others." Yet at the same time, any missionary knows that there are people who are not interested. And so there's this conflict of wanting to really preach the gospel to every creature regardless of what people are going say versus respecting people's agency and also not isolating yourself.

I think that one of the great things about art is that each of us comes with our own perspective and we're all made a bit better for it — for being able to have that exposure and have the dialogue about it and enjoy how that dialogue comes from different vantage points. ▪

Erik Orton

INTERVIEW BY **WADE FOSTER** | PHOTOS BY **NATASHA LAYNE BRIEN**

WEB: **ERIKORTON.COM, BERLINTHEMUSICAL.COM**

Erik Orton is a writer and producer for the theatre. He began producing theatre while a student at BYU. Works he has written and produced include Berlin, *an original musical about the Berlin Wall, which went on to win an Emmy Award in 2009, and* The Drummings, *written in collaboration with Joshua Williams and based on the life and times of Irish statesman Daniel O'Connell. Orton also co-wrote the book for* Savior of the World *and recently completed a script entitled* The Bottom of the Barents Sea *about the international rescue effort to save the crew of a downed Russian nuclear submarine. He is currently producing* Children of Eden *for Broadway. Erik and his wife Emily live in New York with their five children.*

How did you first get interested in theatre?

It was a complete accident because I was on the swim team in high school. But I sang in choir, and they always need more guys for the shows, so my buddies signed me up to audition for *Anything Goes* and I went in. My first audition I sang the baseline from a madrigal and got the lead role as Billy Crocker in *Anything Goes.*

Isn't Billy a tenor?

Yeah, but you know, they were pretty desperate. So they picked me, and I never looked back. I stopped doing swim team, although I still swim, but got the theatre worm, or bug—sorry, the theatre parasite—and just did everything. That's actually when I started writing music for the theatre. We were doing a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and I was playing Bottom and there's a little snippet of lyrics where the fairy queen sings a lullaby. The director knew I was musical, so she said, "Can you write the music for this and all the fairies will sing your song?"

So I wrote it and we recorded it with a tape recorder on top of the piano — it was very high tech — and that's what they played in the

I'm really only interested in stories that I find inspiring and uplifting for me, something where in the process of writing it, I feel like a better person for having told the story.

production. I thought that was so cool, so immediately I decided that what I wanted to do was be a musical theatre writer. It took me years before I actually wrote a show, but that was the beginning.

Did you find that music composition came very naturally for you, or was it a challenge in any way?

I actually don't feel like I'm a natural writer. I mean, I never played by ear, I had to understand the grammar of what I was doing. But it's really just about exploring and trying and failing and trying again and there's no real true training program for this sort of thing. You say, "What is this dance about? What is this song about? What is this moment about?" And you have to really craft that moment.

I think Stephen Sondheim said it best when he said, "Content dictates form." Whatever you're writing about is what guides you towards how you write it. I've always felt that at heart I'm a storyteller. I've never been interested in writing music that didn't have a story attached to it. The music must, must, must serve the story.

Speaking of Stephen Sondheim: Who has been an inspiration to you, musically or artistically?

That's a really good question. I know a lot of musical theatre writers are inspired by Sondheim and I would say that I am, in a unique way. I met him once. He was speaking at the ASCAP panel discussions and he was so full of life. So many of his stories are very sad and dour, but he was just one of the most vibrant people I have ever met. I had a chance to speak with him on the street afterwards as he was getting into a cab and he was very friendly and very encouraging. So I was inspired by the vitality of him in person.

But from an actual writing standpoint, one of my first jobs in New York was working for Stephen Flaherty when they were workshopping *Seussical*. *Ragtime* is one of my all-time favorite shows, so getting to work with him on the heels of *Ragtime* and seeing him and Lynn Ahrens in the studio and in rehearsal — that was my introduction to New York.

His music is so intricate and beautiful, but as a young composer, seeing somebody accomplished going back and revisiting their own work and saying, "This can be better, this can be improved," somehow it just opened a little door for me and I felt like, "Okay, this is it."

And so as I got to work on Broadway shows and see Broadway people do their work, I started to see that these are real people. It made me realize that you just chart your own course and put it out there and put a lot of heart and soul into it. It's not rocket science. It's art.

How do you choose the topics that you address in your work?

It comes from various directions. The very first show that I wrote, I didn't know what to write, so I asked my wife what she would like to see a musical about and she said she'd love to see one about the story of Esther. And so I just wrote it, because I wanted to write *a* show.

After that I met Josh Williams and we were really excited about writing together. We both had a few projects we were cultivating, so we presented what we had in the pipeline. He had developed act one of a script, and we decided that we were going to take that and turn it into a musical. It was set in Ireland in the 1800s, which is a very fascinating period of history, just before the Irish potato famine. There was Protestant-Catholic conflict, and we discovered this man Daniel O'Connell who was at the very center of it. As I learned

about him through the research I became inspired by him. I'm really only interested in stories that I find inspiring and uplifting for me, something where in the process of writing it, I feel like a better person for having told the story.

And Daniel O'Connell was the predecessor to Gandhi, to Martin Luther King Jr.; he was the first person on the heels of the French Revolution to introduce this idea of civil disobedience and peaceful resistance. He was fighting for the rights of Irish Catholics and it terrified the Protestant English to see the Irish actually being organized and civilized.

Telling his story really changed my life. And so that's one of the shows that I'm most proud of.

What was the name of it?

That was *The Drummings*. The next one was a project for the Church where they wanted a Christmas piece and an Easter piece, so the topic was chosen for us, but how we went about it was up to us as the writing team.

And so we wrote the Christmas Story and the Easter Story together as a show, which, as far as I know, still runs at the Conference Center to this day, at Christmastime at least.

That was a very different experience, writing with a larger team, but also having a firm production schedule and plan and the resources available for a production.

It was the first show I'd been involved with where I didn't write the music — I worked mostly on the script and some lyrics. Maybe sixteen bars of music I wrote ended up in the show. Dave Zabriskie, who is a very talented composer, wrote the score. But, you know, that was very satisfying because we had a twenty-piece orchestra and a full set and a costume shop. And we had sell-out audiences, and it was just a thrill to see the blueprints go through to the real-life creation. After that experience I felt extremely confident knowing how a show could come to life from just an idea in your head, to a plan on paper, to a real-life production.

Once that was over, I had another show that I had written on my own while I was at BYU that I wanted to produce here in New York, and that was *Berlin*.

Tell us more about *Berlin*.

It was the most personal story I've written to date and I'll tell you why. First of all, it was one of those shows where when I started writing, I knew that I wanted to tell this

story. Originally I wanted to tell the story of how the Berlin Wall came to be, but I knew that I was still learning about writing, and I just didn't have the skill set to do it justice. I was happy to let it be on the backburner until I got through some of these other projects.

Actually, I had written a draft of it while I was at BYU. In the course of all of those playwriting classes that I took, I wrote the script and started to sketch out some of the songs, but it really goes back to when I was a child living in Germany.

My dad took me on a trip with his scout troop to Berlin, so I got to see Communist Europe as a child and it made a huge impression on me. We were on a train, and my dad woke me up in the middle of the night and he had me look out the window. We were stopped in some switchyard in East Germany and he said, "I want you to see this because you may never have another chance in your life to see this part of the world and I want you to remember it."

In some ways people think that I'm interested in sort of dark stories, but I actually was talking with my wife about this and was able to articulate it in a way that I think makes sense, because I don't think that I'm a particularly dark person. It's that I'm interested in moments where the worst of circumstances bring out the best in humanity. I feel like those are usually ugly situations, but we get to see the beautiful side of humanity. It's juxtaposed with the ugliness that occurs and the ugly things that people do, but I think that's how we can truly see the good and the divine that is within all of us.

Berlin grew out of this experience that I had as a child, and on my mission when I thought, "Oh, I want to write shows," I started sketching it out. I had this whole scene planned out where a play

was going to be going on and the Russians were going to come in and take over the theatre and say the border was now closed. I was just making it all up, but then I started to go and do research and I found these amazing true stories, and out of that I tried to extract the essence of what actually happened.

Sometimes true-to-life, historical characters will come out of that and come with the storytelling, but it's really about trying to capture the feeling that I get as I do the research. I learned about the history behind the Berlin Wall and how it began. The Russians were allies with the British and the French and the Americans in World War II, but once the war was over and they didn't have an enemy to unite them, they became enemies and it developed into the Cold War.

As somebody who lived in Germany at the time because there was a cold war, part of it was exploring my own past and understanding why my life had unfolded the way that it had. From then on, whenever I seek out a story, I think of it as something that strangely enough has some connection to my life, and then I feel like I have a reason to share it.

Because it has blessed my life, it's brought me a gift, and I want to give that gift back to other people through telling it in a way that is compelling. Sometimes I've said it's discovering unknown chapters of history and bringing out unknown heroes, finding inspiring people, and putting them in the limelight.

How does the gospel affect your work?

On *The Drummings,* the producer was a devout Catholic. So she wondered how two nice Mormon boys came to write a musical about Irish Protestant-Catholic conflicts. We kind of looked at each other and said, "I don't know!" But I'll be very candid: I've never been interested in writing about pioneer history. I don't reject it — it's clearly part of my heritage — but my mother's from Finland. She came to New York when she was a teenager and then later met my dad upstate and they got married. I lived overseas, so I never saw Utah until I was a teenager. I've always felt more at home in other parts of the world.

But one of the things that somebody said to me about *The Drummings* was that they'd never seen a more gospel-infused show in their life, even though it was about Catholic-Protestant conflict. I think that as an artist, if we create something that is truly honest, the light of our work can't help but be refracted through the lens through which we see the world.

And so I'm convinced that my faith and my beliefs, no matter what I do, will always appear in my work, regardless of the topic, regardless of the theme.

Also, I think that I have a fairly universal view of how those things apply to the world. I believe that we are all God's children, and so my target audience is the world. I want to tell stories that will speak to a lot of people. So I'm very excited about the story that I'm working on now, which is *The State of the Union*. But I only agreed to write it when as we talked about it we came to the idea of how this story really can reach a universal audience. I wouldn't feel comfortable writing this script unless I felt like it could play on a stage in New York, Chicago, or London and resonate with an audience.

This show is not being written for an LDS audience, in my opinion. I hope they come. I hope they love it. I hope they enjoy it. But I'm writing for, and I always have written for, the broad spectrum.

And really, you can never force anything on an audience. Even audiences have their agency. They have to be able to engage in the story, and they can't feel like they're being spoken at.

So how I write is to hopefully draw people in and have them engage. People will extrapolate from it what they need to hear.

In that sense it's very much like the scriptures. You can see a show or read a verse of scripture at different points of your life and it's going to mean something different. And it's going to mean something different to each person.

I think the wonderful thing about it is that each person can feel and sense and experience the things that they need.

How do you balance being an artist, a storyteller, and a producer with working full-time and being a husband, a father of five, and a bishop?

Some of the best advice that I ever came across was in a book called *The 4-Hour Workweek*. It said that the way to be less busy is to do fewer things.

First of all, I'm not convinced that I'm necessarily successful in that balance, but two things: One, I feel like what I strive to be is the same person in all instances, in all situations. Certainly when I'm in my bishop's office I wear a suit, and when I'm writing I don't wear a suit, but I feel like I have to be the same person inside in every situation. I really try to just focus on doing the essence of each of those things.

For example, last night we hosted an FHE at our apartment for the singles ward. The place was filled with people from the ward, and we had a great time. Our daughter came for the lesson, and then one of the guys who is a concert violinist pulled out his violin and we played music. I'd been writing some songs on the guitar with my kids and so I played guitar and they sang. Then they all went away, and we cleaned up the apartment and sat down and did our scriptures and our prayer. After that, Emily read chapters out of *Narnia* to the kids.

Moments like that, you just feel like it's all of one cloth. I try to not have too many borderlines between the different areas. All the aspects of your life need to be integrated, so that the artistic part is not separate from the father part, which is not separate from the provider part. And when all those aspects of your life become integrated, you don't feel conflicted. But that's a process, and I'm not there yet.

So, what's next?

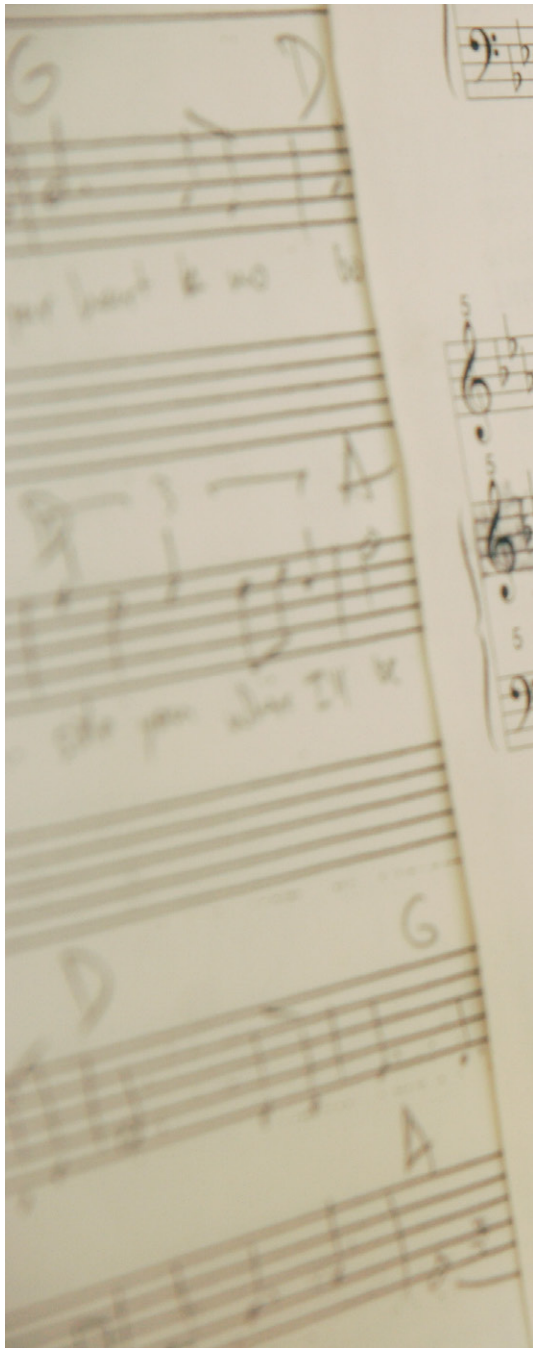
Well, I've got *State of the Union*, which is being written. But the thing that I've completed most recently is a play that I call *The Bottom of the Barents Sea*, which is the body of water that's just north of Russia and Norway and Finland.

I keep a little file of things that I'm interested in writing about, and in the year 2000 there was front-page news about a Russian submarine that sank off the Russian coast with the entire crew inside. It was in shallow water, completely rescueable, but for various reasons they weren't able to get the submarine up off the bottom of the ocean and they weren't able to get the crew out.

I became captivated by this whole story of what must it have been like for these men who were inside the submarine. At the beginning you think this is a dark, depressing story. It's a tragedy about how they're not able to rescue these men for all kinds of engineering reasons both on the surface of the water and below it. And also political issues and people not wanting to coordinate help and not wanting to let help be offered — things that have nothing to do with saving lives. It has to do with pride.

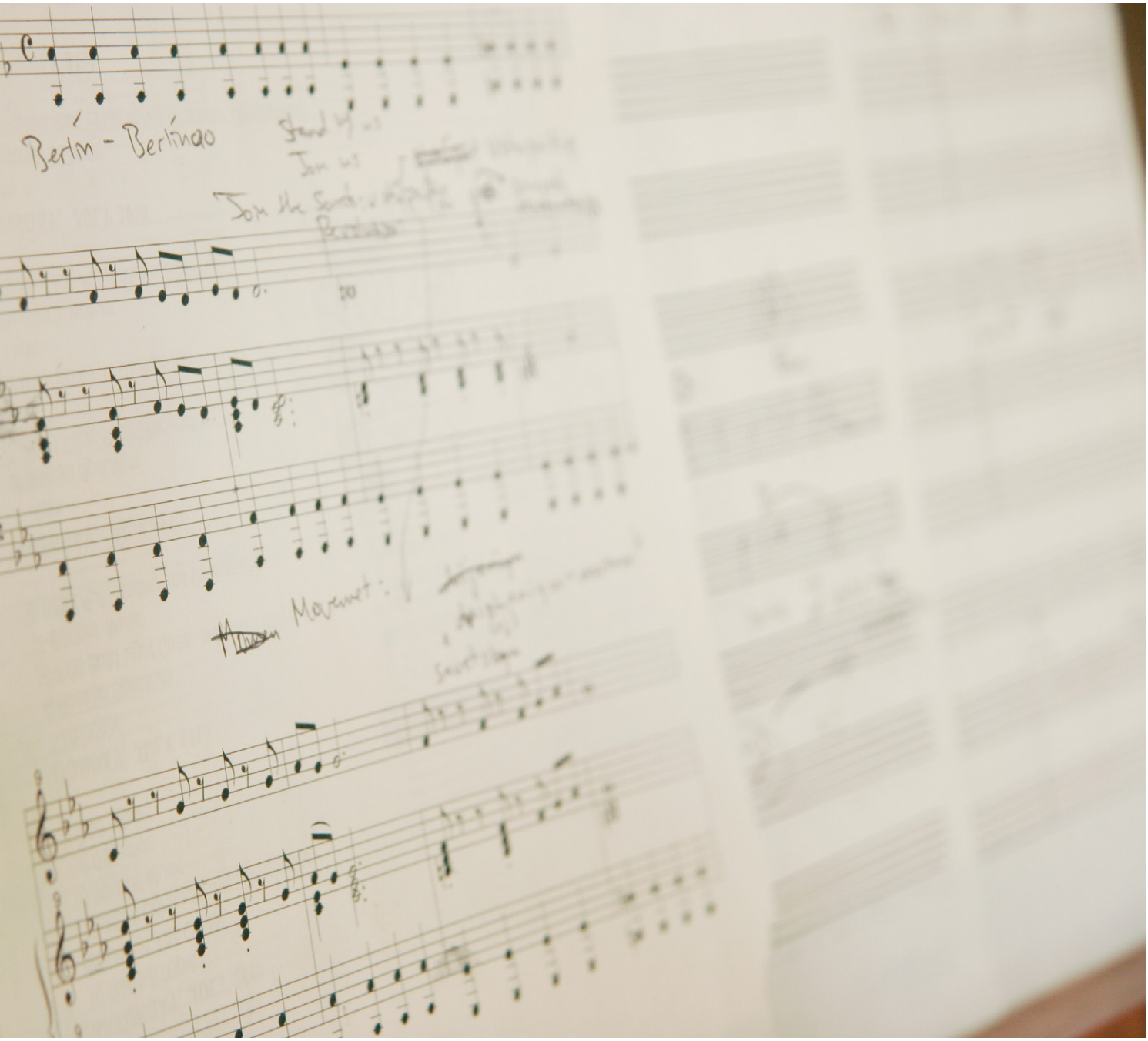
I discovered that at the center of the story is this beautiful friendship between the Russian admiral who's the head of the northern fleet and the Norwegian admiral who's there. And the Norwegians are offering help, and this admiral wants to accept the help. They know each other personally, they're friends, and they're trying to save these several hundred men who are slowly dying below the surface of the water, and it's about all the things they're able to overcome in order to do that.

It's about overcoming — in the case of the Russian admiral, having to overcome his own fear at the consequences of his actions as he thwarts the Kremlin to try to do what he thinks is going to be in the best interest of his men. And also the pride that he has to overcome, because this is a humiliating moment when you have your own men in your own water and you can't rescue them and you have to ask for help.



Going back to the idea of integration, I just thought, it's so much about asking for help. And it's there. Every Sunday I sit in my office with people who have to overcome their own fear and their own pride with certain things. They come to their bishop and say, "I need help."

All of a sudden this story that was about something totally different became very personal. It has moved me as a person, it has



inspired me, and I feel like now I want to make sure that people have to chance to see this story. It's going to mean something different to them, but that's the beauty of it. That's what I want.

And in the process I got to meet these amazing people. I got to interview the British commodore who was there on the aircraft carrier trying to help coordinate this rescue, and I had the chance to speak with one of the American commanders who was commanding a U.S. submarine that wasn't supposed to be there but was on a covert operation observing their military exercises.

To have these cool experiences meeting these fascinating people who are footnotes in the newspaper articles and in history — not only to meet them as real people, but also to take on this sort of transcendent, spiritual layer that resonates not only with my own life but with what life is about, that's the most valuable part to me of the creative process and why I choose to make the effort. Like I said at the beginning, I don't feel like writing comes easy to me. It's a struggle. But once I get into it and I get to be a part of these really amazing discoveries, both for myself and hopefully creating moments of discovery for other people — I feel like it's worth any sacrifice I can make. So I do, I try. ▪

Scott Reynolds

INTERVIEW BY **MATTHEW HERRICK** | PHOTOS BY **NATASHA LAYNE BRIEN**

WEB: **HANDCARTENSEMBLE.ORG**

Scott is the Artistic Director and a founding member of the Handcart Ensemble, a New York City theatre company devoted to bringing new life to literary masterworks. Scott directed and translated the company's debut production of Racine's Andromaque. *He has also adapted and directed productions of Munk's/Dreyer's* Ordet *and Balzac's* The Wild Ass's Skin. *His verse adaptation of the novel which inspired the latter is anthologized in* Plays & Playwrights 2002.

When did you first find your love for theatre and poetry?

It's tough to pinpoint. I do remember that my school was pretty active in bringing in interesting groups. A group that performed a narrative of a Native American tale through puppets, for example.

Or there was a Puss in Boots performance that had these Brechtian puppeteers who would manipulate the puppets visibly so you could see them up on stage with the puppets themselves.

So I would say that from an early age I got a fair amount of exposure to exciting things that could be done in the theatre.

Were you always interested in directing and producing, or was that a later pursuit after your other theatrical interests?

That came a bit later. I wound up always being the guy who organized skits and contributions to road shows and things from our youth groups growing up, but I had some fun acting in high school and got enough positive feedback about that that when I went to college I thought that's what I would spend my time focusing on.

It became clear after a while that I probably had more to offer by bringing people together and making theatrical events happen

There is enough great material out there that is compatible with what practitioners of our religion believe to consume an entire career.

through a merging of unique combinations of talent.

Where did you study and what were some of your concentrations as a student?

At BYU I was pretty heavily invested in what was called at the time the acting track before I got more interested in directing.

So you were a BFA-in-acting major?

I was. I was preparing for that and then at one point I felt that I was being irresponsible and sort of veered into an English teaching degree. I still kept myself really busy with theatrical projects and finally just realized that to graduate in an amount of time that was acceptable to me I needed to just get a theatre BFA and get out.

It was the directing projects that wound up taking most of my time and that opened my eyes to how deep of a well making theatre could be — all the exciting possibilities that can come out of putting a bunch of talented people together. I noticed that I had the skill of being able to draw the right things out of different people that could bring a project into fruition. That that was something I was particularly good that not everybody was good at, so I thought I'd try more of it.

Most artists can cite mentors or classes that triggered something in them to pursue a strong singular focus. Is there any one person or moment you can identify that spurred you into your creative life?

I had a professor named Charles Metton who taught a directing class that I took. It was in the phase where I was convinced that I really ought to do something more responsible with my life even though I'd been enjoying myself. But there was a day where three of us in the class put on our directing projects for feedback from the film class members. This professor took three of us aside afterward — and said that it had been a unique experience for him to have seen three projects of that caliber all on the same day. He told us that we ought to seriously consider careers in directing.

If I hadn't had that sort of verbal encouragement, I don't know if the unique challenges of trying to make things happen in this field would have felt surmountable to me.

Did you move to New York City soon after you finished school? What were some of your initial goals when you got here?

There was a diversion immediately after graduating from BYU. I was accepted into a playwriting MA at Boston University. It was a neat program where the first year was completely covered by stipends and there were only two days of class per week where you brought in material you were writing and it was read by professional actors from the Boston area. It was a great chance to really immerse myself in writing, so I did that.

Then I had a friend who I'd had a discussion with about eventually starting up a company somewhere on the East Coast. He had just left an acting program at Rutgers and was available, so that seemed like the next best thing.

The rest of the MA program involved paying a lot of money for English classes through Boston University and, given that there didn't seem to be a lot of job opportunities that would open up by having an MA in Playwriting, I decided to go ahead and not complete the degree, but take what I'd really gone to the program to get and move to New York and start up this company with that actor friend, Barrett Ogden.

We joined up with another friend from BYU who had just

finished being the company manager for a Shakespeare theatre in Washington and was making a go at being a theatrical agent at William Morris. Together we started up Handcart Ensemble.

The idea behind the name grew out of our having a shared pioneer ancestry and the idea of taking on big things with minimal resources, which was definitely the case in our situation.

Our first production was a version — a translation that I did actually — of Jean Racine's *Andromaque*, and we did that for under $5,000 with money that I convinced some family members to put up as seed money.

They did that, and my father, I think, particularly expected things to not go well and for this to be just an opportunity for me to see that this wasn't a sensible direction to go in.

To give background to people who may not know about the New York theatre industry, that $5,000 may seem like a lot for an independent production, but productions in New York City — even off-off-Broadway — can cost anywhere from $20,000 to $100,000 on average, right?

Yeah. So for this city that was definitely a shoestring.

We did it above a bar downtown and the facilities were pretty horrific and the air conditioning was unreliable. But we used a lot of people that had been actors and were from our BYU circle that we'd gone to school with and they in turn had friends in their wards and so on who were excited by the idea of a bunch of Latter-day Saints doing a production in the city. We actually managed to pack the houses pretty well for that first production, and to do a little better than break even — with the money we raised beyond that, we were able to do additional projects.

So what were the inspirations and collaborations that lead you to create Handcart Ensemble? What was your original artistic mission for Handcart Ensemble? How do you feel it has evolved over the years as your theatre community has changed and as the company has grown?

I don't know that it has changed a whole lot. Our original mission statement was that we're a theatre company that does new adaptations and translations that draw upon classical work, and we have continued to work primarily in that vein.

Our interest has been in combining the work of contemporary writers and poets who are doing great and exciting things in other

areas and have taken on the work of translating and adapting material that doesn't always get experienced in either a theatrical setting, or an American, setting because of language. For example, the Goldoni piece that we did years ago or the *Odyssey* that we did which combined a non-theatrical text with one of the great living poets of our time.

I guess what may have changed is that early on our budgets were low enough that we couldn't afford to pay royalties. So I and people I knew were doing the adapting early on.

Now we've had the privilege of doing New York premieres of adaptations by writers — poets in particular — such as Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, who died a few years before we did the New York premiere of his *Alcestis,* and the theatrical premiere of Simon Armitage's *Odyssey,* originally adapted for BBC radio.

As you've experienced challenges — budgetary, artistic, and what-not — do you feel that your original mission has changed at all?

I feel that our mission has stayed fairly consistent, but our audience has certainly expanded. Originally no one knew who we were, so we were relying on friends and people we knew from church to come see our shows, but the novelty of that wore off for purposes of our immediate circle.

Thankfully we've now been able to draw an audience from the off-Broadway theatre-going community and that has really been our strength for the last few years. And I see that as a positive thing. That's where we've wanted to get to.

How has your membership in the church and your testimony of the gospel influenced your artistic and business choices with Handcart Ensemble?

The Greeks were always fascinated and preoccupied by questions of the eternal, and whether it's in the tragedies or the epics, there is always something about the story that is deeply rooted in family relations.

Being blood relations goes deeper than the biological fact of it; there are these deep spiritual roots or ties that people have that draw them together and that then makes ruptures in those relations all the more pronounced and impactful on those that experience them.

Beyond the literary significance of your play choices, though, is that part of your process of choosing certain material?

I suppose that as a Latter-day Saint that my religion is certainly something that is an important part — the idea that family ties are deep and eternal in their significance. When I see a play like *Alcestis* which deals with this idea of blood bonds having a rootedness that goes beyond the grave, that's

something that I'll identify with and be attracted to.

How do you see your work contributing to the establishment of Zion, specifically in New York City.

In the gospel, Zion is defined as being a state of oneness. I guess I'd like to think that the material I've chosen deals with things that people universally connect with, and that the time that we spend in the theatre together is time where we are able to bond and relate to each other through those shared things. Be it family, be it loss, and be it redemption — all those things I think are actively dealt with in the plays that we have chosen.

Recently the *Odyssey* was reviewed by the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* and other critics of influence. Do you feel like that has put a more public face on Handcart Ensemble and what you are doing?

It's certainly been helpful. A review isn't necessarily the best measure of a work because it's one person's experience on a given night, but the fact is that after the *Times* review came out, the rest of our run had sold out by the next morning. So that sort of thing certainly helps put us on the map. That's what helped us to go on and extend for four additional weeks on what was expected to be a very short run. And it's given us the impetus to go forward and hold a backer's audition for investors and pursue other avenues of funding that we anticipate will allow us to put on the *Odyssey* on a much larger scale.

What are your thoughts about the progression of Mormon theatre in and out of NYC? Is there Mormon theatre as there is Mormon cinema? And do you feel there is a place for LDS-themed theatre?

I feel there is a place for everything in the theatre. I think the Latter-day Saint community has a rich enough story that if people want to deal with that directly through plays and whatnot, there is certainly a place for it.

My choices have been drawn more towards existing classical material and works that are only available in foreign and classical languages with great writers that together have been able to breathe new life into them.

What are your thoughts on artistic integrity verses commercial success in the theatre industry?

That's the balance that maybe until recently I haven't always done as good a job of trying to find. I would say that early on when we didn't have much to lose I was pretty much free to try whatever material I was attracted to.

With some productions the first consideration was to find things that were commensurate with our mission statement. I was specifically looking for translations and adaptations that great writers were doing of classical material that I thought were great works of literature in and of themselves, like the Ted Hughes translation of *Alcestis*. *Alcestis* is not a play that most people have heard of, and it was not the most commercially viable choice. I guess I felt at the time that we were still a young company that was doing things differently from what other people were doing and it was something we might as well do.

With the *Odyssey* I would say that was a self-conscious choice to try to do something that had those qualities, but that also had the potential to cast a broader net commercially.

Where do you hope to see your creative life and the life of Handcart Ensemble in the next five to ten years?

If we are able to enjoy some commercial success in whatever the

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next incarnation of the *Odyssey* is, I would really love it if there were opportunities to commission writers I admire who have a certain standing in the literary world to adapt works that I think have a lot of potential on the stage, or that haven't be tackled yet, or that are ready for a new theatrical rendering.

I think that there are actually some biblical stories that haven't yet been treated or that have stood the test of time that are ready for a gifted poet or writer to take on. There are works by modern and contemporary writers — novels — that have the potential for exciting theatrical life. I'd love it if there were some writers out there who could be attracted to adapting this material.

What advice would you give to aspiring LDS theatre artists in creating and producing new works of theatre in the world but not of the world?

In my case I haven't felt that I've had to make a real choice there. I don't know that there has to be a real choice. There is enough great material out there that is compatible with what practitioners of our religion believe to consume an entire career. There are all kinds of people doing all kinds of work. And there is just a lot of great material just waiting to be done, material that is just waiting for a proactive producer or director who wants to seize it.

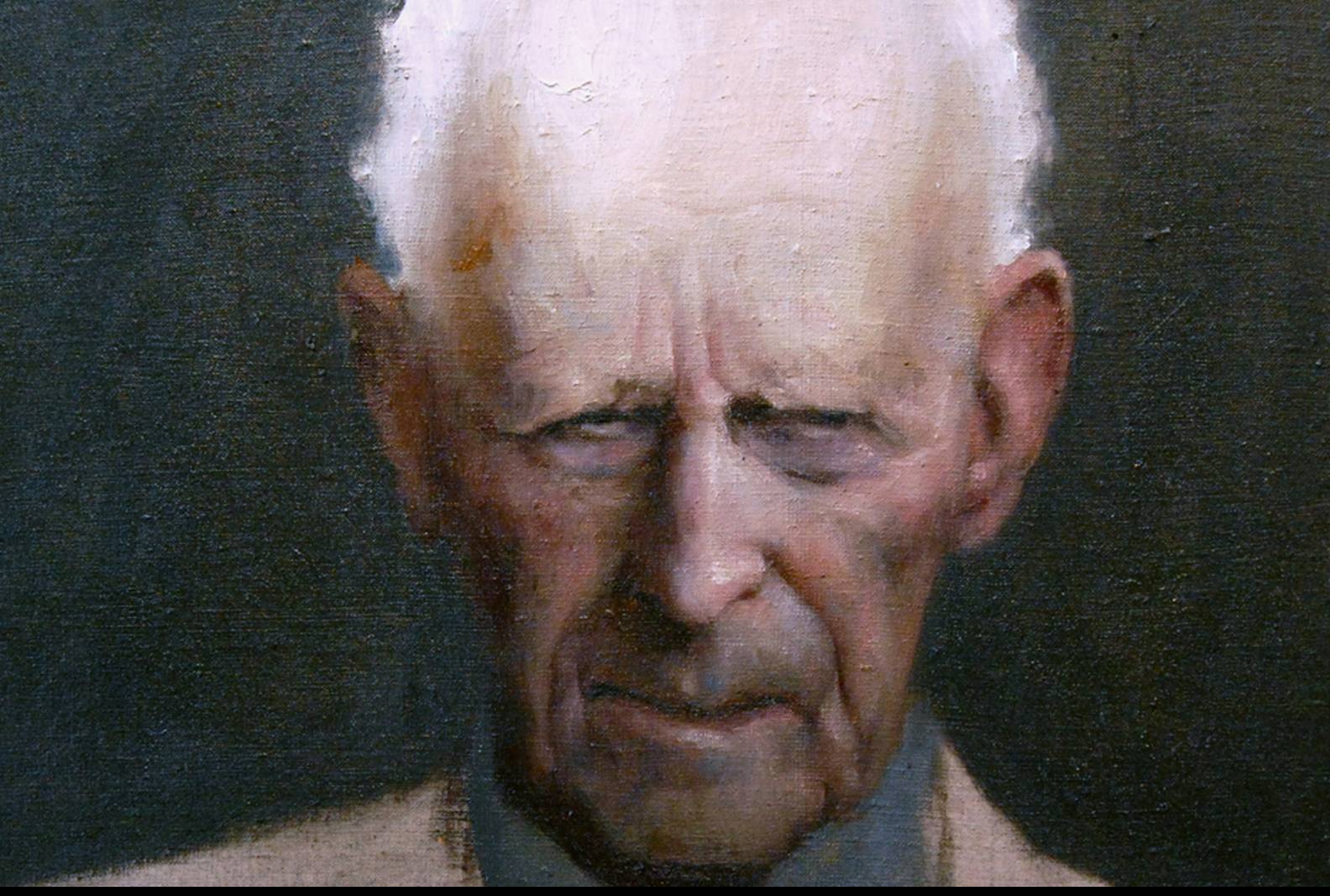
What suggestions do you have for what steps people who are interested in producing or directing can take?

In becoming a director or producer there are as many routes as there are producers or directors. My particular choice has been to go at it from a long and patient slog where, rather than getting internships with regional theatres immediately after college and pursuing assistant directorial opportunities, I've chosen to work full time. I chose to produce my own work, funded partly by myself, and to build that up to a point where it has a life of its own and is a full-time endeavor. That's a way of going about it that may or may not be right for people who want to do this.

In taking that route I've been able to choose my own material and to shape the direction the company has gone in to a degree that probably wouldn't have been possible if I were working my way into the industry through the existing institutions and with established artists. It definitely is a longer route.

Is there anything else that you would like to share regarding your artistic life or Handcart Ensemble?

It's been much harder than I ever imagined it would be, but it's difficult to imagine my life since graduating from college without it because it's been so enriching. It's created so many opportunities for me personally and professionally that I couldn't have experienced otherwise. I'm grateful to have been able to have it. ▪



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