



# Kent Christensen

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

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*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

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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



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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 multi-tasking 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.





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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. ■

