

# Mormon Artist

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# Mormon Artist

COVERING THE LATTER-DAY SAINT ARTS WORLD

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# Editor's Note

Two years ago, in September 2008, we released the first issue of *Mormon Artist*. Now we're over halfway through 2010, twelve issues later, and we've interviewed ninety artists so far.

We have no plan to stop, either. Our list of people to interview is longer than ever, and we've got some exciting special issues coming up: October will be our international issue, featuring artists from all over the globe, and December will be our science fiction and fantasy issue. (If you're wondering where the pageants issue went, by the way, we moved it to next year so we can do it justice.)

Thanks to everyone who has been involved with the magazine—you've made all this possible. ☺

Ben Crowder  
Editor-in-chief

A juried art exhibition will run at the Washington D.C. Temple Visitors' Center from January 29 through March 27, 2011. New works of art are invited. For details and entry materials visit [fulfillthevision.org](http://fulfillthevision.org) or contact the Visitors' Center at 301-587-0144. If you intend to submit, please so indicate by October 1, 2010.

# Table of Contents

## LITERATURE



### Mark Bennion

Interview by Katherine Morris  
Photo courtesy Mark Bennion

1



### Lance Larsen

Interview by Jon Ogden  
Photos by Scott Morris

6

### Mormon Poetry Now A Golden Age?

Article by Tyler Chadwick

14

## VISUAL & APPLIED ARTS



### Whitney Johnson

Interview by Elsie Boyer  
Photos by Ashley Perez

18



### Corey Strange

Interview by Jon Ogden  
Photos courtesy Corey Strange

30

## MUSIC & DANCE



### April Meservy

Interview by Jennifer McDaniel  
Photos courtesy April Meservy

40



### Mountain Blue Singing Towards the Heavens

Article by David Layton  
Photos courtesy Mountain Blue

48

## FILM & THEATRE



### Amy Jensen

Interview by Davey Morrison Dillard  
Photos by Tiffany Tertipes and Mark Philbrick

54



# Mark Bennion

INTERVIEW BY KATHERINE MORRIS | PHOTO COURTESY MARK BENNION  
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*Mark Bennion teaches writing and literature classes at Brigham Young University–Idaho. He recently published his first book, Psalm & Selah: A Poetic Journey through The Book of Mormon, a collection of narrative and lyrical poems that bring the lesser-known characters of the Book of Mormon to life. He and his wife, Kristine, are raising their family in the Upper Snake River Valley.*

## How did you first come to write poetry?

One afternoon as I sat in my third grade class, Mrs. Fallows, my teacher, introduced us to a poet. I don't remember his name, but he had shaggy black hair and a thick mustache. My imagination says it was the poet Larry Levis, but in reality I have no idea who it was. He simply worked for the Utah Arts Council and conducted poetry workshops in various elementary schools across the state.

He encouraged us to write and said something about describing a person or place. At the time, I remembered the room my little brother, Brian, and I had shared. I no longer lived in the house with the room. However, the place was, and still is, cemented in my mind, primarily because Brian had passed away in that room only two years earlier. Consequently, I wrote the following poem.

### The Dark Room

I sit here in the dark room.  
It is so silent  
it makes me think  
I'm under a shadow.  
I turn the music on  
a little ways  
and lie down like a dead bird.  
All the colors start to change.

I remember the thrill of making the poem, and I consciously use the word *making* as opposed to *writing*. At that young age, I barely knew how to write, yet I had made many things, such as clay bowls, sandcastles, thank you notes, etc. In the act of making the poem, I felt connected—in a way I could not explain until years later—to the process of artistic creation. That moment of creation, as well as many others in the context of theatre and visual arts—was pivotal for me.

Later, the poet returned to our school and said he wanted to publish this piece and some other students' works in an Arts Council publication. All of the hoopla surrounding the event made an impact on me; however,

not until high school and college did I start writing on a more regular basis. By the time I graduated from BYU, I knew I wanted to write poetry and possibly essays.

## How do you balance your writing, teaching, and family responsibilities? How do they influence each other?

I'm not sure I have found an appropriate balance, even though I do strive for some semblance of it. Something constantly needs attention, and something invariably suffers because I'm working with too many proverbial irons in the fire. This juggling act can produce some guilt and stress, but I try not to let either paralyze me from being productive in the aforementioned spheres of influence.

I tend to write most consistently in the summer months. Once the school year begins, I spend time revising my work. Usually, I don't produce a lot of new material during the academic year because my focus tends toward my teaching duties. I also have plenty of demands due to my administrative load. In short, what it all boils down to is that I'm a lousy multitasker.

For the most part, though, I tend to privilege my family duties above writing and teaching. My children are young and need plenty of support during these formative stages. I don't want to look back on these years and have regrets about not being there for them. They think poems and writing are great, but more than anything they want my time and undivided attention.

Nonetheless, their creativity plays a huge role in my work. Children embody poetry. They fiddle around with language nearly every time they open their mouths. For instance, kids are not afraid to make up new words. For the longest time, my daughter called some place "the livering park." It took me about two years to figure out what she was talking about. Today we still call that place the livering park. A few days ago, my dad regaled our daughters with stories of his mission in Scotland. While he was sharing a tale, my four-year-old piped up and asked,

"Gramps, how do you speak Scottish?" At face value both of these examples seem ridiculous. Yet, the point is that kids experiment with language. They constantly use nouns as verbs. They drop articles and could care less about the difference between a subordinating conjunction and an adverb. They do not feel confined by rules, guidelines, and parameters. Consequently, they are not afraid to fail. My own children's creativity and honesty fuels my desire to write. They remind me that failure is a critical component of the creative process, and failure is okay.

## Your book of poetry *Psalm & Selah* is subtitled "a poetic journey through The Book of Mormon." What inspired you to take that journey?

In 2004 I remember reading about Ananias in the New Testament. This Ananias was the one whom the Lord asked to heal Saul. While reading in Acts 9, I remember thinking how brief Ananias's time was upon the biblical stage. He shows up for a few verses and then we don't hear much about him. He had a tough assignment. He had to heal a heretic, a persecutor of fellow Christians. In fact, Ananias, at some point, may have been persecuted by Saul.

At any rate, after my experience reading this story, I subsequently started looking more closely at those individuals in scripture who are mentioned briefly. I especially took an interest in Book of Mormon folks like Abish, Sariah, the daughters of Ishmael, Lehonti, Emer, etc. The epiphany I had was that these people contributed just as much to the Book of Mormon narrative as those who are discussed frequently. I started seeing parallels in my own ward. So many go about helping others without seeking the limelight. The bishop's wife deserves just as much commendation as her husband.

The following fall (2005) I had a leave of absence. I spent the majority of that semester writing the initial drafts of the poems in *Psalm & Selah*. This was also the season when President Hinckley asked us to read

the Book of Mormon by the end of the year. His challenge coincided perfectly with this project.

**There are a number of Hebraisms in your poems, and there is an effusion of Book of Mormon language. What was your experience like engaging with the language of the Book of Mormon through writing poetry?**

From 1997 to 1998 I spent a year studying Hebrew and Israeli literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. My studies there provided the groundwork for many of the Hebraisms in the work.

Moreover, as I began writing drafts, I wanted to create a diction that echoed the scriptures. Thus, I mulled over various phrases and tried to identify cadences and words that would cause a reader to reflect on a particular passage or idea.

The overall experience was electrifying. I came to appreciate well-worn phrases such as “And it came to pass” and “As the Lord liveth.” I came to understand, too, that there is no way that Joseph Smith could have written the book by himself. The Book of Mormon’s complexity—on both the macro and micro levels—is akin to a deep well. I look forward to further investigation of this marvelous book of scripture.

**You highlight some less famous Book of Mormon figures, such as Sam and Abish, who haven’t traditionally had their stories told in such a thoughtful, intimate way. Why did you choose those characters, and what was it like writing their stories?**

I chose these individuals because their experiences speak to me. Most of my life, I have enjoyed and, at times, struggled with playing a supportive role of those in more visible positions, regardless of the context. Imagining a possible backstory for Sam and Abish made these individuals more human. I started seeing people differently and recognizing the story in everyone. I felt my empathy enlarge a bit for strangers, acquaintances, and even close friends.

Many people’s stories we simply don’t get to hear, and the reasons for why we don’t hear them are vast and various. Ultimately, though, when the great scrolls of Life are opened up, we’ll hear these stories in all their complexity and beauty. My book, I think, is an exercise in trying to understand and imagine their stories in the here and now.

**What was the publication process like for *Psalm & Selah*, and how has it been received?**

I submitted the work for possible publication to a variety of places before it was accepted at Parables Publishing. When I submitted the work to Parables, I received a quick response back stating that the publisher was tempted to dismiss the work; however, she also happened to love serious poetry. She and a second reader scoured through the poems and sent a response back about three or four weeks later.

When I received notification that the work had been accepted for publication, I nearly started to hyperventilate. As a writer, I have grown accustomed to bracing myself for rejection. My first inclination is to go down that path. Having the book published has allowed me to see the alternative, and it has been excellent. Consequently, I have loved working with the folks at Parables.

To be honest, the collection has not made a huge splash in the LDS market. Most LDS outlets won’t take a chance on selling poetry because they’ve had negative financial experiences in the past. However, those who have reviewed the work (Jeffrey Needle, Doug Talley, and Doug Gibson) have been kind and generous with their sentiments. I appreciate their willingness to read the book closely and carefully. The work is meant to be read slowly, and I think that tendency goes against the grain of our contemporary culture.

As far as book sales go, I have been pleased that a variety of people have been willing to take a chance on the book.

*Imagining a possible backstory for Sam and Abish made these individuals more human.*

*By viewing the worlds of art and spirituality as complementary, I have found that unusual synergy occurs.*

**What have you gained as a poet and also as a Mormon from your poetic journey through the Book of Mormon?**

I've gained a greater appreciation for the importance of writing consistently. Discoveries and epiphanies happen for me when I push and pull and grimace. Doing the pushing and pulling daily brings about a greater ability to observe and articulate the intricacies of life. Sweating over a single word or punctuation mark on multiple occasions has made me grateful for the work of many, many writers.

As a Mormon, I feel a greater kinship with my community. I think I appreciate the many gifts that all individuals in a ward have to offer. I have tried to be more discerning of these talents and appreciate them verbally. I am sure there were times when Sam and Abish did not feel appreciated in their own communities, just as there are some in LDS circles who feel undervalued and underutilized. Nevertheless, their commitment to the gospel allows a bishop or a Relief Society president to do his or her job well. I believe the Lord rewards openly the lives of those—like Sam and Abish—who support those asked to carry heavy spiritual burdens. Perhaps a test for most of us is to see how we'll act when we live life in the shadows of others.

**What advice do you have for Mormon writers, particularly aspiring poets, who are interested in writing about their faith?**

The first bit of advice I'd give is to be true to your spiritual life and be true to your aesthetic. Allow each one to

complement the other. I realize this is easier said than done. Sometimes it is easy to pit art and belief against each other. Unfortunately, though, I have had too many friends fall away from the Church because they felt they had to be true to their art at the expense of the gospel. They did not see how their lives could connect spiritual and artistic principles. When I have felt the tug of the world, I have taken solace in and found strength from the following words of the Lord. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." (Matt. 6:33)

Secondly, I would simply encourage writers to be patient in the writing process. Our culture screams impatience, and this quality can be very damaging to a writer. Take time to step away from your work—say, a month or two—and then, I believe, you'll return to your work with a different perspective. You'll be able to discern the good lines from the riff-raff, and you'll make new discoveries about how you work and about what images succeed and which ones don't.

Finally, gather around you the love and honesty of other writers. Share your work with those who have a clear eye. While what they share may hurt at times, they'll give you advice that will push your work to the next level. When I play tennis, I notice that my game rises to a new level whenever I play with a person whose skills are better than mine. If possible, work with writers whose talents exceed your own. They'll discern patterns in your work that you've missed due to your limited perspective. In short, they'll make you a better writer. 🎾



## Poems by Mark Bennion

### Astonishment

In spring, we are running at dusk,  
all five of us, away from a wisp  
of victim, when a cloud  
barrels down out of the heavens,  
immense roll and wash, leviathan,  
barrels end over end, knocking us down  
in a field's loneliness three furlongs  
from the house of my father,  
the mature grain brushed  
with dew, the dew almost touching  
the soil, quick in its descent  
sweeping towards a night between film and glaze,  
barrels in before Ammon sees the outline—  
like metal burnishing in the summer sun—  
and I sense that I've heard of something like this,  
argued with my father about *thrones*,  
dismissed him as he spoke of *seraphim*  
more beautiful than beryl,  
when Alma looks up too, and catches  
the horse speed of shadow  
and white—this chrysolite sheet  
dropped in before us in a blind  
and boom of eclipse and thunder  
while we hold out for each other  
in this thrashing of sonic death,  
as though outside of this empty  
field nothing else existed, nothing  
that was clear enough to hallow  
after we fell again to earth,  
to dew that tried to make us clean  
face first with the blast of angel and sky.

Published in *BYU Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2006

### My Brother's Bed

To wake up remembering his empty bed  
is serene as touching the walls of a cave,  
is to believe you can keep that Friday in mind  
and heft Galilee on your back.  
To hang up the night's smock  
and oil the lamp, to see through  
a blinding tear is to step outside of a day  
and allow whoever knocks on the front door  
to visit you in this stone room  
you call your life. This place  
that returns today and on a Friday ten years hence,  
occupied now by a ransomed brother  
who makes that room his windowed attic,  
his foyer of the sky.

Published in *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*,  
Vol. 38, No. 4, Winter 2005

### Swollen

. . . and the queen also sunk down, being  
overpowered by the Spirit. —Alma 19:13

In this soul-side of vision, we sink down,  
before and away from the tinsel-tied masses,  
lying side by side as if married by sepulcher,  
limp in our linen and wrapped  
in my long train. Servants hover above us  
like the old tending their gardens, cambered  
and writhing, then fall through vaulted light  
like the husk and sway of cornstalks  
already yellow from the harvest, plucked  
by the autumn sun. You are the rampart

taking the tide, a vine extending reach,  
the diaphanous spirit body more throne-like  
in this breach of palette and winter, feeling  
once more the range of mountain in its  
variety, the steep grade of ascent,  
the sweet water nestled in the highlands.  
We are ransacked fortification  
and first-time chariot, feeling the crumble  
of stone and the lava in rock, whirring  
like the cymbals of ceremony in this fissure  
of firmament and earth, shell and essence.

It is this dying I love, this unreeling,  
this hurling rapprochement in a synagogue  
of blue. In his voice comes *shofar*,  
cornet, flute, *qeren*. In his presence  
arises the cypress and cedar, falcon  
and dove. His wear is threshed wool  
and pure cotton, silk and ash.  
But it's his touch that takes the blood  
of longing, our severs and cuts, both  
given and taken, become his scarlet  
in this ineffable dream or vision  
lifting us higher than the song of birds  
as they dip and soar  
knowing what it means to fly.

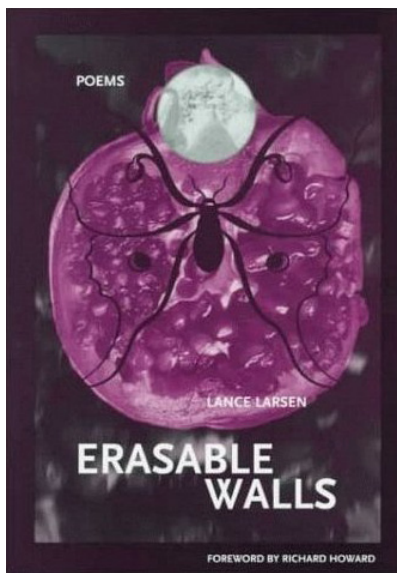
Published in *Irreantum*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2008



# Lance Larsen

INTERVIEW BY **JON OGDEN** | PHOTOS COURTESY **SCOTT MORRIS**  
WEB: [ENGLISH.BYU.EDU/DIRECTORY/LEL2](http://ENGLISH.BYU.EDU/DIRECTORY/LEL2)

*Lance Larsen, professor of English, currently serves as an associate chair in the BYU English Department. He specializes in creative writing, especially poetry. He is the author of three collections of poetry: Backyard Alchemy (2009), In All Their Animal Brilliance (2005), and Erasable Walls (1998). In 2007 he received the Literature Fellowship in Poetry from the National Endowment for the Arts.*



**What are two or three key events that led you to pursue art full-time?**

The first would have to be working a summer job in Denver as a rate clerk for a freight company, 8 to 5, five days a week. It was a good job: air-conditioned office, pleasant co-workers, decent pay for a college student with no skills. Still, it felt like an early grave. When Sunday afternoon would roll around, I'd feel myself sliding towards the abyss of Monday morning—a dead, hollowed-out feeling. At work my co-workers didn't know what to make of me. During lunch, while they were chatting each other up in the break room, I was reading Hemingway or Emily Dickinson or James Baldwin or Joy Williams out on the grass. Clearly I was better suited to literature than calculating the rate of trucking detergent from Reno to Peoria.

The second thing that comes to mind actually occurred earlier—my first semester in a creative writing class. Fall of my sophomore year, I think it was. I experienced for the first time the electricity of good writing. I remember reading James Wright's description of a horse's ear, "delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist." I've never fully recovered from that sentence.

**What is a typical workday like?**

Like luring wild birds to eat out of my hand. Like collecting leaves that

have blown off during the night and reattaching them to the right trees. Like herding water uphill. Like trying to play a recital piece on a baby grand with muffins for hands... Like—

**I meant, what's your schedule like?**

I know, I know.

For me, early is always better: before a shower, before breakfast, before I'm awake enough to remember how hard writing is, before it's time to go downstairs and make sack lunches for the kids. You'd think summer vacation would be a little less chaotic, but this morning, while I was in the middle of a poem, I remembered that my daughter was supposed to pick up a baby bearded dragon from a neighbor. Apparently, the cat my daughter already has isn't enough of a pet. Now she needs a lizard. Which meant I had to search out an old tank in the garage, clean it up, add reptile sand, and find a decent rock for Baby Dragon to lounge on and digest his daily greens.

**What do you most enjoy about writing?**

The invisible fuse it lights within and never knowing exactly where it will lead. Anne Sexton said that "God is in the typewriter keys." I like that. The sensation of the known world colliding with the unknown can become quite addictive.

**Who have been some of the biggest influences in your practice and what about their work has influenced you?**

The poetry list could go on and on. Many of the usual suspects you find corralled in a good anthology—Stevens, Neruda, Bishop, Kenneth Koch, to name a few. Shakespeare in his off-handed quips. Contemporary writers, of course. But I'm also influenced, I believe, by other traditions. Collage artists, for instance, like Joseph Cornell and Robert Rauschenberg, as well as my wife, Jacqui, whose pieces, by good fortune, fill my office and our home. I love the way collage artists use castoff materials everyone else ignores. I'm a collector of sorts,

I suppose: ocean detritus, metal animals, stones, flea market finds, nineteenth-century copy books, cast-off roof tiles I found along the Thames during a recent study abroad. Historical junk waiting to be animated by imagination. Some of my poems carry out a similar project.

I also listen to a good deal of jazz, mostly trios and quartets, from the fifties and early sixties: Miles Davis, Grant Green, Bill Evans, Dexter Gordon. Also Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong duets. Moody, melancholy tunes mostly. Each take brand new. Those guys manage to squeeze emotion out of the simplest of melodies, or they'll re-work an old song you've heard a hundred times and give it new legs—remarkable.

Lately, I've also become obsessed with aphorisms and have been trying to sneak them into my own work. Lines that are quick and devastating. For instance, "Would you rather eat a bowl of question marks or a plate of exclamation points?" That went straight into my notebook. Who cares that my thirteen-year-old son came up with it? Or here's an Alan Watts quote I saw on a community college wall: "Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth." And here follow a couple by Carlos Edmundo de Ory, as translated by a friend of mine, Steve Stewart: "Birds are perfected thoughts." "Lunatics are crazy in both legs, poets crazy in one."

**In what ways do you feel the project of your latest work in *Backyard Alchemy* differs from the project of *Erasable Walls*?**

In writing *Erasable Walls*, I was canvassing personal experience for poems, trying to carve out the perfect lyrical moment, even if I invented a lot. In my latest work, I find myself composing more by juxtaposition. Today, I rarely sit down and write a poem. Instead I will collect intriguing sentences. Always hunting, always gathering. Eventually, when I have sufficient material, I will shape and winnow.

**That's an interesting idea, gathering sentences. How do you know which sentence to graft to another? Do you graft according to sound, content, meter, etc.?**

Yes, all of the above, as well as syntax and alliteration and irony and other devices. I like the up-close, magnifying-glass-and-tweezer work that goes into a poem, but one also has to step back and see what kind of larger argument a poem makes. I keep rearranging till I can intuit structure, as well as some sort of emotional arc from beginning to end. I like poems that have strictness line to line but enough bagginess from beginning to end to accommodate inessential but pleasurable material. Not that I'm always able to write such poems.

**How would you describe the overall effect of your current method?**

I suppose my poems are more surreal and less autobiographical, but (cross my fingers) more immediate. Of course, one will find continuities of voice and sensibility between early work and new, but I hope now there's more contradiction, more associative leaping. Certainly, I'm more enamored of the lovely broken-back sentence, of a certain fretted jaggedness in a line. I'm more interested in petting the nap of a cat the wrong way, just to see a few sparks in the dark, than grooming her for a show.

**In a recent article in *Mormon Artist*, Glen Nelson said, "I think it's commonly known that we're experiencing something like a golden age of Mormon poets." How would you respond to that statement?**

If he means that there are more LDS poets publishing good work in mainstream literary journals, then I heartily agree, though I might quibble with the term "golden age," which perhaps overstates the achievement. But who knows, maybe he's right on that front as well. Earlier generations of LDS poets tended to be parochial, even isolationist, publishing in local venues for local readers. Today, LDS writers are

more willing to throw themselves into the national maelstrom. Which is a good thing for both poets and readers, but especially for the poetry itself.

**What advice would you give to an aspiring poet?**

Always try to write for the larger tribe and you'll pick up local readers along the way. If you reverse that, you get into trouble, whether you're writing principally for Catholics, or Muslims, or Jews, or Iraq war veterans, or the Panguitch PTA. If you write principally for those who share your worldview, you run the risk of taking shortcuts, of not interrogating your assumptions, of merely telling readers what they want to hear. The result? A poem that is a little on the lazy side, or smug.

**What do you hope your audience will experience when they read your poetry?**

In a perfect world: epiphanies, eureka moments of epic proportion, revelations that old religions were once founded on. In our current world: I don't know, maybe a sense of linguistic adventure, or vividness. Perhaps I've proposed an intriguing question, or freshened the language just a bit, or sent a reader back to his or her own life with new eyes. Poems, I believe, are always a transaction between the world of words and the world of things.

**What do you think distinguishes a poem from an essay or a short story?**

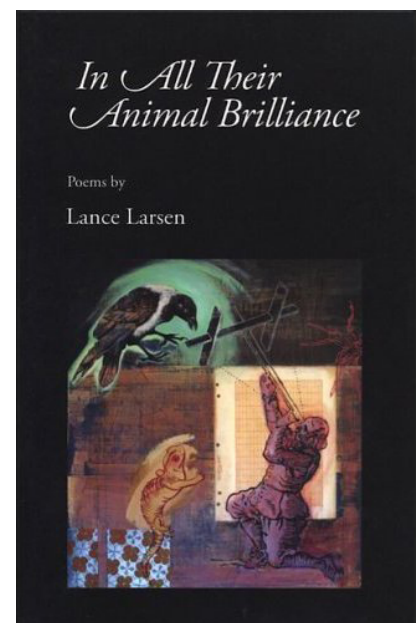
In the fall I'm teaching a seminar in which we'll ask that question for fourteen weeks. By that I mean we'll be writing lyrical paragraphs in all three modes. As for differences, I can make generalizations that hold true much of the time: stories tend to rely on plot, essays have a ruminative quality to them, poems ratchet up the language and music. But the most interesting pieces work the liminal space where rules break down.

**And you can't exactly tell one genre from the other?**

Exactly. My friend calls pieces that play two genres off each other "double agents"—an essay heavy in narrative, a story that eschews plot and tastes a lot like a poem, that sort of thing. Maybe an example will help. Several weeks ago, while revising a lineated poem, I realized that it had potential as nonfiction, since all but a detail or two was autobiographical. So I pushed it in that direction: did away with line breaks, loosened it in other ways, then sent it off to a nonfiction journal called *Brevity*. A few weeks later, an acceptance. I still feel a certain elation at switching genres like that, as if I've gotten away with something. A benign transgression. In my mind, that piece remains both poem and essay. Why choose?

**What does it mean to be a Mormon poet?**

Rita Dove, who is African-American, once answered a similar question about race by saying she resented being considered a hyphenated poet. I feel the same way, I suppose. If we end up emphasizing the adjective "Mormon" rather than the noun "poet," we run the risk of ghettoizing the whole project. I guess I'm dodging the question. I don't know what it means to be a Mormon poet. Maybe that's a good



thing. Let each writer find out for him or herself. One thing I do believe: the work almost always suffers when you start playing the official spokesman or carrying an evangelical torch. Poetry as a genre is simply not very accommodating of such impulses.

### **And in all these projects, just who is your ideal reader?**

While I'm writing, I'm not thinking of a specific reader, only after. Maybe my reader is someone who has just wakened in a subway car after falling asleep. She has fifteen minutes to kill and has a choice between the poetry anthology her friend lent her or a game of Sudoku. I'd like to win out over Sudoku once or twice. Or maybe the reader is a multitasking dad attending another interminable Little League game. Sure, he's there to support his son, who can't hit a thing and prefers to pick clover in right field, but there's plenty of downtime: why not liven things up with poetry? (In this example, I admit I'm speaking from experience.) Or maybe the reader is a student at the back of the room—most likely the obnoxious one snapping her gum who also happens to have ambition. Reading through a literary journal perhaps she happens upon something I've written and says to herself: "Sheesh. Is that all you got? Move over, poet man. I can do this." I want to watch her try. I want to watch her succeed.

### **How does reading your poetry aloud, either while writing a poem or while giving a poetry reading, play into your creative process?**

To some degree, rhythm and voice are content, so reading aloud is indispensable. It also helps immensely to hear a poem in the mouth of someone else, which is why the writing group I attend favors reading a poem twice: first the poet reads, then someone else reads. This simple practice objectifies the poem in helpful ways, emphasizes its "not me" aspects, and moves it from abstract marks on the page to a performance, albeit a small one. As

for poetry readings, trying out new work on an audience helps me to know how to fine tune—what to cut, what to clarify.

### **You talk about sentence-hunting and engaging with the language that others use. Do you find yourself engaging with the language and imagery of Mormonism in your poetry?**

Absolutely, though usually in an unconscious way. I mean, who can resist the cadences and imagery of the King James Bible? As I mentioned, I grab up interesting sentences wherever I find them, whether in *Macbeth*, or on a billboard, or in Sunday School. A teenager in my neighborhood once described the next life as "All puffy and white, goldy, harpy, and angelonic." Though clunky, this description has a vernacular freshness to it, so I wrote it down. At the same time, one has to be vigilant about not simply repeating the idioms of a culture. Use the past, yes, use traditions, but also make it new.

### **In Terryl Givens's book *People of Paradox*, he outlines three paradoxes of Mormon culture: searching and certainty, the disintegration of sacred space, and isolation and integration. Do you see these paradoxes coming up in your own work?**

It would be all but impossible not to touch on these paradoxes, especially the first. For me, every new piece is a search that begins with an itch or a question, as inchoate as it may be. The resulting poem is not necessarily a certainty, but "a momentary stay against confusion," as Frost puts it. Still it is a clarification, which is no small achievement. Sadly, that feeling of satisfaction, of having written something that sticks to the page, rarely lasts more than twenty-four hours. Then you have to gear up and jump into the next crocodile pond.

As for isolation and integration, my poems are always juggling these contraries. In a handful of poems, the backdrop is identifiably Mormon: baptism, a boy passing the sacrament or collecting fast offerings, a missionary

interviewing a young woman, etc. In these poems, the narrator is faced with a crisis of not belonging, then works towards some new integration, if not with the community, then with God or himself. These days I tend to write fewer overtly Mormon poems, though the paradox of belonging versus standing apart remains a subterranean thread. In a more general sense, any writer trying to find a place to write—whether an actual room or a viable psychic space—experiences that isolation every day.

### **When the editor of *Irreantum* died tragically several years ago, the Association for Mormon Letters asked you to write a memorial poem for her. Have you had other opportunities to support your local and religious (and even family) culture as a poet?**

When Leslie Norris passed away, I wrote a collage piece, an elegy, that appeared in *Irreantum* and has been reprinted a couple of times. I found that very therapeutic.

On a more mundane note, I visit school classes and poetry groups when invited, including my daughter's first grade class a few days before Halloween. The teacher was pretty skeptical about the ability of these kids to compose anything, but we showed her. Together we composed a pretty decent pantoum about vampires and phantoms.

Overall, I suppose I keep a pretty low profile as a poet, mostly because the average joe on the street runs the other way when he sees line breaks. On the other hand, I try to be an advocate of the liberal arts whenever I can, and I celebrate the benefits of journal writing.

### **Anything new on the horizon?**

Well, I'm working on a fourth collection, with a working title of *Kittywampus*, which I'm sure someone wiser than I am will talk me out of.

Further down the road a collection of prose poems, and maybe after that I'll try to jump-start a prose memoir I've largely abandoned.



On the more immediate front, I'm collaborating with Jacqui on a show that will go up in November— her collage paintings, my poetry, or at least snippets of poems. We've collaborated before, but informally, me helping to title her works, her art showing up on my covers, someone else pairing our work together.

By contrast, this show, which will hang in the Harold B. Lee Library from November till January, will be a more holistic and sustained collaboration. Content is still partially up for grabs, but will likely gather under the umbrella motif of animal life.

### Any questions you wish I had asked?

Let's see, how about, What is your least favorite punctuation mark?

### Okay, consider it asked.

The semicolon, hands down. There's a place for the semicolon, certainly, as when you want to show connectedness or the relentless advice-giving of a maternal figure, the way Jamaica Kincaid does in "Girl"—a story (or is it nonfiction?) that is one sentence long. But most of the time, especially in short lyric poems, the semicolon comes across as academic—stuffy, or bookish. I agree with Donald Barthelme, who said, "the semicolon is ugly, ugly as a tick on a dog's belly," and Thomas Lux, who describes it as "a period that leaks." 🐞

## Poems by Lance Larsen

### To the Ode

True, you intimidate me, but when I slip you on, like Horace's bathrobe, all things come to life: an ant as worthy of praise as a phoenix, a Styrofoam cup as capacious as a Grecian urn. Nothing too trivial for you.

Not clouds, not the bent spoon  
carrying oatmeal to the dowager's mouth,  
not spotted dogs in heat.

Under your watch, Dejection and Joy  
smoke the peace pipe and take up

residence in adjacent flats. Thanks to you,  
I talk to my orange juice before I drink it,  
I begin a Q and A with the rain, sadness  
and greed converted into longing.  
Behind my sternum, an ancient Mayan city.

What is water, but a confessor, willing to wash  
away my grit? What are train tracks  
but a ladder to heaven turned  
on its side? What is a rotting mouse  
but a country of flies buzzing with praise?

Originally appeared in *Prairie Schooner*

### A Necklace of Ants

To a clown, is grace a pair of floppy shoes?  
To a waitress in Duluth,  
a favorite bra she washes in the sink, then hangs  
by the window, hoping it will dry  
by morning? I don't mean we slip God  
on like a favorite accessory but that He delivers us.

Think of the farmer taking off his oiled belt  
and winching to safety the bawling colt trapped  
on a ledge. I say *grace*, but I mean  
something more layered and symphonic,  
like *Methuselah*, like *Andromeda*,  
but for every vowel a sunny country.

In addition, grace has a job: to hurt us  
toward the good—if we lie, a necklace of ants,  
if we grind upon the poor,  
a shirt of bees. Some days that voice  
chirps and any idiot knows  
to avoid the forklift backing through the alley.

More often, it whispers so far inside we swear  
we're picking up rogue radio waves  
or eavesdropping on angels. We have to gargle  
our mistakes. Say *no* and mean the world.  
We have to taste that delicious itch  
of air the way the blind sometimes hear light.

Originally appeared in *Southern Review*



## Some Minutes

Some minutes pinch us in a crowd, some cheer us up,  
some dangle us from the Golden Gate,  
then at the last instant pull us to safety.  
Some minutes wobble, then rise,  
a homemade kite with a tail of torn pajamas.  
In some minutes you say *I do*,  
in some you vow *In this life I would never . . .*  
Some teach us the difference between “oh” and “o.”  
Some say, What’s the use, we’ll all get audited,  
whether by God or a flunky at the IRS.  
Minute one: you believe in bigfoot.  
Minute two: you doubt your ability to boil water.  
Minute five: you put on a paper crown.  
Meanwhile, minutes three and four join  
other unskilled minutes and compose a weekend  
trapped inside a snowy misunderstanding  
called Montana. In some minutes, a blind man  
reads by the light of his wife’s snore.  
In some, a tiny girl peeks into a birdbath  
to see if she still has a face. Some minutes count  
mistakes at a recital, some dream  
in neon blue, some keep vigil with the dying  
and write down every pause and sigh.  
Napoleon whispers, “Josephine.” Oscar Wilde  
says, “Either that wallpaper goes, or I do.”  
Anna Pavlova, ballerina, leans forward,  
squeezes your hand: “Get my swan costume ready.”

After Rolf Jacobsen

Originally appeared in *Margie*

## Not Necessarily at Rest

Rocks stacked at corners of a squatter’s camp,  
colored bottles hanging from a tree.  
Broken oyster shells  
lining a dirt pathway to match the hems  
of clouds trundling their gossip  
over open-air markets towards the sea.

How can those who watch not be moved  
by our puny tries at beauty—  
the gods who look down, the dead  
who sometimes look up? Yearning works  
through us, whiskers to tail, the way  
a yawning cat converts stretching into praise.

Originally appeared in *Orion*

## A Bright Darkness Sometimes Mistaken for Fishing

He flipped the trout, as if re-positioning a book  
in his hands, then sliced from anus to sunset,  
sunset to quivering chin, clean like the line  
where water licked shore. We were trapped  
in dusk, the two of us, my father thigh deep  
in river, me in wet tennis shoes. He plunged  
thumb and finger into the fish and pulled  
till the insides peeled free. He held that slither  
of organs at arm’s length, as if hanging wind  
chimes, then side armed them into the willows.  
Was it then or later we traded bodies?  
Whatever we had come for—the taut line,  
the underwater blood pull, the blue vacancy  
in the sky one can hook but never reel in—  
beyond us now. He creeled that trout, then rinsed  
his hands. Or tried to. But still it clung—  
a fish-slippery something that glazed the car door,  
printed the Coke bottle we shared, coated  
the radio dial that searched the chaos for a voice  
to warble us home. We drove east, the river  
held west, and I had all evening to swap places  
with darkness. Catch eleven fish, you fail.  
Catch none, you also fail. When he tousled  
my hair I leaned in to feel the failure up close.  
I was a swirl of buggy water, my father the night,  
the sky dreamed in scales, my happiness closed  
and opened like gills, the ones we’re born with  
and spend our best breath forgetting how to use.  
Originally appeared in *Green Mountains Review*

# Mormon Poetry Now! A Golden Age?

ARTICLE BY TYLER CHADWICK

## I. Already to Harvest . . . Again

Twenty-five years ago, Dennis Marden Clark, then poetry editor for *Sunstone*, began a four-part series for the magazine, called “Mormon Poetry Now!” In his column published once a year over the next four years, he set out, according to his stated purpose, to survey “the state of the art of Mormon poetry,” to examine “the best of what Mormon poets [were] trying to publish.” I’m sure his survey of the field dovetailed nicely with the work he was doing alongside Eugene England to gather poems for the anthology they were editing together, *Harvest: Contemporary Mormon Poems*. Taken together, these projects may well compose a unique moment in Mormon literary history—a conscious move to place Mormon poets center stage, if only for a moment; to “definitive[ly]” represent “the new Mormon tradition of poetry” that had developed over the preceding thirty years and that continues into the present. As England has it, those

working within this contemporary tradition tend toward “an unusually healthy integration of skillful form and significant content,” toward the marriage of formal poetic training and the moral “ideas and values . . . they claim to know through religious experience.” It’s a union, England concludes, that leads them to “act with energy to communicate those ideas in confidence that they will be understood” and accepted by both their peers within Mormonism and within the field of mainstream American poetry.

I’ve deliberately tied myself to those definitive efforts to represent the new Mormon poetry by making Clark’s title my own. My essaying here, however, is anything but an authoritative attempt to illustrate the expansive breadth of Mormon poetry as it has developed in the twenty-plus years since *Harvest* was published. That would require far more than the space of a single essay. My immediate project, rather, is to elaborate on Glen Nelson’s somewhat, in his

words, “over-the-top” claim made in passing during his recent *Mormon Artist* interview with Randy Astle: while discussing the Mormon Artist’s Group’s recent “Song/Cycles” project—a collaborative effort facilitated by MAG and several Mormon composers and poets to set the poets’ work to music—he mentions that it’s “commonly known that we’re experiencing something like a golden age of Mormon poets,” that Mormon culture has certain “name poets” who are finding some degree of acknowledgment and success in the national poetry market.

I asked Glen what he meant by this “golden age” and to whom this idea was “commonly known.” In response to the first question, he echoed England’s comments about poets who are, to his knowledge, believing Latter-day Saints and whose work is stellar enough to garner national attention on its own merits. For instance, he mentioned that he had a phone conversation with the poetry editor of the *New Yorker* a while ago. He said, “I was curious whether she was aware that such-and-such a poet in their magazine was Mormon. It made no difference to her. And I’m fine with that. It did, however, make a difference to me.” As it does to me, especially because there seems to be an increasing number of (as best I can tell) believing Mormon poets making names for themselves beyond the Mormon journals and publishing houses—those like the core group reviewed below and the many more I don’t have space to mention here. Taken together, these poets compose a concentrated dose of our literary kin who are making noticeable splashes in the American mainstream, such as may or may not be happening in the more visible genres (the novel, for instance).

I’m not certain whether this increasing movement of our poets into the national spotlight (a) warrants the “Golden Age” appellation or (b) is “commonly known” among a broader audience than the few devout followers of contemporary American poetry who happen to have an interest in those mainstream poets who are also Mormon (or is it those mainstream Mormons who are also successful poets?). However, I am certain the field of contemporary Mormon poetry is “already to harvest” (D&C 4:4)—again—and that this trend and these poets deserve more of our community’s attention.

## II. A Brief, Necessarily Biased, Survey

The following survey of eight Mormon poets—many of whom are winners of national poetry awards and all of whom are accomplished writers—was framed around several criteria: (1) the poets had to have published a book (either a full-length collection or a chapbook) within the last five years—I’ve included at least one book from each year, though each poet only appears once, even if they’ve published multiple books; (2) they had to be—as best I could tell—believing Latter-day Saints; (3) they had to represent something of the diversities of the Mormon lyric voice (a difficult thing to represent with such a small sample size); and (4) their books had to be on my bookshelf. I include this last

criterion as a means to justify not broadening the survey’s scope and not including several recent volumes I want to read but haven’t yet because I’m on a young family/graduate student budget and haven’t the wherewithal to feed all my wants just yet.

So without further ado, I offer capsule reviews of books by eight contemporary Mormon poets, circa 2005–2010, listed by year of publication.

**“A Delicious Lapping”:** Lance Larsen, *In All Their Animal Brilliance* (Tampa, FL: University of Tampa Press), 2005. 84 pp. Winner, Tampa Review Prize for Poetry and 2005 Association for Mormon Letters Poetry Award. Larsen received a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2007. American poet Lola Haskins blurbed about Larsen’s second collection that “the book stands out” in the field of contemporary American poetry for at least two reasons: first, because “it travels—from a talisman in the first poem to a vineyard in the last, in which metaphors of growth and renewal are tied directly to the poet’s life opening outwards.” And second, Haskins continues, because “its honesty stuck with me when I went to bed at night.” These marks of Larsen’s poetry—its movement outward toward the apocalyptic moment when the self becomes expansive enough to embrace all that is Other (including “[t]he Father” of Jesus imagined in the book’s last poem, the Coke-drinking God who “wanders his overgrown / vineyard in an underfed body”) (“Vineyard,” lines 30–1), and its formal, emotional, and spiritual integrity—these characteristics make reading (and re-reading) Larsen’s work a delight. Like the best poetry, its content is substantive, structured on the lyric marriage of the transcendent and the everyday, making the experience both soul-affirming and soul-expanding. This tension between affirmation and expansion tempers the poet’s line, making it taut enough to resound with the rhythms, the wit, and the (ir)reverence—the “delicious lapping,” as he names it in one poem (“This World, Not the Next,” line 23)—of quotidian language laced with traces of an Infinite song.

**“Not Satisfaction, but Its Proxies”:** Javen Tanner, *Curses For Your Sake* (New York, NY: Mormon Artists Group), 2006. 44 pp. The title of Tanner’s chapbook frames well the experience captured in his lyric narrative poems. Extracted from the decree God directed towards Adam and Eve at the moment he expelled them from the Garden of Eden, the phrase “curses for your sake” (see Gen. 3:17) suggests that moral paradox and ambiguity form the developmental crux of mortality. In other words, the pain, suffering, and even, as Tanner calls them, the “proxies” of satisfaction (“Eden,” line 2) (objects or relationships that prepare us for the ultimate satisfaction of spiritual and physical salvation) work toward our advantage and enhancement as human beings and human communities. With evocative language and imagery informed, to some degree, by his Mormon religious experience

and self-consciously centered on the visceral rhythms and ambiguities of human experience, he thus takes up his poetic cross and wills us to follow as he forges a path through variations on these ambiguous realities to the end of preparing us for more lasting psychological and spiritual connections and consolations.

**“An Economy of Grace”:** (Scott) Warren Hatch, *Mapping the Bones of the World* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books), 2007. 96 pp. Winner, 2008 Association for Mormon Letters Poetry Award. Although it might seem contradictory to suggest that this collection (Hatch’s first) of long narrative poems is economical—as if the poet had composed from a frugal rhetorical budget, determined to compress experience into as tight a linguistic vessel as he could craft in order to get the most out of his poet’s mite—the true economy of Hatch’s poems resides not in poetic thrift. Indeed, the poet is very generous with his words, both in terms of rhetorical kindness—his narratives are accessible, marked with compassion for his subject matter and for his readers—and the measured sprawl of his line. Rather, Hatch’s poetic economy manifests in the way he explores the rich narrative resources of his past and of his place (rural, wild, even suburban Utah), meandering through language and experience as he follows wisps of grace from astrology mapped on a lover’s skin to the snap of Grandma’s bed sheets, along the vistas and salt valleys of memory.

**“The Points at which My Loves Fell From Me”:** Philip White, *The Clearing* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press), 2007. 77 pp. Winner, Walt McDonald First-Book Competition, 2007. In this book dedicated to his late father, mother, and wife, White invites us to feel our way around in the soul-space excavated by love and life, loss and death. Framed, then, as elegiac meditations on the loss of persons beloved, White lingers on these moments of departure—what the speaker in the final poem calls “the points at which my loves fell from me” (“Six O’Clock Flight To the Interment,” line 25). But this fall isn’t the end of love, though the poet neither finds nor offers easy consolations or platitudes to pacify the bereaved while making his way through grief to some measure of grace. Indeed, the fact that he leaves *The Clearing* with questions about how we represent and remember those we’ve lost suggests that coming home to love isn’t a simple matter of moving on with life after loss and thus of moving away from loss. Perhaps, instead, it involves learning to see our beloved dead as more than “mere scenery, props” on life’s stage meant to slide into the background, forgotten. Perhaps it means learning to see them as “a world” in themselves, as “a field,” “a struck stage, a slate / wiped clean, a cloud moraine above or below / or within which everything takes place,” including our lives, our love, our memories. Although, paradoxically, “we will never find ourselves in [these places] again” (lines 68–72), partly because in circling back to love through loss we find

ourselves and our surroundings—or rather our perception of our surroundings—changed. And we will never again know those earlier selves, those earlier loves, losses, and landscapes—for better or for worse—the way we once knew them.

**“How We Are Saved”:** Neil Aitken, *The Lost Country of Sight* (Tallahassee, FL: Anhinga Press), 2008. 76 pp. Winner, 2007 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry and 2008 Association for Mormon Letters Poetry Award. Aitken’s first collection begins with a poem—“In the Long Dream of Exile”—that marks the solitary nature of the poet’s vocation. Pointing to this call to wander rhetorical landscapes in pursuit of, among other things, what poet Adrienne Rich calls “the dream of a common language” (the shared signs and tokens through which we might make our way into deeper relationships with one another, with the earth, and with God), the poet shows how this work keeps those who choose it always “on the verge of love” (line 19). As a participant-observer who is both a compassionate part of and who stands apart from various communities (the latter as a function of the solitude necessary for the poet to assimilate and express his insights into human experience), he skirts this verge with longing and lyric precision. He traces rich veins of language and connection through relationships lost, forged, and remembered on his journey through the lost country of sight: the exilic, often neglected place wherein poetic imagination and memory offer new visions of personal and communal histories, presence, and potential.

**“A Little Tomb, but Flashy While It Lasts”:** Kimberly Johnson, *A Metaphorical God* (New York, NY: Persea Books), 2008. 69 pp. Johnson received a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2005. Johnson’s second collection continues the poet’s self-avowed probing at the limits of language as a means to human expression and knowledge. Testing the world as we experience and order it through words from the beginning, she picks up with a poem titled “Epilogue,” whose group of speakers flaunts their poetic acumen, as here:

Before the sackbut, before the virginal  
struck perpendicular chords, our madrigals  
were sublime, loosing harmonies

to unhinge the spheres. (Lines 1–4)

With this poem, she draws readers more deeply into the “little tomb” of poetic language from which she intends to raise us—or at least to make us more aware of—through the Lent-patterned movement of her poems. We follow her from her playing in an ash garden at the outset through a thirty-nine poem psaltery filled with physical and spiritual yearning to a voluptuous rise into the wor(l)d’s “profane loveliness” at the end (“Easter, Looking Westward,” line 10). In

this compressed space framed by the structures of metaphor and sound, Johnson presents us with images, words, and word sequences that flash across the mind and the tongue, that highlight language as a material system through which we act upon the world, and that compel us to lay to rest the easy language (cliches, etc.) through which we too often experience one another and the world.

**“Braced against a Holy Staff”:** Mark Bennion, *Psalm & Selah: A Poetic Journey through The Book of Mormon* (Woodsboro, MD: Parables), 2009. 109 pp. “However much I admire Nephi / I know it is with Sam / I hold the greater kinship” (“Tribute,” lines 1–3). With this declaration of affinity—a genealogy of likeness, Nephi connecting the poet with Sam, and through Sam, the Book of Mormon’s cast of secondary characters—Bennion begins his lyric journey into the heart of Christian theology. As modeled by Christ, it is the act of attending to the one; of extending a hand of compassion and fellowship to the marginalized, silenced Other (as the leprous, the blind, the lame); of assimilating the margins into an ever-expanding center. The poet honors this principle by noticing and giving voice to those characters “braced against a holy staff, / Adjusting their shoes, / Unnoticed” (lines 28–30)—those on the canon’s periphery to whom we don’t pay much, if any, heed: Sam, Lemuel, Zoram, the daughters of Ishmael, Chemish, Abish, Abish’s father, Lamoni’s wife, Lehonti, Gadianton, and more. This revisionary accounting for the Other, offered through Bennion’s layered, dynamic, and aesthetically rich lyric narratives, merits multiple deep readings.

**“Blooms Flourish In Spite of Her”:** Karen Kelsay, *In Spite of Her* (Cheyenne, WY: Flutter Press), 2010. 26 pp. In this latest chapbook of narrative poems, Kelsay explores the relationship between a middle-aged woman and a world that changes and moves on “in spite of her” (“In Spite of Her,” line 11). These poems become acts of mourning mixed with moments of acceptance of and resignation to those things we just can’t change, those losses we’ll never get back. Children grow up, leave an empty nest purred with memories and parental regrets; and no matter how much we want them not to, the seasons change. The world—and our mortality with it—continues its entropic cycle through space. As the title poem suggests, critical language hurled at us when young can shape our self-conceptions for a lifetime. And yet, hope also resides in these elegies: in spite—even because of—the critical words we may carry for a lifetime, we can master skills we once struggled at and become good people. A new generation of kin—whether blood-related or just neighbors looking for a more mature presence in their lives—can give us the chance to try again what we feel we failed at the first time around. We can find redemption from regret. And despite the inevitability of death, there is beauty here, witnessing that God is near, even if a bit “too near” at times for our own comfort (“Autumn Ambivalence,” line 18). ♣

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# Whitney Johnson

INTERVIEW BY ELSIE BOYER | PHOTOS BY ASHLEY PEREZ

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*Whitney Johnson is from Cleveland, Ohio, and graduated from Brigham Young University in 2009 with her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Studio Arts: Painting and Drawing. She studied abroad for oil painting in Florence, Italy at the Santa Reparata International School of Art in 2007 and became inspired by the architecture and cathedrals as well as the paintings and sculptures she saw. She lives in southern California with her husband and makes art based on principles of geometry and uses patterns and symbols to communicate truth.*





**Your work uses a lot of geometric ratios and patterns, as well as repeating shapes or images. What drew you to this particular style?**

I was first introduced to how the laws of geometry are used in art and architecture a few years ago, and it was very exciting for me at the time. I learned how to use eternal laws to compose a space, and I saw how they could help me in finding truth and beauty in my

artwork. Right away the importance of using geometry in my art seemed so obvious to me. I honestly felt like I had finally found something I didn't even realize I was missing. I was also drawn towards using patterns and repeating shapes because their continuity is symbolic of the Infinite, and I felt that by using them along with implementing the laws of geometry, my artwork had a divine purpose and significance.

**Is there a particular piece that you consider your personal best? Why?**

I am my own biggest critic and there are always things I would change about my paintings when I look back on them, so I'm not sure I could call one specific painting my "personal best." If I had to choose one that felt the most fulfilling I think it would be "Words of Isaiah." I worked on this painting off and on for five months



and it ended up completely different from how it started, but I think it was a successful painting in more ways than one, including the color contrast and the use of one-point perspective.

### **What do you want your paintings to convey?**

The concepts behind each of my paintings are very personal to me, but I still think anyone who is ready and willing can benefit from them. I use a lot of symbolism in my work that I use for specific reasons, but my hope is that the viewers can interpret the symbols in their own personal way so that they have a unique, individual experience with the painting. Through their experience, they are led to view a concept differently and feel enlightened as they see things in their life more clearly, or understand a concept more fully.

### **In your blog post on Friday, October 3rd, 2009, you shared an email from your mother regarding your artistic talent as a child. In that post you mentioned that the professor told you—rather emphatically—that there is no such thing as a part-time artist. When did you begin to define yourself as an artist?**

My freshman year of high school I received some positive feedback from my art teacher and immediately felt that this was something I should pursue. My parents were very supportive and their encouragement gave me the confidence to continue working and improving in art.

All my work came to fruition my senior year when I set up a booth (about 6x8 feet large) at the annual student art show at my high school (with all the other participating seniors) and received the first place award. It was exciting and I think this was the turning point for me when I realized that I had been blessed with a talent and desire to do art and that I should be using these things to improve the lives of others.

### **Since that time, have you ever rethought your childhood and seen**

### **how your youthful interests then have led you to where you are now?**

I think I loved drawing and coloring just as much as any other small child, and I also loved all the colors and pictures I saw in children's books. In second grade I remember getting really into writing short stories and illustrating them like children's books. That was really fun for me and at the time my parents thought it was because I loved to write, but I'm realizing now that it was probably because I was looking for a way to visually communicate

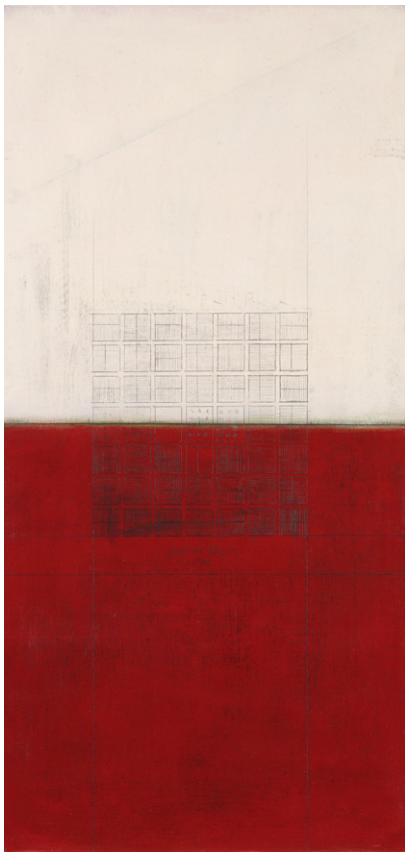
something and it was the only way I knew how.

I was also raised in a very mathematically minded household, and my dad would always quote Plato: "Geometry will draw the soul towards truth." He would substitute the word "geometry" with "mathematics," but it was still the same idea and I always loved when he would say it because I knew he believed it. Truth was something I felt was attainable and I think having that kind of upbringing and exposure prepared me to feel that connection









with how geometry can be used in art to find truth.

**How have you been able to balance being a wife and an artist?**

The challenge for me has been in finding a way to do art while at the same time balancing the responsibilities of everyday life like having a job, exercising, keeping an apartment clean, fulfilling church and spiritual responsibilities, and spending time with my husband. It's been difficult and I am constantly switching around my routines in order to fit in all the things I'd like to accomplish. The most important thing for me to remember is to be flexible but also stay very committed. Hopefully I can prepare now so that I can be ready to maintain my studio practice when the children come.

**What is your artistic process? For example, could you explain the process you went through to create "Pattern in All Things," the theme piece you used for your BFA exhibit?**

My process usually starts with my reading, seeing, or hearing something that catches my attention—something that enlightens my mind or something I feel an immediate connection with. Sometimes it is a single word or phrase, a color, or a concept that I feel is personal and significant. From that point I do some research to better understand what it is that I want to communicate, and I usually start on the painting right away. I should probably be better at sketching out my ideas, but my experience has been that once I start, the painting has a mind of its own and things always turn out differently than I expected, which at times is frustrating but can also be very exciting.

My painting "Pattern In All Things" was actually one of the last pieces I finished for my BFA exhibit. I had seen a similar image elsewhere that had the grid composition, and I was fascinated that each individual square could be a painting of its own, but that together they were unified in

one purpose. I used a variety of patterns and symbols (as seen in the other paintings from that body of work) and was able to experiment with color and scale.

**What did it feel like to sell your first painting?**

It was a surprise and I definitely was not expecting to sell as many as I did. It was a huge blessing and I am still so grateful for the exposure I had at that time. My parents were in town when I sold my first paintings, and my dad actually came with me to meet those who were interested in buying my work. My favorite part about the whole experience was the conversations I had with the people about what the painting meant for them and their connection with the piece.

**Could you explain some more of the symbolism you have in one of your more recent paintings such as "Words of Isaiah" or "Eternities on my Mind"?**

In “Words of Isaiah” I used one-point perspective to suggest the feeling or idea of forward and upward movement, the circle and square which are symbols for heaven and earth, respectively, and the colors are also used as symbols to illustrate the text I included from Isaiah 53:5.

“Eternities on My Mind” is centered around the circle as a symbol for eternity and continual progression, and color symbolism in this painting is also important.

#### **What influence did Wulf Barsch have on you during your time at BYU?**

Wulf was my program advisor in the Visual Arts program at BYU and he definitely has influenced the way I think about art and how I make art. What I appreciated most was that he never told me *what* to paint. That seemed to be a question I had for a few semesters while I went through the art program at

BYU. Some professors would give suggestions or try to lead me in the right direction, but Wulf always just asked the question, “What are you after?” The question itself wasn’t really that clear to me at that time and maybe it still isn’t now, but at least it got me thinking about what my purpose was as an artist and I started asking myself why I am making art and what difference I could make with my artwork. I also think his artwork is beautiful and very thought-provoking. He was really inspiring and taught us to always ask questions and continue learning.

#### **Were there any other influential professors or colleagues during your time at BYU?**

I love Wayne Kimball’s lithograph prints, and Sunny Belliston was another professor of mine whose work I love and admire. Her artwork is beautiful and I love the different textures

and compositions in her pieces, as well as the variety in materials she uses. Laura Hawkins and Lisa Crosby were two students who graduated before me, but I admired both of them for their work, specifically their choice of color and the compositions in their paintings.

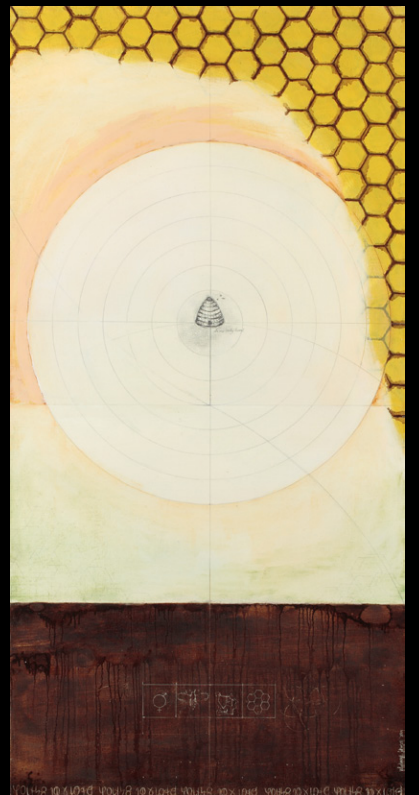
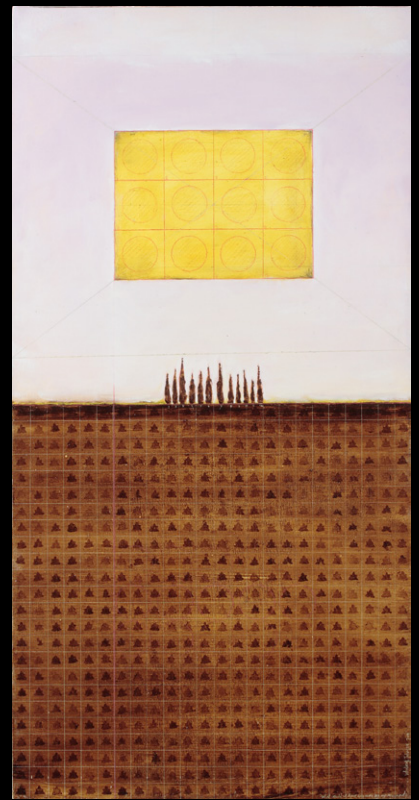
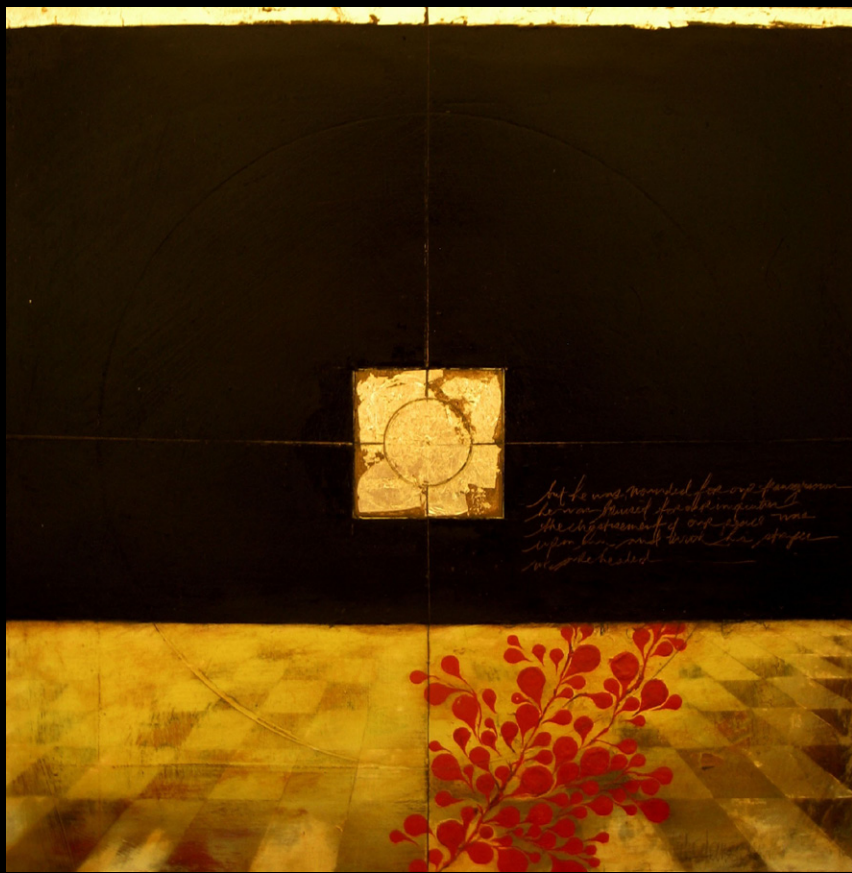
#### **How has your faith and knowledge of the gospel influenced your work?**

A week or two before I graduated from BYU, I asked Wulf for one piece of advice on how I could be a successful artist. His answer was, “Understand your religion.” I expected him to say something about how much work it would take and how many hours I would need to spend on my art, but the truthfulness of this simple statement has become clear to me.

Having a knowledge and testimony of the gospel, of where I came from, and of my purpose here has made







all the difference in how I view my responsibility as an artist. It also influences the topics and concepts I choose to depict, and I think any artist would benefit from having a spiritual connection to something.

### What other artists or paintings have inspired you?

I seem to find a new “favorite artist” every week, but the ones that continue to inspire me no matter how many times I look at their work are Richard Diebenkorn, Marica Myers, Wini Brewer, and Richard Gate. Each time I look at their work I always learn something, and I love seeing how they use color and how they divide the space.

### What was it like when you had your first show?

It was a very rewarding experience to have a solo show and I can't wait for my next one! It was obviously very stressful leading up to it—just the pressure of having everything completed on time and at the quality I wanted it to be. Some paintings were still wet when I hung them but I finished on time. I really enjoyed preparing a body of work for a show and I think it helped me learn and grow as an artist to follow a common theme for each painting. I felt that I really developed my personal style as an artist as a result of preparing for that show.

### This year you've had pieces in two different shows: “Order of Creation” in *Revisiting Beauty* at the Orange County Center for Contemporary Art in Santa Ana, California, and “Words of Isaiah” in *Fine Art & Faith* at the White Stone Gallery in Philadelphia. What was the experience like with those shows?

It was a blessing to be accepted into both of those shows and I was so grateful for the opportunity to exhibit my work with other artists. I believe strongly in the purposes of each of those shows and felt that my purpose as an artist was in line with each of the themes for those exhibits. I was unable to see the Philadelphia exhibit, but I



did get to attend the opening reception for the exhibit here in California. It was a great experience and I was again grateful to be included in both exhibits.

### I noticed that you had the opportunity to study in Italy. How did your time there influence your art?

The things I remember most about Italy out of all the things I saw were the cathedrals and stained glass rose windows. The significance and symbolism in the stained glass and cathedral architecture is something I've been fascinated with for a long time now. They were beautiful, and even though the cathedrals were sometimes a little gaudy and overly ornate, I felt that whoever designed or built them was worshipping the best way he knew how, and that really left an impression on me.

### Are there any particular art pieces you saw while you were in Italy that made an impression?

We saw so much art but I definitely had my favorites. One of my all-time favorite pieces of art is Michelangelo's *Pieta*, which I saw while I was in Rome at St. Peter's Basilica. It really is a beautiful sculpture in technique and also in the scene it represents. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was exciting to see, and there was a John Singer Sargent exhibit in Venice which I also really loved. Lastly, the Madonna paintings with all the gold leaf were beautiful. In general, I just loved all the figure sculptures.

### On your website, your statement says, “Only through abstraction am I able to achieve my true purpose, which is to find truth and beauty on a universal level, and achieve an understanding that is beyond our own reality—an understanding from a different place and time that we once knew and which we will yet arrive.” Could you expound on this?

I've thought a lot about why I make abstract art, and I've realized that spiritual concepts and spiritual experiences are oftentimes communicated to us through abstract ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Sometimes I use representational symbols in my paintings, but for the most part my work is abstract and conveys a degree of mysticism.

Without being too assumptive, the symbols and concepts I use in my work encourage the viewer to think on a more spiritual level, which has the possibility to give the individual a glimpse of a “nobler sphere” and reach a moment of enlightenment. Every aspect of my paintings is executed with purpose and is placed there for a reason—to add to the overarching spiritual concept of the painting and testify of a truth.

### How have you been able to balance being LDS and being an artist?

Being LDS and being an artist are so interconnected in my life that I could never see myself being one without the other. I've come to understand my purpose as an artist, which is to share beauty, light, and truth with others, which is only possible for me to do because I am LDS.

### How do you see your art helping build the kingdom?

Right now I think my main audience is LDS, but my hope is that I will get more exposure and that I will be able to reach a non-LDS audience as well. All those who are willing can understand and benefit from the concepts I use in my paintings, and hopefully others will want to learn more about what it is that motivates me to create these images. 🙏





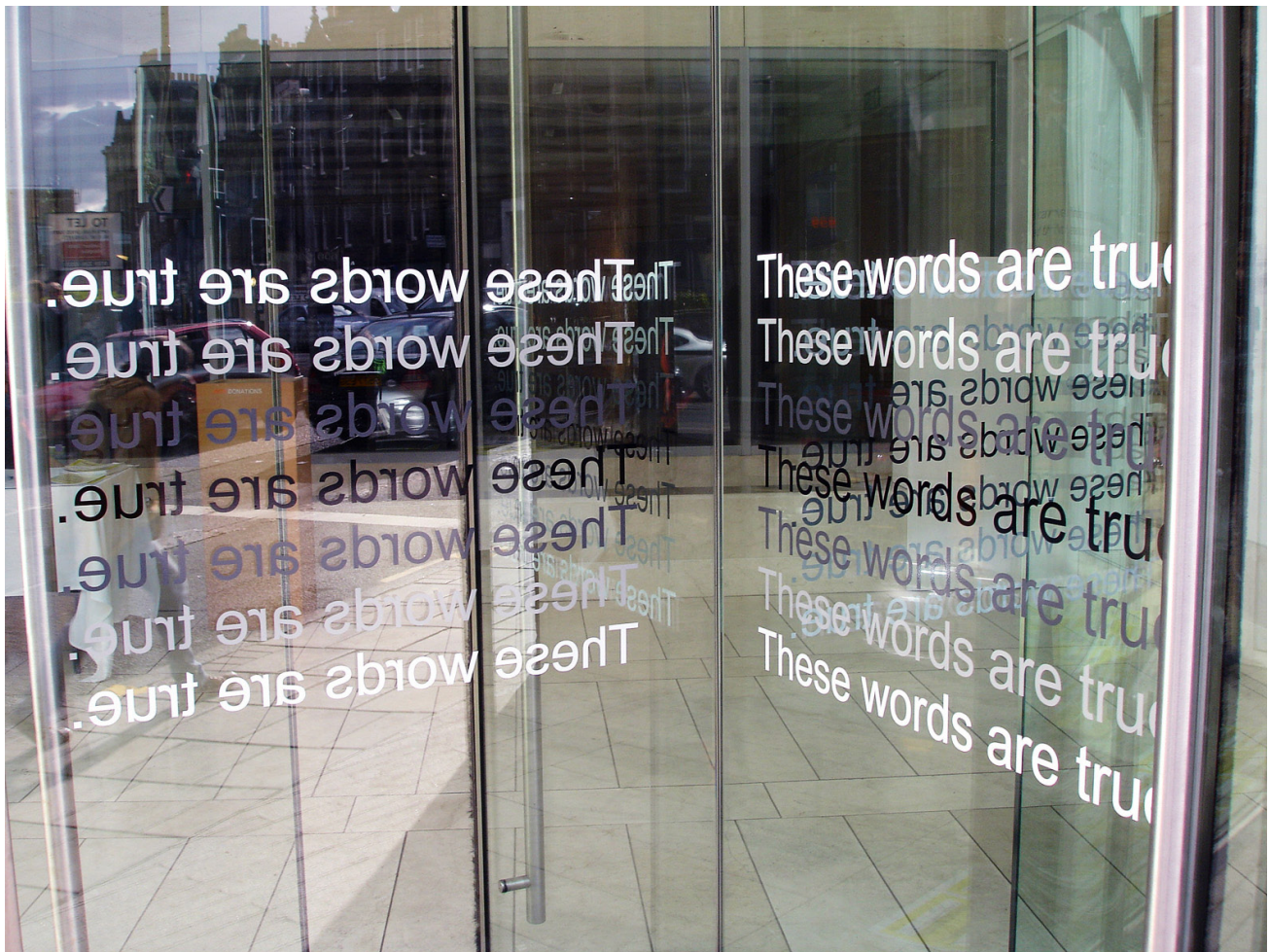


# Corey Strange

INTERVIEW BY **JON OGDEN** | PHOTOS COURTESY **COREY STRANGE**  
WEB: [COREYBSTRANGE.COM](http://COREYBSTRANGE.COM)

*Corey Strange creates abstract art using a variety of items, including circles and barcodes. He teaches at Southern Utah University.*





#### How did you get started with art?

Academically, it wasn't until I was nineteen and graduating high school. It was in the summer of 1996 that I had my first art class at a local community college in Southern California. As with all my formal education, learning art was a matter of being exposed to other artists and having the time to focus on personal expression. Never in all my student years did a teacher say, "This is how you mix paint. These are the elements of good design. This is a better way to get your proportions right."

Community college lasted for a year before I got sidetracked and discouraged. In August of 2001 I decided to go to art school and commit to a full-time art education. The pain of not making art had finally exceeded the fear of making it. It was time to see what I was really made of.

Informally, I began my art career as soon as I could hold a crayon. At the advice of a friend from church my parents had me tested as a gifted child at two years old. Ironically, at least part of the test was drawing circles which is now the major thrust of my work.

#### What led you to focus on conceptual art?

I wouldn't say that I'm a conceptual artist or what I do is conceptual. The art I make happens to have a heavy dose of concept behind each piece but the visuals don't take a back seat to it. The visuals are designed to help guide the viewer to the meaning. Sometimes that's very specific, like when I use black against white, but other times—when I use colors, for example—the reference may be more subjective in its interpretation. It's an approach that

assumes a lot of responsibility for the audience's participation and I have to accept that the work is generally obscure to most people. That's why I try to do a lot of talking about the work when I have a chance. The work then becomes a bridge for mutual education and discussion between the public and me.

When I first started my undergrad program, I was stuck somewhere between figure and abstraction. After feeling super depressed at not being able to hold a candle to other kids' figures, I realized that making art is about making your own rules. Once I made the game my own, I always gravitated towards abstraction of one kind or another. Everything I put out there is an authentic extension of myself and generally orbits themes of spirituality. All of my work is an ever-expanding circle. Everything is

connected in some way. In a big picture, it's the story of *all* life, light and truth. Call it conceptual if you want. It's all just a big self-portrait, an externalized manifestation of a spiritual state of being.

#### What is the connection between your work and the abstract symbols we see in and on temples?

My aunt saw one of my t-shirts with a white circle on the front. When I told her it was my art she said, "Well it's just a circle! I could do *that!*" She's right, but that's not the point. Can you think about a circle? Can you *really* think about it?

Go to the Salt Lake Temple. Circles are everywhere! Absolutely everywhere. Why? Decoration? Sure. *Only* decoration? No. The Lord works on multiple levels whereas we tend to see things one-dimensionally. A circle in an LDS temple means a lot of things, which is my point. A circle on a t-shirt may not have the same reading at first, but to me, whether on the shirt or on the temple, a circle means the same thing and not the same thing at the same time.

The work I make uses symbolic everything. Shapes, colors, context, etc., are all conceived and critiqued by me using symbolic references. In that way, I'm bringing the temple into the outside world. The work, like the temple, is a way of bridging the divine with our "everyday" lives. This is what God does with us all the time. He gives us symbols such as the sacrament or temple garments that are reminders of a transcendent truth in order to bring heaven down to earth and elevate earth up to heaven. This is the meaning of the Star of David with its two opposing triangles. The overlapping area is where Saints reside—between natural and spiritual man, between heaven and earth.

#### What power does art have?

The power of any art is threefold. First, it has the capability to transmit ideas and feelings straight into our spirits and thereby alter our consciousness.

This happens on any scale you can imagine: individual, community of various sizes, nationally, and the world at large. This is the second part: its unifying power via the collective human experience. The third part of its power lies in the fact that after it has united the hearts and minds (in that order) of the people, they can then be steered according to the wishes of whoever is in power.

This power of art is always neutral. Its fruits depend on the purposes of whoever is doing the steering. Power derived from and directed by arts' unifying force was wielded by the Nazis and by the Latter-day Saints.

Think of pioneers pulling hand-carts into the unknown, singing, "Come, come, ye Saints, no toil nor labor fear," and how those songs united and solidified them then. Think of singing those same refrains in one of our General Conference sessions, knowing that Saints all over the world are singing those same sweet words at the exact same time. And not only we who are seen but imagine all those who are unseen singing right along with us. Our hearts become welded to theirs through this shared experience made possible by art. From this connection, the Lord guides and directs His work with love on both sides of the veil. "If ye are not one, ye are not mine."

I must also warn that the most powerful form of mind and behavioral control is the kind where the one being controlled is ignorant of it. Then they can be used and not even resist if they ever had a mind to. The question of beauty is knowing what is really behind the mask. Those alluring aesthetics may be hiding a subtle deception or expressing a divine light. What is the message (the seed) and what are its unforeseen or unintended consequences (the fruit)? Remember that Christ himself had "no beauty that we should desire him." A spoonful of sugar makes both the medicine *and* the poison go down.

#### What do you want your audience to experience when they see your art?

That's an easy one! A profound paradigm shift in every possible way, mostly toward a greater sense of God in every thing and situation.

A good illustration of my ideal situation comes from when I was living in New York City. I was transporting a piece of artwork on the subway. The image was red text saying "I DON'T KNOW." Within the phrase some of the letters are printed half-tone so they dissolve and you can also read "I DO NOW." A young lady was sitting across from me and out of my periphery, I could see she was studying the piece very intently. This went along for a





Small text on the right wall, possibly a poster or notice, partially visible.



Andrew







couple stops but I didn't say anything. I wanted to see if she would have the experience. All of a sudden she clapped her hands and almost shouted, "I got it!" Quickly I turned to face her and she was beaming, like she was really enlightened. She was lighting up right there on the subway! She was practically giddy as she explained to me what she was seeing in my piece. Turns out she's a yoga instructor, which is right up my alley. She brought up yin and yang and eternal cycles, knowledge leading to a greater understanding of our ignorance leading to epiphanies, and so on. It was really beautiful and we were elated to be sharing such a beautiful moment together. She loved it so much I just gave her the piece right there.

What did I need money for when this person had given me the greatest experience an artist can have? That *zap! pow!* connection is rare. It's an

ideal but it's what I hope for, in some way, every time.

#### What place does your art have in Mormon culture?

I think a very important place. The symbolism I use can be used to illuminate gospel principles in general and the temple and scriptures more specifically. Metaphors and symbols are the universal visual language but even as rich as our LDS heritage is in symbolism, we are largely ignorant to its meaning, implication and *application* in our lives. To that end, I think my work is very applicable in a metaphysical sense to unite people together and move the cause of truth and liberty.

In a broader scope, I also think part of my place is to teach people how to think abstractly in order to see more of the glory of God in "everyday life". As we think more broadly, our net is cast

wider and can pull in more light and truth. As we study to become like God, shouldn't we begin to see the world in this way? The universe is the greatest textbook ever created. Mormons should be at the forefront of all godly pursuits. President Taylor and Kimball have said that we will be. In order to get to that place, we as a people will need a massive paradigm shift.

I see myself and my art as building bridges to unite the world with the church and vice versa. We are unified in many of the negative vices the world has to offer but we too often deny the wisdom and blessings the rest of the world cherishes. So it's my attempt to unify and elevate all people in the world by sharing the best of what the other has to offer through my art, life and education practices.

#### How has the gospel influenced your work?





Everything I learn in life, I funnel through the gospel filter, and usually that expresses itself in artwork. It's a great way to externalize and practice the things I learn. Other artists will attest that their work is also a great way to learn about the gospel. I find that God often teaches me profound truths through my own artmaking processes. Basically, there is no other influence on my work greater than God.

**Some of your pieces (especially the barcode pieces) make specific truth statements. How have people reacted to this?**

The barcode that showed at the St. George Art Museum had lots of great responses on the guest register. The domino effect of the some bars toppling over against the adjacent ones had a real impact on people. I think it illustrated what we're all feeling at the moment; that sort of breathless

anticipation of waiting for the ball to drop. You can see the beginnings of its demise coming towards the pristine yet delicately balanced economics further down the line. It was an ominous and foreboding kind of barcode. Generally, I don't like doom-and-gloom, but under the circumstances, I think it's appropriate. I was just happy that people resonated with it.

**Other pieces are more abstract, such as the circles. Do you view both projects (specific vs. abstract) as one and the same, or do you see them as two separate projects? How are they related?**

Perhaps it's not that I see them as two separate projects so much as two different working styles... but you could also say they are both about the same issues, in a way—uniting to defend truth and liberty.

The more specific works using barcodes, red flags, and text make

statements that are persuasive in nature. They are designed with a very particular outlook on our current state of affairs with a very definite hope that people will see things a certain way through the artwork and decide to make a stand against evil.

The circles are another way of persuading people to unite to fight for what's good, but it's more of an "invite and entice" approach rather than "repent or die." This shift towards a softer sell happened when I understood that liberty's foundation is virtue, and virtue, in its highest degree, cannot be obtained without faith in Christ. So in order to pursue the defense of liberty I am fighting the battle for virtue... with circles.

I know it's funny when put like that, but you have to understand that the circles mean for me, among other things, a representation of the good news of Jesus Christ and all good

things surrounding Him. So the tone has changed from “This is bad. This should stop,” to “This is good. We need more of this. This is what we should be focusing on.” Joseph Smith translated the word “Mormon” as “more good.” The Spirit has taught me that it’s not just about weeding out the bad, but about replacing those bad things with more and more goodness. There’s a time to call for repentance, but the standard operating procedure is to uplift and inspire. That’s “Mormon.”

### **How was your experience studying in Scotland? Would you recommend the experience to other artists?**

It was a very, very difficult experience for a lot of reasons. Basically, all my romantic expectations were flushed away within a few days. No studio, no classes, no critiques, no facilities to speak of, no visa, no money to live on or make work, and the list goes on.

So I couldn’t recommend the experience per se, but for me, it was just what I needed. To be humbled and impoverished with only a local bishop and ward for support was the only way that I could get reactivated in the Church. In the space of about two weeks I went from eight years of complete inactivity and opposition to the Church to being absolutely on fire for the Lord and his gospel. That *is* an experience I will highly and enthusiastically recommend!

### **Tell us about your “Infinite Hymn” piece at the St. George Art Academy.**

That piece came about at the request of the wonderful women at the St. George Art Academy. This was the first show in their new gallery space in downtown St. George.

Since they use their gallery as an educational space for classes, it was the perfect opportunity to combine my work with the educational angle that has become so integral for me since 2006. They wanted a piece that was contemporary and that could be in process in order to facilitate discussion with students and the general

public. They wanted something different than the redrock/blue sky that dominate southern Utah galleries.

Besides that foundation, the piece (for me) is about micro and macro processes of the universe. You might say it’s derived from string theory in some ways and music theory in others. Tones and rhythms falling together, apart, together again. It is fundamentally the music and dance of creation. I think of the dots as both musical notes and markings of a dance pattern. There was a high degree of math involved which people picked up on. There’s also the playful aspect to it. So many people said it would look great in their kid’s playroom. How’s that for conceptual art?

### **Tell us about “Upside Down,” your barcode artwork at the St. George Art Museum.**

“Upside Down” was a collaboration I did with Kathy Cieslewicz, the curator at Dixie State College. She presented me with the opportunity to work together and have a beautiful space at the museum back in 2009. She said at the first that she wanted one of my barcodes in the exhibit since the installation was addressing the country’s economic distress.

“Upside down” is the phrase used when someone owes more on their house than it’s worth. In a simplistic sense, the backlash from that economic/housing crisis is the issue that kicked off our economic meltdown today. I wanted to address that idea but wasn’t sure how. By sheer providence, I was inspired halfway through the bar installation to make the right side of the code start crumbling and toppling into the left side like a line of dominos. The impact of seeing that ripple effect was quite moving. It really captured the impending doom sensation that seems to be growing in the country and the world.

### **Why barcodes?**

In some ways, they are the perfect ready-made abstraction in our post-modern world. At first they were an

exercise in self-referential art (they were masking tape barcodes in the form of their own barcodes). That was a fun little circle and a difficult thing to pull off in its purity. Then a friend told me that you can create your own custom barcodes, so I turned them into self-portraits using my birth year, month, day, hour and minute.

Abstract self-portraits that are really objective but in a different language is another fun twist. Since then I found a site that will create custom barcodes in numeric and alpha code, so I started taking famous or infamous quotes and turned them into barcodes. Each one says something specific that relates to the visual twist I’m putting it.

Barcodes also have such a powerful connection to dehumanizing practices—making everyone the same, mark of the Beast, New World Order, etc. They’re such a loaded image and beautiful in their minimalist sensibilities. Their connotation does a lot of the work for me, which makes the work more effective, I think.

### **What tools do you use to make your pieces?**

Oh man, I’m all over the place! The typical painting supplies, lots and lots of sticky things like masking tape, pin striping tape of various sizes, office stickers and sign vinyl. A self-leveling laser level and this special compass which can make circles as large as you want to go have been absolutely indispensable. That’s the standard list for any project these days.

In addition to those tools I throw myself a curve ball and bust out the phone video camera and sound recorder, Microsoft Word’s drawing tools and the ever-handy Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator.

### **Any words of advice for other artists?**

To anyone thinking of pursuing an art school education: Spend as much time at the school as possible and ask yourself a lot of hard questions about everything from living fiscally provident to what the local ward is like. Will your



weaknesses be easily preyed upon at school? Art schools have a reputation for a very good reason. Will you get to make the art you want to? Are their resources able to meet your creative capabilities? Will you be challenged? Will you get to go home enough so you don't get depressed? Will you have a good spiritual support network? Is your testimony strong enough to stand alone in such an opposing peer group? If not, what can you do to bolster it so you can stand up to opposition? What is on your priority list for school? Are spiritual considerations on the top of that list? It is better for a man or woman to enter into the kingdom halt, maimed, blind, and without a higher art education than to lose their soul in the process.

As a married man in Zion, I understand the frustration of being an artist and the frustration that comes

of trying to find work in this economy, finding work in crummy jobs that suck your will to live and leave you unfulfilled, and the gut-wrenching emotional wrestling match of negotiating your internal drive to both make art and fulfill your command to support your family. It's tough, but every artist-father family I know will tell you amazing stories of how the Lord provides for his children as they are living their missions in life.

Whatever seed he has planted in your heart to do, he will provide a way for you to live it out. "I know that the Lord giveth no command unto the children of men save he shall prepare a way to accomplish his command." That desire is how you will serve the world and find joy in your labors in this life. I had to work a lot of jobs I didn't want to and felt like a failure, but it was all part of my curriculum to get me

together with the one woman in my life who believed that God would take care of us if we lived on faith and followed his commands.

Don't wait to have children until the finances are "okay." I was unemployed for eight months when we decided to have kids. After we dedicated ourselves in prayer, my wife and I stood up and less than a minute later I got a call asking me to teach at Southern Utah University. We have several other friends with similar stories.

I wouldn't dream of telling you what to do with your artmaking pursuits, but *please* don't compromise your desires to make "impractical" art that "won't sell" to make art that is more sensible and salable. Think of Isaiah: "Why do you sell yourself for that which is of no worth?" and Lehi: "If ye keep my commandments ye will prosper in the land." 🙏



# April Meservy

INTERVIEW BY JENNIFER MCDANIEL | PHOTOS COURTESY APRIL MESERVY  
WEB: APRILMESERVY.COM

*April Meservy is an acclaimed indie singer/songwriter. She recently took a break from her busy schedule to tell Mormon Artist about her summer 2010 Western States Indie Tour, her latest CD Somewhere Between Sunsets, and her life as an LDS musician.*

### Describe your musical style.

Indie acoustic singer-songwriter. I've heard a lot of different descriptions and some that perhaps fit best are contemporary pop-folk/inspirational, acoustic pop/rock, or acid metal.

Okay, I'm kidding about the metal thing.

People often put me in the same basic genres as Sara Bareilles, Ingrid Michaelson, Missy Higgins, Colbie Callait, Nichole Nordeman, Eva Cassidy, Imogen Heap, or Norah Jones. I like them all so I'm okay with that.

### What makes you unique as an artist?

I have experienced my own share of joys, hard times, hopes, dreams, hurts, and faith, so that is reflected in my music, and I think that is a big part of what makes me unique as an artist. We each have a different background that shapes who we are. Sometimes I have wondered if I haven't seen more than is necessary for someone of my age, but I am grateful that the Lord knows what I can handle. I believe those things are much of what has made me who I am.

### How do you find inspiration for your songs?

I write from experiences in my own life and from what I see around me. Nature often inspires me. People around me inspire me. The gospel inspires me.

### Tell us about your new CD. What inspired the album name, *Somewhere Between Sunsets*?

I think certain moments in our lives stand out more to us than others for a reason. A lot can happen in that amazing space of time from one sunset to the next. For whatever reason, certain moments do stand out as time moves forward—as it always does. That's part of what inspired the title. I thought of it years ago, actually, and even used it on a small EP (Extended Play) when I started writing. It seemed to fit then and it really seemed to fit now, so I changed the CD's title from what I was going to call it to *Somewhere Between Sunsets*.

### What was it like producing this CD?

Producing it was a real challenge, but very worthwhile. I had a few different goals. For one, each song came in a different way and time and I wanted to give each song an authentic voice that reflected the way I heard and felt it come. This was very important to me. Sometimes songs came at important crossroads in my life and other times just as life was moving on from day to day.

Another goal was to have the CD recorded in the best way I knew how. I wanted the sonic quality to be such that it could stand up against other records produced on major label budgets (while producing it on our smaller indie label budget).

I feel we've done that. We used some of the best musicians, arrangers, engineers, and mastering guys I know of. For instance, I was super excited to have Sam Cardon arrange some strings for this record. He's a genius and intuitively just knew what to add to help the songs (like "More of Less," for instance) speak. Everything he did just further gave expression to the feeling I had hoped to convey in that song. Ted Hinckley and Sam Cardon arranged it so that several of the tracks could have the City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra play on them, and wow! I was blown away with the results.

Another dream for me was having Doug Sax agree to master the record. Doug is a legendary (not to mention Grammy award-winning) mastering artist, and it was a real treat to have him. He added a lot.

### Does *Somewhere Between Sunsets* have a theme?

The theme really is a patchwork of various moments in time. Like snapshots on a camera—using the same camera to keep it cohesive, but using different lenses for different lightings, different places, different days and moments and colors. I wanted it to be authentic to life's vicissitudes.

### Can you tell us a bit about a few of your songs?

"Truth Speak" for me is about the way the Spirit is always speaking and it's my choice how much I listen and allow it to teach me, despite the distracting, often busy life that tugs at me.

"And I'll Sleep" came at a time when I was having trouble sleeping because of some things that were on my mind. The Lord sent me comfort in a really powerful and unexpected way and this song is a result of that.

"Looks Like Change" came from a journal entry in the fall when I felt inspired by the beauty of the transition around me. It made me want to embrace the changes that come and see life as an adventure. If I were to sum up that song, it would be with this idea: Change is opportunity for growth. It can be difficult. It can be beautiful. Many times it's both.

Some songs on this album, like "Unbroken" and "Not Going Under," were inspired by the experience of friends and family.

### What has it been like being on tour this year?

This is my first official tour, and it's actually two and a half months long (five states). It's a 2010 U.S. western states tour. I am touring with another artist from L.A., MTV *Duets* winner Nikki Forova.

When we set out for the first leg of the tour—three weeks in California—in early July, I knew it would be a wonderful experience, but I honestly had no idea how memorable it would be. Oh, man—the people we meet! From city to city we find ourselves surrounded by many beautiful and fascinating people.

That's what makes it really unforgettable—when my life intersects with another person's in a meaningful way. When I can, for a moment, share the same space with someone and feel that we each are somehow lifted and are more than we were alone. That is when I feel most at home.

Right now we are playing the Utah concert dates (Moab, St. George, Utah County, etc.) and then it's on to Idaho and Arizona. Our tour ends











September 18<sup>th</sup>, but we have another couple tours in mind for later this year or early 2011, and we are already starting to book, so that's exciting for us.

### **You've had many collaborating experiences. What have you learned from working with other artists?**

There is something magical about working with other artists and writers. Each writer has their own dreams, passions, and life experiences, so every writer wears their heart a little differently on their sleeve. It's really rewarding to be a part of helping with the creation of someone else's dream. I learn from others' hopes, frustrations, happiness, and heartaches. It helps me have a broader perspective of the world around me.

### **You've been the recipient of several awards, have performed for many good causes, and have had the opportunity to perform in big events all over the world, including the 2002 Olympics. What are some moments that were particularly special for you?**

I would have to say being involved in concerts and events affiliated with a non-profit called USeb (United Survivors of Epidermolysis Bullosa) has been particularly special to me.

One of my best friends, Jamie Hartley Gibson, has the rare skin disease epidermolysis bullosa (EB), and she started USeb a couple of years ago. For years I have watched her work her heart out to help spread awareness and also raise money to help those with EB.

She puts together concerts and even holds a weeklong camp where people from all over the world with EB come together to learn new skills and enjoy being together. It's taken her a lot of work. My experience helping out at some of these events has been meaningful to me because it reminds me how much I have and how many beautiful souls surround me.

August 9–14 was USeb camp week, and for several days I was able to mentor a small group of my EB friends in some songwriting sessions. I had the

privilege of putting lyrics they wrote to music. I was really blown away by the depth of their songs and how well they were able to write from their hearts. We actually went into the studio to record some of these songs, and it was an incredibly special thing for me.

Another thing I'm excited about is to finish up the EP I've been producing for Jamie. It will be finished by November. Jamie has an angel's voice and heart, and I think you can feel and hear that in her music in an almost tangible way.

### **What are your career goals?**

I want to continue to write music and perform, as well as produce other people's music. It is important to me to help other people create and achieve the dream and vision they have, capturing it on a sonic canvas. It really energizes and inspires me.

Also, my heart has always felt drawn toward jazz and blues, and so I want to continue to sing with jazz combos as I have been. People often mention that they can hear that influence of jazz and blues in my music. I like that.

### **What do you enjoy the most about being a singer-songwriter? What do you enjoy the least?**

I enjoy most: talking to or hearing how people have felt touched by different songs.

I enjoy least: the long hours. Eighteen-hour days are not exactly my cup of tea; at least, not for any extended period of time. Around the time we were finishing up the record it was pretty rough, sleep-wise.

### **What advice would you have for an LDS artist interested in a career in music?**

Give the best you have and don't worry about what other people are and aren't doing, or what they are and aren't saying. Don't be afraid. We each have different things to share and learn. Give, and have faith that God will help you be where it is that He needs you. I believe that what matters most to God

is that we are giving with an honest heart and regularly check in with Him on how to use and develop our gifts. No one is a better career counselor than He is. He may not always choose certain things for us, but He will always give us good instruction and often can help us recognize paths or ideas we didn't recognize before. There are so many different ways to serve through music.

### **How does the gospel affect you as an artist?**

It is the entire framework and lens through which I view the world. Every hope, joy, frustration, fear, and loss is all interpreted through the lens of a believer. The gospel brings things more into focus for me. My perspective is enhanced. Colors and life become more vibrant and meaningful to me because I know that God does exist. He loves me. He is the reason I sing and write.

### **How do you see your work building the kingdom?**

I believe that as I write and record music that is honest and that reflects truth, soul, and honesty, then the Lord can use that to bless others' lives.

I think I often learn gospel truths more quickly and deeply through music. I feel the Lord's love through music and it makes it easier to share that love with others.

Recently someone told me that a song I had recorded was the reason their son knew it was time for him to go on a mission. I just about fell over with joy. That meant the world to me because I pray often that the Lord will take the music I am doing and use it in a way that helps move His purposes forward.

### **Anything else you want to say?**

CDs are available for order on my website, and they can also be found at Deseret Book and Seagull Book. Digital downloads are available on my website, iTunes, and pretty much anywhere else that online music is sold. 🎧

# Mountain Blue

## Singing Towards the Heavens

ARTICLE BY DAVID LAYTON | PHOTOS COURTESY MOUNTAIN BLUE

WEB: [MOUNTAINBLUEHARMONY.COM](http://MOUNTAINBLUEHARMONY.COM)





*This unique a cappella group, formerly known as Blue Cheese, sprung up on BYU campus in 2003.*

## **Making it Unique**

“How many bluegrass, a cappella, southern gospel, LDS groups do you know of in the West?” asks Todd Horne.

“Or anywhere?” adds Julia Sanders, laughing.

This is Mountain Blue, a Utah-based a cappella group born in the heart of the Rocky Mountains. The four-part ensemble consists of Drew Norton at tenor, Todd Horne at baritone, Spencer Whitham at bass, and Julia Sanders at alto. With a blend of genres that creates intricate harmonies with a gospel message, these four musicians have established themselves as one of Utah’s premier and most unique a cappella groups.

Back in the fall of 2003, Adam Monteith and Karen Magleby, two choir directors at BYU, were “the original instigators of the idea of this group, and they had originally done it as a joke,” says Todd. “There were all these pop groups auditioning for the annual A Cappella Jam at BYU, and there was no bluegrass out there because you usually only hear that with instruments—mandolin, banjo, and stuff. Karen had had a bluegrass band down in Texas, and she’d always wanted to name it ‘Blue Cheese,’ and they would never let her. She came up here and kind of threw the idea at us.” Standing out in the quad in Brigham Square, Adam and Karen pulled Todd aside after a rehearsal and asked if he could sing bluegrass. “Adam pulled out some sheet music from Blue Highway called ‘Some Day.’ I sightread it on the spot.” Todd must have done a good job, because he says the other fellows trying to get in the group “were let off the hook,” and Todd snagged the baritone position. “I was fortunate to





get in when the group was just beginning,” says Todd. “That’s pretty much the roots of it. It started right here in Brigham Square.”

Blue Cheese continued to grow, performing in several A Cappella Jams at BYU, as well as at firesides, dances, and other venues around Utah. They have since branched out, opening for A Cappellastock in Ogden (2009), and they will be performing at venues on the East Coast in October of 2010. The group released their first two CDs (*Gospel Train* in 2005 and *Roll Back the Stone* in 2007) as Blue Cheese, and a third album (*Mountain Blue A Cappella*) as Mountain Blue in 2008.

Over the years, Mountain Blue has had several members, each bringing a unique vocal quality to the group. “Every single member is building upon the shoulders of the former members,” says Todd. “Everyone’s added a significant part to this group. It’s not about us—it’s not about the members. It’s about how we worship the Savior and it’s about how we honor and adore him. Really, the arrangements are designed to bring the Spirit into our lives and help us resonate more with the Savior and his life, who he is, and who we can ultimately become.”

Todd, Drew, and Spencer all followed similar paths; being members of choirs throughout their junior high, high school, and college careers. Drew states that he “always felt drawn towards more challenging groups.”

Todd jokes, “I probably started listening to tri-tones and stuff by humming to the vacuum, growing up cleaning the house. I hope I’m not crazy in that. You know, you go up and down the scale and say, ‘Yeah, this is cool.’”

Julia, however, took a less conventional route to join Mountain Blue. “I guess I’ve always been singing my whole life. My mom always had me and my sister in little singing and dancing groups when we were little, but I’ve never liked the dancing portion and I never really liked the gymnastics. I would always just sing. I started taking lessons when I



was eleven, and it's probably the only thing that I've been able to stick to. I love performing, but I was never in the choirs or anything in high school. I liked performing by myself, mainly. I went to Utah State and did vocal performance up there, and then I came back down and was in a rock band [and did country]. I took more classical training because I wanted to be more rounded. I wanted to be able to sing all different kinds [of music] and could never decide which I liked most. I realized probably around the time that I was twenty that what I needed to do was sing in the church industry. I started pursuing that more actively and directly, and it's amazing that when I work at something, things just kind of fall in my lap like this. Just like being in this group." Julia skipped a bridal shower to audition for Mountain Blue. A week after being accepted into the group, and never having really practiced with them before, Julia went for the first time to listen to Mountain Blue. They were at a CD signing at

Deseret Book, and two former members weren't able to make it, so she sang with them.

"That's how we initiate new members," jokes Todd. "Performance is their first practice."

There are some things that are truly unique about this group; the first being that Mountain Blue is a bluegrass, southern gospel, LDS, a cappella group. "You hear that 'everyone is doing it'?" asks Spencer. "Like, everyone's not doing this."

When Adam Monteith called Spencer to see if he wanted to join the group, he was a little tentative about singing southern gospel bluegrass music, like that from the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou*. "I was a little hesitant, but then when I showed up and we got to singing, I immediately recognized the quality of everyone's voices in the group and the feeling that was in the music," Spencer says. "There's been several times that I've had other things that I could just get up and do, but there's something that

always just brings me back to this. For its uniqueness, for the sound, for everyone in the group that I get to sing with—I've never had a singing experience like it."

"I've always been intrigued by harmony," says Julia, "But this was not something that I'd ever done before or even really considered doing. I love tight, unique harmony, and every song we have has a tight harmony. It blows me away that some of the songs that are my favorite are ones where we're all singing together and nobody's really soloing. There have been times when all of us at the end of the song are like, 'Whoa, that was awesome.'"

"The sound is good and of course, a lot of that is credited to the lyrics and music, but a lot of it is Adam Monteith's talent at arranging music," says Spencer. "You come, sing, and it sounds amazing, and you leave. We come back, and I'm blown away again. It's just so much fun to sing with all of them. I don't like practicing even if one person's gone, because there's just something missing."

"It is fun to sing in such close harmony. You think a cappella and you think, 'Oh, well, they don't have background music,' and you feel like something would be lacking, but it's not, and I even feel like it's so much more powerful," says Julia. "It also doesn't hurt that I'm the only girl in the group."

That's another fact that makes Mountain Blue unique: it's comprised of three males and one female. "I think it surprises people," says Julia.

"I hear that all the time, ever since I've joined the group," says Spencer. "One thing that I did find interesting was that I always liked singing with guys. But this group has proven me wrong with the arrangements because, if we did it with four guys, it wouldn't sound the same. It has to be the way it is. I don't know why. It just does."

Todd explains their unique sound: "The main reason is that there's color that's involved in the timbre of people's voices. And yeah, we could have four guys, but first of all, it would



be difficult to find a tenor that could sing unbelievably high in that register; and the other thing, people wouldn't come to our shows if there wasn't a female. One of the biggest challenges is blending a female and three guys—not having the female stand out above the rest. We've had to find the right timbre, vibrato, and color of sound, and be able to mesh it in a way that gives the full spectrum of sound that we're looking for. It's really kind of unique, and I think it adds a lot to the group to have a female voice there because nobody else is doing it."

## Testimony through Song

When discussing the name "Mountain Blue," Todd says, "Mountains are very majestic. They point you toward heaven. All of our music is about the Savior. And blue is a peaceful color; it's just a color of serenity. A lot of our music is very indicative of the peace we find in the gospel."

All members of the group responded that firesides were by far the most enjoyable projects that Mountain Blue works on. "As far as firesides go, the Spirit that we feel there and the opportunity to sing a song and then share a testimony about it—I just really love it," says Spencer.

Julia says, "I feel also that in firesides, the purpose of the group is really felt. I feel like that's where people really hear the music and can hear and feel the message of it and feel the Spirit so strongly. It's fun to have people like your music, but when people really get what you're saying and feel the Spirit because of something that we're able to convey... That's what's awesome about being in this group."

"Having the opportunity to bear your testimony in word and song, combining those two elements into one really brings the Spirit strongly in meaning," adds Todd. "Having those sacred venues—like Julia said, really having people understand what you're singing about, that it's not about us, it's not about the music. It's about the Savior. Every one of these songs ties back to him. If people can develop a

relationship with the Savior in a new way or see him in a different light, that's kind of the whole purpose of the Church. It's just a vehicle to bring people to Christ. That's our goal."

"What I've found interesting," says Spencer, "is since I've been in the group, the phrase you mentioned, 'It's all about the Savior and it's not about us,' has become more than a phrase; when you're singing, you actually *feel* like it really is about the Savior. To feel it is pretty awesome."

Julia was considering a mission but felt strongly that she should stay home. "This is my mission. Being part of this group and pursuing a career in the LDS music industry is why I need to stay home. It's been since October that I made that decision, and it's already made itself known to me time and time again that this is why I need to be home. It's almost funny to me that I considered leaving. Being part of this is not something that I'd want to give up any time soon. We can reach people through music who I wouldn't be able to reach personally, and I've had several people say that to me since I made the decision. So maybe this is why. No, this is why. There's no *maybe* about it."

Spencer says, "The one icon I had growing up all the time as far as a real big spiritual experience was when I'd go to seminary or go to church and someone would perform a musical number that would just stir things up in me that had never been there. It wasn't the words, and it wasn't just the regular song; it was the spirit of the music, the power that is conveyed through good gospel music. I was a DJ for thirteen or fourteen years, and I've been in tons of different environments of different types of music. The feeling that comes from the music... there's no comparison. It almost doesn't need to be said."

"There's so much secular music out there and so much music just driven purely for entertainment purposes alone," says Todd. "This music is kind of unique in the fact that it's fun, it's energetic, and we have such variety.

Half our music we could do in sacrament meeting, and the other half we could do in an cappella stock show. But the cool thing with this music is it's not just entertaining. It's educational and it's spiritually uplifting. It actually changes people's lives. In a world where it's increasingly difficult and full of uncertainty, this music can bring hope, peace, comfort, uplift, and joy into our lives. There's something that strikes a chord in my soul when I hear the human voice interacting harmoniously with other voices. It can and should be more natural to live in harmony with each other and there are living principles that are taught through music. Robert Shaw said, 'In these days of political, personal and economic disintegration, music is not a luxury, it's a necessity; not simply because it is therapeutic, nor because it is the universal language, but because it is the persistent focus of our intelligence, aspiration and goodwill.' That's what it's all about." 🎵



# Amy Jensen

INTERVIEW BY DAVEY MORRISON DILLARD | PHOTOS BY TIFFANY TERTIPES & MARK PHILBRICK  
WEB: [HANDSONACAMERA.ORG](http://HANDSONACAMERA.ORG), [NAMLE.NET/CORE-PRINCIPLES](http://NAMLE.NET/CORE-PRINCIPLES)

*Amy Petersen Jensen, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the College of Fine Arts and Communications at Brigham Young University, where she serves as Associate Chair of the Theatre and Media Arts Department. She also coordinates the undergraduate Theatre and Media Education Program as well as the Media Education Masters Degree. In addition to teaching and research, Amy directs the BYU Hands on a Camera service learning project. She also co-authored the Core Principles of Media Literacy Education with a select group of scholars from across the United States.*





### What is media literacy?

Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media. At BYU we focus on ways that young people might use and understand media content and digital media forms to express themselves and to understand the expressions of others.

To this end we engage teachers and young people ages eight to eighteen using the *Core Principles of Media Literacy Education* to think about and create with digital media.

Erika Hill and I direct the BYU Hands on a Camera Program, a service learning project where university students work with K–12 students to create documentary films about their community. In the program we emphasize the social capital of storytelling through digital means. BYU students work together with the K-12 students to tell authentic stories about their worlds. For all of us the project is an exercise in civic dialogue. Through artistic expression and digital means we share our perspectives and learn to value the perspectives of others. Most of the digital stories that we create are local stories about family, community events or processes that affect how we live. Through our website we share these stories globally. Our hope is that all of the participants in the program feel more comfortable using digital

media, but we also hope that they have a better understanding of how this global media works to shape the choices that they make as consumers. With this knowledge they have more power to make media choices that match their own ethics.

### How can people outside the academic setting think about using media and media literacy in their homes?

I think it's really an important time for families to be thinking about how a variety of types of media are currently used in their home and how they might be better used to serve the needs and interests of their unique family. I'm really interested in my children learning and growing in a variety of ways, so right now we're taking horseback riding lessons, we are reading the *Harry Potter* series together, we're taking piano lessons, and we're practicing with the swim team. Those are all really great things for nine-year-olds to do, but one of the things that we also do regularly is think and talk about media and then practice doing some kinds of media activities that are appropriate for their age, like learning how to use a still camera or learning how to use a video camera. One of the things that my daughters and I do is engage in conversations about the types of media that they are interested

in. They watch media that sometimes I'm not that interested in because I am a media scholar, but because I'm their mother I watch whatever they watch with them. Not long ago I had the opportunity to go with them to see *High School Musical 3* and I have to say that I was dreading it. I was not excited about it at all. But I decided that that wouldn't be a very good approach and instead we might talk about our expectations before we went and then talk about what happened in the film when we got home. And because I changed perspective from saying, "Oh, I'm dreading this," to saying, "This might be an educational experience for all of us," we had a very lively and very rich conversation about themes that were in the film that were interesting to them, and therefore themes that led to other aspects of our life that were important to us and that allowed us to have conversations about who we were as human beings.

A colleague of mine, Dean Duncan, wrote an article several years ago called "Family Home Media," and in the article he says that it's important for us to watch things, and then to go and do something related so that our children's whole experience becomes integrated. So it's not just about viewing, it's about doing. And it's not just about doing, but it's about seeing

other people's creative work and seeing how it interfaces with our life.

I like to think about that as a good principle for learning all types of new media and technology and how we might think about it in our homes. We could make the choice to ignore it, to say, "In our home we don't access technology, we don't think about films, we don't think about television, we're book readers," and that could be a choice that we make. But our children are going out into the world and they are going to engage in the stories that media presents in some way, and maybe without the conversation with us that might prepare them in the way that we might want them to be prepared. Instead of cutting things off, it might be good for us to work together to explore these varieties of kinds of tools together.

We might want to explore what a blog is like with our family and then look at some other people's blogs and have conversations about them. In our family, we have a lot of interest around the iPhone and think about all the things that the iPhone does to help us be creative and practical. Then there are times that we shut it off and do something else. But the talk around the technology is far more important than the technology itself. And the doing with the technology is far more important than the technology itself because it allows us to discover who we are as human beings as a collective, as a family, or as individuals.

One of the best things that has happened to me as a mother is having experiences where my children have brought a new media form, or some new media story to me and told it to me, and I hear about it for the first time from my child's perspective. I like to try and do the opposite too, try and bring something to them that has been essential to me—a film story or a theatre story or a book that I've loved all my life—and share it with them. But it's really important that I'm willing to listen to their stories and the things that they're interested in so that we can talk about how our

interests are similar and different and how all those perspectives are valuable and make us a family unit and bring us together in some ways, and help us to think differently in some ways. I think it's a really exciting challenge for people to start to explore things on their own. And it actually takes effort; you have to be willing to make some effort, and then fail and try again. I have to admit that I am not a technology savvy person. I do not do all this stuff like technology savvy people, it's an effort for me. But I'm interested in people's stories, in hearing and telling stories. It's something that I have to learn today. Something that we're trying to do with our family is to try to learn about it, but not make it the only thing in our lives.

#### **What work have you done in theatre?**

Like my work with media, my role here at BYU is to engage in conversations about education. That's true of theatre as well. I'm not a theatre director and I'm not an actor, but I get to use my fan skills again, and I get to explore how meaning making occurs in contemporary theatre. And I mostly do that in educational venues.

That might be collaborating with a colleague to think about theatre in education practices and how those might work in a science classroom. Or it might be thinking about traditional theatre skills, such as acting, directing, or producing, and how they are employed in a theatre education setting.

But mostly, again, I'm interested in how a medium can help young people to find their authentic voice. And that can happen in a lot of ways in theatre. It can happen for theatre students when they act in a traditional play by speaking someone else's voice, and if you talk about the words that they're speaking or the role that they're playing, if you engage in conversation about meaning making there, then it might enrich their view of the world—it might enrich their experience. That's really important to me. But it might also mean that students are making their own theatre, making their own

plays, and that they're using their own life experience to generate new theatre, and generate theatre that engages in social issues that are important to them, and tells stories that really reflect their world. We at BYU try to do a mix of traditional types of theatre where production is the end result, but we also try to do, especially with our education students, process-driven theatre that engages in ideas, and engages students in considering their social circumstances and being more aware of other social circumstances and their stories and the conversations that are going on in the world, or going on in their local community, or going on in the very classroom that they're in. We're really interested in exploring both types of theatre, theatre that is production-driven and theatre that is process-driven. In an educational setting we do a lot of process-driven theatre that is engaging students in thinking about their own experience and the world experience and how those two things might intersect.

#### **What is the difference between production-driven theatre and process-driven theatre?**

Production-driven theatre means that the most important part of what you're doing is an end product: a play that is performed for an audience. The value in doing something like that is that students get to try on all the roles of the production process. They might be an actor, they might be a director, they might be a costume designer, or they might take on the role of scene designer. So they learn in sort of an apprenticeship form a valuable skill that helps them be a contributor to a theatre community.

Process-driven theatre means that you're exploring ideas and issues and circumstances and characters through the medium of theatre, using theatre tools to explore new ideas, new conversations, and possibly new theories. Or you're looking at ways that theatre tools might help you understand science or social studies, or a story that you've written in your English class.



Individual Goal

- Eligible 3 - Case
- Eligible 2 - Site
- Eligible 1 - Services
- Eng 1514 - Colter
- Eligible 1 - 10000
- 10000 - 10000

Questions

- \* What is the...
- \* What are the...
- \* How do the...
- \* How will you...



to Ask

Viewpoints

- 1- Man
- 2- Woman
- 3- Water
- 4- Child

STUDENT CAM



And so you start to think about how something might be performed to help others better understand the meaning of a given thing, whether it's the meaning of molecules, or the meaning of a short story that you've read.

I think both things are valuable because they require skills of thinking and doing. And that's what draws me to both theatre and media in an educational setting. The study of both mediums requires you to think and reflect, but also to do and to act. So you get to often simultaneously be a viewer and a creator in both fields. Sometimes, you put on your viewer hat and you get to evaluate the experience that you have with a form. Other times you get to put on your creative hat and you get to experiment and try things out with a story that you're interested in telling, or someone else's story. You

get to recreate someone else's story and re-envision it for your own world, for your own time and your own space. That idea is very exciting to me. And more exciting than just that idea is to watch students as they explore that for the first time, or watch students as they try on roles or positions and start to find out not only what their skills are, but what their likes are, what their interests are, what they value, what they want to understand, what they want to leave behind, what they want to take with them. That's one of the most exciting things about being a teacher, watching someone figure out for the first time who they want to be, or watch them figure out for the second or third time who they are now and how they're situated in the world that they live in. I love what I do because of that, because I get to engage

in conversations with people regularly about who they are and who they want to be and how they're going to be that person, regardless of the medium, and that I get to encourage that in some way. That's exciting to me.

**What is it about education-based work and documentary and new media and things like that that you find important and interesting?**

Here's what I find personally interesting about education work in general, especially artistic work. I've always been a Martha. You're familiar with Mary and Martha from the New Testament. Martha is described as "careful and troubled about many things." And she challenges Jesus and says, "Why are you letting Mary sit at your feet while I'm doing all the work?" I'm a worker, and I like work.



But Jesus' response to Martha is something that really intrigues me about the world. He says that Mary is doing the better part sitting at his feet, listening, paying attention, understanding who he is, relating to him. And there's power in that.

Even though I more identify with Martha and I am careful and troubled and going about doing work all the time, I think that being in education, whether it's in media education or theatre education, gives me an opportunity to see people through God's eyes, to be more charitable as I seek out opportunities to try to see who they really are or how I can really benefit them, or to find joy in seeing them progress as an artist.

I've said over and over again that I'm not an artist, but if I have one skill, it's being able to see someone else's potential. Their potential as an artist, their potential as a human being, and figuring out the unique way that I can encourage that to help them move on to the next step.

Education is the venue that has allowed me to do that, to step back from the busyness and the work that I so enjoy and that comes easily to me, and to sit at God's feet and really see another human being and to value who they are. I'm really grateful for that.

I'm really grateful that even though I'm not an artist, I've figured out a way to experience art and to really feel it deep down in my soul, so much that it helps me to understand who I am. And I can only do that through other people, that's why I'm an educator.

#### **What do you find about these specific processes that's uniquely spiritually enriching for you and for others?**

I have a favorite quote that I sometimes share with my students. It's sort of a familiar quote and it's from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, *Aurora Leigh*. "Earth's crammed with heaven, / And every common bush afire with God; / But only he who sees, takes off his shoes."

I love that idea that if I'm a creator, I get the opportunity to see—whether

it's through the lens of a camera or whether it's placing people on a stage or viewing those kinds of things for the first time—I get to see and experience vicariously through art something that shapes me and allows me to take off my shoes, in a sense.

I think that's all tied up in the idea of charity; it's all tied in up in what I'm trying to teach young people. If you look outside yourself, if you have charity for someone else, you really see them.

And then, in some way, it helps you better see yourself, know where you need to improve, know where you're glorious, know who you are as you're situated in this world, and know that you're God's child.

#### **How does your faith affect what you do artistically and educationally, and vice versa, how does what you do professionally affect your testimony and beliefs?**

One of the things that I know because of my faith is that eternal beings are always growing and progressing. That means that it's important to be curious.

And not just curious about the knowledge that I can gather or intrigued by the things that I can figure out how to do on my own, but curious about how other people are engaging in the world too, and try to learn from them as well.

My faith teaches me that to be an eternal being I have to know other beings and I have to love other beings. In some way, I have to figure out how to move past judgment of myself, or judgment of them, to love. And the two mediums that I've immersed my life in, theatre and media, are the very things that allow me to do that.

I'm curious about people, and I'm curious about how these two mediums allow people to tell stories that change and shape us. I'm continually eager to experience other people's stories.

I certainly have a long way to go in my progression as an eternal being, but I'm pretty excited about the journey because of what I get to do. 🙌

*"It's not just about viewing, it's about doing."*



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