

Drawing on Personal Myths

Dennis Smith

AS ART STUDENTS at BYU in the 1960s, Trevor Southey, Gary Smith, and I, along with a few others, used to get together and talk about creating “*The Mormon Art*.” Mormonism had produced a few artists such as C. C. A. Christensen, Minerva Teichert, and John Hafen, but there was no Mormon *tradition*. Confident of our abilities and filled with zeal, we set about trying to create an art of lofty human values infused with a spiritual reality that would transcend and unify our different artistic approaches.

In the most significant series of historic paintings since C. C. A. Christensen, Gary vividly portrayed historic Mormon events. Trevor created ethereal paintings of pre-existence, resurrection, and other doctrine-related subjects — as well as a superb bronze depicting the restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood. My own work culminated in eleven life-size sculptures for the Church’s Monument to Women in Nauvoo.

This overtly Mormon period became a turning point for all of us. We soon discovered that creating “Mormon Art” was a dead end. Creating *art* — which had to include our private interpretations — for an institution seemingly interested only in illustration of “official” interpretation proved difficult. Disillusioned by the institution’s aesthetic abuses, we abandoned the idea of “Mormon Art” and simply allowed our Mormon-ness to take care of itself in honest expressions of our personal life experience. In so doing we rediscovered common ground with other Mormon colleagues like Neil Hadlock, with whom we had earlier parted company on our quest for the holy grail.

Interestingly, as we let go of our self-conscious efforts at “Mormon Art,” Church authorities who had treated artists with disdain, suspicion, and occasional contempt, appointed professional curators for a Museum of Church His-

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tory and Art. In recent years the museum has done much to improve Church-sponsored art with first-rate exhibits and enlightened acquisitions.

For the past decade my work has focused on children. Before they acquire the beliefs and fears of "maturity," children experience life directly, spontaneously, freshly. They are obnoxiously honest, quick to forgive, given to sudden outbursts of emotion, and unrelenting in their pursuit of fun. This orientation offers little Mormon-ness, except perhaps for the heretical notion of joy as the ultimate excuse for mortality.

My attachment to the past leans more toward conventional Mormon-ness. My ancestors were converted in Denmark and emigrated in the 1860s. I grew up on their Alpine homestead, went on a mission to Denmark, and graduated from BYU. After attending Copenhagen's Royal Academy, my first major decision was to choose to live and work in Alpine rather than New York. It was a choice to remain within the tradition, to identify with, then amplify and expand my ancestral heritage. I converted my father's old chicken coop into a studio and began my life's work. A short time later, Frank Riggs and I built a new studio in Alpine.

For years I have haunted junk yards and old cellars searching for lost and discarded artifacts to use in my fanciful and semi-abstract assemblages. Picture post cards, farm implements, and obsolete machinery became building blocks for my fanciful re-creation of the past. There is something compelling, even sacred, about images from the past which resonate with my present experience.

Over the past two years I have been obsessed with painting — in part because of a fascination with color, but also because painting lends itself so well to narrative. I see life as story, or a complex of stories to which I attach meaning. Mythologizing my own life, I discover moments of creation, fall, atonement, mercy, and salvation occurring and recurring. We are the Adams and Eves of succeeding generations.

I think of my great-grandmother Kristina Beck, who emigrated from Denmark in the 1860s. What if, during the long ocean voyage, she had found a scrap of paper and sketched the ship on which she sailed, with little notations about their sleeping quarters or meals? How that fragile note would be revered by her family now. The touch of it, the very flow of the lines would conduct us back to the reality of our family's Kristina myth. Moses, after all, was only an archetype of Kristina's grandfather, who could not come but watched his wife and granddaughter sail for the promised land. When we retell the stories of our parents and grandparents, we blow the dust off their lives; their experiences filter into our lungs and enliven the air our children will breathe. And if religion is about what matters most, it is certainly about our families and our communities and the stories surrounding them. Keeping journals is a way of reaching forward in time to communicate to descendants we will never see. For me, painting has become a way to explore, to reinterpret, and to express the myths of my family.

The iconography which develops in the paintings is almost never predetermined but is an indirect result of the process. I try to be open to whatever imagery strikes my impulses — forms which seem right to me. I do not con-

ssciously decide to use this or that because it means that or this. If it strikes me as strong — either emotionally or aesthetically — I go with it. The definitions almost always are clarified in retrospect, a revelation of sorts, and it is always exciting when I realize the levels of meaning in a painting.

“*Kristina Goes to School*,” 24” × 30”, oil, in possession of the artist.

In Denmark my great-grandmother Kristina’s grandfather used to take her to school in a horse cart and pick her up after school. His wife and other members of the family joined the Church and emigrated to Utah when Kristina was fourteen. Leaving her beloved grandfather behind was very difficult for Kristina.

In this painting, Kristina’s grandfather watches her go into school (the Church, celestial kingdom?). The shadowy figure of a school marm (missionaries, God?) stands in the doorway to receive her. The school’s interior is a mystery, hidden from the grandfather; but the door is royal blue, suggesting richness, and paradoxically, loyalty. Kristina literally fades into the path, melting out of the focus of her grandfather’s searching gaze. He longs to be with her but knows he cannot. He is outside the stone fence and cannot pass through. Beside him is a beautiful, eternal wheel, a personal cosmology which he cannot betray — his life. The earth turns; the sky progresses from night to dawn. The sea intimates the avenue of Kristina’s eventual departure and, supporting the rising sun, suggests the expanse of the universe before which mortals stand.

“*Labyrinth*,” 24” × 30”, oil, in possession of the artist.

This painting is in memory of a feeling — my introduction into the world of mystery and confusion — rather than a specific experience. Kristina’s log cabin (lower right) was the home of my infancy. The windows glow with warmth and light. I stand in front of the cabin like an intruder on a foreign planet, a pioneer stepping outside the walls of the fort, and am confronted by a labyrinth of trees. Grandpa’s world of the barnyard is half lost in the confusion beyond the stream. His house on the right edge offers a refuge from the puzzling world. But the swirling mass of poplars on the left intrigues me. I am drawn to the mystery, the web of trees that stitch heaven and earth together across the stream. The roots bind the earth while the high branches disappear into tumultuous clouds. Somewhere there I sense God, though I cannot see him. The cow and horse in an opening in the trees are central to the experience, as Adam’s naming of the animals manifested his relationship to the rest of God’s creation. The milkhouse nestled among the tree trunks offers nourishment. The black juniper points upward from the birthing stead toward Grandpa’s place and is echoed by the upward thrust of the barn roof. The four circular orbs along the bottom are rows of an apple orchard, a cushioning support from the ground of God’s creation.

“Silver Poplars,” 24”×24”, oil, in possession of the artist.

A companion piece to “Labyrinth,” this painting has the brown dot of Kristina’s cabin at its center. The bridge across the stream introduces me to a second level of awareness — Grandpa’s world of the barnyard. Silver poplars frame the entrance to this new world, splaying their branches upward in celebration of my “baptism” here. Having visited the animals and the fields, Grandpa, God-like, leads me toward his house, my next world of experience. In the background stands East Mountain, a hint of the world beyond still unknown to my innocent and limited vision. The composition is lyrical, with pleasing, harmonious transitions. The colors — blues, greens, and browns in a mid-range gray blue scale — are muted and pastoral, suggesting softness.

“Alpine Day Appearances: Joseph Smith Appears Before the Alpine Ward,” 30”×40”, oil, in possession of the artist.

The annual Alpine Day parade once featured a float of my brother Alan as Joseph Smith praying in a sacred grove of nailed-down, wilting apple branches. My sister Rayola portrayed Mary who had a little lamb in the leading float, and in this painting I also drive Max’s go-cart near the front of the pack. The street becomes a stage across which the floats move from left to right. The church and trees serve as stage props supporting the players. The front row of cars rims the lower edge of the composition in a subtle arc, holding the action above. The Joseph Smith float is center stage. Ward members sit on benches on the church lawn. Semi-attentive to the familiar scene passing before them, they are unaware of the two pillars of light standing high above the makeshift sacred grove.

“Water Master,” 48”×48”, oil, in possession of the artist.

This salvation painting is very puzzling to me, and frankly I have not quite figured it out. It began as a treehouse on Maude’s ditch, across the fence from Dad’s orchard. Water flows down from the mountains unbridled to the head-gates, where the watermaster tames it and portions it out. The Master is the source of life, and his spirit, like the water, permeates all life. He is pictured here in a “transcendent bubble” borrowed from medieval and Flemish altar paintings of the Last Judgment. I started to paint over the treehouse with the Last Judgment idea but after getting in the two angels I couldn’t cover the rest. Now the juxtaposition of treehouse and angel intrigues me, for the treehouse is the child’s heavenly home from which he rules the world below.

When I was a child I watched my father taking our water turn in the orchard, tending it carefully, diverting the precious fluid here and there with his shovel. I was so anxious to please him, my father. But he seemed so distant, so removed from my childhood world. In the painting the strong red ring around my father is like an impenetrable shell that keeps human beings from being real with one another. For years it seemed that my need for his

approval controlled my life. I subjugated my own thoughts and desires hoping to please him. In the painting my father kneels and reaches out to me, through the posturing membrane, to find me as I really am. And I reach up, no longer controlled by a need for approval, but confident of my own self-worth, accepting of his love.

The tall trees on both sides bind the starry heavens to the earth below. Apple trees bearing fruit stand on each side. On the left a ladder disappears into the womb-like opening of the tree. Trees on the right show remnants of a ladder that I am hesitant to totally remove and a geometric shape borrowed from a book on fruit trees. The shape is a spraying platform, popular in the early 1900s, from which tall trees were sprayed to protect them from infestation.

“Angels in the Snow,” 40”×30”, oil, in possession of the artist.

This painting began as a straightforward treehouse in the snow. But something was lacking. I added the kids to pull a human element into it. But then the trees became “woods,” like in *Hansel and Gretel*. The children wander through a maze, half playing, half lost. The older brother lies down in the snow. He is patterning, making angels in the snow. The other two see him through the trees and make their way toward him, aware of his example. While lying down they see the treehouse, something from their long forgotten past. Now it becomes a ladder leading out of the woods to the blue sky above.

“Dale,” 24”×30”, oil, owned by Dale Smith.

Dale is seventeen, the third of our six children. From birth he has had a mind of his own. Though we have tried to respect his individuality, conflicts have arisen, especially when I have tried to fashion him after my image of what a teenager should be. That never works — he instinctively knows that it is better to be himself than to please others. That is his greatest strength and the source of my conflict. He was frustrated recently when Veloy painted his room and we started “deciding for him” what to put on the walls. He said we were going to make it into a nice motel room. He brought me up short. I knew he was right. So I painted this portrait as a gift, an homage of respect, and told him he could do what he wanted with it. It is my view of him, a gesture of peace and love. He gave me permission to include it in this essay.

The image comes from a photo taken when he was about six or seven years old. I have always been fascinated by the indescribable presence of that photo. Dale stands centerstage, looking straight at you. His coat seems to me a strong pyramid-like mantle, like those handed down from father to son, a passing on of responsibility and self-esteem. His gaze is assertive, you know he will not retreat. From his right shoulder, steps lead to the treehouse south of our home. Tree limbs bend down to caress him. The child-built treehouse is a very personal world, a private domain — no strangers allowed. “I’ll let in who I want. I’m in charge here.” On the left is another tree. Its limbs have been pruned, but thousands of small limbs sprout from the stumps, reaching indomitably upward.