

SYMBOLS ON CANVAS

Lita Little Giddins

Women. A subject that stirs my soul as I seek to navigate this dance of life. I have recently become even more aware of my own need for a community of women to help me stay grounded.

Women of color. A targeted population of which I am a part and have natural and undeniable feelings about. I regularly offer prayers about how I can be more around, involved with, and ready to learn from this spirit-provoking group.

The arts. The creative expressions of the mind and soul are lifelong tools that have been fundamental to my sense of rootedness. In my personal life and in my career as a licensed therapist, the arts are incorporated in everything I do.

I hold deep thoughts and feelings in these three areas and am always eager to talk about them. So when I was invited to write about *Family History and Temple Work* by Michelle Franzoni Thorley, an artistically gifted woman of color, I viewed it as a fortuitous heaven-sent opportunity and gratefully accepted.

It is fitting that this topic coincides with the one hundredth anniversary since the Nineteenth Amendment was passed by Congress, which gave American women the right to vote. Those committed to the movement daringly fought for equal power and for the privilege and right to have their voices heard. They fought to be seen and have their contributions to society welcomed until it was finally granted. Well, to some, but not to all. For black and various hues of brown-skinned women like Michelle's female family members and mine, this was not the case. And sadly, the fight continues. The present-day need

to readdress the movement of women claiming power indicates it is still a timely and possibly timeless issue.

Meeting Michelle

I encountered Michelle's passionate spirit first before meeting her face-to-face. Michelle presented a talk entitled "Diversity in LDS Art" at the festival for the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts in New York City this past June. Michelle is a beautiful Mexican American woman, and I was moved by her candor as she shared her unique experiences of oppression that resonated with my own. I was also impressed as she shared her journey to become a self-taught artist to add to the complex and multidimensional community of LDS art in a style that is conscientious and intentional. Michelle stood and spoke with a firm resolve of her commitment to claim her position as a diverse female artist while extending a hand to other women of color to join her. The traditional limitations on women's participation in public spaces have created an underrepresentation of women, particularly women of color, in positions of power. Women have been expected to retract opinions, rethink ideas, and relinquish identity due to the unrelenting pressure to accept their marginalized position. However, Michelle stood resolute behind the podium and in her conviction to not be consigned to such a reduced and unsolicited place. As she stood unapologetically in that space, I felt an essence about her that was "flora_familiar" to me (her Instagram name). I felt a long-lost sister in the gospel had been found!

After the presentation, I made it a point to meet this extraordinary sister. As we spoke, Michelle's power as a woman, a woman of color, and an artist became very clear. It was not so much about the words she spoke, which held me captive as we held hands to talk with one another. It was more about what was felt as I gazed upon her lovely face. Hand in hand and spirit to spirit I witnessed vision, purpose, and fire branded

in her determined dark brown eyes and erupting like volcanic hopes from within her heart.

Symbols of Time

How do women claim power comparable to what emanated so generously from Michelle? For marginalized populations, finding ways to accomplish that quest has been difficult. But it is important to understand and remember that power is an inherent and internal work. Claiming power is about being aware of, acknowledging, accepting, nurturing, perceiving, and magnifying that ever-present force inside oneself. In Michelle's *Family History and Temple Work* painting I see many symbols that collectively capture the essence of power I felt upon our meeting.

The Calla Lily

Michelle's use of the calla lily stood out to me personally because my own bridal bouquet was made from calla lilies. *Family History and Temple Work* prompted me to research the flower and I was amazed to discover that it is native to Africa! Although the history and significance of the calla lily was unknown to me on my wedding day, today my awareness of the flower's meaning gives me additional insight into Michelle's work. Like Africa and its people, the calla lily is often misjudged and underestimated. Like women, the calla lily is seen as vulnerable or weak. In reality, Africa, women, and the calla lily have a longstanding history of survival, strength, fortitude, and resiliency that is worth noting. The calla lily possesses the chemical calcium oxalate, which protects it from elements that could prove harmful when neglected or overlooked. With that protection it is able to survive and increase in strength over time to make its measurable contributions to the earth, much like Africa and its people, and in the same way women have done from antiquity.

There is a reassurance I feel from *Family History and Temple Work* as calla lilies blossom near a gravesite and close to the female ancestors. The principles of feminine power echo with fluidity back and forth through the generations of time to the women in the foreground. They seem determined to set all hearts at rest that, as Katharine Hepburn calls out in the movie *Stage Door*, “The calla lilies are in bloom again!” *Family History and Temple Work* reminds us that women of power will also bloom again, given time.

The Butterfly

I carry a butterfly on my keychain and have butterfly decor around my home. It is significant to me because it is a symbol of change and hope in my life during seasons of struggle and stalled transitions. During those times, not only have I felt my power waning, but my patience as well. The presence of the butterfly in *Family History and Temple Work* is a merciful reminder that we, as women, like movement in a dance, are constantly shifting through this transitioning process of time in the amazing plan of transformation.

The positioning of the butterflies near and around the three groups of women is intriguing. They give me the sense that they are representing the passage of time from the past to the present and into the future. If the butterflies are monarchs then they could also represent the multigenerational migration of a people or, more specifically, the mass movement of purposeful women. Author Deborah Chaskin affirmed, “Just like the butterfly, I too will awaken in my own time.” Instead of seeing this as the women in the painting being currently devoid of power, I see the butterflies as indicating that power is already embodied, and that we can assuredly anticipate the time when the reclaiming of that power will become more fully manifested in the lives of each of us.

So, this is the question: how will the perception of women claiming power become more fully manifested? As varied and vast as the answers

to this question may be, I believe one of the answers stands hand in hand, face-to-face, and deep within the soul, where power resides.

Symbols of Power

Hand-Holding

Michelle chose to visually link the three women in the center of the artwork together by hand-holding. What an incredible symbol of power this is! It speaks to the importance of understanding that women cannot reclaim power in isolation. We need the support of each other in order to succeed.

Something happens through the sense of touch. There is a transference of energy or spirit that occurs that can positively affect emotions and communication. Where women are involved this can, in turn, expand our sense of self and our communities. It can promote broader inclusivity and create a feeling of well-being that is desperately needed throughout the world.

The Temple

Although the temple is positioned in the background of the lush garden of ancestresses, its foundational role in the painting moves it to the front and center. The presence of the temple in *Family History and Temple Work* carries a strong personal message for me. For the past fourteen years, I have prioritized regularly going to the house of the Lord. I initially went out of my desire to be obedient to follow the counsel of the prophet. Now I attend out of necessity for my well-being.

I often find myself in periods of time when I feel as if I am in a space of ambiguity and lacking in personal power, especially when it comes to family matters. During those times I feel as if I'm in a holding pattern, caught between my desire to move forward in what I want to do and allowing myself to submit to the will of Omnipotence so I can be lovingly parented. So, I attend the temple as a way to reclaim my power. At times burdens are heavy and promises appear distant. At times, as an

LDS person of color, limited options are put before me that contradict more natural preferences from a cultural or ethnic standpoint. Consequently, I am left feeling compromised. But with the temple, I am able to enter into a temporal and spiritual space where my heart can receive reconciliation as I honor the power of God and self.

This is where I need to speak specifically about the temple topic as it relates to the remarkable African American Latter-day Saint pioneer Jane Manning James. As an artist I have had several opportunities to portray this exemplary heroine and to write about her as well. With each opportunity came an increased understanding and appreciation for the way this woman honored the sacred power of God and self.

Sister Jane had a unique understanding of who she was and that her life was equally purposeful and equally meaningful to our heavenly parents, as are the lives of all of their children. Her life was a testament to this truth. Sister Jane remained deeply rooted in honoring the power of God and honoring her own power as a daughter of God. For these reasons, Jane was persistent in her quest to receive the full blessings of the temple, but her petitions to Church leaders were continually denied because of her race.

Living conditions were harsh and difficult for early pioneers of the Church. Being a woman, black, and a Latter-day Saint increased the complexities of Jane's struggle. I empathize with her as she yearned to enter into the house of the Lord so that she, too, could have the opportunity to seek spiritual strengthening, to relieve a portion of her burdens, and to bless her family. I ache for Sister Jane having to live during a time in which she was unable to act for herself in her efforts to achieve her spiritual quest. I ache for her because she was unable to enter into the temple so she could, like the plea in the African American song "Oh Freedom!", "go home to [her] Lord and be free" for a while.

I think about Jane Manning James when I go to the house of the Lord. I think about family members who were enslaved, those whose civil rights were refused, and those whose blessings were denied. I go to

the temple because I need to and I can. I also go to the temple because they needed to but could not. I am grateful for their supportive and ministering spirits sustaining me in my weekly efforts to reclaim my power as the women in Michelle's painting appear to be sustaining each other in theirs.

Symbols of Perception

When I look at *Family History and Temple Work*, I see another rich and vivid image in my mind's eye. This is what I see: to my right I hold the hand of an ancestral woman linked with other transgenerational women. These are women who were deprived of equality, liberty, and so much more. With those women I include my sister in the gospel Jane Manning James and other black female Latter-day Saint pioneers. From places beyond the past they firmly hold my hand in support and encouragement as I stand in my present.

To my left I see my three daughters: Camlyn, Grayson, and Ayan. Their hands are linked and hold firmly to each other and to me with such trust and foresight that they will one day live in a time where their questions are answered and their quests are bountifully attained. I see myself standing in the space of in-between, but now I perceive myself as a woman consciously reclaiming power from those who have come before and those who follow. It is a position of honor.

With this new perception, I return to the eye-gazing, heart-connecting moment when I met Michelle as we also stood hand in hand. I did not realize when I stood face-to-face with my brown-skinned sister, as I held her hand in mine, the significance that moment would have in my life. Now I do.

On my wedding day I did not understand or appreciate what was being symbolically communicated as I held the bouquet of calla lilies in my hands. Now I do.

Fourteen years ago, I did not understand what my weekly pilgrimage to the temple would do for my heart and soul. Now I do.

All of these were moments in time when I reclaimed power. Power is claimed by how it is perceived by the individual. The power I see in myself and that I felt from Michelle lies inherently in each of our hands as we support each other as women along the way on our individual journeys. I saw the truthfulness of this statement when I looked into Michelle's eyes that memorable day in June. That truth was further confirmed as we talked face-to-face and spirit-to-spirit, with her hand held in mine, as the power I perceive in myself and that I felt from Michelle was reciprocated.

So, how will women claiming power become more fully manifested? From brush to canvas, and from my personal encounter with her essence so familiar, the symbols from Michelle's artwork witness this truth: the ability to reclaim power lies in each of *our* hands from eternity to all time.

It always has been and always will be.

Symbolic Manifesto

Positioned in order and matter is a sphere that is fragmented

In phases where patterns of transitions are designed in

Time

There, breathing is shallow from indecisions and unknowing

How does veil-ness line up to precept on precept in the space of

in-between

To arrive at the here and there a little?

Temporal to spiritual?

Where is there room to be secured

In this human-measured condition of

Time?

*Where feelings of standing in the holy place of uncertainty, the
unanswered, are unearthed?*

In this perceived vacuum she enters into a house that is Named

Ascending to the not-of this sphere of

Time

*There, breathing deepens and decisions in knowing gather from the
Lineage of Light.*

*In the solace of the House of No Other Name her soul feels anointed,
Consecrated in understanding, acknowledgment and acceptance
Transcending the not-of this into the peace and rest of that in
Time*

*Restored are promises irrevocable
Descending from an endless heavenly pillar to
Time*

*Spiritual to temporal
Redeemed are origins of spirits unfathomable,
Begotten nations, kindreds, organized dominions,
Sceptered heirs and heiresses*

*In between Alpha and Omega existence, inherited heritages are
prepared*

*At the places of entering, the doors are opened
Above them, atoningly inscribed, the hand in hand symbol affirms
truths as they really are*

*Soul to Soul
Godliness with Goddess-ness
Power from Power.*

*From the Bearers of All Time to the Bearers of All Living
“Reclaim.”*

LITA LITTLE GIDDINS {lita.kevin@comcast.net} is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker who incorporates expressive arts and creative therapies. Her undergraduate degree is in sociocultural anthropology, and she also received an AA in fine arts. Lita uses the full scope of her education in her efforts to influence people, organizations, and cultures. Her broad experience in the arts has afforded her the opportunity to present, teach, coach, train, and travel to many parts of the world where she works closely with diverse populations.

ARTISTS

MICHELLE FRANZONI THORLEY {florafamiliar@gmail.com} creates art that focuses on the ancestral power to heal. She is a self-taught artist who has claimed power through embracing her Mexican-American heritage and her experiences as an LDS woman artist. Her work has been displayed at the Writ and Vision gallery, LDS Church History Museum, and the Springville Museum of Art. She spoke at the Center for Latter-day Saint Arts in New York City in June 2019 about diversity in LDS art. She is passionate about plants, family history, and the stories of women. Her work and words can be found on Instagram at @flora_familiar. She lives in Utah with her spouse and three young children.

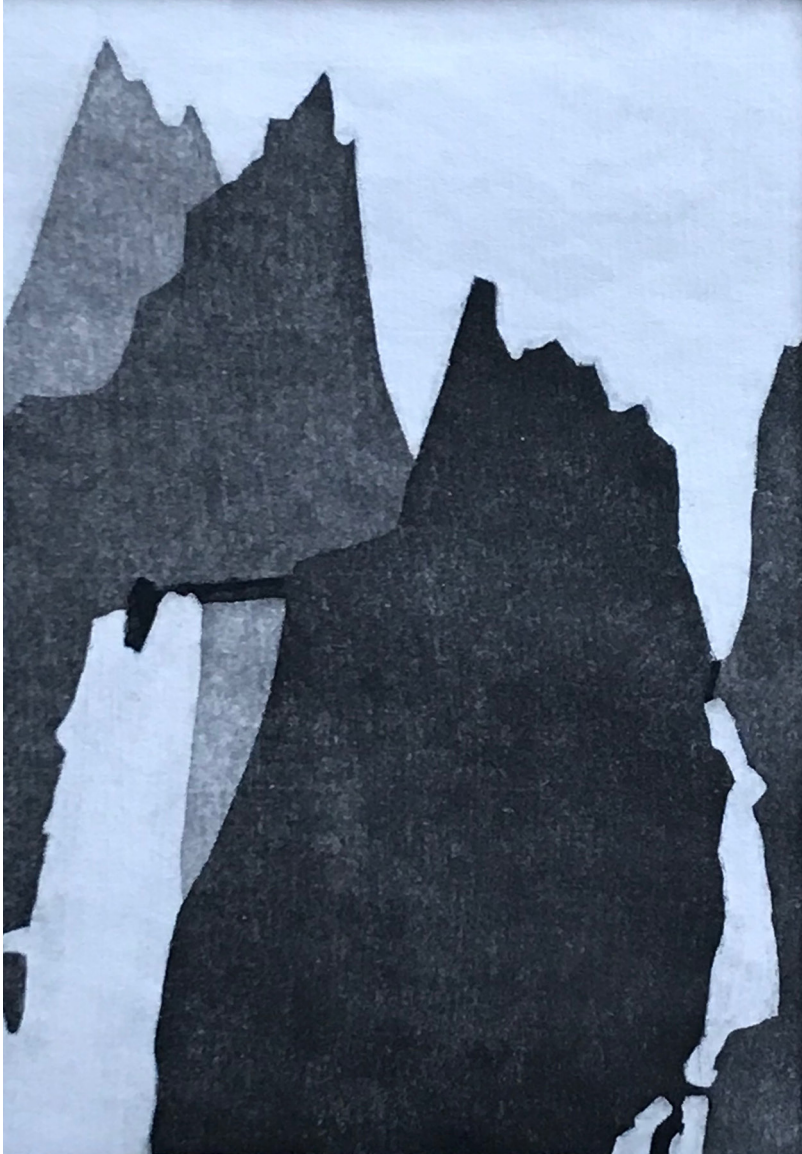
LINDA HOFFMAN KIMBALL {lhkimball@pobox.com} earned her BA from Wellesley College and her MFA from Boston University. She works in a variety of media from printmaking to collage and from photography to fiber arts. She is a writer and a founding member of Mormon Women for Ethical Government. Raised near Chicago and a convert to the Church during her college years, she now lives in rural Utah where she is one of the many “ministers” in the Woodland Ward.

HEIDI SOMSEN {www.heidimollersomsen.com} was born in Saskatchewan, and raised on the coast of British Columbia. She received a BFA in ceramics from Brigham Young University (1995) and an MFA in studio art from the University of Utah (2011). She is a two time Utah Artist grant recipient and has been included in three publications: *500 Figures in Clay, Volume 2*; *Utah Art Utah Artists: 150 Year Survey*; and *Utah Painting and Sculpture*. Currently, Heidi teaches at the University of Utah and the Visual Art Institute.

“From a young age I have always had a playful interaction with material, creating art out of whatever I could find: drift wood, rocks, moss, and a nice coating of Elmer’s glue as glaze. My school report cards often stated that I daydreamed too much—I’m afraid this is still the case.”



Linda Hoffman Kimball
Three in Zion
linoleum cut



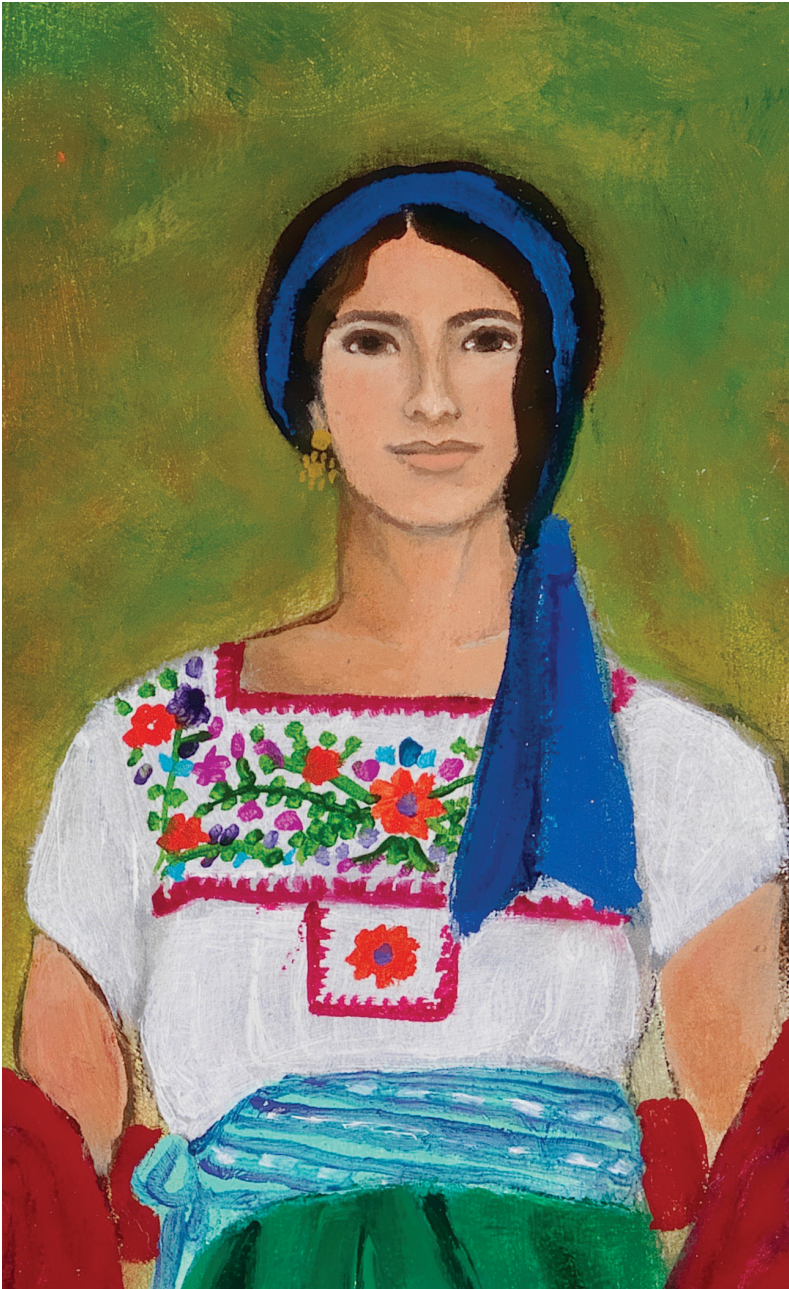
Linda Hoffman Kimball
Iceland
aquatint



Linda Hoffman Kimball
Zion National Park
scratchboard



Heidi Somsen
A Time to Kill and a Time to Heal
sculpture



Michelle Franzoni Thorley
Family History and Temple Work (detail, central figure)
oil on canvas





Michelle Franzoni Thorley
Family History and Temple Work
20x24



Michelle Franzoni Thorley
Family History and Temple Work (detail, two figures)
oil on canvas