

“Astonished Each Day”: An Interview with Richard J Van Wagoner, Utah Artist

Levi Peterson

Note: This interview, conducted by Dialogue’s editor, introduces Richard J Van Wagoner, whose art is featured in this issue. Richard is a retired professor of art from Weber State University, where he and Levi sat on many a committee and council together. Richard and his wife, Renée Hodgson Van Wagoner, live in Pleasant View, Utah.

Levi: I’ve heard you use the term “realistic” in relation to some of your paintings. What do you mean by it?

Richard: Possibly because I’ve been termed a realist by art historians at Utah’s universities, I’ve let the label stick, but I’ve diverged into different interests throughout my career—some abstracts here and there, particularly during the last fifteen years in which I have worked with surrealism or what I like to call super-reality. Certainly most of the art that I’ve made over the years is realistic—the urban and highway paintings being the most prevalent. Perhaps someone else could describe the form of my art better than I. My work certainly could not be called naturalism (naturalism being the assumption that nature is perfect as is, so don’t change anything—copy it as it is, be like a camera) because I am not interested in painting things exactly as they are. I do a lot of editing of the subjects that I paint. It comes naturally. It’s just the way I work. The essence of what I’ve chosen to paint comes to me most of the time without thinking much

about it. That essence is often simplification or strong contrasts that help satisfy my subconscious intent.

Of course, given this approach, it's not difficult to recognize the objects in my work. I use all of the spatial devices that cause the third dimension to be effected on a two-dimensional plane. It's not difficult to recognize how these devices are used by different realists. This process becomes part of the form that allows us to recognize the artist even if there's no signature on the painting.

Levi: You've painted hundreds of scenes depicting automobiles, highways, and trains. Why your fascination with such topics?

Richard: The easy answer is because there's no other subject matter so prevalent for the average American—other than looking at the TV. It should be painted by someone. I like to paint it for lots of reasons. We could ask the question: Are autos and highways beautiful? Probably not in the typical sense of what most people consider beautiful. To me, however, this subject matter is a great opportunity to paint shapes, lines, and patterns that I find can be highly unified and realistic when composed in the right way. It offers an opportunity to paint the “now” of our lives in a powerful combination of shapes, light and dark, lines that bind the parts together and with color and values that simplify and emphasize the structure and pattern of our existence.

Levi: You have also painted landscapes and still-life pieces. I assume you see such subjects as an exercise in technique. Do you also see them as a means for expressing personal emotion?

Richard: From a teacher's point of view, at least mine, still-life painting is a necessary activity, particularly for the beginning student. A group of objects that hold still and possess the elements of design—shape, value, texture, color, line, size, and direction—makes drawing and analysis much easier for the student and the teacher. I have stashed in drawers and portfolios watercolor still-life paintings that are demos illustrating procedures in watercolor painting, layout, and compositional design. It is from still-life that I sometimes diverge into semi-abstraction by changing sizes and shapes to make better relationships within the composition. This activity challenges the student's ability to see visual relationships that have greater unity and interest than can be achieved by making realistic or naturalistic paintings.

Landscape painting is a recreational activity. Getting away by myself or with Renée just to paint is wonderful. I liked it best when we had the

old camper. Renée reads while I paint (usually watercolor) or sketch. To empty my brain of procedures is part of the liberating factor. Nature's rhythms take over, and the painting often takes on a calligraphic quality. I'm about due for another painting trip.

Levi: You've also done some abstract painting. A layperson like myself is pretty easily puzzled by abstract painting. What's the payoff for an artist in such painting? What would you say that you're after when you're doing an abstract painting?

Richard: Abstract painting is not much different from realistic painting. How could that be, you might ask? When I paint realistically, it's possible to recognize the imagery and subject matter; but when I paint abstractly, it seems that nothing is recognizable in the composition. The commonality between the two is that, in order for any work of art (realistic or abstract) to work well, there must be a significant internal form. In other words, "beauty" has very little to do with subject matter but everything to do with structure and visual organization. My free intuitive response in the choices of visually putting down color, shape, line, proportion, texture, value, and direction without making reference to recognizable images frees me completely to concentrate on that which is most important—the form of the painting. One could say that all great art, even the realistic, is abstract.

Great art through the centuries is abstract even when we recognize the subject matter because it is possible to find an internal structure that gives the art its beauty. It's sad to say that much of the realistic art made today is poor art. Most of the attention goes toward trying to make a thing look real, with little regard to the structure.

I alluded to abstraction when I talked about how realistic subject matter can be distorted yet stay recognizable. This kind of modification leads the artist to semi-abstract art; and of course we have seen much of this kind of art over the last 130 years—after the artists later called Impressionists began to use paint in an independent, fresh manner. They rapidly stimulated many new directions in painting. Among those establishing important, semi-abstract movement are Van Gogh, Gauguin, Seurat, and Cézanne.

My own preference in making abstraction is called nonobjective painting. The title gives the clue to the approach. I try to rid myself of any preconceived notions as to what the painting is about, and I try to maintain this focus from beginning to end. This way my full attention is given

to form and color. It's a great exercise for tuning up your intuitive skills. I put a shape, color, or value some place on the canvas and then ask myself, "What does the painting need?" I respond as best I can by putting another shape, color, or value in a different place on the canvas, and I keep following this process until I can't find anything else to do, which may mean that the painting is awfully good or awfully bad. At least, it was a lot of fun.

Levi: Turning from art to autobiography, would you say that you had a typical boyhood and adolescence? What about your parents? What signs of an interest and ability in art did you demonstrate at an early age?

Richard: I was born in March 1932, in Midway, Utah. The family moved to Los Angeles when I was a few months old and then to Salt Lake before returning to Midway where we were pretty much like pioneers—no electricity, running water, or indoor bathroom. Twice a day, my older brother Drew and I walked about a quarter of a mile to a spring at the fish hatchery for fresh water. We walked down with an empty pail in each hand and full pails on the way back. We didn't have many baths, which to us was great! We always had dogs, cats, and rabbits to tend and play with. We usually took care of a few horses and a couple of cows.

My mother, Winnie Jones, was a beautiful woman. In fact, she was a movie star. She was in two early western movies made near Zion National Park. The movie company wanted her to be in more. However, her father, Bishop Philetus Jones of Rockville, put a stop to her career. Luckily for me, Dad, Arthur William Van Wagoner, was helping build the Zion Tunnel, near Rockville. He was a returned missionary, so when he met this beautiful young movie star, and they fell in love, he qualified as an acceptable candidate for her hand. They lived relatively happily ever after.

These were difficult times. The Great Depression had begun. The scarcity of jobs forced Dad into the mines of Park City. Several times, he told about horrifying events that occurred while he was working. Once the elevator in the main shaft broke loose and crushed two men to death. Another time there was a knife fight, which left one man dead.

I started first grade in the old Midway Elementary schoolhouse, a great old building that no longer exists. I started my art career in this place drawing horses and airplanes. They were simple at first—just the side view of each. But I developed the ability to observe critically the contours of the horse and the perspective of the airplane. I look back on these early years as very important. These were the days before teachers were thinking about design and abstraction, so realism was the primary objective. I was

convinced that my horses and airplanes were better than anyone else's. I never stopped drawing; and by the time I was in junior high school, I had decided to become an artist. Youth, romanticism, and ignorance helped me make this decision. My Grandpa, William H. Van Wagoner, helped solidify the decision by paying fifty dollars for two landscape paintings that I had painted with leftover model airplane paint. After this munificent purchase, I became aware, as the years went by, that paintings do not sell like hot cakes.

High school provided many opportunities to use my art abilities. Painting scenery for plays and making posters for student elections used a lot of my time. But I was also trying to make serious paintings in art classes and at home during these school years. A couple of my paintings were portraits of latter-day prophets—George Albert Smith and David O. McKay. The George Albert Smith portrait hung in the bishop's office in Layton First Ward—but only because my dad was the bishop, I suspect.

Levi: You've been a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Has your experience with Mormonism been typical of many Utah-born Mormons? Have you pursued what you would consider Mormon themes in your painting?

Richard: Possibly to my detriment, the kind of LDS art that is purchased and published by the Church is not stimulating or of interest to me. In fact, I have sometimes been distressed, even angered, by the highly sentimentalized portrayal of religious themes that seem to be edited so as to cause the viewer never to be challenged or to encourage questioning. If I'd made a lot of money doing illustrations for the Church, my answer might be different. But again, had such been the case, I would probably have entirely missed what I consider to be the true nature of art.

Art, particularly in today's world, is the antithesis of inflexibility. The Church can use only one kind of image—that which perpetuates its cause. There is no place for the asking of questions. Fortunately, many LDS artists *are* asking questions, moving in personal and investigative directions, and creating new and personal forms.

Levi: You and Renée have raised three sons and two daughters, with whom you stay in close touch. Would you agree that you are a home- and family-centered person? Did you enjoy doing things as a family when your children were small? How has your family influenced your art? Conversely, how has your art influenced your family?

Richard: Renée and I have been married for fifty-three years. She be-

came pregnant with Christine—Christy—several months into our marriage and became so ill that she had to give up the admirable position she had attained as secretary to the dean of the department of elementary education at the University of Utah. Wow, did my life ever change! I worked for the trucking company Pacific Intermountain Express (PIE) six days a week from 4:00 P.M. till 12:30 A.M., getting home after 1:00 A.M. It took seven quarters to complete my degree.

We had our children over a long period. Nick, our youngest, was born when Christy, our oldest, was seventeen, with Kelly, Dru, Rick, and Rob in between. It's inevitable that parents worry about how well they did with their children. I certainly have. I was somewhat limited in my interaction with the kids because of Church callings. I taught many Sunday School, MIA, Scouting, and Aaronic and Melchizedek Priesthood classes. I also served three stake missions, was in the stake mission presidency, the elders' quorum presidency, was high priests' group leader twice, counselor in three different bishoprics, and bishop for five years plus serving on three different high councils. I'm currently family history consultant.

As a result of these demands on my time, Renée shouldered the responsibility of getting the children ready for church and taking them to and fro. Her load was the heaviest, but she was steadfast in her work and, in addition, took on her own callings, which she performed beautifully.

We tried to be the perfect Mormon family by following the counsel of Church leaders—family home evening and the whole bit. In reflecting on training our children, I believe that we were too rigid in our demands and counsel. Nevertheless, our greatest achievement is that we have children who place love and service to each other above differences of opinion, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and monetary success. I truly believe that our family is profoundly Christian in the truest sense of the word, for they seem to look upon all people in this same manner. They are nonjudgmental.

Renée and I remain active and both serve as called. Renée is unwavering in her devotion and service to the Church, the family, and her fellow human beings. My greatest joy is my association with my family. I try to make no distinction between members of the Church and nonmembers.

I drew or painted Renée and the children from the time we were first married, but I don't believe that these paintings can be accused of being sentimental or saccharine. From the beginning, my interests have been

structure and form with a propensity toward contrast of light and dark. My MFA thesis was "The Figure in Landscape," and I relied heavily on family members as subjects in this series of paintings.

Levi: You became an instructor in art at Weber College in 1959 and continued teaching there while it evolved into a four-year college and eventually into Weber State University. You rose in rank to professor of art and served many years as chair of the art department. All along you have continued to paint. Have you thought of yourself more as a teacher than an artist or, conversely, more an artist than a teacher?

Richard: That's a difficult question. Both my career in teaching and my experience in making paintings have evolved and merged into a personal way of teaching and, I think, in making my art more personal. In the early days, I taught more the way that I had been taught: All students made a painting by following a certain series of steps. No exceptions. We see this kind of pedagogy on television several times a week. It continues to have an enormous following. But it produced quite a number of students whose paintings looked a lot like mine, and I started to question my teaching methods. I began to see qualities that I admired in the art of those who worked more independently. The problem with learning to make art this way is that one runs the risk of never seeing more deeply into the world to obtain greater insights into the nature of beauty and to develop a personal, inventive manner of painting.

Of course, you've got to begin somewhere. Art has an intellectual side. You've got to develop your artistic vocabulary and repertoire. Studying the masters is one of the best ways to understand that seeing the world through your own personally educated eyes, as the masters did, is required to make great art. In this philosophy, trying to understand your environment is a never-ending process.

To answer the question as simply as possible, I moved to a critique system that I used for perhaps the last twenty years I taught. I involved my students in the discussion as much as possible. The activity was a blend of what and how the student was doing mingled with visual examples from art, nature, and human-made objects, along with some demonstrations of specific problems related to drawing and procedure. I became more satisfied as the years went by because I could see improvements in the diversity and quality of the students' art, thinking, and energy. My art also improved—probably not everyone would agree with this assessment—because I was applying the same principles that I was teaching in my own work.

Neither the art of my students nor my own has identical form or subject matter—which in my opinion is a monumental achievement.

Levi: In your retirement, you and Renée have moved into a spacious condominium. Would you tell us how you have accommodated your art in these living quarters?

Richard: I encouraged and justified the purchase of a large condominium because of all the wall space that could be used to show art, primarily my own. In a sense, it's like having a regular art gallery except that I'm not inclined to be a salesperson. It is also a place to decorate with color and form. I haven't yet found the correct way to get people to come and visit without offending them by suggesting that they buy a piece of art. I also underestimated the work involved with changing the art around. I want to spend the time I have left making art and letting someone else do all the busy work. It seems that I must paint whether I make money or not. The condo is a very nice place in which to live, and I can be happy with that fact. It also accommodates a studio space in which I love to work.

Levi: Your son Nick came out as gay during the 1990s. You and Renée have proved very supportive parents to Nick, reassuring him of his place in your esteem and affection. Here's what you said in a pamphlet you published in 1996: "The night of our realization was a turning point in our lives. To this day, nothing looks as it did, feels as it did before. We suddenly found ourselves in a hostile, foreign land where no one spoke our language, and we no longer understood theirs."¹ Since then you and Renée have become very active in promoting tolerance and acceptance for homosexual persons. You've spoken in meetings, written statements and pamphlets, and established a monthly meeting for gays and lesbians in your home. Do you and Renée feel that your efforts have been successful? Are you satisfied with having made them? And how did Nick feel about your activities?

Richard: Renée and I always discussed our plans concerning gay activities and work with Nick. He has been completely supportive, to the point of participating in meetings and events. He completed his Ph.D. in cell biology at UAB, then moved into its medical school where he is now in his third year of residency in internal medicine.

To have grown up in a Latter-day Saint family in which my parents held nearly every ward and stake position—my dad was a high counselor—meant that I obtained a galvanized testimony of the gospel. I also be-

came a bishop among other callings. Renée was less active during her teens; but at about the time of our marriage, she began to study and obtained a testimony stronger than my own. I'm handicapped with many weaknesses—no one knows that better than I—but I always had the assurance that striving to overcome my sins would some day allow me to achieve eternal life with my family. During those years, I didn't need to think or analyze—just obey.

It may sound strange, but I think Nick's being gay was the best thing that could have happened to our family. The world did become a "hostile foreign land," but Nick had lived in this land all of his life. I am amazed at the excellence of his life, his goals, and his love of others. He and his partner are an example and joy to our family. I've learned truths that I never suspected were out there, and I have changed from being a homophobe to a person who loves and accepts gay people. In fact, I believe (at least, I hope) that my love and generosity have expanded to include *all* people, even homophobes.

Have our efforts been successful with gay people and also in helping change the attitudes of heterosexual people? Definitely yes! It's not a swift process, but attitudes are unquestionably changing. Renée and I have worked for thirteen years with gays, lesbians, and their parents. They and we have been watching the progress. But there's plenty of work yet to do. We're optimistic that changes are coming that will make our society better.

Levi: I've noticed a marked difference in your painting before and after Nick's coming out. Although you've chosen a wide variety of subjects for your paintings, your art seems to me to be much more clearly invested with ideas. Would you agree with this observation?

Richard: The highway and urban paintings were a great success—not financially, but in terms of getting into juried exhibitions and receiving awards. I was very interested in making them; but when our realization of Nick's homosexuality confronted us, my concentration vanished. The new paintings that came about were invested with ideas gone wild.

It's amazing how quickly a new kind of thinking started taking place within me. I was angry and confused. It seems that my work was becoming editorial, political, and educational. Not many people liked these new works, but they were difficult to ignore. Two galleries were brave enough to give me one-person shows, the Eccles Community Art Center in Ogden and the Salt Lake Art Center.

The burst of energy that produced this startling direction in painting began to dissipate about three years ago. Although I'm presently engaged in a work of similar genre, I've actually found myself again becoming interested in making some highway paintings. But I am leaving the door open for whatever.

Levi: As I've talked with others about these paintings, I have called them symbolic. Do you find that term apt or would you choose a different word?

Richard: You're right. These works use objects in a context that give a meaning—not necessarily the same meaning to everyone, but that doesn't matter. I delight in the idea that people may interpret the paintings differently than I intended. Art history is full of art that is difficult to place in the correct context, and yet we still enjoy those pieces because of our ability to relate them to our own experiences.

Levi: When you began your career, did you have a vision of what you would like to do or become? At seventy-three, are you surprised at the direction your art has taken? Would you tell us a little about the evolution you feel you have undergone as an artist?

Richard: I'm sure that I'll die feeling that I have not achieved enough with my art or with my life in general. Early on I knew I wanted to make art, and I've explored several directions and mediums. Teaching art is one thing I don't regret because it opened my mind to see the variety, beauty, and power of visual form in this world and in my mind.

I'm astonished each day at the variety of information and situations that present themselves to me. To see and think and form opinions and work at my art is about all I can do, but I wish that I knew more and could help solve the world's problems. Actually I haven't given much thought to where I've been and where I'm going. One thing I believe is that I haven't yet done my best art.

Levi: As of this moment, you have been hard at work for some months on a new painting that uses computer graphics. Tell us about this project? Are there other ways it represents a new direction for you? Has it speeded things up in your painting?

Richard: In many ways, the computer has made problem-solving much faster. It's been a boon to graphic design, illustration, linear perspective, animation, and all kinds of designing. I've worked hard to stay abreast of three programs: Cinema 4d, PhotoShop, and Turbo Cad. More than once, I've been able to speed up the layout of pieces that require a

fair amount of linear perspective. Cinema 4d makes laying out linear perspectives even faster. (Cinema programs get their names because they're used to make part or all of a movie. *Spider Man* is an example). These programs are fun to play with, but I have to admit that they take a great deal of study and experimentation to use effectively.

The months that I spent working my way through Cinema 4d taught me several important things. First, it really works well in providing layout and a dynamic point of view in a composition. Second, it's quick in supplying ambient light and gives me flexibility in composition and rendering. Third, I can make and remake color decisions really quickly. Fourth, it's easy to create new shapes and forms, but the results are a little too mechanical for my taste. In fact, if an artist can draw well, it's probably better to render human figures the old-fashioned way—with pencil and paintbrush using a real model. Fifth, it's possible to get objects of all kinds that are as realistic as a photograph, but sometimes they're complex and time consuming. Sixth, you can save a lot of time by photographing images and models, and then manipulating them by using either the computer or pencils and brushes in the traditional way. This combination of media takes less time and less money.

I don't intend to abandon traditional ways of making art right now (and I don't intend to make movies!), but I've used the computer programs because of their speed and power. I particularly like the speed of reproducing as many finished products as desired. But I just don't find computers as much fun as being out of doors and making a painting with a brush. My answer about which direction I'm going is that I am not closing any doors. I'll use whatever process suits me at any given time.

The painting you asked about revisits the subject matter depicted in an earlier painting about artificial insemination. The painting is perhaps more surreal than any I have done so far and makes references to mythology. The color is intense. The surface is broken down into many shapes, the undraped female figure being most prevalent. There are also several babies. It's a happy scene, and I hope it'll be enjoyed as much for its physical qualities as for its controversial subject matter. I've changed the title several times and it will probably end up being called "Untitled." I laid it out on the computer, and you're right. It's taken longer than I expected. I've been working on it about a year.

I started it just before a hip replacement operation and kept working on it during my convalescence. Too many ideas began floating around in

my head, and I started making dramatic changes to find out which image would work best. I'd already used the computer to make the basic composition and then transferred it to a canvas using oils. It seemed logical that I didn't need to use the computer for changes at this point. Perhaps I was wrong and I should have gone back to the computer. Possibly I will. Or maybe I just can't get out of the old-fashioned way of doing paintings and will revert to a traditional procedure.

Anyway, the end is not in sight, but I'm determined to complete it. It's a learning process and it interests me. Of course, I've been working on other art along the way.

Levi: I've found meanings in some of your paintings that you say you didn't intend when you painted them. Does it trouble you that a painting can be interpreted in ways far removed from the artist's intention?

Richard: The most important objective for me in my dialogue with viewers of my art is that they react, positively or negatively, but with an inquiring mind. Very few gallery visitors even make the effort to understand what the artist is trying to convey and so, of course, they miss information that might be interesting and valuable. Some people want the artist to provide a visual experience that is pretty, familiar, and noncontroversial. For many people, art is merely decoration or reinforcement of the status quo—and I'm not very interested in supplying that kind of experience.

Images of all kinds (realistic or abstract) evoke various feelings and meanings. Juxtaposed in a composition, they make other metaphors possible. So much of today's art is made with the intention that a person will react in whatever way his or her experience dictates. I may have intended a particular meaning for a work, but I'm delighted when someone sees a different and personal connotation. Neither I nor the viewer has failed in this situation. It is possible for an individual to bring only his or her experiences to the painting, but it's not impossible to bring questions and analysis to a work of art. I love it when people interpret my work in ways other than I intended. I learn from the patron. It's great when a person inquires about why I made the piece.

Levi: Would you tell us the circumstances in which you painted *Emergence* [Plate 1]?

Richard: *Emergence* started out as a demonstration in an advanced illustration class. The students had used several different procedures in doing the head and figure. When I introduced working with "total wash" in selected areas of the composition, the students requested that I give a