

ABSTRACTION IN
LATTER-DAY SAINT ART:
AN INTERVIEW WITH
CHASE WESTFALL

Margaret Olsen Hemming

MOH: In official LDS Church materials, from magazines to manuals to temple walls, there's a lack of abstract art, in favor of highly representational, literal art. What is the role of abstraction in religious art, in your opinion? And is there a place for it in the Mormon discourse?

cw: Abstraction has been employed within many religious traditions to represent things that are otherwise unrepresentable, or things that are held to be great mysteries. A central action of the LDS Restoration is filling in the gaps, completing the picture, providing clarity and knowledge. This may be why we've been so inclined toward clarity of representation in our visual art—showing things fully and directly. That notwithstanding, I think there's a lot of room for abstraction in Mormon discourse. In fact, I would make the case that there's already a rich vein of it—but it's not necessarily happening in our visual art.

Here I'm not thinking principally about abstraction in a traditional art history sense. I'm thinking of it as a critical action, as something that is done in support of semiotics, as a way of layering understanding, of introducing lenses of understanding and of mediating between an individual experience and a larger reality.

Abstraction is the first kind of analysis in symbology; it begins with the belief that realities can be signified. So whether you're talking about

verbal language or visual representation, abstraction is the first step in meaning-making.

Within that logic, theology is itself an abstraction. Religion is, at its foundation, a meaning-making structure. It's a scaffolding of semiotics and symbology, misrepresentations, shorthand, distillations that allow us to establish value and meaning within our existence and our relationship to the eternal. It's doing a lot of heavy lifting. To have modes of visual representation within our cultural discourse that are consistent with that nature of theology could be really helpful and important.

Another point to establish early is that abstraction happens on a spectrum. There's nonrepresentational abstract expressionism, as one extreme, and then there are all sorts of languages of representation where the artist takes greater or lesser liberty in how something is depicted, with all kinds of different intentions and motivations. Abstraction can be a way of limiting and controlling the subject. But abstraction can also be a way of giving up control. Within modern Western art history, abstraction has sometimes been about leaning away from certainty and authority. It can be a rejection of the rationalist Enlightenment legacies that drove the development of representational realism in Europe. Instead of ordered, scientific observation, it leans into a zone of uncertainty, embracing a kind of openness and rawness. In that development, it is more honest to the way we live our lives as people of faith.

MOH: So you're saying abstract art is more capable of helping us do that heavy lifting in understanding the mortal experience and our journey with God.

cw: It can definitely give us additional ways—language and tools—to do that heavy lifting. And in some ways its openness and uncertainty provide a more faithful analog to that journey. Philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Giorgio Agamben have argued that really meaningful art, art that speaks most profoundly to our human experience, always

carries within it a kind of resistance.¹ There are a lot of ways this resistance can make itself present in an artwork, but one way that it shows up in painting, for example, is in what painters call *facture*—the way the artist handles or executes the painting. It is how the paint is employed. One of the ways in which tidy, representational images can be misleading is that their depictive logic presents a closed system. They're self-sufficient: they're telling you a truth and they're giving you—at least pictorially—the answer. If the painting is totally clear and precise and controlled, then in addition to whatever the image is depicting, embedded in the language of its making is this idea of control, clarity, certainty, understanding, and Truth with a capital T. It essentially becomes an illustration of a limited kind of fact. Whereas a masterful artwork, in addition to whatever it is or isn't depicting, always carries within itself a kind of contradiction and the potential for its own undoing. There is a tension between what is being enacted and what we know is being left out of the image. When we can see each mark, we are able to appreciate that as each mark was being made, it could have just as easily not been made. It wasn't a kind of effortless, automatic fulfillment of its own interior logic. There is a struggle embedded in the process, and that's the resistance that I'm talking about. Although the artist stacked those marks to make something meaningful, the marks might have just as easily slid apart. They don't convey this certainty that verisimilitude can falsely claim.

There's a lot of interest now, in contemporary art, in thinking about the political and spiritual importance of abstraction because of what it withholds. In the current Whitney Biennial, we see an abundance of abstract works made by BIPOC and queer artists, coming from

1. See [thinkingaloud7189](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hifamdISs), "Gilles Deleuze on Cinema: What is the Creative Act 1987," YouTube video, Jan. 8, 2015, 46:58, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a_hifamdISs; European Graduate School Video Lectures, "Giorgio Agamben. Resistance in Art. 2014," YouTube video, Mar. 3, 2015, 43:12, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=one7mE-8y9c>.

populations that have been repressed and exploited.² For these groups and individuals, abstraction becomes a strategy of resistance: it's a way of holding something in reserve, apart and sacred, outside of that zone of exploitation. The opacity of abstraction creates a place into which the oppressor cannot see, and so where cultural, spiritual, and emotional resources can be safely stored up. Withholding means that you (the outsider) don't get it—literally or figuratively. But withholding can also be an act of empathy and solidarity—the artist's way of acknowledging the uncertainty with which most of us are living and choosing not to indulge their own (or our) desire for something easy and comfortable. In withholding, rather than creating a semblance of reality, abstraction creates an experience like reality. On the other hand, when we use art to simply shore up convenient narratives, it's always going to have a fractured, severed, and incomplete relationship to the real experience of trying to live a life of faith.

MOH: Maybe that “zone of uncertainty” you're describing about abstract art is precisely what makes people uncomfortable with abstraction in a religious context. After all, it is one thing to accept that the unknown exists. But purchasing and displaying a piece of art implies an embrace of uncertainty.

cw: Definitely, because people don't want to be confronted with what they don't know. Often they are going to church for comfort, which I understand. They don't want something that is going to hold them in a place of tension, they want something that can help relieve the tension they're already experiencing. Yet Christ was a man of sorrows. People

2. Speaking of the works of abstraction in the Whitney Biennial exhibition, curator Adrienne Edwards writes, “These works . . . remind us of the impossibility of order in the world and ask us to get right with that uncertainty.” Adrienne Edwards, “The Alchemy of Issues,” *Quiet as It's Kept*, edited by Jennifer MacNair Stitt and Beth Turk. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2022. Exhibition catalog.

in scripture are consistently living hard lives of misfortune, struggle, violence, and disappointment. We have to have a mature discourse of faith that acknowledges and embraces that. Welcoming more abstraction, with its uncertainty and ambiguity, in our visual art can be part of that embrace.

At the same time, however, we have to be careful, as people of faith, that abstraction is employed in ways that are complementary to discipleship. Abstraction's "resistance" and "withholding" can be used for exclusionary purposes, to obscure or conceal. It can become hegemonic and authoritarian. The key is to use abstraction to open things up. Comparing representation in artmaking to representation in government, verisimilitude relies on a single perspective, suggesting a singular, fixed locus of representative authority, like a monarch. On the other hand, used properly, abstraction can be about a distribution of representative and interpretive agency, which is more egalitarian and democratic. Managing that aspect of representation in abstraction so that it aligns with the gospel's spirit of inclusive generosity requires intentionality and self-reflection.

MOH: You mentioned that abstraction is used to make meaning within religious traditions. Where do you see abstraction already happening within LDS culture and doctrine?

cw: Ritual and scriptural language are two important places. The temple encompasses a great deal of abstraction, especially as symbolism, in the ordinances and observances and the architecture. A lot of people bemoaned the old Provo temple over the years, but I always loved it as an instance of the symbolism of temple architecture being taken to another level. If you're not familiar with it, the building was designed, as I understand, to represent a cloud with a pillar of fire coming out of it, a reference to God's guidance of the children of Israel through the wilderness. Rather than focusing on "Is this temple beautiful?" the question in building it seems to have been "Can the structure be charged with

the same kind of symbolic significance as the ordinances that happen inside?” It was less about being attractive or pleasant and more about being meaningful.

My family just went to the Washington DC Temple open house a few weeks ago, and while I was there I noticed the gorgeous medallions on the front gates and doors of the temple. Obviously, they’re not abstract expressionist, but they are radically geometric, very stylized distillations of the incredible cosmological theology we learn about in the temple. I thought they were very powerful. During the same visit, I sat in the celestial room and looked at the new chandelier, which is a stack of repeating, gradually increasing (or diminishing) eight-pointed stars. That chandelier is a place where we have something like abstraction—an essentialized rather than mimetic representation—operating in a profound way in the temple, making present a body of light. And, of course, all the Masonic symbolism of the compass and the square, etc., ties in with notions of abstraction and languages of meaning-making. So I think the temple is potentially fruitful ground for abstract art because so much abstraction is already there—you’re just walking through it and participating in it rather than seeing it hung on the walls.

I’ve also been thinking about abstraction in relation to Christ as a figure, his role as a mediator and in the Atonement. If we think about language as abstraction and Christ as “the Word”—which I always find a really generative way of thinking about Christ—just as language aids me in mediating between myself the world, Christ is a point of mediation, a fulcrum for a relationship between my local, sinful experience and something I’m not currently capable of fully conceptualizing or understanding, i.e., a complete expression of God. Christ is the operative point of abstraction and semiotics between my consciousness and the bigger truth that is divine reality.

In the LDS Church, and really in most of contemporary Christianity, there’s also an interesting tension between our doctrines of Christ and our mainstream representations of Christ—both how we talk about

him and how we depict him in our arts. We have popularized an image of Christ that is relatable and legible, probably because that feels comfortable and convenient. And, of course, in the most profound sense, he is a source of comfort and he does relate to us. But if you look at the New Testament narrative, Christ is a constant source of frustration and vexation, even to his own disciples, and his message is often misunderstood and opaque. He speaks abstractly and in parables. Within the Restoration, we know that Christ looks and acts like Heavenly Father, so in that sense it's tempting to think of him in terms of naturalistic representation and realism. But in the time and place of his earthly ministry, he scandalized his community by his *failure* to represent—his failure to reflect back their observational values and what they perceived as their political, spiritual, and social realities. He didn't look like the God they knew or the Messiah they expected. In many ways, he was illegible and inscrutable. And he remains, insofar as we really try to take up the cross, a scandal and inconvenience to us today.³ All the uncertainty and occlusion we experience in trying to move through him toward our heavenly parents and our larger divine destiny offer incredible models of abstraction. Languages of representation in our visual culture or music that could be patterned after that same kind of intensive abstraction could be a really important part of truth-telling. Not just telling the truth, but of telling truthfully.

Unfortunately, somewhere along the line, there was this feeling that visual languages should be adding clarity rather than acting as an extension of the profound abstraction that is already happening within our theology and our lived praxis of religion. So we looked to our visual

3. As the Reverend Katherine Sonderegger has said, “[Christ was] a teacher, yes, but one who filled his disciples with fear and silenced his opponents, so that none dared to ask him anything more. This Emmanuel offended us; offends us still. He is inconvenient to us. And his ways are strange.” Henry Center, “Katherine Sonderegger—Karl Barth on Human Dignity in a Natural World,” YouTube video, Aug. 6, 2018, 1:00:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9TBm8OSGmY>.

culture to sort of buttress against the potential for chaos rather than looking for systems of visual representation that could speak to the complexities of faith.

MOH: So if you're staying with the Jesus art, what you'd like to see is maybe art that is figurative but hints at the unknowability of God or the effort to understand? Rather than a series of paintings in which his hair is consistently the same length, he's consistently the same height, and with the same facial features and complexion. The story we tell when our paintings of Jesus all look the same is that we have essentially captured his essence, as if the mainstream art we have now can say, "We've got him."

cw: I think we do ourselves a disservice whenever we put out that "we've got him" energy. It's hard because culturally, as Mormons, we have developed a conventional language of certainty: like the "I know that . . ." when we share our testimonies. We seem to take that same approach in artistic work, where we want it to create a zone of clarity and certainty. I understand why that can be helpful and reassuring. But I think art can also be reassuring by acknowledging, and in that sense validating, the perplexing nature of what we're actually experiencing. The "we've got it all figured out" narrative can be gratifying in a short-term setting, but it doesn't offer a real counterpart to what we're experiencing in this mortal journey. I don't think we have to totally flip the script, just open up to artwork that is a little more nuanced, a little more reflective of the complexity of real life. There is visual work that is earnest in its intent to support and promote faith but within that intention maintains the freedom to acknowledge these other things we've been talking about.

For myself, I don't know exactly what that would look like. It's hard to imagine walking in and seeing a nonrepresentational image above a floral couch in one of our existing foyers. I like to think that's achievable, but it would start with grassroots efforts that we make to

prepare the cultural landscape for that move. And it would probably also require some redecorating.

MOH: What do those efforts from members look like?

cw: In terms of preparing the cultural landscape, as a people it means being more omnivorous in our cultural consumption and being less anxious and guarded in meeting the world. It means being more open to the future of the gospel as a pluralistic space. I think we are seeing a shift in that direction. We need to be more thoughtful and proactive about education in our own cultural spaces. I find that there is a tendency among Church members who are educated in the arts, who are a little more “in the world,” to kind of wag their fingers and be disappointed with their fellow members—and to sometimes frame themselves in oppositional terms to the general Church culture. Rather than taking a condescending attitude with ward members who are not interested in your life in the arts, find ways of making it relatable and interesting to them. You can do that without dumbing it down. In the art world, we talk about nurturing and supporting emerging artists; we need to assume the same nurturing attitude toward emerging audiences and be willing to take on a greater stewardship in relationship to those audiences.

The art economy is driven by elitism. It’s a prestige economy, particularly at the top. That mindset, of the sanctified connoisseurs of art standing in opposition to the ignorant masses, of the washed versus the unwashed, ends up trickling down through the entire art ecosystem. It grows out of an unfortunate economic reality, but then it ends up toxifying the general culture of art because people farther down the food chain parrot the kind of relationship to mass culture they see modeled at the top. We have to be self-aware and root that out in ourselves. We can be committed to our educated, “elevated” values in art—the things we’ve been trained to appreciate—without being disdainful toward the people and cultural products that don’t subscribe to that standard.

MOH: I had a great experience with this after I curated an exhibit about art depicting Heavenly Mother for the Center Gallery in New York City in early 2022. The Young Women leader in my ward heard about the exhibit and asked me to lead an activity with the young women in which I showed them some of the art and we discussed it. I deliberately chose some abstract, nonrepresentational art that would be outside of their comfort zone, but with some explanation about the artist's background and intent, they were able to at least appreciate the value of it, even if they didn't fully understand or embrace it.

cw: That's such a wonderful example of audience stewardship. You provided a safe space where those young women could ask questions and explore art that was new to them. Those are the kind of conversations that cumulatively can make incremental change. Art exhibits give space for discussions that require more time and lateral room than a ten-minute sacrament meeting talk affords. Not everyone is going to be in love with the same kind of intensely wacky art that I'm in love with. I'm okay with that. But I do think there's much to be gained by opening up the discourse, especially within that model of ministering—meeting people wherever they are and sharing and teaching and encouraging and listening.

MOH: If you were designing a chapel or a *Come, Follow Me* manual and could choose any Mormon artists to include, who would you choose? What would your ideal look like?

cw: As far as a chapel, I don't know if I can answer that in a way that would be helpful because my ideal chapel would probably look like an early Anselm Kiefer—those austere, mythic, rough-plank interiors he was painting back in the 1970s, like his piece *Nothung* (1973). I think we probably need different chapels before we can have really different art.

I don't really have expectations other than didactic content for settings like *Come, Follow Me*. If I were designing the manual, I would still

lean more heavily on artwork that is depictive, still representational but probably a little more stylized and expressive. I'd look for images that are faithful but that also have layers of emotional uncertainty. I'd want them to perform a grounding, comforting function, but grounding in something rigorous and honest—in the contest of faith.

My ideal doesn't start out in *Come, Follow Me* or in our chapel decor—I'm not sure where, how, or to what extent it would come into those spaces. It exists principally in other spheres of discourse and in other kinds of supporting structures. I would love to see a small museum or gallery with a serious commitment to contemporary work, curated by someone with real sensitivity and discernment in both aesthetic and spiritual concerns, doing that heavy lifting to build bridges between excellent art and the broader Mormon population. It's hard for me to imagine what kind of tectonic moves would have to happen in the corporate space of the Church to change its official artistic choices. I think it's more about the individual moves that happen in supplemental spaces. Moves made by people who want to bridge the gap and expand the cultural arena of the Church rather than challenge or supplant it.

The ability to engage in abstract thought is considered a measure or indicator of intelligence. Intelligence is the glory of God, and, along with discernment, judgment, and education, something toward which we aspire and strive as members of the Church. Abstraction in art is an acquired taste, but so is the book of Isaiah—acquired in the sense that it requires training, guidance from experts, effort, and investment before it's really going to open up to you and be a delight. LDS theology includes a provision that the degree of understanding we reach in this life will be to our advantage in the next. Grappling with abstract thought and imagery is a way to elevate our thinking and to compound and extend meaning. Not all principles of development and progression we experience on earth are scalable to the way we will continue to develop eternally, but if there's a connection for *us* between intelligence,

education, and the ability to think abstractly, we have to imagine that God has a capacity—and appreciation—for a fullness of abstraction that is unknowable to us here and now. So perhaps a more rigorous engagement with abstract concepts in theology and art may introduce us to thinking on an eternal order.

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Hayley Labrum Morrison, "Wanton Eyes."
36" x 18". Oil on panel. 2022.



Hayley Labrum Morrison,
"Vain Imaginations." 12" x 18".
Watercolor, spray paint, and
oil paint on paper mounted
on cradled panel. 2022.



Hayley Labrum Morrison,
"Is There No Other Way?"
24" x 18". Oil on panel. 2022.



Hayley Labrum Morrison,
"The Light That Is In Their Eyes."
24" × 18". Oil on Panel. 2022.



Hayley Labrum Morrison, "Hearken."
16" x 20". Oil, marbled paper,
watercolor, and spray paint on paper
mounted on cradled panel. 2020.



Hayley Labrum Morrison,
"And the Veil Was Taken." 16" x 20".
Watercolor monoprint, spray paint, oil paint,
and acrylic paint on paper. 2019.

ARTISTS

DAWN DAVIS-LIM migrated to Australia from England as a young adult. She worked as an intuitive artist before graduating with honors in art from Federation University. Her work has been collected across the globe, and she is the recipient of numerous awards for her Daoist-inspired, abstract work. She lives a peaceful, creative, spiritual life with her husband, Chai, in Avoca, Victoria.

HAYLEY LABRUM MORRISON {art@hayley.com} (she/her) is an interdisciplinary artist from Salt Lake City, Utah living and working in Austin, Texas. Morrison's recent solo exhibitions include *Tinkling Ornaments* at Martha's Contemporary and *Of(f) the Body* at Dougherty Arts Center. She also co-curated *Howdy, Stranger*, a forty-artist exhibition at FOUNDRY for the 2021 Austin Studio Tour. She created and co-runs the ongoing critique group Crit Nites, and co-founded concept animals in 2020. See more of her work at www.hayley.co or follow her on Instagram @hayleylabrummorrison.