

# CANADIAN MENNONITE

## "Pop-Mennonite Surrealism"

by Dr. Ilse E. Friesen

Arts & Culture, Volume 9, No. 10 May 16, 2005

With his Pop-Mennonite series of paintings and drawings, Indiana artist Don Swartzentruber shatters any notion of an idyllic concept the general public might have concerning the Old Order Mennonite and Amish people. He portrays the shortcomings of his own ethnic community, confronting and even caricaturing their systemic problems and troubling aspects, so that sins, temptations and depravities are not only characteristic of the secular world outside.

Over the past decades, tokens of American mass culture have infiltrated the largely isolated world of these rural religious groups. These alienating elements of the popular cultural climate are represented by the artist in the form of “pop” icons taken from cartoons or comic strips. These figures appear in the artist’s drawings and paintings at odd angles, in jarring positions and in overlapping configurations alongside his images of “old-fashioned” community life and moralizing family traditions—with often startling effects.

A rather revealing—and disturbing—portrayal is called *Mennonite Jesus: A Publishers Perspective*. Swartzentruber depicts Jesus as a dark-bearded and ordinary-looking white male. His large head is encircled by a headband of twisted rope instead of a crown of thorns, while he seems lost in gloomy meditation, chewing on a large stalk of grain. Jesus rests his child-like body on “a Stonehenge of hay bales,” with each bale featuring a grotesquely grinning or shouting mouth. Could this be the artist’s irreverent way of suggesting that “the stones will cry out” when humans fail to recognize the divine image?

In his drawing *What's Up Menno*, for example, a figure of Bugs Bunny has been inserted into an otherwise conservative portrayal of Menno Simons. In this surprising way, the cheerful rabbit is contrasted with the cheerless founder of the Mennonites. Bugs stands triumphant on the beard of Menno, pushing his hand irreverently against the preacher's forehead. Both the old-fashioned preacher and the contemporary rabbit have their large incisors exposed—Menno in order to sink his teeth into a small book, symbolic of his intense piety to devour the scriptures (with allusions to Revelation 10:9), and Bugs to exhibit his voracious appetite to chew his carrot. In this jarring juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular, Menno's tongue offers only doctrine, while Bugs Bunny, as the jester, suggests—rather dubiously—a remedy to “life's monotony and melancholy.”

Despite a general Anabaptist prohibition of portraiture as an art form, Swartzentruber—in his 2002 *Self Portrait: The Grotesque Facing the Sublime*—portrays himself with a large balding head and a sober, self-confident facial expression. He is dressed in the traditional plain coat that he had inherited from his grandfather, a common item of clothing that gives him the appearance of a respected community elder. By placing himself in a central position in this work, the artist deliberately ignores an ancient tradition, deriving perhaps a sense of gratification by breaking the ban. There seems to be no sense of guilt or remorse on the artist's part, unless the absence of caring and sensitive human hands—replaced by a pitchfork and axe—can be seen as self-condemnation, as if the very making of images of art can be counted among the other destructive human activities that have already depleted the earth's resources.

On various occasions Don Swartzentruber has both verbally and visually expressed his troubled relationship to his own church and community, as we learn from the commentaries that accompany the work on his website gallery. One wonders if such a dark confessional art, exacerbated by elements of pop culture and surrealist nightmares, yields a more honest perspective of Old Order life. Or are such images a pessimistic—even embittered—reflection of a very private bias, so that the artist is not only “seeing through a glass darkly,” but through a broken mirror?

Ilse E. Friesen, PhD, is professor of art history and coordinator of fine arts at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario and author of *The Female Crucifix: Images of St. Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages*, and *Visions of Earth, Heaven and Hell: Art of William Kurelek*.

© Canadian Mennonite