

Pop Goes the Mennonite: Conversations with an Artist and His Work



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By Vicki Sairs

(Unless otherwise indicated, the quotes in the following article are compiled from e-mail and phone conversations with Don.) **Bugs Bunny meets our Anabaptist forefather** - I stared at my computer monitor and thought, "Whoa! Look at that. I wonder what this guy's thinking?" On the screen was a drawing of Menno Simons. A tiny open book stuck out of his mouth in place of a tongue, and a world-famous cartoon rabbit stood on our poor brother's outstretched beard. Bugs Bunny rested a casual paw against Menno's forehead and chomped on a carrot, insouciant as ever. The picture was titled "What's Up, Menno?" and that's pretty much what I was asking myself: "What's up with this?"

Clicking from one image to the next in the online art gallery, I found myself drawn into the surreal world of the artist behind the pictures - Don Swartzentruber. It is not a world for the faint of heart, but I've learned some things by visiting it.

I've learned, for instance, not to form hasty conclusions when viewing this artist's work. His images have been called bizarre, grotesque, and disturbing, and they often are. But they are that way for a reason. "The work I create is not to shock and not to offend," says Swartzentruber. Rather, he is trying to create a "narrative that will have an impact." He wants to give people something "to wrestle with."

A believer in the Socratic method, he wants viewers of his work to question their "dogmas, traditions, personal history, and worldview." Swartzentruber cites Rosedale Bible College (RBC) faculty emeritus Elmer Jantzi as an example of someone who could get his students to think critically. "Elmer Jantzi was great at the Socratic method. He would just stand up there with a big grin on his face and ask questions...."

Carrying that method of teaching into the world of art is risky. In the hands of a lesser artist, the work could become preachy. It is far from that, and viewers might even find themselves longing for a little more clarity and reassurance that their world is not really as dangerous a place as it appears to be in the Pop-Mennonite exhibit.

Swartzentruber runs another risk. His art grapples with faith issues, yet does not spell out easy answers. This leaves him open to misinterpretation. "At first glance," he says, "some may find the commentary coarse, but as the images are processed you will see my bias towards the culture and traditions that I grew up in." He has wisely included commentary with his pictures, pointing the viewer in the right direction to decode his intentions.

A little background - Before venturing further into Swartzentruber's unsettling artistic universe, let's do a little homework. Who is this guy who wants to shake us up and make us think?

Don lives with his wife and two young sons in Winona Lake, Indiana. His credentials include an M.F.A in Visual Art from Vermont College of Norwich University, a period of focused study under Disney animator Milt Neil, and numerous grants and awards for instruction and studio practice. Swartzentruber exhibits nationally, teaches art at Grace College and is a tenured visual art instructor with Warsaw Schools. Although he grew up in a Conservative Mennonite Conference congregation and spent a term at RBC in 1990, Don and his family now attend a nondenominational church. "My not attending a Mennonite church should not be viewed as a negative statement ... toward this denomination. I still hold to many Mennonite interpretations of Scripture. As an artist I work from source material that I know and have experienced."

Some of that source material will be familiar terrain for anyone who's been a part of the Mennonite world. Pop-Mennonite features pieces that touch on nonresistance, excommunication, plain dress, and foot washing, but it addresses these and other issues in a broader context. Swartzentruber is asking us to think about what we can "learn about faith and community from a critique of conservative Mennonite culture."

It is difficult even to attempt to live a holy life - we dwell in human flesh and live in a world that wars against such an effort. Yet the history of the Mennonite church is one of people who have tried to take discipleship seriously. The artist says, "This was a group who attempted very deliberately to make all daily activities and rituals holy. Was the overall objective honorable and worthy of consideration?"

Clearly, he thinks it was - why else devote an entire exhibit to the question? His artistic eye does not let any of the obvious pitfalls of Anabaptist excess go undetected. For example, in "Mennonite Jesus - A Publisher's Perspective," he responds to a request by a publisher, years ago, to depict Jesus with short hair and no mustache. The oil painting shows Jesus resting on hay bales, dressed like a farm hand, with a straw in his mouth and no mustache on his face. The hay bales are in a Stonehenge pattern, and they are shouting - the artist's way of saying "the stones will cry out" at the narrowness of such a request. In his commentary on the picture, Swartzentruber says, "The black flamed candles [in the picture's foreground] suggest that God's mystical presence prevails, even when the Son of God is caricatured."

Yet he doesn't want to let us off the hook, seeing only the deficiencies in an approach to spirituality that sometimes made the way more pinched than narrow. We need to look at the whole picture and think clearly about our collective past and future. "Pop-Mennonite sets aside time to discuss how we have assimilated into popular culture," says Swartzentruber. "How has it been a positive experience, and where have we given up traditions for something far less valuable?"

The artist doesn't let the larger culture off the hook, either. He's on a mission to critique what he calls our culture's absorption in triviality, and uses images from his conservative upbringing to challenge today's "comfortably compartmentalized" spirituality. But of course, he's an artist, and his work doesn't yield clear meaning at first glance. It would be easy to give this exhibit a cursory

look and conclude that he was just making fun of Mennonites. And some viewers might be offended by the harshness of the imagery and the occasional use of nudity.

Wrestling with Socrates - Going back to Bugs and Menno, let's try to answer the artist's question by rephrasing it: what's up, Mennonites? We live in a culture dominated by the media and entertainment icons; Bugs Bunny serves as a kind of court jester, helping us laugh at folly and giving us some relief from the daily tedium of plowing through life. Comedy is good, but what happens when the balance is lost - when life becomes a chasing after laughter and escapist entertainment? In his commentary, Swartzentruber says that entertainment "has become the new Western religion. We even want our news to be audacious and attractive. In postmodern culture the threat to spiritual ignorance is not atheism, but rather the addiction to active and voyeuristic play."

Mennonites, represented by Menno and his book of a tongue, actually have something of value to say to this culture about its restless search for fulfillment. Have we thought lately about what that might be? And do we know how to say it in a way that can be heard amid all the sound bites and empty noise? What's up, Mennonites?

The alarming piece "Pop Tart" elaborates the same theme, with some terrible twists. A horrified family watches as their young son is seduced by a soulless entertainment machine that feeds the child literal waste, excreted by a demonic Mickey Mouse. Being the big fan of Disneyland that I am, I found this picture hard to take. I asked Don if he really thought Mickey Mouse was that evil. He laughed, and explained that his point was simply, "How much more should we look for something better?" In an e-mail, he said: "The painting 'Pop Tart' describes a boy choosing between the spiritual nourishment of his Mennonite family or the frivolity that entertainment offers. I spent most of my childhood without access to television, film and many other forms of popular culture. But I longed for its promise of delight, only to find it unsubstantial. As adults, my wife and I have spent the past nine years without watching broadcasted TV in our home. The church found it divisive, and it is ironic that something I held in such high regard as a child, as an adult, I opt away from."

He doesn't want to go back to the days when entertainment was forbidden; he just wants us to think about what we're doing with our freedom.

Quilting the sky -- One of Swartzentruber's gentler images is "The Mission Field." Its warm greens and blues evoke a peaceful agrarian scene: a Mennonite family walks along a narrow path that winds through fields so soft and verdant you want to run your fingers through them. The family crosses a covered bridge - made out of a bonnet! - and never turns around to look at the cheerful barn and protective windmill standing watch on the hills in the background. Swartzentruber's commentary is fascinating, dwelling on the positive aspects of Mennonite culture ("The advantage that Mennonite evangelism has in North America is that it does not regard forfeiting mainstream American culture as a substantial loss"), but I love this picture because of the sky - it's quilted! I've never seen a better metaphor for the profound desire for order among my Anabaptist brothers and sisters.

But the picture that brought me to my emotional knees, the one that will not let me go, is "Excommunication: The Trickle Down Effect." In it, a very young boy is trapped upside-down and

headfirst in his Sunday morning pew, his naked body exposed to the members of the congregation, who look on in attitudes of sympathy, suspicion, and even disgust. The little boy's upper body protrudes through the back of the pew, and he clutches his head and weeps as the pew transforms into a cruel monster that won't leave him alone.

Swartzentruber was a little boy when his father was excommunicated, and this picture is a testimony to the pain and turmoil of that time in his life. "That one by far is the most autobiographical," he says. And yet, his father still attends the same church. "That's where my father found God and that's where my family went....It taught me a lot because he's not bitter and resentful."

I've rarely seen humiliation and vulnerability so effectively portrayed. It's a haunting painting. Other notable works in the exhibit are "The Conscientious Objector," "Just As I Am," and "The Last Veiled Feminist" (look for the angel wings in that one).

What's up, Don? - Although the Pop-Mennonite exhibit is no longer on display in Goshen, the artist says it was very well received and he plans to submit it to other venues. His stated goal was to create "a window, a doorway to dialogue about these issues," and judging from the responses posted in his guest book, he succeeded. Here's a small sample: "Wonderful, provocative and principled. I'll be back"; "Very interesting and thought provoking!"; "Scary, but true"; "Deep thoughts, well conveyed"; "Touched the nerve. Well done!"; and "Back for a second look." Not everyone was pleased: "This is stupid and sick."

For some, the jury was still out: "Still thinking." After talking with Don and viewing his artwork, I'm sure he's pleased with that response.