



## **"Mennonite Art Display Depicts Rural Life in New Light"** by Matt McClure

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For those who know Mennonite culture and even those who don't, chances are you've noticed their simplistic presence among rural America landscapes. Some dress in plain clothes similar to the Amish while others are simply passive in their way of life. Yet by assuming this much about American Mennonite sub-culture, popular culture shuns any further knowledge or insight, and uses pleasant ignorance to explain their simplistic reality. Even homeless beggars are acknowledged more often than the Mennonites. So, while the subject matter might be considered something rather dull and even a bit plain, the collection of drawings, paintings, and audio that make up the "Pop-Mennonite" collection boasts a relatively unique surrealistic look at a part of society often overlooked.

Artist Don Swartzentruber tackles this subject by creating a plethora of paintings and drawings that contain visual and emotional elements that stem from his own upbringing. While onlookers may assume that Swartzentruber is taking pot shots at the Mennonite community, he wants to make it very clear he is not.

"Mennonite family and friends will always hold a very special place in my heart" said Swartzentruber, "and in many regards I will always be Mennonite. It is my desire to encourage dialogue, not discord, with this exhibit."

Swartzentruber also said, "Mennonites depicted...are regarded as old order by the larger Mennonite conference, especially in regard to costume, since nonconformity in attire has become a dead issue for many Mennonite groups."

For those unfamiliar with his work, Swartzentruber's paintings often have bold

and colorful surrealistic landscapes vaguely similar to Salvador Dali. However, the paintings remain unique in their darkly cartoon-like figures. While Pop Mennonite boasts such paintings, it also boasts several drawings and comic book covers that rework the cartoon characters of popular culture (such as Bugs Bunny, The Flintstones, The X-Men, and Mickey Mouse) into various scenes of Mennonite life and the spiritual, emotional, and sociological issues that arise. These clever and illuminating drawings go very nicely with the bulk of the collection yet do not carry the honesty of the standout paintings. For example, *Excommunication* depicts the "voyeuristic" thrill religious people have towards those shunned by their religious family, and *The Conscientious Objector* poses the question of who is the greater villain, the rapist or the husband who does nothing to stop him. Both carry a heavy narrative weight since they stem from a very honest place in the artist's own mind. Similar to Steven Spielberg's drama *Schindler's List*, Swartzentruber moves beyond his beautiful use of potent colors in two pieces, opting instead to lull the audience into the imagery with fog-like grays, potent white, and an often subtle, yet very stark use of red. This use of limited color gives the collection a sense of melancholy that propels the viewer further in.

The most subtle element of the collection is an audio soundtrack which plays in a continuous loop of remixed quotes from Mennonite sermons, hymns, and some very simplistic music. While some might find such a contribution to be forceful and pretentious, as a whole it adds a third layer to the exhibit through both visual and spoken word imagery. "Originally, my intentions were to appropriate Mennonite congregational singing for the background of Pop-Mennonite exhibits" said Swartzentruber, but over time "the project evolved into something much larger, and in my opinion, just as expressive as the two-dimensional work." The danger then comes into play with interpretation. Some schools of thought believe that art is interpreted by the audience alone, while others believe it is the artist's responsibility to guide the viewer into his thought process and personal narrative. The incorporation of audio into such a surrealistic collection of art gives the exhibit, as a whole, the rudder needed to steer onlookers into each piece. "I view all the voices on the project as sacred manifestations of spiritual practitioners," said Swartzentruber. "While some may feel the work [has] been edited to make jest or to project a dark tone to the Mennonite faith, this was not my intention when making this soundtrack, or any of the artwork. This sound track gives opportunity for practicing Mennonites to preach to their 'outsider' audience.

As one who grew up in, but has since moved away from the Mennonite church, I find the work nostalgic, inspirational, and a tremendous source for critiquing my own worldview." While Don Swartzentruber is known on Grace Campus for teaching print-making and water color, the exhibit is currently on display at Goshen College and will run through December 9.