



THE GOSHEN NEWS

"Pop-Mennonite Exhibit Premieres at Goshen College"

By Jodi H. Beyeler

GOSHEN, Ind. - Through often surprising drawings and paintings that juxtapose images of traditional Mennonite culture with images from American popular culture, artist Don Swartzentruber has a lot to say about his upbringing.

Swartzentruber grew up in a Conservative Mennonite church in Delaware immersed in a religious culture that valued strict separation from popular society, with rigid rules and the highest standards surrounding proper attire, entertainment, modes of transportation, church attendance and modern conveniences. "A myriad of culture issues - from women's head coverings, to the legitimacy of a wedding ring, to television ownership - has echoed through my childhood formation," he said.

When Swartzentruber was five years old, his father was excommunicated from the church, and the rejection and judgment in that experience was passed unconsciously from one generation to the next - eventually leading him to "step outside of the Mennonite world enough to be critical," Swartzentruber said. The result is the premiere of the exhibit "Pop-Mennonite," which will open on Oct. 16 with a reception from 2 to 4 p.m. in the Goshen College Library Gallery, and will run through Dec. 9. The exhibit - which shows influences from Regionalist artists

like Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton to Disney animation - includes oil paintings, drawings and collages of comic books and old church bulletins that portray Disney characters and Old Order Mennonite subjects juxtaposed to prompt viewers to consider ways that American popular culture has had an impact on Mennonite religious and community culture. An audio accompaniment to the art will be available in the gallery, which blends preaching and traditional Mennonite music selections.

Swartzentruber - a descendant of the first Amish bishop in the United States - has come to realize that the intentions behind the excommunication of his father weren't malicious. "I don't feel any animosity and I have great respect and affection for the conservative Mennonite community. The turbulent and nurturing events of childhood were instrumental in my artistic and spiritual formation. Mennonite family and friends will always hold a very special place in my heart and in many regards, I will always be Mennonite." As a young adult, Swartzentruber left his Mennonite community in Delaware to study animation under a Disney artist, whose influences can now be seen in "Pop-Mennonite." He studied ethics for a semester at Rosedale Bible College, a Conservative Mennonite school in Plain City, Ohio, and went on to receive a bachelor's degree from Grace College and a master's of fine arts degree from Vermont College of Norwich University. Swartzentruber, now a resident of Winona Lake, Ind., has taught art at Grace College, Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne and Warsaw High School.

"Despite a knee-jerk reaction against cultural isolationism and church authority, I have found many spiritual answers in nearby theological pastures. It is my intention to encourage dialogue, not discord," Swartzentruber said. "The images are admittedly a little graphic, but they are never inappropriate and are always done in context." Professor of History John D. Roth, a member of the Mennonite-Amish Museum Committee, said, "I hope that visitors will spend time reflecting on the descriptive captions that Swartzentruber provides for the images. Behind the initial surprise of the visual image is a deep appreciation for the core values of the Mennonite tradition, and a thoughtful critique of how easily these convictions can be cheapened or assimilated by pop culture." Swartzentruber hopes that Mennonite audiences ask, "How has [the church's assimilation into pop culture] been a positive experience and where have we given up traditions for something far less valuable?" At the same time, the exhibit is also a challenge to persons outside of

the Mennonite faith and tradition. "Our culture at large is absorbed in triviality. Most materialistic Americans are keeping scores with large mortgage payments and wide screen televisions," Swartzentruber said. "What can we learn about faith and community from a critique of conservative Mennonite culture? This was a group who attempted very deliberately to make all daily activities and rituals holy. Despite some extremism, was the overall objective honorable and worthy of consideration?"

An online gallery of "Pop-Mennonite," including descriptions of the artwork and the artist, can be found at: www.swartzentruber.com. Swartzentruber is encouraging visitors to his Web gallery and to the exhibit at Goshen College to contribute to an ongoing dialogue about the artwork through an online blog on this Web site. The Library Gallery, located on the lower level of the Wilma and Harold Good Library on the campus of Goshen College, is open from 7:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday, noon to 6 p.m. Saturday and 1 to 11 p.m. Sunday. The exhibit is sponsored by the Mennonite-Amish Museum Committee, the Mennonite Historical Library and the Indiana Arts Commission.

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