



# Anabaptist World

Mennonite news, inspiring stories

## "Art's Oddity, A Critique of Old Order Culture" by Robert Rhodes

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Artist presents visual critique, with humor and context, of his native plain culture. Weird. Disturbing. Bizarre. Don Swartzentruber is probably used to the litany of back-handed adjectives used to describe his accomplished and visionary, if decidedly difficult, art. Others, however, especially those who come from a similar Old Order background as Swartzentruber, might also add "offensive" to the mix. But the artist is ready for that, too.

Swartzentruber, who grew up in a Conservative Mennonite Conference home and now teaches and makes his eclectic art in Winona Lake, Ind., recently completed a cycle of paintings called "Pop-Mennonite." The collection, which offers a visual critique of Old Order culture, while juxtaposing it with popular comic book imagery, also includes a soundtrack featuring snippets of Anabaptist hymns and tent sermons. The paintings, which show influences ranging from regionalist painters Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton to Disney animation, feature a variety of Old Order subjects and scenes presented with surreal twists.

The collection will be on exhibit at Goshen, Indiana College's Good Library Oct. 16-Dec. 9, sponsored by the Mennonite-Amish Museum Committee and the Mennonite Historical Library. Swartzentruber said many of the images in the collection come from his childhood in Delaware, inspired in part by the excommunication of his father when the artist was young. "The excommunication helped me step back from the culture a bit," Swartzentruber said June 20. "I don't feel like I have any bitterness. I still feel a closeness [to Old Order culture], and my family continues to attend the same church, and my brother is on the ministerial team."

Though it may be critical of conservative Anabaptism, Swartzentruber believes the collection explores some bigger issues as well, including the human tendency to make God fit a particular description. "I have yet to come across any group of believers who have not tried to push Jesus into their own world view," Swartzentruber said. "I guess what I try to do is handle the work as honestly as I can. With an open spirit, hopefully people can see God through it." Swartzentruber, who teaches art at Grace College in Winona Lake and attends a nondenominational church with his wife and children, said he hopes the paintings will "open up dialogue" about conservative culture, even while broadening public perceptions about who Mennonites really are. Though he admits he has tried to make sense of the contradictions present in his native culture, Swartzentruber said, "I don't know that that's something I've managed to resolve. "I think I'm just as confused as when I started . . . [but] I won't revisit Mennonite culture in future work. I feel a closure to it, but the next work will have a spiritual dimension."

The Goshen exhibit will mark the public debut of "Pop-Mennonite." Viewers also can find it on the artist's Web site. Though it hasn't been seen by a large number of people yet, "Pop-Mennonite" has made an impression on some of those who have. In the May 16 *Canadian Mennonite magazine*, Ilse E. Friesen, an art history professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont., wrote: "[Swartzentruber] 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." Ervin Beck, a retired Goshen English professor who serves on the Mennonite-Amish Museum Committee, said while the collection critiques conservative society, it does so fairly and also emphasizes positive aspects. "It's a provocative exhibit, a provocative work, [but] I think there's also appreciative elements in it," Beck said. "It's the culture he came out of, so he knows it intimately. There's a lot of context there."

Above, "*What's Up Menno?*", one of the images from the "Pop-Mennonite" exhibit by artist Don Swartzentruber. Below, "*Self Portrait: The Grotesque Facing the Sublime*," featuring Swartzentruber wearing a plain Mennonite jacket. - Courtesy of Don Swartzentruber

Robert Rhodes is the Assistant Editor of *Mennonite Weekly Review*.

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