

## THE ABSURD IN ART AND MORMONISM

*This issue marks the first time that a Dialogue cover has ever had an LDS Church President riding on a dinosaur. Or a spiral jetty made of salt-water taffy. Or green jello stacked on a train. Utah artist Kent Christensen's remarkable triptych painting on our cover has all of these things and more. So much more. In June, Dialogue's art editor Andi Pitcher Davis sat down with the artist and two of the smartest critics we know—Rita Wright, director of the Springville Museum of Art, and Kristine Haglund, Dialogue editor emeritus—to discuss Kent Christensen's "Secrets of the Great Salt Lake."*

ANDI: I think that a lot of people, when they look at this painting, will see similarities with Hieronymous Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*, Just on the big, structural level, the painting seems to call out to Bosch, with three distinct panels and a lot of religious imagery mixed in with complicated symbols. Were you thinking about Bosch when you painted this?

KENT: Very much so. I saw this project as a way for me to have a conversation with Bosch's painting, which I first saw in Spain when I was twenty-two years old and have been obsessed with ever since. It is a brilliant piece of narrative painting, and a lot of the narrative is indecipherable. People have been trying to decode it forever. I don't want to tell a story that everyone gets as soon as they see it. I want them to really struggle with it and figure out what it means to them.

RITA: I see this very much as a creation story. I love how Kent has that primal cosmic mount coming out of the water. I don't know if any of this is intended. But when you do a myth-ritual reading, you do see much embedded here, as in Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. It is the creation. It's almost as though, if you put those two side parts of the triptych together, you would see what Bosch has there. You'd have an

earth that is just barely taking form, but is still just a void, and the waters. And then you open the panels up, and this is the world that you open up into that happens to be this place.

ANDI: I like the way that the painting plays with the sacred and the profane—even in its form. On the one hand, it looks like a sacred altarpiece. But on the other hand, it reminds me of those back-cover foldouts that we used to do every month in *Mad* magazine. This duality of the formal triptych composition plays with our contemporary worship of pop-culture iconography. In this way, Kent reflects a duality in Mormonism between doctrine and culture and the way that we sometimes give doctrinal status to phenomena that are really just part of the culture. Funeral potatoes as a sacrament.

RITA: It is so wickedly funny. That's what I keep coming back to. It's wickedly absurd, but it's also very endearing. There is something about each of these images that Kent found someplace in his heart and wanted to share.

ANDI: So, what exactly makes it absurd? I can see how Brigham Young on a dinosaur is absurd in the way that people normally use the term. But how does it fit into the philosophical or artistic concept of absurdity?

RITA: That's a really good question. In absurdist philosophy, the absurd arises out of the fundamental disharmony between the individual's search for meaning and the meaninglessness of the universe. Philosophers like Kierkegaard and Camus usually talk about three solutions to the problem of absurdity. First is suicide, which Camus calls the "one really serious philosophical problem." We can decide that there is no point to living a life without the possibility of meaning and simply choose to escape existence. The second solution is religion, or a belief in a transcendent realm, being, or idea. Even though we can't find meaning neatly packaged in the world, we can take what Kierkegaard called a "leap of faith" and make a conscious choice to believe in something transcendent. The third solution is to simply accept the absurd and continue to live in spite of it.

As I see it, Kent's painting gives us all three options. We can take the option in the right panel and just give in to the forces of death and

destruction. Or we can take the temple, or the statue, or other religious and cultural symbols and construct some kind of system that weaves everything else together into a coherent, transcendent system. Or we can just enjoy the images and the colors and the humor inherent in the painting for what they are.

KENT: I think that's right. I wanted to show images that don't always make sense rationally but that are beautiful nonetheless. I've always had trouble with people who say, "I don't believe in religion, or Mormonism in particular, just because there are things that can't be true—so much magic and mysticism that just doesn't make sense." Well so what? I went to Bali a couple of years ago. I was just so transfixed by their brand of Hinduism. It was just so beautiful, but a lot of it was absurd too. Mormonism has all of this messy stuff—stuff that doesn't make sense when you put it under a microscope. But you just have to look at it as something beautiful overall, as all part of a satisfying whole. I don't like to strip away the mysticism. I think it's really important to keep that in there.

KRISTINE: There is always a tension between mysticism and form. You have that at the beginning of Mormonism with Joseph Smith. In some ways, he was a radical mystic insisting on the possibility of personal connection with the divine. But he also insisted on loyalty and obedience, and he tried—not always successfully—to construct a form to contain his mystical experiences. Then you had Brigham Young, who was great at the form and lousy at the mysticism.

In the German form of absurdism, which I am most familiar with, the playfulness of absurdist art comes exactly at the moment when the forms cease to be able to contain the meaning that they used to be able to. You can see this in the painting too. You can see it in the railroad, which, in some ways, is a very simple form. It is rigid, and they eye kind of moves across this form. And then the spiral is also a form, but you are playing with it and you are undoing it and you're taking, you've got this sort of mystical experience, and these forms that are crumbling, but then reconstituting them in different ways.

ANDI: If you look at the art that is specifically labeled “absurd,” you see all kinds of strange things—melting clocks, men with apples for noses, and that sort of thing. But if you look at early Christian art, or Greek vases, or Neolithic cave paintings, you see strange things too. Why isn’t that earlier art called “absurd”?

KRISTINE: I think it might be that absurdism (as a deliberate construction) arises in a moment when strangeness isn’t just strange—it’s an existential threat. That is, the strangeness people encounter and imagine after the world wars is of a sort that makes ordinary, meaningful human existence seem alien and unattainable. Strangeness in a frame of normalcy is different from a world where everything is suddenly strange.

RITA: You know, that’s interesting. I’ve been preparing for education week, where I’m doing a session on the arrival of Christianity within the context of Classical art. And I love—absolutely love—when Jesus is depicted as a magician with his wand. And Kent’s work is so so similar. There is that sense of mystical thought; once it gets worked into an approved form, accepted by authorities, you start getting more rigid boundaries on those forms, and they become iconic, and the iconography is what carries forward, losing the meaning that it once entailed.

Now you compare that to doing temple art today. I’m telling you, there is nothing I do throughout the year that leaves me as confused and frustrated. I have to sit and listen while correlation people say things like, “You have to make sure, first of all, we’re not showing God the Father, but we want to show Jesus. And so, we sit there, and this gets back to talking about depictions of Jesus. In the medieval period, you could actually depict God the Father as a mortal. Sometimes, depictions of the Holy Trinity give a body to the Holy Ghost. And all this is wrestling with the nature of God through artistic representation. Kent’s piece would be the most productive kind of thing to have in the temple because you have to work for any meaning that you get, not that it would ever happen, but it’s interesting to consider if there ever might be a place for that kind of contemplative prompt, if not necessarily that style. It doesn’t just hand

you a correlated narrative with cross references to scriptures and General Conference talks. You have to wrestle with it and make the truths that it yields your own.

ANDI: I think you are trying to reconcile something important. Our principles are abstract. We have this deep, rich cosmology. Art, as I often say, is the Ikea instructions to our abstract principles. We have a God who is endless in variety and incredibly abstract, and yet we want to reduce that God to the few simplistic forms and religious stories that we already know so well.

When I grew up, I was a classical violist. I was playing a Bartok piece at home. It was this contemporary, broken music. And my dad came home, after a long day of work, and walked in and said: “Andi, from now on, you can only play music that I can whistle.” I think that we are too often looking for a God that we can whistle.

KRISTINE: But that isn’t always a bad thing, is it? Sometimes religious forms work best when they are simple. Intellectually, we like complexity because we are thinking people who like art and who like the mystical and like things exploding our forms. We want sophistication and complexity, so we can kind of make fun of “a god we can whistle.” That seems simplistic rather than simple. But because you mention whistling, I have an experience to share.

Several years ago, we had a stake conference. It snowed hard before the evening session, and right before the meeting started the power went down. So we had stake conference in the dark, which was amazing and magical. We had a musical number from one of the Spanish branches in our stake. Their choir was terrible in every Western musical sense that I know how to measure, but that night it was actually lovely. We were close to each other and intimate—hearing each other breathing in the dark—and it’s beautiful, even though it’s wildly out of tune. Then, during the last verse of the song, I heard a noise that I couldn’t place. I’ve heard them rehearse, and I know all the instruments they are using, but I just can’t identify the new noise. After about three measures, I realized that

they were whistling. The women were singing harmony, and the men were whistling. And it was gorgeous. They took these old hymns and these stodgy western musical parts, and it made them utterly magical.

So, I think there's this way that we need—humans can't cope with complexity and sophistication, and the mystical all the time. We just can't function. There's a way that these simple forms can become re-animated and enlivening. So I love the spiral because it gets at that sort of thing that happens where the simple all of a sudden becomes the most profound thing we are capable of.

ANDI: I've been kind of dancing around the question of perspective. When I look at the picture, what I see is a sort of "eye of God" view. I can just imagine Him sitting up in heaven and saying, "OK, well it's kind of darling. Look what they've done with it." Is this what you were going for? Or do you see this is the view from the inside out?

KENT: I think it's consciously trying to depict both of those things.

KRISTINE: The absurd depends entirely on our self-consciousness. You can't think about suicide and escape or any of those things if you're not aware of yourself from the outside. Because, animals don't commit suicide generally, apparently because they don't have that capacity to see themselves from the outside. It totally screws us up!

KENT: Yes, and for cultures, there is always a tension between the outside and the inside. This is what I was trying to show with the trains. The happy train is coming from the West, from California, and the scary train is coming from the East Coast. I saw this as a depiction of how Brigham Young handled influences coming in from other places. Some were embraced, a lot of them were not. Unfortunately, we embraced a lot of the negative things and not so much the positive things, so we are always retrenching. We build Salt Air because we don't want people going to those other, naughty beach-side resorts on the lake. We create ZCMI because we don't want people shopping with gentiles. We still haven't figured out what parts of the world we want to embrace and which parts we want to reject.

RITA: So When did you first decide you were going to put Brigham Young on the back of a dinosaur. This is probably the first thing that most people will see in the painting, and it is a central part of what makes it absurd? Did it come to you early or late in the process?

KENT: That was the first thing that I thought of: the dinosaurs, the temple, and Brigham Young.

RITA: Has your approach to that figure changed? Does it still represent what you felt was going on in that initial framing?

KENT: Yes, the main thing that I wanted to emphasize is the way that we Mormons mix up our history, our folklore, and our doctrine into kind of this one big stew of things that becomes inextricable after a certain point.

KRISTINE: Except for the things we leave out, like Brigham Young railing against pollution and destroying the environment We have conveniently forgotten about that.

RITA: I think that is a big part of the absurdity in our culture. Mormons came into the Salt Lake Valley saying, "We're going to change it. We're going to make it blossom as a rose." And then, we actually ended up doing harm. And this is where we are getting into Kierkegaard's version of absurdity. Are we absurd enough to think that we are really all there is, and that somehow we have this special connection to the divine? And we try to impose that perspective on the divine that is already in the creation.

ANDI: As I read this painting, one of the things that I keep going back to is the snake. This is such an incredibly powerful image, which takes us back to the Garden of Eden and the fall of Adam and Eve. But this snake loops back into the center panel, which if we map it onto Bosch, represents earthly delights. Could the fact that the snake loops back around be seen as an expression of hope? Yes, all will burn, but is there a hope that we can come back to a true celestial nature?

KENT: Yes, I wanted to connect the ideas of peril and hope in the same image. Living in the mountains, in a liminal space, I've noticed that when

you are right on the doorstep of global warming, you keep thinking, “Why doesn’t the Church realize that there is a problem about any number of issues until it has become almost too late?” And so here’s the coal fire, the smoke from the power plant, and the rattle shaking around the temple.

ANDI: So much for my optimism!

RITA: I actually see this as a very optimistic work. The optimism isn’t in the situation that the painting presents, but in the responses to the situation that the artist encourages. And I think that this is the key question with absurdism: “How do you approach the absurdity?” Do you approach it with hope? Or do you just adopt a nihilistic stance and say that nothing matters? I see this as being very hopeful.

KRISTINE: I think one of the things that characterizes absurdist art is slipperiness—that is, objects (or actions) slip out of the ordinary conceptual categories we use to assign meaning to things. It reminds me a little bit of the curse Samuel the Lamanite describes to the Nephites, when he says their treasures will become slippery, so that they cannot hold them. There’s a way in which that slipperiness might force you to pay attention, to really look at a thing and figure out how it works and what it’s for, to come up with a new container for whatever meaning is there. What I love most about Kent’s painting is that it takes some of the cultural and historical and even doctrinal riches of Mormonism and forces them out of the contexts and containers we’re used to. It opens up the possibility of seeing them without the cloudy lens of familiarity, figuring out what they really mean, learning how they might function in building Zion if we found new ways to hold and treasure them.