

# BASTARDIZATION THE ART OF JON SWIHART

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Jon Swihart has built a reputation based upon his quirky, impeccably crafted easel oil paintings. These privately intense, oblique masterpieces are firmly grounded in several other centuries yet remain decidedly modern. In a period characterized by the dredging up of revisionistic excess, Swihart's art remains unique to him. Where else can one locate such deftly wicked combinations as gilded plaster, Trecento-styled haloes, and 20th-century impressionist backgrounds; late-19th-century academic realism and the pop-ish, excessive delineation and elevation of the statures of everyday objects; and high renaissance compositions and the apparent sincerity of orthodox Christian devotional paintings? The critical establishment has a field day attempting to penetrate the realms of meaning beneath the sensuously perfect surface qualities of Swihart's paintings. But the artist refuses to title or to discuss the work in depth, simply attributing all of it to the workings of an "underground reservoir" somewhere in his mind.

The trappings of skill and honesty aside, an underlying tinge of perversity stains much of Swihart's work. His paintings have been examined as studies of genre, and yes, they are scenes from everyday life. But whose? The viewer witnesses extraordinary moments of apparently deep spiritual significance but is only mystified by typical Swihart scenes. Background: a Tuscan country landscape, replete with a palm tree bisected along its lineal axis by the picture plane at stage left. Midground: a Romanesque, hewn-wood shrine housing a golden idol obscured in shadow. Foreground: a girl in modern dress being administered to by a young woman and a Vietnam-era veteran, who is crowned with a headdress of carrots and holding a bunny-rabbit mask sceptre. What does it all mean? It is all right there for the taking but it remains intentionally unfathomable. "I like the real meanings to remain obscure," Swihart comments. "It's like revealing the inner workings of a magic trick. Once you know how it's done, the illusion is ruined. When I see the images originally in my mind's eye, I like the mystery surrounding them. It's usually when I'm working on them that I figure out what they're all about. I want the viewer to look at them and wonder, but never quite know, what's happening."

For the record, Swihart has more than 1,000 paintbrushes in his tool kit and lived for nine months in Monet's Giverny country house. A hypothesis has also been tossed around about Swihart's "serious intent" that stems from his boyhood interaction with the modernist master Stanton MacDonald-Wright and applies particularly to Swihart's landscape work. However, while it is true that both artists lived in close proximity to one another in the Santa Monica area for years, their relationship remained so distanced as to be virtually nonexistent.

It is more accurate to assert that the true importance of MacDonald-Wright, the founding father of the European synchronism movement, is that his persona influenced the entire region. Arguably, none of the sons and daughters of Swihart's era could possibly have lived in Santa Monica and not been exposed to some aspect of MacDonald-Wright's extended pattern of patronage. Armed with this overly thought-out theory, I asked Jon about his origins, and he related, "What turned me into an artist was that when I was a kid, my mom was terminally sick for a long time and eventually died. I was only a boy and I didn't know how to deal with it. And so I suddenly started painting. I think what I did was turn to art to try to process everything and to put my focus onto something. Also, we had very few children's books in the house, and one of the only books we had at all was the big "Janson History of Art" book. That was sort of my storybook; I'd look through it all the time and make up stories. I became fascinated with all the old master paintings. So I'd try to mimic them. I was in a band at the same time and I thought I was going to be a rock star, but my hair started falling out, so I couldn't go in that direction. I ended up concentrating on painting."

Meticulously deft portraits comprise a significant portion of Swihart's current output. With an impressive roster of seated subjects - including the Apollo 8 astronauts, Arnold Palmer, Elizabeth Dole, Jack Lemmon, Billy Graham, John Wooden, and Walter Cronkite — Swihart has become a chronicler of establishment greats. Of this role, he remarks, "I really enjoy doing portrait commissions because painting is such a solitary activity. I actually enjoy the interaction with my subjects and patrons as we come up with something together. I also get to meet a lot of interesting people. It feels nice doing something that matters to somebody. It's rewarding."

Aside from MacDonald-Wright, Swihart has garnered excessive associations with the 19th-century artist Jean-Léon Gérôme. Indeed, Swihart does collect some examples of this semi-obscure artist's products. Equally certifiable is that both Swihart and Gérôme handle the painted treatment of fabric surfaces similarly. Swihart admits to having made numerous trips to France during his 25-year quest to track down information about Gérôme. In his own words, "It's an obsession, but not a bad one like Jodie Foster or anything. Pass off my going to find his house, using a 150-year-old photograph for a guide, as a minor eccentricity."

His consequential yet superficial aspects aside, Swihart functions in a thoroughly neoteric matter and therefore merits his contemporary affiliations. What, for example, of Swihart's little-known involvement with the Jeanette Boucher art collective? The fictional artist Boucher was one of the rising stars of the Los Angeles scene two decades ago. During her rein of terror, "she" committed a number of art "crimes" that generally irritated the status quo. This unrest was particularly evident at California State University at Northridge, where the vacancy of the recent resident art scribe Peter Plagens had created a critical void. It was almost inevitable that someone like Boucher would come along to fill it.

Probably the most notorious stunt purportedly pulled off by Boucher during her Cal State tenure was creating a bogus, abstract expressionist painting and passing it off as one by Hans Burkhardt. (Needless to say, when Burkhardt saw the piece in question hanging in a show of his bona fide work, he was quite irritated.) Collaborating with Swihart in this endeavor were the additional (alleged) members of the Jeanette Boucher group: Steve Fletcher, Bill Lundby, and Steve Moore. Sadly, Boucher's life was a short one. "No one could compete with Jeanette Boucher because she had the superior advantage of having four brains. We had to kill her off out of kindness and fairness," Swihart imparts.

A more recent group involvement for Swihart has been with the self-proclaimed "Bastards." Fellow team members are F Scott Hess, John Frame, Steve Galloway, Peter Zokosky, and Michael C McMillen. Swihart remembers the origins of the assembly as follows: "The Bastards grew out of this drawing group we have where we get together and draw from the model. We'd hang out afterwards and drink beer and talk. Naturally, we started collaborating on pieces, at first just joking around, but as they became pretty good, we decided to formalize The Bastards. The name refers to the pieces not having any clear parentage. That's also how a lot of people probably consider us." The Bastards' collaborative pieces are beginning to make inroads into the organized high-tone art scene.

Swihart tells an autobiographical story that sums up his compulsive zeal for arcane past masters. "Years ago, I didn't know there was such a thing as contemporary art. The Janson book we had in my home ended at 1950, so I assumed that art did, too; I honestly didn't realize that it had continued. I was pretty well isolated until I went to college. To learn the old masters' techniques, I haunted libraries looking for information. I assumed that everybody must have been doing the same. UCLA had a lot of books from the 19th century; once, I found out that they had William Holman Hunt's autobiography and ran upstairs, hoping to get there before anyone else could. And when I pulled it off the shelf, it turned out that it hadn't been checked out since 1940."