

This essay is an overview of James C. Christensen's life and artwork. James was born and raised in Culver City, California. He didn't grow up wanting to be an artist, James said that drawing was just something he liked to do. "I'm pre-wired that way", he said. "it was not as a passion, or a mission, it was just what I liked to do." From an early age he was drawing a lot, so obviously he attended ULCA to obtain a degree in art. He moved to Utah in order to finish his education at Brigham Young University. After he graduated he began freelance illustration where he made illustrations of what he thought people wanted. For example his work *Parables* lacked his distinctive medieval style and character of his later drawings. It depicts a pretty iconic religious scene with Jesus, lambs, and such. It's said in his own bio that he was trying to draw what he believed people wanted, and was afraid to make paintings of his imagination and known fantasy for fear of being disliked. Luckily he found out after making *Poofy Guy on a Short Leash* that there's also people who love his imaginative and magical worlds as much as he did. From there he made many medieval fantasy paintings with endearing dwarves, elves, fairies, and giants. With his newly found passion he became an art teacher at BYU for over 30 years! He says "My paintings are meant to excite the imagination and invite the viewer to become a participant in the creative process." Although how great he was as a teacher, he was diagnosed with cancer, and has been battling it to this day.

Many of his paintings have great theming with hidden messages. For example *A Lawyer More Than Adequately Attired*: is a painting of a fat lawyer with dwarves

attending to his complex attire. The theming of this painting is great; it thematically points out the attributes of a good lawyer. The lawyer is surrounded by black and white tiles, but prefers to stand in the grey area. This is a reference to the fact that lawyers don't take a heavy bias until they receive enough evidence. He's looking at a grain of sand, representing the grain of truth that they can use to weave a case. His attire is covered in loopholes which represent the loopholes found in laws and the judicial system to give their case an edge. One of the dwarves is looking at his attire with a magnifying glass, which signifies the "fine print" that lawyers have to keep track of. Already this painting resides in many actual lawyer offices which I think is pretty great.

Unfortunately one of his paintings actually caused a controversy in Davis County, Utah. One of his paintings depicted a bare nipple-less mermaid breast (the horror!). The painting in particular was a painting of two mermaids in a childrens' book named *Voyage of the Basset*. Fortunately for James, despite the outcry of certain easily offended people, the Davis County Library Board voted to keep the book in the young adult section. I find it hard to believe people actually got upset at the fact that their children could possibly find the book sexually stimulating. If that's actually a thing then their child probably have bigger problems than that.

The next painting I want to talk about with theming is *The Blind Leading the Blind*. Many of James's paintings are themed with religion, reflecting James's own background. It's a painting of three blind men leading each other on a grey background. "Four?" you might ask, as there is only three visible blind men. The first blind man has already fallen into a pit with only a piece of clothing still in view. This is a reference to

the famous Jesus Sermon: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?”. Jesus used the metaphor to convince followers to examine their own flaws before criticizing others.

Arise and Shine Forth is a painting by James that depicts many women of varying ethnicities and locations wearing religious clothing and carrying flags while standing on a cliff. This painting in particular appears to have come up in the recent feminist outcries of misogyny. James made it in order to say that women are strong, capable, and unstoppable in their ability to find divine potential. Ironically his statement about the painting includes ownership of women: “...I wanted to say that not only are **our** young women strong...” Can’t quite shake those Christian values I guess.

Similarly to the feminist issues, global warming themes have shown up in his paintings. *Guardian in the Woods* depicts an old man, that looks like a wizard from The Lord of the Rings series, standing near a fallen white tree. James remarks on this painting that “I am fortunate to have such a broad range of icons to play with: puffy guys, mechanical things, beautiful women, and floating fish.” So he drew an actual environment and then stuck a wizard onto it. It’s meant to represent the man that protects the forest. A silent man whom, like Gandalf, nobody knows if he’s immortal or not. A man who looks homeless and smells like it too. James says that he saw the man, but only for a moment as he tipped his hat and vanished like a Santa Claus.

The next painting I want to talk about is *Tempus Fugit*. This painting’s theme is the passage of time, indicated by the latin phrase “tempus fugit” which translates to “time flies”. It depicts a befuddled character with mismatched footwear and sleeves

looking at a clock in shock and surprise of how much time has passed; despite him being surrounded by clocks and reminders of time. This theming is quite good because everyone can relate to how time flies when doing something fun or meaningful.

Another painting is *Pilgrim Angel*, which oddly enough lacks a description or obvious theme. It depicts a flying giant, covered in what looks like religious eskimo clothing, flying over a city of cathedral castles behind a giant flying fish. It heavily reminds me of *The Neverending Story* interestingly enough. All it's missing is someone riding the flying giant. I think the lack of theming and description was on purpose here, in order to inspire imagination in the eye of the beholder.

A more symbolic painting would be *Twilight*. It depicts an old man, who cannot walk, giving a flower to an old woman who cannot walk. Both of them are riding on the backs of their family in order to meet each other. What's most interesting about this painting is the symbols it provides: the final phase of the moon, the turning leaves on an autumn tree, a checkerboard road that comes to an end, and a flower symbolizing the old man's love. They're all indicative to the old people's lives coming to an end, and despite this their love endures.

A less depressing, and more fun, painting would be *Superstitions*. This painting depicts a huge active family living in the middle of a sea in order to avoid bad luck. Despite this, nearly every depicted character is doing something that causes bad luck! A man opening an umbrella inside, a woman dropping and shattering a mirror, and a black cat crossing their path. A single man throws salt over his right shoulder. Is that the one that gives bad luck after you spill salt? Or is it the left shoulder? Who knows, but the

painting is a fun exploration of superstition and almost turns into something like a word search that doesn't strain your eyes.

The last painting I want to talk about is *One Light*. The painting depicts an imperfect hunchback holding a single light upon an endless checkerboard floor. This is one of James's favorite paintings because of how strong the symbols are and what they represent. James believes that everyone has a light within them that they can shine upon the world. While, despite how ugly and imperfect the hunchback is, the hunchback fearlessly shines his own light onto the world. James has a checkerboard on the floor which he believes represents life and death. He has the checkerboard extend off into infinity instead of ending abruptly to represent the fact that your light can shine on past your death. It's quite the painting, even without much going on within it.

To recap, James Christensen is a Utahn Christian artist who makes imaginative fantasy paintings, and teaches students at BYU about art. He is struggling with cancer and is quite old today. He has received multiple awards for his art, and has published several books. He's an ultimately successful old man whose art will live on for generations.