

May 1, 2020 – Josh Welker and Sonya Menges studio interview transcript

In early May, Sonya had the unique privilege to record a Zoom interview with Josh Welker in his newly finished studio space in San Antonio, surrounded with his work that now hangs in the All Saints Gallery. At the height of COVID-19 lockdown, we were sharing Josh's work in a [Virtual Gallery](#) for the season of Easter, and we were unsure if we could install the work in the gallery for in-person viewing. Here are some highlights from that discussion (edited for clarity):

Sonya Menges: Josh, thank you for doing this and for taking some time to talk about your work and share your space with us.

Josh Welker: Thanks for having me!

SM: For folks that don't know you, would you mind doing a short introduction?

JW: Yes, I'm Josh, and I'm living and working in San Antonio with my family: my wife Michelle, she's a social worker here in town, and my three boys – Fred (12), Charlie (9), and Eden (7). My studio has only recently been up and running. I've been working in my dining room...

I work part time at the University of the Incarnate Word in the office of Mission and Ministry, so my position is sort of like a chaplaincy position. That's just two days a week, so then normally I'm in the studio the rest of the time, well the other three days of the week. But now that I'm working remotely, I can get in most every day.

SM: The work that you made for our show, can you tell us how long you were thinking about it and what it was like to make in a different space than you're in right now?

JW: The work at All Saints started several years ago really. The work (*Pink September*) is one of the works that Sonya had initially mentioned, and they came out of a kind of collaboration with the boys. That's a more official word for it... but really the works sort of were to keep us from killing each other in the winter time in the middle-of-nowhere Indiana, where it was freezing and everybody was going stir-crazy. And I had these huge pieces of paper around, and so I just threw them up and we all started making marks on them. We did about three or four of them, and I tacked them up on the wall to keep the walls fresh. And the more I looked at them the more I saw all these great kind of chaotic marks. We just started to continue to draw on them, and I continued to work on them. Some of them I overworked and they became all of mine, and none of the boys.

This one (*Yellow January*) is also probably the most liberated work with all of us working together. A lot of the marks are theirs and I just kind of let their marks be theirs and mine be mine. There's a real kind of visceral, very base mark-making experience. Some of the works have come out of that process and we've continued to sort of do that, not in any real regular way, but something we do from time to time.

SM: That's such an exciting concept of having literally a blank canvas, a space for expression for both you and your kids. Did it feel like a safe place to work things out? Was it like an island of beauty in your house that could be experienced by everyone but in different ways? And how did bringing your family into your practice change how you looked at your own work?

JW: Yes!... I love "island of beauty" I think every artist that I've ever talked to loves the marks of children. I probably don't have to expound on it, but they're always utterly liberated. And I've always enjoyed trying to get back to that space as much as possible. And for everybody who is a parent, you know how incredibly complicated it is. And for me, I have such a desire to control things, this became a real exercise in letting go of that control and trying to find the balance between what needs to happen and for them to have as much spaciousness as possible. In parenting that's a constant struggle for me, and I think in these works too it probably shows this huge desire to really tidy things up and get everything as organized as possible ... So yea, I think on the best note they've become a sort of a guide of us working and living together in a fluid way.

SM: These flower works remind me of a conversation we had a while back, before you started them, about the pure enjoyment of the beauty of flowers or still lifes. Did that tie in to where these were going?

JW: For sure. I think loving gardening and being around it growing up, and loving still lifes, and loving Van Gogh, and then also being a student of contemporary art and lover of contemporary art, influenced these. The floral motif is ripe with all kinds of problems. To make one that is successful, even really just visually successful for me, was... it's not necessarily what I set out to do. The works came out of an overflow of just wanting to really simply make a painting of flowers and make drawings in my garden.

They come out of a heavily involved process, and I say heavily involved just because there's printmaking involved in these, and then there's painting, and there's drawing, and there's watercolor and there's gouache, and there's all kinds of different things. I just go at them as loosely and organically as possible, really similarly to the works with the boys, and just sort of cover the surface. And then later bring in some prints or stamps that I've made, usually related directly to things from the garden.

SM: Are you willing to get up really close to show us what that texture of the print looks like compared to some of the marks? That will be great to see in person. I just love the print of the flower, and how you can see accidental, incidental marks of the print surface, of the paint or ink... it doesn't always stick in an even way. Some of it is opaque, some of it you can see through. It's just really beautiful.

I love what you say about beauty and the necessity for some of the not-so-beautiful to be present as well. I think about what we're all doing right now - trying to survive the morning, as we were saying. When you look at these works now, in light of having to stay home and try

to stay safe, and looking at the whole context of what's happening in the world, and in light of what we know of the gospel, do these speak to that?

JW: For sure, yes. You and I have spoken about the pieces related to Easter, and it was very timely that I started making them even though I didn't make them intentionally for Easter. This one (*Lantern with Flowers*) feels the most explicit, almost illustrative of Easter, with these curtains, or veils that are parting, and all these flowers...

In light of all of our despair and heartache and loss and pain, our faith, our explicit faith in Christ, is one of resurrection. As one my friends who's a Dominican priest says, it's always a faith in the goodness of the earth and the goodness in the universe, and obviously for a Christian, it's a faith in the goodness of God, and in ultimate nurture and care, and the seed going to the ground and breaking open and coming out with something that's far greater than we can understand. You know?

SM: Yes, and a faith in something that brings life, ultimately eternal life.

But we are here in the now-and-not-yet. I think these works so beautifully speak to that, and give some visual, intuitive engagement in Easter as well as the season afterwards, as we ask "now what do we do?"

Oh! *Lantern with Flowers* is so beautiful in that light!

JW: Yea, the light is good.