The Family History Artworks of Valerie Atkisson

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Fig. 1. Hanging Family History, D.U.M.B.O. Arts Center, New York City, 2000, copper wire, rice paper, ink, 13’ x 2’ x 2’. For a detail of this work, see the back cover of this issue. All photographs of art, unless noted otherwise, are by Jean Vong and are used courtesy of Valerie Atkisson.
Valerie Atkisson, an artist who lives in the Bronx, New York, exemplifies a generation of Mormon artists who are at home navigating the world of Contemporary art while maintaining their personal and spiritual identity. Family history, transgenerational inquiry, and relatedness have been the majority subjects of Atkisson’s work thus far. “What began as an interest in my ancestors has turned into an insatiable desire to know as much about them as possible,” she says. “[My work] is a continuation of them, not just that my flesh and blood are a part of them, but the remembrance is also an extension of their life.” Although a broad demographic of gallery visitors have received Atkisson’s work, it has the potential to resonate with Latter-day Saint audiences in a unique way because it intersects with and animates Mormon thought—thought that places relationships not just in the realm of sociology but also in theology. In capturing the essence of her work, Atkisson wrote the following for a gallery guide:

I stand peering into the past
An overload of names, dates, and places faces me crying
for closer inspection.
Stories, lives, uprootings, and landscapes tighten the blur surrounding each ancestor.
By focusing on an individual of whom I am a fraction,
I better understand what I am made of physically, mentally, and spiritually.3

As Atkisson currently sees herself moving to topics other than family history in her art, this essay seeks to look back on this period of her work and understand it through contextualizing it in Contemporary art and Mormon thought.
Background

Although she was born in 1971 in Seattle, Atkisson frequently moved during her growing-up years due to her father's occupation. This itinerant pattern of migration would later influence her art. She has written, “I didn’t feel like I had one place that I was from. There was not a house or place that I could [call home]. But I knew a lot about whom I was from, and I had been to the places that they were from. This became a new subject matter for my work.”

Atkisson studied ceramics and painting at Brigham Young University from 1989 to 1996. After serving a mission to Poland and graduating from BYU, she attended the School of Visual Arts in New York. There she continued to study painting and other studio arts, graduating with an MFA in 1998. After graduate school, Atkisson continued to live and work in New York City, where her art has been displayed in many galleries and museums, including the Queens Museum of Art, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and the D.U.M.B.O. Arts Center. She has also had several shows outside of New York. During 1999 and 2000, Atkisson worked as an assistant to Petah Coyne, a well-known Contemporary artist, and traveled with Coyne to Ireland to help construct a show there. Atkisson is also a founding member of the Mormon Artists Group—a consortium of artists, architects, writers, choreographers, and musicians who collaborate on artistic projects, the proceeds from which commonly go to charities.

In addition to working as an artist, Atkisson has taught painting and ceramics at Grace Church School in New York and has been an active leader of the young women in the Bronx Olmstead Second Ward. The ward’s demographic presented particular obstacles: only one of Atkisson’s young women, for example, had a father in her home. “I felt that the way I could most help

![Fig. 2. Valerie Atkisson with Jennifer Ortiz and Hannah Villarosa, 2006. As their Young Women leader, Atkisson mentored these and other girls from the Bronx, New York, helping them prepare for and attend college. Shown here in the Spencer W. Kimball Student and Administration building at BYU–Idaho, Atkisson accompanied Ortiz and Villarosa to Rexburg, Idaho, to help them get settled in.](image-url)
Figs. 3 and 4. *Family History Wall*, details (right and below). Artists Space, SoHo, New York City, 1999, ink on wall, 14’ x 72’. This work contains all the names of Atkisson’s known ancestors, numbering in the thousands. The work encompassed 72 generations and correspondingly took up 72 feet of wall. The work spanned two rooms and five walls. About the 1300s, she encountered a lot of interfamilial marrying, which she noted by drawing lines between names. The show was a five-week work-in-progress show; Atkisson was on site throughout the five weeks writing the names.
Fig. 5. *Tanner Spiral*, BYU Museum of Art, 2002, gouache, ink on parchment, 8’ x 10’. Seven goatskin parchments are arranged in a nautilus-like spiral, each of them bearing the history of Henry S. Tanner’s immediate family. Photograph by David Hawkinson.
Fig. 6. Tanner Spiral, detail. A portrait of Henry S. Tanner dominates this work. The spiral beginning in the center of this piece of parchment echoes the spiral form of the entire work. An image of Henry as a young child is in the center, and unwinding from there are depicted his school in Payson set against the Wasatch Mountains, gravestones of lost family members, his mother, his father with wives, and the army outpost at Fort Duchesne. Photograph by David Hawkinson.
Fig. 7. *Family in Norway*, detail (top). The viewer of this work proceeded from right to left, beginning in Denmark, the ancestral home of Petra Hermine Johnson (1854–1942). From Denmark (painted in orange), the viewer moves with the Øman family to Skjervøy, an off-shore island in northern Norway that is represented by the nearby Lyngen Alps—snow-capped mountains whose steep slopes descend directly into the Lyngensfjord.

Fig. 8. *Family in Norway*, detail. Ragna Johnson at age five or six, held by her father, Peter.
Atkisson explored the ancestry of her Norwegian great-grandmother, Ragna Johnson, who immigrated to Logan, Utah, via New York City as a small child with her Mormon family. The piece was painted on an eighty-foot triangular wall between two sections of a ramp in the foyer of the Queens Museum of Art. The triangular shape of the wall became part of the form and accentuated, in Atkisson’s words, the “linear story” of that family line.

**Fig. 9.** *Family in Norway*, Queens Museum of Art, 2000, acrylic on wall, 30' x 80'. Atkisson explored the ancestry of her Norwegian great-grandmother, Ragna Johnson, who immigrated to Logan, Utah, via New York City as a small child with her Mormon family. The piece was painted on an eighty-foot triangular wall between two sections of a ramp in the foyer of the Queens Museum of Art. The triangular shape of the wall became part of the form and accentuated, in Atkisson’s words, the “linear story” of that family line.
**Fig. 10.** *Alta, Norway*, 2001, watercolor on paper, 10" x 18". Located in the northernmost county of Norway, Alta is in the Kåfjord and is where Atkisson’s great-grandmother Ragna Jemaima Johnson (1875–1964) was born. Ragna’s father, Peter Johnson (1852–1924), and his brothers worked for their uncle on a trading ship that delivered dried cod there.

**Fig. 11.** *Johnson Home, Trondheim, Norway*, watercolor on paper, 2001, 12" x 20". This home originally stood on the family farm called Buen on Ytterøy Island but was disassembled and moved when the family was pressured to either leave the fjord or leave the Church. Atkisson found the home intact, although modified, during her research in Norway.
Fig. 12. *Patriarchal Line*, D.U.M.B.O. Arts Center, 2000, acrylic and colored pencil on wall, 13½’ x 10’. A tiny figure of Atkisson herself is seen at the bottom right of the work looking up on the seven generations she has reconstructed. The piece begins with her father at the bottom left. A beach turns into a skyline and then back into a beach, representing her grandfather’s move from Florida to New York City and his subsequent retirement to California. The cannon represents the artist’s great-great-grandfather taking his son to a Civil War battlefield shortly after the fighting ceased to teach his son about the realities of war. The horse jumping over a picnic table represents the disruption caused by a disgruntled young man denied the hand of Jane Atkisson in marriage by her father.
them was to help them get ready for college,” she says. “We worked on applications and scholarships together. We talked about bank accounts, credit cards, and budgeting. They all wanted to go to BYU–Idaho, which is about as different from Bronx, New York, as you can get. One young woman who received a Heber J. Grant Scholarship to BYU–Idaho is the first person in her family to ever go to college” (fig. 2).

**Hanging Family History (2000)**

The most striking of Atkisson’s genealogy artworks, *Hanging Family History* (fig. 1), helps one gain a glimpse of the expansiveness of her project to know as much about her ancestors as possible. The work is unique in that it captures the nature of connectedness in a three-dimensional, visual form. The chandelier-like tree is an assembly of approximately 4,000 triangles made by wrapping rice paper around a copper-wire frame, leaving the copper wire exposed on all three corners. Written on each triangle in black ink is a name, beginning with hers and continuing through all of her known progenitors, and the dates and locations of birth and death. The top triangle reads, “Valerie Atkisson, b. Seattle, Washington, 1971.” This triangle is connected to those of her parents and on down through thousands of others, ending with a triangle on which is written, “Claudius, King of the Franks 9 AD.” The result is an organic, three-dimensional image of Atkisson’s family, which leaves an impression different from that of a two-dimensional family group sheets. “There are things you can express visually that you cannot express in words,” she says. As artist Peter Everett points out, the piece is able to transcend the motivation of its creation. It shows that genealogy can become an aesthetic object.

**Tanner Spiral (2002)**

*Tanner Spiral* (fig. 5) explores a branch of these triangles—the Henry S. Tanner family. Henry S. Tanner (1869–1950) was the grandson of John Tanner (1778–1850), a prominent Mormon convert from Bolton, New York. In exploring the life of Henry Tanner, Atkisson arranged seven pieces of goatskin parchment in a nautilus-like spiral. She devoted one parchment to each of Tanner’s wives, and the names of each wife’s descendents were written in the middle of her parchment. The parchment of one wife, Louetta Brown, is void of names, as her only pregnancy was terminated by her fall down a flight of stairs. In an accompanying piece, *Tanner Descendents* (2002), a bundle of paper clips hung delicately in the air represented each wife and her descendents (fig. 13).
Images of people, places, and things, combined with black-ink text, are inscribed upon each piece of parchment in *Tanner Spiral*, beginning with an image of the face of Henry as a baby in the center of the spiral (fig. 6). Unfolding from here, the spiral displays Henry’s boyhood school in Payson, Utah, and several tombstones representing the deaths of some of his siblings and of his mother. His father is connected to his wives by addition signs. Henry was outraged at his father’s decision to take plural wives and eventually left home in a state of personal confusion. Soon thereafter, he had an awakening experience in which he heard the voice of his deceased mother telling him to be a “good boy” while he was visiting an army camp at Fort Duchesne, an episode depicted in the spiral.¹¹

Landscapes are painted around the edge of each parchment beginning with a mountain range above Payson, where Henry was born. Portraits, objects, and places are all inserted along the landscapes. They function both as timeline and setting. In an interesting variation on her search into the past, Atkisson is here looking to places as well as people. The landscapes are more than background to the illustrated narratives. Because her family moved a lot when she was growing up, Atkisson says, “I became really conscious of the fact that I didn’t have a visual landscape that I considered home, a place that I identified with.”¹²

The materials and form of *Tanner Spiral* augment the organic nature of family relationships. The piece is painted in gouache watercolor on dried goatskin, a parchment used for millennia to preserve histories and scripture because it is sturdy and long lasting. The most famous parchment documents include the illuminated Bibles, Gospel books, and Psalters of the Middle Ages.
Since parchment used to be part of a living creature, it is itself a remnant of the past. As can be seen in Atkisson's work, the skin buckles around the edges and slightly warps throughout. The organic nature seen in the uneven texture of the material and in the amoeba-like shapes echoes the organic nature of family relationships. Tanned goatskin was chosen also because of the pun on the family name, Tanner, and because the material’s distressed treatment echoed the stresses endured by the Tanner family. “I feel like the [tanned goatskin] was a metaphor for what the family went through and how [Henry’s] decisions affected his family,” says Atkisson. Henry Tanner would likely find the parchment an apt metaphor because the LDS Church and Mormon society ostracised him for marrying four additional wives a decade after President Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto. In a letter to his family, Henry once wrote, “The furnace has been hot and its season extensive.”

**Family in Norway (2000)**

Atkisson has received commissions and does sell some of her artwork. Families have approached her, for example, to create a visual family history for them. These include paintings and works on paper. But most of her museum work resists commodification. It is not something one buys

Fig. 14. Trondheim, Norway, ancestral home of the Johnson Family.
reproductions of, frames, and hangs on a wall as one might do with a traditional painting or photograph. This is especially true for one-time-only installation works such as Family in Norway at the Queens Museum of Art (figs. 7, 8, 9). In this piece, Atkisson explored the ancestry of her Norwegian great-grandmother, Ragna Johnson, who immigrated to Logan, Utah, via New York City as a small child with her Mormon family. Atkisson painted the piece on an 80-foot triangular wall between two sections of a ramp in the foyer of the museum. Instead of the shape of the wall being a hindrance to her work, the triangular shape of the wall became part of the form and accentuated, in the artist’s words, the “linear story” of the Johnson family line.

Atkisson received a Rema Hort Mann Foundation Grant in 1999 to research and execute Family in Norway. She used the money to attend Norwegian language classes and to travel to Norway for two months to conduct research (figs. 10, 11). She found the family home in Trondheim still standing and, therefore, painted the house into the work. The house was originally on Ytterøy Island in Trondheimsfjord in northern Norway, the fjord where the Johnson family was baptized after learning about Mormonism from missionaries in the area. After the members of the family were baptized, the local magistrate gave them an ultimatum: leave the Church or leave the island. They chose the latter, but they were not willing to leave their house behind. The family disassembled the house and sailed it thirty miles south to the city of Trondheim (fig. 14). There they reassembled the house and built on to it. With the increased space, the Johnsons invited the missionaries to live with them and held church meetings there.

After Family in Norway closed, the work was painted over. The temporary nature of this and some of Atkisson’s other pieces opens another interpretive possibility—pilgrimage. Family in Norway and other works are only temporary. But both can create a change in the viewer-traveler, a change forged in liminal self-exploration. Atkisson’s journey to Norway through the painting was a finite one that occurred within a specific timeframe and in a specific place. Photographs of the pilgrimage may be viewed, but the experience will never be recreated fully. Interestingly, though, Atkisson’s connection with her great-grandmother was heightened when, two years after the show, Atkisson learned that Ragna Johnson Maughan had attended the 1964–65 World’s Fair—a fair held on the grounds where the Queens Museum of Art stands today in Flushing Meadow Park, Queens.
Religion in Contemporary Art

Atkisson’s art is ultimately religious, although its religiosity is somewhat camouflaged. Family history is recognized as a religious subject by Latter-day Saints, but not necessarily by New York exhibition curators. So her work is able to succeed in an environment that is, more often than not, suspicious of religion. Religious art was largely abandoned by the academic modernists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to the extent that today, as one scholar has written, “religion is seldom mentioned in the art world unless it is linked to criticism, ironic distance, or scandal. . . . Fine art and religion have gone their separate ways.”19 This being said, the tides may be changing. Religious discourse is becoming more valued as postmodernism is living up to its own pluralistic agenda.

Some have argued that although overtly religious art has seen a decline, the religious backgrounds of artists continue to inform artworks. Eleanor Heartney, for example, has argued that the Catholic worldview, which stresses the physical, bodied aspects of Christianity, has been the guiding influence of several twentieth-century artists, including Andy Warhol, who attended mass several times a week and whose work was often informed by embodiedness and death as well as the direct imagery of Catholic art in his pastiches of Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* and Leonardo’s *Last Supper* and *Annunciation.*20 Warhol’s Pop art images of everyday objects, the Campbell’s soup can being the most famous, can appear “as the expression of a Catholic vision grounded in the concrete reality of the surrounding world” instead of “some ineffable notion of the sublime.”21 Petah Coyne, Atkisson’s mentor, is another artist Heartney mentions. Heartney writes, “The subterranean Catholic motifs and themes which had always been there rise to the surface” of her artworks. Coyne’s work began to address “beauty of decay and imperfection” and life and death. She employed statues of the Virgin Mary to explore such concepts. She also created votive-like wax Madonnas and incorporated Catholic liturgical architecture into her forms.22

But most of the Catholic or ex-Catholic artists discussed by Heartney focused their work on the human body. The Catholic emphasis on bodily concepts such as the incarnation of Christ, the physical crucifixion, the physical resurrection, and the fleshy transubstantiation of the Eucharist may help explain this.23 In a way similar to many of these artists, Atkisson has been shaped by her religious enculturation. And by creating artworks about family history, she comes as close as may be possible for a student or professional wishing to celebrate his or her Mormon worldview and yet remain a credible artist in avant-garde art galleries and museums. It is not
that Atkisson has intentionally shaped her work away from an overt religiousness, she says. It just happens to fit in within the current art scene.

“Mormonism influences my art,” says Atkisson. “My faith has had an effect on my life and who I am, and my artwork is going to pick that up.” Yet she maintains that her artworks convey a universal message of the equality of mankind. “The essence of my work,” she says, “is about the global family and the value of each life and what each life can tell us about ourselves and about them. . . . I want my viewers to see the other people around them as their brothers and sisters, that they have value.”

The potential constructs that a Mormon viewer could form from the artworks are unique because of the way Joseph Smith theologically reoriented relationships and the idea of the family. He was born into and worked within an environment of radical individualism, but the Prophet gradually replaced this individualism with a communal soteriology that spanned the past, present, and future. The Saints would build a city of righteousness in community, a community built upon bonds of eternal friendship. Besides revealing the necessity of working for the collective redemption of those who were alive, Joseph Smith made it clear that the redemption of the dead is necessary to one’s salvation. And most revolutionary, his revelations redefined marriage in both form and purpose and imbued it with exalting efficacy.

Artistic Precedents

The creative impulses of artists work within the bounds of the vocabularies of their historical moment. Because Latter-day Saints have chosen to live “in the world” instead of being communally cloistered away from it, Mormon creators have adopted the vocabularies, mediums, and techniques of music, art, and architecture for Mormon purposes. This borrowing has contributed to the fact that Latter-day Saints as a group have never developed a distinctive artistic style. As museum curator Richard Oman has written, “Cohesion in the Latter-day Saint [art] tradition rests in religious themes and functions, not stylistic continuity or development.”

Similar to the way the painters of the Salt Lake Temple murals picked up the post-Impressionistic artistic trends of their time while studying in late-nineteenth-century France, so twenty-first-century Latter-day Saints have been influenced by the stylistic trends of their historical moment—a moment which, it should be noted, is replete with stylistic retrievals and combinations thereof. During the twentieth century, the diversity of artistic media expanded drastically. Moving away from the traditional vocabularies of painting and sculpture, artists now include a broad swath
of artistic media, messages, and modes of exhibition in their work. Taking advantage of this openness, Valerie Atkisson has painted on preexisting walls and floors, as opposed to gessoed canvases, and has animated objects as quotidian as paper clips (figs. 3, 4, 12, 13).

This use of nontraditional media originates with the twentieth-century anti-Art, Dada, and Conceptual art movements. The Conceptual artists of the 1960s and 70s aimed to critique the Modernists, who had highly valued the formal and aesthetic properties of an artwork over the work’s meaning. To the Modernists, the art object itself was of the utmost importance. Conceptual artists, on the other hand, aimed to devalue the art object and to privilege, instead, the potential and realized meanings constructed from a viewer’s engagement with an art object. As one scholar has written, “Conceptual art is supposed to be the antithesis of ‘artiness.’”28 Instead of art being an aesthetic solipsism, language—in its broadest sense—was brought to bear on the objects. Nevertheless, as Conceptual art came to be valued as high art, its uniqueness became commonness and it took on an aesthetic of its own. And it has influenced the formal properties of the visual arts ever since.29

Much of Atkisson’s work also functions within the post-1960s trend of installation art, wherein artists create an artwork within, on, or around a preexisting space and incorporate that space into their creation. Much like entering a medieval cathedral, the viewer enters the art instead of being divided from it by a picture plane. And the viewer’s perception completes the work as it activates the possible constructs of meaning therein. Installation art “rejects concentration on one object in favour of a consideration of the relationships between a number of elements or of the interaction between things and their contexts.”30 In this way, museum galleries themselves often become a part of Atkisson’s artwork.

Aesthetics and Form

The creation of objects of beauty has been a dominant goal of Western art for millennia. In U.S. history, the valuing of art aesthetics over all else reached its apogee in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1903, for example, an assistant director of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts declared the purpose of the museum was to “maintain a high standard of aesthetic taste,” and the museum would form its collections based upon the “aesthetic quality” of objects.31

This privileging of aesthetic properties was challenged by the Dada and Conceptual artists through their use of nontraditional media to produce work that de-privileged aesthetics. Unlike the austerity of much
Conceptual art of the twentieth century and today, Atkisson has chosen a middle ground in regard to aesthetics being the priority of her artworks. Some of them do have a beauty about them—the sinuous curves of a group of narratives, the organic form of some installations, and the bold use of color. Yet, intended and potential meanings are as, if not more, important as aesthetics. “I feel that beauty is an important part of my work,” says Atkisson. “I use it to draw people in.”

What has been written about an important team of Conceptual artists in the 1980s and 90s could be said about Atkisson’s work:

They took the rigor of conceptual art’s research mandate, combined that with a subtle but focused political agenda, and wound that around a body of issues and concerns that were deeply personal and motivated by pleasure. They simply made art about the things which were most important to them, rather than proceeding as though it were a disinterested academic endeavor. . . . They challenged convention and proved that intellectually motivated art need not be materially puritan.

As already mentioned, the artistic vocabularies of the twentieth-century avant-garde greatly influence Atkisson’s work. The Dada movement (1917–24) may be most important to understand in relation to her work. In Dada art, everyday objects were assembled in unpredictable ways. Prefabricated commercial objects such as Marcel Duchamp’s bicycle wheel and urinal were exhibited without alteration. Machines were exhibited by themselves or depicted in paintings. And excerpts from newspapers and magazines were pasted into collages and onto objects. These artworks were all “in-your-face” gestures to the artistic, literary, theatrical, and political establishments as well as the traditions that preceded them.

Mentioning Dada is not to say that the influence on Atkisson is a direct borrowing, or that the influence is readily apparent. Atkisson is right when she says that she is more influenced by her contemporaries in school and in galleries than she is by people from a century ago. But similar to the way that Americans are daily influenced by Plato, John Locke, and others—whether they know it or not—so too do Contemporary artists live in the wake of the Dada and anti-Art movements.

By working in the shadow of this movement in nontraditional ways (using paper clips, hanging pieces of goatskin on a wall, and writing on walls and floors), Atkisson raises an important question: Can artists adopt the forms of a deconstructionist project to create art objects that are not nihilistic, but are imbued with traditional meaning? Moreover, can forms with deconstructionist associations be used to create religious art? The answer is yes, artists can incorporate forms and give them new meaning similar to the way one forms language by combining letters.
and punctuation marks into different patterns to communicate different messages. But the engagement of such an artistic vocabulary may limit a work’s audience; and the short-lived duration of installation works will naturally limit the number of viewers who are able to see them.

Making Meaning

Atkisson’s work is imbued with meaning. But like much of twentieth-century art, that meaning is largely the privilege of the artist. Because viewers are not familiar with the narratives behind the images, the reasons for chosen media, and often the art-historical context of the work, they may gain a general idea, at best, of the work’s intended meaning. Artists such as Atkisson withhold some information because they expect viewers to incorporate their own worldview with cues given in the artwork to create a meaning or meanings. This expectation, though, is dependent upon the accessibility of the cues in an artwork. Do the cues contain sufficient information for a viewer to meet the artist halfway or even one-tenth of the way? Should textual cues be explicitly given on a text panel adjacent to the artwork? Is language necessary to unpack the work? Is the artwork prelinguistic or postlinguistic? Or, is it both? And are semiotic planes of meaning inherent in the artwork? No consensus exists among scholars today about these questions, and one can find erudite arguments on all sides. Either way, the composition and display of most contemporary artworks make it difficult at best and impossible at worst for a viewer to access them. For this reason, many viewers are put off by twentieth- and twenty-first century art.

In this environment, then, Atkisson has adopted not only the forms of the Contemporary art world, but also its distanced, individualistic ethos. The images and objects of Atkisson’s work are portals into her individual world. The names of people, the narratives depicted, and the meaning they have are inside the artist’s mind as she gazes on her past. She has even painted herself into some of the artworks. They are, for her, an exercise in self-exploration and identity-seeking as she engages her ancestry. “People will get a general idea,” she says, “but the details will obviously evade them.” So, the works are about connectedness, but with an individualistic departure point.

Constructivist Inquiry

Constructivist learning theory and social construction theory (not to be confused with Russian Constructivism in art and architecture) help inform how viewers might create meaning through interaction with
Atkisson’s artworks. These theories attempt to explain the way learning occurs and realities are constructed. The learner is not passive, but instead brings his or her life experience and paradigm of reality to bear on the artwork, and through a dialectic of visual interlocution, new meanings are constructed. The irony of this in regards to Atkisson’s work, though, is that social constructivism rejects the existence of an ontological reality, whereas the Mormon theology informing her work affirms one.

As is common in this type of art, the heuristic cues to understand Atkisson’s work are subtle. In Retta (2002), for example, Atkisson painted two figures on parallel white pillars. Near the bottom of the left pillar was the artist. Midway up the right pillar was Atkisson’s great-grandmother, Laura Lauretta Woodland Tanner (nicknamed “Retta”). Between the pillars there was only empty space (fig. 15). This void, like missing information about ancestors, opens up the possibility of filling out the narrative, to provide information where it is missing. “I fill in the gaps of knowledge with my own impressions of my relatives’ lives,” says Atkisson. Therefore, in the constructivist/interactive vein being discussed, Atkisson’s work invites the viewers to go further and to replace her—to see themselves where she sits there at the bottom of that pillar and to look up (or, more correctly, to look back) and gaze at one of their ancestors.

Fig. 15. Retta, BYU Museum of Art, 2002, acrylic on pillars.
Developing the value of expressing relationships and life stories in creative ways, Atkisson says, “I can put a stack of family group sheets in front of somebody and say, ‘This is really interesting.’ But, is that person going to do anything about them? . . . I can make a visual something or other and that same person will approach it, come closer, and ask, ‘What is this?’ ‘This is my family history,’ I tell them. ‘And you have just as many people who make up you.’ Then, that person may ask, ‘I wonder what my family history would look like.”’

Atkisson’s works, therefore, can become catalysts of personal and familial inquiry. As Ian Burn, an important figure of the Art & Language movement, pointed out in 1970, the “conversation” surrounding an artwork—“being external, social, and open to scrutiny”—enabled the viewer to “participate in a dialogue that ‘gives the viewer a new significance.’ The viewer becomes an interlocutor ‘involved in reproducing and inventing part of that dialogue.’” But as discussed earlier, how much this is possible and how much information is required to enter into such a dialogue is open to debate.

Talking with Atkisson, one gains a better understanding of her pilgrimages into the past. And as one gains more information about the people and events represented in the artworks, fascinating narratives and personalities emerge and bring the works alive. In addition to better understanding her own past, Atkisson’s artwork has the potential to spark dialogue and to invite others to better understand their pasts. Her work is both past and present, statement and catalyst. Those who have preceded her are more than sterile names on pedigree charts; they were living, breathing family members who “had struggles . . . [and] disappointments and excitements and victories.” This process of ancestral inquiry is open to everyone. By retrieving the past and projecting it into our futures, our presents will be made all the richer. To do so is her invitation.

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4. Valerie Atkisson, email message to author, August 4, 2006, emphasis in original.
5. D.U.M.B.O. is an acronym for “Down under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass” and signifies a community on the Brooklyn waterfront.
8. Valerie Atkisson, interview by Josh Probert, August 4, 2006, Brigham Young University.
9. Peter Everett, interview by Josh Probert, August 11, 2006, Brigham Young University.
10. Tanner’s wives are as follows: Laura Laretta Woodland (1867–1958), who has two parchments because of her large number of descendants; Mary Isabel Richards (1878–1968); Clarice Thatcher (1879–1960); Louetta Brown (1884–1977); and Columbia Eden Richards (1887–1980). For a complete list of the descendants of each wife, see Chad M. Orton, By Reason and by Faith: The Life of Henry S. Tanner ([Salt Lake City]: William W. Tanner, 1998) 257–97.
15. Orton, By Reason and by Faith, 169.
16. This is not to say that images of installations are not made and reproduced. The Gates (2005) in Central Park, New York City, by Christo and Jean-Claude, for example, was photographed and reproduced in numerous postcards, posters, and books. See Jonathan David Fineberg, Christo and Jean-Claude: On the Way to the Gates, Central Park, New York City (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2004).
21. Heartney, Postmodern Heretics, 32.
24. Valerie Atkisson, interview by Josh Probert, August 8, 2006, Brigham Young University.


29. A concise definition of Conceptual art follows:

Conceptual art or Concept art or Conceptualism, a style of art, originating in the 1960s in the USA, which aims to express ideas rather than create visual images. Its materials include, among others, photographs, written information, diagrams, sound, and video tapes. Continuing the tradition of Dada and anti-art, Conceptual art aims to raise questions about the nature of art by flouting artistic conventions. . . . Conceptual art overlaps with performance art where it uses the human body as a medium for expression; some artists, such as Joseph Beuys, are practitioners of both. (The Hutchinson Dictionary of the Arts, ed. Chris Murray [Oxford: Helicon, 1994], 121, s.v. Conceptual Art)


34. The Dadaists’ nonsensical poems, tone songs, and whimsical art objects were all intended to induce shock and outrage. They were a severe critique of the cultural values and societal norms of the early twentieth century—a reaction to the unprecedented level of carnage witnessed in World War I combined with European materialistic consumerism and nationalistic egoism. “DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING,” read the 1918 Dada Manifesto. One member of the Zurich group later recalled, “We were given the honorary title of Nihilists.” Matthew Gale, Dada and Surrealism (London: Phaidon, 1997), 47, 50.
35. I thank Jonathan Gibson of Xavier University and Richard Oman of the Museum of Church History and Art for helping me clarify my thinking on this dilemma of art presentation.

36. This, too, has origins in the early twentieth century. For example, in reference to himself and his contemporaries, Marcel Duchamp wrote, “We created it for our sole and unique use.” Shiner, *Invention of Art*, 291.

37. Valerie Atkisson, interview by Josh Probert, August 23, 2006, Brigham Young University.

