



2015

Art Exhibition Review: *From My Brother's Perspective: Two Artists Painting Gospel Themes*

Herman du Toit
Brigham Young University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

du Toit, Herman (2015) "Art Exhibition Review: *From My Brother's Perspective: Two Artists Painting Gospel Themes*," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 54 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol54/iss2/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Mary and Martha, by Chiloba Chirwa. Oil on Panel, 2014.

Chiloba Chirwa and J. Kirk Richards. *From My Brother's Perspective: Two Artists Painting Gospel Themes*.

An exhibition at the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, September 2014.

Reviewed by Herman du Toit

The exhibition *From My Brother's Perspective*, which was held at the Harold B. Lee Library in September 2014, brought together the gospel-themed paintings of two contemporary Latter-day Saint artists from divergent cultural backgrounds. Chiloba Chirwa is a BYU student from Lusaka, Zambia, majoring in construction management. He is largely self-taught and, by his own admission, simply paints as a hobby. Chirwa was also the first southern African missionary to serve a full-time mission for the Church in the Congo. He transferred to BYU from Malaysia, where he had been enrolled in an architecture program after his mission.

In stark contrast, J. Kirk Richards is an accomplished painter who graduated with a bachelor's degree in visual arts from BYU in 2000. As a professional artist, his work is well represented in regional museum shows and in private collections throughout the United States. His work has also been featured in several Church publications, including the *Liahona* and *Ensign* magazines.

The cultural disparity between these two artists and their vastly different life experiences could not be greater, yet their artworks are united by their common love for the gospel and by the spirit that inspired them. It is unlikely that they would ever have met had it not been for their membership in the Church and for the role that BYU played in bringing them together. Richards was first introduced to Chirwa's artwork when he was shown examples of the Zambian artist's paintings by Margaret Blair Young, a local filmmaker and writer who also teaches creative writing at BYU. Chirwa was familiar with Richards's work and admired his use of symbolism. After a meeting over pizza, the two men struck up an immediate friendship and were soon planning their combined



Top: *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*, by Chiloba Chirwa. Oil on Panel, 2014.
Bottom: *Last Supper*, by J. Kirk Richards. Oil on Panel, 2014.

exhibition. Richards was intrigued by Chirwa’s African background: “The theme came to me because I am probably from the least exotic place a Mormon can be from—that’s Provo, Utah!”¹ Commenting on the initial concept for the show, Richards said, “I thought it would be really fun to do a show where we approach the same gospel themes, but each from our own aesthetic experience. Then put them side-by-side just to show that gospel themes that have meaning for all of us also have personal meaning for each of us.”² Both artists worked quickly, completing the paintings for the exhibition in a period of just three months.

Chirwa is a relative newcomer to painting and has been painting on a regular basis for only the past three years. He is steeped in the traditions of his homeland, and his work echoes the vibrant colors and rhythms of this indigenous culture. However, his work also reflects the influence of aspects of Western culture that he was exposed to as a young boy when he started drawing sports stars and comic book

1. J. Kirk Richards, interview by Herman du Toit, December 5, 2014.

2. Paige Vogt, “BYU Art Exhibit Featuring Contrasting Biblical Scenes Closes Sept. 30,” *Herald Media*, September 11, 2014, http://www.heraldextra.com/news/community/higher-education/byu-art-exhibit-featuring-contrasting-biblical-scenes-closes-sept/article_ccbfdafc-7b5e-5d3c-be50-06308c8caf35.html.



Healing, by J. Kirk Richards. Oil on Panel, 2014.

heroes in a realistic style. Chirwa has become increasingly impressed with Richards's use of symbolic figures as a result of their collaboration. Although he never had any formal art instruction, he believes his capacity for drawing provides a sound foundation for his painting. He had chosen to become an architect while he was still in high school in Lusaka, so that he would have a means of providing for himself in a society where it is hard to make a living as an independent artist. In reflecting on his career choice at the time, Chirwa referred to a quotation he had once read: "Life depends on science but the arts make it worth living."³

Chirwa's paintings reflect his African roots. Back in Zambia he had decided he would represent the true character of his culture: "I took the women who tend to have colorful clothing and colorful dispositions. They are very expressive people. Using traditional stick figures—the way that unschooled African people would draw their figures—and putting colorful clothing on them, [I] give these paintings life. That's how I wanted to represent my culture—they are a very bright people."⁴ His

3. Attributed to John Martin, a noted contemporary British medical researcher.

4. Chiloba Chirwa, interview by Herman du Toit, December 4, 2014.



Left: *Woman at the Well*, by J. Kirk Richards. Oil on Panel, 2014. Right: *Woman at the Well*, by Chiloba Chirwa. Oil on Panel, 2014.

bright colors, unsophisticated figures, and the incorporation of tribal fabric motifs in his paintings charge his works with an elemental energy found only in Africa: “The history of African art is about characters, figures, and animals. Everything that represents a human figure is stylized—that’s how it’s always been. We don’t necessarily want to create realistic art all the time—we like to create stylizations. We tend to look at figures differently and give them a twist to give them character. I would like to make representations that people can interpret their own way, not just push it in their faces.”⁵ Chirwa’s paintings often strike a celebratory tone. Commenting on his painting *Mary and Martha* (see page 166), he said, “African women are excited and jubilant. They are graceful. I wanted to portray how they might actually react to meeting Jesus; they wouldn’t be humbly sitting there—they would be rejoicing!”⁶

5. Chirwa, interview.

6. Vogt, “BYU Art Exhibit.”

He is an only child and says he owes much of who he is and what he has become to his mother and grandmother. Perhaps this is another reason why he is drawn to themes that involve women and Christ. Richards said that he learned much from Chirwa's expressive and joyful depictions: "My work is often somber and tells the narrative in a fairly straightforward, reverent kind of way—it's fun to see Chirwa's interpretations that involve more celebration."⁷ On the other hand, Chirwa was drawn closer to Richards's often abstract forms. He said, "[Richards's] work incorporates rhythms and abstractions—reducing the figures to symbols—which echo a lot of the things that I do, and that struck a chord with me. I used to paint realistically, but not anymore, as this whole abstract thing has caught on."⁸

In this exhibition, both artists share a common stylistic idiom in their use of depersonalized figures with often featureless faces. These figures act as symbolic references, allowing viewers to relate to them in their own terms. Chirwa said he also learned a lot from Richards's strong sense of composition: "I love his composition. As a self-taught artist I try to learn from people who have had a professional training. Kirk also uses simple figures but his compositions are so powerful."⁹

Both artists also share a profound spiritual basis for their painting. Their spiritual alignment became the overarching factor that united their work. Chirwa referred to the inspiration he receives: "Being in tune with the Spirit gives me an outlet to paint. When I paint a figure of Christ, I'm painting from my head—from my spirit. I'm not looking at pictures to paint my representations of Christ. It doesn't always work out, but when you really do feel close to him in certain moments, you feel comfortable and your representations just work—it just comes to you when you feel inspired, and it doesn't work when you're not inspired."¹⁰

Richards commented in similar fashion about the spiritual underpinnings of his work: "An artwork for me is very much like a prayer or an offering, and it could be that way even if the pieces were not overtly religious. Most of my work is overtly religious, but I find deep spirituality in works that are landscapes or that are portraits. So I think most artists would agree that it's an offering, a type of prayer, and that's certainly true for me. I've made promises to God, if he would show me how to

7. Richards, interview.

8. Chirwa, interview.

9. Chirwa, interview.

10. Chirwa, interview.

do this, that I would teach others, that I would use my artwork to serve. I think that is a foundational element to the inspiration that I receive.”¹¹

This exhibition highlighted the contrasting styles of two artists from opposite sides of the world in depicting gospel themes; it also demonstrated the strength that comes from such an unlikely collaboration. The exhibition not only provided each man an opportunity to appreciate and learn from his “brother’s perspective,” but through their friendship they also became their “brother’s keeper” in a manner that affirmed both their faith and their creativity in ways that neither had expected.

Herman du Toit retired in 2011 as head of museum research at the Brigham Young University Museum of Art in Provo, Utah. He has enjoyed an extensive career as an art educator, curator, administrator, critic, and author, both locally and abroad. He is a former head of the Durban Art School and founding director of the Cecil Renaud Art Gallery at the Durban University of Technology in South Africa. He holds postgraduate degrees in art history and sociology of education from the former University of Natal. While at BYU, he was awarded a J. Paul Getty Fellowship for his PhD study of interpretive practices at some of America’s leading art museums.

11. Richards, interview.