THE
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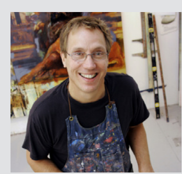

BRUCE HERMAN is a painter and educator, who has published work in many books, most recently *Through My Eyes*. He spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** and undergraduate research assistant **Nathan McGuire** before his presentation about his studio process and Christian framework at a Boisi Center event.

HEVELONE: Welcome, Bruce. My first question is a basic one. What does it mean to be an artist? In particular, since we're at the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, what does it mean to be an artist in relationship to the public sphere and public life?

HERMAN: Historically, artists have both been servants of the rich and powerful and also the church. They've also been decorators. They've been storytellers for the tribe. They've been shamans. They've been priests. In our culture, the role of the artist is changing. It's changed a bunch of times in the last 100 years. The modernist pose of the artist is an agent provocateur, a kind of a troublemaker who asks all the questions no one wants to deal with, points out all the things happening in the room that people would rather not look at.

What does it mean to be an artist in the public sphere? I think nowadays, it's multifarious. You've got artists who are highly political. You've got artists who are decorators. You've got artists who are re-affirming good old-fashioned values that the rich and powerful want affirmed. I could go on, but I think it's a messy, complex and wonderful time to be an artist.

MCGUIRE: Could you talk about your studio process, and how you disappear into the act of painting?

HERMAN: Yes, I'll tell you a story. That might help save breath. This is what painting is like. You go into the studio in the morning. You put on your apron. You squeeze out your paints. You get your brushes ready. You set up your canvas or

your panel, whatever you're working on. Everyone's in the studio with you. Rembrandt's sitting over in the corner, falling asleep. Picasso's got his arms folded saying, "See what you can do, sonny boy." Mary Cassatt's over there knitting, having a cup of tea, and saying, "I wish he behaved better." You got Velasquez over there and Goya. Van Gogh, he's staring at you wildly. One by one, they get bored and they leave. Then when you leave, that's when you're painting.

For me, the process is about self-loss. It's about dying into the act of making the work or becoming a servant of the work, and how that happens is mysterious to me. I don't want to romanticize it, but at the same time, I don't want to take anything away from the mystery of it. It's been my experience since I was a little boy. My experience of making drawings and making paintings has been that when I step back from the finished work, I often feel like someone else did it. I'm often saying, "Hey, that's pretty good." Sometimes I'm saying, "That's terrible. I'm tearing it apart."

Artists obviously have been given unprecedented autonomy in the last 100 years. We do tend to be alone with our own thoughts, our own dreams, our own hopes, our nightmares, our fears, our joys. We're not just simply grinding away at some job for some aristocrat who wants to be shown on their horseback as the great one. As a result of that radical autonomy, art making is self-revelatory. I have some complex feelings about that, both pro and con. It has some good features. It's also led to some pretty crazy stuff in the last 100 years. Not just crazy, but actually caustic and toxic stuff. In any one of our disciplines, I don't think we

arrive at our meaning alone. It's always a shared, conversational meaning-making.

There's lots of meaningless art being made because artists are so totally idiosyncratic. They're so totally free from any constraint. For me, the process can be mystical. It probably has psychological elements in it because of that radical autonomy. If you're left alone for yourself, you make stuff up and you get lost in your own world.

MCGUIRE: That was a great answer. Could you talk about the physical process, too?

HERMAN: Well, like poetry and musical composition and writing novels and so forth, visual artists do a lot of trial balloons. We try stuff out, and it doesn't work, and we scrap it. Sometimes we'll save some residue of a piece that was a failed piece and then see if that can't be incorporated somehow into something that could work. I remember reading Robert Pinsky, the Boston poet who said that sometimes he'd be driving along in the car, listening to the radio, or he'd be sitting in a café, sipping a cup of coffee, and he'd hear some fragment of conversation. He wouldn't have any idea what the context was, but just the sound and the feel of the words in his mouth was enough to get him started on a poem. Sometimes you start something. You think you're on a great path to completion. You get really close to the finish line, and it's a piece of junk. It's a total failure. But there might be still something there that's worse salvaging. My process is pretty vigorous losing and finding of the form.

HEVELONE: One thing that really draws me to your work is the doing and undoing nature of it. You've talked about brokenness in beauty before. You already started addressing this, but how do you come to artistic process of doing and undoing in your painting?

MCGUIRE: It seems especially in [the painting] "Against Chaos" that your paintings juxtapose the chaos in the brokenness with the beauty and the hope. What underlies your philosophy that allows you to give equal weight to each, or is it equal?

HERMAN: That's a good question. I don't know. I don't really know if it's equal weight.

HEVELONE: Is it something that you did initially in your art?

HERMAN: No. Actually, I was taught in a classical method where you would arrive at a subject matter. You'd do a rendering of that in pencil or charcoal. I would start maybe with a sketch and then develop into a fully developed preparatory drawing. Then you would grid that off. Then usually you would expand it, up to a bigger size canvas and you used a grid system for transferring that preparatory drawing up, step by step. You'd do that drawing again. You'd rehearse it several times. You'd do the drawing again on the canvas. Then you'd begin to do an under-painting, which was usually a grisaille, French for gray. It's a gray-scale painting. Then you would add color afterwards. It's methodical, systematic and unidirectional from beginning to end. I was taught that way.

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It was fine, but I found right around the end of my undergraduate years, that I was getting frustrated with that systematic, linear methodology, principally because I became aware of expressionism. I became aware of artists in the twentieth century who had reacted against World War I, against injustice, against their own internal chaos of psychological damage that had been done by living in a culture that was insensible to fairness or human kindness or was loaded with prejudice or violence.

If there's a stereotype of the artist as a sensitive soul, it's probably partially true at least, probably largely true. I was that hyper sensitive kid. I would cry at the drop of a hat, not because I was hurt physically, because I was bigger than most kids, but I wasn't a fighter. I was a sensitive kid. I think what I discovered at the end of my undergraduate years is that the emotional reaction that I was having to the world was not served well by that linear methodology of fastidiously building a painting like you would build a building.

I needed to find a way to paint that included an acknowledgment of the chaos and the craziness of the world around. Not just outside of me, but the world inside of me as well, the internal contradictions; the nightmares and dreams and personal contradictions, emotional dishonesty and the stuff of life. I wanted to find a much more expressive method and image. One day I had an assignment. One of my professors said go home and make six drawings on any theme that you choose. They have to be done by Tuesday. Bring them in.

I went to work and I made these six drawings, and they were pastels – quite colorful. They had a certain superficial beauty about them. I got done with them. I looked at them, and they just looked like lies. Every one of them looked like a lie to me. I ripped them to shreds. I

showed up in class on Tuesday, and I said, "Professor, I did your assignment. I could show the results, but I destroyed all of it." He said, "Well, that's always your prerogative. But it's also my prerogative to flunk you." It sort of was a catharsis for me. It made me realize, I've got to find a different way of doing this.

That started my journey into expressionism. I became aware of the work of Georges Rouault, a French expressionist painter, who's meant a lot to me. There was a major retrospective of his work, by the way, here at BC [at the McMullen Museum] a few years back. Stephen Schloesser was the curator. That Rouault retrospective was one of the best shows of his work I've ever seen. Anyway, Rouault was a major influence and then Max Beckmann, a German expressionist. Those two painters had the biggest impact on me. They introduced me to a whole new way of depicting form, which involved a greater violence, frankly.

MCGUIRE: You mentioned in your book, *Through Your Eyes,* [co-written with G. Walter Hansen] that what drives you to paint is a desire to express meaning about the human experience that can't be expressed through words. For you, what is it about painting that can express that, where words fail?

HERMAN: I don't know if I have a really articulate answer for you. I think we all live our lives both subconsciously and super-unconsciously. We live outside of verbal packaging all the time, every day, 24 hours a day, including our dream life. We are talking creatures though, so we like to talk. We have this way of interacting with each other that's highly nuanced with language, with verbal language. But we all know, if you really stop to think about it for just a few minutes, you can't possibly put into words even an iota of what you experience in a 24-hour period.

One of the famous books that drove this home to me was *Ulysses* by James Joyce, in which the entire novel is one day. It takes place in one day. Words are just incredibly clumsy at expressing nuance of light and space and texture and emotional vibration, even intellectual fantasy. It's almost impossible to put into words. That's why poets take words in any given language and they literally pound them, so they break open and start to bleed daylight. That's actually a stolen line from a Canadian songwriter [Bruce Cockburn] who says, "Got to kick the darkness until it bleeds daylight."

HEVELONE: I'm really curious to see what you have to say tonight about Eucharist because I know you love Orvieto, Italy. For those people that haven't been there, the feast of Corpus Christi is really important to that community. I'm wondering how that experience of being in Orvieto has influenced your thinking about the Eucharist, particularly since you're not Roman Catholic. So could you speak about hospitality and Eucharist and this environment where it's important – and yet you're not quite a part of it, but you are a part of it.

HERMAN: I had the unique experience of being invited to participate in the Eucharist by the Bishop of Orvieto-Todi. Todi is a nearby town, and that's a district. Bishop Giovanni Scanavino is a great man. He's no longer bishop of the region there, but I had the incredible fortune of being invited by him along with a handful of other faculty and students to participate in Eucharist, even though we're not Roman Catholics. The reason he gave for allowing us is that he said, after talking with us, he became convinced that we believed substantially the same thing, about what is happening in that feast. It was moving. You asked about the Eucharist. Do you specifically want to talk about its relationship to Orvieto or for me?

HEVELONE: I was just probing a little bit about how Orvieto has influenced your thinking about brokenness and beauty.

HERMAN: Not just Orvieto, but Italy in general, because it's an incarnational culture – the wine, the food, the lovemaking. It's basically an affirmation of physical life that few cultures really manage to do, especially northern culture. We tend to downplay the body as though it was an inconvenience or something. If you have some pleasure, it's probably illicit and you need to hide it. The Italian culture is pretty upfront about its enjoyment of the body and everything about it.

I spent 15 years involved in a Buddhist and Hindu practice, philosophy and religion before I became a Christian. I'm a convert as an adult at the age of 30 to Christian faith. The attraction for me of the Biblical faith – not just Christianity,

but Judaism – is this emphasis on the goodness of the body, the goodness of the creation of the physical world. It says at the beginning of the Bible, God created, and he said it was good. Then when he created us, he said, "Hmm, that's very good."

MCGUIRE: What's your experience of giving up control of your paintings and welcoming the viewer to be the judge of your work?

HERMAN: I don't really think of it as judge so much as mutually participate in a conversation. I don't know about you, but I don't particularly love conversations in which I feel someone's judging me. There's a whole critical culture out there that thinks that that's the job of the critics – to be the judge. I think they're deeply mistaken. The job of the critic is to be basically an interpreter and someone who is making the work available to other people. A really good critic submits to the work. They don't operate on the work like on a patient. I invite people into the dialogue because I'm not interested in making art if it's just for me.

Philosophically, and even emotionally and psychologically, I'm predisposed to be really curious about what someone else sees when I make something. I want to see what they pick up on. If they have responded to some of the things that I've buried in the work – so far I have not met too many people who have spent the time, taken the time to unpack the whole thing.

One of the gambles that we all make as artists, poets, composers, painters, whatever, is that an unborn generation may some day excavate the work to get to all the different layers that are buried there. I'm genuinely authentically curious to hear what other people see and how they interpret my work. Oftentimes, I'm surprised and enlightened by what other people see because I do feel like I am a servant of the work. As I was saying earlier when you asked me what's your process like, and it's like you disappear when you're painting. You have to exit the studio and let the painting come into being. Part of what happens in that process is things get communicated through you that are bigger than you are.

When a really responsive viewer comes along and encounters your work and declares what they see, then you start to see it. As the artist, you have to affirm it. You say, "You're right. I didn't see that." That's a great experience. I have a story to tell you about that. You know the famous playwright Arthur Miller who wrote *Death of a Salesman*, among other things. After the first production of *Death of a Salesman*, one of his friends said, "So Art, what'd you think?" Arthur Miller's response was, "I had no idea I'd written that."

HEVELONE: Christian art has been around for a long time. You have Rembrandt and all those guys sitting around your art studio before you start painting, and yet you're doing your own thing. How do you maintain that balance? Why continue doing these same Christian themes? What about them drives you re-express them in a new and different way?

HERMAN: I've got two answers to that. One is what any healthy happy child does when their mom and their dad tells them a story. "Tell me that story again. I want to hear it again." Then for a third, fourth or fifth time in one sitting. There's something about human beings from the time they're little until they die, they love to hear a good story again. Even though they know what's going to happen, they still cry or they still laugh. Isn't that amazing? There's something built in, hardwired into us that, if something is true, if something is beautiful, something is good, we want it done again.

When I look at aerial photographs of hurricanes or cyclones, I immediately think of a starry nebula. There's a similar pattern there, that spiral shape. I also notice that when water goes down the drain, it does the same thing. The question that comes to me in thinking about that is: "What is it about that form, that spiral?" You look at a nautilus shell, and you see that spiral. It happens in many places in nature. Fiddle-head ferns have a beautiful spiral shape. It looks like a nautilus shell when it's young, before it unfolds.

There's something about that repeating of a pattern, repeating of a story, the repeating of a tradition that just confirms our humanness. I don't think a living tradition is simply repeated. It's elaborated and developed and evolves. I'm treating themes that artists have been treating for 2,000 years. I've had people come to me who are arch traditionalists and looked at my work and say, "I didn't think I was going to like this, but I do. But it's so different, and yet, it's also the same." To me, that's delightful – the idea that we can tell the same story, but three people are going to tell it just a little differently. That difference is part of the enjoyment, but also the familiar pattern is also enjoyable. I'm a kind of liturgical person. I like pattern. I like ritual.

MCGUIRE: You mentioned the shift that you had at the end of your undergraduate years, but I guess in the broader sense, how has your work evolved over your career?

HERMAN: I've been painting for 45 years in a disciplined way. I suppose I could say I've seen certain emergent elements in my work that do tend to be recognizable and yet also that evolve and change and morph. I suppose if I had to summarize what I see in the evolution of my work is a growing closer to a real deep, deep mediation on the human person. That's what drives me and has driven me. I didn't have the language to say this when I was six years old, but I remember clear as day looking into the face of my grandmother and thinking – that is beautiful. She is beautiful. She's here. She's present in her face. I probably couldn't have said this then, but I knew and intuited that her history was there in her face.

If you looked at that book [*Through Your Eyes*], which samples three decades or more of my work, you'll see that I'm gradually honing in on the human person. I'm getting closer to as a painter in my probably third and last phase of my career – who knows how long it will last. But I'm definitely in a mature stage as an artist. My hope is if I can keep painting for another 20 or 30 years, I'll get even closer to that. I look at a late Rembrandt self-portraits and I think there's never been anything better made ever by a human being. I'm not just talking about art. I'm talking about anything. I don't think anyone's ever made anything better than those late portraits. What is it about them? He's utterly present.

What is it for a human being to be able to push gooey sticky color stuff around a surface, a piece of cloth stretched over some wooden frame and make you feel 500 years later that he's there? Imagine being able to do that. I've seen some great cinematography. I've never seen anything better on film than what Rembrandt did in paint. That's what I'm aiming for. I'm aiming to somehow get closer to what I see in those paintings. It's not that I want to imitate Rembrandt. It's that I want to get at the same thing he wanted to get at, which is the revelation of the human person. I could say that glibly with words, but I say it a lot better in my paintings.

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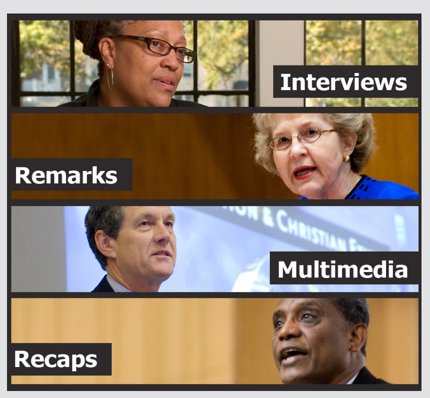

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