

# An Interview with Jud Emerick

by Hannah Maximova

October 2005

JE: It's a very multicultural undertaking out there at OGMM and this is the main reason why I continue. But I really started only because Betsy went. She just declared that she was going to go off to the OGMM, and I said, "You are?" It seemed to me that I had a choice: I could either just ignore this whole business or I could accompany her—just go along with. I keep saying to myself that that's what I've been doing for the last, what, two and a half years or more? (laughs) But now I'm on the Property Committee. (laughs)

HM: My crossover came when I volunteered to do the Record. It's been good – you people are all so fascinating.

JE: I commend you for the vividness of the prose that comes out in your interviews. I do understand that the transcription is not automatic.

HM: Thank you so much for recognizing that. So, gosh, I've heard a lot about where you've lived and what you've been up to. How would you say you came into your atheism?

JE: (laughs) Right. I grew up in a Protestant Dutch Reformed church in Kingston, New York, where it was really quite clear that we were dealing with an empty and lifeless ritual. But it being a Protestant church also meant there was a high value put on intellectual work. The reformers – Martin Luther and John Calvin – were presented that way to me as a teenager and maybe that's where things begin for a scholar like myself. But of course that inevitably takes you to another place--it takes you to understanding modern times and the tension between...I'm not going to say faith and knowledge...I'm going to say authority and knowledge.

As a late teen I understood that I really had to bear down on this problem – that just taking things on the basis of authority was just never going to work and I had to think things through myself. That quickly led me away from faith of any sort.

As I continued in my education it was compounded many times over. I was slow to understand the social dimensions of my work as an art historian, too ready to accept the aesthetic as the end of the work. But I came to understand that the reason we use the visual arts is as a tool for making social sense. That quickly led me to understand some of the complexities of the social interaction of individuals with collectives in our society, and I came to another understanding of how we work ideologically in our world.

I had no interest in anything like a Quaker Meeting, and I must say that I'm still relatively skeptical. I go to Meetings with Betsy largely because of her lead. But I'm fascinated by all of the people there. I try to understand what the silence could portend. I wonder about just how it is that in silence when someone speaks, it has such extra special meaning.

For a professor who has to lecture all the time or deal with students in discussion, speech of this kind is fascinating. Out of a half hour of silence suddenly comes Joe Franko saying words of wisdom. I'm just simply amazed at this. I decided that I have no place to actually speak in the Meeting itself, being an observer. I maintain this observer's status throughout. I imagine many of us must do so.

It would seem that father or mother gods are not really what makes going to the Meeting important at all to me. I would never grant that status...there is no such being. But I would say that there is probably a collective consciousness in silence that has considerable interest (which is high praise on my part). So I'm exploring this new sense of belonging in a group.

HM: Given your feelings toward authority, how do you feel about being an authority figure in your work?

JE: That's an unfair question because what I'm really talking about is what Immanuel Kant would say is growing up. Are you going to do something because your daddy said you should do it (and do it without thinking), or are you going to decide how you are a part of society, what your obligations are – which you will freely assume – and how you will obey given that you do have this understanding of yourself as a part of a greater whole than you alone are?

This is a late 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment idea, and it ain't dead. Talk of postmodernism is premature. We're not done with this world, and we're not done with its problems. They are real and deep and profound. That's where the interest of being human is. I guess now would be the time to say that Quakerism's Christianity with its interest in properly preparing for another world...that next life...is an issue for me. Such preparing seems to subtract from being alive *right now*.

The sacredness that might attend living now is what the Quaker Meeting can bring into such sharp focus. That's its main interest to me. The Quakers can manage this, can't they? They can manage the people rebounding from Judaism or us poor Protestant Dutch Reformers. They seem even able to accommodate Buddhist quietism. So Quakerism would seem to me a peculiarly great latter-day Protestant movement which we could make some headway with. It seems to me that this, shall we call it a movement, a program, a religion? I rather like movement better. It would seem to portend something new for the future.

Protestantism is at the basis of an enlightened modernity. It's all about giving consciousness its full due. It would seem to me that from George Fox to Kant and Hegel to us sitting here (boy am I ever making big jumps) that we could claim that Quakerism provides the framework for us to go somewhere. This is interesting to find myself saying these things, I must say. I hadn't really quite thought them through to this extent.

HM: Part of the fun.

JE: Sure is.

HM: Is the work you do now at Pomona College different from what you originally did when you got there?

JE: Not really. I was hired in Art History, and I still do that. But very early on the person who hired me decided that they would make me do a great deal of administrative work. I was largely responsible for hiring my colleagues. I made sure that they were people who were interested in art as a social phenomenon. What's turned out is that we have a department that works harmoniously together.

We've been the major figures pulling hard to produce a new art history at Pomona which shows the social consequences of art use. We are much less interested in issues of connoisseurship, of artwork having a value in itself. We're much more eager to point out how visual communication works socially. For 32 years I've been teaching there, and this has worked to transform the department. We've become far more relevant in the enterprise of the institution as a whole.

HM: So you're largely a teaching professor?

JE: Largely I'm a professor who teaches, writes, and produces knowledge. I've been working on early Christian and early medieval architecture in Italy, mainly in Rome, for the past seven years or so.

So now here's something interesting: for a guy who grew up in a Protestant Dutch Reformed church and rejected it, I spend five days a week talking about Christian architecture. I really do, and it feels great. I'm ready to fully take my obligations as an historian of European culture of the Middle Ages and present it to students of the 21st century with enthusiasm. (laughs)

It does occur to me that even though my mother wanted me to become a minister like her father, I became an art historian who's talking about all the same things. Dealing with my students as I'm sure a Protestant minister might have to deal with a congregation. It's interesting. I think that college teaching in America has always been just a step away from congregational administration over the two hundred and fifty years that this country has been around.

HM: What was your connection to visual art in your earlier life, when you were growing up? Was it a big issue then too?

JE: Good question. The answer is that I was a kid who did art all the time. I could draw anything, and in high school I was the person who was the artist in the crowd. But I was also the kid who could get A's in math and physics. It seemed that I could do it right across the board.

So at the end of high school, when I applied to professional art schools, I got in. Didn't get into MIT, though. I also got into a funny little college that my mother and father could actually afford, Hope College in Holland, Michigan. So that's where I went.

But you know I didn't press about that. I knew that it was a major moment. Here I was an eighteen-year-old trying to make this decision about where my life was going to go, and I knew that art school wasn't quite going to do it. I was happy indeed to go to a liberal arts college. And I thrived there.

It was a small place, and I got to be the editor of the literary magazine, and I could play at art. I was an art and philosophy major. I was sure I was going to be an engineer as I went and took pre-calculus, but I didn't much care for it; it was just a bore. The chemistry course first semester

didn't go well at all either; I didn't like it. So I got into the art and philosophy departments – I was mad for philosophy.

My teachers in the art department kept saying to me, “Well, you know, Jud, you should consider art history.” Well, there were no art history courses at Hope College, but they would give me books that they knew were great monuments in the field of art history and ask me to deal with them. I remember my first art history book was on Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling by Charles de Tolnay, and I was quite attracted to it.

We're talking early 60's in this case. What was interesting is that I realized that as time went on, my edge as someone who drew and painted was beginning to dull. While that talent never leaves one, if you don't develop it, it just stays rather quiescent. Instead I've pressed hard verbally to become someone who writes, does lectures, and speaks. I'm as verbal as visual. So the choice to go to a liberal arts college was a good one. And I met Betsy there too, didn't I?

HM: So were you taken to museums when you were a kid?

JE: Well, I grew up in Kingston, New York, and my mother sent me to New York City. We were only 90 miles north of it. By age 15 or 16, I was on my own in the big city and went to the Met all the time. I remember wonderful museum moments. The most vivid was seeing the paintings of Rosa Bonheur. She was a late 19<sup>th</sup> century Parisian woman who painted horse fairs. That's one of the most impressive paintings in the New York Met. It covers one wall of a huge gallery, and I can still remember coming through a door, seeing this painting, and being bowled over by it. I just couldn't believe the pounding hooves of the horses.

HM: Did that piece relate to some social movement?

JE: That's an excellent question, but I was a 15-year-old. It would be a long while before I learned Rosa Bonheur's name and put her into 19<sup>th</sup> century art as a realist. And it was a far more interesting thing for me to learn that she was one of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century lesbian women like George Sand, who literally put on pants in order to move in the world she wanted to move in.

HM: I love pictures of women from that era when they're wearing pants – they always look so proud and defiant.

JE: This is true. To think of the distance that women have traveled. I learned all that later. I remember trying to deal with the Abstract Expressionists as a little kid, being hugely impressed by them. Knowing sort of in my bones that this was the Cold War US success story. Abstract Expressionism was going to be the vanguard of modern art, and New York was going to take credit for it – I knew it instinctively. (laughs) I didn't know it for real. I had to read about it years and years later. But I could feel it; I grew up with it.

I'm also a guy who lived through the Pop Art movement as a young person. Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol were still real people at the cutting edge, new people whom nobody had attitudes about yet. You had to make up your mind about them yourself (laughs) – Jasper Johns and all the rest of them. I can remember just being thrilled by Warhol's soup cans and understanding how this set me free – free of all kinds of stupid stuff. Pop Art was one of the great movements, and I really love it. Living in that world was a huge amount of fun.

But I think, being 63 as I am, that being a Cold War baby was a burden. As a kid I really was afraid of the bomb, and when I became older I just took for granted Mutually Assured Destruction. And when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, I was amazed, just simply amazed. My later life through the '90s began to change after that. All of Eastern Europe was opened up, and people could study in Europe. I was in Europe in 1970 to begin with, as a 29-year-old. And after '89, things changed immensely. The students I teach just don't know a whole world that I grew up in. The first two-thirds of my life were in this Cold War world.

HM: So do you think there's any connection between being raised in the Cold War world and your feelings toward atheism? Mutually Assured Destruction doesn't sound like God's country.

JE: Interesting. Doesn't, does it? I think I thought myself to that place. That's a real place. It's where I could embrace this world and the life I have and understand it as holy. It was also (even though I didn't know it at the time) one of the ways to get rid of positivity. It was a way to grow up: not to do things because there was some authority outside of me that required me to do it but to do it because I could understand it needed to be done. That's how I came to it. That's how I did it.

Okay, I think I've got the answer to your question. Yeah, growing up in Cold War America – one of the antidotes is what we'll call atheism. Clearly Hegel ended...I've got to choose just the right word...he ended stuck. He ended in an aporia. He didn't know whether to turn that way or this way because he posited a Lutheran Protestant modern state as the end of history. It left him with no critical place to stand. He had no future! So my atheism left me with a critical place to stand, you could say crudely. This is very crude, but I think it's true. And by the way, the Quakers are happy to welcome me. Which is amazing (laughs).

So maybe only Southern Californian Quakers could manage all this.

Now let me tell you what my biggest trouble with the Meeting is. It's talk of Truth with a capital T. Professors know that the truth is what's good for us to believe. For example, we're all human, we're all trying to make a good society together, and of course it's good that women should have the vote. It's "true," women's suffrage is right. How about George Fox, did he think women's suffrage was right? I don't think it ever occurred to George for one second. You could say truth is relative, but that's so simple-minded. Relative to what?

HM: Relative to the world you live in. You can only grow in small steps, and truth is the next small step you're able to see in front of you.

JE: We could go on with this. If George sat down with us, I'd be willing to try. I would argue that what's true is what's good for us to believe, good for making a just society right here and now to the best of our abilities. The talk on the first day of every month about Truth as some abstract, a priori, eternal norm drives me quite crazy. These are the moments when I forget my resolve to not stand up in Meeting...almost forget. I don't know what to do about that, that's just a huge problem.

HM: It really doesn't bother me. I feel like somewhere within you is a part that's able to feel as much truth as you're able to hold and whatever part of it you can feel is appropriate for your experience.

JE: I guess all I'm thinking is that claims to something called "The Truth" might ground action. And what are you going to do with people who won't grant your claims? Cast them out? On grounds of a Truth violation? But then maybe a Quaker would never do that. Maybe a Quaker would always talk to a group and ask for a consensus. That's all I'm ever hoping we can do when it comes to thinking about our political programs.

HM: From what I understand of Quakers is there's a deep respect for everybody's truth, which could be slightly different, and if you can find a consensus among those truths then everybody can agree on one thing.

JE: Did Betsy explain about being in Philadelphia and being near to all that Quakerness? If you live in Philadelphia as we did, as we studied at the University of Pennsylvania, William Penn and Quakerish things just get into your bones. Swarthmore is nearby. So is Haverford. That's where I think it began for both Betsy and me.

And Betsy worked at Reed College with Doug Bennett. That was a major moment. (Bennett went on to become president of Earlham College.) On a Sunday, excuse me, on a First Day, we were taken by Doug to a downtown Manhattan 18<sup>th</sup> century Quaker Meeting House for the first time.

That was our first Quaker experience, and it had a big impact. It was an unprogrammed, silent Meeting, and we were introduced as visitors and got the requisite welcome. We were impressed that this was the day of a gay men's parade in Manhattan, and the Meeting House was full of a boisterous contingent of gay men. It impressed us very favorably. (laughs)

But that was years away from when Betsy declared on that Sunday morning three years ago that she was going to take that ten-mile trip over to Pasadena and attend Meeting. I was appalled and then decided that since she was going to do it, I could hardly not do it too. When I got there, I looked through the window at this Meeting with all these people sitting there and not saying a single thing. I didn't see how I could barge in at that moment, so I sat outside for the whole hour. When I looked through the window again, there was all this activity inside, and they still weren't ready to leave. It took a long while to get into that Meeting!