
Career Narrative

I grew up on a large working farm in Kentucky. My Aunt in Chicago took me to the Chicago Art Institute when I was a child - I saw the drawings of Giacometti that seem to transcend the bounding lines of objects and people. I tried to make similar drawings at my aunt's house that night. She told me there are people who do that called artists. Giacometti's drawings seemed affirmation that there is a dense nature to the world, beyond the bounding line, even if we cannot see it.

A man named John Jacob Niles, known as a collector and performer of Appalachian song, was a neighbor. I learned later that he was well known around the world (and later learned he was an influence on Bob Dylan and many others). Mr. Niles would perform story songs. He would do all the voices of all the characters. I recall posters of him from performances in Europe hanging in his home.

Soon I was writing songs and making sculptures from fallen trees on the farm. I attended The Rhode Island School of Design studying sculpture. But also began to sing in clubs in New England and eventually at Folk City and other clubs in New York. The two pursuits have always felt as though they are tools from the same toolbox.

A family emergency brought me back to Kentucky when I was 21 but I quickly moved on to Nashville establishing a career as a songwriter, my songs eventually being recorded by Dan Fogelberg, Dickie Betts, David Allen Coe, and Porter Wagoner among others. Missing the isolation and the sense of a dense world that contained mystery, I moved back to Kentucky two years later, far out in the foothills of the Appalachians working on sculptures in the fields and continuing to write songs, receiving a weekly stipend from a Nashville song publishing company.

I was making large figures set into the landscapes. Another cold winter approaching (the cold made it difficult for materials to set up properly) I applied in my mid-twenties and was accepted, to The MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire for that winter. There I met several people who broadened my world. Isabella Gardner (the poet - and seeming black sheep of that family who invited me to stay in her writing room at the Chelsea Hotel when I was in NY). Hannah Green, a novelist's novelist who would invite me to sing my songs to her graduate writing seminar at Columbia University and her husband the painter John Wesley. They became my closest friends. They always came to see me play in NY and brought friends; Odetta, Allen Ginsberg, the feminist novelist, Alex Kates Shulman. Allen Ginsberg taught me about the poet and printmaker William Blake whose work (both writing and printmaking) became a lasting influence. Hannah and I would read Thoreau's journals on the designated days. Through these visits and my correspondence from Kentucky with them and others I believe I received more of an achieved education than the seeming formal one at RISD (where I had left after two years to become a paid apprentice to my favorite RISD teacher for the remaining two years, learning molding and fabrication techniques I still use).

Hannah Green and John Wesley introduced me to the gallery owner Carl Solway in New York. He also had a gallery in Cincinnati. He would drive the two hours to where I lived in Kentucky and camp out and we spoke of life and art. In 3 years, I had my first show at his gallery in Cincinnati. It was Carl who suggested I make prints. I asked why. He said that my drawings take so long - I should try to cut a drawing in wood and make a print, adding "And that way, you'll have more than one."

Carl showed my first efforts at this, a large quartet of woodcuts titled "The Mortal Pilgrimage." He showed them at the Chicago Art Fair, and they were chosen to go on tour in a group show, American Woodcut: Revival and Innovation (including Sol LeWitt, Louisa Chase, Tom Wesselman) organized by the World Print Council and shown in several European cities and the subject of a book. My series was purchased by The Australian National Museum.

Soon I began to make series of prints, finding it to be a way I could explore the sense of narrative I loved both in song and imagery as though to give each a physical presence.

Following my work to Cincinnati, I was soon raising two children. The circumstances did not lend themselves to being a musician on the road. I thought I could devise a way to use all the skills I'd worked on music, writing, sculpture, printmaking, etc. - to devise a kind of self-generated theater.

I had met a group of musicians in New York who'd heard me play at Folk City and on WFMU - members of a band called The Saqqara Dogs. We recorded a song cycle of mine titled The Hidden Boy in NY in the mid 1980's. I had also made a portfolio of prints of imagery and the lyrics to those songs. This was purchased by The Museum of Modern Art. I built large-scale sculptures for the stage based on the woodcuts and we presented this kind of theater in the late 1980's (with the Saqqara Dogs on stage also). The Hidden Boy went on to Louisville and then to the Wexner Center in Columbus Ohio. I met the choreographer, Bebe Miller. We became friends. I contributed two songs to an evening called The Hell Dances at St. Marks Place in NY that went wonderfully. She eventually asked if she could choreograph The Hidden Boy. There was an exhibition at the Watertown Museum in Louisville showing the prints and the resulting sculptures for the stage (this museum received an NEA grant for the organization of this exhibition. In 1989-1990 I received Major Fellowship Individual Artist Award from the Ohio Arts Council).

I continued the path of making portfolios of prints (providing me with a living from folks who would purchase the portfolios pre-publication, enabling me the funds and time to do the time-consuming working out of imagery and of story, translating that into theatrically viable sculpture. A stage piece based on the next portfolio (Limbus Fatuorum) was solicited by a well-known English opera director, Jonathan Eaton, when he saw a workshop version of it. I did not think of it as opera, simply as a sung and acted story. Mr. Eaton suggested that is what opera is and seemed to challenge me into that world. To be honest I was uncomfortable there. The sculptural sets, mechanical in nature and very large, were potentially dangerous. The music necessitated many players.

It was exhilarating yet disturbing and soon after that I wanted to essentially go back to living and working within a smaller palette. I wanted to make work that was right in front of me and did not involve singers flying in from far reaches and endless theater tech problems. I recall one visiting Russian set designer shaking his head and saying, "Jay, this is theater, the sculptures don't have to really work, they just have to look like they do." I said that the whole point of this is to bring these pieces to life in a way that allows them to be exactly what they are (all the mechanics of these pieces were visible) - not a "symbol" of something else. I ended up playing in his theater in St. Petersburg twice, before he left Russia in protest of the war in Ukraine. We remain good friends and speak of working together again.

I had imagined making motion pictures - trying to envision what is behind the drawn or printed image and further beyond even that. I thought I could make a movie out of woodcuts, again using all the skills I had worked on but outside the seeming commotion of the world of theater.

I think to my surprise, it is this work, called The Jackleg Testament, part one: Jack & Eve – a woodcut motion picture, that became the subject of ten solo museum exhibitions here in the US (including The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art (Philadelphia), Smith College Museum (Northampton, MA), - also in England (John Hansard Museum), Russia (Театр Поколений (Theater of Generations)) and Chile (Festival Internacional De Animación - Valparaiso), and winning Best Animation at the 2007 Santa Fe Film Festival (it was the recipient of a New Works Program grant from the Ohio Arts Council).

I continued this path envisioning a trilogy of motion pictures each made in different ways and adding to a kind of cosmology begun in the first (woodcut) movie which turns out to have been a puppet show at a Carnival.

I began a new portfolio (2011-2014) of large-scale prints (the writing etched into the image). Titled The Book of Only Enoch (the basis for the current project), this work was the subject of several solo exhibitions and of a publication from the University of Richmond (VA) Museum.

Work on moving pictures continued with a commission from the Cincinnati Opera for a short film I titled Kharmen, a mix of the opera Carmen and the stories of the Russian Absurdist, Daniil Kharmis.

Interest came from a record label (The Delmore Recording Society) in some tapes they had found of recordings I thought were lost. Released in 2018, this was written about extensively. Delmore plans on 3 more releases and has also inquired about a soundtrack recording of the current project in question. I produced a new portfolio of prints (The L Portfolio) related to that release, based on images and drafts of letters I had written to a loved one during my time in Nashville. This again supported the long work of the current project.

Since the first (woodcut) motion picture I began to envision a new technique for the second of the trilogy (the project in question here) - that of building and shooting physical space and inserting further drawn and animated figures, flora, fauna, etc. into that physical environment. This meant studying camera technique. During this time, I was approached by the cultural essayist and writer Ilan Stavans to make an animation of one of his stories. Having already built significant parts of my city and landscape, I told him I would do so if I could set his story in my city. He agreed. I am grateful for this time (2017-2019) of learning and for our motion picture titled The Silence of Professor Tösla. It won many awards including Best Animation and Best Story at the Fall 2020 Prague Independent Film Festival.

I was hired by the University of Kentucky Fine Arts Dept. (2019 - present) as an Off Sight Artist in Residence - speaking upon occasion with students in several different disciplines. I continue work on The Jackleg Testament, part 2; The Book of Only Enoch for the January 2025 premiere and exhibition of the sculptural sets, the print portfolio, narrative and working drawings and ephemera.