

Lee Udall Bennion: A Quiet Interview

Doris R. Dant

Introduction

Typical of the way artist Lee Bennion interweaves her family life and her work are the setting and events of the morning of this interview. When I arrived at her Spring City, Utah, home on September 23, 1996, Lee was canning tomatoes from her garden. She seated me at her dining room table for the interview, but her husband, Joe, came in to eat, and Adah, her youngest daughter, asked to have her hair braided. Unflustered by the interruptions, Lee simply offered me a slice of homemade bread and met her family's needs before returning to the business of the interview.

In a sense, *interview* is the wrong word to describe what happened next. Lee needed no prompting beyond a very few questions, even after additional pauses to attend to family matters.

Part I: Balancing Family and Career

Doris

Many people struggle with setting priorities and satisfying the demands of both family and work, especially when demands conflict. How have you resolved those issues?

Lee

When Joe and I started out as young newlyweds and got going with our family and making a living, we didn't have a hard, fast plan of what we would do. I think if we had been able to peek and see where we would be with our careers twenty years ahead (we just celebrated our twentieth anniversary this summer) we would both have been very surprised even at what we were doing. I knew I wanted to be a painter, but I don't think when we got

married Joe had any idea that he would be a potter for a living. He was thinking about elementary ed. Things just sort of evolved and changed.

I had no real aspiration as far as a big career with painting. I just knew I liked doing that and thought, “We’ll see where it goes.” But the thing that’s been important for me—and I think for both of us in our lives—is to do what feels right at the time. And it’s kind of difficult to make specific, hard decisions such as, “By the time I’m thirty-five, I’m going to have a career making this amount of money” or “I’m going to be in this or that gallery.” At least I could never cope with those kinds of goals and agendas. It’s always worked better for me to take one day at a time, one month at a time, one year at a time. Break things up, and do what feels right.

And that’s been my approach to how I integrated my artwork and my family. Three or four months after we married, I got pregnant with our oldest daughter and finished out that school year. I was about six months pregnant with her by the time the school year ended in ’77. I tried going back to school in the fall because I had a full scholarship between a talent award and an academic scholarship, but I just couldn’t handle it. I was trying to commute from here in Spring City, had a nursing baby—my first baby—and I realized that either my efforts at being a mom or my art work was going to have to take a big back seat. I saw no point in being in school. It was obvious to me biologically and spiritually what I wanted to do, and there was no point in staying in school because I’d always been the kind of student that if I couldn’t give school my finest effort then I didn’t want to do it. So I totally dropped out of college. And I didn’t paint at all for six years.

I did do a little bit of drawing of the kids but pretty much left color alone. I’d had only one painting class before I dropped out, so I had gotten just a taste of it. But I did tons and tons of reading during the period when I was nursing babies, and I did lots of growing emotionally and the kind of maturing you do when you have two little kids.

When I decided to go back to school, it was 1983. Joe was going to go back for his M.F.A. We realized that he needed it at that point. We thought he’d get a teaching job somewhere, and at that time, he was in a real rut with his work and needed some

outside stimulus. When I heard he was going to school, my heart just leapt, and I thought, "I want to go back to and finish my B.F.A." I felt a real need to start painting, but I was so scared of it that I knew I wouldn't do it on my own. But I was the kind of student that if I had an assignment I would do it. So I wanted to go back to school and get a jump start on working again. And it worked really well.

By then Zina [Bennion's second child] was four years old and Louisa [her first child] would have been six. They were old enough, and we had Sam [Joe Bennion's brother] living with us. The one night a week when Joe and I were both gone, the children were here with Sam. Lots of driving, juggling schedules, but it would work. It felt doable, much different than it was when the girls were infants.

I started back to work [painting] and finally got my B.F.A. in '86 and have been painting ever since. Adah was born in '88, and there were probably six months right after she was born when I didn't paint. But I got right back in the saddle afterwards. Since then, there've been times when I've been painting hard, three or four paintings a month (that's usually when I've got some kind of a deadline). Then there are the times when I've gone two or three months without painting at all. It just depends on what's going on in my life. That's how I work it.

Actually this year, I think, is going to be a very low output year for me because I'm doing home school with Adah. She wanted to do it. She's in third grade, an age where she still thinks that her mom is the coolest person to hang with all day. She's loving it, and I'm loving it. She's making good progress, but to tell you the truth, I haven't painted since September first [for three weeks]. I've got three paintings out in the studio that are just started, but with canning and home school, there's just not time to work on them right now. I probably won't get as many paintings done this year as I have in years past, but that's okay. She will be young and need me this way for just a few years, and then she's going to be gone before I know it. I know that now because my oldest is gone. But the paintings that I am doing I really like, and I feel good about them. Only the production quantity is down a bit and varies from time to time.

Actually there was a time when I was under contract with somebody, when I was providing about four paintings a month that I had a guaranteed sale for, and that was a very good experience for me. I learned a lot about painting, and I learned about myself and what my limits are. I did a lot of good work then, but I came to the point where I felt I was starting to burn out. I felt I had to be out in the studio so many hours. I didn't like that pressure. I was cutting out other things in my life that actually feed my artwork, and I realized that if I don't have the time to be and do what I want to do there's no point in painting because I'm not happy.

So there's a fine balance, I think, that you'd have to recognize within yourself, and it's going to be different for every person. What works for me will not be right for other women. They might have other needs and desires that are stronger on either side of the fulcrum. I don't think there's one right or wrong solution to finding the balance between work and family. It's what's right for you. So you need to be constantly looking at that and praying about it, and if you feel good, then that's the right thing. That's how I get my answer.

Doris

There's a great tranquillity and peace in your paintings. What do you draw upon to maintain that degree of serenity?

Lee

Well, I'm very happy with my life-style and where I live. In fact, I tell people that I'm living out my childhood dreams. I wanted to be an artist and I wanted to have my horse in my backyard and live out in the country, and that's basically what we're doing. You stop and think about it. Not very many people fulfill those kinds of dreams.

I guess the biggest decision Joe and I made when we first got married was where we wanted to live. To us that was pretty important. We wanted to be close to a temple, we wanted to be out in the country, we wanted to live in a rural setting. When we first came through Spring City—we'd been married two days—it just felt like home. We bought our first house when we'd been married two weeks without really knowing what we would do here, how we would make a living. We were just following a gut feeling that this is a good place for us.

Sometimes young people ask our advice. They say, "We want to be like you guys." I say, "Well, first thing you need to figure out is where you want to be. What are your needs?" For some people, it will be living in a big city. It will be in a different spot than here, but for us it was here. I think you need to figure that out, if you can, if you know that much about yourself at that point in your life. Location is very important.

So I have that as a big plus as far as my peace and tranquillity. Even when things get crazy in the family—we're like everybody else; we have our problems; we have our ups and downs—at least we have this [gestures to surroundings]. That's a big part of it.

I think another part of it is I often look at my paintings as a means to explore myself in ways that I couldn't otherwise. With some of these paintings, I figure out things that I'm thinking and feeling that I don't ever articulate mentally or verbally. Those paintings are kind of therapeutic. There are some paintings that are sad paintings, too. I jokingly refer to them as my therapy paintings. The sadness is there, but they're still beautiful paintings. What's nice about it is I get these feelings out, which is healthy to do, and then I can sell the paintings and get paid for my therapy.

I think that painting is helpful. I have attempted to determine whether I try to hide my problems and not put them in my paintings. Am I only expressing the peace and tranquillity I feel? I'm not sure if that's a conscious effort or not. I tend to paint myself and my kids a lot. These relationships are a big part of my life, of my psyche and who I am. I explore the people in figure paintings and things in still lifes in the context of the world that I know. Even my landscapes and my still lifes are partly self-portraits because they're how I feel about those scenes and objects.

Generally those subject matters are things I love. I love my life, I love my kids, and I love where I live and the places that I paint about. I think a lot of those feelings of affection and love are coming through that would maybe translate to peace and tranquillity. I generally don't like to paint things I don't like. There probably is a little bias. It's not because I have a perfect life and there isn't angst or things that I don't care for. But I'm really hard to offend. There aren't many things where I think, "I don't like that." I generally try to respond and notice things that I do like, and that's what I tend to paint.

Part II: The Artist's View

Doris

Tell us about each of these paintings [the two for the covers and the eight for the color inset].

Lee

Let's start with the painting that will be on your front cover. It's called *The Holy Family*. Joe started working a couple of years ago framing a suite of twelve prints by six New Mexican artists—"Santeros"—who use religious Catholic imagery. I've had these out in my studio, and I feel a lot of kinship with them. In a way, I think they have helped give me the courage to come forth with some of the more overt symbolism that I have felt inside in a lot of my mother and child paintings over the years. Since the Santero prints have been around, I have thought, "I can use halos; I can do this; I can do that, too. It's part of my heritage as well." I grew up in California around a lot of good Catholics. And I've always loved Madonna paintings and paintings of the Holy Family. So last year in the fall—it was getting close to Christmas—I decided I wanted to do one of the Holy Family.

I remember in one of my religion classes at BYU one of the teachers told us that the apocryphal accounts have Christ as a red-head, so I have always painted him as a redheaded baby; plus with Adah I'm used to painting redheads. The geraniums in the foreground are symbolic to me of this mortal life and of the blood that flows through our veins and of Christ's mortality. The lilies behind the family are symbolic of Christ's divine lineage and the gift of the Atonement. The whole picture tells of how we and Christ had to come through the portal of the flesh and yet death and resurrection are looming on the horizon. Only he, a mortal son of God, could bring to pass the Atonement.

The back cover, *Grand Canyon, Cardenas Peak*, is of a place that is fantastic and special to me. I never have taken my paints on any of our river trips. There's just not time and space for it, but quite often I do take a sketchbook and do some quick drawings. I did look at some photos that I took of this place, too, as I did this painting. But if you were to look at the photos and my drawings and then look at this painting, you would find I have taken a lot of

liberties with the scene. The colors are actually quite different than what you'd see in the photograph, but people that see my painting say, "Oh yeah, I know that place." So that's just how it feels. That's what I try to do when I paint landscapes. They are more a record of how I felt about those places, and that often has more to do with the color selection than what the places actually look like.

The Gift [plate 1] is a painting I did a few years back that started out just as a self-portrait. A lot of times when I go into the studio and I'm not sure what I want to do, I'll do a self-portrait because it sort of opens a door for me. This one started out that way. I had a potted lily that a friend had given to me for my birthday, so I thought, "I'll do a painting of myself holding those flowers."

Originally, both hands were around the pot, but when I finished the drawing, I felt that it was a weak composition. There was way too much weight on the right side that was empty and dead, so I thought, "I've got to do something with the figure to activate that space." I began playing around with my arms while looking in the mirror, and I came up with that pose and thought it looked interesting. So I drew my hand like that. Then when I finished the drawing [the charcoal drawing she does before starting a painting], I thought, "Wow, it's starting to say something; it's starting to take on a life of its own."

I just started following the drawing's suggestions, and it became a painting about the gift of life. There's a doorway the woman is standing in front of. To me the woman is symbolic of Eve, our earthly mother, the mother of our bodies, and the door is suggestive of the portal of birth that we all must enter and come through. The figure beckoning is also a reference to the idea of birth and coming through. We all come through the body of a woman. The crosses in the transom behind her and also the lilies—those are all very obvious references to the Savior and to his gift of eternal life. The woman giving us the chance to be born into mortality and then the Savior giving us the chance to be born again in a more eternal sense. Again, the doorway represents that portal, too. Death is a door that we all pass through, and by our mortality, we are invited to pass through it.

Anyway, I really didn't finish or verbalize or intellectualize what all those symbols were for me until I'd had the painting done about six months. It was when someone asked me, "What is that about?" that I kind of stopped. You know, I had had this gut sort of subconscious feeling about it, but it wasn't until I had to put a name on the painting to send it out to show and until people started asking me about it that I was able to articulate my feelings. It was a fun experience to have that happen.

The next painting is *Adah Again* [plate 2]. The title refers to the fact that I paint Adah often. My friend had made this dress for her, and I wanted to do a painting of her in it. She was willing to sit and model for me. It's pretty straightforward—a painting of her out in my studio. I don't necessarily view paintings like this as being much of a portrait. It's actually not a terribly good likeness of her. There's a feeling of her there, but I want my paintings to be good in the sense that other people will enjoy their composition and the feeling and not necessarily feel like they've got a portrait of Adah Bennion in their house. You know, it's more a painting of a girl. It's more a painting of someone sitting and thinking. And I try to make them that way so that they are of interest and don't feel just like mug-shot portraits. They have more of a life of their own as paintings.

Doris

You have her very much in the foreground and your studio very much in the background.

Lee

That's again a lot from my head. I draw her sitting there. I'm in my studio, so I can see what those things look like, but I have purposely played around with the distance and the space, and I think that kind of helps, makes it interesting. I have fun playing with it, so that's why I do it. If I were to just try to capture everything exactly how it is, painting would be really boring, and I might as well just get a camera.

Doris

Are you saying something in the painting about priorities in your life?

Lee

Are you referring to where I put things? Definitely. I can see that now that you mention it. I hadn't thought of it before. But definitely people and animals and those sorts of things are much more important to me than the house or the studio. Housework is not my favorite thing, as you can see by looking around my house or studio. Housework will always wait; the opportunity is never lost.

The next painting [plate 3] is *What's Next in My Life?* Part way through our 1994 raft trip down the Grand Canyon, I got sick and had to be life-flighted out—we thought I had appendicitis. It turned out I had a kidney stone, but I passed it that night. So there I was alone at the South Rim. To make a long story short, I didn't call home. I wanted to get back on the river and finish the trip! I knew the group was going to stop at Havasu Creek, so I decided to hike down Havasu Canyon and meet them. I talked someone into driving me to the trail head and hiked the twenty miles to the Colorado and got to the confluence fifteen minutes before the boats in our group came by. They were so surprised to see me!

I don't know if you would call it a life-changing experience, but it was just an amazing thing for me to do. I'd never done anything like that: taking off on my own, going without any sleeping gear. It was actually quite a rugged hike that included a two-hundred-foot climb. I had never done anything like that without a rope or someone to spot me. I really pushed my limits right to the edge. In that twenty-mile hike, there were probably three or four times when I got to obstacles where I thought, "I don't know if I can make it around there or if I can get through this." And I would pray.

I knew we would run Lava Falls the next day on the trip if I caught up with my party. Normally on our other trips, I've had that rapid on my horizon the whole trip, just dreading it. But on this hike, by the time I got to the last obstacle I had to get around, I was saying, "Okay, God, just help me get over this. I won't bother you at all at Lava. I don't care if we flip there. I just need to get around this thing. Help me." It was funny in the boat the next day, after I reunited with the group. I was totally relaxed. I just slept all day as we approached Lava Falls. I didn't get nervous. Well, I got a little nervous. But I was not as uptight as I usually am because I just thought, "Well, I've been through a lot worse in the last few days." Lava is not as bad as a kidney stone with no pain medication.

Anyway, when I came home from that trip, I went out to my studio to start working. Here I am back home looking in the mirror again, getting ready to start another painting. As I did this one, the thought kept running through my mind, "What's going to be next in my life?" I had realized that interesting things do happen. You never know when, either.

Self with Adah [plate 4] is a painting of Adah and me. I often paint the two of us together. Sometimes even now [Adah is eight] I'll paint her as a small infant or baby in my arms just because I have strong feelings about motherhood and about the mother and a small child. And I represent them by doing paintings of Adah and me together. For this one, I think I actually got her to pose with me for a little while. Not for very long, but long enough to get her drawn in, and then I went back and put myself into the drawing. She's pretty wiggly.

Amaryllis, Antler, and Shell [plate 5] is a still life of some objects that I actually do have. I have the pot, I had the amaryllis, I have the shell, and the antler is one I found on a ride that I took with my horse. Just a few objects that have been kicking around the studio a long time. I wanted to do a painting with the amaryllis; that's originally what I had drawn for the still life, and that's all I had on the canvas. I liked it, but I knew I needed other things to complete the composition to make it interesting. So I started casting my eye around my studio: "What shall I put in?"

I loved the way the antler sort of mirrored some of the lines in the amaryllis, so I played with that until I found where I liked it. Then the shell was a nice focal point, sort of a cup to draw you in and hold you. And it worked well floating between those two images. Then I had to figure out a table. I come at still life kind of backwards, sort of just building them on the canvas. The most difficult thing was trying to figure out an edge for the table. I tried curves. I tried straight across, and it took quite awhile to get it right. The tablecloth is out of my head. I didn't have anything nearly that nice. And I kind of thought about putting wood grain on the table, but I figured that was going to take away from the subtle painting on the shell. So this is strictly a formal painting exercise in design and composition but again one that incorporates things that I love.

The next painting [plate 6] is called *New Potatoes, Peas, and Onions*, which is one of our favorite lunches in the summertime when those three things are in season. I'd just gotten this hat. It's pretty ratty now. I wore it again this summer. It's got holes in the top, but I still like it. It had such a nice shape and such nice lines about it, and I loved looking in the mirror at the different ellipses and curves. I thought, "Oh, that would be fun to use as a prop in a painting," and so I did. I drew the figure in first, and then I had this space around the side that I had to do something with to make it work as a painting. I thought, "Well, that's my gardening hat, so I'll put some of the garden in there."

The frame I had fun with. To me, the floral-type image in the corners is somewhat reminiscent of a pea blossom and the green stems and the straight lines in between them. One thing you'll notice in my later paintings is that in many of them I've done much more intricate work in the frame and drawn imagery from the painting into the frames.

The next painting is *Listening for Lise* [plate 7]. I started the drawing for this painting and then found out two days later that a friend of ours had passed away. She had had a lingering and debilitating illness from which she was never going to recover. It was a question of how long she would exist in the terrible state her body was in. It was a difficult situation. She was a young mother in the prime of her life and not at the age when you expect to see someone leave their family. But again, her condition was so wretched that I believed it was probably an answer to her prayer and probably even her family's to have her released from this life.

I thought of her so much as I started to work on this painting, how so many prayers had been offered on Lise's behalf. And you know some people might think they weren't answered because she passed away. But I feel that they were. There was an answer to her prayer in the way she was able to slip away. And I feel that death is not always the dark angel we think it is. There are times when it's merciful, probably every time even though we don't know it. It's what is to be. So this painting's just a different look at the angel of death.

The last painting [plate 8], *Persephone*, is a painting I did around the same time period as *New Potatoes, Peas, and Onions*

and *The Gift*. I love springtime. I'm excited by it every year, by the thought of new life coming up from the dormant ground. And I've always loved the myth of Persephone and how she comes back and brings with her life to her mother and to the earth. That's basically what this painting is about. This figure coming up from the dark. I wanted to have the background just be darkness representing the death of winter and include all of these bulbs.

I'd gotten a great catalog that had photos of all of these plants with their bulb-and-root systems. I got the idea for the painting while looking through that catalog. So while I painted, I did look at the catalog. I changed things around because I needed a curve here that it didn't have and what not. That's the genesis for the idea of showing the roots. They reminded me of Persephone, too.

Conclusion

What is noticeably missing from Lee Bennion's works and words is a sense that the time for her career is passing too quickly and she must work ever faster to accomplish all that must be done. The ceaseless drive so often behind the accomplishments of creative people is missing. Even if she doesn't paint today or tomorrow or next week, her studio will still be there, and in the meantime, life will nurture her talent. The paintings reproduced here reflect that sense of stillness while remaining vitally connected.

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Plate 1. *The Gift.* Oil on linen, 40" x 32", 1989.



Plate 2. *Adab Again*. Oil on linen, 40" x 30", 1995.



Plate 3. *What's Next in My Life?* Oil on linen, 24" x 20", 1995.

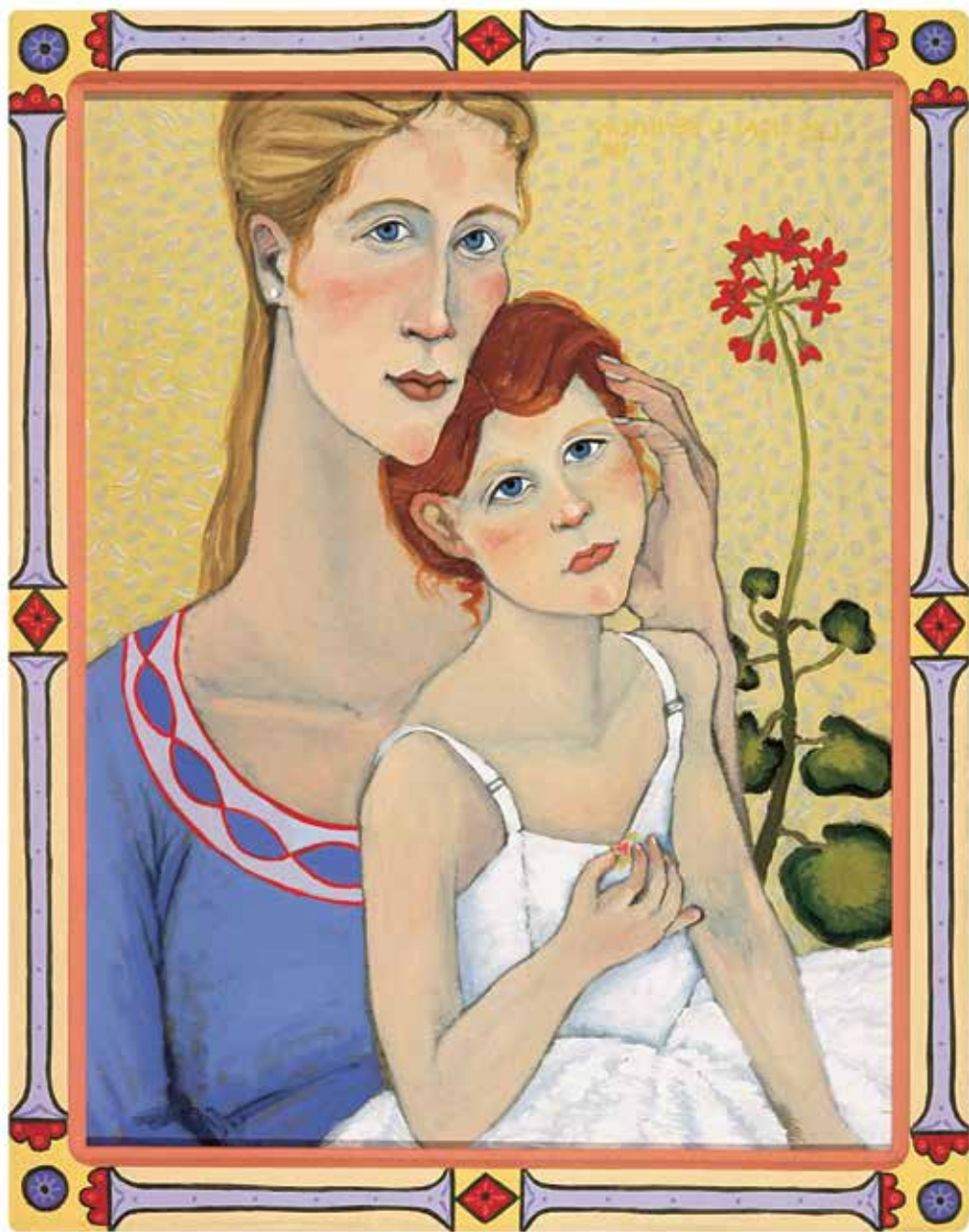


Plate 4. *Self with Adah*. Oil on linen, 30" x 24", 1993.



Plate 5. *Amaryllis, Antler, and Shell*. Oil on linen, 24" x 18", 1995.



Plate 6. *New Potatoes, Peas, and Onions.* Oil on linen, 24" x 30", 1989.



Plate 7. *Listening for Lise.* Oil on linen, 24" x 32", 1995.



Plate 8. *Persephone*. Oil on linen, 58" x 40", 1990.