



Diversity in Psychology and Art

Lanterns hang like jellyfish from wires strung across the narrow street. The watercolor painting captures the almost transparent quality of the papery orbs and the dense, white smog of San Francisco. On either side of the street, oriental shops raise an eclectic mix of Victorian and pagoda roofs toward the unseen sky.¹

John Salminen, the watercolorist who painted “Grant Lanterns,” figured he could usually predict the places on the painting where people would look. The lanterns, of course, would be one of the main focus areas. After all, they are right in the center, the dark circles a stark contrast to the smoggy sky.

Herb Helm, professor of psychology and amateur watercolorist, wanted to find out if Salminen’s predictions would prove correct. Karl Bailey, professor of psychology, worked with Helm on the project, running eye-

tracking tests to see where viewers actually focused their attention.

While Salminen “was fairly good at knowing where people would look,” they discovered that viewers often focused more on a small blob of bright red on the left than they did on the lanterns. The small area has no definite shape and is the only bright color in a dark mass of storefronts. “No one predicted people would look at these small, but contrasting, elements,” says Helm.

Helm became interested in the psychology of art while taking watercolor classes, a hobby he picked up in his mid-40s. “When you take classes with watercolorists, they give you advice on technique and composition. They tell you that you should lead a person through a painting: so one element should lead to another and so on to the element that you want to highlight, where you want people to focus. And I would sit there and think, that

ABOVE: “On the Go” is based on a photo Helm took of downtown Chicago. He says, “it looked like a hotel had just let people out and basically everyone on the sidewalk has some type of suitcase or backpack.”

makes sense, but how do you really know?”

Helm decided to involve Karl Bailey, who has expertise in eye-tracking, to find the answer. “There are a few articles like this out there,” Helm admits, “but they mostly use the artwork of deceased artists. How do you know what the dead artist wanted you to look at?” Instead, Helm used the work of John Salminen, a watercolorist whose workshop he was attending.

Salminen, “who is probably one of the most awarded watercolorist in the United States,” agreed to allow his paintings to be used and predicted where he thought viewers would look. Helm also used the paintings of a local artist, from whom he was also taking classes, as well of some of his own artwork.

RIGHT: This image, named “cta,” was inspired by a workshop taken from artist John Salminen. As a result of admiring Salminen’s complex urban paintings, Helm went to Chicago and took a number of photos of various scenes that caught his attention and then painted them.

After nearly four years of research and writing, Helm and Bailey published their findings in *Watercolor Magazine*.² They are still working with students to analyze the data they gathered, but with different foci.

Helm’s interests in psychology and art are not usually so closely linked. Helm has done research on “everything from assessment instruments, to the psychology of religion, risk behavior, and art.” Some people might call that “being all over the place;” however, Helm prefers to call it “diversity.”

“I think that one of the things that keeps me more interested” in research “is if there is a lot of diversity to what I am doing. A lot of people get their research program going and then integrate students. But I also like the diversity of ideas that students come up with,” he says.

Helm frequently engages with students in collaborative research projects. Several years ago, while Helm was working on curriculum changes for the psychology program, he asked professors from competitive research universities what it would take for an Andrews University student to be accepted into their school. “One answer I got over and over was ‘Research, research, research,’” remembers Helm. Another common answer was that professors looked favorably on students who had experience in their field.

Helm worked with Duane McBride, research professor of sociology, over the course of a decade to develop a more research-intensive curriculum. At the suggestion of Derrick Proctor, emeritus professor of psychology, Helm and Proctor began taking students down to the Midwestern Psychological Association held annually in Chicago. The department later developed a research class that climaxed in the conference and encouraged students to present their research.



Herb Helm



“Students often feel that they aren’t understanding the material when they take the class, but when they go to the convention, they are able to analyze the research that is being presented. By presenting their own research and analyzing other presentations, they became more confident about what they were doing and that confidence spreads to the other students,” says Helm.

In the research classes, Andrews’ psychology students are required to create a research project and then execute all the various research activities. Several alums have related that they seemed better prepared than students who attended large research universities, where students only participate in a small part of a project. Because of the smaller student-teacher ratio at Andrews, students are also more likely to be able to publish an article in a refereed journal. Helm recently co-authored an article with students Adam LaFave and Omar Gomez that was published in the *Journal of Research on Christian Education*.³

During his free time, Helm paints. “I’ve always liked the transparency and luminosity of watercolor,” Helm says, “so I just started taking a class here or there.” Eventually, Helm started taking classes with some of the top watercolorists in the United States, such as John Salminen.

At first, Helm liked the workshops he attended to be like his research projects: diverse. Rather than focusing on artists with the same style, he attended workshops from

artists with completely different styles. “The downside was that there wasn’t the consistent element of learning from one person,” he admits. “But the upside was that I took workshops from artists who said that I couldn’t do something with the paint or composition, and then I would take a workshop from someone else who said I could.”

Helm now focuses on a few key artists when taking workshops. His style is defined by an intensity of colors, rather than a specific technique. He has submitted his work to local and national art competitions and his artwork has been accepted into a number of Michigan traveling shows. Helm has also won a number of awards and sold several paintings.

Helm appreciates watercolor in part because of its diversity. “In watercolor, things don’t always go the way you want them to, whereas if I’m working with oil and acrylic, I can just paint over what I don’t like. In watercolor, I often create a picture and have to keep recreating it as I go.” This unpredictability is not limited to Helm’s watercolor paintings. In both his psychology and his art, unexpected variables affect the outcome. Helm is not perturbed; diversity is his style.

1 <http://johnsalminen.com/product/grant-lanterns/>

2 H.W. Helm Jr. and K.G.D. Bailey. “An eye for design.” *Watercolor Artist*, xx, 46–55, Oct 2015

3 Adam D. LaFave, Herbert W. Helm Jr., and Omar Gomez, *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 23(3), 283–293, 2014