



“Creativity, Gospel Truth and the Dignity of Making Art” Q&A with Jen Logan, artist and founder of Fer

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Jen Logan — winner of ADM’s 2018 Annual Funding Event — founded and leads [Fer](#), an arts organization in the UK that produces creative and theologically inspired projects reflecting the Christian narrative. Because Fer is Latin for ‘that which carries’, Jen sees her work as a collaborative way to explore and ‘carry’ the Christian story through culturally relevant forms such as video, fashion design, performance, music and the written word.

Her faith and vision have been formed in part from her family—her mother trained at Deaconess House—and in part from a combination of church experiences and conversations with leaders like John Dickson. After training and working in social work in Sydney, Jen moved to the UK and studied at the London School of Theology and at Kings College London where she earned a MA Christianity and the Arts.

Recently, Jen was in Sydney on a family visit but made time to speak about her work at ADM's March [Engage](#) session alongside two other artists. We caught up with her to get more of her story, what's inspired her, what art means to her and of course, what her favourite creative meal is:

1. Q: Your mum trained and worked at Deaconess House. Any good stories of the impact it had on her and ultimately you?

JEN: She worked for a year as assistant to the principal, Margaret Rodgers, in charge of housekeeping. When the cook didn't turn up for work, Mum would have to cook for 70 people at a time. This totally baffles me as whenever she cooked for more than two extra people at home it was a total crisis. But her studies there gave her an incredible knowledge of the Bible and when she tells a Bible story you feel like she really knows the characters. She brings them to life in such a unique way, which has been great since she's also worked in children's ministry for fifty years. I'd love to collaborate with her on something someday.

2. Q: What's your favourite place to admire beauty? Speaking of, how would you define beauty?

JEN: Where I admire beauty changes; right now it's Pittwater, it's Barrenjoey Headland. That whole area has me totally breathless at the moment while I'm here on holiday. But defining beauty is a big question and a lot of ink has been spilled on the subject since Plato. For me I like the idea that beauty is an attribute of being itself. That God who is the source of being is beauty, just like he is truth and he is goodness. Not just that he looks beautiful or acts good or speaks truth but is all these things. But I also like the definition that speaks of beauty as 'goodness in material form' and I think this is validated by the incarnation. That God who is Beauty came into physical form, as a man and validated all material beauty. And though he apparently didn't have the appearance of beauty as the Greeks understood—harmony, radiance, proportion etc—he is the image of the one true, good and beautiful God.

3. Q: What are the first things that pop into your mind when you hear the words:

JEN: Curiosity—It's a form of love, especially when GPs and consultants show professional curiosity to find out what's wrong with people. It shows care.

Creativity—Everything done well, whatever it is, is creativity.

Truth —The sister to Goodness and Beauty.

Compassion —My hope for who my children will be.

Abundance—A hard truth to believe in because, like the Israelites, we fall into ‘scarcity mentality’ by default not, ‘abundance mentality’ as we should.

Imagination—Someone told me recently that people who are good at prayer are often people who engage their imaginations as they are praying.

Sacrifice—Loss of life to save it is the heart of Jesus’ artist manifesto

Messy —Is Marie Kondo right?

Joy—As GK Chesterton wrote - it’s God’s great secret!

4. Q: Why do we need creative expressions of Christian faith?

JEN: This is a question I’m in danger of speaking endlessly on. So here’s my simplest answer. We need it for two reasons: It’s true to the whole message of Christianity; if our story is about the God who made creation, in a creative speech act, who creates and recreates endlessly, who made word come to flesh, who established the prophetic tradition of performed signs, who established the church as a relational art form and instituted the sacraments as artistic rituals (as one way of understanding them), then it’s true to the message itself to communicate it creatively. And 2. It’s true to the whole person; we are not just rational beings. We are moved by art, we are formed by artistic rituals. We are emotional, sensory people with souls and spirits that run deeper than our mental faculties.

“Making art is part of the dignity we are given of participation in the creativity of God”

5. Q: So do you think traditional evangelicals are losing ground in influencing the culture? If so, what might be some ways to reframe our vision and impact?

JEN: I think the answer probably varies from region to region. There may be some cultures in the world where evangelicals are gaining ground, but in the UK and Australia it seems traditional evangelicals are losing ground and certainly not influencing culture

very much. But I also think terms like 'ground' and 'influence' probably need to be defined for the church: what kind of ground is rightful for us to try to hold? I think for example the ground that traditional evangelicals have gained in the US might not be the right kind of ground for Christianity. Or what should cultural 'influence' look like for Christians? Is it power or control? Or is it simply having a compelling, credible presence within a culture?

As a Christian in the UK who is interested in the arts and Christianity, I think we need a more integrated presence with indirect influence and less overt power with direct messaging. I also think the arts play a key role; that to do this we need to be present and productive within the arts (from video game design to producing Netflix box sets to stand up comedians). It's not just that we are art makers, but that we could learn more about how artists actually work. In other words, good artists are generally culturally literate (so they'd know that standing on a street corner with a gospel tract is not necessarily the communications mode for our times). And yet knowing the culture they are making art for, or within, doesn't become the driving force in their artistic approach or decision making. They don't employ marketing consultants or ask questions like 'how will this artwork look in the home of the 'end user'? Or 'how will I be perceived as an artist in this culture if I make the work this way?'" Their focus is on the purest expression of their idea into their form or whatever. It's quite nuanced: good artists are culturally literate but in the making of their art, they do so with a certain amount of neglect or 'forgetting' of the 'end user'. This process, ironically, tends to make for the most highly valued art.

I think engaging and producing within the arts is a great way to have indirect influence and play the long game. Christianity is all encompassing so we can use any artefact in culture, any moment in history, any cultural conversation as our entry point for engagement. We don't need to enter the conversation saying, "I just want to let you know about the Gospel of Jesus Christ." That's where everyone who fully engages with us will come to, but it's not often the best conversation starter. The engagement might start with a sitcom produced about a group of London flatmates, or with a debate about whether contemporary domestic design should have any traditional 'rooms' at all or how self-sacrifice rather than self-preservation could be the rewarding actions within contemporary video game design. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it so all roads can naturally lead back to him and to the Gospel, but even before they do, these things have value in showing Christianity to be relevant to, and have voice and application for, all areas of life and culture. Ours is not just an abstract faith expressed through an abstract message.

6. Q: So what makes a work of art theological without becoming propaganda?

JEN: I can think of four things: 1. If it's going to shout - and sometimes that's a good thing - it shouts, but is not shouting at anyone about its theological message. It might want to shout about injustice, but the part of that message that is 'because God is a God of justice' is never shouted.

2. If it wants something from the viewer, it is invitational and suggestive and gives permission and space for the viewer to actually decline the invitation whilst still engaging with the work.

3. I think honesty and transparency in the work is key. If you are an artist who happens to be a Christian, you don't need to tell your viewers that you are a Christian, unless you want to. But, if you are, like me, someone making 'Christian art' (and I'm aware of the connotations of those two words paired like that!) you have to be honest that that is what you are doing.

4. Lastly, whilst I believe there is a place for 'bad art', such as in contexts of therapy or inclusion or even at times, provocation, nevertheless, when it comes to intentional pieces of Christian communication through the arts there are sadly too many instances where respect for the form itself is minimal and the result is needlessly bad art.

For example, there are many big budget Christian films made in the US. Despite their budgets, the focus is on using the film form to get the message across as unambiguously as possible without consideration to what makes a good film like editing choices, original scoring, set design, etc. What results is a sermon thinly disguised as a film rather than a good piece of art with a compelling message within it. In these cases, bad art is unloving toward the viewer and misrepresents God. It is therefore inappropriate (and probably not very effective) as a form of communication of the Christian message.

7. Q: What does the perfect gathering of Christian hospitality look like for you?

JEN: Five things: 1. Organised fun, especially board games so everyone knows what's expected of them and there's no need for small talk;

2. Toasting each other until everyone feels soaked in affirmation (like they do in some Eastern European countries);

3. Non-performance cooking. I'm not a huge fan of how show-offy cooking has become since the rise of celebrity chefs which has turned the kitchen into a theatre/gallery and the host into a performer;

4. An earth-caring plant based single pot dish and everyone does the washing up together.
5. Involves a sing along (by a campfire if weather permits).

8. Q: Beyond the sing along, how do you think works of art might intrinsically reflect the work of God?

JEN: Such a great question because I think artists have thought: OK, so this work of art isn't saving the world, it's not fundraising, it's not explicitly sharing the gospel so what is its value? How art reflects the work of God is ironically by asserting its value apart from any kind of work; by simply not being a work at all. An artwork itself often isn't doing anything. And in its boldness in just being and not doing, it speaks of a God of being not just doing; a God who works, but also rests.

But art is also powerful and affective; it changes people, it changes culture. And in that case, if it tells truth, if it's beautiful or brings delight to the viewer, if it contributes to a cultural conversation, if it asks helpful questions, if it does the soul good or if it does good for humanity (even if it's through a disruptive or provocative work), it participates in the life and work of God who is all those things.

I think if it's a true expression of the artist offered to the world then it's a form of communion or at least creates an opportunity for communion between people. And that is what God is ALL about. Even if it doesn't ever get viewed by anyone, it still has value because making art is part of the dignity we are given of participation in the creativity of God. If it's just enjoyment or experimentation or therapy then its valuable because art is God's gift to us for just that.

9. Q: Tell us what's happening in your ministry and artistic relationships that's encouraging you?

JEN: I love what happens during the process of collaborating with non-Christians. Recently I worked with a film director who is not a Christian but as we worked together on a short theological film we had to have theological conversations along the way in order to do the work. We had some great chats! The film was then used as part of a new ritual design we worked on to help young adult Christians transition from study into full time work. She then came along with me to the event and commented that she wished she could have had a 'right of passage' ritual like that for herself at that age. It's moments like that that make collaborating on Christian projects with non-Christians so wonderful.

10. Q: About that favourite creative meal?

JEN: In high school my friend and I invented the 'BeauJen Ball' which is like a sweet version of a Chinese dumpling. You take a slice of the whitest, most processed of bread, cut off the crusts and put a dollop of nutella in the middle. Then bring the corners of the bread into the middle and wrap the bread around the dollop of nutella until you've made it into a ball. Then paint over the outside bread with butter and roll in 100s and 1000s. Then make loads more and stack them into a rainbow ball pyramid and eat.

BONUS Question:

Q: Top five books or works of art that have influenced your thinking in the past two years?

JEN: The Beauty of the Infinite: the Aesthetics of Christian Truth by David Bentley Hart is a book that informed the foundation of the whole 'Christianity as art' arm of Fer's work. The Sabbath, an incredible book by Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, is what our project 'Palace in Time' is based on. We're working on a music album with lyrics taken from oft forgotten attributes of God from all traditions of Christian history, and we have two songs based on Orthodoxy by GK Chesterton: One about God being younger than we are because he is sinless and the other about God's greatest secret being his mirth.

From The Artist is Present - a performance/durational piece by Marina Abramovic, I find it interesting how performance artists seem to have gone from being weirder and weirder to being banal and ordinary. Maybe because life itself has become so weird that things like just sitting still for months looking into the eyes of thousands of different people and being 'present' to them is the new weird, the new type of 'spectacle'.

And the impact of Robert Rauschenberg's Open Score, a performance artwork from 1966, has been more of a desire than a direct influence. Of all of the performance art I've read about, this is the event I most wish I could have attended. It reminds me of a traditional Tenebrae service with its slow, rhythmic descent into darkness. Everything that connects for me Christian traditions and rituals with contemporary performance art (at least in my own mind) excites me.