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Interview with Kendall Johnson and John Brantingham on A Sublime and Tragic Dance

Conner JB Jones · Wednesday, May 23rd, 2018

The Cold War may be officially over, but the threat of Oppenheimer's nuclear bomb is still very real. Poet John Brantingham and poet and artist Kendall Johnson tackle the complexities of Oppenheimer and the implications of his creation in their collaborative release: *A Sublime and Tragic Dance.* In this collection,Brantingham, the poet laureate of Sequoia and Kings Canyon, and Johnson respond to the striking and ominous paintings by Kendall Johnson, which depict a world ravaged by nuclear disaster. At the center of this riveting work is the mysterious father of the atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and his place in the years that followed his creation. I sat down with John and Kendall to talk a little bit about Oppenheimer, The Cold War, and their work *A Sublime and Tragic Dance.*

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Kendall Johnson

Jones: *You seem to portray Oppenheimer or "Oppie" at first as a oppressive force, then again as a victim of circumstance. After writing this collection/book,* A Sublime and Tragic Dance, *would you say you sympathize with the plight of Oppenheimer and his creation or rather blame him and others for being so careless?*

Johnson: Yes; both. The question of victim vs perpetrator seems to presume it's one or the other. We are all victims of circumstance in that we are born into a specific era or under specific circumstances. Eras and circumstance bring with them a load of demands, limitations, and dilemmas. All of us, for example, are forced to deal with political realities right now that defy common sense. Oppenheimer, with his upper middle class and permissive parenting and in the midst of a world war which, however just or moral, could have ended much differently, combined with his extraordinary ability as a physicist, was handed a volatile combination of opportunity and peril. When else but wartime do ordinary people end up in such extraordinary positions with the capacity to do such extraordinary harm? Do I sympathize with Oppie's plight? On several levels, but mostly, given his need for affirmation and his lack of means to attain it, I do sympathize deeply. Do I blame him for the consequences of his actions. Yes, of course. At the point where he learned that the bomb would be used on civilian targets and the likely effects of using it, he nevertheless proceed with the project. That's on him. We might call it a morality tale, were the consequences not so catastrophic and unthinkable. The tragic flaw here is not enough to know we

want to live. That's being threatened again.

Brantingham: Oppie was a mess of contradictions and motivations that ranged from altruism to ego. That is another way to say that he is human. What makes him interesting is that those aspects of his humanity, both good and bad, were dialed way up. He was extraordinarily intelligent of course. He was someone who campaigned for peace. He was often violent, committing two attempted murders during graduate school. Like me, he liked to disappear into nature. He gloried in his successes often comparing himself to various gods in sideways kinds of statements. His famous re-quotation: "Now I have become death the destroyer of worlds" can be taken in a number of ways. Perhaps, it is elegiac. It also might be a wild boast where he glories in his power. I think it's actually both, and I'm not sure the degree to which he was aware of this.

So I sympathize with him, and I think that the discovery of nuclear technology was inevitable given the state of science at the time, but that's not to say that I don't find him problematic as well. It is the duty of those with that kind of power to be responsible as well. I don't know what that might have looked like, but we can draw a direct line from what he did to the fact that Kim Jong-un and President Trump are playing with our lives right now. And I truly don't know what he should have done, but that's my right. I did not take on the mantle of that responsibility.

John Brantingham

Jones: *This book is a collaboration between you two. Where do you believe your mutual fascination with Oppenheimer and 'the bomb' stem from?*

Johnson: During our initial discussions it seemed clear to me that we shared at least three mutual fascinations. First, we are both enraptured by visions of the world that weave together the electric dynamism of the material world with that of the spirit. Oppenheimer's fascination with how things worked and his split between the science of particle theory and literature allowed him to walk an enchanted path. The second element of his story that enthralled both of us was Oppenheimer's personality. Here is this guy who seems a bit on the autistic spectrum in his inability to either realize or care for the interpersonal consequences of his actions, who appears to understand moral concerns yet turns away from them when it suits his ego needs, and finally jumps on the sword of public politic when it is already too late. John and I both found that very interesting. Finally, we share an appreciation for mixing art and writing. John is both a fiction writer and poet, and has written on the subject of ekphrasis, poetry written to art pieces. I'm a writer and also an artist. We've walked similar ground. Lastly, we've both lived enough and loved simply Oppenheimer's, it is all our own. How often do we fancy ourselves the hero only to discover otherwise.

Brantingham: On top of that, I think we are also interested in Oppenheimer as a philosopher. Forgive me if I'm speaking incorrectly for you, Ken. But I think we both saw the statements he was making as a discussion of who he was and what it means to be a part of a culture.

Now, saying that I find his philosophy interesting is not the same as saying I agree with it. The two most important statements he made were against the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He also said the words I have quoted above. Later in his life, he argued against the development of nuclear power. To me this adds up to a philosophy of arrogance where he saw himself and a few others as having this intelligence and will to know which culture to annihilate and when, but that other people did not have that right. I agree with the second part of the statement but not the first. Others will say that more people died in other parts of the war. That's absolutely true, and I am against

that kind of warfare as well. If we are intelligent enough to develop nuclear weapons and moral enough to know which cultures to eliminate, we should be wise enough to stop ourselves from playing this game.

Jones: *How long have you and Ken known each other?*

Johnson: Depends on how you look at it. About a year and a half, Greenwich Mean Time. We met in Gallery 57 in Pomona, California at the dA Center for the Arts. I was arriving to sit my retrospective exhibit on Vietnam where I'd accompanied my paintings with reflective writing. John asked me to read to his poetry group. We continued our conversation over beers with the group afterwards and we've been talking ever since. At another level, it goes back a lot farther. Maybe a tribal thing.

Brantingham: Yeah, I'd agree with that. I'd call that tribe the tribe of the arts. It's a strange thing to be in the arts in the same time and in the same city. The arts are a large conversation that the world is having about culture and philosophy. In that way, Ken and I have been talking with each other and other people for 30 years now, and we see the world in really similar ways.

Jones: *This book tackles the idea of how Oppenheimer and the people around him dumped 'worms out on tables' effectively spelling out our possible end. Having grown up during the height of the Cold War, would you say you are more scared now with Trump and Kim Jong Un, or back then between the USSR and America?*

Johnson: More scared now than then? It's a pretty bleak commentary on current affairs that we would even have to entertain that question and it really pisses me off. It's been well over 70 years and we haven't controlled something we ourselves created! I'm older than John. I was born before the end of WWII, in fact my father was still overseas. As a schoolboy during the 1950's they were still conducting atmospheric testing of atomic bombs at Yucca Flats north of Las Vegas, Nevada that would light up the night sky over the mountains north of our house east of Los Angeles. Like most others my age I spent hours on the floor clutching the spindly leg of my desk wondering if it would really protect me when the bomb went off over the freeway interchange or the General Dynamics plant seven miles away. A few years ago I was lecturing about traumatic stress management to a bunch of Ukrainian disaster management officials whose radiated, Chernobyl-addled brains caused them—whose fingers rested on the red buttons of half the remaining Soviet ICBM arsenal, to stand up and yell during the lecture. MAD, mutually assured destruction, seemed little assurance at the time, but in retrospect a whole lot more stable protection than the current jargon "shelter in place" sold to school kids whose nuclear world more closely resembles a box of dynamic bouncing around in the back of a dusty pickup truck on a rough road.

Brantingham: I can say absolutely that I was more afraid then than I am now, and with good reason. Even if Los Angeles is targeted and I die with my family and friends, North Korea does not at this time have enough weapons to destroy the entire world. The Soviet Union certainly did. That's cold comfort. I am much more worried about what the United States will do. It's well and good to assert our toxic masculinity over one dictator, but our actions could lead to the deaths of millions of people whose only crime has been to be born in a dictatorship.

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