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## PROFILE

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# Greg Constantine

## Dialogue With an Adventist Artist

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**G**reg Constantine, professor of art at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, has exhibited in galleries in New York,

Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Frankfurt in Germany.

Constantine was raised in a Romanian family of six children in Windsor, Canada.

Soon after getting his Master of Fine Arts degree from Michigan State University, he developed "television painting," a technique using a series of "video dots" to portray subjects as if on a television screen. His "television" portraits include Adventist media pioneers H. M. S. Richards Sr., George Vandemann, and Charles Brooks. His "television portrait" of Jesus hangs in the campus ministries office at Andrews University. His painting of the Statue of Liberty was

shown during the centennial celebration in New York. The organizing committee donated the painting to France as a gesture of thanks for the statue.

Constantine has created three books of "art about artists." The sketches in the books—*Vincent Van Gogh Visits New York*, *Leonardo Visits Los Angeles*, and *Picasso Visits Chicago*—recreate famous artworks from the point of view of the artist/hero in a familiar city scene. Sketches for his most recent book project—*Jesus of New York*—appear with this interview.

Constantine and his wife, Sharon, have two sons and a daughter.

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### How did your faith develop?

My whole family went to a Romanian Orthodox church in Canada. My mother began listening to the Voice of Prophecy on Sunday mornings. Then we had a visit from a local church member. We thought it was incredible that a representative of the Voice of Prophecy would visit our home.

We then began attending a Seventh-day Adventist church against my father's wishes. Soon we started going to both churches. So I was an altar boy in the Romanian Orthodox church Sunday mornings to please my dad. He could not go to church by himself. It was a huge stigma for him not to have his family with him.

### Do you have a philosophy about sharing your Christian faith in your art?

Being a Seventh-day Adventist artist, if my art happens to be about that, then so be it. But if it doesn't, I'm still revealing something about who we are, the capabilities God gave us for understanding mystery, for revealing some new concept that hasn't occurred to somebody else.

### How did you get interested in art?

As a child I used to draw on every scrap of paper I could find, in my textbooks, in my workbooks. I just wish I had a few of those left.

I never considered any career other than illustrator or commercial artist. I worked as a graphic designer in several places in and around Toronto. I became disillusioned about becoming an art director. In addition, I didn't want to work on Sabbath.

### What did you then do?

I was invited to teach at Andrews University after about three years in the design industry. I felt I had something to offer to my students, something I hadn't been able to get.

So I came here to teach graphic design and illustration. I became interested in fine arts when I got my master's at Michigan State University. That's when I began dreaming of gallery exhibition.

### Tell us about the gallery scene.

The work shown in art galleries is work produced in the studio. If the artist is not working in a studio, he

will have nothing to show. The primary requirement for an artist to be working is based on what he or she feels he wants to do. The artwork is like your child. Your ego is involved, because you created something; but when it's out in the public, people will see things in it that maybe you have not articulated in words. Yes, you created it, you did it, and it's probably in there, but you did it subconsciously.

Now if something good happens in that studio, you want to share it, not for the applause. You're overflowing with happiness, and you want to share that experience.

I've been asked by people, "Why do you go through all this baring of your soul with those crusty, abrasive New York dealers?"

### Have you gone through that experience?

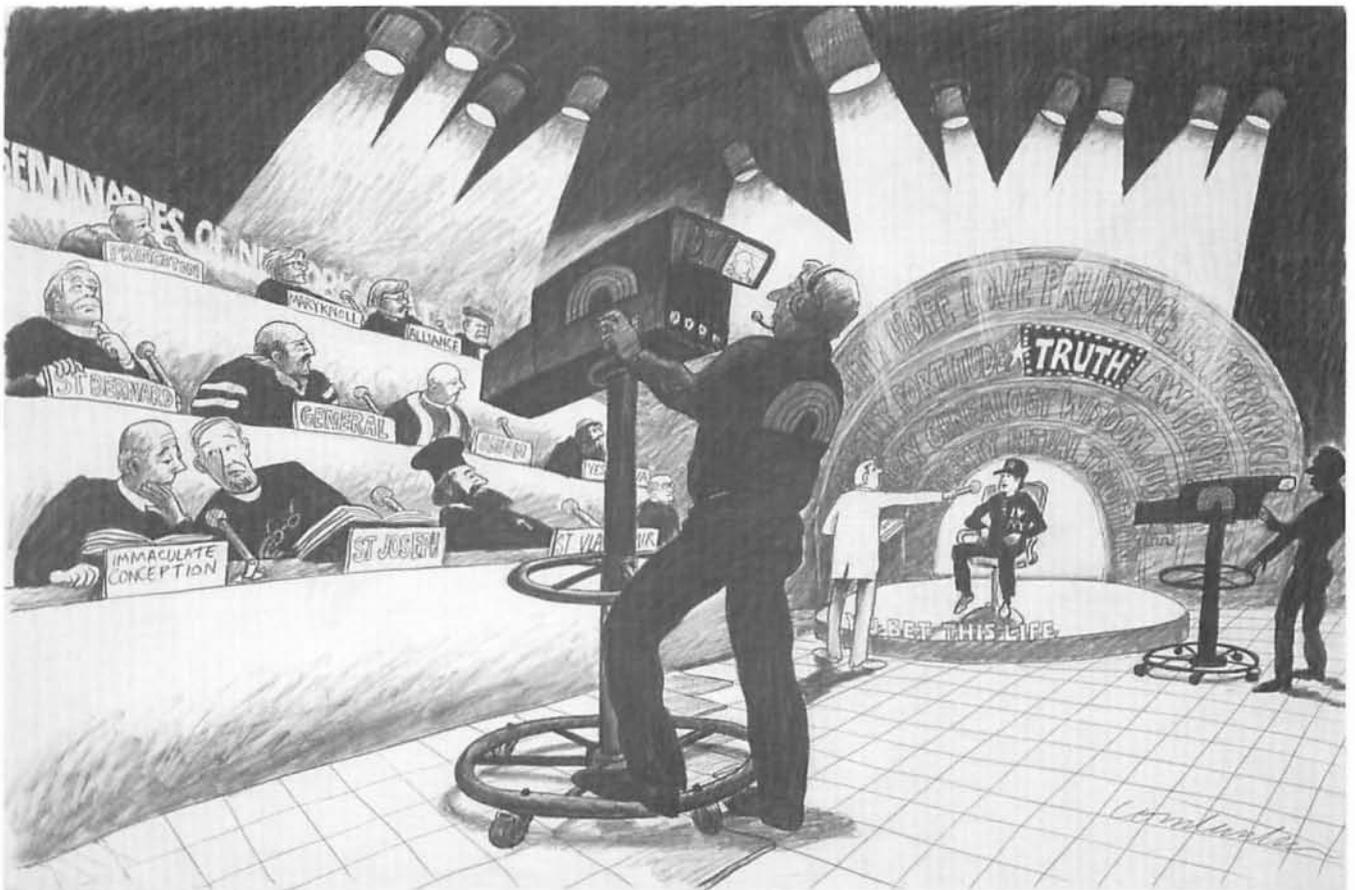
Yes. I've gone to New York with 15 sets of slides and a résumé, knocking on doors, asking to see the director. After that first rejection, I'm ready to go home. Emotionally, I'm devastated. Then I realize, at least intellectually, I didn't come here,

# Jesus of New York

The *Jesus of New York* book project consists of approximately seventy drawings—seven are reproduced here—in which I imagine the young Jesus between the ages of thirteen and thirty in today's New York City. We observe Him having “premonitions” of experiences that parallel circumstances in which He later found Himself during His ministry. The “Jesus in New York” scenario offers many possibilities, since references can be made to almost all the parables, sermons, and events recorded in the gospels.

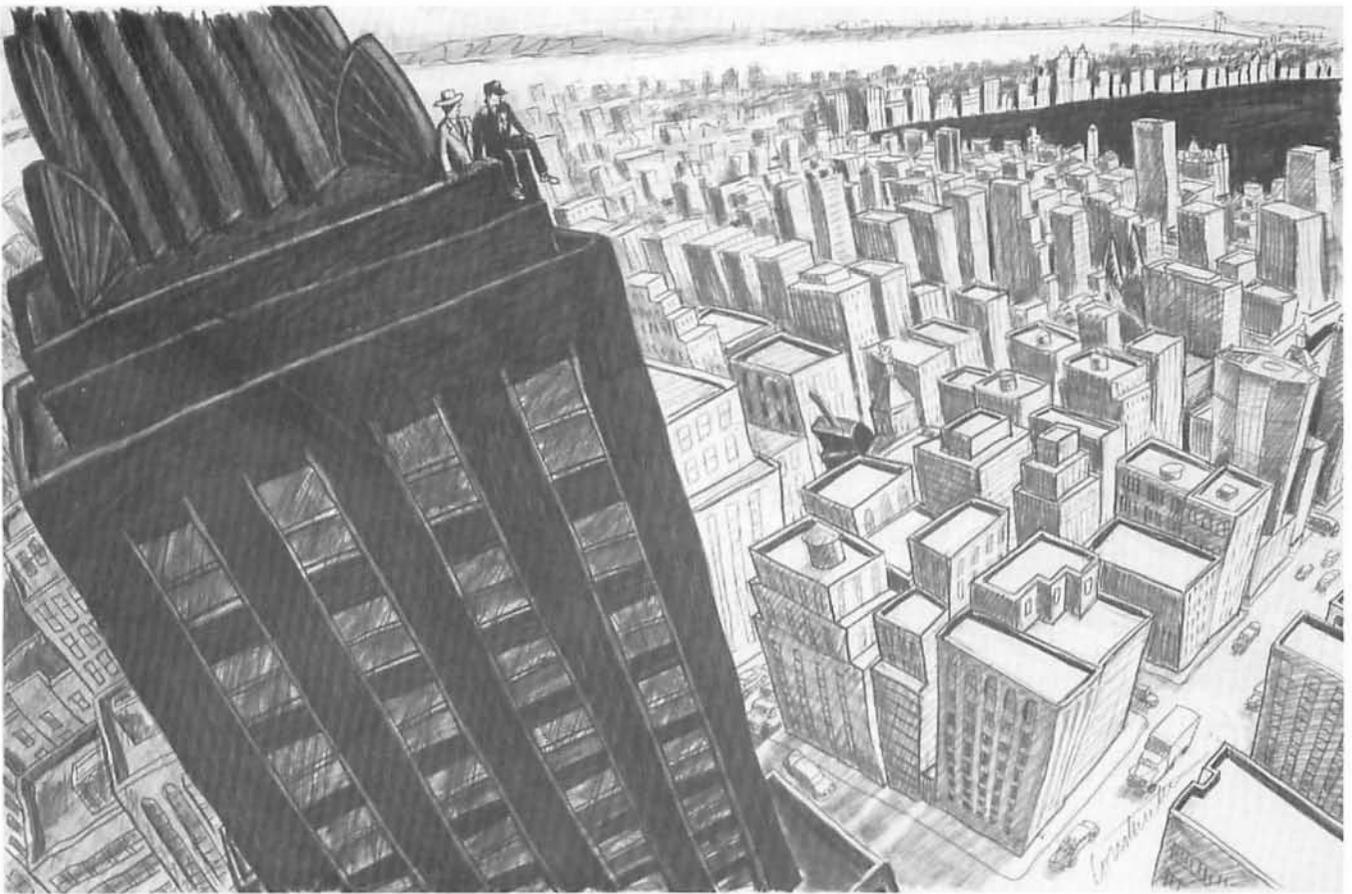
The idea for this series of drawings came to me as I struggled to contribute something for young people to identify with in Jesus' youth. Imagining a Jewish lad in New York City seemed natural after I recognized the possible parallel to the type of protagonist that Vincent van Gogh became in my first book. I trust that these drawings will help young people and others to better understand and identify with the young person that Jesus was.

**Greg Constantine**



He was sitting with the theologians, listening to them and answering questions. They were amazed at his intelligent answers.

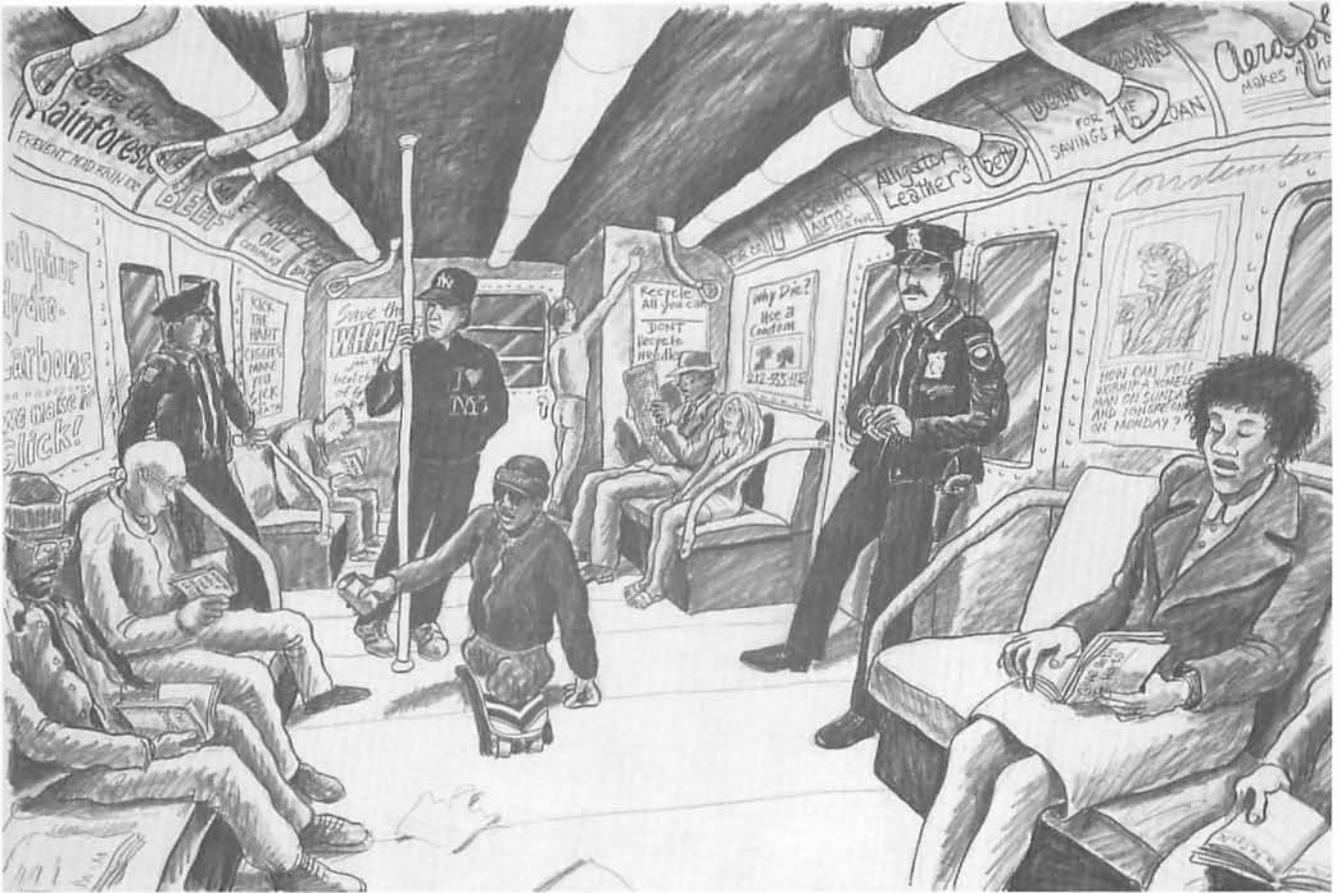
Luke 2:46, 47



The Devil set him on the highest point of the Temple and said, "If you are God's Son, throw yourself down to the ground."  
Matthew 4:5, 6



A certain man going from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked, stripped, beat up by robbers and left half dead.  
Luke 10:30



"I tell you, whenever you refused to help one of these least important ones, you refused to help me."

Matthew 25:45



Jesus went into the Temple and overturned the tables of the money-changers, saying, "You're making it a hideout for thieves!"

Matthew 21:12, 13



Once Jesus was in a certain town where there was a man covered with leprosy. Jesus reached out and touched him.

Luke 5:12, 13



"Nobody lights a lamp to put it under a bowl; instead he puts it on the lampstand, where it gives light for everyone."

Matthew 5:15

spend all this money, come all this way, to turn around after seeing one dealer. I'm prepared to see 20 or 25 of them, and get rejected by 20 or 25.

**What are the things you've done that broke new ground in art?**

I don't think I'm the best one to say. I do listen to critics whose judgment I respect. Those who have criticized me, I just ignore them.

Back in 1981, I made artist license plates, each one created to reveal the visual "signature" of a different artist. When they were exhibited, the response was just incredible. The artists themselves came to see how I had done them. It was like an explosion on the art scene.

**Your books have been acclaimed.**

My three books were Cinderella stories. *Vincent Van Gogh Visits New York* was the first one. I went to a convention in New York. We were approaching the Lincoln Tunnel, which gives you a fantastic view of the city from across the Hudson River. I said, "What would it be like if somebody like Vincent, this innocent person, came to this most sophisticated of cities?" This dichotomy, this wild idea made me chuckle. I immediately bought a sketchbook and a pencil and started sketching. By the time I got home, I had a couple of dozen ideas. These visual puns matured, and Vincent became the person interwoven among all of them.

I also included in them widely recognized artworks. Instead of just putting Vincent in New York, I put him in a Goya composition in New York, or a Monet composition in New York.

**You needed an incredible art background for that.**

Oh, I'd been teaching art history for a while. I didn't really have to do any research. When I got back here to Andrews, I mean, I felt like Van Gogh. I was passionately compulsive about the whole project, and I really couldn't be stopped. I was in my studio, cranking out these drawings, and it wasn't until I had about 50 drawings that I realized I could show these to my gallery.

It took me a week or so just to find the right medium, the right size, the

right paper, everything. I showed them to my dealer in New York, and he loved them. He said, "This would make a great book. Why don't you find yourself a publisher?"

I went to a telephone booth and called up five different publishers that I found in the yellow pages. The first person I talked to I told them I was an artist and I wanted to talk to an editor about a book proposal.

**You just went to a phone book? No introductions from anyone?**

I said I'm from Michigan, I show my work in SoHo. They knew the galleries I was showing at, and that gave me some credibility. That same day I had an appointment with Knopf. The editor there said his editor-in-chief would like the book. When his editor accepted it, he took it and ran.

The book was something totally new and unique. I've gotten great satisfaction out of the response from people that I respect, and for the recognition that it has provided. It was bigger than my artist license plates by a long shot.

**What about the *Jesus of New York* project?**

Van Gogh was this innocent person in "sin city," trying many times to right wrongs. I realized that maybe he was a Christ figure as well. I also felt there was a gap in the slides I showed my class in the course "Christ in Music and Art." The gap was between the years 18 and 30. I didn't want to show Jesus just rejecting someone offering Him drugs. That's too transparent, too obvious. Then it occurred to me that virtually everything He went through was reflected in His ministry. If I took what was in His ministry and predated that, and said that He went through these experiences in some microcosmic way earlier in His life...

**In other words, what He preached about, He had lived ...**

... or experienced or knew about. When He sat and invited the children to come unto Him, and rebuked the disciples for keeping them away, it wasn't the first time that He had played with children. So I showed this 19-year-old Jesus helping a kid dunk a basketball, which the kid could not do by himself. The kid is

ecstatic, and Jesus has borrowed this basketball from a couple of dudes in the background who represent the rebuked disciples. The subtitle for the book is "Premonitions of a New York Teenager." Everything is a premonition of what will eventually happen to Him.

**You've been at this project for a few years.**

I started it back in 1985. I did some paintings without doing any drawings. Then I did the Good Medic where Jesus sees a priest who didn't help a victim of a Central Park mugging.

Some of the pictures are humorous. Instead of walking on water, I have Him barefoot water skiing in the Hudson River, scaring the daylights out of His disciples.

**This is obviously not a traditional look at Jesus.**

I don't want to preach. If there is preaching there, it's accidental. But I've identified the audience—young people, whether they're Christian or not.

Jesus Christ to me is really a very good and close friend. I hope I can be like that for my students and fellow human beings.

**Where are you going next with art?**

I have always said that if as an artist you do something crazy enough long enough the world will pay attention. What that crazy enough thing is for me, I don't know.

I think, though, that many of the rejection letters I have gotten for *Jesus of New York* were written because the book is seen as too outrageous. I don't see it that way. I see it as a natural outpouring of what I believe, of what I've thought about for a long time. If it is outrageous to the world, that would be terrific. But I have left this whole project in the hands of the Lord.

*Kermit Netteburg and Michael Parnell*

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*Kermit Netteburg is professor of journalism and Michael Parnell is a graduate student in communication at Andrews University.*