

# On the Chartreuse Couch: Gene Elder interviews Ann Kinser and Michael Mehl

Arts &amp; Culture

Columns

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The cast and crew of Cornyation 1994's *Corny Rap Music Video*

**Gene:** Ann, Michael have a seat on the sofa. Thanks for joining me and millions of others around the world. Michael, we know you are the spark that ignited the fire for **Fotoseptiembre** and we should talk about that. And Ann you were a major highlight at **Cornyation** for several early years, and I know a full disclosure about that experience will delight our listeners. And of course we can talk about whatever is on your mind. The more controversial the better. I absolutely *adore* controversy. But you start. What is on your mind? What's first. Shall I order pizza?

**Michael:** Thank you Gene. I see a few cobwebs here and there but your famous couch is not as musty as I thought. I guess being as active as you are there's little that can go stale. And speaking of stale, no, no pizza thank you. We are particular about our food.

**Gene:** Well, that cobweb means that under the sofa lives a BIG ol' SPIDER. His name is Fido. And if I don't like our interview I will introduce you. Ann, let's just start with Cornyation. You have some insight about that experience.

**Ann:** Hi Gene. Thanks for inviting us to sit on your couch to chat. Yes, Cornyation and I go back quite a few years. Michael and I were first brought into Cornyation in 1989, by Curt Slangal. For your readers who don't know Curt, he is an exceptionally talented graphic designer and artist here in San Antonio. He was designing his first Cornyation gown and asked if we would help, which we did. Fortunately, he also wanted me to be his duchess/queen and wear all his wonderful creations throughout the years. The Cornyation collaboration with Curt continued until 2001.

**Gene:** Wow! Thirteen years! That was a long time you were involved. And yes, Curt deserves a special recognition. They should give a Curt Slangal award to the most creative. His contributions were excellent.

**Ann:** 1989 was the last year Cornyation was held at the Bonham Exchange, which in my view, was where it should have stayed. I was the *Duchess Of Lost Souls* that year. The show had a more intimate, more exclusive feel in that venue. If someone could get tickets to Cornyation at the Bonham, it was cool! The shows were campy and raunchy in a good way. There were no rules or fear of offending anyone. If a designer wanted to have half-naked girls or boys as part of their presentation, no problem!

**Gene:** Yes that is true, but needless to say, the crowds outgrew the Rainbow Ballroom. I was King Anchovy 1984.

**Ann:** Later, when Cornyation moved to larger, city venues, and was designated an official Fiesta Commission event—with pressure to reign in the shock factor—it felt like it had lost its edginess, which was part of its original appeal to me. Still, during all those years, being part of Cornyation was always a lot of fun. In the earlier years, we witnessed sheer genius from designers such as Curt Slangal, Brad Braune, and of course, the late Robert Rehm. They were able to convey their message or assigned theme with meticulous designs and elaborate constructions. The focus of the show was the gown, not a cast of thousands. Of course there was always drama on and off the stage. Queens bickering over who got the largest dressing room ... yes that frequently happened.

And on two occasions, certain closeted individuals (no names) made of Cornyation their coming-out party! I would be remiss if I didn't mention the endless fun and the stage-make-up tips from the Pointless Sisters. They were always the first to say you looked beautiful and to help get your headpiece secure if it was falling. I miss those girls! And Pat Wells ... it was Pat who made sure the show got from A to Z every night. Without Pat Wells as stage manager, every Cornyation night would have ended in a hair-pulling, prop-hurling catfight. And of course, Ray ... which is all you need to say when talking about Cornyation.

**Gene:** You are an archive of those years and great remembering all this, but we want to know about you and what you did onstage. I vividly remember you wearing a giant princess phone that was like maneuvering a tank onstage as you entered and attempted to bow to King Anchovy. Curt had to guide the whole thing. We want to hear all of your fabulous entrances.

**Ann:** Wow Gene, I've never been called an archive! Curt had a spectacular way of creating those costumes. They always involved a lot of two-by-fours, foam boards, fabric, hot glue, hot glue, and more hot glue! None of us had any fingerprints left by the end of Cornyation. What the costumes were *not* was lightweight.



Kinser in her Queen Of Scintillating Saturn costume created by Curt Slangal for Cornyation 1993

The phone costume that you mentioned, Queen Of Scintillating Saturn, was about Southwestern Bell (AT&T), moving their headquarters to San Antonio from St. Louis. Hence, the phone receiver that I wore on my head! Yes, that piece was so heavy, it took two strong men to lift it into place on my head. Being royalty yourself, you know that it was customary to offer courtesies to the King. I managed, but not without a slight quiver in my knees. The endurance test wasn't over yet. I had to pull the darn thing with my forehead down to the end of the runway. Kind of like an ox pulling a plow. As you said, the back of the phone receiver was on wheels trailing behind me with Curt to guide it. I could only look straight ahead and all along I hoped I didn't step off the stage. When I got too close to the edge, I could feel Curt pulling me back. Obviously there was no room to turn around, so I had to walk backwards all the way to the start of the runway, laughing all the time. I was so happy to get that phone off my head! To this day, people stop me and say: "Weren't you the Telephone Queen?" You gotta love it.

**Gene:** Well, and I just did, too.

**Ann:** Another memorable costume that was huge was Queen Of Pandora and Her Boom Box.

**Gene:** Oh Good! There's more!

**Ann:** The skirt structure was close to 12 feet tall, and I sat and stood on a little perch at the top. I had to duck the stage lights when I was rolled onto the stage. It was comforting to know that Michael and Curt were maneuvering the costume at the base, but I still held on tight when we would go over bumps on the stage. That costume had a built-in surprise factor. Once the contraption was in place, the skirt opened up like butterfly wings with

smoke blowing out. When the smoke cleared, you could see, inside the skirt, two naked blow-up dolls in a compromising position. Of course *Love Shack* by the B-52's was pounding throughout the auditorium and the crowd was roaring, clapping, and stomping their feet!

**Gene:** Was this at Beethoven Halle?

**Ann:** Yes it was. A costume I would like to also mention was the Queen of the 100th Anniversary of Fiesta. When I first entered the stage, the costume looked like a crispy taco with legs. Then came the surprise factor that Curt was well known for. The sides of the taco shell lowered, revealing me in a Mexican skirt. If your readers have ever been to a Cornyation show, they know that the duchesses throw trinkets to the crowd. That year, being the 100th anniversary of Fiesta, Curt came up with the idea of throwing flour tortillas. Corn tortillas do not fly well, we did research. It was the first time it had been done and it was an instant success. Flour tortillas were flying through the air from the stage to the balcony and back. Everyone joined in. It was a hoot! It became quite a tradition after that.

**Gene:** So that is where that started. Well, they have put a stop to it now. Michael has a great picture from the 1994 Cornyation, the year David Freeman was King Anchovy. Let's see if we can show that to our viewers. I see Michael on the left and there you are Ann, on the floor, front left. And there is Jesse Borrego. Who are these others?

**Michael:** The photograph is of the *Corny Rap Music Video* cast and crew. I composed and recorded the music and lyrics, with Jesse Borrego as the lead singer. I also produced and directed the music video, featuring Jesse Borrego as a joker-king. The cast and crew are Jesse Borrego, Ann Kinser, Ray Chavez, Curt Slangal, John McBurney, Brenda Ray, Michael Nerio, Belinda Stanush, Annette Hall, Cameo Kay Ibsen, Wenceslao Armendariz, Christy Ruffer, Doug Hall, Theresa Machado, Rudy Guerrero, Marina Borrego Perez, Britt Lorraine Helveston, Pat Wells, Angela Brysch and Adam Rocha. The *Cornyation Overture*, which I also composed, and the *Corny Rap Music Video* were first presented at Cornyation 1994, and were the Cornyation pre-show for several years.

**Gene:** I taped that Cornyation. I have that in the HAPPY Archives. You should put that on YouTube.

**Michael:** Glad you have it in your world-famous archives. I have not had a chance to YouTube it, yet.

**Gene:** Ok, well enough Cornyation for the evening. This could go on indefinitely. Let's move over to the topic I always ask about. Have you seen a UFO or been abducted by aliens?

**Ann:** I have never seen a UFO or been abducted by aliens.

**Michael:** I have never, consciously, seen a UFO, and I don't subscribe to any of the conspiracy theories on UFO phenomena. However, given the possibilities and probabilities inherent to billions of galaxies in the universe, it is naive to assume that Earth—and life on Earth—is such a unique occurrence. It would constitute a statistical outlier of unrealistic orders of magnitude. In statistical terms, if someone's deep-rooted belief system hinges on the implausibility of Earth being the only planet in the universe capable of sustaining life forms, then that someone would also have to accept, in good faith, as a feasible counterpart the plausibility of multi-dimensional parallel universes, populated by electro-molecular beings of varying wavelength (invisible aliens if you will). Simply put, if we allow ourselves to believe that a god, deity, or supernatural being can oversee and/or affect our lives on Earth, and only *our* lives on *this* earth, then it's equally valid to believe that invisible aliens live among us, which is more plausible statistically than gods or supernatural beings.

**Gene:** Oh, so you haven't seen one?

**Michael:** Not that I know of. Of course, there are many visible things that could well be other things. But it was exciting to see earlier this year, that **SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence)** is officially back in the game, with Physicist Stephen Hawking and Russian businessman Yuri Milner providing renewed scientific and financial credibility to the effort. You are rolling your eyes and yawning, Gene.

**Gene:** *No I am not!* This is thrilling. Really.

**Michael:** Thrilling? Well, okay, maybe. But when you get down to the nuts and bolts it's pretty dense stuff. Extraterrestrial intelligence is a significant field of scientific research, unfortunately the popular understanding of the subject matter is tainted by the random musings of fringe-theory advocates and sci-fi enthusiasts with shallow, novella-induced insights. Since the matter is important to me, I tend to favor a more methodical, empirical, scientific approach. A good place to visit in this regard is the **Radio Astronomy Observatory-Very Large Array** in New Mexico, one of several outstanding research facilities in the world, dedicated to receiving and deciphering radio frequency signals from outer space.

**Gene:** Keep going.

**Michael:** On the subject of SETI, Stephen Hawking has made public his views that encounters between asymmetrical civilizations are invariably detrimental to those with less-sophisticated firepower, implying that if an encounter were to occur between aliens and earthlings, we earthlings would be worse for the experience. Other folks argue that it would be a friendly encounter because the tremendous superiority of alien technology would obviate any need for aggression.

Out of context this would be a nerdy academic argument. But a few significant developments have been in the news recently that make the argument compelling and relevant. The first is that Hawking, Elon Musk, Bill Gates and several other prominent folks—scientists, futurists, ethicists—issued a joint warning about the potentially dire implications of artificial intelligence in robots. These are not uninformed people, they must know something. Secondly, the success of **NASA's New Horizons Mission**—in which for the first time a space vehicle from Earth is traveling to the outer edge of our solar system—brings a new immediacy to the search and research of alien life forms. And finally, NASA just discovered there's water on Mars ... the implications of this are mind-boggling.

Humans—and other beings too, I'm sure—are war prone and trigger-happy, and will always be. It's just nature, universal nature. And even as we earthlings slog through our relatively lower order of technological development (we can imagine the Starship Enterprise or the Star Destroyer but we can't build either one), we are now capable of sending an unmanned (robotic) probe to the edge of the solar system with the intent of collecting scientific data. Yet, a space probe like New Horizons could easily be adapted to fulfill a more aggressive mission, and I would wager that someone is already working on this. It's not hard to imagine then, the tremendous impact on our lives if confronted by an alien civilization of a higher order of technological capability and trigger happiness.

**Gene:** So are we done with your thesis on UFOs?

**Michael:** Yes, please. All this higher order of civilization stuff makes me hungry.

**Gene:** Well, so if you don't like pizza: Where are your favorite places to eat in San Antonio?

**Ann:** Our favorite eateries are always changing. There are certain places we favor, mostly ethnic, family owned and operated. We are particular about what we eat. We like good,

simple, affordable food in a comfortable and clean atmosphere, with good service. Good food is important at many levels, and we don't like wasting our time and money on mediocre food and poor service. My appreciation for food has developed out of cooking at home. I am not a fancy cook, but I cook pretty well. When you are used to good food at home, good restaurants are difficult to find. Occasionally, for a special celebration, I try to find a restaurant that's slightly elegant, with good service and food that's a little over the top. Michael calls these places expensive tablecloths and avoids them like the plague. Me, I like someone else cooking for a change.

**Michael:** My favorite eats are at home. Ann is a wonderful cook, she loves to cook, and she likes to experiment with all kinds of cuisines. And it's not that I don't like pizza—I only like Ann's homemade pizza. We're also very fortunate to have a close circle of friends who are outstanding cooks, have traveled worldwide, and can conjure delicious dishes from different countries. For example, the best, most authentic Vietnamese food we've had in SA is at a friend's house just a half-block away. So even though good food is paramount, restaurants are not on my bucket list. As Ann mentioned, I avoid expensive-tablecloth restaurants and I also avoid food-with-a-narrative restaurants.

**Gene:** My mouth is watering. Well, then, since you are longtime residents of San Antonio, is there a place that inspires you? You know a bank lobby, a grotto, a place on the river ... a spot you like to visit that you never get tired of? Tell us all where that is so we can all go there and ruin it for you.

**Ann & Michael:** A nice bank lobby that makes us feel wealthy would be good, more aspirational than inspirational, but it's still a contender. However, our zen moments are on the open road. One of our nearby favorites is RR 1376, from Boerne to Hwy. 290, just east of Fredericksburg. Another favorite is RR 337 from Medina to Leaky. Both in the Texas Hill Country.

**Gene:** Lets talk about architecture then. About San Antonio buildings. What architecture do you like in town?

**Ann:** In terms of public architecture, the structures that most move me are the downtown post office and the Scottish Rite Cathedral. The residential styles that appeal to me are the old German homes in King William, some of the California-hacienda homes in Monte Vista and the ranch-style homes in Castle Hills.

**Michael:** The aspirational traits of a city are defined by its public architecture. The last spurt of aspirational public architecture in SA was back in the early 20th century, when buildings like the Tower Life, the Emily Morgan and others were built. I am drawn to the Tower Life building. I think of it as a wonderful Gotham/superhero movie location-in-waiting. I even created a cartoon strip with that theme in mind, where the building itself has wishful thoughts of being in a film and laments its isolation in SA, where no one writes a script for it. Another personal favorite is the lobby of what is currently the Drury Plaza Hotel Riverwalk, formerly the Alamo National Bank building. The building itself and the lobby with its stained-glass features, are meticulously restored and maintained, offering a delightful public space. And of course, the Missions, especially Espada and San Juan, of which I have made surrealist photographic interpretations for various exhibits. I have also curated two significant exhibits on the Missions for Fotoseptiembre. One was "Mission Dream" in 2001 in partnership with Mexico-North Research Network—an exhibit that included interpretive photographic images by five photographers. The second was "Timeless Icons-The San Antonio Missions," in 2014, with photographs by Al Rendon. There is a recurring symbiosis between architecture and photography. At their best, architects and photographers both deal with the allocation of space and light in a manner

that is precise, interesting, and satisfying.

**Gene:** Okay, well moving right along to a favorite topic, Fotoseptiembre, please tell us what this is.

**Michael:** Fotoseptiembre is an annual photography festival that takes place every September in galleries and other venues throughout San Antonio and the Hill Country. Ann and I own Fotoseptiembre, and together with Paul Vaughn, our chief technologist, we present the festival every year. The actual name of the organizing entity is FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA SAFOTO, and we present the festival as FOTOSEPTIEMBRE USA. We also have a web gallery component, the **SAFOTO Web Galleries**, where we present curated monographs of local, national, and international photographic artists. We have been producing Fotoseptiembre since 1995.

**Gene:** You also have regular gallery shows?

**Michael:** Yes, most of the Fotoseptiembre exhibits are gallery shows that are organized and presented by artists and galleries on their own. They register their exhibits and events with us, and we coordinate, promote, and document all the exhibits. It's just that we, as festival organizers, don't curate and produce exhibits for galleries anymore. We used to, and we may do so again. But for now we get more bang for our buck from the monographs in our SAFOTO Web Galleries.

**Gene:** What sets Fotoseptiembre apart from other photography festivals?

**Michael:** Fotoseptiembre is by design, an inclusive, eclectic, community-based festival of the photographic arts. All levels of photography-based artists, from rank amateurs to established professionals, join us every year. This is in stark contrast to most photography festivals where the emphasis is on organizational exclusivity and on presenting trending artists.

**Gene:** What do you mean by community-based?

**Michael:** This may be too technical of a point for your readers, who have already been taxed by my UFO dissertation.

**Gene:** Try us. We're all ears.

**Michael:** There are two categories of community that form the foundation of Fotoseptiembre. Our local geographic community encompasses the San Antonio metro area, the Texas Hill Country, and Austin; a regional agglomeration of distinct cultural entities, each one defined by their particular constituencies. We are in a unique position to interact with all of them and this has become an important tool for managing the development of our festival. Every year as we go through the process of organizing Fotoseptiembre, we effectively conduct a regional survey of arts and culture, acquiring valuable insights into the lay of the land. This allows us to periodically integrate the best interests of our geographic community into our festival structure, our programming, and our promotions. Then, as we refine and develop our web presence, we project our geographic community's efforts to a worldwide audience of photography enthusiasts; a global community that has become a significant part of our outreach and interaction. Engaging electronically with a global community as we do daily, forces us to consider a much broader set of particular constituencies that are still closely defined by nationalities and regional cultural traditions, yet more global in their mindsets. Connecting our local geographic community with our global communities is an ongoing challenge.

**Gene:** Well, you are a very valuable resource of knowledge about photography and this discussion makes me want to know why you haven't tackled a project like getting large



photos on the sides of buses and projects like that?

**Michael:** The cost and logistics associated with projects like those require a synchronized buy-in from different entities, for a specific purpose, and in everyone's interests. It would be like managing several three-ring circuses concurrently. But to your point, I personally created an image campaign for the United States Census Bureau, producing bus wraps to promote the 2000 Census in San Antonio. And, unless they have been recently removed, there is a series of large-scale photographic murals of images by SAY Sí students on the windows of the Market Street side of the International Center Building. I curated the images and they were installed as part of Fotoseptiembre in 2006. They might not be as visible now, if still there.



Ann Kinser and Michael Mehl illustrated by Kinser for their 2014 XXX-Mas Card

**Gene:** What did you think about the film *Finding Vivian Maier*?

**Michael:** We became aware of Vivian Maier when her work first surfaced publicly in 2008. Unfortunately, the discovery of Maier's work was overshadowed by the find of **[Robert] Capa's Mexican Suitcase** in late 2007, full of lost negatives from the Spanish Civil War. The full impact of Maier's work came to the public zeitgeist around 2012. Because of our interest in her story and our respect for her work, we have closely followed the development of the Vivian Maier narrative—a colleague of ours, a curator from Spain, has presented exhibits of Maier's work throughout Europe. We knew the documentary was in the works and saw it when it first aired on Showtime back in 2014. In the context of our contemporary-art world, Vivian Maier's story is a cautionary tale about taking selfies when there is no internet to post them on.

**Gene:** I don't understand that. Why would it be a cautionary tale about selfies?

**Michael:** A recurring theme in Vivian Maier's body of work is self-portraiture. She would habitually photograph herself on reflective surfaces found along her walks—mirrors, storefront windows, etc. Her self-portraits are more contextual than self-referential, and provide a unique glimpse into her progress as an artist over time. So, ironically, as she was taking all these selfless she remained unknown because social media as we know it had not been born.

**Gene:** She was unknown because she didn't want to be known. Being known isn't a goal of every artist.

**Michael:** Sorry, Gene. It is well documented that she tried several times to have her work exhibited, even engaging a photo lab in France to print her work and produce postcards.



She was an outsider, she did not know how to navigate the art system, and her gradual dementia became an impediment later in her life. Also, I have yet to meet an artist with a yen for anonymity.

**Gene:** Well, that's because they don't want you to meet them. They are the creative spirits most enjoy. They don't know they are artists. Well, as you know, I started Political Art Month, which is in July. I want to know what you think of photographers that work with political content. And give me the name of one that does political photographs. Were there any in this September lineup?

**Michael:** I cannot answer your political question about Fotoseptiembre photographers because we do not discuss individual artists outside the context of the festival. And even within the context of Fotoseptiembre, we do not qualify or portray any one artist as being of one ilk or another, political or otherwise. Someone may have a body of work that may appear to be political, but the artist may not agree with that assessment. Or they may have had a politicized stance at one point, but not anymore.

However, I do have reservations about the term "political art" and the connotations associated with it. As much as some folks would like to think otherwise, art has always been a reflection of the times, not a harbinger of times to come. And the concept of political art is greatly diminished if we consider that some of its most effective forms were initiated by agencies of government for specific propagandist purposes. For example, the epic pamphleteering of Soviet art was a result of a political directive to present the Soviet system to the world as a monumental achievement. And the aesthetic of American abstract expressionism was proposed and implemented by none other than the hallowed art experts from our national intelligence agencies, in conjunction with the United States Department of State, to counter the more narrative, socialist trends of Soviet and Mexican art. Two prime examples of government-originated art movements being intervened upon by a third government's political interests.

Other relevant examples of so-called political art are the Italian movements futurismo and arte povera. The aesthetics of futurismo were more a result of nascent fascist trends in Italy and did not spark a sweeping dash towards modernity. Arte povera, a reactive movement whose stated mission was to subvert the art market, never came close to accomplishing its goal; in fact the art market went on booming and arte povera remained a brief moment in history. The agit-prop movement of Northern Europe—a repurposed remnant of the Soviet cultural system—was the result of dire economic conditions prevalent at the time, and did not effect any particular social change. The social climate in Europe improved because the economies improved, not because of social agitation by artists.

**Gene:** Hahahaha! Thanks, I rest my case. You know a lot about political art. What are the reservations about? Like you just stated, the socialist Mexican art is a great example of political art. Diego Rivera murals, etc. I maintain that any artist that isn't political is a bore. I'm sorry to have to say that, but it's true. And the older I get the more boring the art is. You know, Cornyation is political art. If it didn't have that political edge it wouldn't be interesting or have lasted this long. And I don't need to get into Mount Rushmore, I take it.

**Michael:** There is a difference between being political and being politicized. I quote myself: "Reality is always subjective. There never is a neutral point of view. Especially now, when every aspect of our daily lives has become politicized and everyone thinks their politics and their aesthetic are better than yours." An example of being politicized on one end of the political spectrum in the United States means that you shop at the farmers market, you embrace the notion, if not the action, of sustainable resources, and you embrace gay marriage even if not gay. I'm simplifying all this for the sake of brevity. Being

politicized on the other end of the political spectrum means that you think President Obama is a Muslim and was born in Kenya, and that you have the right to make and enforce public policy based on religious conviction. So, when everything in our daily lives becomes politicized to such a degree, making statements about the politics of one's art becomes equally as narrow a definition of being political as, for example, wearing a hemp shirt. It also becomes an academic discussion with no particular relevance to reality.

**Gene:** Well, then I quote myself: "Art, like the Alamo, has to draw the line somewhere."

**Michael:** I've always considered that to be a wise quote on your part ... Going back to our discussion, being political is about being proactive, taking action, effecting change on segments of society or society as a whole. There are many folks out there with a "political conscience." This does not mean anything other than being self-satisfied with a certain politicized stance in life. These folks, from across the political spectrum, may contribute to worthwhile charities, or attend like-minded events, but as much as they would like to think so, they make no effectual changes in the real world. This also goes for most "political" artists, especially, in our case, sanctimonious photographers with a high self-regard who photograph the trials and tribulations of the less fortunate. I've always felt that photographing the less fortunate to create awareness is an offensive form of cultural neocolonialism.

**Gene:** Well, all this is extremely truthful, but you are just beating around the bush to avoid a real commitment. Either artists are doing their job as artists or they are boring us. Great art is political— theater, movies, paintings, poetry, opera, dance. It is either pushing civilization forward or just kissing ass. This is not a hard topic to understand. It applies to photographs as well. And I do think documentation comes under political. Taking straight documentary photographs is about telling the truth. What could be more political than telling the truth? Take the various photographers during the Depression.

**Michael:** Yes, agreed, the truth is always political. The problem is, the truth is also always relative. I'm not beating around the bush. I'm just calling into question shallow notions of what it means to be politically active. And I've already stated that regardless of what some like to think, art does not move society forward, art reflects the movement of society. You also reference the WPA photographers, who were beneficiaries of Federal Project Number One, the U.S. government's make-work program to provide employment for the intellectual class: It was a paid job, and they got to travel the country without enduring the day-to-day hardships of the unfortunate subjects they were photographing. The fact that their efforts were later canonized as the result of a higher political calling falls into the category of shameless cultural-neocolonialism in your own backyard. In my playbook it's a simple proposition: Working for the government, even as an artist, does not make of anyone a political anything. You are simply a government employee, a bureaucrat. Politician and bureaucrat are employment categories; they do not necessarily denote or define agents of change. And there is no such thing as straightforward truthful photography.

**Gene:** That doesn't mean it isn't political.

**Michael:** I disagree. To be effective politically you have to take action, direct action, not just be supportive of a cause by creating "art with a conscience." A clear example of direct political action are the folks of the Plowshares Movement—the Berrigan brothers and Megan Rice for example, who spent time in jail for their actions protesting nuclear facilities in the United States. The Plowshares folks are mostly Catholic clergy and laypeople, and for that matter, the liberal Catholic clergy has a legitimate standing as having accomplished some of the most effective direct political-action efforts to date in Central and South America. Many of these priests and nuns were persecuted, imprisoned and in some cases

killed for their convictions. I'm not implying it's necessary to be Catholic or die for a cause—religion and martyrdom are not my bag. But if you have an avowed political stance and are not taking direct social/political action, you are by any measure, a political dilettante.

In 2004, I organized and curated an exhibit for Día de los Muertos at Centro Cultural Aztlán. The exhibit was titled “La Muerte Es Pareja,” with the primary connotation that death is the great equalizer, and a secondary connotation that artist couples were creating work for the exhibit. Ann and I created *La Danza Macabra (The Macabre Dance)*, a triptych of collages referencing the presidential elections that year—George W. Bush was reelected. We combined Ann's illustrations of dancing donkeys and elephants with engravings by José Guadalupe Posada, Mexico's premier political caricaturist during the Mexican Revolution. I have always been of the mind that the folly of politics is best addressed as parody or comedic satire; the jester in the court if you will (like Cornyation, as you mentioned). And so, yes, I have frequently engaged a politicized satirical approach to certain things in life, which would make me a jester or a joker, but I would not call myself political. And more to the point, I have no illusions that my politicized art, writs, or efforts, have any direct political impact. An honest artist is always disruptive.

**Gene:** Thank you. Disruptive ... What about Pussy Riot?

**Michael:** Pussy Riot is a poor example. The only reason we know about them is because two of their members went on a self-aggrandizing media tour through the U.S. and Europe. The original members—back in Russia—immediately disavowed the two strays calling their starstruck media hounds. They are merely a politicized spectacle that enjoyed a temporary prominence in our politicized media. No effective change resulted from their media efforts.

But as I was saying ... an honest artist is always disruptive, either to her/him/it/self, or to a segment of the status quo. An artist is—or should be—by nature, independent, enterprising an original thinker, and beholden to no one. This is a valid political stance.

**Gene:** Good, I'm glad you have some serious thoughts on the matter. Well, we are at the end of our time and I always let my guests ask the last question. In our case two.

**Ann:** Since you were recently mistaken for a homeless person on a golf course, have you considered upgrading your wardrobe? Maybe designing a new line of sand-trap prêt-à-porter for the more discerning gentlemen of leisure lounging on the links?

**Gene:** I maintain that I am always ahead of the fashion curve. Whatever I am wearing will be the in fashion for men in several years. However you have given me the idea to call it the Sand-trap Fashion. Thanks for that.

**Michael:** We have known you for almost 30 years. In that time we have observed your idiosyncratic path from accomplished artist to activist to iconic gadfly. We have at times wondered how your progress—and that of a few others—would have played out somewhere else, in a more dynamic environment than what is afforded in San Antonio. Is there any particular place where you feel your efforts would have been fully embraced, recognized and rewarded?

**Gene:** You know, that is a really good question that I think every artist in San Antonio must have asked at one time or another. So why do any of us stay here? One of the most rewarding periods of my San Antonio art life was when I hung around with Norman Avila and Don Evans when they were directing their San Antonio Museum of Modern Art. Don was such an inspiration about how artists should get rid of their egos, which I have always agreed. I had MUD gallery, on the river, at that time and I got to be supportive and influenced by San Antonio's best potters, Tracy Dotson, Debbie Paulus, Stephen Humphries, Lesta Frank, Letitia Eldredge, Steve Reynolds. Then I started hanging around

with Glenna Park, who taught me all about the feminist women artists and how to be one. And of course we have all benefited from superb Mexican art influences. Kathy Vargas, Tony Villejo and Adan Hernandez have helped to shape my thoughts. I also owe a lot of credit to Robert Tiemann for teaching me that artists should protest censorship. Being the property manager of Blue Star at the beginning was great fun.

I came across a great quote when I was researching Gutzon Borglum for our one issue of *CATCHUP-UP* magazine. The French painter that Marion McNay had invited to stay here had said, "I will be back. Yes, San Antonio is one of the few cities where you can live life as it should be lived." And that told me what I needed to know. I don't have any illusions about being a great artist and I wouldn't have been a better artist anywhere else. This is where I was supposed to do my study. And I still consider myself to be just that, an art student. I do think one of my best contributions to the gay and art community was helping Hap Veltman start and being the manager of the San Antonio Country in 1973. I came to the conclusion when I curated the *Time Capsule* for SAMA that what I was doing was writing a script. That some future gay artist was going to discover this long-forgotten Gene artist, probably when they open the *Time Capsule* in 2181 and then all my antics will be the material for a musical comedy, or something. So that is what I am doing. I am leaving a trail of colorful antics behind for that artist to discover. And now I am creating the HAPPY Foundation Archives documenting as many artists as I can.

Thanks for joining me on the Chartreuse.

*Gene Elder is the archives director of the HAPPY Foundation and can be reached via email at [elder4tomato@yahoo.com](mailto:elder4tomato@yahoo.com).*

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#### TAGS

Adan Hernandez, Angela Brysch, Ann Kinser, Annette Hall, AT&T, B-52's, Beethoven Halle and Garten, Belinda Stanush, Bill Gates, Brad Braune, Brenda Ray, Britt Lorraine Helveston, Cameo Kay Ibsen, Castle Hills, Christy Ruffer, Cornyation, Cornyation Overture, Curt Slangal, David Freeman, Debbie Paulus, Dia de los Muertos, Doug Hall, Elon Musk, Emily Morgan, Fiesta San Antonio, flour tortillas, Gene Elder, Glenna Park, Gutzon Borglum, Hap Veltman, Jesse Borrego, John McBurney, José Guadalupe Posada, Kathy Vargas, King Anchovy, King William, Lesta Frank, Letitia Eldredge, Marina Borrego Perez, Mars, Megan Rice, Michael Mehl, Michael Nerio, Monte Vista Mount Rushmore, NASA, New Horizons, Pat Wells, Paul Vaughn, Political Art Month, Pussy Riot, Queen Of Pandora and Her Boom Box, Queen of the 100th Anniversary of Fiesta, Radio Astronomy Observatory, Rainbow Ballroom, Ray Chavez, Robert Rehm, Robert Tiemann, Rudy Guerrero, San Antonio Fiesta Commission, SAY Sí, Scottish Rite Cathedral, Southwestern Bell, Star Destroyer, Starship Enterprise, Stephen Hawking, Stephen Humphries, Steve Reynolds, Texas Hill Country, The Bonham Exchange, the Happy Foundation, The Pointless Sisters, The San Antonio Country, Theresa Machado, Tony Villejo, Tower Life, Tracy Dotson, UFOs, Very Large Array, water on Mars, Wenceslao Armendariz, Yuri Milner