

## ANIMALS IN ART

**ARTIST:** James C. Christensen (1942- ) Orem, Utah

**TITLE:** Fantasies of the Sea 1985

**MEDIA:** acrylic on board

**SIZE:** 36" x 24"

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

James Christensen is an artist who captures our curiosity with a delightful combination of innocence and humor. "My aim," says Christensen, "always begins with a desire to connect with imagination." He adds, "My work is an invitation to let your imagination run wild, explore, and make interpretations spontaneously."

James Christensen, son of Sibyl and Harry Christensen, was born September 26, 1942, in Culver City, California. He grew up two blocks from the MGM studio; consequently, he and his friends often played in the back lot of the studio in Tarzan's pond or on sets for movies such as *Gone With the Wind*. James loved to tell stories and use his imagination while playing and drawing.

Christensen attended Santa Monica City College, UCLA, and BYU, where he received his Master of Arts. In the middle of his studies, he served a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in Uruguay and became a member of the Mormon Mods, a performing group that toured Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. Christensen found the local art compelling, and its influence can be seen in many of his works.

In 1972, Christensen moved to American Fork, Utah, and became an associate art director for the *New Era*, a teen magazine published by the LDS Church. He was also a freelance illustrator but continually worked on his own painting. Christensen created

fantasy images for his own amusement, but he only displayed what he thought other people would like. However, he soon discovered that others liked his imaginative, magical worlds as much as he did.

Christensen was a faculty member of BYU's art department from 1976 to 1997. He traveled with students in Mexico, Europe, and in Madrid, Spain. He returns to Europe frequently, and his art often reflects his travels.

Weaving dreams, hopes, fears, and humor into the fabric of everyday life, Christensen has created many enchanting works of art. "My paintings are meant to excite the imagination and invite the viewer to become a participant in the creative process," says Christensen. His artwork delights adults and children alike.

James Christensen draws his images from experience, travel, and nature, which he combines with his own active imagination. While he does not always strive to communicate a serious meaning or moral lesson, his paintings often reflect situations which he has personally experienced and with which the viewer can also easily relate.

In his painting *The Rhinoceros*, Christensen has reinterpreted a sixteenth-century drawing of an armored rhinoceros created by the German artist, Albrecht Durer. Abundant detail, scientific perspective, logical space, light, color, and implied texture are characteristic of Christensen's fantasy environments.

In the piece, the rhino is in a predicament: he is unable to go forward, but can't go back. The plastered room, painted to imitate the outdoors, offers the rhino no room to maneuver. The checkerboard floor is painted to give an illusion of depth in a room that has none, and the rhino is so cramped he cannot play with the tantalizingly close orange ball. The tick-bird remains loyal to his symbiotic friend because he also is trapped.

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## SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

**ARTIST:** James Christensen (1942- ) Orem

**TITLE:** *Fantasies of the Sea* 1985

**MEDIA:** Acrylic on board

**SIZE: 36" x 24"**

### **QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING (History, Aesthetics, Criticism)**

James Christensen uses some of the following interesting ideas and symbols, which can be found in many of his paintings.

First, the artist says that in his paintings there often is no division between water and air. In his world, a fish may come swimming through the door, sail under the teacher's desk, and dart around the students' heads. A man may use a leash to take his fish for a walk.

Secondly, the artist says the hunchback men in his paintings represent *Everyman*. We all have imperfections and problems we carry around with us in our lives. His are just more visible.

Finally, fish are another item commonly used in his paintings. Sometimes these fish represent a passage to a higher level of understanding or a search for knowledge. They can also symbolize magic.

All of these things seem perfectly reasonable in the fantasy world of James C. Christensen.

Have the students look at the painting *Fantasies of the Sea* for about five seconds. Have them turn around and look at the teacher. Ask them the following questions: What colors do you remember seeing? What was the main object you remember seeing? Have students turn and look at the painting again. Then ask where they think the artist wanted viewers' eyes to go. (Focal point) (woman and staff) What did the artist do to make you look there? (bright colors, lighter area near her head, areas around border are darkened to direct eyes toward focal point) What other objects do you see besides the woman in orange? Is the woman in orange a mermaid? If you were a member of this group, where would you be going? What would you do when you got there?

### **Art-Animals and the Imagination**

James Christensen is known for his creativity, but James says that creativity is not born out of nothing. Creativity and Imagination are about combining existing things or ideas together in ways that create a new thing or idea. For example, *Fantasies of the Sea* is a very imaginative fantasy piece and yet it shows almost all real subject matter. One thing that makes it creative is that some of the size relationships among objects are changed from reality. Another creative change is the combination of real objects placed together where they normally wouldn't be found. For example, humans under the sea, or armor that is made of shells. Although mermaids are not real, they have existed as part of our

lore for many, many years. Besides, women and fish both exist, and so Mr. Christensen used his creativity and knowledge of lore and combined a fishtail with the torso of a woman to create a mermaid.

**Objective:** Students will combine real animals to create new and unique creatures.

Photocopy pictures of real animals to use as "SCRAP." (Resources such as photos, sketches, etc. to use as reference materials when creating an illustration or artwork) Have the students draw (as realistically as possible) various animals parts and combine them to create a new and unique animal. Many such creatures exist in mythology and lore. For example, see pictures of a GRIFFIN--head of an eagle, body of a lion, tail of a snake; or a MANTICORE--head of a man, body of a lion, tail of a scorpion or dragon; or a SPHINX--head of a woman and body of a lion.

These are all fantastic mythological beings, but all their parts are from "non-creative" real animals or humans.

Now, have the students create their own fantastic animals.

### **Language Arts/Art**

**Objective:** The students will make connections between fantasy in art and literature.

Show the class the slides of *Fantasies of the Sea*, *Rhinoceros*, and *Puffed Up Prince*. Discuss briefly how the artists have chosen to depict a fantasy world or creature. Then read the poem "Jabberwocky" to the children. Discuss how the writer has created fantasy with language and compare that with the artworks. Let the students choose to illustrate one section. Or, read "Jabberwocky" to the class and then have students make up nonsense words that describe a creature and then draw that creature. Or, draw the creature first.

### **Visual Arts-Perceiving**

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of focal point by using color to create the focal point in a design.

Show the class the image of *Fantasies of the Sea* and discuss, using some or all of the QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING above. When you are sure the students understand what the focal point is, introduce the following activity.

Have the students fold a square piece of paper into four sections, and draw a geometric design in one section using a dark pencil. Then they will fold and trace the design onto the next section. Repeat until all sections are filled. Students then will choose one area to become the Focal Point. (Place where the artist wants the viewer's eye to go.) Using watercolor, crayons, or poster paint, the students will color the design using pure, bright

color only in the focal point area. In the remaining areas, the student will use colors that have been altered by adding a drop of black or a small amount of the complementary color to each color. Adding the complement dulls the colors a little, and the eye will be attracted to the Focal Point, which has the pure color. Complementary colors are, red/green, yellow/violet, blue/orange. Display the finished work and have the students take turns pointing out the focal points on some of them.

**Extension:** For older students, you may want to give a more complex original assignment or to follow up the above activity with a more complex variation that gives students an opportunity to explore the creation of focal points in more diverse ways or through more individualistic artworks.

### Art

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of Fantasy Art by making a fantasy drawing that includes symbols.

Show the class the slide of *Fantasies of the Sea* and *Rhinoceros*, and discuss, using some or all of the QUESTIONS FOR LOOKING, above. Have the students create a fantasy drawing in their own personal style. They will make up or decide on two or three items, animals, or people to use as symbols in their painting. On a separate piece of paper, they will draw the symbols and write down the meanings or definitions of each one. This paper will be displayed along with the finished drawing so the viewer will be able to understand the drawing.

### Art

**Objective:** The students will demonstrate an understanding of wax resist by making an undersea picture using crayon wax resist.

Show the class the slide of *Fantasies of the Sea* and discuss Christensen's use of color and of sea creatures. Then have the students draw an underwater scene with several fantasy fish with bold designs--stripes, dots, etc. They should also add a few fantasy plants. The students should use crayons to color fish and plants in bright colors. (Crayon must be put on heavily so it's very waxy)

Have the students mix up a large amount of blue-green (or desired color) watercolor and quickly cover the entire picture. The watercolor pulls away from areas painted with crayon areas if they have been painted solidly.

### Language Arts

**Objective:** The students will explore character development and plot by writing a story about one or more of the characters pictured in *Fantasies of the Sea* or some other artwork.

Show the class the slide of *Fantasies of the Sea* and ask the students to imagine they are one of the characters in the painting. Ask students the following questions: Which one would you be? What are the relationships each of the characters have with each other? Where are you going? Why? What will you do when you get there? Are there dangers on your journey? Then assign students to write a story telling of their adventures. Have the students share their stories.

**Variation:** Show slides of several other artworks from the packets that lend themselves to the activity, and allow students to choose which artwork they will respond to or if they want to write a story that involves more than one piece. (For example, Christensen's piece, *Rhinoceros*, and Gary Price's *Puffed Up Prince*.)

### **Science**

**Objective:** The students will increase their understanding of ocean life by discussing and researching environmental factors that affect sea life. They then will demonstrate their understanding by writing a short report.

Show the class the slide *Fantasies of the Sea*. Lead a discussion using the following questions: What part of the ocean do you think the picture is of? (bay, close to shore, lagoon, deep ocean) What would the environment be like if the ocean currents were very strong? How would the environment change if the ocean temperature increased by 20 degrees? Decreased by 10 degrees? Are the plants drawn realistically or are they fantasy plants? Would weather on the surface affect these people? How? Students should do some research on these questions or others that arise during the discussion. The topics can be student chosen, can be related to a specific area of science being studied, or can be chosen from a list that ensures that various related topics are all covered. Have the students make brief reports to the class about the information they discover.

If desired, the reports can be illustrated with drawings or paintings, and these can be displayed with appropriate explanations as a class bulletin board.

Extension: For older students or for use with gifted or particularly interested students, show the slide and discuss as above. Use the questions about water temperature to lead to a discussion of La Niña and El Niño weather patterns.