

## Review: Kiss Of The Art Gods by Dan Corbin

The Kiss Of The Art Gods is an expansive and honest account of Dan Corbin's life as a figurative sculptor. The story is largely set in the author's native California and goes back two generations, Corbin claiming that his bootlegger and blacksmith genes were an essential element in his hard won success as a sculptor.

Corbin's childhood, as the youngest of three boys, was full of freedom and adventure. It was helping out in his parents' shop, working with fire and metal, that sewed the creative seeds which would later flourish into a thirty year career.

His recollections of the 1955 flood – a year when California recorded one of its highest ever rainfalls – are laced with dramatic detail and personal insights. The devastation of the flood kept Corbin and his family from their ruined home for many months and when they returned, he felt his childhood was over, despite being only ten years old.

*My emotional well-being began to resemble the landscape of the post-flood years: barren, disharmonious, isolated, and uprooted.*

Turbulent years followed, the Corbin family having fallen into poverty, but it was during this time that Dan Corbin created his first sculpture as a school art assignment. His innate talent was obvious to everyone and as he charmingly puts it, *the Art Gods.....gave me the thumbs up*. According to Corbin, the Art Gods are the guardians of humanity, their job being to use art as superglue, bonding together culture and civilization.

*They embrace art and artists as enablers and agents of peaceful transformation.*

This is an important and prescient insight, particularly in our troubled world. Corbin expounds at length about the nature and role of the Art Gods, drawing on philosophy, mysticism, religion, science and evolution.

His relationship with his mother is a recurring theme in Corbin's memoir. A loving but demanding woman, she didn't spare the rod when it came to disciplining her three sons. Nevertheless, Corbin credits her with instilling the qualities that allowed him to succeed as an artist. Not least of these were critical observational skills based on objectivity, knowledge and instinct. Indeed, although he didn't know it at the time, the hardships and tedium of his chore-filled childhood were preparation for the many struggles that lay ahead.

Corbin was drafted into the US army in 1966 but declined an opportunity to train as an officer. He didn't want to give orders, preferring to do his own thing and allow others to do theirs. Instead of being sent to Vietnam – a prospect he dreaded – Corbin was sent to Germany. Among many other things, it instilled a curiosity about Europe and once discharged, he travelled through many European countries on a motorcycle, soaking up the food, the culture, the joy of being young and alive.

Once back in the US, Corbin went to college and fell in love for the first time. It was a transformative experience that helped him grow as a man and as a creative soul. When the relationship ended he moved away, discerning a recurring pattern in his life:

*I would move to a new place, work my tail off getting settled in, learn the ropes, and have a brief moment at the top before giving it all up, moving someplace new, and starting all over again.*

The new place on this occasion was Santa Barbara, where Corbin enrolled in another college and took his art classes more seriously, especially drawing. He came to understand how important it was for artists to become proficient at drawing, a skill that took him around eight years to fully master. According to Corbin, *drawing is an applied science with artistic intent, a fundamental prerequisite to art*. But it was during one of his early classes that Corbin had an epiphany:

*Even though I couldn't draw well, on that day I discovered my life's passion, the study of the human figure.*

His dream was to attend UCSB – a dream he realized in 1970. It was a good fit. When he wasn't in class, Corbin spent much of his time exploring and communing with the physical beauty of the area, claiming that it was pivotal to his cultural, artistic, and personal growth. On graduating he travelled to Spain where he painted happily, feeling he had earned this time and deserved to enjoy it.

*I had fulfilled my obligations to my family by helping on the ranch. I had served my country, worked my way through college, and now had the time, resources, and finally the studio necessary to become an artist.*

Corbin's dream was cut short when he contracted typhoid and spent months in hospital, gravely ill. He had to learn to walk again and faced a long hard road to recovery – physically and psychologically. The experience altered his outlook on life. He took nothing for granted but once again, his struggles hardened his resolve to succeed. It would take time though. When he returned to Santa Barbara a broken heart compounded his troubles and it was a while before the Art Gods spoke to him again.

It was a planned trip to Australia that stirred them – a trip Corbin never made. His flight stopped in Hawaii, a place that transfixed and inspired him so much, it became his home for the next four years.

*Colors in Hawaii seem to vibrate. The flora and fauna try to outdo each other. The insects are colorful, the wild parrots are vibrant, and the flowers are pulsating.*

He moved from island to island, discovering that each had its own character and unique way of stimulating his inner artist. Corbin continued to study – closing

gaps in his artistic knowledge and skills – and worked hard to become more proficient in painting and sculpture. He also meditated and did yoga, which he believes helped him fully recover from typhoid. When the time was right he relocated back to his native California, sensing that it would be the place where his career could finally flourish. And he was right. Corbin sold his first sculpture through commercial means (via a San Francisco art gallery) and over the next thirty years, would sell over 350 sculptures.

This wasn't a linear trajectory, however, and it took many more years for his signature figurative style to develop and mature. In the meantime he flirted with a more conventional lifestyle but found it antithetical to his creative calling so headed south to Santa Barbara again, where he spent two years living in his VW van. He describes this in terms of a mid-life crisis and while giving up everything in pursuit of artistic greatness is a romantic notion in the young, in the not-so-young it is less appealing. Corbin tired of the strain that being homeless imposed, and eventually gave up and went north again to work the fruit harvest.

It was a time of reflection and harsh reality; a time when he felt the Art Gods had abandoned him. He describes going to a smart San Francisco gallery to collect his sculpture or the money the dealer would have been paid if he sold it. The two men came to blows and a vicious fist fight ensued, after which Corbin had to lie low in order to avoid being arrested. It is at this point he describes the uneasy relationship between dealers and artists, and the unscrupulous ways the former sometimes employ to exploit the latter. I think it's fair to say that Corbin has little respect for some of the art dealers he has come across in his career.

Back in Chico, Corbin once again found himself without the kiss of the Art Gods and was beset by the conviction that he was running out of time. He decided to quit once and for all. The plan was to take more classes, earn a Master of Art degree and teach. But like so many of Corbin's plans, it sounded simpler than it was. The problem resided in the low esteem in which Corbin held many of the tenured professors. After all, Corbin had paid his artistic dues – been homeless and penniless, made sacrifices, given up everything in the pursuit of art – in a way the academics simply hadn't. For the most part Corbin found them talentless and anachronistic, with the notable exception of sculptor, David Best. When Best suggested that Corbin work with materials more durable than clay, it was advice that would change his life. Corbin isn't too proud to admit this wasn't the first time a professor had given him this advice, but this time he swallowed his pride and acted upon it.

He began working with bauxite – refined aluminum ore. It was a versatile, durable and malleable material that allowed Corbin to create his first freestanding life size sculpture, and many more followed. At last, Corbin had felt the kiss of the Art Gods:

*The new sculptures revealed an intriguing industrial look, alluding to the process of how they were constructed and leaving an imprint of the materials. The sculptures also conveyed life-like anatomical details, expressing a titillating feeling of sensuality. I embedded areas of color next to sheets of lead, creating a curious*

*juxtaposition. The art world was currently obsessed with sculptures made from non-traditional art materials, and during that moment I was in sync and standing high on the cutting edge of innovation.*

So, after a lifetime of trying to make a living as an artist, Dan Corbin realized his dream. He also fell in love with a woman with whom he has three children. Life was sweet, until a routine medical in 2012 showed a serious and very possibly life threatening condition. The postscript alludes to a long fight to regain his health, the details of which will be revealed in his next book.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should point out that I am the proud owner of two of Dan Corbin's bauxite figurative sculptures. They are extraordinary and fascinating, rather like the man himself.

Colette Dartford 2016