

McKiernan González Opening Convocation musings:

Buenas Tardes, Good afternoon everyone! McKiernan González, my last name attests to the immigrant histories of this nation; my dedication to art history my passion for the artistic expression of cultural, socio-political, religious qualities of our human condition as creators. I say cultural expression as the artistic expression may be individual, but as individuals, artists exist within a moment in time, impacted by the environment they explore, by their training, by their lived experience, by the ideas that they encounter. In the past few years I find more artists on a global stage, for example, pursuing issues of forced displacement, injustice within political systems, the impact of climactic change on their local environments, and our interconnectedness across the globe.

I am a traveler, and as I travel, I encounter not just diverse cultures, but also that interconnectedness. I encourage all students to begin the international traveling experience, not just to see new things, but to challenge your beliefs, your truths, your sense of security, and your interconnectedness with others, may they be just beyond our borders or on the other side of the planet. It will help you see complex systems at work, how, for example, seeding clouds in Texas, means that across the border drought has become more prevalent, and thus also has increased migration as livelihoods are affected. How do our actions as individuals, communities, and nation affect those beyond these borders? And as a result of that, affect us as well. As an art historian I also ask: how are those realities made manifest in created forms?

My interest in art history came early, but I initially didn't perceive it to be pragmatic – I started my college education with international relations as my major. I kept taking courses in art history along side this major and realized that I felt more passionate about art history, yet the coursework in my original major has consistently informed my profession as an art historian. My approach to artistic creation and cultural expression is seen through a lens of the socio-political, the cultural, and the global. It has also changed over time: I began looking at how artists dealt with extreme violence in the 1950s in Colombia, to women building monasteries in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Spain, to how race is depicted in miracle stories in 13<sup>th</sup> century and modern artistic exchange in the Global South. Allow yourselves to explore new things.

I have students in my classes, whose research projects in art history are deeply connected to their own major interests and I encourage this. One such student, a Biology major, chose to take on images from Medieval medical treatises. Her own disciplinary expertise brought greater nuance and understanding to her research in my class, and increased my own understanding of these treatises – and I have to tell you, as a professor, nothing makes me happier than a student who opens my eyes to something new in my own discipline. This research also informed how she looked at the trajectory of her own expression and later her career. Bring yourselves into the classroom.

As you explore new areas of learning, I hope that your Berea story will parallel mine somewhat. Expand your sense of what is possible, choose courses that pique your curiosity, not just those that fit your schedule or check off a box. Berea faculty offer such rich and varied approaches to learning! Take advantage of that. Challenge your ideas, beliefs, disciplines. Travel – physically, see that interconnectedness and deep humanity as you explore, and intellectually, take yourselves out of your comfort zones, fully embrace the opportunities that a liberal arts education at Berea College provides you.