



## Old order, new visions: Rochelle Sumner and Will Kerner bring isolation out in the open

BEGGING MY BONNET



*A prayer to myself.  
Grant me the kindness to breathe.*

You can find The Bonnet Maker's works at Second Street Gallery's "Teeny Tiny Trifecta 3" show; the gallery's online "BondBound 2020" exhibition; online in the Feminist Union of Charlottesville Creatives' "Inside" exhibition; and at [bonnetmaker.com](http://bonnetmaker.com). Image courtesy of the artist

### CM Gorey

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Ida Mitchell Puffenbarger wasn't an artist. If she had any inclination, she likely didn't have the time. With the bulk of her days spent cleaning, cooking, caring for her family, and attending church, she also didn't mix with people outside her religious community of Old German Baptist Brethren. She dressed plainly and, like the other female believers in Franklin, West Virginia, wore a bonnet as a symbol of the Biblical concept of headship, which states that women's purpose is to be subordinate to men as part of God's order of creation. She died in 1972.

Her life, faith, and the bonnet she wore every day came to serve as artistic inspiration to someone in her family who she never knew. Rochelle Sumner, Ida's great-granddaughter, discovered the old order dress and prayer coverings in a trunk—remnants of a different time, colored by a tenacious self-seclusion and heavy with the presence of a rigid belief system.

"I began thinking about the women in my family, and how we've covered ourselves for generations," says Sumner. Reflecting on the fact that Ida was the last woman of her family to wear a bonnet and dress plainly, she believes the metaphorical version—emotional distance and hiding from outsiders as a form of protection—still runs deeply through the psyche of her relatives. That bonnet and what it came to represent took on something greater in scope, and thus The Bonnet Maker was born.

It's hard to pin down the project by the specifications that classify most fine art, but it connects performance, brief narrative writing, and photography. The latter portions are visually directed by Will Kerner, photographer and a co-founder of Charlottesville's Live Arts and Light House Studio, whom Sumner met in October of 2017. Sumner says that the collaboration works because of Kerner's empathy for the character—and for her when she embodies it.

Donning a costume based upon her great-grandmother's dresses and bonnets from the 1940s and 1950s, modified with an elongated cape and apron, Sumner and Kerner create engaging results captured in photos and buttressed by lines of text.

The Bonnet Maker traverses empty natural settings and passes through mundane structures given new, ominous contexts; parking lots surrender in post-apocalyptic black and white sunshine, mirrored structures magnify a greater rift between past and present. Changes brought on by the pandemic have intensified the isolation of the character and infused the visuals. Much can be said of gender issues, systems of oppression, and contemporary isolation, both self-imposed and those brought about by society.

In nearly every context, The Bonnet Maker character appears pained, struggling with an inner conflict simmering right at the surface. As reining in that conflict creates tension, the project's interpretation of a belief system produces another kind of fragile balance.

Both artists maintain the importance of respecting the OGBB community as they explore its ideals artistically. Kerner, like Sumner, is also of a German protestant denomination (the relatively less-strict Moravians), and says the idea of "an older religious sect being placed into the context of today's world" is part of what appealed to him about becoming involved in the project.

The pair started creating at the end of 2017 when Sumner, in her OGBB costume, and Kerner visited a live nativity scene at Church of the Brethren in Rockingham County, which was also the first time she wore the outfit in public.

"I was very nervous because I didn't know how people would react to seeing an old order woman at their church," she recalls.

Other times, they've taken to shooting in even more unscripted situations. On Instagram (@thebonnetmaker), the hooded figure confronts nacho food trucks, beauty queens, and police officers. The results are more akin to a documentary capturing the cultural and temporal dissonance, with Sumner's character drawing smiles and stares from the general public with occasionally comic results.

Kerner says that public shoots, like one at the Rockingham County Fair, can feel edgy because his presence as photographer gives her appearance the buzz of a theatrical event. For Sumner's part, she tends to stay in character during interactions, but says she'll drop it if they mention old order heritage in their family.

Interactions aren't always so breezy. For a performance at Ghost in Reverse at Woolen Mills, Sumner set up a Bonnet Maker Shop, where anyone could try on bonnets and leave written comments about the experience.

"There were angry responses and an aversion by most women who read the large handwritten scroll hanging on the wall," Sumner says. It recounted St. Paul's 1,900-year-old instruction about head covering and the headship concept infuriated many women visitors.

"One woman thought I was trying to convert women to the old order, and did not realize it was a performance. It's good to know I can be that convincing!" Sumner says.

She and Kerner plan to do more performances locally, and to continue creating chapters to the character