



Photography by Michael Vendiola

*Supernatural* fan Rachel Howard displays a crocheted blanket featuring Collins's face. See more of her fan art at [crocheter-of-faces.tumblr.com](http://crocheter-of-faces.tumblr.com).

# SQUISHY HUGS

Why is Misha Collins, AB'97, the object of so much affection?

By Carrie Golus, AB'91, AM'93

**Anonymous asked:**

how do you ask jensen and misha to give you one of those really tight hugs, do i just ask them for a 'squishy' hug, would they get what im talking about? lol (im so nervous)

**Answer:**

Hi there

Yep, they would understand what you mean if you asked them for that. Have fun!

—[spncontips.tumblr.com](http://spncontips.tumblr.com)

**M**isha Collins, AB'97, calls himself "a C-list celebrity." He's a C-list celebrity whose photo ops at fan conventions can include a hug, if desired, but that's it: "PLEASE DO NOT KISS THE GUESTS," the guidelines state. Who inspires fans to create art in any number of media, including sculpture, video, and melted crayon. Who, at this writing, has 2.6 million Twitter followers known as "minions"—not to be confused with the especially ardent fans who call themselves "Mishawives." (Legally Collins has just one wife, writer Victoria Vantoch, AB'97. They have been together since high school and have two young children.)

For the uninitiated, Collins plays the angel Castiel—pronounced with three syllables, Cass-

tee-ELL, or Cass for short—on the television series *Supernatural*. A bit like Collins, *Supernatural* is the most successful show you might not have heard of: last season it averaged 1.8 million viewers, compared with 22 million for *NFL Sunday Night Football* and 18.9 million for zombie drama *The Walking Dead*.

Nonetheless, *Supernatural* is its 12th season on the CW network, making it one of the longest-running TV shows of all time. At press time it had just been renewed for a 13th season.

*Supernatural* centers on two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who lead a lonely, peripatetic existence, hunting demons, ghosts, and other supernatural phenomena. The show functions like a love letter to vintage cars, cheap motel rooms, diners, guns, beer, whiskey,



**Crocheted Castiel dolls are an international phenomenon. The doll on the left was made by Aleksandra Chiel in Poland, the doll on the right by Heather Wykoff of Crafty Geek Girls in Los Angeles. Both are for sale on craft site Etsy.**

classic rock, and small-town America, though it's actually shot in Canada.

There's a lot of stabbing with silver knives, shooting with salt bullets, spray painting of satanic-looking symbols, and Latin spells. A 2016 PR Newswire poll found that Republicans ranked it their No. 1 show; for Democrats it was No. 3, behind *Game of Thrones* and *The Haves and Have Nots*.

Collins first appeared in 2008, at the beginning of season 4, playing the angel who rescues Dean from hell. His first line, delivered in the monotone that would become Castiel's signature: "I'm the one who gripped you tight and raised you from perdition." This unlikely phrase is now available on T-shirts.

Castiel was intended to have a three-show story arc. "As a guest star, your prospects of having a long run are very slim," says Collins. "I was kind of just waiting to be killed." *Supernatural* fans tend to hate anyone who takes screen time away from Sam and Dean—both complex, sympathetic characters played by former models.

But the fans adored Castiel. He was innocent, socially awkward, and nice to look at, despite his frumpy trench coat.

In an essay for the book *Fan Phenomena: Supernatural* (Intellect Ltd, 2014), Collins recalls the screening party for the first Castiel episode. When his character appeared, writer-producer Sera Gamble whispered to him, "Your life is about to change."

Collins writes: "I thought, 'That is a truly arrogant thing for a producer of a CW television show to say. I've been on plenty of television shows. My life is going to stay exactly the same.' ... Well Sera, I think I owe you an apology for that thought."

I am not now, nor have I ever been, a member of any fandom," says Collins, born Dmitri Krushnic in Boston in 1974. (Collins is an old family name; he's always been called Misha.) His mother was "a hippie," so the family didn't have a television. "I never really developed those neural networks that process pop culture very well."

## If his tweets are to be believed, his relationship with Queen Elizabeth II is particularly tumultuous.

He did love the radio though—National Public Radio in particular. "I guess I was pretty fannish," he admits. In the early 1990s he had an internship at NPR, working alongside Susan Stamberg, Nina Totenberg, Neal Conan, Bob Edwards. "I got a rush from it," he says, "but I didn't make paintings of them at night."

At UChicago, Collins majored in sociology, participated in Scav, and performed in one play, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, "in a classroom with plenty of empty seats." He had considered going into politics. But after an internship in the Clinton White House (his time there did not coincide with a more famous intern), he decided it was not right for him.

So he decided to try acting. "I went to Hollywood with the intention of getting famous, with no intention of staying an actor, so I could use that celebrity to have some sort of positive impact on the world," he says. "This sounds like the ravings of an arrogant crazy person."

Collins played guest roles on TV shows such as *24*, *ER*, and *Nip/Tuck* but was fairly unknown before *Supernatural*. During his first season on the show, he would lurk on the website Television Without Pity, a proto-social networking site for TV fans. Collins—who just wanted to know if fans liked him so he could estimate how long his job would last—found the discussions "baffling," he says. "There was a fervor and a passion to this discourse that really shocked me."

He was asked to do interviews, both with journalists and onstage at *Supernatural* fan conventions. At first he tried to cultivate a certain public persona, "the coolest, most composed, sexiest version of myself," modeled after Marilyn Monroe and other stars of classic Hollywood.

But his early interviews went badly. So Collins took a radically different, more playful approach: interviews could be "an opportunity to riff and improvise and to have fun." A star text was born.

In the 2013 essay "#Bowdown to Your New God: Misha Collins and Decentered Authorship in the Digital Age," Louisa Stein, a film scholar at Middlebury College, claims that Collins uses social media with "dadaist creativity" to create "a distinct star text."

As Collins tells the story, in 2009 the network asked him to answer fan questions on its Twitter account. He thought, "They're going to be looking over my shoulder and I'm not going to be able to swear," so he set up his own account instead.

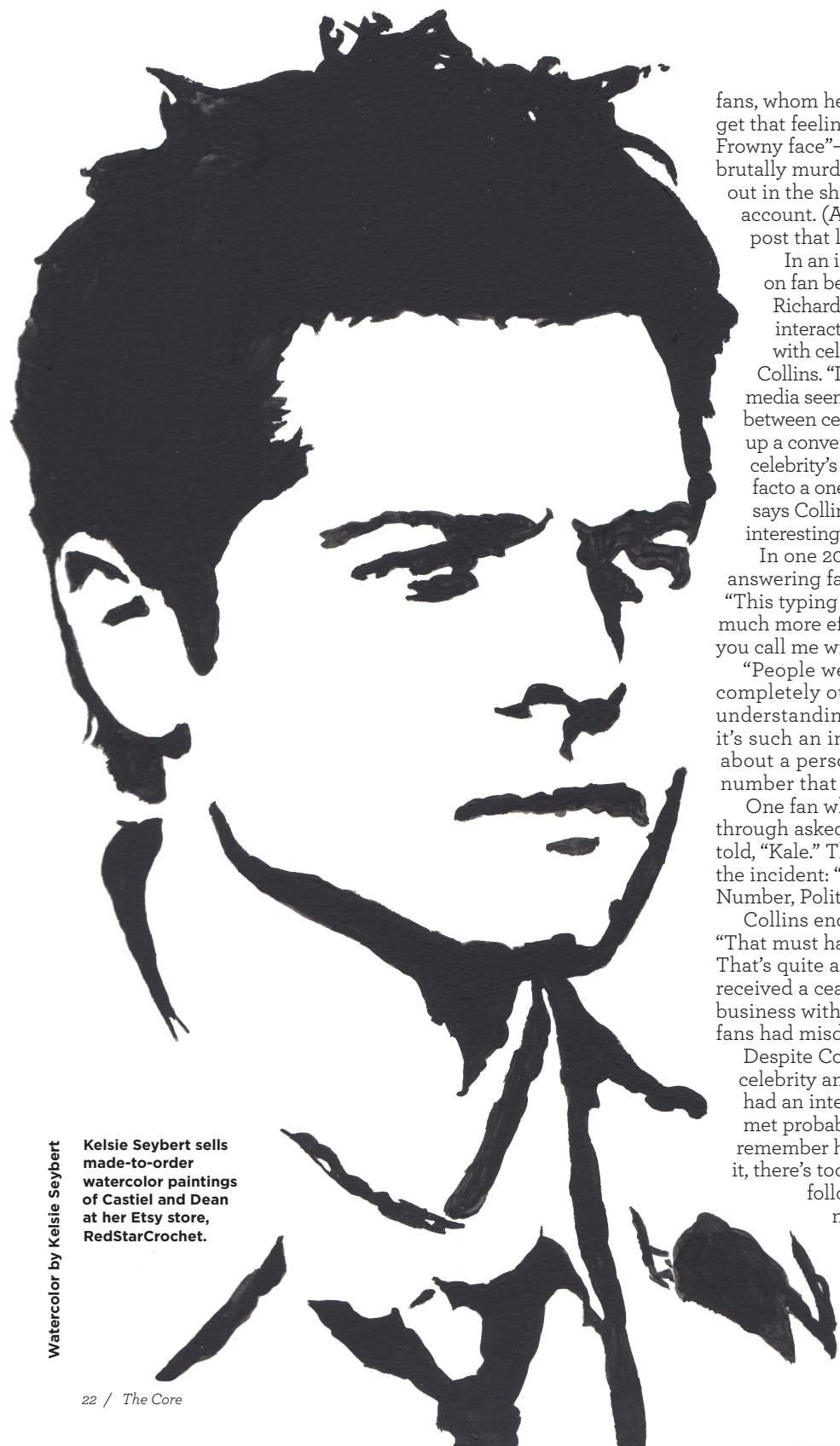
Rather than following the usual celebrity Twitter formula—sharing mundane details of ordinary life—he "created this slightly surreal persona," he says. "I was the self-important celebrity who was actually in incredibly important situations at all times." He tweeted about his (fictional) friendships with various world leaders, who requested his advice or sexual favors. If his tweets are to be believed, his relationship with Queen Elizabeth II is particularly tumultuous. Last June he characterized Brexit as their "conscious uncoupling." The tweet included a Tom of Finland-style erotic painting of the pair.

Stein sees something subversive in Collins's grandiose tweets, given that his role on *Supernatural* is "somewhere between marginal and nonexistent." He uses social media, she claims, to play with his "marginal status as renegade character actor."

"Marginal" is an overstatement, but Stein is onto something: compared to how frequently he appears on the show, Collins plays a disproportionately important role in *Supernatural* fandom. Sam and Dean are the stars. Castiel gets a bit of screen time in roughly one episode in three.

Collins's favorite *Supernatural* episode is "The French Mistake," one of the so-called meta episodes, of which there are many. This particular example is "the most violent shattering of a fourth wall I think in television history," he says. In the 2011 episode—the title is a reference to the Mel Brooks movie *Blazing Saddles*—Sam and Dean find themselves in an alternative universe where *Supernatural* is a television show. (Dean: "Why? Why would anybody want to watch our lives?" Sam: "Well, I mean, according to that interviewer, not very many people do.")

The episode spoofs both Collins's social media presence and his attempts to fit in with the show's stars. He plays a shallow, irritating version of himself, tweeting constantly at his



Watercolor by Kelsie Seybert

Kelsie Seybert sells made-to-order watercolor paintings of Castiel and Dean at her Etsy store, RedStarCrochet.

fans, whom he calls “mishamigos”—“Ever get that feeling ... someone’s in the backseat? Frowny face”—before he is abducted and brutally murdered. Some of the tweets he taps out in the show appeared on his real Twitter account. (Apparently he didn’t have time to post that last one.)

In an influential 1956 *Psychiatry* article on fan behavior, Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl used the term “parasocial interaction” to describe fans’ relationships with celebrities. “I like that term,” says Collins. “It is kind of contrived.” Social media seems to collapse the distance between celebrity and fan; you can strike up a conversation as if you’re friends. But a celebrity’s social media account remains “de facto a one-way stream of communication,” says Collins. “That hazy line is to me an interesting thing to play with.”

In one 2013 stunt, while Collins was answering fan questions on Twitter, he wrote, “This typing is too tedious. I feel i could be much more efficient on the phone. Why don’t you call me with questions. (323) 790-4967.”

“People went bonkers, because it was so completely out of the norm,” he says. “Our understanding of what a phone number is—it’s such an intensely intimate thing to own about a person.” In fact it was a Google voice number that he shut down soon afterward.

One fan who was lucky enough to get through asked him the meaning of life and was told, “Kale.” The *Daily Dot*’s headline about the incident: “*Supernatural* Star Posts Phone Number, Politely Trolls Fans.”

Collins ended up with 175,000 voice mails: “That must have cost Google something. That’s quite a bit of data,” he says. He also received a cease-and-desist letter from a small business with a similar phone number. Enough fans had misdialed to jam its phone lines.

Despite Collins’s tricks, the canyon between celebrity and fan remains unbridged. “I just had an interaction with a fan whom I’ve met probably 10 times,” he says. “I couldn’t remember her name. My brain can’t handle it, there’s too many.” (Counting just Twitter

followers, that would be 2.6 million names; for comparison, the English language has 170,000 words in current use.) “You would expect, having met somebody 10 times, of course they’re going to know my name by now. So it puts a strain on that dynamic.”

Collins is on Facebook too. He uses it to live-stream interviews and announcements. Once he streamed footage of an actual mountain stream. He also posts videos to YouTube, including a spoof cooking show starring his son, *Cooking Fast and Fresh with West*. (See recipe on page 32.)

But for the bulk of *Supernatural* fans, the preferred social media platform is Tumblr. It’s a treasure trove of fan art, fiction, and community.

Some fan artists are content to post photos of their creations on Tumblr. Others bring their work to *Supernatural* conventions. Depending on the medium, they can have it signed by the celebrity or pay to have a photo taken with the object and the celebrity—and then post that image on Tumblr.

Photo documentation can be an expensive hobby. Photos with Collins at the 2017 Chicago convention cost \$90; a “sandwich photo” with the show’s stars, Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, is \$329. “If you want a hug, go for a ‘hug shot,’” the information page states. “Please do not ask for a hug before or after the photo is taken as it takes up someone else’s photo op time.” Admission to the convention costs extra—up to \$1,600 for the gold weekend package with front-row seats.

Some fans want to give their artwork to the celebrity depicted. “I don’t know what to do with all of the paintings of my face,” says Collins. “I think it would make people really uncomfortable to have them all up on the wall.” For the moment he’s storing them, with the idea of curating an exhibition someday.

He lets his children play with the dolls he receives. “They call them Minidad,” he says. “They’re slowly starting to understand that I work on a TV show, although they don’t quite understand what a TV show is.” (Son West, 6, and daughter Maison, 4, are allowed to watch cartoons and nature documentaries when they’re sick. They have never seen *Supernatural*.)

Certain fan creations require “a year of work to produce. They are incredibly time-consuming, incredibly hard to make,” Collins says. “People really pour their hearts and souls into these works.” The fans’ passion and creativity is partly



A fan at the 2016 Chicago convention dressed as Castiel and covered in handmade bees, a reference to his bee obsession in season 7.

why he decided to be so goofy online. Rather than supplying celebrity bromides, Collins wanted to reciprocate in kind: “to engage and be playful with the fandom,” he says. “I saw that there was all of this creative energy being expended on acts of fan devotion.”

Devotion is exactly what it is, says UChicago historian Rachel Fulton Brown, whose research encompasses both illustrated medieval prayer books (“fan fiction” for the Virgin Mary, she says) and J. R. R. Tolkien.

“They’re clearly responding to his beauty,” Fulton Brown says of the artists who create likenesses of Castiel/Collins. “When you’re in the presence of beauty, the desire to draw it is almost overwhelming. It’s an act of seeing, of giving it back.” But given the religious context of the show, it’s not just about physical beauty: “You sense he also has contact with spiritual beauty.”

## Photo ops cost

According to a 2016 Hollywood Reporter article, some stars make more money from convention appearances than from their movies or TV shows. Here’s the going rate for eight fan favorites.

**Fan Expo Canada 2016**  
Mark Hamill  
(*Star Wars*)  
\$200/photo

**Comic-Con New York 2017**  
Matt Smith  
(*Doctor Who*)  
\$105/photo

**50 Year Mission Tour Chicago 2016**  
William Shatner  
(*Star Trek*)  
\$100/photo

**Fan Expo Dallas 2016**  
Stan Lee  
(*Spider-Man* creator)  
\$100/autograph

**Supernatural Con Chicago 2017**  
Misha Collins  
(*Supernatural*)  
\$90/photo

**Megacon Orlando 2017**  
Adam West  
(*Batman*)  
\$65/photo

**Wizard World Portland 2017**  
Erik Estrada  
(*CHiPs*)  
\$45/photo

**Comicpalooza 2017**  
Lou Ferrigno  
(*The Incredible Hulk*)  
\$40/photo

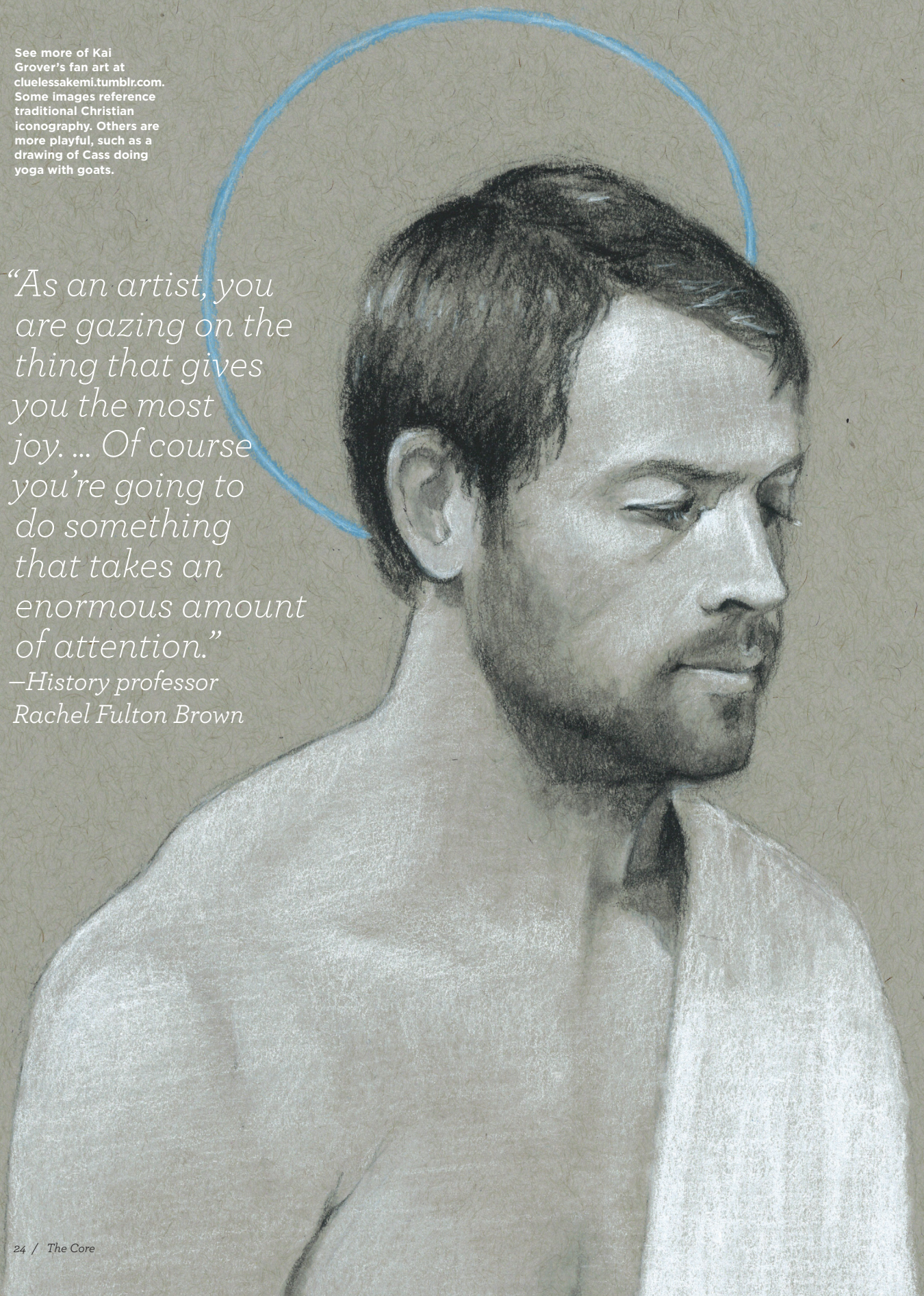
Photography by Joy Olivia Miller

See more of Kai Grover's fan art at [cluelessakemi.tumblr.com](http://cluelessakemi.tumblr.com). Some images reference traditional Christian iconography. Others are more playful, such as a drawing of Cass doing yoga with goats.

“As an artist, you are gazing on the thing that gives you the most joy. ... Of course you're going to do something that takes an enormous amount of attention.”

—History professor Rachel Fulton Brown

Charcoal and pastel drawing by Kai Grover



The choice of time-consuming media—crochet, needlepoint, Perler beads—is significant. (“The neck is pretty boring,” says Rachel Howard, who crocheted the blanket on page 18. “Then you get to the face. The best part is the eyes—you can really see it coming to life.”) “As an artist, you are gazing on the thing that gives you the most joy,” Fulton Brown says. “Of course they’re going to do something that takes an immense amount of attention. That’s the only way you can actually be in the presence of the beloved.”

As well as visual artwork, fans have created an untold amount of *Supernatural* fan fiction. A lot of it is “slash,” sexually explicit stories, typically written by women about two male characters. (The term derives from Kirk/Spock stories that first appeared in the 1970s.) Many flavors of *Supernatural* slash exist, pairing various characters at various degrees of transgressiveness. Castiel is usually “shipped”—put in a relationship—with Dean, whom he rescued from hell. It’s called Destiel.

Collins first came across Destiel accidentally in the early days of researching the fandom. He remembers thinking, “Oh wow, this is cool, the fans have written something”—until he got to the part where Cass performs a certain carnal act upon Dean. Collins was surprised, and a little shocked. He has avoided slash ever since.

Collins told that anecdote during his onstage appearance last fall at Chicago’s *Supernatural* convention, held in suburban Rosemont: “I know there’s a lot of stuff going on on Tumblr that I’m not supposed to see.” That got a laugh out of the audience—about 1,700 fans, almost all women.

Chewing gum and wearing a gray blazer, Collins gamely answered questions about his children, his favorite travel destinations (India and Tibet), and how Castiel managed to get a job at the Gas-n-Sip with no ID or last name.

There happened to be a *Star Trek* convention in Rosemont the same weekend. So earlier in the day, Collins had put on a red shirt and Spock ears and lined up to ask a question of William Shatner, a good friend, during his onstage appearance.

Of course Collins streamed the whole thing on Facebook. Someone who calls him “Mr. Collins” bumps him to the front of the queue. His question: What was the origin of the phrase “May the Force be with you”?

But Shatner didn’t recognize him, Collins told the fans back at the *Supernatural* convention: “I was just another asshole fan.”

Soon after Collins began tweeting, he realized that “maybe there was something more that could be mined” from his social media presence, “that isn’t just in the realm of surreal play.” When an earthquake hit Haiti in 2010, he asked his fans to donate to UNICEF. Within hours they raised \$30,000.

In 2011 he organized the Greatest International Scavenger Hunt the World Has Ever Seen (GISHWHES), a weeklong event modeled after UChicago’s Scav. The money raised from registration fees helps support his charity, Random Acts, “aiming to conquer the world, one random act of kindness at a time.” Random Acts supports programs such as a high school in Nicaragua and a children’s center in Haiti, as well as the Annual Melee of Kindness (AMOK), a global day of kindness—meaning whatever participants want it to mean.

GISHWHES now has more than 20,000 participants from 100 countries and has earned several Guinness world records, including the longest safety pin chain and the largest online photo album of hugs.

“The goal of the whole game,” according to a 2015 article in *Vanity Fair*, “lies somewhere between ‘do good’ and ‘be funny.’”

Occasionally “be funny” wins out over “do good.” During the 2013 hunt, “NASA did post an official tweet asking us to stop bothering the astronauts on the International Space Station,” Collins told Larry King. “I don’t know why they made such a big deal out of it. I mean, what are they doing up there that’s so important?”

The 15-member winning team gets an all-expenses-paid trip somewhere—Costa Rica, Croatia, Scotland—with

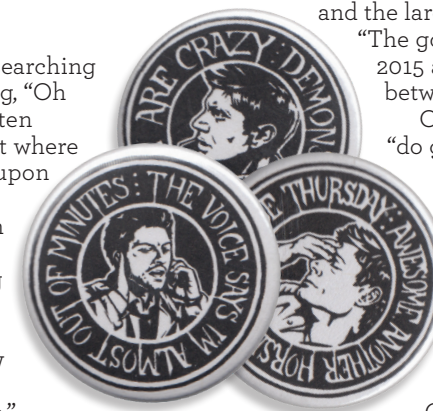
Collins hosting. The 2016 winners, Team RaisedFromPerdition, will travel to Iceland for “dog sledding on a glacier, partying inside a volcano, and thermal hot springs water fights.”

Some past GISHWHES winners have been scavenger hunt aficionados, “and not really known much or anything about me, which has been awesome,” Collins says. “Some have been really quite fannish.”

What’s it like to go on these trips with fans—spending entire days parasocializing, unmediated by technology? “I need a break after a few hours of that kind of intense attention,” Collins says.

“I imagine that’s what it’s like to be a politician on the campaign trail, where all eyes are on you and you have to be on. I don’t personally have the capacity to do that for long stretches at a time.” When it gets to be too much, “I often sneak off on my own, go to my room, read.

“I think I’m kind of an introvert,” he says. “So it’s a strange position for me to be in.” ❁



Hand-drawn buttons by Ninni and Perkie (UK); Photography by Michael Vendiola