

CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN ART IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Overcoming the Legacy

For over 500 years the art and material culture of Native people has been both a source of fascination and misunderstanding for non-Natives. Since Europeans first made sustained contact with the indigenous people of the Americas, Native artistic culture has been viewed through a distorted lens of expectation and, oftentimes, ignorance. While Native people have been the focus of anthropological study for over 100 years, popular perception of Native people and their material culture is, regrettably, still mired in the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, collecting of Native American art, by both museums and private collectors, still focuses on this era.

The marketing of Native American art—or rather, the marketing of the imagined Native American—in the twentieth century both created and sustained the Northern Plains stereotype. From childhood, we are inundated with easily absorbed ideas about “authentic” Indianness: Indians wear feathers; Indians are spiritual; Indians are exotic; Indians are savages; real Indians don’t exist today; you, too, can be an Indian. While the marketing of the Native American image continues to be a successful commercial strategy, the ramifications to the perception of contemporary Native people and their art are far-reaching. Though Native people can be proud of their impressive legacy of art and material culture, the two-dimensional expectations created by the market-



Fig. 1 Rick Bartow, “Coyote Going,” 1999. Mixed media on handmade paper, 162.5 x 129.5 cm.

place keep Native art locked in the past and hinder the success of contemporary artists.

Native American artists have always been influenced by the popular culture of their era, whether it was the eighteenth, nineteenth, or twentieth century, integrating new materials, art forms, and ideas into their artistic production. While the Native American painting style, known as “traditional” in the twentieth century, dominated both the Native art market and popular perceptions of Indian art, by the 1960s and 1970s contemporary Native American art in non-traditional materials began to flourish. The work of Fritz Scholder, a Luiseño instructor at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and one of his most successful students, the Caddo/Kiowa painter T. C. Cannon, overtly incorporated stylistic influences from the then contemporary art scene. Particularly because this radical and brave move came through a respected and visible educational institution, it thrust open the floodgates for Native artists to freely explore many traditions, art styles, movements, and materials.

Like the artists of every time and culture, contemporary Native artists

have the ability to illuminate contemporary issues and problems with clarity and intensity. Cannon, who served in Vietnam, created many beautiful, colorful paintings, but his themes often drew on less comfortable subjects, such as his experiences as a contemporary Plains warrior. With the work of Scholder and Cannon acting as a foundation for non-traditional artists, giving them permission to explore non-traditional materials with personal and political subjects, Native art in the late twentieth century experienced a florescence.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s contemporary Native American group exhibitions proliferated across the United States in art, anthropological, and historical museums, as well as in both for-profit and not-for-profit galleries. For many institutions, exhibitions developed for the 1992 Quincentenary¹ of Columbus’s first contact with the “New” World was their first, and often last, foray into contemporary Indian art. As many artists feared, most were only token exhibitions.

The current work of Native American artists, as I seek to demonstrate, is rich and diverse, encompassing everything from sculpture, painting, and printmaking to photography, performance, installation, and digital art. On a purely visual basis it not possible to categorize them all as part of the same movement; the unifying factor lies within the choice each artist has made to embrace their cultural identity as Native Americans. It is a decision riddled with both risk and opportunities. By positioning themselves as Native they put themselves at economic risk and threaten their broader recognition as artists. The expectation that Native American art must look “Indian” requires the inclusion of Native American markers or icons, such as feathers,

¹ The 500th anniversary of the “discovery” of the “New World” by Christopher Columbus was recognized (and celebrated) with numerous historical and cultural events throughout the Americas, Spain, and Italy.

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Fig. 2 Zig Jackson, "Indian Photographing Tourist Photographing Indian, #1," 1992 (Taos, NM). Gelatin silver print, 40.5 x 51 cm.

horses, and tipis. In the absence of these signifiers, the art risks rejection by collectors of Native American art. Conversely, if the artist does use them, the art might be rejected by the larger non-Indian art community for being formulaic and too "ethnic." According to artist and writer Jimmie Durham (1993: 107), "the implication is that the work of an Indian artist is more restricted, narrow, and perhaps even less serious, while that of an artist is more universal, more sophisticated, and conceivably of lasting importance." Either approach serves only to further marginalize the art, denying the possibility that as contemporary people, the artists are influenced by many cultures and sources.

Many artists delve into sometimes painful subjects, which defy expecta-

tions of Native American art. Yurok artist Rick Bartow, for example, has created many self-portraits which explore his inner demons through dark, transformational imagery (Fig. 1). He served in Vietnam, battled alcoholism, and suffered untimely deaths and tragedy in his close family, subjects which find poignant expression in his work.

Native artists have a special affinity for revealing not only the harsh realities of their personal lives, but also their perception by non-Natives. Hidatsa photographer Zig Jackson, for instance, created a series of unflattering photographs of tourists at powwows titled, appropriately, "Indian Photographing Tourist Photographing



Fig. 3 Bob Haozous, "The Discoverer," 1991. Steel, 520 x 180 x 90 cm.

Indian" in 1991 (Fig. 2). When addressing the personal/political subject of Indian-White relations, these artists get right to the core of the issue.

Art created in connection with the Quincentenary is especially powerful, such as a sign (*REPOhistory Sign Project*, 1992) created by Mohawk artist Alan Michelson, reflecting on the trade relationships between early settlers and Native people. The top four lines of the sign reveal the *overt* trades that were made: "Our blankets for your beaver, our kettles for your otter, our beads for your mink, our guns for your fox." The *covert* trade, the flip side of this coin as it were, is revealed by the bottom four lines: "Our whiskey for your sanity, our God for your spirit,



Fig. 4 (left to right) Lisa Telford, "Blue Clams," 2004. Red cedar bark, yellow cedar bark, blue dye, 18 x 18 cm diameter. "Woman's Work Basket," 2004. Red cedar bark, yellow cedar bark, blue dye, 19.5 x 15.5 cm diameter.



Fig. 5 Terrol Dew Johnson, "Bronze Gourd," 5/20, 2004. Bronze, beargrass, 39 x 23.5 cm.

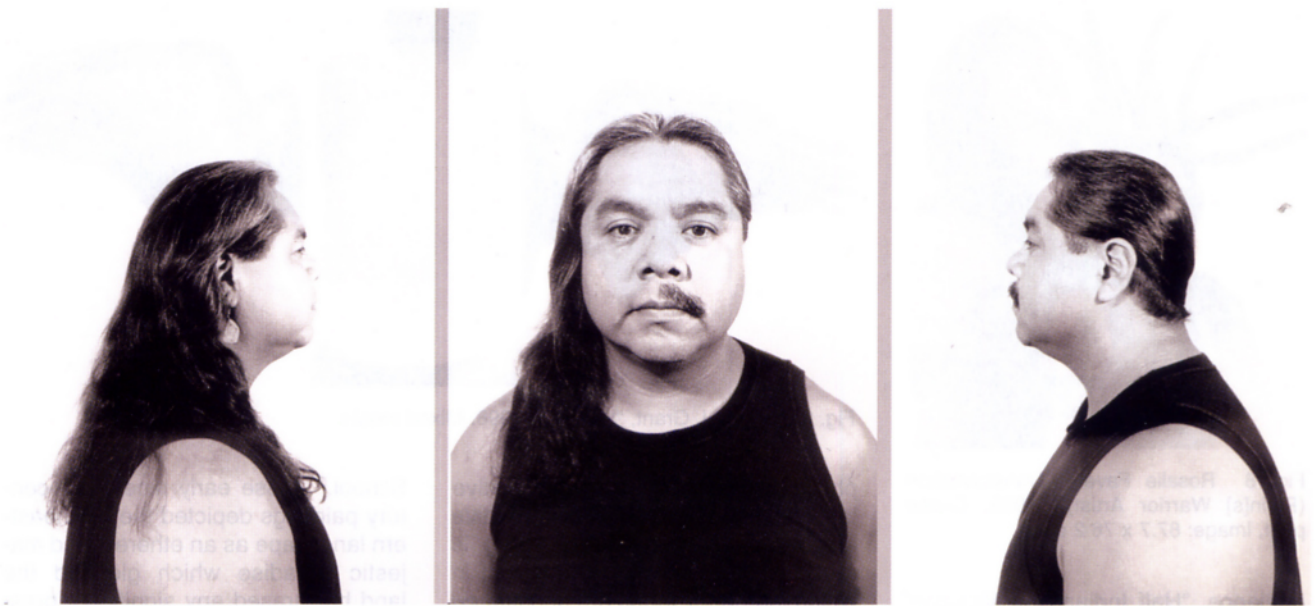


Fig. 6 James Luna, "Half Indian/Half Mexican," 1991. Photograph.

our promises for your colonization, our profit for your exploitation." Apache/Navajo artist Bob Haozous created a politically-charged wrought iron sculpture as a monument during this period, titled "The Discoverer" (Fig. 3). Below the Spanish conquistador, the base is covered with cut-out hands and figures missing arms and legs, an homage to the thousands of Native people, maimed, killed, and conquered for the colonists' success. The graffiti the piece suffered during its installation on the Albuquerque campus of the University of New Mexico is evidence of the uncomfortable impact of his work for some in the local community.

Many artists are perpetuating and mastering traditional art forms such as basketry with incredible skill and lyricism. Some, such as Haida basketweaver Lisa Telford, are experimenting within their traditions. "Woman's Work Basket" (Fig. 4) was made in a traditional Haida style, with the blue color used as a tertiary element in the design. For a contemporary Native American basket exhibition she felt encouraged by the opportunity to try something new.² Using the color blue as the main element in "Blue Clams" was an exciting experiment for Telford, which pushed the boundaries of the art form. Terrol Dew Johnson, a Tohono-O'odham basketweaver, has

been pushing the boundaries of his cultural traditions for years. "Bronze Gourd" (Fig. 5), for example, is part of a series in which he started weaving onto dried gourds. At this point in the development of the series, he has started using bronze casts instead of the gourds themselves, creating elegant shapes and unexpected forms.

Other emerging artists, such as Chitimacha and Choctaw artist Sarah Sense, are using traditional forms with new materials. In her recent work, such as the piece titled "Native Tan," Sense uses photograph prints of various images to weave in traditional Chitimacha basketry styles (Fig. 7). She

uses photographs of her reservation community, as well as images of her family. Sense is currently working on a series which includes photographs of herself dressed-up in stereotypical Indian garb, role-playing the Indian maiden, etc. Gail Tremblay (Mi'kmaq) and Bentley Spang (Cheyenne) have also used photographic elements such as film, negatives, and prints as raw materials for producing traditional forms such as basketry and clothing.

The reality for Native people is that we don't live in a genetic or cultural vacuum. The subject of our identity has been a rich source for exploration and revelation for both the artists and the



Fig. 7 Sarah Sense, "Native Tan," 2004. Woven digital prints, 20 x 20 cm.

² "Beyond: Contemporary Native American Basketry," co-curated by Terrol Dew Johnson and Kathleen Ash-Milby, American Indian Community House Gallery, New York, NY, 2004.



Fig. 8 Rosalie Favell, "Transformation (Plain[s] Warrior Artist)," 1999. Giclée print, image: 87.7 x 76.2 cm.

audience. "Half Indian/Half Mexican" by Luiseño artist James Luna (Fig. 6) plays with our perception and preconceived markers of cultural identity, simply by changing minor elements in his appearance, such as the style of his hair. In 1999 Cree Métis artist Rosalie Favell created a series of self-portraits titled "Plain(s) Warrior Artist" which explore aspects of her mixed identity. In a digital print from the series "Transformation" we can discern images of the artist, a historic figure wearing a feather headdress, and the popular television character "Zena, the Warrior Princess" in a battle cry (Fig. 8).

Although William Grant grew up in Brooklyn, his identity as Chippewa is integral to his sense of self, despite his



Fig. 9 William J. Grant, "Wing, 3," 1998. Mixed media.

physical dislocation from his Native land and family. His transformative and transcultural sense of being is reflected in a powerful self-portrait in which feathered wings are substituted for his arms (Fig. 9). The wings can be interpreted alternately as belonging to an eagle or to an angel. In both cases, Grant explores the divinity in humankind, expressed in the form of a Euro-Christian angel found in the statues of cathedrals, or through his experiences participating in Sun Dances wherein the participants, in a meditative state, seek to transform metaphysically into eagles.

The concept of land and the environment is also a recurrent theme in contemporary Native art (Fig. 10). Grant's goal in his depictions of landscape is to refute the romantic renditions fused into the American art canon by the painters of the Hudson River

School.³ These early nineteenth-century paintings depicted the northeastern landscape as an ethereal and majestic paradise which glorified the land but erased any significant presence of Native Americans.⁴ A piece with a related message is "Mespat," an installation by Alan Michelson consisting of a screen constructed with turkey feathers and a projection of a video he took at both historic and ordinary places in New York State—places once teaming with Native inhabitants, but now absent Native presence except in name (Fig. 11). Michelson's work typifies the creative conceptual vision of many of the artists in the contemporary community. His work is influenced by multinational art, including German landscape painting; some subjects are overtly Native, while others address broader issues such as Manifest Destiny.

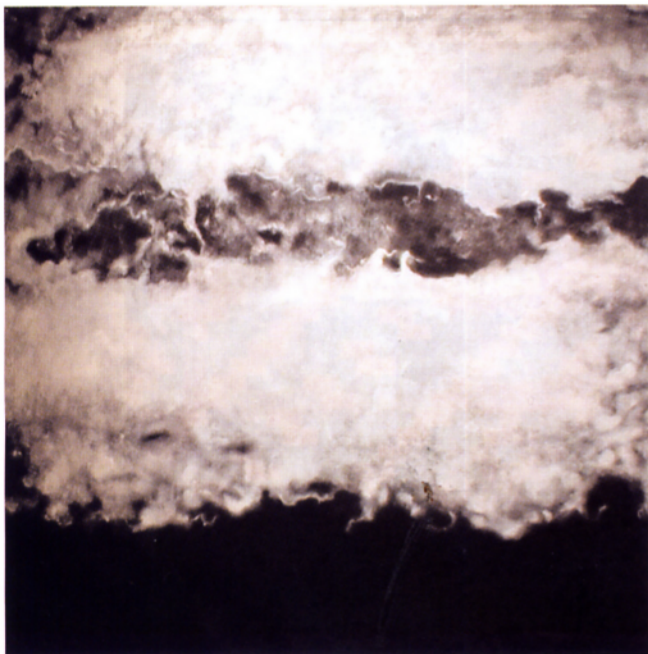


Fig. 10 William J. Grant, "Sky," 2004. Oil on canvas.

³ Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand are the most recognized painters of this genre.

⁴ Portions of this discussion of William J. Grant were previously published in Ash-Milby (2004).

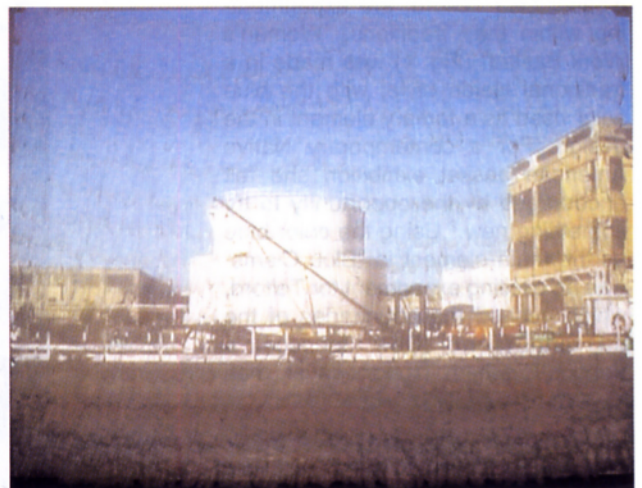


Fig. 11 Alan Michelson, "Mespat," 2001. DVD, turkey feathers, monofilament, 335 x 427 x 2.5 cm.

Abstraction, in this case, of landscape, can be seen as a means of understanding; a distillation of artifice to illuminate a deeper concept. Ho-Chunk artist and curator Truman Lowe also deconstructs and reconstructs environmental elements, such as in the sculpture "Waterfall" (Fig. 12). Using pine strips, Lowe visually explores the essence of a waterfall—its motion, shape, and fluidity. Mario Martinez, an abstract Yaqui painter whose oeuvre focuses primarily on landscape, uses his painting as a vehicle to explore the landscape, aspects of his Yaqui heritage, and personal history. "It's Probably Magic" is part of a series of paintings Martinez created after moving to New York City (Fig. 13). Jeffrey Gibson, a Choctaw artist who received his



Fig. 12 Truman Lowe, "Waterfall," 1993. Pine, 188 x 183 x 170 cm.



Fig. 13 Mario Martinez, "It's Probably Magic," 2004. Acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 15 x 28 cm.

MFA from the Royal Academy of Art, also explores color and organic forms. With vibrant pigments he creates an imaginative universe of his own (Fig. 14).

There are so many remarkable, talented Native American artists working today, but their work seems to slip through the cracks. One of the most difficult challenges these artists face is finding places to exhibit their work. The organization where I worked, the American Indian Community House (AICH), was founded as a social service organization in 1969 to serve the needs of the Native American community in the New York City area. It opened an art gallery in 1977 and is still the only non-profit organization in the city devoted exclusively to showing contemporary Native American art. Though many of the field's most exciting and successful artists have exhibited their work at the gallery, some early in their careers, including George Longfish, Kay WalkingStick, Dan Namingha, and Joane Quick-to-See Smith, the AICH gallery remains one of the city's "best kept" secrets. We have been unable to garner critical attention or improve attendance above approximately 3000 visitors per year. G. Peter Jemison, the first curator of the American Indian Community House Gallery, and I recently dis-



Fig. 14 Jeffrey Gibson, "Infinite Anomaly, #1," 2003. Oil on paper, 102 x 76 cm.

⁵ AICA, which exclusively exhibited Native American art from 1983 to 1999, was an important supporter of the Native art scene on the West Coast. Less visible, community and regionally-based non-profit contemporary Native art galleries include the Sacred Circle Gallery in the Daybreak Star Arts Center in Seattle and Two Rivers Gallery at the Minneapolis American Indian Center.



Fig. 15 Jason Lujan, "Museum Ready," detail, 2001. Mixed media, 34 x 24 x 7.5 cm.



Fig. 16 Alan Michelson, "Ganohonyohk," 1999. Corn husk, string, lights, sound, dimensions variable.

cussed the dearth of venues or galleries devoted to this art. The influential American Indian Contemporary Arts (AICA)⁵ in San Francisco closed its gallery several years ago due to an exorbitant increase in its lease. The Jan Cicero Gallery in Chicago, which represented several prominent Native artists, also closed recently. The Le-wallen Gallery in Santa Fe has already changed ownership twice since its founder passed away. And though the National Museum of the American Indian made a huge step toward promoting contemporary art with its recent series of solo exhibitions "Continuum: 12 Contemporary Native American Artists," in its New York City venue at the George Gustav Heye Center, it failed to receive any significant critical reviews.

In discussing this problem with an active and remarkably talented artist, who has somehow not managed to break into mainstream recognition, he said that he has

"... been puzzled and disturbed for years by its relative lack of critical attention and marginalization. The marketing of contemporary art in this town [New York City] is an insider business: gallery-driven, internationally competitive and demanding, and thus far almost completely unresponsive to contemporary Native art, which continues to be grossly ignored not only by the galleries, but by curators and critics as well. So the existing marketing formula needs to be revamped because it hasn't been effective, at least in this important center" (pers. comm.).

Galleries and museums can play a vital role in helping artists face these challenges, positively promoting contemporary Native American art and broadening the public's perceptions and expectations. But it is a problem without an easy fix. The crux of the matter is that exhibiting and promoting contemporary art takes a very different approach than working with historic material. As curators, museum directors, and arts professionals, we need to focus on quality work in our exhibitions. There are still organizations that promote work as exceptional simply because it is Native-made, acting as if any Native that tries his or her hand at art should be praised merely for making the effort. It is a patronizing approach and the result is that critical, contemporary Native art can be dismissed as simplistic, banal tourist art, easily ignored and not taken seriously. Our challenge is to expand the audience for the quality art, actively draw in the critics, and work with curators to respond to conceptually sophisticated and sometimes confrontational art. For instance, in a detail from the series "Museum Ready" by Apache artist Jason Lujan, the artist deconstructs stereotypes about Native people by photographing and interviewing "real" Indians (Fig. 15). Lujan assembled the answers to his survey with their photo, a map of where they live, and some personal artifact and displayed them in shadow boxes as scientific, museum artifacts.

I want to close on a positive note with an installation piece by Alan Michelson titled "Ganohonyohk" (Fig.

16). Ganohonyohk is the Mohawk Thanksgiving Address which is recited in the longhouse, but also before secular events. Ganohonyohk is a prayer that orders the universe, a concept much like the Navajo's *hozho*. It thanks the creator for life from the earth to the heavens. For this installation, Michelson constructed numerous cornhusk dolls, a traditional Mohawk art form, which he suspends in the air, to honor his community. The audio portion is a recording by one of the Mohawk faith keepers reciting the Thanksgiving prayer as the observers move around and through the floating figures. As Native people we have many, many things to be grateful for. We have endured generations of systematic genocide, yet we are still here. The work of these artists confirms our vitality and our future. I hope you see it in a new light.

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