Critical Issues in Recent Native American Art

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This is not Art Journal's Columbian Quincentenary issue on Native American art. It is unusual, of course, to begin an essay with a negation, but for a number of reasons it is necessary here. All of the contributors to this issue are certainly aware that the climate created by the Quincentenary, and by multiculturalism in general, probably helped generate a space for us on the Art Journal's short list of topical themes. Naturally, we welcome the opportunity to address an important audience about some of the critical issues in recent Indian art. And yet, like the body of art to which it responds, this collection of essays, with the exception of Gerald McMaster's, is largely not about resisting or deconstructing the celebratory aspects of the Quincentenary. In many ways, the retrospective gaze demanded by Columbus-as-spectacle, even if it produces a desire for a much-needed "Indian-centered" history, prevents us from focusing on the continuing colonization and commodification of Native culture(s) by Euro-American corporate and political interests. Thus the works of art considered here—given that they span the last thirty years—have less to do, generally speaking, with a fictive past articulated by various Quincentenary festivals than they do with the reality of recent history, as well as the negotiation of a more equitable future. Like African-American collective memory, which is operant in the months that precede and follow Black History Month, the content of, and context for, Native American art cannot be circumscribed by the twelve months of the Quincentenary. In this regard it is worth noting that a session organized for the 1992 meeting of the College Art Association in Chicago by the Indian artists Richard Hill and James Luna was titled "Everybody Needs an Indian: Native Needs beyond 1992." In his abstract Luna questioned whether "this interest in American Indians and history will prevail after the 'hoopla' of 1992," and whether or not "you'll ask us back in 1993." Similarly, we hope that this issue of Art Journal, and the numerous discourses on Native art at the 1992 annual meeting, as well as the presence of the Indian artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith on the board of the CAA (fig. 1), signals an inclusion of indigenous artists that will extend beyond the short shelf-life of the Quincentenary.

Although many of the artists featured in this issue, beginning with some of the student artists from the early 1960s discussed by Joy Gritton, have demonstrated an awareness of, and interest in, the various styles and strategies of modernism and postmodernism, including Expressionism, abstraction, collage, Pop, conceptual, and performance art, Kay WalkingStick and I have chosen to refer to this collective enterprise as "critical issues in recent Native American art." In doing so we are consciously avoiding categorizing the work, in this instance, as either modern or postmodern. Partly this is in recognition of the fact that one of the essayists, Joseph Traugott, challenges the applicability to Indian art of such terms, while another, Jean Fisher, also notes the work's tendency toward categorical nonconformity. In fact, historically, efforts to classify and label twentieth-century Native art have resulted in a nomenclature whose viability is tenuous at best. For example, in one important exhibition catalogue (1981), Indian art created since the sixties was organized under such terms as Historic Expressionism, Traditionalism, Individualism, and Modernism. More recently, the organizers of a traveling retrospective exhibition of twentieth-century Native painting and sculpture sought to create an all-encompassing historical entity known as the "Native American Fine Arts Movement." Rather than demonstrate that the achievements of twentieth-century Indian artists problematize the Euro-American bias of a modernist canon of high art that is largely devoid of works by women and persons of color, this construction after the fact of a "Native American Fine Arts Movement" perpetuates the spurious distinction between "fine arts" and "crafts" that has served institutionally to segregate Native artists. To insist on recognition, institutional and otherwise, for these artists—which they clearly deserve—by appealing to a hierarchical system (high/fine, popular, folk, primitive, tourist/kitsch) dependent on class and cultural otherwise is to capitulate, conceptually at least, to an aesthetic ideology that valorizes certain media at the expense of others. We thus made a conscious decision not to call this an issue on contemporary Indian art, recognizing that contemporary Native practice includes a variety of "traditional" forms, such as textiles, ceramics, wood carving, beadwork, and basketry, which are not discussed here.

Similarly, in his ambitious, if uneven, essay, "Frames of Reference: Native American Art in the Context of Modern and Postmodern Art," Gerhard Hoffman argued for the "shared genuine-ness" of modern, folk, and traditional Indian art, with the latter characterized as "primal." One of Hoffman's "fundamental con-
clusions” is that “Indian art and postmodern art go hand in hand in trying to remain open” to the potential for the “irrational and the imaginative.”” But this generalization ignores the sobering realpolitik of work by such artists as Richard Ray (Whitman) and Edgar Heap of Birds (figs. 2 and 3). Therefore, by refusing these loaded terms, we underscore the the multiplicity of artistic practices considered in these essays, from Fritz Scholder’s Super Indian series (fig. 4) to Jimmie Durham’s “sociofacts” and assemblages (fig. 5), as well as the thematic ground that is covered, from art education and critical reception to theories of irony and recent federal legislation concerning Indian “arts and crafts.”

It is both logical and natural that following the editors’ statements, the first of the essays, that by Joy Gritton, has an institutional focus. The development of Native American art in this century has been inextricably interwoven with the projects and patronage of various institutions, many of which operate, or have operated, under the auspices of state or federal government. For example, the emergence of secular (nonritualistic, commercial) painting in the Southwest in the early decades of the twentieth century was due in large

FIG. 1 Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Cree/Flathead/Shoshone), Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World with Ensembles Contributed by U.S. Government (detail), 1991, watercolor and pencil on photocopy, one of thirteen panels, 11 x 17 inches each. Collection of the artist.

FIG. 2 Richard Ray (Whitman) (Yuchi), Street Chief #1, 1985, black-and-white photograph, 10 x 8 inches. Collection of the artist.
part to the patronage of institutions in Santa Fe: the School of American Research, the Museum of New Mexico, and its Museum of Fine Arts. Likewise, a new style of southern Plains Indian painting was born circa 1917 in and around Anadarko, Oklahoma, when six young Kiowa artists—Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, Jack Hokeah, Stephen Mopope, Louise Smokey, and Monroe Tsatoke—were given art lessons by Susan Peters, who was an Indian Service employee. In the late 1920s Peters arranged for the Kiowa painters to receive additional training at the University of Oklahoma, where they attended special (segregated) classes taught by Edith Mahier and O. B. Jacobson. These new Southwestern and Plains Indian styles of painting were synthesized and institutionalized at the Studio, which was established in 1932 at the federal government’s Santa Fe Indian School by Dorothy Dunn, a graduate of the Art Institute of Chicago. The resultant style—flat, highly stylized, decorative watercolors that usually depict dances, hunting, or genre activities—has since come to be known by Indians and non-Indians alike as “Traditional Indian Painting” (fig. 6).

In addition to important private collectors such as Leslie Van Ness Denman, much of the support for “traditional” Indian painting from the 1930s to the 1960s was institutional in nature. Representative collections were assembled and exhibitions were regularly held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe, and at two Tulsa institutions, the Thomas Gilcrease Museum and the Philbrook Art Center (now the Philbrook Museum of Art). Indeed, one of the benchmarks for traditional Indian painting was a juried prize at the Philbrook’s “Indian Artists Annual” exhibitions (1946–79). Recognition in the Philbrook’s annual exhibition was such a significant validation of an artist’s work that when Oscar Howe’s Cubist-oriented pictures were rejected from the 1959 exhibition, he was compelled to decry the aesthetic paternalism that dictated the parameters of authentic Indian art, denied the “right for individualism,” and accepted only “pretty, stylized pictures.” Following the creation in 1935 of the Department of the Interior’s Indian Arts and Crafts Board (IACB), Indian watercolors in the Studio style were featured prominently in a number of historic exhibitions, including Indian Art of the United States (1941), organized for the Museum of Modern Art in New York by René d’Harnoncourt, who was at that time the general manager of the IACB, and who later became director of MoMA (1949). In addition to being the dominant mode of art taught and practiced at the Studio from its inception in 1932 until it closed in 1962, “traditional” Indian painting was likewise institutionalized in the art department (founded in 1935 by Acee Blue Eagle) of Bacone Indian College in Muskogee, Oklahoma. The popularity in Oklahoma of the Studio style, according to J. J. Brody, was related to the Euro-American audience’s interest in an “illustrious, anecdotal, and nostalgic painting,” typified by Midwest Regionalism.13

The ascendancy during the late forties and early fifties of
FIG. 5 Jimmie Durham (Cherokee), Aharanov-Bohm Effect, 1989, mixed media, variable dimensions. Private collection.
Abstract Expressionism, and concomitant decline of Regionalism, was but one critical factor in the subsequent perception in the latter 1950s on the part of the IACB and others that “traditional” Indian painting had ossified into an ethnic/aesthetic cliché. The search for a solution was initiated at the Directions in Indian Art Conference (1959), and then pursued at the experimental Southwest Indian Art Project (1960–62), both of which were funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and held at the University of Arizona in Tucson. These in turn led to the creation of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, which opened in 1962 under a charter issued by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, replacing the Studio, both literally and pedagogically. And yet, the IAIA represented the continuation of an institutional context for the development of Native art in the Southwest, which has remained the primary market for Indian “easel painting.”

As a result of the IAIA’s incorporation of modernist principles, and the presence on the faculty of such accomplished artists as Fritz Scholder and Allan Houser (fig. 7), it was instrumental in radically altering Native artistic practice, as typified by the work of a number of distinguished graduates, including, among others, T. C. Cannon, Roxanne Swentzel, and Hulleah Tsinhnajinnie (figs. 8–10). However, as George Longfish and Joan Randall have indicated, there is a critically important national network of Native artists who were not educated at the IAIA (and who in general have not benefited from the high profile provided by the Santa Fe market), including James Lavadour, Kay WalkingStick, and Truman Lowe (figs. 11–14). Nevertheless, the emergence of the IAIA, and the ensuing confirmation of an Indian art that consciously engaged and negotiated the Euro-American avant-garde, constituted a paradigmatic shift in Native art education. The IAIA’s curriculum stressed syncretism and, according to Joy Gritton’s essay here, a shift “from the ethnological to the aesthetic.” And yet its pedagogical philosophy could hardly be considered politically neutral, given that it emphasized individualism over tribalism—an emphasis that has characterized most federal Indian programs and policies since the beginning of the reservation period.

Gritton investigates the gap between the myth and the reality of the IAIA in its early years, focusing especially on the disparity between curriculum and practice, and between exhibition policy and public image. In doing so she utilizes first-person accounts of the school provided by former students and administrators, as well as the IAIA’s own archives. Demonstrating a linkage between a social context provided the civil-rights movement and the school’s avowed interest in cultural pluralism, and between the Rockefeller Foundation’s investment in a cultural cold war and MoMA’s aggressive marketing abroad of modernist ideology, Gritton reveals a

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**FIG. 6** Acee Blue Eagle (Creek/Pawnee). *The Deer Spirit*, ca. 1949, watercolor on mat board, 21½ × 18¼ inches. Heard Museum, Phoenix.

**FIG. 7** Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache). *Sheltered*, 1979, bronze, 15½ × 6½ × 4½ inches. Heard Museum, Phoenix.
paradoxical conflict at the heart of the IAIA’s original mandate.

Joseph Traugott uses a methodology associated with the analysis of material culture to track the legacy of this “modernist impulse” that was established at the IAIA. Questioning the validity of standard art-historical terminology, he extends recent discourse on the “salvage paradigm” to reveal an “interpretive dilemma” that confronts scholars of recent Indian art. Refusing the hegemony of (Greenburgian) formalist definitions of the modern and postmodern, he offers instead a contextual reading of selected works made by Native artists active since the early sixties, including Bob Hazous and Emmi Whitehorse. In the process Traugott argues for the empowering qualities of the indigenous vision embodied in Native American works of art that rescue, in a parodic fashion, the signs of aesthetic modernity.

Similarly, Jean Fisher addresses an “epistemological crisis” precipitated by Native artists’ aesthetic (and political) declarations of subjectivity, and by the ultimate incoherence of Euro-American narratives that seek to define “Indianness.” Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s analysis of the relationship between the colonial gaze and the colonial text, Fisher writes about the potential for liberation inhering in Native “performative acts” that identify traces of seepage from an (un)totalizing colonial structure. Based in part on her experience as co-curator (with Jimmie Durham) of an exhibition of Native art in 1987, she reviews recent exhibition history and links a search for the authentic ethnic “other” to a hunger for (cultural) self. Focusing then on Durham and James Luna, Fisher underscores the centrality of the body, historical memory, and the “dynamics of circulation” to their work.

Allan Ryan, who questions whether Canadian Native artists who work in ironic modes are necessarily “truly ‘postmodern,’” does apply postmodern theories of parody, especially the work of Linda Hutcheon, to his sociopolitical reading of recent aesthetic strategies by such artists as Gerald McMaster and Shelley Niro. Pursuing in particular the twin themes of self-identity and self-representation, including the role of imagery and “critical distance” in gender construction, Ryan details with great clarity the efforts of Canadian Native artists to unsanitize a received history that has been almost blind to the violence (of both church and state) against indigenous people. Furthermore, he sees in this revisionist art the potential for a reconceptualization of Canadian “national character.”

Gerald McMaster (Red Pheasant Cree) also addresses Canadian nationalism, colonial history, and Quincentenary festivals that “embody a language of dominance and conquest” in his essay on “INDIGENA: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on Five Hundred
FIG. 11 James Lavadour (Walla Walla), Gate, 1988–89, oil on linen, 72 × 96 inches (11 panels). Seattle City Lights Portable Works Collection, Seattle Art Commission.

Years,” an exhibition he co-organized at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, where he is curator of contemporary Indian art. He emphasizes the critical nature of an exhibition that asks Native artists to consider the themes of “discovery, exploration, and encounter,” as well as the museum’s determined efforts to have both the involvement and the support of the indigenous community. Relating “polyphonic eloquence” to the audience’s inherent ability to be producers of (historical) meaning, McMaster suggests that 1992 may well be a watershed in the history of Native–Euro-American relations.

Working in the fertile interstitial zone that critical theory and cultural studies have created between art history and anthropology, Charlotte Townsend-Gault is concerned—as her title indicates—with the ritualization of ritual’s rituals. She focuses on four artists who use painting, performance, and multimedia installations to transform “socially symbolic events,” and who seek in the process to address multiple constituencies. Articulating the relations between private and public knowledge, and therefore between the individual and the community, these artists are engaged in a kind of cultural syncretism that acknowledges, but withholds, in an absolute sense, certain traditional Native formations of power. “Critical distance,” “slipped signifiers,” and an “active engagement with [the] dissonances” are thus implicated in their desire to reclaim the past and shape the future.

Richard Shiff also demonstrates a keen sensitivity to the
implications of “a very active engagement with discourse,” in this case, the political necessity of Durham’s humor, which is marked by a “subversive doubleness.” Taking as his cue the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990, which instantaneously transformed Durham into a “foreign Indian,” Shiff explains the desire for authentic Indian art in terms of a “colonization by metonymic exchange.” Demystifying the relations between “cultural stereotyping” and “economic incentives,” he shows how a poststructural reading of essence, authorship, and originality problematizes Indian art as the “proper language of representation” for Durham’s voice. In its place he offers the idea of an “authenticity established by performance.” And like the other contributors, Shiff sees in (Durham’s) Native American art the intertwining of aesthetic issues and a shared sociopolitical situation.

Ubiquitous, then, among the critical issues in recent Native American art as they are defined here are questions about identity and the politics of representation. The visualization of indigenous voices, the acknowledgment of multiple audiences, and especially the prevalence of irony and parodic modes of address are likewise themes that unify these essays. Several of the contributors are also admittedly searching for interdisciplinary, transcultural terminologies, methodologies, and interpretive strategies that are appropriate to works of art that produce transgressive narratives and alternative histories. And the duality of art-as-moral-performance and resistance to (neo)colonial hegemony is clearly one of the most salient characteristics of Indian art since the 1960s.

We hope that this issue of Art Journal on Native American art—perhaps the first of many yet to come—is the inaugural one of a post-Columbian era marked by peace, justice, and prosperity for the host people, because ultimately these are the critical issues.

Notes

4. See Margaret Archuleta and Remillard Strickland, “The World People Meant to Live In,” in Archuleta, Strickland, et al., Shared Visions: Native American Painters and Sculptors in the Twentieth Century, exh. cat. (Phoenix: Heard Museum, 1991), 5–11. I do not mean to disparage or deny the overall importance of either the “Magic Images” or the “Shared Visions” exhibition. Archuleta, Strickland, and Wade have all made outstanding contributions to the discourse on, and development of an audience for, twentieth-century Indian art, and my criticism here is directly solely at what I see as flawed methodologies.
6. Gerhard Hoffman, “Frames of Reference: Native American Art in the Context of Modern and Postmodern Art,” in Edwin L. Wade, ed., The Arts of the North American Indian: Native Traditions in Evolution (New York: Hudson Hills Press, with Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, 1986), 259. Hoffman’s analysis is provocative and complex, and warrants serious attention. However, some of his conclusions are based on concepts that are now widely contested. For example: “Through the insights of Sigmund Freud and Carl G. Jung we have come to accept the primal sensibility (of traditional Indian art) not only as a historical phenomenon of the collective past but also as a permanent part of our unconscious, and thus a psychological fact” (p. 259).
7. Ibid., 281.
9. See Brody, Indian Painters, 120.
13. Brody, Indian Painters, 176. Brody here also discusses the interaction between the studio and the art department at Bacone College.
15. The most conspicuous example of a government policy aimed at dominating Native culture by promoting the idea of the autonomous individual and over against the social collective was the General Allotment Act of 1887 (also known as the Dawes Severalty Act), which divided and allotted tribal lands to individuals. See Janet McDonnell, The Dispossession of the American Indian (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1–3, 6–18.