



Native American Art in the Postmodern Era

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Native American Art in the Postmodern Era

Kay WalkingStick

Troubling thoughts have arisen in my mind concerning the many shows, panels, and seminars on ethnicity with which I have been involved. Often it seems that these exhibitions are a way to garner government support or to entertain the general public with the exotic or nostalgic. I am all for state and federal support of minority exhibitions, but too often these shows seem to be a funding ploy on the part of the exhibitors. I have much more respect for exhibition and panel organizers when there are minority artists in *all* of their shows and on *all* of their panels. In addition, organizers very often expect a few minority artists to represent an entire group of people politically, ideologically, and culturally. Yet nobody expects that of Frank Stella or even Barbara Kruger.

It seems to me that the best reason for mounting a show focused on ethnicity is to introduce new and different artists and their work to a diverse audience as a way of helping those artists to become established in the contemporary art scene, and also to broaden the viewer's appreciation of what constitutes art.

Curators have instead used issues such as gender or ethnicity as an opportunity to show artists who may then be left out of exhibitions dealing with more mainstream themes. Such a separation seems to reduce the possibility of serious critical discourse, and thus implies that there are different standards for different people—and, indeed, perhaps there are. *Separate* is still not *equal*; it marginalizes the art, no matter how wonderful that art might be. Critical questions that would be raised in other venues simply are not considered in ethnic or gender-specific exhibitions. Not to receive serious critical review is a kind of disempowerment.

For any artist serious critical review is an important part of becoming established, and the lack of serious critical discussion of Native American art outside of its relationship to ethnographic or tribal art and artifacts is one of the biggest problems we artists face. Another major problem that now faces Native artists is the new Indian Arts and Crafts law, which is discussed by Richard Shiff in this issue.

I would like to examine a few of the possible reasons for this lack of critical attention. Critics often avoid writing seriously about Native American art because what they consider "universal art values" are actually twentieth-century Eurocentric art values. Postmodern theory promised a more comprehensive critical viewpoint, but hasn't yet delivered it. Just as a broader definition of subject matter and materials in art was an issue in feminist shows of the late sixties and early seventies, so too, a broader definition of art and its cultural components is needed in relation to Native American artists.

And just as Miriam Shapiro's use of embroidered hankies, and other artists' use of feminine accouterments led to an enrichment of art, so too will Native American art enrich and expand contemporary art. It is interesting to note that one of the few critics addressing these cultural questions, Lucy Lippard, is also one who has seriously addressed feminist issues.

If there is no in-depth critical discussion of the value of the work that is included in these exhibitions, then multicultural exhibitions become just another way to segregate artists. Although overcrowded, the 1990 "Decade Show" at the Studio Museum, the New Museum, and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in New York succeeded in fulfilling the goal of integrating various viewpoints and discussing these viewpoints in a comprehensive catalogue.

Another reason for the dearth of critical discussion is that many Indian artists must try to live off their art, and therefore often paint to please a certain kind of taste. Now this has, at times, created some great art—such as Navajo rugs fashioned in the Oriental style at the turn of the century. Nevertheless, painting strictly for the market leads to the loss of an indigenous pictorial viewpoint, or prevents the development of one. As a result art loses its personal and group (or tribal) value, and takes on a decorative or mass-culture value. The kinds of paintings that arise out of this mass-culture value include works that utilize generalized and stereotypical symbols which white culture has identified as Indian, as well as nostalgic and fantasized depictions of Indians. They make indigenous people appear remote, generalized, savage, nonhuman, and nonthreatening—in other words, not real people. This represents control of the Indian by the dominant culture, which, of course, is the one that buys Indian art. Perhaps this explains why Indian artists are willing to perpetuate this nostalgic fantasy, even though it represents the loss of Native American selfhood.

This mass-culture art is not serious art, and yet it is what one often sees in the galleries of the Southwest and New York; one sees it advertised in the art magazines and sometimes displayed in otherwise serious museums. In reality this art is wish fulfillment for a white culture: art by the "Vanishing American." Unfortunately, it represents Native American art to many otherwise knowledgeable people, and it is no wonder that serious critics won't discuss it.

Therefore, I am pleased to be an editor, with Jackson Rushing, of this issue of *Art Journal* devoted to the issues, strategies, and content in recent Native American art. This examination is an important step in the ultimate acceptance of (for want of a better phrase)

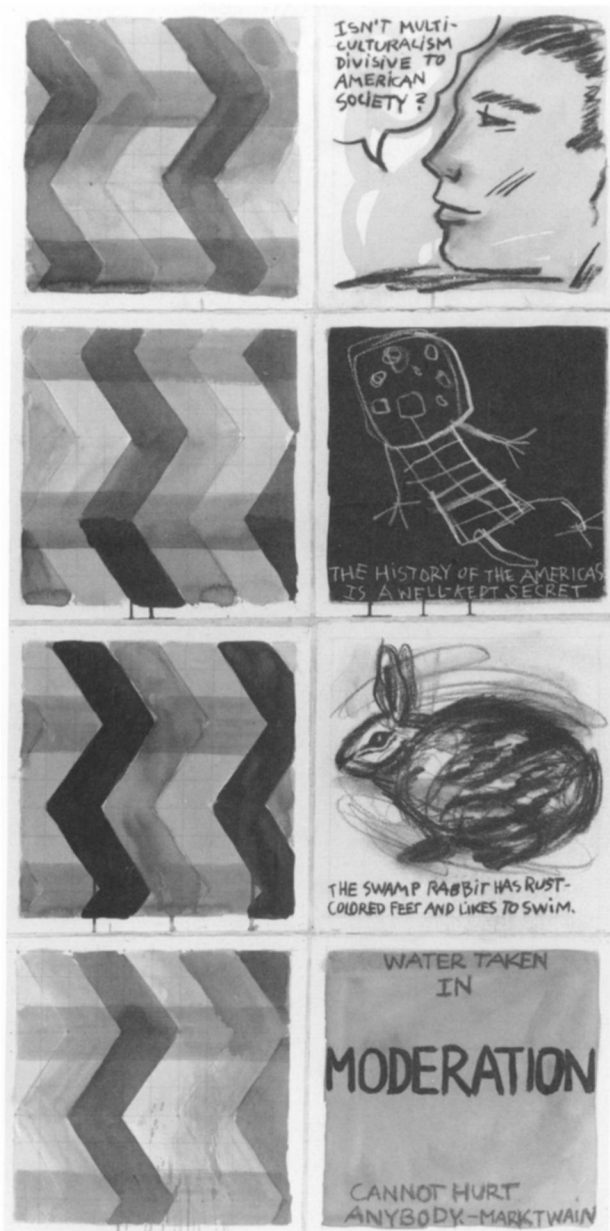


FIG. 1 Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith, *Moderation*, 1991, mixed media on paper, 44 × 22 inches. Courtesy Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York.

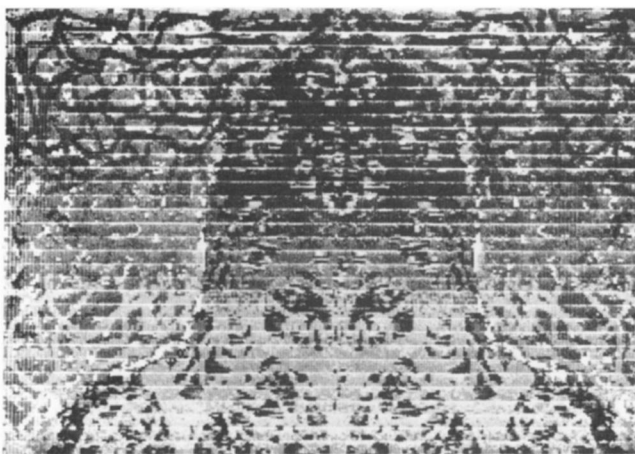


FIG. 2 Joe Fedderson, *Self-Portrait*, 1988, computer-generated print on paper, 5½ × 8 inches. Collection of the artist.

ethnic art as an integral part of the overall activity of art making in this country. It is important that Native American art receive critical attention and understanding not only as an effect of widespread modernist ideas, but also as part of the original source of modern art in North America.

Good, risky, original art is being done by Native Americans, and it is this work that must be shown and supported by serious galleries and museums. This art has been developed by individuals educated in the traditions of twentieth-century modernism, but also in touch with their Indian heritage, their cultural differences, and their spiritual concerns. It is deserving of serious critical analysis and it takes no great leap of faith to analyze or appreciate it.

Living in New York, I look at art continuously. My criterion for all serious art is that it have the voice of integrity. Jimmie Durham's art has that voice of integrity, as does that of Joe Fedderson, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, George Longfish, Kay Miller, Phil Young, James Lavadour, and many others not discussed in this issue. They do not share an aesthetic sensibility, but rather a strong self-identity as Indian people and as artists.

Quick-to-See Smith's newest work deals with her environmental concerns, as her painting has done for the last few years. But these new works are much more a portrait of her inner self than is any of her former work. It expresses her core of caring. She calls the series "Nomad Art."

My tribe had a history of making parfleches (a rawhide suitcase folded like an envelope which carries food, clothing, etc.). Based on that idea I decided to call my work "Nomad Art." Made of rag paper (no trees) and biodegradable materials such as Sumi watercolors, charcoal, rice paper, and rice glue, each piece folds up into a compact form approximately 15" × 15".¹

Such works as *Moderation* (fig. 1) have a formal delicacy and fragility that powerfully conveys the fragility of our earth. The images support the ideas, but it is the implications projected through the use of materials that are so moving.

Lately, Joe Fedderson has been making small computer-generated prints that are all very similar to *Self-Portrait* (fig. 2). These small-scale works on printout paper have an ethereal mutability that somehow states the precarious human condition. That tenuousness is heightened by the use of a common, often discarded material. They richly condense multiple forms of self-understanding into powerful visual gems. All Native people, whether living on a reservation or separated from a tribal experience are living a double life in some way. Fedderson's self-portraits very touchingly address this issue. He remains an Indian, yet portrays himself through the technology of the late twentieth century.

My recent drawings and paintings, such as *Spirit Center I* (fig. 3), are my way of unifying this double life. They are diptychs whose parts relate to one another in the manner of European ecclesiastical paintings. One part is not the abstraction of the other, but the extension of the other. The two portions represent two kinds of knowledge of the earth. One is visual, immediate, and particular, the other is spiritual, long-term, and nonspecific.

To unite these two kinds of memory, these two kinds of

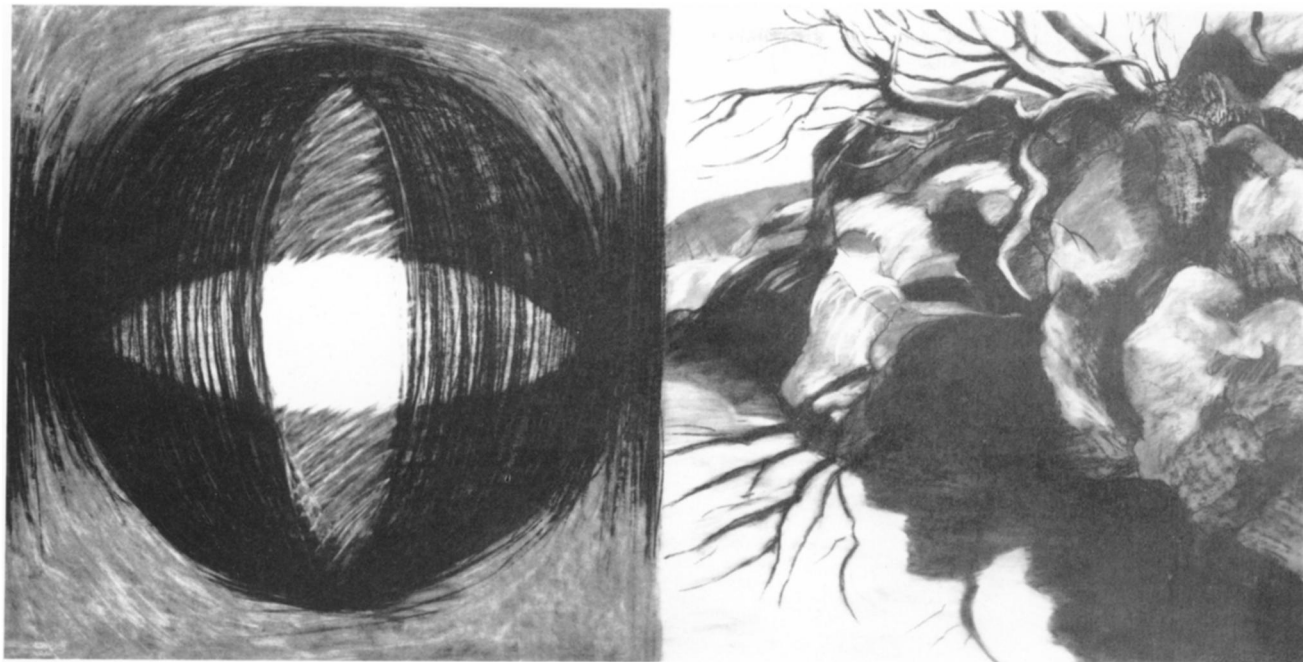


FIG. 3 Kay WalkingStick, *Spirit Center I*, 1991, charcoal on paper, 30 × 60 inches. M13 Gallery, New York.

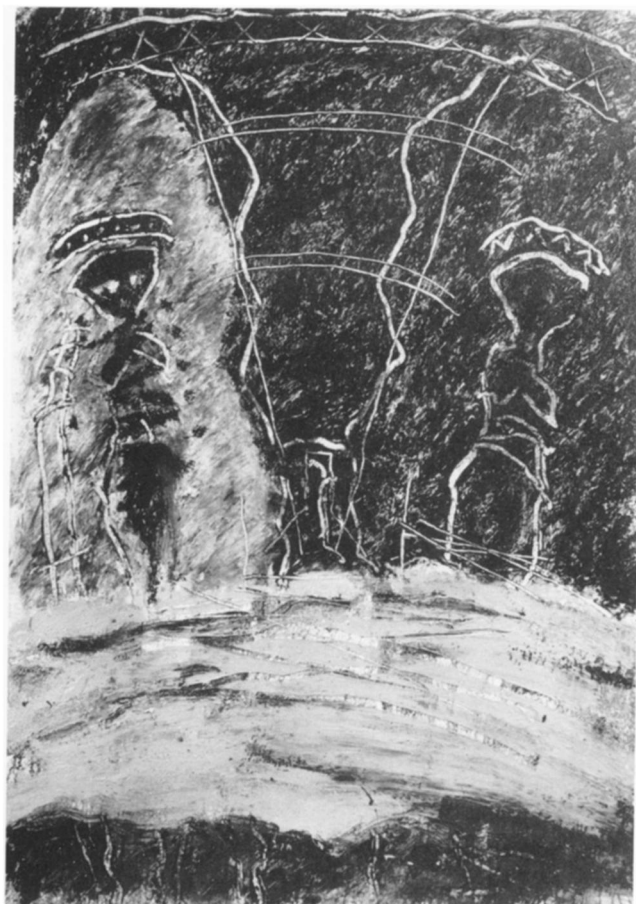


FIG. 4 Phil Young, *Glen Canyon Desecration 1*, 1991, acrylic and sand on canvas, 77 × 55 inches. Collection of the artist.

perception, is important to my psyche. It offers not only a personal wholeness, but also a wholeness in the continuum of humanity—that is, one side refers to the present while the other side refers to both the past and the future. These are not landscapes, but paintings about my view of the earth and its sacred quality.

The content of all my paintings is mythic, if one understands myth to be that which expresses the unknown, the inexpressible, or the incomprehensible. They are an attempt to unify the present with eternity and to understand, in a mythic sense, that unity and balance. Many of my newest paintings incorporate copper, which represents the economic urges underlying the rape of our land.

Phil Young's paintings also deal with this rape of the earth. In his *Glen Canyon Desecration* series, he addresses the desecration of sacred Indian sites. As in *Glen Canyon Desecration 1* (fig. 4), the surface of these large works is agitated, scraped, and scarred, as if representing the earth itself; he utilizes a pictographic drawing style that has a primal energy. The images, which are scratched and painted in the rough surface of his works, are not copies of pictographs, but instead are personal ideograms, based on the pictographs and petroglyphs of the Southwest.

The earth is sacred to all Native people. This seems to be a common thread in much of today's ecological art, both Native and non-Native. I would like to believe that we indigenous people have a message that is being heard. The destruction of the earth is one of the critical issues that unites Indian artists from varying backgrounds with one another and with their concerned non-Indian colleagues in the art world.

Note

1. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, "Nomad Art Manifesto," personal statement, Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York, 1991.

KAY WALKINGSTICK, *assistant professor of art at Cornell University, Ithaca, has written for Artforum and the Northeast Indian Quarterly, and has received fellowships from the NEA and NYFA.*