

## In the Silence of Dusk

### An Indigenous Reading of the West

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We live in an era in which the idea of an American West is understood to be a myth.<sup>1</sup> Manifest Destiny, westward expansion, and yes, even cowboys and Indians represent gross simplifications of the massive diasporic movements and exertions of power enacted across the vast territories once known as the frontier. Yes, the Indigenous presence; incursions by Spain, Britain, and Russia; and the expansion of the American empire are all historical fact, but convergent narratives now problematize the idea of the West with a capital *W*.

The compact and linear conventions that valorize key American ideologies—individualism, exceptionalism, and freedom—are interrupted by historical specificities that are more complicated and layered.<sup>2</sup> This chapter suggests that these newer interpretative paradigms are equally applicable in our assessment of contemporary American Indian arts. While the direct meanings of Native arts may appear easily read by stylistic conventions and materials, deeper significances exist, especially when the works are placed in conversation with resonant icons of art and their packed meanings.

Harry Fonseca's large, striking canvas *In the Silence of Dusk They Began to Shed Their Skin* (1995; fig. 11.1) provides remarkable insight into the multiple ways we have come to understand the concept of an American West.<sup>3</sup> Emotional and energetic, Fonseca's work embraces contradictions and celebrates the everyday complexities of commingling cultural referents. The dualism of twin human figures—encased by energetic lines, dripping gold paint, and surrounded by undulating serpents—presents a seemingly chaotic tableau. Yet the viewer can sense an



11.1 Harry Fonseca, *In the Silence of Dusk They Began to Shed Their Skin*, 1995. Mixed media on canvas, 72 × 60 in. Museum purchase, T2015-36-2.





**11.2** Caspar David Friedrich, *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, circa 1818. Oil on canvas, 37<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 29<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. On permanent loan from the Foundation for the Promotion of the Hamburg Art Collections. Photograph courtesy of bpk Bildagentur / Hamburger Kunsthalle / Elke Walford. Art Resource, New York.

underlying elegance and simplicity in the careful selection of hues and contrasts.

The canvas's movements, even those misty clouds floating past the central figures, are only temporary distractions, an indication that the permanency of the scene is ever still, tranquil even in its certainty. Like solid mountains in a hazy distance, the shrouded figures in black and white serve as silent sentinels to something bigger than simple human bodies. White crosses hover like darting mosquitoes, handprints stretch longingly toward each other near the foreground. And the snakes? Their forms are cartoonish rather than threatening. Do the twin iconic figures look out to the endless horizon, their backs to us? Or are they facing the viewer, trying to make contact? These mysteries are left unresolved, forcing viewers to listen attentively for clues.

The iconic nineteenth-century painting *Wanderer above a Sea of Fog* by Caspar David Friedrich (fig. 11.2) contains the same mysterious fog as Fonseca's work, yet with a single figure rather than the double silhouettes of *In the Silence of Dusk*. Mountains lurk in the distance as the male silhouette stands alone atop a rocky precipice. Observers have noted the sense of solitude and loneliness of the Friedrich canvas, citing the conflict man faces in his isolation from the world.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, the work has been interpreted to signal man's authority over nature, his control and power.

Either assessment—control or desolation—indicates an individualist western notion of selfhood, disconnected from one's own society as well as the environment. This separateness—the darker side of what we think of as freedom—suggests Friedrich's observation of man's eternal ennui. In fact, Friedrich has been called a "painter of sublime sadness."<sup>5</sup> This characterization is certainly a contrast to what we know of Fonseca's hearty embrace of humor and the absurd. And yet, separated by almost two centuries of image making and an ocean apart, these two artists comment on the place of man using a similar trope: the human

figure in relationship to the environment.

Fonseca's wry commentary serves as an intervention to both grand narratives—man dwarfed by nature and man as "master of all I see." *Silence of the Dusk* suggests humans as an integral part of the greater whole, playing a central role alongside the weight of histories, imaginations, and nature. This commingling of humans and animals in an ever-present and timeless cosmos asserts the coequality of histories. We are together rather than alone, a part of the whole rather than the individual in isolation. This Indigenous reading refuses the common binaries of man and nature and instead insists on the parallel nature of our interactions with each other and the worlds in which we live. Even the catastrophic impact of Christianity referenced by Fonseca's crosses and the disastrous results of the gold rush are safely enclosed in a more important narrative, one in which dualism and balance—two figures shrouded in black and white—hold sway.

The Art of the West Gallery demonstrates the Autry Museum's significant contributions to emerging curatorial strategies that similarly embrace these contradictions. Inclusive thematic frameworks have become standard exhibition practice, while standard chronological and regional frames of reference are unsettled. A recent *New York Times* review describes this curatorial shift as a move toward "nimble," "experimental," and "intuitive" curation instead of outdated "canonical," "linear," and "siloes" interpretations.<sup>6</sup> This more fluid curatorial impulse seeks to make evident connections rather than distinctions. W. Richard West Jr., Autry president and CEO, describes this new approach as the "third wave" of cultural interpretations, positioning the Autry as an intercultural rather than simply multicultural institution.<sup>7</sup>

What does this inclusive curatorial approach mean for contemporary American Indian artists? It may be too early to ascertain how emerging curation styles may ultimately inform Native art reception, but some observations are clear. The icons of

American Indian representation that have little significance for Native communities are no longer acceptable. When the complexity of Indigenous lives is reduced to trite stylistic forms like the feathered bonnet, the pipe, or the warrior, no one gains. Native lives as subject matter alone ignore the accomplishments that American Indian philosophers, statesmen and -women, and educators have made to our collective histories.

An intercultural curatorial mandate suggests a more holistic appraisal—one that corrects past erasures and segregation of Native peoples and their works, and considers Indigenous artistic histories as central to any telling of the arts of the West.

The poet Elizabeth Woody has described this embracive approach to the interpretive telling of the West in this manner:

We and Fonseca may linger in the black shadow and innuendo of smoke, oils, and mineral—the constellations of energy flexing itself over the surface textures. Pausing to look at his veracity, I imagine the West before it became an open window of a car, a steady cruise, a long drive into desert time and heated light—a space we rush through and neglect, because it is not as considerate of our comfort as other places. It is a place one should linger to know oneself in a simple and vulnerable relationship. It is a place to stand and look at our reflection in the forms left by the volcanoes, the wind, the rain.<sup>8</sup>

The apparent "silences" of Native arts are available for the telling, if we remember to linger and listen.

### Acknowledgment

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## Notes

1. Eva Respini, "Discoverers, Dreamers, and Drifters," in *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 11.
2. Brian W. Dippie, "Drawn to the West," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (February 2004): 10.
3. "New Acquisitions Featuring the Kaufman Collection," *Autry Museum of the American West*, <https://theautry.org/exhibitions/new-acquisitions-featuring-kaufman-collection>, 2015–2017.
4. "Wanderer Above the Mist," *National Parks, Landscape Art and American Imagination: ART 327 and ES 300 at the University of Montevallo*, <https://arthistory327.wordpress.com/2012/11/17/wanderer-above-the-mist/>, November 17, 2012.
5. School of Life, "Art/Architecture: Caspar David Friedrich," *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g087azXN5Ms>, accessed 2016.
6. Robin Pogrebin, "To Become More 'Nimble' MoMA Upends Tradition; Museum Will Organize Collections That Cross Artistic Boundaries," *International New York Times*, December 18, 2015, 11.
7. W. Richard West Jr., "Westward Stories: New Models of Interpretation and Museum Building," keynote lecture, IARC Speaker Series, New Mexico Museum of Art, May 6, 2015, [https://sarweb.org/?event\\_iarc\\_keynote\\_westward](https://sarweb.org/?event_iarc_keynote_westward). "The Autry [Museum] of the American West envisions itself as a 'third wave' institution of cultural interpretation. With both colonial and anti-colonial approaches to narrative as backdrop, the Autry assumes, uses, and affirms the presence of distinct interpretive voices from both inside and outside the museum. But it also takes a critical additional step: the Autry sweeps horizontally across the stories of the American West to interweave and interconnect the multiple threads of cultural experience and history—in the end, the 'multicultural' becomes the 'intercultural' and in doing so creates a more integrated narrative that makes all stories of the American West, past and present, more whole."
8. Elizabeth Woody, *Earth, Wind, and Fire: Harry Fonseca* (Santa Fe: Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, 1996). Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, November 9, 1996–April 23, 1997.