

## Reviews

PHILIP JOSEPH DELORIA  
*Becoming Mary Sully: Toward an American Indian Abstract*  
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019.  
336 pp.; 221 color ill. \$35

NANCY MARIE MITHLO  
*Knowing Native Arts*  
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020.  
272 pp.; 16 color ill, 27 b/w. \$35

Indigenous women were the creators of most of the historic Native art on view in museums, yet hardly any of the artists' names are documented. Philip Deloria's *Becoming Mary Sully: Toward an American Indian Abstract* introduces readers to one of these overlooked, early twentieth-century Indigenous female artists. Susan "Susie" Mabel Deloria (Yankton Dakota), who signed her works as Mary Sully, was born on Standing Rock Indian Reservation in 1896. She was the great-granddaughter of nineteenth-century American portrait artist Thomas Sully, from whom she acquired her name and with whom she shared a fascination for celebrities. Her works, color pencil triptychs on paper, were stored in a suitcase and nearly forgotten, until her great-nephew, historian Philip J. Deloria, reclaimed the works from obscurity.

His book chronicles and analyzes Mary Sully's journey as a Yankton Dakota woman who was passionate about being an artist in the era of American modernism. The biography's subtitle, *Toward an American Indian Abstract*, hints at Sully's creative blending of both influences. The artworks themselves are mysterious and fascinating. Mary Sully was largely a self-trained artist but came from an artistic family: besides her famous great-grandfather, Thomas Sully, her grandfather Alfred Sully was also a painter and her grandmother Pehánlútawin (Susan Pehandutawin) was a skilled quillworker. Interestingly, Mary Sully was not influenced by Native art groups, such as the Kiowa Six, the Bacone School in Oklahoma, or the Studio at Santa Fe Indian School, who were active at the time and created romanticized images of past Native life that appealed to non-Native audiences. Instead, Mary Sully's works were mainly inspired by her immediate surroundings: several of her drawings include patterns from textile prints, including calico flour sacks or wallpaper designs. To

further her skills, she largely resorted to self-help books and correspondence courses and enrolled in a few art courses at the University of Kansas and the Art Institute of Chicago. Magazines, radio, and newspapers provided access to the world of art and entertainment.

Her main works are what she called "personality prints." These are 134 sets of three-panel portraits rendered in color pencil, representing famous actors, celebrities, and musicians (*Fred Astaire, Amelia Earhart, Charles Lindbergh, Babe Ruth*) she read about in *Time* magazine and *Ladies' Home Journal*; others were classes of people (*Children of Divorce, Titled Husbands in the USA*) or events (*Easter, Highway Rudeness*). The triptychs consist of three stacked pieces of paper of different sizes that are taped or hooked together. The top panel usually depicts abstractions of elements Mary Sully associated with a person—for example, an object or characteristic forms, composed as an individual design or as a pattern. The large center piece is usually a very complex geometric grid-like pattern, which is related to the first panel through color and forms. The small bottom image repeats aspects of these forms and colors and rearranges them into Native American-like designs, which relate to Mary Sully's Yankton Dakota cultural identity. Sometimes these are arranged in kaleidoscopic patterns.

The book is an effort to analyze and comprehend Mary Sully's work and this specific "moment of American/Indian history itself" (4). Deloria examines her work through the lens of genealogical research, Dakota culture and history studies, formal art analysis, art history, art criticism, psychological theories, and American Indian politics of the 1930s. By placing Mary Sully's work in an art historical context, he convincingly portrays her as a Yankton Dakota artist engaged with modernity, including visual arts, such as Art Deco and geometric abstraction, as well as film, music, and lifestyle from an Indigenous perspective, effortlessly blending both influences.

Throughout the publication, Deloria investigates possible influences for Mary Sully's art. One of the most important sources of inspiration is her knowledge of Dakota and Great Plains Indian art and culture. Sully accompanied her sister, anthropologist Ella Cara Deloria, during

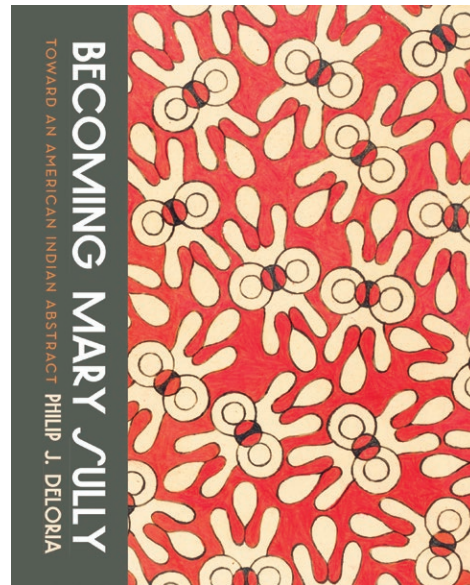
her ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork for anthropologists Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict throughout the United States, visiting many Native communities. Growing up immersed in the visual traditions of beadwork, quilling, and hide painting, and being enlisted by her sister as ethnographic artist and illustrator, Sully was certainly interested in these customary art forms. Deloria also connects Sully's skillful use of geometric symmetry, repetition, and color with the artistic traditions given the Dakota by the spiritual being Double Woman (268–73).

Sully engaged with American popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s through magazines and radio. During the 1930s and 1940s the artist lived with her sister in New York City, where Ella worked for Franz Boas at Columbia University. In New York City Sully was exposed to the thriving modern art and entertainment scene, which is evidenced by the Art Deco forms, for example, in the triptych for harpist *Mildred Dilling* (100, 110). Deloria convincingly positions Sully within the context of American modernism and compares her work with the paintings of Stieglitz circle artists Marsden Hartley, Charles Demuth, Arthur Davis, and other artists. The most striking connection between Sully's drawings and works by Demuth and Hartley are their references to celebrities, artists, writers, and musicians. Demuth painted his *Poster Portraits* between 1923 and 1929. However, unlike Sully, who seemed to be more interested in movie actors and celebrities from popular culture, Demuth portrayed many visual artists.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Demuth, Hartley, and Sully all created symbolic portraits of writer and art patron Gertrude Stein (138, 218). Some of Sully's multifaceted bottom panels could be inspired by Joseph Stella's vibrant kaleidoscopic images of iconic New York landmarks, and her top panel for *Children of Divorce* (83) appears to be a stylized version of his *Flowers, Italy* (1930).

The similarities between Mary Sully's drawings and works by the better-known Demuth and Hartley—their shared use of abstraction, color, and form to express a spiritual atmosphere—have not been fully addressed in previous scholarship. As the daughter of an important leader in the Sioux Episcopal Church and the sister of an Episcopal minister and future archdeacon,

Sully had a familiarity with religion that is evident in several of her works, including the top panels of *Nila Cram Cook* (81), *Harry Emerson Fosdick* (138), or *Lunt and Fontanne* (217). Even though Arthur Dove's paintings such as *Moon and Sea* (1923) and *Two Forms* (1931) are less symmetrical than Sully's, a comparison shows both artists shared an interest in the spiritual, music, and movement expressed through color and abstraction.<sup>2</sup>

The book invites further investigation of other connections between Sully and American modernists, who often borrowed



from Indigenous art and culture without asking for permission and who did not treat Native artists as peers. The blending of Native American motifs and geometric abstraction are prominent in Marsden Hartley's paintings from his *Amerika* series, such as *Indian Fantasy* (1914) and *Indian Composition* (1914–15).<sup>3</sup> Modernist influences in Sully's art, on the other hand, can be interpreted as her resistance to primitivism and stereotypical expectations of Native art. In some triptychs these modernist influences reflect political tendencies in her art, such as her *Three Stages of Indian History* panels (249), which Deloria convincingly compares to Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* (1932–33) and Aaron Douglas's *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934). By analyzing her drawings iconographically, stylistically, and socially, and by discussing Sully's work in the context of American Indian policies of the 1930s, Deloria illustrates how Sully's work can be seen as a move toward an anticolonial aesthetic that claimed

a critical role for Indigenous women artists in American modernism. He discusses one of her key works, the *Three Stages of Indian History*, in connection with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and analyzes how Mary Sully was working within and against a settler colonial history.

One of the most iconic aspects of Mary Sully's art is her vertical triptych format. Deloria argues that this unique form of presentation relates to Sully's process of analyzing her subjects and her interest in time and space and Dakota epistemology (136). When viewed simultaneously, "one is struck by the continuities of the colors, icons, and geometries that bridge across each individual drawing" (134). Even though the artist seems to focus on different aspects of the person/subject in each panel, she maintains a harmonious whole through colors and forms. Creating complex compositions using representation, symbolism, and abstraction, Sully evokes multiple and simultaneous perspectives of time and space. The concepts of simultaneity and transformation or shape-shifting are part of Dakota culture, which might have influenced Sully. Deloria explains, "The idea that the essential quality of a thing can take on multiple forms is key to understanding Dakota worldviews" (136). While this might partly explain Sully's preference for the triptych format, other influences are only touched on in the book, including, for example, the stacked three-part composition of works by American modernists, such as Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals (1932–33) or Marsden Hartley's *Indian Fantasy* (1914). However, the triptych is also a format traditionally used in Christian altarpieces, which might have served as inspiration, especially since Sully was raised in the Episcopal faith and her father was a minister. Several of her personality prints also represent church leaders.

Throughout the book the reader learns about the challenges Mary Sully faced as an Indigenous modernist. A combination of race and gender issues, persistent poverty, and frequent relocations were main factors that prevented her from having a successful career as an artist. It also appears the timing was not on her side: she largely precedes the Native modern artists such as Patrick Desjarlait, Oscar Howe, George Morrison, and Dick West. Yet her artworks arrived

too late for 1920s abstraction and before the 1940s turn to Abstract Expressionism. She also did not fit into other art categories of the 1920s and 1930s; for example, she was not folk art enough for Holger Cahill's folk art definitions (182), and since she was a female artist of color, it was difficult to be part of the inner circle of American modernists and galleries. In addition, Sully was suffering from extreme introversion and bouts of mental illness. The story of her life is also a tale of missed opportunities: Sully and her sister did not fill out the application for the WPA/FAP programs that supported artists during the Great Depression (179). Even though her older sister Ella tried to connect to art circles, several attempts at selling or even showing Sully's artwork failed. Having a career on the margins of the art world resulted in only a few smaller exhibitions during her lifetime. Even though most of her works survived, only a few records of her artistic career exist, and some of those seem inconsistent. However, the quality of Sully's work makes it easy to understand why Deloria's family kept her drawings all these years. The drawings show a masterful use of color and design and a unique artistic vision. Although it was necessary to separate panels for Deloria's methods of analysis, many readers will want to see more images of entire triptychs, especially since this was the way the artist wanted them to be viewed. *Becoming Mary Sully* is a welcome contribution to the growing field of modern Native American art history, inviting readers to consider alternative histories of Indigenous artistic creation.

While Deloria's book illustrates the issue of an Indigenous woman artist's exclusion from larger art movements in the era of American modernism, Nancy Mithlo's *Knowing Native Arts* extends the discussion to the present day and addresses continuing concerns and new challenges in the field of contemporary Native art. *Knowing Native Arts* is a publication of talks and presentations of the past two decades of Mithlo's professional career as a Chiricahua Apache curator, writer, and professor of American Indian Studies.

Throughout the book, Mithlo discusses issues of Native arts scholarship and the field of Native arts through the lens of personal experiences and examples from her family history, such as her great-grandparents' and

grandfather's Chiricahua Apache imprisonment. Her essays are a critical appraisal of a system that continues to be broken for Indigenous artists seeking equity in the arts. Among the problems she identifies are a lack of peer-reviewed journals, a lack of funding/inequalities in philanthropy, and no coherence between core cultural values and program services (13, 23). For example, available grants rarely reach Native artists at the community level (24). She also proposes stronger academic resources, more faculty fellowships, the professionalization of Native arts scholarship, and support for exhibitions and publications (24). Mithlo correctly identifies the main problem in the field: the need for more graduate degree programs in Native American art history (127). In the long term, this will also benefit Indigenous artists: the more curators with expertise in Native art history work in museums and galleries, the more groundbreaking Indigenous art exhibitions will be organized, which will contribute to more research, publications, and acquisitions for museum collections. Her criticism of curatorial methods in the field of Native art is very constructive. She rightfully states there are more exhibition strategies than the conventional Native group or solo shows that only feature traditional art forms or limit artists to the role of a "tribal representative"—models still preferred by most museums and galleries. Instead, she proposes sovereign curatorial strategies and initiatives, such as her Venice Biennale exhibitions *Wahshka* (May 11–19, 2017) and *Ga ni tha* (May 6–11, 2015): these exhibitions can be considered Native arts collaborations and engaged curatorial practices, including the display of social action, performances, and experimental exhibition methodologies.<sup>4</sup> The wealth of Indigenous art traditions and intellectual knowledge offers unlimited possibilities to addressing and presenting the nature of the human condition through the arts, according to Mithlo (57, 127–29).

Through identifying and discussing the framework of Native arts scholarship, including the role of academic departments and museums, the importance of organizations such as the Native American Art Studies Association (NAASA), methods of interpretation, and models of exhibitions and curatorial practices, Mithlo makes an important contribution not only to the field

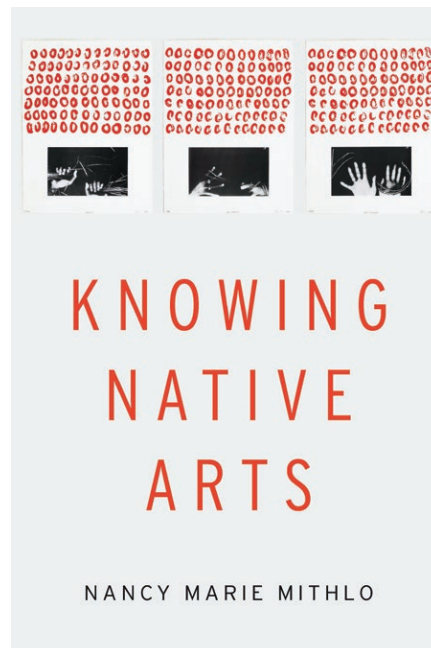
of Native arts but also to fine arts in general. Her book is intended to broaden the debate, invite dialogue, and offer insights that are often not included in the contemporary art discourse and art history curricula. *Knowing Native Arts* makes compelling arguments for why contemporary Indigenous art as a field of study deserves more theoretical attention, focusing specifically on Indigenous self-determination and how Indigenous art is presented and interpreted. In one of Mithlo's examples of Indigenous curatorial practices that includes self-determination, Native artists create a space for counternarratives and reclamation (of history, photographs, stories, places, and assumptions), engage in dialogue with the (historic) place and others, and bring time forward to the present. The contemporary Native artists in Mithlo's book use their art as a vehicle to reappropriate history, reshape history, and enact reality, as well as for truth-telling. In many instances, especially when responding to the traumas of the past and the challenges of the present day, "this level of engagement is not possible in a standard art-historical frame, where descriptive analyses are given weight over the horror of the actual experience," Mithlo explains (57). The examples of exhibitions and artworks she examines emphasize the significance of Indigenous arts on a national and global level. While sharing Indigenous knowledge, these artists address current issues that affect Indigenous communities internationally.

The majority of artworks examined in *Knowing Native Arts* are photography based. They are persuasively discussed within the larger context of American Indian photographic representations and self-representations, including the work of Mithlo's great-uncle Horace Poolaw (Kiowa), one of the first professional Native photographers. Since the publication is a series of talks and presentations, the discussions of artworks are sometimes short but to the point. However, readers with little knowledge of contemporary Native art would benefit from an analysis of artworks in a broader art historical context. An example is Alan Michelson's *Third Bank of the River* (2009), a silk-screened and photo-sandblasted glass window panorama, which was commissioned for the US port of entry at Massena, New York (112). The work refers to the

symbolism and power of the Haudenosaunee Two-Row Wampum, as well as its historic, political, and cultural significance, which Mithlo discusses in detail in her essay “The Indigenous, Problematized, Yet Not Fully Theorized” (110–14). She explains how this Indigenous knowledge of the Two-Row Wampum is one of the strategies, and how the Wampum’s composition is one of the organizing principles, in Michelson’s work. However, since Michelson’s *Third Bank of the River* comments on the border crossings of three distinct political entities—Canada, the Akwesasne Mohawk, and the United States—it would be interesting for readers to learn about this work in comparison with other contemporary Indigenous artworks that address border issues, such as Postcommodity’s monumental *Repellent Fence* (2015).<sup>5</sup> Mithlo’s interpretations of photographic works, such as Emily Arthur’s *Re-Remembering (Not History)* (2015) (51–54, 60) and Tom Jones’s works such as *North American Landscape* (2013) (63–66), *Ho-Chunk People* (1998–2000), or his newer work *Strong Unrelenting Spirits* (2015–present) (170–73), are more detailed and presented in the context of other photographers’ works. They demonstrate the artists’ approach of truth-telling (63) and the use of the photographic process as a theme in itself. By placing these contemporary works in context of her family history and in contrast to historic photographs by non-Native photographers, Mithlo demonstrates that these artists actively engage in the reshaping and rewriting of history by reappropriating historic photographs of their tribal members. *Knowing Native Arts* is written for readers committed to the study of Native arts and especially the history of Native photography. In addition, Mithlo’s essays expose and debate the marginalization of Native arts today. Her book is a highly recommended addition to all art libraries.

Both Deloria’s and Mithlo’s publications are written from the perspective of senior academics during a dynamic era of Indigenous self-determination. *Becoming Mary Sully* and *Knowing Native Arts* are also both deeply personal books that blend family and tribal experiences with significant scholarship and reflection on the field of modern and contemporary Native American art. Both authors criticize colonial

art historical models and museum practices that only present Indigenous art in an anthropological context and exclude Native artists from modern and contemporary art discourse. In the past, museums have exhibited their American Indian art collections separately from mainstream American art and incorporated them into departments such as Africa, the Americas, and Oceania, because all Indigenous objects were seen as primitive from an anthropological perspective. Through the art and story of the overlooked and almost forgotten Indigenous



modernist Mary Sully, Deloria makes the persuasive argument that the story of American modernism is incomplete without the voices of Native moderns, especially since their art also commented on the realities of their era. Similarly, Mithlo uses examples of works by contemporary Native artists Emily Arthur, Tom Jones, David Martine, and Alan Michelson, not only to claim their rightful space in mainstream contemporary art but also to emphasize the significance of their role as artists who reveal hidden histories, share Indigenous knowledge, and use art as communication tools to address current global Indigenous realities. Mary Sully’s modernist art and Mithlo’s examples of contemporary Indigenous works invite readers to reenvision art and culture as interconnected systems that deserve to be interpreted within a larger philosophical context including the purpose of visual arts. Both

publications are necessary readings for those in the fields of Native art history, art history, and museum studies.

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#### NOTES

1. Sully’s only personality portrait of a visual artist was *Annie Stein*.
2. Dove writes about the spiritual in his art in his letter to Stieglitz of October 24, 1923, in *Dear Stieglitz, Dear Dove*, ed. Ann Morgan (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988), 97–98. See also Townsend Ludington, et al., *Seeking the Spiritual: The Paintings of Marsden Hartley* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 11–12.
3. In Europe for the first time, Hartley was seeking to establish himself as an American artist who, like other modernists at the time, drew inspiration for his paintings from collections of North American Indian artifacts—for example, at Berlin’s Museum für Völkerkunde. See also Gail Levin, “Marsden Hartley’s ‘Amerika’: Between Native American and German Folk Art,” *American Art Review* 5, no. 2 (Winter 1993): 122.
4. “Ga ni tha,” on Nancy Marie Mithlo’s website, accessed January 20, 2022, [https://nancymariemithlo.com/Radical\\_Curating\\_Indigenous\\_Art\\_at\\_the\\_Venice\\_Biennale/Venice\\_Biennale\\_2015/](https://nancymariemithlo.com/Radical_Curating_Indigenous_Art_at_the_Venice_Biennale/Venice_Biennale_2015/); “Wah.shka,” on Nancy Marie Mithlo’s website, accessed January 20, 2022, [https://nancymariemithlo.com/Radical\\_Curating\\_Indigenous\\_Art\\_at\\_the\\_Venice\\_Biennale/Venice\\_Biennale\\_2017/index.html](https://nancymariemithlo.com/Radical_Curating_Indigenous_Art_at_the_Venice_Biennale/Venice_Biennale_2017/index.html).
5. Madalen Claire Benson, “Stitching the Wound: Land-Based Gestures of Healing and Resistance in the Work of Postcommodity and Maureen Gruben,” *Environment, Space, Place* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 1–24.

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