

Do images matter? Specifically, are troublesome images, inaccurate and demeaning of racial and ethnic groups, harmless? Could all those bare-breasted warriors on horseback and Indian princesses on cubes of margarine really have substantial material consequences? With the advent of new and more affordable technologies such as digital cameras that can instantly capture and reproduce images across the web, the proliferation of cable networks, and the absolute fluidity with which consumers recognize visual prompts (logos, brands, icons, mascots, celebrity faces), it would seem that the ability to read these conventional representations might advance beyond a literal signifier level. With more images to process daily, has the American public achieved a more sophisticated level of visual literacy? Or do these signifiers continue to reproduce and reify the old one-dimensional standards of squaw and buck? What do Native people make of false representations in popular culture, and how does this impact the contemporary Native American art world?

The debates surrounding Native American representations reflect vastly different perspectives. Drawing from my research and interviews with Native artists over the past twenty years, I have identified two primary ways to think about stereotypical images—mentalist and realist. The mentalist approach dismisses stereotypes as harmless play or as inert advertisements for consumer goods, sports teams, or entertainment. Realists argue that images have consequences—bias in sports imagery, children’s literature, or clothing advertisements results in psychological damage or even physical violence.

This essay is an attempt to define a critical indigenous arts theory by exposing how these divergent attitudes inform the ways we understand popular culture. My work utilizes news articles, film, photography, the internet, fine arts, academic scholarship, and, importantly, the voices of those who produce Native American imagery. I have

A Realist View of Image Politics Reclamation of the “Every Indian”

by Nancy Marie Mithlo

After the White Man Came, 2001
 Marcus Amerman, Gwendolen Cates
 Photograph, 15 × 11 in.





Fig. 52 *Land O Bucks, Land O Fakes, Land O Lakes*, 2006
David Bradley
Acrylic on paper over wood, 24 × 42 × 24 in.

chosen to focus on the perspectives and life experiences of Native women working in the arts because I find their opinions to be especially valuable in understanding communal values. A multigenerational quality of concern characterizes their viewpoints on the arts, rather than a short-term concern with economic returns only. The reader will find that I favor realist interpretations of stereotypes, advocate for collective rights, and accept the employment of stereotypes as productive tools of communication. This acceptance of the utility of false images places me in the category of a “soft” realist, for while I am troubled by stereotypes, I do not advocate total eradication of demeaning icons because of their utility and use by Indians and non-Indians as a means of conveying cultural information across divides of race and class.

Should we be concerned by the “Land O’Lakes” Indian maiden (Fig. 52) adorning our butter? Mentalists contend that there are more important things to spend capital (emotional, physical, political) on than addressing image politics. In this frame of reference, all visual references are purely cognitive and therefore ultimately inconsequential.¹ The real things that matter are economic development, political standing, and access to health care and housing. A 2006 guest columnist writing in *Indian Country Today* under the title “Free Speech: Another Side of the ‘Redskin’ Debate,” put it this way: “I challenge all of us to put the same amount of energy (time and emotion), resources (money for lawsuits, etc.) and effort (drumming up support and blasting those not in agreement) to finding new and innovative solutions to the real reservation issues of drugs, gangs, unemployment, alcoholism, suicides, etc.”²

A realist might counter that sexualized images of Native women do contribute to the general idea of Native women as objects—willing, available, and consumable. One needs only to look at online Halloween boutiques to see

how powerfully this image gets translated into the play-acting that the American public so enjoys (the "Tribal Tease" outfit is especially telling). A quick internet search reveals that while all women might be said to be coerced into sexualized fictional roles for Halloween, Native American women in particular are singled out by ethnicity or race more often for this special appropriation. Realists can cite related statistics, such as the report by the National Congress of American Indians that states Native women are three times more likely to be sexually assaulted than white women.³ Surely these concerns should also count as "real reservation issues."

An easy answer to the problems of inaccurate, insensitive, and harmful images might be to suggest that Native people themselves provide the visual representations of exoticness so desired in sports, cars, films, toys, and yes, Halloween costumes. Certainly tribes can and do manufacture and circulate self-exploitative images. The Mashantucket Pequot tribe's skimpy outfits for female casino employees have famously led to use of the term "Pocahoochies."

Yet, self-inscription in Native America is no less problematic than false representations by non-Indians. Take the current controversy that has developed as a result of the National Collegiate Athletic Association's resolution to ban disparaging Indian mascots from NCAA tournaments but allow Indian mascots for teams that receive permission from local tribes.⁴ Certainly economic motivation has led to a lack of internal resolution about the appropriate use of "primitive" imagery. Rather than seek consistency of Native image production in a regulatory fashion, I'll strive in this essay to describe the contours of representational politics as they present themselves in particular contexts.

Problems of Race

To talk about Indian art, you must talk about race. Indian arts demand an engagement with painful and, for some, confusing concepts, such as political sovereignty, indigenous legal rights, false representations, and histories of genocide. These very real manifestations of difference are premised on the articulation of racial difference. The difficulty of moving race to an overt categorization rather than a covert reference is the hesitancy to fully address the legacy of American conquest and domination.⁵ Although the American public might prefer to be entertained by picturesque and docile Native nations or alternately shocked by the more exotic and brutal aspects of indigenous histories (as I write this, Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* film is being released), it is clear at the turn of this new millennium that willful ignorance of, and complacency in, historically racist policies are all too evident to be ignored.

Part of the problem in understanding contemporary Indian arts is that the topic of race has been deemed an unacceptable variant to bring to the fore. Other ethnic artists can appear to leave the race question behind and move successfully into the mainstream. Consider curator Thelma Golden's famous declaration of "post-black," which managed to establish the whole field of contemporary African American and diasporic arts as open for serious contemplation.⁶ A similar strategy has been attempted in Native American arts by individual artists such as Jimmie Durham, but it did not constitute a movement; there was no momentum behind his rejection of Native identity.⁷

While offering apparent freedom from constrictive categories imposed from the outside, a negation of ethnicity also implies a negation of history. This is the sense in which art historian Michael Harris asserts that "post-black" descriptives are problematic: "to suggest that race is no longer visualized, meaningful, or problematic seems

incorrect and fanciful. The apparent danger is forgetfulness of the power race exerts, even in the denial of its existence.⁸ In this manner, the “abandonment of an ethnic frame . . . mov[es] the artist into a frame that, by its seeming invisibility, closely resembles the way naturalized whiteness functions.”⁹

The obvious key difference between Indian arts and the arts of any other perceived minority group in America is that “Native American” designates not only a racial / ethnic category but a sovereign political status as well. These potent attributes are not easily dismissed, cannot be easily dismissed. As author Eva Marie Garrouette reminds her readers, there are real consequences in terms of loss of rights that accrue to Native American citizenship (often tied to “blood quantum”). She notes that “the ultimate and explicit federal intention was to use the blood quantum standard as a means to liquidate tribal lands and to eliminate government trust responsibility to tribes along with entitlement programs, treaty rights and reservations. Indians would eventually . . . become citizens indistinguishable from all other citizens.”¹⁰ While artists of other ethnic backgrounds may find it beneficial to variously claim or reject identity constructs, the repercussions are greater for Native Americans in reference to access to rights and resources.

Gender Dialogues

The addition of gender to discussions of race necessarily complicates the perceptions that the public has of Native American women and consequently the perceptions they have of themselves. Cherokee leader Wilma Mankiller’s 2004 anthology, *Every Day Is a Good Day*, observes that the “appalling lack of accurate information about indigenous women fuels negative stereotypes. Television, film, and print media often portray indigenous women as asexual

drudges or innocent children of nature,” concluding that in the larger society, “the power, strength, and complexity of indigenous women are rarely acknowledged or recognized.”¹¹ Native women’s voices, then, add particularly important insights to notions of image politics not only as counternarratives to prevailing norms, but also as a reflection of indigenous ideologies, such as communalism and politicization.

To claim identity beyond the princess / squaw, Native women artists create sites of knowledge production; they enact a cultured identity that embraces the communal, even as that act alienates them from trendy dialogues of fine-arts cultural hybridity. This procultural act ensures that Native women and their communities receive continued acknowledgment as sovereign entities, eligible for recognition as indigenous nations, whereas individualistic or hybrid identity claims actually jeopardize this standing. This female affiliation with the communal is why an indigenous knowledge systems approach is an appropriate interpretative tool for Native women’s arts production.

Despite the prevailing acceptance of homogenized global sensibilities in media productions, many Native American and other indigenous artists continue to articulate a sovereign, bounded, and discrete identity based on land, family, and memory. A continued sense of separateness, fully positioned in the unique status of tribal nations and their special relationship to the federal government, prevails. This boundedness, however, should not be interpreted as static; belonging is not enforced but rather employed according to political, technical, economic, and educational developments and changes in the world at large. Both material and ideological constructs enable communal paradigms rather than individualistic or gendered identities to rise to the fore. As Nora Naranjo-Morse (Fig. 53) surmises, these strategic choices had everything to do with state practices of control and confinement:



Fig. 53 *Thought Harvest, ED 10, 2006*
Nora Naranjo-Morse
Bronze, 35 × 9 × 9 in.

I think, the bottom line was, get these Indians to be a part of the mainstream. You know, we'll do what we need to do to get them to be dependent, to be consumers. And to be dependent on this structure. Because I think when you are farming, when you are building, you have to think. I mean, you have to think! You know? And the most dangerous thing is to think. To have women think? Oh god! To have children start thinking about how to build their own home, how to cultivate their own space, how to cultivate themselves. I think the people in the know who knew that the system we have was just an incredible organization because it was holistic. It encompassed religion. It encompassed the economy. It encompasses just everything. I think it works so well that it was very frightening. Why else would they come into the kivas and call us heathens and hit people and make us go underground with our ceremonies? Why were they killing us? Why were they redistributing the equal power in our communities that we had between the men and the women so that the men could then start governing and be more powerful than the women? There were reasons for all of that.

I think it's real easy now to get in your car and drive to Los Alamos and work as a secretary, and type someone else's letter. I'm not putting that down. I'm just saying that's what has happened for these people. That's where we're at now. That's the reality. But I think, it's easier to do that than to have to think, "Wait a minute, why did they do that?" Because then you start building installations that question it. Then you start saying, "Um, I don't know if I want to do that." Then you become a problem. And if it's only one person, OK. Oh my god, if you have lots of people then I think that gets a little troublesome.¹²

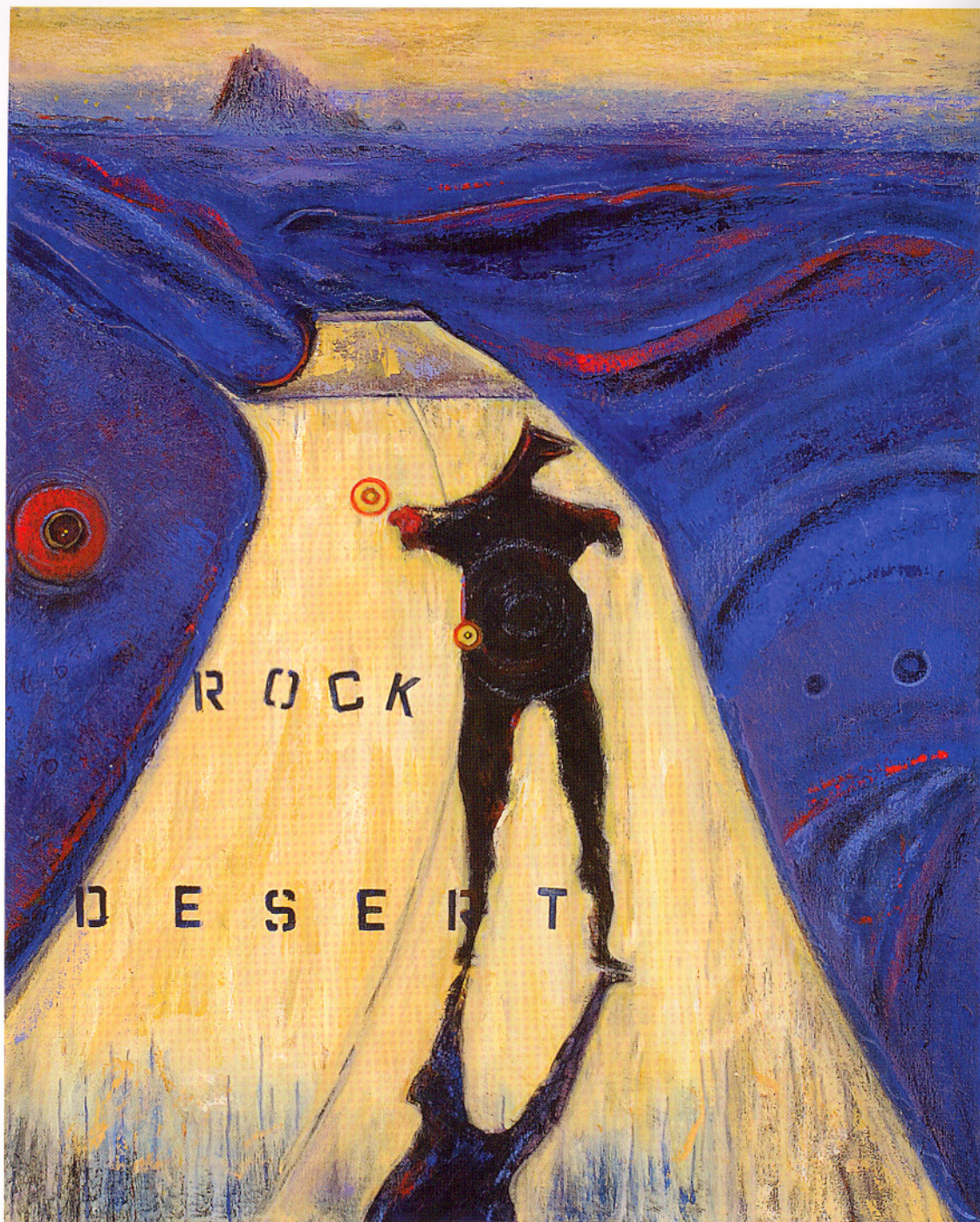


Fig. 54 *Rock Desert (Desert Rock)*, 2007
Gloria Emerson
Acrylic and oil sticks on canvas, 36 × 24 in.

Naranjo-Morse's philosophical orientation as an artist may be read as an exercise in indigenous knowledge. Her decision, in her words, "to think"—to not be a consumer dependent on the structure of a capitalistic wage economy, but to engage in traditional behaviors of making structures (homes, installation art)—enacts indigenous knowledge systems. Making art is Naranjo-Morse's personal strategy for pursuing an anticolonial project. Problematically, this strategy of resistance is simultaneously defined by the U.S. capitalist economy within a web of economic constraints and opportunities.

Diné artist Gloria Emerson (Fig. 54) articulates her motivation as a producer of Native imagery as a personal and communal endeavor. If one looks closely at the articulation of self and community highlighted in Emerson's passage below, it is clear that she locates herself as an active agent within her society. Her decision to paint, while appearing to be beyond the borders of Navajo experience, is also a highly political act.

I worked most of my life in social work, in education, administration, writing proposals, that sort of thing. And I always had been told by others that . . . the programs that I created or I administered were always creative and energetic, and so on. And I knew that somewhere along the way that I started to buy paints and canvas, and I started to work with clay and so on, but never formally trained, and it just started to grow on me during the '80s that I really had to do something for myself. Because everything that I had done was outwardly oriented. And I thought it was time for me. Time to turn inward, and to explore the inner world . . . not me, as an individual, but me as a phenomenon, me as a part of a tribe, and the changes we were going through. So, while I feel I am a case study, of what's going on

throughout the reservation, and I needed to get that out, and to document it in some way.¹³

Emerson's desire to capture and to convey her embrace of a tribal sensibility is clearly not an individualistic endeavor. She describes her artistic practice as an internal and personal one, yet this process is politically significant as well. She is, in her words, "a case study, of what's going on throughout the reservation."

The cultural values of gender and economics in the arts are both constitutive of, and reactive to, established paradigms of knowledge. These multiple sites of knowledge have the opportunity to be contested in the social arena of arts production and consumption, thereby allowing for highly charged articulations of identity claims. Qualities such as femaleness, maleness, isolation, belonging, and community find voice in these moments where conflicting ideologies meet.

I argue that if contemporary Indian arts are to be considered as a political manifestation of cultural identity, communal referents (tribal, pan-tribal, family) therefore take precedence over individual achievements (prestige, individual advancement). In this aspect and according to these frames of reference, the contemporary women artists interviewed exhibited an uncompromising allegiance to their extended lives as mothers, tradition-bearers, and wage earners.

Realist Imagery—Representations Matter
My research, teaching, and activism stem from the premise that images are essential in constructing and conveying personhood. As image-makers, Native American artists struggle with the economic, cultural, and historical exploitation, erasure, and control of their cultural icons. Demeaning oral ("one little, two little"), visual (Land O'Lakes),



Fig. 55 *Woman in Stone*, 2006
Roxanne Swentzell
Stone, 8½ × 9 × 13½ in.

and dramatic (Chief Illiniwek mascot) expressions are ingrained American symbols that actively “work” to degrade and diminish personhood. This colonial legacy is often gendered, with the Native women as “alter” or other. As Michael Taussig relates, “In the visual scheme of things, it is not the men but the Indian women who are alter, and here everything pivots on releasing the spirit powers of appearance.”¹⁴

Santa Clara artist Roxanne Swentzell (Fig. 55) relates how this formula works in practice:

I remember one Indian market I got to my booth, it was still kind of dark and there were all these people there and I was still trying to wake up because it was still early. And I was preparing myself to open the door and get out and face all these people and, um,

and I had not put on my shoes yet because it was too early. So I decided I will just unload without my shoes so I don’t trip. So I got out and I started unloading and then it became this thing that I was this barefoot sort of artist person. It fed into these people’s ideas of who I am. In their mind [was] that I was so earthy or, so, and they really liked that. And maybe I am and I don’t see that. But it wasn’t done for an image, it was only [for a] practical reason. And if I . . . wanted to wear something fancy for instance and I showed up maybe in some heels or like that, I think people would be very upset that I’m not keeping to my image of what they have of me. And that’s another box.¹⁵

Swentzell’s narrative indicates a self-awareness of how her physical appearance supports ideas of cultural authenticity even as she diffuses its power by satire. Clearly the Indian princess/squaw, as demeaning and disturbing as this image often is, serves a deep-seated need in the American consciousness. Rayna Green attributes the prevalence

of Indian stereotypes to the “xenophobic sociocultural framework into which they were channeled”¹⁶ in American culture, noting the Indian woman “finds herself burdened with an image that can only be understood as dysfunctional.”¹⁷

The “power of appearance” in contemporary Native imagery relates to Native women artists both as people and to the work they produce. The Indian woman embodies national ideologies, popular culture, and tribal identity in her person and her products. This double expectation, both that you be Indian in physical appearance and that your work conform to Indian art standards, could be argued to exist in equal strength both for Native men and women, but it is the women who bear the responsibility as communal artists more so than the men. They are more likely to be cast as the “cultural other.”

While ignorance and racism may account for the persistence of the princess/squaw complex, I question the premise that more accurate data will necessarily lead to its demise. This optimistic view—that as public knowledge of Native American communities increases through more accurate and sensitive portrayals in the media, prejudice will diminish—is a mentalist reading based on attitude change alone, with no real material consequence attached. If one then watches a compelling film that confirms the plight of Native Americans as a virtuous one, a non-Indian viewer might feel more disposed to thinking twice about retelling a racist joke. He/she may even purchase a t-shirt or calendar with Native themes and feel progressive and tolerant.

Yet, how does this progressive ideal manifest itself when there are material consequences—economic development, rights to resources, even critiques of genocide? Most studies of stereotypes focus on the psychological harm inflicted upon the subject population; however iconic the ideals, the clusters of expectations surrounding Native women artists

also have professional consequences that should not be overlooked. As social scientists Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins remind us, images are “never irrelevant, never unconnected to the world of actual social relations.”¹⁸

Pan-Indianism Reconsidered

It would seem easy enough to assign blame for racist typecasting to the power of seamless pan-Indian attributes. Devon Mihesuah states that “the two most prevalent images of Native women—the princess and the squaw drudge—still affect Native women’s self-esteem.”¹⁹ Yet are these ideals monolithic? Or consistent over time? Scholars Jeffrey Hanson and Linda Rouse found that while stereotypes are “deeply embedded in American historical and contemporary consciousness,” new pluralistic understandings of Indians may emerge alongside more traditional stereotypical paradigms of Indians.²⁰ Their findings proposed that demeaning stereotypes will be less prevalent in direct correlation to the diminishment of pan-tribal, homogeneous representations of Indians. In this scenario, non-Indians would be less likely to maintain negative Indian stereotypes if they were knowledgeable about a specific tribe, rather than just being exposed to pan-tribal, generic Indian references.

Their initial analysis proved false, however, for a subsequent study by the same researchers demonstrated that negative stereotyping continued as a result of status-based prejudice associated with competition over scarce resources, despite individual knowledge of particular tribes or people. In sum, a realist orientation prevailed because actual knowledge itself (a mentalist approach) did not alter negative appraisals when one ethnic or racial group was competing with another for social and economic resources. The controversy cited by the authors involved Chippewa treaty fishing rights in Wisconsin, where

emotional anti-Indian sentiments were expressed by non-Indian commercial and sports fishermen. Negative personal stereotypes (Indians are lazy, lack ambition) were articulated in higher percentages in areas with greater Native American populations.²¹ Status-based prejudice in this study is directly linked to resource allocation, not to monolithic ideas of identities. The mentalist approach—that a sensitive, fully informed America will relinquish legacies of hate and discrimination—does not apply when more realist concerns, such as access to material resources, are at play.

How does this sociological study inform our concern with art and images? Applied to the contemporary Indian arts world, mentalist codes work and prejudice is less evident when Native arts are exhibited by tribally specific designations and segregated from competition with other arts. Indian markets, traditionally known for the exhibition of tribally specific crafts, fit this definition of segregated contexts, for in these environments there is no competition with non-Indian artists. By contrast, when contemporary Indian arts enter the field of serious fine arts, competition for resources comes into play and racist practices (both covert and overt) emerge. Some examples may serve to illustrate how this formula works in practice.

The 2002 exhibition *Staging the Indian*, at the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, featured the work of six contemporary Native American artists contrasted with historic photographs by Edward Curtis. Curtis is notable for his lifelong preoccupation with “capturing” the “vanishing” Indian. I exposed the problems inherent in this comparative methodology in a review of the exhibition in which I deemed this particular approach “re-active.”²² The exhibition methodology, however, was not the concern of *Daily Gazette* reviewer Carl Strock in his article titled “High Art and Low at the Tang.”²³ It was the art itself and its presence in the college’s “\$10 million temple of culture in the center of campus”

that disturbed him. Calling the Native artists (Marcus Amerman, Judith Lowry, James Luna, Nora Naranjo-Morse, Shelley Niro, and Bently Spang) “alleged Native American artists—practitioners who clearly are, if nothing else, sophisticated enough to have insinuated themselves into the high-class art world of the white man,” Strock then asserts “they have as much to do with American Indian culture as a beachball in China has to do with Chinese culture.” Clearly, the exhibition breached key beliefs of who Indian artists are and where Indian art ought to belong.

Simultaneously, the segmentation of contemporary arts as distinct from the arts of any community has been labeled “an odd kind of segregational racism” by critics. The terms “ghettoize,” “stereotyped,” and “political,” for example, were mobilized in critiques of the 1991 traveling exhibition *Our Land/Ourselves: American Indian Contemporary Artists*, curated by Flathead artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. Writing for Albany’s *Times Union*, art reviewer Thomas Lail enacted the standard contradiction of both demanding the work look Indian, asking “Where’s the culture?” while simultaneously decrying the premise of an exhibition that features only Native American art. He asserts: “The very idea of presenting an exhibit such as this is controversial since it works to segregate and ghettoize the works rather than present them as works on equal standing with other works.”²⁴

Both reviewers rejected the parameters of contemporary Native art exhibits on the basis of specific racial and fine arts mandates. While the *Staging the Indian* reviewer denied the authenticity of the exhibitors as Native and as artists, the *Our Land/Ourselves* reviewer demanded that the artists be both Natives and artists, defined as contradictions in terms. Both critiques deny the construct of pan-Indianism, or non-tribally specific arts safely exhibited as crafts. Clearly, the reviewers indicate, Native artists, if they are Native at all, must be distinct tribal representatives

whose work conforms to historical norms. The allowance of multitribal referents, even the use of materials deemed not authentic, is enough to negate their ethnic and professional status. This approach enforces the either/or argument, whereby one may be one-dimensionally Native in ethnic reference and medium or not-Native in ethnic identification and medium. The common phrase "I'm an artist who happens to be Indian" does not in any way serve to question this false dichotomy, but rather strengthens the intolerant and oppressive intent of controlling Native identity in safe and nonthreatening ways.

The realist critique intersects significantly with pan-tribalism in the following ways. Realism in this instance references acceptance of modern engagement in urban and hybrid (read pan-Indian) environments where any artistic medium (film, as opposed to, say, basketry) may be adopted by Native artists. Mentalist codes argue that authenticity is linked only to tribally specific artists who work in non-modernist settings such as crafts fairs. Realism equates to pan-Indianism as a mentalist framework equates to traditional exhibition practices. It is far easier to assert that images have no real import, cannot cause damage, as the mentalist approach does, when the type of artwork referenced does not challenge established categories but stays safely in the crafts genre of tribal arts. Nativeness, in this schema, additionally signifies relinquishment of participation in individualizing environments, such as the fine arts world where tribalism has no place.

Clearly, notions of purity and containment are at play in these critiques, where clusters of attitudes that define "being Indian" are presented as unquestionable. Anthropologist Mary Douglas reminds us that concepts of purity and danger always involve symbolic systems. By defying standard categorization, contemporary Native artists take the form of matter out of place: "the by-product of a systematic ordering of classification of matter, in so far as

ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements."²⁵

The fine arts environment is acceptable in this perspective only if a Native artist becomes an individualist, a white man, thus maintaining the unspoken systematic classification. If artists present as both Indian and modern, they disrupt systems of reception as well as compete for scarce resources, thus activating racist stereotyping.

The Right to Be Ethnic

One might productively ask, then, what is to be done?

With such an imbalance in power to alter these controlling receptions of Indian art and identity, how does one begin to work toward a more humane understanding? For many scholars and activists, the answer has been to censor the ignorant visual and verbal depictions of Native Americans through either eradication or shame-based discourse. While these strategies may seem liberating in their intent, often the ignorance of wrong-headed thinking about Indian race politics continues, with demeaning commentaries safely operating in a segregated fashion in a covert manner. I argue that the enduring nature of stereotypes indicates that essentialized images are vital in the interaction of diverse groups. The tendency for this essentialization to be viewed in primarily negative terms, as the majority of the literature on stereotypes does, inhibits alternative interpretations of its use.

Pan-tribal or essentialized images are not the culprit of social oppression—in fact it is the "every Indian" image that often provides the opportunity for a political critique of demeaning typecasting. Imagery and ideas do exert pressure on exoticized others and should be considered as real constraints, yet they can also be enabling. The existence and use of broad generalized categories of reference in itself is not inherently damaging and can be usefully mobilized in inter- and intragroup dynamics. Hanson and



Fig. 56 *Some Kind of Buckaroo*, 1990
Jean LaMarr
Serigraph, 24 × 36 in.

Rouse's assertion that "differences between ethnic groups . . . can be accented and/or exaggerated by racial and ethnic stereotypes" makes sense in this analysis only if we also consider the additional possibility that these differences, as expressed by stereotypes, also have other potentials, including self-inscription, political mobilization, and the enhancement of communication between disparate groups.²⁶

For example, consider the following comment by Pit River Paiute artist Jean LaMarr (Fig. 56) as she critiques the difference she perceives in art-making values:

Well, I don't think monetary achievement is my ultimate goal, even though I would like to feel comfortable. I hear a lot of Indian artists [say], "I want to be rich, and I want to be the R. C. Gorman, or the Fritz Scholder, or the ultimate." To me that's

almost a White man's philosophy, or a White man's artist goal.²⁷

LaMarr's ability to articulate what she perceives as a proper way of approaching the arts in a Native context is dependent on comparison with white man's behavior for economic gain alone. The dismissed categorization of white man mobilizes the positive categorization of what Indian artists should strive for—community responsibility and mentorship. In this instance, Indians who act like white men are suspect.

Discussions of what constitutes a breach in proper behavior in the arts are often animated by the offensive Native images produced by non-Indians, as in artist Laura Fragua's narrative:

I saw this Hopi, this sculpture of a maiden with a butterfly whorl. And that's a maiden, that's a young girl. She's a virgin. And they had this . . . this sculpture was this woman, but she must have had a bustier on and it pushed her boobs up and she had this

big old cleft and her manta came down and it was slit down to the middle. Hopi maiden! That's a maiden! It doesn't look like a maiden to me!

You have to know what, because you are a part of that culture, you know what the dos and don'ts [are]. And because the people who did the artwork depict Indian people doing things, they've got it all wrong.²⁸

The articulation of Pueblo values in this example is enacted in response to the faulty ideas of others. This oppressive imagery, as hurtful and clearly wrong as it is, has triggered a conversation about what is acceptable in the Pueblo community (the dos and don'ts), what codes a Native reading might reveal (the whorl signifies virginity), and the expression of a political position (wrongness). Each of these values is effectively communicated via false images—stereotypes. Theorist Richard Handler argues that

groups do not have essential identities; indeed, they ought not to be defined as things at all. For any imaginable social group—defined in terms of nationality, class, locality, or gender—there is no definitive way to specify “who we are,” for “who we are” is a *communicative process* [my emphasis] that includes many voices and varying degrees of understanding and, importantly, misunderstanding.²⁹

Likewise, Linda Martin Alcoff states that the critique of identity (its “negative valence”) as essentializing has “failed to answer the challenge posed by accounts that understand identity as a *process* [my emphasis] of meaning making.”³⁰

This communicative process is a key consideration for how Native women grapple with the imposed identity references of others and thus form new self-referents in response. Instead of rejecting or eliminating the false

stereotypes of squaw or princess, human actors can and do fashion new referents, positioning themselves in unique, complex, and layered selves that draw from, but are not fully inhibited by, the imposing ignorance of otherness. This reworking is indicative of creative adaptations and key response methods for grappling with the impact of Westernization and as such should be considered as an essential component of indigenous knowledge systems at play.

Binaries and Alterity

I advance a theory that claims that the “othering” in identity politics, stereotypes, and role referents can be an essential component of self-inscription. This processual view of identity does not claim to explain identity formation but sheds light on the communicative aspect of identity. It is in this communicative function that we conceptualize our varied positions, our conceptions of reality. In the words of Satya P. Mohanty, “our identities are ways of making sense of our experiences. Identities are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways.”³¹

I have found it useful in my work on stereotypes to reference the twin concepts of binaries and alterity. Simply stated, binaries are the conceptual categories that are used to delineate self from others. Binaries are like fences between neighbors: my property ends here, yours begins there. Binaries require segmentation, a dichotomous reading of selfhood that in itself does not indicate an oppressive agency. Like fences, dichotomies exist as inert terms that are not to be willfully interpreted as polarized arguments.³² This is the manner in which I read stereotypes, as communicative devices of expressing boundaries.

Similarly, alterity connotes “the mode of division of a field.”³³ When Native artists refer to “white man thinking” or when collectors refer to Indian aesthetics, a compare-and-contrast ideology is often enacted. A white man is

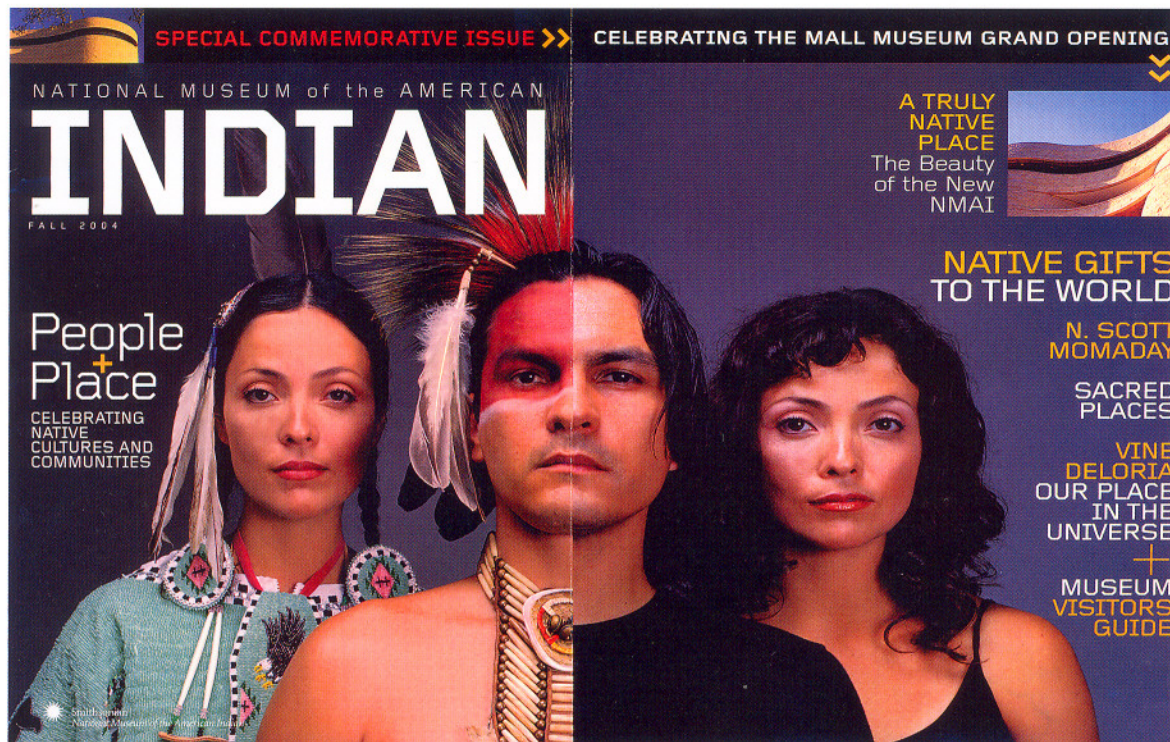


Fig. 57 Cover, *National Museum of the American Indian* magazine, fall 2004

what an Indian is not, Indian art is something that non-ethnically specific art is not. Alterity has been described by Ernest van Alphen as a “screen for the imagination,” a “code,” and “a device of meaning-production”:

The only way to know the other is by letting the other speak about me, by giving the other the position of “I.” When “I” speak about the other, I remain in fact caught in the process of defining or demarcating my self-image. The other is used as a screen on which ideals or terrors can be projected, or as locations to which problematic feelings about self can be displaced.³⁴

How is the theory of alterity manifest in Native communities? Robert Berkhofer’s 1979 analysis, *The White Man’s Indian*, demonstrates that white images of Indians tell more about white attitudes and perceptions than elucidating any realities of Indian life. In this “paradigm of polarity,” whites assume uniqueness as classifiers and

Native Americans as classified only through the content of specific imagery that persists over time, “since Whites primarily understood the Indian as antithesis to themselves, then civilization and Indianness as they defined them would forever be opposites.”³⁵

Alterity is perhaps the central organizing principle in assessing Native American imagery. A close reading of the inaugural magazine cover for the National Museum of the American Indian (Fig. 57) evidences the construction of binaries at play, suggesting potent codes of reference. The exterior cover of this commemorative 2004 issue depicts a direct reference to conforming ideals about Indianness. The Native man appears in the foreground bare-chested and, like the fully clothed Native woman in the background, facing the camera. Obvious interpretations of the woman as subservient and of the man as virile may be made, but we will focus our analysis on the gaze of the subjects toward the viewer.

While a frontal pose utilizing eye contact may seem to signify a desire or availability for communication across the printed page, visual theorists suggest the opposite—to look out at the viewer represents the accessibility of the “other” depicted. The head-on camera gaze suggests



Fig. 58 *Angel DeCora on steps of College Hall, Smith College, n.d.*
4¾ × 3¾ in.



Fig. 59 *Angel DeCora in native dress, n.d.*
Photographic print, tinted brown, 6½ × 4¼ in.

documentary aims and is more often associated with scientific inquiries and criminal documentation than portraiture. Scholars Lutz and Collins note that “those who are culturally defined as weak—woman, children, people of color, the poor, the tribal rather than the modern, those without technology—are more likely to face the camera, the more powerful to be represented looking elsewhere.”³⁶

Once the reader fully opens the magazine, an inner cover appears, depicting the same Native man and woman in Western dress. The Native woman remains behind the man, but in this pose, she is the bare one of the two, her loose, shoulder-length hair suggestively grazing a form-fitting tank top. What codes are read in this set of images? Clearly the Native woman depicts the princess (outside cover) and squaw (inside cover); the man the warrior (outside cover) and the buck (inside cover). It is certain that the National Museum of the American Indian intended a positive reading of Native Americans as real people, just like

you and me, even though they do wear traditional outfits at powwows and museum openings. This universalist intent draws directly on the binary of Native/non-Native, other/one-of-us. Through the use of alterity, readers may project themselves upon the Native subjects of the inside cover—“this could be me, it could be my friend”—while the outside, public cover calls attention to the exotic nature of Indianness that cannot be easily adopted by any reader. The direct eye contact may appear to invite readings of accessibility and communication, but it also signals the possibility of ownership: a nonthreatening otherness that may be safely possessed.

The use of what is commonly termed the “contrast picture” is indicative of the binary references “primitive” and “civilized.” Note that there are only two worlds in this equation—no complicating examples of hybridity spoil the clear reading available to the viewer. This constructed image visually represents the decades-long work to

establish, organize, fund, build, and administer the first national museum of its kind devoted to living Native peoples of North and South America. As the central visual code of reference, this key image draws directly upon existing stereotypes as the most effective communicative device for reaching its audience. Why is this equation of alterity so pervasive, so consistent?

Scholar Edward Spicer states that the formation and maintenance of persistent identity systems is "intimately bound up with the conditions of opposition," adding "it appears that the oppositional process is the essential factor in the formation and development of the persistent identity system."³⁷

I wish to juxtapose for a moment the photographs on page 119 as a testimony to the malleability and historicism of the contrast-picture technique. These photographs are of Angel DeCora, a Winnebago woman who attended Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, from 1892 to 1896. DeCora's life achievements were substantial—after Smith, she studied at Drexel Institute and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts School, worked professionally in New York and Boston as a commercial illustrator, taught at Carlisle Indian School, and lectured internationally on Native arts at conferences held by the International Congress of Americanists, the National Education Association, and the Society of American Indians. In 1919, DeCora died of pneumonia in Northampton, where she was buried in an unmarked grave.

The image politics evidenced in DeCora's portraits (Figs. 58 and 59), taken some hundred years earlier than the NMAI cover, reflect as well the contrast of civilized and exotic other, but note here, importantly, that DeCora's gaze is averted from the camera; she makes no eye contact with the lens. Additionally her whole body is captured for the viewer, not a segmented body as in the NMAI photo set. The photographs of DeCora provide a context—the halls

of academia and the great outdoors—as contrasted with the solid gray backdrop of the Smithsonian photos. In both images DeCora is fully clothed and is not in apparent need of a male guardian. I suggest that DeCora's historic representations imply a more progressive political reading than the 2004 Smithsonian pairing.

Given the vastly different political climate of the early twentieth century, how do we account for the seemingly empowered stance, the privilege of looking away from the camera, the dignity of the clothing and hair? These very different sets of contrast pictures imply that the principles of realism, pan-Indianism, and stereotypes may be productively mobilized as inert communicative devices, free from overly oppressive readings suggested by the codes of analysis commonly tied to stereotypes. Their absolute free-floating availability as signifiers of vastly different times, places, and intended meanings indicates their malleability as well as their utility in conveying personhood and power (or lack of it).

Embrace the Stereotype

An alternative reading of the Indian stereotype calls for new analyses whereby the depiction of common imagery inspires productive actions. It is crucial that this freedom to interrogate icons of Indianness remains uncensored, for as I have argued, to do otherwise would inhibit the process of communicating and therefore understanding identity. A central aspect of detangling the collapsing of codes inherent in stereotyping is to understand how ethnic identities are conceptualized by Native American artists. How are the arts conceptualized by the producers themselves? What types of criticisms are useful for their practice?

While it is clear that contemporary Native arts today cannot be defined under the category of ethnographic or tribal arts, the field has still not reached the critical



Fig. 60 *Suite: INDIAN, Mars Thundercloud Gets a Calling*, 2002
Shelley Niro
Video still

assessment of fine arts museums and galleries. This is due, I think, to assumptions about the primacy of communal norms that are more likely to be expressed using terms such as “identity” or “culture”—descriptives that are not specific only to “small-scale” societies but could also be applied to any social unit—and to notions of timelessness. Native artists who move in both mainstream fine arts and rural reservation communities defy the dated analysis that strictly sees the tribal as separate in time and space from the modern.³⁸

The concept of Native Americans as mobile, contemporary, and, simultaneously, tribal has not yet been recognized by the non-Indian public. Although most Native artists would not inherently see themselves as insurmountably grappling with two foreign cultures—one traditional, one modern—their lives are still patterned and restricted by the ethnic qualifier “Indian” and the misconceptions of those unfamiliar with contemporary Native cultures. Do

these perceptions of others lead to self-inscription? More specifically, does the act of addressing these misconceptions fuel identity? If so, can even negative referents advance positive self-representation?

Images matter to these conversations because visual literacy is tied to cultural competency. Both the motivation to alter preconceived notions of the Native as well as the availability of counternarratives are strikingly missing from general discourse, yes. But the solution to a greater literacy in Native arts is not found in the kind or amount of information available. Elimination of derogatory stereotypes and an increase in more accurate media representations have been unquestionably understood as the standard cure for American ignorance. The resiliency of stereotyped images demonstrates that eradication alone is not an available or effective option.³⁹ An upsurge of more sensitive portrayals in print and media might allow for an altered stereotype, but stereotypes will still be employed, negating the substantial shifts in perception desired.

What must be accomplished, and what I think artists are trying to accomplish, is the engagement of flawed images as a means of capturing their power for alternate



Fig. 61 *Bambi Makes Some Extra Bucks at the Studio, 2002*
 America Meredith
 Acrylic on Masonite, 26½ × 32½ in.

readings. Until the utility of “institutionalized icons”⁴⁰ is dissected, their potency will remain high, and their circulation will certainly remain in place in mainstream culture.

An example of how iconic Native imaging is incorporated proactively can be found in the work of Shelley Niro. Her film *Mars Thundercloud Gets a Calling* (featured in the compilation *Suite: INDIAN*) (Fig. 60) depicts a young Native woman eagerly consuming all manner of Native identifiers, from posters, books, and beadwork to princess pageants.⁴¹ The character’s desperateness to be Indian is conveyed in a poignant and ironic manner. The effect is startling—aren’t only non-Indians supposed to be doing this crazy wannabe stuff? By allowing an identifiably Native woman to harbor the same doubts and resort to the same signifiers of feathers and fans that the non-Indian audience can imagine themselves doing, Niro breaks loose the precious safeguarding of tradition and allows for creative play about outward signifiers of identity. Niro’s work successfully conveys the inner doubts, ramblings, and everydayness of contemporary identity by embracing some pretty disturbing and everyday notions, such as Native people as craftsmen, Native people as homeless, Native people as entertainers. She takes the audience to its intended place of arrival and then takes it beyond that.

Another image that is useful to contemplate in reference to ironic adaptation of historic and limiting icons is America Meredith’s 2002 *Bambi Makes Some Extra Bucks at the Studio* (Fig. 61). The centerpiece of the work is a brilliant blue deer and his companion, a stern-looking female arts instructor who points at him with a lecturer’s stick, hand on hip, while diligent Indian art students work steadily at their canvases. The “gotcha” aspect of the work is its deliberately sarcastic reference to the Santa Fe Indian School’s genre of arts instruction, known alternately as the Dorothy Dunn School (named after its legendary instructor) or (derogatorily) the Bambi School of Painting for its

flat, two-dimensional design-saturated style.⁴² Meredith brings the blue Bambi to life for us to consume, contemplate, and laugh about, even though the 1930s Indian School arts instruction is known to be coercive and controlling. If one were unable to render the blue Bambi, a critique would likewise not be possible.

While these reappropriations may be interpreted as reifying dichotomies of the individual and the collective, I suggest that their performances serve as a means of owning, controlling, and redirecting existing interpretative frameworks for subjective alternative ends.

The Indian art world demands more of the viewer than aesthetic contemplation alone. To fully engage in Indian arts, one must participate in a fairly rigorous intellectual exercise in which personal doubt may productively serve to further one’s depth of understanding. Counterintuitive measures such as an embrace of stereotypes, generic Indian identity, and realism are reasonable places to start the difficult process ahead.

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