Exhibition Review

IAIA ROCKS THE SIXTIES: THE PAINTING REVOLUTION AT THE INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN INDIAN ARTS. February 2 – September 30, 2001, Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, Santa Fe, New Mexico

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For nearly four decades, the United States government has sponsored a unique arts school whose sole purpose is to educate Native Americans. Although its institutional framework has developed over time from a Bureau of Indian Affairs high school to a congressionally supported tribal college, the mission of the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) has remained relatively consistent. It is surprising then, to note how little scholarship has been published on this native arts initiative, given its singular identity.[1]

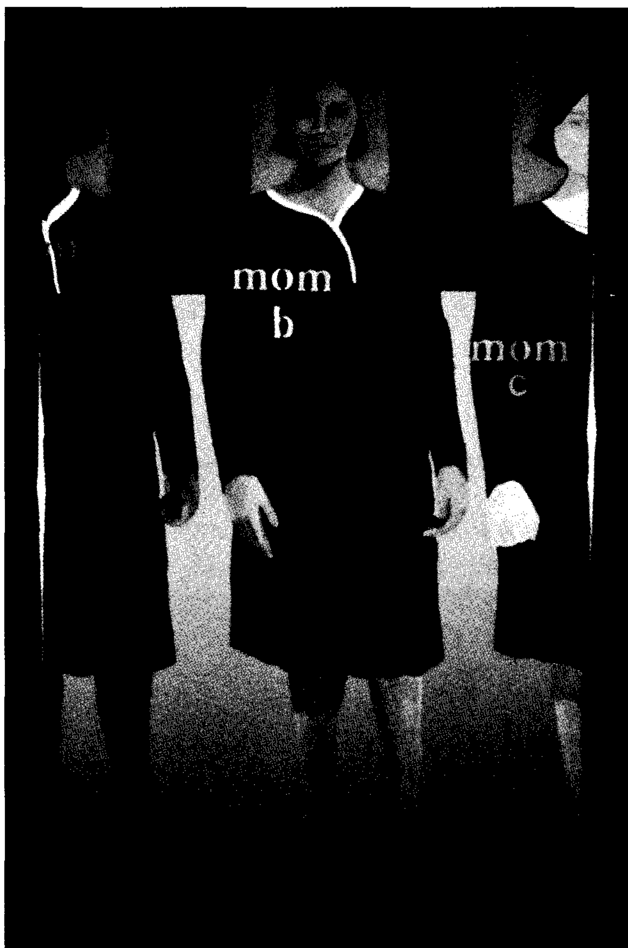
The Institute of American Indian Arts Museum has endeavored to address this void with its exhibit "IAIA Rocks the Sixties" conceived by guest curator Charleen Touchette. The exhibition features the work of 21 students producing works during the time known self-referentially as IAIA's "golden period." A contextual exhibit technique is utilized throughout the show, including recreated studio, library and dorm spaces in an effort to "evoke(s) a multi-sensory experience of what it looked, felt, and sounded like to be a painting student in this historic period." A small black and white television features period sitcoms along with clips of Woodstock, while an audiotape in the main exhibit hall plays Dylan and Hendrix. The ambience is further enhanced by a diner-style booth and a worn table with hand-made coffee cups and urn where visitors can sit and review scrap-book style catalogues of old IAIA press clippings and photos.

Touchette's accompanying essay lists three primary goals of the exhibit: 1) to recreate the excitement of an era defined as revolutionary "when both students and instructors participated in a rich exchange of artistic ideas" 2) "to highlight the quality and artistic merit of the paintings" and 3) to honor

1. *Instructor in Green* by T.C. Cannon. Photograph by Walter BigBee.

the IAIA instructors and the traditional artists of the students' home communities for their aesthetic influence upon the students' development. This last aim is accomplished by the exhibition of works by Fritz Scholder, Otellie Loloma, John Hoover and Allan Houser among others. Traditional arts are represented by exhibition of the Institute's ethnographic collections including a Nez Perce corn husk bag, Acoma pottery by Lucy Lewis, a traditional Cheyenne leather dress and several Navajo blankets.

The influence of traditional arts upon the aesthetic life of the school is most effectively demonstrated when illustrated with concrete examples.



2. *I'd Love My Mother...or White* by Alfred Youngman. Photograph by Larry Phillips.

One such display features several Navajo weavings in view of a horizontally striped painting by Fritz Scholder titled "New Mexico #21." This juxtaposition is within view of a T.C. Cannon painting titled "Instructor in Green." (Fig. 1) Cannon's work depicts a stylized seated figure of Scholder, (T.C.'s instructor) floating in front of what appears to be his "New Mexico #21" painting. Thus the weavings inspired the instructor's painting, which in turn inspired his student to illustrate both, utilizing a style of representation distinctive from either of his original influences. This cross-fertilization is evidence of the stimulating environment the curator intends to convey to the audience. Similar examples include the display of traditional beadwork by Jerry Ingram (a horse collar identified as a Crow tribal design) viewed in close proximity to a comparable geometric motif in a 1965 painting by George Crawford.

This display method of exhibiting an object which has aesthetic merit but is not classified as "fine art" alongside a work of similar design ostensibly defined as "art" is reminiscent of the many historical juxtapositions of "the primitive" with modern art – a history succinctly described in Thomas McEvilley's "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief."[2] McEvilley's concern with the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 exhibit "'Primitivism' in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" is one of apparent appropriation. He suggests that while MoMA attempts to validate modern art by demonstrating universal "affinities" with so-called primitive art, the opposite conclusion can also be drawn, that Modernism is derivative of tribal arts. IAIA President Emeritus Lloyd New succinctly draws out the implications of this suggestion in the "IAIA Rocks the Sixties" wall text, stating:

> What could be more abstract expressionist than the body of a hawk or other animal fetish mounted on a freely yellow ochre smeared Plains Indian war shield collage? What's more conceptual, demonstrational and performing than a Sioux Sun Dance? I like to toy with the idea that a lot of these 'schools' of art – abstraction, surrealism, etc. were invented by Native Americans long before the so-called 'modernists' – that when our young people move out, they are not forsaking their heritage, they are just reclaiming it.

Here we have what might have been the central thesis of "IAIA Rocks the Sixties" exhibit. What are the implications of tribal people establishing ownership over both the production of traditional arts and works that may be defined as modern and why are these categories so often seen to be mutually exclusive? Curator Touchette appears to embrace the notion that crossing over from tribal to modern idioms is a hard won accomplishment, yet, all evidence, including the works displayed and the artists' statements seems to lead the viewer to other conclusions. In other words, the stated goal #1 of recreating the excitement of the period is detrimental to the accompanying premise #3 that the traditional arts formed the base for modernist endeavors.

Herein lies the confusion – is modernism something totally new, a "revolutionary" movement as it is referred to throughout the exhibit text, or is mod-

3. Untitled, by Alice Loiselle. Photograph by Larry Phillips.

ernism simply an appropriation of tribal visual language motifs? If we accept the latter premise, as Lloyd New seems to advocate, that modernism is derivative, then the IAIA students in the 1960's were simply expanding their cultural repertoire in a new setting. If we accept the former premise, that modernism is a foreign influence adopted creatively and synthesized at great effort by talented young Indians, as Charlene Touchette's essays suggest then there was indeed a "revolution" - a totally new development.

Touchette's essays appear to read both ways at points, making the exhibit somewhat difficult to follow. Her introduction stating "the artistic traditions of their native cultures rich in explorations of both abstract and figurative expressions gave them (the students) a strong base for experimenting with the *complex* (my emphasis) art-making concepts of modernist and post-modernist painting" leads the reader to conclude that modernism is an outsider attribute difficult to attain without the "support, encouragement and excellent example of their instructors – all practicing artists grounded in Native American culture and knowledgeable about European, Euro-American and world art history." However the conclusion text reads somewhat differently stating that students were "impressed more than influenced" by the world of Euro-American modernist art, "determined to create a specifically Indian expression of modernism." At stake, it seems is a matter similar to MoMA's "Primitivism" exhibition – which artistic tradition takes precedence?

An applied example of this quandary is found under the exhibition heading *Innovative Figuration*, (Fig.2) one of four categories that group the bulk of the paintings displayed. The other three categories are listed as *Geometric Abstraction, Abstracted Landscape and Abstract Expressionism.* Illustrating the work of Alfred Youngman, Bill Soza and others, the text for *Innovative Figuration* reads:

> (T)heir highly personal expressions of figuration revolutionized Indian painting by integrating tribal cultural values and politics with modernist painting approaches – fracturing the picture plane, integrating text, and manipulating the painting surface with texture and collage elements. Their skillful synthesis of tribal and mainstream art idioms, evidenced in this body of work, demonstrates their exceptional intelligence and individuality.

This description appears to be in contrast with Lloyd New's statement that collage and texturing are traditional tribal expressions. Certainly the question of influence deserves a fuller airing than this exhibit subtext allows, however the issue begs attention here for the unwritten history of the school demands its clarification. To follow this example further, if collage were already a tribal expressive mode then no revolution would have occurred and the apparent "excitement" of the period would have been made invalid.

Certainly, the artist statements and their accompanying period photos in the exhibit do seem to convey that instructors and students were inspired, lively and engaged in their work. Could it be that this excitement had more to do with simply being treated as human beings in a government institution, rather than being elated at their perceived new found freedom in abstract painting? As Touchette's text confirms, students who had come to IAIA from boarding school systems and poor reservations were presented with an abundance of supplies and welcomed into an educational environment which was supportive of them as native people for the first time. Peggy Deam is quoted remembering the stark contrast between IAIA and Chilocco Boarding School:

> I arrived at night and immediately felt the welcoming energetic atmosphere. I was struck by the openness and friendliness of the matrons, the beauty of the buildings and surroundings, and the exceptional ambience of trust afforded the students. I was hungry for everything and tried nearly every medium. It was a safe place to be.

Another possible factor for the enthusiasm of the period was IAIA's unconventional arts instruction method. In comparison to the previous model of a government-sponsored boarding school arts initiative (that of the Santa Fe Indian School's Dorthy Dunn "Studio" of the 1930's) IAIA fostered an environment that did not dictate to students what work would be considered acceptably "Indian" or "non-Indian" as Dunn mandated in her flat two-dimensional style of painting.

This new approach to the arts, that of acceptance, however, should not be equated with the tenants of modernism allowing a never before experienced freedom to students previously constricted by tribal conventions. It is a misunderstanding to think that the practices of the traditional communities were oppressive to begin with. The idea of what was acceptable to tribal communities as demonstrated in the Dunn studios was Dorthy Dunn's own interpretation of pueblo design imperatives, generalized to extend to tribal aesthetics in general. Her idea of traditional native art – lack of perspective, muted colors, and traditional subject matter – became the standard from with other future efforts were judged.[3]

This argument is akin to other generalizations based on ill-conceived notions of Indianness. As judged by Vine Deloria in his cutting review of *The Invented Indian*[4] (edited by James A. Clifton) "Indians can clearly relate to the pressure, experienced throughout one's life, of meeting the fictional expectations of whites." Deloria's recommendation? "So go argue with your mother." Similarly, the expectation that natives are inherently constricted by their tribal visual expressions is more fantasy perpetuated by non-natives than reality as experienced by tribal people themselves.[5] Why then is modernism perceived to be the great liberator of native expression? From whom are they being liberated? Their own people?

A potent illustration of how the matter of ownership and influence is played out in art history at the IAIA is the example of Alice Loiselle, a Chippewa painter who contracted polio as a child and was forced to walk in crutches. Loiselle adopted the technique of spilling paint on canvas in her work, a method reminiscent of both Jackson Pollock and Navajo sandpainters. (Fig. 3) The "IAIA Rocks the Sixties" exhibit text explores this issue with quotes from fellow students who each surmised differently - that the spilled paint method was Loiselle's idea, pursued out of necessity and conversely that she had viewed a film at IAIA of Pollock at work and then adopted the technique.

Touchette makes the argument that Loiselle likely painted next to other Navajo students who

would have been familiar with the drip pigment method in sandpainting, concluding that a "double mirroring...occurs when North American native artists are simultaneously influenced by their tribal idioms and by European and Euro-American artists who have also been influenced by indigenous art." While this level of complexity is not unfeasible, the curatorial question necessitates a higher level of resolve. Is Alice Loiselle alive, but unable to comment? Is she deceased? Why does the viewer not know with certainty?

The selection of such a high number of artists, 21 in number, (plus an additional 16 other painters featured in two walls where paintings are hung salon-style from ceiling to floor) make it difficult to resolve such important issues as artistic influences to any satisfaction. The desire to be inclusive, to tell stories that are untold, often results in native art exhibitions that are overly ambitious, as "IAIA Rocks the Sixties" is, in terms of the number of artists exhibited and the curatorial issues addressed. The sponsorship of one-person shows like the schedule Santa Fe's Wheelwright Museum regularly adopts will lead to increased scholarship in needed areas such as attribution and interpretation of the work.

The lack of clearly established schools, movements or even discrete chronological periods of artistic production within the history of the Institute of American Indian Arts is a matter to be addressed more efficiently outside the constraints of a singular exhibit. However, it is the medium of exhibition display that is most readily available to the institute as a type of oral history device. "IAIA Rocks the Sixties" is an admirable effort to begin this documentation process, however it is an illustration painted before the text has been sufficiently researched and authored. The works themselves deserve to be seen by a wider audience; the histories of the artists demand to be chronicled. The largely celebratory approach of this exhibit however does little to raise the stature of this thoroughly unique arts endeavor.

While the images such as Beverly DeCocteau Carusona's "Nephlidia" (Fig. 4) arrest the viewer with its commanding use of color and symbolism, the paintings themselves cannot be solely relied upon to interpret the complexities of native arts education. Alfred Youngman states in the exhibit conclusion that "many students' lives were saved by their experience at the IAIA, which gave them the spiritual, creative and material tools to build successful lives as painters and make important contributions to their communities." This fact cannot be underestimated. The aim of the school has long been embracing art as a means of reaching native students to build their self-esteem. That this mission has largely been appropriated in the last decade by the insistence that the artwork alone is an indicator of educational success denies the human needs and the often-poignant life conditions of IAIA's students.

4. *Nephlidia* by Berverly DeCocteau Carusona. Photograph by Larry Phillips.

The objects, the physical reminders of the student's accomplishments at the school, are simply examples of *student* work, students who were kids when they produced the paintings; students who are now largely not painters, but that used paint to explore their identity as native people. As student work they cannot be and should not be the self-proclaimed "Native American Fine Art Movement" that they are described as in the "IAIA Rocks the Sixties" text. This label which is drawn in an overly large fashion, is so general as to be of no practical use, except in the effort to claim the work is as good as the other fine artists of the period.

The "as good as" argument found throughout the "IAIA Rocks the Sixties" text denies the self-validating attributes of the works, which should more appropriately be interpreted not within the categories utilized here such as "Abstract Expressionism" and "Innovative Figuration" but as distinct personal examples of individual growth and tribal self-empowerment. It is certainly not a sin to be celebratory, to proclaim the worth of one's community, but to do so in the pattern modeled by others only demonstrates how much further we need to travel to reclaim our own unique histories.

NOTES

1. Only two book-length works on the Institute have been published, Joy Gritton's *The Institute of American Indian Arts: Modernism and U.S. Indian Policy* (2000, University of New Mexico Press) and Winona Garmhausen's *History of Indian Art Education in Santa Fe: The Institute of American Indian Arts with Historical Background, 1890 to 1962* (1988, Sunstone, Press).
2. McEvilley, Thomas. "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief." In *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity*. Kingston, N.Y. McPherson, 1992.
3. See Gritton's description of the program pp 36-39 in *The Institute of American Indian Arts: Modernism and U.S. Indian Policy* (2000, University of New Mexico Press).
4. "Comfortable Fictions and the Struggle for Turf: An Essay Review of The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies" by Vine Deloria Jr. In *The American Indian Quarterly*, Volume XVI, Number 3, Summer, 1992.
5. A more thorough discussion of tribal aesthetics in general is needed and would enhance the issues presented here which are overly generalized. See for example Warren L. d'Azevedo, ed. 1973. *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*. Bloomington:, Indiana University Press and more recently the writings of MariLyn Salvador for analysis of indigenous aesthetics.