EDITED BY GERALD McMASTER

reservation X

THE POWER OF PLACE IN ABORIGINAL CONTEMPORARY ART

LOST O'KEEFFES/MODERN PRIMITIVES: THE CULTURE OF NATIVE AMERICAN ART

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For many, Georgia O'Keeffe symbolizes an attachment to land — specifically a Southwestern landscape. Her identification with New Mexico is seamless — a brilliant blue sky, the ever-present cow skull, and a sparse adobe interior all speak to what should now be termed O'Keeffe charm instead of Southwest charm. The opening of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe signaled more than the latest tourism frenzy; it represented a resounding placement of the outsider front and centre. The actor Gene Hackman, a museum board member, declared at the opening, "O'Keeffe said, 'It is my place.' Now it is even more so because of the museum." Local residents counter, "It's not O'Keeffe Country, it's our country."[1]

This latest wrestling over ownership of place is not unexpected in an arts city whose constantly fluctuating identity lends an aura of the surreal to everyday living. Local newspapers ran simultaneous articles in which O'Keeffe Museum representatives gleefully announced donations of $5 million in endowments, while the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA), celebrating its thirty-fifth anniversary, received notice that its federal funding for the next academic year would be cut in half with no future appropriations.

Hungry for some taste of belonging, urban refugees are fleeing to arts meccas like Santa Fe in search of a borrowed identity. In doing so, the other becomes more real than the original. In the words of Umberto Eco, we journey into areas of "hyperreality" where assurance is established through imitation.[2] In search of an authentic connection, new identities are formed through selective borrowing. The resulting icons are replacing the old originals at worrisome pace. Traditionalists are quickly becoming adept at maneuvering into the cramped spaces left available to them.

It was in this charged climate of celebration and alienation that I was invited to curate a show at the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum that would coincide with the O'Keeffe Museum's opening. Initially titled *In the Spirit of O'Keeffe*, the exhibition's premise was to show a parallel development between O'Keeffe's work and Native American arts. In the process of developing a theme, I shifted from a straight examination of landscapes to a fascination with the marketing of O'Keeffe as a type of "primitive" other whose charm resided in her "womanly" approach to modernism.[3] Like O'Keeffe, Indian artists are marketed for their perceived unconscious connection to the land, their innate spirituality and sensuality, their childlike wonder. I titled the

AFTER MONTHS OF HEAVY PROMOTION, AN ESTIMATED CROWD OF 5,000 ATTENDED THE O'KEEFFE MUSEUM OPENING, WHICH LED TOM SHARPE OF THE *ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL* TO PEN AN ARTICLE TITLED, "GET GEORGIA OFF MY MIND" (18 JULY 1997). THE CARTOONIST JONATHAN RICHARDS OF THE *SANTA FE REPORTER* CREDITED THE ABRUPT RESIGNATION OF THE O'KEEFFE MUSEUM DIRECTOR PETER HASSRICK TO THE GENERAL FOOLISHNESS OF THE O'KEEFFE FRENZY (30 JULY 1997). JONATHAN RICHARDS

exhibition *Lost O'Keeffes — Women, Children and Other Primitives* in reference to the neglected history of Native women painters. Alumni works that had largely been "lost" in storage were exhibited for the first time in thirty years.

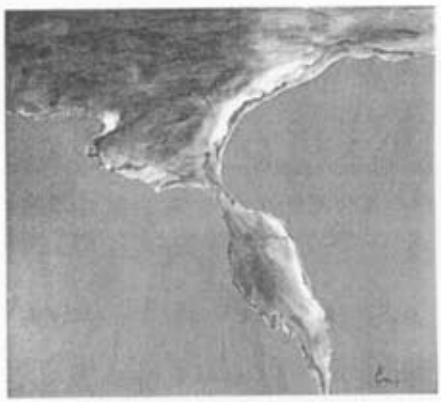
Reaction was mixed. First, there was the use of "primitive," a term so laden with negative connotations that it is almost taboo. Feminists complained that women were being degraded as primitives. In addition, visitors were being misled by the phrase "Lost O'Keeffes," assuming that the museum was showing O'Keeffe's works. In the first week alone, twenty angry visitors demanded a refund because of their disappointment at not seeing her canvases displayed, which led the museum to provide a disclaimer at the door.

Public reaction to a different use of O'Keeffe, a use outside of her glorification as *the* representative of the Southwest, is telling. Are Indians allowed to use Western icons? It appeared that outsiders can appropriate Native images and values, yet Indians themselves are not granted the same borrowers' privileges. Can't an Indian institution turn an inquiring gaze on the history and meaning of an East Coast transplant, or is the O'Keeffe mystique so special, so sanctified, that penetration of this image is impossible? The intent of the exhibition was lost in the city-wide mania for O'Keeffe and nothing but O'Keeffe.

What was actually exhibited was the work of four Native women artists, students at the Institute during its early "golden years," executed when they were teenagers. These visual documents of what it meant to be a young Native woman in the 1960s at an experimental Indian arts school are just a sampling of the materials hidden in the collection of the IAIA Museum. The artists — Brenda Holden (Miwok), Beverly DeCoteau-Carusona (Oneida/Chippewa), Henrietta Gomez (Taos), and Carol Lee Lazore (Paiute) — produced dynamic canvases that pulsed with a vitality O'Keeffe would have envied. Two of the artists, Holden and Gomez, met O'Keeffe when she visited the IAIA campus. While they claim not to have been directly affected by her style (the influence of IAIA instructors such as Fritz Scholder is more evident), the artists did retain an impression of O'Keeffe as a major figure in the arts — a living, breathing icon of modernism in the figure of a woman.

What is unique about the *Lost O'Keeffes* project is the similarity of circumstance these women share. All left small tribal communities to attend the Institute, then vaulted themselves into the world at large. Holden, who entered IAIA not knowing

RIGHT: BEVERLY DECOTEAU-CARUSONA, *NEPHLIDIA*. COURTESY OF IAIA MUSEUM



BELOW: HENRIETTA GOMEZ, *ROOT OF LIFE*. COURTESY OF IAIA MUSEUM

how to read or write, earned a BFA from Cooper Union in New York City. Lazore received a BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and a MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Arts. Ultimately, all four returned to their homes. DeCoteau-Carusona discovered her spiritual home with the longhouse traditions. She enrolled at IAIA thirty years later to finish her Associates of Arts degree: "Advanced painting majors there were more worldly, almost urban. A lot of them did not know their language. I didn't know my traditional ways. And now I do, thank goodness. It was a really exciting time. Maybe that's one reason why I wanted to come back to IAIA, the romance of that ideal time, that balance. A new direction." After twelve years in New York City, Gomez returned to her home at Taos Pueblo to participate in ceremonial life: "It's important coming home to find your place, your space and meaning." She now produces traditional Taos-style micaceous clay ceramics. Each of these women raised families in the meantime, translating their identity as artists to their responsibility as mothers and tradition-bearers.

I often wonder about Georgia O'Keeffe's role as wife and helpmate to Alfred Stieglitz. Reading about her summers at his family's home at Lake George, New York, I get the impression that she catered to her in-laws' needs and expectations, cooking and cleaning for dozens of the Stieglitz clan. If she had had children, would she have produced as large a body of work as she did? Struggling with my own children and work, I periodically ask myself while bent over a sink full of dishes, "Does anyone care about what kind of housekeeper Georgia O'Keeffe was?" Her move to New Mexico may well have been a flight from the responsibilities she undoubtedly faced as Stieglitz's wife.

What of the lost O'Keeffes? They did not have the benefit of an Alfred Stieglitz promoting their works. Could they or would they have enjoyed a reputation similar to O'Keeffe's if they had chosen to pursue fame instead of family? Of her decision to return to traditional pottery-making, Henrietta Gomez told me, "It was a real challenge for me . . . getting back to traditional forms. I suppose if I really wanted to pursue it, I could sell my work more. But I have a moral dilemma with how I work with clay and define myself as a Taos woman."

LEFT: HENRIETTA GOMEZ, TAOS-STYLE MICACEOUS CLAY, 1997. PHOTOGRAPH BY GAIL RUSSEL

BELOW: BEVERLY DECOTEAU-CARUSONA, *BROTHER TURTLE*, 1997. COURTESY OF NANCY MARIE MITHLO

We rarely talk about gender and ethnicity in Native arts, about careers lost, promises unfulfilled. Yet are not the actions of women who choose to devote themselves to their families more culturally appropriate than the image of the successful Indian artist today? The ruggedly handsome Indian male, bare-chested and virile, painting spiritual images for consumption by non-Natives is an invention of the market, a debased idol we now worship. Our ideals are blurred by self-declarations of "Master" status in exhibitions such as the annual "Masters of Indian Arts" show sponsored by the Southwestern Association for Indian Arts in Santa Fe. Our Indian art stars obscure the economic realities of artists sitting on blankets selling jewellery as a nine-to-five job.

A confusion exists about the purpose and intent of Indian contemporary art. Some, in an old-trading-post sort of mentality, consider all Indian art simply a commodity. Others expect each product of Native manufacture to be a spiritually imbued artifact. While the audience vacillates between the extremes of debasing Indian art as a tourist commodity and elevating it to holy status, Native artists seek to position themselves in ways that allow them enough flexibility of movement to choose their own options. Unfortunately, the Indian arts market is so entrenched and concrete in nature that the choices are limited.

LESSONS IN THE CULTURE OF ART

For the last thirty-five years, artists of Native ancestry have produced modernist-type works in a genre generally known only as contemporary Indian art. Stylistic changes, regional variations, and various schools of thought are grouped en masse under this rubric. Almost sixty years after mainstream modern art had its beginnings, Native Americans established a forum for expression outside of what was considered traditional norms. The opening of the Institute of American Indian Arts in 1962 was a beginning point of these developments in reference to the Southwest, although numerous "non-traditional" movements had taken place elsewhere to a lesser degree. These developments are poorly understood by the majority of viewers, who, depending

ALLAN HOUSER, *SEEKING HARMONY*, 1980. COURTESY OF ALLAN HOUSER INC.

on the ideology of modernism and its emphasis on the individual, misinterpret a body of work that is fundamentally communal in nature.

A subjective, contextual approach to Indian arts runs counter to basic premises of the fine arts world. Essential to an understanding of how these differences are played out is the concept of freedom. Artists who choose to identify with a certain community (Indian artist, Chicano artist, African-American artist) simultaneously forfeit their perceived "freedom" by embracing a cultural identity. The word Indian placed before the word artist triggers a response laden with stereotypes. Notions concerning the "cultural baggage" of Native artists (as opposed to the perceived individual freedom of their non-Native peers) invalidate Indian contemporary art from consideration as fine art. This marginalization results in real consequences for Native artists, especially those who wish to be included in a fine arts realm offering higher prestige and economic payback.

Faced with this compartmentalizing, producers of Indian art are left with few options: deny or obscure one's ethnicity (artist first, Indian second), remain as an unequal but acceptable "other" (I live in two worlds), or reject the fine arts agenda completely (there is no word in my language for art). These strategies have left us with a tired legacy of critical approaches. Publications on Indian arts typically reflect two parallel philosophies — ethnographic description and voyeur celebration. One overly studious, the other stubbornly simple, both are devoid of a deeper appreciation embracing a holistic perspective. We celebrate, we describe, yet we fail to analyze. Caught on the borders of any established approach, we remain rooted in the viewer's initial fascination with the exotic.

Those seeking more substance may attempt to find similarities in the work of other established non-Indian artists, yet rarely if ever are Indian artists seen as innovators. Fritz Scholder's early work is typically compared with Francis Bacon's. T.C. Cannon's paintings are seen as reminiscent of Paul Gauguin. Occasionally, one will hear reference to Navajo sand painting techniques as an inspiration for Jackson Pollock's work, but never do we hear of a named Indian artist influencing a non-Native artist. The late Chiricahua Apache artist, Allan Houser, the father of contemporary Indian sculpture, is often compared to Henry Moore. Near the end of his career, Houser produced several abstract works that convey the same graceful fluidity as his figurative sculptures. His move to modernism and general acceptance in the market was viewed as an achievement of parity in the fine arts world. Yet who do we say was influenced by Houser's work, besides his Native American students? Are all Native arts considered derivative because of their cultural affiliation?

ALLAN HOUSER, *APACHE GANS DANCER*, 1980. COURTESY OF ALLAN HOUSER INC.

When culture is viewed as confining, a crime against the human condition is committed. Culture does not reside solely with those who have brown skin. Values and biases are learned, opinions formed. There is no acultural setting. The irony is that those identified as fine artists (non-ethnic) cannot realistically stand outside of their culture, either. Thus, claims of having complete freedom to create as a criterion for inclusion as a valid artist are false. The freedom to create extends only as far as one's society will allow. The production of art, then, is above all a social endeavour.[4]

Various social systems, cultural groups, regions — all operate under their own individual conceptions of what is beautiful, ugly, meaningful, or trite. These multiple "art worlds" exercise their own rules of categorization, use, and aesthetic criteria.[5] For example, many land-based cultures believe that inanimate objects are alive. Spiritual objects are imbued with physical needs and emotions; they must be fed and cared for. This cultural awareness lends credibility to what Native artists have been claiming for generations: indigenous values vary from the unicultural fine arts domain that asserts its right to make so-called objective appraisals on formal qualities alone.

RACE-BASED MARKETING

The cultural barriers that marginalize Indian arts not only obscure an understanding of meaning, they also result in serious economic consequences for practising artists who desire inclusion in a global arts arena. The invalidation process that claims cultural artists are not in the same league as acultural fine artists leads to a type of economic racism that is rarely exposed. In my interviews with artists working in Santa Fe, I found a reoccurrence of "market stories" — tales of injustice and racism in the local gallery system.

Mike McCabe, a Dine artist known for his abstract print work, had just graduated from IAIA and was considering showing his work in a Santa Fe gallery. In 1991, he told me what happened:

> I went to one gallery I really liked that had very good contemporary work, and I asked, "I notice you don't have that many artists. Are you looking for other artists?" And she said, "Yes, but I don't think I'd submit my slides here." And I said "Why not?" She said,

"Well, we don't show Indian art here." She didn't even know what my work looked like.

I ended up sending slides to that gallery, but I didn't write in my resume that I had gone to the Institute of American Indian Arts. I sent them the slides and they wrote me: "Come in. We'd love to look at some more work." And of course I didn't go back there again. I just thought, here's a gallery that claims to be open-minded about art, but they're really close-minded . . . they have preconceived ideas.

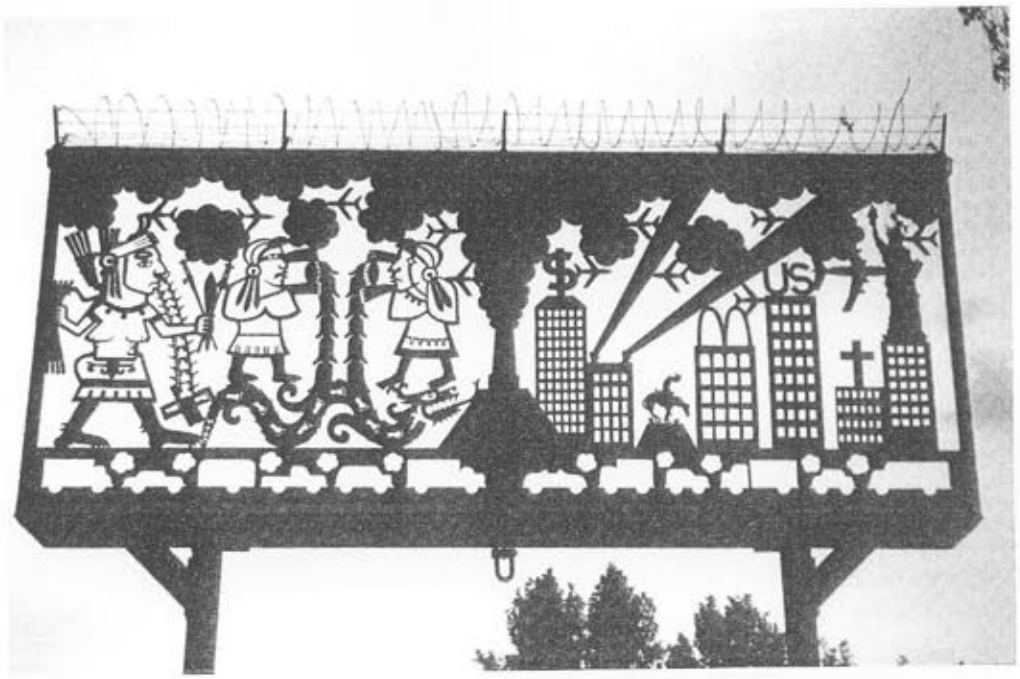
This scenario is a typical "coming of age" ritual for Indian artists trying to establish themselves in a regional market. McCabe commented that these events are so common in the Indian art market that Native artists have become desensitized to their rejection; they censor themselves to fit into existing systems.

Yes, all artists struggle for acceptance, but Indian artists must cope with more challenges than other artists who present themselves as non-cultural persons. Denial of race as a factor in the assessment of Native arts is simply a blame-the-victim mentality. It is not a matter of just trying harder. The reality is that we live in a race-conscious world where all people do not have equal access to venues of power.

My family is currently in the midst of defending the artist's freedom of expression in light of racial issues. The public sculpture *Cultural Crossroads of the Americas* by Bob Haozous, my husband, was installed at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in September, 1996, as an Art in Public Places work. Funded by the state of New Mexico and the City of Albuquerque, UNM exercises legal right of ownership. The artist's addition of a string of coiled barbed wire across the top of the billboard-like steel monument raised the objection of a small ad-hoc university committee who perceived that a negative message was being sent to the public about cultural harmony. They will not pay for the sculpture until the wire is removed, citing breech of contract. Haozous refuses to remove the wire, citing his contractual right to make minor changes to the original maquette as he sees fit. The case is in the court system.

This example brings up many questions concerning not only the production but the regulation of cultural arts. Would the addition of barbed wire be perceived as menacing if a cowboy artist had produced the work? Coiled barbed wire has historical significance for our tribe of Apaches in Oklahoma. The material was used to encase us during our twenty-eight years of captivity as prisoners of war. We also relied on similar wire while raising cattle at Fort Sill, a successful tribal business. The university art officials, however, associate the "razor wire" with hostility and menacing barriers. Obviously, two very different interpretations of the material are at play. UNM perceives that an Indian man is turning a white man's tool of control against him. The artist asserts that the medium is innocuous; he sees *Cultural Crossroads* as a positive message about people transcending the borders that separate them.

The category of public art and public funding raises the market issue to another level of debate. Certainly one of the functions of public art is to be responsive to a



BOB HAOZOUS, *CULTURAL CROSSROADS OF THE AMERICAS*, 1996. KAY WHITNEY OBSERVES, "HAOZOUS' GREAT ACCOMPLISHMENT IS THAT HE IS ABLE TO WITHSTAND THE PSYCHIC STRAIN OF HIS DOUBLED SENSIBILITY, SUSTAIN HIS DUALITY, AND RESIST THE HARSH PRESSURES OF A MODERNITY WHICH DEMANDS REJECTION AND ALIENATION FROM ORIGINS" ("DOUBLING BACK," *SCULPTURE*, 7 APRIL 1997). COURTESY OF BOB HAOZOUS

larger community. Most public art controversies involve a popular outcry against the work. This is not the situation with *Cultural Crossroads*. The city of Albuquerque wants the work to stay; UNM students want the work to stay; and the sculpture received overwhelming support at a city-sponsored public forum.

To draw a parallel with the arguments presented earlier, the work is a social product. In fact, for the first time in a long time, Hispanics and Indians (the state's official minorities) are working together to address the issue of censorship in the arts. Although some caution that this legal fight will jeopardize the future of an already frail public arts funding support base, other consequences seem more dire. What if the artist were to take the wire down and accept the money? Wouldn't this send the message that Indian art is only decorative after all — that our cultures are commodities? Along with performance art, public arts may be one of the few spaces available for Native artists to express their culture without censure. Haozous comments, "It is absolutely essential to remain honest — either that or make coffee cups and T-shirts."

Runaways

I believe historians will look back at the end of this millennium as a time of great confusion. Cultural boundaries are blurred, cross-cultural appropriations are rampant, tribes struggle to reclaim and define what is theirs, while economic interests push us further into the marketplace. Our art heroes, like Georgia O'Keeffe, are recluses, runaways who adopted an alter-identity the quickest and easiest way — by moving to the American West. While Native artists are studiously influenced by modernism, their non-Native contemporary art peers drop further into the reaches of conceptual arts. A total lack of communication exists between fine arts ideologies and Indian art aesthetics. It is difficult to imagine how to find a common ground when so many of the questions raised here appear to have no relevance to the larger international art community.

Recent exceptions to this separation are hopeful. For two consecutive seasons, the Venice Biennale has exhibited the works of indigenous artists. Canada sent Edward Poitras in 1995, and Australia chose three Aboriginal women (Judy Watson, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, and Yvonne Koolmatrie) for its pavilion in 1997. Robert Colescott was the first African-American to represent the United States the same year. These events are promising, but the question remains, must Native artists leave their cultures at the doors of these institutions, or can they enter with their cultures intact? Will there be a return to a culturally relevant arts movement, or will we have another decade or two of obscure modernism?

Considering the great number of misconceptions about contemporary Native American life in general, we must ask ourselves whether simply exposing our art to a broader audience will result in some grand recognition of Native intelligence. What could motivate a population under the delusion that Native people are cigar store Indians, to be used only as props for the real business inside? It appears that the audience wants it both ways. If, for example, a Native artist exhibits at the Biennale, the expectation will be that the work must "look" Indian or it is not authentic. If the work looks too culturally based, however, then its status as fine art will be questioned. If the work is devoid of any reference to a tribal mentality, does it cease to be Indian art? Would it then be viewed as inauthentic?

Authenticity is the main concern. Georgia O'Keeffe must have sensed the potency that accompanies an attachment to land, history, and community. She gained these things for herself by claiming the Southwest landscape as her own. Where she got it wrong was her implicit investment in the myth-making process. The lone artist, separate from society, finds truth in the wilderness — the vision quest revisited. O'Keeffe's legacy follows this pattern of self-imposed isolation.

An understanding of the harm this separateness generates can be gained by studying our generation's cold-shoulder approach to the arts in general. The arts cannot survive long under the present conservative political climate that views arts activities outside the classroom as elitist exercises in which a few privileged people talk to a few privileged people. Our art has ceased to be relevant to our world. Caught up in the desire to please, to entertain, art producers are simply handmaids to an out-of-control entertainment industry.

Here is the point at which indigenous thinkers, art practitioners, and creators may find their contributions welcomed. It is simply not that Indian people are "natural" artists, as some claim (as racist an assumption as claiming that all black people are good dancers). The value in an unencumbered expression of Native thought is its honesty, passion, and sense of a larger community. These values are particularly evident in the works of Native women. Listening to how these women conceptualize their role as Native artists, it becomes apparent that emotions and place are critical components of an understanding of indigenous aesthetics. In 1991, the Santa Clara artist Roxanne Swentzell observed to me, "In Western culture, if life gets to be a struggle, you just pack up and move. The traditional cultures are so tied to a spot and a family that you can't leave. Whenever you're hit with a problem, you're going to have to go through it because there's nowhere else to go. You are at the centre of the world" (interview, 1991).

A sense of place is a rare commodity these days, with extended families living in separate states and job markets that demand mobility. As technology promises to bring us closer together, we find ourselves drawn to the convenience of living vicariously through films, television, and the Internet. The raw passion of life is further beyond our reach, mainly because we have come to fear the unexpected. The Native arts expose this gutsy level of emotions through honest portrayals of lived experience — the loss of one's home, the trauma of historic genocide, the everyday violence that often accompanies poverty and racism. Mateo Romero's painting series *Tales of Ordinary Violence* (1996) is an example of this exposure. Beverly DeCoteau-Carusona commented to me, "Many artists are led by passion. We can't be removed from it because it's so much a part of us. Passion, anger, happiness. I don't think it's a lifestyle of neutrality for a lot of Indians. There's a lot of passion in Native American art."

It is this emotional pull, this encounter with the real that entices modern primitives to this desert landscape. Hesitant to fully relinquish power, uncomfortable with being a guest in another's home, these visitors insist on having it their way at the expense of the land's lifeblood — its people. The Institute of American Indian Arts is seemingly on its deathbed, while wealthy new art patrons have amassed millions in glorification of Georgia O'Keeffe.

Although I like the coolness of O'Keeffe's canvases, and I admire her ability to run with the big boys, I would be insincere if I joined the mass celebration of her ascension to art museum fame. My maternal instincts direct my attention instead to

the wounded but still breathing Native arts community. If, as some believe, it takes a village to raise a child, then Santa Fe is destined to feel the interconnectedness between the frenzied excitement of the newly arrived and the pain of those still exiled on the margins of acceptance.

After all, O'Keeffe is only a figure, a popular icon, some may even say a fad, who happens to have found fame after years of rejection herself. Optimists will rally: "Yes! A woman artist of substance arrives!" Realists will caution, "She's dead, she's from the East, and her work was, after all, modern and decorative." Looking towards the future of Indian arts in the Southwest, I optimistically envision recognition and admiration for Native women whose stories have been buried by years of neglect. Realistically, I wonder: will they say it's authentic?

Notes

1 William A. MacNeil, *Albuquerque Journal*, 18 July 1997; Bruno Navarro, *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 13 July 1997.

2 Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1986), 57.

3 Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 9.

4 Thomas McEvilley, *Art and Otherness: Crisis in Cultural Identity* (Kingston NY: McPherson, 1992), 19-20; Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 118-19.

5 Howard Saul Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), 34-35.