Indigenous Semiotics and Shared Modernity

DEAN RADER

"The challenge in writing about Native American art," critic Margaret Dubin observes, "is to recognize areas of difference, as well as areas of merging social and cultural practices, as they coexist within and influence the nature of our shared modernity"[1] Dubin is correct—and then some. In fact, there may be no more daunting scholarly project than sitting down to write an introduction on or to American Indian art. The sheer scope of work, over both time and geography, boggles the mind. Even narrowing in on "recent" or "contemporary" Native art seems impossible. Where does one start? What does one focus on? Leave out? Should beadwork and clothing be included? Photography and graphic arts? Performance art? Comics and graphic novels? There is so much interesting, innovative, important work that demands attention and appreciation, it almost seems as though this project is doomed from the start.

And yet, here we are: author and reader. You, knowing my task is impossible, and me, continuing with it anyway. Given the complex relationship between artist, galleries, audience, art history, and the cultural and historical circumstances facing Indian artists, there may be no better metaphor for Native art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries than this one.

One reason the practice of summarizing and analyzing Indian art is so complicated is, in part, due to the many provenances of Native aesthetic production. According to Charlene Touchette, Indian art "comes directly from the intricate web of experiences of Native Peoples; ancient, modern, urban and reservation. . . . But Indian art defies easy categorization because ndn [Indian] experience is multifaceted. ndn's art's challenges containment in preconceived notions about America's indigenous people and their art."[2] Touchette is on the money here, and she unwittingly offers a nice entrée

into the essays that make up the second half of this collection, in that these texts look at important artistic moments that shine light on these diverse but inclusive aspects of Indian art. As Touchette argues, Indian art embodies so many different contexts and communities, so many genres and formats, that it is actually more useful to think of Indian arts, rather than the monolithic and subsumable *Art*. Adding to this diversity are the contributions of the scholar. The critics whose essays close this important book interact with methodologies tied to literary and art historical studies, cultural and American studies, and most importantly, tribally specific traditions. Since these particular artists refer to a plurality of subjects in their work—tribes, historical events, removal, gender and power relations, clichés, issues of representation, commodification, and even other artists—their essays and the work they consider demand some contextualization.

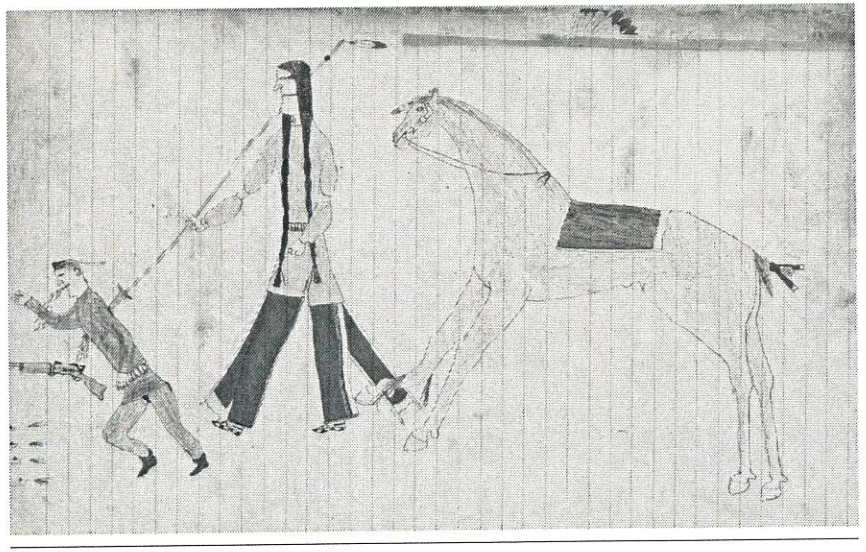
For example, before any Haudenosaunee, Navajo, Cree, or Mohawk artist confronts a canvas, a chunk of granite, or a slab of wood, there is yet another confrontation before her—the long and turbulent history of Indians and Indian iconography in the public sphere. Complicating this issue further are the lingering effects of artistic renderings of Indians created by non-Indians. Consider, for example, all of the paintings of Native Americans hanging in hotels, restaurants, galleries, and gift shops executed by non-Indians—or worse, by those who consider themselves "Western Artists." Think also about all of the statues and sculptures of Native peoples we drive past every day that were created by Anglos. A fine example: Preston Powers's *The Closing Era* (1893) sits outside the Colorado State Capitol complex in Denver. It depicts a shirtless Indian warrior, standing over a recently killed buffalo. The warrior, exhausted but proud in victory, rests one leg on the felled animal, evincing superiority and triumph. For over a century, generations of people have encountered this sculpture and, both consciously and subconsciously, internalized its narrative and its semiotics. This piece along with James Earle Fraser's fatalistic *The End of the Trail* (1894) have performed nearly indelible cultural work by inscribing into the American consciousness the *imago* for Indians in art, and perhaps even more harmful what "Indian art" itself actually is.

Though such sculptures border on the cliché, they are more resilient than mere caricatures because of their realism. Unlike sports mascots or overtly racist stereotypes, these pieces seem to enjoy correlatives in history (or at least lore). Anecdotal and synechdochal, they jibe with what so many have wanted to believe. Grappling with the semiotic legacy of such art is not easy. Part of the project of creating new American Indian aesthetic discourse involves erasing the old. When Picasso claimed that every act of creation is also an act of destruction, he no doubt had something else in mind. But

deconstructing the construction of false Indian identity has always been part of Indian art.

That tension with past and present visual fields makes Native aesthetic production unusually rich and uncommonly provocative. Ledger drawings, for instance, embody this friction in a particularly salient manner. Given ledger books by both missionaries and the military, Plains Indians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would convert these lined and ruled booklets into mini-anthologies of colored pictographed drawings.

By using the materials of Western capitalism as a canvas, a backdrop for Indian creation, Native artists overwrote the documents, the blueprints of American monetary ideology, as well as colonial modes of classification. A similar enactment can be seen in the art produced during the Indian Occupation of Alcatraz. Though no art historian considers the Alcatraz occupation an important milestone in American art, I see it as a catalyst for contemporary Indian aesthetic expression and, like ledger paintings, a perfect example of the dialogic of destruction/creation that informs much of Indian discourse. If we think of the buildings of Alcatraz as an extended living canvas, and the structures of the American penal system as a metaphor for American incarceration, imprisonment, and confinement, then the two hundred–plus paintings that the occupants made on doors, buildings,



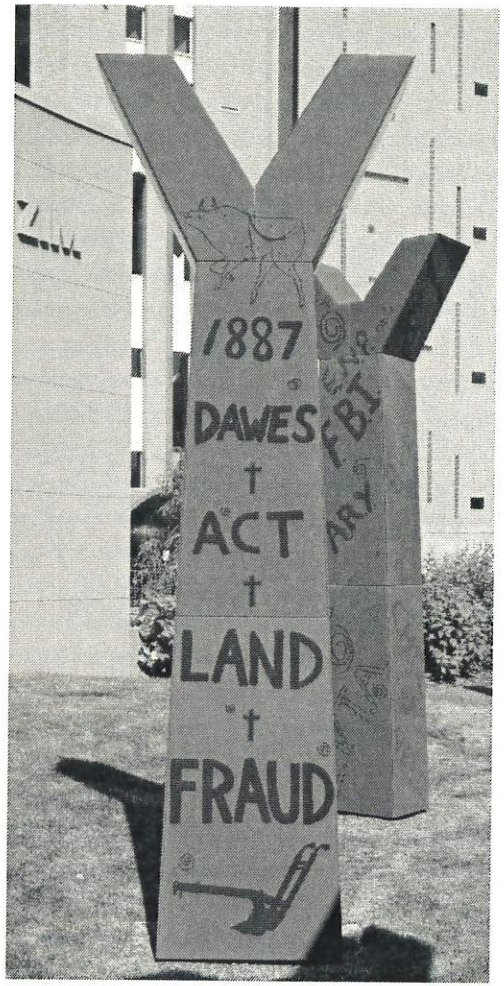
Pamplin Cheyenne/Arapaho Ledger, circa mid-1800s. Contemporary artists like Simon Chaddlesone and Kevin Red Star re-create or reimagine ledger drawings in their work. Acquired by the Dr. and Mrs. Robert B. Pamplin, Jr. Collection of American Indian Art.

water towers, and signs during the eighteen-month occupation (November 1969 to June 1971) can be seen as a giant mural, an epic example of public art advancing and articulating Indian autonomy and sovereignty. Like the pages of the ledger books, the various buildings of Alcatraz function as an anthology of Indian visual expression, as in the "Red Power" painting. Both projects also use the backdrop of American authority to undermine that authority. The Plains Indians transformed the ledger books from a space of categorization to one of subversion, just as the Alcatraz occupants converted the infrastructure of imprisonment into armaments of liberation. I am reminded of Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird, who argue that American Indian women writers who write stories and poems in English "reinvent the enemy's language." Similarly, the artist occupants of Alcatraz reinvent the enemy's symbology—both in terms of structures and language.

Few scholars of Native studies consider the English language as a symbolic field. When a Native author or artist writes or paints in English as opposed to Hopi or Lakota, that choice carries both linguistic and cultural overtones. Communicating in the language of the oppressor means the artist intends an audience; it means he incorporates Western linguistic symbolism to reach a larger demographic. Turning American English against American policies is a gesture long enjoyed by Indian jokesters and storytellers—but it is also an effective artistic technique, as the Alcatraz occupants discovered. The

This Red Power painting, just off the main loading dock at Alcatraz, is both playful and political. Courtesy of the National Parks Service.

text/image interplay at work in much of the Alcatraz art gets recast later in some of the painting, collage, and sculpture of the best contemporary American Indian artists. One in particular, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, a painter and sculptor of Cheyenne/Arapaho descent (and an important artist for Susan Bernardin), embodies the activist aesthetic of the Alcatraz artists with particular alacrity. His "wall lyrics," his recasting of common street signs, and in particular, his unrivaled public art project *Wheel* all draw power from the interchange of word and symbol.



Detail of two "trees" from Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds's *Wheel*. Courtesy of the Denver Art Museum.

A permanent sculpture on the grounds of the Denver Museum of Art, *Wheel* stands as one of the most ambitious and most important instances of American and American Indian public art. Fifty-feet in diameter and circumscribed by twelve 12-foot-tall porcelain "trees," *Wheel* evokes the traditional medicine wheel, pueblo kivas, and the Zapotec standing stelae. On each of the Y-shaped trees are inscribed various words, phrases, images, maps, and symbols, all of which connote or denote Native autonomy and sovereignty. What I find fascinating about *Wheel* is how Heap of Birds, like the Alcatraz occupants, is drawn to structures that exist out in the world. His canvas is not canvas but the built environment—as though "structures" themselves function as metaphors for the constructed networks that undergird the very foundation of American value systems. His emphasis on the trunks of the trees—that which *supports* the branches—underscores this reading. Values and systems have feet in both the connotative and the denotative world. Laws denote, Indian mascots connote; the Indian Removal Act denotes, cigar-store Indians connote; the Red Power image and text do both. Subsequently, I can't help but wonder if Heap of Birds intends a critical intertext with Powers's *The Closing Era* sculpture just down the road from the DMA. Even if he doesn't, *Wheel* creates work similar to the ledger drawing in that it overwrites the value system that informed (and that has celebrated) Powers's art. In Denver, the new boss is not the same as the old boss. Juxtaposition of image and word means double signification. *Wheel* signifies in both realms, reminding viewers how powerful the simultaneity of symbol and speech can be.

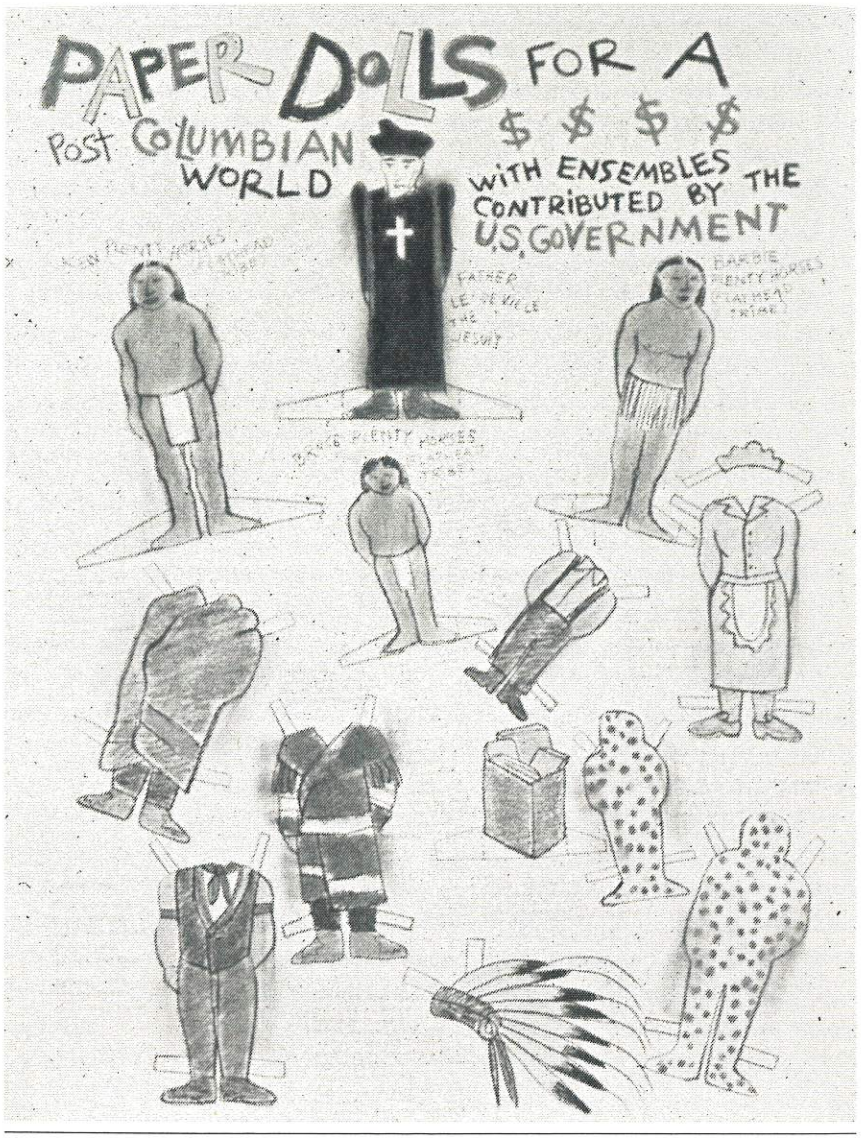
The degree to which text and image narrate and illustrate each other also drives the work of two other extremely important artists—Carl Beam (Canadian Ojibwe) and Jaune Quick-To-See Smith (Salish/Flathead). For better or worse, Beam has come to be identified as *the* Aboriginal Canadian artist, and his stunning *The North American Iceberg* as *the* piece of indigenous Canadian Art. This is all for good reason. Until his death in 2008, Beam was likely the most talented First Nations artist working in Canada, and this piece is breathtaking in its scope, its manic energy, and its activist aesthetic. Like *Wheel*, there is a lot going on here. Along the top portion of the piece, three different photos of the artist, resembling mug shots, sequence themselves along a horizontal plane, enabling us to *see* him from three different angles. These photos are counterbalanced by more iconic photographic images of Natives à la Edward Curtis. Closer inspection reveals that two of the Indians in question are Gerry Elbridge and Geronimo. We know this because their photos accompany an encyclopedia entry for both men. Other entries appear, but are smaller and blurred—the corresponding images to

those entries repeated and enlarged. Other black-and-white and sepia-toned images spangle the canvas, as do numbers, vertical lines, dripped and splattered paint, random numbers, and again, text. Toward the bottom left, "Revolving Sequential" suggests that the numbers and lines don't *really* stop at 18 but continue in an unending circularity, as though this iceberg, like Heap of Birds's *Wheel*, is always already turning, like a fancydancer or the spinning chamber of a pistol. In military-esque stencil, a poetic fragment cascades down the upper right quadrant, spelling out the painting's title and offering a kind of epigraph: "Ignored, the force moved unsung because it is so real into the real it knows flash to light." I don't know what that means, and I can't find a reference to it anywhere, but I like it. It evokes, for me, the flash of gunfire, the force of encroaching white settlers and the new millennium.

As fascinating as the images are, they would be lost without the text. The words ground the images, giving them context and concatenation. The encyclopedic entries call themselves—and all attempts by Anglo scholars to classify and explain and reduce indigenous identity—into question. Within the frame of this painting, Gerry Elbridge's mini-bio seems ludicrous, but without the painting, many viewers might continue taking such texts for granted. This painting urges viewers to mistrust any text about Indians created by non-Indians, no matter how "authoritative" or "objective" it may appear.

Like Beam, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith lets the viewers take nothing for granted. She layers image and text, paint and collage for dramatic and political effect. Her map paintings of the lower forty-eight states are some of the most intriguing instances of contemporary indigenous art because they challenge the sanctity of the cartography of manifest destiny. In most of her other work, though, Smith utilizes less geographical and more cultural images. In *Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World*, for example, the artist uses the familiar visual symbol of the innocuous paper doll to make a darkly comic comment on how we tend to play at history.

I remember the first time I saw this piece. I was rendered speechless. I found it both humorous and horrific. Ken and Barbie Plenty Horses is a good and easy laugh. And, the Jesuit priest in his long robe (which predicts the robe-wearing basketball Jesuits in *Smoke Signals*) is virtually the poster priest for parody. Even the headdress and its smart commentary on the exchangeability of Indian semiotics—aren't all Indians Plains Indians after all?—feels innocently wry. But the smallpox blankets with their little tabs that a young white girl might bend back over the flat, one-dimensional *wooden Indian* is shockingly bold. Who makes light of genocide? Who pokes fun at mass death? A bold artist—an artist who believes that art has



Jaune Quick-To-See Smith's *Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World* strikes an uneasy chord with its smart and shocking mix of humor and horror.

the power to alter perception. The layers of political commentary, personal anger, and historical belittlement contained in this painterly detail is a high mark of aesthetic courage.

Part of what works in this piece is its intentionally crude rendering.

Scrawled in pencil (like a child), *Paper Dolls* foregrounds ethics over aesthetics. Quick-To-See Smith makes another bold decision in that she chooses not to display her sense of craft. Message transcends the need to prove technical ability—a characteristic not atypical of Native artists. A similar piece both in structure and significance is *Flathead Warshirt.* In this piece, the artist uses the familiar visual symbol of the Native warshirt to create yet another field of play. Stripped of its typical beaded finery, the warshirt in Smith's painting has been washed out, emptied of its traditional signification. In its stead, the viewer discovers advertisements that incorporate Indian imagery and iconography as well as slogans from mainstream ads. Juxtaposed against an ad that uses an Indian maiden to hawk tomatoes is a tagline in the middle of the shirt that embodies so many commercial clichés: "I've had tailored suits that didn't fit this well." Orbiting the shirt are more images of Indians in the news, notices for powwows, Indian ads, and, like Beam, family photographs. Beneath one of the photographs of an Indian, Smith has pasted a headline from a newspaper: "Look for this symbol"—a command that serves as a sort of thesis statement for the piece.

Perhaps the savviest Indian artist when it comes to issues of Indian symbolism, Smith collates commercial and cultural products that help create, reinforce, and reify Indian identity. As Julie Sasse notes, Smith uses the warshirt as her own symbol of Anglo misreading. Where Europeans and Americans saw the shirt as a glorification of war, it was in reality all about ceremony. For Smith, the warshirt is "a crucible of Native thinking in terms of religious philosophy, democratic ideals, and social wisdom."[3] In both *Warshirt* and *Paper Dolls*, Smith remains interested in the many ways—both consciously and subconsciously—that Americans have internalized the invented Indian into an unexamined but multilayered form of semiosis. In other words, she shows us a variety of ways we have created a glossary of Indian signification; she tell us what Americans have told the world Indians can stand for. To this end, her dark drips and collaged canvas recalls Robert Rauschenberg, who in pieces like *Retroactive I* and *Persimmon* both celebrates and mocks our culture's obsession with icons and symbols. In many of Smith's paintings, the accoutrements of Indian identity—shirts, feathers, canoes, buffalo, Tonto, frybread—receives a reverse iconoclasm. Rather than reuse them as modes of fetishism, commercialism, or tourism, she recasts them as sites of indigenous reclamation and reinvention.

Two other artists—Fritz Scholder and T. C. Cannon—also traffic in Indian symbolism; but unlike Beam and Smith, they tend to avoid text, relying solely on the power that Indians on a canvas can generate. However, like Smith and Beam, they attack the easy assumptions about Indian

representation and Indian-on-Indian art. In fact, Scholder actually vowed early in his career never to paint Indians. "The non-Indian had painted the subject as a noble savage," Scholder claims, "and the Indian painter had been caught in a tourist-pleasing cliché."[4] But, when he started painting Indians, no one was prepared—perhaps not even Scholder—for what he saw. Drunk Indians, dead Indians, ugly Indians, monster Indians. His *Dog and Dead Indian* (1971) infamously captures death with indignity by depicting a splayed and gruesome Indian whose corpse seems to have just been discovered by a curious canine. With head tilted back and mouth agape, and dots and dashes of crimson on the bleached body, the figure looks beaten or crucified. One of his early Indian paintings, *Monster Indian* (1968), evokes a Francis Bacon canvas. Almost cubist in composition, the face is distorted and blurred, the eyes vacant. The painting is *scary.*

One of his most famous images, *Indian with Beer Can*, actually seems to go out of its way to support negative assumptions about alcoholic Indians, and to reassure viewers that Indians may, in fact, be dangerous. With flared nostrils, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses, and his mouth an oval cave of fangs, the subject of the painting snarls at the viewer with a look of contempt. The sunglasses shield his eyes, denying us full access to him, while he enjoys complete access to us. A virtual panopticon of power and surveillance, the painting does not clearly indicate any sense of play, irony, or humor. It is realism on Quaaludes.

Scholder's most important student, T. C. Cannon, inherited both a thematic and aesthetic sensibility from Scholder. Like his teacher's, his paintings tend to feature a solitary male Indian, neither a part of nor separate from his surroundings. And like Scholder, he enjoys playing with clichés and stereotypes about Indian identity. But, where Scholder tackles the weaknesses, struggles, and anxieties of Indians head-on, Cannon attacks from the side, from behind. If Scholder's paintings are declarative sentences, Cannon's are questions. If Scholder's Indians have been deglamorized, Cannon's have been demythologized. Aesthetically, this translates into a softer palette. Scholder's early Indian paintings strive for an anti–Santa Fe, anti-tourist aesthetic. Often flat and almost matted, his color scheme favors dark tones, and the faces of his subjects are impossible to discern completely. They are hidden, indistinct, or nearly erased. Cannon, on the other hand, is more fanciful. He decorates the backgrounds with flourishes of design and color; the facial features of his subjects are sharp and readable. They feature a quirkiness that communicates both accessibility and humor. In *Collector #2*, for example, a self-portrait, a longhaired Indian man dressed in Western clothing stands next to a Van Gogh painting. Like Scholder's *Indian with a Beer Can*, the subject wears a big hat

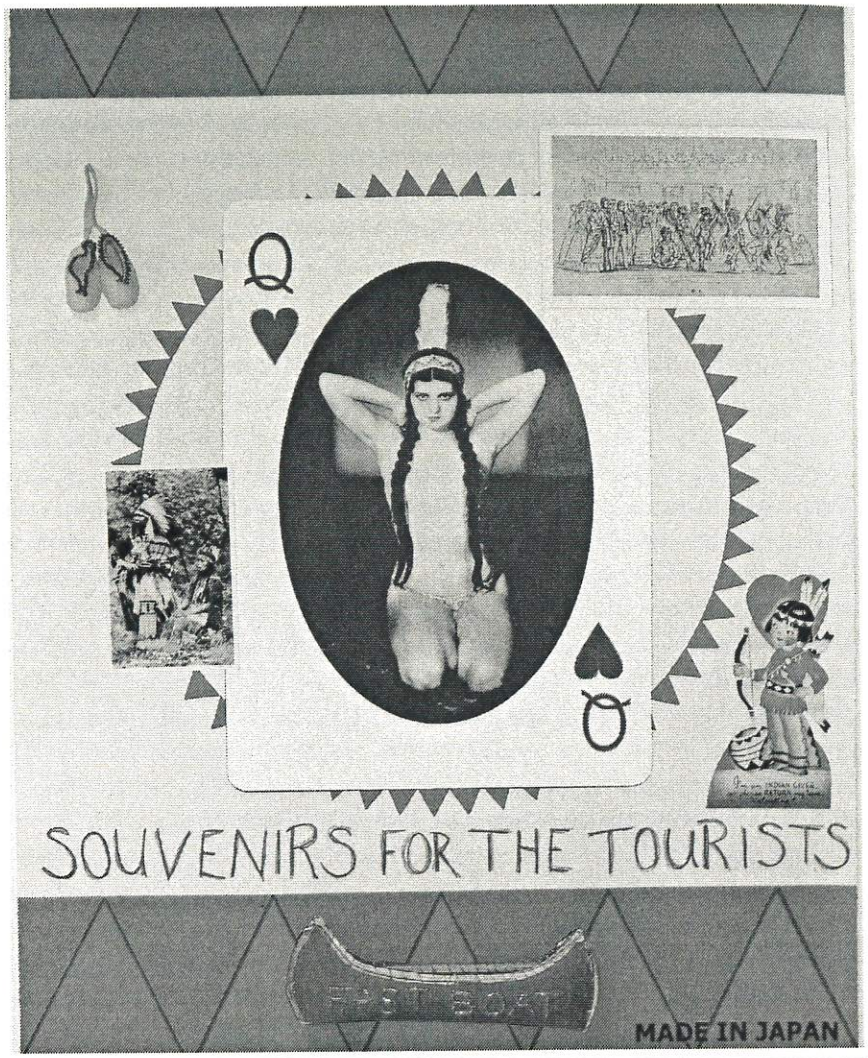
and sunglasses. He doesn't smile so much as smirk, as if to say, "Sure, I'm an Indian and I collect Van Gogh." Just as Scholder plays with the viewer's assumptions about Indians, so does Cannon; but he twists it even further, merging race and class, high culture and ethnic culture. The Indian is also a collector, and the collector, an Indian. "He's a contemporary artist," writes Julie Coleman Tachick, "aware and proud of his heritage, but also familiar with the masters of European art, as indicated by the small van Gogh landscape painting hanging on the wall. In creating his own works, he draws his strength and knowledge from both."[5]

One of Scholder's sticking points about Indian art was what made it collectible. For him, one set of criteria existed for European and American painting influenced by modernist gestures, the expanse of Abstract Expressionism, and the high camp of Pop Art, and another for "Indian artists" and "Indian art." Where the former foregrounded innovation, transgression, and imagination, the latter was often linked to the kitschy world of curios and trinkets. What's more, Indians were (and still are) *themselves* objects of collection. So, one of the more enjoyable aspects of Cannon's painting is the way it subverts the standard collector paradigm. That postmodern sense of play informs much of the more recent Indian art, not just of people like Quick-To-See Smith but that of emerging artists like Larry McNeil and Tom Jones. Both Jones and McNeil take pages from the sketchbook of Smith, Beam, and Heap of Birds in order to use images of the Land O'Lakes maiden (in the case of Jones's *Commodity II*) or Tonto (in *Native Epistemology*) to make larger statements about the commodification of Indian imagery.

Like Quick-To-See Smith, Jones playfully teases out the racist undertones found in Indian toys and tourist tchotchkes. His fantastic collage, built from both actual images and self-created ones, forces the viewer to ask not just what *real* Indians might be, but what real *representations* of Indians might look like.

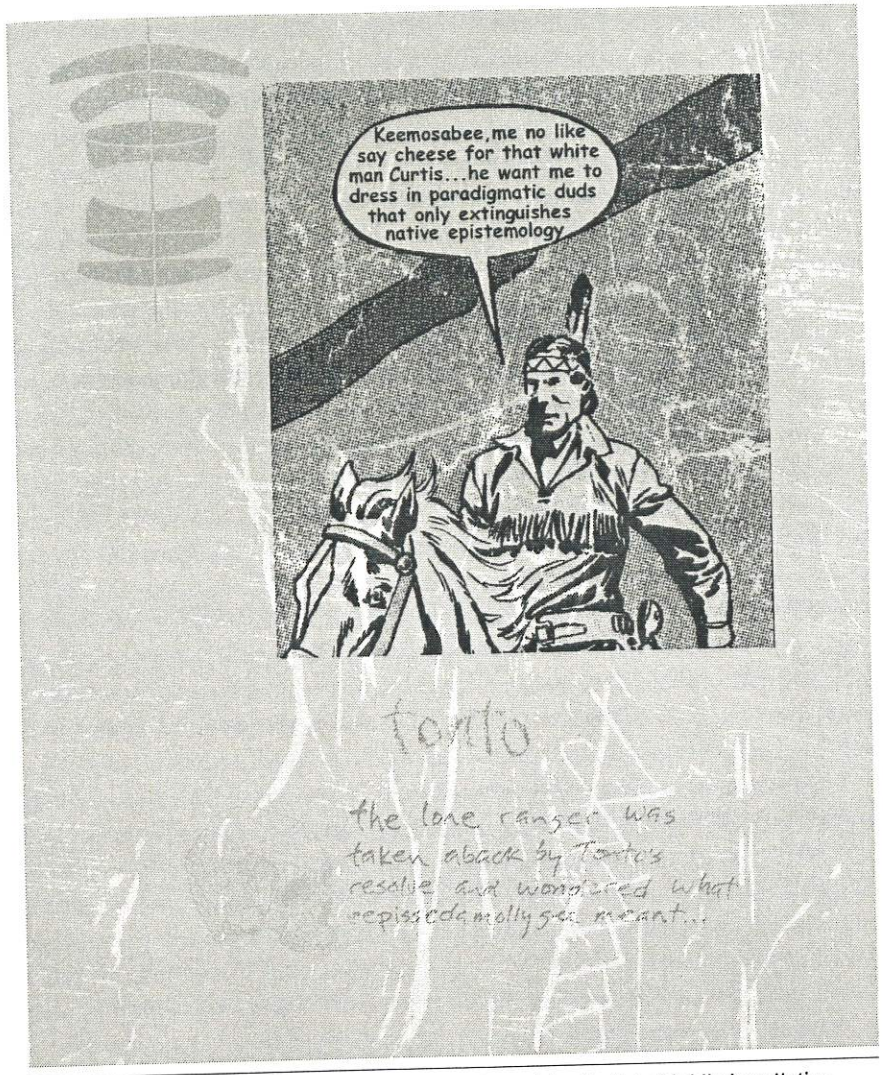
Also drawing on the cultural currency of the Indian image in popular culture, Larry McNeil riffs on Tonto and the silly white people who love him. On one hand, he pokes fun at fussy Anglos who prefer soy cheese over the real thing (perhaps a comment on those who prefer the invented Indian over the real thing), and on the other, he reverses the intelligence dynamic of Tonto and the Lone Ranger. Instead of Tonto not understanding English, it's the Lone Ranger who doesn't know what "epistemology" means. For McNeil and Jones, commodity becomes a form of epistemology.

And once again, we are back in the world of image and text—the marriage of visual and verbal language—their intersymbolic semiotics a form of dual signification. It is at this merger of word and world that I would



In *Commodity II*, Tom Jones coalesces playing cards (gambling), the Land O'Lakes maiden, and Pocahontas, postcards, and other forms of tourist objectification. Courtesy of Tom Jones.

like to turn to the three remaining essays in this collection. In her fine piece "Seeing Memory/Storying Memory: Printup Hope, Rickard, Gansworth," Susan Bernardin leads the reader through a series of texts whose linguistic and artistic interplay advances provocative arguments about what she calls the "aesthetics of encoding." Bernardin looks closely at the



Merging comic books and television, Larry McNeil takes a stab at both in his hilarious *Native Epistemology*. Courtesy of Larry McNeil.

mixed-genre work of three Haudenosaunee artists—Eric Gansworth, Melanie Printup Hope, and Jolene Rickard—in an attempt to show how the aesthetic practice of memory-making enacts a form of continuance. What makes Bernardin's essay so compelling is her ability to show how these three artists incorporate Haudenosaunee-specific gestures in their work through

innovative intertextual dialogue with the protocols of the wampum—"the verbal-visual nexus in Haudenosaunee art." For these artists, collating the verbal and visual is not merely a cool postmodern stance, but a tribal legacy that informs the most basic aspects of communication. For example, in Printup Hope's *My Grandmother Was Calling Me Home*—a collage of photographs, text, and maps—she charts the forced removal of her ancestors from New York to North Carolina. Like Heap of Birds, she deploys signs and symbols as a form of marking; and like Smith, she utilizes maps and the written word. Like much Native literature, Printup Hope's art projects call into question the Western notion of linearity, the false assumption that point A leads to point B, and that time only lunges forward. It is no wonder, then, that Gansworth, an excellent novelist and poet, feels at home in both realms of symbolic discourse. Bernardin does an admirable job of demonstrating Gansworth's wampum aesthetic in his beguiling collection of poems and paintings *A Half-Life of Cardio-Pulmonary Function*, perhaps my favorite book by him. "Gansworth uses his notion of 'indigenous binary code,'" Bernardin observes, "to extend wampum's possibilities as inspiration, creative form, and thematic code." She is spot on here, as she is in the entire essay—all of the artists find uncommon articulation in Bernardin's reading. Many readers will unlikely be familiar with all three of these artists, and it's a credit to Bernardin that through her essay, a cohesive examination of such different artists emerges.

Readers of this book will, perhaps, be familiar with the Seminole/Muskogee/Diné photographer Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, an innovative artist and the subject of a much-needed essay by Cynthia Fowler (complementing Joseph Bauerkemper's piece on Tsinhnahjinnie's videography, earlier in this volume). By grounding her reading of Tsinhnahjinnie's work in the Navajo notion of beauty, or *hózhó*, Fowler positions this work within a tribal paradigm, making the photographs not simply a participant in the long history of women and photography but also a participant in the long history of Navajo cultural production. To say that *hózhó* means "beauty" as we think of beauty in Western terms is to oversimplify and flatten its significance. A more accurate (if painfully New-Agey) concept might be holism. *Hózhó* is about harmony, order, balance, and correctness—but not the order of Western classification or the correctness of uptight manners. *Hózhó* animates much of the art of Quick-To-See Smith, the poetry of Navajo writer Luci Tapahonso, and that of Joy Harjo, as in the final lines of "Eagle Poem":

> We are truly blessed because we
> Were born, and die soon, within a
> True circle of motion,
> Like eagle rounding out the morning
> Inside us.
> We pray that it will be done
> In beauty.
> In beauty.[6]

For Tsinhnahjinnie, balance and imbalance function as both aesthetic and cultural concepts. Part of her artistic project is to harmonize the disharmony of how Indians *are* and are represented in the world. As Fowler correctly argues, "We see beauty and politics are inescapably linked as Tsinhnahjinnie attempts to correct the imbalances in representations of native people from the beginnings of photography in America." One of those imbalances lies in the representation of women, and in particular, indigenous women. Tsinhnahjinnie has some fun playing with the earnest portrait of the earnest Indian maiden, à la Edward Curtis. As critic Lucy R. Lippard rightly notes, "Portraiture is at the heart of discussions about photography by and of Native people."[7] Beam comments, slyly, on this tradition in *The North American Iceberg*, while both Scholder and Canon take the history of Indian portraiture head-on, but through paint rather than photography. Through digital and photographic manipulation, Tsinhnahjinnie tackles this problem with unusual alacrity and confidence. While she does not show formal fidelity to the history of Native portraiture, her execution makes it clear that her photographs are less about the past and more about the present.

One of the many glaring omissions in my opening comments about Native art was any sustained discussion about gender or, more specifically, the representations of Native women by Native artists. In this regard, Tsinhnahjinnie is revolutionary, and Fowler's essay is important in part because she calls attention to Tsinhnahjinnie's groundbreaking work in this area. No other Native visual artist has devoted more time and energy toward deconstructing reductive and prescribed notions of female and cultural beauty. Fowler's most enduring contribution is her persuasive claim that Tsinhnahjinnie's project of beauty has been carried out "on indigenous terms." Though Fowler doesn't really come out and call Tsinhnahjinnie an activist artist, her work does advance an aesthetic and tribal resistance that is at once learned and liberating.

It was the learned and liberating collation of text and image that first drew Molly McGlennen to the work of George Longfish. Like Quick-To-See Smith, Longfish draws much of his inspiration from advertising—logos, slogans, icons—and like hers, his art is filled with the reappropriation of various images. On one hand he loves to juxtapose familiar images that seem incongruent, like giant hamburgers and Indians. But, on the other

hand, like Scholder, Longfish enjoys recalibrating the viewer's notions of what an Indian is, and what our expectations of Indians on canvas might be, as in his startling *Winter Still Life Landscape, South Dakota, 1893.* In this large-scale piece, Longfish creates a bizarre diptych of the frozen body of Chief Big Foot. But, where Scholder's backdrop would remain blank (and bleak), Longfish enlivens his with text that slices across the images. Snippets of dialogue, warnings, and even some black humor ("No Snowboarding") convert this scene of passive conquest into active conversation. McGlennen, who wrote a piece on Longfish for the National Museum of the American Indian, is a shrewd reader of his work because she sees through the many layers of signification to the heart of his project.

According to McGlennen, Longfish's project is to "provide a continuum of healing." One way the artist engenders this sense of restoration is, like Printup Hope, through text. For McGlennen, text encourages dialogue, which encourages interaction, which encourages communication, community, and being in communion. The modernist impulse of Scholder's and Cannon's text-free canvases with their watery colors and nearly cartoonish renderings of Indians (Cannon's self-portrait is a dead ringer for a *Doonesbury* figure) provide clues on how one should read them. The paintings are, after all, figural, but Longfish takes a different tack. His images are actually more complex than Scholder's or Cannon's, but he captions them, in a sense, through his use of text. In an age of email and SMS, Longfish's canvases feel current, even edgy. But most of all, they feel like they want an audience.

This attention to audience informs the work of all of these artists. Obviously, the importance of the verbal and the visual unite all of the artists under consideration here, but beyond that, each one evinces a commitment to the power of healing, of putting things into right relation, through the act of communication. They also demonstrate the syncretic ability of Native artists—the efficacy with which so many indigenous people draw from a myriad of traditions in order to make Native creative expression as layered as life itself. "ndn art is beautiful," writes Touchette. "And confrontational. It is shocking, thought-provoking, awe inspiring and surprising."[8] Thanks to Bernardin, Fowler, and McGlennen, readers from all areas of interest have a much deeper understanding of the ways in which both perception and reception inform and interact with Native visualities.

One of my favorite pieces of recent American Indian art is *Kiowa Aw-Day*, a fabulously beaded pair of Chuck Taylor sneakers, executed by the Kiowa artist Teri Greeves. Almost neon red, and adorned with electric blue laces and a shamelessly cute Indian girl, the shoes are a contemporary version of beaded baskets or decorated pots in that they provide a canny example of

the indigenous marriage of utility and aesthetics. *Aw-Day* means "favorite children" in Kiowa, and the shoes refer to the tradition of children leading the Black Legging Society into dance, a gesture that indicates readiness for adulthood and leadership. But I also like how the shoes play on Indian commitment to basketball—especially the role basketball plays in the life of young women, as documented in Larry Colton's fabulous book *Counting Coup: A True Story of Basketball and Honor on the Little Big Horn.* According to scholar Elizabeth Archuleta, Greeves "adapts the traditional to the contemporary, claiming a difference between whites and Indians who wear sneakers; Greeves's beading on the shoes illustrates this difference visually and ideologically."[9] For me, these shoes bring us back full circle to the ledger drawings as examples of ways in which Indian artists have taken semiotically and ideologically loaded texts and re-signed them, re-coded them so that instead of signifying American culture, they signify American Indian culture. In both cases, Native artists take the accoutrements of dominance and recast them as texts of indigenous semiotics.

Archuleta goes on to note that the shoes "challenge the tendency to privilege text as well as Indians untouched by time."[10] We need the essays in this volume, these re-codings, these challenges to the privilege of text by Fowler, Bernardin, and McGlennen because, when it comes down to it, they do the very same work.

Teri Greeves, *Kiowa Aw-Day*, on display at the National Museum of the American Indian. Courtesy of the National Museum of the American Indian.

NOTES

1. Margaret Dubin, "Sanctioned Scribe," 161.
2. Charlene Touchette, *ndn art: Contemporary American Indian Art*, 7.
3. Julie Sasse, *Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: Postmodern Messenger*, 13.
4. Fritz Scholder and Rudy H. Turk, *Scholder/Indians*, 22.
5. Julie Coleman Tachick, "T. C. Cannon: Challenging the Parameters."
6. Joy Harjo, *In Mad Love and War*, 65.
7. Lucy R. Lippard, "Independent Identities," 134.
8. Charlene Touchette, *ndn art: Contemporary American Indian Art*, 7.
9. Elizabeth Archuleta, "Gym Shoes," 194.
10. Ibid., 195.

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Seeing Memory, Storying Memory: Printup Hope, Rickard, Gansworth

SUSAN BERNARDIN

So much of the story is carried by memory.

—ERIC GANSWORTH, ARTIST'S TALK,
COLGATE UNIVERSITY, OCTOBER 30, 2008

In a self-portrait entitled *Seeing with my Memory* (2000), Mohawk artist Shelley Niro invites the viewer to consider the seen and the unseen. The artist holds onto a tree at Tutela Heights at Six Nations in Ontario. A recurring setting found in Niro's work, including her film *It Starts with a Whisper* and her painting *Tutela*, Tutela Heights memorializes indigenous people forcibly displaced and offered sanctuary at Six Nations. According to Niro, many Tutelos later died of influenza.[1] Taken together, Niro's painting and provocative title beg the question: what are the mechanisms of memory that could make this place, people, and history visible? Looking back at viewers looking at her, Niro stages a scene of layered interaction between the artist's imagination, the lived and shared memories imprinted on and by the land, and the manifold perspectives of viewers who may come into contact with the painting. Do viewers share her vision or do they envision other memory trails? Or is this scene simply elusive? *Seeing with My Memory* balances the primacy of indigenous memory against the ongoing threat posed by forgetting: its reckoning of grief—of almost incalculable loss—shares a clear-eyed, if coded, vision of continuance.

Niro's pairing of title and painting reminds us that the relationship