What We Do and Do Not Talk About

THE PLACE OF INDIGENOUS ARTS DIALOGUE

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OPEN FOR DISCUSSION

- Commercialism as a negative force
- Tribe as enhancer of cultural expression
- Cultural renaissance
- Women's parity with Native men
- Native men's strength (tradition keepers, warriors, providers)
- Popular culture as destructive (mascots)
- Power of sovereignty as a political and social right
- Environmental degradation
- Native art as exiled from consideration as fine arts

REFUSAL TO DISCUSS

- Commercial strategies for economic success
- Tribe as inhibitor of cultural expression
- Cultural denigration
- Women's exploitation by Native men
- Native men's weakness (passivity, destructive behavior)
- Popular culture as generative (Native artists as consumers)
- Abuse of sovereignty as a foil for abuse of political power
- Complicity in environmental degradation
- Anti-intellectualism in Native communities

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN THINKING and writing about Native American arts as a student at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe in the mid-1980s, I did what most aspiring art writers do, I conducted interviews. Eager to be fully prepared, I authored a list of questions that I hoped would elicit the most compelling discussions. Foremost in my mind was the tension I perceived among the audiences for contemporary American Indian arts; among the public who wrote about and purchased the work; and among the artists' own community, including the pan-Indian arts community in Santa Fe. It struck me that while the Native arts community I inhabited was immensely vital and explosive with ideas, humor, pattern, style, and color, the writing on Native American arts was dry and uninteresting. I didn't want to read the glossy magazine articles, the celebratory arts reviews, or the promotional materials galleries produced, so I endeavored to produce my own analysis of the contemporary Indian arts world I inhabited, unaware of the internal checks and regulations placed on what both artists and their public are willing to talk about.

The crux of the problem became apparent with a set of questions I had prepared to discern the motivation and

audience for contemporary Native American arts. I was working with a male painter known for his bravado in executing poignant realist imagery. When I asked why he chose to paint Native imagery, he answered in the style of the glossy magazines—his work was spiritually meaningful, it came from tradition, he was inspired by the ancestors. I then asked who owned the work, Natives or non-Natives? The answer, somewhat hesitantly, was non-Natives. When I then combined question A and question B to counter, "So you produce spiritually meaningful art for consumption by non-Natives?" my friend the painter covered my tape player with his hand and asked, "What are you going to do with this information?" That was twenty years ago and I have done nothing with this information, until now.

Ethical standards of research, simple politeness, and a concern for the integrity of the Native arts community have inhibited me and perhaps countless others from engaging in what I now consider the "trap door" questions that might expose certain nonmarketable values to a consuming public. By consumption, I am referring not only to the naive Indian Market buyer, but also to the academics who consume Indian arts in the form of publications, quotes, and interviews, as well as the arts administrators, gallery owners, granting institutions, museums, civil and political bodies, cultural centers, tribal governments, tourism divisions, heritage sites, cultural resource management offices, arts journals, newspapers, and any other site of institutional dialogue. These systems of reception are actually powerful conductors and regulators of the concepts utilized to discuss, produce, and ultimately understand what is important, trivial, or useful in contemporary Native American arts.

I am not advocating that these refusals to converse on certain topics be judged as insincere, cowardly, or even deceptive. This is not an essay about the need to expose Native artists as complicit in some questionable and covert effort to inhibit a perceived truer reading of Native arts ideology. The denial to engage publicly in conversations about commercialism, genocide, social dysfunction, or any of the many problems that tribal communities are concerned with has meaning and significance; there is an internal logic and order at play. Borrowing a term from scholar Audra Simpson, it would be more productive to see this dynamic as one of refusal.[1]

By refusal I am referring to the acknowledged silences that surround potentially explosive conversations as a means of containment. These theoretically rich and complex concepts—silence, refusal, containment—need not be singularly viewed as purely dysfunctional. Silence does serve proactive functions, such as protection from exploitation, securing the privacy of individuals who wish to remain anonymous, and prevention of culturally sensitive knowledges from entering public realms.[2] Native communities have employed silences successfully since contact, yet can silence also serve to harm? When are silences liberating and when are silences oppressive?

In the years since 1992, a dramatic shift in public discourse has transpired in which indigenous perspectives are suddenly appearing in the normative passive tales of domination and conquest.[3] In academia, terms such as multivocality, polysemous, and hybridity are now frequently referenced as standard interpretative tools. At the time of its opening, as fantastic a feat as it was to accomplish, the National Museum of the American Indian was taken to task for its negligence to fully disclose the extent of the horrors of genocide in America.[4] A generational shift, posttraumatic boarding school indoctrination, is increasingly reflecting a

demand for more explicit disclosure, especially in the visual and performing arts. While these developments are enhanced by increased opportunities to self-exhibit via the Web and global communications, paradoxically the economic support of Native arts in both public and private realms has gradually receded to a low murmur. For even as public culture, politics, and the media may tolerate discussions of cultural, physical, and emotional trauma, the market will not, and in a capitalistic market economy, this resistance is felt, internalized, and replicated. The pain of exile and extermination is more often referenced only in its manifestations of social dysfunction, poverty, and health disparities.

The burden of the representation of racism and its effects then falls to whom? Clearly those artists who make the leap from the decorative to the truly disturbing are doing so at some risk, a risk that is much greater than that of their non-Native colleagues who are allowed much more latitude to create unsettling art as a privilege of postmodern vanities. We should ask ourselves, even with the self-disclosure of pain, what else is silenced? Strategically, what stories are allowed in the rarified confines of the museum walls? What stories are still refused?

A survey of the works presented for *Unlimited Boundaries: Dichotomy of Place in Contemporary Native American Art* reveals a centrifugal pull to issues of health, identity, boundaries, and the crossing of boundaries—physical, emotional, and racial. Many of these messages are subtle to the point of illegibility by Western readers. Emmi Whitehorse's fluid renderings of texture and color, her signature floating marks, refuse the interpretative models so often employed in standard readings of Native arts. Nora Naranjo-Morse's creative plays on black, white, and brown similarly deny easy access to the beautiful. Irregular drips, confusing textures, an attempt even at achieving ugliness are all efforts to bring awareness to nonuniformity, transitions, blends, and denials of clarity, at least that clarity that offers only reassurances. This is a language that requires work, that refuses comfort, that demands more time and effort than most Native art audiences are willing to employ.

Why do Steven Deo's surreal presentations of non-belongings disturb us so? A refusal of prettiness, a claim to unworking the functional, the suggestion of destruction, and the unnatural construction of old shoes and tires, materials we use as tools, unnerves, dis-settles, and yet leaves a lingering sense of wonder. Technical, aesthetic, and interpretative questions float uneasily over the work. These are uncomfortable readings, perhaps willful tugs at the collective amnesia that is the American consciousness. Like Deo, C. Maxx Stevens's work aggressively pokes the hardened exterior of Native art's complacency, overwhelming the viewer with a complexity and a pain that only folks on the inside of the Indian Hospital experience directly. *Sugar Heaven* jolts the consciousness in a visceral way, reminding the viewer of human frailty and loss, while Shelley Niro's *The Essential Sensuality of Ceremony* evokes a sense of flying right through the roof of Indian Hospital on the air of lush grass, cool stones, sweet candies, and the flutter of wings in the air. Visceral yes, but Niro's ceremony is the visceralness of dreams, the remembrance of a song heard in the distance, or a memory that drifts just outside consciousness.

These artistic meditations remind the viewer that images are like a language; without translations the distance one must travel extends beyond recognizable endeavors—muting, some might say silencing. The uneasy and thickly layered recordings do not invite

the same celebratory descriptives of indigenous art dialogues of the past. Could the implied silences be only silences of a certain nature? Could it be that the audience is unversed in hearing, or could the artist's refusal be one of deliberate choice? Is the work alienated or self-alienated?

Contemplating Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's 2006 piece *The American Landscape*, this shifting landscape of meaning is brought forward front and center. The classic feathered Native man looks outward, and we look with him over his shoulder as unrelated orbs of significance float without reason. Dizzying icons of death, folklore, modernism, and fear reference the slippery identity that challenges each of us to take hold of a perspective, any perspective, just for a moment's stillness. Becoming one of us, looking out with our Native male companion, our Tonto, for just a moment in time, fails to have the same charm or reassurance of a previous era. This lack of certainty may be our salvation or our burden, depending on where we choose to stand and what we choose to hear.

NOTES

1. Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal: Citizenship and Nationhood in Contemporary Kanhawake," paper presented at the American Anthropological Association invited session "Critical and Dangerous Issues in Ethnographic Research in Native North America," on November 18, 2006, in San Jose, California.
2. Richard Grounds, "Yuchi Travels: Up and Down the Academic 'Road to Disappearance,'" in *Native Voices: American Indian Identity and Resistance*, ed. Richard A Grounds, George E. Tinker, and David E Wilkins (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).
3. Sharryl Davis Hawke and James E. Davis, *Seeds of Change: The Story of Cultural Exchange after 1492* (Parsippany, NJ: Pearson Learning, 1992).
4. Amy Lonetree, "Continuing Dialogues: Evolving Views of the National Museum of the American Indian," *Public Historian* 28, no. 2 (2006): 57–62.

UNLIMITED BOUNDARIES

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