

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

FLATHEAD

BY AMELIA TREVELYAN

ALL ARTISTS ARE MEDIATORS. They negotiate and define the distance between image and idea, vision and reality, medium and content, artist and viewer. Only a few manage to create links so varied and accessible that their work can also bridge the gap between the mundane and the fundamental, a piece of reality that touches on and interprets the universal. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is one of those few; the utter simplicity of *Coyote in Disguise* is such a construction. In this drawing, Smith pushes far beyond the myriad rich and often delightful references to Coyote that abound in contemporary art. Coyote is the logogram Smith often uses to sign her works. Despite its simplicity, it offers (in microcosm) the same exquisite combination of elements that is present in most of her works. Each is chock full of signs and symbols that refer to the fundamentally human, joined with a delicious—if occasionally cutting—humor. Such works speak to any who listen, even if they are not familiar with the mythic antics of Coyote and the combination of awesome power and occasional fallibility that the classic trickster

represents in cultures around the world.

Coyote also is a mediator, linking the grand regularity of the cosmos with the chaos that often characterizes human lives. Trickster myths were based upon astute observation of reality and the way it operates, fundamental human truths and the humor and irony that accompany them. That sharp and sardonic humor is rampant in all of the works in the exhibition, from the deadly playfulness of *Paper Dolls for a Post Columbian World* to the ironic climax of greed and materials represented by plastic baskets in the sacred colors of the four directions that crown *Tongass Trade Canoe*. In the latter work, Smith's abiding interest in environmental issues is also unfolded in a rich tapestry of words and images. The humor involved is always tinged with irony and, frequently, a quiet but appropriate rage. It would take volumes, and many hours, to unpack the levels of meaning imbedded in each. Fortunately, museum-goers have the opportunity to begin to understand, thanks to the vision and support of the Eiteljorg Museum.

Smith has always dealt with such matters in her work, defining universals through analysis and presentation of the specific, as trickster tales invariably do. Her self-conscious commentary on the history of colonial exploitation in the Americas, and its devastating results, transcends issues of victimization to invoke the larger ones, those that involve the weal of the whole earth and all of its inhabitants. Hence the distinctly positive cast of her work, despite its incisive social and political content. The depth and breadth of meaning in classic trickster tales is there in other ways, too. *Coyote in Disguise* pays homage to the broad range of art traditions that inform her work, from the reams of drapery studies produced in European art academies to the narrative content in so much of





JEFF STURGES

Coyote in Disguise, charcoal on paper, 1998,
99"x34½"

Native American contemporary art. The form is spare and elegant in this case, rich and raw in others. *The Red Mean: Self Portrait* is a powerful example of the latter.

Here, Smith's trickster conjuring calls up Greek tradition and the aesthetics of the golden mean, using Leonardo da Vinci as medium. But her own female form replaces the white male measure of perfection, and she trades the cosmological power of the Medicine Circle for the inert geometry of circle and square in Leonardo's original. At the center are pungent comments on Smith's Indianness, with her U.S. government-issued number, and another recurring theme: the fact that she, as much as anyone else born there, was "made in the USA." Characteristically, the title offers increased enticement to enter into the layered meaning of the whole, inviting the viewer to contemplate society's obsession with the sterile power of statistics, as well as the fundamental meanness of official policies, defined, explained and rationalized on their basis.

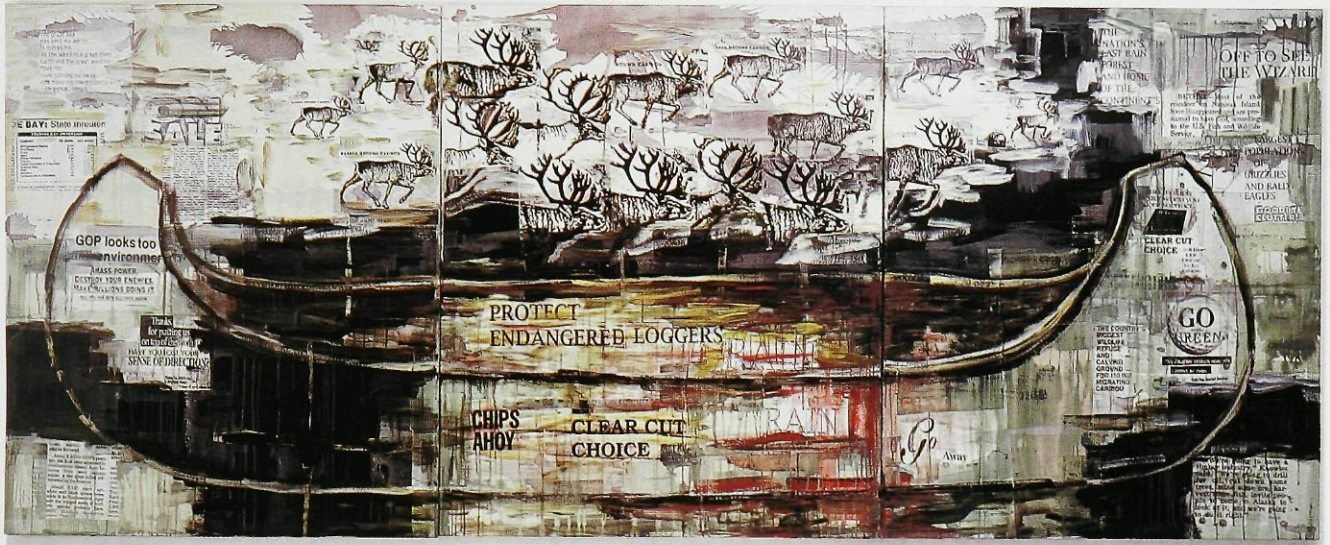
Indian Drawing Lesson works in a similar way, except that references to the past focus on Native tradition rather than European, the emblematic significance of the buffalo and its links with the fate of indigenous Americans. At one level, the viewer is invited to contemplate what it means to be a Native artist—or any artist, for that matter. What are the models, the standards, and why? At the literal heart of the matter, Salish Indian art is juxtaposed to the European canon: Correggio's version of dozens of benign depictions of rape in Western tradition and the Greek glorification of war. All surround an Indian basket, an early (if not the earliest) artistic medium shared by virtually all peoples, yet left almost entirely out of the annals of traditional art history. Interestingly, in an advertisement for fruit, an alluring Native woman above the buffalo's head offers a large apple, with the word 'Mischief' in large letters above her head. It is as suggestive of the Garden of Eden as it is of international beauty pageants; and a squashed portrait of Custer languishes beneath the buffalo's right rear hoof. It's a quote from Smith's earlier series of prints exploring that image and its implications for Euro-American and Native American history. *Indian Drawing Lesson* is a work rife with questions and almost entirely without answers. The trickster again.

Whatever formal and aesthetic choices Smith makes, all seem defined by and clearly subordinate to content. This is clear in the work as it is in Smith's own

comments. The voluminous critical comment on her work bears witness to the same phenomenon. The vast majority of that commentary explores the layered profundity of Smith's content. Only a paragraph here and there explores the formal elements of her style. That is in large part because even the most content-laden work of most mainstream contemporary art produced in the last two decades has considerably less to say than Smith and many of her fellow Native artists. By comparison, the feast of layered meaning Smith's works provides is like the delights of fine French cuisine, as opposed to dinner at the drive-through window. There is an emphasis on content and the communication of it in virtually all Native contemporary art, an important element of continuity from ancient times. Still, form and medium are very much the servants of content, and vice versa. The relationship is complex and utterly symbiotic, so much so that they cannot be successfully disengaged from one another, even in analysis. And they should not be. Only the dichotomous and hierarchical nature of Western academic thought and discourse suggests that such disengagement might contribute to a more rigorous and, thereby, accurate evaluation of this work. In fact, accurate evaluation is impossible without an appreciation for that complexity and the reasons why style and content must be considered simultaneously.

FORMAL ANALYSIS IS CRUCIAL to full appreciation of what Smith does and why. It also helps one to understand how she has evolved as an artist. Early works bear strong formal relationships to the traditional arts of the Flathead peoples on the reservation where Smith was born—expressed in the well-established, formalist vocabulary of contemporary Euro-American art. Large, primarily abstract forms float in the center field, held loosely in place (but never immobilized) by narrower borders, usually composed of signs and symbols from the Native vocabulary. It is almost as if Smith was consciously searching for her artistic identity amidst the vast array of influences that crowd the vocabulary of most artists today—and consciously grounding herself in the ancient traditions of her ancestors.

She moves gradually into the style apparent in most of the works in the exhibition (although specific subject matter and other media may occasion a return to earlier modes). The newer style is a collage of various media, utilizing paint and other traditional artists' tools,



Tongass Trade Canoe, acrylic/collage on canvas, mixed media, 1996, 60"x150" triptych

as well as drawing heavily upon the printed word and media, the core of knowledge and information in much of today's world. *The Red Mean: Self Portrait* also defines the nature of this development. Like her earlier works, the details afloat in the center are located by a border made up of smaller formal elements, drawn from her background. Now, however, that border is constructed of pages from the tribal newspaper. A face-to-face encounter with the complex issues of reservation life has all but replaced the signs and symbols of tradition (though their fragmentary ghosts float here and there across the canvas and some come to rest on her thighs—albeit contained in the context of a museum show catalog). Despite these developments, the formal essence is structurally the same as the earlier work. But the content had become more pungent, focused and direct.

The shift to a more literally readable art corresponds to Smith's increasing involvement in the art world outside of her studio. This increasingly global vision is reflected, too, in the content of several more recent works. With *The American Nanny*, the artificial nature of the natural borders imposed by Europeans invaders begins to be explored and exploded. The work highlights the fact that the same issues of materialism and exploitation that defined the experience of Native North Americans continues to plague the lives of their counterparts throughout the Americas. In a close look at the world of undocumented aliens, once again, Smith invites the viewer to consider the issues, their irony, and the web of deception and rationalization that links the indigenous poor with upperclass Euro-Americans.

Smith combines and controls her imagery in much the same way that Coyote utilizes his special powers in traditional stories, through wisdom and humor, turning reality and the assumptions of its inhabitants on their respective heads. Again and again, he exposes weakness and inconsistency and softens the harshness of the violence and degradation involved with humor. Along the way, Smith has clearly come to terms with the grand quandary of Native artists everywhere: to be, or not to be, self-consciously 'Native.' Unlike many of her colleagues, Smith apparently came to terms with this issue early on, faced it squarely, and has declared her Nativeness unabashedly ever since. Like Coyote, her utter disregard for what might seem to others to be special limitations has clearly contributed to the power that has always characterized her work.

SMITH'S IMPORTANCE as a contemporary artist proceeds in part from her broad accomplishments as curator and advocate. They have given her the opportunity to analyze and present the contributions of Native artists within mainstream contemporary art, as well as to consider and define the effects of Euro-American art traditions upon indigenous ones. Certain themes crop up repeatedly among contemporary Native artists. Profound explorations of personal identity, subtle and sardonic—often dark—humor and myriads of unique perspectives on the land are some of the most common. Smith's work as curator and critic has provided the clear sense of the primary differences in Native approaches and their results, as expressed in much of her writing. A similarly clear and intelligent self-consciousness informs the best of all contemporary Native fine art. It represents an astute awareness of cultural and artistic processes that is rare among their non-Native contemporaries. This awareness is born of their special circumstances as participants, in various ways and to varying degrees, in two fundamentally different cultures. Unlike some of her fellow Native fine artists and despite the risks involved, Smith is frank, even outspoken, about these differences. In fact, they are fundamental to all of the best work produced by contemporary Native fine artists, whether or not the artists themselves are conscious of them. The result is an art that is doubly rich, particularly when the work addresses the tensions inherent in such a history and manages to resolve them, formally or otherwise—as Smith's does. Her willingness to give voice to these issues is crucial to the development of a more general appreciation for the profound strength and richness to be gleaned from the experience of contemporary Native fine art. It should also help dilettantes and collectors to distinguish between this work and the glut of the New Age/non-Native wannabes that fill galleries unwilling or unable to offer the work of first-rate artists such as Smith.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is a communicator. Her paintings, prints and drawings speak. And they speak the same language, in the same idiom, and with the same results as millennia of trickster stories throughout the world: to inform, transform and interpret reality. Only the medium is different, and for good reason. If humanity today listens at all to the kind of wisdom tricksters impart, it listens with its eyes.

Coyote has a lot to say. Listen...and enjoy. ♦



The Queen of Hearts,
She made some tarts,
All on a summer's day,
The Knave of Hearts,
He stole the tarts,
And took them clean away.

How much
you accomplish
is ours.

MY HEART
BELONGS
TO DADDY

The Great White
Father

CRIMES OF
THE HEART

Your Land is our Land
SWEEPSTAKES

What makes them tick?

Money,
Money,
Money,
and Money,
Money

My Heart Belongs to Daddy, acrylic, oil on canvas, 1998, 60" x 50"

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