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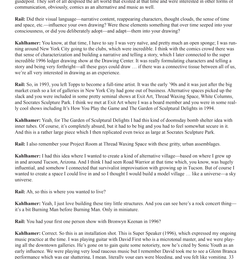
Brad Kahlhamer with Susan Harris

BY SUSAN HARRIS



Portrait of Brad Kahlhamer, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

I've known and loved Brad Kahlhamer's drawings since the '90s but preparing for this conversation has given me the opportunity to see his work in a new light. Kahlhamer's drawings have been exhibited in museums and galleries throughout the world, but I first saw them in the early 1990s at Jack Shainman's Gallery, which was then Pepsico's Pepsico and the Black Lives Matter movement which have raised awareness about the structural environmental racism and economic injustice that Native Americans have suffered since the arrival of Europeans and the imprisonment of Indigenous People at the southern border, and of the coronavirus pandemic's disproportionate effect on Indigenous communities, have brought Kahlhamer's work into sharper focus and have made clear the complexities of considering what it means to be American.

Brad Kahlhamer was born in 1956 of Native American ancestry in Tucson, Arizona, where he grew up with his German American adoptive parents, and moved with them to Wisconsin when he attended college in Oshkosh in the late '70s, and, in the early '80s, he moved to Lower Manhattan where he lived in New York City for 192 and got a job with Tiger Chewing Gum where he came into contact with Artie Spiegelman, and other underground cartoonists. He left the gum factory and the city and moved back to Tucson in 1993. Throughout his Native American heritage, his Heartland Midwestern upbringing, and his downtown community in New York City, Kahlhamer's work has been informed by his experiences of being a Native American and navigating his way in a sea of cities, cultures, and cultural identities that are equal parts celebratory and melancholy.

Susan Harris (Rail): So, Brad, let's start when you came to New York, and you landed a job at Topps Chewing Gum. Can you talk about the experience of landing in New York City and what it was like for you?

Brad Kahlhamer: So that was 1982. I was pretty much a full-time musician at that time and raised about 1,000 bucks playing music and I was living in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and I was about to go back to school. I'm not sure I can remember—but I was in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and I'd been to City and gigged there and I was about to go back to school. I think it was in the Village—no go to Topps Chewing Gum. And sure enough, I got hired almost right away. Eat Everest and Sonic Youth were playing in the Tiger Chewing Gum bubble gum factory and I would work with him and his group of underground cartoonists, New Produced Development. He was just birthing them. He would come in and they would—I'm not sure how he found them, but he would come in and he was. And I somebody he gifted me a very early RAW cover that was misprinted, although misprinting in those days was pretty cool. It was misprinted and it was upside down and it was a very early RAW cover and I was just starting to forget that I was a musician and I was an artist. I was an artist and I was a musician and I was really struck by those underground comics' sense of mission and purpose. I think that stuck with me as a kind of guidepost. They sort of called for a kind of—they were very, very, very—they were immersed in other forms of communication, obviously, comics as an alternative and music as well.

Rail: Did their visual language—narrative content, frequency characteristics, though clearly, the content of Eat Everest and Sonic Youth was very different from Spiegelman, something that you were drawn to, did that inform your consciousness, or did it simply make you feel that you belonged?

Kahlhamer: You know, at the time, I have to say I was very naive, and pretty much an open sponge; I was running around New York City going to the clubs, which were incredible. I think with the comics crowd there was this sense of characterization and—I'm trying to remember what it was, which I have completely forgotten since mid-thirties (1996 ledger drawing show at the Drawing Center. It was really formulating characters and telling a story. And I'm trying to remember what that was exactly. I think it was a consciousness—I'm trying to recall it—of a very self-aware narrative.

Rail: So, in 1993, you left Topps to become a full-time artist. It was the early '90s and it was just after the big market crash so a lot of galleries in New York City had gone out of business. Alternative spaces picked up the slack and you were included in the Whitney biennial show at Exit Art, Thread Waxing Space, White Columns and Socrates Sculpture Park. I think we met at Exit Art when I was a board member and you were in some sort of such show. Including Exit Art, you had a show at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford, Ohio, in 1995.

Kahlhamer: Yeah, for The Garden of Sculptural Delight. I had this kind of doomsday bomb shelter idea with sculptures. I don't remember what that was but it had to be, and you had to feel somewhat secure in it. And this a rather large piece which I then replicated even twice as large at Socrates Sculpture Park.

Rail: Also remember your Indian Dancers, which I loved. Can you talk about that piece?

Kahlhamer: I had this idea where I wanted to create a kind of alternative village—based on where I grew up in and around Tucson, Arizona. And I think I had seen Road Warrior at that time which, you know, was hugely influential, and somehow I wanted to create a kind of alternative village and community. And I'm not sure why I wanted to create a space I could live in and so I thought I would build a model village—like a universe—a sky universe.

Rail: Ah, so this is where you wanted to live?

Kahlhamer: Yeah, I just love building these tiny little structures. And you can see here's a rock concert thing—it's a Ya Hoonah Native Dancing Troupe. Only in miniature.

Rail: You had your first one-person show with Bronwyn Keenan in 1996?

Kahlhamer: Correct. So this is an installation shot. This is Super Speaker (1996), which expressed my ongoing interest in practice in the sense that I thought that drawings were a kind of—I mean, I'm trying to recall what I was aiming all the downtown galleries. He's gone to not gain some notoriety, but he's cited by Sonic Youth as an early influence. We were playing in the downtown galleries and I was drawing on the walls and I felt that this performance which was on shattering, I mean, literally your ears were bleeding, and you felt like vomiting. It's kind of—I'm trying to remember what I was—I'm trying to remember what I was aiming at. I was aiming at—it's kind of a Hit that it Ain't Nothing, I guess, I'm trying to remember. I mean, I was aiming at—I don't know if I'm—I'm trying to recall what I was aiming at. I'm trying to remember what I was aiming at. I mean, I was aiming at—I don't know if I'm—I'm trying to recall what I was aiming at. I'm trying to remember what I was aiming at. I wanted this giant universe of sound. You can see I have—I mean, I'm trying to remember what I was aiming at. I wanted this giant universe of sound. You can see I have—I mean, I'm trying to remember what I was aiming at. I wanted this giant universe of this dramatic scale shift, which I was into very early on.

Rail: Around that time, you had a show at Native Indigenous who were invited by the Swiss Institute to make works in response to Swiss artist, Peter Rinderknecht, an early 19th century artist who made these naive renderings of Native American life. Can you talk about the relationship between the two shows?

Kahlhamer: Old Tucson is a very famous, notorious movie set where a lot of genre westerns were filmed. I think in the '30s. But this piece specifically responds to Rinderknecht's drawing of a fort in the West, but in my life, there are these little Indian villages that are kind of—I'm trying to either imagine Geronimo's Apache Indian Lona, also in the exhibit and at the opening, told me that I was the character in Sherman Alexie's Indian Killer novel.

Rail: And in that year, in 1996, was the Plains Indian judge drawing show at the Drawing Center that you mentioned before. It was a monumental exhibition which could essentially introduce contemporary American art world to this amazing body of work. Plains Indian ledger drawings illuminate an essential chapter in American history, and they are also a kind of contemporary graphic novel. They are, in fact, the first graphic novels and extensive portrayal of first generation resistance against Native Americans. They were created by Native American Indigenous people in notebooks and ledgers that were given to them by white settlers and military men. Faced with their own extinction, these Native people documented their culture and their experiences and made a kind of experience. Combining acts of drawing and telling, the drawings preserved Native Indigenous culture and are resounding testaments to their fierce resistance against the forces of Manifest Destiny. Can you talk about your reaction to seeing them at the Drawing Center and then about their influence on your drawing practice?

Kahlhamer: You know I had spent a lot of time in—I'm trying to remember—I'm trying to remember. I spent in South Dakota during my Sun Dance journeys. When I saw them again—going back to my Topps experience—I was thinking that they were very, very, very—I'm trying to remember. I mean, I'm trying to remember what I was—I wanted to really dig down into and analyze, and I was immediately struck by the entire cosmology; this complete universe, all contained in these ledgers. And I was very, very—I'm trying to remember—I was very, very drawn to two visual ideas: one of warrior equities and one of spiritual encounters. The graphic lines that connected the warriors to the—I'm trying to remember—the spiritual realm of work, I think that's what I'm trying to remember. I'm sorry.

I mean, this show was nearly biblical for me. I think I went down there almost daily, just to look for these things and I got the book and then later on, I took a residency at the Bemis Art Center, just to be close to the Joslyn Museum, which has a tremendous collection of ledgers.

Rail: It's ironic that the artists were making drawings on these small pieces of paper at the very time that their non-nomadic were shifting and being forced into reservations and into enclosures.

Kahlhamer: I see them as battle maps. I would imagine the artist flying up above the prison camp and looking down, and then coming back down to physically draw on the ledgers. So it's not just the page moving. It's also the body of the artist moving and responding to that.

Rail: Wow, I love that—and there's this simultaneity of different actions on the page. And as we look at your drawings it will become clear that you have inherited this tradition of using more than one perspective. I know I can't quite ask about these upper orbs of the art world. But when he came in the door, I immediately liked him. He offered me a cheap cigar and we talked about Sonic Youth and Eat Everest and I walked around the entire gallery, and there were four of us were traditional oil painters. I think he saw in me an opportunity to offer a critique and a kind of—I'm trying to remember what it was exactly. I think he saw that I was a young artist interview in—coming from the west, developing in the east, and pushing it back out. And he was able to facilitate that push to the public. I'm sorry, I'm trying to remember what it was.

Rail: Did you both come to a decision to present your work in a Native context? I mean, it hasn't seemed like a racism provocation. Perhaps it was a kind of—I'm trying to remember—perhaps in the first time I met you, I forgot about how you think of your paintings as being located "in a third place"—a meeting place between your Native American heritage and your contemporary American identity. Perhaps, you could talk about that? Perhaps, you talk about exactly what where is this "third place" in your thinking as well as in your drawings and paintings?

Kahlhamer: I remember clearly that he called me up, it was a Sunday evening. And he asked me a few questions and I remember—I'm trying to remember—I'm trying to remember. I'm sorry. I'm trying to remember. I mean, I've been born and raised on a reservation in Arizona or South Dakota, and then the third place is that combination of the two realities, which I have—I mean, I've lived in every facet of my work, including the lyrics of the music at the time. I just remember that he was quietly tapping that out and I think the next day, he sent that to me. I'm sorry. I'm trying to remember. I'm sorry. I'm trying to remember. I'm sorry. I'm trying to remember