

# The Spirit of Place in an Artist's Soul

BY MASON RIDDLE



*Greatest Geronimo*, 2013

ST. PAUL, Minnesota — A disarmingly provocative show, Brad Kahlhamer: *A Nation of One*, makes clear that the intersectionality of identity and place is the hybrid muse driving the artist's practice.

Kahlhamer, an intrepid traveler who self-identifies as “tribally ambiguous,” was born in Arizona to Native American parents, but adopted by a German-American family and raised mostly in Wisconsin. In 1982, he made New York City home base, but his travel continued to the arid southwest, the sylvan lakes, rivers and forests of the Upper Midwest, the Great Plains, Alaska and Northeast locales. Over time, these travel experiences shaped his evolving identity and have become his creative lexicon. “Yondering” (2011) evokes this wanderlust — to find out what is over “yonder.” A collage on paper, it is an unruly mélange of figurative images, random markings and bits of text that resonates with a palpable sense of people and place.

A compelling survey, *A Nation of One* comprises more than 40 works created between 2000 and 2016, and includes mixed-media paintings, drawings, sculptures, sketchbooks, a music video and two musical recordings. For Kahlhamer, the title signifies a time in 1980s New York when “contemporary Indigenous art was not on anyone’s radar. It is a fitting title in that respect,” he explained by email. It also embodies his singular, often peripatetic creative life, which began as a traveling musician with punk proclivities a decade before he moved to New York, a decade-long day job at Topps Chewing Gum Company, where he became a design director, and, in due course, a visual artist who still plays music.

Kahlhamer is an unapologetic storyteller whose work is an expressive matrix of image and text in a web of gestural markings. He effortlessly co-mingles the real with the fantastical, metaphor with fact, and a loose expressive gestures with a meticulously rendered form. Precise meanings are oblique. His are not universal narratives, but a compendium of personal, experiential tales that give meaning to his multivalent life as an artist-explorer-Indigenous person. The natural world of plants and animals, the social arena of friends, family and colleagues, and the allegorical atlas of visited sites, all claim a vital seat at his creative table.

For Kahlhamer, to think is to draw. Like an electrical charge, his graphic line enlivens each work. The *Nomadic Studio*, an ongoing series of small sketchbooks, are skillful examples of how he vivifies his subject matter. Even his compact *Next Level Figure* sculptures, inspired by Hopi Katsina dolls, feature bits of angular wire and sinewy rope in the carefully assembled compositions of wood, metal, paint, leather, fur and feathers.

Kahlhamer’s paintings on paper, canvas and bedsheets are also lively festivals of image, text, line and color. Single words, lines of meandering text or sketchy notations amplify his narratives. And he frequently incorporates the “Topps” logo or that of the Lakota Thrifty Mart into his work. His wall-filling “Community Board” (2004-06) is a visual time capsule of drawings, photographs, found objects and notations collected over three years that signify a celebration of “community.” “Greatest Geronimo” (2013) has a cinematic feel, whose narrative originates with the legendary Apache leader and medicine man and evolves into Kahlhamer’s life.

Most poetic are four watercolor and ink on paper drawings from 2000. Made during a residency at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, Kahlhamer visited Wyalusing State Park where he closely observed the surrounding environment. In one, “S.W. Wisconsin,” a collection of vignettes depicts coyotes and deer wearing braids, eagles flying about, Indigenous people and spirits looking on, all linked by Kahlhamer’s extensive notations. “The Plains Indians” (2015) is perhaps Kahlhamer’s finest synthesis of multiple elements into a seamless, transportive experience. A complex composition, its image and text, sign and symbol, and spirit of place are interwoven into a triumphant record of events. The notation “1860 – 1880 Death of the Buffalo” elevates the experience of loss and sorrow to a palpable level.

Kahlhamer also addresses the appropriation and commodification of Indigenous symbols and objects into mainstream culture. A play on the ubiquitous dream catcher, “Super Catcher” (2016) at nearly six feet in diameter, is a glinting wall-mounted sculpture configured of shiny silver wire and bells that is at once ethereal and intimidating. Just what dreams are snared in this Brobdingnagian catcher is the question.

*Bowery Nation + Hawk + Eagle* is the title of an attendant Bockley Gallery exhibition, and of Kahlhamer’s recent mixed-media installation inspired by the Crow Nation’s legendary parade floats. At more than 16 feet long and 10 feet high, the work incorporates multiple cut-out and painted elements such as a steer’s skull and Katsina-inspired figures. A wall of two dozen drawings, created last winter in Mesa, Arizona, is a vivid backdrop of agitated line, bold color, and identifying text.

In the end, Brad Kahlhamer: *A Nation of One*, and *Bowery Nation + Hawk + Eagle* provide a fluid ecosystem made of ideas and impulses, and words and images that circle back to notions of identify and place. Consequently, Kahlhamer has realized the ancient concept *genius loci* — “spirit of place.” If considered a dialectic, Kahlhamer’s ideas of spirit and place — sustain and nurture each other, strengthening and deepening his practice, as if two logs fueling a simmering fire.

Being an artist requires a pluralistic approach to life, one at which Kahlhamer has excelled. Art, music, travel, community, and Indigenous and contemporary culture all play a role in his expansive oeuvre. His work also seems to acknowledge there is room for discussion, for interpretation. Viewed collectively, Kahlhamer’s two shows confirm his is a challenging but meaningful life, one guided by its own internal logic of competing intellectual and cultural forces, that has coalesced into a *Nation of One*.