

# Punk Dream Catchers and Native Iconography Make Magic in Twin Cities Exhibition

BY ALICIA ELER



Brad Kahlhamer. Photo by Maggie Shannon .

As a teenager growing up in the Wisconsin town of Mayville, artist Brad Kahlhamer saw something that would haunt his work.

“I had graduated high school, and there was a lanky — I think Lakota — dude coming through town. I remember seeing this guy walk down Main Street. It was like seeing a ghost because we looked alike, and nobody there looked like me.”

The next day, his friends nicknamed the guy “Ugh,” and joked that he was Kahlhamer’s brother.

Born in Tucson, Ariz., Kahlhamer, 63, was adopted at a young age by a German-American family and grew up as the only American Indian in Mayville, about 40 miles south of Oshkosh. He never found out who that guy was, but the word “Ugh” shows up frequently in his work in stenciled, street-art-esque letters, on a cardboard cattle skull and a shelf where “Next Level Figure” dolls inspired by Hopi katsina dolls are perched.

This week the accomplished artist, who is based in New York and exhibits internationally, launches two shows in the Twin Cities: “A Nation of One” at the Minnesota Museum of American Art in St. Paul and “Bowery Nation + Hawk + Eagle” at Bockley Gallery in Minneapolis.

His hybrid aesthetic combines the urgency of graffiti and street art, the rage and existentialism of punk rock, a mix of Native American iconography (he identifies as “tribally ambiguous”), abstract expressionism and even comic books.

Although he’s constantly inspired by the visual stimulation of New York City, where he has lived since 1982, the heart of his practice is his sketchbooks, which are like mind-maps filled with sketches of faces, writings and other notes he makes during travels. He refers to them as his “nomadic studio.” He frequently travels to the West Coast, and recently bought a place in Mesa, Ariz.

The exhibition at the Minnesota Museum of American Art, initiated by former curator Christopher Atkins, is Kahlhamer’s first survey in the Upper Midwest.

His other, more intimate show at Bockley Gallery came out of a 20-year friendship with owner Todd Bockley, known for working with Native American artists. Kahlhamer and Bockley had talked about organizing an exhibit for years, and with this opportunity at the M it “seemed to be the right time,” Bockley said.

Both shows include drawings, paintings and sculpture, overlapping thematically and physically. Kahlhamer’s wire-and-bell sculptural artwork “Super Catcher,” a 4-foot circular dream catcher structure with many smaller versions inside, is at the M and Bockley. (There are three “super catchers” in this series.)

A sly, contemporary commentary on the way this Ojibwe-originated charm hung over kids’ beds to protect them from bad dreams has been co-opted and commodified, Kahlhamer also gives the object a rougher, punk aesthetic by using wire rather than its usual more natural materials.

Kahlhamer’s survey is the first exhibition in the newly renovated M’s contemporary art galleries. It includes stacks of his sketchbooks.

“We wanted to come out with something that we felt fit well with us, which is an artist questioning who you are in America right now,” said executive director Kristin Makhholm. “It’s so complex and interesting, his connection and disconnection with his native roots, his connection with popular culture, his connection with all the different places he’s lived.”

The exhibition is roughly organized into three sections around the themes of search for community; the tourist trade and pop culture appropriation of Native American identity; and “yondering,” Kahlhamer’s idea of adventure and exploration coined from the title of a short-story collection by Western genre novelist Louis L’Amour. Yondering is where he finds his inspiration.

His “Next Level Figure” dolls were inspired by wandering into the Heard Museum in Phoenix, where he encountered 464 Hopi katsina dolls. Traditionally used as messengers between the spirit and human worlds, they were arranged as a mass, and he was impressed by their “power in numbers.”

Back in New York, he created his own dolls — 1-foot-tall figurative sculptures made of wire, bells, wood, feathers, hair, rope and other materials. They are positioned atop iron rods around a gallery at the M, as if keeping watch over the show, while at Bockley they are part of a large, monument-like sculpture that gives the show its name, “Bowery Nation + Hawk + Eagle.”

“In a way they are kind of their own tribe — and I think that’s also part of being adopted,” Kahlhamer said. “You’re free to make your own world, as most artists do anyway.”