



# Beyond Stereotypes: 21st-Century Indian Artists

In the late 1990s the curator Thelma Golden and the artist Glenn Ligon got together and invented "Post-Black," a movement of sorts for black artists who didn't want their work or themselves to be defined primarily in racial terms.

## ART REVIEW

KEN JOHNSON

Now comes Post-Indian. "Remix: New Modernities in a Post Indian World," an exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, argues that for many young artists, being Indian does not necessarily wholly determine who or what they are and does not oblige them to work in a certifiably Indian style. To prove its point, the exhibition presents a mixed bag of works by 15 artists of at least partial American Indian descent.

This somewhat uneven show, organized by Gerald McMaster, a curator at the Art Gallery of Ontario, and Joe Baker, a curator at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, where it was last spring and fall, includes pieces that clearly represent Indian subject matter and some that don't.

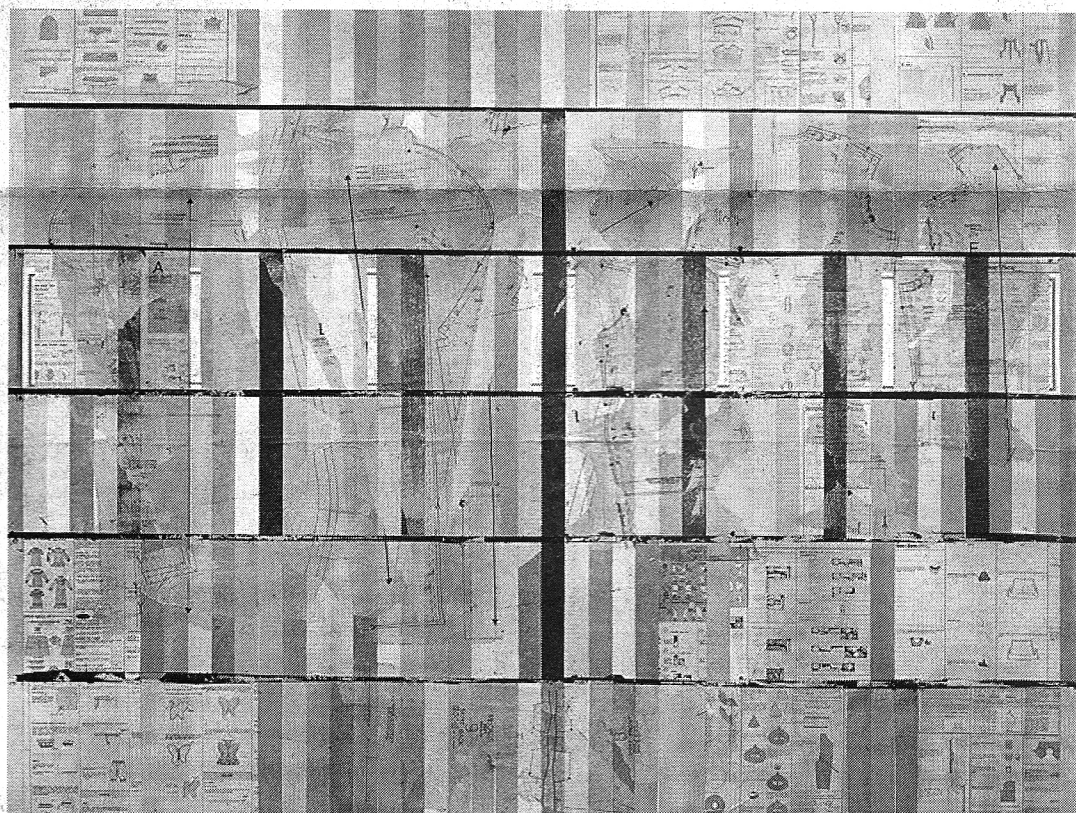
There are paintings and sculptures resembling Mexican folk art by Luis Gutierrez and Hector Ruiz and a skateboarding video called "4-Wheel Warpony" by Dustinn Craig. Fausto Fernandez paints vaguely tribal graphics over collages made from old maps. Gregory Lomayesva offers a puzzling gridded arrangement of brushy, illustrative paintings of sexy women, a pair of newlyweds and a burning house called "The Art of War (sun tzu)."

A big revolving sculpture of dangling animals made of bunched-up clear plastic tape by David Hannan looks like a Bruce Nauman, and photographs by Brian Miller, narrating his involvement with a sexy, borderline-crazy woman, are like stills for a neo-noir movie.

The effect of all this is twofold. On the one hand, Indianness starts to seem nebulous: it becomes unclear what it means for a person to identify him or herself as Indian or as an Indian artist. On the other, the artists seem affiliated to what might be called art-school Postmodernism, relying on the appropriation and manipulation of socially charged signifiers.

Some artists make their points simply and obviously. Alan Natachu presents an arcade game console programmed to show clips from video games featuring stereotypical cartoon Indians. And small sculptures by Franco Mondini-Ruiz are imitation Rocco ceramic statuettes whose bro-

"Remix: New Modernities in a Post Indian World" continues through Sept. 21 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, George Gustav Heye Center, 1 Bowling Green, Lower Manhattan; (212) 514-3700, americanindian.si.edu.



COURTESY OF RAND BRADLEY AND NATHALIE UDO/NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN

## Remix

### New Modernities in a Post Indian World

National Museum of the American Indian

ken-off heads have been replaced by pre-Columbian-style clay heads, setting up a dialogue between Western refinement and the supposed primitivism of native cultures.

In a video with low production values called "Let's Dance!" Anna Tsouhlarakis briefly and in expertly performs 30 different dances with as many different people. Following her partners' instructions, she does the waltz, the twist, an Irish jig, a Bulgarian folk dance, the Indian two-step and the Hokey Pokey, among others. Conventional expectations of ethnic identity are thus traded in for a kind of Up With People liberalism.

Other works are more complicated. Painting large in a skillful, illustrative manner, Kent Monkman exposes a homoerotic undercurrent in kitschy fantasies of the noble savage. Riffing on the French academic painter Jean-Léon Gérôme's "Pygmalion and Galatea," Mr. Monkman depicts a white 19th-century sculptor bringing to life with a passionate kiss his romantic stone carving of a naked Indian on horseback.

Bernard Williams's "Charting America," a mural-scale wall piece consisting of hundreds of symbols roughly jigsawed from plywood and painted black, is comparable to the work of a backwoods outsider artist. Rudimentary silhouettes of musical instruments, farm tools, animals, people working and fighting, in-



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dustrial structures, trains, planes and automobiles and words like Emancipation, Empire and Mohawk are arranged in rows, translating America history into an expansive semiotic flow chart.

Some works are conceptually overloaded. In Steven Yazzie's "Sleeping With Jefferson," a video of indecipherable abstract forms is projected over a grid of squared-off hubcaps laid out on a platform bed. You have to read the wall label to get the reference to Thomas Jefferson's idea of dividing the continent according to a vast grid system.

An installation by Kade Twist is similarly complicated. It includes opposed video projections of the sun rising and setting and a fake electrically lighted campfire on a shiny black plastic platform. Projected poetic texts reflect the elegiac style of the work's title: "The Way the Sun Rises Over Rivers Is No Different Than the Way the Sun Sets Over Oceans." The exhibition catalog says it's about the Indian diaspora.

Above, Fausto Fernandez's collage "Adjustment Line for Miss Petite," and left, Kent Monkman's "Emergence of a Legend," from "Remix."

The catalog's essayists point out that such strategies of mixing and matching signifiers reflect an Indian experience defined by "hybridity." Recovering some pure state of tribal being is not in the cards for sophisticated young Indians whose ancestors frequently include non-Indians and whose interests and influences may range from French theory to hip-hop.

The question — not only for American Indian artists but also for anyone contending with Post-modern questions — is whether it is possible to move beyond fashionable recycling and forge a new language of forms and metaphors to illuminate the complexities and contradictions of contemporary experience.

In this vein, one of the show's more promising works is a lovely short video by Nadia Myre in which the artist paddles a canoe out of a distant fog bank on a glassy lake. You can't tell from the video but the canoe, which Ms. Myre built, has a modern end made of aluminum and a traditional one made of birch bark.

Called "Portrait in Motion," the video could be a parody of a slick television commercial, though that is probably not what she intends. Ironic or not, it turns a cliché into a visitation from the mists of the unconscious. The Indian in the canoe passes like a sad, ghostly dream: an elusive, metaphorical union of past, present, nature, culture and soul.