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Twentieth-century American Indian Artists:

An Issue of Identity

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"Twentieth-century Indian art is about survival

—the survival of the spirit.

In a way, this art was the counterbalance to the federal effort

to destroy all that was Indian"

(Archuleta and Strickland 7)

American artists of ethnic background usually encounter many obstacles on their way to recognition by the art world because the latter is not familiar with what the former paint or sculpt: American Indian artists, for instance, almost always use their cultures (songs, legends, traditions) and religions as their source of inspiration. In the Southwest region, American Indians have decorated walls—petroglyphs, pictographs, pueblo kiva murals—and objects—pottery, blankets, baskets—for centuries. They started painting on flat surfaces, such as paper, for example in New Mexico, only at the beginning of the twentieth century, when ethnologists encouraged them to draw religious dances and daily activities performed in their villages. In the 1930s, their style was institutionalized by the Santa Fe Indian School, where a white professor, Dorothy Dunn, taught what is now called the "Santa Fe Indian style" or "Traditional Indian style": characters are depicted in traditional and religious activities in flat, two-dimensional paintings

with no background, in gouache or tempera (Dunn). These works acquired a certain visibility on the national and international levels in the 1930s, that is to say, during a period when there was a national effort to define a "true" American art. Thus, the art of the native peoples of the nation was accepted for its American specificity for a few years.

In the 1960s, a new generation of American Indian artists decided that they could no longer perpetuate a decorative and illustrative style which interpreted life in the 19th century and to which they could no longer relate. Instead, they needed to *express their feelings* regarding the traditions that were still alive in their tribes and the new ways of living on or off the reservations in the second part of the 20th century. In addition, they had been in contact with European as well as American art styles, and were eager to experiment with them, too (Broder and Tanner). At the time, this new step was considered dramatic by the professors teaching at the Santa Fe Indian School, as well as by regional gallery owners and museum curators who had made the decorative style a commercial item. Most collectors of American Indian painting were also shaken.

A controversy thus appeared on the American Indian art scene, from 1959 onwards, on what American Indian art should look like: supporters of the "Santa Fe Indian painting style" were opposed to artists who wished to express their true selves with whatever material was available to them. (Note 1) Subsequently, an issue of identity emerged because American Indian artists discovered that the art world still rejected their art, even though they were using European media and styles. The obstacle to wider public recognition may have been that their source of inspiration had remained their tribal heritage. As a matter of fact, these artists, who had adopted Western media, were faced with having to take a crucial decision: should they, in order to be accepted by an elitist American art world, obliterate their tribal identity, or on the contrary, keep on promoting their culture?

This article addresses the issue of the preservation or loss of identity in the realm of American Indian art in the second half of the 20th century, by discussing three important American Indian artists: Allan Houser, Bob Haozous, and Fritz Scholder. All three lived or still live in the Southwest, and always insisted or are still insisting on being acknowledged as artists, not American *Indian* artists. I examine the reaction of the art world when these artists decided to create "universal" works, rather than simply "Indian" ones, and then analyze what the future may hold.

Allan Houser

Allan Houser (1914-1994), a Chiricahua Apache painter and sculptor, was always involved in experimenting with textures and colors, shapes and lines. He would present himself and his sculpture as follows: "I want my work to reflect the

heritage that I am proud of, but I also want to show the full range of what I am capable of doing. It has always been my hope that my work would be acceptable all over the world, not as the work of an Indian artist, but as a contemporary American sculptor." Houser started painting at the Santa Fe Indian School in the 1930s. He began experimenting with sculpture in the late 1940s because he felt limited by the "Traditional Indian style" that could not be personalized and that had become a commercial or touristic item by the end of the 1930s. He was nonetheless able to make a living with his painting for some time, thanks to commissions from the Department of the Interior and awards won at various Indian art markets held in the Southwest. In 1949, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in painting and sculpture, and in 1954, he was awarded the *Palmes Académiques* by the French Government for his work as an artist and teacher. From 1951 to 1962, he was artist-in-residence at the Inter-Mountain school in Brigham City, Utah, and from 1962 to 1975, he taught art at the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, where he created the sculpture department. (Note 2)

Houser eventually become more famous as a sculptor, especially after he retired from the Institute in 1975 to become a full-time sculptor. He used his art as a means to pay homage to his people, who had survived war, imprisonment, and the loss of the totality of its land. (Note 3) He made monumental stone and bronze sculptures representing the beauty and pride of his people, depicted in a variety of themes, such as mother and child scenes, Apache families, warriors, dancers, or buffaloes. These sculptures are now scattered all over the Southwest. One of these places is the gallery and sculpture garden located on the grounds of his art studio in New Mexico run today by his family. (Note 4)

Houser's sculptures have not yet been shown in a great number of exhibitions. This limited visibility is partly due to the fact that the sculptor was not a businessman like Fritz Scholder or R.C. Gorman. However, as the American Indian art market is rather small, Houser became the most important American Indian sculptor in the United States—he was even referred to as "the patriarch of American Indian sculptors" by regional as well as national newspapers (Barash). Yet, because his fame was limited to the American Indian art world or to the Southwest region, he was not acknowledged by the American art world, which has not included him in American art history books. In fact, Barbara Perlman's 1987 *Allan Houser (Ha-o-zous)* is the only publication dedicated to his sixty-year career. Moreover, his work has not yet been shown in museums of American art, and only a few of his works are owned by major art institutions: the Smithsonian Museum of American Art and the National Portrait Gallery (Washington, DC), the Pompidou Center (Paris), and the British Royal Collection (London) each own just one small bronze piece by Houser. Even the National Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation in New York City has only one serigraph print that they "found with uncatalogued fourth floor materials" (Photographic Archives of the Museum, object # 252240).

In contrast, the Santa Fe State Capital Collection is composed of a great number of Houser's sculptures along with works by many other American Indian artists living in the area. Several regional art museums located in Arizona, New Mexico or Oklahoma, as well as museums throughout the nation specialized in the American Indian, also show many Houser works. In 1991, the museum of New Mexico (Santa Fe) organized an exhibition of Houser's works ("Allan Houser: A Life in Art") which toured the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (Los Angeles) and the Scottsdale Center for the Arts (Scottsdale) in 1992-1993 and ended at the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indian and Western Art (Indianapolis) in 1994 (Daniels). In 1996, the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian (Santa Fe) was the first institution to exhibit a majority of Houser's abstract sculptures and to emphasize the new directions that his art had taken since the 1980s. Houser's family was closely associated with the latter initiative. (Note 5)

Today, the aim of Allan Houser, Inc. is to bring to the public eye Houser's abstract pieces that were not promoted by the two Glenn Green Galleries (owned by the Greens) located in Santa Fe and Phoenix, his sole representative for fifteen years. In 1981, he had signed a contract with this gallery to avoid wasting time with negotiations and to guarantee that his work would be exhibited in a serious art space. In 1996, however, Allan Houser, Inc. decided not to renew the contract which was expiring because they thought that the gallery had not fulfilled its obligations: the Greens had never seriously marketed Houser's abstract works and had always insisted that he produce figurative sculptures (see Figure 1), even though he preferred working on abstract creations in the 1980s and 1990s (see Figure 2). Consequently, the works that did not look "Indian" were almost never advertised in magazines and left in the rear of the gallery, in order to attract American Indian art collectors with what the gallery owners and collectors of American Indian art considered to be "true" American Indian art (see interviews with B. and Ph. Haozous), i.e., depictions of singers, drummers, or mother and child scenes. The art market drove Houser to produce figurative works that would sell because his style had become recognizable at a glance by the end of the 1970s, but his desire and need to explore new ideas and lines forced him to lead a parallel career in which he plunged into abstraction as an outlet from the pressures of a touristic and demanding local art market.

Allan Houser, Inc., whose aim is to promote Houser's regionally famous figurative art and his abstract works around the world, has been orienting its marketing strategy toward a wider art sphere, both in the US and in other countries. To this end, it signed a contract with Niman Fine Art (Santa Fe) (Note 6) to break the stereotypical image of Houser's work: only abstract sculptures are exhibited and promoted by this gallery, while Allan Houser, Inc. is working on persuading European museums to exhibit Houser's abstract art (interviews with B. and Ph. Haozous). These efforts to extend beyond the Southwest market should eventually be successful, just as American Indian writers, adapting themselves to Western values and media while retaining their tribal identity, have succeeded in being

nationally and internationally acknowledged. The historicity of American Indian art markets, established by white supporters of Indian art at the beginning of the 20th century, seems to be one of the causes of the limitations imposed on American Indian art: sentimentality and nostalgia have driven white people to hang on to a certain image of American Indian art, while refusing to acknowledge that an evolution has taken place, probably because that evolution has brought American Indian artists too close to Western art.

Bob Haozous

Bob Haozous (1943-), Houser's son and an artist in his own right, is of Chiricahua Apache, Navajo, Spanish and Anglo heritage. He has also chosen to challenge the American Indian art market, which he qualifies as "naïve," because it is a tourist market and not an art market. He creates provocative sculptures and paintings that do not look "traditionally Indian," but whose subjects are universal: ecology (nude women often represent the earth), capitalism and prejudice against ethnic peoples are treated with humor and irony, in wood, stone, or in painted steel, which he adopted in 1985 because of the durability and constructive capabilities of the material. His identity, coupled with his notoriety as a protest artist, makes it difficult for him to have his work exhibited in certain galleries which seem to be prejudiced against American Indian art (interview with B. Haozous).

Haozous was educated in public schools, not in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, while keeping in touch with his Apache and Navajo heritages. He studied at Utah State University from 1961 to 1962, then joined the Navy for four years. In 1971, he received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, CA. He has been commissioned to create a few sculptures nationwide since the late 1970s. He has never turned to teaching, but he was an artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College, Hannover, NH, in the summer of 1989. Major museums located in the Southwest or specialized in the American Indian own some of his works. His art is represented by Allan Houser, Inc., (whose team includes David Rettig, his former representative), as well as by a gallery in Frankfurt, Germany.

Like his father, Haozous presents his art as American, contemporary, and a mirror of his concern for humankind and the earth. In 1983, he declared:

> I try to deal honestly and directly with the reality in my art and that reality encompasses both ugliness and beauty. I love the land and I love people and I hope that my work symbolizes this in my own individual way. My art is contemporary because I live in the present—but also adhere to the belief that one should reflect its pure source—the soul of its creator. (Catalog of Heard Museum 23)

This remark implies that Haozous can not bear to have his creativity stifled and his subject matter imposed by American Indian art markets, which mostly promote

painters working in the narrative style developed in Santa Fe or artists inspired solely by Indian subjects. Haozous's work deals with reality, the harsh reality of living as a man and an American Indian at the end of the 20th century.

In his wish to be recognized as an artist, he has always tried to break the wall of conventions that separates American Indian art from the rest of the art world. That is the reason why he does not advertise his art in local or Indian art magazines. He was fighting this rigid classification when he created sixteen portraits (monotypes, see Figure 3) representing people from different backgrounds, and asked eight galleries of *Western* American art to exhibit two each during the 1996 Santa Fe Indian market. Three of the gallery owners—old-time friends—agreed immediately, but he had to rely on a third person who was then working for Allan Houser, Inc., to act as a bridge between himself and the other five gallery owners in order to finally see his prints hanging on the "foreign" walls (interview with B. Haozous). The artist even went as far as using a special latticed window on all the monotypes, which were further imprisoned in steel frames, in order to support his main ecological theme: humankind is a vanishing race because s/he does not take care of the earth (interview with B. Haozous). The relationship between humankind and nature is ubiquitous in all American Indian cultures, but the issue of ecology has become an international concern. Thus, by treating ecology as his main subject matter, Haozous is also trying to show that American Indian values are as contemporary and universal as Western values. He creates therefore an art that is not anachronistic in American society, while using his Indianness as a source of inspiration.

Fritz Scholder

Unlike Allan Houser and Bob Haozous, whose humble wish was and is to show the universality of their people through the monumentality and themes of their sculptures, Fritz Scholder (1937-) looks more like a "show-business" artist, his goal being to sell large canvases, but especially to be seen. Born a Luiseño Mission Indian in California (some say he is 1/16 Indian, but he says he is 1/8), and raised as an Anglo-American, Scholder received an Associate of Arts degree from the Sacramento City College, CA in 1958, and then a Bachelor of Arts degree from the Sacramento State College in 1960. He discovered American Indian cultures of the Southwest in his early twenties and publicly identified himself as being part Indian for the first time in 1961, while still insisting on the fact that he was an artist, not an American Indian artist. In 1962, he received a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Arizona, Tucson. From 1964 to 1969, he was a teacher of painting and art history at IAIA, in Santa Fe. Inspired by the works of some of his students, among whom was T. C. Cannon, he started painting his first series of American Indian portraits— mainly Plains Indians, because they represent the stereotypical Indian in the public's mind—in an expressionist, provocative style in 1967. His

bright colors, deformed faces, as well as his political statements, have made him famous. As an artist-in-residence at Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH in 1973, and a visiting artist at Iowa State University in 1977, he earned a living as part artist and part teacher. In the 1980s and 1990s, he was offered four Honorary Doctorates of Fine Arts from universities in different t states across the US. In addition, his work has been shown in numerous exhibitions, mainly in museums and galleries located in the Southwest, California, and New York City, but he has also participated in a number of exhibitions abroad. His paintings and some of his sculptures can be found in public collections nationwide, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art (New York City), the National Museum of American Art (Washington, DC), the Philadelphia Museum of Arts and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The fact that his work is represented in the collections of these authoritative American art institutions shows that Scholder has obtained a certain renown, but it should also be remembered that each museum owns only a few of his pieces. Although his name does not appear in art history books, Scholder is nevertheless one of the best known American Indian artists in the US today.

Influenced by pop art and Francis Bacon's expressionism, Scholder was the first artist of American Indian ancestry to dare express the harsh reality of what it meant to be an American Indian in the 1960s and 1970s, thus supporting the Pan-Indian movement. One of the methods he used was to adopt the white stereotypes associated with American Indians—the physical appearance of the Indian as a Plains warrior wearing a war bonnet, as well as the drunken or lazy Indian—and to use them in his art to show the state of the American Indian at a time of social and political instability. Many articles refer to him as an American Indian although he himself maintains that he has always insisted on the fact that he is "an artist, not an Indian" (interview with Scholder). In 1980, he declared:

> In a way, I am a paradox. I have changed the direction of so-called Indian painting, but I do not consider myself an Indian painter. I am often called an "Indian artist" and I am on the official Government rolls, but still I am not simply an Indian painter. (qtd. in Highwater, *The Sweet Grass Lives On* 177)

It is obvious that the artist used the reference to his Indian heritage in his paintings and in interviews as a "commercial strategy" to enter the American Indian art world of the Santa Fe and Phoenix areas, which he considered a springboard in order to reach the general American art world. When he stopped painting Indian portraits in the 1980s, his career slowed down dramatically. Thus, it would seem that the paradox he used to attract the public's attention through the media ("I know what being an Indian today means, but I have never said I was an Indian artist") helped him to move to the foreground of the Southwestern art world, but his career outside of that has been short-lived. His strategy, based on

his paradoxical identity, was therefore only partly successful since, although it enabled him to become a famous artist in a very short time, he found a certain stability only in a regional and specialized field.

Scholder has not participated in many exhibitions since the mid-1980s, as if his "Mystery" series, inspired by a tour of Egypt, did not correspond to what the art world was expecting from him. His solo exhibitions have tended to be more and more concentrated in the Southwest region, although he has continued to participate in a few group exhibitions touring the US and some foreign countries. In 1994, he started creating a new series of large Indian portraits—the "Red" series—which were exhibited in the Phoenix area, and included in a publication presenting texts in English and German (Scholder, *Rot Red*; see also Figure 4). This comeback (to the Indian subject) was not as welcomed as it might have been since, for once, art critics declared that his paintings were not ground-breaking, as his 1970s series had been (Nilsen; Pyne). His style and treatment of the Indian theme lack novelty, but this "Red" series has enabled him to re-launch his career in the American Indian art world and the wider Southwest art market. Art critics writing in local newspapers often mention his national fame, but readers should read between the lines that the American art world is not usually acquainted with the realm of American Indian art, and consequently ignores that such artists as Houser, Haozous, or Scholder have been active in the US Southwest, for American Indian art is generally known only where it is created.

Although controversial in the Southwest because of his uncertain blood quantum, Scholder is nonetheless considered an important figure by American Indian artists, and often asked to donate paintings to be sold at auctions for the benefit of American Indians arts associations. On 14 August 1996, for instance, he donated a large acrylic painting, entitled *Blue Eagle*, and two preparatory studies of the painting, to the First Annual Native Americans International Film Exposition held in Santa Fe. The canvas was the only item to be sold at the auction on the evening of the Awards Ceremony (the studies did not generate high enough bids, and were thus not sold), which shows that Scholder's art is not regarded as a good investment. Indeed, Pan-Indianism is no longer visible enough to boost his career.

Conclusion

Today, the Santa Fe Indian market, open to all kinds of creations as long as they are made by American Indians, mirrors the *malaise* that underlies the Indian art market: contemporary fine artists of tribal ancestry feel more and more limited by this stagnating market that has evolved very little since the beginning of the 20th century. As Houser was pressured to create figurative scenes depicting his tribal heritage, artists having reached a certain fame, and therefore attracting a substantial number of regular collectors, fear to step out of the vicious circle that they

themselves have created: will they lose their collectors if they change colors, forms or themes? The Santa Fe Indian market is an integral part of this vicious circle, since it perpetuates the association between fine arts made by American Indians and the Indian art market, which also includes arts and crafts and food. The main goals of the various annual Indian art markets that take place all around the US are to preserve American Indian arts and crafts, and to offer an economic opportunity for many Indian artisans who desire to continue living in their villages. American Indian artists interested in pursuing a regional art career should be the only artists participating in these markets, while the more ambitious artists should launch a personal career and avoid people who collect Indian curios. (Note 7)

None of the three artists discussed above takes part in any Indian market. As already mentioned, Haozous describes it as a "naïve market," because "collectors buy objects they want to hang in their livingroom. They are not interested in discovering true fine art that would be synonymous with investment" (interview with B. Haozous). In order for American Indian art to appeal to serious contemporary art collectors, a body of written works has to be compiled, by unprejudiced art critics, in art magazines of national and international scope. Thus, objective art professionals should, for instance, present Houser as a sculptor who reintroduced stone carving in the US; influenced numbers of young sculptors who studied under his guidance in the 1960s and 1970s; turned from figurative sculpting to sculpting abstract figures; and conveyed feelings of beauty, spirituality, and universality in his works. They should present Haozous as a defender of the earth, and a political and social chronicler whose humorous and provocative art speaks on behalf of not only American Indians, but also humankind. Scholder should be remembered as the first American Indian artist who broke all the conventions that had been associated with Indian fine art until the 1960s (conventions that had already been weakened but not shattered, with the creation of the IAIA). Finally, these three artists should be introduced in American art history books, to serve as role models for American Indian students who feel insecure about their identity: their experience would show younger generations that adopting Western values, techniques, materials and styles is not at all incompatible with retaining one's tribal identity.

Curators of fine arts working in important art museums should start discovering what the First Peoples have to offer. As Lucy Lippard, an American art critic, wrote in 1990, "An enlightened attitude on the part of the West would convey a heightened awareness of the *contemporary* arts being made within those cultures whose pasts now appear to be common property, an acceptance not only of a culture's artifacts, but of its living creatures as well" (27). As Lippard suggests, the world has to acknowledge that American Indians have survived the termination policy carried out by the American government at various periods of time. The tribal heritage of these artists should not interfere with the recognition that is due to them. The criteria of quality of the art world should be based on artistic achievements, not on the racial background of the artists.

It seems that since the beginning of the 1990s museums have started widening their interest to artists belonging to ethnic minorities: the National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC organized a large retrospective of African-American fine art in 1992 (Note 8) and has presented other non-Caucasian artists, such as Luis Jimenez, a Mexican American. The New York City art world has also launched the career of Jean-Michel Basquiat (African-American); important retrospectives of his art have taken place in the US and abroad, and a movie entitled *Basquiat* was released worldwide at the beginning of 1997. At the 1996 Paris FIAC, Basquiat's works were ubiquitous, and their prices were among the highest. Could the art world now give a chance to American Indian artists who have something to offer to the world? The National Museum of the American Indian, which does not currently have a curator of fine arts because of its low budget and relocation priorities, will show the way, starting in 2002: its Washington, DC museum should be dedicated to contemporary American Indian art (Ash-Milby).

Notes

1 The 1959 conference on Southwest Indian art education, entitled "Directions in Indian Art," was held at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. The aim of this conference was to exchange ideas on the present status and the possible future of American Indian art.

2 The Institute is an offshoot of the 1959 conference on "Directions in Indian Art." It was created by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1962 on the grounds of the Santa Fe Indian School; its aim has been to teach American Indian arts from all over the US, and welcome students from all North American Indian Tribes (New 4).

3 The Chiricahua Apache were not given any land when they were released from Fort Sill, Oklahoma in 1913.

4 The sculpture garden, which Houser helped to landscape, is located ten miles south of Santa Fe; it was created about ten years ago by the family. In 1995, Allan Houser, Inc., run by Houser's sons, started to promote his abstract work more actively. For more information on Allan Houser's work, contact Philip Haozous, Director, Allan Houser, Inc., P.O. Box 5217, Santa Fe, NM 87502.

5 Exhibition catalog "The Studio of Allan Houser," Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, May 25-October 2, 1996; with an essay by W. Jackson Rushing, "Essence and Existence in Allan Houser's Modernism."

6 Dan Namingha (a Hopi-Tewa painter and sculptor) is the owner of this gallery which focuses on modern American Indian art executed in various European art styles.

7 I include painting and sculpture in the Indian curio market because the painters and sculptors who choose to exhibit at such markets present a *commercial art* based on what collectors of American Indian art expect, that is to say, stereotypical depictions of Indian cultures.

8 Exhibition catalog "Free Within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art," National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC; exhibition touring the US from 1992 to 1994.

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Figures

Figure 1 Allan Houser, Apache Cradleboard, 1994, bronze, edition of 15. 46” x 11” x 15” Photograph by David Hoptman

Figure 2 Allan Houser, Spirit of the Wind, 1992, fabricated bronze, edition of 10, 126” x 48” x 72” Courtesy of Allan Houser, Inc.

Figure 3 Bob Haozous, 16 monotypes, Invitation for an exposition in 8 locations, August 12-19, 1996. Courtesy of Allan Houser, Inc.

Figure 4 Fritz Scholder, Red # 9, 1994, acrylic on canvas, edition of 8, 88“x 68“. (Scholder, *Rot Red* 33)