

Native American Artists' Use of Irony in Works Restating the Past

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History has recorded that the whites who came to America did not always acknowledge the existence of the Native Americans of North America, including the First Peoples of Canada, as that of a human race with a rich cultural heritage of its own. Instead, these interlopers created images that have varied considerably over the last half millenium reflecting both European and Native American social history during specific periods. These images more often than not have been, as Patricia Trenton and Patrick T. Houlihan phrase it, "paradoxical stereotypes" of Native Americans as "bloodthirsty savage and heroic warrior; hopeless drunkard in need of protection; victim of deceit, corruption, and greed, grudgingly but philosophically accepting his fate" (7).

As Michael Dorris, a Modoc Indian, has noted "Indian peoples were perceived not as they were, but as they 'had' to be" (qtd. in Deloria 401). However, the early imagery of "exotic primitives living in a state of nature" rapidly became altered as the whites began to perceive what North America's natural resources could offer them (Trenton and Houlihan 7). As a result this image was transformed into a "series of images . . . useful in justifying wholesale dispossession," as William W. Savage Jr. explains (6). And, as frontiers were pushed westward, the Indian became branded as "an impediment to civilization, a barrier to Manifest Destiny [in the case of the United States], and a radical militant" (Trenton and Houlihan 7).

Their situation forced many Native Americans to become political activists in order to assert their rights to land reclamation and Indian sovereignty. Others sought alternative means of repossession. Native American artists, for example, considered their mission to be the correction of entrenched misconceptions by using their art to retell Native American history from their own perspective. They produced creative work such as mixed media installations, paintings, and sculptures to contest and deconstruct outmoded stereotypes of "Indianness." They employed in these works the visual language and techniques of western art and western cultural icons, thereby turning these elements against the whites, which resulted in "parody and ironic recontextualization," as Allan J. Ryan so aptly critiques it (168). This article surveys a number of such works by Native American artists who through their art both challenge the dominant Euro-American viewpoint and depict aspects of their colonized past from their own perspective. As will be seen, the artists whose works are introduced below are primarily contemporary artists coming from different areas and using different methods of artistic expression to break through and/or dispel stereotypes and document different experiences. The works discussed take up such themes as religion, indoctrination and education; political issues; history, acculturation, and issues of dual identity resulting from acculturation.

A major aspect of the Indians' colonized past has been their enforced conversion to Christianity. In Carl Beam's etching on paper, *Calvary to Cavalry* (1989-1990), the artist pairs an early crucifixion scene with an archival portrait of five Native men. The etching, focused on the missionized past, is not merely a rebuttal of the colonized past *per se*, but

reveals, I believe, the critical role missionary work has played in the process of colonization. Drawing upon the hidden forces of this work, it becomes obvious that *Calvary to Cavalry* contains a political critique as well. Ryan insightfully observes that this etching is “a searing commentary on the harrowing missionary-military alliance” (194), for in reality it was the Indians who were crucified at the altar of Christian Anglo-American culture, and subjected to forced removal from their “motherland.”

This practice of “Christianizing through force while colonizing through faith” is also addressed by Jane Ash Poitras in her five-piece painting/installation *The Virgin Bullet* (1991). Again Ryan considers that “Like the title of the piece itself, it is a distressing yet riveting elision of imagery. Like a volley of gunfire or a hail of bullets frozen in mid-flight, the shells presage an impending disaster” (194).

The violence committed against the Native Americans under the cloak of religion is also interrogated by Ron Noganosh in *Dominus Vobiscum* (1988), which consists of a rosary placed in a plexiglass-covered and walnut-framed display case. For Ryan, Noganosh’s bullet-rosary is “a biting backlash on the injustices conducted against the Native children in mission schools”—the church-run residential schools where, for several decades, countless Native children were subjected to various indignities.

The Yucci/Muscogee artist Steven Deo’s wood and cloth photographic collage *The Indoctrination* (1995) provides further commentary on the indoctrination of Native American children by “civilizing” them in federal boarding schools. In this case it is the Carlisle Indian Industrial School founded and directed by Captain Richard H. Pratt whose theory was: “Kill the Savage, Kill the Indian, Save the Man” (qtd. in Harjo 85). Deo’s collage consists of two rows of 10 photographs depicting life in that school

In a similar vein, Beam’s *Forced Ideas in School Days* (1991) presents an indictment of the people and the policies that allowed residential schools to become popular. The upper half of this work consists of a group photograph of the artist with his classmates at the Catholic boarding school. To the left of the group is an inscription: “The artist as a young captive in an insane world of fools who will go down in history as the most perverted humans ever to walk on the face of the earth . . . the truth unfolds slowly but surely like a tide almost.” The ironic force of the work is emphasized in a text to the right of the photograph:

FORCED IDEAS in School Days/. . . I remember all my friends and I going to church everyday because we were supposed to change from being Native to non-native, probably never white . . . and yet, in spite of severe brain-washing everyone did remain native. I’m sure Christ would have enjoyed that. (Qtd. in Ryan 200)

These painful, deeply inscribed memories of those days defined by submissiveness, confinement, and conformity are projected onto the painting.

Other Native American artists focus on political issues. For example, the military campaign waged against the Plains Indians in the latter half of the 19th century is the target of Edward Poitras’ series of four installations entitled *Small Matters* (1988/1999) which the artist himself calls “a little ambush. It’s an amenable piece but with big content” (qtd. in Ryan 189). Described by Karen Duffek and Tom Hill, Poitras’ installations are “a series of small fence-like enclosures nailed to a gallery wall,” which introduce “separate ‘pieces of history’ as memorials to the victims of ethnocide.” Each “wire box” contains a “crumpled page of text from *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*,” evoking the displacement and extinction of Indian tribes in the United States as related in that book. Under each “box,” is found, written in

white, a “specific historical reference: ‘Summer Snow,’ ‘The Trail of Tears,’ ‘Sand Creek,’ and ‘Wounded Knee’: the first includes a list of tribes that have vanished like snow before a summer sun.” For Duffek and Hill, “While these memorials are reminiscent of the picket fences that often encircle Native grave markers, the use of wire and nails also suggests entrapment; this history cannot be escaped (33).

The mix-media work *The Things Colonial Angels Witness* (1992) by the Onondaga/Micmac artist Gail Tremblay is a critique of the psychological and psychic injuries inflicted on indigenous peoples by the policies and practices of the colonizers. Elsewhere Tremblay reflects that

it seems ironic to me that spiritual guardians, these simple little angels, must witness destruction caused by torturers who do not support life, who are so interested in riches they will kill or enslave millions of people in order to control land and labor to benefit themselves. . . we must learn to stop glorifying the conquerors. (18-19)

Again, the real motives of the colonizers are stressed by the métis artist Rick Rivet’s painting entitled *Legacy* (1991), which depicts the *conquistadores* as creatures dressed in armor and surrounded by skeletal heads of the butchered Natives scattered all around the scorched earth (Young Man 23). Likewise, *Coho’s Final Journey* (1994) by the Tlingit painter Tanis Matthews embodies a powerful expression of the bitter resentment felt by the Indians against the colonizers. The juxtaposition of the salmon—a fish favored by the Indians of the Northwest Coast—and the human skeletons emphasizes how settlers have destroyed Native American subsistence pursuits.

Several Native American artists have attempted to recreate Native American history from their own perspective. By doing so, they have also questioned the highly cherished Anglo-American values of heroism, patriotism and democracy. An early Canadian Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, has been caricatured in Gerald McMaster’s graphite drawing, *In His Hands He’s Got the Whole World* (1984). MacDonalD is portrayed, according to Ryan, with “the large floppy feet of a circus clown and a head so small as to lack the ability to perceive the world rationally, let alone to apply sound judgement. In his right hand Macdonald holds an orb symbolizing the power he failed to exercise wisely over the peoples of the West” (174).

McMaster created another portrait of the same person in *Trick or Treaty* (1990). Acrylic and oil pastel on mat board, the painting depicts another caricature-like portrait of the former Prime Minister. In the background of flashy red and yellow are written “Trick or Treaty,” below to the left “Have I got an Act for You,” and further down to the right “Your joking.” As Ryan contends, the painting represents “MacDonalD as a dishevelled joker with a greasepaint smile.” He could be “a midway huckster, a vaudeville comedian, or a stand-up comic on a bad night.” He is “not a right honorable sight. . . his words of polished insincerity are unceremoniously thrown back in his face in a symbolic ‘Act’ of defiance.” Ryan also quotes the artist himself as saying that the painting was

inspired by a poster of Jack Nicolson as the Joker, so it became very Halloween’ nish—with ‘trick or treat’. I felt that TRICK or TREATY was actually the same word, or had the same implication. Whether they signed it or not—and a lot of Indians never did sign a treaty—it meant the same thing. There were never any advantage[s] to the Native Peoples. It was all to their disadvantage. . . . I think there were no treats at all! I saw it as a cruel joke. (176)

Acculturation, another major aspect of the colonizing process is critiqued in the Kiowa/Caddo artist T. C. Cannon's *Village with Bomb* (1972), which suggests that “termination” and forced acculturation inflicted on the Native tribes were worse than dropping the atomic bomb on the Japanese or napalming the Vietnamese. Another statement on acculturation is contained in the Cree/Flathead/Shoshone artist Juane Quick-to-See Smith's work *Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World* (1991). The painting is divided into eight frames: in the first, from the left is written: “Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World with Ensembles Contributed by US Government.” The next top three contain paper dolls of Ken Plenty Horses, Barbie Plenty Horses and Bruce Plenty Horses. The accessories to be given to them are placed in the rest of the four frames below. These are “the Flathead Headdress collected by Whites to decorate homes,” “the special outfit for Trading land with the US Government for whisky with gunpowder in it,” “the maid's uniform for cleaning houses of white people after good education at Jesuit Schools or government school,” and “matching smallpox suits for all Indian Families after the government sent wagonloads of smallpox infected blankets to keep them warm” (Deloria 409).

The result of this “civilizing” process was that many Native Americans found themselves torn between the two cultures and even worse, forced to cope with a dual identity as both “Americanized Natives” and “Indians.” This predicament was portrayed most forcibly in the nineteenth century, not by a Native American artist, but a non-Native one, George Catlin. His double portrait of the Assiniboine warrior Pigeon's Egg Head is a telling representation of the Indian's “American Tragedy”—the Native American's difficulty in coping with the white man's world and its corrupting influences (Trenton and Houlihan 104). Catlin's painting *Pigeon Egg's Head: Going to and Returning from Washington* (1837-1839) emphasizes the Assiniboine warrior's striking transformation into a dandy. He is wearing a beaver top hat surmounted with a feather instead of the dog soldier's headdress, a military outfit instead of his traditional costume, high heeled boots instead of animal skin leggings, and clutching an umbrella to protect him from the sunshine while puffing on a cigarette instead of holding a calumet: the contrasts elicit a spectacle of shock and dismay.

Returning to the twentieth century, the dilemma of the new Native American generation is dramatized in T. C. Cannon's *Mama & Papa Have the Going Home to Shiprock Blues* (1966). The irony of dual identity inflicted upon the Indians is suggested by the multiple images of Mama and Papa who sit suspended in time and space, in a surreal visual context. The ironic overtone and the absurdity of their situation is further intensified by the addition of sunglasses—a cheap drugstore consumer product—worn by the couple who are simultaneously clothed in traditional Navajo dress.

Similarly, Fritz Scholder's *American Indian* (1970), a mock heroic image of an Indian chief, draped in an American flag, provides a bitter commentary on the ways in which Native Americans have been deprived of their right to maintain their cultural heritage. A similar idea becomes strengthened in the multi-media installation of the Navaho artist Melanie Andrew Yazzie entitled *Raggedy Ann* (1994). In this installation, the artist uses a Raggedy Ann doll to demonstrate the pull between the two cultures: the mainstream culture of the boarding school and her cultural heritage which makes her what she is. Her Indian identity—represented by the keepsakes and memorabilia she has kept in the trunk and the carpet hanging behind the trunk depicting an Indian woman holding an arch of leaves—is overshadowed by the framed

pictures of Raggedy Ann (symbol of the colonizing culture), and the trunk which she has taken to boarding school.

Native Americans know that if they accept the values of the dominant culture, they run the risk of losing their “Indianness.” If they do not change and remain Indians, however, they are refused a “real” existence in the modern world. Mohawk Indians, for example, were able to circumvent this predicament to a certain extent by pursuing “a path of cultural integration, adjusting to modern-day life and, at the same time, making it part of a tradition that was particularly Mohawk” (Deloria 402, 386). This is reflected in the painting of Onondaga artist Arnold Jacobs entitled *Reflections: Tribute to Our Iron Sky Walkers* (1983). In a similar vein, T. C. Cannon's *Collector #5 or Osage with Van Gogh* (1975) depicts an Osage Indian who stands for Cannon as a contemporary artist—dressed in late nineteenth century tribal finery—“who draws strength and identity both from his Indian heritage and his love and knowledge of European art history” (Champagne 607). The Jemez /Pueblo artist Laura Fragua employs sarcasm to draw attention to the difficulty of asserting one’s “Indianness” against the dominant culture through her mixed media work—the sculpture of a young white boy wearing blue-jeans and sneakers incongruously holding a tomahawk in his hand and wearing a war bonnet— adroitly entitled *Just Because You Put Feathers in Your Hair Don’t Make You an Indian* (1990).

The ultimate use of irony to criticize the colonization and acculturation of the Native world is evident in the works of Maidu artist Harry Fonseca. By merging the symbols of American popular culture with the Native trickster figure, Coyote, Fonseca creates an ironic modern context that parodies the practices of the dominant culture. Coyote the Trickster becomes Coyote the Culture Hero, elder, politician and healer all rolled into one; in other words, a modern-day shaman whose wisdom and spiritual powers continue to serve his people.

The examples discussed above are but a few of the works by Native American artists who make use of irony to criticize the whites’ behavior to their people. Whatever their artistic merits, in their attempt to correct the official mainstream discourse concerning their past and obtain a long overdue justice, these artists have put their artistic creativity in the service of their people. Like Fonseca, they have functioned, and continue to serve, as contemporary shamans.

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