Session 10

Contemporary Native American Art: Challenges for Artists, Curators, Scholars, Librarians, and Educators

April 3, 2001

Art Libraries Society of North American 29th Annual Conference, Los Angeles, CA

Donors:
Art Catalogues; ATLATL - National Organization for Native American Arts; and Nancy Moure/Dustin

Co-Moderators:
Joan Benedetti, Cataloguer, Balch Research Library, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; former Director, Center for the Study of Art and Culture, Craft & Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles.

Dr. Marilyn Russell-Bogle (Ojibwe), Fine Arts and Humanities Librarian and Asst. Professor, American Indian Studies and Art, University of Minnesota-Duluth

Recorder:
Thomas E. Young, Librarian, H. A. & Mary K. Chapman Library, The Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, OK

Sponsors:
Museum Library Division; Diversity Committee; Indigenous Art and Culture Round Table; Women and Art Round Table

Speakers:
Marilyn Russell-Bogle (Ojibwe), Fine Arts and Humanities Librarian and Asst. Professor, American Indian Studies and Art, University of Minnesota-Duluth “My Quest for Identity as Artist, Scholar, Librarian, and Native American”

Harry Fonseca (Maidu), Artist; Coyote: A Myth in the Making [a retrospective], Museum of Natural History, Los Angeles, 1986; Indian Humor, American Indian Contemporary Arts, San Francisco, 1995 “Growth and the Creative Process: 43 Years of Work by Harry Fonseca”

Nancy Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache), Independent Scholar; Asst. Director, The Native Eyes Project: Indian Perspectives on Knowledge and Culture, Institute of American Indian Arts; Chair, Native American Arts Alliance (NA3), Santa Fe, New Mexico “Articulating an Indigenous Aesthetic: Challenges from Indian Art Education and Contemporary Native Art Curation”

Paul Apodaca (Navajo), Asst. Professor, Chapman University; formerly curator, American Indian Art, Bowers Museum (1971-1991); consultant, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian “The Archival Needs of Native American Students Pursuing Education and the Arts”

“Are contemporary art and Native American art mutually exclusive in your mind—or in the missionary statement of your institution? Native American contemporary artists have faced challenges like this in negotiating space for their art in the museum and gallery world and the world of art scholarship. Many are supporting the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of the American Indian, due to open in 2002. Native-run organizations such as the American Indian Contemporary Arts, ATLATL, and the Native American Arts Alliance (NA3) are making contemporary Native American art known more broadly. NA3 showed the work of eight of their members at the 1999 Venice Biennale.”

“This session’s impact will derive from its panelists speaking from first voice experience as Native Americans who are artists, curators, scholars, art librarians, and art educators. They will talk about and show the broad diversity and complexity of contemporary Native American art today. They will also comment on art documentation issues. Bibliographies and webbibliographies will be available.”

Joan Benedetti, co-moderator, introduced the session and dedicated it to three Native American women: Sarah Bates (Cherokee), an installation artist and curator with American Indian Contemporary Arts, who curated an exhibition co-produced by Joan Benedetti at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in 1992; an unknown First Peoples student at the University of British Columbia who, at a session on Native Americans and museums at the 1999 ARLIS conference in Vancouver, challenged us in the audience by asking “Who are you?” and “How many of you are Native American?”
Dr. Marilyn Russell-Bogle spoke about her quest as a member of the Ojibwe Tribe through her maternal grandmother (Ojibwe - Leach Lake Reservation). She spoke about how she had grown up in Kansas as an urban Indian, largely removed from her Native American heritage. It was with her return to northern Minnesota in 1991, that she began the process of reclaiming her heritage. Dr. Russell-Bogle talked to three points concerning Native American art: Spirituality, Contemporary Art, and Education of Native American artists. To the Native American everything has spirituality, beauty and function, which are all intertwined. Within each Native American tribe the creation stories and images in the ceremonies and daily rituals will often vary. All images are an attempt to express these symbols. European-American art has had an enormous impact upon Native American art.

In their book Magic Images Edwin Wade and Reynard Strickland speak of historic, traditional, modernistic and individual styles. The historic style can be seen in the hide paintings and decorations used on pottery, basketry and ceremonial clothing. Traditional styles derive from the historic styles yet were often contrived or constricted by the European-American’s vision of a traditional style. These first two movements include a strong story-telling component, a documentation of an event, ceremony or some aspect of their traditional way of life. The modernistic style contains the Native American's response to the modern art movements around them (e.g. cubism). Finally, the Individual style is primarily a contemporary response of Native American artists in the contemporary art scene. These artists, among whom Russell-Bogle includes herself, happen to be a Native American, yet are influenced by Native American spirituality. In her second point, Contemporary Art, Russell-Bogle presented slides of her own work. Thirdly, the educational impact on Native American artists, Russell-Bogle spoke about how Native American women held on to their culture and passed it on to future generations, illustrating this through the role that her mother and grandmother had played in her own life. Related to formal education she talked about the Institute of American Indian Art (established in the 1960s) as the first school where Native Americans taught Native Americans. In addition, she related the challenges of today for herself as an educator, wearing many hats as teacher (painting), scholar/professor, and librarian developing resources. In recent years she has become more involved in the Native American culture on a personal level. In her own life she had tried to cultivate the positive and weed out that which does not work.

Harry Fonseca deals with Indian life in a non-Indian world. He grew up on the Maidu Reservation near Sacramento aware of his mixed heritage: Maidu, Portuguese, and Hawaiian. He knew he was going to be an artist as a child. He attended California State University, and has actively exhibited every year since the mid-1970s. As an 18 or 19 year old Pop Art, the drug culture, and African art, particularly the decorative motifs of the latter influenced Fonseca. At 25 he began to go to sacred dances with his Maidu uncle and to regain the influence of his Native American background. Early on he became involved with a group of North California Native American artists. Initially, he worked with very flat surfaces, basically self-taught. As he began to dance and participate in ceremonies it influenced his work more. He received a grant to paint the Maidu creation story (a 3-year project). It was at a ceremony that he was introduced to the coyote figure, which became an icon in his work for 10 years (beginning in 1976). He placed the coyote (mythological figure) into contemporary scenes. One of his earliest shows was a two-person show with Frank Day (Maidu) at the Heard Museum. Fonseca prefers to work with images from within his own culture, so as to be respectful of images from other’s beliefs. His work since the coyote series has included the Stone Poem pieces. These grew out of his interest in Native American Rock art. Following this was the Crosses series, which dealt with the harsh impact of the mission system on the California Indians. A related series was the Discovery of Gold in California series, which is very abstract and also relates to the European-American impact on the Maidu. The Saint Francis of Assisi series deals with a person who has a dream and is willing to strip away everything to achieve it. Two recent series includes the Maidu Creation series and the Navaho Rug series. The latter series of paintings takes the image of the Navaho rug and is becoming more abstract.

Dr. Nancy Marie Mithlo (Chiricahua Apache) is trained as an anthropologist and is in the unusual situation of being a Native American anthropologist. She comes out of a background with both parents being academics, and has long been drawn to libraries. Yet at the same time she has been confounded by the sources that she has needed for her research. The mentoring of Native American students into the field Native American arts is one of her major goals. What is art and culture? Artists can be viewed from within a Native American culture as outsiders or perverters of the culture. Terminology can restrict the artist. Why do we as individuals have to be seen as one dimensional, why can’t we be both a mother and a professional. Being designated by a cultural or ethnic sub-element (e.g. Hispanic or Native American artist) seems to imply a lesser anthropologist. She comes out of a background with both parents being academics, and has long been drawn to libraries. Yet at the same time she has been confounded by the sources that she has needed for her research. The mentoring of Native American students into the field Native American arts is one of her major goals. What is art and culture? Artists can be viewed from within a Native American culture as outsiders or perverters of the culture. Terminology can restrict the artist. Why do we as individuals have to be seen as one dimensional, why can’t we be both a mother and a professional. Being designated by a cultural or ethnic sub-element (e.g. Hispanic or Native American artist) seems to imply a lesser artist. Mithlo is currently involved in several programs or projects, the Native American Art Alliance (NA3) and The Native Eyes Project. The first is a group of Native American artists, which grew out of an effort to broaden the scope of “Native American art.” LaDonna Harris has spoken to how complex an issue is leadership in the Native American community. It is an attempt by Native American artists to take on a leadership role for themselves. For this reason the NA3 decided to approach the Venice Biennale, bypassing the official American Pavilion, to exhibit Native American art at the Biennale. They were successful in 1999 with their exhibition Ceremonial, and will again have an official site in 2001 with their exhibition Umbilicus, showing different artist from those shown in 1999. In Ceremonial each invited artist sent the work that they wanted without outside curation (sic). Yet the whole process of getting to the Biennale included a great deal of discussion and consensus decision making. They worked from outside the traditional institutional affiliations. They are interested in changing the definition of terms: curation, aesthetics, etc. The Native Eyes Project, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, was established in 2000 at The Institute of Indian Art (IAIA) in Santa Fe, NM. The Native Eyes courses will answer the question: what is the best program for general education in the Humanities for American Indians in the new century? The visual arts (the traditional strength of IAIA teaching) will be used as a springboard to investigate a variety of native issues. For example, theoretical issues of perception and representation inform the way native peoples view the world and the natural environment and, in turn, the way other cultures understand and misunderstand American Indians. Issues of land rights, bio-diversity, and intellectual property may be clarified by treating painting, maps, medical ritual, song, story and dance as knowledge texts.
Dr. Paul Apodaca is of Navaho and Mexican Indian heritage and is self-described as “not a spiritual Indian.” He is in the strange position of having been a curator yet being involved in the process (e.g. making traditional Navaho sand paintings). He spoke about the root meaning of the terms “Curator” (to care for collections and their understanding) and “Museum” (the place of the sacred spirit). Curators as controllers and museums as dead spaces are the opposite options of what they should be. The Western approach to artists (as individuals) contrasts to other cultures, where the artist may have traditional roles. Within traditional cultures the artist can manipulate as long as they stay within the boundaries of traditional rules. Apodaca spoke of the different needs that Native American artists have for libraries and archives. In the past the Native American went to grandparents to learn, today they may go anywhere stylistically or thematically - personal, western, or traditional art.

Whatever way the Native American artist goes today, ethnographic and archival material within libraries, museums and archives can be important resources for them (to use or pervert). Libraries and archives need to re-think approaches and ways of organizing information for Native American artists, who are not necessarily knowledgeable researchers. Under what terms does one access Lucy Lewis (20th century Acoma Pueblo potter)? - Native American, Pottery, Fine Arts? Surveying the needs of one’s local community is one way of better supporting their needs. This also creates a greater need and use of the institution.

Brief discussion of relevant cataloging issues followed.

WEBLIOGRAPHY OF CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN ART, ARTISTS, AND LIBRARY RESOURCES, compiled by Dr. Marilyn Russell-Bogle

Organizations

American Indian Contemporary Arts, the only center of its kind in California, supports artistic expressions of contemporary Native artists. It also sponsors outreach programs, classes, readings, and lectures.

http://bayarea.citysearch.com/profile/11344571/?p=1


http://www.nativeculture.com/lisamitten/aila.html

Atlatl, Inc. - National Service Organization for Native American Arts promotes the vitality of contemporary Native American art through self-determination in cultural expression.

http://atlatl.org

Index of Native American Artists on the Internet

http://www.hanksville.org/Naresources/indices/Naartists.html

Institute of American Arts was established in 1962 and has served more than 3,500 students from most of the 557 federally recognized tribes in the United States. IAIA has influenced two generations of Indian artists, enriching Indian and mainstream cultures both aesthetically and economically.

http://www.iaiancad.org

Institute of American Indian Arts library catalog is online and the website has some very useful links on it.

http://www.iaiancad.org/library/home.html

Institute of American Indian Arts Museum is home to the National Collection of Contemporary American Indian Arts - and is the Nation’s only cultural center featuring contemporary art by and about Native People.

http://www.iaiancad.org/museum.html

Institute of American Indian Arts Native Eyes Project will implement new approaches to college teaching in the Humanities and Social Sciences, incorporating social, cultural and intellectual contributions of Native Americans.
http://www.iaiancad.org/eyes/htmls/nativeeyes.html

National Museum of the American Indian - helping to foster, protect, and promote understanding of Native American cultures by collaborating with indigenous peoples across the Western Hemisphere.

www.si.edu/nmai

Native American Arts Alliance (NA3)

http://www.na3.org

Bibliographies

A Selected Bibliography of Reference Sources for Researching Women Artist, by Marilyn Russell-Bogle University of Minnesota-Duluth Library


American Indian Women Artists - A Selected Bibliography, by Marilyn Russell-Bogle, Fine Arts Librarian, The University of Minnesota-Duluth


Bibliography of Selected American Indian Reference and Internet Resources, compiled by Nancy J. Disch.