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## INDIGENOUS REFLECTIONS AT BATES

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ART BASEL MIAMI BEACH PREVIEW

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# A HARMONIOUS FUSION

ENTRANCING MODERN  
NATIVE AMERICAN ART  
AT BATES

Imagine, if you will, having lived in the lands which are now America for thousands upon thousands of years. Then aliens from across the sea spread over your land like blood from a wound, bringing smallpox and cholera, diseases for which you have no resistance; cheating you out of your land, using it for settled agriculture as a commodity, not for sustainable self-sufficiency; bringing noisy and polluting railroads, telegraphs, mining, industrialization; destroying your game animals; coming after you with armies which commit atrocities; distorting your sophisticated spiritual beliefs with an overlay of their monotheistic, judgmental God, forcing you into their coercive schools; giving you no option but to join an extractive economy which is so

far from your non-monetary, cooperative sharing way. How would you feel? How could you express that rage, sorrow, displacement as you become a stranger in your own land?

The just-opened exhibition at Bates College, "Exploding Native Inevitable," (the title is a riff on Warhol) tries to come to grips with this history through art by Indigenous people, some well-known, some not, from many different nations and parts of the country, Maine, Kansas, New Mexico, California; from Seattle, Washington; Muskogee, Oklahoma (where my parents got married); Manhattan, Omaha, Nebraska; and Providence, Rhode Island. Their arts are videos/cinema, painting, sculpture, music, multimedia and fiber. Most creations are rooted in their ancestral

tribal traditions but worked in modern techniques to transition the past into the present and future. (Indeed, the concept of time for Native Americans is different than our linear one: it is circular, spiraling, merging past, present and future into one.)

Natives themselves are ambivalent about their approach to settler-invader Americans. Most have been educated by American colleges. Using videos and training sessions, such as those by New York-based artist group New Red Order, in their "Never Settle!," want people to "adopt," "understand" an indigenous perspective to "accomplice" the indigenous, yet rail against those who do as extractive and appropriative; in interviews they, like so many Indigenous people, say that many

## COVER STORY

### EXPLODING NATIVE INEVITABLE

BATES COLLEGE MUSEUM  
OF ART

OLIN ARTS CENTER  
75 RUSSELL STREET  
LEWISTON, MAINE

THROUGH MARCH 4, 2024

Alison Bremner, *Infatuation*,  
2022, acrylic, wallpaper on  
canvas, 36" x 24", courtesy of  
the artist.





Americans think natives are no longer here. A weird dichotomy: Americans believe there are no natives, but appropriate indigeneity. How to come to grips with this ambivalence?

Elisa Harkins, Muscogee and Cherokee, tries with her endlessly repetitive "Die, don't die" song accompanied by electronic music, to spoof cultural appropriation in a video where she sports a huge white headdress in Yoko Ono-ish performances. Raven Halfmoon, Caddo, creates large stoneware sculpture, such as "Cedar Prayers and Prada," which (like others of these artists' works) comments on and captures the schizophrenia of living native in America, often with sophisticated female figures reminiscent of Cro-Magnon Venuses and of

masks splashed with red and sayings, riddled with eyes.

With the Land Back movement, many want all stolen land returned. As this is unrealistic in a totality (some land may be, and has been, returned), the viewer may wonder, would it not be better to learn to live as partners with the land, using our hands and body in season, respecting water, creatures, everything on earth and sky as living beings?

For those who have been involved with things indigenous, some of the tropes of decolonization are becoming cliché. How to avoid this?

With humor, is one way, as Sarah Rowe (Lakota, Ponca) does, modernizing traditional images from her tribal iconography to express the joy and



play of her cultures' myths — thunderbirds, horses, stars (from which the Lakota people are descended) — with video projected on painting, in vivid colors on large installations.

With a more sardonic humor, Alison Bremner subverts western precepts of art, as well as her own Tlingit imagery (most often traditionally created by men) by placing the face of a hideous dance mask of a Tsimshian wat'sa — an otter which, according to the Anchorage Museum, "would take the form of a beautiful woman and appear to unsuspecting men to steal them away" — on "Girl with a Pearl Earring," and another mask on the

LEFT: Norman Akers, *Watchful Eye*, 2023, oil on canvas, 78" x 68".

TOP RIGHT: Brad Kahlhamer, page spread from 91+ sketchbook *Nomadic Studio #1*, ca. 2000 -, 8 1/4" x 10 1/4", Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Brad Kahlhamer, page spread from 91+ sketchbook *Nomadic Studio #2*, ca. 2000 -, 8 1/4" x 10 1/4", Courtesy of the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

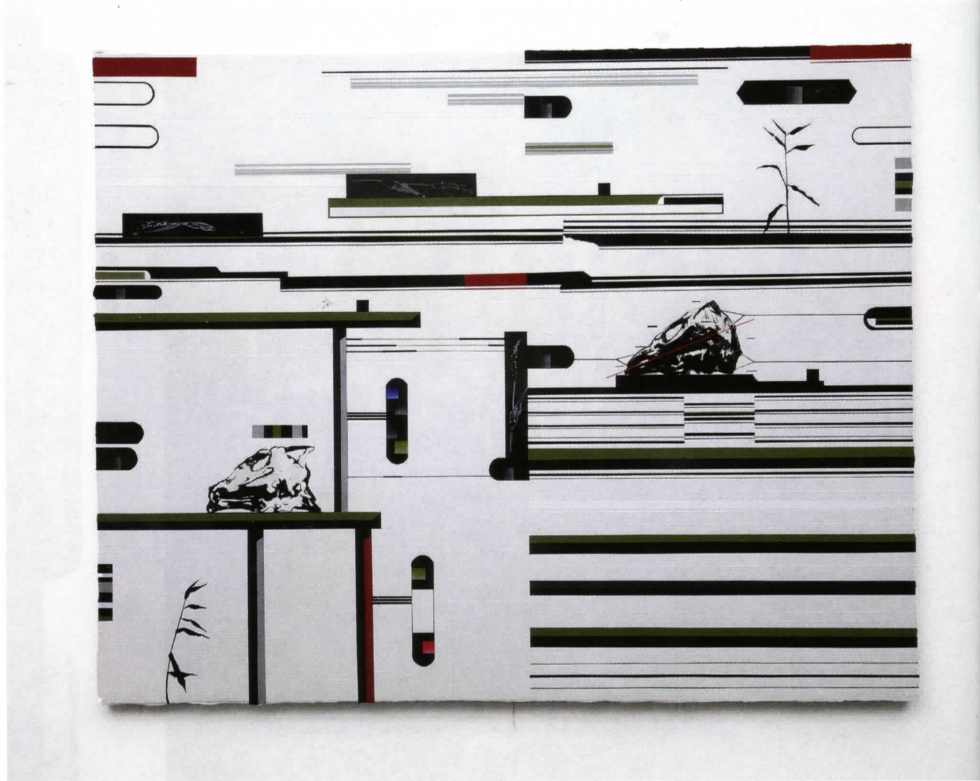


"Mona Lisa." She also uses the traditional uniquely refined elliptical ovoids of northwestern tribal art which express parts of a creature or symbol, upside down, or inscribed with figures and merged with animals such as world creator Raven, with wolf teeth and a semi human body — mixing tribal and western art with equal irreverence.

Expressive of, if not ambivalence per se, the dual lives which natives live — a foot in America and in their own tribal life on Turtle Island — are Tyrrell Tapaha's weavings, such as "Áshkii Gáamalii: The Boy Who Lives in Two Worlds," a "Diné-style tapestry, handspun vegetal-dyed Navajo Churro, Brown Sheep, Navajo-raised Alpaca, 12 1/98" x 15 3/8." Terran Last Gun (Piikani/Blackfeet), who paints abstract shapes in vivid colors to express his culture and cosmos symbolically on antique ledger paper, such as the "City of Butte, Montana, Auditor's Register of Treasurer's Disbursements," also combines worlds of past and present, western art and tribal. Ledger art came into being in the late 19th century when Plains Indian artists such as Amos Bad Heart Bull and even Sitting Bull began to depict their own life events pictographically on paper, often on settler accounting ledgers — adding another face to their historiographies, formerly on buffalo hide winter counts.

Some artists are simply creating beauty from tribal imagery which for me in this case, resonates more vividly than agitprop (though I am a huge fan of agitprop under certain circumstances and use it myself in my film, "Dreams from a Planet in Peril"). Duane Slick, Meskwaki Sauk and Fox Maxy, revels in native mythology, expressing the iconic Coyote "trickster" (a name given by white anthropologist Paul Radin to a universal native demiurge) — a figure who was both fooled by, and fools other beings, and in some nations was a world creator — with abstract acrylics and silk screens. And master Osage craftsman, Norman Akers, in oil and in monoprint collages, creates worlds of loss: antlered creatures surrounded by ghost tree trunks, and the presence of American treasure chests, soda cans, presidents, houses, all movingly poignant and stunningly presented.

While there is outright agitprop by conceptual artist Jaque Fragua, Jemez Pueblo, posting "Sacred" or "Indigenous Land" on billboards as an act of reclamation and protest, some of the



artists create just to create, infused by, but without the consciousness of their indigeneity at the forefront: Nizhonniya Austin, Diné/Tlingit, in her abstract paintings, and Fox Maxy. In Maxy's awesomely inventive film, "Fighting Looks Different 2 Me Now," a series of images, fragments, reassemble in the mind to tell a non-narrative story of rejection by her own people from her tribal lands; using rap, subtitles messaging shorthand, snatches of conversation, found and newly created footage. Fox said that it's an individual voice not a tribal creation.

TOP: Duane Slick, *An Actuarial Space*, 2021, acrylic on linen, 54" x 68". Courtesy of the artist.

BOTTOM: Mali Obomsawin, *Wawasint8da*, 2022, 5:59 minutes (still). Courtesy of the artist.





Perhaps the most powerful expression of many themes is by Mali Obomsawin, who combines worlds in her music and videos. Obomsawin acts, sings and directs "Wawasint8da." This perfect short black-and-white video with her musical score shows discomfiting images of the Catholic church vying with those of a lodge hung with cradle board, animal skulls (what may be a sacred medicine or Mide ceremonial lodge).

As the chaos builds, music and imagery sift between the two worlds, one indoors, masochistic and white, the other within a world of wood and soft-spoken language. What appears to be a statue of St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the Algonquian saint and martyr, and pale bloodless images of the human-god centered church give us a sense of repression, of the nature of sin, which natural, native people have no recognition of, nor is a part of their spirit — as the film pits the conqueror's enforced religion against Wabanaki ritual and vision that at last relieves us with the comforting wood of the lodge, of nature and harmony.

"Wawasint8da"'s score is the first composition of "Movement Two" from Obomsawin's album "Sweet Tooth." The album plays not only mournful music compositions sung in her Abenaki language, but a true synthesis of music, native

and non, some featured in the TV show "Reservation Dogs," in fascinating combinations of jazz instrumentation whose Mingus-like horns whinny into a kind of native "Guernica" with Indian drum beat and moaning song.

Duality has always been a part of indigenous thought, complementary halves, male, female; moon, sun; night, day; earth, sky — in a non-judgmental way, not as good and evil but as parts of life, synthesis in the reciprocity of humans with creatures, spirit with material, aliveness and spirit. And while, in a bit of the art, intention does not always match execution and reminds us just because you are Indigenous and oppressed doesn't mean you can automatically make good art, most of the works in this compelling exhibition embodying ambivalence and the duality of America's worlds seek (or lead the viewer to seek) a harmonious fusion, trying to end the chaos of harm done.

After closing at Bates on March 4, the exhibition will travel to the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, Scottsdale, Arizona; Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska; and Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, Logan, Utah.

**Lee Roscoe**



# PAUL PEDULLA

450 Harrison Ave., studio 314, Boston  
617.480.7364 • paulpedulla.com

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