

Art review: Range of Indigenous art on display at Maine colleges

pressherald.com/2023/12/03/art-review-range-of-indigenous-art-on-display-at-maine-colleges

December 3, 2023



Tony Abeyta (Diné/Navajo, born 1965), "Citadel," 2021. Oil on linen, 40 x 60 in. The Lunder Collection, 2021.246

In the wake of George Floyd's murder and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, art institutions embarked on a long overdue effort to amp up representation of people of color in the shows they curated and the art they acquired. While this was undeniably a positive development, many critics also noted that they had almost stumbled into it, giving imprimatur to artists they treated as fresh new talents, as if those artists hadn't been there all along – for centuries, in fact – creating vital work in the shadow of what is still a predominantly white, male art canon.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Painted: Our Bodies, Hearts, and Village"

WHERE: Colby College Museum of Art, 5600 Mayflower Hill, Waterville

WHEN: Through July 28

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday (Thursdays until 9 p.m.), noon to 5 p.m. Sunday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-859-5600, colby.edu/museum

WHAT: “Brad Kahlhamer: Nomadic Studio, Maine Camp” and “+Exploding Native Inevitable”

WHERE: 75 Russell St., Lewiston

WHEN: Through March 4

HOURS: 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Monday and Wednesday, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday through Saturday

ADMISSION: Free

INFO: 207-786-6158, bates.edu

There followed a more generalized expansion of artists of color throughout disciplines, particularly Asian artists when anti-Asian sentiments tied to COVID spread through their communities. But dedicated exhibitions of work by Indigenous artists – either solo or group shows – were slower to arrive. Many museums unearthed a few Wabanaki baskets or beaded objects from their storerooms, presenting them alongside Anglo-European works to make the point that Indigenous cultures were producing concurrently with white artists.

Two current shows, thankfully, go much further. In May, Colby College Museum of Art opened “Painted: Our Bodies, Hearts, and Village” (through July 28) which juxtaposes art of the Taos Pueblo (both old and new) with that of the Taos Society of Artists, a coterie of Anglo-American painters that formed in 1915. Two exhibitions at the Museum of Art at Bates College – “Brad Kahlhamer: Nomadic Studio, Maine Camp” and “+Exploding Native Inevitable+” (both through Mar. 4) – concentrate on contemporary work of Indigenous American artists from across the U.S.

Taos Society of Artists founders included Oscar Berninghaus, Ernest Blumenschein, E. Irving Couse and others. They presaged a second generation of Anglo artists who came to Taos, which included Marsden Hartley, John Marin and Georgia O’Keeffe (there are Hartley and Marin works in the show, even though they were not among the original “Taos Six”). Kudos to the curators, who were conscious not to set up an “us vs. them” scenario between the TSA artists and those of the Taos Pueblo.

In a letter to the curatorial team as they began organizing the exhibition, Taos Pueblo artist and fashion designer Patricia Michaels wrote: “Dismissing the imagery captured over the last centuries literally negates our existence. While some may see this work as cultural appropriation, take a moment to consider the reality that while appropriation can easily be appreciation, ERASURE is final and unmistakable in its malice.” Her plea for an inclusive view included an acknowledgement of what TSA “masters” brought to Taos Pueblo artists through their mentorship and art training.

Exhibiting the art of TSA and Native artists alongside each other serves to illuminate not only the complexities of the relationships between TSA painters, their models and the Taos Pueblo at large, but also sheds light on a much longer history of intertribal and Native-Anglo cultural and economic exchange, one that long preceded the building of the railroad that brought many white artists and intellectuals to the Southwest in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Wall labels written by members of an Indigenous advisory council chronicle the diversity of those relationships. One label quotes from a letter Couse wrote to a Santa Fe gallery owner about the difficulties some TSA artists faced with Indigenous models who wanted more money to sit for them.

“The established rate for models is 25 cents per hour, which is more than twice as much as the Indians can make in other work,” Couse wrote. “Unless these impressions are nipped in the bud, the whole future of the Santa Fe Taos art movement will be seriously handicapped.” Ouch.

Romanticizing Indigenous culture had its perils. As I took in Berninghaus’s “Desert Nocturne (Indian Nocturne)” of 1919, I could not help but draw parallels with Frederic Remington’s equally sentimentalized “Sunset on the Plains” from a decade before. Remington’s “art” (I use the term loosely) perpetuated mawkish stereotypes of Native American culture on the demise. Clearly, the success Remington had in portraying First Nations peoples as a dying specie also informed Berninghaus’s own naïve and essentially patronizing perspective.



Walter Ufer (American, 1876–1936), "In His Garden, 1922. Oil on canvas," 30 1/2 in. x 30 1/2 in. The Lunder Collection, 285.2008

Conversely, painter Walter Ufer, it seems, eschewed the impulse of other TSA artists to stage poses and inaccurately clothe their models, instead approaching his depictions with respect for the authentic life of his models, among them Jim Mirabal, with whom Ufer supposedly shared a friendship. Ufer's work is, indeed, some of the most sensitive and unromanticized to come out of the TSA. Yet, whatever their well-intentioned naivety, there is also some gorgeous, if romanticized, painting here by Thomas Moran ("Acoma," 1902), William Herbert Dunton ("Buffalo Signal," c. 1915) and other TSA painters.

It's also instructive, considering Michaels' letter, to look at Diné (Navajo) artist Tony Abeyta's 2021 "Citadel," an oil on linen of Pueblo dwellings against a vibrant modernist sky. There are undeniable synchronies with paintings like Georgia O'Keeffe's 1930 "Ranchos Church, New Mexico," particularly in the minimalist approach to form and the stylized depiction of sky. However, as we encounter pottery works like an undated Acoma water vessel and ceramist Madeline Naranjo's (Santa Clara Pueblo) 2022 blackware piece "Human connections, sometimes all we need is a hug," we understand that Abeyta is not working solely on white modernist precedents, but infusing his painting – more powerfully as it turns out – with clouds painted in ancient patterns of Native American pottery.

The exhibition design, by Cochiti Pueblo multimedia artist Virgil Ortiz, also incorporates patterns found on Pueblo pottery. He also contributes other works, including "Omtua," a stunning ceramic sculpture that depicts an Indian warrior who led what Ortiz calls "the first American revolution," a 1680 anti-colonialist uprising of Pueblos that routed Spanish Conquistadores from their lands. Among other things, Ortiz's work and exhibition design challenge the centuries-long practice among museums and collectors of appreciating Indigenous arts purely for anthropological – as opposed to aesthetic and artistic – interest. Effectively, it makes the ideas of Pueblo art and "craft" inseparable.



Madeline Naranjo (Santa Clara Pueblo, born 1971), "Human connections, sometimes all we need is a hug," 2022. Blackware, 5 1/8 x 4 1/2 x 4 1/2 in. Museum purchase from the Jere Abbott Acquisitions Fund, 2022.066



Michael Namingha, "Altered Landscape 15," 2022. Chromogenic print on shaped acrylic mount, 25 x 50 x 1 in. Museum purchase from the Jere Abbott Acquisitions Fund, 2022.065

The depth of this exhibition is hard to capture. Aside from mesmerizing works (including Robert Mirabal's hypnotic, trance-inducing musical composition "The Society," Michael Namingha's chromogenic print "Altered Landscape 15" and Cara Romero's fiercely beautiful photographic portrait of her niece "Crickett"), the exhibition is thoroughly researched and full of valuable information. The latter provides indispensable context for understanding the legacy of Indigenous art and its sidelining throughout history.

The Bates show "+Exploding" also centers Indigenous American perspectives, but this time within the context of contemporary Native American art. Each wall label begins with the voices of Indigenous commentators about the work on view. What I felt coming through most palpably in this show is the search for identity. What does it mean to be an Indigenous American today? How to assimilate the ancient traditions and sense of home as well as the appropriation and commercialization of those customs and the theft of land? How to reconcile the deep legacy of sorrow of humiliation of the Trail of Tears and other forced displacements, massacres and injustices?



Cara Romero (Chemehuevi, born 1977), "Crickett," 2014. Archival inlet print, 40 x 27 in. Museum purchase from the Jere Abbott Acquisitions Fund, no accession number

The artists on display handle this in different ways and through multiple media. The video “Never Settle: Calling In” by New Red Order – which includes Tlingit Jackson Polis and Ojibwe brothers Adam and Zack Khalil – is essentially a manifesto that rails against romanticization, appropriation, commodification and erasure of Native American art, culture and identity. The brilliance of it is its own reverse appropriation of a form of educational inspirational films often aimed mostly at white audiences. It purports to elicit white colonialists’ help with repatriation of land through both legal and illegal means (complete with toll-free number to sign up).

The irony of “Never Settle” is how hard it bites back at settler colonialism while appearing like a breezy parody. Another Tlingit artist, Alison Bremner, does something similar, appropriating two of Western art’s most revered images – the “Mona Lisa” and “The Girl with the Pearl Earring” – and covering their faces with tribal tattoos.

Tyrrell Tapaha (Diné) presents a piece of traditional Navajo weaving that looks almost out of place amid all the contemporary work. Yet a closer look reveals the words “KKKolonization Killz,” another conflating of white (in this case supremacist) views and Indigenous messaging.



Norman Akers (Osage Nation, b. 1958 Fairfax, Oklahoma; lives in Lawrence, Kansas), "Watchful Eye," 2023, oil on canvas, 78 x 68 inches, Bates College Museum of Art, 2023 *Photo by Aaron Paden/Paden Photography*

Other artists prefer pathos to politics or irony. The powerful painting "Watchful Eye" by Norman Akers (Osage) depicts a figure central to the Osage creation story – the Great Elk, who lowered the water level of the Earth to allow land to appear and created rivers, grasses

and landforms from his own body. Here, the elk drowns in a lake of blood and crude oil, ringed by ghost trees and stumps.

Akers's message is unequivocal: White rape of land (due to deforestation and oil exploration) has killed a great spirit in this emotional work, which Bates purchased for its collection. There might also be a tinge of irony to this painting, as its composition is nearly identical to an idealized 1938 painting of an elk spirit by Georgia O'Keeffe, "From the Faraway, Nearby." In that work, an elk skull floats above the plains that are, as yet, unspoiled. Could Akers' painting also be a brutal rebuttal to the sort of appropriation highlighted in TSA paintings at Colby?

Duane Slick (Meskwaki/Sauk and Fox Tribe) uses another archetypal animal, the wolf, to create layered overlapping images of the animal in various media, thus invoking its multiple symbolisms in Indigenous cultures: wisdom, strength, loyalty, community responsibility, courage and resilience. These, like the poetic video "Mnemonics of Shape and Reason" by Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians), deal with the indestructible persistence of images in the Indigenous consciousness, despite centuries of attempts to oppress them.

Hopinka's video compiles layered landscapes and seascapes that live in his spiritual memory, and mixes them with bits of poetry, music and text. Like Mirabal's composition at Colby, this video feels hypnotic and mournful. (Another of his experimental films, "Sunflower Siege Engine," is currently on view at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art & Design through Dec. 15.)

This show was co-curated by the museum's director, Dan Mills, and Indigenous artist Brad Kahlhamer, whose work comprises a separate exhibition downstairs. His "Nomadic Studio" refers to over 90 sketchbooks in which he records thoughts, Indigenous iconography, travel observations and so on.

The sketchbooks are fascinating and almost hallucinogenic in their confluence of image and word. They reminded me of art plates in Carl Jung's *The Red Book*, which he produced between 1913 and 1917, a period during which Jung described being "menaced with psychosis" and encountering what he called the "mythopoetic imagination."

The interesting thing about Kahlhamer is that he was adopted as an infant from his Native parents by a German-American family, so he has no tangible connection to whatever tribe he was born into. This might have caused great anguish over the uncertainty of knowable identities most of us take for granted, and perhaps it did for Kahlhamer.



Brad Kahlhamer (born 1956 Tucson, Arizona, lives in New York, New York, and Mesa, Arizona),
“American Horse II,” 2022, Mixed media on canvas, 91 x 65 inches, Courtesy of the artist and Garth
Greenan Gallery, New York

But more so, it appears, it offered Kahlhamer a kind of unbridled liberty to re-imagine his Native past and its intersection with his contemporary life and the larger cultures of the world. These come through in his sketchbooks, certainly. But the most impressive work, a 91-by-65-inch mixed media on canvas called “American Horse II,” is as wild and rambling – and as filled with truth – as a psilocybin mushroom trip.

Kahlhamer draws imagery from many Indigenous American cultures: Kokopelli (the hunchbacked flute player of Zuni, Hopi and other Southwest tribes); patterns of Southwest Indigenous pottery; hawks, which are symbolic for many Native American tribes, from Cheyenne and Chippewa to Iroquois and Huron; the graphic, stylized animal forms of Pacific Northwest peoples; and so on.

Together, the Bates and Colby shows shed important light and understanding on the incredible variety and beauty of Indigenous American art. Don't miss them.

Jorge S. Arango has written about art, design and architecture for over 35 years. He lives in Portland. He can be reached at: jorge@jsarango.com

[Deaths at a Florida 'reform' school inspire a masterful horror novel](#)
[Indie Film: Otherness comes into focus in films screening this week](#)

© 2024