

Thinking the 'Post-Indian'
Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World
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Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World was Phoenix's most radical, challenging and ambitious exhibition of the past spring; the exhibition now travels to the George Gustav Heye Center in New York. In contrast to the sometimes sleepy traveling shows that drift through this city, the curators of *Remix* courageously took on a subject in need of public debate in the Southwest: what is the future of contemporary American Indian art, and what is its place within the history of American modernism? The fact that this thought-provoking show was hosted by the Heard Museum—a long-standing and conservative cultural institution largely established before the notion of post-colonialism had filtered into our collective cultural vocabulary—speaks to how far that museum has progressed. Even if the exhibition at times overshot in realizing some of its intellectual aims, it presented a fundamental reconsideration of the status and situation of contemporary American Indian art within the modern art museum. The exhibition also gave a freshness and significance to certain forms and mediums of postmodernist art that otherwise seem to have exhausted their relevance.

The exhibition asserts the right of American Indian artists to engage with and to revise postmodernist art forms, mediums, and strategies on their own terms, even if it means deemphasizing traditional craft as a cultural marker of Indian identity. In emphasizing hybrid and multi-tribal notions of Indian identity and its apt expression in various postmodernist forms—most obviously in the term “remix”—a postmodern process of music composition that involves sampling, pastiche, recycling, and repetition—the exhibition rejects the still-current and highly problematic cultural notion of a “pure” and pre-modern Indian identity that arguably continues to shape our picture of the Southwest and indeed of American identity *in toto*.

As articulated by its American Indian curators Joe Baker and Gerald Mc-

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Master, *Remix* contends that American Indian artists have absolute freedom to define their ethnicity or race as they see fit: to engage with their own ethnic identities in their art, or, if they choose, to decide not to be defined by race in their artistic production. This notion of “post”-ethnicity had already been a hot topic in the late 1990s, when Thelma Golden used the term “post-Black” to discuss some of the art she included in an exhibition of African-American art at the Studio Museum. Baker and McMaster revise the term to describe the Post-colonial moment after social modernization. The exhibition’s title refers pointedly to a “post-Indian World,” and not to post-Indian art. Therefore they avoid totalizing proscriptions for where American Indian art should go and certainly leave the door open to the continuing importance and relevance of traditional American Indian iconography and craft for contemporary American Indian artists.

They also assemble a group of artworks that touch upon current debates carried out in the Humanities that point to an ambivalence toward modernization as an historical period of social and political change. Modernity, it has been argued, was an 18th-century ideological development tied to European and American imperialism and to the rise of capitalist markets. The physical world came to be understood through empirical tools, leading to the increasing secularization of knowledge, which has also been described as the “disenchantment” of the world. This modern knowledge was instrumentalized to develop modern medicine, for example, but also to facilitate the expansion of nations and the markets they relied on. For indigenous people, however, modernization followed on the heels of processes initiated by colonialism, like the “reeducation” into Judeo-Christian belief; forced social modernization marginalized Indians through their physical relocation to newly-declared tribal lands or reservations. Of course social modernization, as it began to meld with the concerns of colonialism, proved devastating to Native culture. In its place Euro-Americans erected their own odd amalgam and substitute, a Westernized “primitive.” This latter mythic subject emerged quasi-fully-formed from the modernist canvasses of George Catlin, Gauguin, and afterwards, Adolf Gottlieb, or, in the activities of Barnett Newman in the display of Pre-Columbian and American Indian artifacts. Because of this history, American Indian modern artists have always had a fraught relation to the cultural and artistic forms of modern art, as they were in part established through this mythic “primitive,” a process that paralleled social modernization. As is the case in the art of José Lente, for example, Native modernists approached the modern with a different, critical lens. An additional level of complexity must be acknowledged in the cultural diversity within Native cultures; “American Indian” is hardly a unified or fixed identity, but one that is constituted within diverse tribes.

Many of these artists—and scholars, critics and curators—are now grappling with the cultural complexity of multiple modernisms that comprise a properly post-colonial view of these reactions to the global scope of modernity.

Several artists in Baker and McMaster's multi-tribal exhibition engage in a kind of critical modeling of modernist epistemology. In doing so they construct their own language or sign systems, oftentimes structured in the logic of the grid. Steven Yazzie's (Navajo/Laguna/Welsh) installation *Sleeping with Jefferson* of 2007 juxtaposes several readymades— a bed frame that houses hubcaps and (perhaps) found digital population projections of the Phoenix area into the late-21st century—to reveal the “Jeffersonian grid” as an instrument of modernity and of imperialist expansion and territorial control. Having now merged with the automobile and digital technologies, the territorializing grid has only increased its power over those of us who drive over its surface, more focused on speed and transition than on place. The configuration car/map/grid will continue to profoundly shape who we are. Bernard Williams' (African American/Native ancestry) *Charting America*, a work that has been ongoing since 2002, presents a floor-to-ceiling, nine-tier flow chart or calendar of wood and cardboard pictograms, some unpainted, some in black or red. Texts stating “Brazzaville” or “Pohajank 0” or “Liverpool,” mix with images of guns, televisions, and stereotypical logos of “Indians” or “pilgrims” in profile. Williams filters historical signs and texts through mass-media icons and turns them into a kind of postmodernist signifying morass that implies a particular though illusive logic that connects these signs into meaning. Williams' encyclopedic ambition in this work parallels projects taken on by European conceptual artists such as Lothar Baumgarten. Baumgarten's slick textual installations showcase U.S. railroad company names with the tribal titles they appropriated. *Charting America* instead reminds viewers of the crassness of these corporate appropriations and the oblivion of Native culture that they generated.

The painter Gregory Lomayesva (Hopi/Latino) points to social and domestic rituals involving gender and romance in *Untitled* (2007), a series of nine painterly canvases. Lomayesva gleans his images of houses, gossiping and otherwise gesticulating women, and a marriage party, from mass culture. Partially obscured by means of large patches of dripped or layered brushstroke and unified across the series through the compositional arrangements of color, these figures similarly imply a code of domesticity constituted through bodily gesture. One asks whether in mass culture these codes retain a tie to specific ethnicities and cultures, or if commercial photography has universally flattened all social rituals into empty homogeneity. For this viewer the cloud of loss that hangs over Lomayesva's grid of ethereal paintings suggests the

latter.

Video works in the exhibition are particularly strong, and point to the possibility that this medium is becoming a focal point for contemporary Indian artists: Kade Twist (Cherokee), Dustinn Craig (White Mountain Apache/Navajo), and the only woman featured in the Phoenix exhibition, Nadia Myre (Anishinaabe), are each represented by striking video installations.¹ Craig's installation *4-Wheel Pony* (2007) uses painted and otherwise decorated skateboards to frame a single-channel video that draws its inspiration from rock videos, the Acid Western, and documentary film. Montage sequences present a group of Apache boys and young men athletically skateboarding off jumps, etc., and cut from the logos the group has created, "Apache Skateboarders," to a Western-like scene of four of these young men walking through the Southwestern landscape. Craig powerfully underscores the positive sense of community and the shared Apache and masculine identity that these young men build around the skateboarding culture and style that they have appropriated from American pop culture and made their own.

Twist's work *The way the Sun Rises over Rivers is no Different than the Way the Sun Sets over Oceans* (2007) explores the long history of another legacy of social modernization, the forced displacement and diaspora of the Cherokee Nation, from the East Coast, to Oklahoma, to California. He also draws upon his work as a poet. Like Lomeyesva, Twist's interest is in the postcolonial resonances of the notion of "home," which Twist also references by means of an electric fireplace placed in the middle of the gallery. For American Indians, in the wake of modernization, the very idea has become a kind of lost utopia. His large-scale projections of sunrise and sunset—over a river on the one hand and the Pacific on the other—are intercut with lyrical texts, some focusing on the Cherokee story "Hunter and Buzzard" in Cherokee and English. Instead of loss and melancholy, Twist's poetry here re-infuses this American landscape with its Cherokee heritage: "...our Cherokee blood will always be part of the golden light of the sun we see ahead and behind us..." Nadia Myre approaches the landscape of the First Nation/ Canada in her video projection *Portrait in Motion*. Her sculpture, an altered readymade/canoe, is also part of the installation. Myre performs the landscape in her video, possibly merging it more directly with herself, paddling the canoe quietly toward the camera and away again. She both appropriates and questions romantic views that see Native Americans as closer to nature, made more emphatic in that she is also a woman artist. The female gender has of course been seen as more proximate to nature. How can we square these older views with our increased understanding that modernization "progressed" by means of the tandem global destruction of the environment and the cultural marginaliza-

tion of women and indigenous people?

Paintings in the exhibition by Mexican and Latino-Indian artists made clear that the medium, so fundamental to Mexican modernism, is still central to Latino contemporary art in the Southwest. The strongest of the group were Luis Gutierrez's *Hank Williams Was a Mexican* (2005), Fausto Fernandez's *Slip Stitch Symbol* (2007), and Hector Ruiz's *Vices* (2006). Ruiz also makes direct political statements about current events in his sculptural works, like the legacies of George W. Bush or recent incidents of police brutality against immigrants in New York City. The curators and/or the Heard did not shrink from displaying these works prominently. Kent Monkman's *Emergence of a Legend*, a tough daguerreotype-like series of photographic self-portraits with the artist outfitted in ceremonial feather headdress and high-heels, presented another kind of critical challenge to viewers. In this series Monkman (Cree/English/Irish) points to both gender and Native ethnicity as possibly performed, or to their "drag" aspects within post-colonialism—particularly as they were taken up by Euro-Americans in the twentieth century. The German-Studies scholar Katrin Sieg has examined this notion of ethnicity as a performative act, and has discussed how American Indian ethnicity has been appropriated by other ethnic groups, such as Germans, within the Postcolonial era.

In acknowledging the hybridity and complexity that now characterizes both American Indian identity and American Indian contemporary art, the "Museum of Native Cultures and Art" must be ready for these same artists to work without boundaries, in any and all directions. They must prepare for the possibility that their pictures may or may not present evolving notions of American Indian identity; or, that they might pose fundamental questions about the assumptions of these modern (art) institutions in the first place. The modern museum and we the audience need to be ready to see, hear, and understand what these artists are telling us, as we journey ever further away from our colonial past.

1 While the catalogue cites the video work of Anna Tsouhlarakis, I did not find her work on view at the Heard when I visited.