

Between Two Cultures



The Art of Star Wallowing Bull



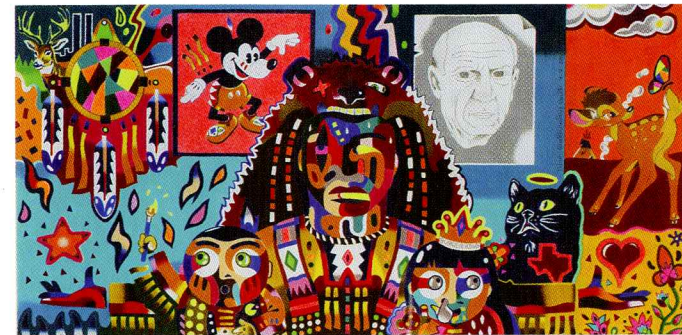
Representing Two Cultures: The Art of Star Wallowing Bull

I have often spoken about being a warrior from the Native perspective. Such a warrior operates from commitment and a way of being. A commitment is to take a stand for what you believe in. A stand can be all sorts of positions coming from one understanding. It becomes a multi-positioned approach out into the domain of creativity, but remains one stand.

Douglas J. Cardinal, Métis architect
*The Native Creative Process: A Collaborative Discourse*¹

The creative process of which Cardinal speaks, describes a philosophy central to the identity of many Native peoples whose artworks symbolically express the multivalent approach of an aesthetics of representation formed by cultural knowledge. This creative process finds expression in works by contemporary artist Star Wallowing Bull (Chippewa and Northern Arapaho) whose drawings and, more recently, paintings stand in opposition to mainstream accounts absorbed by the field of art history. In fact, most contemporary works of art discussed from this standpoint are sanctioned by a traditional theory of representation that inextricably binds aesthetic relevance to proper names exhausted by acts of reference. In an influential essay about the Cubist legacy in 20th-century collage², critic and scholar Rosalind Krauss reveals the limits of this traditional approach to understanding art by evaluating its resistance to a system based upon the structural linguistic conditions of the sign³. Krauss then rightly argues that the classical mimetic approach, which pervades much of art history, relegates the meaning of Cubist works by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso to the boundaries of autobiography in a narrative that pits all pictorial response against stimuli in the artist's personal life. This method of inquiry succeeds only in reducing the multiplicity of visual representations, such as collage elements, to a restrictive personal profile that dissociates the creative process from all that is transpersonal in history (including questions of style and social and economic context). Since Native artists are not impervious to an art history symbolized by the history of the proper name, it is pertinent to redirect one's attention to the ways in which these artists employ modernist modes of representation to engage the domain of creativity from a Native perspective. As an artist whose vision is framed *within* two cultures, Star Wallowing Bull enacts his own movement into the domain of creativity by simultaneously engaging and resisting exterior discourses intent upon simplifying a culture's maintenance of image/meaning.

The complex nature of Wallowing Bull's drawings are clearly recognizable by the fluctuations in subject matter, both as personal events and historical record, which often shift across the flat surface into multiple planes of representation. The image that comes to bear on the viewer's mind is the influence of modernist constructions of space for the abstraction and expression of forms that are often non-illusionistic and nonfigurative⁴. For example, in works such as *Bear Clan with Pop Art Scene* (2001), the artist has rendered the three central figures out of "parts" whose coherence of form rests in the transformation of blocks of color into readable bodies. Furthermore, the outer registers of the composition are symmetrically aligned across the surface to illustrate popular icons, such as Mickey Mouse and Pablo Picasso, along with other signs easily recognizable as either flora or fauna. Even though Wallowing Bull's composition offers a plethora of pictorial passages, on their own each image seems to offer fragments belonging to a whole that is ungraspable unless united by the artist's own voice. Likewise, in another work titled *Windigo*⁵ *versus the Cannibal Man* (2002) [p.12], mythical creatures from differing cultures are engaged in a battle scene where opposing



Bear Clan with Pop Art Scene, 2001, Prismacolor pencil on paper, 7 x 14"
Collection of Hotel Donaldson, Fargo, ND

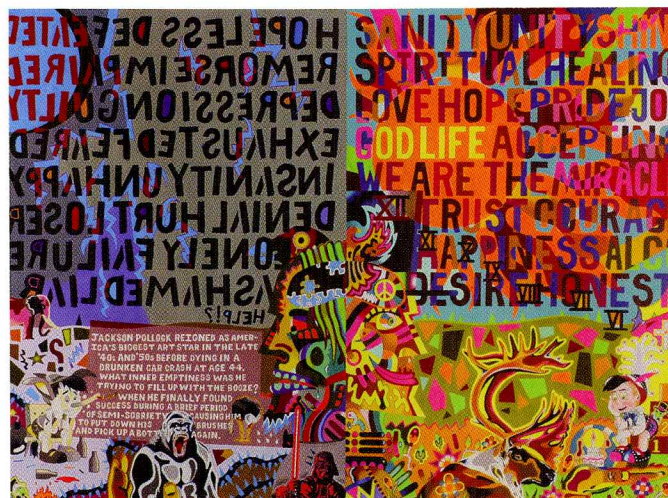
¹ Douglas J. Cardinal, and Armstrong, Jeannette. *The Native Creative Process: A Collaborative Discourse*, Penticton, BC, Canada: Theytus Books Ltd., 1991. • ² Rosalind Krauss, "In the Name of Picasso," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985, p. 27. • ³ The analysis of "signs" relates explicitly to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's discussion of the relationship between signifier and the signified; most commonly known as a structuralist approach to art. This concept of the sign goes beyond the simple evaluation that classical mimetic approaches offer to explain the meaning of an image as an object that directly relates to a referent, or proper name. Mimetic theories limit meaning to names or labels. • ⁴ For a more detailed reading on the influence of modernism on Native artists see Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, *Native North American Art*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 209-239. • ⁵ Windigo is a Matchi-Manitou mythological creature often represented as a giant ice monster and/or cannibal; most feared among the northern Ojibwe and Cree. See Theresa Smith, *The Island of the Anishnaabeg: Thunderers and Water Monsters in the Traditional Ojibwe Life-World*, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1995.

sides represent differing worlds (Ojibwe and Northwest Coast) that are, formally and symbolically, shaped by design elements outlining the positive and negative turns of lines in space. In yet another image titled *Tears of a Broken-Hearted Ojibwe Shame-N* (2001) [not pictured], the categories of space surrounding the tearful man in the center have multiplied into segments, or frames of reference, that announce the artistic influence of Native artists such as George Morrison, Norvel Morrisseau, and Julie Buffalohead, to name only a few. What this quick glance at the surface level of inquiry reveals is a multiplicity in the level of meanings proffered by the tips of Prismacolor pencils employed by an artist wishing to speak to a discourse from *within* it. This particular stance, often discussed as a postmodern turn, succeeds in steering these artworks away from recourse to acts of reference in favor of a substantial move toward understanding how Native artistic practices approach the problem of representation. As a body of work that aspires to multiple intentions and, therefore, interpretations, Wallowing Bull's drawings function both formally and symbolically to engage images of the Indian whose presence is articulated by its inverse relationship to the conditions of absence⁶.

It is no doubt obvious that the artist's intention lies in his aim to make art that points to his own identity as a freethinking individual offering views from a Native perspective. In the act of representing those views, Wallowing Bull enacts a process that begins with drawing attention to the literal meaning of "representation" so that meaning which was formerly absent could now be presented⁷. For example, the act of drawing a shape onto a picture plane brings into existence an entity now positioned on a (formerly) blank sheet of paper. That space now occupied by entities of shapes likewise are shifted and regrouped into things resembling ideas, or concepts, that can quickly multiply in breadth and scope based upon the addition of more images until an entire composition is realized. In *Mind to Mind Combat* (2001), the artist has built up the composition beginning with traces started by a graphite pencil until colors are added in a trial and error process that culminates into a well-balanced approach to blend all shapes, forms, and text into readable glimpses into one artist's vision. The coherency of such an image falls on the shoulders of an informed viewer who must glean whole meaning

from the various inscriptions that make up the identity of the artist's vision. This happens to be the place where previous forays into the interpretation of contemporary artworks failed to be critically engaging because the meaning of an entire image rested on a shortsighted attachment to proper names, or labels, represented by things drawn onto the surface. For example, one could fall into such a trap by trying to reduce the complexity of *Mind to Mind Combat* to its traceable parts, such as the figures of Darth Vader or Pinocchio, to reflect one's grasp of the entire work. Consequently, the artist's vision falls prey to interpretations that hinge all sense of understanding to literal notions that unthinkingly relate specific events in an artist's life to the structural elements of representation. Where this viewpoint succeeds in the positive identification of all fragments, such as the characters, it fails miserably in enriching those same forms by denying an experience that opens the entire artwork to a rigorous modality of meaning about the originality of objects. In effect, the meaning of a work of art becomes depleted and impoverished by what amounts to an autobiographical study⁸. In Wallowing Bull's work, a similar turn away from such traditional methods will be taken in order to touch upon the significance of his body of work.

First, in order to get a sense of the multiple meanings of the artist's symbolism, it becomes essential to think of some of the elements involved in these works as references to the operations of the "sign." For example, in *Untitled* [Flag] (2002) [p.9] the stylized floral forms from his Ojibwe heritage are quite predominant in the entire lower half of the drawing. Interspersed throughout the top half are icons such as a bald eagle, the Statue of Liberty, a medicine wheel, and the figures of Indian men. Second, in order to grasp what has been established in the drawing, each one of these elements just labeled have to be thought of as signs in a system that



Mind to Mind Combat, 2001, Prismacolor pencil on paper, 22.25 x 30"
Collection of Marilyn Bockley, Minneapolis, MN

⁶ This condition of absence refers to Krauss's essay directly when she talks about the application of formal materials (like collage pieces) to a surface to establish "implied depth." That process entails inscribing an element (collage piece) whose depth, or presence, depends on its previous absence. It also refers to the post-structuralist system of establishing meaning. This concept can be extended to the images of Indians in Wallowing Bull's work whose drawings reveal an assertion of Native American identity where it was previously absent in social and political terms.

have literally been placed on the paper as if cut out from the past to be presented anew. To literally rethink of these elements in such a way will cast the works into a new light; one that opens the representation of these objects to concepts that enrich the experience of the entire composition. And third, because these signs do not denote the original meaning of their referents in Wallowing Bull's new system, since they have been cut out of the history books to be regrouped here, they have to be thought of as the re-presentations of signs whose new presence extends from its condition of absence. This concept of absence refers to the domain of the creative process, which rests on the experience of those *new* objects that have been re-presented to the viewer from the artist's perspective. Each of the labeled elements in *Untitled [Flag]* are signs of this nature, put there on the picture plane in an ordered fashion to be spoken by a visual language, the success of which lies in its allowance for multiplicities in meaning for each viewer.

The success of Wallowing Bull's vision becomes very apparent in such a work as *Untitled (2001)* [not pictured], where three portraits of men seem to be fluctuating in an ambiguous space seemingly set in an artist's studio. The central figure has been rendered in a three-quarter's view (as if drawn from a live model in the artist's studio), while two framed canvases flank the walls in the background. However, what becomes clear after further investigation into the drawing is the fact that the so-called artist's studio is not really a studio at all. All the figures seem to float in a precarious space set disjunctively throughout our fields of vision. What this technique does is break up the illusion that we are seeing actual portraits in a studio setting; forcing the viewer to realize that the work is an exploration of the problems of representation, not to mention its hint at the allegorical nature of painting. The implied depth and three-dimensionality of the forms attest to this condition in Wallowing Bull's complex constructions because they straddle the distance between the illusions of realism and modernist space. In that sense, one can now feel the *new* objectivity inherent in the drawing because a re-presentation of the figures, in this manner, draws attention to the function of absence in Wallowing Bull's work. However, unlike the studies into the collage works by Picasso⁷, Wallowing Bull's innovations do not end at the site of the picture plane where his astute grasp of the formalistic inventions of modernism come



Untitled [Flag], 2002, Prismacolor pencil on paper, 12 x 15"
Collection of Hotel Donaldson, Fargo, ND

to bear as a formidable artistic practice in the contemporary art world. In fact, the works entail another experience that is in stark contrast to European modernism's grasp of the function of absence, at the level of representation, because Native artists have to contend with images of the Indian whose identity has been imprisoned by acts extending from colonization. It is that same image from history which now marks a break in focus away from the material constitution of Wallowing Bull's artworks to reveal a Native perspective imbued with traces of memory and transformation to contest traditional notions of their representation in the history of art.

It is a standpoint that most Native artists hold onto as a means to wrest tradition away from the complexities of modernization.

In the portraiture drawings such as *Arapaho Man with Traditional Design* (2004) [p. 2] and *Ojibwe Man with Traditional Floral Design* (2004) [not pictured], the figures of two men are taken from history books and rendered in Prismacolor pencil in a realistic way that implies modeling and depth. The men are further framed by scrolling floral designs to create a drawing that looks like a "picture of a picture." However, if one thinks about the plays of representation in the drawing, it becomes clear that they are actually "pictures of a picture of a picture." Additionally, even though one does not find the same kind of multiple planes ambiguously floating throughout the drawing (like in *Untitled, 2001*) where other portraits compete for the same space) the representation of these male figures occupy level of absence that exceed the conditions of material/medium in the drawing. In fact, a comparison to the levels of absence which define other "signs" in Wallowing Bull's *oeuvre* reveals two male figures without names or place. As is often the case, these portraits reflect an absented position created in most mainstream accounts of Native Americans that are reduced to types for display in history books that contain their image. To remember the countless photographs

⁷ That is, the literal meaning of the prefix "re" in the word representation points to the way images in a work of art come to exist in a space (blank page) previously defined by the absence of a referent, such as lines or shapes. • ⁸ Krauss's essay outlines how this methodology of the proper name should be discarded in lieu of a study inaugurated by the inventions that cubist spaces propose toward problematizing classical theories of representation. Krauss explores these options as it applies to Picasso's use of collage-elements. • ⁹ Krauss's study focuses on the aspects of collage assembly in Picasso's works to establish her argument that those forms guarantee them the status of "signs." Her critical essay on the structural condition of absence is connected to the operations of signs in Picasso's collage; she establishes this condition by illustrating how the inscription of a collage piece onto a flat surface "writes" depth on the very same place from which it is most absent.



Innocence #2, 2004, Prismacolor pencil on paper, 22.25 x 30"
Collection of Brave New Media, Minneapolis, MN

is the way Native artists, such as Wallowing Bull and others, try to problematize a conception of Natives in America through the creative act of representing them. Since Native artists present new forms such as these it then becomes the task of a viewing public to realize what has been offered to open the confines of Native history to *new* readings that draw attention away from the *old* object. What actually comes of such a critical reading points to the same functions of absence that encompass modernist spaces in its evaluation of the characteristics of collage in Picasso's works. The importance of the Native contribution to such a process lies not only in the application of materials, like collage pieces, but in the reaffirmation of the presence of those materials as they relate to the representation¹⁰ of Native cultures in Wallowing Bull's work. In this way, what collage achieves is an eradication of the original surface and a reconstitution of it through the figure of its own absence to effect a representation of representation. After all, as Krauss pointed out, to work in the medium of collage means attaching pieces of material to a flat surface until its representative significance is spoken by an inscription process that is multivalent in vision. In that way, Wallowing Bull's drawings offer a powerful statement because his artistic practice achieves the same effects by connecting fragments of memory into a system of signs that represent a figure that speaks from an absented presence. Not only do works such as these exemplify the glories of modernist space, but they also function to superimpose a presence of cultural knowledge that defies historicist renderings of the Indian as an absent being relegated to the boundaries of identity like an object. Instead, what enters into our experience of contemporary Native art is a discourse founded on a buried origin that calls forth a representation of the figure of the Indian to make meaningful

taken in the early years of the 20th century means conjuring up a history in photography when the Indian was cast in a theater of memory as the vanishing race. Subsequently, the representation of the Indian became enmeshed with an outside view defined and bound by images like these whose nearness to the distant past dissociated him/her from locating a place in the future. What is to be gathered from such a depersonalized image stuck in the annals of photographic history

its presence instead of absence. Only then will the Native contribution to modernism become manifest.

The act of creativity began when Wallowing Bull compiled his signs, such as the floral designs and a host of characters, and regrouped them with a desire to convey what he believes life to be like *in between* two cultures. Indeed, the complex natures of the drawings demonstrate one artist's understanding of his nearness (or distance) to issues of culture and identity as they relate directly to image and meaning in the domain of creativity. For example, one could view the floral element as a meaningful sign of cultural identity that always stands as a constant presence for the artist in works like *Once Upon A Time* (2004) [not pictured], and *Innocence #2* (2004). In both cases, the child-like figure is framed on all sides by the familiar abstractions as if literally placed between the cultural signifier. As the sign most hospitable to visual polysemy, the floral designs are characterized by their openness to multiple stylizations because of the ambiguity inherent in their existence. In fact, as a form that finds its place in the history of Ojibwe artistic traditions, many Native artists have adopted their own ways of representing its virtues across differing mediums which include beadwork. In such a process, it is clear that evaluation of aesthetic relevance comes from a critical standpoint not shortsighted by the history of a proper name, or other narratives that exclude all that is transpersonal in history. Instead, a critical re-reading of the function of the condition of absence, as it relates to images of the Indian, is vital to understanding the connections made between representation and cultural knowledge in contemporary works of art. Only from such a standpoint could the Native perspective be allowed to operate freely, or *in between*, the confines of history.

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¹⁰ Krauss, op cit, p. 37.