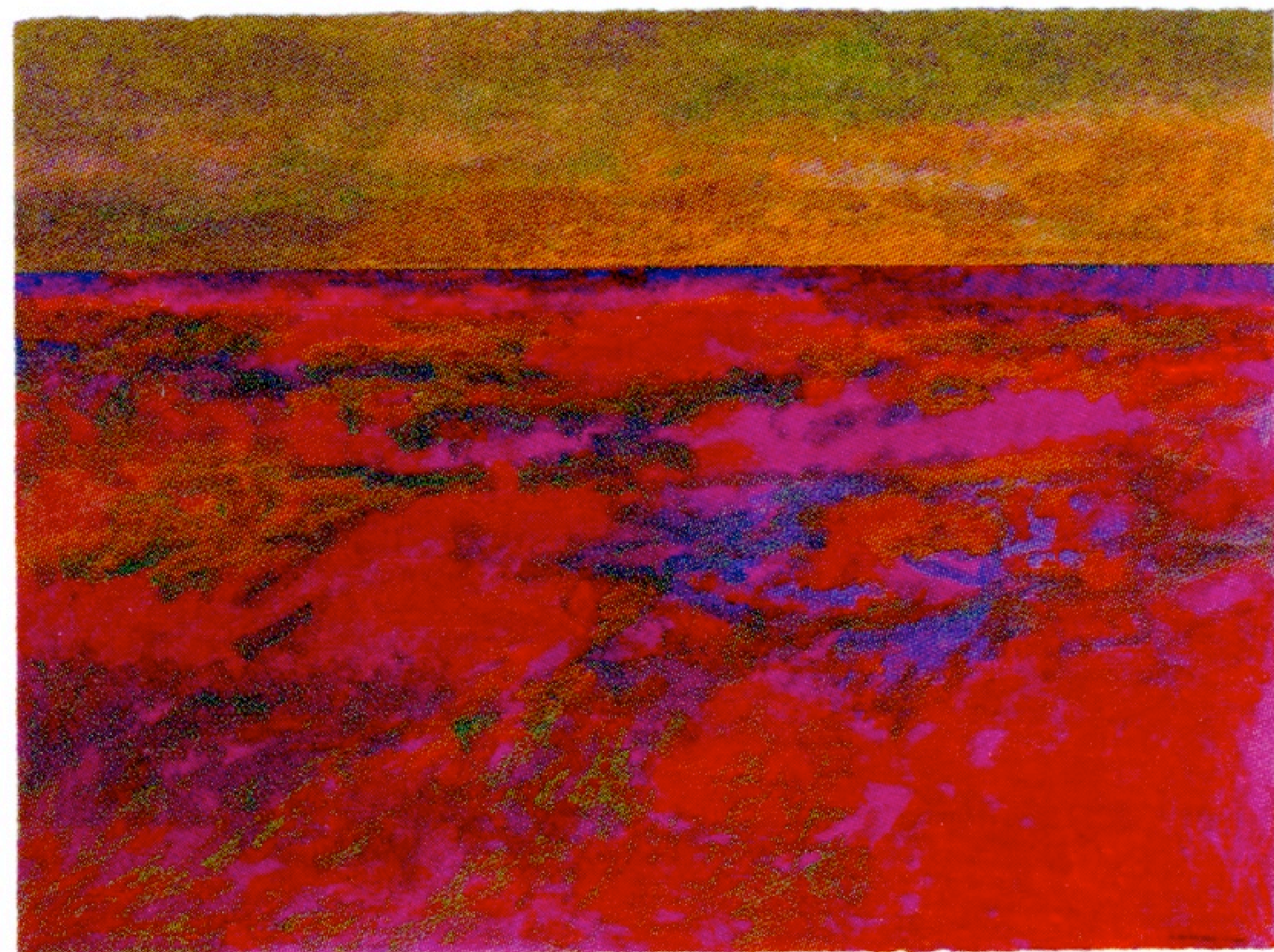
WRITING AGAINST THE ENEMY: RE-THINKING NATIVE MODERNISM AND SHIFTING THE HORIZON LINES OF HISTORY

Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds

My art is my religion. I've tried to unravel the fabric of my life and how it relates to my work. Certain Indian values are inherent—an inner connection with the people and all living things, a sense of being in tune with natural phenomena, a consciousness of sea and sky, space and light, the enigma of the horizon, the color of the wind.[1]

— George Morrison, *This Song Remembers*

When Anishinaabe artist George Morrison (1919–2000) went home in the mid-1970s to the Grand Portage Reservation in Minnesota, he started painting the *Horizon* series at his studio and home located on Lake Superior. Morrison discusses this series of works as springing from his subconscious because the landscape of his youth had come back full force in the kinds of moods, atmospheres, colors, and textures he painted from memory.[2] Morrison speaks also about growing up close to nature to explain his affinity for the textural qualities of rocks, trees, and water that eventually were transmuted into thick paint on canvas. Self-described as an "old fashion[ed] abstract artist,"[3] Morrison's fifty-year career began at the Minneapolis School of Art and continued at the New York Art Students League from 1943 to 1946, where he was influenced by Expressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, and other art movements.[4] Living in a studio on East Ninth Street near Cooper Union, Morrison encountered Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and other Abstract Expressionist painters—whom he described as "friendly to everyone"—at the Cedar Street Tavern in Greenwich Village.[5]



George Morrison (1919–2000), *Spirit Path, New Day, Red Rock Variation: Lake Superior Landscape*, 1990, acrylic and pastel on paper, 22 3/8 x 30 in., Collection, Minnesota Museum of American Art, purchase, with funds from Mrs. Arthur Savage, John R. Savage, Mrs. Harold Searles, Mr. and Mrs. Walter H. Trenerry, and Mr. and Mrs. Louis N. Zelle, 99.04.02.03.

Most critics would agree that viewing Morrison's work within the context of Abstract Expressionism

situates us, art historically, within the Eurocentric scenario that modern art is the provenance of a select few who, by virtue of their Western European heritage and male gender, conform to the fully established conventions and categories governing it. In particular, scholar Serge Guilbaut argues, in his book titled *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983), that the Abstract Expressionist movement achieved its success by abusing the concept of freedom for ideological purposes, and that the "discourses of modernism have produced the silences, created the omissions, and wiped out whole groups of artists and types of artistic practice" because of its focus on white, male artists.[6] In her article titled "The Space Between Art and Political Action: Abstract Expressionism and Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945–1950," art historian Nancy Jachec marks the year 1945 as the "beginning of a stylistic change in the work of each of the Abstract Expressionists, as they moved from a Surrealist-influenced style to what can be considered their mature styles."[7] It is within that five-year framework, coupled with the post-World War II mood of anxiety and trauma, that Jachec links statements artists made about their own work with an idea of freedom and individuality incompatible with political action.[8] Therefore, in terms of the present exhibition at IAIA's Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, "redefining action and abstraction" means engaging Western modernist paradigms and going beyond their limitations and contradictions to define a space for Native artists to exhibit work outside of power structures that have appropriated, commodified, and de-historicized their labor and modes of expression.

'TRADITIONAL' INDIAN PAINTING IN OKLAHOMA: THE 'INDIVIDUAL' AS INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

> *Are we to be held back forever with one phase of Indian painting, with no right for individualism, dictated to as the Indian has always been, put on reservations and treated like a child, and only the White Man knows what is best for him?*
>
> —Oscar Howe[9]

In December, 1975, the Artists Meeting for Cultural Change (AMCC) circulated a petition that demanded the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City cancel a show titled *Three Centuries of American Art*.[10] The Bicentennial exhibition contained works entirely from the private collection of John D. Rockefeller III. The petition stated that "no black artists and only one woman artist" would be shown and that "other minorities in United States culture [would] also be under-represented or excluded."[11] The AMCC produced a publication known as the "anti-catalog," which comprised essays and documents that "criticized what its members saw as the misuse of art and art institutions to serve the interests of a wealthy minority of the population."[12] In an essay published in "an *anti*-catalog" titled "Mr. Catlin and Mr. Rockefeller Tame the Wilderness," artist Jimmie Durham discloses the connections between the Rockefellers' art collection and their history of oppressing Indians in the name of Westward Expansion.[13] In particular, Durham points out that

Francis Blackbear Bosin, *Prairie Fire*, c. 1953., gouache on brown paper, 23 x 33 in., Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Museum purchase, 1953.7.

the history of the Rockefeller family's fortune in the oil industry began in Oklahoma where they stole land that belonged to various Indian nations.[14] Durham includes a reproduction of Oklahoma painter Blackbear Bosin's (Comanche/Kiowa) *Prairie Fire* (1953) to counteract the mythology of nineteenth-century artist George Catlin's landscape paintings that depict white settlers peddling "American exceptionalism" and the "taming of the West" in lieu of the colonization and genocide of Indian people.

In 1958, similar to AMCC's petition, Oscar Howe (Yanktonai Dakota) leveled a critique at the Philbrook Museum's Indian Annual jurors in a letter challenging the institutional legitimacy of 'traditional' style Indian painting that catered to white patrons at the expense of individual expression and experimentation. According to scholar Bill Anthes, since its founding in 1946, the Philbrook Museum, located in Tulsa, Oklahoma, had "promoted what its organizers considered to be the 'traditional style' of Native American painting developed by the young Indian artists in Dorothy Dunn's Studio and under Oscar Jacobson at the University of Oklahoma in the 1930s."[15] The flat, two-dimensional, formal style of "traditional" Indian art that extends from Oklahoma westward into New Mexico and Arizona was popular with white patrons because the Indian subject matter made it "authentic" while the "illustrational style [...] emphasized flat, linear patterns and unmodulated earth colors uncontaminated by Western pictorial techniques such as shading and perspective."[16] This "traditional" style of Indian painting was originally attributed to the Kiowa Five/Six artists Steven Mopope, Monroe Tsatoke, Spencer Asah, James Auchiah, Jack Hokeah, and later, Lois Smokey, who was the youngest and only female artist in the group.[17] In the 1920s, these artists were admitted to the University of Oklahoma's art department by Swedish-American artist Oscar Jacobson and encouraged by their teachers to "develop an 'Indian' style based on the ledger drawings they had seen in books"[18] and that were drawn by warriors who were unjustly imprisoned at Fort Marion in Saint Augustine, Florida.

Although the Kiowa Five/Six artists received international acclaim under Jacobson, by the 1950s, "cosmopolitan, educated Native American artists including Oscar Howe and Dick West (Southern Cheyenne) argued that 'traditional-style' Indian painting had become 'kitsch' or 'formulaic.'"[19] Furthermore, this style of painting, taught and celebrated in Oklahoma and the Southwest, was seen as a "simplistic stereotype that elided tribal differences, repressed individual expression, and was out of touch with contemporary Native lives, which by now [the late 1950s] encompassed

military service, urban wage labor, mainstream education and increasing activism."[20] Revisionist art history starting in the 1980s takes into account tribal diversity and individual expression found in "contemporary painting, as it is practiced by artists who live on or near reservations in the Great Plains, [as] a complex synthesis of tribal traditions, Euro-American influences, and individual visions that cannot be categorized simply as modern."[21] For example, other notable Oklahoma artists such as Acee Blue Eagle (Muscogee/Pawnee/Wichita), his student Dick West (Southern Cheyenne), Woody Crumbo (Potawatomi), and Ruth Blalock Jones (Delaware/Shawnee/Peoria) developed a distinct style at Bacone College at Muskogee, in eastern Oklahoma. And still more notable artists from Oklahoma and the Southwest, such as Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache), Quincy Tahoma (Navajo), and Oscar Howe, attended The Studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, under the tutelage and watchful eye of Dorothy Dunn. Although the journey of each individual artist took them to diverse locations, these artists shared the experience of colonial institutions such as museums, galleries, schools, and government that artists like Oscar Howe increasingly challenged, or critiqued, as limiting.

NATIVE ARTISTS IN CALIFORNIA: RELOCATION AND AMERICAN INDIAN ACTIVISM

> *Here in California, cultural diversity plays an important role now. But when I was going to school as an artist, cultural diversity was not considered an important part of the fine-arts movement. It was always a white Renaissance European artist that was represented as important.*
>
> —Jean LaMarr[22]

Jean LaMarr (Paiute/Pit River), a nationally recognized community-arts activist based in Susanville, California, went to school at UC Berkeley after the Third World Strike of 1968 and during the time of the occupation of Alcatraz in 1969, and the Pit River occupation in 1970.[23] In addition to being a printmaker, LaMarr is a muralist inspired by the Chicano art movement to engage Native American youth in community projects that instill pride about their Indigenous heritage. The fight for civil rights among the minority populations in the US has been cited by many contemporary Native American artists as the impetus for addressing the socio-political realities of Indian life in the US. LaMarr's contemporaries during the late 1960s to 1970s included other artists with California tribal associations, such as Harry Fonseca (Maidu/Portuguese/Hawaiian)/ Rick Bartow (Wiyot)/Frank LaPena (Wintu-Nomtipom/Tena), Judith Lowry (Maidu/Pit River), and Brian Tripp (Karuk), to only name a few. Some of these artists were exhibited in *Images of Identity* (2004), curated by Frank LaPena, at California State University, Sacramento.

Other artists connected to California in various ways were also exhibited in *Images of Identity* such as Dugan Aguilar (Paiute/Maidu/Pit River), Fritz Scholder (Luiseño), and Frank Tuttle (Yuki/Wailaki/Concow Maidu). Curator LaPena states that even though

"California is not usually associated with what is commonly thought of as 'Indian art', the state has a significant population of native people, whether indigenous or relocated from other areas."[24]

When the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 was instituted, the US government encouraged Native people to leave Indian reservations for urban centers promising employment opportunities so that nearly 100,000 Indians were relocated to California between 1952 and 1968.[25] This program brought Native artists from other areas of the country, such as multimedia documentarian Pamela Peters (Diné), while other influential artists like Bob Haozous (Chiricahua Apache), Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Seminole, Muscogee, Diné), James Luna (Puyukitchum, Ipai), Gerald Clarke (Cahuilla), and George Longfish (Seneca/Tuscarora) either studied, exhibited, lived, or worked in California. In fact, since 1973, artist, writer, curator, and educator George Longfish has been a supporter and exhibiter of Native American artists. He served as director of the C.N. Gorman Museum of American Art at UC Davis, California, until 1997, and retired from the Department of Native American Studies at Davis in 2003. As a young artist studying at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1970s, Longfish remembers wanting to be "just an artist. But after teaching in Montana for a year and witnessing the reservation system, his art became politicized."[26]

The American Indian Movement (AIM), like other movements of the 1960s, allowed many artists to create cultural expressions with an overarching critique of US society that also challenged stereotypical expectations of Indian art. These critiques were "radical" in the sense that they "attempted to get to the root of oppression and [the] current system of gross inequality."[27] The impetus for minority political activism can be traced to the 1940s and 1950s because these decades foreground the fight for, mostly, Black civil rights and the emergence of AIM in 1968, especially with the occupation of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to '71. Scholar Joane Nagel discusses the formation of the Red Power movement during civil rights–era America and how, although there were some very real differences between the problems facing American Indians and those confronting Black Americans in the 1960s, we cannot discount the importance of the civil rights movement for the emergence of Red Power.[28] For example, Nagel points out that Red Power borrowed from civil rights organizational forms, rhetorics, and tactics but modified them to meet the specific needs and symbolic purposes of Indian grievances, targets, and locations: "the black lunch counter 'sit-in' became the tribal 'fish-in'; 'Black Power' became 'Red Power'; AIMs police-monitoring activities in Minneapolis paralleled those of the Black Panthers in Oakland."[29] In moments of social upheaval, artists generate large-scale aesthetic and creative outpourings, and the well-documented actions of AIM in the media inspired a large number of student artists from various tribal backgrounds and locations to participate as agents of social change. For these, and many other reasons, the Native artists discussed in this essay continue to inspire successive generations of Native and non-Native artists who are open to investigating, challenging, and creating work that can reshape our understanding of the world.

ENDNOTES

1. Jane B. Katz, ed. *This Song Remembers: Self-Portraits of Native Americans in the Arts.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Col, 1980): 60.

2. "The Art and Life of George Morrison: A 'Beyond the Book' Special," Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), Aired 22 February 2015, Accessed 17 May 2018, https://video.tpt.org/video/tpt-co-productions-art-and-life-george-morrison-beyond-book-special/.

3. Ibid.

4. Gerald Vizenor, "George Morrison: Anishinaabe Expressionist Artist." *American Indian Quarterly* 30, nos. 3 & 4, (Summer & Fall 2006): 652.

5. Ibid., 653.

6. Juliet Steyn, "Reviewed Work(s): How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War by Serge Guilbaut." *Oxford Art Journal 7*, no. 2, (1984): 63.

7. Nancy Jachec, "'The Space Between Art and Political Action': Abstract Expressionism and Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945-50." *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2, (1991): 18.

8. Ibid. Jachec builds upon a number of studies that have appeared since the early 1970s, that focused on the appropriation of the movement by covert government agencies who used it as a vehicle for Cold War propaganda.

9. Notch Code, "Oscar Howe, Cubism, and Traditional Native American Art," Archives and Special Collections Blog, University of South Dakota, 23 March 2012, Accessed 23 June 2018, https://archivesandspecialcollections.wordpress.com/2012/03/23/oscar-howe-cubism-and-traditional-native-american-art/.

10. Prior to the opening organizers changed the title to "American Art: An Exhibition from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd." Katherine Kerrigan, "Cataloguing Critique: Experimental Forms of Documentation in American Art 1970-1977." (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2013): 136.

11. Artists Meeting for Cultural Change quoted in Kerrigan, 135.

12. Ibid., 147.

13. Jimmie Durham, "Mr. Catlin and Mr. Rockefeller Tame the Wilderness," in anti-catalog (New York: The Catalog Committee, Inc., 1977), http://primaryinformation.org/files/AntiCatalog.pdf. Although Durham is a prolific artist and writer, he has been a controversial figure in the Native American art world because he claimed Cherokee heritage, at one time, but was never an enrolled Cherokee tribal citizen.

14. Ibid.

15. Bill Anthes, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940-60.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006): 142.

16. Ibid.

17. Mary Jane Schneider, "Regional Differences in Plains Indian Painting." Great Plains Quarterly 2, no. 3 (1982): 131.

18. Ibid., 135.

19. Anthes, 143.

20. Ibid.

21. Schneider, 135.

22. Susan Lobo, "Interview with Jean LaMarr: Supporting Native Pride; A Native American Artist Talks About Her Community Art Project for Reservation and Urban Youth", *Cultural Survival Quarterly Magazine*, September 1992, Accessed 26 June 2018, https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/interview-jean-lamarr-supporting-native-pride-native.

23. Ibid.

24. "Images of Identity," California State University Sacramento, Accessed 26 June 2018, http://www.al.csus.edu/sota/ulg/pastexhibits/images-of-identity/site/index2.html.

25. Dwight Dutschke, "A History of American Indians in California: Introduction," California State Parks, 8 October 2014, Accessed 26 June 2018, http://ohp.parks.ca.gov/pages/1054/files/american%20indians%20in%20california.pdf.

26. George Longfish quoted in Durham, "A Central Margin," in *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art; New Museum; Studio Museum in Harlem, 1990): 174.

27. Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee, "Social Movement Cultures: An Introduction," in *Signs of Change: Social Movement Cultures 1960s to Now* (Oakland and New York: AK Press/Exit Art, 2010): 13.

28. Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 130.

29. Ibid.