

DOCENT "CLOSE-UP-ON ART" STUDY PAPER

Linda Karlson, November, 2016

Title of Art Work: Shaman

Fritz Scholder, American, Luiseno, 1937-2005

Gift of R. Barry McComic

Oil on canvas, circa 1977



Fritz Scholder has been characterized as an abstract expressionist painter, especially because of his use of intense colors and energetic brushwork. He was trained at Sacramento State College (BA, 1960); and the University of Arizona (MFA, 1964). While he was influenced by West Coast artists of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Wayne Thiebaud, he was also influenced by the post-war New York abstract expressionists, including Willem de Kooning. At the same time, he incorporated elements of pop art reminiscent of Andy Warhol, such as beer cans and stenciled-on lettering, in his paintings.

In "Shaman", Scholder uses the bold, imprecise brushstrokes of the expressionist artist to apply large swatches of color to a large canvas. His limited color palette of dark red, ocher, orange, and black heighten the mystery of the abstract figure. The vague, ambivalent forms, such the wings? mountains? behind the figure deepen the mystery. Finally, the brilliant white piercing spot that may be an eye directly challenges the viewer. This use of color is representative of Scholder's philosophy and approach. As he once said, "One color by itself is pretty blah. I don't care what color you take. It's when you put the second color next to the first color that then things start to happen, and you get vibrations, you get, when you get purple next to an orange, things are going to happen." For me, those white spots on the dark canvas definitely vibrate. These qualities attracted me to this painting.

Scholder has been recognized as the first major artist to abandon the romanticized, narrative depictions of Native Americans that were typical into the 1950s. Instead, he applied post-modern abstraction and expressionist techniques to depict them as "real, not Red". Although he was one-quarter Native American, and an enrolled member in the Luiseno band of Mission Indians in Southern California, he did not think of himself as "Indian". Nevertheless, he changed how they are represented generally in art from his very first Indian painting in 1967, to the last of his Indian series in 1980. His works are represented in major art galleries and museums, as well as serious private collections. He is considered not just an important Native American artist, but an important post-war artist regardless of genre.

Sources:

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