



Title - “First American Girl Series: Naomi”
Contemporary Documentary Photography
Artist - Cara Romero (1977 - present) Santa Fe, New Mexico
Collection of Palm Springs Art Museum, a gift of Loren G. Lipson, M.D.
Medium - Digital Photograph - Archival Color Print
Work completed in Santa Fe, 2017 (in the artist’s studio)

Background:

“American Girl,” is a line of 18-inch dolls released in 1986 by Pleasant Company. The initial series of dolls portrayed 8 to eleven-year-old girls of a variety of identifiable ethnicities. They were sold with accompanying books, told from the viewpoint of the girls.¹ In her fine art photographic portrait of Naomi, Cara Romero is showing us how the “Indian” doll she longed for as a child would look. Naomi is photographed in the studio, in a life size doll box (a constructed setting,) wearing full powwow dance regalia created by the model’s family, and surrounded by appropriate accessories. This portrait celebrates the dignity, grace and glamour of the women that young Cara Romero admired at powows as a child, growing up on the Chemehuevi Valley Indian Reservation near Lake Havasu in the Mojave Desert of Southeastern California.² The American Girl series from Pleasant Company included a Native American doll named Kaya (see below.)



¹ Wikipedia.com: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Girl

² CaraRomeroPhotography.com

Analysis:

Like the photo documentary efforts of Edward Curtis at the beginning of the 20th Century, when viewed through a Post Modern lens of the “colonizer” documenting the vanishing culture of the “colonized,” Kaya is a pale effort at capturing the Native American experience.

Romero’s work carefully and thoughtfully portrays 20th Century pow-wow regalia and a woman of incredible strength and power. Romero conquers stereotypes by “taking back” the specifics of “back story” narrative, accessories, and iconography, hoping to demonstrate the “Native woman” as an individual of immense courage, power, and personal fortitude. Her box design, created life size in the studio, includes the pinecone triangle as a permanent frame. The pinecone is a Cultural Keystone Species for the Western Valley indigenous tribes from Nevada, Arizona and California. It is both a source of food (pine nuts) and a trading commodity, and it includes medicinal and ritual uses as well³. The piñon also is an early indicator of ecological health of the region – a canary in the coalmine. Romero elevates the pinecone on a pedestal with her “doll,” to underscore its cultural significance.

Romero’s fine art photography attempts to correct misleading stereotypical depictions of Native People by replacing them with what she sees as more accurate representations of modern native women who are strong, resourceful and “in control.” A self-professed tomboy herself, Romero is concerned with the underestimation of women in contemporary society generally and in Native American culture in particular. Her contemporaneous work entitled “TV Indians,” depicts actual indigenous Native Americans assembled among TV screens, upon which are indicated stereotypical “Indian” images including Tonto, and others.

Romero’s work, “First American Girl: Naomi” could be interpreted as an “anti-doll,” seeking to reinforce the power and significance of native women, by replacing a toy that reinforces a woman’s submissive role with a “new” toy that signifies the strength and resilience of Modern Native American women. The work is both haunting and confrontational. It’s bright coloring belies the urgency and intensity of its message.

Sources:

Cara Romero Photography: <https://www.cararomero.com/fine-art/xu1700jwaf3bjc4cz1npgqwhjd16aj>

Wikipedia.com: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Girl_\(book_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Girl_(book_series))

Nuwuvi (Southern Paiute) Ecological Knowledge of Piñon-Juniper Woodlands: Implications for Conservation and Sustainable Resource Use in Two Southern Nevada Protected Areas, Masters Thesis by Brian John Lefler, Portland State University

Amazon.com retail site: https://www.amazon.com/American-Girl-Beforever-Kaya-Paperback/dp/B0035NNKNI/ref=sr_1_fkmr1_2?s=toys-and-games&ie=UTF8&qid=1543000155&sr=1-2-fkmr1&keywords=be+forever+kaya+american+girl+doll

Pow-Wows.com: <https://www.powwows.com/american-girl-doll-kaya-captures-authentically-native-culture/>

Wikipedia.com: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Girl

³ Ecological Knowledge of Piñon-Juniper Woodlands: Implications for Conservation and Sustainable Resource Use in Two Southern Nevada Protected Areas, Brian John Lefler, Portland State University