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A Revolution In Contemporary Native American Art Explored At The Hessel Museum Of Art At Bard College

Chadd Scott

New Red Order, Conscientious Conscripture , 8 ft x x 8ft Step and Repeat, 10ft feather flag, 5ft ... [+] OLYMPIA SHANNON

1969.

At the peak of America's anti-war and Black Power movements, another resistance was taking place. Author, scholar and activist Vine Deloria, Jr. (Standing Rock Sioux) initiated the term "Red Power" that year with the publication of his book, "Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto."

That same year, more visible, filling newspapers and TV news reports around the nation, a San

Francisco Bay area Native activist organization known as “Indians of All Tribes” occupied Alcatraz Island. A group of nearly 100, citing federal treaty law, claimed “The Rock” and began living there.

Among the occupiers were Lakota. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868–signed and long ignored by the U.S. government–stipulated the so-called Sioux tribes–Lakota, Dakota and Nakota–could appropriate surplus federal land. Surplus federal land like Alcatraz Island after the government closed the notorious prison there in 1963 and vacated the property.

The occupation gradually fizzled. After 19 months, the last of the activists were removed. The action had a significant impact across Indian Country and came to be seen as the beginning of an era of Native self-determination, an era which continues.

Occupants on Alcatraz Island, gather in front of the main cell block with the island's water tower ... [+]

Another Native American revolution was occurring at this time. It was taking place at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, NM. There, a radical new vision for contemporary Native art and artistic expression was being established. It was taking place across the visual arts. It was taking place in jewelry and fashion design. And it was taking place in theater.

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This context serves as the backdrop for a first of its kind, large-scale exhibition centering performance and theater as an origin point for the development of contemporary art by Native American, First

Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Alaska Native artists. “Indian Theater: Native Performance, Art, and Self-Determination since 1969,” on view at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY through November 26, 2023, begins by examining the role Native artists have played in the self-determination era.

“They were also artists,” Candice Hopkins (Carcross/Tagish First Nation), Forge Project’s Executive Director and CCS Bard’s Fellow in Indigenous Art History and Curatorial Studies, told Forbes.com of the Native activists who occupied Alcatraz and sparked the self-determination era. “One of the things this exhibition is trying to do is show what was taking place more broadly in Indian Country in ‘69 that led to these various kinds of self-determined movements.”

While researching the exhibition she curated, Hopkins gathered an oral history from contemporary Native American artist G. Peter Jemison (Seneca) who was living in Berkeley, CA amongst the activist Native community at the time. He recalled that many of the college students who initially took back Alcatraz were also participating in radical street theater on campus in Berkeley.

“Theater had a role in the occupation of Alcatraz and that's something that hasn't been historicized,” Hopkins said.

New Native Theater

Installation view of “Indian Theater: Native Performance, Art, and Self-Determination since 1969,” ... [+]

OLYMPIA SHANNON

Back at IAIA, 1969 saw the publication of “Indian Theatre: An Artistic Experiment in Process.” The 60-plus page document detailed what it termed “New Native Theater,” the countering of a Western, Eurocentric, colonial theater lineage dating back to Greek tragedies. In its place would be theater rooted in the ceremonial practices and performances taking place for time immemorial across North America: songs, dances, drum circles, masks, regalia.

“Native dance, performance, songs are all integral to Native culture, they can't be separated out,” Hopkins said. “What (IAIA’s founders) were making as an argument (in the ‘Indian Theater’ document) is that you can't just have a visual arts department (at IAIA) because for Native people, there aren't material or medium specificities, everything's connected. A mask will have specific songs and dances associated with them, and they knew that when they were developing this idea of New Native Theater.”

Theater rooted in cultural heritage, but not simply a continuation.

Foundational to understanding IAIA, its students, instructors, significance and influence, is understanding what a complete departure it offered from any other previous type of formal Native American arts education. Established as a high school in 1962 under the leadership of Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee), it would evolve into the only fine arts college in the world dedicated to the study of contemporary Native American and Alaskan Native arts.

Students were encouraged to draw from their cultural backgrounds, but not be burdened by them. This was radical.

“At its very inception, the Institute for American Indian Arts was dedicated to not only new forms, but experimental forms,” Hopkins explained. “It demonstrated that the faculty at the time were really interested in contemporary art broadly and creating these radical ruptures with what people considered to be ‘Indian practices.’”

IAIA’s early instructors, who included some of the legends of Native American art–New, Fritz Scholder (Luiseño), Charles Loloma (Hopi) and Allan Houser (Chiricahua Apache) among them–steered students away from what came before.

Groundbreaking. Experimental. Radical.

These were the guiding principles at IAIA whether in painting or theater. An ethos continuing to this day which has made it the dominant through-line in contemporary Native American art for 50-plus years.

T.C. Cannon (Kiowa/Caddo). Earl Biss (Absáalooke). Dan Namingha (Hopi-Tewa). David Bradley (Chippewa). Patricia Michaels (Taos Pueblo). Cara Romero (Chemehuevi). Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan/Hidatsa/Arikara). Rose Simpson (Santa Clara Pueblo). All IAIA grads. All essentials to contemporary Native American art. Every one of them and hundreds more have pushed the genre in exciting new directions, defining it as they go, making it now impossible to separate contemporary Native American art from the broader global contemporary art market.

That’s a recent development, and proof of it is Jeffrey Gibson’s (Mississippi Band of Choctaw and Cherokee) selection to represent the United States in the 2024 Venice Biennale, the Olympics of contemporary art. The United States has never so honored a Native American artist in the event’s 130-year history.

Gibson was commissioned for the "Indian Theater" exhibition to create a new work and developed a four-act theater piece titled *Don't Make Me Over* featuring Arielle Twist, a trans, two-spirit, Cree woman. A recording of the performance can be seen in the entryway to the exhibition.

"Indian Theater"

Cannupa Hanska Luger (Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota), Drone video still from "Mirror Shield ... [+]

FORGE PROJECT COLLECTION, TRADITIONAL LANDS OF THE MUH-HE-CON-NE-OK

Featuring over 100 works by artists representing a range of perspectives and practices, "Indian Theater" presents a survey of video, performance, sculpture, painting, drawing, and beadwork at once paying homage to the legacy of innovative Native aesthetic traditions, and a continuing tradition of experimentation. Contemporary Native American art heavyweights including Luger, Dyani White Hawk (Sicangu Lakota), Kay WalkingStick (Citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma and Anglo), Raven Halfmoon (Caddo), Kent Monkman (Cree member of Fisher River Cree Nation in Treaty 5 Territory (Manitoba)) and Marie Watt (Seneca and German-Scot) have work on view.

In addition to artworks, on display are important archival materials documenting the emergence of the New Native Theater movement in Santa Fe in 1969 as well as materials directly related to the early self-determination era.

Contemporary Native American art

Further proof of contemporary Native American art's mainstreaming is found 100 miles south of the Hessel Museum of Art where this fall in Manhattan–the busiest, most high-profile season for art in the global epicenter for contemporary art–top galleries feature more prominent presentations of living Indigenous artists than ever before.

Sundaram Tagore Gallery presents an exhibition of paintings, sculpture, photography and an installation by more than twenty contemporary Indigenous artists from diverse tribal affiliations spanning the United States and Canada through October 7. Included are pillars of the genre such as Christi Belcourt (Métis), Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation), Namingha, Virgil Ortiz (Cochiti Pueblo), Preston Singletary (Tlingit), Duane Slick (Meskwaki), and Will Wilson (Diné).

Shuvinai Ashoona, Polar bear sketching people 2023 Colored pencil and ink on paper 50.25 x 97.25 ... [+]

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND FORT GANSEVOORT, NEW YORK.

Beginning September 19, Fort Gansevoort presents "Looking Out, Looking In," the first New York solo exhibition by contemporary Inuk artist Shuvinai Ashoona. Born in 1961, she is the youngest generation of a dynasty of celebrated female artists–her grandmother Pitseolak Ashoona, her mother Sorosilutu Ashoona, and her cousin, the late Annie Pootoogook–from whom she learned her craft.

Ashoona works primarily in pen, ink, sometimes on a massive scale with drawings stretching to 8-feet-wide. Much of her art references Inuk mythology and popular culture, which she merges with imagery sourced from her surroundings and her imagination to produce otherworldly compositions that have magnetized international attention.

James Fuentes gallery nods to an episode of "Reservation Dogs," a TV series about the lives of Native American teenagers in rural Oklahoma, for its "Young Elder" show on view through October 14.

When two self-righteous influencers are invited to a community center for a Native American Reclamation and Decolonization Symposium, one of the speakers refers to himself as a "young elder"—an oxymoron that inspires a communal eye roll from the audience. The gallery's exhibition of four emerging and mid-career Indigenous artists borrows the scene's satire inviting the question: what does it mean to express the wisdom of millennia through a contemporary practice?

At Arsenal Contemporary Art, Montreal-based Anishinaabe artist Caroline Monnet receives her first solo exhibition in the U.S through October 21. “Worksite” centers around Monnet's ongoing exploration of modern home construction materials.

Through family house renovation projects experienced in childhood, Monnet developed a fascination for the transformative process of construction. This familiarity bred an affinity for building materials that only grew over time—the unfinished walls, fiberglass insulation, tar paper, and even the presence of spiders.

Monnet also designed the cover of the recently published book, “An Indigenous Present,” conceived, edited by and with an introduction from her mentor, Jeffrey Gibson. The book showcases more than 60 contemporary artists, photographers, musicians, writers and other creatives taking diverse approaches to Indigenous concepts, forms and mediums.

Institutionally, the New-York Historical Society presents “Kay WalkingStick/Hudson River School,” an exhibition featuring landscape paintings by the renowned, contemporary artist in conversation with classic works from New-York Historical’s collection of 19th-century Hudson River School paintings on view October 20, 2023–April 14, 2024.

“This exhibition features a Native artist, it is Native curated, and it's in New York's very first museum dedicated to American history,” Wendy Nālani E. Ikemoto (Native Hawaiian), senior curator of American art at New-York Historical Society, told Forbes.com. “I think that makes a statement. It's a positive statement about the way that American art history is moving.”