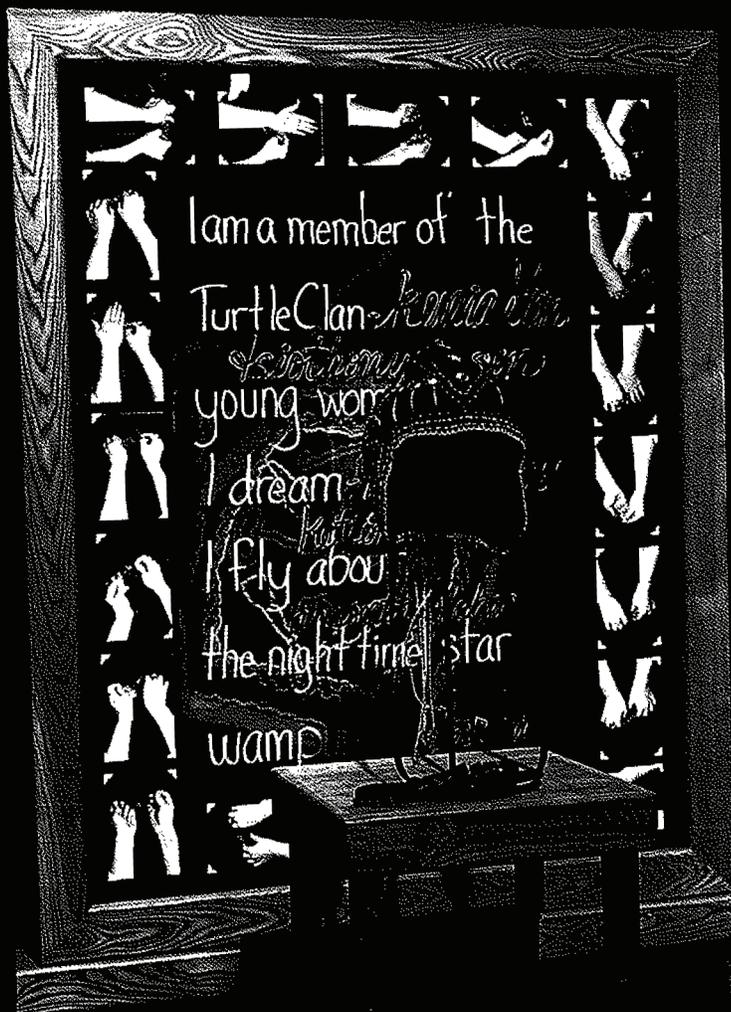


On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery



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Five Suggestions for Better Living

Skawennati Tricia Fragnito

Introduction

It is incredible that in the year 2000, despite numerous attempts to the contrary, First Nations people still exist as distinct nations and are stronger than ever. The strength of a people is a function of their adaptability. Technologies and customs brought to us by Europeans – such as writing, law and a thing called art – did not serve to assimilate us. Instead, we absorbed them and have learned to use them to our advantage. We have our own writers to tell our stories. We understand the law and go to court to regain title to our lands or to ensure the correct interpretation of our treaties. And we have our own artists, whose images and ideas reflect our contemporary world. In this paper I discuss how contemporary Aboriginal artists should be represented in the art gallery using my three most recent projects, “Blanket Statements,” “The People’s Plastic Princess,” and “CyberPowWow,” as examples of how I put my theory into practice. I offer five concrete suggestions to a specific segment of Native artists and curators: those who wish to exhibit their work as widely as possible, who expect to be paid – and even earn a living – for their work, and who want their work to be the best – that is, the most challenging, experimental, and beautiful – it can be. These goals may seem obvious, but they are not held by everyone. There are people who only want their work to be seen by their own community, who believe that getting paid or receiving grants makes them sell-outs, and for whom innovation is not necessarily a top priority.

I write as a Native artist and independent curator, representing only myself. In conceptualizing art and exhibitions, a job I enjoy immensely, I hope to effect change in Canadian cultural institutions such as museums, galleries, and funding agencies – institutions that will in turn help to improve the careers and, ultimately, the artwork of Aboriginal artists. Native people have had to fight for our place in the Canadian art scene, just as we have had to fight for everything else we have. The First People’s Secretariat at the Canada Council for the Arts and the Aboriginal Arts Programme

On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery

at The Banff Centre for the Arts (including the designated annual Native exhibition at the Walter Phillips Gallery – one of only six slots) are two examples of hard-won victories resulting from the tireless work of Indian artists and activists who came before me. Without those battles I know I would not even have the privilege of making my suggestions, and so I would like to acknowledge this fact and thank them for their efforts. I should also stipulate here that I support equity programmes that offer training and other opportunities to Native people and visible minorities. They are excellent structures on which we must build so that we can continue to become stronger, more self-sufficient artists whose work can be shown anywhere from the most Native-specific venue, such as Urban Shaman gallery in Winnipeg, to international extravaganzas such as "Documenta," in Kassel, Germany, and the Venice Biennale.

As co-founder of the artist collective *Nation to Nation* (www.nation2nation.org) established in 1994, I have gained some insight into the needs of Native contemporary artists, and have developed opinions about the future of our community. I believe the following five suggestions will help us to become better, more professional, and more confident artists in a stronger, more supportive and more open community.

1. Any art made by a Native person is Native art.
2. Exclusively Aboriginal group shows should be less frequent and more focused.
3. Opportunities for solo shows for Native artists should increase.
4. Native curators should include non-Native artists in their practices.
5. Non-Native curators should include Native artists in their practices.

Once and For All: What Is Native Art?

Over twenty years ago, Fritz Scholder said, "The American Indian artist, like everyone else, lives in 1979 ... and must cope with that fact in his work. An Indian artist must have the freedom to do anything he wants ... like every other artist" (Highwater 1980, 177). It is unfortunate that an artist has to make this argument at all. Scholder is almost pleading for a right that non-Native artists do not even question. Worse is the fact that many of us are still making the same statement today, over twenty years later. Native artists often feel limited by their ethnic designation, even while they are proud of it. But Native art does not have to depict Indians or ceremonies or mythologies in order to be authentic. As Jamake Highwater states,

Five Suggestions for Better Living

What is "Indian" about Indian painting is not the depiction of Indian scenes, but the mentality that underlies the whole process by which the work of art comes into existence. And that characteristic mentality is also capable of drastic, modernist change without any necessary loss of "Indianness." Culture is dynamic. Tradition is also dynamic, not static.

Highwater (1980, 177)

If I create an image – any image – I cannot separate it from the fact that my mother is Mohawk, or that my father is Italian, or that I am a woman. The conception of that image came from a mind that has been shaped by those, and many other, factors. Therefore, any image that I make is Native art, because I am Native. People's real experiences are far more exciting than the stories they are told they should tell. While it is interesting and important to illustrate our mythologies, it is so much more intriguing and insightful to tell our personal stories, the histories of how we survived, who we are now, and what we love or hate or fear or desire. For example, many of us have a non-Native parent, spouse or child. Why does so little of our work reflect this fact? Why, for instance, do adopted kids not make art about being adopted? This is work I want to see. There is such a wealth of emotion, politics, adventure, and information inherent in our lives that it would be difficult not to make some thought-provoking art. What is more, as Paul Chaat Smith writes,

Silence about our own complicated histories supports the colonizer's idea that the only real Indians are full-blooded, from a reservation, speak their language, and practice the religion of their ancestors. Even though this represents a small number of us as a whole, and fits few or none of us plying the trades of artist, or writer, or activist, we often consciously and unconsciously try to play this part drilled into us by the same Hollywood movies non-Indians get their ideas from.

Smith (1994)

I believe the main reason artists are not doing this kind of work is that they know there is a good chance they will lose their Native status if they do. I am not referring to government here; I am referring to a fear that our own artistic community will cast us out. We have seen again and again what Native art is supposed to look like or what it should be about. We have also heard statements such as this one by artist Jackson Beardy: "If you're an Indian and an artist, you're not necessarily an Indian artist" (Gray 1993, 143). With an authoritative declaration like that, who would not be afraid to deviate from the "aboriginally correct" norm? It is enough to make you want to drop

the "Native" from your artist bio. But that only shrinks our already tiny community, and certainly in our case, we need all the people we can get. There is strength in numbers. I propose that if you are Indian and an artist, you are automatically an Indian artist. If the work has integrity and honesty, it will win.

The Time for Exclusively Native Group Exhibitions Is Over.

Placing First Nations artists together in an exclusive group exhibition perpetuates an otherness that is ultimately counterproductive to our careers. This was not always the case. Group exhibitions such as "In the Shadow of the Sun" (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1989), "Indigena" (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992), "Land, Spirit, Power" (National Gallery of Canada, 1992), and "New Territories" (Montréal and Quebec City, 1992), were extremely important. They made First Nations contemporary art accessible to a wider public and created a forum for critical discussion. They proved that Native people create challenging, thought-provoking art. As Gerald McMaster writes in the introduction to the collection of essays that accompanied "In the Shadow of the Sun": "[The exhibition] provided the first-ever comprehensive view of both contemporary Indian and Inuit art history ... It inaugurated a new-style museum for contemporary Native expressions without any apologetics" (McMaster 1993, xi). However, these exhibitions featured dozens of artists, each of whom was represented by only one or perhaps two artworks. At that time such all-inclusiveness was necessary – both to demonstrate the breadth of Native contemporary art and to galvanize a community of Native contemporary artists – but now it makes more sense for First Nations group exhibitions to be smaller, either in number of artists, so that audiences can better appreciate individual practices, or perhaps in scope. In the past, a general survey of Native art was a sufficient and even ground-breaking excuse for an exhibition, but today, with the evolution of curatorial practice from (supposedly) objective conservatism to an admittedly subjective exploration, artists should expect to be invited to participate in exhibitions with provocative themes. "Nations in Urban Landscapes" (Oboro, 1996), a three-(Native-)person show featuring Eric Robertson, Faye Heavyshield, and Shelley Niro, is an excellent example of such curatorial evolution. Curator Marcia Crosby unabashedly "locate[d] First Nations in an urban landscape" recognizing "the importance and legitimacy of the hybrid histories that arose out of their displacement" (Crosby 1996). Crosby had a specific point to make and the resulting exhibition provided a context in which the art could be viewed in a more directed way, benefiting both artist and audience.

First Nations artists can also fit nicely into group exhibitions that have intriguing, not-necessarily-Native themes. The Dunlop Art Gallery's 1999 show, "Fluffy" (not to be confused with the popular "Fluffs and Feathers" exhibition produced in 1988 by the Woodlands Cultural Centre) went even further in this direction. The aim of

"Fluffy" was to question "cuteness" as a cultural signifier. Exhibition curator Anthony Kiendl invited Ryan Rice to be one of an international group of seventeen artists – , and the only Native participant – because of Rice's clan animal series in which the turtle, wolf, and bear (which represent the three major clans of Kahnawake) are depicted as cuddly cartoon characters. Says Kiendl: "Each artist in the show has a particular interest in cuteness for their own reasons. I was interested in what cuteness means to [Rice] as an Indian. Is 'The Native American' commodified and turned into little toys and sold back to people and objectified just to make Indians less intimidating and perhaps more controllable? Also, there has been a long history of equating Native Americans with animals and nature ... in contrast to the 'once proud warrior,' why is a fuzzy bear or cartoon turtle so funny and out of context?" (Kiendl 2000). Rice was able to add another dimension to "Fluffy" with his unique point of view.

As was the case when "In the Shadow of the Sun" opened, the time has again come to move forward unapologetically. If we are to evolve as artists, we must also be willing, comfortable, and able to show our work in larger contexts. If we continue to show exclusively in the safety of our own limited community, we do ourselves a disservice in several ways. First, the number of exhibitions to which we are invited will remain as low as it is now (or even decrease), because most galleries and artist-run centres in Canada mount no more than one "Native" show a year. Second, and more important, we limit our peer group. Instead of counting all artists as our peers, we have only ourselves to talk to and learn from. We risk becoming an insular community, dealing with issues that affect only Native people rather than the population as a whole. Limiting our subject matter weakens us as artists. Yet the converse is also true. Our Aboriginal cultural perspective informs and enriches any topic we explore.

More Solo Shows for Native Artists

Native artists need solo shows. A solo exhibition is great for your resumé, and for good reason. It means that you have developed your practice to the point where you have an artistic statement to make (and to put into a press release), and you have enough work to fill a gallery. It means that you have lived through the responsibility and stress that only a solo show can evince. Also, a solo show demonstrates that your work can stand on its own, creating its own context. And it is the artist who determines what that context is.

The Indian Art Centre in Ottawa is a good example of an institution that is creating career-building opportunities for First Nations artists. Its artist-in-residence programme includes a solo exhibition for the artist (selected by a jury), along with a commissioned curatorial essay by a Native writer and the purchase of an artwork.

In 2000 the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff used their Aboriginal slot to present "The Presence of Our Absence," an exhibition of works by Richard Ray Whitman curated by Paul Chaat Smith (www.banffcentre.ab.ca/wpg/whitman). These two institutions have not only addressed the need for more opportunities for solo shows, but also provided an excellent example for others to follow.

Include a Non-Native Artist in Your Next Show

If you are a Native curator, do not limit yourself to Native artists or topics. Expand your roster. It can only lead to more jobs. The exhibit "Blanket Statements" (www.banffcentre.ab.ca/wpg/past/blanket.htm), held in February 1999 at the Walter Phillips Gallery in collaboration with the Aboriginal Arts programme at The Banff Centre for the Arts, was my first curatorial project within an institution. I was aware that it could also be my only curatorial project at Banff and, if that were the case, I wanted it to be a good one. The idea for the show originated as a response to the November 1998 exhibition, "To Honor and Comfort: Native Quilting Traditions," at the National Museum of the American Indian in New York. The power of "To Honor and Comfort" was that it showed how quilting has been a community-strengthening activity among Native Americans since contact.

However, viewers of the exhibition would never know that there are Indians who use quilting as their medium of expression – that is to say, there were no art quilts in the show. I wanted to address that lack with "Blanket Statements." Since the exhibition was slated for the Aboriginal slot of the Walter Phillips program, my original plan was to invite only Native artists, but as I began to better understand both the role of a curator, and the responsibility and authority that accompany the title, I came to a realization: I did not want to be limited to Native content. I wanted the exhibition to be about art quilts, not about Native quilters. I wanted to show, in a gallery setting, how the tradition of quilting, which First Nations people have adopted from European culture, is being incorporated into contemporary artistic practice. As I did my research, it became clear that it was absolutely necessary to put Native and non-Native artists side by side because the different quilting traditions informed and complimented each other.

The resulting exhibition, "Blanket Statements," featured four diverse artists whose work is of the highest calibre: Jean Hewes's oversize quilts are whimsical fabric assemblages, hybrids between painting, drawing, and quilting; Clarissa Hudson works in the button-blanket robe tradition of the Northwest coast, incorporating imagery from dreams as well as from daily life in her untraditional creations; Barbara Todd uses the history and meaning of the quilt as a metaphor for protection, security, and sleep; Margaret Wood translates Native American material culture into quilts.

Five Suggestions for Better Living

The exhibition title, which referred to the artists' use of blankets to get their messages across, also had a private meaning for me: Don't make generalizations about Native curators.

It was more difficult to arrive at what should have been an obvious decision to invite non-Natives to participate in CyberPowWow 2K. CyberPowWow (www.nation2nation.org/cyber.htm) is an ongoing project that began in 1996, just as the World Wide Web was becoming popular. It began as a Web page, but has since blossomed into a "palace" – a graphical chat room in which people converse with one another in real time. The CyberPowWow palace comprises a virtual gallery and library furnished with art and texts by Native artists and writers. The idea was to use the Web to connect a community of artists spread across the continent. The ultimate, successful result of the project would be an artist-run centre in virtual space where Native artists could show their work twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, to a potentially huge international audience who could both ask questions and offer comments and criticism. In the two evolutions of CyberPowWow (CPW) so far, all participants were Native because we wanted to fight the prejudice that Native artists were technically illiterate. In fact, for the first CPW, we mostly were! Two of the three pieces commissioned for the virtual exhibition were not created using new technologies, but were *about* new technologies. By the time CPW 2 (1999) was mounted, we had gathered a group of Native artists who were familiar with new technologies. We built the palace collaboratively using programmes such as Photoshop and Iptscrae (a scripting language customized for the Palace software). With CPW 2, we reached a level of comfort not only with the medium but also, I think, with the scope of the project. We felt that we had carved out a self-determined space in the new territory of cyberspace. It finally became clear to co-curator Archer Pechawis and me that if we believed that our collective work was strong enough to be in the international arena, one of our aims should be to explicitly and proactively demarginalize ourselves. That meant inviting not just Native artists. CyberPowWow 2K, the newest evolution of the project, will include ten Web-friendly digital artists from Canada, the United States and Australia who have been asked to create work about place, real or imagined, where Native meets non-Native.

Include a Native Artist in Your Next Show

In order for our utopian future to materialize, we need help. Just as suffragists needed men to vote for their enfranchisement, we need non-Native curators in this country to make an effort to include First Nations artists in the exhibitions they develop, either by including us in group shows or, if their curatorial practice is centred around solo shows, by considering Native artists for solo shows.

On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery

And we need to help these curators. It seems that only the bravest non-Native curators include Indians in their shows. I think we scare them, and perhaps we may even do it a little on purpose. We make them think (or perhaps we actually believe) that they cannot understand our work if they themselves have no Native blood. This attitude keeps us on the fringes instead of at centre stage where we belong.

One good excuse for a curator to exclude First Nations artists might be that there are not many artists making the kind of work in which the curator is interested. I thought I would face this situation in developing "The People's Plastic Princess" (www.banffcentre.ab.ca/wpg/ppp/default.htm) – the first exhibition I curated that was not contextualized as explicitly Native in content.

"The People's Plastic Princess," shown in October 1999 at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, was a group exhibition that brought together painting, photography, sculpture, and digital work by twenty-one artists from Canada, the United States, and Europe to show how Barbie, the world's most popular eleven-and-a-half-inch fashion doll, can reflect society in imaginative, provocative and critical ways. For some time I had been noticing the enormous amount of "Barbie art" in existence; here was an opportunity to present it. However, in the first stages of my research it seemed that there was not an enormous amount of Barbie art being made by Indians. Rather than quietly accept that fact and not include any First Nations artists in the exhibition, I decided to commission two new works by Native artists who had an interest in Barbie. As I continued my research I found that there were indeed Native artists who had made Barbie art. The final roster of artists included twenty-one artists, five of whom were of Aboriginal ancestry and whose work was as technically proficient, as multi-levelled, and as humorous as all the others. And the show was richer for it.

Conclusion

If Native artwork is viewed in a broader context, there is a greater chance that non-Native people will get it – understand it, fund it, buy it, promote it. As Native people, we do not have enough power or money to support our artists. Also, our artists deserve the widest audience we can get. I want all kinds of people to see my work. That does not make me or my work any less Indian. I strongly believe that by curating shows that include both Native and non-Native artists, and by making art that is not expected of a Native artist, I am influencing our cultural institutions. I like to think that I am making a difference on many levels. That's why I do it.

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