



Susie Silook, *Seeking Her Forgiveness*, (fig. 65)

## **On Patronage, Artistic Evolution, and Aesthetic Resolution**

W. Jackson Rushing III

**I**n 1999 the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art in Indianapolis inaugurated, with the generous support of the Lilly Endowment, Inc., the Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art. Each biennial program, developed by the Museum in consultation with its board and its Native American Council, culminates in an exhibition that honors a distinguished senior artist and five contemporary fine artists whose achievements warrant meritorious recognition. Each of the five fellows, who are selected by an independent jury, receives a \$20,000 honorarium to facilitate his or her continued growth as a creative artist. The exhibition is documented with a scholarly catalog befitting the quality of the selected work, and the Museum acquires new work for its outstanding permanent collection of contemporary Native American art. Each fellowship cycle is unique, obviously, but the mission of the program is constant. As John Vanausdall, president and CEO of the Eiteljorg Museum, stated in 1999, "The heart of the program is the idea of fellowship itself: an alliance of scholars, curators, artists, teachers, collectors, and contributors who have come together to encourage and support Native American contemporary fine art and bring it the visibility it deserves." Any cross-section of artists has a natural and desirable level of competitive spirit, and yet, the community of contemporary Native American and Canadian First Nations artists is notable for its nurturing solidarity, borne of the difficult challenge of transcending the stereotypes and clichés wrongly associated with Indian art. Thus it is fitting that the Eiteljorg Fellowship program is, at its core, a collaboration that actively engages Native people—as artists, consultants, jurists, and writers. It is, as such, a post-colonial endeavor that is helping to create a new kind of museum space for Native fine artists (painters, sculptors, photographers, and artists who work in mixed media, including installations).



A pair of historic paintings clarifies and throws into deep relief what is so significant about the Eiteljorg Fellowship. Around 1938 the Navajo painter Gerald Nailor (TohYah) made an untitled work while a student at the Santa Fe Indian School that shows a shy Navajo family displaying a beautiful rug to a pair of Eastern tourists. The Eastern couple, who are inappropriately dressed for Indian country, are inspecting this example of “ethnic” art, trying to decide if it is the right souvenir of their encounter with “the Primitive.” If ever there was any doubt that a picture could speak a thousand words, this one dispels it. The tense, awkward social intercourse that impinged on the commoditization of culture in the reservation period that followed the “closing” of the West is nowhere more transparent. Ostensibly a “quiet” little picture, it generates, in fact, a voluminous if unspoken subtext about the creative process as a form of labor that generates a collectible product—that is, artists are culture workers who must earn a living like the rest of us.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Creek-Potawatomi painter Woodrow Crumbo’s *Land of Enchantment* (1946) is a social satire on the same theme: a reticent Navajo woman and her daughter show a rug to a family of effete Eastern tourists—caricatures, really, whose presence generates a palpable sense of cultural difference.<sup>2</sup> Absent yet present in both paintings is the money that might change hands.

There is no reason not to acknowledge that money is an inextricable part of the creation, circulation, reception, and institutionalization of art. It would be naïve not to include the exchange of capital in any sophisticated art-historical discourse, and contemporary Native art clearly deserves serious scholarly attention. Try to imagine the flowering of Renaissance art without the patronage of the Medici family or the history of twentieth-century art as we know it without such patrons or dealers as Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, Peggy Guggenheim, or Leo Castelli. The National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, has evolved in recent years out of the former Museum of the American Indian, which was established with the formidable collections assembled by the eccentric George Heye. Patronage, however it manifests itself—through a collector, commission, grant, award, or fellowship—is essential to the social context of art. The distinguished art historian Terence Grieder has identified the patron as part of a quartet of the “most important of the varied roles that make up the world of art”: artist, patron, critic, and audience.<sup>3</sup> “Patrons and collectors,” Grieder writes, “are the life-blood of the art world, providing the money that keeps the whole operation alive.”<sup>4</sup> The reason for this is absolutely clear, but needs to be explained, nonetheless. Artists require a staggering variety of materials, which are frequently very expensive, as well as working space and, oftentimes, studio assistants. It is by no means atypical for an artist to need to travel and do research for a particular project. And, like poets, composers, philosophers, and nuclear physicists, artists require lots of unencumbered time in which to doodle, cogitate, reflect, and play. The creative process operates according to its own unpredictable schedule and must be understood both as uninhibited play and as a form of intensely focused “research.”

Juried prizes, of course, have been given out in Native American art shows around the country since the 1920s, although until very recently, the criteria for quality and excellence was usually established by non-Indians. The Philbrook Art Center (now Museum) staged annual juried exhibitions of contemporary Native art from 1946 to 1979, with purchase prizes. Since 1983 the Heard Museum in Phoenix has staged seven *Native American Fine Art Invitational* exhibitions, which have played a prominent role in building a sophisticated audience for contemporary Indian art. But since patronage is the “life-blood of the art world,” the still-young Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art has set the bar very high. By any measure, a \$20,000 honorarium represents a powerful investment in the continued development of an artist. In a time when fellowships and grants for artists are dwindling, the Eiteljorg Fellowship is competitive with virtually all awards for “mainstream” artists, and certainly it is now the gold standard in Native American art. I am emphasizing the financial aspect of the fellowships here because patronage is an essential aspect of the social history of art, and its nurturing stimulation has until recently been the missing ingredient in the evolution of contemporary Native American art.

The first Eiteljorg Fellowship exhibition also set remarkably high standards. Along with the late George Morrison (Chippewa, 1919–2000), who was at that time the “grand old man of Modernist Indian abstraction,”<sup>5</sup> the inaugural exhibition in 1999 featured the artists Lorenzo Clayton (Navajo), Truman Lowe (Ho-Chunk), Marianne Nicolson (Kwakwaka’wakw), Rick Rivet (Métis/Dene), and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Flathead). I had the privilege of viewing that exhibition, and I can testify that the assembled works signaled the energy, diversity, and integrity of and continued potential for Indian fine arts.<sup>6</sup> In the present fellowship cycle it has been my pleasure to be a “silent witness” to the selection process, as three distinguished Native American artists, including one of the inaugural fellows, faced the formidable task of choosing only five artists from the many qualified nominees. The health and maturity of the Native American and First Nations fine arts communities are reflected in the collective achievements of the three jurors themselves. Sara Bates is a Cherokee inter-media artist who works with natural materials. Formerly the director of exhibitions and programs at American Indian Contemporary Arts in San Francisco, she has curated more than thirty exhibitions. Works from her “Honoring” series have been exhibited widely in the United States and in solo shows in France and Italy, and in New Zealand at the World Celebration of Indigenous Art and Culture (1993).<sup>7</sup> Colleen Cutschall (Lakota) is professor and coordinator of visual art at Brandon University in Brandon, Manitoba. Her paintings and installations—including *Voice in the Blood* (1990), *Sister Wolf and Her Moon* (1993), and *House Made of Stars* (1996)—have been seen in numerous solo exhibitions. She is also past president of the Native American Art Studies Association.<sup>8</sup> Truman Lowe, who was represented in the first fellowship exhibition by provocative works on paper and his signature open-work wood sculptures, is professor of art at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and curator of contemporary art at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution. He



was a fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts (1994–95) and has had nine solo exhibitions, including *Haga* at the Eiteljorg Museum (1994) and *Neo-Xahnee* at the prestigious John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin (1999).<sup>9</sup>

The five Eiteljorg Fellows for 2001 are no less accomplished, and together their art makes for a pleasing and instructive exhibition with reassuring coherence, despite the diversity of their approaches and subjects. Each produces work that speaks directly to our moment in time. Although all respond in varying degrees to traditional and historic indigenous American art and culture(s), their objects and images would never be confused with so-called “ethnographic art.” In fact, the history of modern and contemporary art—both “mainstream” and Native American—is inscribed knowingly in their art. The School of Paris, Abstract Expressionism, Pop art, Minimalism, Conceptual art, post-modernism, and the identity politics of feminist art are reflected, even if subtly, in this exhibition. It is, after all, an exhibition of art on the cusp of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Since our senior artist and fellows are treated at length in the chapters that follow, I will only introduce them briefly here.

Allan Houser, the senior artist who is honored (posthumously) here, was, like George Morrison, a draftsman, painter, sculptor, and printmaker. His work, which managed to fuse emotional intensity, classical calm, cultural history, and modernist aesthetics, was both a commercial and critical success in his lifetime. Among his many admirable characteristics, Houser’s ability to “keep it real,” when selling out and pandering to a lowbrow audience would have been easy, was notable. That his paintings, and especially his monumental sculpture, were cherished by the Native and non-Native audiences alike is proof positive of its transcendental quality.

Rick Bartow is known for gestural, painterly paintings and prints that examine the transformative and redemptive aspects of art. His is an intensely emotive art that explores the expressionist tradition of figuration, incorporating masklike images and totemic forms. He also carves masks and traditional objects that, like his two-dimensional works, refer back to oral history and to the power of animals and nature. Recently Bartow has added elements of a Japanese syllabary and fragments of German poetry to his graphic art. His almost violent approach to the picture surface has continued to evolve, as befits an artist who has likened the “marks and erasures” of his art to “roots underground or bones beneath flesh.”

Joe Feddersen is a painter/photographer/printmaker who has used the computer, collage technique, and a whole host of experimental printing techniques in his art. The resulting images are delicate, thoughtful, and poetic reminders of changing weather, the seasons, and Native textiles and baskets. A quietly insistent geometry, derived from indigenous designs but resonating easily with Modernism, provides the structure of Feddersen’s prints, which are created in series. His desire to understand the forms, designs, and structure of baskets encouraged him to make his own, some of which are featured in the 2001 Eiteljorg Fellowship exhibition. Deeply inspired by the stories and



Rick Bartow, *Crow Hop* (fig. 19)



knowledge of his elders and by rock art created by the ancient ones, Feddersen gives artistic life to the idea that the past is always operant in the present.

Teresa Marshall is one clever sculptor. She works with found objects and natural materials, including hides that she prepares herself in the traditional, labor-intensive manner. This is not surprising, since one of her main themes has been a celebration of Native women's work. Biting satire, linguistic games, riffing on popular culture, and elegiac visual songs for extinct tribes are just some of the characteristics of Marshall's sculptures and installations, which often rely on disjunctures in predictable scale. *Elitekey* (1992), for example, which she exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada, consists of three over-life-size forms cast in concrete that told a powerful story about presence/absence in Canadian and First Nations history. Since then Marshall's art has grown ever more sophisticated and refined as she has investigated different ways of manipulating forms and has invented new processes, including a tobacco variant on papier-mâché.

Shelley Niro established her reputation initially with ironic photographs with a sharp political edge. The visual intertextuality of her photos, such as *The Rebel* (1987), made them consonant with the poststructural notion that every image refers to another. But if these carefully staged photographs, which are sometimes hand-colored, are humorous, they are also "dangerous" in pointing out the overlooked or uncovering the partially hidden. Niro has also made installations involving paintings and/or photographs, which are sometimes decorated with references to Iroquois beadwork. Her films, including *It Starts with a Whisper* (1992, codirected with Anna Gronau) and *Honey Moccasin* (1998), are remarkably polished; I count them among the most poignant First Nations works of art produced at the end of twentieth century.

Susie Silook is a sculptor (and writer) who uses the traditional artistic materials of the Arctic, such as walrus ivory, whale bone and baleen, and seal whiskers. Inspired by the cosmology, oral history, environment, and subsistence patterns of the North, Silook has taken a "male" tradition—ivory carving—and imbued it with a female sensibility. The tenuous balance, graceful arcs, and decorative linearity of her stylized figures beg for the phrase "refined elegance." She manages to imply, with her compositions and her use of open-work form, a sensuous fragility and vulnerability. And yet, a strong, even mythic female presence pervades her sculptures. Silook's figures seem to fly, float, and swim through an unseen but palpable space that they generate with their own quiet dynamism. For a Euro-American audience, some of her sculptures will have a hieratic quality associated with religious art, and even viewers unfamiliar with the conventions of Arctic art will see at once Silook's profound mastery of her materials and techniques.

Collectively, the Eiteljorg Fellows for 2001 have taken note of Native media, designs, forms, and stories and the painful postcontact history of Indian-White relations. But it is a tricky business, I fear, to track and trace what is “authentic” or “aboriginal” about contemporary art made by Native American or First Nations artists, including the five highly talented artists exhibited here. If this is all we look for or recognize, their humanity is diminished and the resonant hum of their art is hushed. Sometimes aesthetic politics are front and center in these works of art, but not always by any means. If any one thing is constant in the works gathered in this second Eiteljorg Fellowship exhibition, it is a sense of aesthetic resolution, which I associate with artistic maturity and integrity.

## Notes

1. See W. Jackson Rushing, “Modern By Tradition,” in Bruce Bernstein and W. Jackson Rushing, *Modern By Tradition: American Indian Painting in the Studio Style* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1995), p. 54 and pl. 44.
2. Crumbo’s *Land of Enchantment* is reproduced in Edwin L. Wade, ed., *The Arts of the North American Indian* (New York: Hudson Hills Press in Association with Philbrook Art Center, 1986), pl. 202.
3. Terence Grieder, *Artist and Audience* (New York: Brown and Benchmark, 1996), 18.
4. *Ibid.*, 26.
5. W. Jackson Rushing, “Contested Ground,” *New Art Examiner* 19 (November 1991), 26–27.
6. See Bruce Bernstein et al., *Contemporary Masters: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art*, vol. 1 (Indianapolis: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 1999).
7. See Sara Bates, “Honoring,” in W. Jackson Rushing, ed., *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1999), 196–204; and Jennifer Complo, “Sara Bates,” in *St. James Guide to Native North American Artists* (New York: St. James Press, 1998), 47–50.
8. See Colleen Cutschall, “The Seen and the Unseen Form the Narrative,” in Janet Catherine Berlo, ed., *Plains Indian Drawings 1865–1935: Pages from a Visual History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 64–65; Colleen Cutschall, “Garden of the Evening Star,” in Rushing, *Native American Art*, 189–95; and Vesta Giles, “Colleen Cutschall,” in *St. James Guide to Native North American Artists*, 135–37.
9. See Jennifer Complo, “Truman Lowe,” in *St. James Guide to Native North American Artists*, 338–40; Diana Nemiroff interview with Truman Lowe in Diana Nemiroff, Robert Houle, and Charlotte Townsend Gault, *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 182–89; Leslie Schwartz Burgevin and Kay WalkingStick, *Haga*, exh. cat. (Indianapolis: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 1994); and Hayward Allen, *Truman Lowe: Streams*, exh. cat. (La Crosse: University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, 1991).