A great deal of dialogue goes into the development of every new "chapter" of the Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art. In 2006, the selectors studied more than 700 images of art by seventy-one artists over two days. Their charge was to designate five Native American artists as Eiteljorg Fellows for the 2007 installment of this prestigious biennial program. The three selectors were Hamza Walker, associate curator, the Renaissance Society, University of Chicago; Lee-Ann Martin (Mohawk), curator of contemporary Canadian Aboriginal art, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Quebec; and C. Maxx Stevens (Seminole/Muscogee Nations of the Oklahoma Region), Foundations assistant professor, University of Colorado at Boulder. Walker has curated many contemporary exhibitions and has written or contributed essays to numerous exhibition catalogues. Martin is well-known in the world of Native contemporary art and equally accomplished as a curator and author. Stevens formerly taught at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe and received an Eiteljorg fellowship award in 2005.

After the selection process was completed, Stevens reflected on the experience. She said that "times are changing and materials are changing, and it’s all technology. But you also have to think that traditional Native art also has importance, . . . even in contemporary art, because they inform each other, they work with each other." She smiled and concluded that "the next generations are really going to be kicking it. It’s going to be amazing!” Martin observed that she loved to “see something that is innovative, that is different, that conceptually really charges my imagination.” And Walker summed up the experience by stating that “a lot of the work we did select today is much more sophisticated with what it has to say . . . about issues pertinent to the Native American community, that rise above those kinds of generic markers of identity.”

With input from a broad community of scholars, artists, and the selectors, the museum designated James Luna (Luiseno) as this year’s distinguished artist. The selectors’ choices for the five fellows are Gerald Clarke (Cahuilla); Dana Claxton (Lakota); Sonja Kelliher-Combs (Inupiaq/Athabascan); Larry Tee Harbor Jackson McNeil (Tlingit/Nigga’ai); and Will Wilson (Dine’).

As we did for the previous four Fellowship programs, we have again produced a catalogue with essays by leading scholars, critics, and artists. Sadly, our dear friend and 2005 fellow Harry Fonseca passed away last year; in his memory, this year’s catalogue is introduced with a poignant personal dedication and appreciation by Margaret Archuleta (Tewa/Hispanic). Harry observed in late 2005 that “Mainstream’ is actually a trickle when compared to all the art that is being produced around the world.” His years of wide-ranging experience and enlightened conversation about the world of art also led him to conclude, “I can move beyond the narrow frame of mind that feeds the mainstream and know that art is alive and moving all the time. We can look at art and the world of art with a wider and more embracing vision.” We can all do this with greater ease today because of the grace and talent of this fine human being, Harry Fonseca, who created
his own significant stream of art.

Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie (Seminole/Muskogee/Dine), as you can readily tell from her essay, is deeply involved in the vibrant dialogue about the larger world of “Aboriginal/Indigenous visual sovereignty,” a world that provides a stimulating lens through which to consider the art in this year’s Fellowship program. Examining the issue of the individual’s responsibility to community, she asserts that “we must instill in the young the idea that the artists, the dreamers have a responsibility for creating visual sovereignty: images that remind, art that incorporates Aboriginal/Indigenous technology, shared visions of an Aboriginal/Indigenous past, present, and future.” It is not the purpose of her essay to focus on all the 2007 fellows, but she discusses how some of them are engaged in a dialogue about how Native artists can (and do) relate to the broader world, and the many reasons for making art.

The lives and work of the 2007 fellows and the distinguished artist are presented and explored in essays that provide illuminating context to their work. Lee-Ann Martin (Mohawk) wrote about the work of James Luna, who “moves comfortably between installation and performance art, often combining both forms.” Throughout his career, this artist has been all about dialogue. His in-your-face performance works have questioned strongly held stereotypes about Native Americans. As Martin noted, “Luna’s installations and performances are potent challenges to western mythic traditions of Indigenous authenticity and history.”

Joanna Bigfeather (Western Cherokee and Mescalero Apache) uses the words and works of Gerald Clarke to demonstrate how this Cahuilla artist can be so contemporary in his work, yet remain traditional and expressive of his own (and other) Native peoples. Clarke creates sculptures, and installations, often using modern or found materials. She concludes her essay with the observation that “Clarke has not striven to create work for the art market. This releases him from a constraint that many artists have put on themselves. His work comes from a place of recognition, a place of home, a place of the Cahuilla.”

Michelle La Flamme (African-Canadian, Métis, and Creek) shows how Dana Claxton’s “career spans different mediums, but all her art is rooted in her worldview as a Lakota woman.” Focusing on a recent photo series by this artist, La Flamme declares that Claxton’s “creative output stimulates a much-needed dialogue on the power of the image, the role of the gaze, the importance of history, and the possibilities for articulating Aboriginal subjectivity.”

Sonja Kelliher-Combs has explored her own identity and Inupiaq/Athabascan heritage in her art, often utilizing symbols to express what she calls “secrets,” which she says “can be cultural secrets, family or personal secrets. [They are] the things you carry along with you.” In an essay on this artist and her mixed-media paintings and sculptures, Sandy Gillespie tells us that her “work never loses itself to content. The forms are visceral, intriguing, sometimes unnerving, and always beautiful. Meaning resides in the form of the work, and she never appropriates that meaning to serve a political end.”

Mique’I Icesis Askren (Tsimshian Nation, Metlakatla, Alaska) informs us
that there is “an intrinsic quality” to 
Larry McNeil’s work that “is his way of 
sharing his family history so that it res-
onates with viewers and contributes 
significantly wider statements about the 
lived experience and perseverance of 
Native people.” Especially in McNeil’s 
*Fly by Night Mythology* series, you can see 
how “he uses irony and satire to poke 
fun at some of [the] absurdities” of inter-
action between different cultures. By 
means of words as well as images in his 
prints, McNeil taunts and teases and 
questions ideas and beliefs to force peo-
ple to think critically about “what 
informs American identity, as well as our 
own from the Northwest Coast . . . this 
means lots of things are fair game for me 
to look at and maybe deride a bit, which 
is the fun part.”

Finally, Jennifer Vigil (Diné/Latina) 
presents the work of Will Wilson, noting 
that he “uses photography as a way of 
reclaiming the gaze, being both in front 
of the camera as subject and behind it as 
the composer of images that deconstruct 
colonial paradigms. Here he comments 
on the role of the camera in Native 
communities. Consequently, Wilson’s 
work continues to challenge colonial 
constructs and romantic images of 
Native people while acknowledging 

denied histories and uncomfortable 
realities.”

Yes, this is the fifth time in ten years 
that we have produced and presented the 
*Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American 
Fine Art*. The program’s curator, Jennifer 
Compolo McNutt, notes in her Afterword 
that this is a good time, in our dialogue 
with our artists and our audience, to 
assess what the program has accom-
plished, but also to use the voices of 
artists and authors and critics to help 
determine what the future of the pro-
gram will be.

An Eiteljorg Fellow in 1999, Jaune 
Quick-to-See Smith (Flathead) is one of 
those deep thinkers about art and cul-
ture. She recently wrote:

Contemporary Native painters, sculptors, per-
formance/installation artists, photographers, and 
videographers are some of today’s most original, 
powerful, and groundbreaking artists in the 
whole of the United States as well as the Native 
community. They are the segue from the tradi-
tional world to the cyber world. They are the past 
and the present. They are the soothsayers, the 
seers, the tricksters who critique, poke fun, and 
provide dialogue with the global world.

However, she casts doubt on how wide-
spread the general recognition of her 
own evaluation has become, adding that 
“our work stays hidden and remains in 
silence, unempowered and anonymous.”

It would be unwise for us to be com-
placent about the Eiteljorg Fellowship. 
So far we have created a remarkable 
institutional collection of great art, have 
produced five exhibitions, five cata-
logues, and been a part of the larger dia-
logue. The field has grown in ten years, 
but certainly not just because of the 
Eiteljorg. The Smithsonian Institution’s 
National Museum of the American 
Indian has brought the work of many 
Native artists, including numerous 
Eiteljorg fellows, to key exhibitions in 
New York and Washington, D.C., and in 
Venice, Italy. The Heard Museum in 
Phoenix continues to be a significant 
contributor to recognition of Native art 
and artists and there are other institu-
tions as well. There is also a swirling, 
energetic world of artists, authors, cura-
tors, collectors, and others working 
through both formal and casual organi-
zations and gatherings to spread the word.

But Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is right in lamenting the fact that "there has never been a major national touring group exhibition of contemporary Native painting and drawing with a catalogue such as Latinos and African Americans have had in recent decades." And she is accurate in observing the absence of other major private and public collections of this art. Two years ago, art critic Amei Wallach commented that "I think there is a real need for what the Eiteljorg is doing now. There is a real need for the encouragement of contemporary artists who are out there on a limb and trying to do really interesting things." As we consider the future of Fellowship, we will consider its form and scope and the manner in which it can be taken well beyond Indianapolis, Indiana.


5. Ibid.