

Introduction

JAMES H. NOTTAGE
*Vice President and Chief
Curatorial Officer
Eiteljorg Museum of
American Indians and
Western Art*

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.”¹

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

As we did for the previous four Fellowship programs, we have again produced a catalogue with essays by leading scholars, critics, and artists.² 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.”³ 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/Diné), 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 demon-

strate 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/Athabaskan 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’l 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 resonates 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 interaction 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 people 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 Complo 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 accomplished, but also to use the voices of

artists and authors and critics to help determine what the future of the program will be.

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

Contemporary Native painters, sculptors, performance/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 traditional 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 widespread the general recognition of her own evaluation has become, adding that “our work stays hidden and remains in silence, unempowered and anonymous.”⁴

It would be unwise for us to be complacent about the Eiteljorg Fellowship. So far we have created a remarkable institutional collection of great art, have produced five exhibitions, five catalogues, and been a part of the larger dialogue. 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 institutions as well. There is also a swirling, energetic world of artists, authors, curators, 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.”⁵ 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.”⁶ 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. ■

1. Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Fellowship Selection, 2007, filmed on November 11, 2006 by WFYI Public Television. Eiteljorg Museum exhibition files.
2. The four earlier Fellowship catalogues are *Contemporary Masters: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art* (Indianapolis: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 1999); *After the Storm: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art*, 2001, ed. W. Jackson Rushing (Indianapolis and Seattle: The Eiteljorg Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2001); *Path Breakers: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art*, 2003, introduction by Lucy R. Lippard (Indianapolis and Seattle: The Eiteljorg Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2003); and *Into the Fray: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art*, edited by James H. Nottage (Indianapolis and Seattle: The Eiteljorg Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2005).
3. *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2006), 154–155.
4. *Ibid.*, 173–174.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Fellowship Selection, 2007.