

## “What’s next?”

JENNIFER COMPLO McNUTT

It was reason to pause when the Eiteljorg Museum, after twelve years, decided to change the “brand” of its Fellowship for Native American Fine Art and the way it is identified and presented. Why alter a program that has successfully awarded and honored forty artists and developed one of the most respected collections of Native American contemporary art in the world? The branding team presented ideas about the look of marketing materials and a strategy to attract more interest from the Indianapolis contemporary art community, and decided on a modified title for the program: Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship. The new title emphasizes the idea of contemporary art.

Some may say the Eiteljorg is begging the question: Native American contemporary art is contemporary art. While the importance of a phrase cannot be compared with the importance of a culture, it can illustrate how an incorrect translation or misinterpretation can create confusion and frustration. The meaning of the phrase “begging the question” is widely misinterpreted. Most people think it means

“to raise the question.” It does not.

“Begging the question” is a term that comes from logic, used to indicate that someone has come to a conclusion based on a premise that lacks support or evidence. The term is defined in multiple ways, such as assuming the original conclusion, circular reasoning, a redundant argument, or, more informally, “What does that have to do with anything?” One of the problems with the term is that it may have been mistranslated from Greek to Latin.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly to the misinterpretation of “begging the question,” the contemporary art world has misinterpreted or mistranslated Native art, especially contemporary Native art. There is nervousness about “Indian” art in the contemporary art world, which has long believed that Native art is blankets and pots. They have not adopted a way of thinking that acknowledges, accepts, and honors our first “American” artists. Many Native contemporary artists want to be seen as Native, within the context of contemporary art. Most non-Native individuals do not understand that concept. They cannot translate their

From top:

Alan Michelson, *No York* (detail), 1997. Acrylic on linen map. Image courtesy of the artist.

Bonnie Devine, *Canoe* (detail), 2003. Mixed media and graphite on paper, thread, twine, beads.

Skawennati, *Time Traveller™: Watching the News behind the Barricades* (detail, production still), 2010. Inkjet on poly banner. Image courtesy of the artist.

Duane Slick, *A Tower of Song* (detail), 2010. Acrylic on linen.

Anna Tsouhlarakis, *Legends I* (detail), 2005. Inkjet print. Image courtesy of the artist.



Corky Clairmont (Salish/Kootenai), *10,000 Years Indigenous Indian People, 200 Years Lewis and Clark # 1*, 2001. Monoprint. Collection of the Eiteljorg Museum.

image of “Indian” into a contemporary context. Yet contemporary Native artists are creating some of the richest and most alarming art in the world. Contemporary Native artists have long promoted the idea that their work can hold its own on the walls of any art museum or gallery. Native contemporary artists sometimes choose to place their art in a historical context and/or setting. However, understanding the artist’s intention and making a place for Native art in the contemporary art community is a responsibility the art world must embrace. Amei Wallach explained the difficulty Indigenous artists have faced:

I have come to believe that Native American artists are caught in a conundrum that differs significantly from the experience of other groups marginalized by the dominant artistic canon. . . . the other marginalized groups are immigrants, and when they look to their ancestral past, it is of another place, a different landscape. No one else has experienced

the long-term systematic dismembering of culture and history that fragmented the American Indian identity, if only because African-Americans were brutally torn from one history and abruptly thrust into another. As for identity, fragmentation is the modern condition and the underlying assumption of contemporary art. But only American Indians are defined by the mathematically precise percentage of Indian blood in their veins, in the way that Hitler defined Jews.<sup>2</sup>

In the 2003 Fellowship exhibition, Corky Clairmont (Salish/Kootenai) showed a series of prints created in response to the Lewis and Clark bicentennial “celebration.” The series was titled *10,000 Years Indigenous People, 200 Years Lewis and Clark*, 2001. The first in the series is a monoprint of moccasin prints and the impression of work-boot tracks. Clairmont’s meaning is that the footprint left by the moccasin had less impact on the earth than the tread of the boot. The rest of the series is made of collages with photographs documenting the Lewis and Clark trail as it is today. The implications within this work are primarily environmental: the misuse of land, water rights, invasion of territory, and sound. The highway for semi-trailer trucks transporting oil cuts the Confederated Salish and Kootenai reservation in half, disturbing the prayers and thoughts of those who live there. It is reason to pause and think.

When I am asked, “What is the difference between Native contemporary art and contemporary art in general?” my reply is always, “About 10,000



Jeffery Gibson (Mississippi Band of Choctaw/Cherokee), *Second Nature*, 2006. Oil paint, urethane foam, and pigmented silicone on wood. Collection of the Eiteljorg Museum.

years.” Knowing the long history of your ancestry and how your ancestors adapted over time, coupled with traditions and contemporary experiences, puts power into the artwork.

Over time, the art world has started to crack. It is hard to hold back the force and determination of Native art and artists. Native artists are getting more recognition and being included in more mainstream art galleries.

Artists such as Marie Watt (Seneca) and Jeffrey Gibson (Mississippi Band of Choctaw/Cherokee) are relatively young and have been able to sustain themselves with their art and establish their careers quite early. Artists with well-established reputations and bodies of work are finally being recognized: Both John Hoover (Aleut) and Kay WalkingStick (Cherokee) recently received honorary Ph.Ds.

Consider the work of 2011 Invited Fellowship artist Alan Michelson (Mohawk). In 2009, he was given the prestigious Citation Award, a commission by the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) to create *Third Bank of the River*, 2009, an art-glass window panorama of the local border shoreline between Canada and the United States. *Third Bank of the River* hangs in the U.S. Port of Entry at Massena, New York. The GSA’s press release describes the goals of the program:

The agency’s *Art in Architecture* program today continues the government’s commitment to art by commissioning public artworks from some of the most important contemporary American artists for federal



buildings. In doing so, GSA creates buildings that express the vision, leadership, and commitment of the government in serving the public and the communities in which these works are located, as well as expressing the values of our nation.<sup>3</sup>

Kay WalkingStick (Cherokee), *Le Alpi e Le Gambe*, 1999. Oil and gold leaf on wood. Collection of the Eiteljorg Museum.

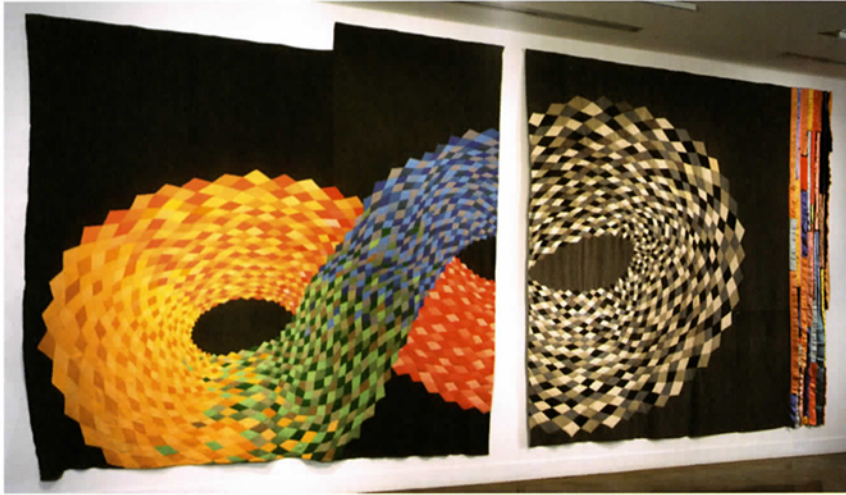
In the press release, Michelson is called “[One] of the most important contemporary American artists.”<sup>4</sup> The phrase is not meant to diminish Michelson’s connections to his culture, but to acknowledge his place in the canon of American and contemporary art.

Michelson is emphatic in his resolve to present a forgotten past or a buried history. Technically perfect, each element of his work is elegant and haunting. Michelson added music to the video installation *Shattemac*. The composition by Laura Ortman (White Mountain Apache) lingers as the image moves, brilliant as it comes into the light and foreboding as it floats into darkness.

It retraces part of Henry Hudson’s 1609 voyage in which his crew had a bloody encounter with the local natives. The searchlight projection references the Hudson River



John Hoover (Aleut), *Puffin Rattle* (male), 1998. Copper alloy (bronze). Collection of the Eiteljorg Museum.



Marie K. Watt (Seneca), *Braid*, 2005.  
Reclaimed wool blankets, satin binding.  
Collection of the Eiteljorg Museum

Night Line boats, which shone spotlights onto shoreline monuments for touring passengers. Embedded also are allusions to Hudson River School painting. The work temporally encapsulates, in its passage from wooden shoreline to modern marina—via industrial quarry, luxury housing, village, and power plant—problematic and enduring aspects of local and national history.<sup>5</sup>

The giant, dark, and quiet dinosaur glides across the water, predicting the fate of the environment and loathing the Hudson's bloody history. Its grace lures the viewer but, in reality, it is a rusty, graffiti-covered barge, and Michelson has made it beautiful.

This year, the Eiteljorg Contemporary Art Fellowship is both quiet and oppressively loud. Bonnie Devine (Ojibwa) is a perfect example. Her work is intricate and attractive with imminent power. There is a feeling that something is about to happen. Visiting Devine in Toronto was a parallel experience to developing an understanding of her work. It began quietly enough and ended with a roar.

Entering the studio was pleasant and uneventful. Yet, as each story unfolded, the depth of her life experiences and connections were revealed.

One of the most ominous pieces, *Manitoba*, appeared harmless. At first glance, it resembled someone's dry cleaning. Devine had only one body bag on display in her studio, but her installation features sixty-two. During the H1N1 flu pandemic in September, 2009, First Nations (Canadian Indigenous people) tribal leaders of Manitoba petitioned the government for additional medical help. When the Canadian government responded, they did so by including sixty-two body bags, one for each reserve in Manitoba, along with the shipment of vaccinations. Upon hearing that story, I gasped. Telling the story is difficult. Most people's responses are similar. That kind of callousness is hard to fathom.

Devine has many aspects. She is an artist, a scientist, an art professor, a curator, a member of a community, a storyteller, a detective, and someone who honors traditions and the Earth. Reading the text on her installation, *Canoe*, and *Letter to Grandfather*, *Letter to Leonard*, *Letter to Sandy*, and *Letter to William* gives a glimpse into her thoughts. She is connecting all the disparate dots. At first, the idea of reading all the tiny text is overwhelming; it must have taken hours to write, and Devine is carrying a weight for her culture. The patience it must have taken is a reflection of her resolve to document injustice, traditional stories,

and the view of a First Nations person. Taking the time to read the endless stream of words is the secret to understanding the passion, compassion, and determination of Devine's thinking and her artwork.

If Bonnie Devine's work creates consternation and concern, don't worry. Skawennati (Mohawk) has created an Indian superhero to set it right. His name is Ratorats Dearhouse, which means "Hunter." He is Mohawk, handsome, and fit. He has a jet pack, lives in the future and can travel to the past and is, in his words, "a cold-blooded killer."

Hunter lives in the *TimeTraveller*<sup>TM</sup> series within Second Life, a virtual world that exists only online. After creating an avatar, individuals can communicate with each other on the "grid," where they can shop and accomplish just about anything imaginable. If you want to look like a fairy princess and have a prince beau, you can! What is astonishing about Second Life is that it has more than 20 million users. For some, it is a romantic interlude, a beautiful dress, a mysterious encounter. But for Skawennati, it is a Mohawk superhero in the future traveling through time.

The *TimeTraveller*<sup>TM</sup> website describes the experience:

Travelling through time these days is easy thanks to *TimeTraveller*<sup>TM</sup>. Observe famous historical events and interact with the people who made them happen! Ideal for students, architects, artists, and anyone else who wants to experience history as it really was!<sup>6</sup>

Skawennati has created a world in which people can get the "real story" by



Alan Michelson, *Shattemuc* (still), 2009. HD video. Image courtesy of the artist.

traveling back in time. When time-traveling, Hunter can exist in two modes: Fly-on-the-Wall, observing the events as they unfold, or Intelligent Agent, in which the characters in the historical event interact with the avatar.<sup>7</sup> Episode 01 sets the stage for Hunter to go back in time to investigate an "Indian massacre." It was a massacre in which the Indians did the killing.

Skawennati is clever, like her character Hunter. The opening scene of Episode 02 is set in 1862. Four Indians stand together in the wilderness. At

Bonnie Devine, *Manitoba*, 2010. Sixty-two Pandemic body bags, digitally printed labels.





Skawennati, *Time Traveller™: Dakotas Raise Weapons* (production still), 2010. Inkjet on poly banner. Image courtesy of the artist.

first, Hunter thinks it is a war party. As he switches from Fly-on-the-Wall Mode to Intelligent Agent Mode, Hunter joins them and experiences their hunger. They are not a war party. They are hunting for food. They have been awaiting a payment to buy food. The four discuss an Indian agent and the payment promised since earlier in the year. Hunter replies, “The old check is in the mail routine, eh?” The

Duane Slick performing in Telluride. Courtesy of the *Telluride Daily Planet*.



response from the group is confusion. However, upon learning that the Indian agent’s response to the group’s concern about how hungry the community was, “Let them eat grass,” Hunter says, “What an asshole.” Everyone nods in agreement. Some things are universal. Skawennati has created a “new world,” a place to go to get to the bottom of the misinterpretation, misuse, abuse, and mistranslation of Indigenous art and people.

In 1993, Jan Cicero, an art gallery owner with one gallery in Chicago, Illinois, and one in Telluride, Colorado, was a strong advocate for contemporary Native art when the rest of the world was not. Cicero exhibited and sold the work of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Salish), Joe Feddersen (Colville Confederated Tribe), Truman Lowe (Ho-Chunk), and Emmi Whitehorse (Navajo), among others. Telluride, a well-known tourist destination, hosts many festivals and events, and Cicero organized a Native Expressions week. Some of the participating artists were Feddersen, Lowe, Simon Ortiz (Acoma Pueblo), and Elizabeth Woody (Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs). A young Duane Slick (Meskwaki/Ho-Chunk) was a performer and storyteller during the week. He was a hit. In the photograph, everyone is laughing and understanding the point of the story he is telling (history).

Slick spread a black four-by-six-foot cloth on the ground. He began to tell a story about Coyote, the trickster, and Slick’s father. As he did, he drew the characters and diner fare on the cloth

with white sand. The story goes like this:

Coyote and Slick's father are on the Meskwaki Settlement in Tama, Iowa. The two of them walked into a diner and sat down. They wait. Three cigarettes later, the waitress finally comes to the table and says, "We don't serve Indians." Coyote looks at the waitress and says, "We don't want Indians. We want cheeseburgers."

It is ironic; there is nothing more entertaining than the humor that has sustained a culture through genocidal efforts of governments and those without heart.

After I searched through old files and examined the photograph that appeared in a local Telluride paper, it occurred to me that the texture and palette Slick used eighteen years ago in his performance piece were the same as the paintings he is doing now. The soft, dry, white, matte surfaces of his current body of work are reminiscent of the sand. The deep, flat black of the paintings is similar to the black cloth. Even the subjects, his father and Coyote, are represented in his current work. His flags are homage to the service of his father and sister in the military. Slick is using different materials, making facile, sophisticated and unnerving work, and it comes from the same spirit as it did eighteen years ago. It is remarkable.

Remarkable is also a good description of the work of Anna Tsouhlarakis (Navajo/Creek/Greek) who embraces equally her Native and Greek heritages. Growing up with her father and spending time with artists mostly working in



traditional Native arts, she learned silversmithing, beading, traditional stone carving, woodworking, moccasin-making, and more. Tsouhlarakis chooses to use photography and video as her primary media, a choice partly driven by her desire to "reclaim Native identity." She rejects the stereotypes and boundaries traditionally assigned to Indian art and believes that to stretch the boundaries and see Native people in a contemporary context, one needs a new language.

For Tsouhlarakis, that translates into new media, primarily photography and video. In her photography series *Legends*, Tsouhlarakis shows her facility with duct tape. There are multiple interpretations of this medium. In some instances, it can be interpreted as low-brow. Car windows and car parts are repaired with duct tape. Then again, people have an affection for duct tape. For the last eight years, Avon,

Anna Tsouhlarakis, *Legends VIII*, 2005. Inkjet print. Image courtesy of the artist.



Ohio, has celebrated duct tape with a festival. Duct tape also implies industry, and its sheen reflects the idea of technology or space travel.

Inspired by her interest in the science and culture of time, Tsouhlarakis created a thirty-six channel video installation of many hands working at beading, painting, or sewing. However, on closer examination, it is apparent that nothing is being created. The hands are just going through the motions. Tsouhlarakis is investigating what is important in the creation of art. Is it the final product or the act of creation that matters? The Navajo way of thinking embraces an abstract view of time. That sense of abstraction makes her work different. It possesses the past, present, and future in each work simultaneously.

Returning to my beginning statement, the Eiteljorg is not begging the question. We did not say Native American contemporary art is important, relevant, and deserves a place in the contemporary art canon because Native American contemporary art is important, relevant, and deserves a place in the contemporary art canon. We've proved it. Or more accurately, the artists have proved it. Native contemporary art is contemporary art of the highest order. The Eiteljorg is not the only institution to attest to that fact. The staff at National Museum of the American Indian would agree. Those who are associated with the Heard, the GSA, the C. N. Gorman Museum at the University of California-Davis, and

patrons of well-known galleries such as the June Kelly Gallery in New York City, which represents Kay WalkingStick, all would agree. There is more to come.

The language we at the Eiteljorg use to describe the Fellowship program has changed over time, but the intention has not. The goal of awarding, acknowledging, and honoring contemporary Native artists is what we believe is important. Following the example of Native people who have adapted and changed, based on their environment and the politics of the day, at the museum we work to accommodate and reflect changes in the field and the world around us. As my friend Truman Lowe would say, "What's next?" ♦

1. Mark Liberman, "‘Begging the question’: We have answers," *Language Log*, <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=2290>, (April 29, 2010).
2. Amei Wallach, "Storm Signals: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art," in *Into the Fray: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art, 2005*, ed. James H. Nottage (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005), 18–19.
3. "Public Art Network Highlights 2 GSA Art in Architecture Projects," General Services Administration, <http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/167385> (July 14, 2011).
4. *Ibid.*
5. "Alan Michelson: *Shattemuc* Description," <http://alanmichelson.com/work/>, (June 30, 2011).
6. "TimeTraveller™: Immerse Yourself in History," <http://www.timetravellertm.com/>, (July 14, 2011).
7. "About: Two Modes to Serve You Better," <http://www.timetravellertm.com/about.html> (July 14, 2011).