

Artist Spotlight:

PAINTINGS OF SELF AND COMMUNITY: CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS THROUGH EXPERIENCE & REPRESENTATIONS

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I often struggle with the perception that my artwork does not look Native American, that I do not look Native American, or that the individuals that I am depicting do not look Native American. Throughout history representations of Native Americans that have been produced have created assumptions of a universal Indian stuck in a timeless past. As a result, contemporary Native Americans face the challenge of defending their identity against stereotypes that intersect race, gender, and sexuality. In my art I reference those stereotypes indirectly, allowing the viewer to approach the paintings with his or her own perceptions or assumptions of what they think a Native American is.

Since I moved away from my home reservation, I have spent years trying to understand who I am, defending my identity and trying to express that through my paintings. As an undergraduate student, my relationships with friends were only understood through funny stereotypes. I often used those stereotypes in my art, taking images of myself and others to make fun of them and to show that I was not alone in the struggle against outside perceptions.

Nutty Mad Indian, finished in 2008, was the first painting in which I began exploring the idea of Native American culture as invisible (Plate 1). Often forgotten or overlooked, the challenge of making it visible was not realized until later. It was during my time in graduate school that I became more aware of what my work can achieve. I came to realize that, no matter what, viewers will always approach a work of art with preconceived assumptions and, instead of attempting to directly portray stereotypes, I could challenge them by showing the diversity of people's lives.

My current paintings are much more personal than I will let on. I am not just painting people from my community, but people that I am extremely close to. I know their reality and their personal stories, which I would usually not

ARTIST'S SPOTLIGHT: PAINTINGS OF SELF AND COMMUNITY

reveal. Part of my process includes following people around with my camera and taking snapshots of them in isolation, as they interact with me, with others, or with their belongings. I do not want anyone to pose, but want to capture people as they go about their day.

I photographed *Tommy* (2011) in his home (Plate 2). The house he lives in is full of his mother's religious icons and lacks evidence of his existence until you step into his room. His personal space is never visible to anyone outside of his family. I know Tommy and how he has lived. The struggles he has endured as a disabled man can be seen in his face and in the patched holes in the walls of his room. He may never live on his own or leave the reservation, so his only sense of the outside world is through the television—this thing that he has come to rely on, is the same thing that has created so many false representations of Native Americans.

The harsh reality of Tommy's life and future are never reflected on the TV screen. He does not recognize his large body, dark sunken eyes, and buzzed haircut in the movies that star tall, slender Indians. My painting of Tommy does not include any myths about the Indian. Tommy is sitting in a space that reflects his interests—music, games, and movies. The faint image on the TV screen cannot be made out clearly and the viewer is left in the dark whether what he/she sees is a reflection of Tommy or a movie scene. No stereotypes are embraced and the assumptions viewers have about Native Americans are confronted by Tommy's turned back.

The relationship between stereotype, perception, and experience is something I encounter daily. By painting self-portraits I try to make sense of my life, my experiences, and what I see. When I returned home last summer for a visit, I was confronted with judgments by some in my community. I have been away from my reservation for years now and my absence has led others to question my identity as a Seneca and my place within the community. Because I follow my interests outside of the reservation, I am perceived as no longer belonging. I returned to school determined to disprove those assumptions. My self-portrait *Ageswë'gaiyo'* (2010-11), in which I depict my tattooed, bare back, reflects the way I perceive myself as well as a personal realization that my relationship with my culture is my own and should not be influenced by other people's perceptions (Plate 3).

Before I began *Ageswë'gaiyo'*, I was looking at a photograph by Catherine Opie titled *Self-Portrait*. Inspired by her work, I tried to take a similar approach in my self-portrait while also bringing in my artistic individuality. I like the idea of the back being turned to the viewer and the use of skin as a screen. I chose not to represent my back turned completely in this painting, because this reflects how I feel, as if I am stuck between two worlds—my home, which is my past, and New Mexico, which is part of my future. I have a foot on both sides and it is the dynamic between these two aspects of me that determines who I am. I am not turning my back on the people from my community, but on the idea that I am not Seneca anymore.

More recently, I have turned to abstraction in my work. When I first began incorporating Haudenosaunee beadwork designs into my work, I used a masking technique of layering color. In the earlier panels, I would cut out forms to create a positive or negative shape of a design. I stayed close to the floral and linear patterns I would see on beaded garments and, as a result, the paintings were often described as “pretty” or “decorative”, which was not what I intended. In the beginning, I held on to the idea that the designs had to be treated a certain way, which was traditionally.

I became tired of that and realized that I could engage in my own dialog with the designs; what resulted was the painting *Large Abstraction No. 1* (2010) (Plate 4). I am not denying my heritage and identity by not following tradition. I do not see the designs as decorative, but I recognize the potential for reinterpretation within them. I expanded the size of my canvasses and began to morph the signs to the point where they become unrecognizable. Through this process I started to challenge the notion that the designs must be fixed. I know that the designs are important to my history, but I do not see them as static, but as evolving, like my identity and my interests.

A combination of hope and loss has been a continuing source of inspiration throughout my work. This dialog might not be evident in my painting, but it was something I was constantly thinking about. The evolution of my work reveals both the loss I feel as my connection to home weakens, and my hope of returning one day. It also reflects a concern with an overall loss of culture that all Native American communities face and, simultaneously, the hope that it will survive. I materialized this idea into a painting titled *What I Was Thinking* (2011) after I attended a Pueblo's dances on Christmas

ARTIST'S SPOTLIGHT: PAINTINGS OF SELF AND COMMUNITY

Day. The feeling of inclusion and strength that the dances expressed was almost foreign to me. It seemed as if the whole community was there, no one was excluded, and I could feel what a tremendous task it is to keep the dances and language intact. I came to realize that I had never experienced anything like it on my own reservation where the customs and religions are no longer practiced by the community as a whole. Only about fifty people know the language fluently. I was intrigued by the stark contrast between that community and my own. It allows a small glimpse at how each tribe has been affected and how each is tackling issues of hope and loss of culture.

I know I do not embody stereotype. I understand the power it has to shape perceptions and the ability I have to challenge perceptions through my own representations. I am painting people to show the diversity of Native Americans as a whole, from community to community, and down to the individual.

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PLATE 1. Luanne Redeye, *Nutty Mad Indian*, 2008, oil on canvas, 35" x 30".



PLATE 2. Luanne Redeye, *Tommy*, 2011, oil on panel, 18" x 24".



PLATE 3. Luanne Redeye, *Agoswë'gaiyo'*, 2010-2011, oil on panel, 30" x 24".



PLATE 4. Luanne Redeye, *Large Abstraction No.1*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 71" x 91".



PLATE 5. Installation View. *Nueva York (1613-1945)*. On view at el museo del barrio from September 17, 2010 – January 9, 2011. Photo Courtesy of el museo del barrio, NY. Photo by Jason Mandella.



PLATE 6. Installation View. *Nueva York (1613-1945)*. On view at el museo del barrio from September 17, 2010 – January 9, 2011. Photo Courtesy of el museo del barrio, NY. Photo by Jason Mandella.



PLATE 7. Installation View. *Nueva York (1613-1945)*. On view at el museo del barrio from September 17, 2010 – January 9, 2011. Photo Courtesy of el museo del barrio, NY. Photo by Jason Mandella.



PLATE 8. Installation View. *Nueva York (1613-1945)*. On view at el museo del barrio from September 17, 2010 – January 9, 2011. Photo Courtesy of el museo del barrio, NY. Photo by Jason Mandella.



PLATE 9. Darwin Rodríguez, *Camuflaje (Si no le gusta póngale flores)*, 2010, óleo, pintura mural sobre pared, 136" x 252".



PLATE 10. Darwin Rodríguez, *Camuflaje*, (detalle).



PLATE 11. Adán Vallecillo, *La fisiología del gusto*, 2010, teeth, stainless steel tray, 10"x15".



PLATE 12. Lucy Argueta, *Post-curtición*, 2010, vestidos intervenidos, instalación, dimensiones variables.