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## Review Essay

### INDIGENOUS PALETTES: SOUTHWEST NATIVE ART AND ARTISTS

Nancy J. Parezo

America has had a long love affair with Southwest Native American art. It has been admired, coveted, collected, analyzed, speculated on, and discussed since contact. Native art is a major component of the southwestern economy and helps shape regional identity. It is almost assumed that anyone living in the Southwest has a Navajo rug, a Pueblo pot, a Tohono O'odham basket, or a painting by an Indian artist in their living room. The art market, which began in the sixteenth century, continues to expand, as does our knowledge about the producers, purchasers, retailers, and the art

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*Indian Painters of the Southwest: The Deep Remembering.* By Katherin L. Chase, foreword by Diane Reyna. (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002. 95 pp. 80 color plates, halftones, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper, ISBN 0-933452-66-7); *Collective Willetto: The Visionary Carvings of a Navajo Artist.* Contributions by Shonto Begay, Walter Hopps, Lee Kogan, Greg LaChapelle, and John and Stephanie Smither, photographs by Bruce Hucko. (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2002. viii + 115 pp. 100 color plates, notes, bibliography. \$45.00 cloth, ISBN 0-89013-396-4, \$29.95 paper, ISBN 0-89013-397-2); *Native America Collected: The Culture of an Art World.* By Margaret Dubin. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001. viii + 184 pp. Color plates, halftones, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2174-7); and *Pueblo Pottery Figurines: The Expressions of Cultural Perceptions in Clay.* By Patricia Fogelman Lange. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. xi + 162 pp. 48 halftones, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, ISBN 0-8263-2799-0). Nancy J. Parezo is Professor of American Studies at the University of Arizona. She has worked with Native artists for over twenty-five years and currently has a book in press documenting the Native peoples who performed at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition.

itself. Literature on Native art is vast. In 1985 I published a bibliography of published information on these topics; from the mid-1850s to 1985, over eleven thousand articles and books had been published on art and material culture produced by Southwest Indians. With a corpus of works this large, one might think nothing is left about which to write. Over the last twenty years, however, books on Native art have continued to proliferate, reflecting changes in academic and popular scholarship as well as the relationships among museums, collectors, and Native artists and their communities.

*Indian Painters of the Southwest: The Deep Remembering* is a book about a novel research project undertaken by the School of American Research (SAR) under the direction of Katherin L. Chase, a writer and museum curator well versed in the history and aesthetics of painting. SAR is well known for its outstanding collections and for its innovative programs that open the doors to its intimidating but gorgeous vault for Indian artists to view the work of others and hopefully to find inspiration for their own art. In 1988 Chase, along with Diane Reyna and Gary Yazzie, organized a gathering of ten respected Pueblo and Navajo painters and asked them to reflect on and share ideas about their art, struggles, goals, and cultural heritages. Artists were also asked to contemplate the future directions their work might take. Participating artists included Michael Kabotie (Hopi), Jeanette Katoney (Navajo), Linda Lomahaftewa (Hopi/Choctaw), Felice Lucero (San Felipe), Marcellus Medina (Zia), Diane Reyna (Taos), Mateo Romero (Cochiti), Alex Seotewa (Zuni), Emmi Whitehorse (Navajo), and Gary Yazzie (Navajo). A brief biography of each artist, along with examples of their works and their feelings on their lives as artists, forms the heart of the book.

*Indian Painters of the Southwest* records the group's discussion so that others can reflect on their insights and perspectives, best summarized by Whitehorse as all their attempts to "take tradition and mold it into modern concepts and a universal language" (p. 13). This short book, richly illustrated with paintings by the participants and examples from the SAR's extensive collections, also includes discussion of the project "Deep Remembering," the project goals, and an essay by Chase on Indian painting traditions in the American Southwest. Her essay is an excellent overview of issues, cross-cultural influences, and artistic developments since the 1860s.

One of the insightful comments found in *Indian Painters of the Southwest* was written by Kathleen Whitaker in her introduction: "No longer can the Native American canvas be annexed to the tenets of tribal and therefore 'primitive' art" (p. 11). It is too bad that the essayists who wrote for *Collective*

*Willeto: The Visionary Carvings of a Navajo Artist* did not understand that fact, for that is just what they did. The weakest of the four books reviewed here, *Collective Willeto* is a catalogue that accompanied a 2002 exhibit of works produced between 1961 and 1964 by Navajo carver Charlie Willeto. The catalogue has gorgeous photographs that memorialize the intriguing exhibit. The essays, however, are disappointing and often contain contradictory information about Willeto, inaccuracies about Diné culture, and universalizing folkloristic explanations that generally show a lack of basic understanding about holistically interrelated Diné worldview, religion, and aesthetics. The most tantalizing parts of this book are an all-too-short (two page) thought piece by Diné artist Shonto Begay, which addresses Begay's own work and his reactions to Willeto's art, and the scattered references to Willeto and his family. Unfortunately, Willeto's biographical information is very sketchy, and does not even include some basic information—such as Willeto's clans—that are essential for understanding the man and his work. The catalogue left me wanting more of the interview with Willeto's family and less unnecessary speculation about Willeto's "collective unconscious" motives and symbolism.

*Collective Willeto* is a book designed for collectors and connoisseurs, for those who want to look at the art from a universalizing artistic perspective. Although it attempts to include Diné perspectives, this is not a book for scholars of Diné or Southwest Indian art and culture or for those interested in the socioeconomic dynamics and political history of collecting. *Native America Collected* by Margaret Dubin, however, is such a book. In this "criticism of contemporary Native American fine arts," American Indian Studies professor Dubin aims to write a comprehensive history of Native American art that is politically informed. As many other scholars have discovered, this is a worthy but daunting task. Dubin frankly admits she had to scale back her ambitious goals and focus only on the elite market, eliminating from her discussion the other culturally internal and cross-culturally external markets that constitute the contemporary Native American art world. Dubin's book, therefore, is about one type of collecting that is influential in the Southwest and has had a tremendous impact on Native American artists.

The result of Dubin's observations, reflections, and impressive set of interviews is a series of insightful postmodern essays on topics that inform contemporary collecting and artistic criticism. The author discusses dimensions of collecting that have not been given the attention they deserve; her chapter on museum exhibits and the problems inherent in artistic critiques

of contemporary works is particularly good. Dubin sees each essay as an initial attempt to map significant features of the cross-cultural interactions of producing, selling, and buying art. Further, these essays examine the uneven distribution and constant negotiation of power in marketplace transactions. Her book contains an excellent summary of the impact of colonialism and capitalism on sections of the Native American art world and shows how market demand has homogenized Western perceptions of what constitutes “authentic” Indian art.

*Native America Collected* has much to offer those interested in Native American art, although the book focuses on American culture. The book includes a fairly complete literature review of the history of collecting and an analysis of recent legislation that affects how Native American art is produced, marketed, and sold. *Native America Collected* advances the development of historically and politically sensitive artistic criticism and connoisseurship about contemporary Native American fine art. Dubin’s strength is how she pulls together her thoughts and observations about American elite collecting in a systematic manner. The book is well written and nicely illustrated.

Although Dubin’s work is firmly embedded in contemporary critical cultural anthropology theory, Patricia Fogelman Lange strives to formulate a theory of Puebloan artistic and aesthetic sensibilities that is ostensibly non-anthropological, one that rejects the “ethnographic other,” yet relies heavily on over one hundred years of anthropological research. *Pueblo Pottery Figurines* is a theoretical work that explores aesthetic expressions and cultural perceptions of Cochiti clay figurines. Lange, a postmodern art historian, critic, and artist looks at creative differences based on a sense of taste and how traditional Puebloan (i.e., Keresan) senses of aesthetic appreciation differ from those of Euroamericans and other Native groups. Most of the well-written, well-illustrated, and intriguing book concentrates on Cochiti aesthetic knowledge. Lange shows how this knowledge is functionally integrated into other aspects of Cochiti culture and society and how these sensibilities have expanded to include production for external markets over the last one hundred years. In addition Lange explores how artists used the figurines to make artistic statements of social and political criticism using techniques of symbolic inversions and parody that negotiated realities and reflected cross-cultural power relationships in the development of commodities.

As the body of literature that addresses Native art continues to grow, the place of these four works in that literature will change. For the time being, each makes a contribution by revealing or illuminating the relationships between Native art, artists, collectors, cultures, and the marketplace.