

2008 Native Americans Project
Essay # 25195

Essay Title : New Opportunities: Reflections on the Transformative Role of Indian Museums

As a 2008 recipient of the Lloyd New Art Mentorship, I traveled to the Plains Indian Museum in Cody, WY to study its collection and create original monotypes inspired by its vast display of historical artifacts. As an artist, I was challenged to translate selected works of extraordinary beauty and anthropological significance: what meaning do these objects have today? What do I see, and what can I say, about my Mandan Hidatsa heritage that can explain the role of Native culture in America today? I came to make new art and I left with a new understanding of the transformative role of Indian Museums.

My mentor, Roger Broer, an Oglala Lakota artist, says "I think, sometimes, when I am alone, usually when I am making art, about the elements in nature around me. I like to ponder relationships. How everything has its own significant place...how everything is somehow related to everything else. How...most importantly, we don't readily understand these relationships, yet if one element is missing, emptiness exists" (Roger Broer). Emptiness might also exist within museums. By definition, a museum is a "permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the *tangible and intangible* heritage of humanity and its environment, for the purposes of education, study, and enjoyment", according to the International Council of Museums (Wikipedia). Furthermore, the better museums come alive by enabling people to explore collections for inspiration.

In the *American Indian Quarterly*, Amy Lonetree writes of Indian museums as

historically painful sites of tainted booty (Lonetree 632) whereas, today, I see the Three Affiliated Tribes Museum on my home reservation on Fort Berthold, North Dakota and the Cody museum complex as exciting and dignified opportunities for sharing and learning. In Cody, tourists from all over the world are drawn into a full scale replica of a Mandan-Hidatsa earth lodge, almost identical to those restored at our old Knife River Village home. Although ancient practices are faithfully described, the exhibit also tells a more recent story of tribal dislocation as a consequence of the creation of the Garrison Dam. This artful blending of old and new allows us to ponder relationships, how “everything has its own significant place...how everything is somehow related to everything else” (Roger Broer).

The museum also uses contemporary tribal members to enrich the collection: Edwin Benson, a traditional Mandan man who is the last surviving speaker of the Mandan language, is depicted proclaiming that our people will outlive the dam, just as we had outlived the small pox epidemics of the 19th century. In contrast, my Montanan hometown fine art museum, Missoula Art Museum, MAM, strives for a more immediate relevance. Earlier this year, a thematic exhibit entitled “Elk Dogs” featured contemporary horse imagery created by contemporary American Indian Artists (MAM Magazine 5).

The stark difference between these two opposing presentation models is clarified in literary scholar E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s article “In Defense of the Author.” In examining Validity in Interpretation, Hirsch offers his crucial distinction between meaning and significance: “Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. Significance, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation or indeed anything imaginable” (Hirsch 8). Since most archived Indian works are by anonymous creators, we look

past the author to the society that created the work. In so doing, we look for the significance of the work.

Only a few years after the publication of The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Cultures (West, Jr., ed.) there may be a further “museological shift” away from exhibitions that tend to reinforce the view of a static, unchanging culture. The “Elk Dogs” exhibit at MAM represents a transformation of contemporary native art into contemporary American art thereby broadening the canvas of American culture. Earlier issues in museum management revolved around repatriation, intellectual property, incorporating native voices and self determination efforts. But now that Indigenous people see themselves as collaborators in the curatorial process there is no reason that our representations should not be afforded the same status and venues as other contemporary artists in addition to traditional Indian museums.

This broadened perspective would require a restructuring of internal museum cultures and professions. The contemporary monotypes that I created last summer are at home in a variety of venues. Molly Murphy, an Oglala artist extols MAM: “Most museums are reactive, but by featuring Native artists the museum is active in the Native community” (qtd. in Rave 51). Juane Quick-To-See Smith, a Salish artist, also advocates such a gallery for Native only art within a contemporary art museum when the museum is situated within a community with a significant Native population (Rave 53).

Such contemporary museums might partner with tribal history museums and established artist communities by intentionally recruiting young artists and creating temporary “Native artist colonies.” My Cody mentorship program successfully assembled a group of young artists, exposed us to a rich collection and gave us the tools and inspiration to reinterpret our culture. I

was especially moved to learn how the staff already knew my large extended family and I felt a wider sense of belonging than I had ever known before.

The Alliance of Artists Communities estimates that there are 250 artist communities in the United States. We might use these centers to provide short term residencies, serving as research and development labs for the arts. A focused program that exposes emerging Native artists to a relevant historical collection, brings them together to work in residence and, finally, shows their work in local contemporary galleries, would further enhance the Indian identity of these emerging artists. Unless a young artist is enrolled in a specialized program such as the Institute of American Indian Arts it is especially hard to have a sense of shared purpose. One attempt to provide outreach is IAIA's *Native Eyes Distance Learning Program* but this is no substitute for the type of experience that I am proposing. What is missing? Young artists need an opportunity to reexamine the historical context of their tribal heritage. We need the mentorship of highly trained senior artists. We crave the friendship of talented peers. And we hope for the exposure of our work in a setting suitable to its extraordinary content.

Amy Lonetree argues against programs that perpetuate stereotypes and are “reinforced by museum displays of the past that tended to obscure the great historical, cultural and linguistic diversity of tribal nations by dividing Native people into cultural groups—giving a sense that all tribes are the same” (Lonetree 633). New art has the power to redefine, to heal and to sustain ourselves and our culture. In one week, my work was transformed from static realism to a final work of which I am most proud: a large monotype collage that portrays humanized female wolves in an almost dream-like setting, dancing in traditional Indian clothing. I now know the power of the past to unleash the imagination.

EssayWorksCited :

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In a letter written by the Department of the Interior to Senator Byron Dorgan, ND, a discussion was held about the oil and gas development on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota. In the letter, it was indicated that the Department of the Interior had come up with some possible options as to how to overcome the obstacles to timely oil and gas development on the Reservation. In the letter, the Secretary of the Interior indicated that Senator Dorgan had asked that a plan be developed and submitted to Senator Dorgan's office on or about July 7, 2008. Under the Plan, the Department of the Interior agreed to meet the needs of the Reservation for timely leasing of the lands for the right to drill for oil and gas. This agreement did become reality, but as with so many other things regarding the Fort Berthold Reservation, the