The New York Times
nytimes.com

September 17, 2006

ART REVIEW; Visions of Native Americans in Today's World

By BEN GENOCCHIO

American museums have been so occupied for the last few years with matters far from home, among them the call for greater coverage of Islamic culture, that they have often passed over domestic themes and issues. One of these is the situation of Native American artists in the contemporary art world, the subject of a fun and intriguing, but not entirely successful, exhibition at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum.

Usually such exhibitions herd together disparate artists with any amount of Native American blood in their veins, the idea being that the appellation belongs to anyone who claims the ancestry. So it was reasonable to expect that the artists in "No Reservations: Native American History and Culture in Contemporary Art" would be descendants, no matter how remote, of American Indians, Eskimos or Aleuts.

Not so. In an effort to shift attention away from issues of race and ethnicity and toward the cultural legacies of native peoples, Richard Klein, the curator of the exhibition, has used both native and nonnative artists.

You have to give Mr. Klein credit for his attentiveness to issues of cultural politics. Through the 1990's, group exhibitions surveying artists of minority ethnic, cultural and racial groups in the United States were criticized for ghettoizing artists, divorcing them from the larger contemporary art world while setting up an expectation that they make art about being a person of a particular color or race. Rightly, many of the minority-group artists argued that they were artists first and members of an ethnic or racial group second.

The current exhibition neatly sidesteps these thorny conceptual issues, but stumbles into others. By including nonnative artists with varying degrees of interest in and enthusiasm for the subject matter, the issues at play are reduced to just another choice on the global cultural market shelf.

The creative convenience inherent in the work of some of the nonnative artists clashes with the work of those with deeper cultural commitments. Happily, though, there are no overtones of cultural appropriation. Mr. Klein has chosen to integrate the work of the native and nonnative artists throughout the exhibition, which runs over two levels of the building, filling many galleries.

And the museum has done a tremendous job with interpretative materials, producing brochures and expansive wall labels about the artists and artworks in an effort to help guide viewers; it also plans to release a comprehensive exhibition catalog in October. (The Aldich makes the same effort for all its major exhibitions, which is why a visit here is always one of the better regional contemporary art-viewing experiences, regardless of what is on display.)

But even without the background information, it is fairly easy to spot the Native Americans, who tend to work with standard tropes of identity politics in art -- imagery culled from the historical archive, memory and personal family history. Though such strategies are derivative, coming from Conceptualism, the artists have found ways to make them seem fresh.

On entering the museum you are confronted with something totally unexpected -- a fully functioning, remodeled vintage 1965 Chrysler New Yorker automobile. It is one of Lewis deSoto's "public sculptures," the car customized with designs, upholstery and other elements that make reference to the history of his surname -- the same as that of a now defunct American automobile named for the Spanish conquistador Hernando De Soto. (DeSoto was a division of Chrysler and similar design teams worked on both the New Yorker model and the DeSoto brand.)

The conquistador's sword is superimposed over the word "conquest" on both rear side panels of the car. Nearby is a painted disc composed of traditional basket designs by the Cahuilla of Southern California (of which deSoto is a distant descendant through his paternal great-grandmother) encircled by the Latin word for smallpox. Like many native people in the Americas, the Cahuilla were hit hard by the disease in the 1880's and 1890's.

Duane Slick and Nicholas Galanin, both Native Americans, work with archival materials, though in different ways.

Mr. Galanin, a contemporary Alaskan Tlingit artist, has used a digitally controlled plotting cutter to carve the shape of a traditional native mask out of 1,700 compressed text pages from the book "Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit." The book, written by the academic and archaeologist Frederica de Laguna, is the definitive account of Alaskan prehistory.

Mr. Slick, a painting professor at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, and a descendant of the Fauk and Meskwaki of Iowa and the Nebraska Winnebago, looks more generally at the history and reality of being a Native American today. His book installation, "Looking for Orozco" (1993), is a collage of images and text relating to his family history and cultural, social and political influences on his life, along with historical material on the Mexican muralist painter José Clemente Orozco, whose murals often dealt with the murder and dispossession of native peoples in the Spanish conquest.

Injustice, racism and the struggle for self-determination among descendants of the original Native Americans are the nominal subjects of a prison-cell installation by Rigo 23, a San Francisco-based Portuguese social activist and artist. It is a room of paintings by Leonard Peltier, a citizen of the Anishinabe and Dakota and Lakota nations who is serving two consecutive life terms in Pennsylvania for the murder of two F.B.I. agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Books, letters and documentary material relating to the incident, his arrest, conviction and legal appeals are installed in cabinets around the walls.

The other nonnative artists in the exhibition tend to work with clichéd or stereotypical cultural imagery. Yoram Wolberger grossly enlarges those once popular plastic toy figurines of cowboys and Indians, which helped reinforce negative racial stereotypes, while Edie Winograde takes photographs of historical re-enactments of the Battle of Little Bighorn on the Montana plains. One of the re-enactments takes place outside the ranching town of Hardin, sponsored by the town's Chamber of Commerce; another on a nearby Crow Indian reservation, the site of the battle. Rest assured each group tells a different story.

"No Reservations: Native American History and Culture in Contemporary Art," the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through Feb. 25, 2007. Information: (203) 438-4519 or www.aldrichart.org