

## “Art for a New Understanding: Native Perspectives, 1950s to Now”

IAIA MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY NATIVE ARTS,  
SANTA FE

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JAUNE QUICK-TO-SEE SMITH made her multimedia collage *Mischief*, *Indian Land Series* in 1992, during the quincentennial of Christopher Columbus’s minatory arrival in North America. *Mischief* is titled after a print advertisement affixed to its upper-right-hand corner in which a woman resembling Betty Boop in cartoonish Native dress stands holding a Mischief Washington apple, the company’s logo emblazoned above her. The image is typical of American pop-culture portrayals of Native peoples, and Smith juxtaposes it with images of men in elaborate headdresses and photographs of the Statue of Liberty, as well as with newspaper clippings that attest to the inequities facing Native Americans: A headline cut from a 1989 issue of the *Lakota Times* reads, “Notes from Indian Country: No skills—no jobs—no income.” Another declares: “A Crisis of Leadership.”

Columbus’s landing and the consequent genocide are inevitable touchstones in narratives of Native experience, but the curators of “Art for a New Understanding: Native Perspectives, 1950s to Now”—Mindy N. Besaw, Candice Hopkins, and Manuela Well-Off-Man—began

their traveling exhibition at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, with another moment, one that suggested the ongoing struggle by Native artists against erasure. The 1950s was the decade in which many Native North American communities began to reframe “Indian art” as part of the dominant discourse of modernism. That time period also marked the ascendance of the American art market, undergirded by the promotion of a uniquely American worldview of exceptionalism and individualism. “Art for a New Understanding” tracks how Native artists have long employed strategies such as appropriation and institutional critique to counter colonialist ideology and exclusionary art-historical practices. Many of the show’s underlying themes—honoring and protecting Native lands, standing up to racism, resisting the narrative of discovery, and battling the elimination of Native languages and cultures—have characterized Native art practices for hundreds of years, but have only been recognized when they were expressed through narrow, stereotypical stylizations.

*Mischief* is significant to “Art for a New Understanding” because it demonstrates that many of the exhibiting artists engage with these indigenous traditions while emphatically laying claim to cultural references that aren’t usually considered indigenous. In other words, they make it known that the world they live in is not separate from American culture, that their experiences are neither universal nor calcified in some rarefied, precolonial realm. Smith’s work nods to Rauschenberg’s assemblages; Oscar Howe’s watercolor *Dance of the Heyoka*, ca. 1954, clearly belongs to midcentury abstraction; Brian Jungen’s masks inspired by the Haida, an indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest, are made of fragments of Nike Air Jordans. The exhibition’s second venue (the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Arts [MOCNA] in Santa Fe, New Mexico), where it is currently on view, prominently displays pieces that directly connect with recent events. For *Mirror Shield Project*, 2016, Cannupa Hanska Luger created body shields affixed with mirrors for use against police at the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. Referencing another historic environmental concern, Lawrence Paul Yuxwelupton’s dire, hal-

lucinogenic painting *Scorched Earth, Clear-cut Logging on Native Sovereign Land. Shaman Coming to Fix*, 1991, depicts a deforested Pacific Northwest landscape.

The selection of works at MOCNA demonstrates how Native artists have tackled formal and thematic concerns akin to those of mainstream (white heterosexual male) American artists, especially since the ’50s, even as they prioritized their own indigenous traditions. Institutions are finally catching up to this fact, and younger and more affluent venues such as Crystal Bridges are well positioned to fold Native artists into their canons of American art; that museum’s recent acquisition of Smith’s *Mischief* and of a pair of baskets by Shan Goshorn woven from an 1868 land treaty (among other materials) seems important in this respect. But the exclusion of Native artists from contemporary exhibitions cannot be remedied simply via the

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increased mounting of exhibitions of and about Native artists. As the curators stress in their catalogue essay, the show must be seen as part of a “call for other museums to reassess their holdings and take a close look at what histories remain marked more by absence than presence.” The true test of the exhibition will be its ripple effect—whether it is in fact able to contribute to a new understanding of *American* art that includes Native practices, and whether it can motivate institutions to increase the presence of Native voices in positions of power. □

“Art for a New Understanding: Native Perspectives, 1950s to Now” is on view through July 19; travels to the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, NC, August 29, 2019–January 12, 2020; Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, February 11–May 27, 2020.

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From left: Oscar Howe, *Dance of the Heyoka*, ca. 1954, watercolor on paper, 20¼ × 26¼".  
Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Mischief*, *Indian Land Series*, 1992, acrylic, oil stick, and collage on canvas, 60 × 40". Cannupa Hanska Luger, *Mirror Shield Project*, 2016. Performance view, Oceti Sakowin Camp, Cannon Ball, ND, December 2016.

