

***Changing Hands: Art without Reservation 2***  
***Contemporary Native North American Art from the West,***  
***Northwest and Pacific***

Edited by David Revere McFadden and Ellen Napiura  
 Taubman

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Reviewed by Alexandra Swaney

This catalog issues from the second in a series of three exhibits at the Museum of Arts & Design, New York City (until recently the American Craft Museum) and is aimed at celebrating and documenting the rich flow of contemporary art created by Native peoples of the United States (including Hawaii) and Canada. David McFadden, chief curator and vice president for programs and collections at the Museum, has collaborated with Ellen Taubman, an independent curator, to produce an exhibition and book saturated with ravishingly beautiful, highly skilled, creative, complex, and tangible ruminations on identity, history, and loss.

The publication features color images of the works of 183 artists, short bios of the artists, and quotes from many, as well as an introductory essay by the curators and twelve essays from a variety of writers reflecting on aspects of the exhibit, the history of Native arts since European contact, and the subsequent destruction of much of the traditional cultures.

Jackie Parsons, traditional Blackfeet artist and chairman of the Montana Arts Council, likes to say that Indian people had no word for art. Rather, art imbued every object and way of doing things of tribal peoples. Both beauty and functionality were necessities.

Tradition is a word that can be used as a weapon, as in “it’s not traditional,” or “it’s too traditional,” or “it’s my tradition, not yours.” The word carries an inherently dialectical charge and could be expected to be especially edgy for Indian artists. On the substantial evidence of this exhibit, however, the answer to this conundrum is that the strongest element of Native American tradition is creativity. These artists engage with their traditions in 183 different ways, some looking to carry forward the formal elements of the past with stunning skill and intelligence, some electing to use some of those elements in totally new ways, and some adopting “traditional” techniques of contemporary art to express their philosophical positions on the state of their identities as artists and Indians, and their responses to five hundred years of struggle.

The multi-wood (birch, mahogany, ebony, bird’s eye maple, etc.) sculpture of Northwest Coast artist Yaya (Charles Peter Heit) entitled *Tele Box*, is a striking example of the juxtaposition of modernity with traditional form and materials. The carved and decorated wooden box was a staple of Northwest Coastal art. The beautifully made maple box is open, and within is seated a telephone receiver made of ebony, next to a keypad on which the keys are made of abalone. The artist says, “I think tradition is continually in state of change, or innovation, constantly being altered to reflect the artist’s life experiences. Sometimes I think I

have a duty to show the world something. Our art and our culture and our language have always been changing. Innovation is the second oldest form of tradition.”

Beadwork is of course a prominent element in many of the pieces shown here. An entire essay is devoted to examining the history of beadwork and its uses in traditional and contemporary Native art, from adornment to social commentary. It is almost synonymous with a stereotype that most of us, Indian and non-Indian alike, have in our minds about Indian art. Yet people worldwide have been using beads for millennia, and the kind of beadwork we see today is really the result of the adoption of European (and perhaps Chinese) trade beads by Native Americans, early on, applied to an ongoing production and decoration of all kinds of objects needed for daily life, warfare, and celebrations. This association makes for some wonderfully beautiful and lighthearted, yet serious, pieces of art. Consider the common tennis shoe, an icon of the Indian love for sports, sports attire, and especially here in Montana, basketball. Wind River artist Teri Greeves has dressed up a pair with solid blue seed beads, red shoelaces and beaded powwow dancers. They make you smile.

Jackie Larson Bread of Great Falls is also widely known for her amazingly intricate portraits, often done on the outside surfaces of buckskin-covered boxes. She was much influenced by her Blackfeet grandmother’s beading, but she also references the recent popular poster style that is another powerful stream among the artists shown here. Her main color is blue, true to the historic usage of colors favored by most tribes. She, along with Oklahoma artist Marcus Amerman, is among those who have pioneered the use of beadwork as a primary element in contemporary Indian art.

Like many others of these artists, Jackie attended the I.A.I.A. (Institute of American Indian Arts) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, subject of one essay, *The I.A.I.A. and the New Frontier*, by Richard Grimes. The importance of this school in the development of contemporary American Indian art cannot be overstated. Founded by visionary Cherokee-Irish artist-designer Lloyd Kiva New and supported by early stellar faculty Fritz Scholder and Allan Houser, the school, originally a B.I.A. high school, became one of only three congressionally chartered colleges in the United States. (Montana Blackfeet painter Neil Parsons was also among the early faculty at I.A.I.A.). It has produced four thousand graduates and a steady stream of positive influence on the careers of Native American artists, providing them with the freedom to dream and express countless forms of their tradition—or not. With its progressive faculty, the school gave permission not to be an “Indian” artist, not to have to follow strictly the expectations of the dominant culture as to what exactly an Indian artist should be.

Bently Spang is Montana’s international postmodern art warrior: sculptor, visual and multimedia-performance artist, and writer whose creativity shrinks before no challenge. He has exhibited postmodern, clear plastic versions of his native Cheyenne attire in an Italian gallery and created and performed the collaborative multimedia piece *Techno-Powwow* while in residence at the Montana Artists Refuge. Spang was also a player in the postmodernist multimedia production *Geyserland*, during which stereotypic images of Indians were projected on rock faces from a moving train traveling from Livingston to Bozeman, Montana. “Real live” Indian Spang roamed through the train acting as (traditional) clown and counterpoint to the images being projected

both by the train and its mostly non-Indian passengers.

In this exhibition and book, Spang's ironic warrior is represented by *War Club #1* from his Modern Warrior Series, 1998, a more-or-less life-size war club made of glass, moss, brass, mirror, hot glue, and rawhide, an intriguing and ultimately mysterious object. His other piece is *The Four Stages of Dried Meat*, in which he transforms the cultural "trait," to use the anthropologist's word, of drying meat into a piece of art. Four pieces of silicone imbued with reservation dirt are hung from commercial pant hangers on the wall. Spang notes,

By juxtaposing natural sculptural materials with artificial, I am able to create a metaphorical and symbolic representation of myself. The tension that inherently exists between the natural and the artificial characterizes the difficulty of finding a balance between the two worlds that I exist in. Achieving that balance becomes the ultimate challenge. The specific materials I use also serve a metaphorical function in that they support the layers of meaning built into each piece.

Molly Murphy is a young Montana artist who is using her (traditional) skills as a seamstress and beader to create more contemporary images that, in their construction, reflect past cultural practices, patterns, and materials in a new light. Her *Six Horses Courting Blanket* is a beautiful fusion: beaded horse heads-as-chevrons cascading wavelike across a silhouette landscape of black wool against red.

In her essay, "The Edge," Jennifer Complo McNutt discusses the art of Montana artist Corwin "Corky" Clairmont, among others. Currently chairman of the Art Department at Salish Kootenai College, Clairmont attended art school in Los Angeles in the 1980s. His recent pieces successfully fuse elements of traditional Salish culture with use of contemporary materials, often making statements about what McNutt calls "the edge," which she defines as the sometimes-painful interface between cultures. In the three-dimensional work *Split Shield*, Clairmont references the traditional element of a shield, but the piece is constructed of paper fiber made to look like torn fragments of tire track and eagle feathers. A zigzag of white runs down the center of the shield, evoking the controversy when the Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes protested the State of Montana's plan to widen Highway 93 through the Flathead Reservation. Clairmont says,

My ultimate goal as an artist is to remind people of our shared humanity. I wish to give Indian culture back the humanity that has been taken from it by stereotypes created over the past five centuries. Neither the super-shaman nor the drunken Indian do anything to convey what we as a people feel. I want to express the passion, pain and reverence I feel as a contemporary Native person.

No one could have better expressed the impact of this exhibition and publication.