

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ARTSEEN

FEBRUARY 7TH, 2018

by Alan Gilbert

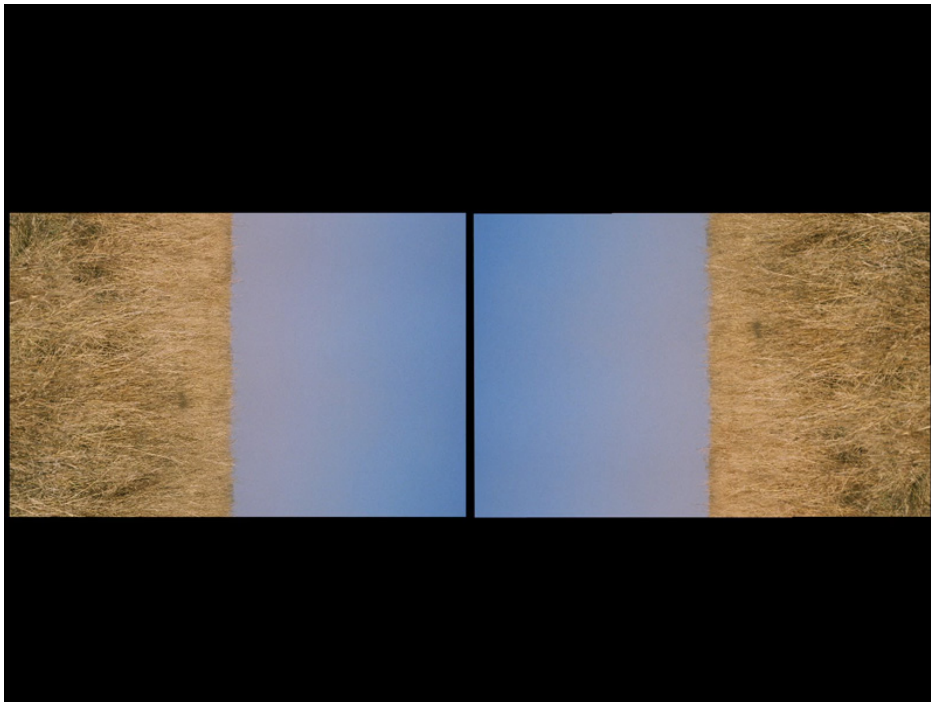
Unholding and other exhibitions of Native American art

Unholding
ARTISTS SPACE

NOVEMBER 19, 2017 – JANUARY 21, 2018

Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound
SMITHSONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
NOVEMBER 10, 2017 – JANUARY 6, 2019

Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
NOVEMBER 3, 2017 – JANUARY 28, 2018



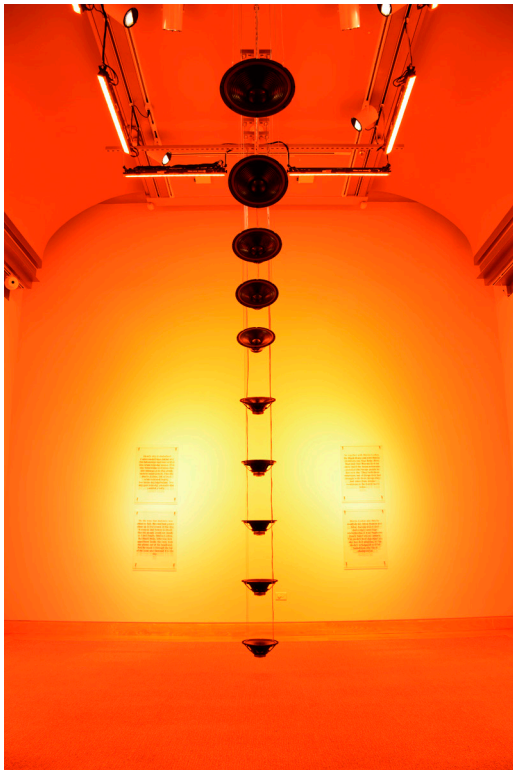
Marcella Ernest and Keli Mashburn, *Ga.Ni.Thu*, 2013 (video still).
Two-channel video with audio (4:55 min.). Courtesy the artists.

On November 16, 2017, an underground section of the Keystone Pipeline in north-eastern South Dakota spilled over 200,000 gallons of oil. As part of the same pipeline network, the Dakota Access Pipeline had been deemed too hazardous to locate near the local water supply of Bismarck, North Dakota, and so was rerouted beneath the Missouri River upstream from the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. Assurances had been given that the Dakota Access Pipeline would not leak into the Missouri River and contaminate the primary source of water for the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation (or damage the multi-state Ogallala Aquifer—one of the largest in the world). Continued pipeline building led to the Dakota Access Pipeline protests that temporarily halted this construction and made visible, partly through the power of social media (#NoDAPL), both the plight and the resistance of various Native populations gathered at the site. The Dakota Access Pipeline also crossed territory preserved in perpetuity solely for its indigenous population by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. In other words, no non-Natives would be allowed to live in at least half of what is now South Dakota without the permission of the tribes occupying the land. This treaty was violated and ignored within a couple years of its signing, although in 1980, the United States Supreme Court upheld certain aspects of its legality, offering as compensation a cash settlement that the current Sioux tribes continue to reject, insisting on the return of the Black Hills in particular according to the articles of the 1868 treaty.

November 2017 also saw the opening in New York City of three exhibitions dedicated to Native contemporary art: *Unholding* at Artists Space; *Transformer: Native Art in Light and Sound* at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian; and *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World* at the Whitney Museum of American Art. These coincided with the October 2017 issue of *Art in America* that contained feature articles on Native contemporary art, as well as the release of David Bunn Martine's (Shinnecock/Montauk/Nednai-Chiricahua Apache) *No Reservation: New York Contemporary Native American Art Movement* (published by American Indian Artists Inc. [AMERINDA]), a valuable resource book on Native artists and performers in New York City. Native contemporary art has rarely been so publicly embraced. But as Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Salish/French/Cree/Shoshone) commented at a conversation and book launch held at Artists Space in December to celebrate the publication of *No Reservation*, this kind of attention has come and gone before. She then cited prior moments occurring once a decade when Native contemporary art received broader attention, usually tied to political events, only to have that institutional support disappear: with the headline-grabbing protests of the American Indian Movement (AIM), such as the occupation of the abandoned Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay from 1969–1971, and more specifically Lloyd E. Oxendine's (Lumbee) groundbreaking article "23 Contemporary Indian Artists" in the July–August 1972 issue of *Art in America*; the rise of multiculturalism in the 1980s with accompanying exhibitions and publications; and the quincentenary celebrations and protests in 1992 of Columbus's landing in the Americas. The Standing Rock Dakota Access Pipeline protests of 2016–17 might be the recent political parallel to all of the attention directed at Native contemporary art this past fall.

Another important public moment in the history Quick-to-See Smith mentioned was the 1987 exhibition entitled *We the People* at Artists Space curated by Jimmie Durham (for a variety of reasons, Durham no longer self-identifies as Cherokee,

although he did at the time of *We the People*) and Jean Fisher that *Unholding* notes and honors. *Unholding* includes a few works from this earlier Artists Space show, and reproduces at the beginning of the exhibition Fisher's curatorial statement for *We the People*, its press release, and an installation view. In this sense, *Unholding* is as much an archival show as it is a presentation of Native contemporary art. Out of the eighteen artworks on display, more than half are from the 1980s and 1990s. Only three are from the past couple years, including the only video in the exhibition. *Unholding* is also accompanied by a full schedule of discussions, readings, performances, and screenings, pushing it further toward the contextual, as opposed to a set of static artworks on view, which is appropriate given that indigenous peoples rarely approach cultural objects—sacred or secular—this way, while Western institutions have generally treated these same objects as historical relics meant for anthropological display. The structure of *Unholding* also has a hint of one of the best shows that Artists Space's relatively new executive director and chief curator, Jay Sanders, assembled while he was a curator at the Whitney Museum: *Rituals of Rented Island: Object Theater, Loft Performance, and the New Psychodrama—Manhattan, 1970–1980* (2013–14), with its similar attempt to reenact non-nostalgically the past as a way of presenting alternatives to the present.



Raven Chacon, *Still Life, #3*, 2015 (detail). Sound and light installation with text. Voice and translation by Melvatha Chee. Collection of the artist. Photo: Joshua Voda/NMAI

This is related to another important quality of Native contemporary art: how to engage with a cultural past that makes it responsive to present conditions, which the dynamic work in *Transformer*, curated by Kathleen Ash-Milby (Diné) and David Garneau (Métis), consistently does. As its subtitle indicates, the exhibition approaches this concern by concentrating on post-2000 work that features sound, light, and digital technologies. In doing so, it situates issues of identity as much in audio—and specifically story—as in image. In *Still Life, #3* (2015), Raven Chacon (Diné) retells a Navajo origin tale by having its oral transmission across generations echoed in an arc of small, round speakers synchronized to pass along the spoken narrative. (The story was also reproduced in English and Navajo on wall texts.) Marcella Ernest (Ojibwe) and Keli Mashburn's (Osage) two-channel video *Ga.Ni.Thá* (2013) is located in a prairie landscape that undergoes fire and rejuvenation, yet is edited in such a way that linear time is disrupted for a visually and aurally collaged experience of self, place, and culture. Images of the changing prairie are mixed with brief footage of traditional Native dancing along with snippets of song and recordings from the ambient environment as well as flashes of light and dark in an elaborate patterning that is sometimes mirrored across the two screens and sometimes distinct. Certain images are rendered opaque, non-appropriative, or made disorienting, as the video's abrupt shifts in horizontal and vertical perspectives create a fourfold orientation between earth and sky.

At Artists Space, Adam Khalil (Ojibwe), Zack Khalil (Ojibwe), and Jackson Polys's (Tlingit) digital video *Culture Capture* (2017) also uses rapid edits and shifts in perspective in order to interrogate the treatment of Native artifacts stuck behind glass in an anthropology museum. A man and woman in glistening semi-transparent masks move through the space, peering into the displays while being tracked by the camera, rendering them in turn objects and categories for Western—frequently racist—ethnography (hence, the masks as partial disguise). Freedom exists in a space in between, which for the artists in *Unholding*—and in *Transformer* and the Durham retrospective—is as much a question of form as of content. As part of this in-betweenness that simultaneously remains firmly rooted in indigenous life, materials are repurposed and transfigured. Artist, curator, and activist G. Peter Jemison (Seneca) is represented in *Unholding* by a series of paper bags (one of which originally appeared in *We the People*) on which he has drawn and collaged images from Native traditions and white, commercial culture (and politics, e.g., Oliver North). Kay WalkingStick's (Cherokee) painted diptychs generate visual correspondences between landscapes and abstract forms that blur the boundaries between indigenous and Western as the eye finds connections—and also differences—between each work's two parts.

Also at *Unholding*, Jolene Rickard's (Tuscarora) large *Corn Bread Room* (ca. 1998) is a mixed-media installation featuring references to broken treaties and Native sovereignty (members of the six-nation Haudenosaunee [also known as Iroquois], of which Rickard is a member, have in the past traveled internationally with passports issued by their own government). It was installed next to Alan Michelson's (Mohawk) series of scale-model structures collectively entitled *Prophetstown*. For instance, *Prophetstown: Cherokee Phoenix Print Shop* (2012) is a version of the building in which the Cherokee Nation published its bilingual newspaper prior to

the tribe's forced relocation to what is now Oklahoma—the contested treaty that instigated this involuntary exile is reproduced on the sculpture's roof. *Prophetstown: Henry David Thoreau Cabin* (2012) is a miniature version of the famous dwelling near Walden Pond, which Michelson has covered in printed text from Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*. Durham's decision not to return to the United States after 1987, and his refusal to identify as American (or Native), might be seen as participating in the lineage of resistance to enforced citizenry and nationalism in Thoreau's treatise. In his ninety-minute video *Smashing* (2004) on display at the Whitney Museum, Durham sits behind a desk wearing a black suit and destroys with a rock items that people bring to him before he "authenticates" the splintered and fragmented remains with an inked stamp and personal signature. At the same time, it is hard not to notice how solid—and quotidian (stools, sawhorses, etc.)—the bases of Durham's sculptures are, while the remaining parts of these pieces are fluid and recombinatory. They are almost brazen in their demonstration that Durham stands firm in his dislocation.

If many Native contemporary artists are rethinking notions of individual identity, then it makes sense that this would be accompanied by an examination of collective identity, including the idea of nations and states. At the Whitney Museum, Durham's movement from an explicit engagement with Native identity to one more focused on indigenous concerns with colonialism and power (some of which may be the result of ongoing public attempts to disprove his earlier claims of Cherokee heritage) began to occur after the first gallery of work. Before dedicating himself fulltime to his artistic practice, from 1974 to 1979 Durham was the director of the International Indian Treaty Council, established by AIM at Standing Rock in 1974. The organization aimed to develop transnational alliances among indigenous peoples worldwide and to represent their legal standing at the United Nations. In the current era of economic markets, including the art market, designed to absorb almost any identity, this emphasis on alternative collective formations is aimed as much at the future as at the past. Moreover, as the landowner and landlord continue to reign supreme, whether in rural or urban milieus, the legal pressure Natives have brought in recent decades to have the original terms of treaties honored, as AIM emphasized and the Dakota Access Pipeline protests made clear (and as the U.S. Supreme Court partly recognized in 1980), is not only an economic fight, but an environmental and spiritual one—a different kind of space, a different kind of time, a different kind of land. At the heart of *Unholding*, *Transformer*, and *Jimmie Durham* is this reimagining of what it means to be a human within a world nexus encompassing history, ecology, and politics.

CONTRIBUTOR

ALAN GILBERT is the author of two books of poetry, *The Treatment of Monuments* and *Late in the Antenna Fields*, as well as a collection of essays, articles, and reviews entitled *Another Future: Poetry and Art in a Postmodern Twilight*. He lives in New York.