

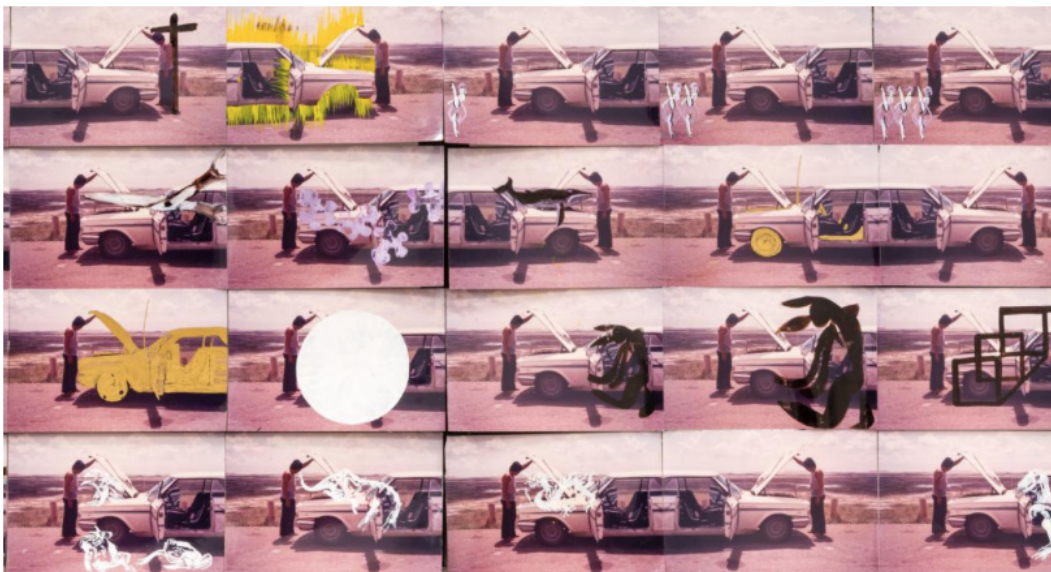
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“Unholding,” an Art Show About America

The exhibition of painting, sculpture, photo collage, video, and drawing by ten Native Americans, on view at Artists Space, provides a vital history lesson.

By Andrea K. Scott



A detail of Pena Bonita's mixed-media collage "Stalled" (1987), in the group show "Unholding."

What is America? It's fifty states, sixteen territories, and five hundred and sixty-seven tribal nations. The invitation to a poetry reading in lower Manhattan, organized, last month, by the Portland-based artist Demian DinéYazhi, contained a quick history lesson on the last category: "By entering this space, you are acknowledging you are on colonized Lenape lands." The event was part of "Unholding," a vital exhibition of painting, sculpture, video, collage, and drawing by ten Native Americans, on view at Artists Space through Jan. 21. Don't expect a primer on recent developments. Most of the works were made in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, because "Unholding" coincides with the thirtieth anniversary of "We the People," a show at the nonprofit gallery in 1987, curated by the art critic Jean Fisher and the sculptor Jimmie Durham (whose magnificent retrospective is now at the Whitney).

Artists Space already holds a place in the annals of art for the show "Pictures," which named a generation of white-hot—and all white—American artists. "Unholding" emphasizes a parallel history of the period, with works by Pena Bonita, G. Peter Jemison, Kay WalkingStick, Alan Michelson, and Jolene Rickard. A few years ago, the Met anointed the Pictures Generation with a significant show. What if it did the same for this group and its peers? Call them the lekhamën generation, after the Lenape word for both "draws a picture" and "writes."

Language, verbal and visual, is central to the experience of “Unholding.” (The show’s title is borrowed from a poem by Layli Long Soldier.) In Michelson’s installation “Permanent Title,” from 1993, a series of charcoal rubbings on muslin sacks transforms the text of signage on buildings in lower Manhattan into a portable cemetery, evoking headstones in graveyards. Jemison makes witty use of words printed on brown paper bags in his drawing-sculpture hybrids, which split the difference between beauty and political pointedness. WalkingStick’s powerful paintings marry landscape to pictographic abstraction.

“Unholding” pays homage to the 1987 show at Artists Space, but it doesn’t literally restage it, which makes the ratio of old to new works feel lopsided. “Culture Capture,” a ghostly four-minute video about museum displays of sacred tribal objects, made in 2017 by the filmmakers Adam Khalil and Zack Khalil, with Jackson Polys, is an eloquent expression of the original theme, which Durham described as “us looking at them looking at us.” I wonder how the inclusion of other younger artists—say, Jeffrey Gibson or Sky Hopinka—might have expanded the view. ☺

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