

frieze

UNHOLDING Artists Space, New York, USA

For 'Unholding', Artists Space has partially restaged its landmark 1987 exhibition 'We the People' (curated by Jean Fisher and Jimmie Durham) with new works by a younger generation of Native artists. 'Unholding', which derives its title from a poem by Layli Long Soldier, reframes many of the questions posed by the initial exhibition, one of the first shows in New York to present contemporary Native art in an otherwise non-Native gallery space, by including the practices of Indigenous artists whose relationship to their Native geographies and to non-Native cultural institutions – to that American 'we' – remains uneasy, and decidedly outside the national (read: white) notions of the 'people' the 1987 exhibition attempted, with mixed results, to critique.

Two versions of Pena Bonita's serial photomontage *Stalled* (1987 and 2017) describe the vexed sense of belonging that is felt throughout much of the show. In its 1987 iteration, paint is applied to a grid of images of a Native man and his car parked by the side of a desert road to depict dancers, animals and landscape elements, while the more recent version incorporates cut-outs: a nude, roosters and various forms of text. In both, Bonita eschews the liberating boundlessness implied in the serial works of (white) conceptual artists and, instead, dwells on the terror of seriality's desire to make everything repeatable: contra the freedom of the grid, Bonita's Native motorist is trapped in a feedback loop, the car locked in place.

Adam Khalil, Zack Khalil and Jackson Polys's film *Culture Capture* (2017), displayed on a wall-mounted television near *Stalled*, investigates the imbrication of museum collecting and a culture of spectatorship, a major concern of the exhibition. The short film follows two individuals (their faces obscured by what appear to be burnt plastic bags clinging to their skin like goopy, reflective coating) as they tour an American history museum, using their phones to snap pictures of Native sculptures, relics and each other. Over all this, a digitally rendered bust of an elderly Indigenous male face flickers in the foreground. His facial features change as his head rotates, conjuring a temporality that looks backwards and forwards, at once reflecting an irretrievable Indigenous ancestry and looking towards a different future.

As Christopher T. Green recounts in his essay for the exhibition, the Native artist Edgar Heap of Birds declined to participate in 'We the People', arguing that the then-current state of affairs

among Native peoples required direct political action, not more exhibitions. 'Unholding' attempts to allay Heap of Birds's concerns through a robust public programme of events that concern non-art issues, including an acknowledgement of the Lenni Lenape's ancestral claim on the land on which Artists Space resides: Manhattan, named after the Lenape word Manna-hata, meaning 'island of many hills'. In 'Unholding', the connection between art and life, as with the connection between these artists and the larger US, will always be a tenuous, politically fraught one, defined in part by the usurping forces of a federal government and national culture that has long sought to deprive Native peoples of self-determination. With this in mind, 'Unholding' invites difference and disagreement. In a series of zines, pamphlets, posters and t-shirts produced for the exhibition, the artist-activist initiative RISE: Radical Indigenous Survivance & Empowerment makes clear that the exhibition is as much about the terms of representation as it is those specific works included. In this, 'Unholding' highlights and challenges the ways that art is shaped by both local and national histories of displacement, containment and isolation which have defined who 'we the people' are by disputing the very notion of ownership – and belonging – that underwrites the American national myth in the first place.

Shiv Kotecha

Above
Lutz Bacher, *Cyclops*,
26 mirror surveillance
domes, 70 x 70 x
31 cm each

Below
G. Peter Jemison, *An
International Lie*, 1987
(left), and *Liberty for
Sale*, 1986 (right),
installation view

Pena Bonita,
Stalled (detail), 1987,
mixed-media collage

