JAUNE QUICK-TO-SEE SMITH

3 Ibid.

JAUNE QUICK-TO-SEE SMITH IS A PARTICIPANT IN CONTINUUM 12 ARTISTS, AN EXHIBITION PRESENTING NEW WORK BY TWELVE CONTEMPORARY NATIVE ARTISTS IN A SERIES OF SIX PAIRED SHOWS AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN’s GEORGE GUSTAV HEYE CENTER FROM APRIL 2003 TO JANUARY 2005.
Jaune Quick-to-Smith, an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation of Montana, is of Flathead Salish, Fort Hall Shoshone, and French/Cree descent. In her latest body of work, The Silence, Smith invites the viewer into an environment of paintings as an active participant. Standing amid rows of paintings, one is compelled to contemplate one's role among hushed kinsmen. The shadowy, faceless forms cannot utter a word. Their silence is overwhelming. It speaks volumes.

Smith, an acclaimed painter, printmaker, curator, and activist, is known for her keen political statements. She believes that the answers to many of today's problems can be found in indigenous cultures and their straightforward and wise belief systems. Drawing from her knowledge of art history, her work incorporates postmodern abstraction and traditional indigenous images. Smith's art dispels stereotypes and sends a moving message through her use of cultural references and social critiques.

Displayed on two facing walls in the Continuum gallery, The Silence is a series of sixteen watercolor paintings, each measuring 30 by 22 inches. They are painted in a spontaneous, loose style, and consist of fragmented, truncated torsos—remnants of a silenced and diminished humanity or society. The forms, with varied palette and brush strokes, range from dark and somber, distinct and linear voids to luminously vivid, blurred metamorphic and organic shapes. These bilateral and reticulated interior views of the human body present what seem to be organs and structures within the chest as well as opposing views of the spine and vertebrae. According to the artist, these works may be "reminiscent of medical X-rays and even a fluorescent reminder of atomic or nuclear activity." The figures are depicted as generic body forms, but an innate desire leads us to try to assign each figure a sexual designation. However, their indeterminate features prevent this. They are androgynous, anonymous, and eerily mute.

In that context, these silent guardians evoke the human condition. Is their peaceful stance an unspoken demonstration against man's inhumanity to man? Or are the taciturn forms remnants of ancient warriors revived to warn us of impending danger? Smith uses the assembly of figures to convey ideas of human fragility and psychological tension that are visually and physically palpable. As simple as the figures seem, they are layered in meaning.

Resembling a dressmaker's dummy or a storefront display stand, the figures are silent on many levels. Today, with the spirited debate over the war in Iraq and the current political unrest, we live in a society on the edge of upheaval and change. The artist comments that these "are headless torsos that are mute, cannot speak or hear, and they have no comment, no thoughts and [furthermore] make good representations of a major part of America which for right now is not analyzing this government for themselves but accepting sound bites from the White House."

Although we may see reminders of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture in these fragmented vestiges of the human form, the artist's influences derive from various non-Western traditions. True to her Native heritage, Smith integrates indigenous American art forms into her strategically provocative work. Smith explains, "These pieces came directly from a series of paintings in my studio that used Plateau X-ray vision figures that appear on sally bags, flat bags, petrifiedpshs, and Salish house posts. Salish customs dictated that each person seek his or her guardian spirit through a series of rituals or vision quests. The spirits were separated into two classifications: those who gave wealth and those who gave healing abilities to tribal members who were designated shamans. In addition, another gift or "power" was given to the recipient. This could include skills such as hunting or basket making, or the strength to be a warrior. In accordance with this belief system, Salish people built both summer and winter homes adorned with carved representations or house posts of the guardian spirits of the highest ranked males and females of each family. These representations were created with a skeletal or anatomically reticulated appearance."

Another indigenous influence the artist credits as inspiration is the Mexican artist Jose Guadalupe Posada. Posada was one of Mexico's most important graphic artists. His politically driven illustrations were reproduced in cartoons, posters, announcements, and newspapers or broadsheets. Posada used skull and skeleton imagery to produce prints that mocked the upper class and well-known political figures. The result was an enormous body of work that is timeless in its critique and parody of Mexico's elite citizenry. Like Posada, Smith uses the stripped or skeletal human form to express political concepts and concerns.

Although at first glance the small watercolors of The Silence may appear to be a departure from the artist's usual body of works, Smith notes that the series is more appropriately described as "recycled." Such work reflects similar issues and offers a similar impact to her other paintings and drawings, but, as Smith points out, "with a change of scale or media becomes new work." The watercolors include an enormous amount of knowledge found in indigenous thought systems. Smith also warns the viewer of previous mistakes in judgment regarding the frailty of our existence. Her art compels and challenges us to look at contemporary society with a more discerning eye.

---

**Jaune Quick-to-Smith: Ancient Admonitions**

Professor of English and American Indian Studies,
Haskell Indian Nations University
Ph.D. Candidate in Art History,
University of Kansas at Lawrence