connections. It also evokes the disjointed, complex nature of contemporary life—and equally, the possibility of reuniting aspects of the self that are rent asunder by the everyday world.

Bartow’s depiction of a multiplicity of simultaneous states-of-being implies the possibility for personal change and growth. The artist has acknowledged that artmaking provides him a means of coming to terms with his experiences in the Vietnam War and the psychological trauma it caused. Artmaking has also aided his recovery from alcoholism. In his visual world, one cannot be reduced to one’s traumas or distilled to a single experience. What is most important is how one recombines and integrates all the elements of a lifetime.

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1 Personal Interview, 2/25/03.
2 Personal Interview, 2/25/03.
Energetic, gestural marks combine with delicate, hesitant lines and erasures in Rick Bartow’s artwork to create haunting images of a brilliantly colored psychological world where nothing is static, and animals and humans are constantly in a state of mutability. While these transformations reference concepts found in Native American spiritual and philosophical traditions, they also seem to resonate with the frantic pace of postmodern experience, in which situations can change in an instant, and cultural hybridity becomes an alternative to cultural isolation.

Bartow’s art evidences that cultural hybridity. He has developed a personal visual symbolism drawn from a wide range of sources, including Western literature and the oral traditions of his Yurok tribe and of other tribes of the Oregon coastal region, where his family has lived for four generations. For example, the animals that make regular appearances in his work—raven, hawk, bear, deer, and coyote—are important in Native oral traditions. But Western literary classics such as Macbeth, Othello, and Moby Dick also provide inspiration. Similarly, the art and cultures he encounters on trips around the world influence Bartow: aesthetic and symbolic elements from German, Mauri, and Japanese artistic traditions have worked their way into his drawings and sculptures. His art runs refreshingly contrary to the simplistic conceptualization of the Indian living in—or caught between—two worlds. Rick Bartow’s life experiences traverse many worlds. In his artmaking, he seeks to integrate rather than separate them.

The influence of Japanese aesthetics is evident in a visually arresting pair of portraits of a Raven and Deer Dancer executed in pastel, charcoal, and graphite on paper. In the latter, the dancer wears an antlered headdress that seems to transform the very shape of the human head. Human and animal eyes peer out from the dark mass of marks of these heads, while their male bodies are ephemeral, painfully thin, armless, and vulnerable. The drawings capture visually the emotional and narrative complexity of the characters that people the oral traditions of the Pacific Northwest.

Stories seem to lurk behind most of Bartow’s creations, and knowing the story may add layers of meaning for viewers, but the artist does not believe this knowledge is necessary. He ascribes a great deal of agency to viewers and challenges us to find our own meanings:

Stories or poetry will inspire the work. But if it’s a good image, I think it’s a great deal more than just a story. If it’s a good story and a good image, then really it’s up to the viewer. The viewer’s interpretation is, to me, as important as anything I put out there. As a communicative device, art is open-ended. I simply use a story to create the best image I can, to make something visually arresting. Once I’ve been able to capture your attention, it’s an open door. You can come in and look around yourself.

Certainly, Bartow’s dynamic compositions are evocative and absorbing even without their literary and mythological references. His expressionist style has been compared to that of Odilon Redon, Francis Bacon, Käthe Kollwitz, and Frank La Pena. But his work is very much his own. His dramatic sense of composition and energetic mark making produce works that are emotionally intense and sometimes disquieting. Frenetic gestures and large dark areas are sensitively balanced by bold use of negative space. Often, Bartow allows significant areas of the paper to retain their natural state, and these blank spaces heighten the psychological intensity of the images.

The titles of several works in this exhibition indicate that the drawings were executed with particular individuals in mind. The artist explains that he honors people who are important in his life through his artwork:

I always feel very beholden to people. As a recovering alcoholic and general ne’er-do-well, I know that so many times, if it hadn’t been for my friends, I may not have survived. I’ve been blessed to know a lot of wonderful, supportive people. For many years, these people would try to get me to see myself as an artist, but I just couldn’t believe that was possible. I kept doing art but then I would get drunk and burn it up, or give it away. It wasn’t until recently that I really came to understand my gift, and the responsibility it carries. It was through ceremony at the sweathouse I go to that I saw I was given something that could be very powerful, and it is there that I continue to learn how to change my life. With this gift comes responsibility, which in turn requires self-discipline and humility. Previously I didn’t take responsibility for it. It’s difficult to explain, except to say that it’s through people that I’m alive.

Much has been written about the transformation themes present in Bartow’s work, the artist resists attempts to label them as shamanic. “I am as much taken by the myth of Sisyphus as I am by Coyote,” he explains. “I didn’t have to use some pseudo-knowledge of shamanism or ceremonial rites culled from some anthropology book. Contemporary art allowed me to vent something of my native interest… It allowed me to speak of my firsthand experience.” Thus, his frequent merging of human and animal, of spirit and corporeal being, is representative of psychological, philosophical, and intuitive