

“Borderchild”  
Exhibition/Installation/Ideas  
John Sommers Gallery, University of New Mexico  
Jan. 28-Feb. 11, 1997

As a borderchild I walk the edge of many fences, many paths, many existences with constant deliberation.

And finally this, when the sun was falling down so beautiful we didn't have time to give it a name, she held the child born of white mother and red father and said, "Both sides of this baby are beautiful." (Alexie, 148)

My paths have taken me many places. The path I walk is along the barbed wire fence, a child with a foot in each world. The modern Native world, the rez (reservation), and the westernized technological world of the anglo. Two halves of myself that as time passes negotiate for co-existence.

The images I create fall in the cracks between 'purist' representative photography and abstraction or distortion. They are images from the world, my world and environment that are transformed by my vision along this metaphoric fence. The intimate view captured by the lens of the camera is combined with my visual impression of the spiritual power of each subject. In *Circle of Nations* Leslie Marmon Silko talks about the importance of the Indian with a camera. Native people with this tool, the camera, can reverse the voyeurism that has been prevalent in our cultures by the outside western world. She states,

The Indian with a camera is frightening for a number of reasons. Euro-Americans desperately need to believe that the indigenous people and cultures which were destroyed were somehow less than human; Indian photographers are proof to the contrary...Euro-Americans distract themselves with whether a "real" or "traditional" or "authentic" Indian would, should, or could work with a camera." (Gattuso, 6)

This modern technological tool provides our communities with records of the present that frequently contradict the westernized view of who and what an 'Indian' should be or how they should look. Modern Native peoples are not the romanticized image of the noble savage. They are people existing between tradition, and the modern technological world. They are Homo Sapiens who may be spotted wearing Nikes, Reeboks, or cowboy boots.

My role as a Native and mixed race artist dealing with my cultures is to present a view of our transforming communities. We are peoples of continuous cyclical change. The modern tool, the camera, walks with us on this border. The tension between tradition and modernity become inherent to every new image made. In the preface to *The Photograph and the American Indian*, Lee Clark Mitchell addresses this paradox. He states,

Yet just as art can endanger ceremony it can also play a ceremonial role, allowing a fuller understanding of one's culture in the process of recording it. Recognizing this paradoxical fact has led Native Americans to turn the camera on each other with increasing sophistication. (Bush, xxv)

As I walk hand in hand with this paradox my images transform and communicate a view from my changing culture. The images are somewhere in between. The camera is strictly a tool, not the sole image maker. I choose how the eye of the lens will record the landscape, objects, or person in front of this piece of technology. I continue to walk with this tool in my hand.

There was another who walked with this tool in his hand recording images of various Native peoples in the lower Okanagan valley during the late 1800's and early 1900's, which is now the Colville reservation and

many small towns in the state of Washington. His name was Frank Matura, a Japanese immigrant, to the area. From his contribution of representations of our people I have chosen images of his to be part of my historical ribbon. This ribbon of historical images link the lyrical large pieces to older generations of peoples that consist of my mixed race heritage. Family portraits of my Irish/English ancestors who came to the lower Okanagan homeland in the late 1800's are combined with stills by Matura of Natives from the area. Together they present a foundation for the contemporary people and landscape in the larger pieces to reside upon. A conversation, a link, to the past that illustrates the preservation of tradition in the face of modern technology and expansion.

This conversation or link is also established in the tipi sculpture. A larger tipi holds the smaller tipi that gives a more intimate view into my family. In the larger tipi the clear landscape and image of my grandmother represent the world. The image of mother earth and her physical image of landscape in our traditional Okanagan homeland. The links between all these pieces are not on a linear continuum. They refer to circles within circles that are a foundation for traditional and modern Native culture. Old and new generations combine to uphold our cultural values and reinforce to the outside Euro-American world that we have no intention of stepping down from survival for many cycles to come.

The ribbon of images flows into larger views juxtapositioned with the traditional home, the tipi. Along with into the wall of images, snippet views of the image maker are offered. (Illustration 1) It is my hope that the importance of young and old are seen within the visual language I present. Just as a view from any point within or outside a circle is different and flows into one another. My hope of transferring a piece of

my world to each viewer as they leave my circles and pass back into their own circle of life is the goal of my visual language. The importance of the circle and viewpoint around it are discussed by Hyemeyohsts Storm in a book about the Native American Tarot. He states,

...If the thing I were to place within our circle should be an abstraction, such as an idea, a feeling, or a philosophy, our perception of it would be even more complicated than if the object had been a tangible thing...The perception of any object, either tangible or abstract, is ultimately made a thousand times more complicated whenever it is viewed within the circle of an entire people as a whole. (Gonzalez, 33)

I do not speak for the entirety of my people, but rather present my view as one singular point around the circle. An individual in a group of distinct Native people.

### *Grandmother*

Roses, sweet smells, many things  
Scarves tied under the chin with flowers of pretty blue  
warm, true eyes, soft gray hair, once brown-black  
Soft hands that show their history in trails of wonderful lines  
A soft shuffle with a strong stance in each movement  
A new horizon, with your words carried upon it  
A quiet seat that needs no words spoken  
Presence  
Approval  
A look of knowing  
Happiness in a voice asking  
"When will you come home?"  
"I'll wait for your visit."  
"Good, when school is finished. Soon..."  
(4-25-95)

My grandma Jack is the foundation of our family like the earth to the human race. Her presence in my work is conscious and unconscious. Her roses, home, and physical image make up the first piece in my show. (Illustration 2) Without establishing the influence she has upon all of us

would make the other images invisible. How may I ask can anything be made without a foundation? The images and pieces are built upon and around her presence. The physicality of size and surface of the pieces are created from the base or foundation of her, like the people are created from the earth.

The surface marks and veil of color are another tool to transform the images into the visual language I have established. As the land spreads in the light of summer we see layer after layer of our mother that is there and not there. The encampment tipis, vans, and trucks lead us to the edge of the powwow trail in the summer of 1996. My images of landscape are references to the traditional homeland that in modern times is still here. A physical witness to the generations of Native peoples that were here before colonization and will be here for many generations after continued land expansion. As this sacred land is our home we will fight for land development to remain minimal to preserve the little land our nations still have.

In contrast to the summer quad of tipis and land layers, the triptych of trees with rising hands above show a glimpse of this land in winter. (Illustration 3) a time of rest and hibernation. An illustration of the vast number of trees that continue alongside the wide open fields. The hands are my father's. This image is not only about the land it is about my grandfather, who was a lumberjack. My grandfather Joe died when my father was eleven years old so I never knew him. The stories I have heard transform these trees into those my grandpa Joe worked alongside everyday. A combined image that also combines generations to continue the memory of those who have passed on. Like the continuing circle my

father and grandfather are brought together again by the third generation, me.

The images of the dancers are those of the younger generation. (Illustration 4) Justin, is a traditional dancer or tradish for short. He travels the powwow highway in the summer hoping to make enough in prize money at each contest to make it to the next powwow on this summer trail. I described the images I had made of him to my cousin and this is what she wrote, "A close up of a dancer in the faded distance, his figure still standing before me. Two million images dancing before me." Like many other dancers on the powwow trail Justin keeps the traditions alive with each step. My cousin Billie Lee wrote this piece about Justin.

Like flashes from crime scenes on powwow grounds nothing but fields of different nights, different times of meeting each other all over again, every time the first time. Memories ago counts the span of time in frames, segments of the profile. Hearts beat of the dance in every flash...Different thoughts come to mind forming the time I shared with you.

Arms stretch from the horizon on home. Making me feel energy even when I'm not with you. Feeling like I'm disconnected from you. You continue to look and feel for me and stand there and watch and waiting for me. Wondering if your heart skipped a beat, messed up a step, or many edges. Why can't you fall? What makes you so confident that you can dance on the wind, caring the sun? Rolling it on your back gracefully. The morning dance like a butterfly landing upon a flower. Morning thought landing in my mind being with you.

Everything stops for a second. All these images capped in one thought when I think of you the energy so strong. Tired of dancing, hearts racing. Enough? why no, I continue on dancing after you, for you, heart stops. (Billie Lee, Jan. 1997)

Like the description of Justin, Billie describes the triptych of Kelly, who is a fancy dancer along the powwow trail as well. Kelly's images rise

from the floor of the gallery to the sky. (Illustration 5) She dances for her family, for her people, and for herself. It is said that in order to preserve our people and our traditions we need the tool of education. We also need the active learning of traditional ways in our communities for the younger generations to uphold the pride of our nations. Academic education hand in hand with traditional ways.

The other summer trail many native people travel is that of the softball tournaments. The fastpitch players in these images were the champions in the 1996 Native Fastpitch Nationals held in Spokane, WA. (Illustration 6) It is my father's team. This year they played as the "Nightmares." They are also known as the "B.C. Arrows" that in the past won the Nationals approximately 8 or 9 times. To be honest, I lose track of all this. I was traveling from tournament to tournament, like my baby sister does now, when I was a kid. It is a family tradition that will last until the end of the physical body.

As the distinguished players of fastball win the championship again they leave and make memories for their families to remember for years to come. They are held up again as red rezervation heroes who make all the ancestors smile from the clouds and traditional passages above. The individuals melt into a collective plane overlapping and coming forward to make a whole image or team. They won with teamwork, the physical image on film is an illustration of this collective effort by these red warriors.

The man stands with his helmet and bat in place waiting for a perfect pitch to come to him so he can win the Nationals with his team, and become a red hero, and be one of those rezervation legends. (Illustration 7) The mesh of the fence obscures the view for the witnesses

to this legend making event. The triangles form a veil of pattern over the whole batter's box, scenes merging with patterns of light on the ground of the infield. Will G Man's medicine be good enough to work this time on the ball to get him a hit, or just maybe a home run?

These are scenes of modern Native life. Quite contrary and unimaginable to those who want the noble savage esthetic to remain. Like many other cobwebs in the towers of academia, this negative stereotype of Native people has got to be erased. We cannot unify as one world of people with these kind of perceptions. As I continue to walk along my borders I hope the walk in these two worlds will get easier as time passes.

Through my image making and walking in negotiation of two worlds I will travel with my peoples to a new consciousness where there is room for the unusual or 'Other.' A woman from my tribe, Jeannette Armstrong, has written about this continuation. She states,

A word in Okanagan, **xaxa?** refers to the meaningful essence of all creation. The word has been translated to mean "the sacred aspect" of being. This word is applied to humans, as being with the power to acknowledge or act in ways which seek to maintain the principle of harmony with creation and yet continue to make new choices for survival. (Cardinal, 46)

As we pass to a place of survival that includes our images, our traditions, and our people's education we will truly be traveling the road in between along the barbed wire fence. This place is also called a place of sovereignty by Jolene Rickard in the Aperture publication ***Strong Hearts: Native American Visions and Voices***. She States,

Today, sovereignty is taking shape in visual thought as indigenous artists negotiate cultural space. Unfortunately, the place where the Western-based art world permits indigenous visibility is in the narrow margin of identity politics. Or the official category of the "Other" in postmodern cultural

criticism, which continues to reinforce all of the old stereotypes. The trouble with this construct is that the grooves in the collective brain are deeply scored with what Robert Berkhofer describes as “the white man’s Indian.” The challenge is to jump track and cut a new swath for indigenous expressions. (Roalf, 51)

Whether it be called sovereignty, survival, or the place along the barbed wire fence we must find the passage to complete negotiation between worlds. My images and installation is an attempt to provide the passage. The negotiations are within myself and the viewer.

# *Bibliography*

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tanto Fistfight in Heaven*. New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 1993.

Aperture 139 (Summer 1995) *Strong Hearts: Native American Visions and Voices*. New York, NY: Aperture Foundation Inc, 1995.

Bush, Alfred L, and Mitchell, Lee Clark. *The Photograph and the American Indian*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.

Cardinal, Douglas, and Armstrong, Jeannette. *The Native Creative Process* Penticton, B.C., Canada: Theytus Books, 1991.

Gattuso. *A Circle of Nations: Voices and Visions of American Indians*. Hillsboro: Beyond Words Publishing, Inc., 1993.

Gonzalez, Magda Weck and Gonzalez, J.A. *Star-Spider Speaks: The Teachings of the Native American Tarot*. Stamford, CT: U.S. Games Systems, Inc, 1990.