

STAGING THE INDIAN:
THE POLITICS
OF REPRESENTATION

JILL D. SWEET with IAN BERRY

With essays by

KATHERINE HAUSER and BARRY M. PRITZKER

Foreword by W. RICHARD WEST

THE TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE

Marcus Amerman

Curtis had great timing. By the time he started *The North American Indian*, the Indian wars were over and the invasion and dominance of the White Man was complete. His audience was free to appreciate the high quality of his images because the subjects of his work had been subdued and were no longer a threat. The time was ripe for a “visual Anthropologist” like Curtis.

To his credit, Curtis recognized the beauty and power of Indian life and Indian people and was passionately driven to capture an unobstructed view for posterity—truly, a magnificent feat. Unfortunately, he was so successful that his work has had the effect of freezing the Indian in time. He captured a vision of an indigenous paradise. He showed us the Indian “Garden of Eden.”

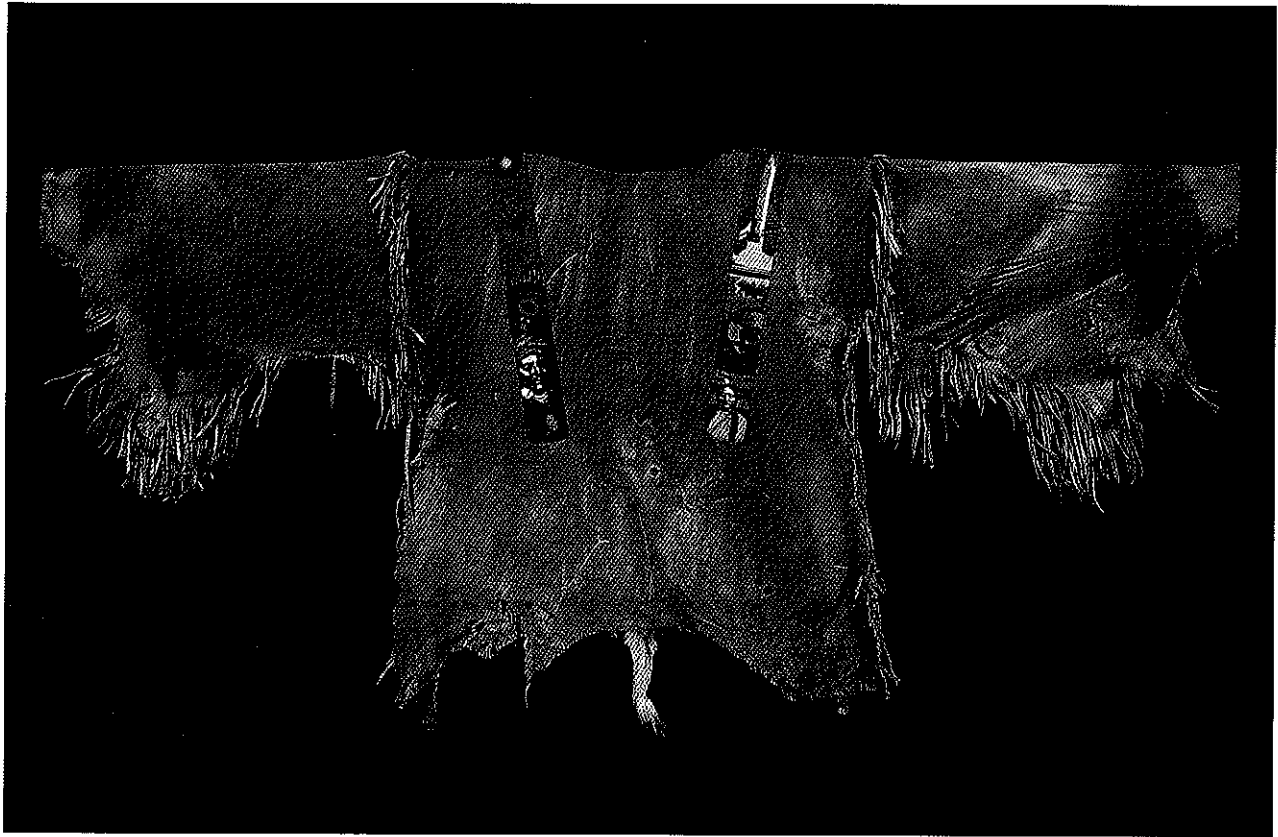
It doesn't bother me that Curtis edited the content of his photographs. It was the way he wanted Indian life presented to the world. It was beautiful and romantic. Sometimes, I like to think of Indian life that way, too. I also see the pain and the grief and the fear and the anger. And if you look closely into the eyes of some of Curtis's portraits, you can see it, too.

In spite of all that, I feel I personally owe Edward S. Curtis a great debt because I have rendered many of his photographs in beadwork. Over the years, I have spent thousands of hours staring at his photographs as I slowly obscure them with beads. From the beginning, his masterful use of shadow and light have greatly enhanced the impact and effectiveness of my work, and the popularity of his images have directly translated into the popularity of my own. I like to think that Curtis and his Indian subjects would appreciate what I do with their images and I like to think that I honor them by doing so.



Marcus Amerman, *Hopi Snake Priest*, beadwork, 1994

In many of his photographs, I can sense the mutual trust and respect that Curtis must have had with his subjects in order to achieve the aesthetic and emotional depth that lives in his work. As I spend countless hours rendering a Curtis image in beadwork, I often ponder what life was like for my subject. I try to imagine the sacred importance that they would bestow upon those things in their environment that they depended upon for nurture, such as corn, or salmon, or the buffalo. I also think of the elements of their worlds that they used to create their clothing, adornment, shelter, weapons, and art. To me, Curtis's Indians dressed and lived in the height of fashion and design. They looked both literally and figuratively, "dressed to kill".



Marcus Amerman, *Art is a War Shirt*, 1997
Collection of American Museum of Natural History, New York

Many of Curtis's Indians have long served as my models of fashion and integrity. I wanted to look like them, and moreover, I wanted to be like them, full of love and virtue, and confident in the value of their people, their religion, and their way of life.

And I am—and so are the other artists participating in this exhibition. If, as I often espouse, “Art is War”, then this group of artists is a war party of historical proportions. I trust them and I see them as “fearless” in the face of art. Like warriors of old, they are able to bypass individual glory and material accumulation for the greater good of the people. To me, this is an essential quality and a symptomatic trait of being a “real” Indian. One of my Anthropology professors in college used to say, “there are no real Indians left”, but when I'm around artists of this caliber, I know that what is “real” in the Indian has survived fully intact.

In my opinion, Edward S. Curtis was a “real” Indian.

I always say, “some artists make money, and some artists make art, and some artists make “history”. Curtis knew what he was making and he did it for the illumination of Indian people. I thank him for that. As an artist, I think you have to decide early on what you are making and what you are making it for. Are you hunting for food, are you stealing ponies under cover, or are you confronting your enemy, openly and fearlessly?”



Marcus Amerman, Buffalo Man performance, *Culture Embodied*, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2000

Judith Lowry

I paint primarily for and about my family and my people. I come from a long line of storytellers, from a culture of oral tradition, but I am also an artist. My paintings are how I choose to share my stories.

My Aunt Viola is a painting of my father's oldest sister. She was a very fashionable, well-dressed woman. This image of her was taken from a small faded photo of her on a day she attended a county fair. More than once my relatives and their friends of the Indian community were approached by fair promoters and asked to dress up, "as indians," in order to provide local color for the event. In exchange they were given a small fee and free passes to the fair. Times were hard and this was before the current political/social climate of Native pride, so they didn't see anything wrong with it. On her head she wears the ubiquitous plains-style war bonnet, so often associated with the image of Indian people whether or not it was an actual part of their traditional regalia. My father wore similar headdresses into the boxing ring during his career as a professional prizefighter. In fact, there are many photos in our family's photo albums of one relative or another in such a getup.

Road Kill Warrior: Last of his Tribe is a sad painting about the attempt to keep traditions alive in modern times. The Roadkill Warrior is on his way to or from some Pow-Wow, preparing to cut the wings and claws from a hawk for his dance regalia. In the background his child waits in the van playing with a Gameboy. His world is changing around him, as evidenced by his modern attire and the encroachment of civilization in to his ancestral home. The painting also reflects my deep affection and admiration for those who, whether in the Pow-Wow arena, or in true traditional ceremonies, dance and celebrate native culture, and by doing so, keep it alive.

My knowledge of Curtis's imagery goes back many years to when I was a young photo student. Before I began painting, I was a photographer. I do

not look particularly native and I have photographed Indian people professionally and artistically. So I have met that challenge and know what it entails. Yet, even my cousin, Dugan Aguilar, who does appear Native, says the camera sometimes cancels out the trust he would normally enjoy from his subjects. It has taken him years to gain the reputation among the people that allows him to capture the beautiful images he makes. In fact I suppose I look upon Dugan's work as the exact counterpoint to what Curtis was doing because he does it from the inside and with great love in his heart and with great respect. Dugan never says he "takes" a photo, he says they are "given" to him by his subjects. I don't think Curtis took that approach. I think Curtis was trying to document Indian people and their habitat. I can appreciate his work on that level. I would call him more of a photojournalist than a true documentary photographer. Like other photojournalists who would follow him, such as the WPA photographers, he was not above altering something in the scene to produce the desired effect.

I understand and have encountered many Indian people who do not care for Curtis's work or apparently the man himself. I had one fellow native artist complain that he was "mean" to Indians during their sittings. None of this is conveyed in the portraits. I believe he was very particular about not having modern innovations like safety pins or anything of that sort in the pictures. He was attempting to preserve the purity of the image he had in mind. He wanted his sitters to appear as though they had not yet been touched by European civilization. I do not know for sure how sympathetic he was in the moment toward his subjects but his photographs are elegant and very touching. I cannot pass judgement on any artist, we have Helms and Gringrich for that, and I understand that Curtis's motivations for working in the way he did, have become suspect in recent years. But when you strip all the rhetoric and debate away, there is just the beauty in those faces.

His term for Indian people, a "Vanishing Race", has a feeling of urgency about it. And of course, on some level it's true, even today. In the last few years we have lost so many of our elders, I sort of know the feeling of seeing an era pass away before my eyes. I am grateful that we have Curtis's body of work, for the moments it captured.

Anyone can represent anyone. I often represent cultures other than my own in my work. How meaningful those representations are and how enduring they remain is left up to the judgement of time. I do feel a special responsibility as a California native artist to reflect my culture and family's history with honesty and compassion. With a foot in both the Native American and European cultures I feel especially blessed with a unique perspective that allows me to tell my stories the way I do. I don't know how often it is important to me to take a stand with my work, except to tell stories with compassion and love. Love may sound like a very corny motivation for making art, and it is. But with the passage of time, if only that shines through, I'll be happy enough.



Judith Lowry, *Welgatin's Song*, 2001

James Luna

In my work I have moved between performance and installation. I do not think of these media as different. Sometimes these performances are recorded and the video recording becomes a part of the final installation thus creating a multimedia presentation.

I do not make pretty art, I make art about the life here on La Jolla Reservation and many times that life is not pretty. I do not need to go elsewhere for information, I have thirty years of work (a rough estimate) just exploring myself and my community. Our problems are not unique, they exist in other Indian communities; that is the Indian unity that I know.

There are many things that just need to be talked about, the many things withheld and the things that we don't understand. I see this communication as the first step in recovery. The social conditions of this community are many and interrelated such as alcohol/drug abuse, crime, lack of education, unemployment, cultural apathy, loss of personal and cultural identity. In much of the work that I have done I have met these subjects in a clear and simple way and thus have allowed my work to be accessible to Indian people and many others. Despite the many hardships we as Indian people encounter there is much beauty and fun in our cultures. I would live nowhere else as my life is filled with variety as I truly live in two worlds. This "two world" concept once posed too much indifference for me as I felt torn as to who I was. In maturity I have come to find it the source of my power as I can easily move between these places and not feel that I have to be one or the other, that I am an Indian in this modern society. Whether I like it or not this society is not going to go away, so my culture must learn to survive in it. In some of my work, I use the vantage-point of "two worlds" combined with Indian humor and many of the painful and dark subject matters become accessible. The dual edge of the work also makes it that much more interesting.

Curtis's images were first highlighted for me in the late 1960's, when a lot of multi-cultural things were becoming popular. I actually had a book way on before that, it was a child's book on Indians and there were these exquisite drawings, I still have it actually, and I did not realize it until way later when I saw the Curtis photos that those drawings came from those photos. They represent that image of the Indian that people feel comfortable

with and then, later on, I came to learn that some were posed, with the same regalia on two different guys, for example. It didn't surprise me because the pictures were too perfect. That particular time when he took them, at the turn of the century, that was probably one of the worst times facing our cultures, people were starving, and along that time when I heard about the manipulation by Curtis a lot was being revealed about what multi-cultural really means.



James Luna, *The Artifact Piece*, 1987

Those pictures still stand today, but the reality of the situation then is still blocked. Despite all of the writings and exhibitions I think a lot of people continue to see them as a romantic vision, and even the people that do know, sort of step over it, just like people kind of step over people laying in the street. You can't beat a good looking, handsome, Indian person, whether it be female or male. I would like the photos to be totally representative of what they are and consider Curtis as more of an artist as opposed to a documentarian or ethnographer.

Contemporary Indian artists are getting more opportunities to show because their work is just good work, and that is refreshing. Frankly I see a lot of bad work out there, I see a lot of bad thematic work, attempts at installation, attempts at political work, attempts at performance without really knowing the medium. Some artists leave their foundations like color and composition behind, and go for the shock or the laugh, and that is not enough. When that issue subsides the work does also, and I would like to think that better work will withstand time.

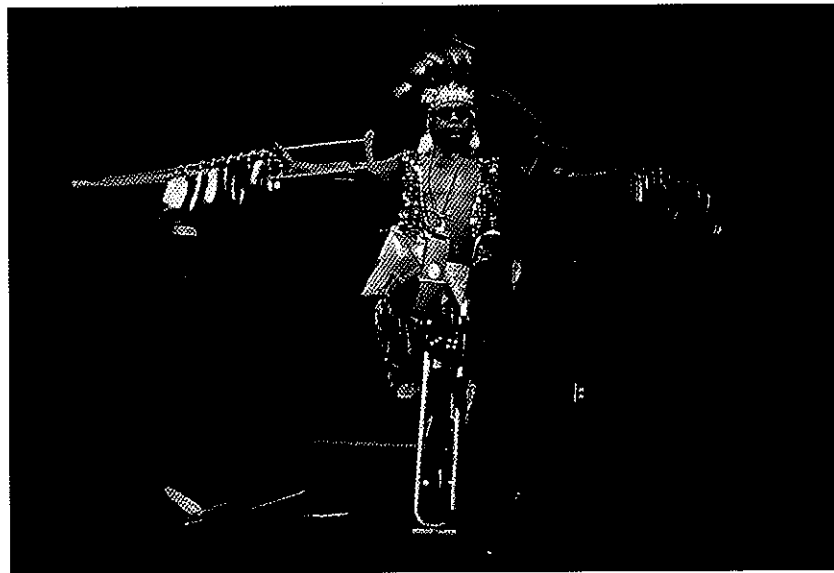
Petroglyphs in Motion began as a site-specific piece for Site Santa Fe. I was frustrated with becoming too theatrical, meaning a reliance on a monologue, reliance on technology, and I was thinking that my strongest work has always been more minimal. I think of myself as a minimalist, although if you looked at the work you would not think of that first. I began looking at this place and I want to respond, so I imagined the piece outside along a long wall and it was about shadow and movement and characters and I was going to light it with car headlights and have a drummer outside. I thought it called for something a little radical, but it snowed. So we moved it inside, where the cavernous space turned out to be very successful. The theme is pretty simple, you know it is about a kind of reenacting, or waking up, of simple petroglyph drawings and having them tell a story. When I look at a petroglyph, whether it be a figure or a symbol, I think about the artist, think about the time, think about the energy, think about the symbol, and just that little symbol as simplistic as they can get, I am just dumbfounded by it.

So I started with a whole cast of characters. I thought about politics, I thought about the Indian image of Santa Fe, and then I thought about the reality of the Indians and downtown Albuquerque, I thought of classic Indian folklore, from the coyote story, and then all these other things in between.

What I did not bank on was what I thought would happen outside happened even more inside. The lighting and shadows play a really important role and made a kind of Petroglyph on the wall momentarily. I am thinking in future work about some non-objective sounds, like a white video kind of fuzz, background, and so I was thinking about that rather than something that could be identified. But then I thought about, not Indian drums, but rock, and this guy I know, Darren Vigil Gray who turned out to be fantastic. There was no rehearsal, he just did it. We sat down before and I showed him the list of characters and said that what I really needed for him was not to respond to the characters and just go, and there may be moments where we would communicate, there were several of those, and other times not.

I was planning to repeat all the characters again, but physically I could not do it. I had done the characters and now I was going to come full circle, which maybe subconsciously is a structure of ritual, and I think that comes across. Although I am not up there to be a therapist, I am there as an artist, if you get that from it then fine, but I am not going to shout it. I think the structure of ritual, coming full circle, sets a nice tone, and it is a nice way to ease out, and there are things that call for not easing out and walking away abruptly and leaving people confused, disarrayed, and emotional. I was feeling something else.

First and foremost I am responsible for my own ideas. Certainly people want me to speak for the community, and I will just say what I said right now, I do not speak for the community, I speak for myself, I speak for my vision and my interpretation of it. When I first started school 20 years ago there was just a handful of Indian Phd's, now there are tons of them. I have been at colleges lately giving performances, and the other day at Cornell I was in a room full of professional Indians, young Indians, identifiable Indians that were working on their law degrees, doctor of this, and doctor of that, and I was feeling so good because all the work of my generation has paid off. We are not quite there yet, we are a long way from that, but certainly it is working, we are on the move.



James Luna, *In My Dreams*, 1996