

GINA ADAMS: INHERITED HEARTBEATS

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Although she is half Euro-American, Gina Adams' art is primarily inspired by and deeply committed to the memory of her White Earth Ojibwa grandfather. Abducted at the age of 8 to attend boarding school at Carlisle ("white man's training school," he called it), he never returned to his culture nor received tribal membership papers.¹ But he was the one who told Adams as a young girl that she was an artist – a directive she has taken very seriously. The Native North American history of forced assimilation and broken treaties became her obsession, along with the intimate process of making, "having your hands be busy, making something beautiful".... and often disturbing.

Her grandfather's painful experience came to stand for that of thousands of Native people. To honor their memories, Adams has channeled her love of materials, originating in the often demeaned area of "crafts." She speaks eloquently of clay, for instance, as a means of *survivance* -- a term coined by Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor to amplify and deepen the meaning of *survival*. Adams was taught by her grandfather to tan deer hides in Maine, where she was partially raised. She has learned Ojibwa and Lakota, and how to work with coiled pots, beadwork, and birchbark. *Survival/Zhaabwiiwin* -- her MFA thesis show at the University of Kansas in 2013 -- was an installation of three manufactured backpacking tents, overturned to "symbolize discord," evoking unprovoked massacres of Indians by the U.S. Military like that at Sand Creek in 1864. The tent poles were red maple "divination staffs," and the tents' synthetic fibers were covered with tanned deer hides, reclaiming her ancestors' culture and

¹ Adams has few regrets about her lack of tribal membership papers, which she associates with "a form of apartheid"; "No piece of paper could make that bond any stronger," she says.

recontextualizing “the sense of sacred and the ritual object.” The installation suggested an unbroken line of community as well as the artist’s own migratory life, and offered another take on the tipi-and-buffalo stereotypes that haunt contemporary Native arts.

Survival/Zhaabwilwin and Adams’s print titled *Assimilated* call up “continued remembrance,” she writes. “You never lose the longing [for] what once was, it only grows stronger, and its heartbeat beats in your ears and mind like an alarm waking you out of deep sleep. For me this work is about survival of the spirit, of my spirit and that of my grandfather’s people....” Moving between three worlds – Native tradition, the dominant European culture, and her own creative hybridity – Adams makes something personal out of the politics of a heartbreaking history. Nostalgia is tempered by her familiarity with post-colonial theory, which offers rigorous structures for her “yearnings.”

Adams is also aware of present-day life on reservations, though she was not raised in Indian communities. Her choice of basketball as the focus of her *Basketball Assimilation* project (which might incorporate a pun on basketry) reflects Native youth’s obsession with the game. But her balls are made of clay, again a material reversal – a resilient and flexible object that is also hard-core, even lethal. The banners she is hoping to install soon in the Haskell gym as part of the combine short phrases emerging from discussions with Native students at the University of Kansas (“Massacre is Murder” “Inherited Memory,” “Rejection Becomes Alcoholism and Addiction,” among them) in cut-out calico on white grounds, with silhouettes of U.S. presidents from Peace Treaty medals. (Ironically Haskell, now the only four-year Indian Nation university, was once a boarding school like Carlisle....and it has a strong basketball program.) Adams chose calico because it was “the first industrialized commodity made in the U.S. for export to Europe,” and it made many white men wealthy.

Even as fully traditional arts are still prominent on the Indian Market circuit, the use of textiles, beadwork, and other so-called “craft” media has been transformed by younger artists, especially by the heirs to second-wave feminism and those labeled “multicultural” or “ethnic” (like we’re not all “ethnic”?). These quotation marks are still warranted, because such materials when associated with women or “minorities” remain contested. The mainstream has opened its arms to a select few (including Louise Bourgeois, Yinka Shonibare, Ann Hamilton, and Ghada Amer), while others have found success largely outside the commercial artworld (Faith Ringgold, Judy Chicago). Yet despite a longstanding post-colonial critique of European/American artists who appropriate so-called “primitive” arts, my two favorite recent books on contemporary art and craft – Elissa Auther’s *String, Felt, Thread* and Maria Elena Buszek’s anthology *Extra/Ordinary*—contain nothing on contemporary Native arts.²

This is where Adams and a number of Native artists, mostly women, come in: Seneca Marie Watt’s piles of blankets, Algonquin Nadia Myre’s beaded Indian Act, and Kiowa Terri Greeves’ often pointedly whimsical beadwork, as well as Anishinaabe Rebecca Belmore’s iconic *Fringe* -- sewn as a wound across a woman’s naked back. In the 1970s, Harmony Hammond cited the ubiquity of the “stitch-like mark” in feminist abstraction; some of her own art was inspired by indigenous women’s traditional arts, intended, like that of Chilean Cecilia Vicuña, as homage rather than critique. Although boundaries have been blurred in the ensuing forty years, the gendering of textile-based arts (no longer limited to “fiber art”) continues, often by the artist’s choice. Quilting, with its communal and functional associations, has been canonized as a

² See Elissa Auther, *String Felt Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010 and Maria Elena Buszek, ed., *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011. Auther mentions indigenous basketry in the context of Harmony Hammond’s basket inspired work. Cherokee basket weaver Eva Wolfe is illustrated in Buszek. See also *Heresies #4: Women’s Traditional Arts; The Politics of Aesthetics*, Winter 1978. Essays on “Quill Art” by Carolyn Berry and Navajo weaving by Jean Feinberg (both non-Indians) provide the Native features in this international medley.

feminist art par excellence; the African American quilts from Gee's Bend, Alabama are shown in museums world-wide. Any number of feminist artists working with body references (Michelle Stuart comes to mind) have associated the surfaces on which they work with skin. Adams' contribution to this rich aesthetic has been to seek out worn antique quilts that are roughly the same age as the broken treaties that are stitched on them, letter by letter, with patterned cloth, as a way to "weave that over-arching sadness into a source of tremendous comfort."

For those artists who still feel responsible to a near or far traditional community, the goal is to make art that is both satisfying to the individual maker and comprehensible, attractive, or provoking to many in and beyond these communities. It's not an easy balancing act. Perhaps the most moving body of work Adams has created from her determined sense of recall is her series *Honoring Modern Unidentified* – historical photographs of nameless Native people veiled with milky layers of encaustic that stand in for the mists of time and cultural erasure – the loss of identity she associates with her grandfather.³ Sometimes the cloudy images are paired with simple earthen pots, suggesting both life and death. Rather than obscuring the identity of the subjects, Adams's encaustic layers can be seen as protective, guarding against the objectification that is endemic in such images.

She has done some exacting research on the unidentified subjects of these photographs, focusing on these poignant, almost invisible faces in order to answer her "yearning to recreate the past in order to grasp a sense of identity for the future." Many 19th century photographers (most notoriously Edward Curtis) dressed their subjects in anachronistic "costumes" kept in their studios to provide a spurious "authenticity." Adams scrutinizes these clothes -- "beadwork from

³ Having written about photographs of Native North Americans, I am well acquainted with those tantalizing files of "unidentified" images in museums and libraries across the country. Faces reappear in different tribal contexts, different "costumes," differently categorized, rarely identified, often misidentified.

several different cultures...a vest that looks Lakota, a pair of leggings that could be Assiniboine, a woodland bag, parfleche, or moccasins” – some of which she has actually tracked down to the Spencer Museum in Lawrence, Kansas. She has transported these patterns or symbols to the surfaces of her ceramic basketballs, once again reconnecting past culture with the present.

As James C. Faris has written about photographs of Indians historically corralled into photo studios, “the focus became a black hole into which freedoms disappeared.”⁴ Like Adams, other contemporary Native artists, well aware of the insidious back stories to even the handsomest images, are finding ways to use these photos with respect, or to turn them around, as in Will Wilson’s *Critical Indigenous Photographic Exchange*, in which he employs the wet plate collodian process to echo and challenge the clichés of historical portraits. Adams preserves these images by making something new and fresh of what has been called “the archival impulse.” More recently, in an extension of the initial *Unidentified* series, she unveils her subjects, who are surrounded with ornamental “frames” -- the delicate tracery of lace beading, another form of protection.

Finally, Adams’ large *Honoring Loss* series brings together the “duality, fusion, and hybrid identity” of her ancestry. Two of the clouds honor her Ojibwa great grandparents, White Cloud and Cloud Woman, while the third is the artist. The central figure could be an alter ego, a tipi/dwelling, or an ancient Lithuanian star symbol, once used to define religious identity. The lace beadwork, a hybrid in itself, was inspired by the artist watching her Lithuanian and Irish grandmothers make lace while her Ojibwa grandfather made beadwork. In the intimate process of recreating and retracing her own identity, Adams reminds us that while the sins of the fathers should not be blamed on their progeny, we live with some responsibility to those our fathers

⁴ James C. Faris, *Navajo and Photography*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996, 12.

sinned against. By translating the “blood trauma” of rage into the beauty of her artworks, she provokes us, the viewers, to see, to rethink, perhaps to react.