

Radical Migrations Through Anishinaabewaki

Mooniyaang

RYAN RICE

DYLAN MINER: *Tell us a little about yourself and what you do?*

RYAN RICE: Curator and artist. Currently Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

DM: *Although you currently live in Santa Fe, can you tell us about any important Indigenous activism/art/community projects being organized in and around Montreal (contemporary or historically)?*

RR: A key project which is beginning to interest many is the Indian Pavilion at EXPO '67 "Man and His World." The Pavilion was somewhat of an exercise in sovereignty for Native peoples in Canada at the time. On an international stage, we told our own story. Artworks exhibited included Norval Morrisseau, Alex Janvier, and others. Although it was a jumble of an art exhibition with varied didactic information about the state of survival, economy, poverty and

performance, it is nonetheless referential to an Indigenous art history discourse or path that we are still developing. The 2011 Aboriginal Curatorial Collective Conference, held in Toronto, focussed on the Indian Pavilion as a platform to review the history of curatorial practice and the sovereign space it created for the future. It was called *Revisioning the Indians of Canada Pavilion: Ahzhekewada [Let us look back]*.

In Montreal, I was co-founder of a collective called Nation to Nation. Collectively, we organized several projects that were local and national, receiving significant attention. They included "Native Love," "Tattoo-Nation," and "Cyberpowwow (1 - 4)." Other events/exhibitions took place locally in Kahnawake and Montreal.

LaMacaza was an arts/liberal school/college developed in the 1970s. Perhaps modeled after the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, it was unfortunately shut down soon after it opened.

Cree/Métis artist Edward Poitras attended, as did many other important figures.

In terms of media-based work, Jason Lewis and Skawennati Fragnito's media project *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*, located at Concordia University is exciting. Filmmakers and production companies—Rezolution Productions (Neil Diamond), Tracey Deer, Reaghan Tarbell, and Wapinoki Mobile (across Quebec) are likewise doing interesting things. In 2009, I curated an exhibition called "Hochelaga Revisited" at Montréal, Arts Interculturels (MAI) which re-claimed Montreal as Indian territory and highlighted the absence of our presence since contact was made with Jacques Cartier in 1654.

In this same way, Métis artist/historian Sherry Farelle Racette curated an exhibition, "Izhikawe: To Leave Tracks to a Certain Place," of Native alumni from Concordia University in Montreal. Quebec Aboriginals (who are linguistically divided) are trying to develop a collective of sorts, although it is not going anywhere fast.

DM: *If I am correct, you were in Montreal during the Oka Crisis. Can you talk a bit about the Crisis and its role within contemporary Native art-making? How have Indigenous artists/critics/curators/activists responded to these sorts of events within their work?*

RR: I am from Kahnawake, the "other" community involved with the Oka Crisis. As a community, we brought the attention to Oka by blocking the Mercier Bridge on the south side of the island. Our community was part of the standoff from July until September 1990 when we re-opened the

bridge, which was one of the bargaining tools. After this, Kahnawake became an occupied state (by Canadian army). The Mohawk Crisis/Oka Crisis made people/Canadians reconsider the nation-state and relations with Native people in every aspect of Canadian society.

In many ways, it was a revolution inspiring, in both good or bad ways, artists to be activists. The colonial project was being (and still is being) ripped apart. The Crisis opened up to show Canada's violent history. The civil rights movement started this, but I think the crisis was sort of a kick in the head for everyone.

Artists and curators have "benefited" in many ways, however. Mohawk artists and "participants" never really got to tell their/our story in these exhibitions or through their projects. Films, performances, books, and articles focus on Oka and how it affected them. The communities of Kane-satake and Kahnawake, as well as other local and Quebec artists have never really been included in this exhibition of the Crisis. Even after this year's twentieth anniversary of the Crisis, our voice is still soft (even if art has been produced about the struggle).¹ This is perhaps due to the experience of actually being there.

DM: *How would you say contemporary Native art and the issues that artists address differ in the U.S. and Canada? How does this become manifest in the Indigenous art world?*

RR: The issues are relatively similar in many ways as our histories have been affected by the same conquest and political ramifications of being "settled," as are Australia and New Zealand likewise

on board. The fact that only these four countries didn't ratify the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples indicates that we are still seen as a threat. Since 2007, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada have signed the declaration, however the US still opposes the declaration.²

Having lived in both the U.S. and Canada, the primary difference between the two is money. Having been in Santa Fe for a year-and-a-half, I am feeling more and more adamant that art in the U.S. is an industry (similar to the music industry), especially Native art. "Indian markets" are alive and well. Even though I find Indian markets dangerous in a sense, they nonetheless have an economy. Inversely, in Canada there is no economy for art, but there is a system of art welfare through granting programs. That is to say the granting process often feels like the welfare system as many artists and institutions are dependent upon receiving a grant in order to see a project move forward or for their doors stay open. It is a very rigid system. As such, the support of the arts differs tremendously.

DM: *As a Mohawk curator, how does Kahnawá:ke influence your practice, if at all?*

RR: Kahnawake is key to my practice. I am interested in forms of nationhood, sovereignty, and see art as a form of nation-building. Kahnawake is active in establishing our political structure as key to who we are. I also am inspired by the Mohawk Nation and Iroquoian philosophy and history. I build my ideas and work ethic around these concepts.

DM: *What role does the U.S.-Canada border play in how your and/or other Native artists work? How about the divide between competing settler governments (meaning Anglo- and Franco-Canada)?*

RR: The border is a contentious space for us Mohawk/Iroquois as our territory is crossed by the U.S.-Canada border. We are raised to know we are neither Canadian or American, but Mohawk. Our homeland stretches across Quebec, New York, and Ontario and we revere this space as ours. Because I/we absolve the border and think beyond that specific barrier, I have always moved freely across it, allowing it to lead my curatorial practice and interest in artists from both sides.

Kahnawake is smack in the middle of Quebec, which is one of the reasons why we are so defensive because the relations between the Iroquois and Quebecois aren't always good. As Mohawks, we resist the contemporary colonial laws and power of Quebec, including all what comes with it (language laws, land claims, racism, etc.). So we must deal with multiple settler governments who contradict themselves all the time. We come to the table politically as a nation, so we need to deal with Quebec, Ontario, New York, Canada, and United States in our political negotiations.

DM: *What is the state of contemporary Native art? What are some of the main curatorial and theoretical issues artists, critics, historians, and critics are working through?*

RR: I think the state of contemporary Native art needs to be in constant assessment.

I wrote an assessment a few weeks ago for a presentation at the National Gallery of Canada. The talk was called "Checks and Balances: Onkwehonwe Artistic Practice Home and Abroad." In this, I "reviewed" the last couple of years, as I did for the 1990s in another paper. This assessment of the 1990s was one I did two other times, as well. Staying as positive as I can be, there is still a lot of work to be done in this area.

The issues that I witnessed during the 1980s are still around today. The discussion of developing our own discourse, language, etc. is still very much there. Artists wanting to be recognized as "artists" rather than labeled Native artist is still there. Personally, I am very comfortable naming myself as a Mohawk curator, as an Aboriginal curator, as an Indian curator. However, I am not a Canadian curator and this upsets me when I am presented as such.

Creating sustainability and developing a presence for a practice is constant and requires commitment. There are many in the field who are individualists and others who are community-oriented. These are very different perspectives and attitudes, which have both good and bad elements. The field in the U.S. is still dominated by non-Native, white, anthropologists and art historians who have been on the stage since the 1980s. One needs to attend a Native American Arts Studies Association conference to witness this disparity. This needs to change. The Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, a Canadian-based organization I helped organize, has reached out to folks in the U.S. but people just aren't biting.