

***Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940-1960.* Bill Anthes, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 235 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Laura E. Smith

Bill Anthes' book, *Native Moderns: American Indian Painting, 1940-1960*, offers a welcome contribution to the field of scholarship on twentieth-century Native American art. Not just a bravura display of a few little known artists, Anthes instead pulls together the biographies and careers of six Indian and two non-Indian painters to tackle one of the main impediments to the scholarly recognition of a modern Native American art: the perceived disparity between Indians and modernity. Long envisioned and romanticized as the antithesis to progress, most white Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries thought Native Americans incapable of producing innovative or individualized works of art. Rather, they saw Indian artists working solely in a collective manner and passively perpetuating static, ancient traditions. When Native artists stepped away from their past aesthetic practices and used Western materials or pictorial conventions, many critics, scholars, and collectors judged their work to not be "authentically Indian." Using recent writings on hybrid modernities in which modernism is envisioned as an intercultural encounter and Mary Louise Pratt's vision of a "contact zone" where colonial Others are mutually transformed by each others' ideas and aesthetics even amidst an imbalance of power, Anthes proposes to challenge the boundaries constructed between art made by Indians and that created by the European and American modernists. Thus, the author intends to not just rewrite Indian artists into "the modernist canon," but to deconstruct the prevailing exclusivist understandings of modernism which have perpetuated racial and gender barriers in the art world.

After an overview of the shifts in modern U.S. Indian policies and the changing perception of Native Americans and their art from roughly 1880 up to 1960, Anthes sets up the next five chapters as case studies. Each of these features one or two artists who all demonstrate Anthes' vision of either a modern Indian artist identity or a non-Indian who challenged the singular notion and superior position of Western modern art and culture. The individuals are in one way or another a "cultural hybrid." They all are painters who developed as artists in the 1930s through the 1950s and all but one are men. The Native artists including José Lente (Isleta Pueblo), Jimmy Byrnes (Lakota/Acoma-Laguna), George Morrison (Ojibwe), Patrick Desjarlait (Ojibwe), Oscar Howe (Sioux), and Richard West (Cheyenne) largely grew up as marginal figures to their indigenous communities and/or lived extended periods away from them in large urban centers, sometimes in Europe. Most served in World War II. Four of the six received art degrees from Western academies. Because of their unique intermediate position between Indian and Western worlds, many of them acted as "cultural brokers," translating indigenous knowledge and values to outsiders.

Similarly, the two non-Indian artists portray marginal or dual cultural positions. American modernist Barnett Newman is the focus of chapter three. As the son of Jewish immigrants and an anarchist, he is someone who lived and worked on the borders of the American mainstream.

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<sup>1</sup> Posted to *Museum Anthropology Review* September 5, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.wordpress.com/2007/09/05/mar-2007-2-9/>. © 2007 Laura E. Smith.

Newman believed in the relevancy of Native American art to the transcendence of European and American racial nationalisms. Despite his restricted view of Native art as primitive, Newman gave new authority to the aesthetics of cultural and political outsiders. Yeffe Kimball constructed a mixed white/Indian identity for herself. Her personae and her paintings were observed by critics to be the perfect hybrid of primitive/Indian and modern/Western. Anthes also uses her biography to speculate on the permeable boundaries for defining Indianness in the postwar period, since she passed as an Indian for forty years. Each of these painters clearly demonstrates the author's view of modern individuals as global, not locally isolated, and versed in the values and visual expressions of at least two worlds.

Anthes further develops his argument on the intercultural nature of modernism by examining how each of these artists fuse American Indian and Western art conventions in their paintings. He locates Native aesthetic traditions in each of the artists' works through motifs that reference longstanding cultural knowledge or practices, sometimes ceremonial information, or the long-lived geographic locations of their particular communities. The paintings reveal the characteristics of Western modernism when they become innovative, individualistic, and abstract. Except for Lente, Anthes shows how all of the painters moved from painting in flat-style, realism, regionalism, or an illustrational style to a rejection of what they felt to be those restrictive aesthetic practices. Each then developed an abstract and/or more personal expression, but entangled it with Native traditions. The hybrid nature of these artists' paintings is the primary basis for the author's definition of Native American modernism and his vision for the nature of modernism itself.

*Native Moderns* insightfully demonstrates the benefits of using a model of cultural or aesthetic hybridity or of the "contact zone;" it creates a dynamic third space of creative possibilities in between two previously imagined irreconcilably distinct cultures, individuals, or aesthetic conventions. The problem is that the distinctness of two original worlds does not get challenged and ends up reinforcing the defining characteristics that made them allegedly distinct in the first place. Most of Anthes' case studies reinforce the dichotomy between Indian/tradition and Western/modern rather than dismantling it. He convincingly fuses the two worlds together in all of these artists' works, but generally stops short of diffusing the twoness of the worlds. Surely, Ruth Bunzel's 1929 study of Pueblo potters is one example of Native painting where the values of innovation and individualism are shown to be a Pueblo tradition, not an incorporation of modern Western values.(1)

In *Native Moderns*, Indian painters only become more modern when they incorporate those designated qualities of Western modernism into their work. Indian artists themselves become modern when they act more like Western individuals, leave the reservations, and/or get mixed with the other world. In the cases of Richard West and Oscar Howe where the author shows most convincingly how they challenged the 'westernness' of aesthetic practices such as abstraction by pointing to the abstract qualities of much Sioux and Cheyenne art of the past, the author still finds a distinction between what is Indian and what is modern in Howe's paintings. "Thus Howe's innovative, abstract paintings... were at once authentically Indian (in the sense that they represented a traditional and collective expression) and fully modern (in that they were Howe's innovative, individual creations)" (p. 166). Why is modernity never 'authentically Indian?' And, if an indigenous abstract artist, like George Morrison's work before 1970, does not specifically

reference a 'Native traditional and collective expression,' then is his work modernist, but not Native?

Anthes' thesis leaves his readers with these unresolved issues and a few other problems. The hybridity model for defining Native modernism apparently leaves some indigenous artists out of the picture. First, most glaringly absent are Native American women painters, as is made evident by the single paragraph devoted to Santa Clara Pueblo painter Pablita Velarde (p. 8). Secondly, shoved to the side, are the painters who happily continued using the modern flat-style throughout their career. Thus, while Anthes opens the door for a few male indigenous artists to take their place in the modernist canon, he maintains the exclusivity of Western modernist gender and stylistic conventions that continue to write many Indian artists out of the art world. This provocative study will hopefully inspire further evaluations of modernism and Indian art in the twentieth century.

### Note

1. Ruth Bunzel, *The Pueblo Potter: A Study of Creative Imagination in Primitive Art*. (New York: Dover, 1972 [1929]).

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