

***Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian.* Lowery Stokes Sims, ed. Washington, DC, and New York: Smithsonian Institution National Museum of the American Indian in Association with Prestel, 2008. 192 pp.\***

Reviewed by Laura E. Smith

The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)'s catalogue that accompanies their exhibition, "Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian" (November 1, 2008-August 16, 2009), is an impressive reevaluation of the work and career of this complex artist, as well as a refreshing contribution to the scholarship on 20th century Native American and American art. The exhibition, organized by the curator of contemporary art, Truman Lowe (Ho-Chunk) and the associate curator, Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), opened concurrently at the Washington, DC, venue and at the George Gustav Heye Center in New York City.

Edited by Lowery Stokes Sims, the curator of the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City, the catalogue predominately consists of four essays that contextualize Scholder's creative endeavors within the mid-20th century mainstream art movements, within Native American experiences in the post-WWII period, and amidst the new Indian art scene that burst forth at the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA) in Santa Fe after 1962. The volume includes gorgeous reproductions of the artist's oeuvre and ends with a chapter in the form of a roundtable discussion on the issues that Scholder's legacy raises for the present day Native American art community. The participants in this dialogue include Native artists who had known Scholder personally or had been his students.

Fritz Scholder V (1937-2005) was born in Minnesota, but grew up in North Dakota. He studied art at Sacramento City College and Sacramento State College after the Scholder family moved there in 1957. His artistic mentors and teachers included prominent figures in the West Coast abstract expressionism and Pop art movements such as Wayne Thiebaud, Raymond Witt, and Tarmo Pasto. Scholder went on to teach at the IAIA from 1962-69. He painted landscapes early in his career, but moved to subject matter in the 1960s that would predominately chart his success and fame, Indian figures. Although his artistic career spans five decades and he was a seminal figure in stimulating the growth of Santa Fe as an art center, Scholder has remained a marginal figure, at best, in most American art histories. His father, a Bureau of Indian Affairs employee, was part Luiseño, making Fritz one-quarter Indian; however, he would deny throughout his life that he was Indian, an Indian artist, or making Indian art. This was the catalyst for the exhibition and much of the writing by the authors in the catalogue. As indicated in the Forward by NMAI Director Kevin Gower (Pawnee/Comanche), Scholder's work reignites opportunities to examine questions that have haunted the Indian art scene since the turn of the 20th century: What is Indian art? Who is an Indian artist? "No single artist and no single life and career can resolve these issues for all times and circumstances, but Scholder and his art certainly present an important context for examining these questions" (p. 10).

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By and large, the contributors to this volume position Scholder as a pivotal figure in 20th century Indian art history, despite his reticence to identify as an Indian. The authors present him as an artist who marks a conscious point of departure from flat-style or Studio-style painting that had dominated the Indian art scene since the 1930s. As influenced by his teachers, Scholder developed a painting style that merged abstract expressionism with pop art. He encouraged his students to learn about and experiment with many styles including abstract expressionism. The rejection of flat-style painting by many IAIA artists in the 1960s was largely linked to desires to generate imagery that reflected their contemporary realities and furthered indigenous individual and cultural authority over the art-making process, Indian art exhibitions, and the definition of Indian art itself. Previous to this decade, Native painters who did not paint in the flat-style tradition were denied exhibition opportunities because their work was deemed “not Indian,” both by non-Indian patrons and by some Indian artists.

Many Indian artists in the mid-20th century perceived that flat-style paintings were tourist art and/or that they perpetuated romantic representations of Indians and past life-styles. The development of the new Indian art and artistic identity coincided with Indian activism and the national political and social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Scholder’s Indian paintings, as Paul Chaat Smith explains, provided “a new way of seeing our circumstances without the blinkered lens of art made in the interests of tourism and pacification” (p. 35). Rather than the painted warriors or fancy dancers of the flat-style paintings, Scholder presented dark, disturbing, and disfigured Indians: loafers, drinkers, and wise guys (p. 20). His use of the language of the grotesque, inspired by contemporaneous painters such as Francis Bacon, exorcised and reconfigured depictions of what he perceived to be tourist pleasing Indians.

Like his biography which waivered ambiguously between being Indian, but not, Scholder’s paintings of Indians present “real” but “not real” Indians, figures that refuse to be defined absolutely or confined by someone else’s standards. In this way, artist and scholar Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) insightfully finds that Scholder’s work was very postmodern: “mirror[ing] the conflict of many Native people from different communities...he himself [Scholder] was very conflicted about his own subjectivities and, in my opinion, never found a productive way to own it” (p. 165).

Paradoxically, while embracing Scholder, some of the writers in this catalogue and the round-table participants consider the anxieties, discomfort, and displeasure that this painter’s work ignites within some Indian art communities today. Artist Alfred Young Man (Cree), for example, who studied under Scholder between 1966 and 1968, decries extolling his teacher as a “real Indian artist” and that his Indian identity was possibly something he or his agents exploited to help market his paintings. “Initially Scholder was tyrannical in his view that we would never get any place painting Indians” (p. 152). Young Man further indicates that Scholder was influenced by the energy of the IAIA students to start painting Indians, but is generally credited, along with T. C. Cannon, as having “invented the whole movement themselves” (p. 151).

Along these lines, an issue that could be pushed further in future studies is that raised by artist Rick Bartow (Wiyot) regarding how Scholder’s Indians exposed the Indian realities of alcoholism and violence in ways that were meaningful to him. Ironically, it was the image of Indians as drunks, dirty loafers, and blood-thirsty savages, as particularly exemplified in Gilded

Age anti-Indian political cartoons and soap ads, which also inspired many of the flat-style painters. But the works by these artists were intended to dispel or bury those prevailing visions. Like Scholder, these painters opened up other possibilities for imagining Indian identities and lifestyles that negative images or stereotypes had shut down.<sup>1</sup> While Bartow found Scholder's style and subject matter liberating, is part of what makes his work controversial in the Indian art community his lack of reticence to approach painful issues or shameful skeletons in closets like alcoholism? Did some Indian artists, especially those from the earlier generation, feel that Scholder too casually or flippantly revived those old Indian demons and "degenerates?" And lastly, in considering Scholder's placement in the history of modern Native American art, is he not so much a pivotal figure as his is one who perpetuates, as well as transforms, a trend of expressing cultural authority and affirmation that 20th century Indian painters had begun several decades before him? While the works of Scholder and flat-style painters are different in many respects, they are also very much linked to an anti-assimilationist quest that was unlike any experienced by their artistic pre-reservation forbears.

As Jolene Rickard points out, there are many histories of 20th century Native artists that have yet to be written (p. 168). NMAI's decision to reconsider Fritz Scholder's work and identity is one valuable contribution to further the understanding of this complex period for Native artists and more prominently position this artist's creative endeavors in the greater American art story.

## Note

1. See, for example, Kiowa flat-style painter Monroe Tsa-toke's definition of his role as an artist to challenge the image of Indians as blood-thirsty savages in Leslie Van Ness Denman and Susan C. Peters, *The Peyote Ritual: Visions and Descriptions of Monroe Tsa Toke* (1957:xv). Also see Creek flat-style painter Solomon McCombs review of the struggle he had amidst the period of federal assimilation policies to make any works on Indian subjects in "Indian Art Struggle" (1972). Lastly, Oscar Jacobson, in recounting his role in the education of the Kiowa flat-style painters, indicated that one of his intentions in facilitating the training of these artists was to counter the prevailing hostility towards indigenous peoples (1964:4). In light of these individuals' insights, flat-style painting can be read, at least in its initial stages, to be as much a subversive art language as Scholder's.

## References Cited

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