

# Issues in Contemporary American Indian Art: An Iroquois Example<sup>1</sup>

By

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Katsi George left her reservation to go to university when she was eighteen. She decided to study art because she had always had a passion for making things. As a teenager she had worked with her grandmother and uncles gathering and preparing basket materials so that her grandmother could supplement the family income by making baskets. She also worked with one of her grandmother's sisters learning to bead the edges of leggings and skirts worn for ceremonies in the longhouse. While she was still in high school, because it was clear that she had the interest and patience, she began to work making husk dolls in traditional dress and then *gajesa* or Husk Faces for use in the longhouse. She loved making things that were used to keep the cultural life of the people alive. She also loved to draw and paint pictures that made references to traditional stories handed down for generations. Her interest in making things made art seem like the perfect choice for a major in college.

As a freshman student, Katsi was advised to take a 3 credit course called Introductory Design for Art Majors and another called Introduction to the History of Western Art along with three other courses to satisfy her general education requirements. She found these classes interesting, but it was clear that none of her courses related to her cultural life or the values she had learned on the reservation. In her Introductory Design course, all of her assignments, while they taught her skills in a variety of art media, did not allow her space to use the media she had learned growing up at home. Indeed, she was told for the first time in her life that basket making and beadworking were considered crafts and were valued less than painting and sculpture. She was given an assignment to draw a paper bag, and several to do various types of figure drawing. She did twenty, five-minute, ink paintings of a towering still life set up on a table, and a detailed, forty minute pencil drawing of a surreal still life built in a box and lit so that objects cast strong dramatic shadows. Other assignments taught her to design a series of small abstract sculptures out of paper, cardboard, and various odd blocks of wood. She was instructed to glue the blocks to one another and to a base and to paint her composition in a single color. She also learned about perspective, and did a drawing of a hall in the art building that used a vanishing point. Finally, she did a series of abstract color studies. She did not find the assignments difficult, and generally got A's on her assignments and praise from her professors. There was, however, no space to produce works that thematically related to her culture, and she really missed the connections she had experienced between her artwork and her culture when she was living with her family.

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Katsi also found it easy to learn the information taught in the Introduction to Western Art class. She had a good memory and had no difficulty memorizing the information about the works in the slides she was shown, could easily identify the works in the slides. and could supply the names of artists, artworks, the cultures from which the artists came. She could easily supply the names of the art movements or periods and dates for her exams. She had no trouble learning the material, and writing short essays about Gothic cathedrals, the difference between Baroque and Mannerist sculpture during the Renaissance, or about the painters of the Impressionist Period. She learned to define terms like chiaroscuro (the use of contrasting areas of light and shadow in paintings and drawings to highlight certain areas of a composition and obscure others), impasto (thick applications of paint on a canvas so that brush or knife strokes become an element of the composition) or foreshortening (to diminish the size of part of a composition in a way that complies with the laws of perspective so that the objects represented appear to be the proper size in relation to one another.) She did well in the class and learned about the art of Europe and Euro-Americans, and found the information she learned interesting. At times she could see the way in which painters at home used techniques she was learning about in their works, but she also became aware of the ways in which art at home not only was informed by very different themes and imagery, but also expressed different values about the nature of art, and how art functioned in a culture.

After she completed her entry level courses, Katsi decided she would try to find courses where she would be able to study art that was relevant to her own culture, and courses where she could do art work that thematically related to the stories and traditions she had experienced as a child. She enrolled in a Painting class where the course description said students were required to develop their own themes and do a series of related paintings, and after carefully reading the college catalogue she found a course on American Indian Art in the Anthropology Department. That course allowed students to do a special research project that looked at the artistic traditions in a particular tribe. She went home for the summer excited to return for her sophomore year.

Over the summer, Katsi visited various artists doing artwork on the reservation. She learned to weave baskets, to bead bags and *gustowe* ( Iroquois style-men's headdresses), and she did several paintings that made references to the creation story about Sky Woman coming to Earth. She was very happy to be home, to go to doings in the Longhouse where she could celebrate Green Corn Ceremony, and to listen to the traditional songs and stories. She especially loved doing the women's dances and watching the young men do Smoke Dance. It was true that life on the reservation could be complicated and difficult at times because there was very real discrimination and many people faced social problems caused by years of external and internalized oppression. Nevertheless, the reservation was a place where she could practice speaking her own language, and she could enjoy being with people who shared history and cultural knowledge that enriched one's life. It was the one place where Katsi was not asked to constantly explain herself and where she could spend her time learning more about her roots.

In early September, Katsi returned to college. She had decided that in her Painting class she would work on the theme of women in Iroquois culture. She would expand the work

she had been doing about Sky Woman and include works about the Three Sisters, Corn, Squash, and Beans, and a work about the role of the *Otiyaner* (Clan Mothers.) She also made her mind up do her special research topic in American Indian Art on the history of Iroquois beadwork. She was excited about the start of the new school year.

In both Painting and American Indian art, she was the only Indian student in class. Given that there were only fifteen indigenous students at the college and only one other was majoring in art, and that student was a senior, she was not surprised. However, she felt a bit lonely because she didn't have anyone else with a Native perspective to talk to about what she was doing in her class. Still, she was not prepared for the reaction she would get from her faculty and fellow students in either class.

During the first critique in Painting during the third week of the semester, she presented four paintings, two about how Sky Women Fell to Earth, a third called, "Three Sisters: Corn, Squash, and Beans," and one about Clan Mothers titled, "Women of Good Mind." All were representational paintings that contained imagery that was based on parts of traditional stories. The first, pictured Sky Woman falling through the hole in the sky dome caused by the uprooting of the celestial tree. The next pictured Sky Woman being flown to a water-covered earth on the backs of large water birds with outstretched wings, while turtle and beaver, otter and muskrat swam below. She hung her works in a group on the walls of the classroom. Her professor told each student in class to exam the works that their colleagues displayed in the classroom and to make notes on the works before discussing them. Their notes were supposed to comment on each work and were to be given to the artist who created the paintings after their works were discussed in critique. The twelve students in the class spent about twenty minutes going around the room and making notes on the other students' paintings and then discussion began. Students were told not to explain their works so as not to influence their classmates reading of the imagery in the work. Discussion was lively and interesting as students discussed the works of the first five students. They talked about the imagery, concepts expressed, and the formal elements of the painting. Then they got to Katsi's work. Since no one in the class knew the traditional stories on which her suite of paintings were based, the imagery seem strangely surreal and arbitrary to her fellow students. Their reaction to her work was confused and critical. They all admired her skills as a representational painter, but they thought the imagery was odd, sometimes too romantic or sentimental, and clearly not marketable in the mainstream Euro-American art market. Even her professor thought that this body of work was too outside the direction of contemporary art to be acceptable to gallery owners or art critics. Katsi left class with a stack of student responses, very discouraged and lonely. She struggled with thoughts about whether or not she should abandon her theme and adopt a less culture specific theme that her classmates could understand. She knew everyone at home would recognize the symbolism of her paintings, but she was painfully aware that without complex artist statements that told the traditional stories on which her works were based, that her peers had no way to understand the roots of her work.

Things were not as discouraging in her American Indian Art class. The anthropologist who taught the class spent hours talking about the cultural context for each of the works

they studied. Her teacher was not interested in the formal or aesthetic elements of the work, but she was knowledgeable about the materials used to make each object and how that object functioned in the culture from which it came. She taught the students that there was no art/craft divide in Native American culture, and that functional work like basketry, pottery, clothing and ceremonial regalia was considered aesthetically important in most Indian nations. Her teacher considered that pre-contact art and artifacts were a purer expression of Native aesthetic traditions than things made after contact and with trade materials. When Katsi did her research on Iroquois beadwork traditions, her teacher considered beadwork inferior to quillwork and moosehair embroidery, and she quoted Carrie Lyford's book on Iroquois art to argue that works done for the tourist trade at Niagara Falls were inferior to earlier works done on women's leggings and skirt hems. Coming from inside the culture, Katsi valued both kinds of work and enjoyed them, and did not make the same distinction between styles of work and historic periods as her teacher. She recognized that contemporary beadworkers in the community kept both traditions alive and enjoyed both. As Katsi studied American Indian Art, she became aware that the art works of certain cultures were more highly valued by Euro-Americans who invested in collecting them. People paid more for well designed Northwest masks and Totem Poles, for Pueblo pots from certain families, and for Navajo rugs than they did for most of the works made by traditional Iroquois artists.

As Katsi continued her education she learned that since early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a tension caused by people outside Indian communities in the Americas who wish to define and authenticate art by indigenous American and Canadian artists. There have been scholars in the fields of both anthropology and art history who have defined what is most authentic in terms of what Native people in the Americas made before contact. Many of these scholars have taught collectors to evaluate indigenous art in terms of materials and styles that attempt to freeze Indian Art in an ethnographic present<sup>2</sup> This group of scholars valued the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century artists and craftspeople as most authentic. When they enjoy objects which have been made since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, some of these same scholars ignore the introduction of new materials like wool yarn and trade cloth, beads, silver and nickel silver, that were acquired through trade and were used in highly innovative ways to create new art traditions during the 1800's. They call certain objects traditional and value them because they are old. Because the history of colonization and genocide in the United States and Canada means that there are a finite number of 19<sup>th</sup> century indigenous American artworks available, such scholars have

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<sup>2</sup> Ethnography is the study of the customs of ethnic groups or cultures. "... to freeze Indian Art in an ethnographic present ..." refers to the practice of defining contemporary indigenous cultures and art, in particular, in terms of their ancient cultural practices and to see change, not as a normal part of all cultures, but as a negative element that makes both insiders to the culture and outsiders feel indigenous people need to stop changing to prevent loss of culture. Outsiders who believe an American Indian person is losing their culture because they buy their clothes in the mall instead of making traditional beaded dress, or use a truck instead of a dog and travois or canoe, or use modern art materials or tools to make innovative works are all trying to freeze Indian culture in an ethnographic present. Being surrounded by people who insist that living indigenous people are not "real Indians" can cause some Native people to internalize this thinking and feel inauthentic. As one thinks about this issue, one needs to recognize that no one insists that Euro-Americans are losing their culture if they no longer live like their ancestors in 1492 or 1830 in order to realize what a strange practice this is as though only people of European ancestry invent "modernity."

attempted to train indigenous artists to copy the styles and materials used by their ancestors and have discouraged the innovative use of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century materials in Native art.

At the same time, the Euro-American and Euro-Canadian art establishments, that define what is valued in the mainstream United States and Canadian art markets, value innovative and often highly individual uses of media and artistic styles that continually define an avant-garde. Indigenous artists trained during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries in university art departments and in schools or colleges of fine art are pressured to do work that is both innovative in its use of media and develops an individual style. As she continued her education, Katsi certainly felt that pressure. Often, when she attempted to use traditional Native American materials and styles to fulfill the assignments in her university classes her work was criticized by her professors and her peers. By the time she graduated, Katsi was aware that other Native artists attempting to exhibit works that made cultural references in established, mainstream galleries, sometimes faced odd critiques written by art critics who did not understand the context of work they made. Not only were the university or art school educated indigenous artists she knew trained to do innovative artwork, but they also quickly became aware that successful mainstream Euro-American and Euro-Canadian artists were getting paid much more money for their work. Top Euro-American male artists can get paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for a single work. As a result, some contemporary indigenous American artists felt the need to decide how, or for a few, whether, they wished their artistic practice to relate to issues of community and identity. At times, Katsi felt terrible pressure because she wanted to make a living as an artist, and she didn't want to give up her culture even when it seemed to prevent others from understanding her work.

In university, Katsi learned that when indigenous artists decide to use new media, to innovate, or to develop a unique individual style, they inevitably faced pressure from certain conservative scholars and collectors in the Euro-American and Euro-Canadian communities who try to define what is authentic in historical terms. She knew that occasionally, such artists have also faced pressure from people inside the community who have been trained to work in traditional media and styles. This was more true during the 1980's than it is now because as more artists in the Native community have done innovative work, people in their communities have come to understand and appreciate that work. It has also become clear that there are artists in many indigenous communities who create objects needed for ceremonies and pow wows that are rooted in ancient traditions at the same time that they create highly innovative works grounded in community values for the outside art market. Further, it has become clear, that most contemporary artists, even those who never do work based on the historic cultural objects used by their nations, respect and value such works and their place in the indigenous community. As a result, as we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, pressures about "authenticity" and indigenous art tend to be a struggle between outsiders who want indigenous art to be traditional and other outsiders who pressure indigenous artists to make work that is "universal" and not related to indigenous culture, history, and politics.

Clearly, Katsi really enjoyed making baskets, beadwork, *gajesa*, *gustowe*, leggings, skirts and other traditional objects for use in the community and she continued to study with her elders who made them when she was home during the summer, but she also wanted to be an artist who showed her work in galleries and museums and who could make a decent living marketing her work as an artist. Because she had decided to prepare to go to graduate school in art, she knew that she needed to put together a portfolio that would get her accepted into a good art school where she could earn her Master of Fine Arts degree. She wanted to continue to do work that related to her cultural roots, but she felt unsure whether or not she would be accepted for graduate school if people on the admissions committee did not understand or value Iroquois aesthetic traditions.

In preparation for creating and documenting a body of work to submit to graduate admissions committees, she decided to study the work of established Iroquois women artists who exhibited internationally, and whose work was written about by scholars in a variety of exhibit catalogues. She began to examine the works of two highly innovative indigenous artists from the Haudenosaunee<sup>3</sup> Confederacy who use contemporary media to create works that relate in powerful ways to values that are important in their communities. She decided to explore ways in which their work raises cultural issues inside the indigenous communities from which they come, as well as ways in which their work addresses a larger non-Indian audience.

Katsi decided to study works by Jolene Rickard (Tuscarora) and Shelley Niro (Mohawk) who use photography and a variety of other art media including installation to reflect on Haudenosaunee culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. No one had taught her about the works of either artist when she was at the university, but she had read about their work on-line when she was trying to find articles written about contemporary Iroquois art. In doing their work, these artists critique a colonial discourse<sup>4</sup> that seeks to make the art of their nations invisible. Raised like Katsi, in Iroquois communities noted for their orality; they are both aware of the way that story, ceremony, history, and a sense of sovereignty are passed down from voice to ear, remembered and practiced, Rickard and Niro have both used national imagery as well as irony and in Niro's case— a developed sense of humor— to talk about the way community resists erasure. By examining visual strategies in several works by each artist, Katsi wanted to explore the use of art as a visual language that addresses issues of cultural survival and de-centers dominating U.S. and Canadian discourse about indigenous nations. Katsi was well aware

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<sup>3</sup> Haudenosuane (People Who Build) is the word in the Iroquois language used to name the Confederacy of people called the Iroquois Confederacy by the French and Americans, and Six Nations Confederacy by Anglo-Canadians.

<sup>4</sup> Colonial discourse refers to the world view developed by settlers to marginalize Native nations and make the story of the people who immigrated to the Americas from Europe the most important or central story about the American continents. In colonial discourse stories about the founding of the settler states of Canada and the U.S. become “mainstream” history and concepts like “Manifest Destiny” are developed to rationalize the violence of the conquest. “Manifest Destiny” is the notion that Europeans had a God-given destiny to conquer Native people in the Americas because they were pagan and primitive and the Europeans were Christian and civilized.

that both these artists most often showed their work in exhibits with other Native artists rather than in mainstream galleries, but they showed at prestigious museums that showed Native art in the United States, Canada, and Germany, and Shelley Niro had showed a work at the Venice Biennale.

Jolene Rickard has worked as an artist since the early 1980's, and began a visual dialogue about life in the community at Tuscarora in her early photographs like, "Reservation Rust,"



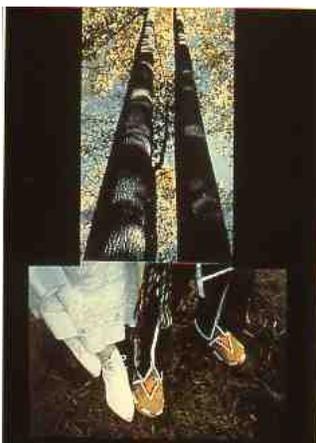
Reservation Rust

or her light boxes like, "Our Medicine,"



Our Medicine

that was part of *Women of Sweetgrass, Cedar, and Sage*, the first national touring exhibit of American Indian Women's Art that opened at The American Indian Community House Gallery in New York City in June of 1985. These works were followed by a series of works that explored topics of importance to citizens of the nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. That series had been shown at American Indian Contemporary Art Gallery in San Francisco. As part of this series of photocollages, Rickard created the work "Two Row Wampum,"



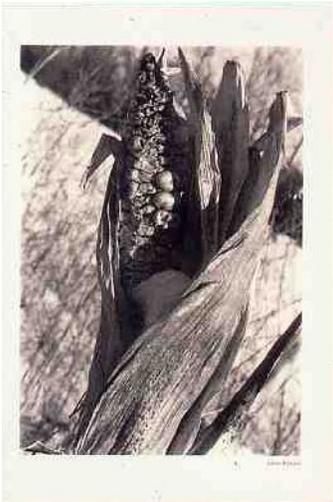
Two Row Wampum

written about by Lucy Lippard in her book *Mixed Blessing* and by Gail Tremblay for an article in *Views*, the publication of The Photographic Resources Center.

This body of work helped give the art of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy greater visibility in the art world. In many ways, Rickard's work, even in this early period, privileged the Haudenosaunee viewer, by making visual references to wampum belts, passages in the Great Good Law that is the constitution of the Confederacy and other oral passages and stories. Her work, "Two Row Wampum," for example, makes two parallel tree trunks into a visual metaphor for the rows of purple beads on a wampum belt that marks a treaty between the Iroquois and the Dutch. The belt is an object used to remind each nation of their agreement to remain separate, or in the language of the treaty to stay in their own boat. The photo also pictures the feet of a Euro-American bride and Native American groom, so it makes complex references to mixed marriages in contemporary society. Outsiders to the culture may enjoy the visual elements in this photo/collage, but may find reading deeper meanings of the work difficult without research. By placing Haudenosaunee life at the center of her work and making other cultural systems less important, Rickard defines her art in opposition to the cultural values of the U.S., settler state. She allows her art to undo definitions of "Native" art derived from an anthropological discourse about material culture that tries to lock indigenous visual culture into an "ethnographic present" that is defined as outside contemporary movements in the art world. Katsi was impressed that Lucy Lippard, a Euro-American Art Historian and cultural critic had bothered to learn about wampum and the stories related to it in order to write about this collage in her book on multicultural art called *Mixed Blessings*.

Katsi learned that during the 1990's, Rickard did photographic works and an installation about corn that explored native corn as a metaphor, not only for the state of the Tuscarora Nation but also for the health of the land claimed by the United States which surrounds that nation. Rickard explored the effects of living in a dominating country that exploits and pollutes land as a usable commodity. It has long been the role of Rickard's family to

preserve the native corn seeds for her nation. Her use of corn and the local knowledge of its role as sister who feeds and keeps the people alive in a circle where the people are also responsible for nurturing and preserving the life of the corn, makes this body of work particularly evocative of Tuscarora values. Thinking back to her own series of paintings about the “Three Sisters: Corn, Squash and Beans,” Katsi was excited about the way that Rickard chose this as her theme. For the 5<sup>th</sup> Heard Biennial ( the Heard is a Native American Museum in Phoenix, Arizona) in 1991, Rickard created a triptych, “The Blight Is Upon Us” that contained three images, one of a corn husk doll laying in the snow , one of a blighted ear of corn and one of a healthy ear of corn. To Katsi, these were very moving works.



The Blight is Upon Us

In 1994, Rickard did the installation “Cracked Shell, for the exhibit, *Watchful Eyes: Native American Women*.



*Cracked shell*

In her statement about the piece, she wrote:

“Cracked Shell” is a visual condition report on our lives within the territories of the Haudenosaunee. A warning and an honoring, “Cracked Shell” floats on the back of the great turtle where Skywoman fell and brought our kind to this world. “Cracked Shell” is made from the pounding of our corn. The dust becomes mush and feeds the spirits which protect us. “Cracked Shell” locates the scars on the land that ooze toxins. The chemical industry landed in Niagara Falls, New York during the 1940’s and pumped the worst poisons from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century into the Niagara River which pours into Lake Ontario. Love Canal, Bloody Run and Modern Landfill surround the Tuscarora boundaries. The tailings from the Manhattan Project were used to as fill for the road where I grew up. “Cracked Shell” represents the inside looking out and the outside looking in. It is the ideological divide that was illustrated by the *Two Row Wampum* upon contact with the West.

She ended her statement by saying, ““Cracked Shell” is the skin that connects my life to yours.” In this piece where braids of sister corn from Tuscarora are given the center place in a space created around it by a circle of photographs attached to strings weighted by stones, it is clear that the indigenous nation is the center looking out and the perspective that is applied to understanding the ways of the world is an indigenous perspective. It is through those values that one comes to understand the meaning of modernity and its effect on the lives both of Tuscarora and others inhabiting the land in that part of the world.

In 2000, Rickard completed a complex, multimedia installation called “Corn Blue Room”



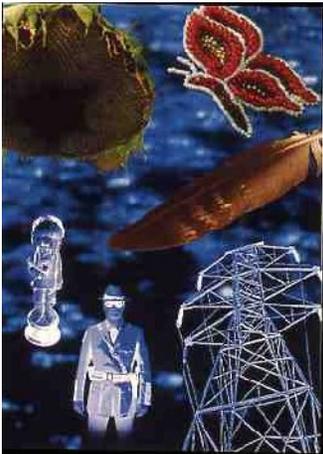
*Corn Blue Room*

for an exhibit called *Reservation X: The Power of Place*, that was held at the National Museum of the American Indian George Gustav Heye Center in New York City and the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec. Like her installation, “Cracked Shell” she hung braids of dry corn from the ceiling in a longhouse space she created using illuminated photographs mounted on black poles.



*Corn Blue Room Two*

In this installation the corn is colored with blue light. She also uses projections from an interactive CD she created for this work. The work explores the negative and positive effects of modern technology on the Tuscarora Nation and “in particular the hydroelectric project that took a third of her community’s land.” (quoted from the brochure for the exhibit)

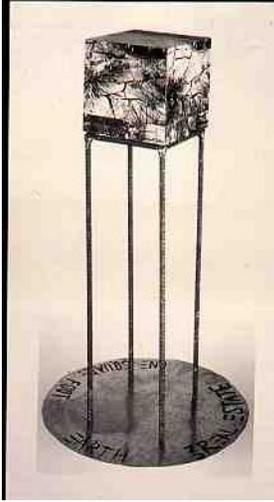


*Corn Blue Room Detail*

The issue of this dam is one that Jolene has been aware of all her life. When she was an infant, she was placed on the ground in front of the bulldozers in an attempt to try to stop the building of the dam and the flooding of the reservation.

Indeed, Jolene Rickard has always had a sense of the importance of land and control of resources as part of the equation necessary to maintaining the sovereignty of indigenous nations. She revisits this subject in a work, “One Square Foot of Earth or One Square Foot of Real Estate—You Decide #2,”

which she first built in 1993 and then redesigned a decade later for the *Lifeworlds—Artscapes: Contemporary Iroquois Art* exhibit.



*One Square Foot of Real Estate-You Decide #2*

That exhibit opened at the Museum of Weltkultren in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, and then traveled to Zurich, Switzerland and to Brantford, Ontario. In her statement for the catalogue for that exhibit she writes:

What's left to mine from the intellectual terrain of land for an Indian woman? It's a cliché—or that's what a sharp cultural theorist would quip. Environmentalist desire will be stoked because an Indian really cares about "Mother Earth." "Post-feminists" should wail on this work as evidence of gender balance gone bad, as Post-colonialists ignore the ongoing dispossession of indigenous peoples in the Americas. Go ahead, take another chunk of my skin. I'll heal thick with scars. Be sure to stuff your treaties into the place that was once mine.

For Rickard the question of land is not tied to other's romantic stereotypes of Indians and the Earth, but a question of relationship to national territory that has supported and continues even in its current damaged state to support the life of the people.

In her essay, "Indigenous is Local" in Jessup and Bagg's book, *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery*, Rickard writes:

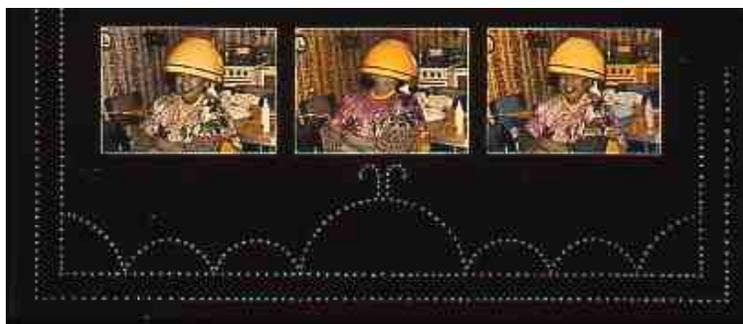
The framing of indigenous artists as coming from "sovereign" nations was not recognized in the art world. It could be argued that in today's transnational environment, when artists of any nation exhibit, the nation or ethnicity expressed is not important for a contextual framing of the work. Indeed, if the audience completely understood the subjugated relationship between recognized nations

and unrecognized ones— including most indigenous people globally— the discussion could move elsewhere. I am suggesting, however, that an understanding of the term “self-determination” as “sovereignty” is as critical a framing for indigenous artists as “gaze” is to the gendered discourse. The fundamental issue is the exposure of an inequitable power relationship. By making sovereignty part of a national and international dialogue, museums shift the boundaries of control for the maker, the Native Nation, the gallery and society.

Furthermore, Jolene Rickard, in her work as an exhibits designer at the National Museum of the American Indian, has applied such thinking not only to works by her own people, but to the display of indigenous work from throughout the Americas. The historical exhibits she designed in collaboration with Paul Chaat Smith, have challenged the dominating culture’s anthropological readings of objects made by indigenous artists in ways that have unsettled numerous critics from the U.S. settler state.

Katsi, was excited by her study of Jolene’s work, but it was clear that Rickard’s work was best understood by Iroquois people, and that people in the Euro-American art world had a lot of homework to do to understand this work. She thought back on her own experiences in her Painting course and wondered what reactions students would have trying to interpret Rickard’s imagery, and she was also aware that some people might be angry about Rickard’s political views. She knew that her fellow students would not call Jolene Rickard’s work romantic. She thought about reviews of Rickard’s exhibit design for the National Museum of the American Indian and how many white newspapers complained that the failure to label objects with ethnographic information made it difficult for people to understand the cultural context of the works. Katsi understood and enjoyed Rickard’s works because, as a cultural insider, she knew the stories and customs to which Rickard’s body of works refer. But Rickard clearly expected non-Indians to do their homework before they could understand the deeper levels of her work. There were sophisticated formal elements that anyone could appreciate as they approached Richard’s work, but the deeply cultural elements that were most moving to Katsi were not going to be obvious to outsiders.

Next, Katsi began her study of the works of Shelley Niro, a Mohawk artist whose family is from Six Nations Reserve in Ontario. Niro’s innovative work is also grounded in a Haudenosaunee aesthetic. Like Rickard, Niro privileges the Haudensaunee viewer by using images that are part of a visual language that grows out of Mohawk Nation stories, treaties, laws, worldview, and aesthetics, though, at times, she is likely to explore cultural contradictions with a lively sense of humor which can take a viewer by surprise. This has been evident since series of photographs she did in the 1990’s like “Mohawks in Beehives,” and “This Land is Mime Land.” For example in her work, “The Iroquois is a Highly Developed Matriarchal Culture,”



*The Iroquois is a Highly Developed Matriarchal Culture*

she mounts three hand colored pictures of her mother under a hair dryer in a black mat which is pierced with holes to create a design that refers directly to the Haudenosaunee Creation Story in which Sky Woman falls to earth. This design, which is often beaded on women's leggings and skirts, instantly makes Haudenosaunee viewers think of their creation story and the first mother in a matrilineal society. At the same time she examines the way in which contemporary society works to define women's roles and standards of beauty. In a statement about the piece and its title in the *Watchful Eyes* catalogue, she writes it "is a play on anthropological notions. It [the title] is one of those sentences that I have heard all my life. I wanted to make fun of the acceptance of what other people said about the society that I come from. Since I come from a reserve where domestic violence is high, I wanted to ask, "If we are a matriarchal society why does all this violence happen?" She also points out, "Her [my mother's] humor is very clear in the way she placed herself in the photograph." In this work, it is Niro's sense of irony about a world that understands her culture in a way that is different from the ways she experiences it that motivates her work.

Niro completed a short film called *The Shirt* to show in the American Indian exhibit at the Venice Biennale in 2003. In it, she cast Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie and dressed her in a series of shirts which talk explicitly about the ways in which indigenous people experienced American history.



*The Shirt, Detail*

Between each segment which has Hulleah wearing a tee shirt with different text and a bandana printed with an American flag, Niro shows moving images of the landscape in Iroquois territory. The final picture of Hulleah



*The Shirt, Detail*

wearing a shirt quips that all she gets is a shirt. In her next appearance



*The Shirt, Detail*

Hulleah has no shirt and no bandana. The final frames of the piece



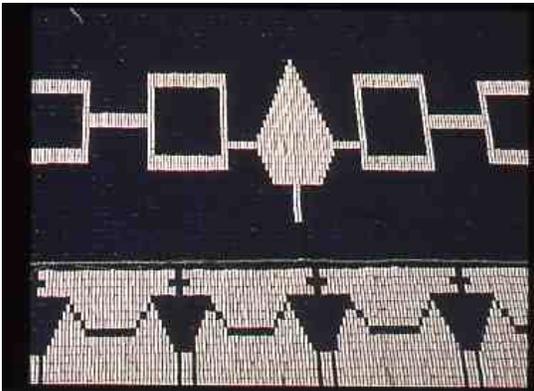
*The Shirt, Detail*

show a pretty white woman wearing the shirt and bandana which is tied around her neck. This work speaks to the experience of people in hundreds of native nations on this continent, but at the same time, is clearly grounded in the landscape and territory of the Haudenosaunee people,

Katsi's favorite Niro film, *Suite Indian*, was finished in 2005 and is a fascinating study in Iroquois creativity. It starts with a reference to the story of Hiawatha



and the Peacemaker, at the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, but clearly the prologue of the film is an enactment with references to the modern 21<sup>st</sup> century world in which we live. Starting with the contemporary shirt that Hiawatha wears, the prologue continues with a series of short beautiful portraits of contemporary Iroquois creators of objects that help to preserve cultural traditions needed in the community. The viewer sees them using modern tools to make beautiful things. We encounter Christine Skye, Cornbread maker, Ken Maracle, Wampum Belt Maker. Lorna Thomas Hill, Beadworker, Vince Bombery, Sculptor, Bunny Doxtater, Corn Husk Doll Maker, and Samuel Thomas, Moccasin Maker.



*Suite Indian Segment on Ken Maracle, Wampum Maker*

*Lorna Thomas Hill, Beadworker*

Several of the objects we see them make appear as objects or images in the episodes that follow.

The first episode after her portraits of artists is called “Mars Thunderchild Gets a Calling.”



*Segment on Lorna Thomas Hill, Beadworker*



*Mars Thunderchild Gets a Calling*

Niro's set designer creates, in Mar's bedroom, an incredible installation of objects that speak to Mars' interests and struggles with issues of identity. We see the beadwork and moccasins we just saw made, posters of work by Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, pictures of Sitting Bull and Albert Einstein, small plastic Indian warriors like one used to find in cereal boxes, and all sorts of crafted or kitsch objects that a girl might collect. Mars is dreaming, and appears to wake up for a phone call from Sitting Bull. We hear her side of the conversation as she tries to sort out her identity and relative comfort in relation to her understanding of who Sitting Bull was and his experience. At one point in the scene she puts on the beaded crown, and slashes the air with a knife then eats an apple, that fruit which is red on the outside and white on the in. She struggles with her own sense of comfort and achievement as she compares herself with native people in previous generations then talks about her reactions to Indian people living on the street. Sitting Bull appears and gives her a strange kitsch object,



*Suite Indian, Mars Thunderchild Gets a Calling, detail*

half scepter, half war club in its form, but totally useless. It is a mirror ball set in a handle wrapped with yellow ribbons from which hang white and purple dyed chicken feathers. She takes it as an object of power and puts it beneath her pillow, lays down and has animated dreams of being at one with the creatures of earth, water and air. She wakes, remembers her night, and nervously looks under her pillow to find her gift from Sitting Bull is still there. She decides she needs to burn tobacco. The scene uses humor to raise questions about issues of identity and authenticity that are very complex and leave us with a sense of how difficult it can be for young people growing up in a world full of strange images of what it is to be “Indian” in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Other segments in *Suite Indian* deal with a young aboriginal writer and his girlfriend, and with an older Indian couple and their dog. In this segment Niro sets the action before thought provoking objects,



*Suite Indian Detail*

a blanket which has a large wampum belt design on it that marks the founding of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and on the adjoining wall, a large Canadian flag with an “End of the Trail” image printed on it. Clearly she is making highly ironic juxtapositions choosing these wall hangings to grace an Iroquois living room. The next segment, “Home,” is about four homeless indigenous people sleeping in the park in Brantford, Ontario. It moves with one of the characters out of the park to show images of urban decay and personal loss. As that character sits on the street, Niro introduces a short reprise of footage from the prologue about Hiawatha, and then a series of images of the women and her family at home before we return to the street, and she returns to her friends in the park.

The final four segments in the film are dance performances choreographed by Santee Smith. Also introduced with a reprise from the prologue about Hiawatha, the first two are performed in the longhouse at the Woodland Cultural Center, one a solo by Smith, and the next a pas de deux, Smith does with Sid Bob. These are poetic modern dances, and they are followed by two humorous dance performances on the stage at the Center. “Dance of the Canoe Pants” has six dancers wearing quilted canoe shaped costumes they pull up over their jeans and then dance to a march tune while these canoes protrude in front and behind their hips.



*Dance of the Canoe Pants*

They swing hatchet and tomahawk shaped props around, and a scene of them dancing on the banks of the Grand River is intercut for a few seconds in the midst of the performance before we return to the center and they begin to wobble and fall on stage. The final scene, called “The Red Army is the Strongest”



*The Red Army is the Strongest*

is performed to a song by the same name sung by the Red Army Choir from the Soviet Union. Since this work was done after the demise of the Soviet state, it is clear that the appropriation of this song is ironic. The dancers perform waving their hatchets and war clubs around while the song talks about the Reds fighting the Whites during the Russian Revolution. Add to this a memory that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels read books about the Iroquois by Louis Morgan, the father of American anthropology, and wrote about the Confederacy as an example of “primitive socialism,” and you have a sense of the way that Niro is playing with ironic juxtapositions to comment on indigenous issues. The film ends with an image of her “Red Army” dancing on the banks of the Grand River on Six

Nations Reserve near her home. The film, *Suite Indian*, values Haudenosaunee culture and speaks to the survival of the people, at the same time as it explores issues of living surrounded by Canadian settler culture with its strange stereotypes about First Nations people. In response, Niro uses both humor and thought provoking creativity.

Writing about her work for the *Reservation X* exhibit catalogue, Niro said, “My work gets created through cultural identity. I don’t start off saying I am going to make something with an Iroquois look to it. But those elements impose themselves on my work. In the end, it has an enormous impact and my own identity seeps with this cultural construct.” And later in the same statement, “ I present images that speak loudly of Indian women who happen to be Iroquois.” While Niro occasionally does work like her installation, “Unbury my Heart” which deals with the effects of the atrocities during wars against indigenous nations in the Americas, the largest body of her work grows directly out her personal experience living on or near Six Nations Reserve in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Her work explores contemporary indigenous life and the pressures on it in a way that makes cultural survival a central theme in her work. But her work is not about repeating what has been done in the past so that outsiders can buy artifacts of cultures that their governments have attempted to destroy. Niro’s work is about the way community adapts and continues despite a violent history of colonization, and she finds a way to use humor to call history into question.

Katsi really liked the way that both Rickard and Niro created a visual language that made meaning in ways that are illuminating to Haudenosaunee viewers, and appreciated how, in their art practice, these two women were commenting on the values of their nations and keeping those values alive. At the same time, she enjoyed the way that they both clearly used new media like digital photography, film, video, light boxes, and installation art to innovate. Through their works, they created a discourse that celebrates the continued life of Iroquois culture, and allows people inside the culture and outside it to reflect on the world in relation to that culture. By placing the values of the nations they come from at the center of their work, they create innovative ways to build on the aesthetic practice in their communities. In this way, their work can not be understood to fit into the paradigms for “Indian Art” that are common in the dominating discourse used by U.S. settler culture. This is not the art of the vanishing native, nor is it possible to lock it in some static “ethnographic present;” neither is it assimilationist. Whether serious or humorous, this is work that honors the sovereignty and creativity of the nations in the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, and as citizens in those nations, Rickard and Niro attest that they are very much alive.

In the end, Katsi still felt unsure about how to construct a portfolio for her graduate school application. She was well aware that both Rickard’s and Niro’s work was primarily shown in Native American museums and cultural centers like the Heard Museum, The Eiteljorg Museum, The National Museum of the American Indian, The Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Ontario, and the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ontario. Only critics willing to study their work in cultural context were comfortable writing about it. Unless she chose to apply to a university with sympathetic American Indians on the faculty, she was not sure what the reactions of people on the

admissions committee would be like if she chose to do work that privileged Iroquois viewers and was ironic and political.

Katsi realized that when outsiders to indigenous culture are reflecting on the contemporary arts of people from the First Nations in the Americas, it is difficult for them to define what is authentic about indigenous art or to stipulate which materials, styles, and subject matter make art indigenous. She felt very strongly that it was not the job of scholars to limit the creativity or to try to stop the inevitable change that allows cultures to grow and survive, nor is it the job of art professors to pressure indigenous students to enter the Euro-American art mainstream. This seemed especially true when those scholars and professors come from a settler culture that has had a long history of trying to control and destroy indigenous cultures. Katsi believed that it is the work of artists in a culture to create those objects that people need to practice the customs and ceremonies important to the life of their own communities and also to do whatever other creative work they need to do to address both insiders and outsiders by developing an aesthetic language that relates to the needs of indigenous communities. It also occurred to her that one should not expect cultures to remain static in order to serve collector's needs to own objects that do not serve the needs of native communities and cultures. At the same time, she recognized if profit from making certain objects based on 19<sup>th</sup> century traditions is important to the economic survival of an indigenous community, then people in that community will learn to make such objects and sell them. In thinking about contemporary indigenous art in the Americas, one needs to examine the way in which it functions in the various communities to which it speaks and to appreciate the roles it plays.

In spite of all these realizations, Katsi wanted to become an artist who could show her work at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. She didn't want to be in an art ghetto where her work was only exhibited with other indigenous artists or in multicultural shows limited to people of color. She did not want to give up the visual language that defined her culture, but she struggled to understand how when all art is based in culture, place and time, she could make work that communicates multiple cultural contexts and be understood. Katsi George was still trying to understand how the work of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Iroquois woman artist could be written into the narrative of American Art. She kept thinking about what she needed to make and what she needed to do to create an American culture that would understand and appreciate her art and culture as significant and equal. It was difficult to decide what images to create in a world with a history of both appropriating and stereotyping the aesthetic work of indigenous people, but as an artist of the new generation, she felt the pressure to try to define the direction indigenous art should take.

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