

SHAPESHIFTING: TRANSFORMATIONS IN NATIVE AMERICAN ART

Book Review by Matthew Ryan Smith

Karen Kramer Russell with Janet Catherine Berlo, Bruce Bernstein, Joe D. Horse Capture, Jessica L. Horton, and Paul Chaat Smith and contributions by Kathleen Ash-Milby, Karah English, Aldona Jonaitis, Madeleine M. Kropa, Kate Morris, and Ryan Rice. *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art*. Peabody Essex Museum in association with Yale University Press 2012. 248 pp. \$65.00 (US). ISBN: 9780875772233.

Concise, clear and consistent, the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition, *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art*, establishes a critical dialogue between historical and contemporary Native American objects. Mounted at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts¹ by the PEM's resident curator of Native American Art and Culture, Karen Kramer Russell, the exhibition "offers an exciting new orientation for understanding Native creativity and art-making as an all-encompassing product of its time, grounded in an artist's community, philosophy, language, and environment" (15). Essentially, the exhibition project embraced chronological and aesthetic differences between Native American objects to reconsider the ways that transhistoricity can function as an agent of meaning.

This comes as somewhat of a surprise in view of the execution of several shows in recent years which explore a similar thematic premise, most noticeably the exhibitions, *Native American Art at Dartmouth: Highlights from the Hood Museum of Art*, at the Hood Museum of Art in Hanover, New Hampshire and, *The James T. Bialac Native American Art Collection: Selected Works*, at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art in Norman, Oklahoma. However, while these exhibitions were intended to illustrate the scope and depth of their permanent collections, *Shapeshifting* differs because it represents a deep and sustained commitment to assembling objects which best demonstrate the nuanced connections between the past and the present. Though *Shapeshifting* shares a resemblance to shows that have been staged before, the research and scholarship involved serves a unique intent on a wildly ambitious scale.

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Organized around four central themes—changing, knowing, locating, and voicing—the catalogue features an original essay for each theme, in addition to two essays that function as an introductory statement and a concluding statement. The first text, curator Karen Kramer Russell’s “Raising the Bar,” operates less as an argument and more as a survey of the exhibition. While Kramer’s essay touches on the discursive specificities of work by Canadian artists such as Kent Monkman (Miss Chief Eagle Testickle) and Brian Jungen, it has the tone and delivery of a justification for the exhibition rather than holding to a critical engagement with its central themes. Nevertheless, it is effective because it provides context to the museological intersections, bonds, and divisions between Native and non-Native peoples. Kramer makes note that some Native artists and curators feel that by “placing contemporary Native American artists together in an exclusive group exhibition solely on the basis of tribal affiliation ‘perpetuates an otherness that is ultimately counterproductive...’ while others caution that ending the segregation of Native art by enfolding it seamlessly into the mainstream world would provide equity but will not create a history based on Native perspectives” (16). This statement gains deeper significance when it is applied to the actual exhibition catalogue itself, which further condenses Native ideas, cultural

heritage, and otherness into a physical object that audiences can purchase and take home with them. How is this different from Native Americans selling objects to non-Natives well over a century ago? The colonialist implications of this act have yet to be fully explored in scholarship but could yield some interesting results.

Bruce Bernstein’s essay, “Expected Evolution: The Changing Continuum,” argues that Native artists understand, perhaps more than other communities, the logic of change and that this is manifested through their deconstruction of traditional objects and the stylized reconstruction of these forms today. However, it is Joe D. Horse Capture’s enlightening text, “Time-Honored Expression: The Knowing of Native Objects,” under the thematic banner of “Knowing” that is the clear standout. In the essay, he analyzes particular Native American discourses which have survived pre-Euro-American contact and their transition to current art practices. For example, the iconography of the coyote, traditionally considered a mischievous trickster in Native American objects, doubles as a more positive and even humorous entity in the work of Harry Fonseca. Capture, a member of the A’aninin people, stresses the importance of cultural knowledge to Native Americans; in particular, the idea

that sharing and exchange generate a stronger social order, which not only disseminates knowledge but solidifies tribal bonds. In Capture's words, "to learn together is to keep the People together" (76).

The remaining three essays cover the themes of "Locating," written by Jessica L. Horton, and "Voicing," written by Janet Catherine Berlo, while Paul Chaat Smith, a member of the Comanche people, concludes the catalogue with his essay, "Famous Long Ago." Here, Smith analyzes what he calls "the Indian paradox," a dubious state of being in which Native Americans are "nearly erased, almost invisible, yet almost everyone in the world knows something about us" (213). Idiosyncratic, with an almost comical delivery, Smith's text is the perfect antidote to the heavy theoretical material offered by some of the other scholars and critics in the catalogue. Using Monkman and Jungen as his primary examples, much like Kramer does in the first chapter, Smith pointedly criticizes the commonly held view that Native Americans are inherently confined to a "timeless past;" this past and perceptions of it, he notes, are continually being challenged and usurped by contemporary visual artists (219). Notions of resilience, resolve

and renewal lie just beneath the surface of Smith's text and, for that matter, Capture's as well.

The catalogue itself is organized into four sections which represent the four main themes; however, it is somewhat disconcerting to read that the works in the exhibition, which are also used as image plates, are listed in numerical order. Moreover, the artists that are mentioned most in the essays—Monkman and Jungen—are presented "1" and "2", along with their works, *Théâtre de Cristal* and *Cetology* respectively. In short, the numerical arrangement of the artworks, coupled with the prevalence of Monkman and Jungen in the essays, can be misconstrued by the reader as a proverbial ranking system. Doing away with the numerical ordering system and grouping work within the exhibition's four themes (or even the essay's themselves) would have prevented any misinterpretation

Although its organizational structure and curatorial thesis are problematic, *Shapeshifting* is a powerful statement on the interconnections between Native American past and present. Kramer's catalogue is successful because it provides a breadth of perspectives and angles which flesh out the nuances and difficulties of transhistorical projects such as this. For those in

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art history or the museological field, the catalogue makes a significant contribution to the scholarship on Native American objects, both historical and contemporary, while raising further questions around weaving pre-colonial materials within postcolonial walls.

Notes

¹ *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art* was on view at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts from January 14, 2012 to April 29, 2012.