

CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS ARTISTS

WELCOME TO THE CONTEMPORARY NORTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS ARTIST BLOG.

I SUGGESTED TO WILLIAM LEPORE, THE CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ART AT PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY, THAT I WOULD LIKE TO TEACH CLASSES FOCUSING ON TOPICS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY NATIVE ART. TO MY...

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PAUL CHAAT SMITH - COMANCHE

Interview by Eliza Gregory

Winter 2012



Paul Chaat Smith is a Comanche author, essayist, and curator. His books and exhibitions focus on the contemporary landscape of American Indian politics and culture. As an Associate Curator at the Smithsonian's **National Museum of the American Indian**, his projects have included the NMAI's history gallery, performance artist James Luna's *Emendatio* at the 2005 Venice Biennial, *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian* (2008), and *Brian Jungen: Strange Comfort* (2009). With Robert Warrior, he is the author of *Like a Hurricane: the Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New Press, 1996), a standard text in Native studies and American history courses. His second book, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*, was published in 2009 by the University of Minnesota Press, and is now in its second printing. An extended version of this bio can be found on his website: www.paulchaatsmith.com.

Paul Chaat Smith is incredibly fun to listen to. His ideas are exciting, refreshing, and never static. He breaks down the false barriers people perceive between Native and Non-Native American culture, even as he also acknowledges important differences between people and places. As he says in this interview, "I write to make sense of my own confusion."



<http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/everything-you-know-about-indians-is-wrong>

Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong, by Paul Chaat Smith, published by the University of Minnesota Press. This book is great.

Eliza Gregory: "Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong" strikes me as one of those books that can be revelatory for a lot of people—it certainly was for me. I felt like I was waking up a number of times as I read it. Has it had the sort of impact you hoped it would? And how have you become aware of its impact?

Paul Chaat Smith: I wasn't sure whether it would be successful as a book, since it's a collection of essays going back almost twenty years. I was confident that at least some of the essays would connect with readers, because of the response when they were originally published or presented. Overall I'm very pleased with the book's impact. Lots of reviews, sold well for an academic title, and has become a required text for lots of intro Indian studies classes. (Which means lots of people not interested in art, much less Native art, are reading about our scene.) Sometimes I think if I hadn't relied so much on existing essays on perhaps too many different topics, I might have been able to write a more cogent book that might have crossed over and reached a much larger audience. At the same time, if it reads as revelatory for some readers it's because it was revelatory for me when I wrote it. For example, I don't think "On Romanticism," which I wrote in the early 1990s, would have read the same way if I had substantially revised it in 2009 for the book. I've lived with those ideas for twenty years now; they aren't fresh to me and today I don't even agree with some of them. Which is okay, I think. On my first web site, the tag line was "Art, politics, and honest confusion." I write to make sense of my own confusion. Which often makes me even more confused!

EG: You've had a few different professional incarnations. Why do you think that being a curator fits you so well? What makes coming at them from these ideas through art more satisfying to you than coming at them from other fields?

PCS: For me, writing and curating are mostly the same enterprise. I see my job as something like a talk show host, someone who stages an interesting conversation. Which is odd, since I'm not an extroverted personality, quite the opposite. The magical thing is that you discover other people are thinking about the same questions you are, and you don't feel so crazy or so alone. I ended up writing about art because the Indian political world had become tiresome, and it seemed to me that artists were asking the most interesting questions. Also, better parties.

Curating fits me because curating is a dubious, mostly invented profession, with no firm requirements and elastic definitions. Good for someone who never graduated from college!



<http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/emendatio/jamesluna.html>

James Luna, rehearsing for Emendatio performance, National Museum of the American Indian, Washington, D.C. 2005. Photo by Katherine Pogden.

EG: In the essay "Meaning of Life" you write, "In the years after Wounded Knee and before 1992, the Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham wrote, 'I feel certain that I could address the entire world, if only I had a place to stand.'" How does that Jimmie Durham remark resonate for you at the moment?

PCS: Ah yes, one of the great lines of the 20th century. The crossover dream, still unrealized, and these days JD's quote resonates for me as both deeply and profoundly true, and still relevant as a strategic goal, yet very distant. I don't see us any closer to building that platform, and am not sure what we'd say if we had the chance.

EG: In "After the Gold Rush" you write, "Walking in two worlds is ideological Viocidin, and because we're the descendants of the greatest holocaust in human history, you can expect most of us to keep getting our prescription refilled for the foreseeable future."

That statement really caught my attention, partly because it seemed so clear intellectually, but partly because I think I don't understand it emotionally. I wonder if you would unpack the emotional aspect of that a little more for me—why does it feel easier to have two selves or two identities than one?

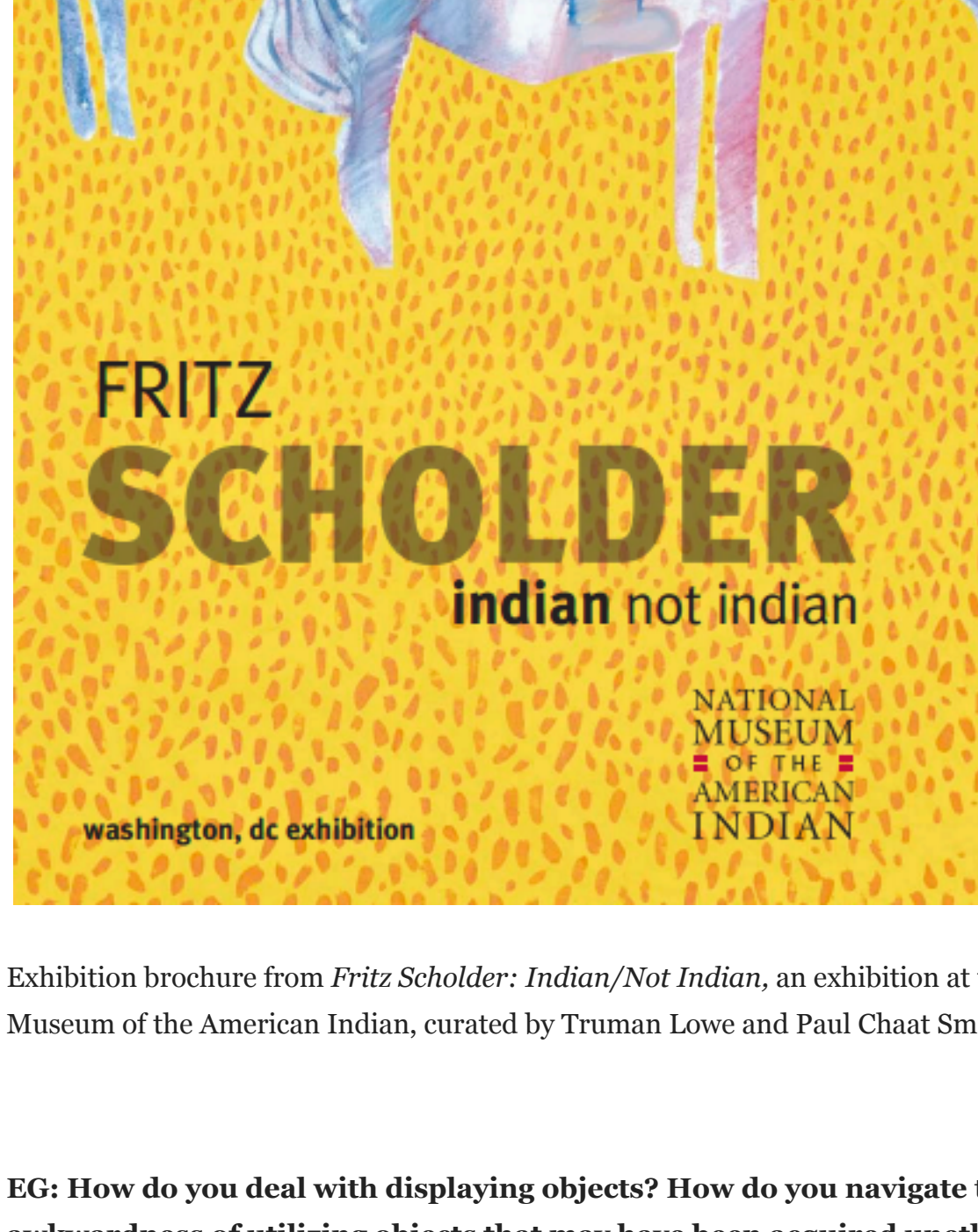
PCS: I think humans really like boxes. Look at Facebook, defining yourself by relationship status, favorite movies, books and music. A massive step backwards. Why do Indians embrace these particular boxes? I think because the Great Retraditionalization Project of the 1970s was largely built on essentialist Western ideas about race and authenticity. There is something so childlike, so intentionally stupid about this formula, which I am certain never came from us, ever. In fact, it is the opposite of what any truthful examination of our history would show.

Life is complicated, and it becomes dishonest very quickly when anyone in 2012 convinces themselves their lives and experience can be reduced to discrete, separate worlds. It's a sad, anthropological notion that holds us back. Cut it out, people!

EG: For your non-Native audience, how do you negotiate the need to instruct about the history and context in which the art is operating so that the audience can engage fully with the work? I imagine there is some tension between wanting people to really understand what is being communicated, and being wary of reverting to an info-panel-laden natural history museum style of presentation.

PCS: In my experience, the question of differences between Native and non-Native audience knowledge and expectations is overrated. The Indian audience is incredibly diverse, even if we are only talking about U.S. Indians visiting NMAI in Washington. Some people imagine that Indians automatically have deep knowledge about Indian history and culture. Well, that's certainly not true, even if you are only talking about their own tribe. Most Indian visitors to NMAI in Washington have never even heard of several tribes who have their own exhibits, and this includes me, so the common presumption that Indian visitors would read those exhibits differently than non-Indians doesn't make sense.

Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian, which I curated with Truman Lowe in 2008, was one example where there was a difference, because lots of Indian visitors of a certain age remembered the 1970s and understood how Scholder's Indian series was as shocking as the Sex Pistols, especially to Indians. Non-Indian visitors would probably not read them as shocking. But few Indian visitors knew Scholder's story or work in detail, so it didn't change how we organized the exhibit.



Exhibition brochure from *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian*, an exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian, curated by Truman Lowe and Paul Chaat Smith, 2008.

EG: How do you deal with displaying objects? How do you navigate the awkwardness of utilizing objects that may have been acquired unethically, or which have a weighty history of being represented in a context (like a natural history museum) that you want to move away from?

PCS: One way Dolene Rickard and I wanted to deal with this for the history exhibit at NMAI was to give detailed information on objects, not on who made them and what they were for, but what happened to them after they left the hands of their makers. Discovered by Tomb Raider so and so, starred in this exhibit in London, and that one in Antwerp, bought by another collector in 1951, donated to NMAI in 1998, stored in a nice container in Sultland, had regular visitors....like that. Or, sacred pipe, sold to border town pawn shop to pay for booze. Still a good idea!



<http://www.nmai.si.edu/exhibitions/jungen/works.html#shapeshifter>

Brian Jungen, "The Prince" 2006. Baseball gloves and dress form. 82 x 24 x 19.5 in. Included in the show "Brian Jungen: Strange Comfort" at the National Museum of the American Indian, 2009-2010. Courtesy of the Sender Collection; photo Adam Reich; courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, NY.

EG: Why do you think artists like Brian Jungen are able to cross over into the mainstream art world as a huge success? How are some people able to avoid being pigeonholed as "Native" artists?

PCS: Don't you wish there were more people on that list? Too big a question to answer here!

EG: Do you ever feel pigeonholed as a curator? Are there shows you have wanted to do that you couldn't because you are seen as having a particular, "Native" focus?

PCS: Not so much. I've written catalog text for two non-Indian artists: Baco Obama and Maggie Michael. Our goal my contemporary art colleagues at NMAI have is for the institution to organize exhibits that include non-Indians, which hasn't happened yet. But there's nothing to prevent us from doing that on our own time.

EG: What lessons do you think the National Museum of the American Indian has learned already, as an institution, since opening at its current location in 2004?

PCS: We learned that nobody cares about process. We thought people (and critics) would be fascinated about our collaborations with Native communities; they weren't. People like narrative. And people don't want to feel overwhelmed with too much information, too many objects, and too much repetition. The new boss, Kevin Gover, has charted a new direction which sees NMAI's role as emphasizing history, and the ways contact created the world we live in today; that we are part of a common history and shared experience; and how Indians in the U.S. continue to have a unique relationship with the federal government.

Perhaps bigger than those things is the recognition that the building will be around for a century or more, and we don't have to do everything at once. It's like in 2004 we thought we had a six month lease or something.

EG: And what is something that you have learned so far, in your role as a curator there?

PCS: Text is, by far—and I mean really, really far, like the distance between Earth and Jupiter—the least important part of an exhibit. Also, that *The Simpsons* is a terrific model for exhibits on the National Mall, because, like the demographic for that show, our audience ranges from humans too young to *Simpsons*, to others too old to walk, to dullards and geniuses and everything in between. Why is *The Simpsons* the best show in the history of television? Because they keep everyone watching, mixing slapstick physical humor with quips about Jonathan Franzen, Adrienne Stevenson, and Frank Gehry. This is what I learned from Jimmie Durham and Matt Grooting, always make work for people smarter than yourself. It sounds mystical and isn't easy, but the best way to make sure you aren't boring your audience is to not bore yourself.

EG: What is a question you really enjoy being asked?

PCS: Do you think there will ever be a Replacements reunion? And if there was, would it be any good?

EG: What's the best curatorial work you've seen this year?

PCS: 2012 is not even two months old but promising. I'll go with Super Bowl XLVI, President Obama's State of the Union message, and *Shapeshifting: Transformations in Native American Art* at the Peabody Essex Museum.

EG: What are you working on now?

PCS: Who wants to know?

EG: What other Native artists and curators do you recommend we interview for the Contemporary North American Indigenous Artists database and blog?

PCS: Richard Smith, Hill and Wendy Red Star.

Paul Chaat Smith: Further Resources

Paul Chaat Smith's website: <http://www.paulchaatsmith.com/>

A video Q&A between PCS and Jason Weisman of Minnesota Press: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3hdCY9llw>

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ceetunalia reblogged this from contemporarynativeartists and added:
this is an excellent interview, and you should pick up some of Smith's work.
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