

FORT GANSEVOORT

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ART: MODERN WORKS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

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WE'RE a long way from the days when Indians were encouraged by well-meaning patrons to produce a hide-and-feathers school of work that was merchandised as "tribal" art. Though still an identifiable ethnic minority, Native Americans, as they are now often referred to, are, by and large, as diverse in their cultural outlook as Americans in general and no longer feel dutiful about making art that reflects their Indian heritage.

If they do it today, it is by choice, as we see in the show "Contemporary Native American Art" at the Pratt Manhattan Center Gallery, 160 Lexington Avenue at 30th Street (through Dec. 18). Its participants, while retaining their ethnic identity as individuals, are free in their art to be Indian, American, both or none of the above. And that's as much group message as you'll get from this sophisticated show, boasting contributions from 26 artists, ranging in tribal connections from Navajo to Nisenan- Maidu, with other ethnicities (Hawaiian, Portuguese) also as part of their backgrounds.

Still, many of the works do comment on living between two worlds. Addressing the "colonized" people in the show's catalogue, George C. Longfish and Joan Randall engagingly point out the cultural confusions they face: "Wipe your Indian hands on your Levi jeans, get into your Toyota pickup. Throw in a tape of Mozart, Led Zeppelin or ceremonial Sioux songs. . . . Paint what you see, sculpt what you feel and stay amused." The last part is as good advice as any for making art, and Longfish himself, an associate professor of Native American studies at the University of California, has happily followed it. His two lively works on paper, "The Contract" and "Spirit Guide/Healer," deploy motifs of feathers, beads, stylized rain clouds, in smart formats whose subtle but cheerful colors and juicy paint textures give a relaxed reading of current New Wave painting.

Cross-cultural humor, in fact, abounds in the show. G. Peter Jemison, for instance, a New Yorker who has observed how subway riders shlep things, has made "Indian Bags" by painting brightly colored fish and reptile designs on real paper bags. In his small sculpture "Be My Buffalo," Richard Glazer Danay, of Mohawk extraction, turns this cliché beast into a comic valentine, adorned with painted cupids, flowers and big pink lips. Harry Fonseca presents two hilarious lithographs of fierce animals - a coyote and a bear - gotten up as rock performers. And, obviously inspired by an old photograph, Gerald McMaster has packed, in a graphite drawing, a group of stern, war-bonneted braves into an ancient flivver with a flag draped across its hood.

Although the show eschews the traditional Indian rugs and pottery, there are several craft entries, or works derived from crafts. The most interesting of these is Truman Lowe's sculpture "Solstice I," a flat

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wooden block whose surface bears a composition of crossed sticks and flat pebbles united by cordlike thongs, evidence of his fascination with woodland culture of the western Great Lakes region. Other Indian themes, innovatively handled, appear in the work of Brian D. Tripp, whose beautifully modulated drawings pay contemporary tribute to traditional geometric designs, and Emma Whitehorse. Her "Another Blanket" celebrates, in veils of delicate color and linear forms, the garment of her Navajo forebears.

And then there are, of course, objects that have more relation to mainstream art than Indian culture, such as Kay WalkingStick's "Rotation Piece," a set of four canvases whose dense textures are inflected by simple marks derived from a conceptual grid, and Ted Garner's eloquent bronzes, whose open forms are abstracted from birds.

Oddly (Could it be because the show was assembled under university auspices?) only one piece of "protest" art appears, a "word installation" by Edgar Heap of Birds that speaks of the rejection of Indians by white civilization while it appropriates their names for its products and cities. If the show is thus blander than it might be, it still makes a readable anthology of Native American points of view. Put together for the 1983 Southwest Cultural Heritage Festival, "Contemporary Native American Art" is sponsored by Oklahoma State University, the Oklahoma Humanities Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Also of interest this week: Donald Judd (Leo Castelli Gallery, 420 West Broadway and 142 Greene Street): While art goes off in all directions, Donald Judd stands foursquare in the Minimal mode, still playing variations on the box forms that have by now become his, if not Minimal's, trademark. Though he works with only two ideas - series and simple "progressions" - the boxes are carried out in different scales, materials, colors and configurations, giving the false effect of creative plenitude.

The stopper at the Greene Street gallery is a huge, free-standing "progression" of three units in concrete and steel, each about 8 feet by 8 feet, open at two facing sides. In the first one, the left interior wall is built out at an angle that takes up a third of the interior space; in the second one the right interior wall is built to the same angle; in the third a partition, placed on the diagonal, takes up the middle third of the space. With this kind of scale, you don't need much substance. And that applies to a vast floor piece at 420 West Broadway, made up of rectangular steel modules in different colors and bolted together to form a unit whose presence suggests nothing so much as a bank of office file cabinets.

More sculptural in feeling is one of Judd's vintage "stacked" progressions at the Greene Street gallery, six rectangular modules of brushed aluminum with Plexiglas backs, vertically lined up on the wall, each separated by an interval. Each is divided by a different method of horizontal partitioning. It's only a short jump from this work to architectural furniture, and sure enough, Judd is now making handsome furniture pieces of wood - chairs, desks, bookcases - on view in a showroom at 101 Spring Street. Like his sculptures, they are rigidly geometric and totally devoid of embellishment, but at least they are functional. (Through Dec. 15.)

Bill Hutson (Onyx Art Gallery, 54 Irving Place at 17th Street): In this handsome new gallery devoted to the work of black artists, Bill Hutson makes a lyrical showing with paintings on canvas and paper and several scroll hangings. But the works, though based on childhood memories of a small Texas town, have nothing narrative about them. On their very active surfaces, lines and curves and free forms play over, in and out of rich painterly textures and hazy spatial infinities, evoked by mottled veils of color. In "Center Street Series 11," for instance - a lively work on paper - against a kaleidoscopic backdrop of marbled blue

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smudged with ashy pink, a wriggly mauve arc zooms downward to meet an upthrusting squiggle of green. All manner of lesser incidents occur, on and back from the picture plane. Among the more object-like scrolls, less concerned with space, "The Creek" suggests just that, a tiny body of rushing water, by means of dense calligraphic brushings in black and gray touched with white. The pyrotechnics here are skillfully controlled. Incidentally, this gallery's hours are Wednesday through Sunday from noon to 7 P.M. (Through Dec. 16.)

Melissa Meyer (Exit Art, 578 Broadway at Prince Street): This show of paintings and drawings from 1980 to 1984 reveals Melissa Meyer as deeply involved in the process of painting, which she pursues with what seems at times the raw energy of Soutine. Her skill at paint handling creates vibrant surface textures, but what's problematical is the tentative imagery. Characteristically, it takes the form of an arching biomorphic structure centrally placed in the lower half of the canvas, radiating out and up to other forms, as in "Sub Rosa." Here, the arching shapes, in deep reds and blues, seem to form the generous root system of a wide-branching tree that rises above them. In "Una Pietra Sopra," an arched framework surrounds a large, beating heart, and in "Notte Bianca," the radiating shapes, in mauves and blues, give the sense of a giant seed pod. Though feeling is there, none of these images speaks with much intensity; Meyer is better at facture than iconography. She shows a more shaping hand in several strong charcoal drawings. (Through Dec. 29.)