

STANDS WITH A FIST: CONTEMPORARY NATIVE WOMEN ARTISTS

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY NATIVE ARTS
108 CATHEDRAL PLACE, SANTA FE

THE SEVEN NATIVE AMERICAN ARTISTS IN THIS EXHIBITION

—Gina Adams, Natalie Ball, Nanibah Chacon, Lindsay Delaronde, Merritt Johnson, Tanya Lukin-Linklater, and Melanie Yazzie—defy classification in terms of types and styles of work. If there is anything that ties their art together, it could be irony or even inscrutability. Referring to the latter quality, one of the most interesting pieces in the show was a grid of twenty-seven small watercolor and graphite images by Gina Adams. Titled *Honoring Loss Painting*, this work gained its strength by the cumulative effects of repetition. The top half of each ten-inch-high painting was pretty much the same—there was a schematic representation of a vaguely human form floating in it. However, underneath each humanoid shape there was a different abstract configuration of pastel-colored dots and lines.

If the form above was a definite unifying element throughout, it was the bottom part of each work that was rife with possible interpretations. It was as if underneath each human there was a buried city or a series of maps or hidden jewels—no two designs were alike and the overall effect suggested a delicate labyrinth of inscrutable meanings. Adams also trafficked in the obscure with her ten photographs of Native Americans

in traditional dress printed on rice paper, but each image was covered in a thick coat of translucent wax so the portraits could barely be discerned. All one felt were these apparitional presences that seemed to float away from the walls and quietly embrace their own absence, their own nearly obliterated sense of self.

Natalie Ball's three large mixed-media pieces were a kind of mash-up of Neo-Expressionist painting and deliberately crude and garish efforts at quilt making. Ball's works weren't hung on the wall; the eight-foot-high paintings were attached to even taller wooden poles on either side and propped against the wall. Using a star-quilt pattern as a central motif, the artist also drew images and painted on the fabric with gashes of color, and the sides of these pieces contained a great deal of graffiti-like information to be decoded or accepted at face value. What did the repeated stick figure represent with its large drooping breasts and sporting a top hat? Ball's iconoclastic works were an exuberant arena where the ghost of Jean-Michel Basquiat met the early Sigmar Polke who walked hand-in-hand with the feminist quilt artist Faith Ringgold.

Speaking of ghostly presences, Merritt Johnson's mixed-media installation of separate but related pieces was a cross

between decidedly spooky and downright creepy. Human beings were implied though not overtly depicted—only by way of allusion, as in a kind of figurative bulkiness either sitting or standing underneath copious drapery—like “monsters in disguise” as has been said of Johnson's work. In one installation, *Shhhhhh*, a larger-than-life stuffed rabbit with real fur stands on its two hind legs, a stethoscope draped from its neck to its feet. The animal is positioned at the end of a black-velvet-covered mattress on the floor with the suggestion of a “patient” lying at the other end, huddled under the dark fabric. It's a disturbing work, but then all of Johnson's pieces reek of dysfunction and spiritual death.

Those two signifiers—death and dysfunction—permeated the video *In Memoriam* by Tanya Lukin-Linklater. However, there was a strong sense of mystery in the work as well. Were the two women dancers—performing both inside a room with a brick wall and out on the shoreline of a lake—actually the same woman? They looked so much alike they could have been twins or at least sisters, although their hairstyles were different and the clothes they danced in, though similar, were not identical. I never could figure out if these women were the same individual

and I'm even less sure if their separateness mattered or if the blurring of their identities was part of the piece.

What was Lukin-Linklater searching for in her choreography redolent with a spastic agony? Did each woman function as a doppelgänger of the other, acting out a series of projections or memories of thwarted attempts at communication? In all of the sequences of this dance that shifted locations and performers, the viewer was privy to bodies closed in on themselves, almost choking with imploded emotions. As the title *In Memoriam* suggests, some type of mourning was being enacted. The brochure for the exhibition said about Lukin-Linklater that “her work often engages with notions of revitalization through deconstructive and reconstructive performative practices.” If this piece had revitalization at its core it wasn't obvious. The performances were more like an instrument for embodying the uneasy death throes that might or might not be followed by a resurrection. The same could be said of the entire show as these Native American artists grappled in vivid ways with ideas about the death and rebirth of culture without resorting to cultural stereotypes.

—DIANE ARMITAGE

Tanya Lukin-Linklater, *In Memoriam*, video still, 2012

