

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: Flathead Contemporary Artist

By Gail Tremblay

Jaune Quick-to-see Smith was born at St Ignatius Jesuit Mission on the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Reservation in Montana, and is an enrolled member of the Flathead Nation. She is also descended from French, Cree, and Shoshone ancestors. She and her sister were abandoned by their mother when Quick-to-See Smith was two, and the two of them moved with their father, an accomplished horse trainer and trader, first to California and then to various reservations and towns in Washington state. Often her family had very little; Quick-to-See Smith went to work on a Nisei farm at the age of eight to help out. Her early life was difficult; she lived in foster homes and went to public schools where people openly discriminated against her because she was an American Indian person. School was, however, the place where she was first introduced to art materials, and where she fell in love with making art.

As a child, she seldom got to travel to visit her family on the reservation in Montana because her father had no money to take the children when he traveled. Quick-to-See Smith worked a number of low paying jobs as a young woman and struggled as a mother to raise her children and to take college courses in order to eventually earn a

degree. It is a testimony to her strength of character and to the power of stories her father told her about her ancestors—people like her great grandmother, Nellie Quick-to-See, an outstanding beadworker—that Quick-to-See Smith developed a sense of her ability to become a professional artist. After completing work at Olympic Community College, she earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Art Education from Framingham State College in Massachusetts in 1976 and her Master of Arts degree in Art from the University of New Mexico in 1980.

It was not until Quick-to-See Smith finished college and began to establish herself as an artist in the mid-1970's that she had the money to visit the reservation regularly, and to enjoy the company of her surviving relatives, especially her cousin, Gerald Slater, who was working to found Salish Kootenai Community College, a project that Jaune valued because she believes that education is important to the welfare of her people. As Quick-to-See established a national and then international reputation as



Song and Dance, oil, mixed media on canvas, 2003, 36.25 x 4.24"

an artist, she also worked to raise funds for scholarships and library books for the college on her reservation. She organized art symposia there, and brought indigenous artists from Montana together with contemporary Native American artists from other regions of the country. Quick-to-See Smith worked steadily to promote the artwork of American Indian artists by organizing artist collectives, curating exhibits, and giving hundreds of lectures, panels, talks, and workshops on the work of native artists at museums, universities, galleries, conferences, and other venues across the country. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's generosity of spirit, which she claims she learned from her father, is remarkable and has greatly increased American understanding of the contemporary Native American Art Movement in the United States.

Quick-to-See Smith is one of the most creative and prolific of the American Indian artists whose work explores Native American aesthetic traditions in a modern and post-modern art context. Over the years she has worked in many media, using an impressive vocabulary of techniques including painting, printmaking, lush pastels, and richly layered mixed media works. Few artists working today are as sensitive to the effects of texts on images, or as skilled at creating and appropriating texts that capture the paradigms of American society in ways that reveal its implications. Quick-to-See Smith embeds her texts in a rich environment of images she creates and images she takes from a variety of sources. By doing this, she creates complex juxtapositions that recontextualize the way viewers understand not only relationships between Euro-American and indigenous American culture, but how she, as an artist of Flathead descent, views issues in both these cultures. Her works are thoughtful and thought provoking and can raise questions that explode stereotypes and myths about indigenous people. Two of the paintings in the collection of the Missoula Art Museum, *Flathead Vest* (1996) and *Song and Dance* (2003), demonstrate Quick-to-

See Smith's ability to combine text and image in her work.



In *Flathead Vest*, Quick-to-See Smith uses a painting of a traditional beaded vest as the central image on her canvas. She uses collaged images of roses, leaves, and other flowers to suggest the use of 19th and 20th Century beadwork patterns done on Flathead clothing. She also uses a collaged image of a turkey from a coloring book, an image that brings to mind both the way that Indians are stereotyped in American Thanksgiving stories and the way that dyed turkey feathers are used to make strange headdresses for children playing cowboys and Indians. She also uses a 19th Century picture of an Indian parent and child, a text about food additives, and a label with the words "Rocky Hill" that pictures an Indian man wearing a headdress and riding on horseback to market a product.

Flathead Vest: Father and Child, acrylic, paper, canvas, 1996, 60 x 50"

This vest is surrounded by images and texts some of them partially obscured by washes of white, green, red, and black paint. Above the vest is a 19th Century portrait of a group of American Indian people in beaded, buckskin shirts and feathered headdresses. Quick-to-See Smith anchors the corners of the painting with four images: a label for apples of the sort you would see on a crate with an odd image of an Indian used to advertise the produce; a label reading HUNTSMAN with another stereotypical image; a painting of a petroglyph image with a bow and large feet; and a photograph of an attractive woman. The placement of these images create areas of attention that draw the viewer's eye to the edges of this work. Between those corners, texts include newspaper clippings about topical subjects, like a headline that reads "Interior Secretary Signature Validates Gambling Compacts" above the words "Drums Sweat and It" in another newspaper clipping. In this work the artist plays with the images and text prevalent in Euro-American culture that appropriate and stereotype indigenous people at the same time that she presents historic images of native people so that in this work there is a tension between different visions of who Native American people are.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is also a skilled printmaker as is shown by the large number of prints in the Missoula Art Museum Contemporary American Indian Art Collection. Indeed, the Missoula Art Museum has the largest number of her prints in a museum collection anywhere in the country, thanks to the artist's commitment to donating one print from every edition she has made. These prints include lithographs, collagraphs, a serigraph, and other editioned works, as well as one monotype. The earliest of these works dates from 1991 and the most recent was done in 2005. The range of these works reveals Quick-to-See Smith's ability to address multiple subjects in her work as well as her ability to use a variety of strategies for visual representation. Six of the works depend almost entirely on visual images rather than on a mixture of language and text, and this is a strategy she returns to over time.



Ode to Chief Seattle, lithograph, ca. 1991, 30 x 22.25"

The earliest such work in the collection, *Ode to Chief Seattle* (1991), uses minimal references to language except for the chemical symbol for water and a few marks that can be read as letters. This lithograph with a collaged surface uses images of a cloud, red hands, a tree with the map of Washington printed on it, an elk, a coyote, a plane, and a horse over a blue shape that could be seen as transforming between a bird and a fish, all surrounding a hand painted red bear. In the upper corner are three arrows turning on one another, the visual symbol for recycling, and all of this is arranged over areas of red, yellow, blue and black, with a variety of abstract marks that causes the eye to move between the positive and negative spaces in the design in a way that is visually stimulating. This print, done in an edition of 30, was commissioned by the Washington State

Arts Commission for a collection they put together to travel to public schools around the state. The work makes reference to local animals and environmental issues. The title pays homage to the Suquamish leader, Chief Seattle, after which the largest city in the state is named.



Winds of Change, lithograph, ca.1992,
30 x 22.5"

In her print, *Winds of Change* (1992), Quick-to-See Smith relies entirely on visual symbols to tell a complex story. Traditional native imagery and contemporary imagery relate to one another in a way that shows that modern life on the reservation is not locked in some ethnographic present where modernity is foreign. The world of Quick-to-See Smith's print, like the contemporary world of American Indian people, contains both tipi and truck, house and coyote story, Appaloosa and geometric symbol, mountain range and airplane, and there is not contradiction between the traditional elements, the corn, the fish, the men on the canoe journey and the modern world in which they live. Using a design with three colors, red, blue and black, Quick-to-See Smith worked with master printer Mike Simms at Lawrence Lithography Workshop in Kansas to create this work for a fundraiser for a University of Wisconsin film about changes on Indian Reservations. She fits bold areas of design and color together to create a

strong diagonal movement from the left margin to the lower third of this piece, so that the viewer's eyes travel, then focus at the bottom center of the picture and then begin to work around to the smaller drawings that explore the theme of both the print and the film it helped to fund.

Wasatch Winter (2002), another of Quick-to-See Smith's image-based prints, uses petroglyph images of people, snakes, a bird, a rabbit, and horses with various marks. She employs overlapping triangular shapes that move from the upper left to lower right of the composition and function to remind the viewer of both mountains and tipis. This

bold composition was made as a commission to celebrate the Olympics in Salt Lake City.



Sticky Mouth, lithograph, 1997, 21.5 x 19"

Two more prints in this series, *Salish* (1989) and *Sticky Mouth* (1997) are one and two color lithographs. Jaune printed *Salish* at Tamarind as part of a suite of prints done in collaboration with a group of artists, and the piece pictures animals from the Salish Kootenai Reservation along with a beautiful oval face. *Sticky Mouth*, a print done in black and yellow, has a central figure of a standing bear with the outline of a human figure inside it. The bear is surrounded by child-like drawings of people and animals, a butterfly, faces, and various marks including the numbers "6" and "4". The title refers to the literal English translation of the Blackfeet word for



Celebrate 40,000 Years of American Art, collagraph, 1995, 71.5 x 47.5"

bear and Quick-to-See Smith relates, "...the work makes reference to traditional beliefs about the transformation between human and bear that are based on human qualities seen in standing bears." The petroglyph-like figure at the left side of the composition shows this transformation to human, but retains the bear's ears. The yellow glow which illuminates the center group of images focuses the eye so that it moves between the ghostly figure of the transformed bear with an exposed rib cage at the left and the image of the standing bear with the drawings that surround it. This creates an interesting visual tension that gives the work a sense of movement between realities.

A large number of the prints in the Missoula Art Museum Collection use titles printed as text on the work to contextualize the images for the viewer and these titles create new levels of meaning with which to consider the images. Of these one of Quick-to-See Smith's best known prints, *Celebrate 40,000 Years of American Art* (1995), is a lively example of how the artist can make the viewer rethink what defines American Art. Using five petroglyph-like images of a rabbit, in graduated sizes from small to large, arranged first in a diagonal down and then in a line

across the composition, Quick-to-See Smith arranged the text above and below the images. She is letting the viewer know that indigenous people have been on this continent for millennia creating American art. Any art history of the American continents celebrates our place in the art world over thousands of years.



Indian Men Wear Shirts and Ties, lithograph, pulp paper painting, 1997, 41.75 x 29.25"
Donated by Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper

Another of the prints using this strategy, *Indian Men Wear Shirts and Ties* (1996), has the image of four ties above a man's traditional, beaded, buckskin shirt. Quick-to-See Smith plays with images of Indians locked by the American imagination in some permanent 19th Century moment. Real tribal people live in the same 20th Century world as everyone else and move with ease between the Indian outfits they use for pow wows and ceremonies and modern dress they use every day.

Perhaps the most haunting of the images Quick-to-See Smith designed around a printed title is a work called *Cowboys and Indians: Made in America* (1995). It



Cowboys and Indians, collagraph, 1995, 77.75 x 50.5"

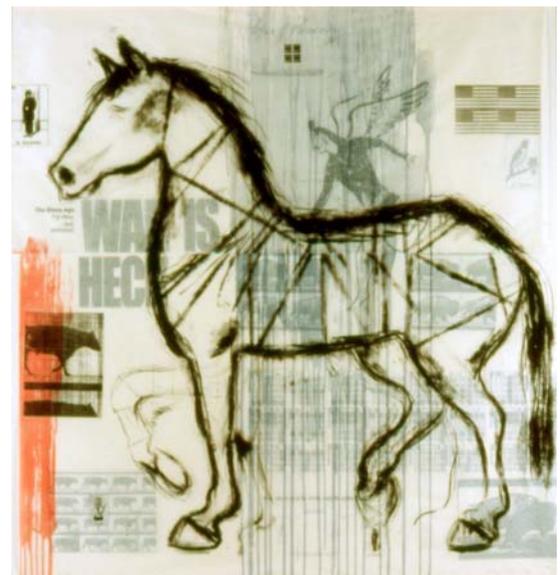
explores the way in which the American mythology about Indians creates alarming and violent stereotypes. In this lithograph, two figures in cowboy hats shoot it out. A sensitive viewer is struck by the fact that “Cowboys and Indians” is a game that American children play. That game makes a history of violence and genocide against indigenous human beings seem both normal and acceptable. The vacant mask-like faces with the small round eyes and the guns, pointed and fired across the center of the piece, are frightening. Quick-to-See Smith makes viewers aware that this is a game that no one should be taught to play.

Many of the prints in the Missoula Art Museum collection use texts and sometimes advertising images in the same complex, multilayered way that Quick-to-See Smith’s paintings from the 1990’s and early 21st Century do. Works like *In the Future We Will All Be Mixed Bloods* (ca. 1995), *ABC’s* (2003), *Light Speed* (2003), *Tribalism* (2003), and *War is Heck* (2002) use multiple texts and images to get the viewer to reflect on topics ranging

from the effects of intermarriage on indigenous and other populations to Indian education and mainstream education about Indians to the effects of war in the world. Each work in this rich collection of prints reveals a world that can cause viewers to witness and question socially constructed realities that obscure a deeper understanding of the nature of things we need to confront to become fully humane and aware beings. The study of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith’s work can lead to epiphanies that open the viewer to new insights into culture, nature, and the human condition. It is a journey worth taking that will reward those who look with close attention at the way she juxtaposes text and images in her work.

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War is Heck, lithograph, chine colle, 2002, 57.5 x 58"