

JUDITH LOWRY



THE RACE FOR FIRE, 2001. ACRYLIC ON CANVAS, 173 x 239 CM

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PHOTO: DUGAN AGUILAR

JUDITH LOWRY: OFFERINGS OF SOLACE AND STRENGTH

I first encountered the art of Judith Lowry during her 1994 solo exhibition, *Visitations*, at the Gorman Museum in Davis, California. Her large acrylic paintings lured me with their rich palette and towering figures. The canvases possessed a strong narrative quality, as if I had peered into a family photo album. Immediately, I wished for the gallery to empty so I might be alone with the paintings and engage them in conversation.

Soon after, I attended the artist talk that accompanied the exhibition. Lowry spoke candidly about the inspirations for her work—family stories, some heartbreaking and some celebratory. She describes her work as “a modern extension of the tradition of storytelling.”¹ The painting *Going Home* (1992) depicts the death of her great-aunt from exposure while running away from an Indian boarding school at age nine. The girl, frozen in the snow, stands in a crucifixion pose while an owl (a symbol of death) hovers nearby to guide her into the next world. Lowry’s family discovered the truth about the girl’s death in the early 1990s, and the painting became, in the artist’s words, a means for “solace...a way to put it to rest in my heart.”²

Lowry’s home and studio are in the foothills of northern California, close to the origins of her Native ancestors. Yet her inspirations are varied and reach beyond Native California. Her father’s occupation as a career military officer required the family to move often, and she attended schools in Germany, Australia, Japan, California, and Maryland. The family visited cities such as Versailles and Venice, about which Lowry recalls, “It seems like there were cathedrals and storybook castles everywhere decorated with paintings and sculptures of fantastic beings and unearthly scenes.”³ Her young imagination was fed by the creation stories of her Native American father combined with the fairy tales of author May Gibbs and accounts of the Aboriginal Dreamtime told by her Irish-Australian mother.⁴ Initially lacking a studio, Lowry began her career as a photographer, returning to art school for a bachelor’s degree in fine art in 1988 and a master’s in painting and drawing in 1992 while raising her three children.

For the *Continuum 12 Artists* exhibition, Lowry revisits her father’s stories through a “quintet of creation stories.” The series of paintings, based on narratives recited since time immemorial, explain how the world came to be and how one should act considerately and wisely. Lowry explains that the painting *Welgatim’s Song* is about faithfulness and being appreciative of one’s mate.⁵ *Welgatim* is

the Old Frog Woman, married to Weh-Pom (Coyote). She lovingly cooked for him every day while singing about her happiness. Yet Weh-Pom desired Suh-Mim, the beautiful Deer. In frustration, he killed Welgatim. The next morning his wife reappeared, singing and cooking by the fire. This cycle continued each day until one morning Welgatim warned Weh-Pom not to strike again. He failed to listen and awoke to an empty home. Without breakfast, Weh-Pom stepped out to hunt but it was raining. He waited for the storm to end but it continued until a great flood arose, leaving Weh-Pom hungry and all alone.

Welgatim's flood caused the land to grow cold and dark. The animals met to choose the best candidate to retrieve fire from Mount Te-e-m-a. Grizzly Bear or Hu-neh-he-sim, the first choice, failed because for all his power, he lacked endurance. Next they selected Suh-Mim (Deer), who swiftly reached the mountain but lacked strength. Pacune, the Mountain Lion, was overlooked initially but possessed all the necessary attributes: power, speed, endurance, and perseverance. *The Race for Fire* recounts this lesson about misleading appearances. Employing the device of a "compressed narrative," Lowry has painted the three animals racing together on one canvas instead of three, relaying the sense of urgency.⁶

Weh-Pom appears in another multi-paneled work, *Weh-Pom and the Star Sisters*. Five celestial beings, each on separate canvases arranged like points of a star, surround the center canvas of Weh-Pom. Lowry has adorned each sister in traditional California regalia—shell necklaces, flicker headbands, and tule skirts—holding baskets of stars and catching comets in their hands. Lusting after the beautiful sisters, Weh-Pom journeys to the sky only to discover that they prefer dancing to his sexual advances. Weh-Pom must return to earth immediately, lest he be trapped in the heavens forever. Lowry's quintet of narratives, also including *The Rescue* and *The Obedient Wives*, are as important today as in the past, for humans can still learn from strengths and foibles that are shared universally.

On the opposite end of the gallery, Lowry reveals her most private work. She has constructed an installation based on a *K'um* (Native California roundhouse). Entitled *K'um De-go-i-dom (Home Place)*, she built it for all New Yorkers, non-Native and urban Indians alike. It is a scene most have never experienced, a *K'um* in the Sierra Nevada foothills on a starry, snowy night, with a warmth emanating from within. It is meant to be a sensory experience, and the doorway is left open,

welcoming visitors to enter, sit down, and look around. The interior explodes with color and magical images. Lowry creates places of imagination—drawn from our sleeping and daydreaming visions—made tangible to feed everyone’s inner child.

The inner wall panels are tributes to California, her friends, and family. Images surrounding the ceiling depict celestial angels, similar to those seen in the great cathedrals of Europe, but with faces drawn from family baby photographs. Two women offering their farewells frame the doorway through which visitors exit. The scene is taken from a photograph of Lowry’s maternal grandmother and aunt saying goodbye to her mother and family as they left Australia for the United States. Lowry understands the immigrant’s journey and ties to another homeland.

The roundhouse is obviously not traditional; it is wrapped in a gray tarp covered in duct tape. Lowry refers to the work as “her duct tape dwelling in a nuclear forest.”⁷ She draws parallels between the industrial covering and the Ghost Dance clothing of the late 19th century as well as the recent homeland security recommendation to seal windows in plastic sheeting in case of terrorist attack—all intended as protection in tumultuous times.⁸ Throughout the work, Lowry has encoded expressions of empathy and love into her narrative. Beyond its function as a structure for ceremonies and dances, a K’um represents the womb of Mother Earth, a place of renewal, offerings, and healing. In this artwork created from her soul, Lowry has synthesized her experiences of loss and remembrance.

In the *Continuum* venue, Lowry has proven herself to be a multidisciplinary artist, exploring new media, taking risks, and engaging in formidable yet exhilarating projects. While she feels that her creation story paintings may be formal and restrained, they are nonetheless powerful and substantial.⁹ Able to reach a wide audience, they keep ancestral stories alive and breathing. Raw and personal, her K’um installation examines the significant stories and experiences of her life, while simultaneously inviting visitors to look within. Drawing from her ancestors and surroundings, Lowry has created a far-reaching gift, an absolute offering.

— ANYA MONTIEL

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¹ Artist’s statement, 2003.

² Personal conversation with artist, 15 March 2004.

³ Frank LaPena, “Using Quality,” *News from Native California* 8, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1994): 5.

⁴ Personal conversation with artist, 8 April 2004.

⁵ Personal conversation with artist, 15 March 2004.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Personal conversation with artist, 8 April 2004.

⁹ Personal conversation with artist, 15 March 2004.

