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Native Artists Challenge Landscape Traditions in “Off the Map”

Five artists investigate the complex relationship between Native art and the landscape in “Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination,” opening at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian in New York, the George Gustav Heye Center Saturday, March 3, 2007. The exhibition, which comprises recent work by Jeffrey Gibson, Carlos Jacanamijoy, James Lavadour, Erica Lord and Emmi Whitehorse, closes Monday, Sept. 3.

For Native people, land has multiple meanings. It is home, culture and identity, but it also represents violence, isolation and loss. The artists in this exhibition reinvent and examine landscape from this complex perspective, creating work that exists outside of Western landscape traditions. Their work also defies common expectations of Native American art in both its form and content.

Jeffrey Gibson’s (Mississippi Band Choctaw/Cherokee) oil and silicone paintings utilize intensely colored marks, glossy and transparent pours and pigmented silicone to depict an imaginary and fantastic environment. A Creative Capital grant recipient, Gibson showcases five paintings and a site-specific installation of a large-scale invasive sculptural form, created from urethane foam and pigmented silicone, which emerge from the gallery wall.

Carlos Jacanamijoy (Inga) is inspired by both the light and sounds of Colombia’s tropical rainforest and the urban cityscape of his present Brooklyn home. Known for his large-scale expressionistic paintings, Jacanamijoy uses rich colors and organic forms to create his dramatic interior landscapes.

James Lavadour’s (Walla Walla) elegant depictions of the landscape are rooted in his intimate relationship to the land near his home on the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Oregon. “Blanket,” a recent major work comprised of 15 panels in three rows, offers a glimpse into a universe where abstraction and representation blend into a luminous vision.

Erica Lord (Inuit/Athabaskan), an emerging artist known for work that addresses themes of race, ethnicity and gender as well as memory and home, has created an evocative, site-specific

installation, “Binary Selves.” Combining video, sound and constructed environment, her work challenges the audience’s perceptions of reality and place.

Emmi Whitehorse (Navajo) is known for her mixed-media panels created with chalk, oil-stick and pigment rubbed, drawn and scratched onto paper and applied to canvas. Her multilayered abstract work explores memory and land and draws upon language and symbolism. Whitehorse’s work in this exhibition focuses on water, a recurring subject for the artist.

“I am struck by the originality of the works presented in ‘Off the Map,’” said W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne), founding director of the National Museum of the American Indian. “Each of the artists in this exhibition discovered their own path to the landscape—one of the great traditions of both European and Asian art—and has recreated it as a place of deeply personal revelation.”

“As this title ‘Off the Map’ suggests, historically contemporary Native art has been marginalized, being quite literally ‘off the map’ in terms of the mainstream contemporary art world,” stated John Haworth (Cherokee), director of the George Gustav Heye Center. “We are pleased to present the work of these innovative and provocative artists to a larger audience.”

“Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination” has been organized by Kathleen Ash-Milby (Navajo), assistant curator.

An accompanying catalogue includes essays by Ash-Milby, Kate Morris and Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche). Priced at \$19.95, the publication will be available in the museum shops in March 2007.

Public programs include a panel discussion about the landscape in Native American art with the artists, authors and curator Thursday, March 1, 2007, at 5:30 p.m. The discussion will be followed by a book signing. Gallery talks with the artists will take place Saturday, March 3, 2007, from 1 to 4 p.m. All programs are free.

Jeffrey Gibson’s work has been supported by Creative Capital. Materials for his work have been provided by GE Sealants & Adhesives.

The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian’s George Gustav Heye Center is located at One Bowling Green in New York City, across from Battery Park. The museum is free and open every day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Thursdays until 8 p.m. Call (212) 514-3700 for general information and (212) 514-3888 for a recording about the museum’s public programs. By subway, the museum may be reached by the 1 to South Ferry, the 4 or 5 to Bowling Green or the R or W to Whitehall Street. The museum’s Web site is www.AmericanIndian.si.edu.

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