

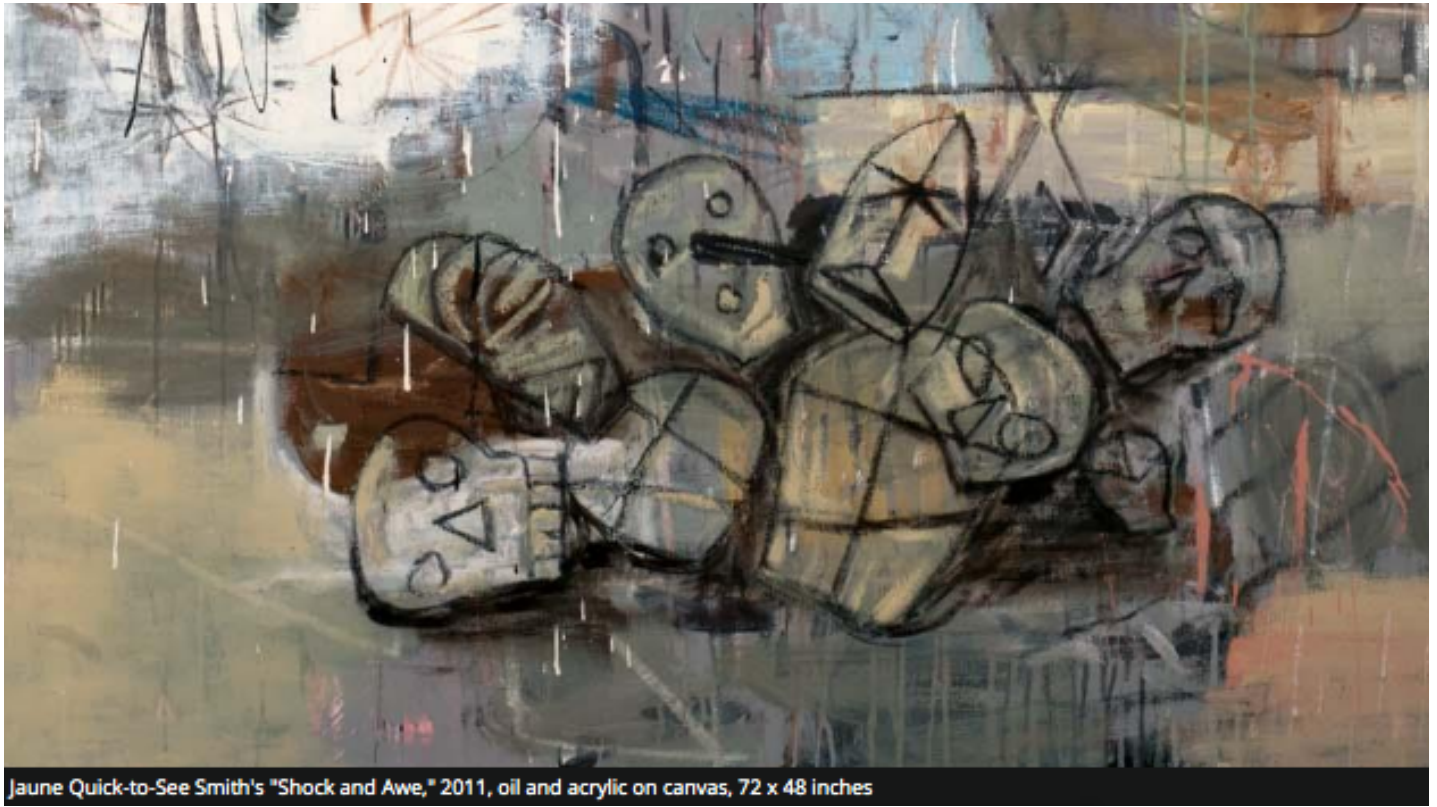
ARTS

Indian artist says vivid images reveal stereotypes that linger

When Jaune Quick-to-See Smith delivered her artist's talk last week at Union College, the first imag

Karen Bjornland | [September 27, 2014](#)





Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's "Shock and Awe," 2011, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 inches

SCHENECTADY — When Jaune Quick-to-See Smith delivered her artist’s talk last week at Union College, the first image that she clicked onto the screen came from her granddaughter’s coloring book.

In the bold black line drawing, a smiling Indian sticks a frog into his mouth with both hands, as if to eat it.

Pictures like this misrepresent Native Americans, Smith said, and “affect people in a subliminal ways.”

Then she clicked up two more photos. In the first, taken at a sports event, an attractive white woman wears only a beaded bikini with an Indian-style headdress atop her blond hair. The other was an ad from Vogue, a woman in an Indian-inspired mini dress sitting on a railroad track, her open legs straddling the rails.

“When we see something like this, it makes us sick in our hearts,” she said.

Smith, who is also a curator and professor, has traveled to more than 200 universities, museums and conferences, giving talks that point out offensive stereotypes and dispel myths about Native Americans.

One of the myths is that the mistreatment of Indians happened centuries ago.

“I had a grandfather and grandmother when that treaty was signed,” she said. The stories of what happened to Native people are not forgotten and have been passed “from my father’s lips to my ears.”

Another myth is that most Indians live on reservations. Seventy-five percent do not, she says.

One of today’s most acclaimed Native American contemporary artists, Smith was born in 1940 on Montana’s Flathead Indian Reservation. She is of Salish, French-Cree and Shoshone ancestry and is a Salish member.

At Union’s Mandeville Gallery, her solo exhibit of 15 oil paintings and prints runs through Nov. 30.

It's not the first time her work has been shown in our area. In 1991, Smith was part of "Our Land/Ourselves: American Indian Contemporary Artists" at the University at Albany.

In the Mandeville, Smith's large paintings are platforms for her political views.

Often using humor and satire, she creates figures that float in a collage of symbolic objects and animals, like petroglyphs, Aztec art, rabbits, skulls, coyotes, seed pods and Native American cut-wing dresses.

Whatever she is thinking about at the time — the Holocaust, the Iraq war, 9/11, an American culture of consumerism, inequality of wealth and resources — finds its way into the works.

"It's sort of a meditative process," she says.

At a Sept. 23 reception for the show, Smith, who lives in New Mexico with her husband and two young granddaughters, described herself as a "cultural arts worker." She spent much of the remainder of her talk relating the history of Native American art, from the earliest known examples to works by contemporary living artists, including her son Neil Ambrose-Smith.

Long tradition

American art dates back 40,000 years, she said.

"We are the only ones who have an art history on this continent. Everyone else brought theirs here."

Her own interest in art began when she was very young.

"I wanted it so bad before I knew the word artist," she said.

Her mother was 15 years old when Smith was born, and by the time she was 3, she was being raised by her grandmother.

Her father, a horse trader with an alcohol problem, couldn't read or write, but would draw pictures of animals for Jaune, which she kept in her pockets.

As she talked about her childhood, Smith showed an image of her Barbie and Ken Plentyhorse paperdoll figures, their government food and "small pox suits."

A painting of giant trees dwarfing a small building is her memory of growing up in a one-room cabin without water, beds or electricity.

"I think the trees were a mile high," she said.

In high school, a teacher told her that she could draw better than the young men but warned that "you'll never be able to be an artist. Women are not artists."

Smith was 36 when she received her bachelor's degree in art education from Framingham State College in Massachusetts; and in 1980, at the University of New Mexico, she earned a master's in art and Indian studies. She planned to teach art, but then her art career took off.

Widely exhibited

In the past 35 years, she has exhibited around the world in more than 100 solo shows and curated more than 30 Native American-focused exhibits, including the first traveling Native American photography exhibit.

If you've walked across the Great Hall floor in Denver International Airport or strolled the history trail in West Seattle, you've encountered projects that Smith collaborated on.

Her work can be found in the collections of the Whitney Museum of Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Brooklyn Museum, Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Smithsonian.

Among her many awards was a 2011 induction into the National Academy of Art.

Last summer, she was invited to serve on the National Artists Advisory Committee, and worked with the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards.

"We have to come to it from all different angles," she said, because schools today are filled with students from many different cultures.

"The browning of America ... It's making people afraid," Smith said. "We need to teach culture in our schools. So we don't have mistakes like Michael Brown, so we don't have mistakes like the Middle East."

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