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NO RESERVATIONS: NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY ART RIDGEFIELD, CT

Smart and densely layered, the exhibition *No Reservations: Native American History and Culture in Contemporary Art* explores American culture's complex relationship with First Nations histories and living cultures [Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum; August 23, 2006—February 25, 2007].

The exhibition features work that, in one way or another, tackles questions of Native American history, culture or identity. *No Reservations'* curator Richard Klein also deliberately selected contemporary practices, excluding work by Native American artists who strictly conform to traditional Native art forms. While some of the ten selected artists are Native American, others are not. This curatorial position highlights the vast, diffuse impact of Native American culture on the American psyche.

The glass-fronted, high-ceilinged lobby space is dominated by *CONQUEST*, 2006, one of Lewis deSoto's two elaborate sculptures made from automobiles. This work initially appears to be nothing more than a vintage car in mint condition, complete with an intact dealer sticker labeling it as a 1965 DeSoto. As I viewed the piece, one astute museumgoer noticed what I had not: "There's no way that's a DeSoto; they didn't make them past 1961." I then turned to *CONQUEST's* lengthy wall text. The passerby was right. deSoto had used the body of a 1965 Chrysler New Yorker to create the car. Symbols, patterns, and details on the license plate, the car body, and the lights convey a long train of thought about the artist's ancestral ties to both the Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto and the Agua Caliente Indian nation—who survived near-extinction by smallpox to run a casino chain near Palm Springs, CA.

Confronted with such label-heavy works, I often wonder if the artist's intent would have been better served by stand-alone text or narration rather than a mix of facts, allusions, and personal associations in an overburdened and overexplained visual statement. Yet, deSoto's *CONQUEST* and the related piece, *CAHUILLA*, 2006, are information-rich works that draw more attention than a simple text might on its own.

Yoram Wolberger's large-scale, brightly-colored sculptures from the series *Cowboys and Indians*, 2006,

are more readily accessible as they play off the familiar plastic toys that American children of a certain era used to wage battles on playroom carpets. Wolberger reproduces these red cowboys and blue Indians on a massive scale, in durable fiberglass coated with colored resin true to the source material's garish hues. Larger than life-size, the tiny toy faces' lack of detailed features becomes grotesquely exaggerated. Yet, the shorthand simplicity of the signs that identify each toy as cowboy or Indian—good or bad guy—ensures that they remain recognizable.

A more predictable entry is Rigo 23's installation, *Tate Wikikuwa Museum*, 1999-2006, a tribute to the jailed American Indian Movement activist Leonard Peltier. Considered a political prisoner by Amnesty International, Peltier—whose Dakota name is Tate Wikikuwa—is a familiar symbol of the ongoing struggle for Native American rights. Like many other optimists before him, Rigo 23 provides blank wall space and pencils for visitors to record their responses to the works. Despite some surprisingly thoughtful scribbles, the opportunity for public self-expression has resulted here, in the fifth incarnation of *Tate Wikikuwa Museum* as it almost always does, in a proliferation of crude irrelevancies, including the inevitable drawing of a cock and balls.

The show's most seamless integration of the Native American and contemporary art worlds is Marie Watt's *Dwelling*, 2006. Echoing Joseph Beuys' material and the minimalist cube's form, the work utilizes four hundred donated blankets to create a sculpture that will be dismantled at the end of the show. Resuming their function as blankets, the component parts will be donated to low-income families and homeless shelters in the area. Watt, a member of the Seneca nation, reminds us that blankets are rich with associations in tribal cultures: important items of trade, symbols of nurture and home, and gifts to commemorate births and marriages. Each donated blanket carries a tag with its donor's name and a bit of the blanket's history, drawing out the similarity between Native American and American society. The piece sounds a welcome note of hope and humanity that serves as a coda to this varied and interesting show.

—Lara Kristin Lentini

[GRID<>MATRIX] ST. LOUIS

Three concurrent exhibitions inaugurated the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum at Washington University's striking new facilities, designed by Fumihiko Maki [October 25—December 31, 2006]. One of these three shows, *[Grid<>Matrix]*, illuminates the intricate discourse on the grid, which is arguably modernity's most prevalent device. In addition, the exhibition details the evolution of the grid from the early twentieth century into the more open idea of the matrix in contemporary art and architecture. *[Grid<>Matrix]* also presents the grid as a device that pays attention to structure, technology, and materials while tackling the full impact of attendant methods and processes on content and style. The show relies on a small but deft selection of objects and images that speak clearly to an often-overlooked avant-garde axiom. The modernist tenet states that, not only must art reveal its production method and content in its form, but material and production method are often the exclusive subject.

[Grid<>Matrix] is also the first in a series of exhibitions that furthers one of the museum's curatorial missions—to reveal the conceptual frameworks and historical dimensions of screen arts. This entails the use of the screen as a device that, shared by painting, photography, film, video, and digital imaging, crosses cultures and disciplines. This initial educational foray lays the groundwork for the museum's ongoing exploration of the screen as the subject of the most critical artistic discourses of the last century, which have also influenced the dissemination of public information.

Despite bold and alluring images such as Dan Flavin's 1987 chromatic eight-foot-by-eight-foot cross-brace of fluorescent lamps and Julius Popp's mesmerizing mural scale water jet bit map, the galleries surprisingly call on other, sometimes dismissed, relics of modernist production—viewers' participation in and completion of all work, and the necessity of decipherable production for credible, rather than fantastic or illusory, works. There are no exoticisms for sale here and no art of escapism, despite a utopian subtext.

Take, for example, Jeffrey Shaw's 1988 video installation *The Legible City*. Here, viewers mount a stationary

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Yoram Wolberger, *Indian #2 [Bowman]*, 2006, 3-D digital scanning, CNC digital sculpting, reinforced fiberglass composite, pigmented resin coating, A/P #1 [collection of Michael and Crystal Paselk; courtesy of the artist, Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco; photo: © Terri Garneau, 2006]; Lewis deSoto, *CONQUEST*, 2004, full-size customized motor vehicle [courtesy of the artist, Bill Maynes Inc., New York, and Brian Gross Fine Art, San Francisco; © Terri Garneau, 2006]