

ARTS

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JAUNE QUICK-TO-SEE SMITH MESSAGE IN MODERNISM

by Kathaleen Roberts

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's politically charged abstractions thrust her into the Modernist pantheon of Wassily Kandinsky, Willem de Kooning and Joan Miró.

Santa Fe's Georgia O'Keeffe Museum curator Carolyn Kastner explores that ascension through "Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: An American Modernist" (University of New Mexico Press, 2013), the first full-length critical analysis of the Corrales artist's paintings.

"I would really like people to look more closely at her work," Kastner said. "I see this modernist influence nobody writes about."

"She adapted their techniques, but ignored the dictum of the non-objective," Kastner writes. "She freely adopted their lyricism and brilliant use of color while loading the surface with symbols of her own heritage and New Mexico's landscapes."

The author also discusses Smith's borrowing of pop culture (i.e. the Barbie doll), as well as her grounding in traditional western techniques to express issues impacting her own culture.

Kastner says Smith chose modernism as the tool for delivering her message, thereby enacting the most ancient role of an artist: to make visible what others cannot see. While countless painters have chosen the Southwest as their subject, "her contribution is a very close look at how fraught the landscape is," Kastner said. "But she always leads with aesthetics. For her, it is about inhabiting the landscape."

Kastner grew at first curious, then fascinated by Smith's work when she was teaching at the California College of Arts in San Francisco.

"There was no book," Kastner said. "She has had an extraordinary impact on this generation of modernists. She has been a great mentor to young Native American artists, not only through organizing collectives and exhibitions, but by collecting their work. I couldn't imagine that someone that important in the Native art world" was so unrecognized.

So Kastner wrote a paper about Smith for a conference. She quickly realized it was the fulcrum of a book.



"The Red Mean: Self-portrait, 1992" is an acrylic and mixed-media on canvas by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. (Courtesy of the University of New Mexico Press)



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is shown in her studio with her painting "Which Comes First." (Morgan Petroski/Albuquerque Journal)

Corrales. She earned her master's degree in art at the University of New Mexico. She is an enrolled member of the Flathead Nation, also descended from French, Cree and Shoshone ancestors.

One of Smith's first masterworks, "The Red Mean: Self-Portrait, 1992" combines her own version of Leonardo Da Vinci's famous drawing of "The Vitruvian Man" (c. 1485) with a collaged background of tribal newspapers. To create her own painting slashed with a red X across a red circle, Smith asked her husband to outline her splayed form to replicate on canvas.

The title resonates with the classical ideal of the golden mean as well as her own tribal identity. Smith created the piece as a protest against the Columbus quincentenary. The figures stenciled across the chest are Smith's tribal enrollment number; above it she slapped a "Made in the U.S.A." bumper sticker. The seeming contradiction claims her dual identity as both American and Indian.

A 1993 series of Custer monotypes highlights a set of humiliations rooted in a Library of Congress photogravure. The long-locked general stands with his arms folded in arrogance. Smith places him with a cartoon figure above the caption "Coyote Made Me Do It," then prone with bloody petroglyph figures raining down on him in "Rain II."

"She's always telling a story, but she never makes it a pitiful thing," Kastner said. "She adds her voice to the record of her people."

Smith's inhabited landscapes jolt her viewers into a world of turmoil, expressing the infinite human conflict over contested space.

The artist created her Petroglyph series between 1985 and 1987 in reaction to controversy over the steep volcanic cliffs west of Albuquerque. A proposed housing development threatened the ancient inscriptions. Smith's turbulent, slashing paintings capture the political wrangling of the struggle to preserve the sacred sites. The series established her artistic voice, grounded in modern abstraction. Smith signed petitions and auctioned paintings to support the effort to create the Petroglyph National Monument in 1990.

The harsh, rugged terrain is marked by 24,000 human signs and symbols extending for 17 miles between the Rio Grande and the volcanoes on the mesa ridge. Melon shapes symbolize Sandia Peak as it rises to the east. Blue currents double as the Rio Grande. Horses represent Spanish explorers.



"Coyote Made Me Do It!" is a 1993 monotype by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. (Courtesy of the University of New Mexico Press)

Smith created "The Court House Steps" (1987) in response to the preservation emergency created when a landowner bulldozed a basalt boulder marked with petroglyphs from its escarpment site. He delivered the culturally significant stone to the courthouse to protest legal negotiations blocking him from building on private land. The jagged angles on Smith's painting might be kiva steps swelling into high-rise buildings that grow and tumble. Diagonally, a series of orbs ends in a solar eclipse across the center.

"The 'Court House Steps' is the most traumatic of all her paintings," Kastner said. "It documents a world spinning out of control."

"She has all this grounding in European and American modernism," she continued. "I compare the work to Willem de Kooning."

"Herding" (1985) implies partition, the act of separating animals within a specific environment. The title also reflects Smith's heritage; her father was a horse trader. But the painting suggests a clash among people over the practice of animal husbandry in the Rio Grande River Valley.

The artist's glyph for the horses mimics Spanish inscriptions among the petroglyphs, marking their colonial entry into the landscape as invaders and occupiers. The valley had been settled for at least 1,000 years when the Spanish arrived. Their invasion jump-started waves of conflict.

Kastner acknowledged an underlying agenda for writing the book.

"I'm interested in enticing a curator into giving her a retrospective," she said. "I've done what I can do in this museum."

Smith's work hangs in the collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, Museum der Weltkulturen in Frankfurt, Germany, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Walker Art Center, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and London's Victoria and Albert Museum.



"The Court House Steps" is a 1987 oil on canvas by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. (Courtesy of the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History)



"Herding" is a 1985 oil on canvas by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. (Courtesy of the Albuquerque Museum of Art and History)