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Rabbits and Flying Warriors: The Postindian Imagery of Jim Denomie

David Martínez

In an era defined by self-determination and decolonization, it is refreshing and startling to hear about indigenous artists making every effort possible not to be "Indian artists."[1] Although the phrase *Indian art* is still commonplace in the vernacular of indigenous artists, historians, and critics, it is used within a community that has undergone substantial changes since the post-1945 generation of artists, including Oscar Howe (Lakota) and Allan Houser (Apache), first confronted a conservative and largely Euro-American–controlled art establishment that unequivocally shunned their efforts to create an indigenous discourse on modernist aesthetics. Especially since the rise of the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA) during the early 1960s, one has seen artists from a range of tribal backgrounds striving to exceed the limitations of "Indian art," which is a nonindigenous identity imposed primarily by well-meaning patrons of Native North American art—most famously Dorothy Dunn and Mabel Lujan. Although these patrons revered the artwork of the indigenous imagination, they nonetheless stifled efforts at responding and adapting to a drastically changing world. Consequently, although the Indian art of the 1920s and 1930s may have reflected the climate of reform and a more enlightened acceptance of American Indian cultures, as epitomized by the 1934 Wheeler-Howard Act (Indian Reorganization Act) and the 1935 Indian Arts and Crafts Act, Indian easel art—most notably, the San Ildefonso watercolorists—was frozen in time

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like dioramas in a natural history museum.[2] In an art world dominated by non-Indian curators and experts, being "Indian" was confined to an ethnographic fiction of storytellers, dancers, and medicine men attired in traditional clothing and regalia, in which the colonization of indigenous lands and peoples is left to the margins like an Edward S. Curtis portrait. These are the notions about history and indigenous culture that persist, even in a post–Red Power society, which Jim Denomie (Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe, b. 1955) critiques and satirizes in a body of work that looks at Indian stereotypes and other misconceptions from the vantage point of growing up in the streets of Minneapolis, Minnesota, during the climactic years of the Indian protest movement, when the American Indian Movement's (AIM's) 1973 confrontation with federal forces at Wounded Knee blazed across American television screens. In its wake, Denomie's Minneapolis saw an urban society transformed by a renewed sense of being Anishinaabe (Ojibwe), Ho-Chunk (Menominee), and Dakota (Sioux), which are the three major tribal groups of southern Minnesota: a world in which people from all walks of life affirmed their varied indigenous identities as part of current times, complete with civil rights, concerns for their families and homes, and ambitions for themselves.

Denomie, as a product of the community along Franklin Avenue in Minneapolis and as someone who earned a bachelor of fine arts degree from the University of Minnesota in 1995, is living in two worlds. However, the two worlds indicated here are not the tiresome cliché of American Indian literary studies, in which a character like Archilde Léon of D'Arcy McNickle's 1936 novel *The Surrounded* grapples with the cultural conflict between Indian and white societies. On the contrary, Denomie's two worlds are uniquely Native. Specifically, he is simultaneously a contemporary of two disparate artistic generations, both of which influence his vision as a painter. On the one hand, he is a peer to Dan Namingha (Hopi), Samuel Ash (Ojibwa), and Harold Littlebird (Santo Domingo), all of whom saw American Indian art and innovation nurtured during the Red Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which was a way of asserting a more timely and authentic—as opposed to ethnographic—voice in the indigenous art community. During this era, creative minds like George Morrison (Ojibwe) and Fritz Scholder (Luiseño) lit up the museum and gallery scene with their bold new visions, complete with modern art influences and references to lives deeply impacted by relocation and urbanization, all of which was expressed with the sophisticated training of an art school education, such as the IAIA and Bacone College. On the other hand, because Denomie entered the art world much later in life than planned, having forsaken his desire to draw and paint due to very poor advice from a high school counselor, he is also a part of the millennial generation of indigenous artists for whom "Indian art" has always been a polymorphous

phenomenon and in which personal influences, inclinations, and experimentations are as important as tribal identity. One can say that Denomie inhabits the effluvial spaces that Gerald McMaster (Plains Cree) observed in "Living on Reservation X":

> Aboriginal contemporary artists, like other artists, often reflect the conditions of their times. These artists move freely between different communities and places, often within a new "third space" that encompasses the two. They are able to see, borrow from, and articulate within the two spaces. They understand the aboriginal community and the mainstream; at times they question the two, sometimes they subvert them. They see boundaries as permeable and culture as a changing tradition. Aware of family and community dynamics as constituting identity through language, sociality, and the unconscious, aboriginal contemporary artists have accessed new and different reference points, of which the reserve ["reservation" in the United States] is a major catalyst.[3]

What Denomie adds to the visual discourse on contemporary American Indian life and society is his identification, as an urban denizen, with Rabbit, a character that he acknowledges is inspired by the Ojibwe trickster Nanabozho, who has a prominent role in the oral tradition and who appears regularly in Denomie's paintings. Regardless of which Denomie paintings that one views, a Rabbit-inspired image appears, complete with enduring caricatures, pop-culture references, and historical myths and inaccuracies, in addition to the hard realities of Indian life in areas like the Phillips neighborhood in Minneapolis, which is probably better known to the general public for stories in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* about crime and poverty than it is for community revitalization. Minneapolis, after all, was the birthplace of AIM, which formed in July 1968 as a local grassroots organization. Sadly, as well as frustratingly, the newspaper stories are contemporary versions of the savage Indian stereotype that has always besotted popular perceptions of Indian people. The latter is in spite of the fact that the Philips neighborhood is home to developments that have become well-known landmarks in the area, such as the American Indian Center, the American Indian Neighborhood Development Corporation, the Franklin Circles Shopping Center, and the Little Earth Community, all of which are located near the University of Minnesota, which founded the first Department of American Indian Studies in June 1969. Moreover, it is worth noting that, in late 1972, the Walker Art Center held an exhibit titled *American Indian Art: Form and Tradition*, which, although it did not feature contemporary artists, was held in a well-known venue for the avant-garde. In a foreword, Ron Libertus (Ojibwe) affirmed that "For Indian people, the exhibition reflects a reawakening of pride," which is a reference not only to the Red Power movement but also to the fact that local Indian organizations

played a role in the curating and coordination of the Walker Art Center show. Working under the umbrella label "Indian Art Association," the association, as of 1972, was "a newly formed group" that was "developed to represent a variety of Indian views in the organization of the exhibition and its related programs, and includes [the] American Indian Movement, American Indian Student Association, Department of Indian Studies, University of Minnesota, Indian Advisory Council, Indian Upward Bound, S.T.A.I.R.S., Upper Midwest American Indian Center, [and] Urban American Indian Center."[4] In turn, the purpose of the exhibit, according to Libertus, was to liberate Indian people from the burdens invented by "white historians and anthropologists": "The Indian has long been denied individuality and has been, essentially, a romanticized creation of white society's imagination. Today the Indian is in theory what he has never been allowed to be in fact, a synthesis of himself."[5]

Aside from the environmental influences of the Philips neighborhood, Denomie brings a wealth of life experience into his work. Denomie did not immediately pursue his interest in an art career, opting instead to enter the more ordinary world of construction work. Denomie currently supports his artistic lifestyle with a day job as a contractor in the Twin Cities, which he has been doing for much of his adult life and which enabled him to obtain his bachelor's degree. Pointing out Denomie's working-class background, however, is not to suggest that his work lacks the sophistication of someone who followed a narrow path between classroom and studio. On the contrary, if what one means by sophistication is a mature intellect capable of comprehending a world made up of complex and diverse people, values, and ideas, then this level of thinking is evident in Denomie's compositions. At the same time, because he is familiar with a life of working with his hands and struggling against the grind of modern life, there is a plainspoken quality to Denomie's work that is profound, accessible, and often humorous.

Once asked to comment on the inspiration for a 1997 large-scale painting erroneously titled *Chicken with VW Bug* (fig. 1), which was being shown in a Weisman Museum exhibit on Indian humor, Denomie stated in that charming, matter-of-fact way he has about him:

> Indians flying on horseback, hunting chickens with golf clubs. I got hungry for chicken one day last summer. And I thought, Indians don't eat buffalo anymore. They're eating fast food, Chinese food. And I thought, there's this popular imagery of Indians hunting buffalo and I thought why don't I just turn that buffalo into a big chicken. And I put it in my flying horse series. As the painting developed I ended up putting golf clubs in their hands—it was to add more humor, but it was also to make the statement that Indians are playing golf too—modern weapons.[6]

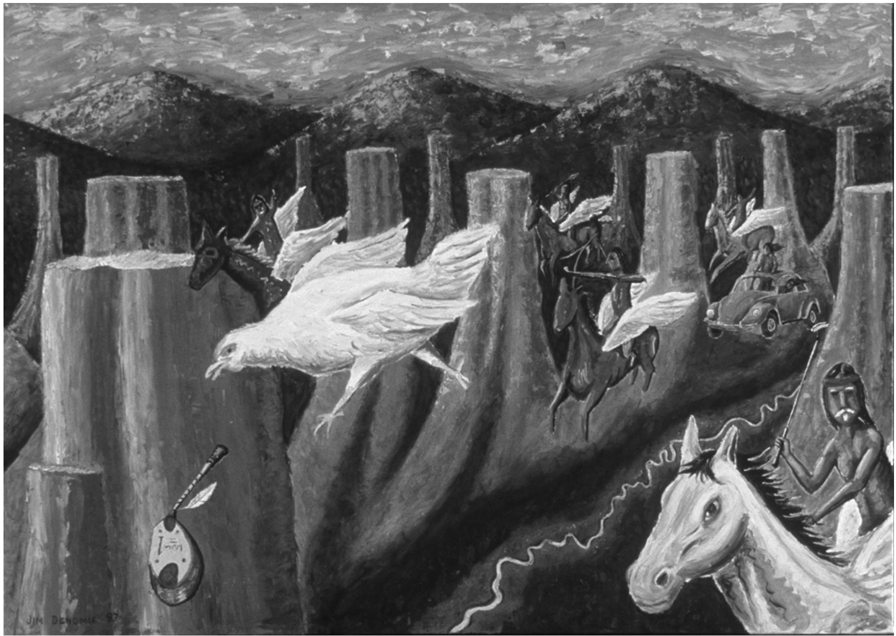

Figure 1. *Jim Denomie,* Transitions, *1997. Oil on canvas, 35 × 49 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

What appears on canvas is what one can say is a reflection on the incongruities of modern indigenous life, in which there is a significant generation gap between "ourselves" and "our history." Even though Indian families still teach their children to respect their elders, one cannot help but notice how different the elders' lives are from their youthful descendants. In addition, the fact is that not all Indians hunted buffalo in the first place, such as the Ojibwe, who are woodlands people, not a prairie tribe like the Lakota and Cheyenne to the west. In either case, seeing Indians on winged horses chasing after a giant flying chicken is a way of laughing at ourselves and our ridiculously unromantic lives on and off the reservation.

Whereas Anglo artists Frederic Remington or James Earle Fraser handled the passing of the "old ways" with a great deal of melancholy, indigenous artists frequently alternate between anger and humor—anger at the Americans and humor among relatives, which may go from satirical to sarcastic very quickly. Such humorous imagery as *Chicken with VW Bug* is deceptively simple and may deflect one from observing the social commentary embedded in the composition. I say "deceptively simple" because comprehending Indian humor is contingent on one's familiarity with Indian society, which does not necessarily mean that one has to be "traditional" in order to appreciate it; rather,

one has to have had the experience of interacting with a variety of Indian people, by virtue of which one becomes familiar with their hopes, struggles, and travails. Knowing the latter will inform one's understanding of images like *Chicken with VW Bug*, as its style of humor is also a way of handling tribulations, including irrepressible stereotypes such as the buffalo-hunter motif, which makes everyday Indian life and its concomitant hardship largely invisible to non-Indians.

To overcome the culture gap that may exist between Denomie's work and his viewer, the viewer—especially the non-Indian viewer—is compelled to clear his or her mind of the old stereotypes and rethink why they are there in the first place. As W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne) states in his foreword to *Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World*, "The challenge presented by contemporary, avant-garde art is not simply whether or not we will like the work, but rather what we can learn from it."[7] Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the things a viewer might learn is something about the artist. As Denomie disclosed in a May 2000 article in *The Circle*, a monthly newspaper serving the Twin Cities' Indian community, "My art speaks about my own identity. The ceremonies still go on, but we're wearing jeans and go to Perkins afterwards. I guess my work is about expanding the boundaries of Indian art."[8] Other families may choose to go to Denny's or IHOP, but the message is the same: such places are as much a part of modern Indian geography as the sacred and historical sites named in oral tradition. In spite of his emphasis on modern urban life, however, one must not assume that Denomie is attempting to break free from the Indian community, least of all from other Ojibwe. On the contrary, one way of appreciating Denomie's art is to remember to look at it through the eyes of Rabbit, or Nanabozho. Moreover, Denomie was a student at the University of Minnesota, where he was heavily exposed to traditional and modern trends in Ojibwe culture and politics.

Gerald Vizenor, a White Earth Ojibwe writer and thinker and former professor of American Indian studies at the University of Minnesota, has turned the folkloric trickster into an indigenous philosophical idea—one that illuminates the modern Indian condition, which has been largely defined by a contentious and tragic history of Indian-white relations. However, the modern era is not the first time that the Ojibwe have faced the threat of extinction and prevailed. In the prologue to *The People Named the Chippewa*, Vizenor tells a Nanabozho story, in which the rabbit-trickster encounters a "great gambler," "round in shape, smooth and white," while searching for his missing mother, who has in all probability been taken by the Gambler. The Gambler informs Nanabozho that all who play with him put their lives at stake, as evidenced by the human hands that hang throughout his lodge, their owners' spirits condemned to a land of darkness, their bodies consumed by *wiindigoo*.[9] With

the stakes set, the Gambler states that they will now "play the game of the four ages of man." Four figures are then placed in a dish. Once they are tossed, each time all the figures remain standing the Gambler wins; otherwise, Nanabozho wins. Before playing commences, Nanabozho insists that because he is the one challenged, he ought to get the "last play." The Gambler consents to the peculiar demand. Three times in a row, however, the Gambler throws the four figures down and three times in a row they remain standing: once more and all would be lost. Suddenly, as the Gambler throws the dish for the fourth time, Nanabozho makes a "teasing whistle," which causes the figures to tumble down flat. The Gambler is stunned. "'Now it is my turn,' the woodland trickster said to the gambler, 'and should I win, should all the four ages of man stand in the dish, then you will lose your life. . . .' Nanabozho cracked the dish on the earth."[10] The trickster, be it Nanabozho or any one of the many tricksters populating indigenous oral traditions across North America, is a relentless fool who is completely uninhibited about breaking all the rules, even the most sacred prohibitions. Basil Johnston (Ojibwa) summarizes the characteristics of "Nana'b'oozoo," comparing him to his siblings in *The Manitous: The Supernatural World of the Ojibway*:

> He was not as attentive to the winds and thunder and waves, nor did he have the same interest in or respect for ceremonies and rituals, dream quests, and purification rites or regard for bears, hawks, sturgeons, and the manitous themselves. In outlook and in conduct, doing what he ought not to have done and neglecting to do what he ought to have done, Nana'b'oozoo behaved more like a human being than a Manitou.[11]

According to Vizenor, Nanabozho "is an existential shaman in the comic mode." His humorous qualities come from "the sense that he does not reclaim idealistic ethics, but survives as a part of the natural world; he represents a spiritual balance in a comic drama rather than the romantic elimination of human contradictions and evil."[12] As part of the natural world, the trickster exceeds the limitations of artifice and convention, which typically dominate so-called civilized society. It is civilized people, after all, who invented the "Indian," a construct that still oppresses the lives of indigenous people. This Indian is a political and racial fiction created throughout generations of federal Indian law, which described the Indian as a "savage," a "ward," and a "problem" to be solved through social-engineering programs that would transform him into a yeoman, Christian farmer, and citizen. The Indian is also the concoction of the Bureau of American Ethnology, which promulgated thousands of pages of scientific observations "out in the field," where Indians dwelled in primitive misery on the reservation, suffering the consequences of being removed from the wilderness. All of this is in addition to a massive pop-culture industry, replete with

Westerns in print and on film, not to mention comic books and radio serials, which turned the noble/savage redskin warrior chief into an international symbol of the Wild West, which still generates revenue to this day.

As a consequence of Indian-white relations, what tricksters like Nanabozho teach "Indians" is survivance, a neologism that Vizenor coined from combining the words *survival* and *endurance*. Conceptually, survivance connotes more than mere staying power; it responds to hardship with patience marked by cunning and the conviction that one is creating a new way of doing things for his or her descendants. One survives because one must survive. However, this is done with the heart of a subversive, in the same way that sacred clowns affirm the sacred by violating its ethical boundaries. A trickster not only lives through perilous and outrageous situations but does so with wit and creativity that often crosses into chaos. Despite great exertion, pain, and adversity, a trickster is recurrently a source of laughter: for others and at its own expense. The trickster spirit, if you will, is a persistent motif in contemporary indigenous art and literature out of historical necessity. It perseveres along the fault line that divides the indigenous from the Euro-American world. More specifically, the tricksters that appear in Denomie's work, such as Rabbit or Nanabozho, are products of the haphazard collision of Ojibwe reservation and American urban societies. "The natural reason of the tribes," Vizenor writes in *Manifest Manners*, "anteceded by thousands of generations the invention of the Indian. The postindian ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance."[13] Denomie's images give a visual presence to those new stories of survivance.

Because Denomie's rise in the contemporary indigenous art world has occurred only during the past decade, the commentary on his work is presently limited to exhibit reviews and catalogs. The scholarly discourse on Denomie's images and his place in the history of American Indian art is in the process of being written. Nevertheless, the developing narrative focuses on the satirical and narrative qualities in Denomie's images, both of which reflect the marginal existence of being an "Indian" in a modern urban environment, in which Indians are often viewed, when they are noticed at all, as casualties of progress, rather than as creators of their own post-Indian world. In this context, Denomie distinguishes himself as a homespun Ojibwe from the streets of Minneapolis, living and working in the rarified spaces of contemporary art. He neither beads moccasins nor carves birch bark canoes, but rather works with oils and canvas.

Since 1993, Denomie has shown his work in a variety of group and solo exhibitions across the Midwest, in New York City, in Munster, Germany, in Olympia, Washington, in Phoenix, Arizona, and at the *8th Native American Fine Art Invitational* at the Heard Museum. What viewers have seen are erotic landscapes, dreamscapes, portraits, and sketches populated with caricatures

and poignant commentaries on Indian life at the turn of the twenty-first century. Not a single warrior riding into the sunset is in sight; however, many figures fly through the air, in which mushroom-shaped clouds and lonely mesas define a fantastic but poignant geography.

The commentaries on Denomie's work can be divided along Indian and non-Indian lines, in which both types of viewers may enjoy what they see. One of the earliest commentaries, if not the first, on Denomie's work occurs in a foreword to the brief but fascinating exhibit book *New Art of the West 5: The Fifth Eiteljorg Museum Biennial Exhibition*. In "The Unexpected West," Bently Spang (Northern Cheyenne) places Denomie in the context of a modern American West that is home to indigenous peoples—whose aboriginal claims to their respective homelands preceded westward expansion and whose participation in contemporary life makes them a part of a rapidly growing and diversifying geographic region. With a sharp eye on Denomie's work, namely two 1995 pieces, *The Posse* (fig. 2) and *The Renegade* (fig. 3), Spang says that he "uses wry humor, vibrant color, and a painterly style to talk about the current state of affairs in '*Indian Country*,' a powerful segment of the unexpected West. His use of humor in dealing with such volatile issues as the backlash against Indian-owned casinos, treaty rights and the perpetuation of Indian stereotypes is a familiar strategy to Indian people; we have always found a way to defuse the negativity of hardships with a healthy does of humor." At the same time, as Spang observes, Denomie's humor is far from flippant; rather, he is quite "aware" of the complexities behind the issues that he addresses in his work.[14] Thus, Denomie has been recognized not just as a painter of the humorous but also of ideas—his humor makes the viewer think in addition to laugh and smile. Both images evoke a dreamscape made up of plateaus at the top of which rest a casino (*The Posse*) and an Indian tipi village (*The Renegade*). Literally flying across these landscapes are Indians on winged horses being pursued by US cavalry who are also on winged horses, a man on a hobbyhorse, and a truck labeled "Dinks." Both images evoke a playful loneliness while they reference a notion of Indians as being outlaws, something to be hunted down and killed, jailed, or returned to the reservation.

The following year, in an interview with Mark Anthony Rolo (Bad River Band of Ojibwe) that appeared in *The Circle*, Denomie was asked about the humor in his work and its presence in Indian art in general, to which he answered: "I do believe that's a survival tactic. It's made me wonder about how humor was a part of the culture before Columbus and the cavalry. I got to believe they sat around the campfire and cracked jokes." In the same interview, Denomie discloses that, although he delves into subjects, such as sexuality, which are atypical for Indian art, there are ethical boundaries to his work. When asked about aiming his sharp wit at tribal politics and politicians, Denomie

was cautious about the "delicacy" of the situation: "I guess I'm more apt to offend white people than Indians. I'm more respectful toward Indian people." This is not to say that Denomie is unaware of the absurdities endemic to contemporary Indian society: "I've thought about Chip Wadena going by with a Corvette and the rest of the Indians driving Volkswagen beetles. And Clyde Bellecourt who has a license plate that says 'AIM ONE.' There's just one (laughs)." Darrell "Chip" Wadena is a former chairman of the White Earth Ojibwe Reservation, a powerful figure convicted in 1996 of bid rigging, money laundering, and stealing from his own people. Clyde Bellecourt—along with his brother Vernon and others—was a founding member of AIM, which reached the apex of its notoriety during a much-publicized 1973 standoff with federal forces at Wounded Knee, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Both would be poignant targets for Denomie's satirical imagination. So does the fact that Wadena and Bellecourt—not to mention other "internal" issues—have not entered his work mean that Denomie is apprehensive about retaliation? "I don't really want to focus a whole lot on the internal struggles. I don't want to show just a drunken Indian by a bus stop. That doesn't serve anybody. I want to show the underlying reasons why."[15] Denomie's interview was published with a

Figure 2. *Jim Denomie,* The Posse, *1995. Oil on canvas, 24 × 36 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

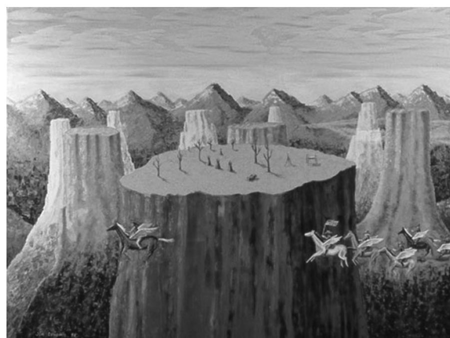

Figure 3. *Jim Denomie,* The Renegade, *1995. Oil on canvas, 36 × 48 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

Figure 4. *Jim Denomie,* Sustenance, *1995. Oil on canvas, 18 × 24 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

black-and-white reproduction of the portrait *Sustenance* (fig. 4), in which a somewhat sullen middle-aged Indian man is shown looking straight into the viewer's eyes with a small bird on his right shoulder and a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese bearing the slogan "Yum Yum" in his shirt pocket. The figure also has very broad shoulders and a greenish-yellow complexion, which makes him look like he grew organically out of the mountainous landscape in the background; this is accentuated by the bird sitting on his shoulder and the tiny skier racing down his shirt in hot pursuit of a slice of bread. The man's expression looks bedraggled and a bit cynical, as though he feels foolish and is posing reluctantly for his portrait.

At the next juncture of a burgeoning art career, Denomie began to venture further into the mainstream art world with the one-man exhibit *Jim Denomie: Recent Paintings*, which took place in 1998 at Beauxmage Fine Art in Saint Paul, Minnesota, which Judy Arginteanu described as a "sly mix of American Indian and Wal-Mart Americana." In an attempt to summarize his artistic agenda, Denomie stated to Arginteanu: "I'm not in it for the money. . . . I'm just trying to be as honest as I can."[16] Honesty, as it turns out, would become a defining quality of Denomie's art—not as an "honest injun" stereotype but in terms of being existentially authentic. Following the Beauxmage show, Denomie was featured in the *25th Ojibwe Art Expo*, also in 1998, at the Duluth Art Institute's Balcony Gallery, in which *Chicken with VW Bug* was featured and about which Ann Klefstad commented, "What I didn't expect at the expo was some of the humor. You go expecting a kind of hush, a kind of—well, kind of a museum of a culture—and you find something very different. This work is alive." Klefstad then said, testifying to the intrinsic charm of Denomie's work: "You can't not like this painting."[17] One might be tempted to say here that Klefstad was expecting an exhibit by a stoic Indian. It is often news to non-Indians that indigenous people have a riotous sense of humor.

Denomie's ability to surprise and delight continued with the review of the Arrowhead Biennial, also held at the DAI's Balcony Gallery, in which J. Z. Grover thought that *Live Music Tonite* (fig. 5), Denomie's featured work, offered "far more food for thought than 'Reminiscence,'" the exhibition's first-place winner by Jill Seguin. *Live Music Tonite*, as Grover describes it, "indicts both Native and white cultures for their deadly twining—I could also say twinning—of entertainment and booze."[18] More specifically, the painting shows a stage surrounded by

> a forest of bottles (beer, wine, whiskey) and tree stumps, emblems of two very different kinds of loss, one (the loss of homelands) often at the expense of the other (booze). Winged horses and their bareback Native spirit riders flit about the canvas like angry insects. An eight-horse team draws a red-painted "Christian Bros."

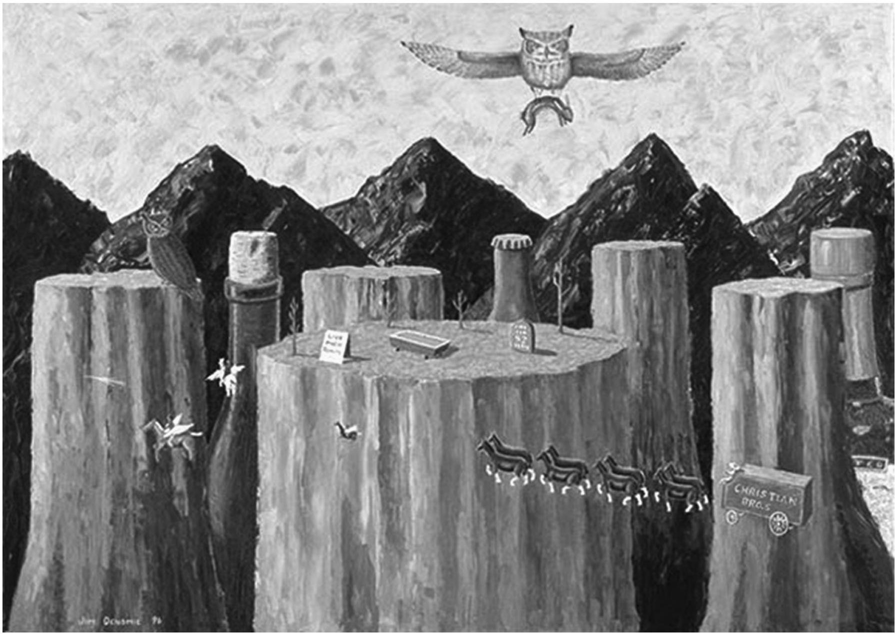

Figure 5. *Jim Denomie,* Live Music Tonite, *1996. Oil on canvas, 35 × 49 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

> wagon through the air toward the tiny concert stage. . . . On the circular stage, a small tombstone is inscribed "Life exp. 52 years." . . . Above this dismal scene, a huge, realistically rendered owl pounds directly towards the viewer, grasping what appears to be a rabbit.[19]

Clearly moved by what she saw, Grover concludes, "Denomie's painting demonstrates the power that a conceptually based painting can pack. How sad that this dense, disturbing painting did not garner even an honorable mention."[20] Given that the alcohol in question is imported into reservations from non-Indian distributors, it is fair to say that the prevalent problem of alcoholism in indigenous communities has less to do with a genetic (or racial) predisposition for alcohol abuse and more to do with a dominant society placing a high value on alcohol consumption and inebriation, which has unfortunately been assimilated into reservation society.[21] However, rather than harangue his viewer with doleful statistics or tragic imagery, Denomie focuses on the too often irresistible "high" of "having a good time" that many times leads to this kind of substance abuse.

A couple of years later, John Steffl wrote of Denomie's work: "The fact is that Jim Denomie's narrative paintings [e.g., *Migrations* (fig. 6) and *Erotic Landscape* (fig. 7)] create a cultural bridge," thereby demonstrating his growing

appeal to the non-Indian imagination.[22] However, this is not in terms of Denomie's work accommodating non-Indian artistic values and social expectations, but rather because of his capacity for drawing non-Indians into his personal vision of contemporary indigenous life. In the world that Denomie presents his viewer, one does not necessarily need to know how to speak a Native language or possess ritual knowledge; instead, the Indians of Denomie's universe consist of ordinary people whose humanity is ultimately accessible to all. As Steffl continues, "Strongly rooted in story telling, his work links wry, historical narratives with popular culture clichés in what the artist refers to as 'metaphorical surrealism,'" which may be Denomie's way of ascribing symbolic meaning to the absurdities and ironies inherent to communities that are paradoxically described as "sovereign" and "domestic dependent nations." "With seductively rich colors," Steffl observes, "strangely familiar landscapes and a touch of humor, Denomie coaxes us into considering his position and reconsidering our own."[23] Getting any non-Indian viewer to question his or her preconceptions about Indians is a victory in itself. Unfortunately, as many of us in the indigenous community know, such assumptions do not easily fall to the wayside.

Figure 6. *Jim Denomie,* Migrations, *1996. Oil on canvas, 24 × 48 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

Figure 7. *Jim Denomie,* Erotic Landscape 1, *1997. Oil on canvas, 18 × 24 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

Tim Anderson, for example, was less enthusiastic and a bit more critical, stating, after making some complimentary remarks: "the one fault with the 'Erotic' series may be that it is too wide-ranging in style and presentation to cohere properly together as a group. Several works fall outside what appears to be the theme, such as the strong archetypal imagery of 'Untitled Antlered Man and Birdwoman,' which is positively steeped in Native myth, but is neither obviously a landscape nor erotic."[24] With such remarks, Anderson may be revealing more about his own ethnocentrism than about Denomie's paintings, as he is more focused on the curatorial aspects of the exhibit rather than on the content of the paintings. Still, turning to the *Renegade* series, Anderson was more forgiving in his criticism: "In a style suggestive of both childlike

draftsmanship and contemporary pop-surrealist artists like Robert Williams, Denomie dissects the inherent contradictions between cultures and perspectives in a very linear fashion." Being ignorant about Ojibwe history and culture, Anderson sounds annoyed with the repetition of the right-to-left narrative, which consisted of "the Native on one side and debased American culture opposite it." According to Anderson, Denomie explained this in terms of Ojibwe oral history: westward expansion went from right to left, so to speak, which parallels "the basis of Ojibway language and storytelling" (the latter is a likely reference to birch bark scrolls, which form the basis of the Midewewin tradition). Did Anderson really comprehend what he looked at, even with Denomie's assistance? Probably not. "Simple devices," Anderson notes, "such as a Native rider chased by a missile, cowboys or an armored car imply a narrative that is known only to one who can read the symbols."[25] Perhaps Anderson's real problem is that he only has a taste for Euro-American pretentiousness, angst, and social decay, as opposed to demonstrating any interest in learning anything about the indigenous people who are his neighbors. This otherwise very provincial critic, however, was astute enough to notice the recurring appearance of rabbits in Denomie's images, which he asked the artist to explain. "Denomie stated," Anderson notes, "that for some reason he has a strong mental tie with the animal, and rabbits seem to turn up in moments of strange coincidence."[26] Nanabozho has been spotted. Unfortunately, a critic who did not have the eyes to see what was in front of him spotted the trickster.

Marcie Rendon (White Earth Ojibwe) portrays Denomie and the *Renegade* and *Erotic Landscapes* series in a more down-to-earth way. For Rendon, Denomie's images are not an enigma that only the initiated can comprehend, nor do they compel her to rethink her position on Indian art, as they did for Anderson and Steffl. On the contrary, Denomie speaks in colloquialisms, albeit visually, which are commonplace in the American Indian community. Explaining for Rendon what he means by "metaphorical realism"—obviously toned down from "metaphorical surrealism"—Denomie states, "Flight becomes an issue of freedom. The paintings are a great vehicle for social and political comments. The mesas represent reservations." Then, elaborating on a remark he made about his work to Arginteanu back in 1998, Denomie considers honesty to be the strength of his work. "It takes a lot of courage to put it out for an audience. They're not just looking at a painting, they're looking at you." What does Denomie's audience see of him? As far as Rendon is concerned, "Today, he works part-time construction, is a dad, a self-proclaimed 'honeybun' and an artist with a dream of living off his art within 10 years." In the final analysis, Denomie's art "draws you in either to contemplate the meaning or stimulate conversation with the person viewing it next to you."[27] Among American Indian viewers, Denomie's images are like stories from a favorite uncle, rich in

humor and the sights and sounds of everyday life, which, in turn, make one want to laugh loud and share one's own stories.

I encountered Denomie's work for the first time while visiting the *Listening with the Heart* exhibit, which was held in 2000 at the Weisman Art Museum on the east bank of the University of Minnesota. The exhibit featured the works of Frank Big Bear, Morrison, and Norval Morrisseau, all Ojibwe artists of the late twentieth century.[28] What may not have been apparent to the casual viewer was the fact that there was a smaller companion exhibit titled *Contemporary Native Art of Minnesota* in an adjacent gallery, which showed the works of Starr Big Bear (Ojibwe), Julie Buffalohead (Ponca), and Jim Denomie.[29] Whereas *Listening with the Heart* was about established and historically important Ojibwe artists, *Contemporary Native Art* was about the up-and-coming generation of indigenous Minnesota artists. With respect to what differed between the two exhibits, Denomie stands out in varying ways. First, Denomie, who was forty-five at the time, was juxtaposed with two artists who were in their mid- to late twenties. Yet his affiliation with these two much younger artists was appropriate for the reason that Denomie's debut in the art world occurred only recently. At the same time, because he is only two years younger than Frank Big Bear, Denomie was a much more mature and experienced person and artist, which showed in the sophistication of his visual ideas. From the latter perspective, Denomie demonstrated in his two works—*Manifold Destiny* and *Migrations*—the kind of insight that can only come from a wealth of life experience. I remember being struck by the humor and idiosyncratic vision of *Migrations*, the very first painting I had ever seen by Denomie. Against a Van Gogh-esque night sky stood an array of tall, slender mesas at the top of which were two tiny Indian villages, complete with tipis. One mesa was completely natural, surrounded by a few trees; the other took the form of a skyscraper. Crossing back and forth in front of the mesas were Indians on winged horses, casually going to and fro between the two villages. The image was an unpretentious yet insightful commentary on the path between reservation and urban areas that have become an entrenched part of modern Indian life. I smiled at the thought of recognizing myself on one of those winged horses. What I saw were not "two worlds" but one—an Indian world in which the landscape has changed but is still Indian land.

Returning to the *Renegade* and *Erotic Landscapes* series, Klefstad praises Denomie's work, declaring with an enthusiasm informed more by art theory than by familiarity with the Indian community: "This isn't really surrealism. . . . It's instead a literal depiction of the incredible transformations wrought upon cultures by time and media." Klefstad also notices, like Anderson before her, the abundance of rabbits in Denomie's images, stating: "In these paintings, the rabbit—a common incarnation of Nanaboujou [Nanabozho], the really

marvelous culture hero of the Anishinabe [Ojibwe]—is a protagonist, the stand-in for the viewer and painter alike. Somehow, in this small figure, a dry humor, self-mockery warmed by mercy, is transmitted."[30] Although Klefstad's review smacks of postmodern trendiness—as she refers to media-induced reality, the deconstruction of history, and a healthy dose of ironic humor—she makes an earnest attempt to find a new language for talking about what simply cannot be summed up with words like *tradition*, *Indian*, or *modern*. Unfortunately, she reaches for something she cannot quite apprehend and gets lost in the process. Denomie's work shows us, in Klefstad's opinion, "that grab bag of culture, put together by our media out of our collective greed and desire," in particular, as this "looks . . . to a singular individual, whose history sets him at the borderline between some memory of a primal landscape and the stuffed and nutty world we all occupy together." Klefstad goes on to describe Denomie's work as a "parallel universe," one in which is found "a ghostly history that continues current in this painting. A door opens here onto a reality imbued with what was past as possibility."[31] Is Klefstad sure that she is talking about Denomie's perspective and not her own? Denomie might remind Klefstad that he grew up in Minneapolis and not some "primal landscape." As for the parallel universe, one can say that Klefstad is simply saying what has been said about Indian artists all along—that indigenous persons like Denomie live in "two worlds." Klefstad's review is an example of what often happens when non-Indian critics, unfamiliar with contemporary American Indian life, review the art made by artists from the Indian community. More to the point, Klefstad is torn between regarding Denomie's art and worrying about being culturally sensitive. When this happens, one can almost hear the Indian flute music playing in the background as clichéd references to "primal" culture are made.

In a 2002 interview for the *Native American Fine Art Invitational*, which was held at the Heard Museum in Phoenix, Arizona, Denomie was asked about the "very strong iconography" in his work. He answered: "I saw the inaugural painting, 'The Renegade,' in my head months—half-a-year or longer—before I even put it to paper. It was months after that before I did a first painting of it."[32] Let us be clear that Denomie works like many artists, developing ideas over time until they reach a point when it is finally time to get them on canvas or paper. Denomie is not talking about a "vision quest," as Klefstad might claim. On the contrary, Denomie asserts that his thinking became more conceptual, signifying a turning point in his artistic development. He began learning more about the history of federal Indian affairs, perhaps during his time working as an undergraduate teaching assistant for Bob Danforth at the University of Minnesota's Department of American Indian Studies. Many American Indian students do not learn about what the federal government did to tribes at an

official level until they take courses in American Indian studies. Most students, in my experience as an educator in American Indian studies, are transformed by this knowledge. "I saw the reservation system," Denomie states, "in this metaphorical visual state where high mesa tops represented confinement and flight became an issue of privilege."[33] Hence the flying warriors or, more specifically, warriors on winged horses. At this point, Denomie becomes a painter of ideas, inspired by the history he learned while taking courses on American Indian culture and politics. "Like individual frames of a film," as Margaret Archuleta (Tewa Pueblo/Hispanic) analyzes Denomie's work, his "paintings evolve around three interconnected themes [: first, there are] social, cultural, and political issues of contemporary Native life. [Second,] sexuality, spirituality, and regard for the land. [Third,] his dream world and the psychology of his desires and fears."[34] Consistent with the dream logic from which his ideas originate, all of these themes ultimately overlap and intermingle throughout Denomie's images. His identity, though, comes out most clearly in his portrayals of rabbit (fig. 8), about which Denomie gives the following account:

Figure 8. *Jim Denomie,* Medicine Man, *2005. Oil on canvas, 10 × 8 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

> I've always had a strong connection with the rabbit. I recognized years ago that a rabbit would come around at very important points in my life, life-changing events.
>
> It could have been on a downtown street, in the park, wherever. I just recognized this connection, and I continue it. It has popped up in my paintings. I stand back and look at the brush strokes and say, "Oh, there's waboose, the rabbit." I have named my studio "Waboose," which is rabbit in Ojibwe.
>
> So, these paintings are a combination of the erotic landscape, hills and trees with the renegade mesa tops, and then the mushrooms come, and the rabbit is introduced. Just introducing those last two elements has created a third and distinct theme that is much more emotional, much more psychological. I even get nervous when I paint these things. These are very risky. So, the rabbit is me in these paintings.[35]

It is through the intercession of the rabbit that Denomie ousts the invented or fictional Indians that populate the American landscape, from gift shops to national parks, and replaces them with a more honest and unedited version of modern Indian society.

Such honesty as an aesthetic value has been taken a step further in Denomie's *Painting-a-Day* series, which as of the spring of 2007 was more than four hundred small paintings strong. Three hundred of these quick studies became the *Rugged Indians* series, several of which were installed in the *New Skins* exhibit at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. Denomie hit upon this experiment one evening when he was feeling "too tired to paint," which was more than likely due to putting in a grueling day working as a contractor. As he tells the story to Tammy Sopinski Perlman, after some thought, Denomie told himself: "Go in [the studio], use whatever paint is on the palette and do a quick painting," such as "a blue circle with a yellow line through it." In his own words, Denomie "wowed" himself.[36] Typically executed in about half an hour, each of the *Painting-a-Day* works consists of raw brushstrokes and emotionally wrought colors. Each portrait, similar to Denomie's images in general, conjures faces whose expressions are layered with experience, yet, like a mask, the true identity of the individual is kept hidden. Gail Tremblay (Onondaga/Micmac) said of the portraits that hung at the 2009 exhibit of Eiteljorg: "Together, these paintings work like a psychological portrait of what it means to survive a history of oppression and attempted genocide. At the same time, they have a disarming honesty that totally deconstructs the romantic images of Indians that make so many people in Euro-American society comfortable" (see figs. 9 and 10).[37] Whether or not Denomie is intentionally working to deconstruct such images, it is apparent that each portrait has its own personality, as though

Figure 9. *Jim Denomie,* Untitled, *2005. Oil on canvas, 13 × 16 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

Figure 10. *Jim Denomie,* Dream Rabbit I, *2000. Oil on canvas, 33 × 45 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

Denomie caught a glimpse of someone, maybe himself, in which the face is a pulsating sphere of emotion instead of a physical object. Crazy, calm, angry, happy, and confused, each face is unique in that it was drawn from a different emotional, chronological, and geographical point along the endless spectrum of faces and personalities that one can find in the indigenous world.

Before receiving the honor of an Eiteljorg fellowship, Denomie unveiled his masterwork, *Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill* (fig. 11) as part of the *New Skins* exhibit. The work is one of Denomie's larger oil and canvas compositions, measuring 35 × 49 inches. In an invoice to the Frederick R. Weisman Museum, which purchased this work, Denomie says, "Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill is a visual story about some of the historical events concerning the state of Minnesota and the Ojibwe and Dakota tribes within it's [*sic*] boundaries, since the 1862 Dakota War."[38] What one sees is a White Castle–like establishment bearing the name "Fort Snelling" just below its crenulated battlement. Inside is a diner reminiscent of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1942). Outside there are a variety of Indians on horseback—even one inside the trunk of a police cruiser. Also included are references to Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty's policy toward Indian gaming, deference to the Dakota Commemorative March honoring the Dakota victims of the

Figure 11. *Jim Denomie,* Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill, *2007. Oil on canvas, 35 × 49 inches. Photo courtesy of Jim Denomie.*

1862 US-Dakota War, as well as allusions to treaty rights and the scourge of alcoholism in the Indian community. Writes Denomie, "The photographer," standing in the lower left-hand corner of the picture taking a photograph of an Indian couple, "is Edward Curtis as paparazzi, [and] on his back is a reference to the 38 warriors hung at Mankato and the two others captured and hung three years later. These 40 are remembered by the 38 people and two rabbits portrayed in this painting."[39] Mary Abbe says of Denomie's work, making oblique reference to *Fort Snelling*, "Despite the seriousness of the subjects, Denomie doesn't pontificate or hector. He ridicules. In Denomie's nothing-sacred landscape, an Indian can be spotted mooning the governor, a horse from Picasso's 'Guernica' screams and an Indian couple pose like the farmers in 'American Gothic.'"[40] Dakota writer Susan Power, author of *Grass Dancer* (1997), said of Denomie's work in the exhibit's gatefold brochure:

> In membrane theory physicists posit that a myriad of other universes are only a membrane away from the one we inhabit, closer to us even than the clothes we wear. Jim Denomie arrives at a similar conclusion without using numbers, calculations, and he goes a step further, seeing the artist, the creative, inspired mind, as one capable of piercing what he calls the "macaroni and cheese membrane" that divides our mundane real world from the artists' dream landscape. He visualizes the process as the artist down on hands and knees (a supplicant, praying for a vision?), head plunged boldly in the kitchen oven, the gas and flames blasting, until, volcano-like, the creative mind explodes onto that other plane where Picasso and van Gogh and Frank Big Bear dream together, fantastic creatures fly through purple skies or lunch on orange grass. The artist makes it to the other side where anything and everything is possible.[41]

What Denomie sees is not a "nothing-sacred landscape" but rather a landscape whose sacred boundaries are set by the antics of Nanabozho, the rabbit-trickster. In a modern world beset with rampant secularism, the contemporary Indian community needs—as much as ever before—the sacred to be reestablished. Yet such an endeavor must be done from the peculiar vantage point of one striving for authenticity in an otherwise inauthentic world. Hence the irony of Denomie's head-in-the-oven metaphor. What at first appears to be an attempted suicide is actually a deliberate effort to expand the mind, not kill it. Just as humanity once took a collective leap forward when it discovered cooking, baking, and smelting, Denomie seeks to transform the mind beyond its current material limitations. Denomie wants to melt away the hardened and crusty assumptions and clichés that regularly impede one's thinking and that can crab around one's mind like barnacles on a ship's hull. Perhaps another way of describing what Denomie is pursuing is purification. His own word is simply *honesty*. Once I asked Denomie what he meant when he described his

work as honest. I had observed that he uses this term often as a way of characterizing his paintings, so I assumed that it must have considerable value for him. When I asked him to elaborate, he wrote:

> So I paint stories that are from my perspective, (my understanding of the world and history) and my experiences, in a style and form that are unmistakably my own. And I paint from my dreams. I paint creative stories with humor, wit, and sarcasm because I am funny, intelligent, and angry. I am angry about historical events of land thefts, massacres, boarding schools, racism, and genocide. I am angry that the attitudes associated with those past events still exist with some people today. I do not generalize, I speak to those people specifically. Some of my paintings say "mean people suck." The only people offended are mean people. Some of my paintings are more intuitive and comment about personal issues of spirituality, sexuality, intimacy, and addiction, as I understand them. I paint about these things fearlessly and honestly.[42]

The kind of honesty of which Denomie speaks requires fearlessness because in so doing one risks being ridiculed and misunderstood by others. Many of us know the experience of "disappointing" non-Indians when we are nothing like the idealized images they hold dear in their heart, and of having to explain why many Indians do not speak their language or participate in ceremonies and the like. Yet the truth needs to be acknowledged, respected, and even celebrated. What non-Indians may discover, if their eyes are open to the indigenous world around them, is that this world is populated by an astoundingly diverse array of men and women—young, old, urban, suburban, or reservation—who pursue an equally diverse range of occupations and lifestyles. So how does Denomie compare to other Ojibwe artists? Is there even such a thing as "Ojibwe art"? Or is it, like "Indian art," another non-Indian fiction?

Among those who have tried to maintain an Ojibwe-centric artistic agenda, Morrisseau is the well-known founding spirit of the Algonquian Legends School (sometimes called the Woodlands School), centered on Manitoulin Island, in Ontario, Canada, which nurtured the talents of Carl Ray, Jackson Beardy, Daphne Odjig, James Simon, Goyce and Joshim Kakegamic, and Samuel Ash. According to Theresa S. Smith, "Woodland art is distinguished by its indebtedness to shamanic art forms (midewewin or medicine society mnemonic birchbark scrolls and rock paintings), including x-ray techniques, cross-hatching, a distinct form line, and specific symbolic forms such as circles, heart and head lines, and ovoid shapes often filled with dots."[43] In this sense, the Algonquian Legends School became a part of the cultural revitalization movement that had come to define much of the tribal self-determination era during the 1970s. Indians everywhere were rediscovering their cultures and histories, informing themselves about their identities and how they wanted to

be recognized by others. Traditional imagery and symbolism thus becomes the most obvious way in which an artist can identify him- or herself as belonging to a specific ethnic group. Nevertheless, because such icons are regarded as sacred, their ethical boundaries may, in the opinion of some, preclude them from being used in the secular spaces of contemporary art.

In the case of Morrisseau, developing Midewewin-inspired images may have been a potent antidote for Indian stereotypes, but it was also a controversial transgression of the Midewewin tradition. Those who regarded themselves as caretakers of this sacred tradition did not consider the depiction of its stories and images as appropriate for modern artistic and commercial reproduction. As Bernard Cinader writes, "The first attempts of Morrisseau to paint the sacred legends of his people were fiercely resisted by those who guarded the secrets of the Midewewin society, but Morrisseau persisted, and as he developed his own capacity as a painter, the opposition to his work gradually declined."[44] It is unclear why the traditionalists relented on their criticism. Perhaps they eventually understood that Morrisseau was consistently respectful of the Midewewin and recognized it as a way of reminding younger Ojibwe of their sacred traditions. Often, young Indians rediscover their traditional ways through nontraditional media, be it paintings, books, music, or movies. Robert Houle (Ojibwa/Salteaux) describes Morrisseau's work as

> a cyclorama where people, animals, birds, fish, plants and demi-gods negotiate an existence over lands, highways, rivers and lakes. . . . As a master narrator, he has a voice that thunders like the sentinel of a people still listening to the stories told since creation. Indeed, for me he has invented an interior colour space where the imagination with its paradigms, viewpoints and methods is in complicity with the potent traditions of critique and resistance. He is a conjurer, orchestrating themes that offer a voyage into the fantastical and the outrageous.[45]

The fantastical and the outrageous are points at which one can say that Morrisseau's and Denomie's work meets, in spite of their disparate styles and intellectual orientations. Denomie, for all his references to Nanabozho, never includes the Midewewin tradition in his images. Denomie's work is equally different from that of Morrison, which is relentlessly abstract and much more oblique in its references to anything recognizably Ojibwe. Katharine Van Tassel writes that Morrison "was born in 1919 in Chippewa City, Minnesota, an extension of the Grand Portage Indian Reservation outside Grand Marais. His father, James Morrison, was a native of the area and his mother, Barbara Mesaba, was from a Chippewa reserve in the Thunder Bay region of Canada. Both were raised in the Chippewa tradition and brought up their children in the same tradition."[46] Yet, as Morrison grew and matured as an artist, he became one of the more cosmopolitan figures working against the limitations

of "Indian art." What is most distinctive about Morrison's work is the conspicuous absence of any reference to Indian symbolism, culture, or history. At the same time, the lights, colors, and forms of the land and water around Lake Superior regularly inform Morrison's vision, not to mention his palette. With regard to the *Horizon* series, an important sequence of works that defined the latter part of Morrison's career, I have written elsewhere,

> What appears in the horizon paintings . . . is less a concern for breaking free of any tradition . . . and more of a meditation on his place of origin. Yet, despite his unquestionable Ojibwa heritage, Morrison does not engage in so-called "Indian Painting." . . . On the contrary, Morrison's "authenticity" comes through the act of painting itself. As such, he shares in the reverence of nature, which is common to the Ojibwa tradition. However, that reverence is expressed in a very individual language, which is consistent, not only with the tenets of Abstract Expressionism [a major influence in Morrison's early work] but also with a native culture that values dreams as a source of insight.[47]

Vizenor describes Morrison's work as that of "a Native modernist painter" whose "inspiration was both innate, Native by sentiments of natural reason and memory, and learned by art history, museums, and galleries." Yet Morrison is not what one would call an academic painter, if by that one means an abiding fascination with a "classic" or "romantic" vision of history and reality. On the contrary, Morrison displays the kind of sensitivity that can only come from reflecting on nature, not as an abstraction, but as something that provides living sustenance for one's senses. "He was roused," Vizenor continues, "more by the imagic traces of nature, motion, color, and abstract patterns than he was by the academies of modernist turns, modes, and representations."[48]

Similar to Morrisseau, Morrison became a canonized figure in the history of modern Native North American art and is still revered in the Ojibwe community. Anya Montiel observes in her 2005 article, which recounts the process that went into developing the inaugural exhibit at the National Museum of the American Indian, "While Morrison and Houser have passed on, their legacies remain, especially in the lives they impacted and the artwork left behind." Montiel then states that Denomie, in addition to Doug Hyde (Nez Perce/Assiniboine/Chippewa), Dan Namingha, Estella Loretto (Jemez Pueblo), George Longfish, and David Bradley (Chippewa), "talk about the influence of these artists on their careers."[49] Interestingly enough, the exhibits at the Weisman Art Museum notwithstanding, if Denomie ever spoke of Morrison, let alone Houser, as influences on his painting, these claims did not make it into print, as is evident in the above analysis of his career. In an e-mail, Denomie responds to my query about the relationship between his work and that of Morrison and Houser, stating:

My artistic relation to George Morrison is rather minimal. I met George when I was still in art school and he was nearing the end of his life. I met him in about 1992 and he died in 2000. I saw him only four or five times over that period but I was able to go and visit him at his studio/home on Lake Superior. Our friendship was brief. He invited me to a show he had at the Dolly Fitterman Gallery [in Minneapolis] and I told him I wished I could afford to buy one of his paintings and he said he wished I could too. In the Fall of 1999 I got a Jerome Travel grant to rent a cabin in Grand Marais for a couple of weeks just to paint. I had George's number at the studio but I decided not to call him and bother him with a visit because I had recently heard that he was ill. He died about five months later. I know he knew I was an artist and I am sure he knew about my work but we never discussed it. Shortly after he died, he came to visit me in a dream and he told me he liked my work.

I think George's biggest influence on me was the fact that he was a contemporary artist stepping outside of and expanding the boundaries of indian art. That is what I have purposely tried to do with my art. When I was in art school, I felt an expectation by both indian and non-indian people to do "indian art." In most people's minds, this meant the stereotypical genre of spirits and eagles, buffalo and teepees etc. But I grew up in south Minneapolis where most of that did not exist. I thought, if I was going to paint images like those just to sell work, I might as well be painting Elvis' [*sic*] on black velvet. When I went to research contemporary indian art, George was one of the first artists I found any published material on.[50]

Denomie makes it perfectly clear that he does "not claim Allan Houser as an influence on [his] work."[51] Moreover, given that Denomie admits to doing "research" that led him to works on Morrison, it is probably the case that Morrison was more of an influence on him than he is willing or able to articulate. Then again, how does anyone accurately account for how one's predecessors influenced him or her? Except in cases of teacher-pupil relationships or instances in which one deliberately attempts to imitate another's work, determining influence is at best a matter of speculation. In the end, an artist's work has to be able to speak for itself, thereby communicating meaning and value to the viewer, however that might be understood or interpreted. Trying to impose categories like "Indian art" only serves to censure the communication between indigenous artists and their viewers. Equally problematic is attempting to essentialize tribal identities, such as Ojibwe, and impose this on artists with vastly different styles in an effort to reduce their work to a set of ethnographic traits. "Ojibwe art" does not exist. At best, it is a colloquialism meant to refer generally to any persons belonging to a perceived ethnic identity; at worst, it is a social-science construct promoted by anthropologists like Carrie A. Lyford, author of *Ojibwa Crafts* (1982). On the contrary, there are simply artists who come from a variety of Ojibwe communities, whose experiences as an Ojibwe influence their work on a personal and subjective basis.

Considering these issues, what makes Denomie's work a refreshing voice in indigenous art is the fact that he is not self-conscious about being Ojibwe or "Indian." He simply is. As such, Denomie allows himself the freedom to paint from his variegated experiences of living in an urban environment replete with spaces and peoples inhabiting a broad spectrum of spaces, be it downtown Minneapolis art galleries, the American Indian Center, or the Mall of America. Denomie embraces it all without worrying whether an "Indian" ought to be doing such things, which in his case includes going to college, working as a contractor, owning a house in the suburbs, painting in oils on canvas, and going to Hawaii for his daughter's wedding. Like his mythic predecessor, Denomie has broken the Gambler's bowl. What he has done with the scattered contents is mash them together, remixing the sights, colors, and sounds of contemporary American Indian life into a new groove, comparable to the music that has become the soundtrack for the current generation of young Indians. As W. Richard West Jr. observed in "On the Edge": "[Remix] refers to the practice of using altered, but recognizable, pieces of earlier works to create new music, a technique that takes advantage of the astonishing tools of our digital age."[52] Although not literally mixing music, Denomie's dexterous interweaving of historical, mythical, satirical, and social discourses into his images is compelling all of us to rethink what it means to be an Indian at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. *Postindian* is a very specific term coined by Gerald Vizenor.

2. The Indian Arts and Crafts Board, in particular, was charged with promoting "the products of Indian art and craftsmanship," complete with "government trade marks of genuineness and quality for Indian products and the products of particular Indian tribes or groups," such as Hopi kachina dolls or Pima baskets. See Francis Paul Prucha, ed., "Indian Arts and Crafts Board," *Documents of United States Indian Policy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 229.

3. Gerald McMaster, "Living on Reservation X," in *Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art*, ed. Gerald McMaster (Seattle, WA and Hull, QB: University of Washington Press and Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1998), 28.

4. From David Beaulieu, emeritus professor of education policy studies at Arizona State University: "I remember [S.T.A.I.R.S.] as a bridge program for Indian High School youth to University. It was a project of University with community through the Training Center for Community Programs (TCCP) in the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA). There were many efforts like STAIRS that engaged the University with Indian community. They were also contractor in the National Study of American Indian Education of US Office of Education HEW."

5. Ron Libertus, the foreword to *American Indian Art: Form and Tradition* (Minneapolis: The Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of Art, 1972), 6.

6. Quoted in Mark Anthony Rolo, "Savage Humor," Native City Arts, *The Circle*, September 1997, 10.

7. W. Richard West Jr., "The Challenge of This Moment," in *Remix: New Modernities in a Post-Indian World* (Washington, DC, New York, and Phoenix, AZ: Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian and the Heard Museum, 2007), 7.

8. Quoted in Marcie Rendon, "Jim Denomie: Expanding the Boundaries of Indian Art," Native City Arts, *The Circle*, May 2000.

9. *Witiko* and *weendigo* are alternate spellings, of which there are others depending on the Algonquian dialect. All of them refer to a cannibal monster that is prevalent in several oral traditions. For more on the Ojibwe tradition, see Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibways* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995), 221ff.

10. Gerald Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa: Narrative Stories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 4–6.

11. Johnston, *The Manitous*, 51–52.

12. Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa*, 4.

13. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 5.

14. Bently Spang, "Foreword: 'The Unexpected West,'" *New Art of the West 5: The Fifth Eiteljorg Museum Biennial Exhibition* (Indianapolis, IN: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 1996), 12.

15. Rolo, "Savage Humor," 10.

16. Judy Arginteanu, "Ojibwe with Attitude," Showtime: A Daily Guide to What's New in Arts and Entertainment, *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*, February 7, 1998.

17. Ann Klefstad, "Tradition Is Evident, but Expo Also Breaks New Ground with Style, Unexpected Humor," The Arts/Milestones, *Duluth News-Tribune*, May 10, 1998, 7E.

18. J. Z. Grover, "Like a Box of Candy, Biennial's Offerings Are a Curious Mix," Art Review, *Duluth News-Tribune*, July 19, 1998.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. For more on the "myth" of "Indian alcoholism," see Beatrice Medicine, *Drinking and Sobriety among the Lakota Sioux* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006).

22. John Steffl, "Transitions: Jim Denomie," *Duluth Art Institute News Magazine*, Spring–Summer 2000, 3.

23. Ibid.

24. Tim Anderson, "Erotic Landscape Renegade," *Ripsaw*, May 2000.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. When I say "toned down" I mean that he is redefining his work as moving from a kind of "surrealism," which is dreamlike, mythic, or fantasy, to a kind of "realism," which depicts things as they are seen in everyday life. Rendon, "Jim Denomie: Expanding the Boundaries of Indian Art."

28. For information on this exhibit, see *Listening with the* Heart, http://weisman.umn.edu/exhibits/Listening/listening.html (accessed July 27, 2011).

29. For information on this exhibit, see *Contemporary Native Art in* Minnesota, http://weisman.umn.edu/exhibits/ContNative/contem.html (accessed July 27, 2011).

30. Ann Klefstad, "Denomie Portrays Complex World," The Arts, *Duluth News-Tribune*, June 25, 2000.

31. Ibid.

32. Quoted in Margaret Archuleta, "Jim Denomie," *Native American Fine Art Invitational*, February 16, 2002–February 7, 2003 (Phoenix, AZ: Heard Museum, 2002), 10.

33. Ibid., 9.

34. Ibid., 11.

35. Quoted in Tammy Sopinski Perlman, "Background Check," *Arts: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts Magazine for Members*, March/April 2007, 16.

36. Anderson, "Erotic Landscape Renegade."

37. Gail Tremblay, "Jim Denomie (Ojibwe): Art that Sings and Stings," in *Art Quantum: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art, 2009*, ed. James H. Nottage, Jennifer Complo McNutt, and Ashley Holland (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 45.

38. Jim Denomie Invoice, "Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill oil painting on canvas, 35 × 49," June 5, 2007. Copy provided to the author by the artist.

39. Ibid.

40. Mary Abbe, "'New Skins' Sheds Traditional Indian Expectations," *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, April 5, 2007, http://www.vita.mn/story.php?id=12326806 (accessed July 27, 2011).

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48. Gerald Vizenor, "George Morrison: Anishinaabe Expressionist Artist," *American Indian Quarterly* 30, nos. 3–4 (Summer–Fall 2006): 647.

49. Anya Montiel, "The Art of George Morrison and Allan Houser: The Development and Impact of Native Modernism," *American Indian Quarterly* 29, nos. 3–4 (Summer–Fall 2005): 488.

50. E-mail communication with author, October 6, 2008.

51. Ibid.

52. West, "On the Edge," in *Remix*, 11.