

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

I Stand in the Center of the Good Interviews with Contemporary Native American Artists. Edited by Lawrence Abbott.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5rf6w3dn>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 19(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Berlo, Janet Catherine

Publication Date

1995-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

I Stand in the Center of the Good: Interviews with Contemporary Native American Artists. Edited by Lawrence Abbott. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994. 292 pages. \$40.00 cloth.

Seventeen American Indian artists are interviewed in this book, nine of them male and eight female. They include Rick Glazer Danay, Shan Goshorn, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, Rick Hill, G. Peter Jemison, Michael Kabotie, Frank LaPena, Carm Little Turtle, Linda Lomaheftewa, George Longfish, Mario Martinez, Nora Naranjo-Morse, Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, Susan Stewart, Frank Tuttle, Kay Walkingstick, and Emmi Whitehorse. Ranging in age from their early thirties to their late fifties, these artists represent a nice range of differing media and approaches to contemporary art-making—from the elegant abstractions of Emmi Whitehorse to the pop humor of Rick Glazer Danay.

The interviewer is an English professor rather than an art critic or art historian. This fact may account for some of the book's strengths as well as its weaknesses. The main strength is an important one: Abbott has provided a much-needed, accessible introduction to some of the people whose work figures prominently in the contemporary art scene. These interviews are engaging and written without the jargon that burdens much critical writing on contemporary art. The topics discussed are interesting, and it is clear that the editor has done a professional job of editing them for clarity and readability. Students as well as people interested in other genres such as theater, literature, and politics would find much of interest in the worldviews expressed by these artists.

As an art historian reviewing this collection, I find its main weakness to be that I do not feel I have learned very much new or insightful about the art work itself. There were few epiphanies, since the work itself often was not really probed by the interviewer in a sophisticated way. The language concerning the art work is not that of a discerning art critic but an inquiring journalist. Because that was, in fact, the editor's intent, he has succeeded in his aims. In the introduction, Abbott says that the book is neither art history, art criticism, nor anthropology:

Rather, the substance of this book is the artists themselves, offering an opportunity for those interested in art to hear what a variety of artists have to say about their lives and work, and, strangely enough, in their own words.

I say "strangely" because in the many, many books and essays on contemporary native art, the voice of the artist, with some exceptions, is nearly inaudible, a sidebar to the pronouncements of art critics and scholars. (p. xiv)

This is, of course, not a feature that is unique to native art. This is true of much of contemporary art, in part because many artists choose to speak through their work rather than about it. Abbott spends some time in the introduction decrying the marginalization of native art. Yet, both in the introduction and in the selected bibliography that follows each interview, he too often ignores the work of those art historians and critics who have indeed engaged these works and artists in a discerning and sophisticated manner. Many of the selected bibliographies are so brief that they do not do justice to the artist, for many important critical writings are omitted. Fuller bibliographic coverage would also have helped the reader who desired to see more works by each of the artists.

Each interview is accompanied by a small, black-and-white photo of the artist. In the middle of the book, a section of color plates provides only one reproduction for each artist. This is, of course, not the fault of the editor. It is unfortunate that publishing costs have gotten so out-of-hand that a book that costs forty dollars can offer only one illustration for each artist. I hope that the University of Nebraska Press plans to publish a more affordable paperback version. This would make it more accessible to a wider audience of students, libraries of tribal colleges, and artists.

The editor acknowledges that one shortcoming in the book is the lack of interviews with Native Alaskan or Pacific Northwest artists. This is truly unfortunate, for many fine and articulate artists work in both of these regions. Some Northwest Coast artists, such as Robert Davidson, Doug Cranmer, and Tony Hunt, are well known, and much has been published about them, but Native Alaskan artists are too often marginalized in the discourse that takes place in the lower portion of the United States. Moreover, the book would have benefitted from the inclusion of some Canadian Native artists, such as Jane Ash Poitras, Rebecca Belmore or Gerald McMaster, to remind the reader that conversations on native art do not cease at the border. (A fine interview that Lawrence Abbott conducted with Gerald McMaster was published in the journal *Akwe:kon* in spring 1994.)

Despite my criticisms, this is a worthwhile and interesting book. The reader will be impressed with the way each artist

articulates his or her own personal, artistic, and political vision. It provides a good snapshot of the native art world of the early 1990s.

Janet Catherine Berlo
University of Missouri–St. Louis

Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements, 1775–1920: A Geographical Analysis and Gazetteer. By Robert Galois. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1993. 465 pages. \$60.00 cloth.

In *Kwakwaka'wakw Settlements, 1775–1920*, Robert Galois has produced a highly detailed reference guide summarizing the dynamic settlement history of the Kwakwaka'wakw, a native people who have inhabited North America's Pacific coastline for centuries. The principal notion guiding this work is that the Kwakwaka'wakw's changing settlement patterns depict "a culture's inscription upon the landscape—a record of a people's interaction with their environment" (p. 19) and that this "inscription," like those of many other cultures, ought to be preserved for posterity.

The bulk of the book consists of a gazetteer of village locations and resource procurement sites utilized by Kwakwaka'wakw tribes from 1775 until 1920. Because of the incorporation of the Kwakwaka'wakw perspective, Galois refers to this work as "an ethnogeography: a description of a people's cultural knowledge about their territory" (p. 6). Additional materials supporting the gazetteer include demographic data, place-name orthographies, and origin myths. Galois attributes inspiration for the gazetteer portion of the book to Wilson Duff, who conducted research on Kwakwaka'wakw settlement patterns in the 1950s but died before completing his project.

Robert Galois began researching the Kwakwaka'wakw in the late 1980s. Using oral histories, ethnographies, and archival materials, he describes the historical location and land-use patterns of the Kwakwaka'wakw during a 150-year period. Students of oral history will be particularly interested in the rich collection of Kwakwaka'wakw quotations in which native elders tell their own stories of life on the land. Native writer Gloria Cranmer Webster of the U'mista Cultural Center on Vancouver Island and anthropologist Jay Powell of the University of British Columbia facili-