

PAUMANOK

September 12 - October 18, 2006

Lorenzo Clayton

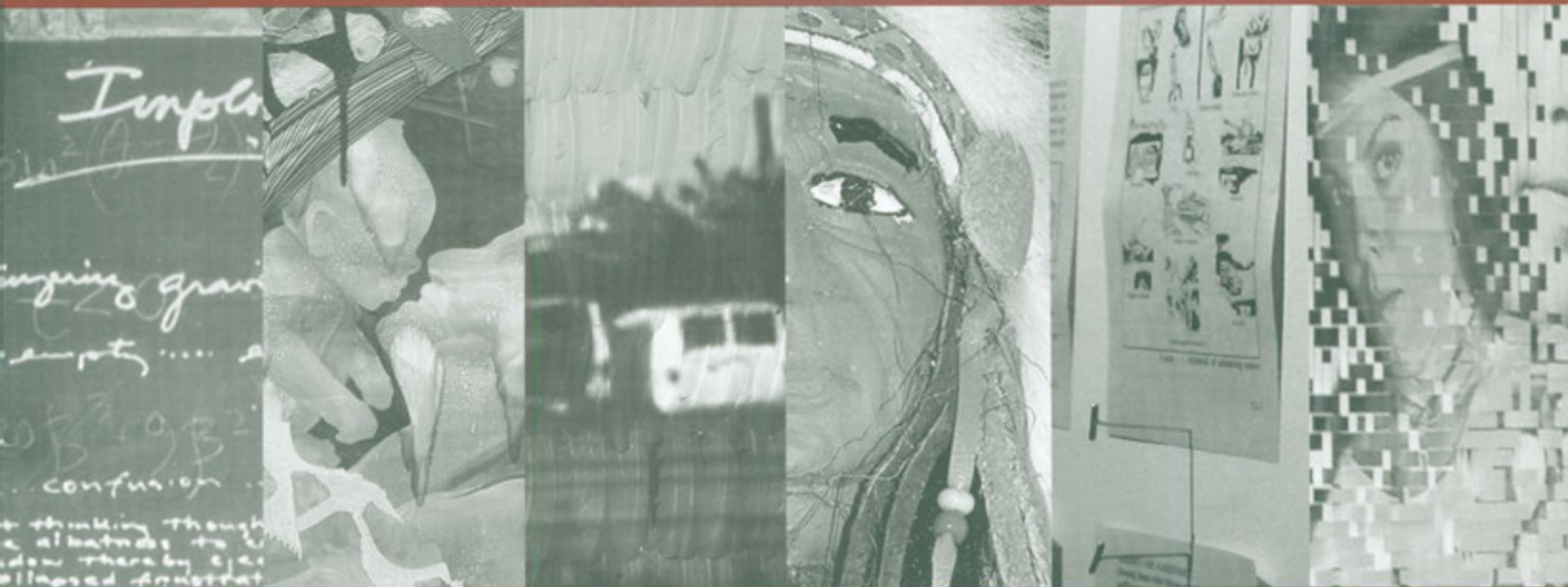
Jeffrey Gibson

Jason Lujan

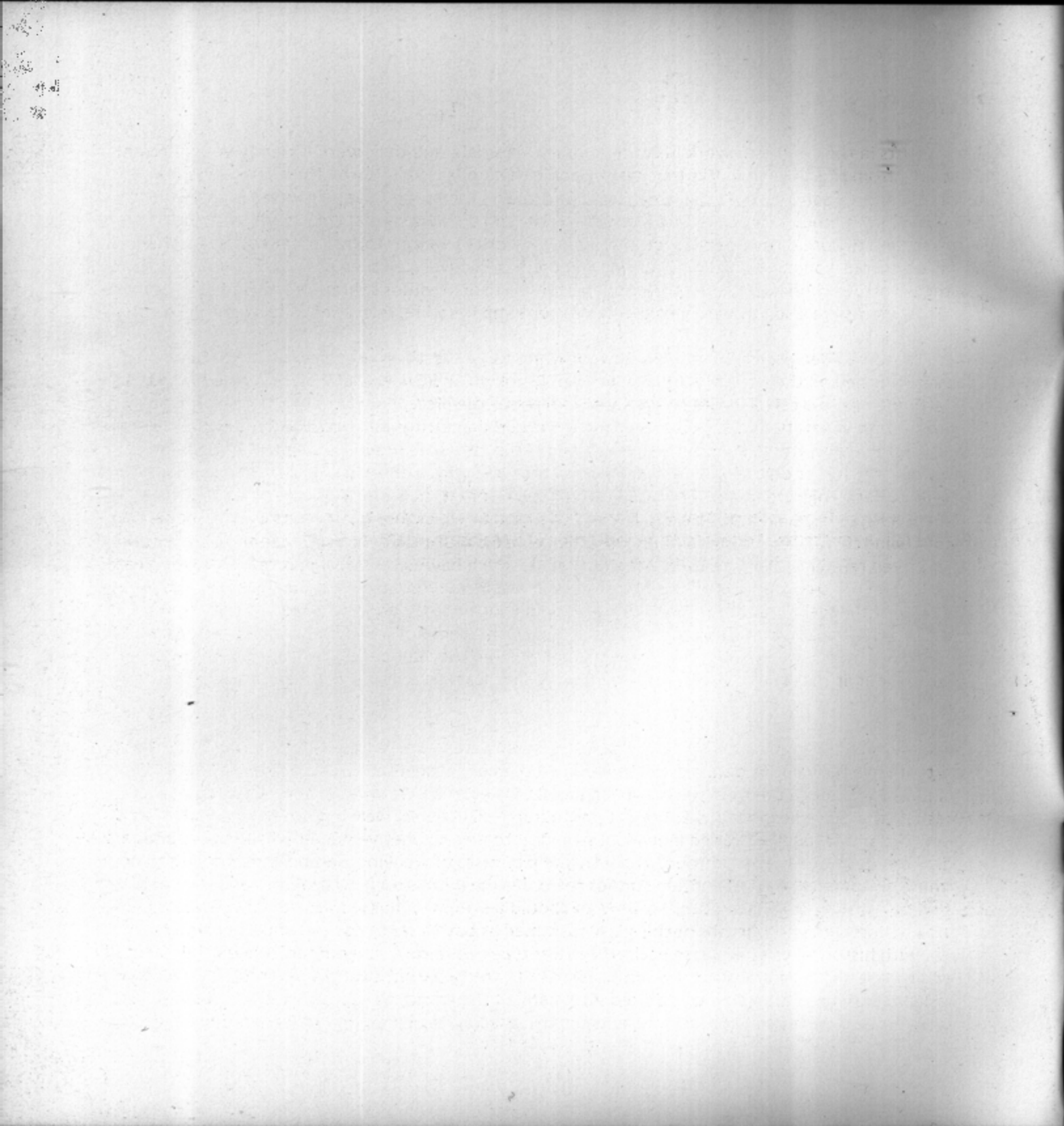
Alan Michelson

Lloyd E. Oxendine

Sarah Sense



University Art Gallery, Staller Center for the Arts, Stony Brook University



Paumanok

All the artists in the exhibition work in contemporary materials, and their work is clearly very different stylistically from the kinds of works that many people think of as "Indian art." The artists are, in fact, drawing on their traditions in many complicated and interrelated ways. Native peoples in the Americas have always been innovative adapters of new materials and technologies, such as silversmithing in the southwest and the use of trade beads for intricate beadwork of various forms. The artists in Paumanok continue this tradition of innovation. Considering them collectively, all these artists do two great things with their work. Each makes use of indigenous cultural artistic traditions through visual images or materials. Their works are also intimately connected to contemporary life, relevant to life as it is lived now.

Alan Michelson's video projected onto a screen of white turkey feathers uses the eye of the camera to replicate a journey on the Newtown Creek between Brooklyn and Queens. The piece is titled with the original name of the creek, *Mespat*. As we stand in front of the piece, the banks of the creek roll past, overgrown with vegetation in some parts, littered with urban detritus and backed by industrial sites in others. Aesthetically, the surface of the overlapping turkey feathers produces an effect of undulating motion, as if the leaves on the trees move gently in the wind with a dimension of movement usually not possible in a flat, projected image. The installation has a disorienting visceral quality to it. The overlapping feathers are like an enormous wing, a wing so large that we cannot perceive its overall shape. For people viewing the work who are familiar with the Lenape culture indigenous to Manhattan, the turkey feather screen references Lenape turkey-feather capes, which have ceremonial purposes. *Mespat* creates a link between the creek as it is today and the creek as a spiritual resource. For some viewers, the pure white color of the turkey feathers and their overlapping pattern may bring to mind an angel's wings, an association which again brings together the landscape with a sense of wonder and sacredness. Michelson uses ingenious methods to evoke related conceptual ideas across multiple cultural boundaries. *Mespat* gives us a thought-provoking, visceral experience of a landscape in a simple, yet highly aesthetic, installation.

Sarah Sense, a recent graduate of Parsons School of Design, creates artworks using photographic materials that have been cut into thin strips and then worked back together using traditional weaving techniques. Some are in the form of flat woven panels. Others, like *Chitimacha Loop Basket*, are shallow baskets that have been woven out of cut photographs. Of course, weaving can be understood as a metaphor; it brings together varied individual strands into a new cohesive whole. Unwieldy strands are brought to order, even beauty, through the intricate processes of weaving. Sarah Sense is trying to do something quite similar, but the unruly strands she is dealing with are the stereotypes and assumptions about what Indian people have been, are now, or should be. Some of her works, like *Cowgirls and Indians # 4*, combine photographs of the artist costumed as both a saucy cowgirl and a coy Indian maiden, with historical photos. Sense packs the stereotypes with irony and humor. She is fundamentally challenging notions of "authenticity." Specific abstract basketry patterns from Sense's Choctaw/Chitimacha basketry traditions are also incorporated into many of the works, so they are not just about countering stereotypes. On the one hand, she presents us with the logistical problems of integrating, on a very

personal level, the contradictions between stereotypes about Native peoples, traditional culture, present realities, and the need to operate successfully in the modern American sociopolitical system. On the other hand, Sense's work presents us with a logistical problem of an aesthetic nature: taking a series of images apart and working them all together into woven patterns in such a way that the original images are reassembled and discernible, while also incorporating abstract basketry patterns in such a way that none of the images are obscured by the others. These woven works are highly symbolic in terms of the visual images presented, but the method of creating the work is itself symbolic, representing a synthesis of disparate cultural influences.

Like Sarah Sense, Lloyd E. Oxendine also tackles stereotypes about Indians. *Indios-Adios* is a symbolic gravesite for stereotypical representations of Indians. The numerous sculpted heads are attached to weathered wood backings and are covered with decorative fibers and beads with the kind of aesthetics one finds in tourist gewgaws. The combination of these simulated-tchotchkes with the seriousness of the physical rituals of death and mourning creates strong tensions. For much of the twentieth-century, most Americans assumed that the continent's Native peoples were doomed to disappear. It never happened. *Indios-Adios* is giving a disturbing farewell to the myth of the "vanishing" Indian and is also an ironic but respectful laying-to-rest of a stereotypical image of the Indian.

Chiricahua Apache artist Jason Lujan discusses stereotypes and the invisibility of actual Native people in urban America in his video work *I Look at Indians I Look at Myself*. As the artist says, "It is not customary to wear Eagle Feather headdresses when going to the deli." In a search for change, Lujan imagines what things might be like if Indian cultures were not invisible in the city. He seamlessly inserts Cherokee language text into the multilingual brochures on the subway, street signs, and product packaging on store shelves. This short video provides an introduction to the urban experiences of Indian peoples. Lujan is great at asking "what ifs" and taking imaginative leaps. His *American Indian Activist Handbook* uses the famous t-shirt "Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism since 1492," government military training manuals, and the U.S. Army Ranger Handbook, along with other government publications as the premise for a new kind of instruction manual specifically aimed at training American Indian activists. The installation artwork re-visions "homeland defense" as an indigenous movement. Lujan uses satire to bring a very different perspective on world events.

Many people imagine indigenous life before European contact as a utopian life, as life in a garden of Eden. Painter Jeffrey Gibson explores that possibility in a new series of paintings. The earliest painting in the series, *All That Matters*, shows a mother and child fully absorbed in each other, an ideal state of loving parenting. *State of Emergency* also depicts a pair who are fully involved with one another: this time, two men. Like the mother and child, the men are enveloped in a fantastical environment of intertwined organic forms evocative of stalactites and stalagmites, vines, scales, and foliage—somehow a cave-like, deep-forested, and undersea setting all at once. Most of Gibson's paintings do not have a clear figure-ground relationship. The ground is not ambiguous, but it seems to be just as alive and changeable as the figures themselves.

Of course, the idea of a utopia would seem to imply a certain degree of stability. In a world where everything is alive, how is constant stability possible? Unlike *All That Matters*, tensions arise in *State of Emergency*, as implied by the title and by the contrast between the warm and cool colors of the two figures. This painting seems to hint at the dangers of interpersonal difference. The space between the two faces is not open. There is some substance between them, dividing them. A utopia seems impossible; this painting seems to say that we bring our problems with us everywhere. The painting may not show us an emergency, but it shows us the emergence of conflict and the impossibility of a serene, unchanging utopia.

At first consideration, Jeffrey Gibson's paintings might seem to have little to do with anything "Indian." Like all the artists in Paumanok, Gibson works against what many viewers might expect Indian art to look like, and yet some aspects of Gibson's artworks are actually related to other manifestations of Native material culture. For instance, Gibson's color palette is extremely vibrant. Neon-bright colors set up optical resonances that imply movement and confuse depth perception. This unconventional color palette is evocative of the electric brilliance of the colors and materials customarily used in contemporary men's Fancy Dance powwow regalia. It is a particular color aesthetic. In many paintings, Gibson uses his pigmented silicone gel to mimic the texture and patterning of traditional beadwork artistry. The methodical, geometric patterns create an intense visual contrast with the organic liquidity of the other textures on the paintings' surfaces.

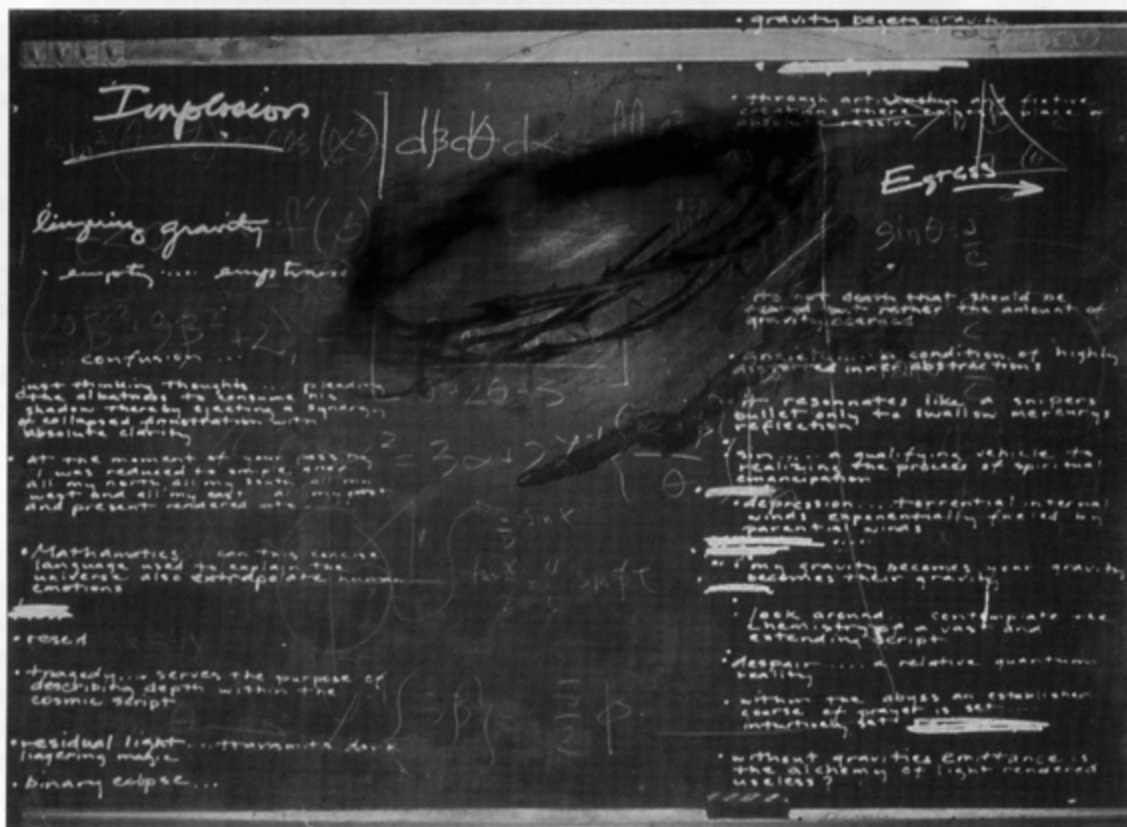
Lorenzo Clayton's abstract work often brings together science and spiritual life. He uses abstraction to explore relationships between nature, spiritual and emotional life, and philosophy and the sciences. Using systems of abstraction to describe and analyze the world is something that Clayton sees as a customary practice in his Navajo culture. Clayton's lithograph *Accrued Gravity* works out the concept of "gravity" through multiple lenses: mathematics, physics, optics, and the emotional experiences of despair, tragedy, and depression. Abstract mathematical formulas coexist with a well-understood image of suffering: a bloody circlet of thorns. He finds order and connections between things that Western science often tries to keep separate. Clayton uncovers a disturbing intimacy between the gravity of science and the messiness of human emotional experience.

The themes that the artists in Paumanok explore through their artworks are also themes that relate to larger human experience in addition to any experience that is specific to the artists' tribal identities. Thinkers of many cultures have explored the idea of a utopia, and most of us have come up against some stereotypical assumption at some point and had to figure out how to respond. We all try to interweave the varied strands that influence our lives together into something cohesive. We all look for the connections between the bigger picture and our own small selves, the connections between Paumanok and the rest of the world.

Lara M. Evans (Cherokee), Ph.D.
Professor, Expressive Arts,
The Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA

Lorenzo Clayton

Diné (Navajo)



Accrued Gravity #1, silkscreen and lithography, 2005
in collaboration with George Sidebotham

This print is a partial study of a broader concept that investigates articulating human emotions through mathematical equations. The inception of this idea occurred several years ago after I became interested in the writings of the philosopher Rudolf Steiner. In one particular book, *Science and Anthroposophy*, Steiner wrote about the ability of the mind to comprehend and become any natural phenomena through the imagination and the discipline of mathematics. Steiner's concept of mathematics and the possibility of applying his idea to the range of human emotions prompted me to seek out the expertise of George Sidebotham, a professor of chemical engineering. Our ensuing conversations lead us to *Inner Equation*, a conceptual installation.

Jeffrey Gibson

Mississippi Band of Choctaw



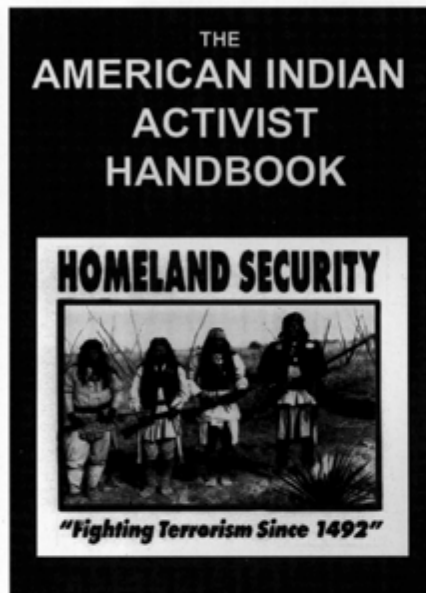
State of Emergency, oil and pigmented silicone on wood panel, 2005
Courtesy of the artist and Samson Projects

The two paintings, *All That Matters* and *State of Emergency*, came from a series that depicted figures in a lush utopian environment. I wanted the people in this land to be uninhibited and enjoying the pleasures of the land and of each other, nothing more. This may sound simple and escapist, but I felt it was important for me to visualize what this kind of environment looked like and imagine what happens there in order for me to begin to push further into less idyllic visions of developing society. In the utopian environment, abundance and beauty champion all. One painting shows a woman who is totally immersed in her relationship with her child. The other shows two men just about to kiss. It was important to me to include all types of people and relationships in this environment, in a non-judgmental and non-hierarchical way.

As a native person, the idea of utopia was important for me to explore because of the perception that pre-contact tribal life was idyllic and harmonious with the land. This is a simplified version of history that I have learned since I was a child. With this series of paintings I wanted to imagine this utopia for myself.

Jason Lujan

Chiricahua Apache



Selections From the American Indian Activist Handbook, 2004

When the Department of Homeland Security was created in late 2001, Native Americans nationwide seized upon the concept as a means to communicate our own struggle with colonization in the Americas. Posters and t-shirts were distributed with the intent of creating dialogues along the lines of, "Whose homeland?" and "Who defines what Terrorism is?"

My response to the current climate of fear in the United States is a work called *Selections From the American Indian Activist Handbook*. This project recontextualizes U.S. Military training manuals such as the U.S. Army Ranger Handbook, and other U.S. government publications, and transforms it to a training manual for Native American political activists (acting under the guise of Homeland Security.) The publication and doctrinal terms are changed so that the chapters imply that the "good guys" are American Indians, and the "enemy" or "terrorist invader" is the United States government.

Alan Michelson

Grand River Mohawk



Permanent Title, mixed-media installation, 1993

I began as a painter influenced by European landscape art: Turner and Constable, Barbizon and the Impressionists, Anselm Kiefer. Kiefer's integration of German landscape, history, and myth were crucial for me at a certain stage, as was his use of materials. American landscape art was equally important: the Hudson River School painters but also Robert Smithson's work and writings.

American history for me is the history of the land and everything in or of it, not just human history. The land is the one constant, the one concrete reality in a torrent of abstraction: real estate, acre, lot, county, state, nation, territory, environment.

I perceive a temporal dimension to landscape that is inseparable from the spatial dimension, and I have experimented with different ways of rendering it. Mostly I look not only at a site or landscape, but into it, for traces of its experience. I take my cues from what I find and offer it back in some form.

European or Euro-American landscape artists painted views. A view is an act not only of perception but of interpretation. The artists of the Hudson River School viewed the landscape through an aesthetic lens that was at least partly ideological: the pastoralism of Manifest Destiny. The real masterpiece of that group is Thomas Cole's *Course of Empire* depicting the fate of a particular landscape over time and subject to human "progress."

Lloyd E. Oxendine

Lumbee



Indios-Adios, mixed media, 2006 (detail)

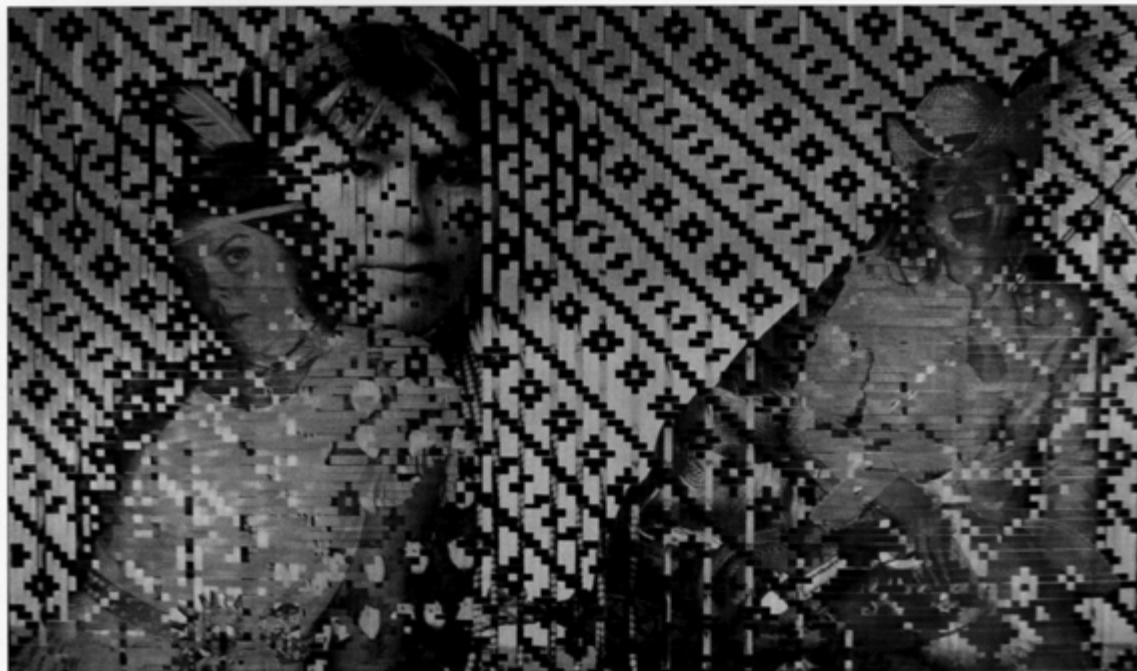
This piece was born from my participation in and preoccupation with Powwows and Indian Socials for over 20 years. My installation of chief-heads has many different meanings. The heads themselves are hand-made kitsch representing the commercialization and stereotyping of Indians, Indian Art, and Indian Culture. Many contemporary Indian artists are rebelling against this in an attempt to define and articulate their "New Indian Art." I, however, have chosen to use this and create a piece, a configuration which speaks of the many dead Indians and the genocide of our various Indian cultures in the U.S. The piece addresses the simultaneous rejection and co-optation of Indian culture that has occurred after the Holocaust. It also explores the on-going Indian dilemma:

"What is Indian Craft? vs. What is Indian Art?"

"And, more importantly, does it have a place in American Culture?"

Sarah Sense

Choctaw/Chitimacha



Cowgirls and Indians # 4, woven digital prints, 2005

These works are an exploration of the conflicts between tradition and assimilation affecting contemporary American Indians within the broader American culture. I am part German, part French, part English, part Choctaw, part Chitimacha and was raised in California with an influence of Hollywood idealism. I digitally manipulate photographs of my reservation, Hollywood imagery, mass produced Indian posters, and of myself acting out cultural stereotypes of my heritage. Each print is then deconstructed and woven together into traditional Chitimacha basket patterns. The old forms of articulation with new forms of iconography create a collision, echoing the cultural experience in my life.



Chitimaca Basket, woven digital prints, 2005

STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY



CENTER FOR THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY
Stony Brook, NY 11794-5425

<http://www.stallercenter.com>

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Rhonda Cooper
Director



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University Art Gallery
Staller Center for the Arts, Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, New York 11794-5425
Tel: 631.632.7240 Fax: 631.632.1976