

New 'Vantage Point' show at American Indian museum shows off symbolic power

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Those with power make money. Those without, make art. I'm not sure my aphorism always holds true, but it often comes to mind when I'm looking at shows of art by the powerless and disadvantaged. Once a group has been deprived of its lands or its votes or its living -- or even its lives -- exhibiting its art can feel like conscience-salving condescension.

It's as though we were saying, "Oh, but things aren't so bad after all. Look, we've left you your artmaking soul. What could be more precious than that?"

"Vantage Point: The Contemporary Native Art Collection," a new exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian, runs some of those risks, even though it was chosen from the recent works acquired by the native-run institution. It includes 31 pieces, and the lesser among them feel powerless, the fiddlings of people left with no more effective way to make a mark. Unlike mediocre works made by the culture that's on top, native works that lack artistic power can seem to represent the larger disempowerment of their makers. This leaves their artmaking souls -- all that we've left them -- suddenly looking less precious.

Luckily, the opposite is also true. Even if it can't change the world, powerful art stands as a symbol for the possibility of other kinds of power. And that's doubly true for art by native peoples, who start with the deck so stacked against them.

Among the works in "Vantage Point," the following struck me as particularly empowered and empowering.

-- "Tire," made by Joe Feddersen, a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes, in 2003.

"Tire" is a large, cylindrical vessel or vase of blown glass, about the size and shape of a bathroom wastepaper basket. Its crisp, clear surface has been sandblasted with the fine patterns of traditional basketwork, making it look almost as though Feddersen had cast an actual basket in frosted glass. In a ring around the middle of the vase, Feddersen lays a bolder, much bigger geometric pattern, angular and black. It starts off looking like it too might be traditional but then, as you take note of Feddersen's title, you realize the pattern is in fact a track from some Mack truck or ATV. (A fine, cream-colored bead around the rim of the vessel looks like it could be a remnant of whitewall.)

The work invites certain easy readings -- of modernity riding roughshod over the past or of the mechanized crushing the natural. But I think the piece invites more subtle interpretations, too. The tire track is too appealing, as a pattern, to be cast as the villain: It is closer to a booming but necessary present, laid over, but not canceling out, a past that's more genteel -- or at least is made to seem that way by time. Indians, like all of us, live in both present and past, and can master both, as Feddersen has done. His work's ambivalence is the source of its power.

-- "Indian Act," a work finished in 2002 by Nadia Myre, an Anishinaabe Canadian from the Kitigan Zibi First Nation of Quebec.

For "Indian Act," Myre took the printed pages of the law by the same name, which lays down the legal framework within which Canada's native peoples live. She and 200 friends and volunteers then covered those 56



pages with tiny glass beads in red and white -- the colors of the Canadian flag, but also of much native craft.

Some pages of the act are entirely hidden under the beading; others might only lose half or a quarter of their original text, with the rest left visible for the reading. The beadwork more or less respects the format of the original document: the red is the "page," while the white beads crawl across it in broken lines that evoke the broken lines of text in printed matter. The beading gives some sense of a crossing out, of a denial and repudiation of the content of the act. You could see it almost as a turning back of the clock, transforming a legal document into a traditional decorative textile, and asserting the power of Indian craft over European law. But meticulously decorating the document also evokes a certain sense of respect for it. You tear up a text you hate, you don't spend vast effort making it more beautiful. There's some sense that, in their beautification, Myre and her collaborators have decided to make the Indian Act their own, for better or worse.

-- "Infinite Anomaly #1," painted in oils by Jeffrey Gibson, a half-Cherokee member of the Mississippi Band Choctaw, in 2004.

"Infinite Anomaly" almost reads as a standard abstraction, although more lively than most and unusually subtle. It has a fascinating mix of techniques, from dirt-brown washes worthy of Arshile Gorky in the 1940s, to black-and-white lashings that could be by Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline in the '50s; from spray-painty blurs out of graffiti culture to scraped rainbows of paint that come straight out of the high postmodernism of Gerhard Richter, plus black polka dots on pink and passages of Spirograph swirls. The wall text for the picture cites the energy of Pow Wow dancing as a source. That may sound like a stretch, but it makes sense when you see it.

And then, on top of all that dancing form, there are strange, rainbow coils of oil paint that look as though they've been squeezed out of a star-tipped pastry tube -- but that also evoke Victorian "whimsies," the over-the-top beadwork that native women sold to European ladies. Gibson's "beadwork" is a striking gesture that's also subtle in its implications: Our "superficial decoration," it may say, can trump your "high-art abstraction."

Vantage Point: The Contemporary Native Art Collection runs through Aug. 7, 2011, at the National Museum of the American Indian, on the south side of the Mall at Fourth Street. Call 202-633-1000 or visit <http://www.americanindian.si.edu>.