

COUNTING COUP

ACCORDING TO THE BOOK *Plenty-Coups, Chief of the Crows* (University of Nebraska Press), authored by Chief Plenty-Coups with Frank Bird Linderman, the notion of “counting coup” developed within historic Plains Indian warrior culture. It means to strike a blow, often literally, while battling against the enemy. “The most prestigious acts included touching an enemy warrior with the hand, bow, or with a coup stick, then escaping unharmed.... Risk of injury or death was required to count coup” (*op cit*, page 31). Not an act for cowards, then, and this is the juncture—for curator Ryan Rice of MoCNA—that links his show to the term. Rice notes in the exhibition brochure that these works by eighteen contemporary artists indigenous to the United States, Canada, and Australia embody “evidence of confrontation, interaction, and risk encountered through incessant forms of colonization.” He goes on to affirm the fact that “Native peoples are here today,” and examines the “who, where, and why” of their realities. Indispensable to the continued presence of indigenous peoples is the ongoing courage required to fight—legally and otherwise—for centuries to maintain and/or regain the autonomy and authenticity of personal, tribal, and common identity.

Counting Coup is a robust exhibition, hung thoughtfully with an eye to the viewer’s aesthetic experience of it. It doesn’t beat the drum of Native presence into a mashup of background noise. Rather, it serves to examine how the tactics of mundane survival can be subversive, even as blatantly courageous as the actions of old: riding one’s horse pell-mell at an enemy

who wants you dead, touching him with your bare hand, and turning around and speeding off, leaving your foe astonished and confounded by the nerve of your valor. The variety of subject matter found in *Counting Coup* is broad, and includes images of U.S. Natives who fought in two World Wars despite not having the right to vote (here, photographer Tom Jones depicts Indians as regular Americans, not the Other), popular heroes such as Jim Thorpe, “the world’s greatest athlete” at the beginning of the twentieth century (a quilted and antlered piece by Marie Watt), and the whole of North and South America as *Indian Land* (a graphically simple yet stunning print by Jesús Barraza).

The use of graphics is a strength in this show, and nowhere more so than with artist Vernon Ah Kee’s text that declares in a bold, black font: *not an animal or a plant*—a piece that manages, like Barraza’s, to be elegantly understated and brashly forthright. This type of art uses the tools of dignity and dark humor to remove indigenous cultures from anthropologists’ specimen boards. Nigit’stil Norbert and Paul Wilcken’s red-and-white print titled *Indian Artists Here Today...* acts as a sign in the semiotics of the commoditization of the Other, and is executed with clarity and audacity. Graphical art is at the forefront in the hands of Jason García, with his series *Tewa Tales of Suspense*, presented as comic-book illustrations. In an issue dated August 1680, Spaniards—conquistadores and padres alike—grovel before the mighty superhero Po’pay, instigator of the Pueblo Revolution. Wit abounds in this exhibition, and the visitor is greeted with shouts of laughter engendered by Thomas Ryan Red Corn’s *Bad Indians*,

a video in which contemporary Indian individuals speak to the unfortunate axiom, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.”

Stillness and fragility are the hallmarks of María Hupfield’s *Jingle Dress*, an obsessively accurate yet static representation of the ever-tinkling costume, here made from lined notebook paper. In real life, the dress constantly swings and sways with the weight of hundreds of tinkling bells; the use of paper suggests the flatness of the public’s perceptions of traditional Native womanhood, limited to a Disney-fied princess. In contrast to the elegance and restraint of much of the exhibition is Jim Denomie’s monumentally scaled painting, *Eminent Domain, a Brief History of America*. It’s a coast-to-coast extravaganza of Manifest Destiny in the twenty-first century that includes a naked Statue of Liberty with a toilet for a plinth; Osama bin Laden climbing the Twin Towers; Santa Claus; a hanging tree with, nearby, Indians plucking chickens; the railroad heading westward, along with covered wagons, speed boats, water skiers, and motorcycles (Evel Knievel flies over the whole country); villains of the past including Hitler, Ku Klux Klansmen, and U.S. cavalrymen, collaborating on the Native holocaust; the Acoma Pueblo massacre; the beating of Rodney King; Japanese planes bombing Hawaii. Next to a small figure of Marilyn Monroe, under the Hollywood sign, ride the Lone Ranger and Tonto. The latter says, “You lied to me!” to which the Lone Ranger responds, “Get used to it.” It’s a pretty fantastic picture, depicting in its own inimitable way a pretty fantastic history.

—KATHRYN M DAVIS



Thomas Ryan Red Corn, *Bad Indians*, still from video, five minutes twelve seconds, 2009