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## Contemporary American Indian art melds tradition and today

By ALICE THORSON  
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"I've seen enough 'poverty porn,' 'plight of the Red Man' and 'vanishing race' anthropology/pity images to last a lifetime," writes San Carlos Apache artist Douglas Miles on his blog.

An artwork by Miles, featuring graphic, pop-styled images of American Indians emblazoned on two battered suitcases and an old gas can, is on view in the main galleries at the Nerman Museum.

Titled "Apachelypse Now/Have Gas Will Travel Let's Blow This Joint," Miles' piece is one of 56 works by 46 artists on view in the exhibit, "Contemporary American Indian Art — Works from the Nerman MoCA Collection." He is also represented by a gouache on paper.

"We are here" is the dominant message of this gathering, which brings plenty of humor to the business of exploding negative and romantic stereotypes.

The exhibit also celebrates a decade-plus-long initiative on the part of the museum's executive director, Bruce Hartman, to build a "substantive collection" of contemporary American Indian art. It's a focus, he notes, that is "unusual in contemporary art museums."

As a result, the Nerman's collection of 130 works and counting by 96 artists (some works are also on continuous view in the college's Regnier Center) provides a rare opportunity for a real overview of the field.

The show's selections, many of them recent acquisitions, pack a wallop in terms of vibrant color and exquisite craftsmanship. But it's what the works have to say, on issues ranging from government oppression to the destruction of the environment, that makes them powerful.

All of the featured artists, from Cochiti Pueblo potter Virgil Ortiz to fourth-generation Navajo basket weaver Joann Johnson, draw on tradition to some extent. That was not an easy decision for Jeffrey Gibson, a Cherokee/Choctaw artist who has entered the national limelight.

Gibson had a one-person show at the Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston, last summer that was covered by the New York Times, and he was the Critics Pick for ArtNews magazine in December.

While an undergraduate at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago and a grad student at the Royal College of Art in London, “I felt like tradition was weight,” Gibson said in an interview at the exhibit. “Now,” he says, “I find it to be an incredible, empowering thing.”

Gibson’s debt to tradition is obvious in his vibrant beaded punching bag in the Nerman Collection, which also includes one of his shield paintings on deer hide. An ironing board support alludes to his grandmother’s job as a domestic servant.

Elaborate masks by Kwakwaka’wakw artists George Hunt Jr. and Joe Wilson employ traditional materials including red cedar, horsehair and rabbit fur, and a “Clamming Bucket” by their fellow Kwakwaka’wakw artist, Clinton Work, features traditional designs carved into one of the polyurethane buckets now used instead of baskets.

“Its presence (in the show) supports the statement of the piece itself,” Work has said. “Native peoples are part of the modern world.”

Crow artist Wendy Red Star achieves a similar blend of past and present in her “Jingle Dress” (2011), a fusion of pow wow, prom and disco style adorned with hundreds of cone-shaped jingles made from chewing tobacco can lids. Besides fashion, the exhibit includes stunning jewelry and accessories, including a “Barack Obama Bolo-tie With Beaded Tips” (2009), by Choctaw artist Marcus Amerman.

Even in an exhibit where remarkable craftsmanship is the norm, Navajo artist Monty Claw’s colorful peyote fans, fashioned in the traditional manner from feathers, beads and leather, stand out. One has the grace and delicacy of an insect; the other captures the splendor of a flower in full bloom. There is a godliness to these creations befitting their ritual use in the Native American Church.

The objects here make an open-and-shut case for the continued vitality of American Indian art. The exhibit also paves the way for the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art’s fall blockbuster, “The Plains Indians: Artists of Earth and Sky.” That show’s 140 works will include contemporary art as well as historical masterworks — objects that have inspired their descendants to excellence.

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