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The native as image: art history, nationalism, and decolonizing aesthetics

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Publication date
2010

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Citation for published version (APA):

Caro, M. A. (2010). *The native as image: art history, nationalism, and decolonizing aesthetics*.

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Preface

“¡No sea tan Indio!” This was an admonishment I heard now and then when I was a child in Colombia. “Don’t be such an Indian!” It was directed at me whenever I failed to observe proper etiquette. A more literal translation is “Don’t be so much the Indian!” This meaning is more telling of a certain anxiety the expression betrays, an unease about Native identity found in much of Latin America. In regions where racial categories are not as easily invoked as a stable marker of identity, Native identity is more often determined by cultural means, such as language, fashion, customs, manners, music, art, and food. Although these signifiers are themselves fairly slippery, it is their instability that produces such anxiety about, and vigilance against, behavior that may allude to Native identity.

The difference in the ways in which racial categories function between South and North, between my place of birth, the source of initial cultural identity, and my current home and site of assimilation, has always framed the ways in which I examine culture. It was during a panel discussion held for the opening of “Anticipating the Dawn: Contemporary Art by Native American Women,” a show held at the Gardiner Art Gallery of Oklahoma State University in January of 2000, that, after some decades, I heard the admonishment again. This time it was part of an anecdote told by Ofelia Zepeda, the Tohono O’odham linguist and poet. She recounted how as a little girl she was scolded not to be “such an Indian” when she misbehaved. Unlike my experience, however, hers was part of a history of struggles that resisted, rather than embraced, assimilation. Her warning was against behaving like the figure of the savage that the dominant culture had constructed, a warning that highlighted and embraced the specificity of her Tohono O’odham ancestry. The Indian she was warned not to be like was the colonial stereotype of the wild Indian. My reprimand, on the other hand, was a Eurocentric negation of any possible trace of the Indigenous within.

The difference between the vigilance practiced by Zepeda’s family and that enforced by mine motivates my discussion in the following study of the uses of the Native image in the production of art and its history. While the admonish-

ment Zepeda recalled invoked a colonial gaze that was immediately supplanted by her Tohono O'odham perspective on civility, mine reinforced a nostalgia for a Eurocentric perspective that denied the presence of the Native.

My migration north was the kind that many of us have made, seeking economic stability, educational opportunities, and an overall improved quality of life. However, the successful traversal of the many borders created to maintain an infrastructure that favors the north has required a great degree of assimilation, a process that distanced me from my Native self. This study is an intellectual journey back to that self.

My quest began with my interest in art history, and that most European of cultural periods, the Dutch Golden Age. The analysis of this realistic, and, thus, highly effective, imagery allowed me a perspective on how the Native was imagined then, and to a great extent continues to be conceived today, within the project of empire. My engagement with the history of this way of looking was eventually supplanted by an interest in contemporary visions of Indigeneity, particularly those produced by Native artists themselves. This study is intended as a contribution to the critical analysis of this contemporary vision of the Native.