

Indian Summer: Reclaiming and Revitalizing Native American Identity through Art

Jennifer L. McMahon
East Central University

The works of contemporary visual artist, Summer Zah, are powerful and thought provoking. Zah draws from a variety of artistic styles and utilizes different mediums to communicate her message. This essay will examine works from two of her recent collections in hopes of enumerating some of the things her works convey regarding Native American identity. As Zah states, “My art is the culmination of overcoming misconceptions about family, the past, and identity to disclose a fearless factuality...I am too American to be native, yet I am too native to be American” (<https://www.zah-art.com/artist-statement/>). In her work, Zah draws not only from her Navajo, Jicarilla Apache and Choctaw heritage, but her experience as a woman in the midst of media saturated contemporary American culture. Her work speaks about the impact of media on her self-identity, including the way in which her sense of self has been affected by lifelong exposure to the sorts of stereotypical representations of Native Americans and women that are found in mainstream media, representations that she notes, resulted in misperceptions and confusion about her Native American identity, and also her femininity.

As noted, Zah attributes much her confusion regarding identity to the stereotypical representations of Native Americans and women that dominate mainstream media. In his essay, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” Renato Rosaldo discusses a psychological basis for the former. In particular, he describes the tendency that “agents of colonialism”(107) and their cultural successors have to perpetuate images of the people and cultures they conquered in such a way as to express a “long[ing] for the very forms of life they...altered or destroyed”(107). As Rosaldo explains, this tendency serves a clear psychological function. It “captures peoples’ imaginations,” while at the same time disguising their “complicity with often brutal domination”(108). In short, it assuages collective guilt by encouraging the circulation of a psychologically satisfying, if false counter-narrative, one that denies cultural decimation, including the genocide of indigenous peoples, by promoting the perception that those who were conquered are alive and well, and their original culture intact.

The tendency Rosaldo describes is clearly evident in the Americas. It is evident historically in the long-standing practice of portraying Native Americans in a prelapsarian state and in a manner reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s (1712-1778) “noble savage.” It is also evident in contemporary media where this stereotypical portrait of Native Americans persists despite the fact that the manner of existence it portrays is, for all practical purposes, dead and gone. Today, few Native Americans are living lives that bear significant similarity to those of their cultural forebearers. Yet this is not the image of

Native American identity that mainstream media conveys, if it conveys images at all. In mainstream media, what Sally Grande calls, “whitestream”⁽⁴⁾ media, indigenous Americans tend to be presented in an anachronistic fashion if they are represented at all. The consequence of this pattern of representation, or lack thereof, is that mainstream media offers no evidence of the existence of modern “Indians.”¹ Though mainstream media provides little or no sense of what it is like to be Native American today, U.S. Census data reveals that Native Americans experience markedly higher levels of poverty, disease, and mortality than other minority groups and tend to have less access to education and other mechanisms that facilitate social and economic opportunity (www.census.gov). Given the pattern of anachronistic representation, or lack of representation, of Native Americans in mainstream media, many non-natives have virtually no idea what being “native” looks like. However, one can find some of this “fearless factuality” in the work of Native Americans themselves, well-known figures such as Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Sterlin Harjo, and Leslie Marmon Silko, as well as emerging ones like Summer Zah.

Zah’s works speak of the individual resilience that is required to endure the negotiation of identity mandated of minorities and of the wherewithal individuals have to locate a meaningful sense of individual and social identity within a restrictive context. Zah juxtaposes symbols of media, stereotypical images of indigenous Americans, death imagery, and real photographs of Native Americans, often of her family, in her works. She expertly invokes the classical tradition of *memento mori*, which translates reminders of death, to paint a picture not only of what it means to be an indigenous American now, but to show what has been taken and lost in getting here.

To begin, let’s look at the way in which Zah’s work foregrounds the way media influences individuals, shaping their perception of reality, and consequently, their sense of themselves. Media is the thematic concern of Zah’s *Unplugged* series, and so too is her message that we need to obtain a critical distance from it. Zah’s preoccupation with media is shown clearly in the amusingly titled, “Apple TV” (2015). While the title refers literally to the product that Apple has used to infiltrate the television market, the composition simultaneously alludes to the way in which media infiltrates our homes and minds. Cast in appealing primary colors and a visually appealing pop-art style, this piece conjoins a palpable symbol of mainstream media, the TV, with an iconic image of temptation, a luscious apple. In addition to embodying temptation, the apple serves another purpose. Like the troubling, yet more familiar racial epithet, Oreo, the apple alludes to an indigenous person who is red on the outside, but white on the inside due to his or her thoroughgoing assimilation of mainstream identity and values. Through a conjunction of elements, Zah speaks of the force media exerts on the individuals who engage with it. She does so most obviously by placing the apple on the screen, thereby communicating the message that the

¹ Here and elsewhere I use scare quotes or strikethrough font to draw critical attention to the term Indian as applied to Native American persons, or First Peoples. These techniques, inspired by and reminiscent of ones used by philosopher, Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), are designed to draw the reader’s attention to the term, “Indian,” as both a recognized and regularly used term with which to refer to Native Americans, and term that, because it embodies error, should be critically examined and dispensed with even though its history cannot be erased.

images the media delivers to viewers are like appealing foods for which we hunger, and which we readily ingest and absorb.



“Apple TV”

The seductive nature of media is further shown in the piece, “There’s an Apple”(2015), where a skeletal figure, reminiscent of the Evil Queen in Disney’s *Snow White* (1938), reaches toward the viewer, extending an apple in her hand. Here, invoking the rich symbolism of the apple again, Zah also uses it to allude to our tendency to uncritically accept appealing things delivered to us by others. Moreover, by virtue of the insertion of the skeletal figure, Zah’s composition suggests the danger implicit in this exchange. In the same manner as the bony hand of the old hag in *Snow White* arouses anxiety in viewers, alerting them to the danger awaiting the protagonist, Zah’s use of a symbol of death complicates the imagery and elicits anxiety, or what one could characterize as an uncanny response.



“There’s an Apple”

As Sigmund Freud noted in his essay, “The Uncanny,” the uncanny is a feeling. In particular, the uncanny refers to a peculiar type of anxiety aroused when something familiar is rendered strange and frightening. As Freud notes, the uncanny is predictably aroused by death imagery, a fact confirmed by contemporary terror management theorists such as Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszczynski, and others, who discuss the way in which implicit and explicit representations of death elicit feelings of anxiety and discomfort. Artists have long known the evocative power of death-imagery. Indeed, the intentional incorporation of symbols of death, a practice known as *memento mori*, is an artistic technique that traces back to classical times. As theorists of *memento mori* note, while artists and authors continue to use death imagery for a variety of purposes, its classical function is to elicit a change in thinking on the part of the audience by confronting them with imagery that elicits both emotional and cognitive unease (Morris 1035). Zah uses this sort of imagery expertly in “As Seen on TV”(2015), “Makes Me Wanna Shoot Myself!”(2015) and “Insert Princess [Here]”(2015).



“As Seen on TV”

Just as “Apple TV” alludes to the power of media to condition its viewers to readily assimilate the content it conveys, Zah illustrates some of the images that dominate that medium. She does this not only by populating her *Unplugged* series with familiar stereotypes of Native Americans (in headdresses and other “Native” dress), she delivers us one directly via the medium of the screen in the aptly named, “As Seen on TV.” In this piece, Zah depicts a caricatured version of a “princess,” a generic icon of feminine beauty whether portrayed as an Indian Princess or not. Here, in large part through the vehicle of the title, Zah explicitly reminds her viewers of television’s tendency to disseminate problematic representations of ideal femininity and indigenous identity. Using several other pieces, Zah comments on the adverse psychological of these pervasive, yet elusive, ideals.



“Makes Me Wanna Shoot Myself!”

Zah does this powerfully in the self-referential “Makes Me Wanna Shoot Myself!,” where the artist incorporates her own self-portrait, namely, an image of her averting her gaze while making the gesture of a gun to her head. Importantly, the artist’s self-portrait is depicted on the screen of a small television held in the hand of a skeleton princess. Here, the unnerving death imagery invites the reader to follow the implicit visual logic of the composition: actual viewers of screens, represented in the realistically rendered self-portrait of Zah, build a sense of self by internalizing the carefully crafted images fed to them through the media. This process of uncritical assimilation creates a dynamic where individuals increasingly lose their selves, shown in the transfer of the death-referring artist onto the screen, in an effort to emulate the reductive stereotypes that the media delivers to them.



“Insert Princess [Here]”

This same pattern of representation is evident and arguably reinforced by “Insert Princess [Here],” whose title suggests that the media tends to deliver stereotypes that suffocate their recipients in and through their subliminal seriality, delivering vacuous forms, whether of femininity or Native identity (or both), that, while empty of real content, are nonetheless oppressive. Zah questions these stereotypes and the vehicle that delivers them to us, the media, largely through her prominent use of skeletal figures, figures that naturally unnerve because of the way they arouse thought of death, and which, in doing so, raise our critical sensibility with regards to the destructive effects of other elements presented in the composition such as media and stereotypes.



“Headdress Ain’t Yours or Mine”

This technique is perhaps best exemplified than in Zah’s “Headdress Ain’t Yours or Mine.” In this piece, Zah depicts skeleton wearing an iconic “Indian” headdress. Unlike in “There’s an Apple,” where the figure looks at the viewer, the skeletal figure in this composition is turned away from the viewer. Importantly, this a structural feature that actually invites the audience to look more closely at the figure by lessening the visual pressure the figure applies to the viewer[s], a phenomenon theorist, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, discusses at some length in *The Roots of Power: Animate Forms and Gendered Bodies*. As mentioned at the onset, Zah here juxtaposes one of the most familiar stereotypes of Native Americans, namely a figure in a headdress, and renders this figure “dead.” This death symbolism coupled with Zah’s title remind viewers that the form of life exemplified by the dress of the skeletal figure has been lost and is, for the most part, irretrievable. Through this composition, Zah reveals that the iconic image of the traditional Native American is a reality possessed neither by contemporary Native Americans, due to pervasive cultural loss, nor by those non-Natives who appropriate and perpetuate the image.

As Zah’s most recent collection suggests, while contemporary Native Americans undeniably have a legitimate claim to their traditional culture, language, and dress, the impact of colonization, racial persecution, relocation, persistent racial bias, and conscious and unconscious efforts to promote assimilation and re-acculturation produce a situation where many indigenous Americans are estranged from their traditional culture and as likely to exhibit characteristics of the dominant culture as their traditional one. As her collection

illustrates, while echoes of traditional culture remain a critical part of the identity of contemporary Native Americans, the identity of many Native people is shaped as significantly by mainstream culture. This is apparent in virtually every piece in her 2016 collection, including, “Last I Heard He Was Doing Good”(2016), “We Built Our Own House”(2016), “Best of the West”(2016), and “What We Were Meant For”(2016).

In all of the pieces in the pieces in Zah’s recent collection, we see a notable change in style from the pieces in the *Unplugged* series. Zah replaces the slick contours and eye popping palette of the *Unplugged* series, with pieces endowed with a greater degree of realism in part due their integration of actual photographs and a more muted color scheme. Drawing together hand-drawn and photographic components, Zah’s pieces are themselves synthetic, integrating a variety of elements, a choice of medium that also effectively alludes to the myriad sources for, and synthetic nature of, personal and cultural identity, indigenous identity included.

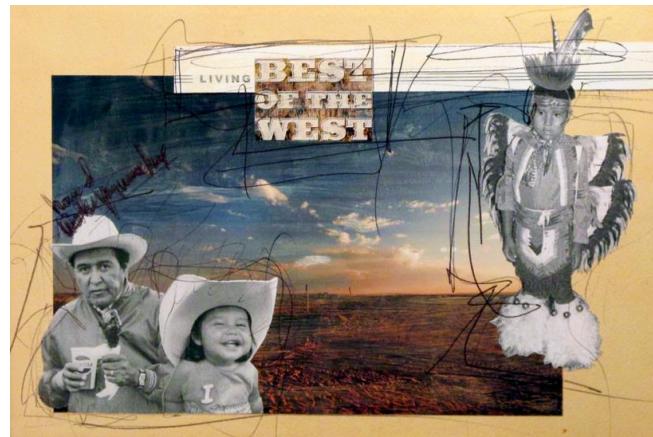
In “Last I Heard He Was Doing Good,” “We Built Our Own House,” “Best of the West,” Zah offers her audience compositions that reflect both her reverence for the rich history and culture in which indigenous identity is anchored, but which also offer fearlessly realistic representations of contemporary Native persons. Zah frequently does this by superimposing images of Native Americans in traditional dress with everyday candid photographs of contemporary individuals in attire viewers are more likely to associate with mainstream than minority identity. This type of superimposition is clearly evident in “Last I Heard He Was Doing Good,” which not only depicts a ghostly apparition of a Native male in traditional dress, but also superimposes this figure on two contemporary “Indians” gone “cowboy.”



“Last I Heard He Was Doing Good”

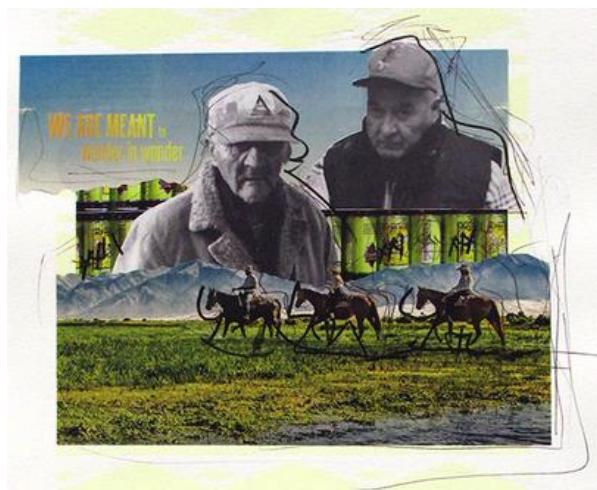
This pattern is similarly evident in “Best of the West,” where the father and daughter figures in the foreground of the photograph both wear ten-gallon cowboy hats rather than the sorts of headdresses that years of exposure to stereotypical renditions of native identity might lead many viewers to expect. Like the death imagery of the *Unplugged* collection, this feature works to deconstruct the traditional representation of

Native Americans, but it does so without erasing that history altogether. Indeed, that is the effect that the conjunction of image types achieves. The integration of images that illustrate the phenomenon of acculturation alongside images that allude to traditional native culture make it clear both that native peoples retain aspects of traditional identity and that this identity has, to a great extent, been lost, and a new one forged.



“Best of the West”

In his essay, “Globalization, Culture, and Anxiety: Perspectives and Predictions from Terror Management Theory,” Michael Salzman discusses the way in which minorities in contemporary American society are subject to incredible pressure to conform to the culture of the majority. From linguistic practices, to values, to norms regarding appearance, individuals are indoctrinated to emulate mainstream norms and are both consciously and unconsciously pressured to conform. Individuals who fail to conform are threatened not only with criticism, but exclusion, exclusion from the larger community, from jobs, indeed from a viable livelihood. In short, their literal survival is threatened. Throughout his piece, Salzman discusses the existential pressures that drive the psychodynamics of assimilation, pressures that serve as the basis for the modification of identity.



“What We’re Meant For”

This modification is seen clearly in “What We’re Meant For,” where two male “elders” wearing seed caps look nothing like the “TV Indians” Zah watched growing up, and that we often still see in the media. Instead, with “What We’re Meant For,” Zah provides her audience with a clear view of two contemporary individuals and a rather unequivocal illustration of the lifestyle for which these hardworking men worked, and for which many others hope, as Zah indicates, while they wander in wonder. A similar image pattern is evident in “We Built Our Own House,” where one of the same male figures with a seed cap is present, but is instead accompanied by a Native American woman in traditional dress, and no house is present. Sadly, what a number of Zah’s images reveal is how far away ideals such as building a house are from many indigenous persons due to a variety of factors including the ongoing pervasiveness of poverty among Native Americans (www.pewresearch.org). Ultimately, Zah’s work provides an unadulterated look at what it is like to be native, right now, in America. Her work speaks powerfully not only of the radical transformation in indigenous identity that was necessitated by colonization, but also, and as importantly, of ongoing cultural death, the perpetual necessity of survival by assimilation, and the narrow but critical opportunity that individuals have to define themselves, sometimes through art, sometimes through other ways, but in manner that lets them be seen not merely in terms of their gender, or their race, but with greater sensitivity and complexity as their individual selves.

Works Cited

- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., Rosenblatt, A., Veeder, M., Kirkland, S., Lyon, D. “Evidence for Terror Management Theory II: The Effects of Mortality Salience on Reactions to Those Who Threaten or Bolster the Cultural World-view.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1990, Vol. 58, No. 2, 308-318.
- Krogstad, Jens Manuel. “One-in-four Native Americans and Alaskan Natives are Living in Poverty.” Pew Research Center. June 13, 2014.
<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/13/1-in-4-native-americans-and-alaska-natives-are-living-in-poverty/>. Accessed January 12, 2018.
- Morris, Harry. “Hamlet as a "Memento Mori."” *PMLA*, Vol. 85, No. 5 (Oct. 1970), pp. 1035-1040. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1261544>. Accessed February 6, 2012.
- Rosaldo, Renato. “Imperialist Nostalgia.” *Representations*, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory 26 (Spring 1989): 107-122.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. “Discourses on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men” in *The Basic Political Writings*. Trans. Donald Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987.

- Salzman, Michael. "Cultural Trauma and Recovery: Perspectives from Terror Management Theory." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 2.2 (2001): 172-191.
- . "Globalization, Culture, and Anxiety: Perspectives and Predictions from Terror Management Theory." *Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless*, Vol. 10, No. 4, October 2001, 337-352.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. *The Roots of Power: Animate Forms and Gendered Bodies*. New York: Open Court, 2003.
- Solomon, Sheldon, J. Greenberg, and T. Pyszczynski. *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. New York: Penguin, 2015.
- United States Census Bureau. "Facts for Features: American Indian and Alaskan Native Heritage Month November 2015." November 2, 2015.
<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2015/cb15-ff22.html>. Accessed January 12, 2018.
- United States Center for Disease Control. "National Suicide Statistics." *CDC*. 24 Jan 2016. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/statistics/>. Accessed 2 November 2017.
- Zah, Summer. *2016 Series*. www.zah-art.com Accessed October 11, 2017.
- . "Artist Statement." <https://www.zah-art.com/artist-statement/>. www.zah.art.com. Accessed October 11, 2017.
- . *Unplugged Series*. www.zah-art.com Accessed October 11, 2017.