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## Old Meets New, or Arting: Editorial Statement

“The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state.” – Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*, (N7a, 5), 1927-1940.

“I sometimes wonder how anything is accomplished by Indians because of the apparent overemphasis on humor within the Indian world.” – Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 1969.

I don't want to write a longer and verbally gymnastic introduction, describing personal relationships, histories of publications, digital disagreements, or memeish he said she saids.

But I do want to talk briefly about this art thing. This “Quality and Control: How Native Artists Have Failed to Criticize Each Other” from June 8, 2017 in *ICMTN* (R.I.P.).

I am grateful to Terese Mailhot for beginning this conversation, and suspect I'm not the only one.

(Note—The business, *this* business of addressing the business of art is actually for another series of discussions.)

This one here is about movement and movements, I think.

Native art *is* moving forward, moves forward all the time, reflects the movement of us all. At least in a perfect world. That is, we are all moving, in that perfect world. We don't all always see it though, I think. That? That's the fault of the media, usually, and less so, but still guilty, our own lazy search habits.

Typically, critiques of art and artists relate to the particular movement that the artist is situated in, and often, that artist is one of the founders of that movement. After critiquing the movement and its founder(s), while somehow, somewhere in the piece noting that critique is not an implicitly bad thing, nor is the practitioner of the art an implicitly bad person (unless you are writing as say, Evelyn Waugh, who signed off letters “Death to Picasso,” but hmmm, still said “Señor Picasso's paintings cannot be intelligently discussed in the terms used of the civilized masters,” so, hah, I guess only critiquing the work with that one), the critic often holds up a new artist or movement as the replacement for what the critic perceives to be a tired or obsolete style or movement.

This is not happening at the moment.

And in the rush to make the type of art being critiqued (whether pop, NDNpop, or what I'll call *RetroShop*), representative, in broad, if not absolute ways, of the current field of “Native American Art,” we have missed something, I think.

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Mailhot mentioned a sketch comedy piece with thousands of likes. I’m not sure which one it is, but I can guess the sketch comedy troupe that made it, and say that some pieces have more likes than others. Often by the thousands. Humor is subjective, of course. Humor finds its way into successful sketch “comedy” (using those marks obviously says there might be another meaning to the word, and here, if we are feeling particularly generous, we can note that “comedy” is often insightful “critique”), and humor finds its way into the visual arts as well. Some of those RetroShop photos are... funny. And *intelligently* funny for a variety of reasons. To be sure, the “we’re still here” and the “Indians in Unexpected Places” is part of the attraction, but for the same reason that some segments of *Drunk History* are hilarious is because both turn upon the pairing of completely unrelated anachronistic items. The work is accessible because of its style and content, and also because of social media. This type of work lends itself well to Instagram, and Facebook, and Tumblr, and others because it’s visual, often arrestingly so. It spreads virally because it has the chops and format to do so. Ultimately it does so because, well, people *like* it.

When we look at, for instance, Steven Paul Judd’s films like *Neil Goes to the Moon*, *RoundDance*, *Six-Pack and Gas Money*, *Search for the World’s Best Indian Taco*, or his graphic work in *Dr. Sioux*, or *The Warriors*, or *Lego My Land*, that’s a body of work. Do all his productions hit the mark? No. Of course not. But did Judd revise *The Warriors* after folks pointed out the lack of women in the piece? You bet. And that level of engagement between artist and audience ain’t gonna happen in a gallery in NYC. The work he is producing now, while not limited to “Photoshopped images of old photos of unnamed Native men in regalia within some contemporary setting,” reflects a long engagement with a variety of artistic traditions, including “Native Pop.” He works to expand his vision of art in the worlds he knows well. And there are others (thinking here of Brent Learned) who come from other artistic traditions or schools and find something here that relates to their own artistic vision. They contribute their styles and views. That expansion reaches others outside the field, and brings them in as well. (This happens all the time. It can even happen with horrible consequences. Think of KISS’s “I Was Made for Loving You,” or the Rolling Stone’s “Emotional Rescue.”)

That’s a movement, good or bad, whether you like it or don’t. That’s an art movement that builds upon the ideas and structures and most importantly, *urges* of the art of Edmonia Lewis, or TC Cannon, or the Kiowa Six, or Helen Hardin, or James Luna, or B. Yellowtail, or Jeremy Singer, or...name your favorite artist here, and see if they are part of a movement, or might even be founding one. That’s where it gets really good. Because I think we can marvel at what we have, and work hard to identify what’s next. This is progress. We can move forward. We are obligated to do so. This is what Mailhot has pointed out. I’m looking forward to so many future conversations, especially those ones “that will inevitably make us better.”