

Complexity and Contradiction in Native American Surrealism

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“Native American Surrealism” may be a contradiction in terms. If “Surrealism” is a European creation, then joining it with “Native American” suggests an oxymoron. European Surrealism can, however, be regarded as based in part on Native expression. “Native American Surrealism” then would identify an artistic mode *avant la lettre* that non-Native Surrealists appropriated. And it would be possible to view some contemporary art by Native artists as a re-appropriation that results in a Native American Surrealism *après la lettre*. Whatever the linguistic and conceptual issues, this art represents a complex form of expression, encompassing a multiplicity of tribal identities and artistic approaches.

This essay will examine the conjunction of “Native American” and “Surrealism” and its significance by considering the work of five prominent Native artists from the Upper Midwest: Frank Big Bear (b. 1953), Julie Buffalohead (b. 1972), Andrea Carlson (b. 1979), Jim Denomie (b. 1955), and Star Wallowing Bull (b. 1973).¹ These artists do not form a school or group, and do not all share a common tribal affiliation. They are not all the artistic sons and daughters of George Morrison, the most prominent Native artist from the Upper Midwest, and someone who did reveal a debt to European Surrealism as he moved between representation and abstraction in a work such as *Surrealist Landscape* (1995). Big Bear, however, has acknowledged the importance of Morrison for his own art, and the floating abstract forms that Morrison associated with Surrealism in some of his landscapes have equivalents in the work of Big Bear and Denomie.² In their individual approaches, these artists of the two artistic generations after Morrison reveal some of the many ways that Surrealism and contemporary Native American art intersect.

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Frank Big Bear

At first glance Big Bear's work might be labeled "surrealist" in that old, familiar fashion, equivalent to "weird" or "strange," or "unconventional" in comparison with traditional representational painting. On closer inspection of a work such as *Chemical Man in a Toxic World* (1991; Fig. 1), where an image of Picasso appears in a vignette, one line of affiliation and affinity becomes clear: for all the brilliant colors and pattern play and the energetic, free-flowing line that suggests a



Fig. 1. Frank Big Bear, *Chemical Man in a Toxic World*, 1991, Prismacolor pencil on paper, Collection Walker Art Center © Frank Big Bear

kind of automatic drawing, Big Bear's work rests at least as much on Cubism as on Surrealism. Big Bear's debt to Picasso is at once formal, in the obvious delight in subdivision and faceting, and philosophical, insofar as the cubist elements play into a broader interest in representing scenes with an intensity and density that establish an alternative vision of the world. That kind of imaginative rendering is at its most radical in a work such as *Red Boy* (1989), which displays an explosive liberation from perspectival space even when incorporating figures and other representational elements. There are antecedents in the surrealist tradition with artists such as Arshile Gorky and also in the Picasso of *Guernica* and other works where the surrealist (and expressionist) aspects are most apparent. In Big Bear's *Intelligent Design: The Big Bang Oxymoron* (2008) there is a figure that directly recalls the primitivistic figures in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The high-key colors in a work such as *Taxi Cab Warriors* (1992), especially in comparison with the low-key tonalities of analytical cubism or the black, white, and gray of *Guernica*, offer their own immediate, eye-dazzling way of moving the depicted world away from traditional representation and toward an alternative mode of perception. The dark backgrounds in works such as *Virgin of Fire* (2007) suggest both nocturnes and the spectral chill of outer space, and create a sense of strangeness and mystery.

The steady, contemplative gaze with which Big Bear's figures often address the viewer anchors the universe of unlimited formal vitality. Figures, including the images of skulls and skeletons, generally occupy the center of the picture in Big Bear's work, with the exception of grand, spectacular scenes such as *White Earth Pow-Wow #4* (1983-1984). But if the images are often environmental portraits, the environment surrounding the figures is often unworldly, a cosmos gone wild. At times Escher-like geometries appear in the background spaces. But Big Bear's dense compositions in works such as *Red Boy* more often fill all available space surrounding the main figures with smaller elements that sometimes move toward an abstract biomorphism. These recall the work of Surrealists such as Arp as well as Native American pictographs. This duality, if not ambiguity, indicates Big Bear's strong artistic connection to both Western and Native American visual traditions.

Star Wallowing Bull

Just as Big Bear pays tribute to Picasso, so does his son, Star Wallowing Bull. In the early work *Bear Clan with Pop Art Scene* (2001) Wallowing Bull pairs Picasso with Mickey Mouse: both appear in the background behind the Native American figures, a father in Bear Clan regalia and two children. This trio is flanked on one side by a Bambi-ish fawn and on the other by a non-cartoon buck, along with an assortment of other Native and non-Native imagery including a tipi and a map of



Fig. 2. Star Wallowing Bull, *Little Star*, 2009, color pencil on paper © Star Wallowing Bull

Texas. More recently, Wallowing Bull acknowledges a debt to an older master in *Little Star* (2009, Fig. 2) by including a small portrait of James Rosenquist in the lower-right hand corner. Big Bear also appears, in the upper left-center. A wide range of other imagery from Pinocchio to a Native warrior, and from the Oscar statuette to the Superman logo, surrounds a Wallowing Bull self-portrait in the center. Rosenquist befriended the younger artist and clearly influenced his recent work, although as the Bear Clan image shows, Wallowing Bull set traditional Native American imagery against material drawn from popular culture and fine art from the start. The generational shift from Big Bear to Wallowing Bull, and the shift in the son's work to a mature style less indebted to his father's, are therefore accompanied by a change in artistic models, including a change in the Surrealism in use, or perhaps I should say, in question.

If one trait of Surrealism is the creation of an alternative vision of the world, broadly defined, and another, more formal one, is the use of modes of representation that are different from standard realism, then an additional major characteristic is juxtaposition. As Lucy Lippard has remarked, "Underlying all Surrealist art is the collage esthetic."³ Surrealism frequently relies on the clash of the

seemingly incompatible, as in Lautreamont's famous image of the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table. Rosenquist's greatest paintings, such as *F-111* (1964-65), use billboard style to render dramatic, if not accidental, collisions in imagery. In the case of *F-111* that means spaghetti and a fighter plane, a girl under a hairdryer and a nuclear mushroom cloud. The painting offers a panoramic representation of America in the Age of Vietnam, displaying the Pop fascination with popular culture and advertising. It presents a critique of a society suffering from militarism and consumerism in a combination that, as depicted by Rosenquist, is surprising, disturbing, yet artistically exciting. Wallowing Bull takes this Pop style, with its dramatic and, if you will, surrealist juxtapositions, and converts it to his own purposes, with juxtapositions that introduce a critique of Native American imagery in popular and commercial culture. Thus the brand icon of Chief Pontiac can appear within a dense mixture of sleek Deco animal hood ornaments and other images in *Ojibwe Service* (2008). A conventional gasoline logo is complemented and undercut by an iconic, but not logo-istic image of a Native chief in *Sky Chief #2* (2010), complete with his own Indian chief nickel coin pendant (*Sky Chief* was the name of the Texaco gasoline premium brand). In *Garage Door* (2009) Wallowing Bull in effect creates his own logo or brand signifier by appropriating the Great Northern Railway logo with its Rocky Mountain goat silhouette in the center. He inserts his name to replace the corporate title in the ring around the circumference. In a bold, unusual composition, he sets this emblem against what might appear to be an abstract linear pattern, but is in fact the wood grain of the garage siding. The emblem also plays off the geometric forms of the other garage elements and the front of a car which features yet another Deco Indian ornament, its chrome surface sporting brilliantly rendered reflections.

Wallowing Bull at other times moves away from the flat, clear style of classical Pop (and classical advertising illustration), to a style that suggests a surrealist strangeness equal parts Native American patterning and futuristic geometry, with an extreme stylization of the figures. In *Once Upon a Time* (2004) the relatively straightforward rendering of the infant in the center, who reaches out for a hummingbird, is framed by traditional Native floral motifs. By the time of *Rez Dog* (2009; Fig. 3) the stylistic opposition becomes the main event. Wallowing Bull uses a straightforward realistic style shaped by photography to represent the elements in the perspectival background and peripheral space including a dog bowl, an abandoned house, a junked car, a smashed television and several animals. The primary exception to the realism of the bleak yet finely rendered reservation setting is a naïf version of a baby—the same one that appears in *The Curious Crawler (Self-Portrait)*, (2004). Wallowing Bull offers a touch of vitality and playfulness in the



Fig. 3. Star Wallowing Bull, *Rez Dog*, 2009, color pencil on paper © Star Wallowing Bull, Collection Tweed Museum of Art, University of Minnesota, Duluth

deployment of elements such as the dog bowl and the birds, and in the dramatic overall spatial rendering. But he overpowers the setting with the large central figure of the dog, which he places in the foreground and presents in a dynamic style that displays his ability to generate elaborate, energetic geometrical patterns without becoming mechanical or cartoony. The dog has ticks and is in a rough world; yet he is a survivor and, says Wallowing Bull, happy.⁴ Here surrealist juxtaposition is not a simple stylistic technique but a pictorial expression of a fundamental opposition.⁵ The image displays two systems of representing the world. Whether or not one regards such intricate, expressive patternmaking as distinctly Native—Wallowing Bull has said that the designs are a product of his imagination and are not indebted to Native models—there is no question that the artistic expression in the central figure dominates, in effect triumphing over a more conventional, harsh realism.⁶ That stylistic triumph dramatizes the existential triumph of the rez dog.

Andrea Carlson

The work of Andrea Carlson, like that of Wallowing Bull, has the finish

and photographic clarity of classic Rosenquist-Lichtenstein Pop. Like *Wallowing Bull*, Carlson delights in the juxtaposition of elements; commercial logos, however, are not part of her visual vocabulary. Her imagery combines subjects drawn from Native American traditions and beliefs with pop cultural and, more recently, media references. First presented in 2007 in the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program gallery at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, her *Windigo* series uses the idea of hybridization to explore multiculturalism by incorporating works from the MIA permanent collection into images that re-contextualize and comment upon them.⁷ In *End of Trail* (2007; Fig. 4) an Asian carved jade mountain appears in a landscape setting, framed by a vibrant black-and-white pattern that Carlson repeatedly uses to energize her designs, accompanied by a stylized image of a ruffed grouse.⁸ In this painting, representative of the series as a whole, Carlson in effect presents a landscape-still life-figure composite that brings together cultures, geographies, and histories.

W. Jackson Rushing has observed Carlson's "surreal conjunction of styles," including "the slick visual crackle of pop art."⁹ The conjunction and the crackle of what might be called her Pop Surrealism (or Surrealist Pop) are impressive. Equally



Fig. 4. Andrea Carlson, *End of Trail*, 2007, acrylic, oil, graphite, and color pencil on paper © Andrea Carlson



Fig. 5. Andrea Carlson, *Aimez-vous les femmes*, 2011, acrylic, oil, graphite, color pencil, ink, gauche, pastel and watercolor on paper © Andrea Carlson

impressive is how Carlson expresses critical awareness in her objection to using terms such as “Native American” as art historical labels for what she calls “a vast, imaginary pan-category,” and in her idea that hybrid imagery is appropriate for a fluid sense of identity that is “not easily codified.”¹⁰ Carlson’s most recent work is the VORE series, with “VORE” referring to both “carnivore” and “herbivore,” and an underlying concern with colonialist appropriation and consumption of cultures. In these images the artist explores consumption in its various forms by offering a battle royal of binaries: the human versus the machine, painted representations versus the modern media (photography, film), the organic versus the geometrical and mechanical, words versus images. In the VORE series her approach to movies—and in particular cannibal exploitation films—as in *Aimez-vous les femmes* (2011, Fig. 5) and *Eaten Alive* (2010), offers the high-spirited pleasures of the New Wave, or Quentin Tarantino’s delight in Spaghetti Westerns and grindhouse classics. Here she replaces or complements the rare museum artifacts of the Windigo series with cinematic and photographic equipment; animals represent the nature that is being subjugated by a ravenous form of civilization and its supposed culture. There is no denying the visual force of works such as *Eaten Alive* or *Apocalypse Domani* (2010),

or the shrewd handling of the Native motifs in *Cannibal Holocaust* (2008) or *Vaster Empire* (2007). Carlson is Swedish-American as well as Native American, and in *Dala Horse* (2006) she presents that icon of Sweden along with rosemaling and part of a stylized female body in a bikini swimsuit or underwear bottom. Personal and social complexities result in complex artistic combinations. If some of those combinations appear less surrealistic and shocking, even with such an assured handling of materials and exclamation point effects, that perhaps points to the larger issue Carlson addresses: the omnipotence of the media universe and how we are subjected to a bombardment by a stream—or should that be “streaming”?—of images that is surreal in its constant juxtaposition of decontextualized fragments. Even with all the graphic energy in Carlson’s work, its poster power, one challenge is that a painting of media technology and other contemporary imagery can seem curiously old-fashioned. Carlson, however, has proven herself an exceptional artist as she engages issues of Native identity, contemporary culture, and artistic representation. Because of its dynamism her art moves well beyond the work of an artist such as, say, David Salle, who for a time seemed to epitomize a contemporary sensibility. But that time has passed. Popular culture, now almost synonymous with media culture, has moved on. Carlson’s play with scale and space, and the illusion of motion in her work, now makes her images appear strikingly of the present, more akin to freeze-frames from a 3D movie or a video game than a compilation of static images, or the anti-gravitational floating imagery of Magritte or Morrison.

Jim Denomie

The most painterly of these artists, Jim Denomie is the one who has explicitly used “the S word,” in describing his narrative paintings as “metaphorical surrealism.”¹¹ His work has taken a number of forms, including the expressionistic portraits of the Chief series, which might be taken as his droll, sad, and powerful response to Catlin, Bodmer, et al., as well as an excursion into disguised self-portraiture. In many of his paintings Denomie has also done many paintings that creates a fantastic world with stylized landscapes marked by erotic forms, a non-naturalistic approach that appears both personal and indebted to traditional Native visions of an animistic universe. These works display the transformational obsession and visual punning that can be found in the art of Dalí, Magritte and Pavel Tchelitchew; it is an essential surrealist characteristic and the means of moving from external juxtaposition of forms to the creation of a new compound form. Denomie unmistakably sexualizes the flora and topography, that is, the trees and mounds in a work such as *Confluence* (1998; Fig. 6). He anthropomorphizes the body of water at the center, which takes the shape of a human body with a rock outcropping as



Fig. 6. Jim Denomie, *Confluence*, 1998, oil on canvas © Jim Denomie

its head. He also depicts human bodies in the environment that are read as human forms first, rather than natural forms resembling humans or natural-human hybrids. These works have something of Dalí and Tanguy's radical perspectival depth and disconcerting landscape-mindscape ambiguity, combined with an eerie nocturnal glow and electric colors.

In addition to the Chiefs and the erotic fantasias, Denomie displays a satirical gift in works that can be both political and funny. Gail Tremblay has described these Denomie images as capturing “a madcap dream state.”¹² In Denomie's last one-person exhibition in Minneapolis, in 2011, the key image was a monoprint that offers yet one more Native American representation of The Lone Ranger and Tonto and includes yet one more acerbic Native American view of the Tonto-Lone Ranger relationship:

Tonto: You lied to me.
Lone Ranger: Get used to it.¹³

Denomie earlier created works, in his Renegade series, that are more expansive and elaborate, in that they employ landscapes with elements drawn from actual sites, such as iconic Southwestern buttes and the Minneapolis skyline. These become settings for scenarios of wild imagination and wit, whether that means an

their work always had a jokey side. Not all jokes are surrealist jokes, however, and the surprising combinations and juxtapositions in Denomie's paintings display the illogical logic of Surrealism in a different satirical fashion than, say, the humorous images by David Bradley, a Native artist originally from Minnesota but now resident in Santa Fe.¹⁵ Denomie's humor, as in the Santa Claus painting and others that feature Indians mounted on winged steeds, often results in images of flight that are perfect demonstrations of his flights of fancy.

Julie Buffalohead

A member of the Ponca Tribe in Oklahoma but raised in Minnesota, Julie Buffalohead attended the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and now lives in the Twin Cities. Her work also combines or juxtaposes Native and non-Native elements, with an emphasis on popular imagery. In graduate school she turned away from playing off Indian logos in popular and commercial culture because she found that too common in contemporary Indian art. Some of her early work uses a collage/assemblage technique to combine existing imagery and texts with her own drawing and painting, such as one that incorporates an image of the 1862 execution in Mankato, Minnesota, of 38 Lakota punished as a result of the so-called Sioux Uprising (the same event alluded to by Denomie). Her recent work usually presents a narrative situation in a theatrical space emptied of all but the actors and a few key props and scenic elements. These paintings can seem reminiscent of the work of Nicholas Africano, but more obviously they recall fairytales and animal fables. The images display what Lucy Lippard describes as "oneiric realism...like individual frames from films or comic strips, dislocated parts of strange tales."¹⁶ A deadpan humor lies behind Buffalohead's straightforward representational technique and titles. As she explores both general cultural or existential situations and her own personal experiences, Buffalohead has moved toward the traditional surrealist interest in mystery and masks. Denomie uses Waboose, a rabbit figure, as a trickster icon of identity and alter ego. In relatively early works such as *Nanobhozo and Coyote's War Party* (2000; Fig. 8) and *Skin Shifting* (2000) Buffalohead likewise used Nanobhozo, whom she depicted as both woman and coyote, alongside stereotypical cowboy-and-Indian imagery, in order to explore issues of identity and metamorphosis.

Buffalohead now uses other animals, along with the trickster coyote, as a supporting cast to help her symbolically capture her own experiences and ideas. Some of her scenarios emphasize Native issues, with the animals as the principal actors; others focus more on domesticity, motherhood, and the world of children, in a manner that suggests both the rituals of play and psychologically fraught moments of daily life. It is worth recalling that Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures*



Fig. 8. Julie Buffalohead, *Nanabuzo and Coyote's War Party*, 2000, oil on canvas. Collection of the Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis © Julie Buffalohead

in Wonderland and *Through the Looking Glass* were favorite texts for the Surrealists, with Carroll's fantastic visions beautifully capturing childlike wonder and terror by creating alternative universes where shape-changing and animals with human characteristics were key elements. In the explicitly theatrical *Let the Show Begin* (2010; Fig. 9) a masked young woman, presumably the Buffalohead surrogate, plays chess with a masked coyote, near a small puppet stage on which a red fox is manipulating an animal puppet while being watched by a group of small animals as the audience. Here we see enigma re-entering art through the depiction of dramatic scenarios that feature what seems familiar—animals, domestic spaces and objects—charged with a puzzling, even threatening tension. Buffalohead's works obviously do not draw upon melodramatic thriller elements in the same serio-comic fashion as one of Magritte's first major works, *The Menaced Assassin* (1926). But a sense of uncertainty and tension is present in her recent art. For all the humor in *Hostage* (2008), where a fox confronts a line of other animals by holding up a (stuffed toy?) unicorn, the threat of violence is front and center. Violence is more direct in *The Capture* (2010), in



Fig. 9. Julie Buffalohead, *Let the Show Begin*, 2010, mixed media on paper. Collection of the National Museum of American Indian Art © Julie Buffalohead

which the coyote, wearing a dress—as camouflage and disguise, as human surrogate, or both—has a bird in its mouth, while surrounded by other birds. In *The Lone Ranger Rides Again* (2012), a couch set in the woods hosts a great-antlered deer with a Lone Ranger mask and six-gun, a rabbit, a crow, and the Buffalohead surrogate, who wears a mask (presumably to play Tonto) as she reads the newspaper. Is this the calm before the next fight? In *The Columbus Prophecies* (2012), a fox with a bow-and-arrow is about to shoot at a miniature Spanish galleon, the Columbus flagship Santa Maria, that floats in a bathtub, as one masked rabbit with a hatchet approaches to join the attack, and another holds two rubber duckies. The masked Buffalohead surrogate does a dance move. Buffalohead has said that the painting indicates “how native people feel about heroes who are not true heroes.”¹⁷

Buffalohead’s daughter led the artist to an appreciation of children’s ability to play pretend and change roles. In Buffalohead’s art the world of child’s play becomes a vehicle for an adult awareness of how adults assume roles. Buffalohead incorporates children, animals, and animal toys within tableaux that reveal her sense of the shape-changing and disguise in the Native storytelling tradition. Nanobhozo may be the central figure in her dramaturgy, but the masked, role-playing adult female human is also important as the heir to Buffalohead’s early depiction of the half-woman, half-animal figure as a personal surrogate. The woman embodies

Buffalohead's evolving concern with disguise, double-ness, and the creation of identity. Yet the old cowboy-and-Indian stereotypes and stories are still there, and Buffalohead still recreates and challenges them. In another recent work, *The Pre-contact, Post-contact Skirmish* (2012), Buffalohead makes a suburban home the setting for a conflict between cowboy toys and a biplane on one side, and the attacking Indian toys and an assortment of animals on the other. A masked fox, wielding a sword while riding on a hippo (!), leads a charge against the homestead. A giant rabbit observes the action, the only animal presented as living and real but somehow caught in a toy world. The struggle goes on.

Traditionalism and the Question of Native Art's Relation to Surrealism in the Americas

All these artists have primarily employed drawing and painting rather than sculpture, installation or mixed media.¹⁸ In spite of Carlson's interest in film and photography, and the appearance of still cameras in Buffalohead's *Nanobhozo and Coyote's War Party* and in Denomie's recurring potshots at Curtis—all of which emphasize issues of representation and realism—the artists' commitment to two-dimensional image-making might seem formally conservative. The satirical side of their art, especially the contemporary references, helps disguise their relatively traditional approach. Their traditionalism can, however, be viewed as in part a tribute to traditional Native image-making, a connection with a history going back to prehistory, rather than simply a continuation of image-making in the Western fine art tradition. If even the constant references to stereotypical pop cultural Native images seem familiar, that is no doubt because, as Buffalohead's grad school shift reminds us, such a practice has been going on for a half century or more. James Earle Fraser's *End of the Trail*, for example, appears in countless Native American works as a convenient, irresistible visual shorthand for "Indian stereotype"; it epitomizes a melancholy romanticism over a sense of an ending to which Natives do not subscribe. Big Bear and Denomie, as well as Bradley, James Luna, and many others have incorporated Fraser's work into their art in a variety of ways; Carlson refers to it ironically in the title of her Windigo series painting. Yet in the postmodern art world all is permitted, historical styles and concerns are given a new life, and as all these artists suggest, the effort to escape from such stereotypical imagery often leads not away from it, but through it.

The central question in relation to the subject of Surrealism and Native American art is not whether Native American art, and in particular the work of these five artists, is surrealist, but rather how and why it might be considered surrealist, and what the significance of such a critical interrogation might be. The most important aspect of this consideration is the recognition that even now when the two are so

enmeshed, the fundamental relationship between Native American art and non-Native art, and between Native American culture and non-Native culture, necessarily involves a set of juxtapositions, combinations, and transformations. Whether we are speaking stylistically or philosophically, that melding is everywhere visible in the work of these five artists. It may be immediately clear and comic, as in the case of the art historical and political revisionism in Denomie's *Edward Curtis, Paparazzi: Skinny Dip* (2009), a parodic yet pointed variation on Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Or it may be more enigmatic and mysterious, as in the theatrical scenarios played out in Buffalohead's *Let the Show Begin*.

By way of comparison, it may be helpful to make an excursus to Latin America. The Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier suggested in his 1949 prologue to *El Reino de Este Mundo* (The Kingdom of This World) that the Americas have a built-in magical realism. He asked, "But what is the entire history of America but a chronicle of the marvelous real?"¹⁹ Yet he did not argue that simple naturalistic description of this *real maravilloso* would necessarily result in magical realism. He believed it took a kind of perceptual faith to see the world that way, and artistic ability to express that vision. Carpentier, who early in his career had associated himself with the European Surrealists, distanced himself in this discussion by upholding the marvelous reality he had experienced in Haiti. He dismissed their "marvelous" (André Breton's key term), "manufactured by tricks of prestidigitation, by juxtaposing objects unlikely ever to be found together... The result of willing the marvelous or any other trance is that the dream technicians become bureaucrats. ... certain paintings are made into a monotonous junkyard of sugar-coated watches, seamstresses' mannequins, or vague phallic monuments. ... Poverty of the imagination, Unamuno said, is learning codes by heart."²⁰ In a pair of interviews Gabriel García Márquez presented his approach to Latin American reality as the description of "the wildest things in the most natural way," giving credit to his grandmother's storytelling: "She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness."²¹ These ways of approaching literary surrealism and magical realism can be translated to the discussion of surrealist visual art. Magritte, for example, employs a relatively neutral depiction of "supernatural and fantastic" subjects. Dalí's style—notwithstanding Carpentier's comment about the junkyard of sugar-coated watches—demonstrates an extraordinary clarity and detail that becomes a marvel in itself, a magical medium for viewing exceptional subjects. The contemporary Native American artists under discussion, from the painterly Denomie, to the skillful but relatively matter-of-fact Buffalohead, to the more photographically-based Carlson, all raise the same issue: of the relation between style, transparency, representation, and surreal reality.

Without assuming that Native American culture, like the Americas for

Carpentier, has a kind of built-in Surrealism, I would be prepared to argue that the wit, the dream-like situations, the formal complexity and contradictions, are all but inevitable when we are dealing with two worlds or world views—there are many more than two, of course—and with multiple artistic traditions. Duality, variety, and opposition are essential formal principles in Carlson’s and Wallowing Bull’s art. In a relatively early work by Wallowing Bull, *Black Elk’s Little Sandman* (2002), there are no umbrellas or sewing machines, but Yoda appears in a Native feather headdress, the head from Munch’s *Scream* wears a headdress of flames, and the Statue of Liberty rubs elbows with totem poles, a T-Rex, and the Twin Towers. This modern-day mash-up may not be technically surrealist, but is certainly surreal—perfectly comprehensible given contemporary culture. As Rey Chow has observed, “the violent yoking together of disparate things has become inevitable in modern and postmodern times.”²²

David Martinez has described Denomie as “living in two worlds,” but he goes on to argue that these “are not the tiresome cliché of American Indian literary studies, in which a character like Archilde Leon of D’Arcy McNickle’s 1936 novel *The Surrounded* grapples with the cultural conflict between Indian and White societies.” Denomie’s worlds, Martinez argues, are “uniquely Native . . . he is simultaneously a contemporary of two disparate artistic generations.” He then goes on to cite Gerald McMaster’s idea that aboriginal contemporary artists “move freely between different communities and places, often within a new ‘third space’ that encompasses the two. . . . They understand the aboriginal community and the mainstream; at times they question the two, sometimes they subvert them. They see boundaries as permeable and culture as a changing tradition.”²³ This is highly suggestive, although I am not sure it is entirely accurate as a description of Denomie or the other artists under discussion, even if the old melodramatic—and powerful—literary version of culture clash also does now seem a less-than-convincing model for explaining contemporary Native art and artists. In any event, I am speaking less about artists and more about art, that is, imagery and other stylistic elements. Therefore I can agree with Martinez’s later observation that “the tricksters that appear in Denomie’s work. . . are products of the haphazard collision of Ojibwe reservation and American urban societies.”²⁴ More broadly, the collision between traditional and contemporary ways of life and artmaking appears in other variations and with other variables in the work of all the artists. In formal terms, one might begin to use McMaster’s idea as an analytical tool by noting the exceptional fluidity and permeability of pictorial space in the works of Big Bear and Carlson. Both artists preserve a sense of perspectival order while opening it up in fresh and surprising ways to accommodate their worldviews.

Culture Clash/Doubleness/ "Real Sur-Realists"

David Treuer's *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* includes the essay "The Spirit Lives On," written in response to the "Listening with the Heart" exhibition at the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota in 2000 that included the work of Morrison, Big Bear, and Norval Morrisseau, and to the companion exhibition "Contemporary Native Art of Minnesota" that featured the work of Wallowing Bull—at that time still Star Big Bear—Buffalohead, and Denomie. Treuer admired the exhibit, which he describes as "conceptually complex, thematically nuanced, and intellectually demanding," but criticizes it for emphasizing cultural values rather than artistic virtues, and for emphasizing a non-verbal experiential response over a verbal, intellectual one.²⁵ This judgment reflects the larger argument Treuer advances in the book, that Native American literature should be considered as literature, not just as the written expression of Native American beliefs and values: aesthetics, not anthropology. I am sympathetic to this perspective, and am not trying to highlight cultural Surrealism created by a clash of cultures, or at least a complex relationship between cultures, at the expense of aesthetic Surrealism. For me, the two Surrealisms are inseparable, as is evident in the work of the five artists. As they explore the Native and non-Native, the traditional and the contemporary, and all the associated personal, social, political, and artistic relationships, their work reveals an unavoidable existential doubleness.

In the famous opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," W.E.B. Du Bois proclaimed that "this American world" yields the Negro "no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others.[...]One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings..."²⁶ I am not saying that all non-Western or "minority" cultures and artists are automatically double, and therefore in some sense born Surrealists. But doubleness is a recurring theme in statements by Native artists, as in this statement by James Luna: "I truly live in two worlds. This 'two world' concept once posed too much ambiguity for me, as I felt torn as to who I was. In maturity I have come to find it the source of my power, as I can easily move between these two places and not feel that I have to be one or the other, that I am an Indian in this modern society."²⁷ The title of Star Wallowing Bear's exhibition "Between Two Cultures" is another recognition of this theme. A remark by Frank Big Bear adds a twist to the formula: "Many Native Americans say they live in two worlds, but they actually have to live in more than two worlds. If you live in one world, you're pretty much stuck in

one place... The more worlds you live in the better it is.”²⁸

If it is difficult not to see Surrealism permeating much Native American art, it may be equally difficult not to see Surrealism permeating all of contemporary art.²⁹ The challenge is not to somehow sort out all the qualities in these works and divide them between non-Native and Native, surrealist and non-surrealist. That would be too neat because the artists and art are too complex, and any assumption of clearly defined and absolute binaries is problematic. One danger exists in valorizing Native expression only to the degree to which it can be shown to share in Western artistic movements. Another lurks in the assumption that Native expression is valuable only to the degree it remains unaffected by non-Native art. The issue of historical priority is literally an historical issue, removed from the present even if it is still of interest in terms of the history of Surrealism and the history of Native art and its exhibition. It is important that Breton, Masson, Ernst and other European Surrealists were fascinated by Native American art. It is also important that the response to the first exhibition of Native American art in a modern art museum, the 1941 “Indian Art of the United States” at the Museum of Modern Art, recognized the relationship between Native expression and Surrealism. As Rushing notes, “Max Weber, one of the very first modern American artists to appreciate Native art, wrote to Alfred H. Barr that the magnificent exhibition proved that ‘we have the *real* Sur-realists right here in America.’”³⁰

If we go back to the simple vernacular sense of “strange” the most surrealist contemporary art might well be traditional “Western” representational art—i.e., cowboy art—that depicts Native Americans in a conventional nineteenth-century mode. The survival of such pictorial costume dramas in a neo-Catlin, neo-Remington mode (in sculpture, neo-Fraser, and in photography, neo-Curtis) provides the starting-point and often the target for virtually all modern Native American art from Fritz Scholder on. Regarded from that perspective, the younger generation of artists understandably takes pop culture, flanked on one side by art historical images and on the other by consumerist images, as its primary domain, while building upon Native imagery and Native consciousness. Their art perhaps inevitably appears in one sense or another surrealist. Yet to say that sidesteps the question of what, in the contemporary world, does not seem surreal.

1 This text is based on a paper of the same title presented at the College Art Association conference in 2012. For Big Bear, see Andrea Carlson, et al., *Drawings by Frank Big Bear*, ex. cat. Tweed Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Duluth, 2009. For Buffalohead, see Judy Woodward, "Julie Buffalohead And Her Furry Little Friends Deconstruct The Obvious," [St. Anthony] *Park Bugle*, April 22, 2013: <http://www.parkbugle.org/julie-buffalohead-and-her-furry-little-friends-deconstruct-the-obvious/>; and an excerpt from a December 17, 2010 interview with Ampers on the radio station KFAI: www.mnartists.org/article.do?rid=279791. For Carlson, see Susan Power, "New Skins," in *New Skins: New Paintings by Andrea Carlson and Jim Denomie*, Minnesota Artists Exhibition Gallery, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007. W. Jackson Rushing, "Andrea Carlson's Ravenous Vision," *American Indian* (Fall, 2008): 38; "Q & A: Andrea Carlson on 'Vore,'" Plains Art Museum weblog: <http://plainsart.org/weblog/q-a-andrea-carlson-on-vore/>, and the artist's website: <http://mikinaak.com>. For Denomie, in addition to *New Skins*, see Gail Tremblay, "Jim Denomie: Art That Sings And Stings," in *Art Quantum: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art, 2009*, ed. James H. Nottage (Indianapolis: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 2009), 36-55; David Martinez, "Rabbits and Flying Warriors: The Postindian Imagery of Jim Denomie," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 35:4 (2011): 119-145; and "Jim Denomie," in *2012/13 McKnight Visual Artists...in conversation with Phong Bui*, ex. cat., Minneapolis College of Art and Design Gallery, 2013 [posted at: http://mcad.edu/sites/default/files/2012-13_McKnight_final.pdf], 2-8. For Wallowing Bull, see Rusty Freeman, et al., *Between Two Cultures: The Art of Star Wallowing Bull*, ex. cat. Plains Art Museum, Fargo, N.D., 2005. All of these artists are represented by the Bockley Gallery in Minneapolis; the gallery website [www.bockleygallery.com] contains additional images and information. I would like to thank Todd Bockley for his exceptional help with images for the conference presentation and this version. I would also like to express my gratitude to Jack Rushing and Claudia Mesch, to my fellow panelists, and to Steven Ostrow, Chair, and the Department of Art History at the University of Minnesota for helping to make it possible for me to participate in the conference. The title of the talk and essay refer to Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), rather than to the subtitle for *Essays in Native Modernism: Complexity and Contradiction in American Indian Art* (2006).

2 Martinez says, "...given that Denomie admits to doing 'research' that led him to works on Morrison, it is probably the case that Morrison was more of an influence on him than he is willing or able to articulate" ("Rabbits and Flying Warriors," 142). I find this less than convincing, even though Martinez immediately adds, "Then again, how does anyone accurately account for how one's predecessors influenced him or her." Andrea Carlson has said that the treatment of the horizon in her Windigo series was influenced by Morrison (conversation with the author, May 31, 2013). At a roundtable at the symposium "George Morrison: Art, Life, and Legacy" at the Plains Art Museum in Fargo, North Dakota, on June 16, 2013, she elaborated, saying, "I keep my horizon lines consistent." She also noted that the treatment of water in her works shares something with Morrison's approach, with both drawing upon the sensation that the lake is "a living, breathing thing—you feel its presence." As part of the same roundtable Carlson described Morrison as "the gift that keeps on giving," saying that she realized that her current works-in-progress, which use ten sheets of paper to create vertical compositions, perhaps were affected by Morrison's totem pole works, as a kind of "embedded" influence. At the same roundtable Denomie remarked that when he met Morrison he was not really ready to be influenced by his work, although he probably absorbed Morrison's art through Frank Big Bear, who was always speaking to him about Morrison. Of Big Bear, Denomie said, "He was a huge inspiration—still is—one of my heroes." Denomie concluded his remarks by saying that having seen the retrospective exhibition "Modern Spirit: The Art of George Morrison," "Now I'm going to be influenced" (his

emphasis).

3 “Introduction,” *Surrealists on Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 2.

4 Conversation with the artist, June 16, 2013.

5 Not all juxtapositions in Native art are surrealist. The diptych-style dual images in Kay WalkingStick’s work, for example, are arguably closer to a cinematic notion of montage, with the contrast between elements not necessarily offering the radical oppositions associated with surrealism. She describes the relationship between the two sides as “a balance of apparent opposites. It is through contrasts that we see meaning. [...] There is a duality in the painting...It is as if the two sides of reality are shown—the inside and the outside of perception—and both are raw, intense, and manipulated—and both are mysterious. ...It is as if the two sides of reality are shown—the inside and the outside of perception.” For WalkingStick, the form of the paintings is bound up with her identity as a bi-racial woman who balances two world views, one based on her Western Christian education, the other on her knowledge of Native tradition. See “Seeking the Spiritual,” in *Native American Art in the Twentieth Century: Makers, Meanings, Histories*, ed. W. Jackson Rushing III (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 185.

6 Conversation with the artist, June 4, 2013. Another work, *New Age Fancy Dancer II* (2005), also employs the kind of design used for the reservation dog, which suggests a contemporary equivalent, shaped perhaps by science fiction futurism as well as a pure pattern-making impulse, for the kind of stylization using mechanical forms employed by Leger or the fascination with modernity and movement at the heart of Futurism.

7 This is by now a somewhat familiar exercise. Carlson does a brilliant job of it, but I feel compelled to note that, beginning with Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* (1992-1993) at the Maryland Historical Society, the idea has gained currency that institutions can address and perhaps somehow escape from their own contradictions by inviting artists, especially Native and other “minority” artists, to shine a critical light on the often problematic nature of their collections and cultural role. This makes me more than uneasy, and recalls Herbert Marcuse’s notion of repressive tolerance, which translates in this context as “cooptation through commission.” That does not, however, apply directly to Carlson’s exhibition, which was sponsored by the Minnesota Artist’s Exhibition Program, an independent curatorial department of the museum. I would add that I admire Carlson’s sensible but not uncritical attitude toward this issue, as demonstrated in an interview with Kris Kerzma: “...another question I often get...is, ‘How can you critique museums harshly, yet display your work in collections and museums?’ This is a very fair question. The best place to have a conversation on museums and collections is in museums and collections. The conversation is relevant to the space. Similarly, I talk about assimilation and appropriation while appropriating. I couldn’t have that conversation if I wasn’t appropriating. I don’t know what appropriation-free art looks like” (“Q & A: Andrea Carlson on ‘Vore’”).

8 Carlson associates the ruffed grouse as a visual icon with a figure of speech she identifies in traditional Native storytelling, when a story is suddenly stopped—to be continued later—by the unexpected interjection, “and the ruffed grouse’s asshole.” The visual icon is therefore a figure in Carlson’s visual storytelling, different from the spiritual beings that appear elsewhere in the series, for example in *Waagadijiiid* (2007), where another extravagant object from the MIA collection is flanked by figures with stylized bear faces and claws that the artist regards as monster-like spiritual beings that cannot be named, live in the ground, and emerge as devouring spirits (conversation with the artist, May 31, 2013).

9 “Andrea Carlson’s Ravenous Vision,” 38.

10 "A Band of Outsiders," MN Artists, posted November 5, 2007.

11 Quoted by Gail Tremblay in "Jim Denomie: Art That Sings And Stings," 39. Tremblay describes Denomie's art as "at once ironic, expressionist, and surreal" (37). In his conversation with Phong Bui ("Jim Denomie," in *2012/13 McKnight Visual Artists*), Denomie says that when he first encountered Surrealism in college, "I knew right away that I would be attracted to surrealist paintings, mostly because I dream vividly, and I love my dreams." (Cf. Doug Hanson on Frank Big Bear: "His dream imagery lends a surreal component to the work..." In "Dimensions of the Artist," in *Drawings by Frank Big Bear*, 7). Denomie singles out Ernst and Dalí as particular surrealist artists to whom he relates more readily, and says that in the historical narrative paintings he likes "the language of Surrealism" because he can mix the past and contemporary events.

12 Tremblay, 43.

13 "Yet one more" because there are so many other examples, such as Larry McNeil's 2004 lithograph, "Native Epistemology": "Keemosabe, me no want to say cheese for the white man Curtis... He want me to pose in paradigmatic duds that only extinguishes native epistemology"/the lone ranger was taken aback by Tonto's resolve and wondered what eepistamollygee meant..."

14 Martinez notes the police car with the Indian and the horse emerging from the trunk ("Rabbits and Flying Warriors," 137). This is an allusion to a 1993 incident where two Minneapolis police officers handcuffed two apparently intoxicated but sleeping Native Americans and, after cancelling a request for an ambulance, put them in the trunk of their squad car and took them to Hennepin County Medical Center. A third man was put in the back seat of the car. The two in the trunk sued and were each awarded approximately \$100,000 dollars in a civil jury trial verdict. See Human Rights Watch, Minneapolis Incidents: www.columbia.edu/itc/journalism/cases/katrina/Human%20Rights%20Watch/uspohtml/uspo86.htm

15 Bradley has created his own parodies of *American Gothic*: in one, Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe pose in front of the Silver Bullet B&B, run by The Lone Ranger and Tonto; in another, the couple are Native, with the man clutching a hoe and the house behind them set off from the distant hills by an adobe wall.

16 Lippard, 2.

17 Quoted in "Julie Buffalohead And Her Furry Little Friends Deconstruct The Obvious." Accessed May 30, 2013.

18 In 2012 Big Bear exhibited two large-scale works that used gallery invitation postcards (one for an exhibit by his son that reproduced Wallowing Bull's *Red Owl Food Stores*, another for a photographer, Frank Stefanko, that featured a portrait of Patti Smith) as the basis for large-scale assemblages. The overlays introduced a dizzying variety of imagery: animal photographs, outer space subjects, historical pictures of Native Americans, iconic pop cultural and celebrity photographs, famous paintings and painters, etc. Big Bear is doing additional works in this style, but he also continues to make drawings and paintings. Buffalohead has recently said that she is interested in doing sculptural and installation works; see "Julie Buffalohead and Her Furry Little Friends Deconstruct the Obvious." Denomie moved in the direction of installation when he exhibited his most recent large-scale work, "Creative Oven" (2013), which measures 144 x 84 inches, with a platform that enabled viewers to go up a few stairs and look at the top section of the painting from an elevated position. The work, which features a central boxing match between Vincent Van Gogh and Mike Tyson, as well as Dalí melted watches, quotation and parodies from Picasso, Botticelli, Kahlo, Michelangelo, *The Wizard of Oz*, and a version of *End of the Trail* atop the nipple of a Tom Wesselman nude, is reproduced in *2012/13 McKnight Visual Artists*, 8.

- 19 “Pero qué es la historia de América toda sino una cronica de lo real maravilloso?” *Obras Completas* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1983), II.18.
- 20 “On the Marvelous Real in America,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 1995), 85. For Carpentier, however, there is still an equivocation between the ontological and the phenomenological, a directly experienced reality and a miraculous alteration of reality “through a privileged revelation” that “presupposes faith” (86). In the 1975 essay “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real,” he asks why Latin America is the chosen territory of the Baroque, and answers, “Because all symbiosis, all *mestizaje*, engenders the baroque” (*Magical Realism*, 100). Without wishing to over-complicate the already complicated linguistic-conceptual problem of Surrealism (and magical realism), or venture into the linguistic-conceptual-historical quicksand of the Baroque, I would nevertheless note that the idea of symbiosis and *mestizaje* (racial mixing) giving rise to the baroque in some ways parallels my argument about Native American art and Surrealism.
- 21 “Journey Back to the Source: An Interview with Gabriel García Márquez,” trans. Gene H. Bell-Villada, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, <http://www.vqronline.org/webexclusive/2005/06/24/marquez-journey-back/1977>, downloaded April 8, 2013; “Gabriel García Márquez,” *Latin American Writers at Work: The Paris Review*, ed. George Plimpton, (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 138.
- 22 Rey Chow, “The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective,” in *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2006), 81.
- 23 Martinez, 120, 121.
- 24 Martinez, 126.
- 25 *Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 2006), 155.
- 26 W. E. B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 11.
- 27 Quoted in David Revere McFadden and Ellen Napiura Taubman, “Changing Hands: New Directions,” in *Changing Hands Art Without Reservation 2/ Contemporary Native North American Art from the West, Northwest & Pacific*, ed. McFadden and Taubman (New York: Museum of Arts & Design, 2005), 12. See also the statement by Walking Stick in note 5.
- 28 Quoted in Peter Spooner, “Conversations with Frank Big Bear,” *Drawings by Frank Big Bear*, 15.
- 29 One person’s Surrealism may be another person’s realism. More to the point, is Native American realism (representation, art) always Surrealism to non-Natives?
- 30 W. Jackson Rushing, *Native American Art and the New York Avant-Garde: A History of Cultural Primitivism* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1995), 117-118; emphasis in the original.