

FORT GANSEVOORT

The New York Times

Art in Review

Roberta Smith

August 27, 1993

'Indian Territories' '20th-Century Native American Artists Dismantle 19th-Century Euro-American Myths'
Renee Fotouhi Fine Art 16R Newtown Lane East Hampton, L.I. Through Sunday

This flawed yet provocative group exhibition is more rough outline than finished show. Crowding together works by contemporary artists of American Indian descent and 19th-century images of their ancestors by Europeans and European-Americans, it is too often sketchy and imprecise, short on the dreaded Q word (quality) in either century, and plagued by a number of fashionable tics. The most prominent of these are the tedious and simplistic labels explaining the sins of the 19th-century photographs and paintings and the deconstructive intent of the contemporary efforts.

Still, the exhibition -- assembled by Renee Fotouhi and Bridget Goodbody, a graduate student at Columbia -- includes portrait photographs by Edward S. Curtis, drawings by Frederic Remington and George Catlin, and Hudson River-style paintings of wagon trains observed from afar by ghostly Indians. In different ways, these images remind one of the entwined strands of racism and romanticism that threaded their way through 19th-century America's attitudes toward the people it so violently displaced. And it also provides important glimpses of the way contemporary American Indian artists like Havichi Edgar Heap of Birds, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Fritz Scholder and Carl Beam use their work to convey a sense of cultural rage and pride.

But because the work on either side is so uneven, only occasionally do the juxtapositions succeed in dismantling myths. The color lithographs of Indian chiefs published by McKenny & Hall in the 1840's pay homage to (and Europeanize) their subjects, while Richard Ray Whitman's stark photographs of contemporary Indian men from his "Three Chiefs" series say more about society's neglect than about its selective, idealizing attention. In "Indian After Bodmer," Mr. Scholder appropriates another 1840's image -- of a dancing warrior in elaborate feather headdress by Karl Bodmer -- imbuing his 1970 version with a sarcastic, exuberant ferocity that points up Bodmer's sense of studied academic artifice and possibly his repressed fear. On the other hand, Catlin's relatively reportorial drawings, awkwardly rendered in pencil, provide a surprisingly sympathetic frame for Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's "Indian Horse," a big red colored surface that angrily contrasts mass-media representations of Indians with their representations of themselves: a busy, somewhat sloppy field united by the large outline of a horse in profile.

In the end, this exhibition should generate a larger and more carefully considered successor. In the meantime, it is refreshing to see it at the height of the summer season on Long Island's South Fork, where a sizable chunk of land is still held by the area's original occupants, the Shinnecock Indians.