

Culture



Norman ZEPP and Michael PARKE-TAYLOR, *Horses Fly Too*, Bob Boyer/Edward Poitras, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, 1984. 67 pages, photographs

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Norman ZEPP and Michael PARKE-TAYLOR, *Horses Fly Too, Bob Boyer/Edward Poitras*, Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery, Regina, 1984. 67 pages, photographs.

By Karen Duffek

Since Indian arts began to be made for sale to non-Indians, anthropologists and other viewers have debated the "Indian-ness" of the new work and have attempted to determine boundaries of ethnicity, quality, and authenticity that would define Indian art in its non-traditional context. In the exhibition catalogue, *Horses Fly Too*, these issues are examined through the paintings and sculpture of Saskatchewan native artists Bob Boyer and Edward Poitras. The catalogue provides a refreshingly critical and insightful analysis of the artists' works as well as of viewers' reactions to contemporary native art generally. Organized by the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery (NMAG), Regina, in cooperation with the Thunder Bay National Exhibition Centre and Centre for Indian Art (NECCIA), the exhibition was intended to fulfill an ongoing mandate of the NMAG to "show work by artists of North American Indian ancestry who are developing in a contemporary idiom yet remain informed by their cultural heritage" (p. 4).

The catalogue is composed of a foreword by the Director of the NMAG, Carol A. Phillips, an introduction by Elizabeth McLuhan, former Curator at the Thunder Bay NECCIA, and an interpretation of the works in exhibition by the two exhibition curators, Norman Zepp and Michael Parke-Taylor. There is at least one photograph of each exhibited work, as well as a photograph and biography of each artist. The catalogue is attractively presented and laid out; unfortunately, the glued spine has meant that in the course of reviewing the catalogue, several pages have already pulled loose.

Both Boyer and Poitras are professional artists who have received formal training, have had their work widely exhibited (primarily in exhibitions focussing on native art), and have been associated with teaching in the Art Department of the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College at the

University of Regina. In her foreword, Phillips notes that the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery has resolved to provide a critical context for the new work emerging from the College, in order to engender public attention and analysis. *Horses Fly Too* presents the artists' works as fine art, without a dominating ethnographic or historical framework. As McLuhan states in her introduction, the references within the art itself "are profoundly historical and political, unmistakable and personal in its use of the Indian experience as a contemporary subject and metaphor for survival" (p. 9). The exhibition allows the viewer to create a personal meaning out of these images by making connections between the art and the associations with "Indian-ness" it brings to mind.

McLuhan makes the provocative statement that the art of Boyer and Poitras "is not Indian art per se" (p. 7). She points out that both artists "operate without benefit of ethnic umbrellas" (p. 7), even though they address issues of concern to Indian people in their art. Like other Plains artists who work in individualistic styles, such as Alex Janvier, Robert Houle, and Gerald McMaster, Boyer and Poitras draw upon pan-Indian designs and images as well as contemporary mainstream art forms. Yet "their art is not 'Indian art' in that it is not created exclusively for Indian use or for an Indian art market" (p. 9). This is an interesting and possibly useful definition of contemporary Indian art that avoids setting boundaries around particular kinds of subject matter, style, and meaning and thereby avoids constructing a model of "Indian-ness" to which the art should adhere.

McLuhan contrasts the work of contemporary Plains artists, who have resisted the formation of any "school" or any single ethnological label, with the art of contemporary Northwest Coast and Woodlands Indian artists. She accurately notes that in Canada, Indian art has generally been marketed with an emphasis on ethnological labels, which are used to sell "Indian-ness" rather than art. Thus, the term "Woodland School" is used to describe almost any Ontario Indian artist, no matter what the style and iconography of his work. For Northwest Coast artists, whose work is very successfully promoted and created under an "ethnic umbrella," the result of such marketing has

been an avid and specialized Indian art market, but a very limited mainstream audience. This situation is beneficial for the tourist art market, where many of the objects available assume a static form marketable on the basis of their reaffirmation of consumer expectations of Indian-ness and tradition. But for the best Northwest Coast Indian artists, this emphasis on ethnicity only serves to restrict the recognition of their art as “fine art”, and brings into focus the challenges that face all twentieth century native artists who are attempting to develop their art while maintaining a continuity with the past.

The paintings and sculpture of Boyer and Poitras are discussed by McLuhan and the exhibition curators in terms of the relationship of their Indian heritage to their work. McLuhan states that, “In eschewing an ‘Indian art’ label, artists such as Boyer and Poitras are able to convey more accurately a contemporary Indian reality unfettered by Indian or non-Indian expectations of their art” (p. 12). Referring to the stereotypical image of the Plains Indian, she comments, “Ironically, it is this archetypal composite of European and pan-Indian elements that comprises the classic non-Indian image of ‘Indian-ness.’ Boyer and Poitras use these preconceptions as a starting point, visually luring in viewers and then subliminally ambushing them!” (p. 13).

Bob Boyer’s painted blanket, entitled “Smallpox Issue” (1983), is a particularly striking example of his work, in which he makes use of traditional Indian material culture to express his personal ideas. The visually appealing, brightly dotted design of the blanket contrasts sharply with its historical reference to the infected blankets used to decimate Indians. In this piece, his canvasses, and his other painted blankets (eg. “A Government Blanket Policy”, 1983), the titles are critical to an appreciation of the work. The titles often bring images of horses and Plains Indian warriors to mind, images that are not apparent in the abstract, geometric compositions of his paintings; the viewer must make the connections between the two.

Edward Poitras also makes use of materials traditional to Indian art and culture in his sculptures and installation pieces; he uses natural

materials like bones, feathers, and leather, juxtaposing them with modern manufactured materials such as acrylic, plexiglass, and transistor components. In McLuhan’s words, Poitras “reclaims stereotypes and reinvests them with new — and Indian — meanings” (p. 14). A statement of transplanted cultural identity, for example, emerges from “As Snow Before the Summer Sun” (1980), which consists of a horned skull archetypally associated with the sun dance, but which is now fitted with a transistor and an old photo of Indian school children.

The descriptions and interpretations of the works in exhibition, written by Zepp and Parke-Taylor, help the reader towards an understanding of the artists’ directions in both style and meaning. The curators explain the connection of many of the pieces to native history and culture, and they suggest different levels of meaning or various interpretations of the paintings and sculpture. They state that the artists’ “Indian heritage may inform the work, but it is not essential to its appreciation” (p. 19), and that “In a way, Poitras’ installation pieces can be perceived as performance art, which allows a free association of ideas to occur within a preconceived structure or framework” (p. 25).

Like the exhibition itself, the catalogue *Horses Fly Too* addresses important and difficult issues that surround the meaning and appreciation of contemporary native art. Simplistic answers are not offered; rather, *Horses Fly Too* acknowledges the relevance of traditional Indian culture to the contemporary Indian and its role in non-Indian society. The catalogue is able to stand on its own once the exhibition itself is dismantled. It is a welcome addition to the small number of critical analyses of contemporary native art that address not only the art itself and its association with tradition, but also reflect upon the contemporary context for the art. For museum anthropologists in particular, who have been actively involved in creating a theory and definition to go with the art, this catalogue and the works of Boyer and Poitras may prompt some of us to take a renewed, reflexive look at the frameworks within which we exhibit and interpret contemporary native art.