

Native Pop: Bunky Echo-Hawk and Steven Paul Judd Subvert *Star Wars*

OLENA McLAUGHLIN

Most representations of American Indians in American culture confine Indigenous peoples to the stereotypical roles of the savage, the environmentally friendly, the sidekick, the vanishing race, and other derogatory and diminishing portrayals. Philip J. Deloria (*Playing Indian*, 1998), Elizabeth S. Bird (*Dressing in Feathers: The Construction of the Indian in American Culture*, 1996), Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (*Hollywood's Indians: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film*, 2003), Louis Owens (*Mixedblood Messages*, 1998), Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (*Celluloid Indians*, 1999), and others have generated provocative discussions concerning portrayals of American Indians in media, press, and film. The relationships between whitestream society and Native American nations have largely been guided by cultural appropriation. Peter Kulchyski points out that “the culture field is a critical domain of intellectual and social struggle” (606) and argues that “we are in an era in which appropriation has become the dominant cultural tendency informing all relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in the Americas” (615). According to Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, cultural appropriation is often viewed as an ambiguous term by the dominant cultural groups, as something that happens naturally when different cultural groups come into contact. Yet to the minority groups and the Indigenous peoples, cultural appropriation poses a threat not only to their material goods and subsistence, but also sovereignty and cultural integrity. The misrepresentation of the heritage of a people may have detrimental impact on their cultural identity (9).

Yet, as Cynthia L. Landrum and John W. Troutman point out, appropriation can be a two-way street. Native Americans have not been silent and complacent in cultural appropriation. Kulchyski identifies appropriation and subversion as two sides of the same coin: appropriation implies the use of the cultural texts of the dominated group by the dominant group for its own interests; subversion, on the other hand, involves employment of the cultural texts of the dominant group by the marginal group as a means of cultural resistance. Such resistance is opposition to the commodification that is the essence of appropriation. Dean Rader further explains that Indigenous nations have been participating in cultural “engaged resistance,” which

can be used to expand the notion of Indigenous subversion. Rader defines “engaged resistance” as Indigenous acts of communication and expression through written, spoken, or visual language, which control the depiction of identity and creation of Native image and destiny by linking them to Native cultures, beliefs, and histories (179). To the definition of subversion provided above, I also find it necessary to add that Native artists aim to often engage in subversion in order to undermine the mainstream power and its claimed authority over Native identities and cultures. Native artists engage in subversion in all aspects of popular culture including music, film, performance, fashion, comic books, and literature.

In this article, I will explore the work of two contemporary Indigenous artists, Bunky Echo-Hawk (Pawnee/Yakama) and Steven Paul Judd (Kiowa/Choctaw), who employ the diverse sources of their backgrounds to practise subversion. They subvert iconic images of *Star Wars* as a means to address dominant American culture’s understanding of Indigenous identities and histories, thus engaging in contemporary art and political conversations. Their works re-imagine what it means to be Indigenous in the 21st century and create affirmative visuals for Indigenous peoples. Here, I will examine Echo-Hawk’s painting *If Yoda was an Indian* (2007) and Judd’s piece *Hopi Princess Leia*. Through humorous and clever mashups of iconic *Star Wars* characters and Indigenous visual languages in these works, the artists explore the complex relationship between Indigenous peoples and the film industry. At the same time, while engaging subject matter that is not perceived as “traditionally Native,” they defy stereotypical expectations of the mainstream audience about Native art and create images that represent their personal experiences with contemporaneity. By merging American pop culture with Native experiences, Echo-Hawk and Judd encourage their audiences to reconsider Native American history and position Indigenous peoples as active participants in the present. Although one might argue that employing *Star Wars* imagery is a response to market demand and the large fan base of the franchise (which is true to an extent), such moves also allow Echo-Hawk and Judd to draw attention, with humor and wit, to social criticism and make the non-Native audience question stereotypes, as well as raise issues of self-representation and visual sovereignty. In the process of subversion, images of popular culture the artists use become props for Native discourse. While exploring Native comic books, for instance, C. Richard King refers to such process as reclamation projects that aim both “to interrupt imperial idioms” and create space “to reimagine themselves and reclaim their cultures” (220).

Bunky Echo-Hawk and Steven Paul Judd are not the only Indigenous artists utilizing *Star Wars* in their works to make the popular franchise imagery serve an Indigenous purpose. Wanting to critique the state of current affairs in an easily accessible form that would reach a wider audience seems to have led to a recent trend among Indigenous artists to subvert *Star Wars* imagery. One might wonder why Native American artists chose to employ *Star Wars* in their work. *Indian Country Today* asks the same question: “Why do American Indians like *Star Wars* so much?” (“The Native”). The number of works and artists who use *Star Wars* imagery and motifs seems to be growing. Some examples are Susan Folwell’s (Santa Clara Pueblo) jar *Star Wars* (2013); Ben Pease’s (Crow/Northern Cheyenne) paintings *Buckskin Storm Troopers* (n.d.) and *Honor Your Elders* (n.d.); Ryan Singer’s (Navajo) *The New Ambassadors* (2015) and *Tuba City Spaceport* (2012); Andy Everson’s (K’ómoks First Nation) *Star Wars* (2011, 2012) series which he uses to criticize the treaty process; Nicholas Galanin’s (Tlingit/Aleut) *Things Are Looking Native, Natives Are Looking Whiter* (2012) and many others. *Indian Country Today* argues that *Star Wars* is “a huge race-crossing, culture-crossing phenomenon” and many groups enjoy working with *Star Wars* imagery (“The Native”). They point out that in their fascination with *Star Wars*, Native Americans are no different from any other group of people, “hip hop fans, Millennials, and Irish Americans,” who grew up participating in the contemporary world. It seems the stereotype of the American Indian stagnating in the past prevents many from seeing



Bunky Echo-Hawk. *If Yoda Was an Indian*, acrylic on canvas, 2007

them as part of contemporary American culture. After all, many Native artists such as Andy Everson admit to being huge fans of *Star Wars* simply because it is the popular culture in which they grew up. William Lempert argues that *Star Wars* resonates with a variety of audiences, both Western and Indigenous (169). It is worth mentioning that in 2013, the Navajo Nation Museum in collaboration with Lucasfilm, Fox Home Entertainment and Walmart released *Star Wars, Episode IV – A New Hope* dubbed in the Navajo language as part of the language revitalization project. Jeana Francis and Nigel R. Long Soldier’s sci-fi film *Future Warrior* (2007), meanwhile, draws its

inspiration directly from *Star Wars*. The plot resembles that of the epic: the protagonist is the last hope of his culture and has to learn and train with the last surviving elder because other elders were killed by a masked man. Lempert argues that the film both parallels and subverts *Star Wars* by introducing Indigenous and culturally specific elements (169).

In his piece *If Yoda Was an Indian*, Echo-Hawk indigenizes one of the most prominent *Star Wars* characters to make him celebrate Pawnee culture, affirm its values, and provide a new vision of Pawnee identity. The painting depicts Yoda against the background of ocher land and starry sky, and he is dressed like an Indian. However, it is not the stereotypical pan-Indian image that usually portrays Plains Indians clothing. His outfit is specifically Pawnee. By choosing to depict Yoda in Pawnee attire, Echo-Hawk is expressing his own cultural heritage. Yoda's clothing is decorated with geometric designs; he is wearing a Pawnee roach headdress; he is adorned with multiple earrings and a necklace of bear claws and holds a feather fan. All of these attributes reference the traditional Pawnee dress. The roach headdresses are not as widespread in popular culture as feather warbonnets; however, they were the most common headdress worn by a variety of tribes in the US. They also generally did not have a particular spiritual significance such as the warbonnet headdresses. Roaches were mostly worn by warriors into battle or by dancers. So, on the one hand, by dressing Yoda in a roach, Echo-Hawk positions him as a warrior. Yet, on the other hand, the roach can also be viewed as a reference to contemporary Native American cultures, and even more specifically to pow-wows, where roaches are often an integral part of the dancers' regalia.

Similarly, the bear claw necklace on Yoda signifies a strong leader and a powerful warrior. It was worn by Pawnee men as a symbol of honor and accomplishments (Hansen). The bear claw necklace often acknowledges the men's roles as leaders. The claws on the necklace are attached to an otter hide. According to Emma Hansen, “while the claws represent the bear's strength and courage, the otter hide signifies power over both land and water. Both animals' qualities guided the wearer during warfare, treaty negotiations, and other important events” (Hansen). Hansen also points out that Pawnee men believed that the necklace would protect its owner from bullets and arrows in battle.

Other small Pawnee regalia details depicting Yoda as a warrior and a chief are the earrings and the feather fan. In Echo-Hawk's painting, Yoda has multiple piercings on both ears with many hoop earrings. Among the Pawnee, earrings were worn in abundance by men and

frequently signified war honors. According to Brian Frejo (Skiri Pawnee, Seminole), a DJ and Culture Shock Camp¹ founder, the Pawnee “wore earrings in both ears traditionally, not just one piercing, but many in both ears for war and decorations. Each chief and warrior had his own unique style and flair. There has always been a balance in all things, so earrings in both sides!” (Manning). According to Paterek, the feather fan, which Yoda also flaunts, would usually point to a special status in the tribe as only men of distinction carried fans with turkey or goose feathers (130). The quill-work choker and celestial designs on Yoda’s clothing also add authenticity to his dress (Paterek 130-1). By detailing Yoda’s regalia, Echo-Hawk encourages his non-Native audience to reconsider the pan-Indian stereotype of the Plains warrior reinforced in every Western film; yet, most importantly, he creates a positive Pawnee image for Pawnee youth while celebrating his Pawnee heritage.

The image discussed here belongs to Echo-Hawk’s series *Weapons of Mass Media* and is not the only work that employs Yoda’s character. Echo-Hawk’s other interpretations of Yoda include *If Yoda Was an Indian, He’d Be a Chief*; *Peyoda*; and *If Yoda Was an Indian, He Would Dance the Tail Every Time*. Every painting draws attention to one of the Native realities such as dancing the tail or ceremonial use of peyote. *If Yoda Was an Indian, He’d Be a Chief* is likely the most recognizable and well-known piece out of the four. In this piece, Yoda is wearing a feathered headdress, which seems somewhat more pan-Indian. At first glance, such depiction also seems to cater more to non-Native audiences. In this piece, Echo-Hawk uses the stereotype of the ‘Indian chief’ and simultaneously plays on it. While exploring the use of stereotypes by American Indian Movement activists, Maureen Trudelle Schwarz discusses the occurrences when activists dressed in Native attire for meetings with media and played on the stereotypical understandings of American Indians by reusing common stereotypes and drawing attention to the particularities associated with them. In other words, they subverted “red-face performances” by embodying “both the stereotype and its critique so integrally that no safe barrier [could] be erected between the two” (16). The activists used the stereotypical Indian icons to support and further their cause. Schwarz insists that such images can be potent in social and political critiques because they are easily recognizable by the mainstream and do not require additional explanations. She urges that “in the absence of lobbying power or economic influence, the ‘symbolic capital’ of cultural identity is one of American Indians’ most valuable political resources” (25). Similarly to AIM activists’ performances of stereotypical images to draw

attention to their cause, *If Yoda Was an Indian, He'd Be a Chief* uses the stereotypical envisioning of an Indian, namely the pan-Indian image in Plains Indian attire, to point out Native American contemporaneity, persisting presence, and participation in American mainstream culture.

Nevertheless, if one considers Echo-Hawk's cultural identity and the details of the painting, it is possible that in *If Yoda Was an Indian, He'd Be a Chief*, like in the other three pieces depicting Yoda, Echo-Hawk is referencing his own heritage. While the piece in focus in this paper explores the artist's Pawnee heritage, *If Yoda Was an Indian, He'd Be a Chief* concerns his Yakama heritage. Although originally Yakama men did not wear headdresses, with time they were influenced by the Plains style of dress, like the Sioux dress, and borrowed the headdress for ceremonial purposes. Thus, this piece can be both pan-Indian and tribally specific. According to Schwarz, it is possible for Native Americans to combine both tribal and pan-Indian identity without contradiction (16). *If Yoda Was an Indian, He'd Be a Chief* is readily available not only to the Yakama audiences, but Native Americans in general, as well as non-Natives. While the Native audiences might recognize the details that the non-Native audience will overlook, the latter will be able to acknowledge the association of Native Americans with the Jedi, the light, the force, i.e. the 'good guys,' for which Yoda stands. In other words, Echo-Hawk subverts one of the *Star Wars* hero characters, with which both Native and non-Native audiences tend to identify themselves.

Echo-Hawk's painting *Darth Custer* comes into play with *If Yoda Was an Indian*, relying on the narrative logic of *Star Wars* to encourage audiences to rethink the history of Federal-tribal relations. The painting portrays General Custer, instrumental in Indian wars, as Darth Vader. The word play of the title is not lost upon the viewer. Anyone even slightly familiar with the *Star Wars* epic will recognize the parallel drawn in the painting: General Custer relates to Native Americans the same way Darth Vader relates to the imaginary universe of *Star Wars*. The reference is obvious visually as well in the way elements of the two characters are combined into one image. The character is portrayed wearing the Darth Vader mask and breastplate, yet also has auburn hair and mustache. The outfit is navy-blue, typical of the Union Army officer, with stars on the shoulders of the cape representing the rank. He is also outfitted with light brown fringed gloves in which Custer is often pictured. The only missing object of Custer's typical outfit is his non-regulation red scarf.

Darth Custer disrupts the artificially constructed myth of the heroic General Custer, which persisted in the American historic narrative for some time, and presents the Native vision



Bunky Echo-Hawk. *Darth Custer*, acrylic on canvas

of the historic figure. Echo-Hawk subverts the *Star Wars* narrative to engage the American myth of Indian wars. Yoda and the Rebel forces represent resistance to the Empire, while Darth Vader with storm troopers are the face of oppression and erasure. This logic translates to federal-tribal relations. Native audiences will easily catch the historic reference; yet, the non-Native audiences will be able to recognize the message and criticism as well because they also seek to identify with the Jedi and the rebels while acknowledging the evil of the Empire and Darth Vader.

Although it is within the stream of Native Pop, Echo-Hawk's work leans more towards Pop Surrealism or Lowbrow, a movement that emerged in the 1970s after Pop Art. It engages popular culture, but in a more concrete story-telling way with slightly less ambiguity. Matt Dukes Jordan identifies cartoons and satire as some of the most prominent features of Lowbrow: Lowbrow is inspired and powerfully influenced by cartoon art, which serves as its philosophical and stylistic base with "a carnivalesque sense of satire and humor" at its center (11). Jordan explains that artists working in Lowbrow "revel in the ribald, love the lurid, and turn the everyday world upside down" (11). Lowbrow was also inspired by the spirit of romanticism, which led artists to explore emotional extremes and often turn to the grotesque and the decadent. According to Jordan, the outsider and underground subcultures of the twentieth century also had an impact on development of the Lowbrow. He explains that many defining images of Lowbrow first appeared as graffiti, skate, hot-rod and other subcultures (12). Yet the most defining feature of Lowbrow is the narrative. Lowbrow paintings usually tell a story which may rely on comic books or movie scenes (Jordan 12). Such reliance on the narrative adds representational quality to Lowbrow; the paintings represent particular places and people and are mostly not abstract (Jordan 12). Echo-Hawk's art borrows quite a few elements from Lowbrow and often tends to exhibit a cartoon-like

nature, but most importantly it usually speaks to contemporary people with urgent issues (for example, consider his series *Gas Masks as Medicine*, which, according to the artist, explores “environmental racism and injustice in Indian Country” (bunkeyechohawk.com), and carries a narrative.

In his *If Yoda Was an Indian*, Echo-Hawk relies on the audience recognizing Yoda’s story and its significance. It is important that in *If Yoda Was an Indian*, Yoda, a Jedi elder and warrior, becomes a Pawnee elder, an acknowledged leader, and an honored warrior who evokes respect and reverence. Although Echo-Hawk means to include all possible audiences in his art, who are willing to listen (hence the easily-recognizable character of *Star Wars*), he wants, first and foremost, to “paint for the advancement of [his] people... with a positive message” (Longhousemedia4). He considers his ties to the community in all of his work. Echo-Hawk suggests that he works to make empowering and healing art for the community (WBEZ). Having a dialogue with his community and his audience is vital for the artist; he stresses the reciprocating relationship that serves as the basis for his art. While he produces traditional fine art for galleries and exhibits, he also does live art or live painting, which, according to Echo-Hawk, is a modernized form of the traditional winter tribal recounting of significant events that took place throughout the year. In the latter, the artist would capture the most important stories on a hide painting that would also serve as a memory site for the community (WBEZ). In a similar manner, in his live painting performances, Echo-Hawk engages in a conversation with his audience to create a unique piece that is rooted in the comments and ideas derived from the viewers. He asks the audience to imagine that they are creating their story and they need to consider what they want it to say. The resulting piece is then auctioned at an affordable price to the audience. Many of the audience members claim that the paintings which come out of such dialogue between the artist and his audience are highly relatable. Susan Froyd calls Echo-Hawk’s art “community-building art-oeuvre” (Froyd).

As in the case of his live paintings, Echo-Hawk carefully considers the story he wants to tell in *If Yoda Was an Indian*. The artist draws a parallel between the wisdom of Yoda, who, in Episodes IV, V, and VI, is the only remaining keeper of the knowledge about the magical force of the Jedi and the last representative of these people, and the cultural knowledge of the elders of the Pawnee tribe who are also tasked with preserving and continuing the tribal culture into the future. Echo-Hawk’s comparison of the Pawnee culture to the Jedi culture is empowering for the

Native communities. It references sacred knowledge that can be healing both for the community in particular and society in general. This parallel is also productive because the Jedi are considered a dying culture that makes a comeback with the newly regained “force.” It is able not only to withstand the attack of the Empire, but also to defeat it and persevere. In addition, *Star Wars* portrays the Jedi culture as advanced and spiritually developed, and although its primary focus is on development of the mind and connection to the universe, there is no hint of primitivism which is often stereotypically ascribed to many Indigenous cultures that are believed to be “close to nature.” Quite a few Indigenous peoples of the *Star Wars* universe are portrayed as primitive. For instance, the Ewoks, the fictional race of the *Star Wars* universe indigenous to the moon of Endor, whose name resembles Miwok, the name of a Native American tribe, whose village, according to George Lucas, was just outside his office (Miller 146), are a simplistic and gullible hunter-gatherer society living in the wilderness (for a full description of the race see Wookieepedia). Although George Lucas intended to stress the advantages of such a race that defeats the technologically advanced society, its simple-mindedness and primitivism are what stands out the most. Some might draw parallels between Ewoks and Native Americans because of the belief spread across the Internet that the name of the race is derived from the Miwok (which Lucas indicates only as coincidental) and the fact that the Endor scenes were shot in the California redwood forests to which the tribe is indigenous (McMillan). Another example of the primitive Indigenous people of the original trilogy are the Tusken Raiders or the Sand People native to Tatooine located in the Outer Rim territories of the galaxy. These nomadic warrior people are portrayed as uncivilized savages who attack small settlements of colonists. Echo-Hawk works against such stereotypical comparisons by creating a positive image in *If Yoda Was an Indian* that both younger and older generations of Pawnee can relate to. He conjures an interpretation of *Star Wars* iconography that lifts the Indigenous peoples to the status of heroes. Such affirmations of Indigenous values are important especially to Native youth as they create inspirational images and models that counter the absence of positive Native imagery in American popular culture.

Many Native artists, Echo-Hawk and Judd among them, define the purpose of their art as educating the public about contemporary Native American issues, but most importantly they want to remedy the lack of positive representation of Native peoples in popular culture and create experiences Native youth can relate to. Alaka Wali, anthropologist and co-curator of the

exhibit *Bunky Echo Hawk – Modern Warrior*, which took place in Field Museum, Chicago, Illinois², notes that Echo-Hawk “sees himself as fighting for the dignity and wellbeing of his people” (WBEZ). One of the ways he pursues this purpose is by creating inspiring images for younger generations. Kathryn Shanley argues that images of Native Americans in popular culture have an enormous influence on “determining the quality of the lived experience of American Indians” (29). Dean Rader points out the negative effects of stereotypes in media on Indigenous populations:

Where place names and laws and raids robbed Indians of cultural identity 100 years ago, so too have Westerns, team mascots, comics, Tonto and other caricatures stolen Native cultural identity and sovereignty. Contemporary visual culture—movies and television in particular—have erected identities for them. So effective have the modern media been in altering how Indians see themselves that many Native writers talk about growing up sympathizing with cowboys and ridiculing the Cheyenne and Arapaho.
(183)

Rader encourages and praises Native American artists’ resistance to harmful stereotypes through their works. Such resistance is the discourse of today’s reality in their works, the reality that is shaped by “popular culture, politics, current events, and the changing social mores of the 21st century” (Baker at al. 7). Explaining his artwork, Steven Judd points out, for instance, that he is indeed Native American, and he went to an all-Native college, and he is inspired by his “Native stuff”; yet he is also a part of the larger American culture and likes “cool pop stuff,” movies, and music (Mormann). In an interview with *Santa Fe Reporter*, Judd elaborates:

I live in the same world that other people live in, and I just found that there wasn’t what I felt was cool, pop culture stuff made for me—stickers, toys, action figures—I didn’t feel like they were necessarily speaking to things that I saw or that my family saw, so I decided to do my best to try to make my own. (Limón)

Judd creates alternative images to those with which he had to grow up such as Iron Eyes Cody, who was Italian and whose commercials romanticized the “noble savage” stereotype. Judd expresses the sentiment familiar to many Indigenous artists and points to the lack of positive and accurate representations of Native Americans that could have served as role models in his childhood. Tonto and any other Native Americans in Hollywood Westerns certainly did not serve as good examples in American popular culture. That is why Judd’s images often incorporate

superheroes from comic books and portraits of famous Native Americans. One of his projects is his series *LEGO My Land* (2015) which transforms LEGO figures into American Indians.

Steven Paul Judd's works are different in style from those of Echo-Hawk. Although he has some works that are similar to Lowbrow, the artist created his piece *Hopi Princess Leia*, like many of his other works, in a style more common for American Neo-Pop of the 1980s, which in its turn was a rebirth of American Pop Art that emerged in the 1960's as a reaction to the elitist Abstract Expressionist scene. Its aesthetic reacted to the cultural and industrial changes, centered on contemporaneity, and strived to be socially relevant (Osterwold 7). Pop Art served as a reflection of the capitalist consumer culture that arose in the US in the 1950s and 1960s. This art movement was largely characterized by the images derived from popular culture and consumerism. It relied on and reflected the power of television and borrowed its images from comic strips, celebrities, advertisements, everyday objects, and consumer products. It was interested in mass culture and mass production. According to David Katz, Pop Art "appropriated and transmuted traditionally commercial and 'low' art into 'fine' art that was instantly recognizable, archly self-referencing, clever and witty, and yet easily understood, since it sprang from common images" (21). Its characteristics made it highly marketable and quickly accepted by both collectors and critics. Katz notes American Pop Art's "apolitical, non-confrontational content... its irony, its coolness and the hip detachment with which it mirrored the youth culture of the early Sixties" (21). It played with the surfaces and expressed ambivalence. Artists avoided making clear statements in their works.



Steven Paul Judd. *Hopi Princess Leia*

Judd jokingly calls himself "Andy Warrior-hol" (Murg) because his use of pop iconography is similar to Andy Warhol's, one of the most iconic Pop-artists of the

20th century. Similarly to Warhol, who challenged boundaries between media and merged together printmaking and photography, as well as objects of mass-production to create new meanings (Museum of Modern Art), Judd often employs film celebrities and movie scenes, uses bold block colors, creates multiples, and experiments with combining media. Although *Hopi Princess Leia* lacks some of the prominent elements of Pop Art and Neo-Pop aesthetic, it is conceptually Pop. In this piece, Judd brings together Edward Curtis’s 1921 photograph “Pulini and Koyame-Walpi” from his multivolume collection *The North American Indian*, Volume 12: “The Hopi,” and a still shot from *Star Wars* of Princess Leia pointing a gun. It is a Photoshop piece depicting two Hopi maidens in their traditional dress with the squash blossom hairdo that was typical for unmarried women in a sepia photograph. Princess Leia is Photoshopped in front of the two maidens. She is pointing a gun at someone who is not in the picture, but who obviously poses a threat.

Hopi Princess Leia may invite different interpretations from Native and non-Native audiences. Due to the nature of Pop Art, it might merely be pointing to one thing only—the resemblance between Leia’s costume and Hopi girls’ outfits. The non-Native viewer may notice the witty play of the piece, but not go any further in her attempts to scrutinize its underlying political logic. At times, it is difficult for the non-Native audience to decide whether the artist intends to initiate political discussion. Judd’s piece is such a case. In his seminal work *The Trickster Shift: Humor and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (1999), Allan J. Ryan discusses the art of Bill Powless, Grand River Mohawk, whose attitude seems to be similar to Judd’s. He points out that Bill Powless takes “definite delight in pure play and juxtaposition, with seemingly little interest in provoking political debate” (14). The artist enjoys the look of bewilderment on the faces of his non-Native viewers who are uncertain whether they are expected to smile and laugh, and whether the piece in front of them is meant to be humorous. Ryan explains that Powless’s *Beach Blanket Brave* and *Home of the Brave* (1984) mean to depict “Native participation in contemporary consumer society and possibly their bewilderment with it;” yet, both pieces also highlight stereotypes about Native Americans, which, engrained in the minds of the non-Native audience, prevent them from recognizing Native participation in contemporaneity, which the author intends (15). Similarly, it is difficult to say what Judd’s intention is in *Hopi Princess Leia* as he might be merely pointing to and playing with the striking resemblance between the maidens and Leia. Like Powless, he might not intend a political

conversation, but wants to observe the reactions of his audience to an image they did not anticipate.

Yet, on the other hand, the Native audience may refer to the narrative logic of *Star Wars* and see the Hopi women as participants in the Rebellion alongside Princess Leia. In such a way this piece manages to write Hopi women into the *Star Wars* narrative, working against the narrative of erasure by affirming Indigenous presence and identity. In such interpretation, Judd's choice to modify Curtis's photograph is not coincidental. Edward Curtis's photographs were instrumental in their time in establishing stereotypes about Native Americans, especially the "vanishing Indian" stereotype. The latter presupposes that all Indians are objects of the past that need to be captured before they disappear completely; their knowledge, traditions, ceremonies, and land "should" be passed down to the whites in order to preserve them. Judd's insertion of Princess Leia into Curtis's photograph counters the idea of the Indian of the past as he is consciously placing a character of contemporary popular culture into the image of Native Americans as opposed to Curtis's editing out of any objects and signs of contemporaneity from his photographs of the Indigenous peoples. In such a way, *Hopi Princess Leia* questions authenticity of Curtis's photographs.

By manipulating Curtis' photograph, Judd draws the viewer's attention to the history of representations or rather misrepresentations of Native Americans in media. The artist has a number of works where he alters Curtis's photographs in some way to portray Indians depicted in them not as artifacts, but as contemporary human beings. Judd adds color to some of the photographs and Photoshops images of popular culture into others. As Gyasi Ross puts it, Judd creates positive images and healthy images instead of ranting about the mainstream imagery of Native Americans. Ross exclaims: "That's powerful, my friends. That's self-determination. That is the power to influence generations of Native people. Instead of angrily protesting popular images of Natives, he's consistently showing the many ways Native life is beautiful" (Ross). In such ways, Judd reclaims representational agency. Rader further argues that such works are "both a measure and a means of Indian sovereignty" (180) and hold the key to resistance by participating in contemporaneity and subverting the imagery of erasure into imagery of presence:

[C]ontemporary writers, directors, and painters battle against the near-totalizing forces of American cultural inscription and misrepresentation. The most provocative practitioners of Native discourses resist the imperial colonizing thrust of contemporary

culture through participation in it. Their inventive use of the lyric poem, the collage, and the movie transforms both public and private discourses and allows them not only to counter prevailing establishments of identity but also to tell who they are in their own languages. They resist cultural erasure by attacking those armaments designed to annihilate their ability to speak themselves into being. Yet, through art they recoup the performative energies of enactment, ritual, and oration and engage both Anglo and Native discourse. (180)

Rader’s argument supports the claim that by engaging popular culture in a way which addresses cultural erasure and the stereotype of the vanishing Indian, Native artists rewrite representations of Indianness and Whiteness by simultaneously subverting traditional pop-cultural icons and images that have become an embodiment of the American spirit. In the spirit of Cynthia Landrum’s discussion of Native artists as countercultures, Rader stresses that Native artists undermine the authoritative voice of the mainstream society, the colonizer, by exposing the mechanisms of “how a culture thinks about itself” (182). Rader argues that collaboration with stereotypes, idioms, and images of the colonizer is meant to push for change (184). Such sites of engaged resistance involve issues of sovereignty, self-portrayal, image, and identity.

The caption Judd provides on his Facebook page for the piece suggests another interpretation of *Hopi Princess Leia*, which makes it offer multiple readings that do not necessarily agree with each other, yet also do not deconstruct the piece. The caption declares the following: “For the last time, my great, great, great-grandmother was a Hopi Indian Princess, that's what makes me a Princess! - Princess Leia” (Judd, “Hopi Princess Leia”). It seems difficult not to notice the issues of cultural appropriation and self-representation underlying *Hopi Princess Leia*. In this piece, Judd makes Leia representative of “imperialist nostalgia,” which according to Renato Rosaldo “uses a pose of ‘innocent yearning’ both to capture people’s imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination” (70). Judd is evoking the concept of a “wannabe” and critiquing the white man’s desire to “play Indian,” which according to Shanley has become “an American pastime” (28). In this piece, Judd makes Princess Leia seem a “wannabe” wrongfully appropriating everything Native including the dress and the hairstyle. According to Neil Diamond, a Cree filmmaker, Hollywood has created a mythological appeal around Indians placing them in a magical land desired by everyone (*Reel Injun*). This desire to “occupy” Indianness reflected and intensified in the New Age Movement, which turned

sacred Indigenous ceremonies and traditions into commodities available for mass consumption, and led to an appearance of a tribe of “wannabes.”

Although there are multiple theories where George Lucas got his inspiration for some of Leia’s most iconic hairstyles and outfits, in Judd’s piece, there is a striking resemblance of Leia’s look to that of the Hopi maidens including the world famous side buns. Some have observed before that it is possible to assume that some characters, ideas, and even scenery of the *Star Wars* drew inspiration from Native American nations. Appropriations and influences from different cultures are abundant in *Star Wars*. For example, the Jedi costumes were inspired by the Japanese samurai, the stormtroopers by medieval armor in costume and World War II German Nazi troops in name; and queen Amidala’s throne room gown was influenced by the Chinese Imperial Court dress (Rebel, Jedi, Princess, Queen; Henderson 123-161; for detailed discussion of *Star Wars* costumes see Brandon Alinger’s *Star Wars Costumes: The Original Trilogy*, 2014). Some of these influences are acknowledged in the new travelling exhibit of the Smithsonian *Rebel, Jedi, Princess, Queen: Star Wars and the Power of Costume*; others, however, remain a conjecture of fans (Geek in Heels; Barder). Judd’s piece seems to suggest that appropriation of the Hopi fashion took place. Although there is plenty of speculation that the sidebuns were inspired by “cootie garages” hair style of 1920’s; sci-fi and fantasy comic book portrayals of women; or the scientist Barnes Wallis’ wife’s hairdo in the 1955 film *The Dam Busters*, it is difficult to deny the resemblance with the Hopi squash blossom buns (McRobbie). The buns Padme Amidala flaunts in her Senate landing gown look even more like the Hopi hairstyle, thus bridging the prequels with the trilogy through fashion (*Star Wars: Fit for a Queen*).

In addition, Judd is toying with the widespread stereotype of the Indian princess grandmother so often employed by white people attempting to pass for Indians. His *Hopi Princess Leia* vehemently calls for critical thinking and opposes settler-colonial desire to “play Indian.” It is a theme that can be traced through many of his works. Recently, an Atari-like game “Invaders” was developed based on the art he designed for T-shirts with the NTVS clothing company. He comments that this is his way of “countin’ coup,” and “it’s the only acceptable way to play Indian!” (Luger).

Both Echo-Hawk and Judd explore Indigenous experiences of contemporaneity in their works. Their two pieces discussed here cleverly join Indigenous imagery with pop-cultural icons, which situates them as participants in contemporary art and popular culture. As Wilhelm Murg

notes, in many of his works, “the pop culture references give an immediacy to Judd’s seemingly simple statements” (“Andy Warriorhol” 34). Echo-Hawk, Judd, and multiple contemporary Native American artists work in the genre of Native Pop, borrowing images from popular culture as it lends itself well to reaching a wider audience in a language familiar to many. If one goes to a Native American art market of any kind, the majority of works that one will find are what is deemed “traditionally” Native. Yet, Native Pop is becoming more prominent and draws more attention in the contemporary art world. In his blog post “Pop Go the Indians,” Scott Andrews notices that there are more Native artists working in this genre that engages the themes and images of everyday life every year. Speaking about Indigenous art and Pop Art, he notes that there is:

a growing trend in contemporary American Indian art that combines visual vocabularies from two fields generally thought of as distinct from each other (at least in the art marketplace and mainstream art criticism). They combine the signs and symbols from American Indian representational traditions that predate contact with Europeans with signs and symbols that came after that contact. (Andrews)

It is worth noting that such categorization into pure “authentic” Native art that is rooted in pre-contact tradition and post-contact Native art “modified” by European influences is artificially constructed, mostly representing the collectors’ belief in the vanishing race stereotype. Works of Native artists and craftsmen have been informed by environment, trade, contact with other tribes, and later contact with Europeans since time immemorial and have always reflected changes taking place in the community. However, historically, multiple “patrons” of Native arts such as Dorothy Dunn have imposed the idea of pre-contact authenticity on Indigenous artists who have been attempting to escape limitations of said authenticity ever since.

The growing number of exhibits and critics who focus on contemporary Indigenous art that re-thinks and even deconstructs the notion of “traditionally Native” speaks to Native artists’ ever more successful attempts to re-imagine Native art as a category. Museums (although with caution) start exhibiting a trend to incorporate Indigenous artists’ works engaging in the Native Pop conversation. For instance, the Heard Museum held an exhibition “POP! Popular Culture in American Indian Art” in 2010 highlighting the work of Ryan Singer and Lisa Telford, who can hardly be classified as traditionalists, among others. The Philbrook Museum of Art can boast several pieces of Native Pop such as beaded bracelets “Lone Ranger and Tonto” by Marcus

Amerman. The 2012 Santa Fe group art show of Native artists working in Pop Surrealism “Low-Rez: The Native American Lowbrow” deserves a mention as well. The press release for the art show speaks of the Native Pop movement with its focal point in Santa Fe,

in which artists use pop imagery to explode non-native fantasies of Indians such as the timeless “Noble Savage” and to establish entry points for audiences who might not be familiar with tribal histories or imagery. The subversive humor of Native Pop and Lowbrow Art provides a perfect vehicle for social commentary without becoming preachy or propagandist. (*Low-Rez*)

As mentioned earlier, Indigenous artists are concerned with issues of sovereignty and self-representation. They defy the mainstream collectors’ expectations of Native American art with value in authenticity and limited to primitivism and Studio style. It is not merely about aesthetics, but about activism and making the viewer aware of contemporary Indigenous issues. Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., Director of the Heard Museum, suggests that “there is a commitment by the younger generation of artists... to get beyond the traditional artistic obsession with Native identity and tribal customs. Their commitment is to a “post-Indian world”—without the limitations or expectations of earlier times” (Baker et al. 7).

Contemporary Indigenous artists reference world art movements and speak of their identity as shaped not only by tribal traditions, but also film, music and popular culture. Their works explore their Indigenous identity as in flux and influenced by the multicultural globalized world; their art finds crossings and intersections of the tribal customary and traditional and the contemporary. Robert Jahnke (Māori) defines contemporary Indigenous art as “trans-customary” which exhibits “visual empathy with customary practice,” but is neither hybrid nor somewhere in-between customary and non-customary (48). Jahnke stresses empathy with traditionally accepted forms, but not strict correspondence to them. Such empathy may reveal itself either in “customary” art genres with “non-customary” materials (such as Shan Goshorn’s traditionally woven baskets made from a variety of documents pertaining to Federal Indian policies) or vice versa. April Holder asserts that “if Native Americans live in two worlds, then Native Pop is the bridge between those two worlds. Native pop art is the combination of the essence of traditional identity and the embrace of the ever changing world around us” (as qtd. in *Low Rez*).

In this vein, both Echo-Hawk and Judd focus on expressing contemporary issues in contemporary media. While Echo-Hawk acknowledges the importance of tradition, he also

points out the importance of defying the stereotypical expectations of what Native American art should be. He creates art that is not about “buffalos, and buffalo robes, and sunsets, and the Indian slumped over on his horse at the end of the trail” (SiWatson), the topics that dominate the mainstream society's view of Native art, but about Native Americans and cell-phones, skateboards, and Nike shoes. Judd is also known for producing images for subcultures. Eleanor Heartney discusses how the myths and stereotypes popularized by Hollywood and popular culture limit Indigenous artists. She insists that such kinds of generalization have the potential to freeze Native artists into what James Clifford terms the “ethnographic present,” “a state that fixes ethnographic groups within the traditions that existed before the disruptions caused by the incursions of modernity” (Baker et al., 37). She explains that “such romanticized formulations ignore or diminish the adjustments Native Americans have made and the transformations they have undergone in partaking of the complexities of contemporary American society. It also threatens to strip Native identity from those who have moved too far from Native traditions” (Baker et al., 37). Echo-Hawk and Judd work with the themes that position the Native American as contemporary, with a vision of a future. Wali rightly points out that Echo-Hawk supports the vision that “Indians are not about the past; they are about the present and the future” (WBEZ).

Native Pop borrows from American Pop Art, Neo-Pop, and Lowbrow, but it is distinctly Indigenous as it voices Indigenous concerns with visual sovereignty. It incorporates the everyday life and the subcultures. It is gaining momentum with collectors and galleries due to its ironic mashups of Native experiences and mass culture and is often seen as “cool” due to its refreshing and “out-of-the-box” exploration of Indigenous identities. Native Pop is also often political and anchored to reality. Its purpose is to re-examine Native American history, Federal Indian policies, and stereotypical non-Native representations of American Indians. Yet, first and foremost, it aims to forge positive self-imagery for Native nations.

Native Pop focuses on resistance and cultural perseverance and aims to counter the stereotypical beliefs about and images of Native Americans in the US. Adrienne Keene curated the *Native Re-Appropriations: Contemporary Indigenous Artists* (2015-2016) exhibit at Brown’s Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America that featured five Native American artists with Judd among them. She noted lack of exposure of the general public to American Indians and contemporary issues in Indian Country, as well as absence of images countering stereotypical portrayals that the mainstream could draw upon (Mormann). According to Keene,

artists like Judd create pieces that “offer a critique through humor, bold statements, and the reimagining of recognizable images in pop culture, which... gives... a better sense of contemporary Native identities” (Mormann). Landrum asserts that “Native people have historically used popular culture as a means to contest stereotypical notions of “Indianness” and to define their identities on their own terms” (185).

Through Native Pop, which defies expectations of traditional Native art, artists like Echo-Hawk and Judd engage in visual sovereignty and subvert stereotypical representations of Native Americans in media, which to this day largely inform the mainstream audience about Indigenous nations. By tackling American popular culture in their works, such artists establish their engaged presence in contemporaneity. C. Richard King urges “[to] push toward embodied individuals in Indian country who actively engage with modernity, often resisting and reworking its projects, and that demand recognizing the centrality of (cultural) imperialism to popular culture and the need to decolonize it” (216). Echo-Hawk and Judd are such artists who rework the projects of popular culture to make them serve Native communities by creating “powerful and positive alternatives to dominant media image” (King 219). Simultaneously, their use of pop-cultural imagery, *Star Wars* iconography in particular, invites non-Native audiences to reconsider their assumptions about Native Americans.

Notes

¹ Culture Shock Camp or Created 4 Greatness provides entertainment and educational services to Native American communities to promote healthy lifestyles, leadership, and artistic expression. See <http://www.brianfrejo.com/>.

² The choice of place for one of Echo-Hawk's exhibits, the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History, is simultaneously ironic and representative of the artist's desire to reach wider audience. His presence in the museum speaks to the long history of museum misrepresentations of Native Americans in general and Native American artists in particular. Echo-Hawk's exhibit in a natural history museum asserts his Indigenous representational sovereignty. It also counters the long-standing tradition of exhibits about Native Americans in natural history museums which portrayed Indigenous peoples as an obsolete part of the natural world, i.e. "vanishing" species.

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