## AR 592 - Art History Seminar Writing & Research Methods

May 2, 2001 Elizabeth Nakoa

Contemporary Native American Artists: Defining Identity

## Contemporary Native American Artists: Defining Identity

The presence of contemporary Native American art at the end of the 20th century is one of the fruits that grew from the survival and indomitable spirit of the American Indian. After 500 years of attempted genocide by some Americans and the United States Government, Native Americans are still fighting to survive. Many Americans today are unaware of the history of injustices dealt the American Indians since the Indian Wars and the relocation of Native peoples to Reservations in the late 1800s. Historically, many, Americans and Indians, felt that the Indians would just die out. An interesting path in the history of the survival of Native American people, however, is the nature and preservation of Native arts and crafts. The role of preserving traditional beliefs in a visual interpretation has been an important element in blending traditional beliefs and contemporary aesthetic styles. Contemporary Indian artists have learned that survival is achieved through adaptation and change while at the same time remaining true to basic, timeless values. Their identity as artists is tied to their history and culture and yet, not unlike non-native Western artists, their art expresses a diversity of ideas and presentation.

It is impossible to understand and appreciate the present condition of contemporary native arts without looking first at the political, social and economic history of the American Indian. The situation of Native Americans was directly affected by the politics of whichever president and political groups were in power at the time. When Franklin Roosevelt was elected president in 1933 a radical change in the direction of Indian policy was begun. By 1940 government policy seemed to be more understanding and responsive to the needs of Native Americans and under the 'Indian New Deal' the situation of many tribes and reservations showed remarkable improvements. This was short lived however, and when John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, resigned in 1945 current attitudes reflected feelings that his policies

were promoting tribalism and undesirable native traits. Interest groups felt that the Indian's best interests would be best served by having them absorbed into mainstream white America.¹ Dillon S. Meyer, previously in charge of the wartime internment and resettlement of Japanese Americans, was appointed new Commissioner for Indian Affairs in 1950. "Termination" was the term given to ending the U.S. Government's relationship to Native Americans on reservations. Without consent from Indian tribes, Congress passed 13 termination acts between 1954 and 1964, affecting over 100 tribes. Lands were removed from trust for the Indians who were forced to move to cities in search of jobs. Unlike the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act which attempted to enable Indians to be self supporting, self governing and to live with their own aims and ideals on their own lands within the United States, the Termination Policy and relocation efforts strived to bring about the end of reservation life and to weaken family and tribal ties.

From the time the first European settlers arrived on the North American continent, the American Indian has been dispossessed of his lands, decimated by wars, diseases and poverty and deprived of his bonds with his family, his culture and his religions. He has been lied to and cheated out of the meager lands the government set aside for him. He has been an unwilling victim to the whims and greed of the American people and government. But, he has survived. There has been a constant effort to maintain native culture, art, religions and language in spite of the overwhelming efforts to be assimilated into white America. However, the status of Native American rights has always been vulnerable to shifts in public opinion and government policies.<sup>2</sup> What the government gives it can also take away. Even today, although Indians are regaining some of their lands and assets through redress in the legal system, they are still subject to appropriations and changes brought about by government desire for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> James Wilson, <u>The Original Americans: U.S. Indians</u> (New York: Minority Rights Group, Report No. 31, New Edition, 1980), 21

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Wilson, The Original Americans, 27

land acquisition. With this history in mind it is easier to understand the content and feelings expressed in the artwork of twentieth century Native American artists.

The history of Native American art in the 20th century follows an interesting path that was determined by political and economic as well as cultural concerns. In the late 1800s the official policy at boarding schools was to suppress traditional art and encourage utilitarian handicrafts. Government licensed contractors continued this practice in order to support small craft fairs and a growing interest in Indian artifacts and fine arts.<sup>3</sup> Early in the century, Native American painting grew out of the flat, two-dimensional style characteristic of painting done on shields and tipis. Traditional pottery, basketry and weaving had graceful, intricate patterns and designs that represented life forms and symbolic designs of nature. By 1909, traders and collectors recognized aesthetic qualities in the handicrafts and started encouraging production of higher quality arts and crafts that could be marketed at fairs.<sup>4</sup> The intent of the United States Indian Service who supported the development of craft items was to benefit the Indian. But it also benefited the traders and the administrators and who were in control of the Indian market.

The revival of Plains Indian art in 1928 with a group called the Kiowa Five in Oklahoma, and the establishment of "the Studio School" in 1932, by Dorothy Dunn at Santa Fe Indian School, gave impetus to growing support for Native painting. Dunn was a white art historian from Chicago who encouraged the students to paint from inspiration from their artistic traditions and heritage.<sup>5</sup> This was meant to encourage the representation of traditional beliefs but it came to be criticized for its limited style of decorative, two-dimensional genre scenes. Students were not allowed to have freedom of decision making in their art. Oscar Howe who worked in abstraction and cubism

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Edwin Wade and Rennard Strictland, <u>Magic Images. Contemporary Native American Art</u> (Norman, OK: Philbrook Art Center & University of Oklahoma Press, 1981) 11

<sup>4</sup> Wade, Magic Images, 11

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Janet C. Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips, <u>Native North American Art (</u>Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 217

(Fig. 1) and Joe Herrera who painted in a 'radical' approach involving cubism and art deco (Fig. 2), both students at the Studio, each developed a style that broke away from the traditional Studio style. Another of Dunn's students, Allan Houser, a sculptor, often said that contemporary Indian artists had to find their own unique style, to study what was being done, and to search for their own way to express themselves.<sup>6</sup> The contributions of these three artists helped Native American art make a transition to a more modern style.

Native arts were growing economically and stylistically. In 1935 the Indian Arts and Crafts Board was established and John Collier supported Rene d'Harnoncourt as general manager. By 1940 and 1950, the Indian Arts and Crafts Board established tribalowned craft marketing enterprises and co-ops. They set up training opportunities in the form of demonstration workshops. Native art was being shown in museums and exhibitions across the country from New York to San Fransisco. The existence of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board was vital towards supporting Native crafts and encouraged room for adaption in order to help the crafts survive. This process of adaption is seen frequently in contemporary Native art as artists assimilate Western techniques and styles into their work.

Indian Art Project conferences in 1960 at the University of Arizona prepared the way for a new direction in Indian artistic expression.<sup>7</sup> In 1962, the Bureau of Indian Affairs started an innovative, unique experiment in Indian education. It was the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA), a high school founded on the location of the previous Studio School in Santa Fe. Native educators designed the curriculum to incorporate indigenous ways of teaching and prominent Native artists formed the school's faculty.<sup>8</sup> IAIA has been celebrated for encouraging students to experiment as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Roger Matuz, St. James Guide to Native North American Artists (Detroit: St. James Press, 1998) xii

<sup>7</sup> Jamake Highwater, The Sweet Grass Lives On. Fifty Contemporary North American Indian Artists (New York: Lippencott & Crowell, Publishers, 1980) 26

<sup>8</sup> Berlo, Native North American Art, 223

well as to incorporate, interpret and reinvent traditional beliefs in their imagery.9 The students' visual vocabulary was strongly bicultural and was perceived as transcending linguistic and cultural barriers. In actuality, part of the Institute's purpose was to present to the people of the world an educational program which exemplified respect for a unique cultural minority.10 Students were taught courses on the "Artist in Business," "Production," "Sales" and "Advertising Promotion" in an effort to help them transition into the art market economy. Because the students were also encouraged to develop their own personal expression some traditionalists felt that they were losing their sense of harmony with the tribal beliefs and placing 'self' ahead of the native community and moving more towards assimilation into Western way of thinking. This has been one of the problems for contemporary native artists who pursue a style that is more western or European because they are seen as being 'less Indian.'

Two artists who came out of the IAIA program were Fritz Scholder and T. C. Cannon. They explored a visual politics of identity that was new to both Native and non-Native art. Scholder's image of Screaming Indian #2 (Fig. 3), is an example of his expressive, gestural rendering which plays off modernist existential angst and humor against the tragic experience of the indigenous people. In Collector #5, (Fig. 4), Cannon shows the collector, an Indian in traditional clothing against a backdrop of a decorative Navajo rug and Van Gogh's Wheatfield on the wall in a parody of the juxtaposition of two different cultures. Scholder and Cannon both disregarded the commercial advantages of working in the Studio style and understood that pictures, with their layers of references, have consequences and therefore open up new communications and understanding. They both present examples of the diversity in expression and style that is starting to be one of the most important elements in

<sup>9</sup> Matuz, St. James Guide to Native North American Artists, xiii

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Margaret Archuleta & Rennard Strickland, <u>Shared Visions: Native American Painters and Sculptors in the 20th Century</u> (Phoenix, AR: Heard Museum, 1991) 28

<sup>11</sup> Berlo, Native North American Art, 225

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Archuleta, <u>Shared Visions</u>, 18

developing contemporary Native art.

AIAI had a very strong impact on the awareness and growth of its Native American artists, but there were other art-related education programs and universities around the country that were also making contributions to the development of other Native American artists. One of these was Jaune Quick to See Smith, born in Montana in 1940, of the Salish, Cree and Shoshone tribes. Her art reflects a commitment to the land based on place and identity, signified by a spiritual alliance. Her abstract paintings and mixed media collages reflect modernist influences such as in the work of Robert Rauschenberg, Paul Klee, Anselm Keifer and Oscar Howe.<sup>13</sup> She utilizes broad brushstrokes, layering of paint that reflect animated landscapes as well as blocks of color to represent broad expanses of space. Her earlier work involves the use of symbols, pictographic language and frequently the image of a horse. She frequently makes statements about history and environmental issues. In Trade (Gifts for Trading Land with White People), (Fig. 5) she is making a statement about the relationship of America to her indigenous people. She also made a drawing of Barbie, Ken and Bruce Plenty Horses as paper dolls that makes a strong statement about the role the U.S. Government had on families when they were forced to relocate to reservations. The piece titled, "Paper Dolls for a Post Columbian World with Ensembles Contributed by the U.S. Government, illustrates Barbie, Ken and Bruce Plenty Horses with outfits such as a boarding school outfit, a capote for traveling on forced removal and matching smallpox suits. (Fig. 6) In another piece, Rain, she makes a statement about environmental pollution and hangs silver-plated spoons on a canvas to represent acid rain dripping down. Smith is very active in showing her work nationally and internationally as well as teaching, lecturing and curating shows. She says the two forces driving her are working in her studio and spending time on the reservation. She feels as a tribal person there is an innate responsibility to "give back" to your

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Matuz, St. James Guide to Native North American Artists, 528

community.14

Harry Fonseca is another artist who deals with historical issues in a contemporary format. He is from Sacramento, California, is of Maidu, Portuguese-Hawaiian ancestry and attended the California State University of Sacramento. He has worked with diverse imagery such as that found in his Maidu Creation Story, the Covote Series, (Fig. 7) the Discovery of Gold and Souls in California series (Fig. 8) and more recently in the series titled In the Silence of Dusk He Began to Shed His Skin, with the Dawn He Would Never Be the Same. In his Coyote series he presents us with the Coyote, a figure in Western and Southwestern Indian mythology who is known as the trickster, a survivor and the spice of life. He is presented in a colorful, pop, funk art imagery wearing a leather jacket that puts a little Indian humor into Fonseca's vision of the artist and the Indian in society. The Discovery of Gold and Souls in California deals with the more somber theme of the physical, emotional and spiritual genocide of the Native people of California. This series is comprised of 160 mixed media pieces and are subtle variations on a black cross surrounded by gold leaf and red oxide. They refer to the establishment of the mission system and the discovery of gold in California which both led to the fracture and devastation of Native communities in California. Most of Fonseca's work deals with metamorphosis, change, growth and rebirth.

Edgar Hachivi Heap of Birds uses the print media and text to express his feelings about the history and relationship of Americans to Native peoples. Heap of Birds' art is 'in your face.' He speaks of the survival of his people as being based on expressive forms of communication that serve as combative tactics. He has utilized billboards, panels on buses, park and freeway signs and the Spectacolor Light billboard in Times Square to get his message across. He is expressly intent on challenging the white man through the use of media. He does not hold back from making political statements in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Lawrence Abbott, <u>I Stand in the Center of the Good: Interviews with Contemporary Native American Artists</u> (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994) 230

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Matuz, St. James Guide to Native North American Artists, 176

<sup>16</sup> Abbott, I Stand in the Center of the Good, 30

his art. It is blatant, simple and direct. He feels the past treatment of American Indians by white Americans is abhorrent. He wants people to be aware of the truth of the past and to be able to communicate or have dialogue about these issues. In <u>Building</u> Minnesota, (Fig. 9) a site specific piece installed along the banks of the Mississippi River in 1990, Heap of Birds presents forty, red lettered signs, each with the name in Indian and English, of the forty men who were hung in the 1860s when they rebelled against starvation conditions on the reservation. The signs call upon the viewer to honor the lives of those executed as well as draw attention to the nature of the business and commerce aspect of why lands are appropriated. Mission Gifts, another piece involving text, was installed on public buses in San Jose and South Bay in 1991, making an ironic comment on the results of the Missions in California. The text read "SYPHILIS/SMALL POX/FORCED BAPTISMS/MISSION GIFTS/ENDING NATIVE LIVES."17 Heap of Birds (Cheyenne, Arapaho), who lives in Oklahoma, where he belongs to the Warrior Society, also creates art of a more personal nature that deal with his ancestral home, his life and his family. In <u>Is What Is</u>, (Fig. 10) Heap of Birds works with paint, black marker on paper and pastels, and has created wall lyrics that communicate "coded messages" to the audience. In response to Heap of Birds's art, critic Meyer Rubinstein wrote, "He is not using art to get his message across, rather, the getting across of the message is the art."18

I think that even though Heap of Birds's work speaks the truth about what happened in the past, he can speak comfortably in drawing attention to past injustices. Perhaps by acknowledging these incidents and allowing Heap of Birds to have a platform, white Americans can assuage their guilt. After all, he was *invited* to install his signage as an installation piece by the Walker Museum in Minneapolis. He had *permission* to install Mission Gifts on buses in the San Jose area for a period of one month. He was *commissioned* to create a piece in Seattle to commemorate the Indians of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Matuz, St. James Guide to Native North American Artists, 204

<sup>18</sup> Barrett, Theory and Art Criticism, 136

that region. It is easier to refer to Indians selling Manhattan to White settlers than it is to talk about the forced sale of mineral or water rights today in the year 2001. What would happen if Heap of Birds chose to do a piece about current conditions on the Pine Ridge Reservation? Is there an American Fine Arts or Educational Institution that would pay him to publicize the ongoing injustices currently being practiced by the U.S. Federal government? It is apparent that addressing historical treatment of the Indians in an aesthetic format has met acceptance by the white art establishment. Perhaps it has even been encouraged. It seems that most politically and socially controversial art is tolerated in our Western society unless it extremely offends conservative Americans on religious or moral sensitivities. By presenting historical White America in a negative light, the contemporary Native American artist has found a format where he or she can safely vent their anger about their history.

Not all native political art is received with approval. In the case of Smith's work with the Barbie and Ken Plenty Horses paper dolls, they were not allowed to be exhibited at one of the locations booked when it went on national tour. The content and the reference to small pox outfits was believed to be offensive. In Minneapolis, there was very minimal turnout to a show on the Quincentenary that Smith curated, when only one week earlier there was massive attendance for a show that had more traditional work displayed.<sup>19</sup>

Emmi Whitehorse, a Navajo painter, was born in Crownpoint, New Mexico, in 1956. Her work integrates her Navajo background with abstract shapes, forms and colors. She creates geometric forms and planes, soft shades and tints of analogous colors, and delicate lines of figures and shapes. (Figures 11 & 12) She combines the abstract, formalist qualities of more contemporary art with her spiritual Navajo world view.<sup>20</sup> Emmi Whitehorse does not work on an easel so her works take on an ethereal look which have no top or bottom but are more fluid and undefined. This is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Akwe:kon Press, <u>Native American Expressive Culture</u> (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, Fall/Winter 1994, Vol. XI, nos. 3 & 4) 27

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Matuz, St. James Guide to Native North American Artists, 625

reminiscent of sand paintings and also work done by Jackson Pollock. She works with paper pieces, oil sticks, chalk, graphite and turpentine and applies the color by hand. Whitehorse feels that she works from the context of being a printmaker especially when it comes to the touch and quality of paper. Whitehorse feels that by being labeled a Native American Artist, one is confined to certain expectations. Although her work is involved with her Navajo experience she prefers to be known as a woman artist.

It is difficult to determine how the response of art communities to politically-inclined Native American contemporary art affects the artists creating the work. It seems that because there is a venue for the work it allows the artists more leeway to express themselves in that arena. However, I think Native American artists would continue to create politically charged work even if they met with stronger resistance. This is partially because they have such strong feelings about their culture, life and history that it is expressed in their art. Art is the expression of who the artist is and what the artist thinks and feels. One cannot divorce the Native American from his history. The aesthetic statements that are being made by these artists are key to their survival, not only as individuals, but as a people.

Western and European thought frequently glorifies art and relegates it to a realm of what is beautiful or of more than ordinary significance. Art was not separated from everyday life for the Native American. Art was done in relation to customs and traditions that were intrinsic to the community and social fabric of each individual tribe and its place in the cosmos. Art functioned in harmony with how the tribes related to their place and existence on earth. I think this is very important to practicing Native artists today because it is like a fabric that binds and unifies all aspects of their lives.<sup>22</sup> Jaune Quick to See Smith says "My art, my life experience, and my tribal ties are totally enmeshed."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Abbott, I Stand in the Center of the Good, 286

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Matuz, St. James Guide to Native North American Artists, xiv

<sup>23</sup> Ballantine, The Native Americans, 464

For many of the Native artists who have found recognition in fine art circles, there is a common thread of Indian tradition, history and experience. There is also a wealth of diversity present in styles, mediums and content. Diversity of expression and the willingness to adapt and incorporate other influences have contributed to the ongoing journey of contemporary Native art. They are also contributing factors in defining the creative identities of many of the artists I have mentioned. In <u>The Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs</u> exhibition in 1992 Bob Haozous said simply, "Art should be a portrait of who people are." For contemporary Native American artists their art has become their portrait and it reflects and reveals their identities and experiences to those who share their art.

<sup>24</sup> Matuz, xvi



Fig. 1, Oscar Howe, Rider, 1968



Fig. 2, Joe Herrera, Eagles & Rabbit, 1952

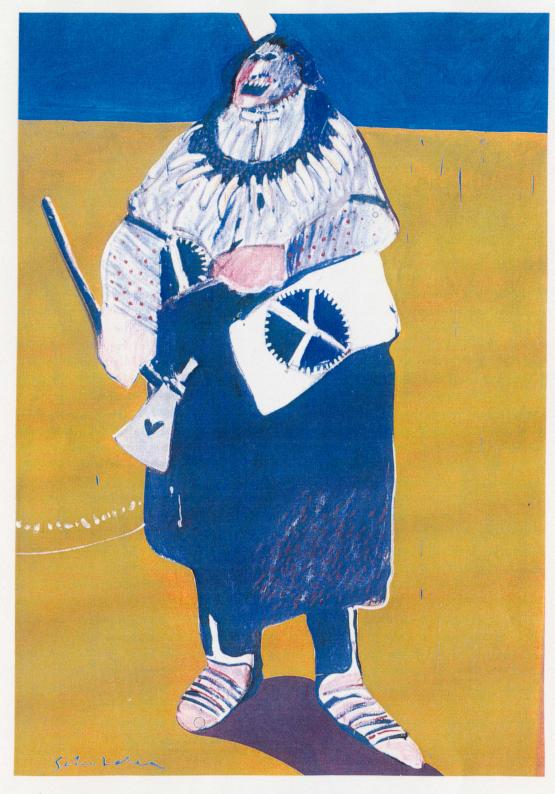


Fig. 3, Fritz Scholder, Screaming Indian #2, 1970

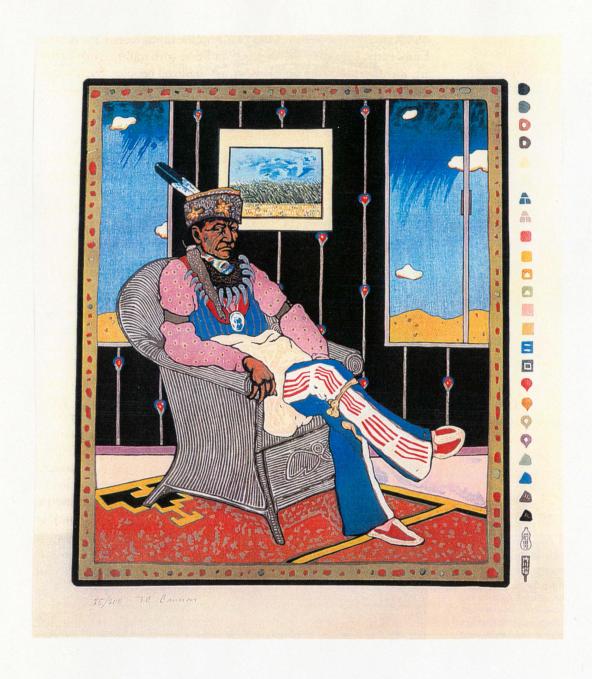


Fig. 4, T. C. Cannon, Collector #5 (Osage with Van Gogh), 1980

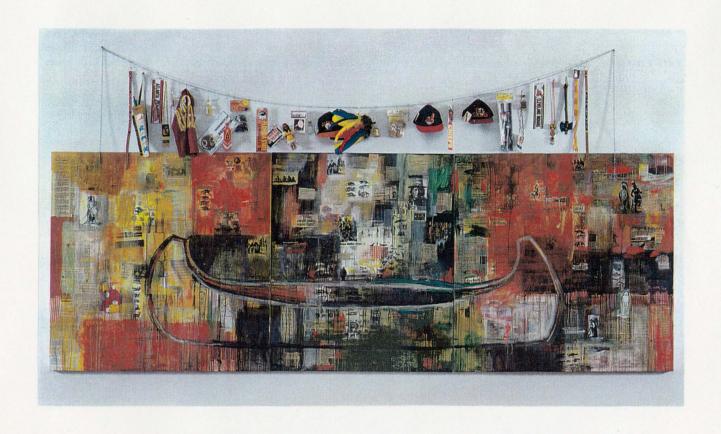


Fig. 5, Jaune Quick to See Smith, Trade (Gifts for Trading Land with White People, 1992

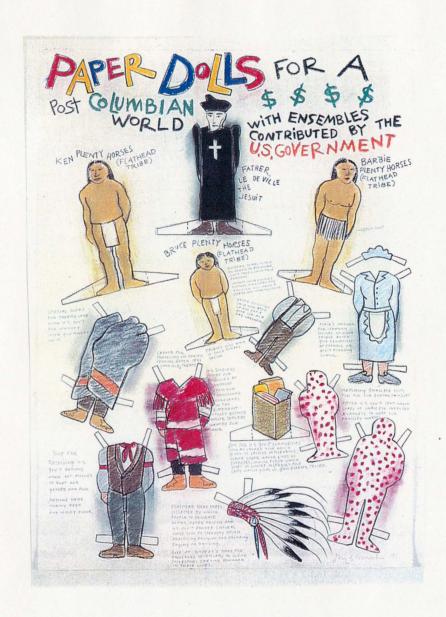


Fig. 6, Juane Quick to See Smith, Paper Dolls for a Post-Columbian World, 1991



Fig. 7, Harry Fonseca, Coyote Meets the Lone Ranger in a Painted Desert, 1978



Fig. 8, Harry Fonseca, Discovery of Gold and Souls in California, 1992



Fig. 9, Edgar Hachivi Heap of Birds, Building Minnesota, 1990

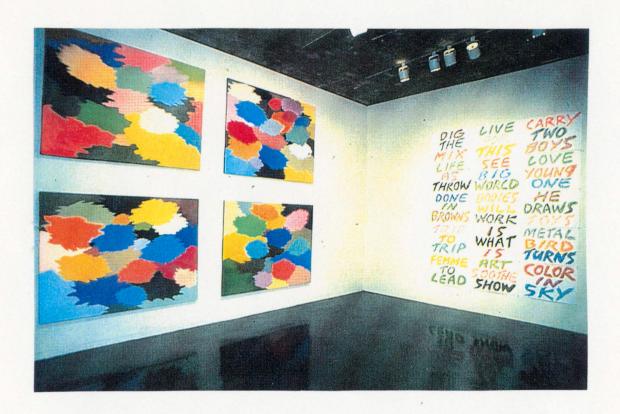


Fig. 10, Edgar Hachivi Heap of Birds, Is What Is, 1991



Fig. 11, Emmi Whitehorse, Yei's Collection of Mountains, Hills, and Plant Life, n.d.



Fig. 12, Emmi Whitehorse, Salina, 2000

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- Fig. 12 LewAllen Contemporary Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2000. Postcard