

72: Jaune Quick-to-See Smith *Famous Names* (1998)

G. Peter Jemison

We Indians are a paradox in this land of paradox. We are members of sovereign tribal nations, but we are also Americans.

—Joy Harjo¹

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's large and remarkable body of work—paintings, drawings, collages, and prints—challenges simple notions about Native Americans and Native American art. Her success at bridging the traditions of her inherited past and those of modern Euro-American culture has made her a highly admired contemporary artist and a much sought-after spokesperson.²

Born in Montana, an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Indian Reservation, Quick-to-See Smith traveled as a child around the West with her father, who was a horse trainer and trader as well as an amateur painter. In her thirties she started painting seriously, and was already earning a living at it when she went to the University of New Mexico for an M.F.A. degree. While in Albuquerque, she met younger Native American artists with whom she formed a group in 1977, Grey Canyon, named for the skyscraper-lined city streets. After several exhibitions the loosely organized collective dissolved, but some strong artists emerged, Quick-to-See Smith among them.

Recently she has made her home in Corrales, New Mexico, where her studio is surrounded by the high desert landscape whose colors are reflected in much of her work. But there is nothing passively picturesque about that work, which is highly charged by Quick-to-See Smith's activist values. She is a staunch supporter of Native American rights, of women's rights in both the larger world and the art world, and of the environmental movement. She is also a tireless educator, of both Native and non-Native people, about the values and meanings of her traditions.

In MAG's *Famous Names*, what appears to be a simple form—the outline of a woman's dress—is actually a layering of materials whose complexity becomes clear only as we continue to regard the work. Names, old photos, art historical images, decorative forms and details are glued, stenciled, and painted onto the canvas in bewildering detail and variety, emerging from the background as we look. The whole work is overlaid with a viscous acrylic, predominantly of desert reds and browns that appear to drip or flow down the middle of the work.³

The form of the dress itself speaks to the role of women in Native American society, since it is they who traditionally raise the children and then perhaps remain most keenly aware of kinships, maintaining family ties to a Native community even if they are living far away. Dresses of this type—made of buckskin, commonly called a cut wing—are today worn for powwows and other ceremonial gatherings. Those from the Flathead or Plateau country are often decorated with beaded designs that illustrate the camas or bitterroot flowers. Quick-to-See Smith has used the traditional dress form, but has decorated the painted dress to express her own message. Her flowers, collaged onto the canvas, resemble the beadwork designs but also suggest European printed fabric—another instance of Western form applied to Native tradition. Other images in the painting include a bird, a number of old photographs, a Christian triptych, a Native Madonna and Child (the child on the mother's back, both with haloes), a coyote branded with Quick-to-See Smith's Native registration number 7137,⁴ an array of rifles and bayonets, and several seemingly faded patches where the "dripping" paint has eerily resolved into landscape effects. It is quite evident that Quick-to-See Smith wishes to confuse the eye with a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar images, forcing us to ponder and "reassemble" the montage into a meaningful whole.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith,
1940–
Famous Names, 1998
Oil, acrylic, collaged photographs,
and mixed media on canvas,
80 x 50 in.
Gift of Thomas and Marion
Hawks by exchange, 98.39
Courtesy of Jaune Quick-
to-See Smith

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith,
1940–
Famous Names (detail), 1998
Oil, acrylic, collaged photographs,
and mixed media on canvas,
80 x 50 in.
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Recently Quick-to-See Smith remarked that “The dress, men’s shirts, vests, buffalo, canoes, horses, coyotes (creation story) and rabbits (also a trickster)—all Salish cultural icons—began to appear in my work after 1992.”⁵ Many of these icons are apparent in the 1994 lithograph, *Horse Sense*, also in MAG’s collection. But she is circumspect when asked about their meanings. In the lower right corner of *Famous Names*, for instance, one also finds of all things a medieval Christian triptych physically imposed upon the canvas. When asked about this puzzling detail, Quick-to-See Smith responded: “I’ll say what I think it might

mean. The Christian churches were sent by the U. S. government to ‘civilize’ us and used whatever means possible to decimate our cultures.”⁶ Similarly, the Madonna and Child may suggest the aggressive missionary tactic of “nativizing” Christian stories to make them more appealing.

That same sense of outrage is surely at work in one of the painting’s most prominent features, the “famous names” that appear to be stencilled or glued onto the canvas in various sizes, fonts, and styles. Like the whole variety of images in the painting, some of the names are familiar from Westerns and popular culture (PRETTY ON TOP, TAKEN ALIVE, PLENTY HORSES, OLD COYOTE); some seem mysterious (CHILLING BLACKBONES, YELLOW KIDNEY, HORSE LOOKING); some may strike us as mocking (KICKING WOMAN, FOOLHEAD, BIG NOSE, BAD OLD MAN). Some of the names are historical, some contemporary; one (BUFFALO TAIL) belongs to her son.⁷ But however exotic-sounding, the “famous” names Quick-to-See Smith has focused on were in the first place attempts to give in English the meaning found in Native American languages. In the interest of converting Native Americans to various faiths, churches needed names they could spell and pronounce for proper registry. The army also needed names when foods were being distributed to those visiting a fort for rations when hunting was outlawed.

Thus, BAD WOUND, TAKEN ALIVE, CURLY BEAR, LEFTHAND and the others are not the names of the founding fathers of America, but the record of people with ancient ties to the land and of the often-bungled attempts of English-speaking writers to capture what a translator related. Sometimes this

translation and recording process was done with the same haste implied in the seemingly slap-dash painted image, yet the results remain with us until today. Quick-to-See Smith gets the names from basketball and baseball rosters as well as council members, medicine people, and artists whose names appear in her tribal newsletter, *Char-Koosta*, from the Flathead community.⁸ “My ‘Famous Names’ dress,” she commented, “proves that we still retain many of our original names, either because they’ve lasted or because our families took them back (as in my case).”⁹ By reappropriating them for her painting she has reclaimed their ownership. As she says:

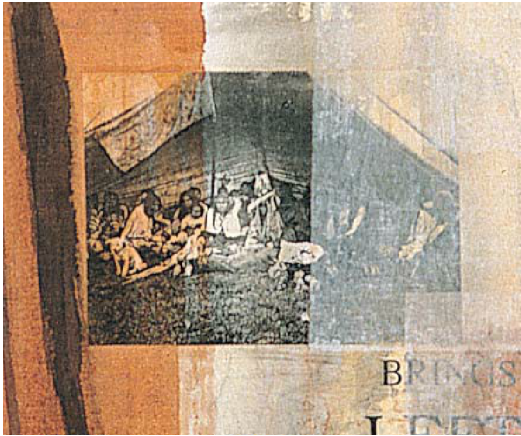
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I've used large identifiable Indian icons that have been romanticized by movies, novels and the media. But up close the viewer gets a reading of a different story about Indian life on and off the reservation. Clippings from my tribal newspaper (the Char-Koosta), newspapers, books, magazines tell a story that deals with the reality of Indian life....Even though the government and the Christian churches banned our ceremonies, dancing, drumming, religions and languages all the way through the 1950's, our elders retained our cultural knowledge and are revitalizing our cultural ways.¹⁰

Aside from the icons and names, the photographs play a crucial role in the painting's work of "reassembling" our prejudices and expectations. In the nineteenth century there was a lusty commercial appetite in the East for photographs of western scenes and exotica, including of course

Native Americans. Behind the natural fascination with the "other," the photographs were also another way for the dominant non-Native culture to define, trivialize, and neuter the Native culture. Quick-to-See Smith's photos, vintage 1870–80, range from depictions of individuals in their Native attire to those with European hair styles and dress. By using them here, literally gluing them onto the form of the Native dress, she again inverts the historical record, reclaims the images as she has the "famous names," allows us to "gaze" at the images once again, but this time in a wholly reconfigured context.¹¹



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Clearly Quick-to-See Smith's work is about preservation of the traditions her Flathead Salish relatives handed down to her, and about earning respect for them, through teaching and lecturing as well as in her art. But it would be a mistake for us to see her work only in terms of a specific Plateau cultural tradition. She is an artist of the twenty-first century with a gallery in New York City. She is well aware of the art world, and has integrated the major influential currents of twentieth-century modernism (from Klee, to Kandinsky, to Picasso, to Matisse, to Pollock) into her work. And a recent trip to China suggests that the scope of her influences and interests also extends beyond the West to the art of the world.¹²

6. Peter Jemison is a Heron Clan member of the Seneca Nation of Indians, an artist, and the Historic Site Manager of Ganondagan State Historic Site in western New York.