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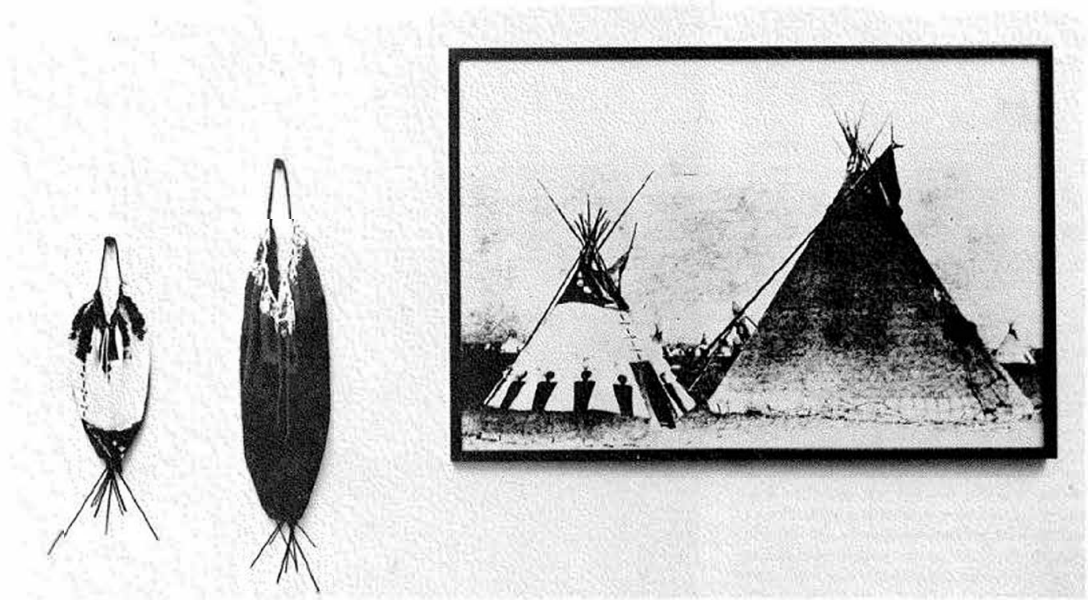
ELAINE REICHEK'S "NATIVE INTELLIGENCE" *by Nancy Princenthal*



Elaine Reichek, *Double Blackfoot with Children*, two wool tepees and oil on photograph (65x120 in.), 1990. Courtesy the artist and Michael Klein, Inc., New York.

"Here's what I can't figure out: Why can't Americans hate us? Here we are, a constant reminder that this country is profoundly evil, born in unspeakable crimes . . . and most Americans still like us. A lifetime of being Comanche and years of being a political activist and this still leaves me baffled." So mused Paul Smith in a 1987 catalogue essay.[1] In the same catalogue, Jimmie Durham wrote, "We want to figure out how *not* to entertain you, yet still engage you in discussions about what is really the center of your reality, although an always invisible center."[2]

The anodyne Indian, the Other we call our own, has been Elaine Reichek's subject for several years. With *Native Intelligence*, a show that opened at the Grey Art Gallery in New York and can be seen at the Greenville County Museum of Art from August 11 to October 4, Reichek looks in particular at how white Americans became, and remain, so comfortable with this paradoxical figure of domesticated alienation. The materials she uses are historical; this body of work began with existing documentary photographs of South and then North American natives. And it began with the conviction that there is nothing objective about the original construction or current use of these images. Writing in the current exhibition's catalogue essay, Jimmie Durham points out the dearth of contemporary images of American Indians—while other minorities in our society are routinely shown to have no past, his community is deprived of a present.[3] Reichek's principal target is this sense of timelessness and attendant intangibility—of deracination—in the representation of native cultures.

The exhibition opens with work using Reichek's best-known procedure, in which enlarged, black and white archival photographs are paired with knitted wool replicas of their central subjects. The first of these works appeared in 1982 when Reichek created a series of *Dwellings* from documentation of structures in Fiji, East Africa, Lapland, and elsewhere. These were followed in 1986 with the Tierra del Fuego series, in which the knit replicas were of men, not their homes. The current work, which focuses on North American natives, includes both men and tepees. These knit figures recreate their subjects just as the photographs give them to us—nothing is inferred about the backs of the men or their shelters, or about features lost to shadow or glare. The photographs of men are all enlarged to roughly lifesize; the tepees are smaller. In both cases, the knit figures are made to the photographs' scale. Sometimes Reichek alters the photographs with hand-coloring, and then the knit figures are colored accordingly, but otherwise they are in shades of black and white. Tepees are hung upside down and unstretched, but supplied with sticks that inescapably suggest knitting needles; men are hung on metal armatures that keep their contours true.

Knitting is rich in metaphorical as well as practical applications. To knit is to integrate, resolve, and heal. It produces material of greater warmth but inferior durability than woven textiles; it is associated with hobby rather than industry. Perhaps because it conjures images of grandmothers making baby booties, its appearance in the ski-hat masks of tabloid-publicized terrorists is particularly disturbing. There is something graphic, or artful, about the snake-charming way it allows an entire body of apparel to be conjured from a single skein. Most reliable of all associations is that knitting is women's work. Reichek avails herself of all this information, and more. The Tierra del Fuego natives she earlier depicted were entirely eliminated within 50 years of their first contact with Europeans, casualties largely of disease carried by clothing given in misguided charity. There is, clearly, violence in the knit figures, and it can be read not just in appended historical accounts but in their vivid suggestion of eviscerated skins, of shrouds, of relics. And, undeniably, there is humor in these unprepossessing objects. The juxtaposition of knitted form and photograph produces a compound that is humble and fierce, cozily familiar and profoundly alien.

Reichek works by herself and by hand, with skill and care, but her knitting and other handiwork does not aim for virtuosity. Its primary purpose is to register the kind of information suppressed or unavailable in traditional photography: tactility, volume, singularity, duration. Perhaps most important, it affirms the artist's presence. With every opposition in her work, Reichek stresses the complex relationship between her medium, her subject, and her own white, female identity. Sometimes she is explicit about this to the point of inserting photographs of herself in her work. In *Tears*

Were Shed, one among a group of new photocollages, she appears in an inset snapshot taken before a museum display case where the final "t" of "Indian Paint" is obscured by glare. Other inset photographs in this collage show a white man painting a portrait of a tribal chief and several commercial transactions—sales of jewelry and of various handicrafts—by which native culture is transformed into white cash. One cameo photograph documents an American Indian Movement march, which complements the self-portrait to distinguish this photocollage by its specific topicality. Its backdrop is a natural history museum diorama of Indian Life, the kind that has helped shaped a generation's mythology.

Other photocollages use reproduced history paintings as backgrounds. A sweeping Frederick Church landscape of 1860 serves for *Church Ritual*, in which the photographic insets show a series of ceremonies staged in 1913 by businessman Rodman Wanamaker, enlisting tribal allegiance to his declaration of brotherhood. Wright of Derby's 1785 portrait of a very Caucasian-looking Indian maiden is the pretext for *Red Delicious*, where the insets are of white actors taking classic American Indian roles in Hollywood movies. *Westward, Ho!*, which builds on an Emmanuel Leutze potboiler of 1861, contains various telling cameos in its ornate frame, from portraits of white elders to a dead buffalo in the snow. On top of an image of a train forging westward in *Sign of the Cross*, inset photographs are arranged in cruciform pattern. Two offer comparisons of children before and after their transformation from Indian attire to Western; another shows two native American children staring quizzically at a bedraggled Christmas tree. *Noble Savage/Savage Noble* is the show's most succinct work, a pair of stereopticon images of an Indian Scout as white men conceived him. Here are the classic feathered headdress and moccasins, the slight crouch, the hand warily shading the eyes, all staged before the studio photographer's painted backdrop and copyrighted by him. Doubled, the image intimates a future of mass production as well as a history of oppression and cooptation; its median line suggests a virtual turning point between the consolidation of a myth and its capitalization.

The most recent body of work in *Native Intelligence* doesn't make use of photographs at all. Here, textiles stand alone, in the form of embroidered samplers. Traditionally, such samplers were multipurpose educational tools, providing young girls with practice in executing a variety of stitches and in rehearsing the homilies that would guide their lives, as well as providing an eloquent study in discipline and restraint. Reichek's samplers are appropriately tidy and composed; as with her knitting, we can measure the time they consumed, stitch by stitch. But, in each, something is misplaced: "Home Sweet Home" is a tepee, a funerary urn bears the legend "Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee." Some of Reichek's samplers are sewn on plain linen, others on printed fabrics that themselves replay vintage cowboy imagery in the graphic style and color schemes of the '40s and '50s. Like many of the objects in *Native Intelligence*, these embroidered retro readymades carry two sets of baggage, one for nostalgia, the other for ideology. They are evenly weighted, and the work bears them without preference.

As in an acclaimed fall 1991 Brooklyn Museum exhibition examining the provenance of American Indian artifacts gathered —and in many cases commissioned—by an early 20th-century curator,[4] the historical record that Reichek replays tells us more about the picture makers than their subjects. It is, indeed, well established that a progression of hopes, fears, misunderstandings, and simple cruelty is reflected in mainstream imagery of westward expansion. What sets Reichek's approach apart is that she accepts responsibility, however partial, for that pictorial record. One especially telling group of photographs in this exhibition shows children at play as cowboys and Indians. In images both commerical and amateur, the story of the white man's engagement with the Indian is brought forward sufficiently that almost any adult viewer can find a place in it. Here, as elsewhere, Reichek stresses the yearning for innocence—for youth, for exoneration, and for it all simply to have been different—that clouds every response to the latent and overt malfeasance revealed in conventional imagery. She wants to lay those components bare, knowing that their analysis and disposal may in some cases constitute a personal loss.

Reflecting on the impetus for his novel *The Death of Che Guevara*, Jay Cantor recalls that it began with newspaper pictures of guerillas and with some snapshots reproduced in *Ramparts* magazine. Noting that most people approach history this way, through the deathless world of photographs, he writes, "I think that this continual consumption of images may make us feel immortal."[5] And yet, he says, "I can't deny that I told a story about history because of its *particular* prestige, because it shared in the prestige of the dead body, the glamour of the corpse, its infrangible, undeniable, whispering of a transcendent truth."[6] With his novel, Cantor aims—quite unerringly—to arrest the photographic dissolve, to make the image yield its portion of mortality. It is Reichek's achievement, too.

Elaine Reichek, *Samplers*, embroidery on linen, 1992. Courtesy the artist and Michael Klein, Inc.

[1] Paul Smith, "Anadarko Calling," *We the People*, Artists Space, New York, 1987, n.p.
[2] Jimmie Durham, "Finally, I Address Matters at Hand," *We the People*.
[3] Jimmie Durham, "Elaine Reichek: Unraveling the Social Fabric," *Elaine Reichek: Native Intelligence*, Grey Art Gallery, New York, 1992, p. 16.
[4] The exhibition *Objects of Myth and Memory: American Indian Art at the Brooklyn Museum* (October 4–December 29, 1991) examined objects collected by Stewart Culin between 1903 and 1911.
[5] Jay Cantor, "Blood for the Ghosts," *On Giving Birth to One's Own Mother*, New York, 1991, p. 127.
[6] Ibid., p. 137.

Nancy Princenthal is an art critic who lives in New York.