

'Indian Speak' through an 'Indigenous Dialogue'

Date : May 1, 2007

Erin Mell-Taylor, former UCL Material Culture postgraduate

Bob Haozous is famous person, or that's how I've always looked at him. He is someone that I looked up to as an example of a Native American that has truly 'made it'. While he works in the same discipline as his father Alan Houser, he has transformed the idea of art, and made it controversial and beautiful. "...His artwork is rooted in his strong communal and cultural identity. Haozous believes that the prestige he earns as an artist goes back to his people and, in a sense, he does not own himself." (Eun-Hui An www.thephotographyinstitute.org) This is one of the reasons I found the statement that Bob Haozous wrote as apart of the accompanying text to his exhibition in the IAIA Museum of Contemporary Native Art beautiful in a melancholy way, as well as very suggestive of what one would think Haozous would write as a precursor to his work. Bob Haozous always struck me as someone who tried his utmost to accurately view people, society, and culture. His judgments seemed to be centuries old, but full of life and passion for change. He never wanted to put people in pretty boxes to define them. There was no justification in classifying people as white, black, red, or yellow, but just dealt with race, diversity, religion, and culture as fact; this is how it is for all different types of people. "He is concerned with the themes of man's relationship to the environment and man's relationship to his fellow man." (www.haozousarts.com/artist.htm)

Upon one's first read-through this statement; you would get an idea that this is a modern 'Indian', one that seems to struggle with his ideas of individuality and sense of community. The statement seems to read of someone who is questioning the "Indian" norms and way of life. Upon a second read-through, one can begin to see the struggle with aesthetics and what "modern concepts of individualism" have come to mean to someone who is representative of the mainstream native art community. We see conflicts of representation and modernism. "I do not believe non-tribal

(emphasis is mine) people can honestly speak for indigenous people.” Haozous seeks to create a definition of who can accurately speak for an indigenous group. While I, as well as many museum curators, academics, and non-tribal (but indeed indigenous people), feel that representation can come with cooperation between community and academia, or research led by indigenous peoples, one has to appreciate Haozous’ candor and honesty in his opinions regarding native representation. The main problems or questions I would have with his representation ideal would be to question if he is suggesting that if one doesn’t grow up on, or end up on a reservation, can they truly understand what it is to be Indian? Or does this just suggest that if you are not affiliated with a tribe you do not understand? What if you belong to a tribe that is exceptionally inactive? Does that make you less of an Indian? What does it mean then to be Indian?

Haozous believes that Native American artists have aesthetic expectations put upon them, but they have brought these expectations on themselves because they have sold-out by selling art objects that romanticize the conceptions of Native American people and culture due to market demand. (www.thephotoinstitute.org/journals/1998/bob_haozous.htm)

Bob Haozous explains that his art allows him to find what his cultural sensitivity is, yet it seems when other Indians (and I use that term only because he does) create art, albeit more traditional, or romanticized in the ‘white’ westernized fashion, it is no longer art, but the destruction of Native culture. In an interview from the magazine online, Haozous asks questions that do fit into the Anthropology of Art framework like: What is art? What is the value of art? What is the meaning of cultural art? He seems to be allowing himself more leniency in what he chooses to create, and chooses to see, than other native artists. So again, I would pose more questions to him: What makes an artist? Who defines who can be an artist and who cannot be? Are these social constructs? Can others find their cultural sensitivity in more romanticized, ‘traditional’, high art market demanded art?

I will continue to admire Bob Haozous as an exceptional artist, as an ‘Indian’ that made it. Yet while he is a strong example of a modern indigenous artist, his views on what other artists are trying to accomplish, why the native art market is how it is today, and where this will lead modern native artist’s and the communities they represent seems indicative of someone who is afraid they are becoming out of touch with the ‘modern generation’. Then again, a modern generation of Indians is no more, or no less than what they believe to be modern at the time. They believe they are progressing for the betterment of their community, and themselves. Therefore they should not have to feel hindered for choosing to work in turquoise, or carving, or metallurgy, even if it is to have a leg up in the art market.

Haozous has created a compelling statement. One that indeed sets our minds thinking of the indigenous art market, the aesthetic pressures that may be put on an indigenous artist, representation issues that are currently at the forefront of indigenous representation in museums, collections, schools, and art and anthropology journals. This statement is fresh, and at the same time, slightly retro in a 1960’s activism sort of way. It puts questions on the tongues of a generation of artists and anthropologists that did not see the same struggle of his generation. These new entries believe that they can claim that they are better represented in a more accurate manner and that the public actually wants to hear ‘their side’ of the story more than ever before.

Haozous cautions this generation with this statement. Showing that representation is an issue that can never be underestimated, as there will always be misrepresentation, especially when communities, academics, and museum staff choose not to work together to create an accurate portrayal that is all inclusive. The identity and presence of the indigenous in multiple arenas is one that continues to need careful consideration and understanding in order to effectively show what it is to be indigenous, in any manner of the term.

- The statement can be found here: www.iaiacad.org/museum/Bob.php