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Indigenous Curatorial Practices and Methodologies

Michelle McGeough

What does indigenous curatorial methodologies mean in terms of curation, and how does an indigenous model of curation differ from that of a Western model? Forward thinkers such as the art historian Nancy Marie Mithlo and the curator Ryan Rice describe indigenous curatorial exhibition projects as utilizing a process of consultation and mentorship, as opposed to a Western notion in which individuality and authorship are highly valued.¹ Although this individualism is most apparent in early ethnographical displays of Native Americans, it is still evident in contemporary Western practice in which the curator maintains a position of authority and is seen as the interpreter for the masses.

The purpose of my discussion is not to critique the Western model of curation, but rather to present two examples of how indigenous methodologies and practices that Mithlo and Ryan cite are presently taught and utilized in the curatorial field. The first example emphasizes the notion of mentorship and demonstrates how this practice is integrated into the curriculum presently being taught in the museum studies program at the Institute of American Indian Art (IAIA), in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The second example is an examination of my experience as the curator of the exhibition *Through Their Eyes: Indian Painting in Santa Fe, 1918–1945* at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian (May 17, 2009–April 18, 2010). My focus in this instance is on how the process of consultation was used throughout various stages

of this project, and more important, how it was used to bring together what may have been competing interests.

The museum studies program at the Institute of American Indian Arts is one of the oldest in the United States.² The IAIA was created by an act of Congress in 1962; a federally funded institution, it offers an associate of fine arts and bachelor of arts degrees in all its disciplines, in addition to a masters of arts in creative writing. In 1972, IAIA created a museum studies program to meet the needs of tribal communities. Originally, the department offered a certificate and an AFA degree. The focus of the program was to teach Native Americans museum practices so that students could return to their communities to assist or become administrators of tribal cultural centers or museums.³ At that time, the museum and the Institute were located on the grounds of the Santa Fe Indian Boarding School. In 1977, the institute moved to the College of Santa Fe campus, but the museum remained on the boarding school's grounds until 1992, when the Institute of American Indian Arts acquired a federal building in downtown Santa Fe that would become what is now the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts (MoCNA). Museum studies classes were taught at this downtown location as well as on campus. In the 1990s, the museum was primarily a teaching institution, as demonstrated by the fact that under the direction of Chuck Dailey, chair of the museum studies department, the students enrolled in the museum problems class designed and installed many of the new museum exhibitions at MoCNA.

By the fall of 1999, the courses being offering by the department had increased to seventeen. Since the late 1990s, the department has incorporated indigenous worldviews into its curriculum, a move that has become an even greater priority for museum studies in the last five years. In 2005, a new facility for museum studies was added to the hundred-acre campus of the IAIA in southern Santa Fe. The building consists of studios, classrooms, and a teaching art gallery called the Primitive Edge. This gallery space is an integral part of the museum studies curriculum, especially for Exhibitions I and II classes. Exhibition I is primarily a hands-on course in exhibition preparation. Students learn mount making, framing, matting, and generally serve as a volunteer work crew for the four student exhibitions presented each semester in the gallery space.

The Exhibitions II curriculum was built on the foundations of Exhibitions I but was dropped in 2005 and replaced by Museum Studies 240: Telling Our Stories: Museum Curatorial Practices and Methodologies. The intent of this course is for students to understand the process of planning an exhibition, including preparing and presenting an exhibition proposal. Based on a consensus among the students in the class, one proposal is chosen for the winter exhibition. This provides the students with a shared experience of being responsible for one of the ex-

hibitions presented in the Primitive Edge Gallery, where deadlines are real and consequences immediate. Students are responsible for putting out a call for artwork, processing submissions, preparing the artwork for installation, completing the installation, preparing print publicity, catering, and documenting the artwork and exhibition. Although the planning stages may take eight to ten weeks, the actual installation of the exhibition is two weeks, and scheduled class time is only five hours per week. The role of the instructor as a mentor to the students is to make suggestions and point out potential problems; however, it is ultimately the students' exhibition.

Although the students have only months to put together their exhibition, it is a normally a process that can take years. Such was the case of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian's exhibition *Through Their Eyes: Indian Painting in Santa Fe, 1918–1945*. I was hired as the curator of this exhibition, with little knowledge of the beginnings of easel painting in the United States or the protocol of the Southwest indigenous people. Whether it was through divine guidance or sheer desperation, I found it imperative to employ a consultative process throughout various stages of the exhibition.

Native American stakeholders have consistently advocated for specific changes in the ways that Native American people and their stories are to be presented in institutions such as museums. In both the United States and Canada, protests by Native American people regarding the display and interpretation of our culture were finally heard. In the United States, years of lobbying saw the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and the establishment of the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. In Canada, protests resulted in a Task Force on Museums and the First Peoples. The recommendations of the task force grew out the recognition that it was "crucial that all stakeholders have full opportunity to express their views and exchange ideas."⁴ Native people wished to be consulted and involved in telling their stories. The desire for such collaborations has resulted in substantial changes of museum practices.

My own dialogue with the collectors Charlotte Mittler, Elders Geronima Cruz Montoya, Ramoncita Sandoval, and Tony Reyna as well as community members and an advisory board of contemporary Native American artists, tremendously influenced the exhibition that was eventually presented in the Wheelwright Museum's gallery spaces. The exhibition consisted of nearly one hundred paintings. Seventy-seven paintings were by the students who attended the Santa Fe Indian School between the years of 1918 and 1945 and instructed by Dorothy Dunn. In the Slater Gallery hung fifteen works by the self-taught painters of San Ildefonso, who were painting at the same time that the earliest paintings by Santa Fe Indian School students were being created in the living room of the superintendent, John DeHuff, and his wife, Elizabeth DeHuff.

The Charlotte Mittler collection spans more than eighty years of Native American painting and is perhaps one of the most extensive private collections of this material. Mittler began her collection in the 1990s. Today her collection from this period of early Native American easel painting consists largely of works depicting dances and ceremonies, while other works are based on memories of the student's home life, such as herding sheep or plastering the abode home.

The fact that much of the collection consisted of ceremonial scenes was a little disconcerting for me. As a person from the northern prairie who was not privy to the Southwest's indigenous peoples protocol, I was cautious. For me, there is also concern that communities vary in terms of the degree of disclosure that is permissible regarding their spiritual practices. And to an indigenous person there is also the recognition that even in those seemingly benign depictions of everyday life are elements of ceremony and sacredness.

The pueblos of the Southwest have a long history in terms of their openness to outsiders, as seen in invitations extended to non-community members to attend annual feast days. Although outsiders are invited to witness the public portions of these communal prayers, there are spiritual practices that are not to be shared. Not being from a pueblo community, I was not certain that any of the subject matter of the student's paintings was meant for public viewing, although the paintings created by the students were meant to be sold and often visitors to the Santa Fe Indian School came especially to purchase work by the students. Times do change, and so do attitudes regarding past practices.

Before my selection as the curator of the exhibition, Charlotte Mittler organized an advisory group of contemporary Native American artists and community members. The group included Tony Abeyta, Rachel Agoyo, Mark Bahti, Gail Bird, Richard M. Howard, Yazzie Johnson, and Emmi Whitehorse. Out of these early meetings, the advisory group recommended that the curator for this exhibition be of Native American descent. Upon being hired, I met with the advisory group twice, and these discussions informed the thematic organization of the paintings in the main gallery.

Early in the project, the elders Geronima Cruz Montoya, Ramoncita Sandoval, and Tony Reyna Sr. were invited to view the collection with the specific intent to advise me regarding the paintings that could be shown publicly. Geronima Cruz Montoya is a graduate of the Santa Fe Indian School's studio program. Many of these paintings in the collection were created by Cruz Montoya's contemporaries and later her students. She was the instructor Dorothy Dunn's assistant and took over the studio program when Dunn left in 1937. Cruz Montoya remained in charge of the program until 1962. Ramoncita Sandoval is Geronima Cruz Montoya's younger sister and a graduate of the Santa

Fe Indian School. Tony Reyna (Taos) is a respected elder who also attended the Santa Fe Indian School with many of the students whose works are included in the collection. They shared stories of their experiences as students at the boarding school and insight into the lives of their classmates.

Paintings I thought would have been questionable did not receive the same reaction from these elders, which was surprising to me. However, taking into consideration their words and my knowledge of community taboos, as expressed by other community members, there were paintings that were not chosen for the exhibition or for publication in the catalogue. Many of these decisions were based on whether the subject matter would be seen by a member of the public if they attended the ceremony or activity. In some instances, this had to be negotiated between the collector, Jonathan Batkin (director of the Wheelwright Museum), and myself. At the end of the process, one hundred paintings were hung in the main gallery of the museum, and more than three hundred were printed in the exhibition catalogue.

Although the Indian School artists were physically absent from their communities, the imagery they created expressed memories of home with amazing accuracy and attention to detail. For viewers who share a common tribal affiliation with the artists, the paintings reaffirmed a collective history. One of the most difficult aspects of curating the exhibition and writing the catalogue for me was placing these works into a context that acknowledged the subject matter of the student's paintings while not diminishing or threatening the integrity of the spiritual practices or beliefs of their communities.

It was for this reason that I spoke to community members about the paintings, and in particular what it meant for them to view the works of these young artists, who may have been their mother, father, aunt, uncle, or grandparent. Often the words and thoughts these people shared spoke to notions of continuity, change, and community. My explanation of Lorencita Atencio's "Taking Lunch to the Ditch Cleaners" was a complex story of how gender and generational roles foster the realization of common goals within the pueblo.

The catalogue essay became much richer by including the words of Lorencita's son, Mike Bird Romero, who spoke of his own memories of the annual activity:

The men would gather at the head gates and start digging. My Grandmother would cook all kinds of food for the men. All the ladies of the village would cook—it was expected of them. Then at lunch they would gather the food into stacking pots, and along with the children the women would bring the food to them. The women dressed in traditional clothing. . . . I remember the men and women



Lorencita Atencio (T'o Pove), *Taking Lunch to the Ditch Cleaners*, 1936, gouache, 18 x 24 in. (47.5 x 61 cm.), Charlotte G. Mittler Collection. Courtesy of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian. Photograph by Mittler Photography.

would tease each other, with the men joking about how hungry they were and the women would tease and joke with them. It was wonderful. It was hard work because they would work twelve foot sections at a time, the ditch had to be six deep and three feet wide. And they would measure it with planks and if it fell short, you had to stay and dig until it was done. It was a community effort. When I think of those times I have a sense of belonging somewhere. No one went hungry, you had a place to sleep and clothes to wear and everyone helped each other.⁵

Another example is the painting by Harrison Begay titled "Navajo Weavers," in which the representational and abstract elements are combined to create a very complex narrative. The painting shows three women demonstrating stages in the process of weaving a rug. As the contemporary Diné weaver D. Y. Begay explains, the presence of the guardian figure references Diné ceremonialism. It is an image that recalls the origins of weaving and the oral tradition in which the Diné received the knowledge of weaving from Grandmother Spider.⁶ The stories community members shared provided enough information to put the subject matter into a personal or cultural context while also demonstrating the complexity of these works of art.

I wanted this complexity to be reflected in the exhibition space. Paintings by the Santa Fe Indian School Studio students were exhibited throughout the United States and Europe over the years. The display of the paintings in these contexts was very standardized, often hung salon-style from floor to ceiling and grouped according to subject matter. Today, salon-style display is rarely used, but grouping according to subject matter is a practice that continues. My intent was to create a narrative in the gallery space that spoke to a more indigenous worldview, one that acknowledged the role of the seasons and cycles that dictated life and organized activities in our communities. To this end, paintings of fall ceremonial dances were grouped with paintings of other activities that occurred during that same time of year. The use of salon style was a compromise between the collector's desire to include as many paintings in the exhibition as possible, and my goal to create an experience that would not overwhelm the viewer visually.

This was my first exhibition as a curator, and in retrospect there are things I would have changed. It was the generosity of the indigenous community members and their willingness to share their insights that helped me present the work in a way that reflected an indigenous understanding and methodology.

Today we continue to bring indigenous methodologies and practices into our museum studies curriculum. It is through our encounters with students in the classroom that we refine these ideas as we put them into practice. The practices of mentoring and consultation are not new to indigenous people, but we are applying them to new situations. Whether we are working with a tribal community, a group of artists, or an individual, our objective is to give them the opportunity to express their views and voice their ideas.

A U T H O R B I O G R A P H Y

Michelle McGeough received her MA in art history from Carleton University, Ottawa, with a specialization in aboriginal art. She holds an AA from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, a BFA and diploma in media arts from the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design, Vancouver, and a BEd from the University of Alberta, Edmonton. McGeough was an assistant curator at the Wheelwright Museum from 2005 to 2010. She is currently the head of the museum studies department at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

N O T E S

- 1 The American Indian Curatorial Practice symposium proceedings, "Visiting: Conversations on Curatorial Practice and Native

North American Art," http://www.nancymariemithlo.com/aicp_menu.htm.

- 2 Institute of American Indian Arts museum studies department review, May 4, 2005, 3.

3 Ibid.

4 David W. Penney, "Reflections on the Task Force," *Museum Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2008): 10.
- 5 Michelle McGeough, *Through Their Eyes: Indian Painting in Santa Fe, 1918–1945* (Santa Fe: Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian), 47.

6 Ibid., 69.