Lands You Can't See in a Guidebook

GRACE GLUECK
ART REVIEW

Can a South American Indian landscape painter find inspiration in Brooklyn? In a word, yes. Carlos Jacanamijoy (of the Inga people of Colombia) has no trouble making a connection between the urban jungle where he lives now and the Putumayo rain forest on whose edge he grew up. "Here, the roar of the subway or the incessant traffic of cars and pedestrians on the Brooklyn Bridge, projected by the sun, is right in front of me, through my window," he writes. "In the same way I remember listening, among lights and shadows, to the cacophony of animals during an overwhelming night in the middle of the jungle."

Mr. Jacanamijoy, whose luminous, explosive landscapes mix the rich colors and events of the rain forest with hints of Brooklyn's bustling environment, is one of five artists in "Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination," a refreshing show of landscapes, or better, mindscapes, at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Lower Manhattan. Not exactly in the American tradition of the sublime, their work doesn't speak of spacious skies and amber waves of grain, but of complex personal relations with their culture, ancestry, past and present surroundings.

Most of it doesn't relate to places you can locate in a guidebook or on a map, writes Kathleen Ash-Milby (Navajo), an assistant curator at the museum, who conceived and organized the show. Instead it "reveals the unexpected in a genre of painting dominated by European convention." But the show isn't all painting. One artist, Erica Lord, of Finnish-American and Native Alaskan parentage, uses video in "Binary Selves" to fashion a more site-specific environment that evokes a split and shifting self.

Gravitating as a child between her father's Alaskan village and her mother's in rural Michigan, Ms. Lord sees home as an indeterminate space without a fixed geographical location and herself as a person of multiple cultural identities that can't be teased apart. Looped film of the villages and her voyages between them alternate with depictions of the Inuit tradition of "throat singing," in which two women face each other, vocalizing wordlessly in an almost competitive duet. In this mirror-lined installation she plays the part of both singers, appearing in one role with the face tattoos, native shells and beads that suggest her Alaskan descent; in the other, assuming the more conventional appearance of her European ancestry. It's a touching performance.

Another arresting presentation is made by Jeffrey Gibson (Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians/Cherokee), who also lives and works in Brooklyn. His wonderfully ornate, colorific abstractions, incorporating beads, thick impasto, pigmented silicone and other relief elements, are inflected by a blobby spill of silvery urethane that breaks through a wall in the gallery to cascade onto the floor, a sardonic attempt to mess up the pristine, white box of the gallery's space.

His influences range from 19th-century Iroquois beadwork to contemporary techno rave and club culture, he has written, adding that his desire to "act out the role of an explorer depicting an inviting landscape was a reaction to Native tribes being consistently described as part of a nostalgic and romantic vision of pre-colonized Indian life."

The two other painters in the show, Emmi Whitehorse (Navajo) and James Lavadour (Walla Walla) work in more traditional but still lively modes. Ms. Whitehorse's Navajo heritage is reflected in the Southwestern elements that inform her paintings: nuanced grounds in the deep-to-pale colors of sky, land and water, against which float delicate seeds, floral and vegetable forms, insects, squiggles and calligraphic notations along with echoes of Indian ornament.

In his group of intensely colored oils, Mr. Lavadour explores geological formations, fierce firestorms, ruined or ghostly buildings and layered mountains, built up in authoritative brush strokes. Inspired by jazz, he orchestrates his work with discordances and offbeat juxtapositions, making sudden shifts in hue and composition. A powerful effort is "Blanket," a grid arrangement of 15 same-size but different landscapes in three rows, each unit neither fully abstract nor explicitly realist, each contributing to the overall impact by its teasingly ambiguous structure and the heat of its color.

What gives this show its flavor and vitality is the sophisticated integration of indigenous American motifs with a vibrant contemporary approach.

It's a different story at the uptown UBS Gallery, where "Gifts of the Forest: Native Traditions in Wood and Bark" holds forth. Drawn from the collections of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, a vital part of the tribal reservation in southeastern Connecticut famous for its Foxwoods casino, the show celebrates the trees of the rich forests that once covered the Northeast, yielding essential materials to the Pequot and other Eastern Woodland cultures. The materials go back hundreds of years to ancient woodworking tools used in New England before the introduction of European iron implements.

Contemporary objects in the show for the most part carry on the tribal traditions, like the simple and beautiful wooden flute made in 1999 by Hawk Henries (Nipmuc) and adorned with an elegantly carved bird motif; the exquisite containers covered with showy dyed quills done around 1996 by Vicky Sanipass (Micmac) and displayed with Micmac boxes of the mid-19th century; and a carved and painted root club made in 2000 by Stan Neptune (Penobscot), topped by a stylized eagle and ending in a delicate deer's hoof. It is based on traditional Penobscot root clubs that originally served as weapons, like the 19th-century model also shown here, with a formidable spiky head.

Many of the objects were made in the 19th or early-20th century: handsome woven baskets, carved bowls and spoons; decorated cradle boards to which babies were strapped; birch bark canoe models; an elegant birch bark hamper whose sides bear a stylized tree motif. One of the show's most arresting displays is an array of 19th- and early-20th-century tools, most embellished with decoration, including an apple corer, a knife with a handle in the shape of a curved hand, and splint gauges that allowed basket makers to cut several splints of the same width at the same time.

But this is just a taste of the treasures at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum. For a truly in-depth experience, go there.

Off the Map

Landscape in the Native Imagination

Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian

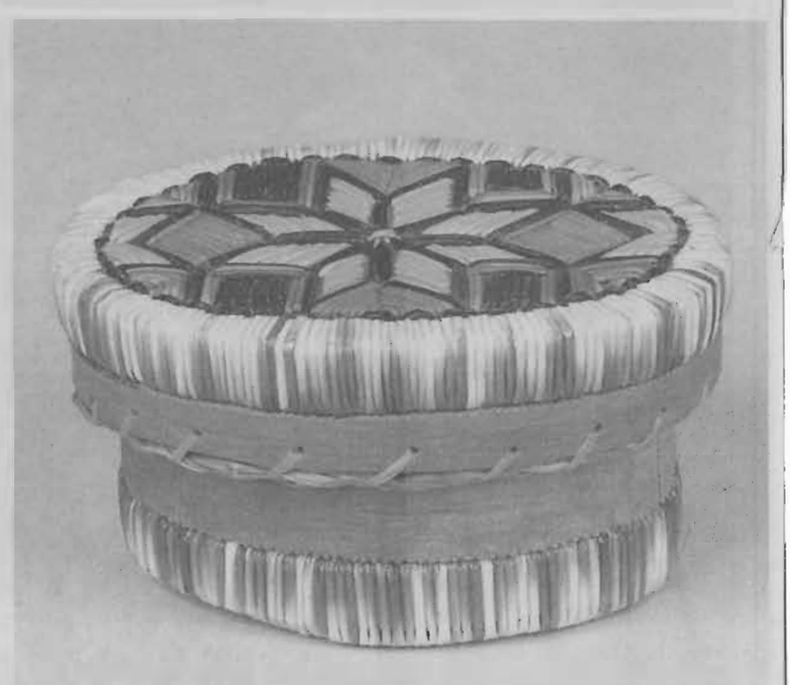
"Off the Map: Landscape in the Native Imagination" continues through Sept. 3 at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, George Gustav Heye Center, 1 Bowling Green, Lower Manhattan, (212) 514-3700.

Gifts of the Forest

Native Traditions in Wood and Bark

UBS Art Gallery

"Gifts of the Forest: Native Traditions in Wood and Bark" continues through April 27 at the UBS Art Gallery, 1285 Avenue of the Americas, between 51st and 52nd Streets, (212) 713-2885.



Mashantucket Pequot Museum

Quilled box by Vicky Sanipass (around 1996).

THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MARCH 23, 2007