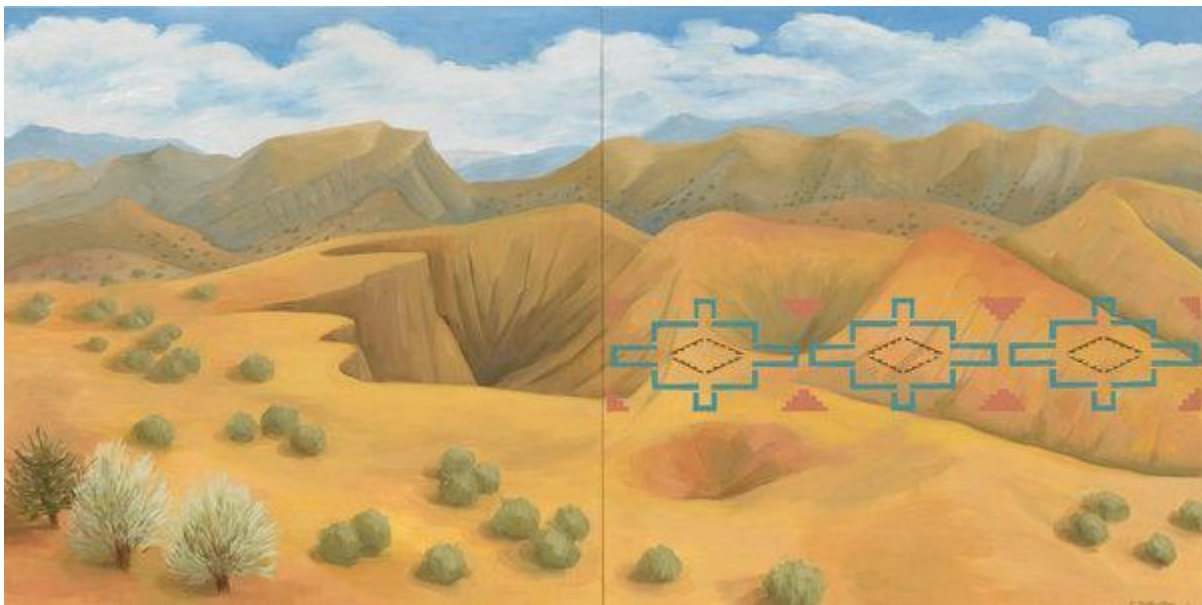


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Last Chance

Growing, Faltering, Changing, Growing: Lessons From Kay WalkingStick



Kay WalkingStick's "New Mexico Desert," 2011, in which bands of Navajo patterning float across scrub land and mesas as if surveying and protecting them. Credit National Museum of the American Indian

By Holland Cotter

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MONTCLAIR, N.J. — An artist's career retrospective, if shaped with care, is more than a look at a life of labor. It's also a record of contingent lives, cultural changes and a political passage in time. This is true of "Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist," an era-spanning survey of this 83-year-old painter at the Montclair Art Museum here. Yet what powers the chronologically arranged show, first and last, is the personal: the sense it gives of one worker growing, changing, faltering, then growing and changing more.

Born in 1935 in Syracuse, Ms. WalkingStick was the child of a biracial marriage: "Syracuse Girl Weds Cherokee Indian" was the headline on the report of her parents' wedding in the local newspaper. As it turned out, she saw little of her father over the years, though her mother, Scottish-Irish by descent, made a point of instilling pride in her daughter's Native American heritage.



Ms. WalkingStick's "Chief Joseph Series," (27 panels of a 36-panel series), 1974-76, a tribute to the famous Nez Percé leader. Credit National Museum of the American Indian

Ms. WalkingStick studied painting in college, and as a young wife and mother in suburban New Jersey in the 1960s, she continued to paint, keeping a close eye on what was happening in Manhattan. Among the earliest pieces in the show, from 1971, are two crisp, Pop-ish silhouette images in bright colors of female nudes. The artist herself was the model, and feminism — or at least the loosened-up spirit of it — a spur.

Two years later, in 1973, at 38, she enrolled in the graduate studio program at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn and started experimenting, complicating. A painting from that year called "Hudson Reflection VI," of undulating water patterns, retains a Pop palette, introduces a landscape theme, and moves in an abstract direction. Soon afterward, now in full abstract mode, she adds political content.

In the 1970s, after the 19-month occupation of Alcatraz by Native American activists, the American Indian Movement was in the news. And it may have been partly in response to this, and to her father's death at that time, that Ms. WalkingStick — an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation — introduced allusions to Native American history into her art. Her project, "Chief Joseph Series," composed of 36 small rectangular abstract paintings, refers to the Nez Percé leader who, in 1877, after refusing to sign away Indian land to the United States government, led his people on an arduous and ultimately thwarted exodus toward Canada.



“Going to the Sun Road,” 2011, oil and white gold leaf collage on wood panel. Ms. WalkingStick has been revisiting the grand landscapes of the American West in her art, and visually reclaiming them for their Native American owners. Credit American Federation of Arts

Ms. WalkingStick’s series took three years to complete, largely because of its labor-intensive demands. After plotting the series in drawings, she covered each canvas with colored inks; then, using a palette knife, with multiple layers of encaustic mixed from acrylic paint and wax. Finally, she cut linear patterns into the surface to expose color strata beneath. The process, which had the repetitive rhythm of ritual, must at some points have felt like a forced march. What came out of it, though, was a complex art: abstract, but topical, even autobiographical. (Chief Joseph had been a hero to her father.)

With its built-up surfaces, the series was as close to relief sculpture as to painting. Through the ’70s and into the ’80s, the heft of paintings increased with addition of more and different materials: crushed seashells, pebbles, glitter. Incised symbols became multivalent: In the large, scarlet-red “Cardinal Points,” a cross served equally as a Native American directional sign, the Morning Star and a Christian emblem. Suggestions of landscapes returned: Two 1983 paintings done in Montauk, Long Island, allude to the changing play of sunlight on sand.

After spending time in the Colorado Rockies, Ms. WalkingStick began to separate out abstraction and straightforward landscape painting onto pairs of canvases joined as diptychs, a format she continues to use. The most dramatic early example was a product of personal calamity. In 1989, the year she began teaching at Cornell University, her husband of 30 years, Michael Echols, died suddenly.



“A Sensual Suggestion,” from 1974, acrylic on canvas. Credit American Federation of Arts

Plunged into grief, Ms. WalkingStick clung to painting as a steadying force and an outlet for emotions. In a diptych from that time, called “The Abyss,” the left-hand panel is an image of churning blood-red water — the “unstoppable onrush of time,” as she later described it. In the right-hand panel, a crimson escutcheon hovers, like a danger signal, against a vortex of tangled, scribbled lines.

Much of the work for the next several years is somber, under a shadow. Then in the late 1990s, the mood starts to lift, around the time Ms. WalkingStick was making regular visits to Italy. She began to favor brushed-on oil paint over troweled-on or finger-worked encaustic. She introduced light-reflective gold leaf as a medium. For the first time in decades, figures appeared, some from Italian Renaissance art, others imaginary; all sensual. Diptychs were no longer necessarily divided into unlike images. In some, a single landscape stretched over both panels, and had the swells and torsions of a nude body.

A charge of sexuality, explicit in the early 1970s nude self-portraits, returned. And the aura of spirituality implicit in the many radiant abstract shapes that had, for decades, floated like power generators through the work, remained ever-present. (Raised Presbyterian, Ms. WalkingStick converted to Roman Catholicism in 2000.) Present too was contact with history, personal and political.



“Eternal Chaos/Eternal Calm,” 1993, acrylic on canvas. Credit American Federation of Arts

A two-panel charcoal drawing, “My Memory” (1997), records, with piercing frankness, a vision the artist had in Italy of her dead husband. The work’s unguarded anguish is like a return to the mourning diptychs of eight years earlier. And an oil stick painting, “Howitzer Hill Fusillade” (2008), with its image of a river of fire flooding a landscape, brings us back to the Chief Joseph saga in one of its most violent episodes.

In the 21st century, Ms. WalkingStick has been revisiting the grand landscapes of the American West in her art, and visually reclaiming them for their rightful, Native American owners. In the diptych “Our Land” (2007), she interrupts an Alfred Bierstadt-style vista with Native American weaving designs. And in “New Mexico Desert” (2011), bands of traditional Navajo patterning float across scrub land and mesas as if surveying and protecting them. It’s the visual equivalent of hearing two very different languages, carrying the same assured and assertive message, spoken simultaneously.

As if to set that tone, this beautiful painting, done with a fluidity new to Ms. WalkingStick’s art of the past decade, opens the retrospective, which originated at the National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, in 2015, organized by Kathleen Ash-Milby and David W. Penney, scholars and curators at the museum. In Washington, the show was almost twice the size of the traveling edition, which is making its final stop at Montclair. (Gail Stavitsky, the museum’s chief curator, has coordinated the installation there.)

In the compressed version you inevitably lose a certain historical depth, particularly in the early phase of Ms. WalkingStick’s career, when she was first involved in the New York scene. At the same time, Montclair, by virtue of its superb permanent collection, places her in the context of 19th-century American landscape painting and 20th-century modernism in a way the Washington museum couldn’t, and that’s a gain.

Most important, her essential work is here, and the chronological shape of her career is intact. The show lets us see an artist of deep curiosity and poised discipline developing an art that will let her give politics and personal history, reality and memory with equal, and eventually undivided weight. A successful retrospective should feel like a marriage of personal journal, time capsule and moral tale. This one does.

Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist Through June 17 at the Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, N.J.; montclairartmuseum.org, 973-746-5555.

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