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Kay WalkingStick, painting her heritage



Kay WalkingStick (Cherokee, b. 1935), "New Mexico Desert," 2011, (National Museum of the American Indian)

By Philip Kennicott Art and architecture critic November 6, 2015

One hopes there was a long and complicated discussion about the placement of the first painting that greets visitors at the entrance of the Kay WalkingStick exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian. The curators have chosen a recent painting, from 2011 — a large-scaled, sun-drenched Western landscape, with a colorful overlay of Navajo textile design superimposed on one side of its long, horizontal format.

It is both characteristic of WalkingStick's work, and misleading. A visitor with no preconceived ideas about the artist, who is one of the most distinguished artists of

Native American descent working today, would probably jump to a number of conclusions, all of them at least partly wrong: that WalkingStick makes the kind of art you see in the tourist-oriented galleries of Santa Fe, anodyne and decorative, with a regional flavor; that she is Navajo and grew up in the West; that her vision is fundamentally naturalistic, celebratory and cheerful. You might even make assumptions about what she looks like, how she talks and dresses, and where she lives and works.

An exhibition must start somewhere, and WalkingStick's "New Mexico Desert" is a crowd pleaser. But WalkingStick's career since the 1970s has been far more complicated than this painting suggests. She did not grow up in the West, but in Pennsylvania, closely connected to her mother's family (of Scottish and Irish descent) and with only sporadic and fraught contact with her father, who came from a distinguished Cherokee family from Oklahoma. She married a journalist, moved to New York City and by the late 1960s was raising a family while circulating in the New York art scene.

The forces in play in the New York art world during WalkingStick's early years offer the most reliable clues to her art, and ultimately they help explain how she came to produce (many years later) works such as "New Mexico Desert." By the early 1970s, abstraction was in decline and the art world was entering into a period of creative yet fecund disarray that continues today. Pop Art, minimalism, a return to figuration, performance art, conceptual practices and a concerted focus on identity and identity politics were all either emerging or competing for ideological precedence.

Like so many artists of that period, WalkingStick was searching for a meaningful way of moving forward in a climate that was contentious, male-dominated and unforgiving. Her early work focused on her own body, flattened to a silhouette, often depicted nude and rendered in bright acrylic colors. An early and intriguing development was the rendering of the sky, or reflections in water, as abstract camouflage patterns, such as the autumnal orange and blues of "Hudson Reflection VI" (1973). In "April Contemplating May" (1972), a woman sits looking out a window at another camouflage rendering of blue sky, a wry comment on how, despite the masculine and military associations of the pattern, camouflage

ultimately is derived from the natural world, a design meant to make the human invisible in a complex, organic landscape.



Kay WalkingStick in her studio. Easton, Pennsylvania, 2014. (Julia Verderosa)

Another series of paintings, of aprons covered with a flurry of abstract brush markings, suggest multiple complications. The aprons are spread out on what appear to be hangers, disembodied and advertising ambiguous gender associations — with “women’s” work in the kitchen, or “men’s” work in the atelier? Both, would seem to be the answer, and “both” in many ways defines WalkingStick’s approach to art throughout her career.

Is she devoted to abstraction, or to representation? Both. Is she an artist, or a mother? Both. Even her preferred format for painting — the horizontal diptych — is chosen because in its very form it says yes to at least two ideas.

WalkingStick’s diptychs are among her most powerful works, especially those made after the sudden death in 1989 of her husband, R. Michael Echols. Riven

with grief, and inspired by the dramatic landscape of the deep gorges near Cornell University, where she was teaching, WalkingStick created paired paintings, with one panel reminiscent of the anguished landscapes of Marsden Hartley and the other representing a simple but evocative geometric form (often a circular wedge) in a closely related color palette. These are thickly painted, laboriously rendered forms, about as far as one can imagine from the fluent and stylized landscape of sun and sand in “New Mexico Desert.”

But the diptych form is a common thread. Sometimes the division between the two sides of the painting takes on sculptural form, with one side standing out from the wall like a thick box, the other more traditionally set against the wall plane like a painting. And sometimes, as in “New Mexico Desert,” the line between the two sides almost evaporates, with the ideas interpenetrating.

“The diptych is an especially powerful metaphor to express the beauty and power of uniting the disparate and this makes it particularly attractive to those of us who are biracial,” WalkingStick says in a catalogue essay. The reference to her biracial background invokes the issue of identity and the cascade of anxieties and negativity that have formed around this fundamental tool for parsing American life. WalkingStick, now 80 and still active as an artist, was raised fully conscious and proud of her Cherokee roots but not particularly connected to them. She came of age as an artist when Native Americans were organizing politically, culturally and as artists, showing together in group shows and positing cultural and aesthetic links between their work.

Art seems to have been a way of exploring a missing or inchoate sense of her Native American past, perhaps more a journey of self-discovery than an uncovering of something hidden or denied. In any case, the diptych form is indeed ideal for the process, allowing meanings to coexist without one identity requiring denial of another. And while it might seem rooted in a simple binary opposition, no one walking through this extensive exhibition will be able to say with confidence that one side or the other of these paintings is definitively “Native American” or not. “Both” is probably the safest answer.

The exhibition is large and well designed, with sight lines that connect different rooms in appealing ways. It includes more than 65 of WalkingStick’s works,

covering the full arc of her career. The last time the National Museum of the American Indian did an extensive monographic show on this scale in Washington was in 2010, when it surveyed the work of Brian Jungen. There have been other shows in between, but this kind of focus on a single artist is always welcome. When the issues are complex, depth is essential, and without the full range of WalkingStick's work on view, one might be inclined to completely misread that first painting.

Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist Nov. 7 to Sept. 18, 2016, at the National Museum of the American Indian. For more information, visit americanindian.si.edu.

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