

ARTSDESK

At Museum of the American Indian, An Exploration of Kay WalkingStick's Art

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“Venere Alpina,” by Kay WalkingStick, 1997

It makes perfect sense that **Kay WalkingStick** knew all about **Sam Gilliam**. Her 1974 painting “A Sensual Suggestion” depicts a paint-splattered apron suspended from a triangular form like a coat hanger. The apron is painted against a neutral yellow color field, a reference perhaps to the way Gilliam lifted raw stained canvas off its wooden supports and into space. WalkingStick, who was then studying at the Pratt Institute, admired Gilliam as well as **Helen Frankenthaler**, the unofficial dean of the Washington Color School.

WalkingStick and Gilliam have a number of things in common: Both artists were born in the 1930s, yet both painters are working at the height of their careers right now. Something about their identities as artists binds them, too. Gilliam is a D.C.-based artist who has never made his status as an African-American artist the subject of his formalist abstractions, a decision that has sometimes earned him judgment in both the art world and the black community. WalkingStick, who is Cherokee, grew up in Syracuse; in her art she navigates what it means to be biracial but not bicultural.

Teasing out the difference is no mean feat. But “Kay WalkingStick: An American Artist,” now on view at the National Museum of the American Indian, manages to fully explore the artist’s

identity as a painter while focusing fully on her art. Never didactic, the exhibition—a survey of more than 75 paintings and other artworks—is a testament to how sensitive scholarship can illuminate, contextualize, and advance the interests of a contemporary artist who does not necessarily share the same background as her peers.

David Penney and **Kathleen Ash-Milby** curated the survey, which proceeds chronologically through phases of WalkingStick’s life and artistic production. The show susses out a handful of primary formal concerns that emerge early in the artist’s career—the female form, symbolic iconography, landscape, abstract space, minimalist repetition—and explores how she balances those factors in her work. The catalog that accompanies the show compiles rigorous essays by the curators, **Lisa Roberts Seppi**, **Lucy Lippard**, and other art historians with more than 200 illustrations of WalkingStick’s paintings.

The show is decidedly clear on a point that art historians have made over and over again: “Native American” is not a category of art, like sculpture or photography. Instead, the exhibit shows WalkingStick processing a range of painters—rapidly—as her work develops. “Me and My Neon Box” (1971) and “Fantasy for a January Afternoon” (1975) feature highly flattened forms in spatially complex spaces, as if she were examining the sex and geometry of Cubism through the palette of Warhol. She shifts gears many times throughout the 1970s, creating, for example, a series of complex “Tepee Forms”: complex because they bear the emotional depth of Rothko but, again, the smirk of Warhol. As an artist who grew up in Syracuse and studied art in New York but felt acutely aware of her Cherokee status—and her Cherokee father, a world away in Oklahoma—perhaps the stereotypical tepee was a perfectly non-Native way to access her own history.

Late in the 1970s, some ideas began to coalesce in WalkingStick’s paintings. She developed a kind of encaustic using acrylic, ink, and wax that she used for thick, textured paintings. “For John Ridge” (1975), one of her best, looks like a fiery landscape obscured by a black rectangular form. Inset in that rectangle are a series of thin arcing lines drawing together the corners of the square. This work plus an untitled series rub shoulders with **Jasper Johns** or early **Frank Stella**. The paintings were a hint of work to come.

Several refinements in her process and symbolic system culminated in the “Chief Joseph Series” (1974–79), WalkingStick’s best-known works. Fully embracing the modernist mantra of repetition, the artist created dozens of panels in reference to the failed exodus in 1877 of Nez Perce Chief Joseph. The works are utterly abstract: Each one is a permutation of four semi-ovular forms, two large and two small, set within a black rectangular bar against a field of bold color. Something in this repetitive exercise captures, perhaps, Chief Joseph’s long retreat as he led hundreds of Nez Perce in their flight from the U.S. Army over more than 1,000 miles through the territories of Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana. Whatever the tragic narrative possibilities, they do not diminish the sense of motion and experimentation in the artist’s own minimalist procession.

The Whitney Biennial in 1993 didn't advance an agenda for American Indian artists, and it didn't include WalkingStick's work. It is, in any case, widely hailed as one of the most important exhibitions in modern museum history for its inclusive agenda (it was the first biennial in which women and artists of color outnumbered white men). Concurrently, WalkingStick was tapping into the same political consciousness with "Talking Leaves," an illustrated book of diptych plates with self-portraits. One plate reads, "We were told to hire minority artists, but there are no good minority artists." It's paired with a self-portrait of WalkingStick wearing a buffalo hat and standing in front of depictions of several of her paintings that have landed in various noteworthy museum collections.

One complaint about this otherwise excellent survey: It's a straightforward presentation, bound chronologically, without any supportive works or documents from other artists to show viewers the artworks WalkingStick was looking at. It would be welcome—and provocative—to see her works alongside paintings by other artists. In fact, it would help make sense of some of them.

"New Mexico Desert" (2011) and "Orilla Verde at the Rio Grande" (2012), typical of her marvelous later paintings, feature realistic landscapes on which she has overlaid decorative patterns borrowed from Plains Native American cultural groups' parfleche and pottery. Put 'em up against another great American landscape painter: Albert Bierstadt, the greatest painterly progenitor of manifest destiny and virgin landscapes as yet untouched by Western man. Perhaps "Among the Sierra Nevada, California" (1868), which is in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum? The idea really belongs to WalkingStick. In the catalog, one of the curators relates how the artist responds to Bierstadt's epic landscape treatments (including one on the landing of Columbus in America). WalkingStick writes, "I often gave in to the urge to laugh."

At the National Museum of the American Indian to Sept. 18. 4th Street and Independence Ave. SW. Free. (202) 633-1000. nmai.si.edu.