Exhibition Reviews

A ZUNI ARTIST LOOKS AT FRANK HAMILTON CUSHING: CARTOONS BY PHIL HUGHTE. An exhibit of forty-three paintings by Zuni artist, Phil Hughte, curated jointly by the staff of the Zuni Museum (A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center) and the Maxwell Museum. Maxwell Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque (January 1994-January 1995); Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, OK (January-April 1995); Southwest Museum, Los Angeles, CA (May–June, 1995).[1]

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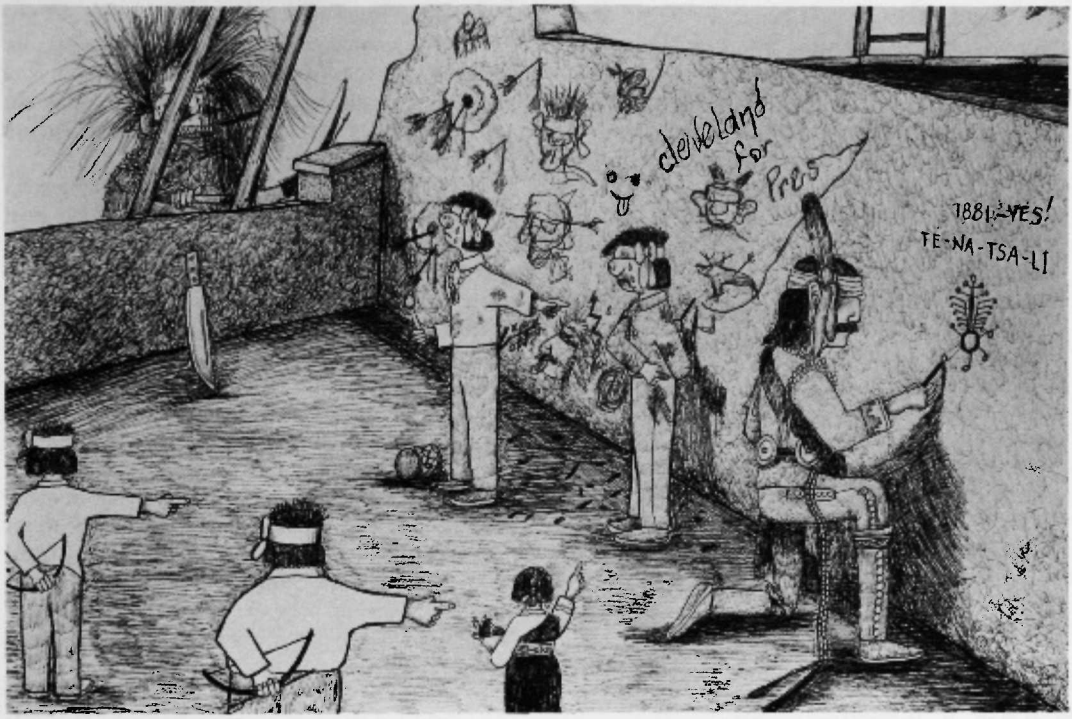
This exhibition deviates from the usual curatorial genre in that it is amassed as a personal initiative, rather than being assembled from disparate works. The effort started out innocently enough, with the ruminations of the Zuni artist, Phil Hughte, about the life and legacy of the controversial anthropologist, Frank Hamilton Cushing, during his sojourn to the Pueblo of Zuni, New Mexico, from 1879 to 1884. In other words, collective memory was committed to drawings through the artistic talents of Phil Hughte.

The collection is comprised of forty-three ink and colored pencil drawings, drawn in a style reminiscent of Mort Walker's Beetle Bailey cartoon strips. The observer is challenged to participate in the depiction of various episodes of Cushing's life among the Zuni people: some good, some bad, and some indifferent. The style of the drawings border on a cartoon-like presentation, thereby reinforcing the two-dimensional quality of Cushing's memory upon the village. That is to say, over time, Cushing's three-dimensional presence has been reduced to a collective two-dimensional memory. Hughte, therefore, usurps this medium to his advantage and the viewer is left trying to ponder if the exhibition represents betrayal or humor on behalf of Zuni people.

Needless to say, anthropology-types from the turn of the century have always been at the source of mixed discussions among tribal communities. In fact, some aspects of anthropology have been darn-right disruptive. In a manner of interpretation, anthropologists like Cushing often went in with one agenda and in the process of their "scientific research" ended up being transformed, totally, into something else.

In this case, Cushing became a member of the Zuni Bow Priest society. The rite of passage was the taking of an enemy scalp in 1881. Like contemporary gang

1. *The Big Photo.* "Here Cushing is getting his portrait done. This is just an artist's perception of what I thought it might have looked like. And here, of course, are some Zuni kids making fun of him, and two Zuni ladies admiring him the way he is standing." By Phil Hughte. From *A Zuni Artist Looks at Frank Hamilton Cushing.*



2. *The Graffiti Clan.* "Cushing is writing his Zuni name and it has 1881 because that is when he became a Bow Priest. And what he did is that he gave some of the charcoal to the Zuni kids and all of a sudden they went bad and they started putting graffiti on there and the bogey man is coming after them." By Phil Hughte. From *A Zuni Artist Looks at Frank Hamilton Cushing.*

behavior, initiates are required to prove their worth with some irreversible deed. In some circumstances, initiation into these societies is rather automatic. But even in those situations, membership often requires some indoctrination into the rites prior to the initiation. In this way, an individual is apprised of the responsibility that comes with that obligation. And Cushing's relationship with Palowahtiwa, a Governor from Zuni, gave him the inside edge as a Bow Priest apprentice.

In fact, Cushing attempted fakery by using scalps appropriated via the collections of the Smithsonian. These were rejected. So it was Cushing's reckless act, during an expedition to the Havasupai in the Grand Canyon, which probably nailed his karmic hide to the wall of Zuni society. It was an act that committed the Zuni people to accept him on that level, whether for better or for worse. And like a bad Catholic marriage, there was no way to divorce him from that immemorial compact.

So the real focus of this discussion and concurrently, the exhibition, is whether Cushing is or isn't a Zuni. And Zuni artist, Hughte, simply echoes that discussion. Even after all first-hand experiences of that encounter have passed on, the discussion continues. In a larger sense, therefore, viewers are given the often conflicting visual snapshots of Cushing's interaction among the Zuni people. It is a defacto trial, so to speak.

There are two distinct sides to that trial. The first side of the debate is whether Cushing conspired to reveal secrets in his role as anthropologist. Did he or did he not purposely use that cultural loophole to invade the religious life of Zuni? It certainly is not

beyond anthropological ethics to have done this. Anthropologists are renowned for their field-method ingenuity in getting to secreted material.

Hughte's visuals, therefore, are peppered with images that hint at that plot. In the drawings entitled *Judgment Day* and *My Punishment*, Hughte depicts Cushing as a self-absorbed man who is oblivious to the social transgressions that he committed in the name of scientific show-and-tell. And in the four directional cadence of the Zuni ethos, the people are prepared to sentence Cushing to four different deaths, as depicted in these works.

The second side of the debate is whether Cushing really did choose to become Zuni, to cross-assimilate into Zuni lifeways; that, somehow, he transcended the mundane existence of being a gawky, sickly, white "Melican" to become someone who was more endearing and who upheld Zuni traditions.

On that level, Cushing is depicted by Hughte as not being quite Zuni, but neither being quite as obnoxious as his caricatures of Matilda Coxe Stevenson, *Yes I Can Take A Picture*, or missionaries, *No Bible Please*, or as innocuous as his wife Emile, *What You Should Do When You Go To Cushing's House*. In fact, Hughte depicts a subtle chronological transformation of Cushing's self, therein leading the viewer to begin to believe that Zuni lifeways have indeed infiltrated his persona.

At the beginning of this sequence, Hughte introduces a *Young Cushing* engrossed in the reproduction of Indian artifacts under the watchful eye of President Andrew Johnson, the United States President who was impeached and acquitted by one Congressional vote. It is the first hint that Cushing may have been one of the original conscriptors of native culture; something we call today the "wannabe" syndrome.

Later, Hughte depicts Cushing's propensity to dress and act like a Zuni, although it is unclear whether he actually mastered the nuances of the culture, especially the language. He chooses, instead, to depict him as the progenitor of *The Graffiti Clan*. So it continues until Cushing finally reaches an apex as the Zuni defender of land encroachment in the drawing, *Zuni Land, Bucko!*. And following that depiction, it is a downhill slide for Cushing, ultimately to be construed as *Bad Boy Cushing*.

The final blow to Cushing's memory comes in the next-to-last drawing, entitled *The Last Supper*. Here we see Cushing seated at a table in Florida, still dressed in Zuni regalia, being served a dinner of fish. In 1900, he choked on a fish bone and died. But more revealing is a falling eagle feather which is juxtaposed alongside a black cat. In this fleeting scene, two bad-luck symbols, representing beliefs that are world's apart, converge. The feather portends a Zuni retribution for his betrayal of their religious beliefs. The black cat, a mainstream symbol from Puritan culture, warns of an evil fate.

So in the end, a hung jury is out, and there is no final verdict. Cushing ultimately becomes a marginal man—neither Zuni nor Anglo. Thus, in a manner of speaking, the title for the exhibition has missed its mark. For indeed the true title of this exhibition is really hidden in another of Hughte's drawings, *Becoming A Zuni*.

Under such auspices, Hughte has successfully exhibited a visual trial which still holds contemporary implications for tribal identity. And from that vantage point, this exhibition has less to do with Hughte's own personal view than with the collective view of many tribal people. It represents a contemporary debate on the role of non-Indian scholars in interpreting tribal culture. That is to say, how much should be divulged about tradition or religion under the pretense of "scholarship," especially as scholarship has become the *modus operandi* for public policy.

Interestingly enough, and it should come as no surprise, the Pueblo of Zuni has been in the forefront of building some community consensus on the role of non-Indians in Zuni scholarship. In a landmark conference on Zuni history in 1983, the Pueblo secured funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities to bring back non-Indian scholars of Zuni life. It was a *Who's Who* of social scientists that made an accounting of their research back to the tribe. And their participation was secured by a laced message that secured either their cooperation or their banishment from all future research in the reservation.

It was amazing, absolutely amazing. And so is this exhibit. ◆

Note

1. In addition, all the paintings are reproduced in black and white in a publication of the same name (Zuni, NM: Pueblo of Zuni Arts & Crafts, A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center, 1994. 125 pages, $24.95). Additional narrative and interpretations are provided in this publication which are not represented in the actual exhibition itself. Viewers may also be interested in a video production that profiles the artist, Phil Hughte, which features his interpretation of the exhibit. Entitled *Another Side of the Story*, the video is coproduced by Matthew Sneddon and Mario Ruiz for the PBS Colores Series: A National Syndicated Program on the Arts & Culture of the Southwest, KNME TV, Albuquerque, NM (1994, approx. 29 min, $29.95).