

## Who's Afraid of Fritz Scholder

In *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Joan Didion confesses that much of what she writes in her notebooks are most people would call lies. She explains that she keeps notebooks not because they are an accurate record of what actually happened, but to remember things: bits of an overheard conversation in a hotel bar, a cat in a triangle of sunlight, and especially to remember how she felt about hearing and seeing those things. But above all, she keeps notebooks to remember who she used to be, all those Joan Didions she'd rather forget. She writes "I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends. We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were."

I think forgetting is just as important a part of life as remembering, and you don't have one without the other. Brain scientists tell us that we rewrite memories each time we access them, and surely our brains know enough to helpfully edit out some of the bad memories. A Didion notebook, being a physical object from the past instead of neurons we can't see or even really control, can't be rewritten so easily. It just sits there, like an indictment, daring to be read.

I'm sure this is one reason humans invented notebooks and paintings: to speak truth to our faint-hearted and self-serving memories.

Upstairs you'll find rooms filled with paintings and sculpture that challenge the collective memory of who we as American Indians used to be, and by implication who we are today. Fritz Scholder painted Indians. Often the Indians were monsters. Sometimes the monstrous Indians were self-portraits.

I borrowed the title of my talk from an exhibition called *Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns*, which took place in New York at the Tony Shafrazi Gallery earlier this year. I did this for two reasons. First, in the alternate universe that the New York portion of *Fritz Scholder: Indian/Not Indian* imagines, Fritz Scholder is as famous as Jasper Johns. And second, because Scholder borrowed extensively from artists he admired, always being straight up about doing so, but he did this before it became fashionable.

Exhibitions, if they're any good, take on a life of their own. So do interesting failures. And this one, whatever others decide which is the case for Scholder, clearly had a life of its own. Here's a list of what we tried to do, and why it couldn't be done.

A blockbuster retrospective. You know, like Edward Hopper or Romare Bearden. Except that unlike Hopper or Bearden, few people outside of the southwest have even heard of Fritz Scholder.

One artist, two cities at the same time. As far as I've been able to determine, this has never been done before. Now we know why.

Provoke a reassessment of Scholder's standing in American art history. Hey, good luck with that.

Deepen scholarship about Scholder and his students and colleagues in the New Indian Art Movement. Well, it might have been forty years ago but you know what, lots of people are bitterly divided on what happened and what it meant.

Since there was no obvious way to just bail on the project, we persevered, and decided we would try to make controversy and contradiction our friend. We couldn't make Scholder superfamous, but we did spend a lot of money on advertising, including subway ads in New York and Washington. The two city thing was very difficult and took about a year to resolve, but in the end we decided to give the artist a big retrospective in DC, and in New York the show he never had but always wanted: a classy Museum exhibition without a single painting from the series that made his career. This also had the advantage of denying visitors in New York who knew Scholder's work the one thing they wanted to see the most: his Indian paintings. As a bonus, it would reinforce the feelings of our New York staff that they are always being shafted by DC. So far, that all seems to be working perfectly. Getting the art world to take another look at Scholder: who knows, but we did get a famous New York curator to edit our book, and our friends from across the Mall to put together this conference. Something, anyway. And about revisiting the New Indian Art movement, we invited Scholder's most prominent critics to a roundtable in Washington and gave over an entire chapter of the book to those proceedings.

Essentially, we decided that framing the show around Scholder's own contradictions would give the project energy and focus. And because Scholder's own contradictions and spectacular life and career and fabulous quotes were a gold mine, and it would have been stupid not to use them, and we're not stupid. But such energy and focus comes with a price.

Most blockbuster exhibitions don't feature a video that describe their subject with phrases like "he was reviled as an opportunist." My institution is a lot of things, among them a place of celebration, and the approach my team chose tempered celebration with critique, both ours and the voices of others who were central to the issues we wanted the show to raise.

Here is what Scholder's work forces me, and other Indian people of a certain generation to remember. That we used to have short hair and wear IHS glasses. That we passed for white. That our grandparents were raised by the army. That we drink. That we weren't always about tradition, that most people we knew didn't care about it either, until not so long ago when suddenly everyone did and then pretended that we always had cared about it. That we often we hated ourselves, and sometimes we still do. That life is ugly and beautiful, that monsters are real. And that death is never far away.

That's why I'm afraid of Fritz Scholder.

The art world? Are they afraid? Of course, there's no such thing really as the art world, so let's use air quotes here. But I will theorize that the art world was put off by Scholder for several reasons. His early commercial success was one, and that it took place in the Southwest was another.

As my smart friend Lowery Sims has noted, Fritz Scholder could be seen as the Not Indian version of 1980s art world superstar Julian Schnabel. And she's right, they have more in common than just the similarity and number of letters in their surnames. Scholder and Schnabel both lived unapologetically large, were exceptional painters and even more exceptional self-promoters. They loved money and fame and big canvases with bright colors. And both defined an era.

Scholder engineered the cold-blooded demolition of Dorothy Dunn's Studio School, which dominated Indian art for a generation, and created space for Indian artists to paint according to no one's rules but their own. The revolution, yes, let's call it that, that occurred in the 1960s at the Institute of American Indian Arts would have happened without Scholder, although it would have happened differently, and without his flash, style, and drama it would not have been nearly so exciting.

Schnabel rewrote the rules on how to become a New York art star, and his flamboyant self-promotion and celebration of wealth and fame made him detested by many. Schnabel came to symbolize all the tacky excess of the 1980s art world.

But Scholder, who would have liked to be Schnabel, never became a superstar artist except in New Mexico, Arizona, and the diasporic Indian art world. Being famous in those places not only didn't help Scholder's cause, arguably it counted against him. Not just because of how few electoral votes those territories command, but New York, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, had its own provincialism. The American southwest was a fine place for art stars to live after they became successful somewhere else, preferably New York, but except for Georgia O'Keefe, living and working there was career suicide. Okay, maybe not career suicide, but definitely not a good idea.

And then there's the Indian thing. Despite his endless obfuscations and dissemblings, Scholder never fully denied his Indian identity. He believed it would have been as false to ignore his Luiseno background as it would be to ignore his European ancestry. And surely he knew being Indian, however he defined it, was essential to his commercial and critical success. Remember that at the IAIA, there were white faculty too, but it's hard to imagine a white artist coming out of that environment and leading the New Indian Art Movement. That success, however meant that he would never be just an artist, or even an abstract expressionist artist from the Southwest, or even the guy who painted all those crazy Indian portraits, but he would be an Indian artist.

There was never a better moment to be an Indian artist in the United States than in the 1970s, so it was an excellent time to be Fritz Scholder. As Vine Deloria Jr. pointed out, every generation or so the country rekindles an old crush and becomes infatuated with Indians. However, like all crushes, it fades and eventually becomes an embarrassment that both parties deny ever happened. I think Scholder understood this, and ended the affair just as the decade that had been so good to him came to a close.

But it wouldn't be that easy. Scholder said an artist must transcend his subject, or the subject wins. When he began painting Indians in the early 1990s, it could only be read as surrender.

I spoke earlier about alternate universes. That's because I'm a big fan, there are so many and they are always so much more interesting than this one. Like, for example, the one where T.C. Cannon, Scholder's most talented student, survives his fatal car accident in 1978 and becomes an international art superstar. T. C. and Jean-Michel Basquiat are friends, and T.C. and even saves Jean-Michel from heroin addiction. By the end of the 1980s, there's no such thing as Indian art, only Indian artists, and they come in all flavors,

and some are fabulous and some are terrible. At the turn of the new century, Bob Rauschenberg curates a massive Fritz Scholder retrospective which takes over both wings of the National Gallery. A black guy is elected president. And over at the National Museum of the American Indian, we have two shows up: Martin Puryear and the Indian Paintings of George deForest Brush. Yes, in that universe Nancy Anderson works for us. Because the Indian experience is understood to be so vast and consequential that it would seem absurd to limit its investigation in any way.

But where we really live, in this universe, the Indian experience is a sideshow, and Indian images will always refer back to Indian space, in all its troubling and unresolved dimensions. And what is Indian space except a clever euphemism for that buffalo in the American living room, see even here I look for more euphemisms and metaphors, and the reason is because nobody likes to hear the words settler colonialism.

Scholder's work presents questions, not answers, and the biggest unresolved question in this half of the world is what really happened five centuries ago. Scholder says, well, it wasn't anything like they said.

Naturally I can't help but wonder what Fritz Scholder would make of this show, almost as much as I wonder what Blake Gopnik, our friend from the *Washington Post* will make of it, and when he might tell us. And I remember that in an interview Scholder gave to the Smithsonian Archives of American Art a decade ago he called NMAI "the museum from hell." Didn't care for where things seemed to be going, and this makes me think he probably would have hated our show. Fritz wasn't really what you'd call a team player; he never really got with any program except his own. Which is precisely why his work still provokes us, and why I believe it has relevance in 2008.

Scholder's stubborn refusal to deny his English, French and German ancestry baffled us back in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it sure looks prescient today, as everyone's extended Indian family looks like the UN General Assembly, and our first Black president never lets us forget his white mother from Kansas.