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AMERICA AS INDIAN COUNTRY

The omnipresence of Native Americans in popular culture.

By Peter Schjeldahl



Images of Native Americans ossified in kitsch awaken complicated, living truths.

Courtesy National Museum of the American Indian

I don't often cotton to museum shows that are educational in character—when I want instruction, I'll read something—but I love, and I wish everyone would see, “Americans,” at the National Museum of the American Indian, in Washington, D.C. It

is keyed to the ubiquity of Native Americans in popular culture. Spectacularly installed, in a grand hall, are hundreds of Indian-themed artifacts, from movie posters, toys, and commercial and sports-team logos to weaponry (a Tomahawk missile, on loan from the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum, intimidates overhead). “Indians Everywhere,” the display is entitled. Other sections unpack the legends of Pocahontas, the first Thanksgiving, the Trail of Tears, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn—stories that everybody knows, at least hazily. Apt photographs and entertaining videos abound. So do irresistibly readable texts. There’s no through line. You bounce, pinball fashion, among the show’s parts, seduced into cognizance. Is it worrisome to relish aspects of a harrowing history that commonly stirs feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and fear, perhaps smeared over with sentimental treacle? Yes, and that’s a thought that “Americans” anticipates but leaves hanging—and haunting—to deal with as one can and will.

“We want viewers to feel smart,” Paul Chaat Smith remarked while I toured the show, which he co-curated with Cécile R. Ganteaume. Smith is Comanche on his mother’s side and a member of the tribe. Born in Texas, he grew up in Oklahoma and Maryland. In 1974, he dropped out of Antioch College to join the American Indian Movement, shortly after that radical group’s seventy-one-day, at times violent standoff with federal and local law-enforcement agents at Wounded Knee—the infamous site of a massacre of Sioux men, women, and children by U.S. Army soldiers in 1890—on the Pine Ridge Reservation, in South Dakota. (The immediate issue was a rebellion against the reservation’s elected leader, but news of the event stoked Indian militancy nationwide.) Smith is a daring thinker and writer. He co-wrote, with Robert Warrior, a consummate history, “Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee” (1996). A collection of his essays, “Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong” (2009), one of my favorite books of recent years, does indeed make me feel smart, abruptly wised up to ramifications of a modern “embrace of love and hate and narcissism” between post-1492 latecomers to the continent and inhabitants who “only became Indians once the armed struggle was over in 1890. Before then we were Shoshone or Mohawk or Crow.”

Smith joined the American Indian museum in 2001, three years before its opening, on the Mall, in an exuberantly curvilinear limestone building by the Blackfoot architect Douglas Cardinal. Smith has concurred in a policy of congeniality to the museum’s overwhelmingly non-Indian, though not wholly white, audience of around a million

visitors annually. This puts him at odds with some of his former comrades. In 2004, the American Indian Movement demanded that the museum “forever be named and referred to as the National Holocaust Museum of the American Indian,” detailing the reduction by violence, disease, and displacement of the native population from the millions—estimates vary widely, from a few million to tens of millions—in the fifteenth century to barely a quarter of a million by the end of the nineteenth. (Today, there are about three million people who identify as members of more than five hundred tribes.) Smith hardly dismisses the tragedy, an unhealable wound like that left by slavery, but he cedes protest to such other Indian intellectuals as the Choctaw historian Jacki Thompson Rand, whose eloquent essay “Why I Can’t Visit the National Museum of the American Indian” (2007), in the online journal *Common-Place*, rejects any notion of compromise with “colonial privilege.” Smith, having chosen to be a diplomat rather than a combatant for the interests of Native Americans, proposes conciliations that needn’t be sought, because they are baked into American memory and hope.

Start with “The Invention of Thanksgiving,” a funny and moving four-minute animated video narrated by Smith in a style that he has of deadpan drollery with gravitas at its heart. As generally understood—general understandings, including clichés and stereotypes, being grist for the show’s mill—the holiday commemorates a neighborly feast that was shared by Pilgrims and Indians in 1621: a true event that was little known for two centuries, until mention of it turned up in a footnote to a document from the time. The narration admits that the promise of comity wasn’t kept: America is “a national project that came about at great expense to native people.” The video succinctly acknowledges the national consciousness of Indian suffering, and also of African slavery, with an animated image of a brain on fire. But it proposes that we—all Americans—like the annual observance because it helps us aspire to “our best selves,” even amid the difficult travel, emotional turmoil, and family fights that typically attend it. Stating a premise for the show, the narration avers, “However imperfectly we remember Indians, we’re remembering Indians.” The video ends with a cartoon of Smith, taciturn and sporting a feather, at a middle-class white-family table. “I’m glad to be here,” he says. Pause. “Better than the alternative.” But something in his laconic tone hints that the alternative—upending the table, perhaps—has been well considered and retains an attractive rationale.

The show tells the tale of Pocahontas, who, in 1617, died in England, at the age of twenty-two or so, after having a son with the early Jamestown settler John Rolfe, in terms of her strange posthumous prestige for aristocratic and, of course, slaveholding Virginia families. A bit of Indian blood from her line could be an ornamental exception to pure whiteness. (Thomas Jefferson's daughter married a direct descendant.) The Trail of Tears—the forced relocation, in the eighteen-thirties, of whole tribes from Eastern states to Western territories—occasions the show's deepest dive into historical detail, citing characters and quoting testimony in a national debate that raged for years before and after the passage, by a close vote in Congress, of the Indian Removal Act, in 1830. There's nothing revisionist in the show's assessment of the Trail, which was atrocious: thousands of Indians perished on the way to mostly barren lands. But the plenitude of contending voices, white and Indian, has a you-are-there effect, demonstrating positions that, with minor editing, could be at one with both the enlightenments and the bigotries of our day. Regarding the 1876 Little Bighorn battle, the show exposes, without quite espousing, a triumphalist Indian point of view. Featured is a wall-filling blowup of a terrific—and terrifying—contemporaneous ledger drawing of the battle, by a Sioux artist. Custer's men spout blood from well-aimed spears and arrows or, often decapitated and dismembered, litter the ground.

As an old white man, I can't propose my pleasure in "Americans" as a model response to it, given the plurality of brains that burn with variants of rage or anguish in this time of identity politics. But I'll dare to endorse an approach—a specialty of Smith's—that lets identity and politics float a little free of each other, allowing wisdom to seep in. The show attempts it by parading crudely exaggerated understandings of Native Americans, ossified in kitsch, to awaken reactive senses of complicated, deep, living truths. (Not all the items are crap, by the way. I found it hard to take my eyes off one of the most beautiful machines in existence: a butter-yellow 1948 Indian Motorcycle.) The project gains drama, and a degree of peril, from occurring in the tax-funded Mall museum that is physically the nearest to the Capitol Building. Absent any correct attitude or even argument on offer, viewers will be thrown back on their own assumptions, if they think about them—and I expect that many will. The show's disarming sweetness and its bracing challenge come down to the same thing: a Whitmanesque idea of what Americanness means not only involving Indians but as a possible solvent of antagonisms past, present, and fated. ♦

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Video



Saving the Wild Horses of the American West

As the government budget threatens the population of wild horses, one woman is fighting to keep them free.

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