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Neal Ambrose-Smith: The Artistic Modernity of Indianness

Erik Parker

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**NEAL AMBROSE-SMITH
THE ARTISTIC MODERNITY OF INDIANNESS**

BY

ERIK PARKER

BACHELORS OF FINE ARTS IN PAINTING

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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Erik Parker

**B.F.A., Painting, University of Tulsa, 2002
M.A., Art History, University of New Mexico, 2015**

ABSTRACT

Neal Ambrose-Smith is an artist of Cree, Metis, and Salish heritage who is at the forefront of contemporary Native American art. A thorough examination of Ambrose-Smith's body of work will reveal that the majority of his art can be viewed as having overwhelming intentions toward a dissolution of boundaries separating the ideas of "Native," "contemporary," and "Western art." It also will show that through the utilization of popular culture and its icons, Ambrose-Smith is able to build a rapport with audiences, while also using images and themes in his art to help break down barriers that contemporary Native artists face in modern society.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary landscape of Native American art is a marriage of art histories, old and new. Western and Native influences become apparent when viewing this modern art form, and both are critical tenets that are central to what contemporary Native American art is at its core. Native artists who create today are acknowledging that the blending of histories and ideas is a necessity, knowing with absolute certainty that there can be no way to keep art or culture autonomous within the ever-expanding and interconnected bubble of modern society. Neal Ambrose-Smith, born in 1966, is an artist of Cree, Metis, and Salish heritage who has a strong sense of his cultural identity, but he also does not allow that “Indianness” to dominate his creations. A Native ideology is represented in all of his artwork, but it is not presented in a formulaic or established so-called Native American style that could be expected from an artist of indigenous heritage. He is not turning away from his culture but instead embraces modern Native society, art histories from both Native and non-Native cultures, and the contemporary world. Ambrose-Smith peppers his art with imagery from pop culture, clever symbolism, wry humor, and timely subject matter, effectively using his art to demonstrate problems inherent for present-day Native Americans as well as addressing modern society as a whole. As a Native artist, his self-interpretation creates meaning in today’s world. His artwork and ideals challenge familiar tropes about Native art and artists. Through his use of integration, inclusion, and connectivity, he seeks to break down barriers that hold back Native American artists of today.

Struggles faced on the reservation are typically different varieties of adversity than those experienced in urban areas, but Native peoples both on and off of the reservation confront difficulties. Ambrose-Smith began to take note of the different types of hardships suffered by Native Americans that took place in urban settings. Speaking on the subject, he reflects: “I’m very sensitive about... things that I’ve had to deal with growing up, with a matriarch¹ that struggled with a white man’s world and just struggled as a minority.”² The adversity that Ambrose-Smith has experienced and seen informs his ideas and works, and he uses his experiences as a way to relate to others. It is these encounters and observations that led Ambrose-Smith to the realization that the battles he and his people must fight are not like the ones his ancestors fought, on some distant field for survival against deadly foes. Rather, these conflicts are insular: inside oneself, inside one’s country, one’s government, and one’s planet.

To have strong ties to heritage is to have a deep connection to land, to the environment, to family, and to people. Thus, Ambrose-Smith chooses not to overly emphasize a Native appearance or iconography in his work because he, too, fights the inner conflict of being Indian and struggling with identity. He does not want to succumb to being stereotyped, to produce art that has blatant overtones of the unchangeable fact that he is Native American. On the topic of appearances, Ambrose-Smith declares:

Humans have always needed distinction, clarification and identification for each other and their environment. One thousand years ago when Tribes met each other at gatherings or trade routes, they weren't looking to see who was Native, but from what tribe, clan, region, or climate. In America today, people with dark skin and kinky black hair are classified as of African descent. Outside of the United States the same person may be perceived as something else entirely. The

¹ Neal Ambrose-Smith’s mother is the Native artist Jaune Quick-to-see Smith.

² Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

perception that there could be an alternative, *a something else*, is where the subtleties become richer.³

These subtle differences can be witnessed in the multilayered art and ideology that Ambrose-Smith presents to his audiences.

When examining the world of art from the perspective of contemporary Native American artists like Neal Ambrose-Smith, one inevitable question must be asked: What makes Native American art *Native*? When contemplating this question, one starts to unearth a cascade of even more questions on the subject of Indianness. Does the subject matter truly make a difference if the artist is Native? If someone who is not a Native person creates a so-called “Native” image, how should that be classified? How important is it for a Native artist to be closely affiliated with their tribe or born on a reservation or reserve, and does that have an effect on how the art’s “authenticity” is viewed? These are but a few of the questions that continually reoccur when scrutinizing this topic, and all of these queries pose difficulties that must be navigated, especially for the artists who are directly affected and caught in the middle of ever shifting views on the subject. The question that looms the largest for Ambrose-Smith and his contemporary Native colleagues, and one that unquestionably adds another wrinkle to their predicament is: When Native American art foregoes a so-called traditional Native look in favor of one that embraces modernity does that change how it is perceived by outside viewers?

It is the same conundrum that has been confronting Native artists since the early twentieth century when first reckoning with outsider influences. One very early example of this occurs in the first decade of the 1900s at San Ildefonso pueblo’s day school. The school’s teacher, Esther Hoyt, encouraged a group of children in her classroom to paint

³ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

scenes from things in their lives. Many of these children who were pupils under Hoyt would later become pioneer Native artists, producing groundbreaking work. Yet, as children, these budding Native artists were from the beginning shown to paint in a much different way than if they had learned exclusively on the pueblo. While the subject matter they depicted was inherently “Indian,” the materials provided by Hoyt were not. She introduced her charges to painting with watercolor on paper and they learned ways to make art that had non-Native influences at its core.⁴

In the early 1930s, a new art tradition was launched at the Santa Fe Indian School, under the tutelage of Dorothy Dunn. Federal policies were put in place by the year 1932, and part of these mandates were intended to foster formal art training in the Indian schools.⁵ The new style that Dunn was teaching at the Santa Fe Indian School encouraged her Native American students to create tribally idiosyncratic pictorial forms. However, most of the pupils relied on drawing inspiration from Pueblo painters of the 1920s and their contemporaries in the Kiowa Five, an Oklahoma group of painters.⁶ With this in mind, it can be seen that there is a destabilization of the old with a new wave of ideas and inspiration, and many Native painters started to break away from the style of decades past.

These two examples show how a small amount of stimuli over time began a large-scale movement for Native American artists. It takes little imagination to see how exposure to the whole of the European art historical canon could be an influence on generations of Native artists. So, the challenge these early Native American modernists

⁴ J.J. Brody, *Pueblo Indian Painting: Tradition and Modernism in New Mexico Painting, 1900-1930* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1997), 37-40.

⁵ Brody, *Pueblo Indian Painting*, 6.

⁶ Brody, *Pueblo Indian Painting*, 180, 182.

faced was one that still, unfortunately, can be debated today: When influenced by non-Native forces, can the art still be considered to be Native, and if so, to what degree?

The problem with this idea is that a similar argument presents itself when looking at how non-Native painting evolved over time. The changes that occurred over the centuries in western and European arts can be readily viewed when looking into any art history text, and while it can all be nestled neatly under the same umbrella, there are still vast chasms to be found. Renaissance art would never be confused with French Impressionism, yet these two disparate styles are both housed in the European art historical canon. Art styles changed over time based on influences and tastes, but no one would argue that these changes did not occur within the same family tree. Coming back to the subject of Native artists, many intentionally began to distance themselves from flat, two-dimensional painting and drawing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and started to emulate the three-dimensional style used mainly in non-Native art. However, it was a natural evolution, one that can be paralleled when examining the arcs of changes in art over time. Change is inevitable, and the move away from a rigid format into one less unbending was begun, and later perfected, by many American Indian artists over the last century. When thinking about these ideas in the context of Ambrose-Smith, the end result of this evolution over time can be seen in his art. The melding of modernity with personal culture and ideology in Ambrose-Smith's art forms a bridge to the past that stretches into the future. He strives to push forward the genre of contemporary Native art, even as he pays homage to his ancestors and heritage.

Ambrose-Smith examines the world of contemporary Native art and the questions surrounding identity, culture, and society that Native Americans face, with the creations

that he brings to life. However, it is difficult to find solid footing when treading on subject matter that has so many nebulous issues surrounding it. Ambrose-Smith reflects upon how he approaches the issue of being a Native American artist:

I don't spend a lot of time trying to present myself as Native American or contemporary Native American in my art, even though that's what I am. In a way, that's going down the wrong road, it's reaching for that idea, making an attempt to convey something. It's like getting some tattoos or joining a religion or a cult or something, just because you want a group to fit into. And I'm not thinking about joining a tribe or trying to be tribal or trying to fit in that way. I'm just making work and my real angle is the content and the educational aspect of the content that drives it, that there's always something there, something witty, something unexpected, and that it has a couple of layers to it. Also that it's delivered in a palatable way that has some entertainment value [for the viewer]. If I stick to that, there's no doubt that some aspect of the culture, my upbringing and that stuff, is going to come through. It just happens.⁷

The fact that he is Native American is at the core of Ambrose-Smith's being, but he chooses not to force feed that fact into the forefront of his art. The Indianness in his work is ever-present yet subtle. He wants to be able to coax profound and provocative thoughts and questions from those who see his art, hoping that these viewers will glean insight from all of the details and layers presented to them. Whether or not it manifests as an embodiment of Native American culture for the onlooker is somewhat irrelevant because the issues of culture, environment, and society – as well as all the subjects in between – are themes that are relatable no matter someone's background. Ambrose-Smith emphasizes the theme of humanity in his art as a means to achieve an overarching connection from his work to others.

A major dilemma for contemporary Native American artists is the concept of actually being "Native." In the minds of most critics, museumgoers, and artists in the art world, Native American art is generally not synonymous with modernity. In fact,

⁷ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

“Native” might be thought of as diametrically opposed to the idea of what is considered contemporary. Nancy Marie Mithlo, a scholar of American Indian Studies working at Occidental College and the Autry Museum of the American West, examines contemporary Native art in her essay “The First Wave... This Time Around,” from the book *New Native Art Criticism: Manifestations*. Specifically, Mithlo presents investigative efforts about the struggle that Native artists face, finding a place in today’s society, not only for themselves but for their artworks as well. Her analysis does include some context for appraising the state of Native arts viewed by commercial markets. However, the more paramount and troubling focus of her essay dissects how the overwhelming majority of critical art reviews on Native American Art are, on the whole, a detriment to the genre. Mithlo explains that a huge number of these so-called critical reviews only serve as a broad platform that, intentionally or not, continually undermine the importance of the field of contemporary Native Arts in the eyes of the public at large. These reviews do not take this subject very seriously, and, as such, they lead directly to biased perceptions by laypersons who are reading those specific assessments. When discussing the state of critical review of contemporary Native art, Mithlo argues:

What I am suggesting is that non-intellectual sources are guiding the assessment of contemporary American Indian arts, and that this casual, cultural art-of-the-week variety of arts writing has exerted a harmful influence on the development of a more serious field of inquiry, one that has the ability to open doors to established arts venues with the capital and stature to seriously address the complexity and depth of our field... Most of our collective knowledge continues to draw from the circuit of art openings, press reviews and privately commissioned catalogues for singular exhibitions, not from direct research by trained scholars... I can testify to the lack of American Indian art programs available in universities, the dearth of published resources to use as texts, the complete void in the recognition that Indigenous aesthetics... even exist.⁸

⁸ Nancy Marie Mithlo, “The First Wave... This Time Around” in *New Native Art Criticism: Manifestations*, ed. Nancy Marie Mithlo. (Santa Fe: Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, 2011), 21.

What she is positing is that, outside of a small, intellectual community, nearly no one is considering the relevance and significance of contemporary art made by American Indian peoples. When this particular type of art is discussed, these “non-intellectual sources” continually ask the exact same kinds of questions that have been raised over and over again. Critics, generally ones who are largely uninformed about contemporary Native American art, often ask whether this type of art should be considered an *art* or relegated to status of *craft*. To simply disregard contemporary Native art by associating it with the word “craft” strongly perpetuates the reduction of a relevant art form down to something more akin to vocational work that is done by manual laborers.

Author and scholar Margaret Dubin makes her own assertions, which strengthen Mithlo’s argument about the way that critics view and interpret contemporary Native art, stating:

Criticism is expected to build on the foundation laid by art history, and because so much of Native American art history has been romantic and apolitical, critics tend to interpret contemporary abstract works as extensions of an ancient, pan-Indian, symbol laden aesthetic... criticism influences the market and... many contemporary Native American artists feel they are denied the attention of professional critics. Artists who wish to engage with the mainstream contemporary art world, in particular, dismiss the typical coverage of their work as amateur and full of clichés characterizing the disjuncture of an Indian-in-the-white-man’s-world.⁹

The lack of scholarly inquiry and study into this genre continually propagates a false atmosphere of quiescence or triviality, making it easy for the art world at large to hold in contempt, or perhaps worse, copiously ignore, contemporary Native art. Those who are not trained in the subject and do not have a knowledge base in contemporary Native art, but have visible platforms in the media, actively rob the art, as well as the artist, of the

⁹ Margaret Dubin, *Native America Collected: The Culture of an Art World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press), 109-110.

opportunity to exist on a level playing field in the contemporary art community. Thus, they are acting as disseminators-on-high who eschew the genre of Native American art, relegating it to a second-class standing in the minds of their reading audiences. Dubin identifies a handful of critics, associated with *Art Guide* magazine, the *Washington Post* newspaper, the *New York Times*, and various other publications.¹⁰ Both Mithlo and Dubin are emphasizing a serious call for the inclusion and standardized assessment of Native arts, and, until that time comes, nothing will change.

One of the strongest attempts to give Native American art the recognition it deserved as *art* not as *craft* or *artifact* was in 1941 at New York's Museum of Modern Art. W. Jackson Rushing, in his 1992 essay *Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern*, discusses the ways that Native American objects have been defined in the past and how this particular exhibition created a shift in ways that Native American art could be viewed by both the art community and general public. Under the direction of General Manager René d'Harnoncourt, the Department of the Interior's Indian Arts and Crafts Board coordinated an exhibition at the MOMA on American Indian Art of the United States, which "was a watershed event in the history of Euro-American proprietary interest in Native American art in the twentieth century." Rushing goes on to discuss d'Harnoncourt's modus operandi for the "Indian Arts of the United States" exhibition as being a, "decontextualization of ancient art, contextualization of historic art, and recontextualization and aestheticization of contemporary art."¹¹ In this instance, a push forward was being made, one where Native American art was looked at less as something

¹⁰ Dubin, *Native America Collected*, 112, 117, 121.

¹¹ W. Jackson Rushing, "Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern" in *The Early Years of Native American Art History*, ed. Janet Catherine Berlo (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992), 191-195.

that was a “craft” but more as high art, and it was presented as such. MOMA’s “American Sources of Modern Art” exhibition, held in 1933, focused on the lineage of modern art through Aztec, Maya, and Inca art predecessors.¹² So, while this 1941 exhibition was not the first attempt at real recognition and inclusion for contemporary Native American art, it was a significant movement towards a greater acceptance of Native art into the contemporary canon. It has been noted that the “Indian Art of the United States” show was the one art exhibition that, “radically altered the public’s perception of a non-western art tradition.”¹³

Exhibitions like this one presented by MOMA jumpstarted the momentum surrounding Native American art, especially in its contemporary incarnation, but it only cracked open the door a fraction for this art form becoming something seen as equal to its modern art counterpart. It is unfortunate that Native American art has not gained a great deal of traction in the years since. Mithlo states:

The contemporary Native arts field is particularly susceptible to the whims of these informal evaluations. Given the lack of infrastructure for more serious appraisals, the disinterest of established critical writers to venture into unknown arts territory, and the association of American Indian art with commerce and craft, the light press has exerted unusual power in the overall assessment of contemporary fine arts in Native contexts.¹⁴

If there is a hope, it is that modern Native artists, ones like Bob Haozous (b. 1943), Roxanne Swentzel (b. 1962), Jason Garcia (b. 1979), and, of course, Ambrose-Smith, along with countless others, will forge ahead with their ideas, keeping heritage and culture, identity and self-awareness at the forefront. Self-awareness and an awareness of the modern world may have the biggest impact on audiences, because the artistic

¹² Rushing, “Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern,” 192.

¹³ Rushing, “Marketing the Affinity of the Primitive and the Modern,” 193.

¹⁴ Mithlo, “The First Wave... This Time Around,” 21.

creations made by Native Americans today show an embrace of, and flourishing in, contemporary society. With luck and time, acceptance, recognition, and equality will no longer have to be struggled for by Native American artists to obtain, but given freely by others to them.

Ambrose-Smith is not committed solely to artistic endeavors, as he has been working since 2011 with the Joan Mitchell Foundation in their *Creating a Living Legacy* (CALL) project.¹⁵ This project is: “designed to provide support to older artists in the areas of studio organization, archiving, inventory management, and... create a comprehensive and useable documentation of their artworks and careers.”¹⁶ This gives Ambrose-Smith access to work behind the scenes with other artists and help document their careers. Doing this work increases his knowledge of and connection to a great number of artists, thereby giving him scholarly expertise on them and their art.

Thinking more deeply about the essay by Nancy Marie Mithlo, it can be argued that she is presenting calls for a change in not only the critics but also for the artists involved. She feels that Native American artists need to be mindful of the ways in which outsiders perceive contemporary Native art. Mithlo would undoubtedly value more Native people actively participating in the research of contemporary art and artists. Taking on a role in how contemporary art is studied and criticized, these Native artists’ opinions and ideas would likely have better traction in the discussion of their place in the modern art world. With the CALL project, Ambrose-Smith has taken on a role of scholar, not just artist. In doing so, it has given him license to act as a knowledgeable voice for other artists, contemporary Native and non-Native alike. Adding more Native people as

¹⁵ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, January 13, 2015.

¹⁶ Joan Mitchell Foundation, “Creating a Living Legacy (CALL)” accessed October 20, 2015. <http://joanmitchellfoundation.org/artist-programs/call>

scholars will not solve the problem completely since Native American artists want inclusion on par with Western artists. However, it will begin to shift the onus of assessment from those uninformed and informal evaluations into the hands of someone of Native descent, who is in the thick of the contemporary Native art world. The time and effort spent on art and scholarship by Ambrose-Smith may serve as an example of the amount of work that must be put in by Native artists in order to help achieve a better understanding of Native art of the present day.

A thorough examination of Ambrose-Smith's body of work will reveal that the majority of his art can be viewed as having overwhelming intentions toward a dissolution of boundaries separating the ideas of "Native," "contemporary," and "Western art." It may be assumed that these topics are disparate when viewed through the narrow lenses of cursory criticism and colonialism, but Ambrose-Smith prefers not to let traditional or stagnant standards pigeonhole or hamstring his vision of a unified art historical catalogue. The discussion of Ambrose-Smith's art will focus mainly on his prints and paintings, along with one installation piece. A thorough examination of his art will show that the application and inclusion of multiple styles, genres, and ideas are essential to his message of integration of Native art into the contemporary canon, and also reveal that Neal Ambrose-Smith is a vanguard in the world of contemporary Native art.

CHAPTER 2

NEAL AMBROSE-SMITH... NATIVE AMERICAN, ARTIST, HUMAN

Neal Ambrose-Smith's art and ideology are centered on the connectivity of all things. This interconnectedness has become the wellspring that he taps into, giving the artist license to access anything and everything he encounters as a way to further his art. When discussing this methodology, Ambrose-Smith proclaims, "Pablo Picasso once said that amateurs borrow ideas, but a true artist steals."¹⁷ He continues with this idea, saying, "I've got it all from somebody else. There isn't a single thing that I've created by myself... I'm an organizer of their ideas. Just like it was with [Fritz] Scholder, who also was a thief, but that's the genius behind it. Having the knowledge and background of art history makes creating so-called 'new' art so much easier."¹⁸ By utilizing the blueprint for theft set forth by Picasso (1881-1973), Ambrose-Smith has been able to create images that do not fit easily into a set category: Neither singularly Native nor bereft of Indianness, his artworks are a fusion of stolen ideas from other artists and artworks, grafted onto his own beliefs and ideologies. Ambrose-Smith also draws more inspiration from a range of disparate sources, anything across the spectrum that strikes a chord with him. Words, ideas, and advice from his mother and his children can be lumped in with cutouts from in-flight magazines procured on one of numerous trips, and all can contribute equally to his art. With all of this ammunition at his disposal, Ambrose-Smith

¹⁷ Neal Ambrose-Smith, Graduate Exhibition Catalog, 2009.

¹⁸ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

is able to construct contextual spaces in the artwork he creates where all things can, and do, co-exist.

The history of art can be very influential in Ambrose-Smith's works, and when asked about how important he views it in relation to what he creates, he replies: "Learning where you've been is important to showing you where you are going. Which is why it is so important to study art history when creating." Utilizing the art historical canon gives the artist a reflection of self, culture, ideas, and where his mind is in that moment. He strives to add blatant art historical touches to his imagery, and occasionally some of these ideas can permeate his designs unintentionally. Ambrose-Smith states:

I don't always recognize it at the time, sometimes I see the [art historical] influence after the work is completed... I was looking at this painting [*The Modern World We Live In* (2013)] that I made of the Starship Enterprise and I've got all of this stuff going on and I was looking at the bottom corner and I saw this fig leaf from a Greek painting down there in a corner. And I thought, 'oh that would be perfect. And then I started looking around, trying to remember where I saw it, and it was in this Picasso painting that I had just stolen some other stuff from. And I saw that it was in a different position, so I took it, and I stuck it in there, and it looks great! It was a compositional element to justify a situation of symmetry and balance, but it also gives it another layer of context or content.¹⁹

It may be subtle, but he wants to make sure to give a nod to the past. As is to be expected, however, the layperson is not as well versed in art history as Ambrose-Smith. The artist talks about an encounter with a person at an art opening: "It's interesting talking to someone, like a donor for instance, who doesn't have a strong relationship to art or art history... They can't really tell you why they like a particular work of art. Since they are uneducated in art history, it will limit their interactions with most artworks."²⁰

¹⁹ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

²⁰ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

The desire to bring together contrasting themes is most apparent when looking at how Ambrose-Smith deals with art history. He is staunchly unwilling to partition the art histories of Native America from the mainstream, often called “Western” or “European,” variety. Bluntly speaking on the topic, he states, “Native Americans must have both European and Native art history. Art history *and* tribal art history are elements in my toolbox for making good work.”²¹ He feels an overwhelming urge to utilize both, not only to stay informed, but as a way to avoid excluding himself from realms where he can poach ideas – because he wants to steal from *everyone*, regardless of heritage. Ideas are not confined to one group or another, and to be able to pull from every direction not only inspires him but provides a limitless supply of fodder to be churned into his paintings and prints.

Many non-Native artists, including, Cy Twombly (1928-2011), Philip Guston (1913-1980), and the aforementioned Picasso, are perceived by Ambrose-Smith with similar levels of significance and esteem as many artists of Native descent. He is attracted to these artists because they, like him, are what he calls “mark makers.” Ambrose-Smith discusses these three, stating: “All three of those artists are mark makers... As a viewer, my first instinct or identity is the mark. This is what draws me into a work.”²² The genesis for Ambrose-Smith’s interest in artists like Twombly or Guston does not stem from the color of their skin or where they were born. It begins in the art that they have made, whether this art speaks to him on some level. Ambrose-Smith believes that having a solid understanding about the art that he pulls from often makes conceivably stronger finished pieces. By not limiting himself and being able to pull from everywhere, any

²¹ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

²² Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, October 26, 2015.

source to which he has access, Ambrose-Smith grants himself the autonomy to create artworks that can emerge from beneath the shadow of both Native art and European art.

Fritz Scholder (1937-2005) and Rick Bartow (b.1946), just to scratch the surface, are two Native artists that are cited by Ambrose-Smith as huge influences. However, like the three artists mentioned in the previous paragraph, Ambrose-Smith does not necessarily approach how he views Native artists that appeal to him any differently. He appreciates Scholder's understanding of art history, stating: "You could look at his work and not know who Fritz is and say, 'he stole *this* from [Francis] Bacon, he stole *this* from [Wayne] Thiebaud' ... he's incredible...that's what good training does, it's solid art history, solid knowledge."²³ Ambrose-Smith may share common ground with artists like Scholder and Bartow when it comes to cultural background and history. Nevertheless, finding things to appreciate about any artist that attracts him is not difficult. With that in mind, he chooses to unequivocally level the playing field when thinking about *all* other artists. In doing so, he is giving himself unlimited access to Western and Native artists in deciding the best bits that he wants to steal. These ideas and creations that have their origins with other people and places become the recipes that get distilled into a concentrated and potent end product that allows him to express who he is culturally, socially, and creatively. He uses this pastiche of ideas as a means to liberate himself from not only self-labeling, but also from labeling by outsiders. The ideology stemming from his cultural background holds the most prominent position in his imagery, but the idea of Indianness does not have a stranglehold on Ambrose-Smith's art. Thinking about the subject of his art, Ambrose-Smith discloses: "People assume my work is not Native,

²³ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

continually asking, ‘where are the feathers and warriors?’”²⁴ Thus, his artwork can be boiled down into imagery that does not necessarily look “Native,” however it still retains the Native ideology that is ever-present in the work that he is producing.

Using all of the ideas and resources at his disposal in the conception of his art necessitates that Ambrose-Smith know how to construct art from a plethora of various types of media. With that in mind, he finds that, for himself, being a jack-of-all-trades is a requirement in the art world. Among his many artistic abilities are printmaking, painting, large installations, and sculpture; he also has knowledge as a goldsmith and does his own metalworking, using these latter two skills to fashion some of his three-dimensional pieces. Earning a BA in Painting from the University of Colorado in 1989 and his MFA in Printmaking in 2009 from the University of New Mexico, he has acquired a large assortment of aptitudes over time.²⁵ He has also taught workshops for the majority of the past decade, which has kept him current on new ideas and art-making methods. The wisdom gained over the years from studying at these universities as well as his personal teaching experiences, then combined with his own culture, has given Ambrose-Smith a broad range of tools with which to forge artworks that blend modernity with personal heritage which helps him create many dynamic artistic styles. Thinking back to his days in school, he recalls: “The first question I encountered in art school was ‘*what do you want to say?*’” The need to say something with his artwork is the catalyst that pushes him to create, but it is only the first step in the process. He goes on to say: “Today I take the art I see, the news I read, the music I listen to, and the conversations I have and process it.” Continuing, he asserts: “I work seamlessly from one medium to another. I don’t see

²⁴ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

²⁵ “Neal Ambrose-Smith Biography,” accessed February 18, 2015.
<http://indianspacepainters.com/biography/>

them as autonomously as many people do. This is a tribal belief, of all things being connected. I believe artists should be adaptable, our jobs today require it.”²⁶ Calling the creative process that he does a “job” is vital to Ambrose-Smith, because it helps him remember that art, while a pleasure to make, is still a business that he must use to make a living.

Knowledge of the art marketplace and consumer desires can greatly inform a percentage of an artist’s decision making when thinking about choosing specific details. For instance, if the market calls for smaller and inexpensive works, it is better for an artist to create many small works quickly to satisfy demands. However, if the demand by art collectors changes to large scale or three-dimensional work, then a good business practice by the artist would be to adjust according to suit the public’s desires. Today’s artist must have a blue-collar attitude, self-marketing skills, and the wherewithal to stay connected to the wants of consumers on both large and small scales. This is done to achieve financial success, because being an artist is not just about making art, it is also about being a smart salesperson and knowing how to market oneself. Ambrose-Smith understands this and he looks to always have his fingers on the pulse of these arenas of capitalism. Thinking about the process of producing art in today’s market, Ambrose-Smith remarks: “The reality is you just can’t smoke cigarettes and drink whiskey and make paintings. You have to do other things. You have to think about who might like this, who might buy this. Is it a museum piece?”²⁷ This remark specifically alludes to how twentieth and twenty-first century artists have been viewed by society-at-large as some kind of tormented souls, with booze and nicotine seemingly their closest companions. However, what this

²⁶ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

²⁷ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

statement really brings to the forefront are the ways that this idea is actually illusory and that being an artist takes more than just a canvas, a can of paint and brush, and a brooding temperament. Speaking pointedly on the subject of targeting specific markets and consumers, Ambrose-Smith states: “One example is, most apartments in New York City are small, so you can’t make [artworks] overly large. A work that is 30 inches by 40 inches is almost too big, but something like 22 inches by 30 inches is a good range, it’s sellable. You have to meet the public at a certain level and making it accessible.”²⁸ His example expertly shows that Ambrose-Smith has a good grasp of the needs of particular demographics, and this knowledge aids him when deciding what to make as well as what to attempt to sell, and to whom. Ambrose-Smith shows that being a professional artist means that you have to be able to wear a number of different hats in order to have the greatest chance at success. The possession of numerous aptitudes – artistic talent, business savvy, and leadership, amongst other skills – accords Ambrose-Smith the flexibility to excel in the art marketplace whilst staying true to his culture and foundational beliefs.

Living and working in New Mexico means that the artists who reside and create here, including Neal Ambrose-Smith, are subject to a different set of rules than artists who ply their trade in places like New York City or Chicago, which have vast art markets. The challenges and difficulties of working in a more insulated location like New Mexico are discussed by the artist, as he pronounces, “It is hard being a professional artist in this state, because there is no tight knit art community like there is in a place like New York.” Yet, in New Mexico, there are an abundance of Native tribal communities

²⁸ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

that boast great numbers of artists, and, as such, large quantities of Native artwork are being created. However, even with substantial amounts of art being produced in the state, Ambrose-Smith discovered, through his own personal experiences, that there can be a real sense of disconnect between many of the individual artists. Ambrose-Smith's mother is Jaune Quick-to-see Smith (b. 1940), a well-known Native artist who lives a few miles from him and Ambrose-Smith sees her as the closest available communal source to which he can turn. Speaking pointedly on the topic, he says: "The only community that is available to me here is my mom, so our work has begun to look very similar."²⁹

Ambrose-Smith continues on the issue, stating, "My mother and I are our own reservation in many ways, but our connections reach nationally. The 'Indian' question is a big one. Does the artist want to break out of their community and reach a broader audience, at great risk, or stay confined and comfortable being a big fish in a little pond?"³⁰ There are nineteen different Pueblo communities in New Mexico, each with unique art forms, and, as such, each group can often lack strong connectivity to the artists in the state who do not come from the same tribal community. Culturally, Ambrose-Smith has ties to his mother and tribal background and, while they both live and work in New Mexico, they are not originally from here and have no specific tribal ties to this region, unlike the majority of Pueblo artists. However, both Quick-to-see Smith and Ambrose-Smith feel that they are a part of the larger landscape when it comes to how they fit into the art world. This is not to say that he has no stake or interest in New Mexico and its artists, because that is far from the truth. How he approaches art history and how he regards that subject as a whole and not as a bunch of mismatched parts can be

²⁹ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

³⁰ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, January 13, 2015.

seen as a microcosm of his greater views; he wants to connect to more people, see more art, and develop more ideas. He cannot accomplish these tasks by confining himself to a place where a duo makes up a community. This arrangement would only stifle what he is as an artist and person. While his best and truest community is most definitely his mother, he knows that the wider he expands his reach, the greater his connectivity can become.

Ambrose-Smith uses his links to the world outside New Mexico not only to aid his career, but to also turn his small personal community into one that is large and diverse. He proclaims, “People have to know you, not as a famous artist, but on the social level. So I travel and do gigs, shows, public art, workshops, and lectures all over. I keep in touch with friends and colleagues coast to coast. I find out what’s going on and try to participate as much as possible.”³¹ All of this outreach helps to grow Ambrose-Smith’s network that, in turn, eliminates his sense of disconnect. When he can shape his own community by disregarding distance, cobbling it from the kinship with those he meets in his travels across the globe, it makes it easier for him to return home and be inspired.

Neal Ambrose-Smith’s recent work has seen a sizeable shift towards the medium of painting, inspired by his mother, his travels, and the market. His latest creations have allowed him to take more liberties in condensing a multitude of the ideas and techniques that he has learned. This gives these latest artworks dense layers, both physically and ideologically. In the mixed media piece, *Tips for Assistance When Your Flight Takes Control* (fig. 1), from 2013, Ambrose-Smith utilizes a pastiche of methods, inspiration, and ideas to create a visual landscape that combines past and present. In the work, the

³¹ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, January 13, 2015.

focal point is a strange pear-shaped figure, whose bodily shape is immediately reminiscent of prehistoric rock art known as pictographs. The organism has many protrusions jutting forth from its central mass, mimicking many pictographs, giving the appearance of appendages. On the upper portion of this being, drawn in black, materializes the face of a young person with feminine characteristics, based on the eyes and lips. Her hand rests up against her cheek in a contemplative manner, while at the base of the form two dismembered legs sit upright, giving the illusion of the figure standing erect. Inspiration for this work is taken in part from the art of Phillip Guston, who often uses exaggerated body parts throughout his art. Ambrose-Smith utilizes repurposed body parts as a means to flesh out a fuller existence for the populace in this work. Ambrose-Smith takes this method of building up a surreal plane using miscellaneous scraps in order to imagine a world that feels familiar yet alien. Bisecting the 'pictograph girl' is a block of text clipped from magazines and periodicals, reading like a stream of consciousness. The words, "tips for assistance when your flight," merge into another fragment that states "takes control," while a snippet from a magazine declaring "the surprising power of" is buttressed next to "ORDER." Text becomes converted, phrases fractured, rebuilt, and reimagined, giving continually new intentions to these sentence shards. This allows the viewer the opportunity to glean diverse meanings by studying different facets in *Tips for Assistance When Your Flight Takes Control*. The onlooker is invited to continuously reimagine, through multiple readings of this text, the notion of ever-shifting implications that are layered throughout the work.

When looking at this image, the central figure and the bold colors are immediately apparent. The color palette that Ambrose-Smith has chosen to use is a combination of

warm colors, mainly for the central figure, and cooler tones and neutrals for the background. Creating the spaces of color loosely, paint drips and brush strokes are clearly evident. This treatment gives his works an almost sculptural quality, as the drips and the marks are used to create energy and tension, giving the viewer three-dimensional illusions with which to grapple. Ambrose-Smith believes that the magic of the drips pulls everything together, and in these blots, blobs, and lines, interconnectivity is reflected. Colors touch, frequently interplay, and in these painterly marks and splashes hues overlap and often explode off the canvas, creating an electric focal point for the eye. The electrifying hues draw the eye diagonally through the work, allowing the viewer's gaze to land squarely on the image's central feature, the pictogram.

In the beginning stages when considering making a work of art, he thinks of something that he wants to discuss, an interesting idea or problem he views as worthy of receiving attention. From this seed, he then filters it through his personal history, current musings, and the concepts he has learned, as well as stolen, over time. However, Ambrose-Smith does not plan ahead of time concerning how he wants his art works to look. The images he conjures are ever evolving, made on the fly in real time, constantly being adjusted to incorporate new ideas, words, thoughts, or colors. "It's a process," explains Ambrose-Smith, "it's part of the conversation and often you have to cover up something good to get the absolute best you can from a work."³² If nothing else, the work reflects change; however, it also denotes a kind of continuity with the past. This work, mirroring a pictogram, has evolved and grown beyond any rock wall meant to hold it in place, as it learns to think for itself and "take flight" from its wallflower status – but it is

³² Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at artist's studio, Corrales, NM, March 26, 2013.

still essentially a pictogram. It is just that this particular one has since gained a set of legs, and it is no longer bound to the rules of old, never wishing to be relegated to the silence of its predecessors.

Text is a tool that has made its presence felt in much of the art that Ambrose-Smith has created. In many recent works he cuts out sections of prewritten text from magazines to paste onto the canvas. Any words or phrases that may strike him as being relevant or interesting will be ripe for plucking. Ambrose-Smith talks about the use of “appropriated text” in his work, stating: “I used to start out with any unbelievable statement, but now I use any words or phrases that might open my mind.”³³ He expects his audience to look at the words in such a way as to produce an eye-opening moment, one that helps the audience understand the artwork on their own terms. Ambrose-Smith claims, “I use the words to recontextualize the already contextualized environment of the world and how we interact with these things.”³⁴

When an onlooker reads the textual content that he has positioned in his paintings, the words do not necessarily need to be read left to right or up to down. These sections of text can become meaningful to anyone as long as some kind of personal significance can be garnered from them. Ambrose-Smith remarks on the layperson’s understanding of art, stating: “It’s harder for people to grasp a Jackson Pollock painting than it is a portrait by Van Gogh.”³⁵ With the application of text into the image, Ambrose-Smith seeks to streamline a meaning that can be obtained by the viewer. The words that he uses can be a commentary on the bombardment of advertising in the modern world, or they might dole

³³ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at artist’s studio, Corrales, NM, March 26, 2013.

³⁴ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

³⁵ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

out a stern environmental warning, but Ambrose-Smith tries to give his audience some “brain twisters” when viewing his work; he genuinely wants people to ruminate on the implications behind his ideas. “The text I steal, or appropriate, from these magazines is okay to be visible, to be read.” He continues, “They are not necessarily meant to be controversial or in your face because I don’t want to lecture to anyone.”³⁶ The cutout text typically holds a prominent location in his paintings, and the blocky, collaged shapes are often presented with a drop shadow painted beneath them, giving the words the appearance that they are floating above the artwork.

The main reason text has become more prominent in his latest artworks is that Ambrose-Smith wants to better communicate with his audience. Once he began teaching workshops in 2006, he became acutely aware of the type of communication needed to relate with pupils, saying, “As a teacher, I try to convey information in the most accessible manner. This teaching methodology pours over into my work as I look for better ways to connect to my viewers. One of the most universal tools I use is text, so I know there will be something in a composition that is recognizable.”³⁷ Words, phrases, and sentences can often convey a clearer connotation to most onlookers about the overall idea of a work versus an artwork that has vague and abstract concepts. When one’s message is made slightly easier to understand through the use of a written language, it can achieve a greater relevance for a viewer. This transparency that Ambrose-Smith attaches to each image is often carried over when he creates titles for them. Loathing to waste an opportunity by leaving any of his artworks untitled, he purposefully gives his works designations that not only expand the story he is telling, but also offer an opening

³⁶ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at artist’s studio, Corrales, NM, March 26, 2013.

³⁷ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

that will ensnare an onlooker's imagination, drawing them in to a painting or print, challenging them to look for a deeper-than-surface meaning.

When viewing an artwork created by Ambrose-Smith, it might seem like a maximum amount of planning went into the piece, but this artist does not operate in that way. In fact, all of the sketchbooks he owns are either empty or full of watercolor doodles or drawings that he makes with his children. "Starting an artwork creates problems you have to solve," declares Ambrose-Smith. "For example: If you dig a hole, you better plant something. The canvas or paper is completely fine by itself, but once you make a single mark on it... You *have* to do something with it."³⁸ He goes with a basic idea, and, from that thought, he molds and shapes an ever-evolving piece of art. The paintings and prints are made of strata – not only of mixed media, but also of ideas and histories piled one on top of the next until they become what the artist deems final. Ambrose-Smith recalls: "I remember that somebody asked Jasper Johns (b. 1930) why he put that spoon in one of his paintings, you know, because it's just in the middle of this painting, and he said, 'Because I wanted to.'"³⁹ It is this sort of philosophy that Ambrose-Smith takes to heart. Without the sterility of planning a project, the art becomes free to dance, to turn on a dime, or double back onto itself. It can grab bits from a classical work of art and a tacky advertisement, and blend them seamlessly. "I think artists are kind of like "MacGyvers" in a sense, of solving compositional problems," Ambrose-Smith speculates. "They are a puzzle... how do I justify it in there with the story and then I start thinking, 'what would I

³⁸ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at artist's studio, Corrales, NM, March 26, 2013.

³⁹ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

say? How am I going to talk about this work?’ None of it is planned. I just know I’m going to get there. I have enough dedication and enough skill to get me there.”⁴⁰

Lack of planning when creating a work of art has a strong hold on Ambrose-Smith, and others in his family as well. Ambrose-Smith recalled that his artist mother once thoughtfully presented him with a notebook, asking him to use it whenever he was thinking about an idea or starting a new artwork. Graciously, he accepted the gift, thanking her for it. Ambrose-Smith had always created his artwork in a more nebulous and spontaneous fashion, thus he realized he would have no use for it and surreptitiously tucked it away. Later, he discovered information about Navajo weavers who would set up their warps out in the middle of nowhere and just weave, no planning at all, just *doing*. As if a revelation, Ambrose-Smith thought, “Well no wonder I don’t sketch! No wonder I don’t plan things out! I’m just like the rest of these blokes!” He excitedly brought this information to his mother who then innocently asked him how his sketching was coming along. Ambrose-Smith decided to answer the query honestly, stating, “I don’t sketch anything. I can’t plan! I just get some ideas and then I work through it.” She knowingly replied, “Yeah, me too,” laughing about it, confessing to her son that she herself did not own any sketchbooks, because she never had any use for them, either.⁴¹ When talking about how his creative process begins, Ambrose-Smith says, “The way I work might start with a small idea that gathers sparks from other places along the way, and it just snowballs from there.”

Ambrose-Smith admits that while he does not necessarily make sketches in order to plan out his works, he has to adjust how he approaches printmaking versus how he

⁴⁰ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

⁴¹ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

handles painting. An art form like printmaking is more demanding than painting in this regard, which Ambrose-Smith acknowledges, saying, “Sometimes I have an idea, but with printmaking, you need a lot more dedication to planning.”⁴² Paintings can be altered at any time after the fact if so desired, but when making prints, they must be approached with a certain mindset and plan of attack because they are not easily manipulated. Separate pieces can be adhered in or marks can be made on the print adding to it, but once the image has been placed onto the paper that image acts as a chassis for the work, becoming the driving force behind it. This stringency involved in making prints means a greater effort put forth by Ambrose-Smith, simply because of his dislike of preplanning. Although he might not readily plan ahead of time, he still creates sketches, often placing them directly in his work, saying, “The only drawings I do are with my kids... but that’s about it for sketching for me, coming up with ideas. But, then I take the drawings and glue them into my paintings, or stick them into my prints. The connectivity, it’s very Native, it’s cyclical, there is no separation between my life and my work, it’s all connected.”⁴³

In the majority of prints that Ambrose-Smith creates, he characteristically presents a strong focus on Native visuals, such as pictograms, animals, and nature. But these images are more than just eye-candy for the viewer and more than just “Native” imagery. *Baby Birdbrains* (fig. 2) from 2012, *Nuclear Sunset* (fig. 3) from 2008, and *Embrace Your Waste* (fig. 4) from 2009, all make insinuating references to the idea that American Indian art must have representations cognizant of nature or cultural history. However, when one looks more closely at these images, a deeper meaning and a relevant

⁴² Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

⁴³ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

message can be realized. All three of these monotype prints allude to the ways humans have had a negative impact on our planet's environment.

The print entitled *Baby Birdbrains* uses the idea of recycling as a catalyst to initialize a conversation on the topic of pollution. In the foreground of the image, a pictograph that seems to be floating has been placed centrally. It is mushroom-shaped with two dots that act as eyes set into a yellow "head," while its "body" appears white and full of dark scribbles and bottle-like shapes. There are two sentences that are written on this figure; the one inside the body's outline states, "Flutes can be Jazzy and a Hammond organ is nice," while the other text, hand-scrawled across the yellow "head" portion of the figure, states, "Please don't Deface me." However, the pictograph, itself ironically vandalized with this plea against despoilment, has literally "defaced" the image of a human cranium in the background by being positioned to cover up a significant portion of the skull's facial region. The skull, a large, transparent object with one visible, swirling eye, takes up a large section of the background in the work, which helps to instill for the viewer a looming presence of death or destruction. From the top edge of the cranium, phrases have cropped up, tall and straight, flowing down the head like a Mohawk hairstyle. However, this is one hairdo that seeks to convey a message with its points of "hair," with the hair being comprised of a number of buzzwords and fragmented statements. For example, these strands proclaim, "When did the fowl become a chicken?," "say, you end up with a map of one of humanity's greatest migrations," "SAVE TIME!," "Keeps Paint Out," "What Your Seat Says about You," "Odds against survival," and "Insects Change." This collection of aphorisms mostly has an overtone concerning change, and is especially ominous when coupled with "Odds against

survival.” The fact that they protrude from a human skull only underscores the idea that a birdbrain, defined by the dictionary as an annoyingly stupid and shallow person, will not have logical priorities when it comes to humanity’s place in the world.⁴⁴

Phrases in *Baby Birdbrains* act as a commentary on modern humanity’s focus on unimportant and irrelevant obsessions, further underscored by the way these words are presented with an eye towards advertisements. The buzzwords and catchphrases pulled from magazine ads form the perfect signpost, mirroring some of humanity’s absurd and asinine fascinations with things like infomercials. This handful of thoughts that are emerging from the desiccated head act as a stream of consciousness, presenting perhaps a signpost of warning, one that tries to peel back the truth of the decadence and indifference of modern man. The phrases reflect indifference to the plight of the environment. Since the words are linked to a previously live human, the text serves as a warning that the trivial should not be allowed to take precedence over something as important as the environment, because it may be fatal.

The bottom half of the work is littered with plastic bottles and recycling logos. These objects begin transitioning into round bubble shapes as the eye moves upward, making it seem as if this scene is taking place inside a soda bottle, with all of the fizz from carbonation enclosing the figures. In the bottom right corner of the work, the phrase “There’s nothing” and the Waste Management logo are bookended on either side by the statement, “CANS: INFINITELY RECYCLABLE.” Nothing is sacred, not the art the pictograph represents, not humanity represented by the skull. Ambrose-Smith is building layer upon layer of objects – bottles, dots, words, skull, and scribbles – all amassing into

⁴⁴ ”Birdbrain Definition,” Oxford Dictionary, accessed October 21, 2014, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/birdbrain

a crescendo. The overcrowded presentation of these objects, magnified by the fact that the viewer can see every single object in the background directly through the ghostly outline of the skull, is used in a way that tries to shed light on the sheer amount of consumed items in the world that could be recycled. *Baby Birdbrains* acts as Ambrose-Smith's scathing commentary on the ways which humanity chooses to patently ignore what is in front of their faces, in favor of something shallow, salacious, and wholly unimportant.

Similarly, in Smith's print, *Nuclear Sunset*, he gives the audience an unabashed view of the potential radioactive aftermath from nuclear fallout. *Nuclear Sunset*'s main focal point is humanity's manipulation of the environment and the effect that it has on creatures in nature. The audience is introduced to this through the presentation of a roadrunner's head that appears in profile, large in the picture plane. Behind this bird a hill rises, and atop the crest two pictographic figures appear, seemingly surveying their bare surroundings. The roadrunner is unnaturally green and bright, and the orange earth and pink sky merge, becoming one with each other as the dripping smears ooze down the image, like so much acid rain. This work does not utilize text in the image itself, instead relying solely on the graphic visual of electric greens, oranges, and pinks to create the impact. In these gaudy colors, one may immediately recall the title of the work and associate the word *nuclear* with the day-glo flora and fauna depicted. This kaleidoscopic coloration gives the impression of a world emblazoned with radiation, transforming landscape into a hot zone while transmuting everyday creatures into luminescent aberrations, caricatures of their healthy counterparts. These beings act as the survivors of some nuclear apocalypse, either hardy enough to adapt to a harsh wasteland or horribly

mutated by the machinations of man. The message that Ambrose-Smith is expounding is a cautionary tale, one that focuses on environmental destruction – whether it happens in the blink of an eye or by inches, over time, as we allow the planetary destruction to continue unabated.

The monotype *Embrace Your Waste* echoes the sentiments of *Nuclear Sunset*, but with sharper focus on the American contribution to pollution and waste. With this image, Ambrose-Smith chooses not to envision a post-apocalyptic wasteland, one created by an atomic cataclysm, but rather he examines the slow decay of nature perpetuated by the contamination and garbage that are the constant companions of humans. In the print, the focal point is a large, watchful owl sitting fixedly in the center of this image, surrounded on all sides by a border. This tan-colored frame is mainly comprised of people and hands that are holding objects, mainly scissors. The people, all clustered upside-down on the upper perimeter of the print, are supposedly U.S. citizens, strongly indicated by the American flag that flies upside down in the upper left corner of the work. Other clues that point this out include the handful of people who are portrayed as saluting armed forces members, while others cover their hearts with their hats, as if listening to the Francis Scott Key's "Star-Spangled Banner."

This image is straightforwardly emphasizing the self-destruction that people impart onto themselves and their surroundings through their own wasteful ways. Hemmed in on all sides by these people and their pollution, the owl is only able to observe this gradual deterioration occur. Even the owl's body has become a knotted mess, presented as inky swirls and scribbles, indicating that even nature's passive observer cannot escape the tangle of toxins streaming into the environment. "The wise

owl watches us with our trash party,” describes Ambrose-Smith, “it is a ‘She Who Watches’ idea.” *Tsagaglatal*, or She Who Watches, originated from a rock pictograph in the Columbia Gorge in Washington. As described by the Wishram people, Coyote, the trickster, comes to a village and asks the people if they are living well or poorly. The people, unsure how to respond to Coyote, send him to their chief who lived in the rocks above, always alert and watchful of her group. Coyote tells her that the world will soon change, that the time of female chiefs is at an end. He then transforms the observant female chief into the rock visage, represented by Owl, so she can watch her people forever from her high perch.⁴⁵ She Who Watches is an idea that has been used from time to time in Ambrose-Smith’s works because of the powerful message of change – as well as being ever vigilant – it conveys, particularly for contemporary generations. It is this idea of shifting currents moving forward that is reflected in *Embrace Your Waste*, with wise Owl watching, bearing witness to the inevitable comings of change brought upon humans by their own wasteful ways. This print offers a warning, one that will most likely go unheeded, but Ambrose-Smith makes sure that there will be at least one witness to view the end result.

The impact on the environment is something that weighs heavily not only in Neal Ambrose-Smith’s subject matter, but in his creative process as well. In 2006, while taking Don Messec’s *Making Art Safely* program, he began to learn about environmentally friendly printing methods taught by non-toxic printmaking expert Keith Howard.⁴⁶ This experience was a revelation for Ambrose-Smith, presenting him and the other artists in this course with a way to create high quality art prints while simultaneously lowering the

⁴⁵ “She Who Watches,” accessed April 13, 2013, <http://www.lensjoy.com/gallery/20.htm>

⁴⁶ Neal Ambrose-Smith, Graduate Exhibition Catalog, 2009.

carbon footprint caused through traditional printing techniques. “I began using non-toxic inks for no other reason than to use what was available. Adaptable, resourceful, and NDN-genuity (Injun-nuity),” Ambrose-Smith explains, blending the words “Indian” and “ingenuity” as a humorous pun that underscores Native inventiveness. “I don’t have a preference for materials or brands, but rather ease of use and price...the inks I use for printing don’t skin or dry on the palette – they bond to paper fiber, absorption rather than evaporation – so I’m not throwing away dried ink, instead I reclaim and recycle it.”⁴⁷

Being a realist and an environmentalist tend to go hand in hand for Ambrose-Smith, as the means to lessen his own carbon footprint on the planet subsequently, and conveniently, allowing him to reduce some of the direct impact on his personal finances. Ambrose-Smith believes that humanity, as a whole, must have an intimate relationship with the environment, going on to confer, “When thinking about my own connection to the environment, I have to remember community. Why? Because community is really the whole planet and how we’re all connected within this planet.” It is this imperative to be the change he wants to see in the world that compels him to use sustainable resources and eco-friendly techniques. One person doing something to help the environment is commendable, however small the act. Moreover, as an artist, his creations present him an opportunity to reach out to a large audience, and, having this platform from which to shout, it then becomes possible for him to encourage greater action from the public. “I cannot separate myself from it,” says Ambrose-Smith, “we all have a responsibility individually and globally.”⁴⁸ The symbiosis of using sustainable resources in the making of his art has become a focus in his processes, and he astutely observes, “I feel

⁴⁷ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

⁴⁸ “Neal Ambrose-Smith Biography,” accessed January 27, 2013, <http://www.missoulaartmuseum.org/index.php/ID/b09aa3a8/fuseaction/exhibitions.artist.htm>

responsible by making statements about reclaiming and recycling in my imagery and not practicing those very things with the work itself.”⁴⁹ The concern for the future of the planet is ever-present in not only the artworks themselves, but in the concept and creation as well. He understands how art-making techniques can often be toxic and how those practices can negatively impact the earth, so he makes personal choices in how he makes his art and the subject matter therein to affect as much change as possible.

Installation pieces are another means that Ambrose-Smith uses to get messages across to audiences. In 2009, the artist created his installation piece entitled, *Commodity Cans* (fig. 5). This work directly borrows – nay, *steals* – from Piero Manzoni’s (1933-1963) work, *Artist’s Shit*, of 1961. In that work, Manzoni literally canned his own fecal matter and labeled it art, largely because of his disgust of Picasso and the collectors who saved anything from the great artist, even his trash. “I had fallen in love with those Piero Manzoni cans, where he canned his poop, and I don’t really care about that he canned his shit or whatever, or the whole concept behind that. But I like the idea that it says ‘pure artist’s shit’ on the side of the can. It was intriguing...” Continuing, Ambrose-Smith says, “On thinking about if I was going to do that, if I was going to make my own cans, what would I put in it? So, I thought, ‘oh, I’ll put an idea in there. An artist’s idea.’”⁵⁰ The first reason Ambrose-Smith chose to use this particular work after which to model his *Commodity Cans* installation was to expound upon the thought that “anything touched by a famous artist has value as a work of art.”⁵¹ In the act of stealing and recycling Manzoni’s concept as his own, Ambrose-Smith is acting much like Marcel Duchamp

⁴⁹ “Neal Ambrose-Smith,” Contemporary Native Art to Russia, accessed January 27, 2013, <http://nativeartinrussia.webs.com/nealambrosesmith.htm>

⁵⁰ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

⁵¹ Neal Ambrose-Smith, Graduate Exhibition Catalog, 2009.

(1887-1968) did when he introduced the “readymade.”⁵² Taking another’s work or product and making it their own, these men interject new life into an old idea or product, like Duchamp did when he repurposed an unsuspecting urinal into a dynamic piece of art or like Ambrose-Smith turning cans of feces into cans full of ideas. Pushing boundaries can actually define one’s worth as an artist while also creating value for one’s art through the transformation of the ordinary into something distinctive.

Secondly, but perhaps more importantly, by using the basic idea behind these cans and naming the work he creates, *Commodity Cans*, Ambrose-Smith explicitly points to the fact that they are *commodities*, which is a charged word in the Native community. The word “commodities” references a recent period of interaction between Native culture and the United States government and how this contact has impacted his people on the whole. “Commodity” holds multiple meanings for Native Americans, indicating both the US government’s food commodity ration program, implemented as a means to feed Native Americans, as well as the appropriation and commodification of Native culture by outsiders. The United States government established commodity ration programs as a way to provide food for Native Americans after the US seizure of lands and goods from American Indians. The items provided were essentially a base means on which to survive. However, these canned goods were often substandard and foreign to the diets of Native peoples. These commodities have led to a host of ailments such as diabetes and heart disease, causing health complications for a great many Native Americans.⁵³ By re-

⁵² The Tate, Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917. Accessed on October 26, 2015. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573/text-summary>

⁵³ “State of the Science: A Cultural View of Native Americans and Diabetes Prevention,” last modified July 16, 2010, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2905172/>

appropriating Manzoni's cans for this work, Ambrose-Smith sought not to give spoiled food to his audience, but one hundred fresh ideas – one inside each canister.

Finally and perhaps most significantly, Ambrose-Smith elevates both the Native meaning of the term “commodity” as well as the physical material of human feces by relieving them of negative connotations through the positive attributes of the uplifting ideas that he placed inside each can. By reinventing the original meaning of the cans in a non-ostentatious manner, stripping them of any pomp by replacing human dung with a collection of ideas, Ambrose-Smith pays homage to Manzoni and Native people, true, but he also graciously absolves past misdeeds against his people and gives back in an effort to move past historical inequities. “In Native America, material goods, especially food, are to be shared and passed on.” The artist goes on to explain, “*Commodity Cans* is a push towards a positive future, a place of sharing and caring. It is a return to the supreme Native Giveaway. Ultimately this set of cans,” – containing ideas – “are to be given away.”⁵⁴ The philosophies in these containers acted as a tongue-in-cheek guide, an approach to how to become an artist, or possibly how to become complete (or maybe how to become a complete artist). Ranging from thoughts as simple as “Daydream,” idea number 36, to those as encompassing as “How to be an artist,” number 91, his Artist Ideas for *Commodity Cans* are reflective of how he wants to provoke discussion of Native art as high art, yet in a whimsical manner.

The ideas he placed in each can are his gifts to the world. They work as a way to see art, and make it, without getting caught up in a competition or a my-culture-versus-yours division. He wants to bring people, art, and ideas together. He wants to fuse the

⁵⁴ Neal Ambrose-Smith, Graduate Exhibition Catalog, 2009.

best parts of Western art and Native American art as a way to produce the greatest possible artwork. It is this reconciliation of divergent philosophies, ideas, histories, styles, and functions of art that are prevalent in his art. He wants to bring his own culture into the conversation, but he seeks not to use it as a crutch, rather as a ladder – one that places his art, and his culture, on equal footing with anyone else's.

CHAPTER 3

ART & CONNECTIVITY TO SCIENCE FICTION & POP CULTURE

Conveying viewpoints that aid in educating his audiences can be seen front and center in Ambrose-Smith's artwork. In topics ranging anywhere from world environmental problems to Native American subject matter, he strives to raise awareness of the concerns that impact not only him personally, but also ones that have bearing on national and international societies. Ambrose-Smith's art shows that he has the ability to recognize connectivity between storytelling, entertainment, and culture – and the utilization of all of these ideas is essential to creating works of art that tell a story that is relatable to any audience. He continually endeavors to bring each of those elements into being when he is making something new. One way he is able to achieve this goal is to create work that resonates in the minds of the people of today's modern society. Ambrose-Smith ponders this idea, stating, "One thing that helps me streamline an idea is looking at it from the perspective of my kids." Expounding on this thought further, he continues, "When I think about what I'm trying to say, I want it to be understood by everyone, including children. So, it has got to be kid-friendly. If you can't explain the art to them, then who are you making it for? You've got to make it fun."⁵⁵ While the playful nature of his artwork could detract from the seriousness of the issues he discusses through his art, in reality it aids him in telling a richer story. Making it easily readable gives him an opening to bridge gaps for audiences who may not fully grasp some of the more nuanced aspects in modern art, or art in general. For these reasons, Ambrose-Smith wants

⁵⁵ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

to throw in as much enjoyable and engaging imaginings – from giant yellow bunnies to fictional starships to masked superheroes – as possible. But it is not amusement for amusement’s sake; Ambrose-Smith makes sure to give everything he puts on the canvas a proper inquisition. If he judges that it is memorable enough to get his message to stick, he will likely include it.

Pop culture and science fiction are the typical armaments that Ambrose-Smith equips himself with when creating. This utilization of popular imagery creates a recipe for successfully achieving a delicate balance, allowing the coexistence of meaningfulness and entertainment in his art. Capably weaving his message into a palatable package where high-minded wit acts in harmony with the popular ideology of the masses, Ambrose-Smith not only delivers his ideas but he streamlines them into a potent and relatable story that connects with viewers in a catchy and memorable way. He has, like all other contemporary Native American artists, access to art and art history from all over the world, going back many hundreds of years. Many of these peers and recent precursors of Neal Ambrose-Smith have utilized similar methods to get across their ideas and topics to the masses. Eva Mirabal (1920-1968), for example, was from the Taos pueblo and she studied with Dorothy Dunn at the Santa Fe Indian School in the 1930s, excelling in the flat, almost two-dimensional style of painting. In 1942 she enlisted in the United States Army to aid in the war effort, and this enabled her to branch out artistically. Mirabal embraced cartooning as an outlet for her art, going so far as to create a comic strip, *G.I. Gertie*, which detailed with a deft hand the humor in the lives of women serving in the armed forces.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Jason Silverman, *Untold New Mexico: Stories From a Hidden Past* (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2006), 111-114.

Another artist, Phil Hughte (1954-1997) of Zuni descent, found that the artistic mainstays of his people, mostly pottery and jewelry making, were, according to Professor of Anthropology Triloki Nath Pandey of UC Santa Cruz, “‘repetitive’ and ‘restricting’... [Hughte] chose to use ballpoint pens and acrylic paints in drawing and painting.”⁵⁷ He always had a story to tell about the Zuni, but in a non-traditional way. In order to achieve this Hughte knew he could not make baubles or form clay into pots. Krisztina Kosse, former Curator of Collections at the University of New Mexico’s Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, said of Hughte’s work, “For what the artist wanted to say no existing genre served well enough, so Phil Hughte invented his own: the pictures are combinations of cartoons and drawings.”⁵⁸ Hughte used his art as a way to criticize the impact of anthropology on the Zuni, specifically the impact that anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing had on Hughte’s people. The cartoons acted as a way to make a critical discourse on social and cultural problems, much in the same way that Ambrose-Smith does when he uses text and pop iconography to draw attention to the environment, for instance. It is these types of observations and evolvments that Native artists must make when considering the world around them.

Both Hughte and Mirabal were able to blaze new trails with their art, both using the medium of cartooning to its fullest potential. This commitment by these artists to utilize a pop culture genre as the focal point in the art they made can also be seen overwhelmingly in Ambrose-Smith’s work. A large majority of his paintings and prints can be recognized as owing a debt to cultural icons, popular fiction, and cartoon imagery.

⁵⁷ Triloki Nath Pandey, foreword to *A Zuni Artist Looks at Frank Hamilton Cushing*, by Phil Hughte (Zuni: Pueblo of Zuni Arts and Crafts A:shiwí A:wán Museum and Heritage Center, 1994), 15.

⁵⁸ Krisztina Kosse, commentary in *A Zuni Artist Looks at Frank Hamilton Cushing*, by Phil Hughte (Zuni: Pueblo of Zuni Arts and Crafts A:shiwí A:wán Museum and Heritage Center, 1994), 120.

Ambrose-Smith's specific intent can *always* be found just below the refined and colorful veneer of his canvases. Storytelling is important to Ambrose-Smith since this method of communication is a large part of his Native American heritage, and telling his stories through his art is explicit. Imparting knowledge through tales is something that has been fostered from an early age for Ambrose-Smith. As a youth, he grew up hearing Coyote stories told by family and friends. "Storytelling," he recalls, "is a way of educating the youth as well as entertainment for everyone."⁵⁹ Conjuring a story for viewers might be as simple as presenting them with the retelling of a Coyote story or as vital as voicing global concerns over the destruction of the environment. Anyone can tell a story but to entertain and teach with the same breath and breadth is quite the feat indeed. In this mode of thinking, it is easy to see why Ambrose-Smith chooses to incorporate into his work the polished and mainstream imagery of science fiction and pop cultural icons and ideas.

In the 2013 diptych, *No Matter Which Way You Go, Powwow!* (fig. 6), Ambrose-Smith looks to bring a tale to life centering on the fictional movie character Dirty Harry. The painting shows an image of the iconic stance, gun, and suit of the hard-nosed detective, however instead of Clint Eastwood's face on the character's body, Ambrose-Smith has substituted his own face onto the body of the film legend. Grandiosely, a foreshortened hand clutches a revolver that extends outwardly, almost blatantly, towards the audience. This is directly referencing the image on movie posters showing Dirty Harry in the exact same stance and positioning. The large magnum .357 is a main source of Harry's power and potency; however, the danger of his firearm becomes nullified through the inclusion of a flag jutting out from the barrel, displaying the oversized words,

⁵⁹ Neal Ambrose-Smith, Graduate Exhibition Catalog, 2009.

“POW WOW!” It makes the gun, and, by extension, the man holding it, comical. The Dirty Harry character is a no-nonsense, über-masculine rogue cop who has become an iconic antihero in the genre of American film. However, Ambrose-Smith attempts to strip away that persona by removing some of the machismo from the figure. In taking away the side arm’s purpose and power by morphing the weapon into a children’s toy, he is able to convert it into an impotent implement. Moreover, the figure is shown as being surrounded by pinks and yellows, which aids in tempering the character’s aggression through the employment of dashes of color typically associated with femininity. Finally, the inclusion of cartoonish companions to the scene completes Dirty Harry’s transformation into a humorous, non-threatening caricature.

An additional layer of meaning is discovered in this painting when examining the single largest word on display, “POWWOW.” In Native culture, a powwow can be an important and powerful ceremony. Scholars Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine address the Northern Plains powwow as being: “A dynamic event, renewing cultural identities, traditional values, and social ties important to many of today’s tribal communities.”⁶⁰ The powwow is an event that is meaningful to a vast number of Native American people, and can relate to it as being part of their identity. Ambrose-Smith is using the word as a way to negate the violence of the fictional man and his weapon. Ambrose-Smith strips away Dirty Harry’s aggression and viciousness with one simple word: powwow. He does this with the gun’s transformation into something akin to a plaything. The metamorphosis into a toy via the word, and idea of, a powwow not only removes the harmful aspect of the gun’s destructiveness, but also illustrates, especially

⁶⁰ Patricia C. Albers and Beatrice Medicine, “Some Reflections on Nearly Forty Years on the Northern Plains Powwow Circuit,” in *Powwow*, ed. Clyde Ellis, et al. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 26.

when considering the title of the work, that no matter how many times the metaphorical gun has been pointed in the direction of Native Americans, they have managed to survive. This diptych, when viewed separately in its two halves, has a stronger distinction towards malice in the right hand panel and a negation of this ominousness through the inclusion of amusement and humor on the left half. The placement of color in the work also mirrors this rift: bright yellow, pale blue, and red pervade the left panel while the neutral colors of beige, gray, and white dominate the right half.

Aside from the word “POWWOW,” the small, red pictogram character, along with Ambrose-Smith’s self-portrait, convey the only other truly direct references to Indianness in the entirety of the image. By placing his own semblance in the artwork, he is effectively turning himself into his own guinea pig. He is attempting to use this self-reflexivity as a means to erode any references to racial biases, focusing solely on the Native persona. By removing the identity of the Caucasian character, Ambrose-Smith not only gives his artwork a powerful sense of Native identity, but it also instills a kind of humor that he has turned back onto himself in a self-effacing manner. As such, it becomes a cathartic outlet and a vehicle that works to rid the piece of potential negative connotations.

This painting has a vast number of layers, and text is used as a way to help supplement the many ideas that are being expressed. Ambrose-Smith’s use of cutout text reappears again in this painting, bisecting horizontally across the middle of each panel. Just above the grouping of collaged text in the left panel dwell two watchful observers: the red pictogram sits with a cartoon-like rabbit. The pair is keenly observant of this scene, sitting firmly on their balcony comprised of text. From this position, they take on

the roles of spectators to the posturing of the Native Dirty Harry. The placement of these two characters, along with their ever-so-slightly judgmental stares, is reminiscent of the two theatre-going heckler puppets Statler and Waldorf from *The Muppet Show*. The Muppets are a pair of churlish old men who watch the rest of the cast of *The Muppet Show* from their balcony seats. Typically rude and contrary, these two figures seemingly parallel the creature duo in this painting by Ambrose-Smith. These two look out toward the canvas's central figure, appearing poised to chime in with sarcastic wit and humorous comments about the spectacle of Dirty Harry and his toy gun. As they sit passively, surveying the scene like watchers from on high, the text around them becomes less reflexive and actively morphs into a dialogue for the duo. The written statement that surrounds these two figures says, "You know as well as I do that to enact change it takes a whole lot of... power. This is the real war." In the first sentence, the word just prior to "power" in this proclamation has been obscured. This leaves the audience to wonder exactly what type of *power*, and, by proxy, what kind of *war* Ambrose-Smith might be referencing. By leaving dialogue open to interpretation, viewers are encouraged to fill in the blank with what they imagine could be the answer to enacting change. These two cartoonish individuals, when paired with the text, act less as humorous foils and start behaving more like sober sentinels, adding substance to the themes in *No Matter Which Way You Go, Powwow!* by associating themselves with serious matters like "change" and "war."

This work emasculates the tough antihero symbolism and what that iconography represents: a strong, white male presence in the contemporary world. By placing his own face on the body, Ambrose-Smith is effectively supplanting Dirty Harry's race with his

own Native one. The conversion of the weapon from a thing of hostility into one of comic relief completes the transformation from a man full of rage into one that is, hopefully, more peaceful. This idea works seamlessly with the title, serving as a reminder that Native Americans are survivors and that the people and culture are alive, even into the twenty-first century.

The division of the picture plane in *No Matter Which Way You Go, Powwow!* seems to be reflective of the dichotomy that many Native peoples experience with modern society and how it is difficult to merge the world of their Native heritage with that of the contemporary world. This duality is a recurring theme in Ambrose-Smith's work, one that gets explored often because it is central to his and many other Native people's daily existences. Non-Natives often romanticize the idea of Native Americans due to the way they have been presented over the decades as noble savages. And just like the struggle by Native artists to achieve equal footing in the world of art, there is this same struggle for acceptance from modern society by those who identify as Native. Ambrose-Smith chooses to utilize diptychs, for instance, or replaces a white man's face with his own, as a way to draw attention to the inherent nature that Native people are a part of two worlds: the one of the American Indian and the one of modern citizen.

Pop culture has been a major influence on the artwork of Neal Ambrose-Smith, evidenced in the aforementioned *No Matter Which Way You Go, Powwow!*, starring Dirty Harry, or in this case, "Dirty Neal." Artistic storytelling in such a manner helps him to quickly facilitate communication to many who may not have the most focused attention span. Ambrose-Smith's work has seen a steady assortment of a variety of pop icons including the use of comic books and their characters, television and cinematic

references, and larger-than-life celebrities. One of the originators of the Pop art movement in the 1960s was Andy Warhol (1928-1987); he utilized imagery that was recognizable to all, from mainstream and commercial culture, that brought a new spin about what high art could be. Art critic Arthur Danto spoke on the subject, saying: “There was something in-your-face about Pop art. Yes – everyone knew who Superman and Mickey Mouse were. But it took some special courage to accept a painting of either of them as high art.”⁶¹ Like the aforementioned Manzoni and Duchamp, Pop artists were pushing back against the established ideas of what was considered high art. Scholar Andreas Huyssen declares about Pop art:

Pop proclaimed that it would eliminate the historical separation between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic, thereby joining and reconciling art and reality... In bourgeois ideology, the work of art – in spite of its almost complete detachment from ritual – still functioned as a kind of substitute for religion; with Pop, however, art became profane, concrete, and suitable for mass reception.⁶²

With this in mind, Ambrose-Smith utilizes pop culture imagery in much the same way as the Pop art pioneers: as an effective means to communicate with the masses but also as a way to push boundaries. He tests the boundaries of what is expected of Native art, and like Pop art serving to strip away the idea of art as an embodiment of something bourgeois, Ambrose-Smith looks to build a connection to audiences while simultaneously undermining the elitism prevalent in the contemporary art world.

Far and away the single most-used pop culture icon repeatedly utilized by Ambrose-Smith in his works is from the fictitious and futuristic world of Star Trek. In a multitude of paintings by the artist, the interstellar starship “USS Enterprise,” from Gene Roddenberry’s Star Trek television and movie franchise, is the predominant focal point

⁶¹ Arthur C. Danto, *Andy Warhol* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 28.

⁶² Andreas Huyssen, “The Cultural Politics of Pop,” in *Modern Art and Society: An Anthology of Social and Multicultural Readings*, ed. Maurice Berger (New York: IconEditions, 1994), 255.

examined. The paintings *Sweet Corn Baby!* (fig. 7) from 2012, *The Case of the Peppered Moth* (fig. 8), and *The Modern World We Live In* (fig. 9) both from 2013, as well as other works depict a representation of this make-believe spaceship.

The burgeoning idea for this particular subset of artwork was initially fueled by the resurgence of the series' popularity due to a recently released 2009 film and the subsequent sequel films. Upon learning about this movie, Ambrose-Smith's children wanted to see this "new" action, space-adventure romp. Acquiescing to their desire to watch the film, he took his kids to the theater, where many of his own childhood memories began flooding back to him. He began to recall times from his own youth of sitting in front of the television alongside his brother, visually drinking in the original Star Trek series that was first shown in the 1960s. This was a catalyst that quickly started him contemplating not only the meanings behind the Star Trek missions, but also contemplating the deeper significance and impact that this show had provoked on society as a whole. The crucial recognition that he eventually arrived at was that the USS Enterprise – the actual ship itself – has become, as Ambrose-Smith states, "an icon that represents peace and doing the right thing. Its purpose is not a war machine, but acts more like an arbiter."⁶³

Considering the Star Trek universe more fully, another realization dawned on him, one where this imagined universe was absent Native starship captains, and the subsequent dearth of Native heroes in general in the lexicon of not only science fiction, but in almost every corner of true or fictionalized society.⁶⁴ In an effort to remedy this omission, Ambrose-Smith was inspired to insert some element of Native identity directly

⁶³ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

⁶⁴ "Federation Biographical Database File: Chakotay," accessed March 13, 2013, http://www.startrek.com/database_article/chakotay

into his works. “I am a bit of a Trekkie, but I’m not the type of Trekkie that goes to the conventions or puts on the regalia. The Enterprise is an icon. In one print, I did a drawing of Captain Kirk and I put my face on it. I was Captain Kirk. And, in a sense, there’re no Native superheroes. We have heroes, but not superhuman heroes in the sense that western society has them. And so, there have been no Native American starship captains. So, the closest thing that you’re going to have is [Kahn from] the Wrath of Kahn.” The only notable exception to this in the fictional world of Star Trek can be found in the *Voyager* series, where the first officer of the Starship Voyager is Native American.⁶⁵

Using his love for such a universally recognized institution that is Star Trek, Ambrose-Smith has sought to build a bridge between popular societies, which generally dismiss Native Americans, with his own personal world full of Native culture. The concept on which he settled was one that incorporated his self-portrait in his paintings, and soon his face started to become “the face” of a Native presence in many of the science fiction-based artworks. This idea began to spread into some of his other, non sci-fi artwork, and his face made its way onto the bodies of iconic symbols of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This inclusion of a Native component via self-portraiture was an elegant solution to his problem, one that has given his artwork an avenue where an infusion of elements of Indianness could exist, elements that Ambrose-Smith viewed as largely non-existent in contemporary culture. Through his appropriation of pop culture images and icons in his art, Ambrose-Smith has begun a process of growing and shaping his own Native heroes instead of hoping and waiting for society to one day decide to represent him and his culture. Thus, the importance of Star Trek cannot be overestimated

⁶⁵ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

in these latest artworks, since it was the catalyst to reimagining the contemporary and future place of Native American people, not only in the fictional world, but in the here and now.

An Ambrose-Smith painting from 2012 entitled, *Sweet Corn, Baby!*, prominently displays the image of the Starship Enterprise. The focus of the painting strives to convey a blend of science fiction and Native culture, with an emphasis on the ways in which these two ideologies interact when placed in the context of modernity. Examples of Native culture are visible throughout the work, as a smattering of text, stating, “SWEET CORN BABY” and “POWWOW” take up the upper left quadrant of the work. Both of these phrases placed in the image echo terms from Native culture, with “POWWOW” directly alluding to the Native powwow ceremonies, while “SWEET CORN...” is a type of very palatable corn grown for hundreds of years by a variety of Native American peoples who introduced the crop to European settlers in the late eighteenth century.⁶⁶ This vegetable holds significance to many Native peoples, with corn being a physical and spiritual basis of a majority of Native American cultures.⁶⁷

Between these two written expressions rises a fist, an uppercut punch that communicates a forceful and visual representation of power. Directly to the right of this, two featureless, transparent, and minimal representations of men – presumably Native Americans – are depicted wearing headdresses and holding musical instruments. Behind these figures and the starship looms a colossal monochromatic green self-portrait of Ambrose-Smith, occupying a considerable portion of the background area. The two men

⁶⁶ Jonathan R. Schultheis “Sweet Corn Production” North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, North Carolina State University, last modified January 1, 1998, <http://content.ces.ncsu.edu/sweet-corn-production/>

⁶⁷ Fernando Divina and Marlene Divina, *Foods of the Americas: Native Recipes and Traditions* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2004), xiii.

along with the clenched hand, coupled with these overlarge words, become framed inside the dynamic graphic style of comic books, replete with characteristic “speech balloons” and onomatopoeia sound effects. Presenting the work in this stylistic way adds a secondary layer, one that could be viewed as playful and contemporary.

The two figures in headdresses are another thing that Ambrose-Smith has appropriated from elsewhere. Taken from a painting by Archibald Willard (1836-1918) entitled *The Spirit of '76*, these two men are reimagined by Ambrose-Smith as being dressed in feathers, giving the viewer the impression that they are Native. The original image features iconography of the American Revolution, with Caucasian men proudly marching on the battlefield, instruments in hand.⁶⁸ Once they are transformed into American Indians, they come to symbolize victory for Native Americans, much in the same way the men in Willard’s painting symbolized victory for Americans over the British. This idea of triumph is reinforced by the fist that rises on the left of the image, which appears to have connected with its intended target.

When focusing solely on the symbol of the fist – which has been left white, or perhaps translucent like the two Native musicians – the work begins to lose some of its innocuous nature. This limb lashes out simultaneously in the direction of the two men as well as Neal Ambrose-Smith’s enormous visage, ostensibly making contact with the latter of the two. Three lines of faded text also appear in this corner of the work, not quite coherent thoughts, but more of a list; they read: “Blue Ribbon,” “Kit Models,” and “full scale plans.” In the bottom portion of the work, below all of this action, floats the Enterprise. The spaceship is seemingly in orbit around the overlarge head of Ambrose-

⁶⁸ “American Revolution, Spirit of '76,” accessed on November 4, 2015, <http://www.americanrevolution.org/spirit.php>

Smith, allowing the self-portrait to work double duty, as both artist's image and planetary body in the painting. The spaceship covers the eyes of Ambrose-Smith's face, hiding his gaze.

The method of concealing the subject's stare is very reminiscent of works by other Native American artists, including T.C. Cannon (1946-1978) and Fritz Scholder. These two Native American master artists painted portraits that depict their subjects wearing sunglasses. This effectively shields their stare from the viewer, which, in turn, denies a direct association for the onlooker through eye contact. Notable examples of this would include Scholder's *Indian and Beer Can* from 1969, and Cannon's *Self Portrait in the Studio* from 1975. Not only does Ambrose-Smith's self-portrait echo this concept, but it can also be seen in the Native musicians, who, too, do not possess eyes. Making a detailed observation of the hull of the USS Enterprise, an image of the Plateau-region petroglyph *Tsagaglatal*, or She Who Watches, is visible. This pictograph, discussed earlier with Ambrose-Smith's print *Embrace Your Waste*, may be an attempt by the artist to place a positive spin on the possible fate of Native people or humanity as a whole. Since She Who Watches was a protective chief who became transformed into stone, her appearance in this painting could be viewed as that of protector. She Who Watches is also a signifier of change, and the placement of this image on the ship's hull likely denotes the scientific and technological advancements made in modern times. The icon of the star ship, along with the celebratory nature of the men, positive declaration of Native culture shouted in the words, as well as the planet fashioned out of Ambrose-Smith's Native head, all provide a positive affirmation of a hopeful future for Native peoples.

The painting *Sweet Corn, Baby!* and another of Ambrose-Smith's pieces, *The Case of the Peppered Moth* from 2013, share similar imagery, but differing themes overall. Like the painting previously discussed, *The Case of the Peppered Moth* also shows the image of the Starship Enterprise poised over a large surface. This undulating blue plane appears like water, and when coupled with the black background it leads the viewer to assume that this could be a planet. As with *Sweet Corn, Baby!*, a large hand enters the frame from the left side of the image, but this arm grasps the edge of the spaceship, making it feel like the spacecraft, and by extension humankind's present technology for viable space travel, is merely a toy and not a fully realized idea.

Appropriated text is utilized in greater amounts in *The Case of the Peppered Moth*, more so than in the previous artworks discussed. The majority of the Enterprise has been pieced together like a patchwork quilt made up of cutouts of words and phrases. In addition to the text, Ambrose-Smith also begins to add a great deal of appropriated imagery into this work, with pictures of an eagle and various plants, which represent nature, also adding to the ship's exterior. The artist has also placed cutout images of human limbs into the image, showing multiple unattached arms making up sections of the ship's hull. The inclusion of another type of body part, an eye, can be found on the exterior of the vessel. The eye is the Egyptian eye of Horus, and, according to Egyptian mythology, is said to symbolize healing and protection, among other things.⁶⁹ The eye could be analogous to the idea of the She Who Watches pictograph seen previously in other works by Ambrose-Smith. This idea is especially magnified when coupled with the compendium of unblinking pictographs staring from the bottom portion of the work. The

⁶⁹ Geraldine Pinch, *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 131-132.

faces that peer out at the viewer vary in size, shape, design, and color. When thinking of them linearly, it appears as if they are evolving before the audience's eyes, going from the single-celled dot on the left to the complex and humanistic forms on the right. A swath of pinkish-red demarks the upper edge of the spaceship, and the handwritten phrase "tell me what you see" is repeated five and a half times in this colored region. "Hallmarks of Individual Identity," "WE ARE BREATHING OUR OWN APATHY," "and Fall of Populations," "The Fit and the Unfit," and "A Uniquely Adaptable Organism" are some of the largest and most notable buzz phrases pasted onto the painting. Moreover, this artwork creates a cacophony of words clustered at the center of the spaceship, building up almost a dozen lines of text to sift through. Most telling of all of the phrases might actually be the title of this work, and how it refers to the peppered moth.

Evolutionary studies have been done on this insect, specifically involving how the industrial environment where it lives has impacted changes in this moth over time. These studies were conducted to show evolution at work, since the changes it has undergone, through environmental influences, have been seen and recorded by the scientists investigating this creature. The moth has undergone natural selection in the form of "industrial melanism," which shows how the moth has evolved to become more darkly colored as a direct result of living in a location where levels of soot are highly elevated.⁷⁰ This effort to endure in the face of such a dramatic change in its ecosystem has made the moth a case study in being an organism that is "Fit" and "Uniquely Adaptable" for survival. The work itself is testifying to the idea that in order to survive, adaptability is a necessity, and this is reflected most notably in the title of the work and the morphing

⁷⁰ L. M. Cook and I. J. Saccheri, "The Peppered Moth and Industrial Melanism: Evolution of a Natural Selection Case Study," *Heredity*, December 5, 2012, accessed October 20, 2015, <http://www.nature.com/hdy/journal/v110/n3/full/hdy201292a.html>

pictographs. For the purposes of context regarding humanity, this painting can act as a sobering reminder that if the species continues to flood the planet with poisons and toxins from the waste of industry, only three options may exist: adapt to the environment as the peppered moth has; leave the planet behind somehow on an as-yet-unrealized space craft; or simply perish.

In Ambrose-Smith's 2013 painting, *The Modern World We Live In*, the entity of the starship Enterprise once again makes a prominent appearance. It occupies nearly the entire bottom third of the image, with the stern of the ship facing the viewer, as if about to embark ahead on a journey. To the immediate right of the ship, a small, leafy plant takes up residence in the corner of the painting, growing solemnly alone, the last link to nature. In the upper portion of this artwork, a large, helmeted, floating head with a trompe l'oeil shadow can be seen. Somewhat reminiscent of *She Who Watches*, this disembodied head stares fixedly forward, an observer with pupil-less eyes, ready to engage the scene and any observers to the painting. On top of this head, a headdress of sorts is worn, having the look of the Egyptian diadem that was designed and worn by the Egyptian queen Nefertiti.⁷¹ In the middle third of the painting, the viewer is presented with a huge conflux of collaged words and phrases, and this text acts as a partition in the center of the work, separating the upper and lower halves of the piece. The phrases, "The Modern World We Live In," "WE ARE Introducing IMPROVEMENTS," "NEW PLAN NEW EXPERIENCE," "Products & Services," "Enjoy the greatest books of all time – and never have to read a word!," "Lost In A Clinical Study," and many more, are packed into the center portion of this image. All of these bits of writing hold a universal theme

⁷¹ Mary Abram, "The Power Behind the Crown: Messages Worn by Three New Kingdom Egyptian Queens," *Studia Antiqua* 5.1 (Spring 2007): 9-10, accessed July 18, 2015, https://rsc.byu.edu/studiaAntiqua/PDF/studia_antiqua_spr07.pdf

when read together: one of modernity and how that modernity is supposed to make life easier for all. But the reality of it is, when examining the big picture, the words, colors, shapes, lines, drips, scrawls, and imagery all build into a crescendo of visual noise, a complexity that is truly more indicative of present-day society. Throughout this painting, squiggles drawn like faces are repeated a handful of times, appearing as ephemeral visages, unable to cast their own shadows. Swatches of color comprised of reds, yellows, peaches, grays, and whites make up the patchwork background.

Ambrose-Smith tries to be mindful of something he calls “the three C’s”: Color, Content and Composition. Commenting on this, he says:

Yeah, I mean, that’s what the three C’s are, the rudimentary elements of what we look at, because it’s in some kind of balance. It could be symmetrical or asymmetrical; there is balance in there. The colors are going to evoke something, and how they function and if there is any kind of composition, if it’s figurative or if it’s recognizable.

The three main sections – the upper area with the head, the middle portion containing words, and the lower third the starship inhabits – all line up in such a way as to break up the picture plane into three mostly even horizontal sections. But through Ambrose-Smith’s application and placement of the background colors, as well as the large areas covered with vertical lines from paint drips, a greater balance of composition has been achieved. The Enterprise that is shown to the viewer works as an anchor to aid in tempering the frenetic look of the remainder of the work. The utilization of one-point perspective to bring non-horizontal lines into the picture plane also helps the ship to become a dynamic element in the composition. Overall, the impression of this painting is one of complexity and dichotomy. The segmented sections intersected by the elongated paint drips only serve to give this work a claustrophobic feel. The tumult of words, and

their persistent messages of betterment reinforce this idea. *The Modern World We Live In* is a reflection of today's modern world, and a reminder that progress will always have its costs.

This Star Trek ideology does not appear solely in Ambrose-Smith's paintings, but it has also seeped into many of his other creations. The iconography of this science fiction world has pervaded some of his prints. However, it seems as if the references in the printed pieces, versus the painted ones, have been placed into the imagery in a considerably more subtle, non-overpowering way. A striking example of the understated insertion of a science fiction reference can be seen in each of two monotypes that Ambrose-Smith completed in 2008, entitled, *The Final Frontier, but Not to Conquer* (fig. 10) and *Going Where No Man Has Gone Before* (fig. 11). In each of these works, Ambrose-Smith has prominently placed a canoe, and in both works these vessels are shown in three-quarter views. The boats appear as white shapes that are foreshortened into a darkened and undefined background that is in all likelihood representative of outer space. In each of these works, a lone roadrunner peers out over the front of its respective boat, and this bird serves as the captain of this sea/space-going vessel, steering it onward to adventures and discoveries in its voyages. The two prints, nearly mirror images of one another, each have understated yet ubiquitous traces harkening back to Star Trek lore. Both crafts have the letters and number sequence "NCC-1701" stenciled onto their sides, giving the viewer the subtle indication that this canoe is acting as the fictional starship Enterprise, which also has this exact designation on its hull. The titles used in both of these works also reinforce the Star Trek motif, as the phrase, "the final frontier," as well as the phrase, "going where no man has gone before," are both spoken verbatim in the

1960s television show's opening sequence. When asked the reason why he chose roadrunners to be the starring creature in these two Star Trek prints, Ambrose-Smith recalls, "I had this idea of Captain Kirk going where no man has gone before. Canoes make good spaceships and [have] entertainment value. Native Americans were never starship captains and neither were roadrunners, so why not?"⁷²

The image of the roadrunner paired with canoes crops up once more in *Captain, They Scrambled the Code* (fig. 12). Very much akin to his prints *The Final Frontier, but Not to Conquer* and *Going Where No Man Has Gone Before*, Ambrose-Smith chooses to forego any blatant Star Trek references, instead focusing on how science fiction and personal culture can intermingle to formulate a strong image. The roadrunner in all of these images acts as captain, granting greater authority and autonomy to Native American peoples by not limiting themselves to stereotypical categories. So while a Native American captain is an idea that has not been explicitly portrayed in popular culture at-large, it is something that Ambrose-Smith is optimistic will happen someday. The substitution of the roadrunner for starship captain has its roots in everyday occurrences for Ambrose-Smith. During the year 2008, he had a friend who documented a family of roadrunners that had occupied her garage, and Ambrose-Smith asked if he could make drawings of the birds. He wanted to use the roadrunner in his work to further enhance the entertainment value, stating: "The use of stories and entertainment is tribal and I'm a firm believer in entertainment."⁷³ This sparked more and more drawings incorporating roadrunners, and they naturally started to find homes in some of his more sophisticated artworks. Thus, the convergence of roadrunner and Star Trek made perfect sense at the

⁷² Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

⁷³ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

time. The bird acts as the strong reference to his heritage and it makes more sense to use this animal as captain because, by keeping it playful, Ambrose-Smith does not overwork Native overtones heavily into the imagery.

Another of his prints from this same year, entitled *Light Speed* (fig. 13), creates a predominant focal point utilizing the presence of a hawk that was rescued. While this work in particular does not have a connection to Star Trek per se, it does allude to ideas about science and science fiction. After Ambrose-Smith had a chance encounter with a group of rescue birds – including eagles, hawks, and owls – he asked permission to draw them to use in some of his future creations. Ambrose-Smith states: “I grew up with animals around and all of our tribal stories have animals or animal connections.”⁷⁴ He has combined these two themes to formulate an idea that meshed his fondness for pop culture with the desire to get an imperative message to his audience. The central figure in *Light Speed* focuses on another rescue bird (Hawk) that was burned from power lines and lost its ability to fly. Ambrose-Smith’s mindset of the hawk in this piece returns the creature’s lost power back to him. He remarks, “I visualized him flying through space in my print. Time is represented by the three-point perspective of pictographs from the plateau region.”⁷⁵ In these images involving birds, Ambrose-Smith is coalescing the two worlds that he enjoys the most, popular culture and personal heritage. By presenting the viewer with his vision, he can begin to make inroads with these people about how the format of Native American art is changing for the twenty-first century.

The appropriated use of pop culture references is not limited to the realm of Ambrose-Smith’s painting, as they are also presented in many of his prints. For the most

⁷⁴ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

⁷⁵ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

part, these overt pop references appear slightly less frequently in his prints than in his painted works, but they are still a large part of the framework for many designs he creates. One extremely recognizable persona that recurs in Ambrose-Smith's work is the comic book, television, and movie icon of Batman. This embodiment shows up in the prints *You're an Animal, Run Like One* (fig. 14) from 2010, *Sam Small Feathers and His Cape at the Fancy Shawl* (fig. 15) from 2008, and *Charlie Two Eagles Exercising Affirmative Action* (fig. 16) also from 2008. In each of these three works, Batman's persona becomes skewed since the artist gives the viewer an idea, at least in two of the prints, of the racial identity of the man behind the mask; he is most likely Native due to his assigning a Native name to the images. As a figure that has dual personas, he must keep his worlds separate. But if Bruce Wayne were discovered to be Batman, he would become vulnerable, making himself and his loved ones targets. He would no longer have the bat, a creature associated with darkness, to provide him with protection. This is reflective of a crisis that some Native Americans face in contemporary times. While many people have Native names or look Native American, many other Native Americans are able to blend into society without any fanfare because they look, sound, act, and have names like their non-Native peers. While it is highly unlikely that any real person suffering under dual identity issues would suffer under the same risks as this fictional character, the message still holds credence. Regardless of how one might presume to examine these artworks, they strike powerful chords about the shifting roles of Native identity in modern society.

The color lithograph *Charlie Two Eagles Exercising Affirmative Action* shows Batman whisking off a blonde Caucasian woman, carrying her away from a small trailer.

Near this mobile home, a deer and a domesticated looking dog have been placed, and this scene conjures images of life away from civilization, perhaps life on a reservation.⁷⁶ The darkened background, presumably grass, is made up of scissors jutting forth from the ground, reinforcing the idea that this is a tough place to live. Batman appears to be rescuing this woman from her existence in this location, likely taking her to someplace less isolated and destitute. However, while the female in this work appears pale white, Batman, named Charlie Two Eagles by the artist, has a face with a very dark complexion. From these two things known about the hero, it is natural to assume that he is Native American. In the top portion of the image, over half a dozen lines of text are seen, and they read like a tag on an article of clothing, giving instructions on how to wash and care for a garment. The phrase “WASH DARKS SEPARATELY” is highlighted, perhaps as a solemn reminder of racial segregation or forbidden love for Charlie Two Eagles and his fair damsel in distress. Ambrose-Smith has used the term “Affirmative Action” in the title, which means “taking positive steps to end discrimination, to prevent its recurrence, and to create new opportunities that were previously denied minorities and women.”⁷⁷ By titling his work in this way, he seeks to point out the issues of racial inequalities for Native Americans, and he uses Batman as an icon of change for people who have experienced such treatment.

In the monotype *You're an Animal, Run Like One*, Ambrose-Smith uses the title of the print to present the onlooker with an assumption about the dual identity of Batman. He does not, however, lead the audience into any type of racial bias with this particular

⁷⁶ Duane Champagne, “Living or Surviving on Native American Reservations” accessed October 25, 2015, <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/10/08/living-or-surviving-native-american-reservations-57073>

⁷⁷ The Leadership Conference, “Affirmative Action,” accessed September 12, 2015. <http://www.civilrights.org/resources/civilrights101/affirmaction.html>

title, unlike the ones found with *Sam Small Feathers and His Cape at the Fancy Shawl* and *Charlie Two Eagles Exercising Affirmative Action*. The identity of the hero is more open to interpretation in this work, and, with Batman's secret identity being a mash-up of both man and animal, the audience can take the title at face value and imagine that human and animal characteristics are infused into the being's persona in the image. When examining the crime-fighter in the simplest way, through the use of the physical characteristics of both man and bat, Batman could be seen as possessing some animalistic or possibly subhuman qualities. However, a more profound way to think of this character would be to see Batman struggling with his own personal identity – does he choose or associate himself more closely with one role over the other? Or perhaps he likes the duality that his alter ego provides. The mask allows him to morph and be different things to different people, giving him advantages in both worlds. But this double identity can limit him as well since he can never fully immerse himself in one world or the other. Essentially if he is ever truthful and open to others, he takes great risk onto himself as well as endangering those close to him with this information.

Reading further into the layers of this particular print, one can see the obvious signs of good versus evil inherent through the use of a superhero, but it is nearly impossible to discern which one of at least three possibilities the artist would like his viewer to glean. Firstly, it could be that Batman is in fact Anglo, just like he is in the character's mythology. If this is the case, the image may be interpreted by imagining that Native people are considered to be the "animals," or villains, in his eyes. This would make the title of the work read very much like an internal monologue, with the central figure assessing Native people with a certain amount of disgust and loathing. However, a

second and completely reverse way to view this work is by visualizing that the hero is not Anglo, but that he is Native American. Using this hypothesis, the dominant icon of Batman very much serves as a strong graphic representation, one that culturally bestows onto Native Americans a persona that could give them ownership to reclaim power, or at least autonomy, from those who have inflicted injustice and hardships upon their people. In this scenario, these non-Native people would take up the role of “animal” and be subject to the swift, vigilante justice that is this character’s calling card. It makes the Native person strong through the swapping of traditional roles, usually with supremacy held by non-Natives. Finally, the third situation would most likely examine the bigger picture, with the viewer given the presupposition that Ambrose-Smith is depicting Batman as a representative of all of mankind, and that the animal – already being of nature – is a fundamental embodiment of it. With this in mind, it would appear that Batman is presented as less of a hero, or even an anti-hero, because he would be heedless in his crusade against nature, giving him traits more in common with the outlaws he typically battles against. Nature in the form of animals forced to flee from this masked crusader in order to save themselves really does not make much sense when thought of in terms of the idea of what Batman stands for. However, when thought about solely in terms of humankind and the environment, it could be seen as appropriate. Man has the power to do whatever he likes to the world and the way in which man wields power against the environment is like a dark crusade. But he labels himself “Batman,” which is of both man and animal, and he is depicted as a force fighting for good, thus this third scenario seems rather unlikely.

Looking more closely at what is included in the monotype itself, Ambrose-Smith again utilizes the technique of taking text from other sources, giving the work a liberal smattering of blue and red patches of words and phrases imprinted onto the surface of the print. Many catchy advertisement one-liner phrases such as, “ACT LIKE A BABY,” “STOP SNORING!”, “COOKIE Diet,” and, of course, “you’re an animal RUN LIKE ONE,” are littered throughout the work. The words “POW WOW” once again are a dominating statement in the image, which simultaneously conjures thoughts of Native dances and comic book fight scenes. These attention-grabbing buzzwords are designed to make an immediate impact on the reader, a succinct segue to an idea that was originally conceived as a way to sell a product of some sort. This is the type of textual imagery that denizens of contemporary society are faced with on a daily basis, so much so that these kinds of messages have become commonplace and, as such, ultimately get ignored. By placing these phrases in this work, Ambrose-Smith is reimagining them, giving the words an important and secondary meaning that places the focus squarely on a Native person’s navigation of modern civilization. All of the words and pop culture signifiers reinforce the trouble that many Native people have when adjusting to contemporary society outside their own culture. With these things in mind, the viewer can glean the dichotomous nature in which this image is steeped, and no matter how one may choose to interpret the image, this artwork shows that life in the modern world is complex and not easily navigated by man or hero.

Sam Small Feathers and His Cape at the Fancy Shawl and *Charlie Two Eagles Exercising Affirmative Action* are two more prints that feature the iconic hero Batman. The artist’s decision to bestow Native names on the central figure in each of these two

works makes the Native American identity into something heroic. The act of naming transforms Batman's secret identity in a way that operates as a form of empowerment, conferring upon Ambrose-Smith's brethren the starring role, this time as protagonists, not merely the sidekicks or – worse still – the antagonists. On the surface, both of these artworks provide more positive takes on the role of Batman than does Ambrose-Smith's work, *You're an Animal, Run Like One*. The print from 2010 is nearly a carbon copy of *Sam Small Feathers and His Cape at the Fancy Shawl* in its main visual components. Both works feature Batman's overlarge face, as well as the words "POW WOW," displayed with the exact same positioning and size. The main difference between the pair is that the 2008 work does not feature any other text in the image, limiting the exploratory nature of Native identity that is present in his 2010 work. Moreover, the titles of these two works set emotional tones for the viewer, with *You're an Animal, Run Like One* leading the audience by injecting tension and uneasiness while his earlier print takes a stance that leans closer to lightheartedness, or at the very least graced with less negative undertones. Thinking back to the Ambrose-Smith painting *No Matter Which Way You Go, Powwow!*, a connection can be made between the film character of Dirty Harry and the fictional hero/anti-hero, Batman, who is discussed in the previous three prints. The pair of iconic personas can be viewed similarly, since they share a certain number of parallels. The greatest of these is that that they are both presented as dark heroes, caught somewhere between good and evil, each figure possessing a strong resolve and willingness to use any necessary, and sometimes even unscrupulous, means as a way to defend their respective worlds. The dichotomous nature that these characters' personalities manifest may be the exact thing that Ambrose-Smith is drawn to and

something that he wants to direct the audience's attention towards since it reflects the clash of two worlds that many Native Americans face in contemporary society. He uses both of these figures as jumping-off points to begin thinking about the duality and complexity of modern civilization. Both Batman and Dirty Harry possess traits of human frailty and imperfection. This allows the audience to realize that these men are just that: *men*. When viewed in this light, these icons present themselves as having more in common with the average Joe than characters in Star Trek, for example. While it is true that Ambrose-Smith placed Dirty Harry's image in a setting that works to limit the figure's original hostile intent, down to its core the persona continues to embody imperfection and fallibility.

Through the use of science fiction and popular culture, Ambrose-Smith is able to create a touchstone for his audiences, one where the artist can meet the onlooker on common ground that is found in the imagery. By connecting with viewers in this way, he opens the door to them to think more broadly about his art and what it represents. He wants to merge amalgamations of the past with the present, the exciting with the mundane, text with colors, and culture with fiction in images like *No Matter Which Way You Go*, *Powwow!*, *You're an Animal*, *Run Like One*, and *The Case of the Peppered Moth*. Since the pieces he makes are accessible, it gives onlookers the freedom to dig deeper into the work, almost certainly helping them attain a stronger and more meaningful interpretation in the process. Speaking pointedly on how popular culture icons function in his art, Ambrose-Smith says, "Putting something like [the Starship Enterprise] in there... people will see a pretty image or just a cool, sexy looking spaceship or whatever. Most people know what it is, which is good. I try to put things in

the work that reach more of an audience.”⁷⁸ It is the same with Batman, Dirty Harry, magazine cutouts, and a multitude of other instantly recognizable things residing in his art. He continues speaking on relating to the public, saying, “Putting my [face] into paintings... it gives it a sense of identity... When we look at paintings, look at art, if there are people in in, we are more inclined to check it out than if there are no people in it.”⁷⁹ Understanding how to make imagery that people find non-threatening is important in having them engage the artworks, and by using popular culture and science fiction, Ambrose-Smith can shed enlightenment more readily in the minds of his audience.

⁷⁸ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

⁷⁹ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at Satellite Coffee, Albuquerque, NM, February 22, 2013.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Integration, inclusion, and connectivity: these three words embody what is at the core of Neal-Ambrose-Smith's art, ideas, and ideals. He is set on achieving this lofty goal of integration through the use of his own melting pot ideology and background.

Ambrose-Smith's voice is important to both the world of Native art as well as the world of contemporary art largely because he is unafraid to tap into sources that are valuable to him as a Native American, an artist, and a human being. The connectivity of modern society has turned humanity into a global community with the Internet, giving everyone the opportunity to see what is out there. Once this Pandora's box was opened, it can never truly be closed again. To Ambrose-Smith, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and it is in his artwork where we can see this unbounded spirit shining through like a spotlight, highlighting a modern Native American psyche. He is Native, but he has the ability in the twenty-first century to break free of the so-called "traditional" expectations with which that society and the art world at large might try to saddle those artists identifying as Native American.

An important crux of Neal Ambrose-Smith's artwork is the wish to streamline ideas. It is to pare down, to get rid of the unimportant things, like labels and expectations, and use art as a way to educate and inform in an entertaining way. He has something to say – be it on the state of the environment, the complexities of existence in modern society, or the need to strive for a better future – and he does not want to hem himself in; he wants his message to go to the masses. When approached about his feelings

concerning the label “Native American artist,” and whether or not he identifies with this classification, Neal Ambrose-Smith replies:

I identify as an artist before anything else. I am a creator, a mark maker and an assembler. When I think about creating I'm not conscious of my identity or my culture, but it's always there. For instance, when I see a triangle I am reminded of tipis first and always. Someone else may see a polygon or more specifically an isosceles triangle, say. Similarity or congruence, resemblance or harmony... these truths of identity are also of art. We believe we can see everything, but understand only what we know. Perhaps we only see what we know? Still, the question may be *what are we looking for?*⁸⁰

Ambrose-Smith, like Fritz Scholder, would likely prefer to be identified as an “American artist” not an “Indian artist.” However, unlike Scholder, who claimed over and over again that he was not Indian because he was “only” one-quarter Luiseño,⁸¹ Ambrose-Smith knows exactly who he is and who he identifies with and, because of these close ties, he understands why his Native culture is important to him.

In the 2006 book, *Relations: Indigenous Dialogue*, Bob Haozous shares his thoughts on the issues of cultural integration for Native American artists. When discussing the RELATIONS project he was working on at the time, Haozous stated:

We, as a group, or as cultural representatives, cannot allow ourselves to be dictated to by non-Indigenous philosophy. It is the creation of this Indigenous philosophy that gives our group a sense of purpose. It goes without saying that those of us with traditional knowledge must also accept the importance of those who seek honest, healthy, or possibly revolutionary change. Conversely, those who are challenging the status quo must equally embrace those who maintain our cultural wisdom and experience.⁸²

The main idea that should be taken away from his remark is one of balance. Haozous says that these artists should not be dictated to by non-Indigenous philosophy yet there is

⁸⁰ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, April 24, 2013.

⁸¹ Lowery Stokes Sims, ed. *Fritz Scholder: Indian, Not Indian*, (Munich: Prestel, 2008), 30-33.

⁸² Joseph M. Sanchez & John R. Grimes, eds., *Relations: Indigenous Dialogue* (Santa Fe: Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, 2006), 12.

no way to dismiss it fully, so accepting change is inevitable. Therefore, a balance between these two sides must be struck. When taking Haozous's words in the context of Ambrose-Smith's art, it reflects Ambrose-Smith's own philosophies of using the framework of his culture and heritage but mixing it with his own honest relationship to the social and physical world in which he lives. Ambrose-Smith truly feels the need to turn a blind eye to limitations when thinking about the art he creates and how outsiders might view his ideas. Being able to bring that type of ideology into his work consciously is a good jumping-off point for the artist, one that keeps him focused and prevents the machinations of others – those unwilling to accept contemporary Native art as an elite genre, who want Native art to look a certain way or to fit into a narrow preconception – from affecting him. He harvests inspiration from everywhere, but perhaps he would still prefer to think of it as larceny. Ambrose-Smith reiterates his stance, declaring, “You have to steal ideas! You have to in order to keep things going. Grow and change – keep moving in a direction. Don't stagnate, and always engage in entertaining yourself.”⁸³

In order to move forward with art, and life, one must be able to do two things: remember and forget. This idea sounds paradoxical, so an explanation is in order. As children growing up, we all learn certain things: what names to call ourselves, labels of things and people, what colors are, what things taste like, and so on; we develop opinions, likes and dislikes, behaviors and habits – among many other things. This knowledge is acquired from parents, peers, teachers, media, and almost any place where information can be garnered. Everybody spends their early years learning the ways of the world, uncovering their own family history and personal heritage, accepting or rejecting

⁸³ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at artist's studio, Corrales, NM, March 26, 2013.

religion – just finding a unique path to walk. While all of this information and experience is of the utmost necessity, it can become overly complicated once a person is fully formed. With this in mind, artists are people who need to be able to let go of some of this structure and allow freedom and creativity to shine through – essentially, to forget for a time. The artist Neal Ambrose-Smith forgets the impositions placed upon him for being born Native – what society anticipates from him as a “Native artist” – freeing himself from preconceived notions. He chooses to forget that which does not serve him or his art, instead he chooses to remember what is at the core of everyone: we are all human and we are all connected. Recalling his childhood, Ambrose-Smith says, “My first recollection, as told by my mother, is having chocolate pudding while in my high chair. She’d give me a bowl and I would paint my face with it.”⁸⁴ Ambrose-Smith has the ability to shrug off the demands and perceptions of outsiders, the desire and capacity to be free and childlike, and the skill to act as a bridge of connectivity with others through his ideas. These things make Ambrose-Smith’s art stand apart from what might be expected from a Native American artist. This notion harkens back once again to the inimitable Picasso who said, “Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.”⁸⁵ Ambrose-Smith has seemingly decided, as an artist, to remain a *child* once he grew up. This is just another idea Ambrose-Smith has stolen from the famous twentieth-century painter, retaining that childlike wonder and love of art and channeling it into his works. “I love it. I love to paint, I am driven to have that experience,” Ambrose-Smith explains. “Learning where you’ve been is important to showing where you are going. If you don’t

⁸⁴ Erik Parker, e-mail correspondence with Neal Ambrose-Smith, January 13, 2015.

⁸⁵ Laurence J. Peter, *Peter’s Quotations: Ideas for Our Time* (New York: Bantam, 1979), 25.

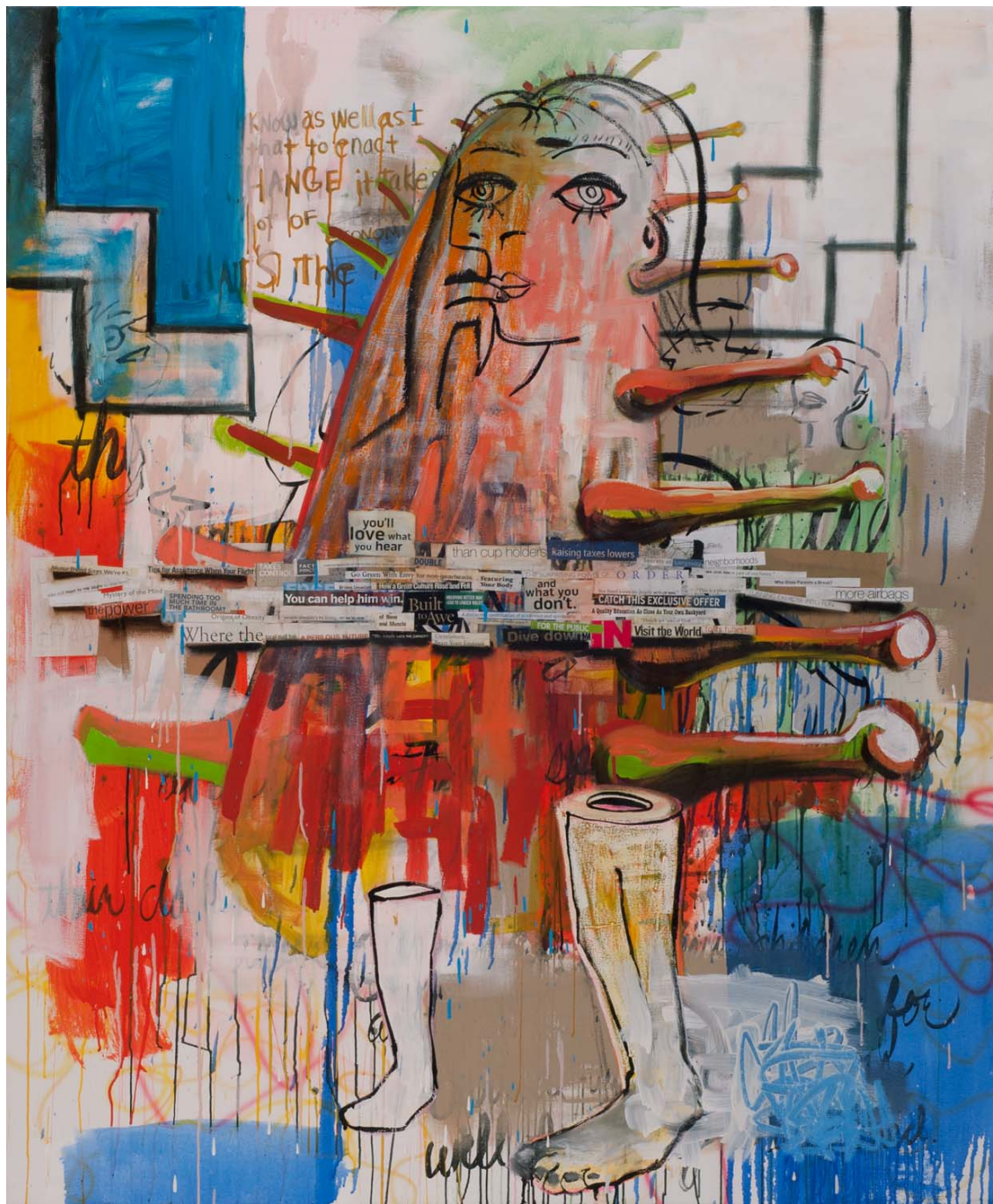
know where you're going because you don't know where you've been, then what do you have?"⁸⁶

Ambrose-Smith takes all that he has learned and all that he has “unlearned” and focuses it into his art like a laser beam. The imagery that he creates is universal, ideas that resonate in the language of the modern and the mainstream. He serves his dual Gods – one of art and the other of popular culture – quite zealously, and it is this kind of potent tenacity and innovation served up in his artwork that is sorely needed in the genre of contemporary Native art. All of these ventures in multiple venues of art are what make Ambrose-Smith a key figure in shaping a modern landscape for Native American art. At the heart of the artwork that he creates lies not only his personal culture but also knowledge and wisdom from everything he has ever touched. He wants people to see that and realize that we are all the same, that we live on the same planet, and that our goal should be to work together for a better, more unified future.

⁸⁶ Neal Ambrose-Smith, interview held at artist's studio, Corrales, NM, March 26, 2013.

IMAGE APPENDIX

Figure 1:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Tips for Assistance When Your Flight Takes Control*, 2013, Oil on canvas, mixed media, 72 x 60 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2:



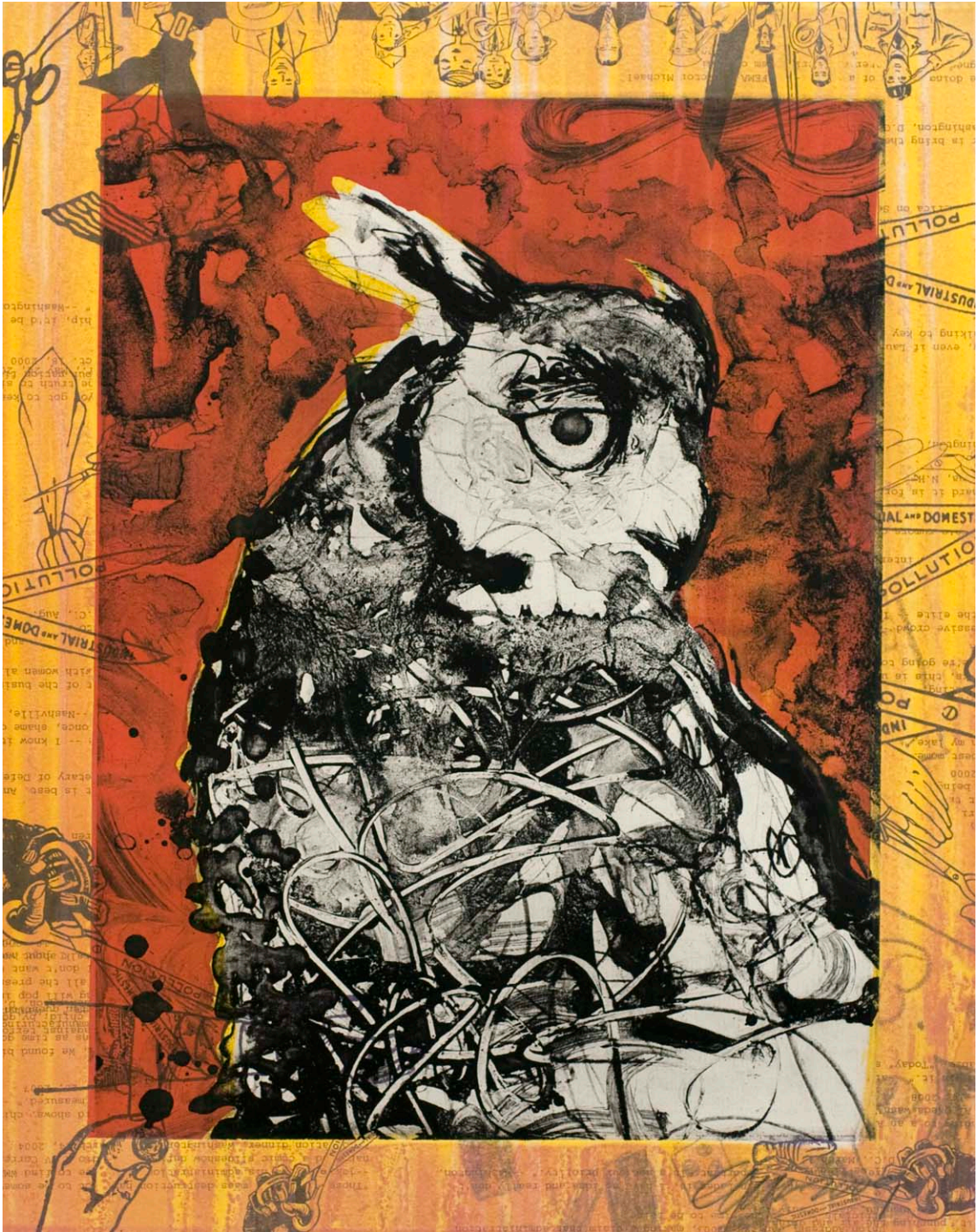
Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Baby Birdbrains*, 2012, Mixed media monotype, 30 x 22 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Nuclear Sunset*, 2008, Monotype, 30 x 44 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 4:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Embrace Your Waste*, 2009, Solarplate, 19 x 15 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Commodity Cans*, 2009, Found objects and mixed media, 60 x 48 x 24 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 6:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *No Matter Which Way You Go, Powwow!*, 2013, Diptych, Oil on canvas, mixed media, 60 x 96 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 7:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Sweet Corn, Baby!*, 2012, Oil on canvas, mixed media, 60 x 48 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 8:



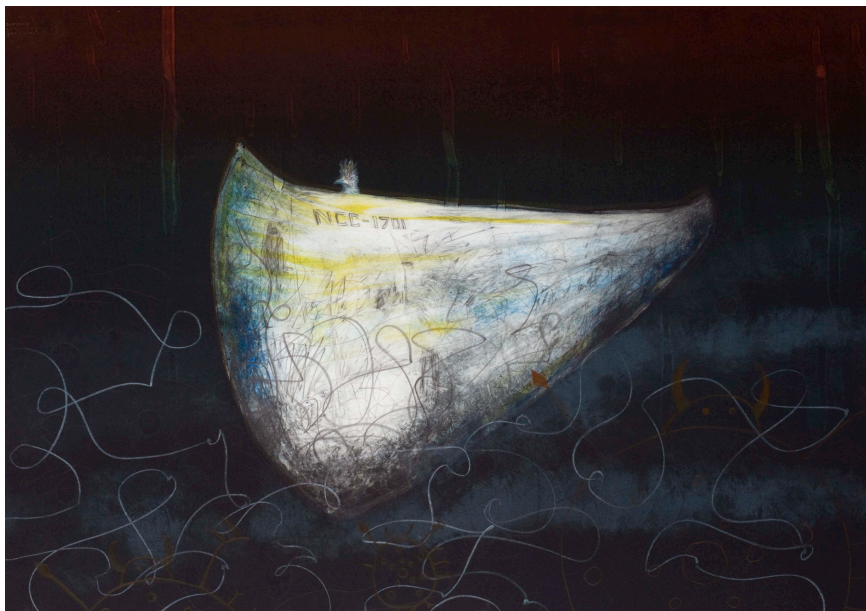
Neal Ambrose-Smith, *The Case of the Peppered Moth*, 2013, Oil on canvas, mixed media, 48 x 72 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 9:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *The Modern World We Live In*, 2013, Oil on canvas, mixed media, 72 x 60 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 10:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *The Final Frontier, but Not to Conquer*, 2008, Monotype, 30 x 40 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 11:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Going Where No Man Has Gone Before*, 2008, Monotype, 22 x 30 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 12:



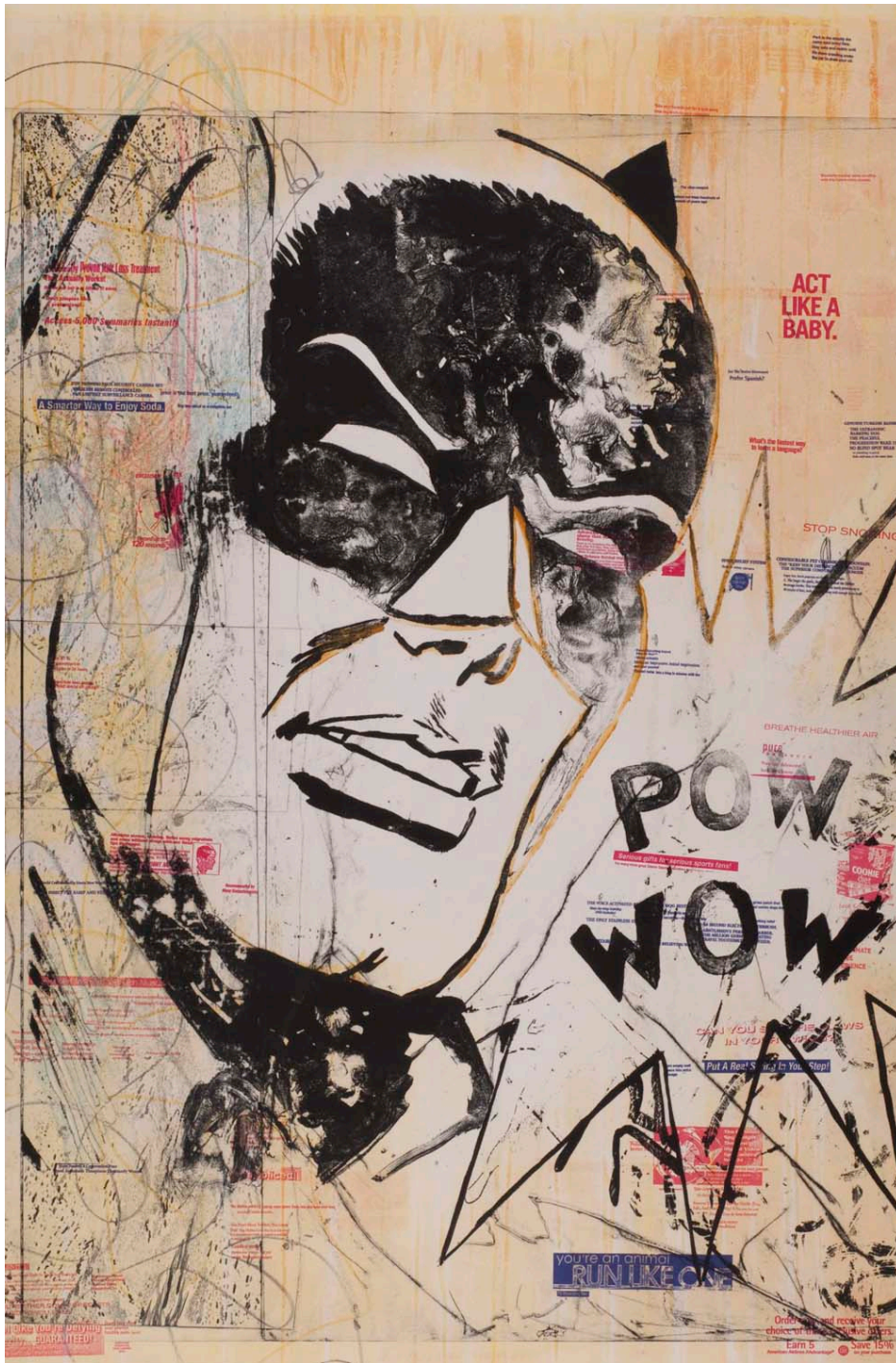
Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Captain, They Scrambled the Code*, 2008, Monotype, 22 x 30 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 13:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Light Speed*, 2008, Monotype, 30 x 44 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 14:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *You're an Animal, Run Like One*, 2010, Intaglio-type, 47 x 32 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 15:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Sam Small Feathers and His Cape at the Fancy Shawl*, 2008, Inverse intaglio-type, 41 x 30 inches, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 16:



Neal Ambrose-Smith, *Charlie Two Eagles Exercising Affirmative Action*, 2008, Color lithograph, 30 x 22 inches, courtesy of the artist.

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