

12\_Cafe 541\_ Caprario August 1, 2020

### “The Art of Subversion Over Appropriation”

Images, words and ideas are so fluid. The more I write, the more I appreciate the influence of context and interpretation regarding my own comprehension. And the more I'm certain that one's location in relationship to appropriated material is critical. We in the arts can lead and direct the larger society toward a culture not stained or restrained by the colonizing structures built to contain and dominate rather than to thrive and celebrate, but only if we consciously choose to do so.

Appropriation is about power. It's about taking and using something that belongs to someone else—their culture, history, identity—because you can. It is essentially a form of erasure that marginalizes, excludes or assimilates the other into the dominant default group but without all the bennies enjoyed by those who occupy that privileged space. Many well-meaning folks are so insulated by their unearned privilege that cross-cultural appropriation is seen as a form of benign borrowing or an homage'. Who wouldn't be flattered by having what's yours—your cultural identity and life experience—pinched and profited off of by someone else? Just ask the Romanian people of Bihor who “were so outraged at Dior replicating their traditional jackets with neither permission nor credit that they established their own online magazine and store.” Closer to home, Nike cancelled its 2019 roll out of a new version of its popular “Air Force 1” shoe after the Indigenous Guna community in Panama successfully sued the footwear behemoth for “pirating” a protected traditional design. *Their* traditional design, thank you.

How about having one's pain assumed by others? The 2017 Whitney Biennial exhibition in New York included Dana Schutz's large oil painting, “Open Casket.” The piece depicts Emmett Till, a Black 14-year-old boy who was brutalized and lynched by two White men in Mississippi in 1955, and Schutz appropriated both its subject and composition from a well-known photograph taken at the time of Mr. Till in his open casket. In her gossamer defense of her work's sensational and, in my opinion regrettable appropriation, Ms. Schutz, who is White, said “I don't know what it is like to be black in America. But I do know what it is like to be a mother.” Oh, Dana...your privilege is showing.

Subversion is a conceptual stance taken by many artists to assert stories and positions either not generally told or that have been historically appropriated as acts of cultural aggression and as trophies. The African American artist, Titus Kaphar's work brilliantly re-appropriates and subverts the Western European aesthetic paradigm in order to reclaim what's his—the history of Black bodies in America and American art. His Neoclassical-style paintings and mixed media works reconfigure art historical sources and highlight the presence and agency of African Americans in the American Story. His beautifully crafted images compel and draw one in for, as Kaphar puts it “...important and difficult conversations.”

Portland artist Wendy Red Star reclaims the racially offensive cultural tropes and assumptions that have traditionally been assigned to Native American imagery by beating those racist appropriations at their own game. Red Star is of Apsáalooke (Crow) and Irish descent; the tension that exists within her bi-racial

heritage and the use of conventionalized depictions of Native Americans is juxtaposed in her surreal and humorous multimedia works and photographs. Red Star asserts a new model of authentic cultural identity that resonates with an honesty that is both revealing and refreshing. Her work simultaneously confronts and delights the viewer as it turns upside down the romanticized representations that have long stereotyped the numerous and diverse First Nations Peoples' existence and cultures into one palatable, easy to digest stereotype for popular consumption.

It's all about power. Use yours well.

626 Words

#### **IMAGES AND REFERENCED LINKS:**

Wendy Red Star Image:

"Four Seasons Series (Fall)"

large format color photograph

<https://www.wendyredstar.com/>

Titus Kaphar Image:

"Behind the Myth of Benevolence"

oil on canvas

<https://kapharstudio.com/>

[https://www.ted.com/talks/titus\\_kaphar\\_can\\_beauty\\_open\\_our\\_hearts\\_to\\_difficult\\_conversations?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/titus_kaphar_can_beauty_open_our_hearts_to_difficult_conversations?language=en)

Common Objective's Practical Guidelines For Working Ethically With Artisans:

<https://www.commonobjective.co/article/practical-guidelines-for-working-ethically-with-artisans>

"Nike cancels 'Puerto Rico' shoe over Panama indigenous design"

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-48363024>

Dana Schutz and the Whitney Biennial Controversy:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2017/03/23/dana-schutz-responds-to-outcry-over-her-controversial-emmett-till-painting/>