

“The Most American Thing Ever Is in Fact American Indians”



Indianhead Motel, Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. Photo via Recapturist.com

On Jimmie Durham, Native Identity, and *Americans*, the Forthcoming Smithsonian Exhibition

“How is it that Indians are present everywhere—in the form of place names, popular culture, advertising, sports team names, weapons systems—yet barely present in history and largely absent from the great national debates of our time?” At his August 31 talk at the Walker Art Center, author and curator Paul Chaat Smith examined this question through twin lenses: *Americans*, the ten-year show he curated that opens at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian this fall, and the controversy surrounding the identity of Jimmie Durham, an artist (and Smith’s friend) whose Cherokee heritage has been questioned. Drawing from Durham’s influential career, as well as alternate

BY
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approaches to the intersection of art and politics, Smith addressed a riddle at the heart of American life:

For most Americans, the vast majority, Indians are not present and Indians are invisible. Yet paradoxically, Americans are deeply familiar and emotionally connected with Indian imagery, with Indian place names, with Indians in the fabric of American life.

The following is an illustrated transcript of Smith's August 31, 2017 talk. Video of Smith's presentation, including an introduction by Walker director Olga Viso and a brief Q&A with audience members, can be viewed at the end of this presentation.

Hi, Minneapolis. So this is where I'm supposed to say how pleased I am to be here and how much I've been looking forward to this evening. Well, actually, no. It's not that I've been dreading tonight. I would say it's more anxiety, with a twist of dread and a splash of fear. Naturally I've been looking for ways out. I thought about canceling. But, no: that would make me look bad, and looking bad is the main thing I'm afraid of.



Fritz Scholder, *Indian with Beer Can*, 1969
Collection of Ralph and Ricky Lauren; National Museum of the American Indian

So here's the problem: I've been a Native art critic for 30 years. A critic's job is to take positions, and I'm good at that. I specialize in the big, sweeping narrative. I argue Fritz Scholder's stubborn views on his own complicated identity are central to understanding his work, and I anoint *Indian with Beer Can* as the greatest painting in the history of the field. I propose that James Luna's *Artifact Piece* effectively divided Indian art into two eras. The first is called Before, the second, After. I've known many of our best artists for decades. I watched it all unfold when I lived in New York in the 1980s, and later when I attended a kind of graduate school in the 1990s, in Regina, in Saskatoon, in Thunder Bay and Banff, and other places too cold to mention, and later at the Smithsonian when I organized projects in Venice and Washington. Before all that, a book on the American Indian Movement. According to my publicist and press clippings, I'm a wry, sharp-edged, fearless observer of the Indian scene. Given all that, it would seem that offering my views on the Jimmie Durham crisis is simply part of my job. When you throw in my close friendship with him, going back to the 1970s, it appears to be mandatory. I kept looking and looking for a loophole, but no loophole arrived.



James Luna. Photo: Katherine Fogden, National Museum of the American Indian

This controversy has been bitter and painful, for one reason, because I know nearly everyone involved. I know all the Indians. I know Olga. I know Anne Ellegood, who curated *At the Center of the World*. And hey, bonus, I even know Sam Durant. I like them all. The field of Native art just isn't that large. I hesitate to say we're like a family, because most importantly that's so not a PCS thing to say. Yet in many respects we are, at least if we stipulate a very large and very messy extended family. Like any real family, some of us do hate each other, but we agree on the important things. We agree the best Native art is equal to any in the world. We agree it's been overlooked and ignored, and are committing to changing that. We cheer for each other's success. While I personally don't know everyone in the anti-Jimmie Durham campaign, I know most of them, and I believe they are coming from a sincere, and I have to say, extremely passionate place. (Parenthetically, I'll say I have a new appreciation for that amusing line about

moral outrage being the millennial’s drug of choice. Wow, so much passion. So much certainty.)

I confess the dread is also about something else. About 10 years ago I became a little bit popular. Don’t get me wrong. I fully understand this is nothing like being really popular, nowhere close to being famous. I’m none of those things, but my essays started ending up on freshman reading lists. There’ll be a line of text on somebody’s Facebook signature that I wrote. I’d routinely meet total strangers who knew my work. What I discovered is I liked being a little bit popular. It was fun. I remembered Elvis Costello talking about the time “Oliver’s Army” made it to the UK Pop 10, and how for about 10 glorious, never to be repeated minutes, he was a for real pop star. *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (2009) was my “Oliver’s Army” moment.



Jimmie Durham, *Head*, 2006

I followed up the Fritz Scholder project with *Brian Jungen: Strange Comfort*, another smash hit, and all was fine, or so I thought. I presented at the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association some years ago, raising questions about how touchy we’ve all become about everything, and also a paper called “Genocide: A Love Story,” which raised questions about genocide. Probably the best thing I’d written in years, and the response was very good. Even the genocide scholars liked it. But when it came time to prepare my essay for publication, I chickened out. I didn’t want to lose fans for being soft on genocide. I started pulling punches. I realized I not only wanted to remain a little bit popular, I actually wanted to become even more a little popular.

Remember that great scene when Walter White finally told Skyler the truth about why he became a drug kingpin? Turns out it wasn’t the money or the cancer.

Walter White said, “Because I liked it.” This isn’t a good thing for a critic. Anyway, after tonight maybe I won’t have to worry so much about being popular anymore. In her autobiography, Chrissie Hynde wrote about terrifying gigs at horrible motorcycle bars, where physical assault was all but guaranteed. She played them anyway. It’s the job. Sometimes,” she explained, “you just have to walk the plank.”

So the most incendiary, and also the most interesting, charge leveled at Durham is that he is a white man who for decades has perpetuated ethnic fraud. I believe this to be untrue, and I’ll explain why. While I know positions have hardened, and I’m not likely to convince those who’ve argued the other side, I do want to start with some areas of agreement. I agree Indian nations in the United States must be the arbiters of who is a citizen and who is not. I agree many tribes have been harmed by people who falsely claim tribal citizenship or cultural affiliation. I agree tribal sovereignty is always, to greater and lesser degrees, under attack, and there’s no guarantee it will exist in 20 or 50 years.



Still from Jimmie Durham's video, *Songs of My Childhood, Part One*, 2014

I also believe that if Jimmie Durham was a white man who’s told countless lies about his identities, it would fundamentally change how his career should be viewed. On this I have common ground with his critics. If this were true, I would be right there with them. And, obviously, it would end my relationship with Durham and forever change how I view his work. To me, there are only really three possibilities. The first is what I believe to be the case: Jimmie Durham was born into a Cherokee family, has never considered himself anything but Cherokee, and neither did anyone else in his family. The second is that maybe there was some Cherokee something-or-other in his family history going way

back, but for all intents and purposes, JD was born to a white Arkansas family, at some point convinced himself he was Cherokee, and over time embellished these tenuous connections to make it seem he was always Cherokee, instead of someone who later became his version of that. This would be very lame, if true. The last is that he's a straight-up white person who knew he is a straight-up white person, lied about being a straight-up white person, consciously built a false identity about his past, and for the last 60 years has profited by being a fake Indian.

I have to say it's the Jimmie as white man scenario that I think is most interesting. It would mean that for decade after decade I've personally been the victim of a carefully orchestrated ethnic fraud, one that took place on Sioux reservations, right here in Minneapolis, New York, Venice, San Francisco, Geneva, Berlin, and other places every decade from the 1970s to the present. It would mean all those casual stories about Arkansas, the family anecdotes, the pictures he showed me, his adventures in Houston and Austin, everything he said about his early life were lies. I'm sure that's not true, but here's the thing. I'm not wired for absolute certainty. I love doubt. I love confusion. Sometimes I even love being wrong. Anything's possible, right? If Jimmie Durham is a fraud, it would rank somewhere between two poles for me. The first would be finding out my parents were actually KGB officers. The second would be a colleague that you've known for decades, whose house you visited, who shared stories of their childhood and their siblings, you met their spouse and have friends in common, and you find one day every single thing they told you about their past was a lie. Hard to imagine what that would feel like, but I'm sure it would make me feel dumber than a box of rocks, which in a way would be deeply interesting.



Paul Chaat Smith on the Walker stage with a visual for his August 2017 talk.

The anger and fire in this debate has surely come from the certainty on the part of the critics that it's the last scenario—Jimmie Durham's a white man—that is true. Because if it were the other scenarios where the main issue is citizenship, I think there would be a little sympathy. Jimmie never claimed to be a citizen. He never pretended to and, the fact is, anyone who knows Eastern Oklahoma and Western Arkansas knows there are a great many people who consider themselves Cherokee

—not Cherokee descendants, but Cherokee—who are not citizens. I’m not talking about Senator Warren or Sarah Vowell, or other people that have said they have Cherokee background. I’m talking people who say they’re Cherokee and are not enrolled. These are people who have no agenda, nothing to gain, but simply believe their family histories. Now, here’s the tough but defensible argument: the Cherokee Nation can no longer allow people who are not citizens to identify themselves as Cherokee, period. Any honest person would have to concede this is a big change, that this idea that no one can be Cherokee except those who are citizens of one of the three recognized Cherokee Nations. That’s radical. That’s new.

Jimmie Durham does not just happen to not be enrolled. He’s never tried to be enrolled, never wanted to be, opposes enrollment, and fundamentally is opposed to the Cherokee government at Tahlequah. How can that be okay for someone who believes that to be the most internationally renowned Cherokee artist? That’s a fair point. One curious thing about the debate over these past months is the omission or forgetting that not so long ago there was deep skepticism about tribal governments in our crowd. It was even a badge of honor. After all, the American Indian Movement’s crowning achievement was the attempted overthrow of the legal and popularly elected government at Pine Ridge in 1973. Yes, we can say, “But that was a corrupt puppet government that should have been overthrown.” When, I wonder, do they all quit being neocolonial puppets? Anybody got a date? Do we think it was only Pine Ridge that was rotten, and the others were pretty good? Even if they are all pretty good now, which we all know they’re not, it’s striking to see artists and scholars so anxious to show their loyalty to these institutions.



Installation view, *Jimmie Durham: At the Center of the World*. Pictured: Photo: Gene Pittman

I noticed years ago Indian academics bragging they had vetted their research with tribal governments. Call me old-school, but I believe artists and scholars should operate with a degree of skepticism toward state authority. Unlike Jimmie Durham, I am proud to be a United States citizen, and I love my fabulously screwed-up country, but I also have profound disagreements with it on a daily basis. Likewise, I support tribal sovereignty, I want it to continue, and I understand it's always at risk. I further understand many tribes and national organizations are deeply flawed.

Now, I'll admit I'm not a very good citizen of the Comanche Nation. Haven't been to Comanche Fairs since the 1990s. When I get those absentee ballots, which seem to come every four days, I let them sit around for weeks thinking, "This time I should really investigate the candidates, or vote on some impenetrable policy change." I never do. If you applied the standards some advocate, things like actively participating in cultural activities, learning songs and dances and so forth, I would be disenrolled in a heartbeat. I don't live in Oklahoma, and if family members didn't live there, I would rarely, if ever, visit. But I have this tribal membership card, so I'm Comanche. But that doesn't mean I know anything. Identity is not knowledge.

I also think the anti-Durham people are much too hard on Lucy Lippard and Jean Fisher and those European curators. It is asking far too much to expect them to have investigated Jimmie's identity and become experts on the intricacies of tribal enrollment. On the other hand, the campaign is much too lenient with the scores of well-known Indian artists and curators who have supported Durham since the 1970s. These are the people who should be held to account for enabling this alleged fraud to continue. People like myself. Why are you giving us a pass? We all knew Jimmie was not enrolled, and we also knew he fundamentally disagreed with that very concept. We all knew his Cherokee identity was controversial. I can assure you if myself or any of these colleagues believed Jimmie was a white man, they would not have exhibited with him or written about him. What most of us thought was that his not being enrolled was not determinative of whether someone was Cherokee or not. This is fine to disagree with that position, but it feels cheap to denounce the Lucy Lippards and barely mention the many leading Native writers, artists, and scholars who never saw what was so blindingly obvious to those critics.



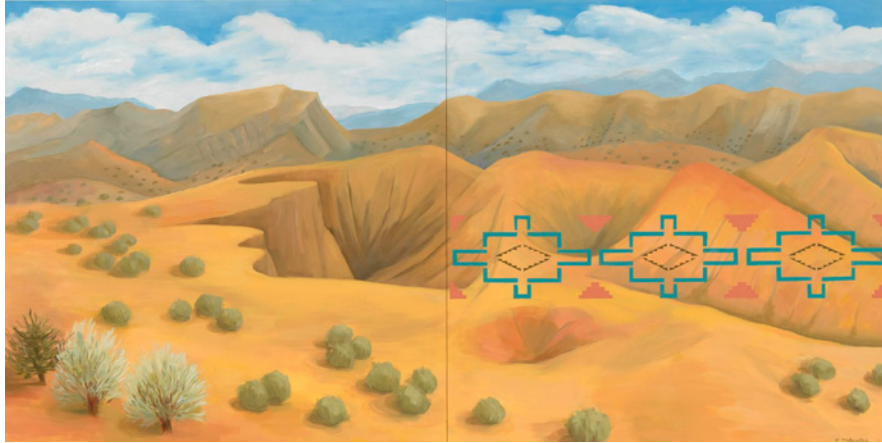
Installation view of Jimmie Durham: *At the Center of the World, with L'Essence* (2007) at left.
Photo: Gene Pittman

If the question is why the art world didn't see all this sooner with the clarity of Durham's critics, I'll tell you why. It's because for decades he's worked closely with many Indian artists, has championed Indian art, including some of our most accomplished. These white curators and critics didn't ignore the controversy. For the most part, they knew all about it, and saw an Indian art crowd divided on the issue. So, once again, the real blame shouldn't be assigned to these all-powerful white curators, who in this narrative are only interested in Durham and no other Indian artist, but on people like myself, who one way or another validated him time after time for many years.

The other suggestion I would make is to maybe dial back the rhetoric about being Cherokee, enrolled or not. Everyone knows the unofficial state religion of the Oklahoma Cherokee is Southern Baptist Christianity. Everyone knows, in many ways, Oklahoma Cherokee aren't so different than other Oklahomans. When I read the lofty sentiments about stomp grounds and sovereignty, I wonder what part of Eastern Oklahoma they're talking about. This is a deeply red and southern place, speaking as a Comanche, we're sort of the yang to Cherokee yin, very different yet both Oklahomans. You know, when I sometimes read the highfalutin' rhetoric, I wish I could show the New York art world Facebook posts from my Comanche relatives. Their politics makes Fox News seem like the propaganda arm of European Social Democrats.

What is our role in all this? I think we're outsiders. Let's be honest. The most popular novelist in Indian country isn't named Alexie or Erdrich. It is and always will be Tony Hillerman. Most Cherokees have never heard of my friend Kay WalkingStick, (yes enrolled, though she's spent more time in Italy than Tahlequah), whose solo show at NMAI dazzled crowds last year. If they ever encounter the likes of everyone's favorite new indigenous art collective,

Postcommodity, they would be baffled, bored, or both. (But not me. I like you guys!)



Kay WalkingStick, *New Mexico Desert*, 2011. Collection the National Museum of the American Indian

You know what? That's all okay, really.

But the usual default stance of cutting-edge scholars and artists is that partisans on all sides of this debate consider themselves as oppositional. Yes, in times of great crisis, World War II or 9/11, we may be at one with state power. Jimmie Durham's identity does not rise to that level. Our job should be to be skeptics, to be critical, and ask questions.

I'm curious about a new trend among my colleagues in indigenous studies. They are fond of using the term "settlers" to refer to basically everyone they see on a daily basis who's not Indian. When I first heard it, I thought it was a joke. I've been thinking a lot about a statement by a Mohawk artist named Skawennati. She was wondering why so few Native artists ever make work about their white relatives and family members and significant others. I suppose those artists whose extended families are pure red all the way down are off the hook, but not really, because they probably don't exist, and also because Skawennati's critique is about curiosity and range. But what she's talking about are the Native people she knows. They're not bitter from bad experiences with these white people. They actually, they're family, they're their spouses, and yet somehow, somewhere, somebody might make some art that involves them, and it's curious that seems to never show up.

Why is Indian art and photography only and exclusively about Indians 24/7? Somehow, being an Indian artist or scholar means creating a bizarre wall between how our lives are actually constructed and lived and our intellectual work. It's especially weird given how many of these folks have white spouses who manage their art careers. They deserve a place on your canvases. They deserve a place in the

books that we write. To this end, I'm seriously considering a campaign to bring back the term "half-breed." I'll let you know how that goes.

There's another new trend I absolutely hate, and am baffled that people I deeply respect are on board. It's called "politics of citation." It seems to have started in Canada, not so long ago the home of the smartest and most talented Indian artists on the planet. This flavor of the politics of citation seems to involve making a declaration, perhaps in the manner of Chief Joseph, to never again to cite a person in your writings who is not indigenous. This is—how should I put this?—unfathomably stupid. I expect this will soon be followed by indigenous art histories which refuse to acknowledge Picasso or Warhol or Basquiat, who after all are just settlers anyway. They have nothing to teach American Indians. Come on, people. This is crazy, building a dumb little prison and sealing yourself off in it. Stop it.

So it brings me back to an even bigger question than who is Jimmie Durham? And that is, who are we? I insist we're a band of malcontents, rebels, known weirdos, dark dreamers, and troublemakers, or we're nothing. If your tribal chairman loves your book or your art installation, okay. Well, I'm not saying for sure there's something wrong with it, but the odds are pretty good there's something wrong with it. Take it from me, we're never going to be popular, not really. So let's stop trying and focus on what we're good at: writing books that don't sell and making art the nobody buys. Because it's important, people. Well, it's because somebody has to do it. Okay, I don't know why, exactly. Does it even matter? It's our job, okay? We're not supposed to be cheerleaders, but interrogators. We don't need more boosters. We're not the Chamber of Commerce.

To that end, as the country is engaged in controversies over Confederate monuments, I believe it's a good moment for Native artists to take a stand on the Confederate memorials erected by Indian nations who passionately believed in enslaving African Americans, who fought with the Confederacy until the final days of the Civil War. Tell me again the reason those monuments shouldn't come down, and the reason this history should not be interrogated.

I've gotten a lot of mileage out of saying things like, "Compared to the Comanche, the Sioux were a bunch of Girl Scouts." I still like the line. But the historical record, just as it is on the Five Civilized Tribes' profound commitment to enslaving black people, is crystal clear about the political economy of the Comanche empire. It was not a resistance struggle against the United States. It barely noticed or cared about the United States for most of the 19th century. The Comanche empire was built on the rape, murder, and enslavement of Indians and Mexicans, and in a very distant third, some whites, who actually were settlers.

At some point, Comanche scholars, artists, and critics should begin acknowledging that. And we should apologize for, among other things, doing

everything we could to exterminate the Apache. Without the jokes.

I know that sounds harsh, but history is harsh and it spares no one. Human beings throughout time and across the world demonstrate pretty much the same measure of brutality and grace. Talking about this part of our histories is a price of seeing Indians as fully human, not New Age forest bunnies. I see it as a powerful blow against white supremacy to insist that vast amounts of post-contact Native history is not a binary struggle between settler and the indigenous. That history is complicated and scary and dense, precisely because it centers around political agendas of Indian peoples rather than a neatly constructed 21st-century fantasy that everything that ever happened to us is about the white man. It wasn't. It isn't. These are difficult but worthy projects for my intellectual brothers and sisters who consider themselves social justice warriors. Join me if you dare.



Exhibition graphics for *Americans*, the NMAI exhibition Paul Chaat Smith curated

So if I had a really good transition it would go right here. Also a public service announcement: I am here representing the Smithsonian. They are kind and good people who grant their curators long leashes to express their views. Please understand the preceding commentary is my own, and does not necessarily represent the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of the American Indian, or Major League Baseball. All right?

Now I'm going to talk about the project I've been working on for the past seven years, an expensive and massively ambitious exhibition that is opening in Washington real soon, end of the year. It's the best thing I've ever done, and I predict it's going to be really, really popular. Now, the fact is I'm a pretty comfortable guy living in a rich country, but Nam June Paik is my curatorial spirit animal because my job is to engage a million visitors a year. Most of them will spend just 15 or 20 minutes in my exhibition. They live, as we all do, in a world where information is virtually free, always accessible, surrounded by astonishing imagery and entertainments to match every conceivable taste. My job is to deliver

an emotionally and intellectually powerful visual experience to an audience of every conceivable demographic. Often they are bored and cranky and, well, I have to say, badly dressed. Lately many are wearing bright red baseball caps with inspiring patriotic slogans. You know what? I love them all. The success of this project depends on whether I have an impact, whether this become a thing they talk about when they go home.

“I am a poor man from a poor country so I have to be entertaining every second.”

Nam June Paik

What I'm up against is that my exhibition is just one of several at NMAI, and that building is flanked by a dozen other Smithsonian museums, all world-class, all offering free admission, closed only on Christmas Day. You can imagine how jealous I am of my friends who are college professors, with their captive audiences and required readings and all those months of classes. So much power. I have no power. I have no leverage, no reading list, no grade to punish or reward. So, like Nam June Paik, I have to be as entertaining as fast as I can.

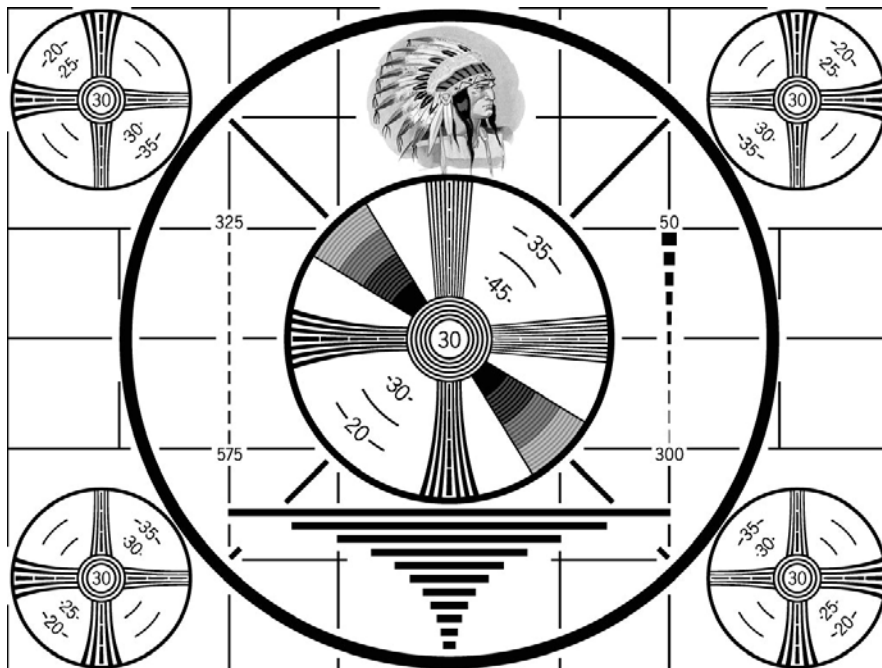
The assignment for this show came straight from the top. Kevin Gover, the NMAI director, said, We must create exhibitions that are more effective, that reach our actual audience, not some imagined audience, and drive home the message that the Indian experience is not just interesting, or sad, or inspiring, rather that the Indian experience is foundational to the United States. Sure, that sounds fine, but why this message? Because Kevin is convinced that the more people understand about American Indians, the better our chances are to preserve tribal sovereignty. He notes that many of the most devastating legal opinions were based not on bad law, but on bad history, incorrect facts, such as the land was empty, or Native people did not practice agriculture. He believes that over time a better-informed public will shape policies that benefit Indian nations. He's told his staff that he believes NMAI's been very effective at preaching to the choir. He says, Mission accomplished, and moving forward, we must be all about preaching to the congregation, people who don't always agree with us.

And so we're reframing our work as being that of a truly national museum of the United States, rather than an ethnic museum. In other words, our particular interest is in how American Indians have shaped the United States at large. For example, how Indian removal changed the entire country and was arguably the biggest event between the American Revolution and the Civil War, and not just because how it devastated Indians. It doesn't mean presenting just the Indian view of these events, which is always fake, because there's never one Indian view

of anything, but taking a larger view. What we are no longer doing is that we're no longer staying in our lane.

Kevin Gover's an optimist. He says, "The NMAI believes in the American people and American institutions, and are convinced that when they are properly informed, they will support programs, projects, and policies that promote the self-determination of Native nations." Following his example, *Americans* is an optimistic, forward-looking exhibition. My task, along with the original core team of Kathleen Ash-Milby and Gabi Tayac, was to translate these ideas into three-dimensional space for busy, distracted visitors. We talked a lot about why people visit the Smithsonian, and how the biggest draw is the chance to stand in front of an iconic object you've heard about your entire life: the Hope Diamond, Lincoln's stovepipe hat, the Apollo 11 command module, Dorothy's ruby slippers, Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis*. No technology, no book or image can top standing in front of one of those things with only plexiglass between you and it. Nothing ever will.

So we asked, what are those iconic objects for us? Our collection is full of extraordinary and dazzling works, yet there's nothing really that fits that bill. We have a rifle that was given to Geronimo, but that's not the same thing. You don't want to see Dorothy's handbag or Neil Armstrong's Ford Fairlane, or Lincoln's khakis. You want to see the specific ultra-famous thing you've heard about your entire life.



RCA's "Indian-head test pattern," used on television from 1947 until 1970

But we realized we do have something. They aren't objects, exactly. They are the handful of events and stories that every American has heard of. Maybe there's a

dozen. After exploring ways of beaming vast amounts of information and insight into our visitors' brains in some unobtrusive way during their 15 minute tour (technology isn't ready, but check back in five years), we quickly adopted the mantra of meeting people where they are. What people already know, however imperfectly, that became our mantra and became the common ground of the exhibition.

The things people know from history to involve Indians may be a dozen things. We ended up going with Thanksgiving, Pocahontas, Trail of Tears, and Little Bighorn. I can't go in detail on the treatment, but trust me, it's not like anything you've encountered before. The larger territory of the exhibition rests on what we call Indians Everywhere. In 2017 in this country of 320 million, Indians are perhaps one percent of the population. There are more Indian Americans than American Indians. In the Twin Cities, the Southwest, Upstate New York, some other places, Indians are present in daily life of Americans, but for most Americans, the vast majority, Indians are not present and Indians are invisible. Yet paradoxically, Americans are deeply familiar and emotionally connected with Indian imagery, with Indian place names, with Indians in the fabric of American life.

“What’s kitsch is Indians, said Irene, as images. There is no way around it. We’ll never get the franchise back.”

**Louise Erdrich,
*Shadow Tag***

Back when the decade was young, I was snowed in at O'Hare and read in one gulp a novel by a promising young writer from right here in Minneapolis. Turned out to be my favorite Louise Erdrich book. For one >thing, I didn't feel like I needed a doctorate in genealogy to understand who was who, and also, it's hilarious and oh so dark. Recommend it. Anyway, this line stuck with me: “We've lost the franchise and we'll never get it back.”

I asked myself, as I'm sure many of you have, “Well, what if Louise is wrong? What if there's a way to return the franchise back to the Red Nation?”

My curatorial team looked closer and realized we had severely underestimated the beast of Indians Everywhere, and really, that's it's true genius: shapeshifting and deflection, what we in the cultural criticism trade call normalizing. Indians have been the wallpaper of American life for centuries, and wallpaper is designed not to call attention to itself. It's just there. We're trained to ignore it. “Pay it no

mind,” the imagery and place names tell us. It somehow worms this idea into our heads, “There’s nothing unusual about it.” Yet I’m here to tell you there’s nothing like Indians Everywhere.

People say, “Well, Paul, what about the Notre Dame Irish or the Dallas Cowboys?” I laugh and say, “Let’s count. There have been thousands of teams with Indian names.” But then I say, “Hey, I’ll give you the sports names. Let’s call it even. Show me what other ethnic group has been the face of airlines and insurance companies and brake fluid and whiskey and cigarettes and software and hotels and motorcycles and surface-to-air missiles and luxury sports cars and attack helicopters and bottled water and atomic bomb tests and baking powder and fruit boxes and a third of the states and streets in every town and every city in the country.”



Indian Motorcycles logo

This opened up the paradox for us that most Americans know very little about Indians, yet from their earliest memories, Indians are part of their lives—and it never goes away. It’s just that these aren’t actual Indians. It’s the idea of Indians manifested in advertising and place names and cars and weapons and sports teams. The deeper we explored this, the more we found. Eventually this became the rocket fuel that powers the entire exhibition. So the big idea: Indians Everywhere. There’s nothing like this anywhere else.

It turns out that the most American thing ever is in fact American Indians. How crazy is that? The *Americans* exhibition sees Indians Everywhere as profound visual evidence that the country is acknowledging there’s no United States without the indigenous. It’s an emphatic, though subconscious, determination on the part of Americans to always remember it, no matter what.

jujitsu
[joo-jit-soo]

noun

a method developed in Japan of defending oneself without the use of weapons by using the strength and weight of an adversary to disable him.

the use of an opponent's strengths or one's own weaknesses to accomplish one's goals.

The Japanese have a name for this, what we're trying to do with the show. We're building an experience visitors will see for the first time what has been around in their entire lives, and move past the shiny distractions of stereotype, cultural appropriation, kitsch to see a bigger and more profound picture. In a way, the most radical thing about our project is our insistence on treating our visitors, overwhelmingly non-Indians, with respect and even affection. I so much want people to have a good time. We even have big sofas in the largest gallery, not the benches you usually see. I don't want people to feel guilty. When has that ever advanced Indian interests?



A fidget spinner, branded with the logo of Washington's NFL team

I've written about Indian imagery and romanticism since the 1990s, and what fascinated me was how the phenomenon was never just one thing, it was a shapeshifter. It always felt reductionist to say "stereotype" or "racist," because it's so much more than that. We began seeing the opportunity to surround visitors with the Indians they've known all their lives, with these familiar, comforting presences, as a way into a more profound engagement. The goal is to create a situation where visitors feel empowered to assess our arguments and decide for themselves. We're saying, "No, it isn't just kitsch or stereotype or one big racist joke." We're saying, "These images have tremendous power, and if you look closer, they can be decoded to reveal deeper meanings." This felt way better than dumping massive amounts of information on them. Visitors don't seek information. If they were, information has never been easier or cheaper to obtain than now. What visitors want is experience and meaning. They want to learn more about a topic they already know something about and are interested in, and they want to feel affirmed and to feel smart. Most of all, they want to understand how it relates to their lives. This isn't what they say if you ask them. This is what I know from 30 years as a curator.

Something else that's weird and striking about Indians Everywhere, especially at our present moment when it feels like the country hasn't been this divided since 1861, is how remarkable it is that the phenomenon crosses every demographic,

every taste, every region, ever political viewpoint. In the show, we have nearly identical tour T-shirts. One is from Kanye West, one from Lynyrd Skynyrd, with the same Indian death head feathered skull, a broad range.

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Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum object A19820119000, a Tomahawk missile, being transported into the galleries of *Americans*. Photo courtesy NMAI

As you probably know, exhibitions like this take a small village, and I want to acknowledge my partner in this enterprise, the formidable scholar and curator Cécile R. Ganteaume. University of Minnesota Press is publishing her book called *Officially Indian*, and it'll be out soon. You'll be seeing lots of her once we begin rolling out *Americans* in the next few months. The show is being constructed as we speak, and one of the key pieces is a actual Tomahawk missile. The grand entry into the gallery was some weeks ago. There's a famous line dissing rock critics that says, "Writing about music is like dancing to architecture." That's sort of how I feel about describing an exhibition before it opens. I'm not going to show you these pretty renderings of it, but I will tell you about some of the people featured in the central gallery in *Americans*. They include Albert Einstein, Elvis Presley, FDR, Karlie Kloss, Ted Turner, Robert Griffin III, Jimmy Hoffa, Michelle Obama, Tim McGraw, Boris Karloff, Cher, Harry Belafonte. I fully expect they'll come to life after closing each night. Imagine the parties!



Miss Tallahassee Rosemary Plunkett, 1962

The funny thing about curating at the Smithsonian is that we have a guaranteed audience most museums would kill for. A million people a year! But that doesn't translate into impact, and that's what we're after. Will Americans be in your head three days later when you look in your pantry and see that baking powder wearing feathered hats, or hear Peggy Lee singing about Pocahontas in a crowded bar, or when Little Bighorn is referenced on CNN about a losing political campaign? The awesome accomplishment of the Indians Everywhere phenomenon is incredible staying power of stories of Thanksgiving and Trail of Tears. They've taken up real estate in our heads and show no signs of leaving. Indians

Everywhere is a forever kind of thing. What we think about it, how we decode it, how we understand it, well, that's always changing. Indians Everywhere is part of the furniture in the American living room, and the exhibition proposes to rearrange that furniture. Because you know what? It's past due for a makeover. Can it really be done, steal back the franchise? Here's some friendly advice: Don't bet against us.

Watch Paul Chaat Smith's full talk:

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