

# Missoulian

Missoula Art Museum

## Artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith makes homecoming with MAM exhibition

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One of Montana's most respected artists has a homecoming in the biggest gallery at the Missoula Art Museum. A new traveling exhibition, "In the Footsteps of My Ancestors," marks Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's first solo show in the Garden City since 1998.

Smith, who calls herself a "cultural arts worker," has shown her politically and socially informed work around the world, including prominent museums like the Smithsonian and in arts centers like New York City.

The exhibition, which was arranged by the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, spans mediums and sizes from large-scale canvases to comparatively small prints. With dense and expressionist imagery and text, she addresses Native Americans' history and past and present mistreatment by the government and U.S. society as a whole; the toll of commercialism on society and the environment; all while maintaining a noted sense of humor, often conveyed through cut-out headlines from newspapers and magazines.

Her pioneering career began in western Montana: Smith was born in St. Ignatius and

is an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Inspired by the drawings of her father, a horse trader, she began making art at an early age. Despite discouragement from some teachers based on her gender, she put herself through college for a bachelor's and eventually a master's in art. From her home base in Santa Fe, New Mexico, she helped female Native artists earn recognition from galleries. She began curating shows of American Indian artists around the country, and in the process became one of the most well-known Native American contemporary artists in the U.S.

Smith will be in Missoula next Thursday for a reception and a public conversation on her life and work. She took some time to answer questions about her art and career via email.

**Q:** The minute you step into the gallery at MAM, the climate change-themed "Trade Canoe for the North Pole" leaps out at the viewer. Was there a specific experience or line of thought that spurred this new entry into the "Trade Canoe" series? It's also striking how many symbols, visual and text, are incorporated. Could you walk viewers through some of the imagery?

**A:** I'm constantly reading articles about climate change, social justice, indigenous seeds and plants, art books, education and Indian politics among other things. So with the possibility of the U.S. turning into a dust bowl with our aquifers and waterways drying up, plus the excessive heat we constantly have now and fires ravaging our forests and prairies, we will no longer be an agrarian country.

I made a "Trade Canoe" loosely based on Noah's Ark with lots of survival basics so that we can farm in the Arctic even though they say Canada is where our future farmlands will be. But since Canada's tar sands are destroying their environment we can't depend on them either. I loaded this canoe with lots of things we might need such as palm trees, which are a highly sought after crop these days. A little-known fact is that palm oil is in a lot of what we eat, what we lather on our bodies and even in what we wear, so yeah, I needed to put palm trees in the canoe.

**Q:** Given the size of some of these works, could you tell us how you conceptualize a piece from start to finish?

**A:** I'm usually thinking and dreaming about the next painting and ideas can come from anywhere, the news, reading about immigration, flipping through a book on art, seeing a billboard, a color, a cartoon, being outdoors, reading the CharKoosta newspaper, talking to my son, the artist and the Institute of American Indian Arts professor Neal Ambrose-Smith, I never know from whence it comes. ... When I have a vague idea, then I'm thinking of a title, sometimes it appears right away and sometimes I have to fish for it. The title describes the narrative for me, so usually I need it to hold onto, to stay on track with my story.



**Q:** The rabbit and the coyote both appear numerous times throughout the exhibition. Could you tell us what they symbolize to you, and the ways you draw on their personal and religious meanings in your work? (I was particularly curious about "The Long Shadow," in which the long rabbit's shadow is cast by a small human figure.)

**A:** Coyote is part of our Salish creation story, s/he helped Amotken "turn on the lights" at the beginning of the world. Coyote is also every human, foolish, bright, conniving, beneficent, helpful, greedy and generous. Coyote is a trickster and is always turning everything around, upside down. Rabbit is a part of the Cree-Chippewa-Ojibwe creation story in the Great Lakes and is known there as Nanabozhou or the Great Rabbit. Similarly s/he was sent by Gitche Manitou to help the humans and is also a trickster. There are standing figures of rabbits on rocks and cave walls around the Great Lakes and across Canada. I have Metis family in Canada in my background as well as Flathead Salish family where I am enrolled. These two tricksters guide me through my painting, my dreams and my stories. They are my assistants, my posse, they make me see the flip side of life and its ironies.

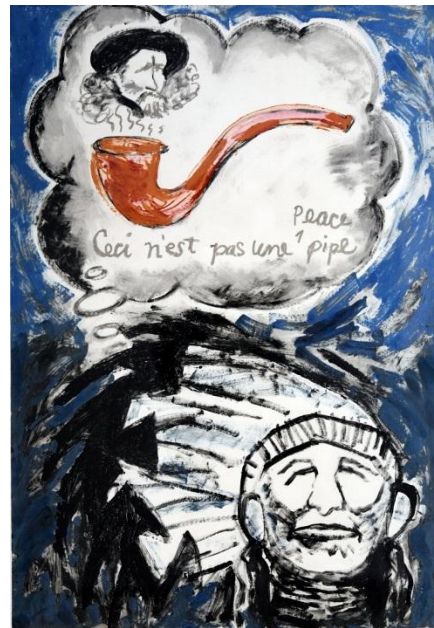
**Q:** Since you've used political, social and environmental messages in your art for so long, how has the reception to that aspect of your work changed over time?

**A:** I have used political, social and environmental messages in my work for more than 40 years and over time they have

become more blatant, more prominent. Sometimes the reception is warm and welcoming, sometimes not so much. I had a board member of a prominent museum tell me that he liked my painting but not my messages. I thanked him for being so honest.

Here's what I'm thinking about that: if a silent painting hanging on a wall can incite or foment some annoyance, some response, some agitation, then I've accomplished what I set out to do, which is to get a message out there somewhere where it's not supposed to be. I think that's quite an accomplishment.

**Q:** In my reading about your life, you've said your father's early drawings were a source of artistic inspiration. Some articles and reviews have mentioned abstract expressionists or Robert Rauschenberg and Paul Klee, and others. Who are some other artists who had an important role in your development or thinking about art?



**A:** Oh boy, inspiration comes from so many places. I'm a ravenous, constant feeder of images and ideas, something like Cookie Monster. In the early 1980s, I was practicing my Joan Mitchell strokes on canvas, so I could liven up my Salish icons. Then at another time Georgia O'Keeffe stepped into the studio and she was on my mind. ... But I was also seeing Flathead parflech design in her work. Paul Klee is always a favorite with his pictographs, Italian and Mexican artists, cartoons and Frida Kahlo have all been influential but most of all my tribe plays the biggest role in influencing my work. The Salish and Kootenai iconographic images of women's cut wing dresses, men's vests, horses, buffalo, coyote and canoes have all permeated my work for nearly 40

years. Petroglyphs, pictographs from the Plateau, basketry images are always lurking around corners and invading the studio, too.

**Q:** Some newer Missoula transplants might not know that you helped start the MAM's collection of Native American contemporary art. Can you tell us a bit about why you selected the MAM?

**A:** I always feel when you name something you put a stake in the ground so that brings it to attention, it works like a magnet. I think I learned that from my cousin Jerry Slater, founder of Salish Kootenai College. He taught me a lot, like my father, Arthur Albert Smith, a horse trader, did. I can remember way back when there were no Native Americans being shown at the Missoula Museum and I remember when Laura Millin arrived here, she turned up on my reservation to meet and greet a bunch of us Indian artists who were having an outdoor art conference at Salish Kootenai College in Pablo.

I am very blessed to have this exhibit here in Missoula, near my reservation, the Salish and Kootenai Nation. I am thankful to Missoula for this honor.

Laura's made it her mission to work with Montana artists of all shapes and sizes. People in the community probably don't know what a resource MAM is for children, people of all ages, races and income levels but it's a gold mine of cultural resources in this small town. Laura has made MAM into a destination.

She has even helped modernize the downtown architecture of Missoula as well as create a new outdoor gathering spot with the Art Park. I can name much larger city museums that might be seen as dead tombs, but not Missoula, you are blessed with one of the most active museums in the country.

Since you ask, 20 years ago I offered to give my life's work of printmaking, other artists work from my own collection and a check to put that stake in the ground for a contemporary Native collection. Then Laura sought funding to designate a wing for contemporary Native art in the newly renovated portion of MAM.

I also have given a check and artwork to another Montana art museum but it hasn't gotten any traction yet, still I keep hoping. It's probably not a known fact that we Salish were forced to give up all this land that

Missoula sits on, in our Treaty of Hellgate with the U.S. government.

With Laura's networking and advocacy, Montana is the very first state and one of the few states that has created a curriculum for public schools teaching about Montana tribal history. Montana also is the only state to put \$4.4 million into the school budget for this purpose. This is drawing attention and setting standards for other Western states to follow. Yayayayay for Montana, for the city of Missoula and for the Missoula Art Museum.

**Q:** From your experiences as an artist and curator, how do you feel about the progress that museums and galleries have made in exhibiting Native American contemporary art since that donation?



**A:** I may have answered this question already. For Missoula, the designation of a contemporary Native art collection has been extraordinary. In fact, I would venture to say that MAM has the largest contemporary Native collection on the Northern Plains. No small feat. Not Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota or Wyoming can compete with MAM's collection of contemporary Native art, sure the other museums have some antiquities, but not the art of contemporary, living Native artists. This takes real dedication and hard work. MAM rocks!