Forbes

Julie Buffalohead: "A Native 'Takeover' At Baltimore Museum Of Art"
By Chadd Scott
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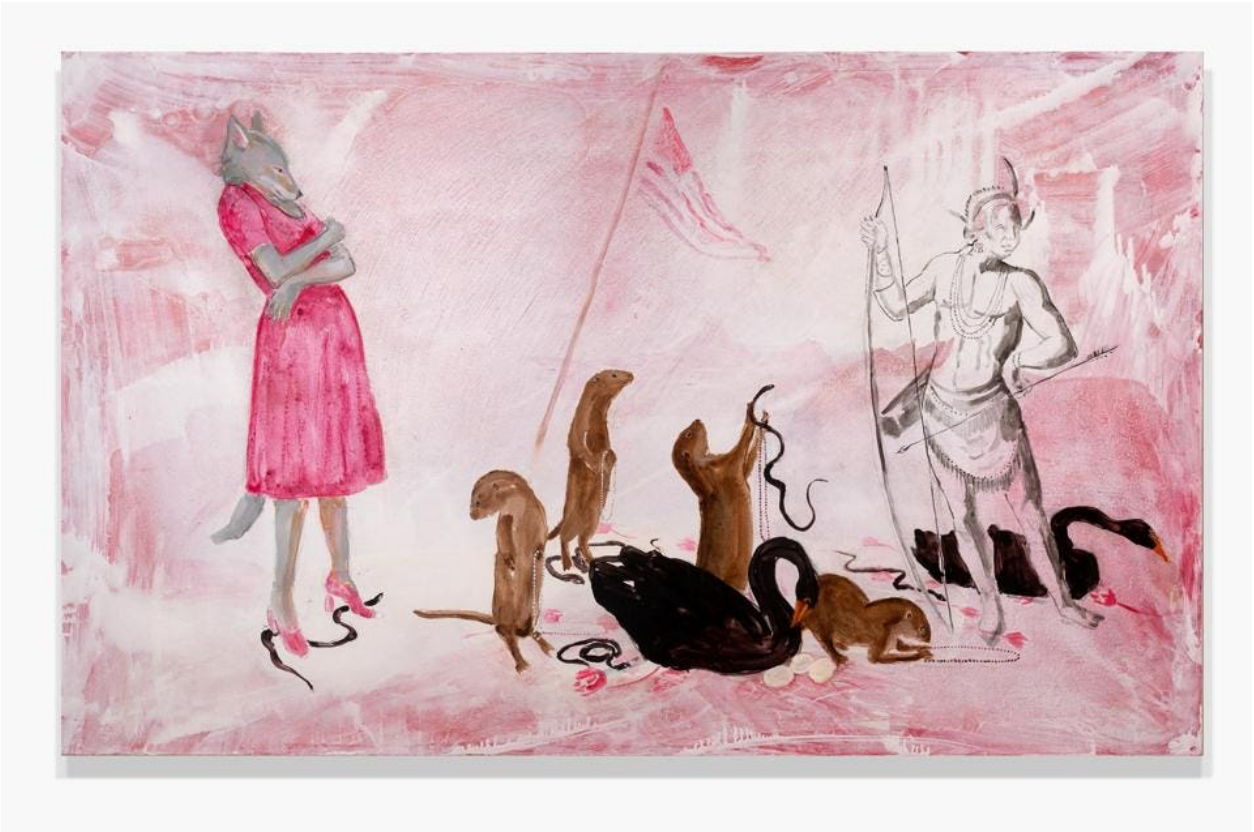


Julie Buffalohead (Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma), 'The Noble Savage,' 2022. Courtesy of Jessica Silverman and Sarah Thornton, San Francisco, CA. PHOTO BY RIK SFERRA

"A Native takeover."

That's how Dare Turner (Yurok Tribe), Curator of Indigenous Art at the Brooklyn Museum and former Baltimore Museum of Art Assistant Curator of Indigenous Art of the Americas, describes the Baltimore museum's "Preoccupied: Indigenizing the Museum" initiative launched April 21, 2024.

"Preoccupied" includes nine solo and thematic exhibitions, a film series, a publication guided by Native methodologies, museum-wide education for staff related to Native American history and colonization, and a broad array of public programs through February 2025.

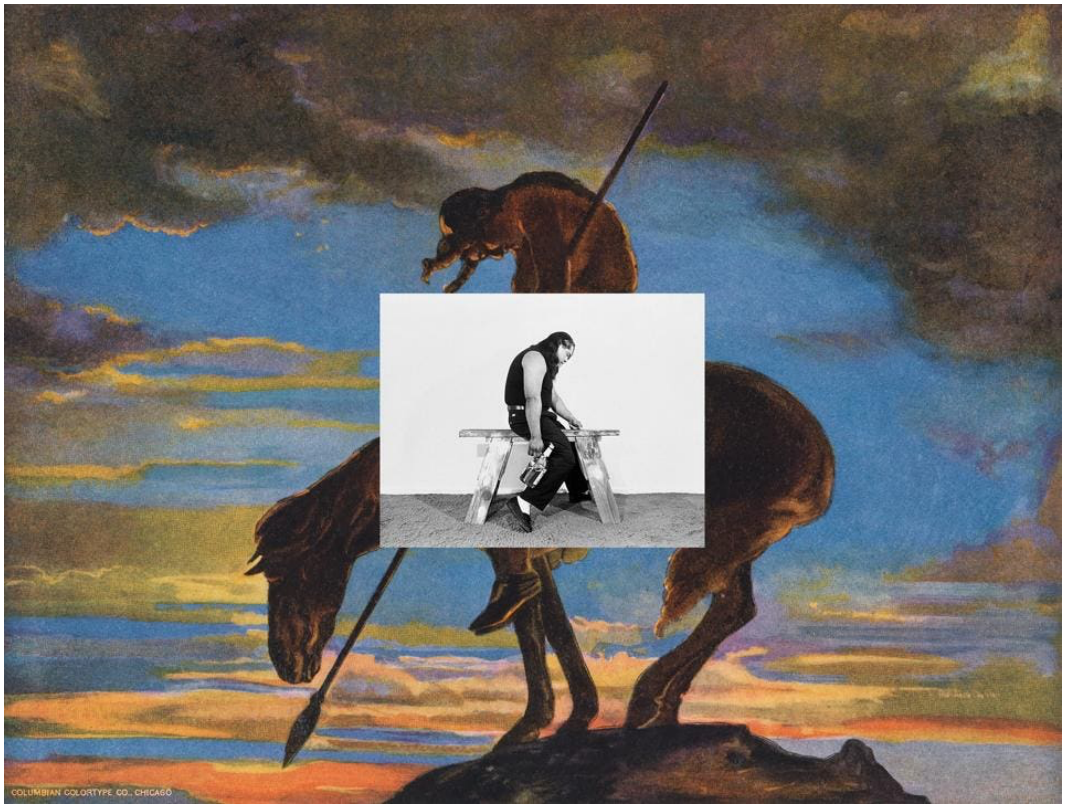
"It also includes audio tour stops where indigenous community members have gone into the galleries and selected any artwork they're interested in, which most of the time is not an artwork made by a Native person, and they speak about it from their perspective," Turner told Forbes.com.

"We also rewrote (wall) labels that had privileged white artists when they were depicting Native subjects. We flipped the script on that so the Native subjects were privileged."
Nearly 100 individuals contributed to or are represented across the initiative, transforming not only who tells stories in museums like the BMA, but also what stories get told and how.

"We wanted to make a big statement with Indigenous art in the museum, but we wanted to go much further than simply putting an exhibition on view and congratulating ourselves as job well done," Baltimore Museum of Art Associate Curator of Contemporary Art Leila Grothe, a collaborator on the project, told Forbes.com. "We thought together about how could we thread through perspectives, stories, truths, and histories in the museum in as many ways as possible, how can we surface these voices in as many places as possible to go further and do something that to us felt like a significant statement and a significant presence."

"Preoccupied" debuted with "Dyani White Hawk: Bodies of Water," a presentation of new and recent works from the artist's ongoing "Carry" series. White Hawk (b. 1976; Sičáŋǧu Lakota) adorns large copper buckets and ladles with glass beads and long fringe suggesting arboreal root structures. These works upend long-held boundaries between fine art and craft traditions in museum practice and center Native perspectives on the significance of both functionality and artistry in material culture.

Looking In The Mirror



James Luna (Luiseno/Puyukitchum, Ipai, and Mexican-American), 'End of the Frail,' 1993. © Estate of the artist. Courtesy of Tia Collection, Santa Fe, NM. PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF GARTH GREENAN GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY

Museums in America aren't responsible for the nation's genocide against its indigenous inhabitants. Museums didn't draft the Indian Removal Act or initiate the Navajo Long Walk. They're not to blame for broken treaties, boarding schools, the near extinction of the buffalo, or the Sand Creek Massacre. They have, however, been complicit in forwarding white supremacy and a flattening and erasure of Native American people, culture and artwork through their historic-and, in cases, ongoing-collecting and display practices related to Native items.

"There are many instances historically where institutions have come to (Indigenous) communities and either taken or coerced objects out. Sometimes they have paid for them, sometimes they have not, but even in the instances when they have paid for these belongings, they have sometimes taken things that were not an individual's to give," Grothe cites as one example of how museums have harmed Native Americans. "They call that cultural patrimony where it actually belonged to the community and not an individual, but there was a sort of colonial misunderstanding-and that might be being generous-whether or not that individual owned it and could sell it to the person. There's an exploitation right in the sort of economic status potentially of whoever it is making these sales, and trades are sometimes outright theft, sometimes grave robbing, all of these things have happened."

Placing Contemporary Native Art In The Past

American museums have traditionally relegated Indigenous items to their "ethnographic" sections or placed Native artwork in natural history museums instead of art museums, sending a subconscious, but not at all subtle message to their mostly white visitors.

"Museums have spoken about Native communities, Native artists in the past tense, not positioning Native communities as vibrant and living and thriving today," Turner explained.

Putting Native American material on view alongside wooly mammoth bones tells museum guests Indigenous people are of the past. That Native histories and stories and truths and futures needn't be considered in modern society.

"A lot of Native artists feel frustrated that one of their contemporary pieces will be put in a historical gallery of Native art, contextualized in a narrow way, not brought into conversation with larger stories of contemporary art," Turner said.

From a non-Native perspective, this museological practice has been so subtle and pervasive, guests don't even recognize how they've been hoodwinked.

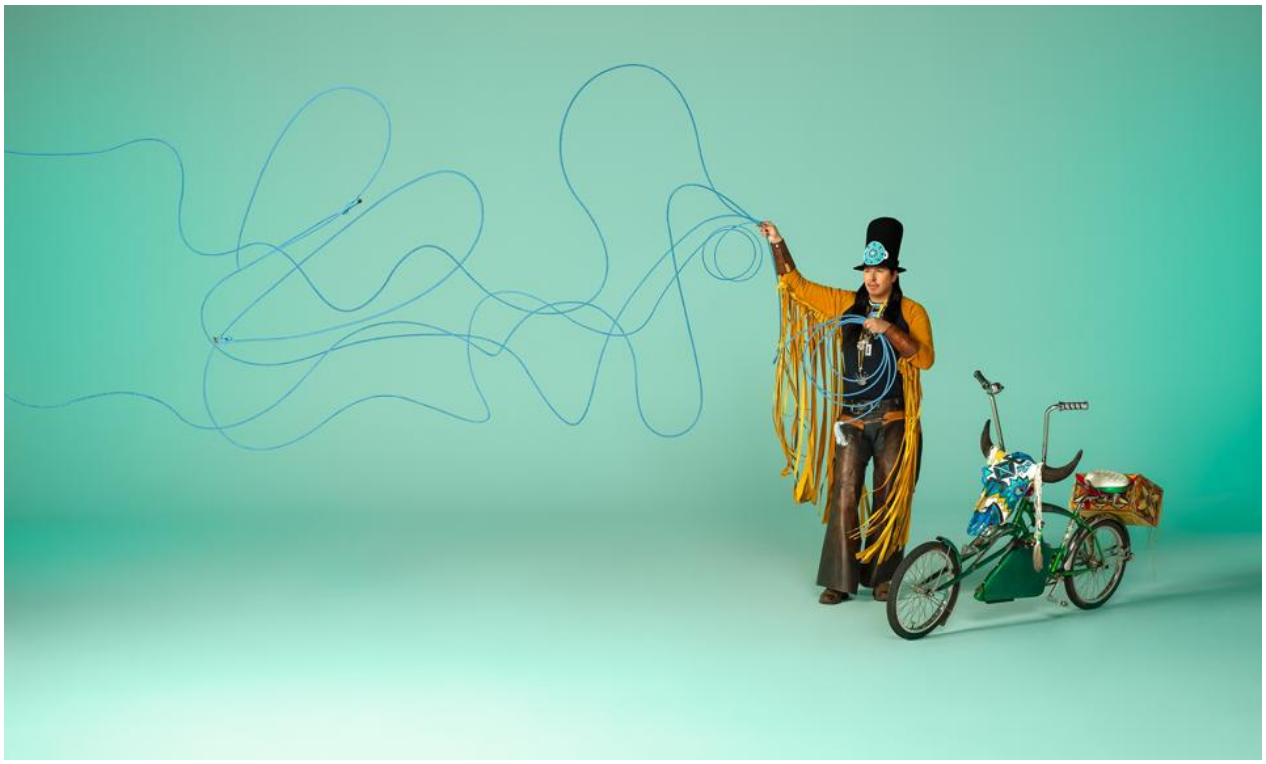
"(A visitor) stopped me recently to say they hadn't realized the very fact that we installed this exhibition in the contemporary wing completely reversed a lens they were accustomed to viewing these works in," Grothe said. "They were so accustomed to seeing (Native American) work in specific settings with specific lighting and gallery colors-it felt radical to see (Native artwork in the contemporary wing). They said they even saw the historic artworks they were familiar with for the first time (in a new way), simply appreciating (their) beauty. That is exactly what we're trying to do. There are subtle shifts an institution can do to change the way people see these things."

And by changing the way visitors see the items, museums will change the way visitors see the people who made them.

"By bringing in contemporary artists, contemporary voices, and commingling historical art with contemporary art, we're showing the continuity of narratives of artistic practices in a way that embraces the realities for Native people," Turner added.

Additionally reminding museum visitors that Native art, people and culture are contemporary, dynamic, and ongoing.

Fine Art > Craft



Dana Claxton (Hunkpapa Lakota), Lasso,' 2018. Courtesy the artist and Vancouver Art Gallery COURTESY THE ARTIST AND VANCOUVER ART GALLERY

Museums must also acknowledge how their hierarchies have dismissed and marginalized Indigenous artistic talent.

"Dyani White Hawk, one of her big statements as an artist is to talk about the ways Indigenous artworks have often been relegated as less than fine art and labeled as craft in collecting institutions," Grothe explains.

Craft–material objects (pottery, weavings, beadwork)–has always been considered "lesser than" fine art–paintings, sculpture, photography–in the historical perspective of museums who act as the ultimate arbiters and gatekeepers of taste and culture in America. An opinion founded in patriarchy, white supremacy, and Western exceptionalism.

"Preoccupied's" breadth and its takeover of the museum all at once helps visitors recognize how these various museum practices injurious to Native people, taking place at thousands of

institutions across the country since the 19th century, have combined in contributing to disempowering, oppressing and excluding Native people from mainstream American culture.

Baltimore Is Native Land

In addition to "Preoccupied's" scale and scope, its location is significant. If this were taking place at a museum in New Mexico or Oklahoma or Arizona or Montana–where Native artwork and people are more visible–it would still matter, but in Baltimore, in Maryland, it hits a different way.

"We find that on the East Coast in particular–this is true everywhere, but here because colonialism is so much older, it happened hundreds of years before it happened with my (Yurock) people (in California)–there is a different understanding in non-Native communities about the history of the (Native) people in the region," Turner said. "They think that Native people were genocided and that was the end, they welcomed the Pilgrims and then went away. There's a lot of education that needs to happen and museums are uniquely positioned to reach many different audiences."

Ten months of a Native "takeover" at the Baltimore Museum of Art, or any museum, can't make up for 100 years of institutional contempt, but it's a meaningful start.