

Lost in Translation

The Clay Art of Peter Jones

A Review by Denise Carvalho

PETER JONES IS AN IMPORTANT IROQUOIS ARTIST WHO lives and works in the Cattaraugus Reservation, located 40 miles southeast of Buffalo, New York US. The Iroquois Confederacy is the alliance of six nations: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora. Although the Iroquois were an important presence in the early development of North American culture, their art has been often subjugated to the realm of anthropology or natural sciences and their culture translated into an exotic or invisible otherness. The diversity and unity of the Iroquoian (People of the Longhouse) signal their resistance to a pan-American assimilation. Perhaps this same diversity and unity kept their art from being ethnographically categorized – the same strategy of resistance used by many contemporary artists in urban artistic communities. Jones stresses, “It is possible to create art that can compete on a world-wide scale and to do so from the reservation.”

His latest work has developed into less sketched, or technical and more experimental ceramic processes that begin with the wheel but combine, in a more organic manner, other materials such as beads, shells, leather and organic materials, allowing the clay to direct the end result, making the work freer and more emotional. Its social context is, nevertheless, always present, intentionally guiding the viewer toward the artist’s tradition, language and memory through metaphors and narratives. His clay figures are silent voices of strength in the midst of oppression, ghosts of time slipping like sand within one’s fingers. *Portrait Jar new Indian* (2010) depicts an Indian head transformed into a jar with feathers. Although dressed with traditional headdress and ornaments, the Indian head with an iPod™ and earphone shows contradictory artefacts of both assimilation and alienation through stereotype. The head (itself a jar) creates a visual pun: the head is also an empty vessel, highlighted by the figure’s alienated expression. *Angry Indian Vessel* (2010) is a haunting clay figurine ornamented with shells, leather and



Above: *Angry Indian*. 2010.
Below: *New Indian*. 2010.





other materials along which one can detect the figure's crawled [not sure I understand the use of "crawled" here] fists. Most of Jones' clay figures are small, about 20 to 30 inches high, though their expressions make them seem larger than life. *Indian with Baggage* is a clay figure of an elderly Indian enveloped by an American flag sitting in front of a rock, cigarette in mouth, gazing nowhere beneath sunglasses, himself an acculturated stereotype. Next to him are three suitcases, suggesting he is a traveller and a witness of historical events. This work references the Wounded Knee Occupation of 1973 by the militant group AIM, the American Indian Movement, which lasted several months and left casualties on both sides.

In Iroquois culture, elderly women play the most important roles, including establishing and imposing new rules, carrying on traditions, being spokespersons and



Top: *Indian With Bag*, 2009.

Centre: *Red Moon*, 2009.

Above: *Louise Skywoman Falls to Earth*, 2007.

appointing chiefs. In the case of Jones' clan, it is the ability to speak the Seneca language that has kept the culture alive but this has decreased in the last years. Roberta Jones, Jones' wife, has been building an archive with recordings of indigenous documents to be accessed inside the reservation. This archive includes natural spoken language, speeches, Indigenous philosophy and historical data. Artworks are also social documents and as they continue to function as mediators between local community and outside art markets, they also serve as repositories of a living history. *Woman with Shell Dress* (2008) is a clay sculpture that shows the subsistence of a matriarchal culture in the native tradition, in which the mother's heritage is sustained as the basis for the structure of the clan. As the Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson states, "tradition matters but it is matter to be worked upon, to mobilize meanings, to subvert and play with the present, to remind us of who we are, to suggest to us where we are going." (Audra Simpson, "Art for Our Sake: Contemporary Iroquois Art in the Collection of the Indian Art Centre." Unpublished.)

Storytelling, a strong Iroquois matriarchal tradition, involves elders sitting at the kitchen table or around the wood stove, an art that has lost its importance in recent years. It is through the elders' voices and their tales that a sense of community has been preserved. Jones' clay figures evoke the timeless trajectory of Native cultures from the oral strength of storytelling to the silenced voices of ancestors over the last centuries. Teller of many voices, a polyphonic narrator, the elderly man or woman is the ethos of the community, fostering a link between the social, collective aspects of the community and its most basic principles of humanity. Jones' work took over the role of storytelling and the process of his art-making now involves telling the story of his people and how it has changed over time. In his *Louise Skywoman Falls to Earth*, a Native woman struggles to keep herself seated atop a moving turtle while holding a tray with cups and a bottle. According to Iroquois cosmology, Skywoman falls to earth from her home in the Skyworld and is aided to safety by a turtle, signifying both the Turtle clan of the Seneca people and Turtle Island, dedicated to the first native peoples in North America and Canada. Jones parodies skywoman as a waitress who loses her balance in the greedy sprawl of native cultures. On a different clay sculpture with the same motif, Jones' clay skywoman lies on the floor next to the turtle, carrying iconic images, such as the *Statue of Liberty*, a slot machine and a television, commenting on urbanization, displacement, media exploitation and local acculturation among the native communities.

Although early sprawls in historic Iroquois territory led to an increase in cultural displacement, most recently it has seen a renewal of traditions, in particular a growing demand to learn the language of the elders. Colonial domination, which instilled a paternalistic

tendency among native communities, did not succeed replacing the local matriarchal roots that are still present in today's native communities, perhaps due to its philosophy that adopts and adapts, takes in the old and redefines into the new, deeply rooted in matriarchal traditions. The bronze sculpture, *The Portage*, depicts a nine-foot tall Indian carrying his canoe as he returns from his trading voyage, a native practice common among many native American communities. It references the voyages through the Cuyahoga river (Iroquois for 'crooked river') into the Mississippi, connecting north and south. By the 1600s, new policies imposed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, under the motto, 'Kill the Indian and save the man', led to trade restrictions, forcing Indians to become farmers and also leading to changes in local methods of transport. No longer able to trade for something they needed, Indigenous communities were robbed of their lands and forced to acculturate. Jones' *Red Moon* depicts a totemic figure referencing the harvest moon, an important farming symbol that is rooted in Native American tradition. Both *The Portage* and *Red Moon* represent the longing for a culture that no longer can be experienced or revived.

Jones' work comes out of his use of formal elements and processes that are contingent upon his local history and cultural language. His use of clay is itself a reminder that everything comes from and returns to the earth: a concept not sentimental but realistic, grounded on causality, on gravity, on a sense of transformation and transmutation through natural laws. His use of raw earth materials is grounded on four decades of research on the cultural methods and traditions of his ancestors. In the 1960s, he studied with the established Hopi potter Otellie Loloma, at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In the 1970s, he continued reviving pre-historic pottery techniques, earning him several important commissions, including a 3-foot bronze sculpture for the Ganondagan State Historic Site, in Victor, New York and a monumental bronze for the Summit County Historical Society, in Akron, Ohio. His work is part of important collections, such as the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, NY, The Iroquois Indian Museum in Howes Cave, NY, the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, DC and New York City, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and New York State Museum in Albany, NY and the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

As an artist who delves into issues of identity, locality and tradition, his work can at times appear at risk of becoming rare (a contradiction in light of expanding international markets that take in anything and everything) and on materials, concepts and processes that endorse multimedia trends grounded in the notion of the copy, of the kitsch. Most art today can be commodified but does this ensure the survival of the work's social context? Perhaps the question should

be rephrased after discussing the etymology of the word commodity: a good for which there is a demand but which is supplied without qualitative differentiation across a market. When global markets improve the value of art as an object in and of itself, they dismiss cultural specificities that are integral to the history, culture and language of the artist. As a by-product of global markets, most art today articulates brands, monetary value or symbolic cultural value also as commodity, dismissing locality, specific social contexts and histories and, eventually, all history: a language of signifiers without the signified. Thanks to the expansion of art markets, earlier divisions between high and low art are now blurred but the blurring also comes with new tendencies that eliminate identity-specific meanings in art. The commodity of art destroys the artist's specific social and cultural message, like dead languages that are only used for reference. This is the system of diminishing returns that the artist as a sole producer

must endure to continue to exist within an economic model reaching new heights of obsolescence and dissemination. When we think of Peter Jones' art, we must envision the future of all art that needs meaning to subsist, all art that in the wrong version of history becomes stereotypical and all art that feeds its own cultural existence.

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All photos by Martin Studios, Alleghany, New York US.

Top: Street Chief. 1991.

Above: Old Woman. 2010.

