

# Art as a Mirror of Iroquois Life

Doris I. Stambrau

"Art can be many things to Indians. Indians can live many kinds of legitimate lives. However, it is becoming increasingly important that art reflects the real lives of the Indians of today and not reflect romanticized notions of a past never experienced" (Hill 1995: 93).

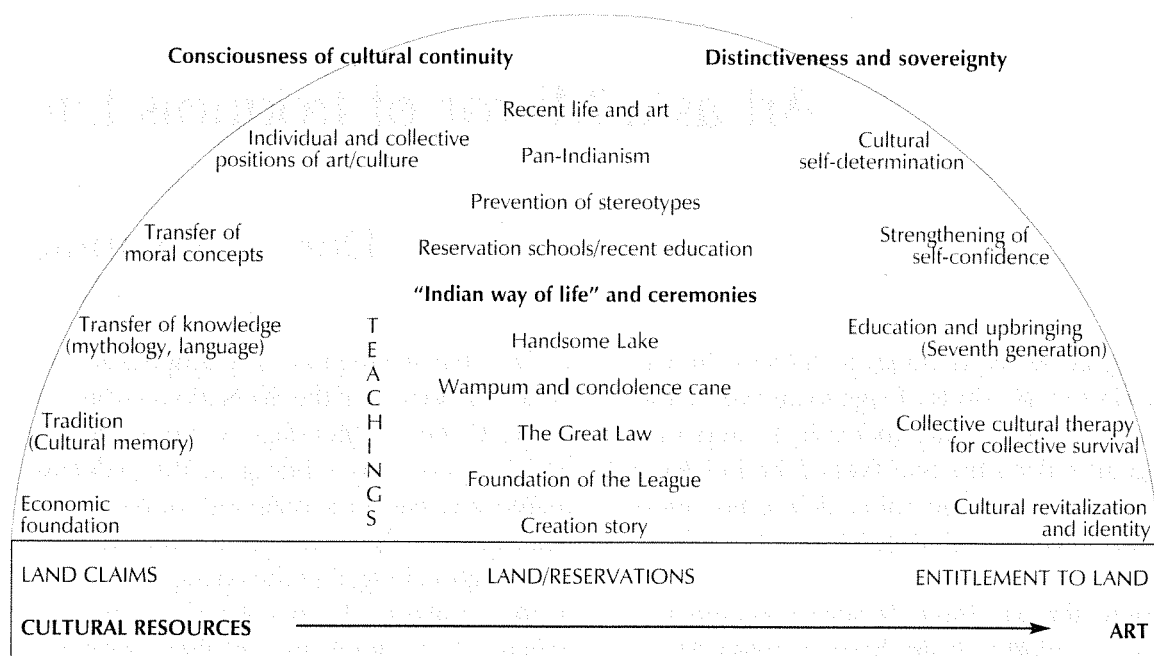
During the past three decades contemporary Iroquois works of art have increasingly received attention and recognition far beyond their regional origin. They are documents of a multi-layered process: Within a broad range of aesthetic forms of expression their formal language reflects pluralism and an increasingly intercultural orientation. Traditions, the vicissitudes of history since the beginning of the cultural encounter with Europeans, and a present in an environment dominated by White influences find their expression in art and culture. On the one hand, the creators of art are committed to their cultural heritage and Native tradition, on the other hand, they are creatively and innovatively dealing with the realities of modern life. The increasing interculturality also refers to the question of their own identity.

As a mirror of the indigenous lifeworld the art of the Iroquois of today rests on the foundation of the culture of their ancestors. Three overarching concerns synergetically form the thematic core of the artistic production of the Iroquois: the spiritual level of the myths, the historical development, including the consequences of the cultural encounter, and the conditions of their present life with a focus on the importance of the indigenous living space today and tomorrow.

The shared creation story emphasizes the close connection of the Six Nations—the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora. As a bridge to the collective memory of past or submerged traditions, the illustration of the myths contributes to their revitalization long after the change of lifeways in the course of the past centuries led to a waning of the dominance of their oral transmission. Signs and symbols, art and crafts as media of memory have taken its place. Artists preserve oral traditions and traditional value systems, translate them into a contemporary visual language, and thus become brokers of knowledge about their culture.

Images also are effectively counteracting stereotypes and bring their suggestive power to the resolution of identity conflicts. The commemorative value promoted by these works of art is recognized even by traditionally oriented members of the Six Nations, who are essentially inclined to reject this kind of artistic production as an adaptation to Western culture (Jones in Stambrau 1997).

Art as a conscious and mentally creative activity is based upon the cultural resources of a society within the framework of a shared process of social development in a specific geographic territory. Like other indigenous peoples, the Iroquois will only be able to maintain their identity if they can retain their sovereignty and the right to their own land. This is a basis for the development of their art and culture. Origin myths and their history, including the essential events from the founding of the League to the circumstances of present-day life, legitimate the title of the Six

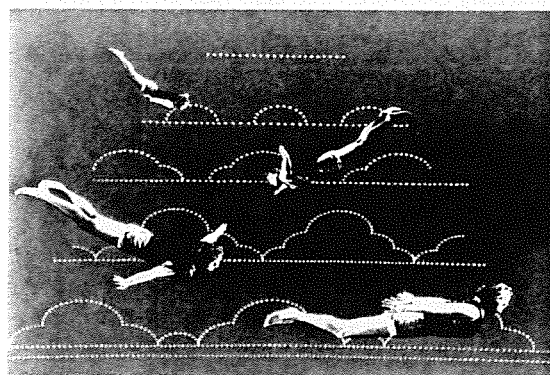


Structures of the development of contemporary Iroquois art  
(This diagram is based upon an analysis of interviews conducted between 1996 and 2002. The constructive criticism and additional comments by G. Peter Jemison, Peter B. Jones, Shelley Niro, and Tom Hill are herewith gratefully acknowledged.)

Nations to land in the United States and Canada. Distinctiveness and sovereignty—individual and collective—are the result of a shared intellectual endeavor. Cultural knowledge and moral concepts are being conveyed and transmitted. The revitalization of their own culture contributes to the personal search for an identity. As a process involving work and learning, art plays a therapeutic role. Education and upbringing strengthen the individual and the community on their path to distinctiveness and sovereignty. Iroquois artists have not only developed very personal strategies for their lives, they have very consciously accepted responsibility for the community and for securing the basis of its future existence all the way to the “Seventh Generation.”

According to the Iroquois creation myth it was a woman who created the earth. Pregnant Skywoman, who plunged from the upper world into the depths above the ocean,

was caught in her fall by aquatic birds and placed on the carapace of a turtle. The otter dove into the primordial sea and returned from the bottom of the lower world with a piece of mud from which Skywoman created the earth resting on the turtle’s back. She gave birth to a daughter who later bore twin sons. From the beginning, the twins fought against



Shelley Niro, *FLYING WOMAN*, 1994

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Tom Huff, *MOTHERSHIP*, 1997

one another; their conflict epitomizes the dichotomy of life. After Skywoman's death her daughter became Mother Earth, who took care of the growth of nature.

In Shelley Niro's photo collage *FLYING WOMAN*, Sky Woman is a self-confident young Indian, who weightlessly moves across the pictorial space in modern everyday wear; the light dotted cloud-lines are reminiscent of Indian glass bead appliqué and of the symbol for the sky dome. Thus mythology is kept alive in the present by being brought up to date. Shelley Niro, who refers to herself as a "female intellectual terrorist," tells stories which are critiquing society in the language of visual art and poses questions about identity and the spiritual values of indigenous culture in a world increasingly determined by materialistic concerns.

"My work gets created through cultural identity. I don't start off saying, I'm going to make something with an Iroquoian look to it.

But those elements impose themselves on my work. In the end it has an enormous impact, and my own identity seeps with this cultural construct" (Niro in Smith and Niro 1998: 113).

Tom Huff's work is inspired by his consciousness of a deep attachment to his cultural heritage. His stone sculpture *MOTHERSHIP* includes mythological references and at the same time tells of juvenile dreams and imagined conquests, of distant stars as visionary Iroquoian lifeworlds. The Iroquoian space ship combines the origins and the future: Turtle carries the earth on its back; the Tree of Peace is growing forever, his roots pointing to the four directions; the wampum belt demonstrates the closeness of the six members of the League; the eagle defining the aerodynamic shape of the stone protects the traditional heritage and carries it into futuristic spaces (Huff 2000).

For Richard Glazer Danay the concept of "tradition" antithetically represents the oppo-



Richard Glazer Danay, MY DOG SPOT HAT, 1982

site of progressive thinking. He is inspired by places and their history, the footprints of Indian life in White America. The imagery of the amusement park of Coney Island and the



Peter Jemison in his studio setting up his installation I AM WIPING AWAY THE TEARS, 2002

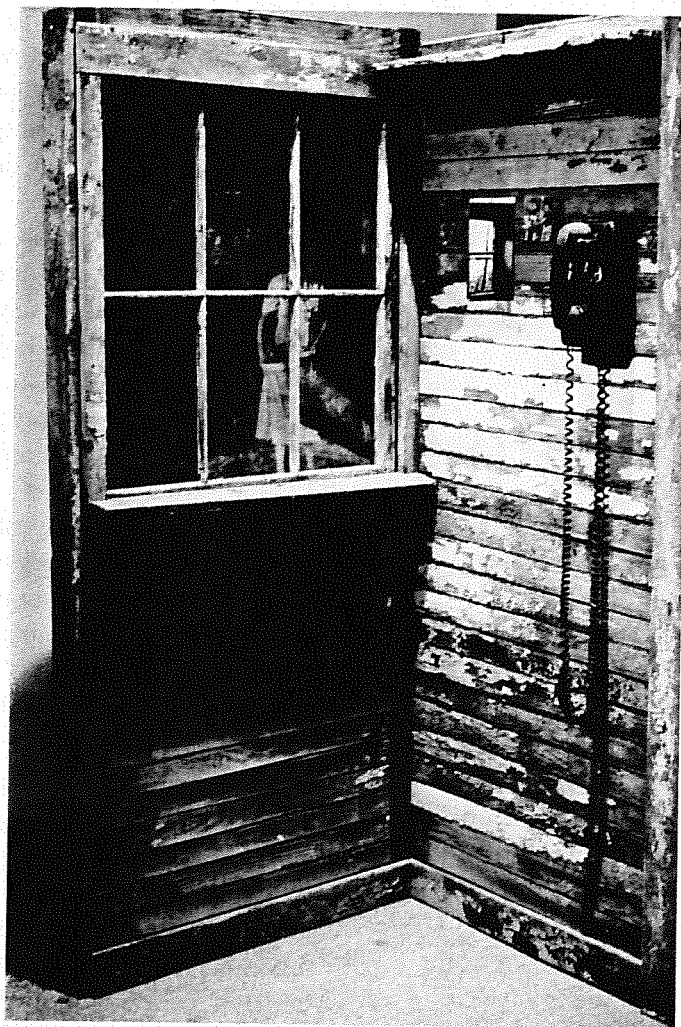
life of the Mohawk ironworkers dominated his early work. Stereotypical "plastic Indians" of the toy industry and *objets trouvées* were transformed by him into signifiers of a counterworld vis-à-vis the discriminating and romanticizing generalizations of "the Indian." As "the only specifically Iroquoian feature" in his work and as "modern Mohawk headdresses" he identifies the painted hard hats the designs of which represent what the ironworkers saw when they got drunk on Friday night: the kitschy images of the fairground, naked women, Cokes everywhere, imaginary animals as comics, revolting insects, mouths larger than life, but also the New York skyline and dogs loyally devoted to man (Danay in Stambrau 1997).

Today Danay lives in the vicinity of Los Angeles. "Although I am a Mohawk Indian from the east coast of this continent, I began exploring the essence and spirituality of where I currently reside. The physical place where I live and work in has always been very important to me ... I began to explore this by taking note of my surroundings and looking for ways to express this in my current work. ... I realized that the spirit of place has always been of great importance in my life's work until now. ... I began by looking at pictograms (rock art) from ancient California Indian sites from Santa Barbara to San Diego" (Danay 2001).

In his "dot paintings" Danay combines across the ages Chumash rock art imagery and traditional beadwork designs. These explorations are further developed in his recent works, in which prehistoric Indian lifeworlds are demarcated from a bird's-eye view. SPIRIT OF PLACE (p. 69) allows the articulation of personal feelings in abstract fields of color.

In all of his work, he said in an interview, he was reinvesting everyday experiences with sacredness: "I think deep down I'm a religious person, not in an organized-religion way ... but basically I'm very conservative" (Abott 1994: 9).

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Peter B. Jones, *My MOTHER'S CORNER*, 2001

G. Peter Jemison's socio-politically informed position stands in contrast to Richard Glazer Danay's primarily personal perspective: Contemporary works of art are part of a process of reclaiming tradition, and they reactivate a consciousness of the personal indigenous past; the representation of past events from an indigenous perspective is used to create a different historical consciousness (Jemison in Stambrau 2002).

In his video installation *I AM WIPING AWAY THE TEARS* Jemison attempts to strike a mental balance between an emotionally strained past and an optimistically inclined vision of the

future, between nature and art, between a natural and an increasingly sprawling urban lifeworld. He juxtaposes Iroquoian ritual paraphernalia, such as sweetgrass, wampum beads, and antlers, with things only introduced since Euroamerican culture contact, which pollute the environment. Images of ironworkers cleaning up the debris at the World Trade Center and of the Three Sisters corn, beans, and squash representing the basic foodstuffs assigned to the care of the women symbolically refer to traditional and contemporary Iroquois modes of work. Yesterday and today are intersecting in the video





Peter B. Jones, "September 11" pot, 2002 (detail)

images: The reflection of the date September 11 in a store window is superimposed upon the two protagonists of the film at the end of their journey to places of memory in New York City (cp. pp. 38–39).

Working in a studio on the farm of his ancestors on Cattaraugus Reservation, Peter B. Jones is closely connected to the mythology, the history, and the land. It is these surroundings which inspire him as an artist and give him strength. Nearby, at the edge of a field on which the Three Sisters corn, beans, and squash are raised in the traditional manner, he has built a little longhouse as a playground for his daughter.

"We are one of the few tribes in this country that still have their aboriginal land—the land that we owned before Columbus—it's still under control by the Indians" (Jones in Stambrau 1996).

Jones wants to improve the perception of indigenous historical conditions and to perpetuate memories. In a very personal manner he points out the importance of space, history, and identity. His installation *MY MOTHER'S CORNER* is a reconstruction of surviving frag-

ments from his mother's torn down house. The portrait behind the window shows her at the harvest. By presenting these segments of space, Jones offers a statement against the disappearance of historical consciousness on the reservation.

"The art reflects the people ... The art is ... replacing language as a method of telling stories, keeping the legends alive, the myths, everything. And even depicting the life-styles of Native Americans today ... current issues, past issues ... Where we should be, where we aren't, where we are going" (Jones in Stambrau 1996).

Research on finds of prehistoric Iroquoian pottery prompted Jones to produce replicas of vessels with representational designs. In one of his works of 2002 he combines this formal corpus with the events of 11 September 2001: Instead of integrated figures it is airplanes that project beyond the rim of the pot. Against corruption and pollution in his own country he sets a counterpoint in the "sensitive language of art." His sculpture *HORNS OF A DILEMMA* (p. 85) unites in its duality an indictment of recent developments on the reservations with references to basic Iroquois values. The antlers, symbols of the traditional authority of chiefs, have been transformed into gasoline spouts. Gasoline hoses and dollar bills cover the head. The face is disfigured by pock marks, the body transformed into a money bag and slot machine with a horn rattle serving as a lever. "High stakes" and dollar signs beckon the gambler, as does the reset button. The reverse side features a skull underneath the wads of money; instead of dollar signs the wheels of fortune display the images of corn, beans, and squash under the headline "Winner takes all." There is no need to encourage the gambler to continue and reset: "You Lost."

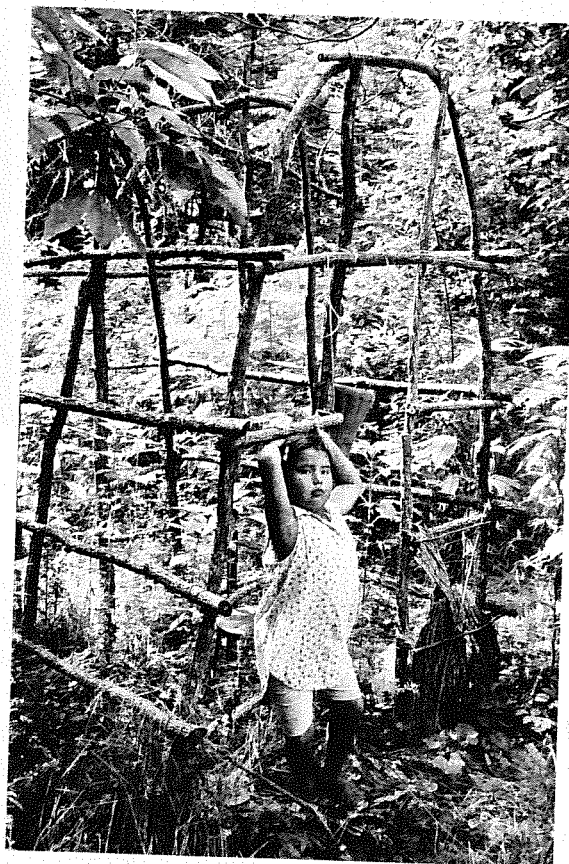
Jones's sculptures display his deeply felt attachment to the reservation and to the piece of land which had already been the home of his ancestors. For Ryan Rice, on the

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other hand, the experience of the indigenous lifeworld as an emotional space of reference is rather ambivalent and geographically much more extensive. He is longing for his native Kahnawake, but once he gets there, he wants to return to where he lives and works. The larger cities with their possibilities of getting an education and of finding employment have seen the emergence of a particular form of living together—a community of “urban Indians,” groups of actors, authors, and artists of indigenous ancestry who feel at home in the city. The importance of the local indigenous places of origin is being replaced by an emotional positioning in pan-Indian communities (Rice in Stambrau 1996).

Such an enlarged conception of “home” leads to greater flexibility, which for Rice is an enrichment of his artistic activity. Traveling creates a network of information and images. Like Peter Jemison on his scouting expedition from Ganondagan to New York City, Ryan Rice and Audra Simpson have documented sites of Indian presence. The assemblage *YOU ARE HERE* (p. 78) can be used like an archive, a collection of these impressions. Traveling in Iroquois country means a crossing of boundaries between countries and nation states. “I get to the border and get all aggressive because why do I have to stop here? It’s not my border, this is my land ... You’re always dealing on a political basis, I think” (Rice in Stambrau 1996).

In addition to the political borders there are invisible boundaries which have also been forcibly crossed. His etching *STATE OF THE NATION* is regarded by Rice as an illustration of the relentless struggle for land rights between the Whites and the Mohawks of Kahnawake. Red letters on white ground painted on a massive boulder at the access road to Kahnawake were a widely visible proclamation of the indigenous population’s claim to their own land. The stone became a bone of contention when unidentified persons used bulldozers to attack it and managed to break the rock



Peter Jones' daughter in her “longhouse,” 1997

apart. Ryan Rice depicts the process of destruction in three stages. The natural stone symbolizes the primeval land. The statement of the Mohawks of Kahnawake represents their claim in opposition to land loss and expulsion. The sign of wilful destruction documents the vulnerability of the right of the Iroquois to their own land (Stambrau 1998).

Real and threatening land loss are also visualized in Jolene Rickard’s installation *ONE SQUARE FOOT OF EARTH OR ONE SQUARE FOOT OF REAL ESTATE—YOU DECIDE* (p. 77). All over the United States one encounters the signs of realtors announcing “Real Estate Sold.” One square foot as the unit in which prices of land are quoted is transferred to a cube with photo montages of earth and sky symbolizing the commodification of land in a money economy—land ownership as a characteristic fea-



Ryan Rice, *STATE OF THE NATION*, 1996

ture of the capitalist maximization of profits. The equilateral cube rests on reebar used in highway construction and a base made of sheet metal. Photographs show a piece of sky on the top and images of cracked earth on the sides. The hexahedron represents a handy size, a unit of sale, as is suggested by the welded inscription "Real Estate." It stands for the clearance sale of Indian land, even if the land must not be sold individually. The state, however, may expropriate Indian land for certain purposes, such as road construction or water reservoirs; elected tribal councils may also exchange land for casino permits (Stambrau 1996).

Rickard wants to sensitize people to cultural consciousness and their own responsibility toward the land and their own descendants, and sees her own work in the context of many generations. "The idea ... in my work is that these aren't new steps that we're taking. We're just following steps that have already been taken" (Rickard in Stambrau 1996). Her message not only points to perspectives for the future, it also inspires discussion about the past.

In his sculpture *INDIAN WITH BAGGAGE* (p. 84) Peter B. Jones names exemplary historical data—the emotional baggage which in the course of history has gained more and more



Kanahwake, Quebec, 1997

weight. Jones received his inspiration for the clay figurine from the director of a secondary school in which he registered his daughter. Here would once again be a child coming to her school with so much baggage, she commiserated the young girl, and explained that it was very difficult to rid the children of the heavy burden placed upon them by their familial background and ethnic past. After hearing the complaint once more at a meeting with friends, Jones transformed it into a visual shape: a man sitting in a waiting posture as at a bus station, holding a cigarette, introspectively wrapped in an American flag. "This lies across everything today," Jones explains this feature. Next to the figure (said to represent one of the artist's friends, but with facial features reminiscent of those of Jones himself) there are bags inscribed Wounded Knee, Tradition, and Removal Act. The burden of the past is always carried around by the "Indian with baggage," who lacks any perspective of the future (Jones in Stambrau 2002).

In her installation *PATH OF REFLECTION* (p. 62, 63) Katsitsionni Fox deals with the conflict inherent in living in two culturally distinct worlds, but also with the bridges needed to cope with this situation. Her work as an artist is informed by her personal experience of an

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adolescence, training, and career influenced by Euroamerican values and her Native ancestry, Iroquois culture, and tradition. The guiding principle of her life is the safeguarding of the interests of the "Seventh Generation"; this includes making the language and culture of her ancestors available to her children. She seeks a balance within the real conditions of two lifeworlds—an opposition she encounters in the daily life at Akwesasne, the reservation in the border region with Canada. The people spend their time in front of the TV, watch soap operas, eat chips, and drink Coke. Her installation depicts the two lifeworlds, everyday routine rituals in front of the tube, and the spiritual experiences of the "Thanksgiving Address," the ritual of expressing gratitude to nature. The two worlds are separated in the installation by drapes serving as permeable room dividers. The woollen trade blanket thrown over the chair is an isolated reference to Indianness in a consumer's world of Euroamerican attributes. It is worn over the shoulder when crossing over into the other part of the installation. Fox uses pine needles, white corn, and water to mark the path toward contemplative experience in the spiritual space. In a circle of red, white, black, and yellow lengths of fabric are suspended mirrors with reduced signs of the animate nature to which thanks are given. Penetrating one another visually, the reflections include the human observer who participates in the replay of a recitation of the "Thanksgiving Address" (cp. pp. 34–37) in the Mohawk language (Fox in Stambrau 2002).

Shelley Niro's installation *THE ESSENTIAL SENSUALITY OF CEREMONY* (p. 90) is based on a similar intellectual approach featuring mental contemplation, sensual perception, and spiritual connection with mythological traditions. "Peacemaker's Journey" is the story of Deganawida traveling through the Mohawk River valley to bring about after long deliberations the political union of the Five Nations of the Iroquois. The basic elements of this



Billboard of a realtor, New York, 2002

story are rediscovered in the five senses: Only after Thadodaho, the mythical Onondaga chief, recognizes the way to peace and refrains from eating human flesh, does he gain the gift of sight and taste. The burning of tobacco, the smoke as a mediator between humans and the spirit world, awakens with smell the other senses as well. Singing and drumming to accompany the ritual activities represent hearing. The sense of touch is affected when Deganawida consoles the desolate Hiawatha with strings of wampum. The wiping away of Hiawatha's tears produces a clear vision, free of past grief. In the spiritual orientation and the conscious interplay of the five senses lies the key for a peaceful coexistence and for social action: "You have to feel yourself, take care of yourself, and later can help others" (Niro in Stambrau 2002).

In her installation Shelley Niro conjures the power of the ritual and mythological foundation of traditions through portraits of friends from Six Nations Reserve. Jeffrey M. Thomas juxtaposes historical photographs and contemporary images to contextualize history. His photographic sensitivity in dealing with people allows him to offer very personal insights.

As an indigenous artist and curator of exhi-

bitions Thomas develops new modes of communication by choosing subject matter and perspectives from an indigenous vantage point. Stereotypical views of powwows he juxtaposes with snap shots of dancers putting on paint for competitive dancing. Archival documents of the past, such as of boarding schools, he complements with photographs of the living descendants and thus removes the veil of anonymity from the portraits. He regards his work as a stabilizing factor in the process of his quest for identity. Like many other Iroquois artists Thomas lives within the tension created by opposite lifeworlds, Native and White, urban and rural, traditional and modern. As an "urban Indian" he engages in a photographic search for signs of indigenous identity in the big cities in Canada and in the United States in which he has lived and continues to dwell.

"All people have an immediate responsibility in these times to put forth positive education about ourselves in relationship to each other and the land. The interconnectedness of ourselves and the land is positive, both physically and spiritually. The land is our most important commonality" (Staats and Thomas 1992: 3).

In 1995 Thomas photographically preserved a graffito on the pillar of Mercier Bridge near Montreal and Kahnawake: "Remember you are on Indian Land"—not far from the boulder with the defaced inscription "This is Indian Land"—is a political statement representing the Mohawk's assertion of the claim to their own land. The occupation of this bridge by Iroquois activists in 1990 led to an escalation of the conflict about land rights at Kanehsatake (Oka).

PERSPECTIVES FROM IROQUOIA are personal views of the Six Nations Reserve, scenes, places, people and their emotions, historical photographs, and current events—observed through the camera's eye. "Iroquoia" does not appear on official maps. It is an imaginary region—the metaphorical longhouse inhabit-

ed by the tribes of the League of the Iroquois, which had once extended from the Adirondacks to Niagara Falls. As a designation for the original land and the regions presently inhabited by the Iroquois the term today defines the Iroquois world both in Canada and in the United States.

"It all leads to one thing, identifying who we are and our relationship to contemporary society, to a responsibility for our own image. We need to be able to see and place ourselves in relation to an environment, not only on the reserves, but in an urban context as well. We are (I am) fighting assimilation, the loss of a cultural identity and a history in the face of a Canadian or nationalistic imperative" (Podedworny 1996: 34).

The recent production of crafts and art expresses the same essential values that are also shaping the identity of individuals and their collective consciousness as Iroquois. Individual and cultural identities underlie the self-esteem of human beings in their lifeworlds, whose external appearance they have created and shaped in the course of history. For Alan Michelson, who refers to his oeuvre as "Cult of Memory," landscapes are therefore one of the indicators of these historical processes of change. The presence of the past in the present, migrations from Europe to the Americas, and the question of individual identity within this process inform his work as an artist.

Michelson sees the reproduction of external features only as part of the representation of the total network of relationships embedded in landscapes. His video installation MESPAT (p. 75) is characteristic for this approach. It was inspired by the moving panoramas of the nineteenth century, sequences of images about exotic life, which were unwound and commented on in front of the audience like a kind of travel movie about unknown lands. The video shows the bank of a branch of the Queens River in New York, recorded with a digital video camera during a boat trip. This

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waterway had also been used by the first Europeans, who had forcibly expelled the indigenous population. Today this region is predominantly industrial and notorious because of its polluted water. The video is projected onto a screen of easily movable white feathers, which are stereotypically associated with "the Indians." History is evoked through music and sound, accentuated by video images. Michelson's installations are intended to create a consciousness for what happened, and offer both information as well as intellectual approaches for the future. To the extent that humans accept that the past has not found closure and is still effecting their lives, they will be able to deal with the present in an appropriate manner (Michelson in Stambrau 2002).

"Native artists share an experience of the underlying power that forces them to share their insights," remarks Richard Hill. "If you look at art by Indians of the Americas, you see ... that there are groups of artists that apply various attitudes toward the function of art ... If they truly want to be measured by international standards, they should be ready for some tough criticism, for some downright nasty assessment of their skills and visions, for some bruising of the art-ego. ... Artists' only defense, after all is said and done, will be their art" (Hill 1992: 51).

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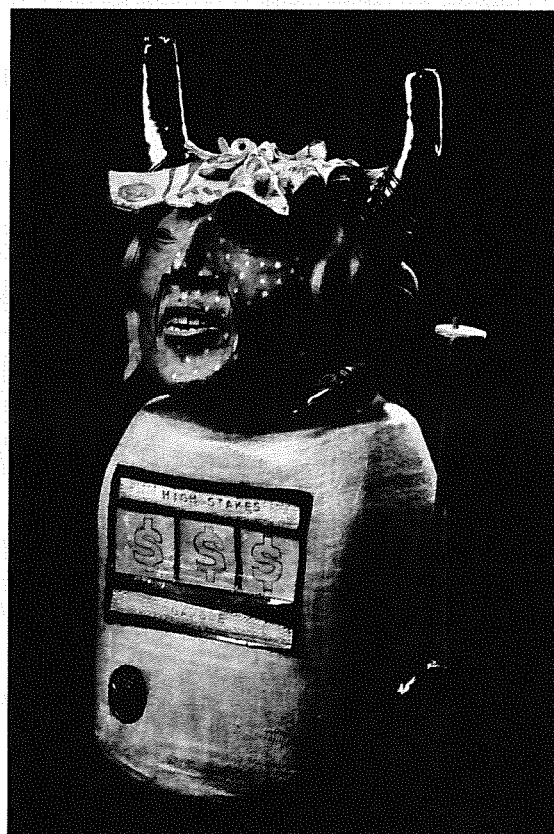
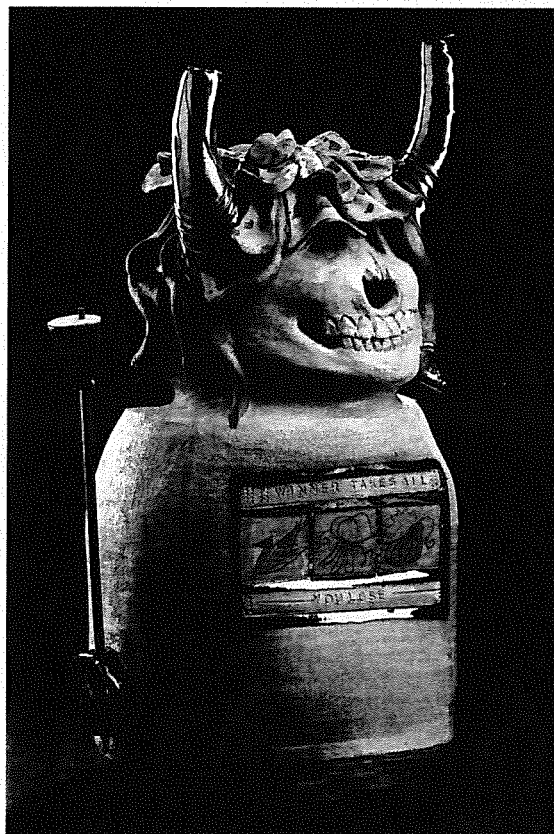
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Peter B. Jones  
 HORNS OF A DILEMMA  
 1992  
 Clay sculpture  
 Height 17½" (44.5 cm)