

HOLY LAND:

Diaspora and the Desert

April 8, 2006 - December 31, 2006



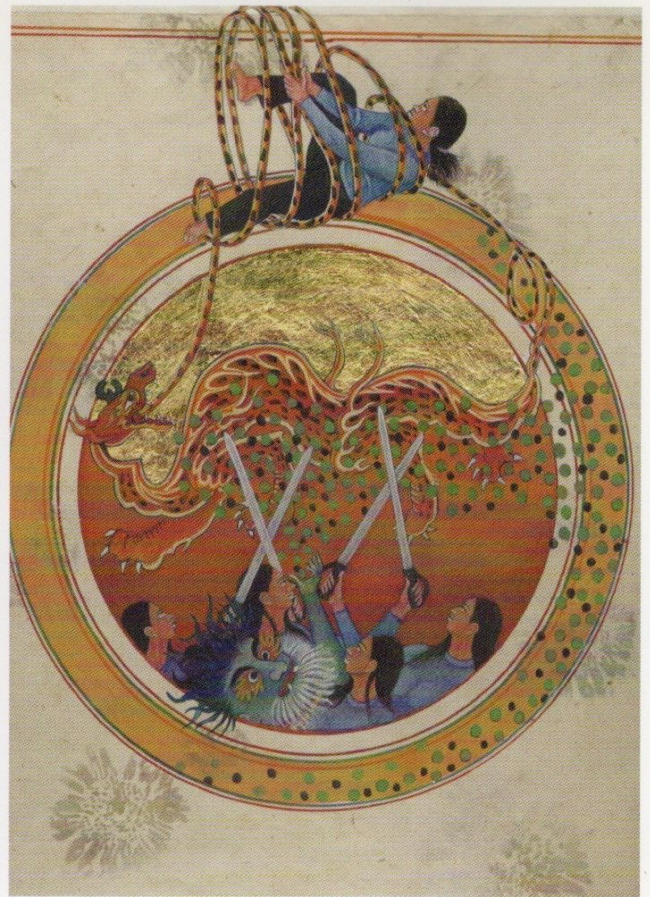
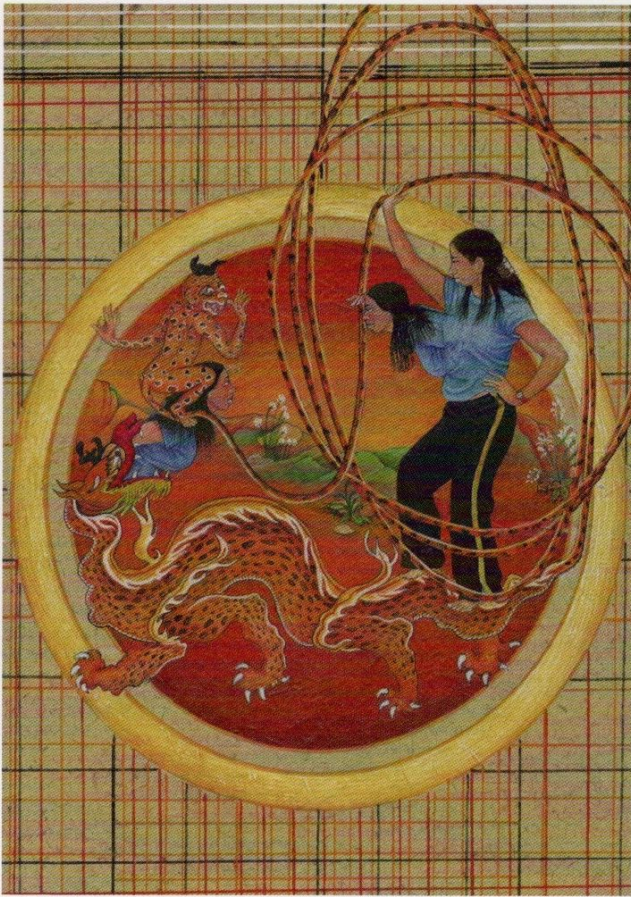
Desire, Seeking Reflective Spaces in Diaspora

JOE BAKER, LLOYD KIVA NEW CURATOR OF FINE ART

Diaspora is one of those "in" words often used by curators when discussing the current status of the contemporary art world. As a word, "diaspora" seems remote and disconnected from any discussion of contemporary American Indian art, though the word certainly applies. As a word, "diaspora" feels distant, curious, exotic and rooted in Europe. Yet, this seemingly unconventional concept has been the key organizational component of *Holy Land: Diaspora and the Desert* – an exhibit that challenges preset and stereotypical notions of history, art and identity.

The term "diaspora" is of ancient Greek origin and refers to "a scattering or sowing of seeds." Historically it is associated with the populations of Jews exiled from Judea in 586 B.C. by the Babylonians, followed by the Roman Empire expulsion. Yet, the term has been used in a broader sense since the late 20th century. The past and present centuries have seen a continuous upheaval of people of various nations as a result of nationalism, fascism, communism, racism, civil wars and colonization. Most recently, natural disasters have displaced large populations. Here in the United States, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which is now being referred to as the "Gulf Coast diaspora," we still await the full impact of displacement of evacuees who now find themselves in a restless state of uncertainty. Hundred of thousands of citizens of the historic cities along the Gulf Coast must now re-create their lives in urban centers far from their homeland because of economic pressures. It seems certain that many may never return home.

Contemporary art suggests that a new kind of diaspora may be driving artists to explore futuristic worlds as evidenced by ideas expressed in the urban utopias of a new global project. What connects artists from diverse reaches of the globe is shaped by their own histories, i.e. national and cultural identities, homelands and stories of displacement. However, their work is not defined by a rhetoric of victimization or polarization that was common to the identity politics of the 1990s. Instead, they live and work in spaces and locations that are immersed in fluid worlds of understanding that seek alternative paths for the circulation and exchange of ideas. They explore the edges and margins of human experience by pushing the boundaries of the expected. Driven by technology and



AMBREEN BUTT, B. 1969, LAHORE, PAKISTAN. UNTITLED, FROM THE "I NEED A HERO" SERIES, 2005, WATERCOLOR AND WHITE GOUACHE ON WASILI PAPER AND UNTITLED, FROM THE "I NEED A HERO" SERIES, 2005, WATERCOLOR AND WHITE GOUACHE ON WASILI PAPER. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND BERNARD TOALE GALLERY, BOSTON.

a new arts economy that expands the limitations of national borders, these artists probe new spaces of and for complex engagement. They demonstrate a desire to "know what sorts of insight and reflection might actually help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile."¹ In other words, a multicultural place where one celebrates otherness. They willingly blur the boundaries of both reality and fantasy.

Why is this exhibition important to the advancement of contemporary American Indian art at the Heard Museum? Some might ask why this exhibit is even here. I offer that this exhibit presents a bold step forward. By recognizing and acknowledging the Heard's place in global society, we invigorate artistic dialogue by recognizing the artists' contributions to global understanding. Museum visitors and supporters will be invited to confront continuing currents of colonization. The tenants of racism, class, economic shifts and politics are not absent from today's art world. The Heard Museum is uniquely



DETAIL OF: EINAR & JAMEX DE LA TORRE, B. 1963 & 1960, GUADALAJARA, MEXICO. "MAYBE," 2001, MIXED-MEDIA, VIDEO. COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS & LISA SETTE GALLERY, SCOTTSDALE.

positioned to embrace progressive new arts while continuing to celebrate the traditional expressions and rich history of indigenous people. Although some audiences may view the Heard Museum as a bastion of tradition, it too has been an incubator of innovation. Originally conceived as a museum of anthropology and primitive art, the institution has launched two landmark movements; the first in the 1960s by recognizing two-dimensional and three-dimensional work as fine art, and second in the 1980s by introducing first person voice to museum exhibits. All subsequent actions of the museum have been informed by these innovations. *Holy Land* represents the next step forward.

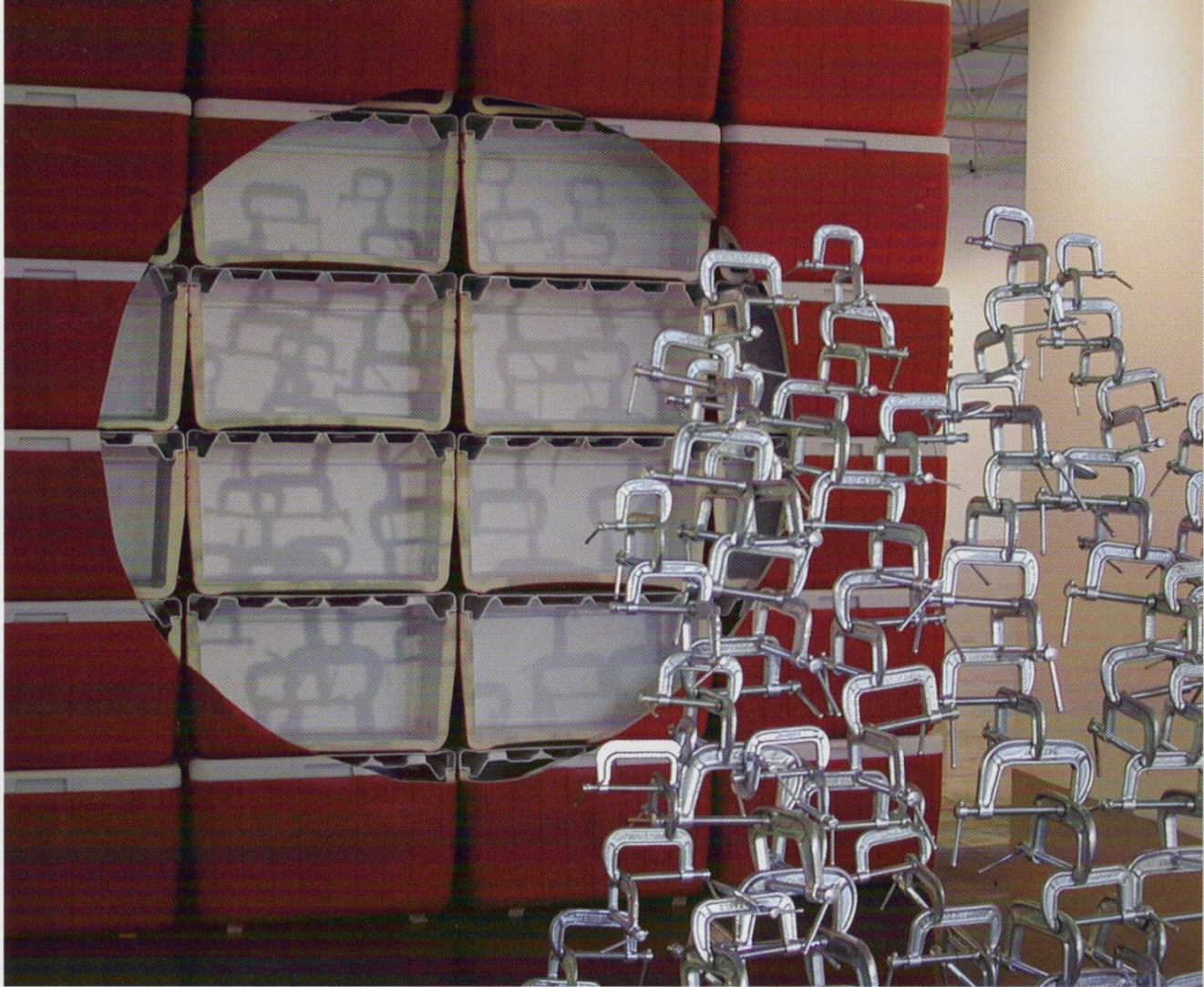
A brief look at the history of contemporary Native discourse of the last 20 years reveals that Native artists, curators and scholars have asserted and lamented that Native art has been excluded from the mainstream. Some have postured that, by its very nature, Native art must forever remain "outside" contemporary dialogue because of cultural ties. This assertion has gone unquestioned since the 1980s. Museums and institutions that support the Native contemporary movement have almost without challenge accepted

*Native ethos is embedded in
the very fabric of the American experience.*

the position and assumed a paternal role in support of artists who “play the identity card.” Citing the Indian Arts and Crafts Act of 1990, these monolithic systems have perpetuated “Indian only” in much the same way as “colored only” was perpetuated during the pre-Civil Rights days. There must be powerful reasons that Indian and non-Indian advocates have invested extraordinary energy in such a law. Amei Wallach, in the essay “Storm Signals,” goes so far as to say that, “there are reasons for these racial laws that many Indians embrace. It keeps imposters from exhibiting as Native American, without having endured the consequences of growing up Indian. Proof of authenticity is particularly important in a situation in which what institutional support there is comes from the very network of museums and galleries that focus on American Indians.”² What this statement fails to recognize is that a vast number of full-blood Indians fail to satisfy the blood quantum requirements of any one of a number of tribes within their personal mixture. While they may in physical appearance fulfill any consumer’s desire for the exotic, they fail to meet the requirements of the law. And the position excludes all those who are not “authentic” – “pure” – or whose work does not fit into easily identified ethnic symbols of authorship. This position contributes to stasis in the field of contemporary Native art.

Native ethos is embedded in the very fabric of the American experience. “The Indian” is advertised, marketed and promoted in almost every aspect of our consumer-based culture. Commenting on *Holy Land* artist Brian Jungen’s work, which subverts this love affair with “The Indian,” art critic Cuauhtemoc Medina states, “Jungen set out to design a new commodity that would capture these stereotypical expectations of Aboriginality. His ‘Prototypes’ are a market fantasy like any other fashion product, a mixture of well-tested formulas (Nike trainers + Aboriginal curios) and the pretence of ‘the new.’ In other words, they are clearly recognizable merchandise kept safely within the boundaries of the ‘Aboriginal culture’ brand but with an inbuilt semblance of radicalism that is essential to capture the desires of the street-fashion victim. Instead of opposing the stereotype, Jungen fulfills and exceeds the expectations of the new-ethnic market in a single go.”³

According to curator and critic Robert Storr, the reality of contemporary art is that it “grows in the spaces between such (societal) monoliths and in the cracks in their

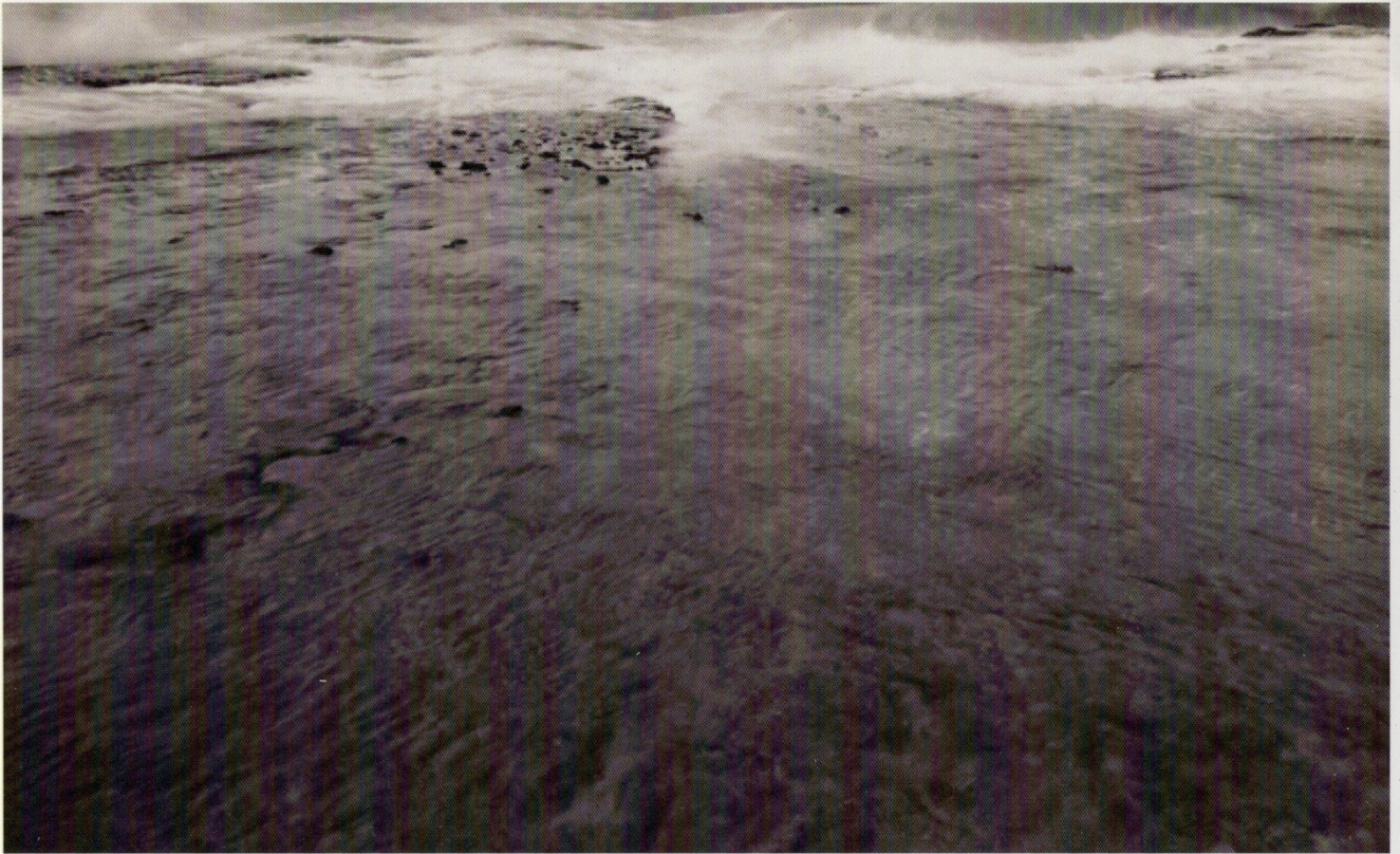


DETAIL OF: BRIAN JUNGEN, b. 1970, VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA, SWISS AND ABORIGINAL (DANE-ZAA) DESCENT. "VOID," 2002, COLEMAN COOLERS, WOODEN PALLET, LIGHT, METAL CLAMPS. COLLECTION OF BOB RENNIE, RENNIE MANAGEMENT, VANCOUVER, CANADA. COURTESY OF CATRIONA JEFFRIES GALLERY, VANCOUVER.

supposedly seamless facades. And if the superpowers are in crisis, frozen in predictable patterns or in decline, art can still thrive. In Europe, in Latin America, in Africa, in Asia, a lot of things are happening. New centers and epicenters emerge, art finds alternative paths and networks and the exchange of ideas continues."⁴

Whether subverting stereotypes, exploring personal inner spaces, or reminding the viewer that there have always been cross-cultural influences and connections, this group of artists brings an energetic new language to the direction of contemporary art in *Holy Land: Diaspora and the Desert*.

*"The Indian" is advertised, marketed and promoted
in almost every aspect of our consumer-based culture.*

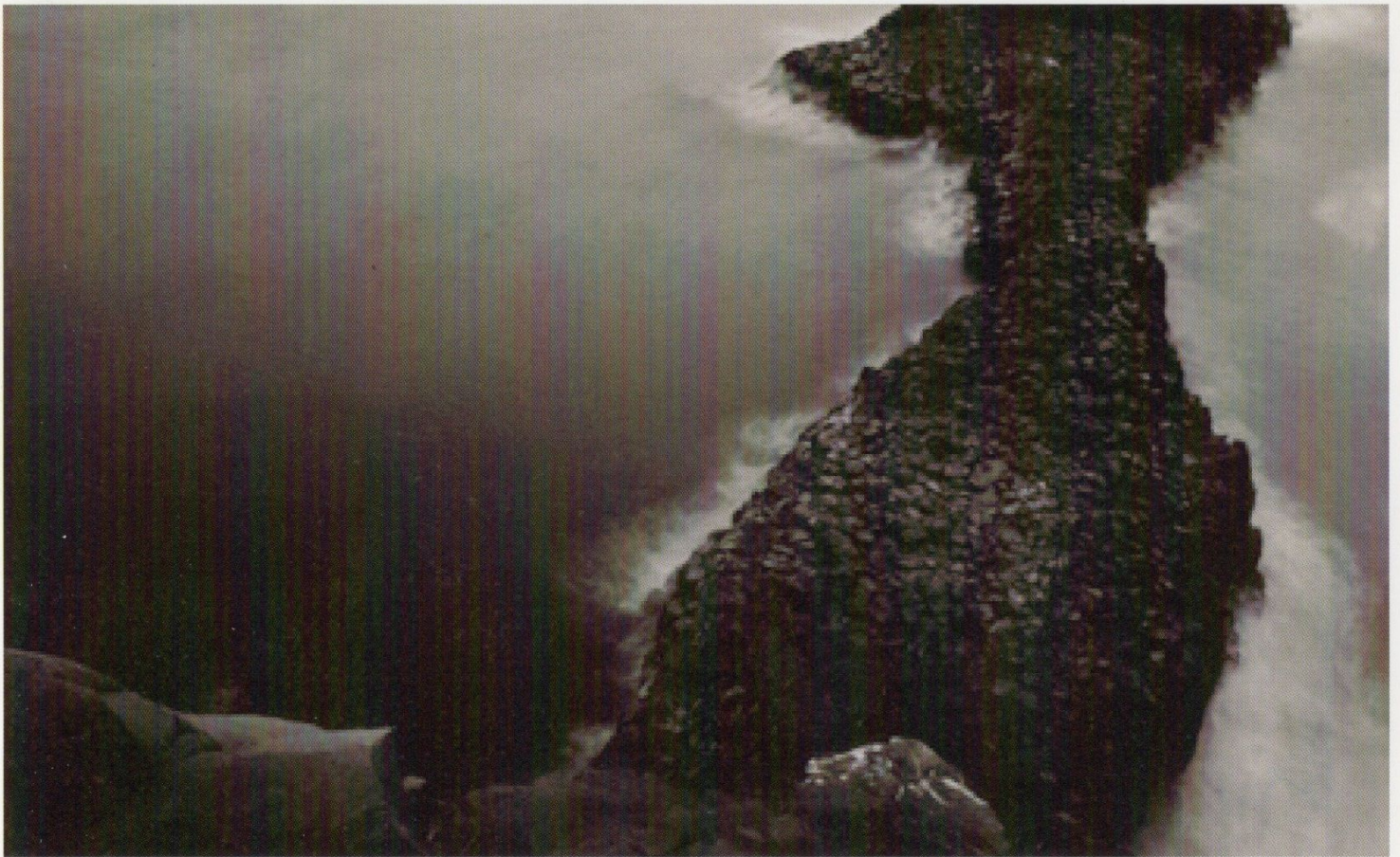


Breaking Ground: Diaspora's Current Shifts from the Body to Geography

LARA TAUBMAN, INDEPENDENT CURATOR

I live today neither in this world nor the last, neither in America nor Astrakhan. Also I would add neither in this world nor the next. A woman like me, she lives someplace in between. Between the memories and the daily stuff.¹

The "Other" is the subject borne from 19th century colonialism who today continues to play a vital role within society as the subject who possesses no membership within it. Falling into the cracks between nations, ideas, economies and citizenship, his identity survives because his questionable status of citizenship is indispensable to the self-realization of Eurocentrism and dominant ruling forces. Over the last 50 years, as the world has become smaller through transnationalism and globalization, the "Other" has not



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DETAIL OF: THOMAS JOSHUA COOPER, B. 1946, SAN FRANCISCO, USA, CHEROKEE, U.S. CITIZEN WITH PERMANENT BRITISH RESIDENT STATUS. "FURTHEST SOUTH: THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR. PUNTO MARROQUI O DE TARIFA," 2003-2004. GELATIN SILVER PRINT. AND DETAIL OF: "SOUTH - THE-MID ATLANTIC OCEAN. CAP MANUEL, DAKAR. CAPE VERDE PENINSULA, SENEGAL," 2004, GELATIN SILVER PRINT. IMAGES COURTESY OF HAUNCH OF VENISON, LONDON.

died but has been reinforced as economic systems have strengthened throughout the world whether in the far East or on United States soil.

The 21st century is the first moment that the identity of the "Other" has been able to take steps beyond the grips of capitalism, colonialism and Modernism. "At the conclusion of the Cold War, human rights have become linked to world trade and to the diversity of capitalism."² Methodologies have become interdisciplinary while national borders have gained in flexibility due to technology. Where subjugation always broadens in an expanding world, so do ideas and opportunities. As alternative modes of thinking and living become more widely visible, there is a possibility for ideas to extend beyond Modernist tropes.

Fredric Jameson in his recent book *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia*



GUY BEN NER, B. 1969, RAMAT GAN, ISRAEL. "TREEHOUSE KIT," 2005, WOOD CONSTRUCTION, VIDEO. COURTESY OF POSTMASTERS GALLERY, NEW YORK.

and Other Science Fictions re-examines the history of Utopia as understood throughout modernity. For the sake of brevity here, Utopia has become the idealistic alternative construct to Western dominant powers for the last 200 years. Jameson sheds light on the dark economic corners of globalization and how crucial aspects of Modernism and its descendent ideas are weak from the ground up because of unstable ideological structures integral to Utopian philosophies. Like the "Other," Utopia was a concept that came to life as an equal and necessary alternative to the dominant forms of Western governments.

The Holy Land exhibit uses the metaphor of the desert to represent the wilderness as a site that remains permanently untouched by human hands due to its tough environment, but also as a place where, when resourcefulness is used, life can exist.

Jameson asserts that globalization is "the consolidation of the world market" and that culture, a given insertion into any global economic transaction, is fraught with ideological blind spots for which "Utopian politics (or of any political Utopianism)" is responsible for supplying the foundations of its belief systems.³ Thus, Jameson re-examines ideas of the identity of the "Other" to make both a critique of the influential Utopia in critical cultural thinking as well as to point out that an alternative to the social imaginary of Utopia has already been at work in popular culture through the imaginary of science fiction.

Resting on the popular assumption that fantasy and imagination are merely notions of the whimsy or flighty, imaginative daydreaming maintains strict boundaries that are hyper- or hypo-flexible. It is always gauged by the needs and desires of the dreamer. Desire is a natural force that never requires a disciplinarian to fully realize itself.

"[H]umans remain the prisoners of an anthropomorphic philosophical system" in imagining ourselves to be attempting contact with the radical "Other," we are in reality looking in a mirror and searching for an image of our own world.⁴

Within the different "Other," Jameson asserts, is not an entity separate from the person looking at him, but rather a reflection of that person. A man can only relate to other man-like things whether in the physical universe or here, more simply, on planet Earth where human beings are also stamped and relegated as Aliens and/or other worldly within social parameters. The ideal and usefulness of the "Other" is typically relegated to celebratory, performative or an aesthetically revolutionary cultural discourse that is typically disregarded as having any kind of agency other than its value as entertainment.

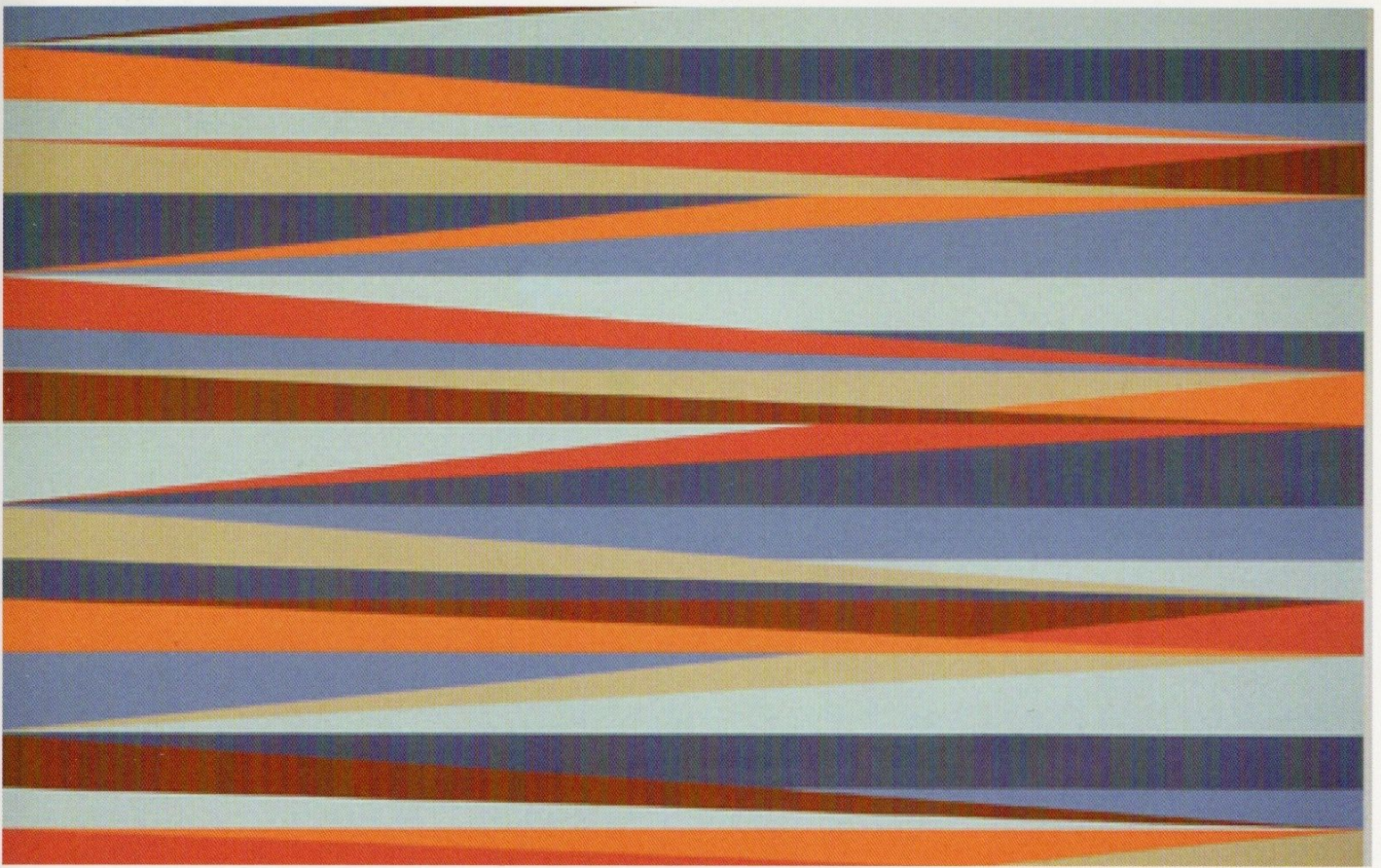
In 1903, the Black American cultural historian/critic, W.E.B. DuBois was one of the first to link the subject of the "Other" to a unified global body under the rubric of the Black Diaspora. In his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois links Black peoples



DETAIL OF: RAHA RAISSNIA, B. 1968, TEHERAN, IRAN. "HYPOTHERMIA," 2005. GRAPHITE ON PAPER. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

throughout the world under the single physical characteristic of skin color. This facet of identity becomes the signifier that communicates across national and economic borders to connect people and their cultural similarities through simple visual recognition. DuBois' proposition of the Black Diaspora is still a template referred to today by compromised peoples throughout the world to peoples of various race and color. In the 1980s and 1990s, diaspora and identity theories rigorously use the human body as the site of harm and healing in society. The early 21st century, however, has shifted overwhelmingly to view the geography of actual land masses as sites in which to discuss these issues.

The *Holy Land* exhibit uses the metaphor of the desert to represent the wilderness as a site that remains permanently untouched by human hands due to its tough environment, but also as a place where, when resourcefulness is used, life can exist. Shifting the diaspora discussion of identity from the site of the body to a physical site makes room for the flexibility of fantasy in a landscape setting where personal desires are the starting point. Ideas become fluid, mutable and guided by individual will. Boundaries



DETAIL OF: ODILI DONALD ODITA, B. 1966, ENUGER, NIGERIA. "PAN-AM," 1999, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

begin to flex with a single desire.

For the artists of this exhibit and others like them, culture workers and theorists (like Jameson) show, there is a frustration with the lack of methodologies that seek options outside of Eurocentric thinking. In their work, the artists are among people who have begun to explore in the wildernesses, using metaphors, physical boundaries and fantasy to exist beyond civilization.

Metaphor "as the etymology of the word suggests, transfers the domain of home and belonging across the middle passage; or the central European steppes, across these distances and cultural differences that span the imagined community of the nation-people."⁵ Metaphor and fantasy become the engine in the mind of the artist, the culture worker and/or the person physically moving between or through nations. Physical characteristics and their cultural givens are no longer the only invisible passports of recognition between migrant, displaced peoples. Those subjects who fall outside of a cultural mainstream recognize shared circumstantial experiences, ideas and dreams at

all levels of society.

“The language of modernity reveals a politics without duration, as Louis Althusser once wrote: ‘Spaces without places, time without duration’ aptly expresses the movement of diaspora through today’s imaginary.”⁶ Thus, today’s diaspora is a worldwide recognition that has expanded its prime focus from physical characteristics to ideas borne of circumstance and experience.

Land and space, whether imagined or real, indicate the agency that comes with ownership whether it be of sanity or property. What is holy has become personal space and time that may be discovered and explored in a safe realm. Every artist in this exhibit approaches diaspora with an open ended tool of fantasy whether through abstraction or memory or both. They are breaking ground with an urgency that accompanies the search for relief.

Holy Land: Diaspora and the Desert is generously sponsored by TCB Consolidated Management, LLC, Mr. Charles King and Mikki and Stanley Weithorn.

NOTES:

Desire, Seeking Reflective Spaces in Diaspora

1. Gilroy, Paul. *Post Melancholia*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2004. page 3.
2. Augaitis, Daina. *Brian Jungen*. Douglas & McIntyre Ltd. 2005. page 33.
3. Nottage, James H., ed. *Into the Fray*. University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2005. page 19.
4. Storr, Robert. “The Art Newspaper,” no. 164, December 2005. page 13.

Breaking Ground: Diaspora’s Current Shifts from the Body to Geography

1. Rushdie, Salman. *Shalimar the Clown*. Random House, New York, New York. 2005. page 9.
2. Breckenridge, Carol, A. Pollock, Sheldon, Bhabha, Homi, K. and Chakrabarty, Dipesh, eds. *Cosmopolitanism*. Mignolo, Walter, D. “The Many Faces of Cosmopolis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism.” Duke University Press, Durham & London. 2002. page 174.
3. Jameson, Frederic. *Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, New York & London, 2005. page xii.
4. *Ibid.*, page 111.
5. Bhabha, Homi. ed. *Nation and Narration*. “DissemiNation: Time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation.” Routledge, London & New York. page 291.
6. *Ibid.*, page 294.