

## Smith at Accola Griefen, Basquiat at Gagosian

**Sunday, May 5, 2013** Jaune Quick-to-See Smith at the Accola Griefen Gallery in New York



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *La Hara*, 1981, NYC, Gagosian Gallery

In March, Chelsea's Gagosian Gallery presented a large show of the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat. With close to sixty paintings in Gagosian's spacious Chelsea gallery on West 24th Street--it has 3 major galleries in NYC--this show reifies the hot market for the work of this Haitian-American artist who died in 1988 from a drug overdose at the age of 27.

The Painting seen here, *La Hara*, refers to a slang and pejorative term for "the police." It's a tough work, depicting a bust-length image of a policeman, shown frontally, his mouth a line-up of teeth, his eyes blood red, surrounded by smudges, scratchings and a wide range of marks made in acrylic paint and oil paintsticks. As all of Basquiat's work, it is done quickly and, typifying his best work (done before drugs began to take their toll), it exhibits not only his brio and spontaneity but also a degree of control.

Today, the market for Basquiat's work has skyrocketed; this past year saw two other paintings from 1981 (the year he painted *La Hara*) sell for \$16.3 million and \$20.1 million. It's no wonder that Gagosian mounted this enormous show, and saw the crowds to support its decision.



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Underwater*, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery, "Water & War" exhibition

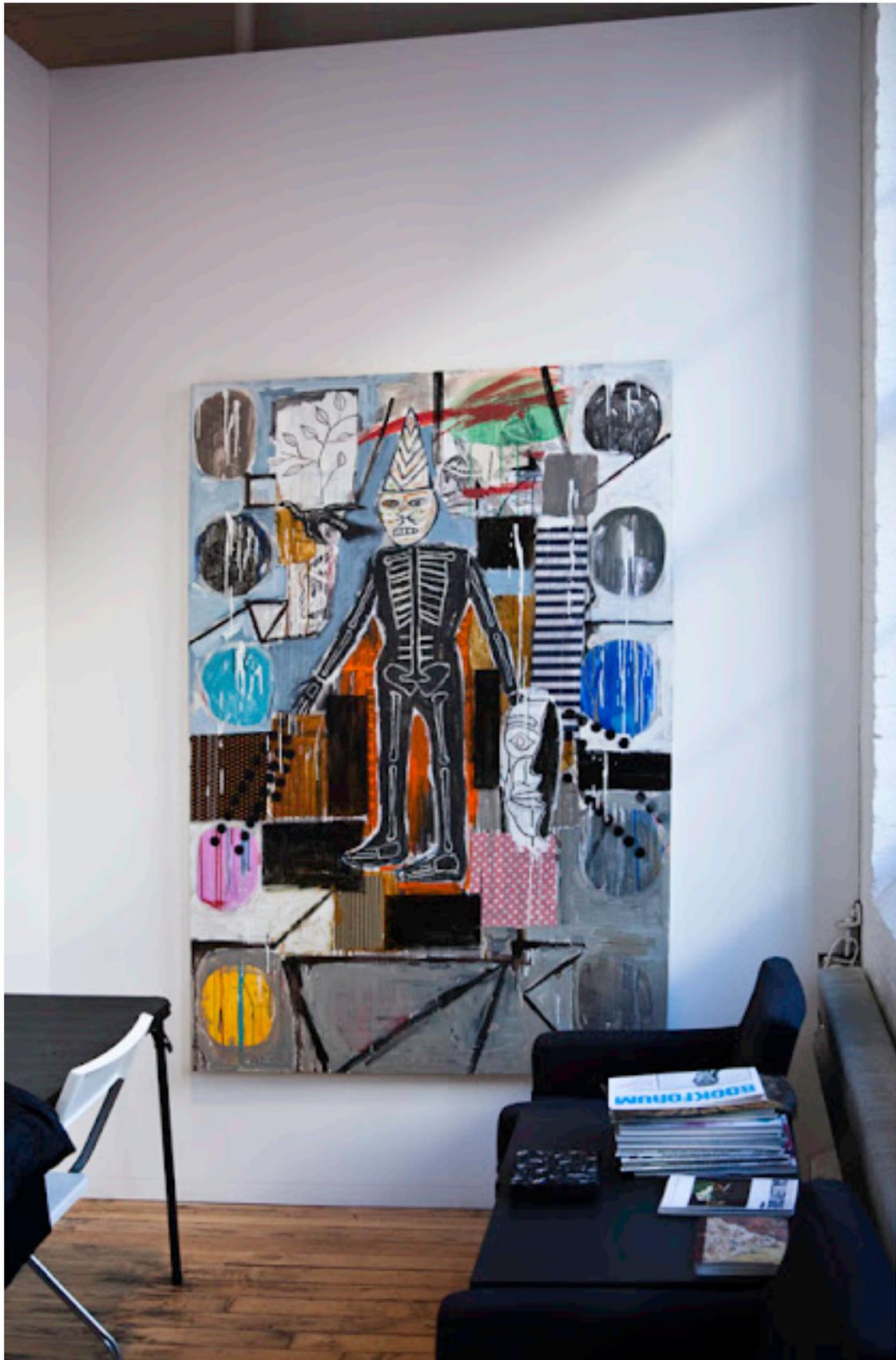
At the same time, however, just three blocks north, the Accola Griefen Gallery had mounted what I consider a much more interesting, if smaller, exhibit of paintings. Here were about a dozen paintings by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith which shared traits in terms of scale and general style with Basquiat's, but exhibited a depth of maturity and intentionality that the young Basquiat had not attained.

But then Smith, a Native American member of the Flathead Indian Nation in Montana, is now enjoying her seventh decade and has been painting since a child. Besides a difference in

maturity, her process also differs from Basquiat's in that she sometimes takes more than a year to complete a painting, and her subjects are much broader in scope.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled*, 1981, NYC, Gagosian Gallery



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Grasp Tight the Old Ways*, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

With regard to style, both work in what can be called Neo-expressionism, in which the artist portrays recognizable objects, but in a slightly abstracted or primitive manner. Whether the crown and heads in Basquiat's painting (above, top) or the standing figure containing a simplified skeleton form in Smith's (above, bottom), these objects are shown frontally, usually as outlined forms depicted without any three-dimensional modeling. Colors are strong, even violent. Figures are mask-like and flat. Space is broken-up and discontinuous, not homogeneous and perspectival. Paint is roughly-brushed, unevenly applied, splashed and dripped.

But beyond these formal similarities, the work of these two artists diverge. Basquiat's work is more idiosyncratic. His figures, letters and symbolic objects are part of his own personal iconography, often inaccessible to the viewer in search of a deeper meaning. What emerges most strongly in his work is a general expression of anger.

Although Smith's work may also defy interpretation, the reason is not that her imagery is personal and unique to her. The reason is our--certainly my--unfamiliarity with an iconography of forms derived from our Native American cultures, as Smith's paintings attempt to bridge the gap between the westernized culture of contemporary America in which she lives and that of the reservation from where she was born and grew up.



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Grasp Tight the Old Ways*, detail, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

So, in *Grasp Tight the Old Ways*, Smith centralizes that skeletal figure wearing what we would see as a dunce cap. Its left hand holds a mask that she calls a transformational mask as used in northwest coast rituals and potlatches; but also, in this mask's merging of frontal and profile aspects of the human face, it is clearly indebted to western modernism, specifically to the synthetic cubist forms of Pablo Picasso or Fernand Léger (see below, near).

So, too, that slightly skewed flying bird just to our left of the figure's face acknowledges the work of that other major cubist artist, Georges Braque (see below, far), while at the same time referencing the natural world, as does the stylized branch with leaves right above it.

That natural world represents the “old ways” to which this figure must “grasp tight.” My sense is that this painting represents an uncomfortable meeting of two worlds. As Smith explains, the title is from a “Yupik saying about referencing past knowledge which protects and preserves the future for our coming generations. Without this kind of vision we will use up our resources and damage the planet irreversibly.” Certainly, many of us deny our role in global warming and even deny the fact that our earth is warming; yet the icecaps are melting and, as Smith hints in reference to the many thick dribbles of white paint on both edges of this painting, “melting snow is everywhere.”



Pablo Picasso, *Dora Maar Seated*, detail, 1937



Georges Braque, *Bird Returning to Its Nest*, 1956

As my training and equipment is inadequate to tackle Smith's complex imagery, I will merely present my photographs of the following ten paintings by Smith from the Accola Griefen Gallery exhibition and leave most of the commentary to Smith's own remarks, taken from the gallery's web page.

I have loosely ordered these ten paintings by a few broad topics, as I see them: America; Economic Inequality; War; Ecology; Life In General.

America



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *The Face of Ancient America*, 2013, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

Smith says the following of this painting: "This image is taken from a head fragment dated 300 A.D. in Coastal Lowlands of Veracruz, Mexico. It likely was attached to a life-size human figure. So I'm only guessing what that figure might have looked like. I have the figure standing in a pile of building blocks with skulls peering out as though in a dig or a midden. I was so captivated by the sophistication of this sculpture that I wanted to commemorate it, commit it to memory for myself. As I delve into the history of the Americas for my own research, Native America never ceases to surprise me with artistry that is unknown or little discussed. Museum, University and art conferences often neglect the continent they stand upon and offer panels and discussions on Egyptian art, Medieval and European art rather than anything about the original peoples of the Americas including today's descendants of the First Peoples who are sometimes called 'Aliens'."

A theme from Smith's earlier work is the wealth of American culture before the arrival of Europeans, which she hints at in the comments above. In *The Face of Ancient America*, I would love to know the intended meaning of those concentric circles above the figure. Are they a record of past time, as in the annular rings of a tree, or simply symbols of wholeness? And that left hand in negative, at the bottom: is it more than a reference to those most ancient artists' signatures from cave paintings? Is there meaning to it being a left hand, connoting wisdom in Buddhism or healing and spiritual power among the ancient Incas?



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Turtle Island*, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

Of this work Smith writes: "All our tribes (566 U.S. Federally Recognized tribes plus 245 Tribes Waiting for Recognition) have individual creation stories about how we entered the world like the Bible stories in *Genesis*. Only our stories are closer to Buddhism in the sense that we believe in a connection between all living things. The Iroquois Nations believe that during the great flood Turtle raised it's back and saved the people. In Pan Indian celebrations, many tribes have picked this up and refer to the United States as Turtle Island (or Indian Country.)"

Among the meaningful forms that float around the periphery of the turtle shell are a horned devil (upper right), a mask, an eye, a moon, and a snake-like form in a triple loop (bottom). Snakes can be associated with healing and fertility, as well as the male organ and stealth, but I won't venture any interpretation beyond the artist's statement above.

### **Economic Inequality**



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Sissy and the Plutocrats*, 2012, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

This large diptych, eight feet across, depicts a mountain containing fruits, bottled drinks and prepared foods. A figure--Sissy--pushes a grocery cart up its slope on the darker side, accompanied by a moon and a rabbit--the symbol of fecundity, but even more common as the trickster.

Of this work, the artist writes: "Instead of a man, it portrays a woman with her belongings in a shopping cart going up the

mountain, which is laden with elegant food. **A comment on the ever increasing class system in America where executives receive bonuses of thirty million dollars for one year's service while the employees are expected to work for minimum wage with no benefits or their jobs will be shipped overseas.** We listen to corporations whine about paying more than zero in taxes while they use our roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, electrical grid, plumbing systems, food harvesting—all the parts of our infrastructure, that we, the plebeians, support by having to pay taxes. **This is corporate welfare.** Yet help for the disenfranchised, the voiceless, powerless, impoverished part of our society is frowned upon."

**Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, you are my kinda gal.** It took all of my self-control not to simply bold this entire paragraph. As Senator [Bernie Sanders wrote earlier this year](#), "In America today, we have the most unequal distribution of wealth and income of any major country on earth, and more inequality than at any time period since 1928. The top 1 percent owns 42 percent of the financial wealth of the nation, while, incredibly, the bottom 60 percent own only 2.3 percent."

Here is a painting for the 99%. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith is as concerned about the "Soul of America" as is our great Senator from Vermont and as every one of us ought to be.

**War**



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Imperialism*, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

A warrior stands in a pose of conquest, left foot on a head. He is surrounded by accomplices: a horned devil with trident, a church prelate with cross, moon, stars and that trickster rabbit.

Smith describes this as "a war painting in which the aggressor believes that the sun, moon and the stars all favor him sometimes called Manifest Destiny (especially to we Indian people). **War is like the moth to the flame. It's seductive; it's profitable.** Eisenhower proclaimed in a famous speech that we must beware of our military industrial complex and its all too powerful grip on this country. **This war machine ideology sits in the middle of our congress, which protects it.** How are we to interfere or lessen the grip of this greed or appetite for war mongering, for building tools or implements of war, for profiteering off war? History repeats the sad lessons about governments who stay continually focused on war until they are spent economically and reach their demise."

Even though painted two years ago, *Imperialism* touches a raw nerve that still festers at this very moment as America's hawkish neocons (and others who ought to know better) push President Obama towards yet another war with Syria, as if it were not enough that we already have destroyed Iraq, Afghanistan, and our economy in the process. In [the most inane of statements about taking military action in Syria](#), Bill Kristol says: "You've got to do what you've got to do." I say, "Not if you have a brain in your head, you don't."



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Shock and Awe*, detail, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Shock and Awe*, detail, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

A female torso, like a mannequin, holds a swaddled baby in her vestigial arms. She hovers over a pile of skulls, one of which on the left appears to be Olmec in form. The horned devil once again makes an appearance in the upper left.

Smith provides the obvious context for the title of this piece in George W. Bush's Iraq War in which, [by the very nature of the doctrine of "rapid dominance,"](#) *Shock and Awe* would necessarily have civilian casualties. In her words: "When the last administration called the attack on Iraq "Shock and Awe"

and our televisions were filled nightly with bombing raids on Bagdad as though it was a football or video game to entertain people, **I was sickened at the thought that there were women, babies and children being killed or maimed in those raids.** I researched war paintings such as Goya, Picasso, Kollwitz, the Mexican muralists and others. Generally war is about the men. So **here I feature a woman with child in a Blitzkrieg,** lights flashing with bullets and shrapnel flying while death piles up. There is a devil in the upper left leaping for joy in the smoke and ashes and an open mouthed wailing Picasso-like head off to the right."

### Ecology



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Underwater*, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

Here we see, floating in this aqueous ground, that rabbit, an extremely long snake, an erect figure seen from the back and another figure with an Olmec-like face holding the erect figure up by its waist.

Smith informs us that "In the past few years, there has been an unusual amount of storm related flooding around the U.S. damaging whole communities; the latest of course, is Hurricane Sandy. At the same time the so-called 47% of Americans has been under siege by loan predation and bank foreclosures causing another situation damaging to many American families. This situation has also been called Underwater. The New York Times recently reported that yet coming is Global Warming in which all coastal cities will be "Underwater." The Rabbit is a trickster for some tribes, as is Coyote. Both are stand-ins for Every Human, meaning that they represent good and evil, that means all of us. We are all in these situations together and must find solutions together and not think in a short term way. I placed Louise Bourgeoise's smiles and eyes floating at the top of the water, she is a trickster herself and the rabbit was too mute. Death, destruction and bad karma are trying to pull the human figure "Underwater", but there is hope in the Peruvian figure, Native science may come to the rescue."



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Woman Looking in a Mirror (after Wilfredo Lam)*, 2013, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

Whether flooding or drought, the ecological issues of global warming find their place in Smith's art. Of this work she relates the following: "Many years ago, I went to the Snake Dances at Hopi with a Hopi friend who belongs to the Water Clan. The Snakes are thought to bring the summer rain. Aztecs speak the same language as the Hopi People and as one wing of my family that comes from Shoshone-Bannock in Idaho also. The Aztecs have a goddess of water, rivers, seas, streams, storms and more. This goddess of water is married to the rain god, Tlaloc (sounds like chalk). Like other water deities, she is often associated with snakes. So in this image, the Indigenous (Indian of the Americas) woman may be seeking the end to drought and sees a reflection of the serpent that can end that drought."

This idea, that we must remain in touch with our native past as we face our future problems, is an essential theme for Smith. In 2004, for example, she made this comment in regard to an exhibit of hers titled *Made in America*: "[Our traditional way of viewing the world and the interconnectedness of it will save this world if anything does.](#) Somebody has to connect the dots."

### **Life in General**



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Black Ice*, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

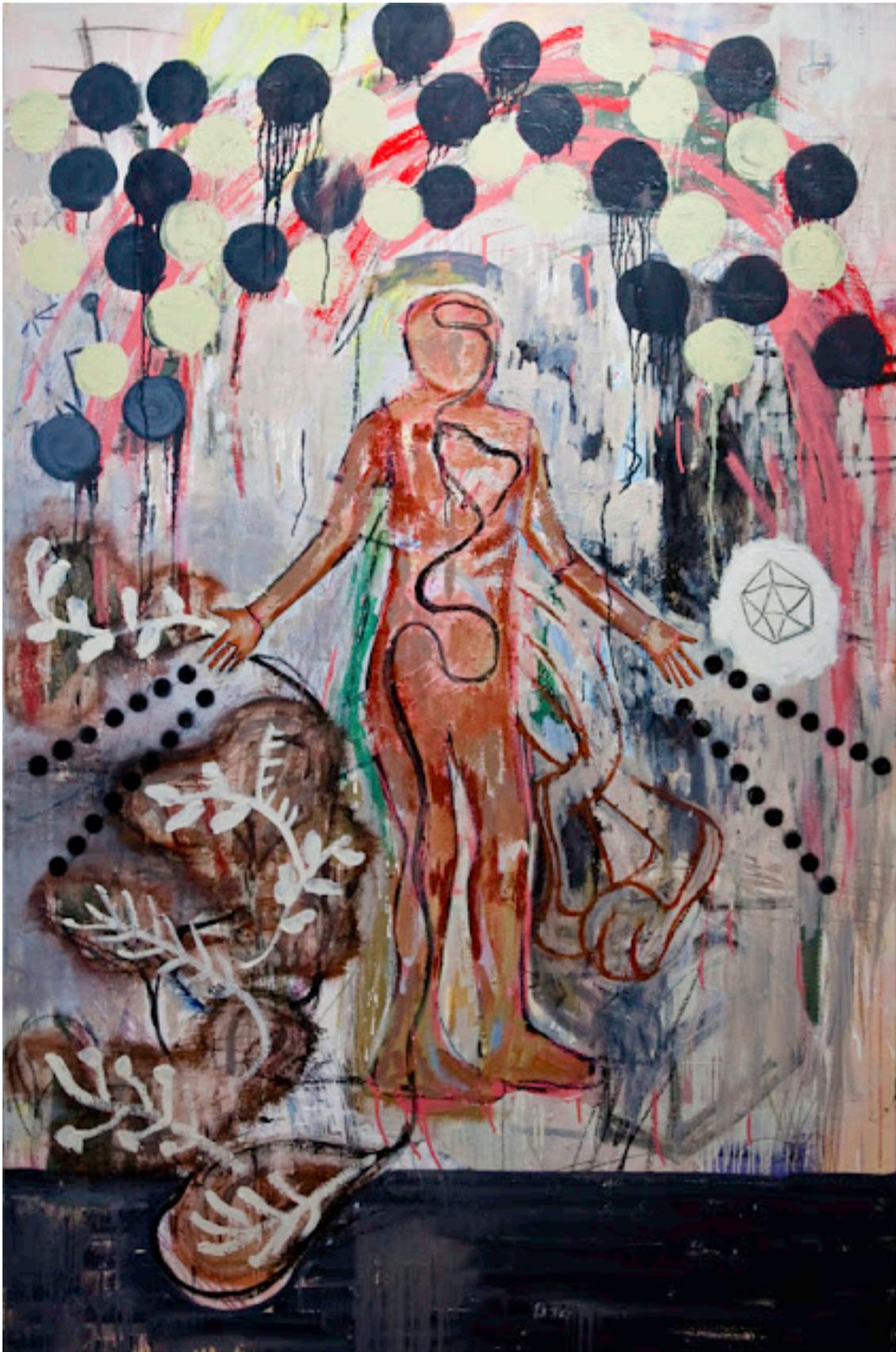
Here is Smith's explanation of this painting: "My reservation newspaper, the *CharKoosta*, last week had a warning to drivers about Black Ice and the dangers of driving on it at night. As Salish people, we use the number 4 or 6 in our prayers and ceremonies, thus I had to make the Black Ice snowperson with 4 layers instead of three. Note there's a small circle marking the four directions by the figure's foot. There's also a Trickster Rabbit making trouble for humans trying to maneuver on Black Ice. Black Ice might be a metaphor for treacherous ground we humans suddenly, abruptly, meet up with in our life journey that skids us off our path into the trees with no warning. This too is about life and it's imperfections."



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *La Vida*, 2013, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

This is a simpler work, and smaller as well, only 26" x 20". We see a torso/mannequin shape, a leaf within it, and a right hand emerging from the upper left. Is this hand like the "hand of God" as it would be found in western medieval art? Smith doesn't say; but she does offer us an optimistic view to life:

"One of my favorite artists, Frida Kahlo, is known for her self-portraits and though I admire the portraits as well as her extraordinary beauty, I am drawn to her interpretation of the Indigenous worldview. All of our illustrious American Indian speeches that were recorded during the treaty times speak so eloquently of the need to respect and care for nature and of the connections of everything on the planet. Frida Kahlo's paintings interpret this worldview, using symbolic images to teach us. *La Vida*, in homage to Kahlo, portrays a leaf as a rib cage including the shadow of a leaf behind the torso reminding us that **life never ends, it only goes forward in a new form or came from a different form.**"



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *The Nature of Things*, 2011, NYC, Accola Griefen Gallery

Smith gives us the following explanation of this painting:  
"Lucretius was a Roman philosopher and poet of the first century BC whose only known work is *The Nature of Things* (c.50 BC). His visionary work is about the human relationship to the earth. Frida Kahlo often painted about her relationship to the earth, which also portrayed a pantheistic view; certainly her view was heavily influenced by Indigenous America. The female figure, a giver of life, exhibits the movement of plant or food or water from the soil through her body. Frida Kahlo painted a self-portrait showing a plant growing through a hole in her torso. The Trickster rabbit is in the shadow behind my figure, drawn in the form of Bugs Bunny, a modern day trickster. Lucretius talks about molecules or atoms or dust particles that we can't see; here I made pictures of them. There are dust or water particles in the rainbow and a diploid cube to represent the beginning of life."

There is a calm about this painting that, as I see it, embodies the [Epicureanism of Lucretius](#) and also serves nicely as a way to conclude this look at the paintings of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. She is a wonderful painter and a deep thinker whose art embraces and validates the culture of Native American peoples while also addressing pressing social and political issues of our contemporary world. But, regardless of the specific topic, there is something universal in all of her art. As she once stated, ["My art is about the human condition."](#)

Posted by [Tyko](#) at 11:06 PM 

[Email This](#)[Blog This](#)[Share to Twitter](#)[Share to Facebook](#)[Share to Pinterest](#)

Labels: [Accola Griefen](#), [Art](#), [Corporate Crime](#), [Ecology](#), [Economic Inequality](#), [Jaune Quick-to-See-Smith](#), [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#), [Native American](#)