

# *Jaune Quick-to-See Smith*

By Carolyn Kastner

*“My art, my life experience and my tribal ties are totally enmeshed. I go from one community with messages from the other, and I try to enlighten people.”*

- Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

American artist, curator and political activist, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, was born in 1940 at Saint Ignatius Mission on the Flathead Reservation. Her roots continue to reach deep and wide in Montana soil, even though she has lived and worked in New Mexico for the past twenty-seven years. As an enrolled member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation, she frequently visits family and friends in Montana. In addition, she has maintained a professional connection and built a base of support for the arts on the Flathead Reservation at the Salish Kootenai College and at the Missoula Art Museum. Her art and activism have helped both institutions to grow artistically and financially.

In the early 1990s, Jaune Quick-to-See began to contribute her own work to MAM. Her first gift was a promise of a print from each suite she created. In exchange, she asked for a commitment from the museum to collect additional works by contemporary Native American artists. The museum eagerly accepted the challenge and began to acquire artwork from Corwin Clairmont (Salish Kootenai), Neil Parsons (Southern Pikuni), Ernie Pepion (Blackfeet), and Susan Stewart (Crow). As a result, MAM has one of the largest

collections of contemporary Native American art in the United States, including thirty-six of Smith’s paintings and prints.



*Salish Spring (Montana Memories Series), oil, wax on canvas, 1988-89, 60.25 x 50”.*

Smith describes the MAM collection of her artwork as “traditional in a new medium.” She draws on the imagery and cultures of the Plateau Region where the trade in design and materials has a long history. The titles and imagery invoke experiences and places in Montana that viewers will recognize, like *Salish Spring* from Smith’s *Montana Memories Series* of 1988-89. Smith’s hand is palpably present in the heavily worked surface of pigment in oil and wax. The surface of the large-scale painting is formed in subtle colors built in intense layers. The medium and the technique signify “contemporary painting,” but the ancient pictographic forms

reference the artist's cultural and personal memories in Montana. In this painting, Smith asserts her place in contemporary art even as she reclaims her ancestry and the place of her birth. Smith doesn't fit into tidy categories of art or history. A bricoleur, she has self-consciously formed her identity and her art. Inspired by the cultures of her Flathead Salish, Metís, and Shoshone ancestors, Smith's expressive painting is a hybrid text that also represents her intense training in Euro American artistic traditions. She expands the boundaries of American art as she constructs this record of her life in a dense system of signs.

Smith has fond Montana memories of being raised by her father, Arthur Smith, on the Flathead Reservation. A rodeo rider and horse trader, Smith's father took her with him on his extensive travels. From these early experiences, she developed a love of horses and a profound respect for the process of communicating and exchanging values and ideas. She also gained knowledge and respect for the natural environment. Images of horses, bears, bluebirds, flowers and plants are significant elements of Smith's visual and cultural heritage. Ever-present in her artwork, these figures represent substantial ties to her family heritage and personal past. The images also express the importance of nature in Smith's personal, religious, and scientific philosophy. Though she has traveled far from the Flathead Reservation, reverence for her cultural traditions and nature are still the heart of her beliefs and artistic practice. *Sticky Mouth*, a lithograph from 1998 visualizes her philosophy of nature and respect for the great power of bears, seen here standing upright on two legs, in its most human form. Smith deploys a variety of hand-drawn animals among several images of humans, who share the space peacefully. Though the bear literally dominates the composition, figuratively it is only one of many living beings represented. Further, the title *Sticky Mouth*, the translation for the Blackfeet name for bear, also used by other tribes of the Plateau region, locates the image culturally. The image and title express Smith's personal philosophy and background even as her expertise in technique and medium articulate her graduate training in art. Together they form her unique visual vocabulary and signature style.



*Sticky Mouth*, lithograph, 1997, 21.5 x 19"

Smith first visualized her artistic identity at thirteen, in the tradition of Frenchman Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, complete with beard and beret. As this 1958 picture demonstrates, she had no difficulty in grafting this foreign and masculine notion of an artist to her cultural roots in Montana. Five years later in 1958, she enrolled in her first art classes at Olympic College in Washington. Over the next two decades she studied in Boston, Seattle and Houston. In 1976 she earned a BA in art education at Framingham State College in Massachusetts. In 1980, she earned an MA in art from the University of New Mexico. By then Smith articulated a more integrated view of herself as a Native American artist, as she lamented the limited scope

of her studies focused on European traditions and techniques. “From the time I started taking college art classes in 1958 to the time I finished college with a master’s degree in 1980, “. . . it wasn’t acceptable to show any ethnicity in my work.” Motivated to address this issue and create an audience for contemporary



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, 13 years old.  
Photographer unknown.

Native American art, she founded the Grey Canyon Artists in Albuquerque New Mexico in 1977, while she was still in graduate school. Their name was a metaphor for their urban education and creative environment. The artists included her classmates at UNM: Larry Emerson, Conrad House, Paul Little, Felice Lucero, Ed Singer, and Emmi Whitehorse. Their work was exhibited together more than a dozen times in the years that followed. Those early efforts to earn recognition for Native artists blossomed into an additional aspect of Smith’s career. As a curator, she has organized dozens of significant exhibitions, often introducing new artists and concepts: *Women of Sweetgrass*, *Cedar and Sage: Contemporary Art by Native American Women* (1985) featured nineteen artists in a variety of media; *The Submuloc Show/Columbus Wohs*, (1990) featured thirty-five artists expressing their views on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Columbus’s contact with Native peoples; *Our Land/Ourselves: Contemporary Native American Landscape*

(1991) was a significant exhibition that interrogated the art world’s limited notion of landscape; *We the Human Beings* (1995), and most recently *Offerings from the Heart* (2001), which included 20 contemporary Native American Artists. Smith’s curatorial practice has taken her around the world and brought recognition to new artists in every decade since she graduated from the University of New Mexico.

After completing her graduate education, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith founded a second collective on the Flathead Reservation, called the Coup Marks Coop to nurture the ambitions of young artists in Montana. Smith has also served as a board member to the Salish Kootenai College Foundation, which sustains the college that was founded in 1977 in Pablo, Montana. In 1989, she initiated a national campaign to increase funding for the arts at SKC, where students study traditional and contemporary art practices. The effort culminated in a building that houses art studios, classrooms, and offices. The nave of the building is an exhibition space that showcases the artwork of SKC students.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith’s own work was first shown in a museum in the exhibition *Indian Art Now* in Santa Fe at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in 1978. Since that time, her work has been exhibited nationally, internationally, and collected by renowned museums, including The Museum of Modern Art, New York; the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; the Whitney

Museum of American Art, New York; the National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Heard Museum, Phoenix; the Denver Art Museum; The Albuquerque Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe; in addition to a host of university and college museums.



*Ode to Chief Seattle*, lithograph, ca. 1991, 30 x 22.25"

MAM's collection of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's artwork embraces a cross-section from each period of her work. As a group, they trace the artist's roots in Montana to her most immediate artistic and political interests. *Ode to Chief Seattle*, a 1991 lithograph, is one in a series of over 100 explicitly environmental works Smith created in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The series is named for the Duwamish Chief of the Salish speaking people, who is remembered for his eloquent speech at the Port Elliot Treaty of 1854. Each print and painting from the series addresses contemporary environmental issues visually and metaphorically. The *Chief Seattle Series* was first featured at an exhibition entitled *A View of Western Landscapes* at the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery in New York in 1990. The series was composed as a call to action with a hybrid visual language that enunciates its power in a direct and raw system of signs that form a complex visual dialogue

with the viewer. The imagery invokes Seattle's speech of 1854 as he spoke on the solemn occasion of a treaty that conceded U.S. Government control over the people and land he loved. Further, each work of art refers to a particular place or incident from a global perspective, reminding viewers that we all share the earth and responsibility for its wellbeing. *Ode to Chief Seattle* was created for the Washington State Arts Commission. The collaged state map locates the site of the salmon, water, and The Boeing Company symbolized in the print. Titles of the other paintings and prints in the series similarly evoke local environmental issues, such *Prince William Sound*, a print named for the site of the environmental disaster created by the crash of the Exxon Valdez. Smith's artistic strategy extends and reinvigorates Chief Seattle's prophetic power to communicate to a contemporary audience.

Smith's whole career has been dedicated to pushing the political, and artistic boundaries of art. In the collagraph, *Celebrate 40,000 Years of American Art* created in 1995, she lays claim to her heritage as an American artist, even as she extends the history of American art to include the earliest indigenous artists of this continent. The asymmetrical composition of progressively larger rabbit figures visualizes the title and

stenciled text as a lineage so vast and long that it cannot be contained, even in this extraordinarily large format print. Marching ever forward in upright postures, the rabbits boldly emerge from the background to confront the viewer, standing in the museum, proving the artist's point. Significantly, the Whitney Museum of American Art has also collected a copy of this print.



*Flathead Vest: Father and Child*, acrylic, paper, canvas, 1996, 60 x 50"

Smith's contributions to MAM's collection also include works that are specifically tied to her family memories in Montana. The 1996 painting entitled *Flathead Vest: Father and Child*, articulates the continuing interplay of Smith's artistic interests and the fond memories of her childhood in Montana. Though time and distance separate the artist from her past, this art work expresses how her creativity grows from the deep roots in the life and culture of the Flathead Reservation. Like a journal, the canvas receives the artist's actions and reflections. Fragments of text from recent additions of the local paper, the *Char-Koosta News*, and photographic images ruptured from the past collide on the surface. This hybrid mix of contemporary news from the Flathead Reservation and pictures from a bygone era merge on the canvas, like thought and

memory in the artist's mind. As viewers, we are offered both an emotional and historical context for the hybrid vocabulary specific to each work of art created by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, who travels the world but continues to cherish her Montana roots.

---

Carolyn Kastner is an assistant professor of Native American art history at the College of Santa Fe. She earned her Ph.D. from Stanford University. Currently, she is writing a book length monograph on the artwork of Jaune Quick-to-See Smith.

---

All artwork © Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. Photos: Chris Autio except where noted. Artwork dimensions given are for image, h x w. Unless noted otherwise, all artworks pictured were donated to the Missoula Art Museum Contemporary American Indian Art Collection by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. Essay © Carolyn Kastner / Commissioned by the Missoula Art Museum with support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Cultural Trust for *Montana Connections*. This material may not be reproduced for any commercial use without permission. Additional project materials are available for free at [www.missoulaartmuseum.org](http://www.missoulaartmuseum.org) > The Collection.