

Exploring issues metaphorically

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's works draw on humor, myths and Native American storytelling to confront difficult subjects

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Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *Sissy and the Plutocrats* (diptych), 2012, oil & acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96 inches, each 72 x 48 inches

Artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith tells stories with her work. Black ice becomes a metaphor for how we humans skid off track from time to time. The myth of Sisyphus is retold as a story about income inequality.

In her hands, these narratives aren't overt and the messages aren't didactic, but they're there, layered with meaning. In both prints and paintings that mix collage with oil and acrylic, references to contemporary art history and the art history of native peoples coexist with political and social issues.

Her eponymously titled solo show at Union College's Mandeville Gallery showcases a selection of recent works — nine recent oil and acrylic paintings and six prints. Smith was born on a Montana reservation of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation and received her master of fine arts from the University of New Mexico.

Over her 40-year career, Smith has had over 100 solo exhibitions and her work is held in the collections of all of New York City's major museums and many others around the globe. She's a recent recipient of many grants, including one from the Joan Mitchell Foundation.

Although she confronts difficult issues, she does so with humor, drawing on myths and Native American storytelling. Her work, raw and expressive, is also complex. In "The Nature of Things," she refers to writings by Lucretius, but also references Frida Kahlo, molecules, atoms, rainbows and Bugs Bunny. Rabbits are present in most of her paintings, signifying the trickster, which, for many Native American tribes represents the good and evil in all of us. In this work, all these elements come together around and inside a central red figure, whose life force flows from the soil and extends out through its fingertips.

Most of her paintings are accompanied by a brief description of the piece by Smith. "Imperialism" features a figure in black, arms raised with the sun and the stars in his hands. The figure is surrounded by symbols, some rendered petroglyph style: a pile of skulls, watchful eyes, a priest and a dancing devil, flames, children, nature and, again, the rabbit trickster. In her comments, she writes that "the aggressor believes that the sun, moon and the stars all favor him," and that this belief causes an addiction to war.

In "Underwater," she tackles the dual menaces of recession and global climate change, using the title word literally — as with flooding associated by increasingly severe weather and metaphorically — referring to the term used for people who owe more on their houses than the houses are worth. Again, the imagery is layered; waves, drips and swirls suggest water as a figure is pulled down by a skeleton. A large silhouette of a rabbit occupies the center as eyes, a reference to the work of artist Louise Bourgeois, look on. Even without Smith's detailed description of the work, it would be clear there are many meanings here, though the overlay of a black, red and white stick form is harder to read. She describes it as representing "Native science" to the rescue.

At times, her descriptions are more forceful than the works themselves. "Sissy and the Plutocrats" humorously tackles the American class system with the Sisyphus character played by a woman just trying to get by while surrounded by unattainable luxury, the ever-present rabbit looking on from a distance. The description decries corporate welfare and the wage gap but the painting addresses these issues more gently.

Other paintings are more explicit, such as "Shock and Awe." Even without the description, it's clear this work is a comment on the American attack on Iraq: bombs explode around a woman's torso holding a baby while suspended over a pile of skulls.

According to the gallery's press release, Smith describes herself as a "cultural arts worker." It's an apt description for an artist who melds cultures and styles so deftly to tell a story all her own.

Amy Griffin is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.