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ENG 338

3/7/19

Discovery Paper

Many Native American artists are using the art of writing, paintings, photographs and songs in order to express their emotions and insight into how the world views and stereotypes Native Americans. The Native American artist that will be analyzed in comparison to N. Scott Momaday as well as class discussions is Wendy Red Star. Red Star is a photographer who takes self-portraits that aim at making fun of the white American culture’s misrepresentation of Native American history. Reviewing the class discussion about Mark Trahant and analyzing N. Scott Momaday in comparison to Red Star’s work, there will be a clear understanding of the continuing theme of white American’s misrepresentation of the Native American culture and how this theme influences Wendy Red Star’s photography in the world today.

Wendy Red Star is a Native American of the Apsáalooke (Crow) lineage. Through her photography, she is able to showcase her experiences of growing up in a Crow Indian Reservation in Billings, Montana. Red Star’s photography allows her to express the tendency of white American’s to misrepresent the Native American culture and Red Star acknowledges this theme very well throughout her many photo series. The Four Seasons photo series in particular, Red Star is dressed in a traditional Crow regalia which is similar to what her ancestors wore, has inflatable animals surrounded by her, the background of Western landscapes and fake plants scattered all around her. The Four Seasons series depicts the theme that Native Americans are one with nature to the audience. The photographs show a distinct line between reality and stereotype as the background is the reality and Red Star along with the props in the photos represent the stereotype. The Four Seasons series consists of four photos. One in summer, fall, winter and spring. She is dressed in the same outfit in each photo and has some of the same props. The fall photo of the series has Red Star sitting down, holding a bouquet of flowers and has a washed out, blurry backdrop of a field with mountains. In front of the backdrop there is an inflatable deer-like animal. The winter photo of the series has Red Star sitting down on snowy grounds right on the edge of a small pond. The backdrop is somber and has light shining through at the top. With little to no vegetation in this photo, there is also only a few fake crows and a head carcass of a dead animal. The spring photo has a lot of bright colors, a backdrop of a lake with a lot of trees and mountains. Red Star is joined by an elk and a wolf in this photo and is surrounded by flowers. Lastly, the summer photo of the series shows Red Star sitting with an elk, the carcass of the dead animal and lots of vegetation around her with a snow mountain in the backdrop.

How does this relate to the theme of white American’s misrepresentation of the Native American culture? Red Star’s photos offer a quick look into the Native American culture as many people view it today. However, her photos do not represent how the Native American culture is today but showcases how white Americans recognize and know the Native American culture through the theme of Native Americans being one with nature. Through illustrating traditional dress, being surrounded by animals and the setting of these photos being in the wilderness, Red Star simply expresses how the majority of white American’s view Native Americans today. A photograph can be so powerful. Using certain colors and shapes can really draw in an audience. The audience of Red Star’s photo series in not just Native Americans but I think it is aimed towards white Americans who constantly give their own image to this special culture. Red Star is not the only Native American artist bringing contemporary artwork into the public in order to raise awareness of the Native American stereotype. Mark Trahant, a Native American journalist, is also voicing his opinion through his articles by discussing images white Americans give the Native American culture, just as Red Star is in her photos.

Advertisements in today’s world often use the image of an Indian. For example, Land O’ Lakes butter has an image of an Indian as their logo and many sports teams use Indians as their mascot. To many Native Americans, this is very offensive. Red Star’s work is most similar to the class discussion about Mark Trahant’s work as a journalist. In particular, an article he wrote for National Geographic, “Native American imagery is all around us, while the people are often forgotten,” the overlying theme is that Americans have created a cliché branding image of Native Americans. For example, dream catchers, head dresses with feathers, beaded moccasins and more. In this particular article, Trahant focuses on a football team called the “Indians” that his son played against. “I would cringe when his team played a team called the Indians,” Trahant said, “It’s beyond imagination that such disrespect would be shown to any other group.” This exemplifies that Native Americans take great offense to the American labeling of their culture. Through plenty of discussion, the main offense that Native Americans take to this type of labeling is that Americans are presenting Native Americans as harsh, harmful, scary and promoting violence. The class discussion about Mark Trahant and his article from National Geographic relates immensely to Red Star’s work because they both blatantly show the white American’s stereotypical image of Native Americans. In Trahants article, he writes about how the team name “Redskins” with the mascot dressed in cartoonish paint and feathers was incredibly offensive to the Native American culture. Whereas in Red Star’s work, she continually pokes fun of how white Americans perceive the Native American culture by placing herself in an image that exemplifies the difference between stereotype and reality.

An author that Red Star is most similar to is N. Scott Momaday. In his novel, *House Made of Dawn,* the overlying theme of Momaday’s novel is showcasing the Native American culture through telling stories and symbolism. One example of this is when Abel hunts the eagle at the beginning of the novel. The eagle in the American culture represents the freedom of Americans. When the Europeans found America, they tried to convert the Native Americans and get rid of them. The eagle signifies the freedom of the new world. The context of Abel hunting the eagle is important when analyzing the theme of symbolism because Abel destroyed or killed a symbol of the American culture. The deeper meaning of this scene that Momaday created is that Abel was able to diminish the meaning of the eagle in the American culture just as Americans diminish the meaning of the Native American culture. Another example of the theme in Momaday’s work in *House Made of Dawn* is the creation of Abel’s character as a whole. Momaday created Abel to be a veteran who comes back from war, suffers from PTSD, drinks a lot and has to constantly be helped by his family or by his friends. Stories are told throughout the novel that symbolize Abel living in a “white man’s world” (Momaday). Symbolism is key here because the white American’s stereotype of Native Americans goes far beyond images. A lot of the times, white Americans put a label on Native Americans and how they live their lives. Momaday created a character that exemplifies the Native American stereotype by storytelling throughout this novel that resemble his own experiences in life. This relates back to Red Star’s photo series because both Momaday and Red Star are showcasing the theme of exemplifying the Native American culture through storytelling and symbolism. In Red Star’s photography, she tells a story through her images which symbolizes the stereotype of her culture. Both artists are proving through their work that this perception that white Americans have is wrong and misinterpreted.

Through analyzing our class discussions about the white American’s image of Native Americans through Trahants article and analyzing Momaday as the author of *House Made of Dawn,* both relate greatly to the work Red Star has produced. The discussion about images of Native Americans showed that white Americans view the Native American culture in a deteriorating way. Momaday relates to the artwork of Red Star by creating symbolism of the Native American culture through storytelling as well as creating a story of how the Native Americans view the symbolic images of the American culture.

Overall, the Four Seasons series of photographs created by Red Star is extremely informational and compelling to any audience. Red Star really grasps how to poke fun at how white Americans view her and her tribe by creating these photographs that perfectly showcases how Americans view the Native Americans. Red Star is an upcoming contemporary artist who will continue to share her photography with the world and will continue to raise awareness about this theme through her photography.

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“Wendy Red Star.” *Bio - Wendy Red Star*, Wendy Red Star, www.wendyredstar.com/four-seasons.