



Illuminations

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Paintings by Judith Lowry

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Judith Lowry

AIMING FOR THE HEART

Lucy R. Lippard

THE SHARP WIT OF JUDITH LOWRY'S PAINTINGS is paralleled by the crisp definition of her forms and figures. Hammawi Band Pit River/Mountain Maidu/Washo/Scottish-Irish on her father's side, Euro-Australian on her mother's, raised all over the world as an army brat, she has always had to be aware of edges, boundaries, and the lack thereof. The "hybridity" made much of by postmodern scholars of cross-cultural phenomena is her home turf. When asked a few years ago why she was painting pre-Columbian Mexicans instead of North American Indians, she replied, "I don't recognize those boundaries, OK?" That goes for the boundary between social activism and art, too.

Lowry practices what she preaches. Her creative process is distinctive. "My paintings are stories from visitors passing through," she says.¹ "Most of my paintings emerge in my head fully formed...and I name them. I write that name down and later when I go to paint something I just look at my list of titles and it's like I can retrieve it like a com-

puter image. . . . I think they're just a result of a percolation process, thinking about the issues."² Stylistically, her work is influenced by the illustrated storybooks her parents gave her as a child, by the Italian early Renaissance paintings she saw while living in Europe, by Art Deco, and by the Dorothy Dunn school of flat, decorative paintings as taught at the Santa Fe Indian School in the 1930s. But her content is vintage, wry, understated, modernist Native American. This is the kind of parentage from which significant art is born.

Lowry studied photography first, and when in her mid-thirties she went to art school, she was drawn to Abstract Expressionism, though she didn't feel sufficiently connected to that tradition and wanted training in classical European painting. (She continues to use expressionism as the first layer of her canvases, as a way to capture gesture and light. Then she subverts the underpainting, making it "more clumsy, purer," more innocent in a sense, like the early Renaissance art that was her first love.) At the same time, she was reluctant to make "Indian art," although a professor insinuated that she "had an in" when the art world began to pay attention to multiculturalism and ethnic arts. She recalls that she couldn't "sort of heartlessly exploit my culture. . . . That iconography is very beautiful to me, but it isn't mine" (she didn't "live Indian" until she was an adult, when she moved to Susanville, California in 1979). So she began to search for her own way. "Do I want to paint about this? How sincere can I be? And mostly, how much fun am I going to have doing this?"

It was not all fun and games. By now the fact that humor is a staple of native culture and art has become a truism, but the work for which Judith Lowry is best known—

Going Home—is simply tragic, as are the origins of several other paintings. Even her funny works are bittersweet. Certain themes constantly recur: cultural mixtures and crossovers (both positive and negative); cultural and religious exploitation from both sides of the fence; consumerism and greed; dress, or fashion, or “costumes” and their cultural significance; family relationships; death; and the precarious position of native cultures in the modern world. As a former photographer, and as a woman embedded in family stories—many of them tragic reflections of indigenous life on a larger scale—Lowry is a wholeheartedly narrative painter. Symbolic detail is all-important, and she is fascinated by the way symbolism gets obscured over time. (What *did* they mean? And by extension, who will know what we mean?) The more you scrutinize Lowry’s paintings, the more you get, on both the esthetic and the storytelling levels. But you probably won’t get it all. Family and tribal secrets lurk beneath those meticulously painted surfaces.

The Maidu are a tiny tribe, and California Indians, many of whom are federally unrecognized, are also neglected on the cultural level. It is, therefore, extraordinary that the Maidu have produced three well-known contemporary artists—Frank Day, Harry Fonseca, and Lowry. Her theory is that “the Maidu were a creatively *busy* tribe; there are many fine basketmakers.” Lowry’s first native art model was Fonseca’s *Coyote* series, in which the hapless (and sacred) trickster moved into a hip modern world. In 1985 Lowry painted the first in what she called her “Coyote Bitch” series. Now and then she considers returning to it. “I have a sketch were she’s taken a six-pack and some ribs to God and she’s going to pick a bone with him, and I’m going to use Robert Hughes as my God figure.”

For many years a single mother of three, a hairdresser, and an artist, Lowry is also a (non-institutionalized) feminist. Her work clearly and powerfully emerges from a woman's viewpoint rather than from some neutral ground, although feminism has subtly different meanings in Native American contexts, often centered on female ancestors. *American Tobacco Girl* (1994) comments on the commodification of the native woman's image. Tobacco boxes, like cigarette advertisements, have often depicted gypsy, harem, or Indian girls—"all women of color associated with the guilty pleasure of smoking." In *Shopping* (1996; plate 14) she deals with female bonding and cross-cultural history. A pre-Columbian mother and daughter are shopping for a "prom gown" which turns out to be the Virgin of Guadalupe's cloak, decorated with maize plants—a comment on cultural overlay and Mexican history as well as the importance of female deities. Guadalupe, the Indian Virgin, is emblematic of *mestizaje*, which of course is Lowry's heritage as well. She speculates that indigenous Mexicans had powerful female deities and the Catholic church was forced to emphasize Mary in order to compete. ("They just couldn't get the people to buy an all-male pantheon, so they created the Virgin.") The store window displays the latest in halos, a trenchant comment on fickle religious and philosophical fashion over the ages. The painting itself is a kind of homage to goddesses, full of sensuous curves. "This act of making these curves, the hips, the breasts, you know," Lowry has said, "it's like a great kiss or snuggling with a freshly bathed baby. It's really sensual. It's the physical act of painting that I love." In *Fortune* (1993) Lowry introduces the element of luck into the clash of cultures. Another pre-Columbian goddess, derived from the Bonampak murals, glares at the message she has received while a Euro-virgin looks

smug about hers. As in *Shopping*, the context is both humorous and disorienting. The two have been lunching at a Chinese restaurant and are reading their fortune cookies.

Lowry prefers to “critique native culture from within...because I believe it is good for the health of the culture.” One of her most hilarious pieces, *Medicine Man* (1994; plate 4), is on the one hand a kind of reverse feminist painting about the sexual objectification of Indian men. On the other hand it takes on the internal issues of tribal censorship and self-censorship. A takeoff on Jean Dominique Ingres’ *Jupiter and Thetis* (1811), Lowry’s version transforms Thetis into a very white, blonde, new-ager, boneless like Ingres’ women, gazing up at the boss god in adoration. He is the aloof (or just dumb) Indian guy—the self-conscious Lakota stereotype complete with bare chest, tight jeans, “dream catcher (ugh) and End-of-the-Trail beaded belt buckle and all of that,” Lowry reports. She is playing with the “shades and braids” syndrome (a phrase coined by Rayna Green)—an image of Indian men replete with cliches of male power and dominance created as much by white culture as by a native “warrior” tradition.³ The American flag draped over his lap was seen by one reviewer as overkill,⁴ but can be read in various ways (veiling or smothering his “manhood” in false patriotism, for one). The woman is dressed in green, a color associated with envy; her Ankh ring, beaded earrings, vest, and sandals are “regalia” borrowed from other cultures, says Lowry, because she is unsure of her own. The man’s End-of-the-Trail belt buckle introduces an initially tragic and potentially offensive image that has become ludicrous in its popularity, as has the dream catcher—and the stereotypes themselves. The title of course is also satiric, perhaps a reference to the “plastic shaman” syndrome. Lowry intended *Medicine Man* to

“reveal aspects of illusion and hypocrisy that occur in both native and non-native societies. We as native people need to resist the allure of false worship of our marketed image and critique ourselves honestly. . . . Otherwise we may survive only as two-dimensional, cartoonlike parodies of our ancestors.”

For all her biting humor, Lowry does not shirk the painful aspects of her life, of native life. *Jingle, Jingle* (1997; plate 8) exposes greed or corruption, but here she enters the more problematic arena of Indian casinos, a personal dilemma since her own family has suffered mightily from their presence. At the same time, not all tribes have casinos, and not all casinos make money. Convinced that gaming is a legitimate issue of native sovereignty, Lowry has vowed never to protest it if the people themselves have decided it is necessary for economic stability. “Nobody wants Indians to make money.” She pulls no punches in the painting, however, which speaks for itself in a garish fusion of sex and money. Yet it is also a memorial. The numbers on the lotto balls overhead are dates, tribute to a cousin—an athlete and university student—who was murdered after threatening to expose corruption in a California casino.

Lowry is equally critical of Euro-American life today, while acknowledging that she can hardly hate her white side. *Sacred Conversation, American Pantheon* (1992; plate 15) is about what U.S. culture worships—an indirect response to an insulting church brochure on “Indian idolatry” that claimed Native Americans were defeated because they worshiped animals. Reconstructing a Renaissance convention, she juxtaposes an evil Santa Claus (“He doesn’t visit poor children”) and Romeo Rabbit/Easter Bunny tenderly holding an egg over his bulging codpiece (commercial icons for Christ’s

birth and death, but also greed and lust). Leonardo's *Madonna of the Rock* is paired with Madonna the Material Girl. Uncle Sam presides over this slimy crew of icons driving American consumerism.

“Costumes” loom large in native life, from outside and inside. Some (like Plains warbonnets) may be trotted out to reinforce stereotypes. Some are self-assumed to confuse the issues and the would-be stereotypers. Lowry exposes the contradictions and highlights the dignified humanity of her subjects. Lowry tells of seeing an old photo of her Aunt Viola tricked out in an inauthentic costume, which resulted in the striking 1996 painting *My Aunt Viola* (plate 2). When asked “Why would you let them stick a headdress on you and put you in a blanket like that?” Viola answered, “Free tickets to the fair, are you kidding?”

Viola was not alone. Lowry notes that she has many family photos with one relative or another “in such a getup.” In *Family: Love's Unbreakable Heaven* (1995; plate 10) she recalls a pivotal “costume” event in her own life. In a triptych, two children occupy panels separate from their parents, each in their own world. At left is the artist as a young girl, holding a toy drum to her heart. Next comes her younger, darker brother in full classical Indian garb, dancing with a painted shield; and at right are their parents taking home movies, the mother dressed in the “squaw dress” which was a 1950s fashion hit.⁵ The overall background is a starry desert landscape, suggesting a fantasy homeland synonymous with the happiness of a secure childhood. The memory stems from a Christmas in Germany when her brother was in a sense given permission to be Indian and proud of it, while his sister stood to the side, paler, more distant. “It was the day,” she

recalls, when she realized her family was different, biracial. “I took after my mother, while my brother was Indian-looking. He went through a lot of pain growing up⁶ . . . a lot of what I feel now about the relationship between white and non-white comes from seeing the way my father and brother were treated.”⁷

Lowry often turns to family photos for inspiration, combining as they do familiar faces, the homely details of real life, and food for thought on the history of native people. Yet these works are not sentimental; there is always an edge. *The Good Marriage* (1997; plate 5), for instance, seems a straightforward portrait based on a benign old photograph of her great-grandparents—an Indian woman and an older white man. Yet she tells us that John Lowry was an “Indian killer who rode with Kit Carson,” implying a far more complex relationship. *Indian Wedding, Reno* (1997), also taken from a family snapshot, was conceived as a companion piece to *The Good Marriage*. (Lowry often works in pairs.) The glitzy background contrasts with the natural landscape and formal solidity of the older couple, seeming to bode less well for this modern marriage. Reno is near Susanville. As a quick and inexpensive place to get married, it is popular with local natives, on whom the irony is not lost. Leonard Lowry, the artist’s father, called it “our sacred wedding grounds.”

In *Beautiful Dreamers* (1996; plate 9), from another snapshot, Lowry painted her handsome war-hero father in a bar celebrating New Year’s Eve 1945 with friends (the drunken white sailor at the left simply barged in on the picture). Although outwardly this is a happy scene, the demons of alcohol are gathering, setting fire to two of the protagonists. Painted as Renaissance *putti*, they are stand-ins for traditional Maidu imps

who set fire to those entering forbidden places. “Who better than those little western European Christian cherubs to be our little demons?” quips Lowry.

Another of Lowry’s preoccupations, also triggered by a family story, is resurrection or rebirth. Her great-grandmother, Wilis-Kol-Kold (renamed Susie Jack after contact) fell into a deep coma as a child and was believed to be dead. She was put on a burial scaffold and awoke there, calling for her mother. Later she was trained as a healer because she had touched “the other side.” Lowry painted this extraordinary event in *Awakening* (1994; plate 6), but the 1994 portrait, *Wilis-Kol-Kold* (plate 1), shows a stately older woman, flanked by a plant in a coffee can and two glowing feathers standing upright on lava rocks. She holds a washtub in which is coiled a two-headed snake. All these attributes are references to her healing powers, which were entirely beneficent, though often risky to her own health. (She was a “mouth healer,” sucking the evil from the patient.) The plant (sought as a “familiar” of the patient) and the feathers are tools of traditional methods, while the snake was a bad omen she had swallowed when protocol was not followed. This heralded her death, and she knew it immediately.

Her great-grandmother’s resurrection as a child was recapitulated in the large painting *The Funeral of Frida Kahlo* (1996; plate 3). The artist’s corpse was about to be cremated. “As the oven door opened, Frida’s body moved slowly toward the fire as her friends sang songs of farewell [among them the *Internationale*]. . . . As the cart hit the most intense heat, Frida’s body suddenly sat up with blazing hair surrounding her face, looking, according to one witness, as though she were smiling in the center of a huge sunflower. She had left the world with a stunning image no one would ever forget.”⁸ Yet

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until Lowry, no one seems to have painted this astounding moment, which celebrates the resilience of a specific *mestiza* artist with whom Lowry intensely identifies and, by extension, the strength necessary to all women determined to be artists. Lowry painted Kahlo “in a moment of serenity” amidst chaos, thinking of the Buddhist priests who immolated themselves to protest the killing in Vietnam. The scene also evokes the Mexican approach to death, embracing rather than hiding it. Here, as usual, the details add narrative density. The ceramic dog in the lower right refers to Frida’s devotion to her pre-Columbian roots and culture. The lilies refer to her husband, Diego Rivera, who often painted them.

In *hope* of resurrection, Lowry made *Rolling Thunder: Dancing Across America* (plate 13) in 1997 for her friend Tina, “a pow-wow dancer, wonderful mother” who remains in a coma after an automobile accident in 1996. This painting too projects a healing image. Tina dances ecstatically with an angel: “I hope he’s taking care of her.” In the background, friends and family wait in the bleachers. Above them the sun breaks through storm clouds. Lowry has not yet painted the recent tragic death of her brother, but she is gathering her forces to do so.

The clarity of Lowry’s style, which enhances parody, can lend a somber aura of truth as well. Among the most historically painful memories in Native American history are those of the missions and government boarding schools. Two of her major works, *Going Home* and *The Wish*, deal with this searing wound to Indian culture. She found out about the tragic death of her great-aunt Margaret (Molly) Lowry when the University of Nevada was doing research on her family because of their intermarriage with a power-

ful Reno family. At the age of eight or nine, Molly and two other girls from Greenville Indian Industrial School ran away in the middle of winter to protest mistreatment. She froze to death. Another little girl died, too, after having her legs amputated. The survivor was also an amputee (who later recanted and said the devil made them run away). This horror story was not uncommon. Even at the Santa Fe Indian School, known as a relatively peaceful place thanks in part to the reserved nature of Pueblo peoples, one runaway lost his legs to frostbite and another froze to death in the 1920s.⁹ Molly—brave but lost—becomes a symbol of the devastation of indigenous culture. The owl, an ominous sign of pending death, here appears as a guardian from nature to accompany the little girl to the other side, the warm gold of his feathers reflected in the child's eyes. By painting Molly, Lowry transforms her from victim into survivor.

The story continues. Rebecca Dobkins, who was writing a dissertation on Frank Day, saw Lowry's painting and later sent her a large file on Molly's case from the National Archives. The family was devastated. They had not talked about Molly because it is considered rude to talk about tragic and unexpected events. Lowry says it is her Irish side that wants to focus on the terrible things that happen within Indian families who have lost their social autonomy. ("And they wonder why there is so much depression.")

A related work is *Sacrifice* (1997; plate 11), dedicated to another little girl, Patricia, a relative who died from being overanaesthetized by a drunk, burned-out Anglo doctor while having her tonsils unnecessarily removed at a tiny Indian hospital. The night before she woke up crying because an owl was hooting outside her window, but she went into the operating room happy and unafraid. No apologies were ever made to the fam-

ily, whose lives were altered by her death. Patricia is identified with falling leaves while her mother (the Aunt Viola of another painting) holds a beautiful bird in her lap. An otherworldly light glows at “the end of the tunnel.” Photos of family members fall like leaves at the right. The aura of innocence is palpable. Lowry knows that paintings like these will be reproached for “wallowing in sentimentality,” but she enjoys defying art-world tabus that reject emotion while accepting a vast range of other touchy subjects.

Wish (1992) is an apparently benign image of a mission school as a calm spot in a flaming world, with a solicitous nun gently ushering a little girl who might be Molly into “the other world”—a landscape of snow and ice. Lowry first painted her escaping into a springtime meadow, but it didn’t work, perhaps because the contrast was too obvious. She recalls thinking about discipline and institutionalization, the relationship between kindness and control, sparked by a recalled newspaper story of the death of nuns and children in a Chicago school fire. In the painting, she changed the boys’ uniforms from blue to green, foreshadowing their fates in the military. Her father told her that Indian youth made wonderful soldiers because of the regimentation and discipline they had endured in school. Leonard Lowry was one of them—football star, Golden Gloves boxer, awarded the Bronze Star, Silver Star, Distinguished Service Cross, and five clusters on his Purple Heart in two wars.

Wish is over eight feet wide—a monumental scale appropriate to what used to be called a “history painting.” Lowry has elevated the indigenous stories she heard from her father and the Western classics her mother loved into a new kind of visual storytelling that brings the past along with it. As Anya Spielman has written, “Lowry’s dreamscapes

reflect the desire to dissect the strata of conscious and unconscious thought. It is a ground where reflection and curiosity meet, like colors in the dark. . . .”¹⁰ When images come to Lowry in flashes, she sometimes feels as if “people are trying to borrow me” as a vehicle through which to tell their stories.¹¹ She wondered at one point whether her work would suffer from its determined accessibility, the fact that she wants her family and anyone else to be able to understand it.

On the contrary, Judith Lowry’s consummate technique heightens the esthetic experience for all comers. Her gift is a fusion of precision and imagination within a unique realm of metaphorical history. In *Lost in the Translation* (1994; plate 7) her two cultures confront each other across a wasteland of confused or lost communication. One of the two angels is the artist’s husband (“When I say, ‘Honey, be an angel and pose for me,’ I mean it literally.”) The Indian cheerleader, Lowry’s alter ego, represents (in two senses of the word) native people. She is also two people in one, evoking twins—Merle and Milo Meyers, who were cheerleaders at the Sherman Institute, where her father went to boarding school—and her own double ancestry. Lowry has added an Eastern Woodlands-style female fertility symbol on her breechcloth which is, like the warbonnet, male clothing. With her rubbertipped arrow she is trying to protect her “paradise”—this continent about to be lost to future generations.

Because she looks white, Lowry calls herself “an invisible Indian,” but in *Red Ribbons* (1997; plate 12), she is also a woman warrior. Her childhood self is astride a pony, smiling enigmatically, while a Hollywood image of a horde of warriors comes over the

hill, ready to back her up. Here too she holds an arrow and is ready for battle. The artist as savior. But her weapon, says Lowry, is humor, “and she aims for the heart!”

Lucy Lippard is a writer and activist who has published twenty books on contemporary art, including *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* and *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place*. She is the editor of *El Puente de Galisteo*.







