



FRESH PAINT: RAVEN HALFMOON

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PARRISH ART MUSEUM

The FLAG Art Foundation



ON RAVEN HALFMOON'S "SUN TWINS"

by Rose B. Simpson

Two larger-than-life rough-hewn ceramic figures are joined from the ear to the vessel-like feet, two-tone gloss glaze vertically applied with a yellow hue base and a dusty white stripe at their joint. This linear glazing abstracts their connected moment, they each represent an alternating side of the other.

Bulbous shoulder-length hair frames their faces, smiling mouths and crooked concern jag their brows. The bottom edge of their glazed surface drips like fringe silhouetted against the unglazed finger-pinched clay, with marks so clear one can almost count the squeezes. As a ceramic sculptor myself, it is impossible to unsee Halfmoon's physical presence as a ghost energy buzzing around the work. The work is monumental, and the aura of the work is even grander. Their stance is clear and upright, but the gesture in their bodies is that of forward movement.

Rejection of Perfection

Raven Halfmoon signs her work large at the back, the two imagery-inducing words stacked with a dripping black glaze—a powerful gesture that not only claims an ancestral-style Indigenous name, but simultaneously performs taking space on and around a culture of Western individualistic artistic practices. The obviousness of the application of her name seems to be a reclaiming of art spaces, of the earth of the clay herself, of the White Cube of modern art discourses. I see it, and again, her identity, the body of her being is always present with her work. It is brave. It is demanding. It is reclamation, it is loud even in its silence.

I believe that the discourse and market surrounding Indigenous craft and art making has tended to lean more toward perfectionism and the acceptability (or digestibility) of the work and culture. Exotification and objectification were the ways that Indigenous creativity could push the boundaries of acceptability within the economic structures available to and for Indigenous people to support ourselves within the capitalist economy. Recent movements in Indigenous art have begun to reject these ideals of acceptable economic marketability, to dare to claim space as the complex and dynamic expressions that are also true to our lived post-colonial experiences. In the contemporary aesthetic family of ceramic artists in "Sloppy Craft," or gestural honesty such as the work of Nicole Cherubini, or the gestural monumentalism of Matt Wedel or Viola Frey, Halfmoon remains current and sincere.

Halfmoon honors her own freedom of expression by revealing the process of her work—unapologetically claiming her space in the postmodern art world, and by default, her own humanity.

The History of Craft and Colonization

Where I am from, in the Puebloan Southwest of the colonized states that is America, Native American crafts and artwork have been a primary source of income and livelihood for our people. Ceramics have been collected by tourists and supporters of Indian Art, mainly non-Indigenous people intrigued by the memento value of the objects, backed by stories of colonization and erasure, similar to that of the "vanishing Indian." Collectibles by people who were deemed to disappear had an archeological and anthropological value because of the promise of inevitable scarcity. My great-grandmother and her children would make small clay pottery to sell to tourists coming by our Pueblo on the train—small pieces weren't necessarily traditional, but they were easily transportable and therefore attractive to the buyers.

With the influx of metal and eventually plastic cooking wares for the tribe, the craft of making utilitarian ceramics might have entirely disappeared if not for the economic support of the tourists (a forced dependence on capitalist economy, I might add).





As I am not Indigenous to, or familiar with, the ancestral communities of present-day Oklahoma, I am not entirely sure how the crafts of the original inhabitants of that area or the ones that were forced into those lands coped with craft and the cash economy, tourism, forced assimilation, or genocide. However, it seems that the work that Halfmoon has done to maintain her ancestral Caddo connection to an almost-lost connection to clay pottery reflects on the successes of assimilation and the loss of cultural practices—one that most tribes sadly have familiarity with.

I'm sure that Halfmoon studied the ceramic practices of all Indigenous people and tribes because of her interest in ceramics, and so she would

be actively considering our all-too-familiar challenges around craft and colonization, and these common historical and contemporary challenges would definitely factor into her studio practice as an Indigenous and contemporary ceramicist.

Maybe for some of these reasons Halfmoon works monumentally, to disrupt the apologetic collectible scale—there must be a definite dedication in the decision for an art collector to acquire and live with something that weight and size. Her work is daring and incredibly confident, nowhere in her practice seems to live any kind of victim narrative that comes with many of our ancestral stories. She shares truths

like facts, but those facts are expressed with a link to empowerment, change, and prayer. I find it exciting to witness Halfmoon rewrite the well-worn script.



Adaptation/Innovation

As a clay sculptor myself, I know how challenging it is to make work in the scale that Halfmoon does. It is not only hard on the body, but it requires community to complete. Raven frequents ceramic residencies equipped with large kilns such as the Archie Bray Foundation and California State University at Long Beach, where they regularly fire a kiln with an eight-foot ceiling. Moving these works that are built in one piece is a feat of strength and skill, as bone-dry clay is in its most fragile form. Halfmoon believes in the availability of support and community to achieve these feats and manifests the support—thereby pushing the limits of what is possible with once-fire clay. She accepts cracks and drips, she claims the evidence of process. In this, it seems evident that she is healing her own community and demonstrating that acceptance and innovation might be a key tool for the survival of our collective humanity.

Acceptance and Context

Much like how us Pueblo people of the Northern Rio Grande were colonized by Spanish and have coexisted and intermixed for centuries, the Indigenous people of Oklahoma were influenced by the colonizer and contemporary communities of the current day American South. In my home community of Santa Clara Pueblo, everything from our spirituality to aesthetics to even our current politics are influenced by the closeness to Hispanic populations. When I see cowboy hats as a prominent feature on much of Raven's work, I find joy in the acceptance of the adaptation of our contemporary lives as complex and intermixed peoples. I see the way some of the hardworking blue-collar identity shows through in the way that space is claimed, hard work is done, and there are relationships to farm life and a livelihood that precedes conceptual disconnect and an over-attachment to the stories of victimry.

Sun Twins are hundreds of pounds of vitrified ceramic coated with colored glass. They are literally beaming and moving together. They face the future with grit and confidence.

AUTHOR BIO

Rose B. Simpson (b. 1983, Santa Clara Pueblo, NM) is a mixed-media artist who lives and works in Santa Clara Pueblo, New Mexico. Simpson has a BFA and an MA in Creative Writing from the Institute of American Indian Arts, as well as an MFA from Rhode Island School of Design. She is represented by Jessica Silverman, San Francisco, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

ABOUT FRESH PAINT

An ongoing partnership between the Parrish Art Museum and The FLAG Art Foundation in New York, *FRESH PAINT* is a rotating series of single-artwork exhibitions at the Parrish that spotlights new or never-before-exhibited works by both emerging and established artists. By circumventing traditional exhibition planning timelines—which can extend years into the future—*FRESH PAINT* provides a platform for artists to promptly showcase freshly created artworks and ideas, allowing for a more direct response to current issues and cultural movements. Each *FRESH PAINT* installation is accompanied by two sets of interpretative texts: one is a commissioned piece of writing by an invited author, critic, poet, or scholar; the other is a collaboration between members of the Parrish Teen Council ARTscope.

FRESH PAINT: Raven Halfmoon is organized by Scout Hutchinson, Associate Curator of Exhibitions at the Parrish, in collaboration with Jon Rider, Director, and Caroline Cassidy, Director of Exhibitions, at FLAG.

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Parrish Art Museum is located on fourteen acres of ancestral Shinnecock land. We, at the Parrish, recognize Shinnecock people as the traditional stewards of this land.



PARRISH ART MUSEUM
279 MONTAUK HIGHWAY
WATER MILL, NY 11976

631.283.2118 | parrishart.org

Cover and interior images: Raven Halfmoon (Caddo Nation, b. 1991). *Sun Twins*, 2023. Stoneware, glaze, 77 x 49 x 28 in. (195.6 x 124.5 x 71.1 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Salon 94 © Raven Halfmoon.
Photo Credit: Elisabeth Bernstein