

Building the Story of a Life Lived Between Worlds

By ANN WILSON LLOYD

THE New York-based artist Brad Kahlhamer paints from life — his own, and a life that might have been.

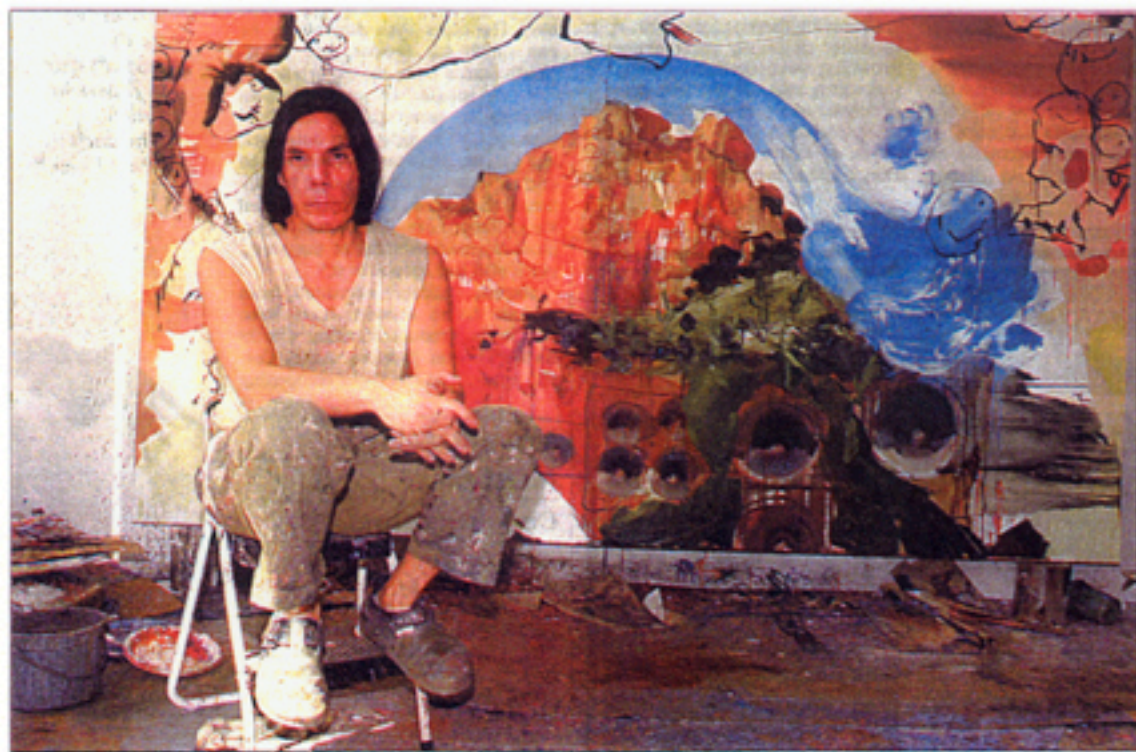
An American Indian, Mr. Kahlhamer was adopted at birth by Caucasian parents and raised, quite happily, he says, mostly in the Midwest. Since official links to his tribal heritage were lost, his explorations of native culture have been conducted as neither insider nor outsider. He sees this nebulous state as a child existence melding history, fantasy and personal revelation. It flavors the edgy country-rock music he writes and performs, but comes through most overtly in his paintings.

A traveling show of Mr. Kahlhamer's recent work will run from June 1 through July 22 at the Aspen Art Museum in Colorado; it originated last winter at the Madison Art Center in Wisconsin. His latest paintings are on view at Delich Projects in SoHo until June 30.

Like the works in the touring show, these new pieces are still cheerfully messy, though segments of washy landscape emerge from the chaos. Colliding patches of expressionistic abstraction and scrawling cartoonlike drawings are strewn around like graffiti. The cartoon figures often have skulls or smiley faces for heads, or take the form of raw-boned maidens or wildlife like eagles and wild pigs. Images of stacks of dark speaker boxes that refer to Mr. Kahlhamer's musicmaking appear less frequently and are less towering here than in other shows.

Mr. Kahlhamer, 45, came to fine art through a side door and somewhat late in life (his first solo show was in 1994). Before taking up painting, he spent 10 years as a road musician, then 10 years as a graphic artist at Topps Chewing Gum in New York, where he became a design director. At Topps, his cartoon style evolved through contact with contemporaries like Art Spiegelman; other influences range from kitschy western tourist art to Plains Indians' ledger drawings and the outsider artist Henry Darger; more recently, ersatz desert landscapes painted on Sunbelt campers and mailboxes have figured in.

Ann Wilson Lloyd's most recent article for *Arts & Leisure* was about the artist Hiroshi Sagamoto.



The painter and musician Brad Kahlhamer in his Brooklyn studio, before his painting "Immature Eagle USA." Cherise Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Mr. Kahlhamer does not aim for parody or critique, per se, and cultural politics is just one factor. His parallel lives, like train tracks, create a middle space where connectedness and yearning mingle, often in absurd ways. It's here that the story unfolds. "I'm interested now in building a more complete narrative, as much as I can, given my background," he says. "My past can't change, but the chapters I'm adding pressure all this up."

An antidote for this disjointed narrative may lie in Mr. Kahlhamer's recent interest in what he calls "ideas

of belief." He often makes small, crudely fashioned figurative objects, reminiscent of animal totems or kachina dolls, that have been linked to shamanism in exhibition essays. Recent travels have taken him to Jerusalem and to Indian burial grounds in the Southwest of the United States. On a South Dakota reservation last summer, he attended a sun dance, a semi-private religious ceremony that Mr. Kahlhamer says was once banned by the United States government. None of this is overtly present in his paintings. "It's spiritual property that's not mine to quote, but aspects of these experi-

ences inform my work," he says. "I'm taking these issues and imagining my own personal community. The paintings are very chaotic because my sense of myself in this community is very chaotic."

Predictably, perhaps, the chaos is also linked with Abstract Expressionism. "Brad is appropriating an almost quintessential American style," says Dean Sobel, director of the Aspen Art Museum. "He's not using it for the

Brad Kahlhamer, an American Indian raised by Caucasians, seeks through his art and music to define a middle space for himself.

same reasons Pollock did, or Rothko or Twombly did later, but combining it with images of another culture."

Mr. Kahlhamer points out that his scruffy brand of abstraction could also be seen as cartooning. "I see late de Kooning, for example, as a kind of cartooning," he says. "But I also like the sumptuousness of paint, and ultimately, abstraction is perceived as personal, as mapping the self."

Beyond abstraction and imagery are subtle formal factors like circular compositions and meandering, interconnecting lines. "There is a hierarchy here that is clear to me but may not make sense to the viewer," he explains. "My favorite movie is 'Natural Born Killers.' It's a bit ugly, but uncontrolled chaos is so interesting. Chaos may be something that plays out over the entire experience of life — stretched-out violence."

"Maybe the paintings don't convey that. It's really hard to wrap up all these important messages, and then deal with yourself and not come across as a victim. I prefer to be positive about the whole Native American thing, and not define myself by tragedy. You can't do that as an artist, you have to be sort of absurdly positive."