

Flash Art



Brad Kahlhamer
"Big Eagle"
Oil on canvas



BRAD KAHLHAMER

PRAIRIE ROCK

Michael Cohen



EXPLODING AND IMPLODING the myths of the American Old West, Brad Kahlhamer has recently emerged into the front ranks of contemporary New York painters. His jagged cartoon lines and swirls of earth-colored pigment reconfigure painting as an open-system able to encompass multi-ethnic and street cultures from Native American iconography to Zap comix. In an era poised between capitulation and diversity, Kahlhamer has left the recycling of previous abstract styles behind him. Instead he rummages through the dust-bin of history to organize jagged intellectual rushes which encourage viewers to reconnect with social roots and identity.

Michael Cohen: *Your paintings propose a meeting point between what have been two relatively distinct ideological positions in art — multi-culturalism and abstract painting. How does that relate to your idea of initiating an imaginary "third place" through your art?*

Brad Kahlhamer: The third place happens in my painting through a combination of the imagined and real. Imagined, as if I'd been brought up by my birth parents, and real in its representation of my life as it now is. As far as the ideological junctures you mention, I see multi-culturalism as involvement with a specific community, while abstract painting maps the self. Abstraction is a form of cartooning with its own signatures and readings, but in the end is perceived as personal. I'm profiling myself, but am interested in the history of those caricatures as well. Basically, I'm making landscapes that I can live in, within that history.

MC: *The scratchy, mutable line you use in your calligraphic strokes seems reminiscent of some of the underground cartoonists like Kaz you once worked with as an art director. Have their raw approaches influenced your own?*

BK: My graphic styles have been influenced by many sources: comic artist Gary Panter's sketch books, "Maus" author Art Spiegelman's politics, Henry Darger's episodes, along with the Drawing Center's 1996 Plains Indian drawing show.

MC: *The various characters who keep reappearing in your paintings bring to mind those from comic strips as well. How did you create characters like Ugh, Jr.?*

BK: Ugh, Jr. was a name I took from a guy nicknamed Ugh who was a Native guy passing through. Small town locals wanted to know if I was his brother. Around the same time I was involved in a bar fight with a Wisconsin Oneida guy (domestic problems) who became part of the character too. It was stupid — as the crook in my nose keeps reminding me — but also an influence. Essentially, real events and people make up my characters. My work combines chronicle, myth, and fantasy.

MC: *Your studio is filled with a collection of ghostly totemic figures, and these elements appear frequently in your work. Are you deliberately referencing elements of shamanism?*



SACAGHEWA

FRIENDS USA.

BK: I am interested in ideas of belief. Spirituality could imply organized religion, vortexes, or robed dwarfs. This year I was able to visit Jerusalem, a sundance in Green Grass, South Dakota, and Vegas. All these places can offer relief or they can provoke. I'm interested in how religious ideas are transplanted into a modern world they don't work in — a spiritual version of the Beverly Hillbillies. Right now I'm really just beginning to take the steps towards a fuller understanding of shamanism, a primitive term if I ever heard one.

MC: I agree that spirituality can be too easily tied to primitivism, or linked up with fascism for that matter. But on the other hand a pluralistic era allows artists to select from whatever texts are useful to reinvestigate constructions of the past, whether they're progressive or conservative, to sort out the forces operating there. Rainer Fassbinder's films and Klaus Theweleit's writings have approached this dynamic from European perspectives, and it seems that your work also probes some sort of buried wound that lies at the heart of Native and Anglo-American cultures.

BK: There is a national disconnection regarding Anglo and Native culture. Black issues and the European Holocaust are routinely and extensively dealt with on an institutional level. When Native issues are visited, on the other hand, they often tend to examine notions of vanished nobility and then are epitomized as a kind of national heritage or legacy. I don't set out to be a political artist; it enters my work as it develops. The painting *Loser and Clark* stands as the most political to date. Some of my drawings deal with other Western historical sites, but politics are only part of my story.

MC: There's a lot of discussion of globalization in contemporary art, do you think the painting scene in New York reflects that diversity?

BK: I came to New York to be part of a larger discussion. It's only recently that the dialogue became global. Global sounds better because it's bigger and sometimes you want your burger not to be big but global-sized. New York was probably always diverse as a destination. No one can say the art world leads in terms of diversity. In the world of entertainment, much greater strides have been made in music, movies etc. The higher you go in the New York art world the more the mirror reflects not diversity but sameness. The current fascination with sex and celebrity is fun and I enjoy aspects of it but it is also what the mirror wants to see — these are interests that reflect entrenchment and not change.

MC: Edward S. Curtis' photographic portraits of Indians have a perverse relation to your caricatures and landscapes. Do you see your work as creating a play within those archetypal portraits of Indian identity?

BK: Curtis' photos depicted a fantasy of pre-contact purity which is starting to be seen as an enduring taxidermy of its subjects. My depictions of the West are not as silent or perfect, because I'm mapping bands of accidental out-



Baby Millennial Javelina, 1999. 221 x 29 inches Watercolor and ink on paper. **Opposite: Sacagena + Friends USA, 2000.** Oil on canvas, 40 x 31 inches.

siders, communities of adoptees — looking for but never finding the center.

MC: The fragmented representations in your paintings seem to reflect a heritage which is dispersed, almost random, in opposition to the timeless formalism of classical portraiture. What painters have inspired that liquid, chaotic style you use?

BK: My first inspiration was the smell of paint. Those paint by number oil pots I remember as a kid. Later on it was the metallic spray cans used for model making. Ted de Grazia was the first artist I became aware of. He was a local Tucson, Arizona artist who made upbeat expressionistic genre scenes of Natives which he sold to Hallmark cards. These images also had Christian overtones. School introduced me to ab-x painters, German Expressionist printmakers, and alternative music. Most recently I have walked around a retirement community in Mesa, Arizona and admired the landscape dominated themes of "Snowbird Art." These are decorative and heartfelt scenes on mailboxes and trailer sides. It's a strange tension of northern optimism juxtaposed with harsh desert reality.

The chaos you mention translates as collisions of paint. Most of my cultural influences (movies, music, TV) dwell in chaos. One of my favorite movies, *Natural Born Killers*, features the senseless, chaotic violence that is so inherently American, and I'm always happy when people think the same of my work.

MC: There's definitely a sonic sweep to your painting and I know you toured as a musician for several years. How does music intersect with your work?

BK: I love to play guitar and made my living at it for a while. Lately, the art world has gotten as exciting as the road antics were for me

then. What excites me is music and art that make you travel someplace. I like my work to feel like a soundscape with melody on top and discordant energy below, like P.J. Harvey's new album.

MC: Which other musicians have you been influenced by?

BK: Lately, I've been listening to the poetry and storytelling of rap, as I'm interested in telling more stories with my work. I play different music just to get my blood up, to get the feel for my paintings right. There's also this new band from Tucson who have a hybrid scent called Calexico, and these two native drum groups Stony Park and Star Blanket who do wild harmonic singing. But sometimes I prefer total silence.

MC: Why silence?

BK: I draw more in silence and gob more paint on in noise. Silence brings anticipation. ■

Michael Cohen is a critic and a writer based in New York.

Brad Kahlhamer was born in Tucson, Arizona, in 1956. He lives and works in New York.

Selected solo shows: 2001 Deitch Projects, New York; Art Museum, Aspen, CO; 2000 Madison Art Center, Madison, WI; Modern Art Inc., London; Francesca Kaufmann, Milan; 1999 Deitch Projects, New York; 1998 Bronwyn Keenan, New York; 1996 Bronwyn Keenan, New York.
Selected group shows: 2001 "Spiritual America," Audiello Fine Arts, New York; Tirana Biennale, National Gallery, Tirana; 2000 "Lost," Boon, Birmingham (England); "Greater New York," P.S. 1, New York; "Endpapers," Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York; "ID/Y2K: Identity at the Millennium," Castle Gallery, The College of New Rochelle, New York; 1999 Patrick Gallery, New York; "PETS," Bronwyn Keenan, New York; "Wall Paper," Nicholas Davies, New York; 1997 "Structures," John Berggruen, San Francisco; "Stepping Up," Andrew Mummery, London; "Black & White," Neuberger Museum of Art, Collischan, Purchase, NY; 1996 "Red River Crossing: Ten Contemporary Native American Artists Respond to Peter Rindisbacher (1806-1834)," The Swiss Institute, New York; "Scratch," Thread Waxing Space, New York; 1995 "Way Cool print Portfolio," Exit Art, New York; Chassie Post Gallery, New York.