Starship

G. Peter Jemison, Wenitsyoh II, 2008

The landscapes of G. Peter Jemison

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The paintings, drawings and collages that Peter Jemison has produced since the late 1960s are observational artworks. Responsive to the environments he finds himself in, they are a delicate reflection of both the physical and the cultural reality that surrounds him. Jemison's ability to handle the formal elements of color, texture and composition, are blended with the politics that is embedded in any knowledge of place.

GREETINGS FROM NEW YORK: Robert McKenzie

The social aspect of Jemison's art has been enriched over the years by his professional and personal engagements as curator, cultural preservationist, activist and story teller. To give just one example, as the first director of Ganondagan, which is a State Historical Site that preserves the archeo-logical presence of a 17th Century Seneca village in Upstate New York, Jemison produced a full scale replica of a Seneca Bark Longhouse. This traditional form of indigenous architecture was based as closely as possible on a known example that was destroyed in 1670 by a French colonial general.

Considered within the parameters of Jemison's art practice, this Bark Longhouse is something of a collaborative social sculpture and a testament to the breadth and diversity of his landscapes.

In recent years, Jemison has received increasing institutional recognition for his art. In 2022, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. acquired his painting Sentinels (Large Yellow), an acrylic, oil and collage on canvas painting from 2006 that depicts dead sunflowers against an abstract-ed landscape. Also in 2022, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired five paper bag drawings variously dated 1980 to 1984, and these pieces were included in MoMA's major exhibition "Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces." Inclusions in group exhibitions such as the "Greater New York" show at MoMA PS1 in 2022 and "Unholding" at Artist's Space in 2017 have brought his work to greater public attention. In late 2023, Jemison held a solo exhibition of work from the 1980s through to the present day at 47 Canal Gallery. Jemison was kind enough to give me a walk through of the exhibition and allowed me to record the conversation. Extracts of which have been contextualized below.

Recalling his early days in New York, in the very late 1960s, Jemison gives some insight into how he developed as an abstract painter. Curiously, even his early abstract work responded to a specificity of place.

Well, when I was here in New York… I didn't get into the graduate school of my choice, so I just moved directly to New York. Right out of undergraduate school and I started finding a place to live, and I worked in an art supplies store, so I had access to materials, and in college I had taken this mathematics course. And I was terrible at it. I dropped it once and took it again. And so I had in my head this whole thing about math, because it was a requirement, I had to complete it in order to graduate. So I had this thing about math. The early work was sort of mathematically driven. It was all kinds of things. It was recognizing how the street lights in Manhattan worked, that it was a sequence, and that they were a set theory, you know, how they operated. And just numbers, like, if you are sitting in a restaurant in Buffalo and you look behind the counter, there is a stack of plates like this [shows with hands a small stack], but in New York, there is a stack of plates like this [shows with hands a big stack]. So there was just more of everything. And so some-how all this math kind of made its way into my work—random, chance theory, all that kind of stuff. But it kind of got to the point of feeling very limiting in terms of what I wanted to do.

After a period in New York, Jemison moved to San Francisco. The early 1970s was a charged political moment in terms of race relations in America and San Francisco was a hub for this activity. The 19-month-long occupation of Alcatraz Island, a former federal prison site, by Native American activists between 1969 and 1971 marked a turning point for the young Jemison.

Then, one of the instrumental things was I moved to San Francisco at the urging of a friend of mine. There was a company I worked for here in New York and they had a store in San Francisco. The place was called Design Research and it was really high-end merchandise, Marimekko fabrics, chairs by Marcel Breuer, on and on. And my job was simply to set it up and make it attractive and get people to buy the stuff. They had one on 57th Street here [in New York] and then one on Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco. While I was in San Francisco, I went to work for them out there too. There was a take over of Alcatraz while I was living there. Yeah so, all of a sudden, so all the politics—literally I could look up, cause Ghiradelli Square is right on the bay, Alcatraz was right there, I was right here. So there were underground papers covering the whole thing, right. A cousin of mine was out there and we kind of got more and more into conversations. You know, we had grown up in a completely Indian community but it wasn't political at all. I was very, very—you know my father was an

ironworker and my mother was a housewife, and we went to a community church and it was all like that. And now suddenly there was this awakening going on in Indian country and I was kind of getting swept into it and following the events. And so, that was one sort of pull. The other was to go back home and really reconnect with my own roots and discover more about what it meant to say you are a Seneca. Our language, our songs, our dances, our culture and traditions, all of that stuff that was not a part of my education growing up. I really felt the need to feel that, understand it. And that just really just opened up a whole world of family that I had never connected with previously, my mother's side of the family primarily. That really changed the way my art worked.

The politicization that Jemison experienced through his observation and conversations around the occupation of Alcatraz Island came at a moment when Indigenous artists were also coming together to exhibit. After moving back to upstate New York from San Francisco, Jemison describes how it:

Re-connected me with friends of mine from undergraduate school who were working for the old Museum of the American Indian before it became the National Museum. And it was up at 155th and Broadway [in New York City], and they curated me into a show of five Native American artists, and I was one of those five. Again, it kind of opened up my eyes to—you know, now I am meeting people who are artists and from other communities, and we have a common thing which is our experiences in growing up. And you know, and either we knew a lot, or we didn't know a lot but we wanted to know more. And so all of that stuff would come about as I had more conversations with other Native artists.

The artists Jemison was exhibiting alongside included legendary artist like Fritz Scholder and George Morrison, and it's not too difficult to see how this camaraderie might have influenced his decision to go into curating and cultural organizing.

Well, from 1978 to 1985, I ran the American Indian Community House Gallery. […] I moved it from 38th Street, where there was no other galleries, but there was a space for the community aspect of the house, you know, healthcare and jobs and all the rest of it. But when they moved down on Broadway, there was no gallery space. So I found a gallery space in SoHo on West Broadway… Literally, I was down the block from Leo Castelli and Mary Boone and everything was going on, of course, so we were right

there. And then I started bringing artists into the city and exposing them to New York. So I went through that whole thing of building fraternity with all these different people from communities like South Dakota, Oklahoma, California, wherever…

While running a gallery space in the very center of Manhattan in the early 1980s, and acutely aware of the mainstream art world, Jemison's concerns were different to his commercially successful peers. The way in which Jemison's work was perpendicular to the art that was celebrated in that moment is well illustrated by a couple of anecdotes.

Well, here is an experience that I had. There was a guy who owned in Union Square a nightclub, right. And one day he came into the gallery and was taken with the work in the gallery and he said, "Um, would you guys ever think about doing a show in my nightclub, you know we got the walls there and uh, just another venue, but people will see the work." And I thought, there is no harm in doing that, so I said "Yeah, I will do it." And I talked to the other artists that were living mainly in New York at the time. And they were all down with it. So we did that and the night of the opening, of all people, Mary Boone was sitting there with a friend of hers and I heard her say to the owner of the cafe, "Why would you ever show this work?" And I was standing back, and I was like, do I go over and just jump in her shit, say hi, fuck it, I don't care what you think. I mean was she threatened by it, or? Then the other experience, Ivan Karp, who ran O.K. Harris, he was literally telling people, "don't bother going over there, cause there is nothing there to see." About my gallery. The gallery I was running. So this guy wrote a newspaper that used to be a freebie on the street, I think it was called Artspeak or something like that. So he offered me to write an article, so I decided to write about that. That the tastemakers are the ones who think they are in control of what is art. They are not in control of what is art. They are in control of what they like.

At the same time that Jemison was organizing the American Indian Community House Gallery he continued to make his artworks. It was during this time that he developed his now trademark paper bag drawings, which are as evocative as they are simple. Describing the way in which these works developed, Jemison recalls:

So 1979, I am sitting in the gallery, which has a window out onto the sidewalk on 38th Street, and Charlie Ahearn is walk-ing by and he saw that

I had an exhibit in that space, as we had taken a showroom and turned it into a gallery. He came in, is looking around at the work, and he walked up to where my desk was, he saw me doodling on this paper bag and I was kind of very busily working on it and I took the time to talk with him. Before he left, he said, "I would like to show some of those," he was talking about the paper bag. Then he explained he was doing this show that was going to be in Times Square, that it was going to be artists with training, artists without training, you know, younger artists from the Lower East Side, and he was kind of going on. I said, "Sure, I will do that," and so I proceeded to make some more paintings, really using the paper bag, and went beyond simply doodling on them to, like painting on them or collaging on them, doing whatever. But at the same time I was commuting from Brooklyn and I noticed how frequently people were carrying some kind of a bag and that was a common thing. And at the same time, also I was having the opportunity to go into different museums and see-ing their collections that were not on display that were Native, that were beaded bags, or quilled bags, or twined bags, you know, all the different variety of things that people had created, and decorated as well as created for practical use.

The fact that everyone, from all walks of life, must carry their belongings in a bag, resonated with Jemison, especially in the diverse setting of New York City. The issue of Indigenous rights became a more explicit theme in Jemison's work. One of the key historical paintings in Jemison's exhibition at 47 Canal is Buffalo Road from 1985, that shows two buffalo in an abstracted landscape, each of the animals painstakingly rendered with delicate brushstrokes. As Jemison describes:

Yeah, so the Bison is done with egg tempera, the back-ground around them is acrylic, and then mountains and the clouds and and the sky are all oil. So there are three different media that's involved. It kind of came out of a recognition of the lack of a suitable space for these animals to live in and the real effort that was made to kind of eliminate them, you know. Then recently, I don't know if you saw it, on tv, Ken Burns did a whole thing about the Buffalo, and it was worse than I even knew. The effort just to try and just completely destroy them. So it's a trope, it's about us and it's about them. What happened to both.

In recent years, Jemison has turn his attention to a more classical form of landscape painting. The snowy hills of upstate New York, the place he grew up and where he lives now, has become another of the motifs he has

made his own. These paintings, although less obvious, are perhaps just as political as anything else he has made. Speaking of Ganondagan, the Seneca archeological site, and the land-scape painting Jemison developed while working there:

Well, I had 569 acres of land to manage… Bigger now as we have added more. And I laid on trails here, I put in signage here, and I got into management one area over another, like introducing native grasses again back to a landscape, took another landscape over for farming. I mean I was on this land-scape all the time and in different seasons and observing. And these milkweeds became a real theme for me. I did them in various ways.

The recent landscape paintings have almost an American Modernist feeling to them, and when I mentioned Andrew Wyeth's cool, cold and mysterious landscape paintings, Jemison continued:

When I was a kid, [Wyeth] was the second show I ever saw of a mature artist. The first one was Vincent van Gogh and the second one was Andrew Wyeth. They were both at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, which is now ABK. But anyway, when I went there, you know, I was just in awe of van Gogh's drawing and how Wyeth was able to use the white of the paper as part of the composition and, whether it would be snow or whatever it might be, he found a way to use the paper, and I liked that idea. Really looking again at the positive and negative space, all those things you kind of think about as an artist.