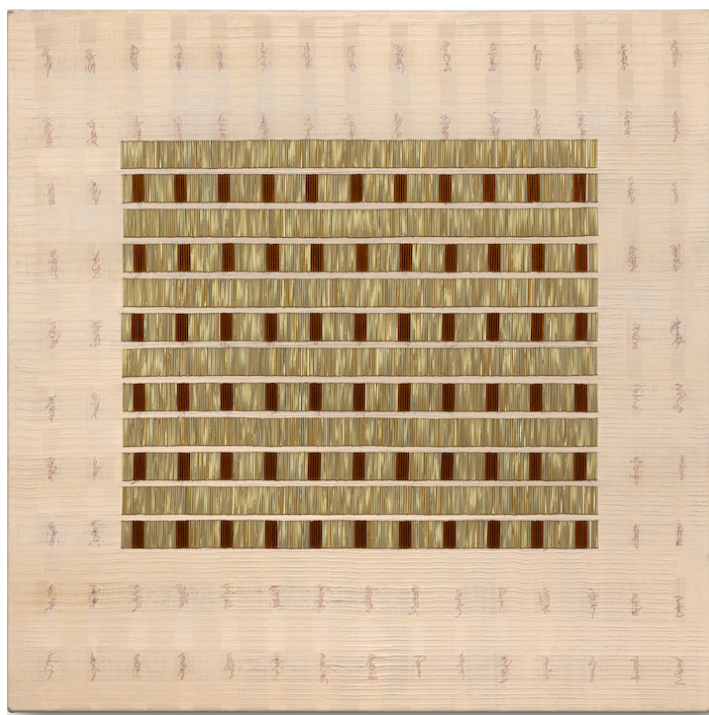


Deconstructing a Narrative Through Indigenous Art

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Dyani White Hawk, *Untitled (Gold and Russett)*, 2019. Acrylic, oil, glass beads, and synthetic sinew on canvas, 30 x 30 in (76.2 x 76.2 cm)

Untitled (Gold and Russett) is a multimedia work by Dyani White Hawk consisting of glass beads sewn onto a canvas covered with acrylic paint. By referencing indigenous craftwork and its contributions to the minimalist art movement through pattern work and beading, White Hawk complicates the typically accepted narrative of art history—that it was dominated by white men in the 1950s and 60s.

Dyani White Hawk was born in 1976 of Sičangu Lakota ancestry and is a member of the Rosebud Sioux tribe. She is based out of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Much of her work is inspired by the art created by Lakota women. She commonly uses beads in her work to allude to the beading in the bags, clothing, moccasins, and more made by Lakota women. She cites Mark

Rothko as an artist with a large influence on her work, and it is evident in her minimalist compositions and usage of geometric shapes—especially rectangles—in her paintings. She received her MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and a BFA from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Looking at *Untitled (Gold and Russet)*, what first draws the eye is the gold beading in the center. The work is square, 30 by 30 inches, and painted a neutral tan color, with a repeating grid of small scratches etched into the canvas. The *pièce de résistance* of the work is the beads. There are 12 strips of woven gold beads in the center of the canvas, framed by the stark color of the canvas the beads are sewn onto. The beads alternate patterns. While the first strip is solid gold, the second strip underneath it has small amounts of brown beads woven uniformly in. The rest of the stripes proceed to alternate in this pattern. The piece is installed at eye level on the wall of the gallery, with no framing around it. The frameless presentation evokes a sense of importance in the work, forcing your eye to the canvas and canvas only. With closer investigation, one sees many telltale signs of classic Minimalist artwork in this piece. The beads are arranged in a repeating pattern, something very common in Minimalist works. There are also many geometric shapes evident in the work, from the cylindrical beads to the rectangles that the beads form when sewn together. The marks on the canvas are also arranged in a grid pattern, all a uniform amount of space apart from each other. Where her work starts to err on the side of post-Minimalism is through the presence of her hand. When looking at the piece, one can see where her hand was present in the work and it is clear how she worked on the piece. The scratches on the canvas were evidently made by her dragging some sort of object like a pencil through the still wet paint, and one can assume that she used her hands to thread the beads.

It is a well-known fact that U.S. history has been heavily whitewashed, and only in recent years has our larger society started to reckon with this. Minimalism is thought to have developed in America in the late 50s and early 60s, with artists like Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, and Frank Serra being titans of this style of work. Minimalism is largely based more on what you can't do rather than what you can when it comes to its style. Minimalism is characterized by a lack of expression or emotion, as well as a lack of texture or representation. Minimalism is meant to be taken for what it is, with no deeper meaning present in the art. Most importantly, the hand of the artist is not supposed to be present in Minimalist work. Donald Judd was a pioneer of works like these, with simple, geometric sculptures presented in a bare, stripped-down manner. Carl Andre was known for presenting his works as simplistically as possible blurring the line between the art and viewer, an important principle of the minimalist movement. While these artists are thought of as the founders of the Minimalist movement—and for good reason—White Hawk argues that Indigenous people were practicing minimalism long before it was recognized as such. A prime example of this, White Hawk argues, is in the patterns of beadwork that indigenous women would weave. White Hawk sees these examples in “generations of hand-made objects created by Native Americans in North America, in the patterns and shapes of fabrics and beadwork created by Indigenous women for centuries” (Rinaldi, 2022). These works are some of the first examples of symmetry and patterns that characterized minimalist work. Still, they were not recognized nor included in the canon of art history because of the suppression of indigenous people and their erasure from history.

White Hawk continues to reinforce her claims through her explanation of her works and how they connect to larger themes of indigenous contributions to art history. “The concept is about recognizing our relatedness as human relatives. All of the things that we’re facing right

now are all completely intertwined. They can't be separated." (Regan, 2021). White Hawk shows this sense of connectedness in her art through her explanation of her work. She shows how art is influenced by many more groups of people than we are taught to believe. While Western art history may teach us the contrary, White Hawks' work leads us to these moments of reckoning. We see in the stacks of beads our own communities and cultures, inexplicably intertwined, and we realize how we as human beings are all related and affect one another. To say that an art movement was pioneered by just one group of people would be a ridiculous statement when we realize how much the cultures that came before us, such as indigenous groups, affect us. White Hawk speaks about this realization, saying that "I started figuring out that they were often influenced by Native artists, or collecting Indigenous art, or they lived in proximity to Native communities" (Regan 2021). She explains that when she went to college and started learning more about European and Western art, she recognized many important aspects of that art as being grounded in Indigenous works. Stripe paintings, a huge cornerstone of the Minimalist movement, were often used in Lakota beadwork long before people like Bridget Riley became known for this type of art.

Personally, White Hawks' work helped open my mind to the possibilities of art history beyond what I had been taught. Her pieces urged me to look more introspectively at my own understanding of art movements and who pioneered them. Her ability to create art pieces that function as tools to both teach us history and rewrite art history is also an incredible skill. When I first looked at this piece, I didn't consider it very much, but after learning about it and researching White Hawk I was able to learn so much more about indigenous art and its effects on the global art community.

When talking about the inspiration for the beading in her pieces, she says “There is a glorious simplicity in the stacking of beads across a surface, in the movement of fringe swaying in unison along a line of dancers, and in the power of many voices in the accompaniment to the sound of a drum.” (Mithlo, 2021, p. 11). This theme of community is evident in her pattern work and shows the connection between all people. White Hawk places the power of many voices into the narrative of art history, signaling loud and clear, humans have a duty to acknowledge one another.

Bibliography

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