

RoundUP: Selected Works By Torry Mendoza
Urban Shaman Gallery

Don't Fence Me In

By Ryan Rice

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The “Hollywood Indian” is a distorted image, symbolic of an invention culled from a constructed imagination influenced by the pseudo-scientific “vanishing race” theory, the Western concept of Manifest Destiny, and erroneous and misconstrued depictions of the Native represented in mass culture. The constant inconsistencies and fabrication of public mis-portrayal of race/culture developed and circulated through popular media such as film, art and literature, has affected, mislead, and exploited the historic truth and realities of Indigenous people all over the world throughout the 20th century.

Oversimplified one-dimensional caricature depictions of Native North Americans, projected larger than life on movie screens in Hollywood pictures, were viewed (and still are) as being “authentic,” “primitive” and “popular” by movie-going audiences. Authenticity, Hollywood-style, overshadowed any form of diversity or reality spread across Native Nations and instead branded a Pan-Indian image to emerge, classifying Indians as either, good or bad, noble or savage with regard to their relationship to progress and white America.

As Hollywood studios cranked out “Cowboy and Indian” and Western genre films, radio broadcast serials and television shows, the popularity of the “Hollywood Indian” soared. The genre generated a consumer’s drive, fantasy-laden aesthetics and the branding of “Indian” as a commodity, a concept, a problem, an anti-hero and eventually, a neo-spiritual influence. Imaginary Chiefs, princesses, savages and sidekicks were developed as a reflection far removed from the truth, conjured by misconceptions and fear that reduced the richness, legacy and complexity of 500 distinct cultures situated across the North American frontier.

They [Indians] are usually characterized as riding horses, hunting buffalos with bows and arrows or guns, and wearing tailored leather clothing and feathers in their hair or in headdresses. They are seen as consistently been cheated by whites and therefore as consistently as against whites. They are portrayed as persistently involved with warfare, fighting as tribal units under a chief, and taking the scalps or their enemies as war trophies. In more racist terms they are stereotyped as sexually desiring white women

and therefore abducting them, being more adversely affected by alcohol than whites, and being humourless, taciturn, and speaking simple languages.”¹

In **Round UP: Works By Torry Mendoza**, new media/video artist Torry Mendoza exhibits work centering on the re-appropriation and deconstruction of Indigenous identity in mass media/popular culture by confronting and dispelling the myths imposed on our collective spirit. By utilizing and re-appropriating Hollywood productions through hi-lo digital editing, remixes, mash-ups and satirical juxtapositions, Mendoza sears dominant society's image of Native Americans as a reflection upon themselves. Round UP stomps out the fires stemming from the arts (film, art, literature), sports (logos, mascots), and media (newspaper, broadcast) to eradicate any misunderstandings that influence denial of our own traditional and historical narratives and societal views.

Torry Mendoza taunts the Hollywood Indian in his short media works, stirring Tonto (Jay Silverheels ne Harry Smith) and the Lone Ranger's one-dimensional dialogue to a pulsating dance/techno beat in *Kemosabe Version 1.0* (2008). He scrutinizes the duo's relationship by remixing a conversation between the two, revealing a master and servant disposition similar to the disparate relationships assumed by the nation-state with native nations.

In *Stupid Fucking White Man* or *Going Indian* (2005), Mendoza spins the celebrity of the Academy award winning film *Dances With Wolves* by ridiculing Kevin Costner's character's wannabe desires and his attempt to go native. Mendoza captures and emphasizes the distortion between fantasy and reality by tweaking a redux version of Lt. Dunbar's choreographed disillusioned dance around the fire. Playing Indian, which has its own historical colonial roots, is an ongoing exercise in power, as well as evasion. Mendoza continues to dissect and appropriate Hollywood films starring past A-list white actors playing Indian (such as Charles Bronson, Lee Van Cleef, and Jack Palance) in *Red Man and Savages* (2005) as a means to raise conscious of the mis-representation and outright racist connotations articulated towards native peoples imparted through such popularized roles. By inserting the words Entertainment? Education? History? And Reality? into the mix and overlaying them as questions scrolling horizontally across the screen, Mendoza identifies the impact of the master narrative (film) and perpetrator (actor) as deceitful.

¹ John A. Price, "The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures," in *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*, ed. Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles P. Silet (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980) p. 75.

With *Technical Difficulties Part I and II*, Mendoza goes a step further to examine and expose occurrences of ethnic fraud by focusing on the acceptance of Indigeneity gained by notoriety. Two fictional American characters – Iron Eyes Cody famous for the “Keep America Beautiful” commercial (otherwise known as the “crying Indian”) and Billy Jack, a half-breed war vet character from a cult film series feeding off of the civil rights movement - are constructed lore, who blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, real and make-believe to become popular and iconographic across America. Mendoza edits snippets of the popular tv commercial and movie with constant interruptions disguised as broadcast difficulties as a means for viewers to acknowledge that something is wrong with this picture.

Contrary to Popular Belief (2005), and *Good Riddance Chief Illiniwink* (2008), finds Mendoza critically toying with stereotypes created, romanticized and perpetuated by the enduring attitudes and misconceptions embedded in the cultural landscape and memory that spans the history of oppressed people, Native peoples, to resonate the gamut of representation developed, sustained and distorted by society and media. With *The Mechanics of Being NDN* 2009, Mendoza takes an animated post-modern spin on the highly renowned sculpture *The End Of The Trail* (1915) by James Earle Fraser. Chock full of clichés, Mendoza breaths new life into the sculptures hundred year-old presence by imagining a new dawn in the frontier, far from the limitations imposed on imaginary Indians.