

FROMM Essay

Translating Living Vestiges of The Past Through Adventures in Serigraphy

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Inspiration for artists comes from many sources; that is both the source of the visual images coupled with the source of the medium used to represent those images. Carolynne Whitefeather's art reflects the rich and layered oral traditions and enveloping physical nature into which she was immersed as she grew up surrounded by Seminole elders and descendants of European and First Peoples in North Florida's environment of dense forests, swift rivers, expansive prairies and the remains of plantations surrounding the area of Tallahassee. These are people who had long inherited a land they adopted several centuries earlier engrained with a deep-seated heritage.

The Southeast of the United States has long been inhabited by groups of indigenous people long before the Europeans arrived. They shared a sophisticated political structure, a full social organization, and complex sets of customary practices. The descriptive term, Southeastern ceremonial complex, is a classificatory name conferred on indigenous peoples residing in what became the American Southeastern states. Though different and distinct, the early inhabitants of this region of continent held a treasury of similar cultural traditions and values comprised of shared commonalities of political, social, and traditional practices. The well-established heritage and social structure were inherited and perpetuated by the First People who followed them. They persist in the Five Tribes who, though violently removed in the 1830s, lived rich and productive lives in the Southeast at the time of colonization. These early First Peoples of North Florida have persisted as the Seminole and Miccosukee, now in South Florida.

Unique, evocative visual expressions were shared by the ancient cultures that prospered in the region. Abstract images were captured in carved wood, hand-built pottery, forged copper, and incised shell. The resonant, shared oral heritage of the earliest people of the Southeast, especially the Apalachee who established themselves in northwestern Florida, was portrayed in their material culture. Through the suggestive graphic representations found on their objects, the so-called bird man, the recurring spider, and the graceful cat sculpture, they preserved narratives that were transmitted to the more recent Five Tribes.

Carolynne Whitefeather absorbed many of the narratives she heard from elders as she was growing up immersed by the clear rivers winding through the dense forests of North Florida. She also was privileged to work with early archeological explorations that unearthed representative material culture of the older peoples. Her expressive art

references the culture of the older First People; it also reflects the oral traditions she heard as she grew up surrounded by Seminole elders who had long inherited the heritage engrained in the land they adopted more than two centuries earlier. Images of birds, animals, and humans representing the stories and beliefs are translated and transferred to paper, often in abstract form cleverly combine the tangible with the intangible. Whitefeather's "Art of The Apalachee of the Southeast" is a singular collection of artworks that visually bring to life more recent connections with sophisticated long-ago occupants of Ocmulgee, Etowah, Moundville, Spiro, and Cahokia.

Whitefeather has successfully interpreted the oral and visual heritage in which she grew up into a contemporary art practice. Through her creative vision, graphic images that had much earlier been set in clay, copper, and shell are skillfully transformed onto the printed page. Printmaking is the perfect medium, according to Whitefeather, to bring to life the aurally rich narratives that flourished before. Using inks that she specially engineers, she most effectively employs the art of transferring highly original visual expressions to paper surfaces to express lessons learned in her youth.

The roots of serigraphy, or screen printing, can perhaps be traced back many thousands of years to the earliest human artistic expressions. Some four thousand years ago, Japanese artists using pure, non-toxic pigments derived simply from water and rice, devised a mechanical system, not unlike the screen-printing process used by today's artists. By the eighteenth century, machine-driven stencil printing was widespread throughout Europe. Toxic, petroleum-based inks, however, replaced the non-toxic media used for centuries in Asia. By the mid-twentieth century, commercial techniques were adopted by artists as a means of aesthetic expression; the result was Fine Art Serigraphy in contrast to the widespread, well-known commercial applications. Just a few of the American artists noted for their explorations of screen printing include Jackson Pollack and Hans Hoffman and Pop Artists such as Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist.

By the 1990s, because of health dangers associated with the toxic inks generally used in screen printing, manufacturers started innovating with non-toxic, water-based products. By the mid-90s, Carolynne Whitefeather, already an established professional artist, returned to The University of Oklahoma; one of the goals in her research was to develop "archival quality water-based acrylic inks." A complex process emerged from her explorations with ink formulas resulting in singular products paired with unique techniques and imagery drawn from deep knowledge of First Peoples. Furthermore, Whitefeather's use of non-toxic, water-based products is also a reflection of the observations and lessons about the frailty of the natural world. Her concerns about the environment and its sustainability, as it repeatedly appeared in the stories she learned in her youth have supported the choice of materials used in her printmaking practice.

Whitefeather developed a unique method of producing elaborate multi-layered screen prints by controlling viscosity, rheology, tensions, layered color controls, transparency, and

perceived and literal surface qualities. The result of this extensive process and explorations was the development of ink formulas based on water-based fluid acrylic paints, mediums, and modifiers. On-table clean-up processes that retain perfect registration make possible no loss of folios in the printing process. Analogous or complementary cross-directional color blending results in clarity and smooth graduations between image separations. Her innovative work has resulted in unique artisan development. Whitefeather's Southeast Collection is the Fine Art Serigraph collection derived from her extensive research into inks, papers, and printing processes coupled with a visual and aural heritage inherited in her youth.

Carolynne Whitefeather's innovative and personalized artwork is informed by both the storytelling absorbed early in her life and her immersion into the natural world brought to life in those narratives. Diversity in her artwork inspired by First Peoples from ancient times to the present is achieved through her pioneering, sustainable printmaking process. Her studio practice captures the life, beliefs, and natural surroundings of First Peoples whether indigenous to the American Southeast (today's Florida, specifically), the Hawaiian Islands, and the impenetrable mountains of Albania. Under her creative eye, the tangible and the intangible, drawn from narratives based on ancient sources, are transformed into dynamic abstractive images. Uniting all of Whitefeather's work is her lifelong commitment to honestly represent the lives and values of First Peoples through artistic expression.

Whitefeather's unique works of art are found in public and private collections through the United States and Europe. This includes the corporate offices of the inks she manipulated in order to develop her sustainable practice, Golden Artist Colors, Inc., New Berlin NY and Hunt-Speedball Corp., Philadelphia PA. Museums in which her work is found include the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington DC; The State of Florida, Bureau of Historic Preservation; The University of Oklahoma School of Art Permanent Print Collection; Maui Arts and Cultural Center; the USSD Art in Embassies Program; The National Gallery of Art, Tirana, Albania; the Central State Archives, Tirana, Albania; and Butrint National Park/Ministry of Culture, Albania.