

MELANIE YAZZIE



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Probing Beyond What Meets The Eye *The intriguing art forms of Melanie Yazzie*

by Eddings Whetstone Focus Santa Fe Magazine



A conversation with Melanie Yazzie is a multi-layered affair—alternating moments of straight talk, playful whimsy, humble wisdom, heartfelt compassion, and penetrating vision. Printmaker, painter, ceramist, and collage artist as well as professor of printmaking at The University of Colorado at Boulder, Yazzie has much to say about art, her past, her culture and her students.

The works she creates reflect multiple strata as well, sometimes appearing light-hearted on first glance, but inviting deeper interpretation, intimating meaning beyond what meets the eye. One of her ceramic dogs, for instance, initially attracts the viewer attention because of his defiant stance. Planted with husky legs wide apart, he looks like one of those truculent mongrels that yaps at the driveway of many a rural home.

However, a closer look reveals more puzzling details. Why does he have cut-up sheets of wrapping paper plastered onto his sides?

Above: Artist Melanie Yazzie with her sculpture POLLEN KEEPER, steel with powder coated finish © 2004 73" tall edition of 8

Right: LEVI BLACK SHEEP DREAMS OF FLYING bronze edition 15 © 1996





What do those pieces of currency stuck to his surface represent? And what about that expression on his face? Haven't we seen it somewhere before? "When I first started making the ceramic dogs, people were really condescending about them and said how 'cute' they were," Yazzie laments. "That drives me crazy. Creating them does fulfill a light, happy side of myself," she admits." But I didn't make them just to be cute. They're about something else, too."

That "something else" goes back a few years to Yazzie's childhood on the enormous Navajo reservation in the Four Corners area. A member of the Salt and Bitter Water clans, the artist was raised in Ganado, Arizona, the daughter of parents working in professional positions with the reservation's public schools. Slight of stature, with reddish hair as a child, she was often the target of schoolyard bullies.

"They used to tease me and pull my hair and call me *willa chee*," Yazzie remembers. "This made me cry, from the teasing and because I didn't speak Navajo very well and didn't know what they were saying. Finally I told my father, and he laughed really hard. *Willa Chee* means 'red ant'. They were calling me that because my face gets flushed and I turn very red."

Both her parents were sent away to boarding school as youngsters during a time when Navajo children were punished for speaking their own language. Because they wanted what they believed would be the best for their own offspring they encouraged Yazzie to speak English. But their aspirations put her in direct conflict with the more traditional young people on the reservation, and the bullies' teasing became emblematic of her "outsider" status.

I REACH FOR HER monotype ©2009
SHE IS SINGING acrylic on canvas ©2009





“I wasn’t aware when I first started making my dogs that this was who they represented for me,” she confesses. “But when I built their faces and stated seeing the expressions that were coming out, I knew, this is Harrison Begay. This is Stetson Baker’. They were all these childhood bullies appearing as little ceramic reservation dogs.

“I have to admit,” Yazzie acknowledges with a conspiratorial grin, “I might have dropped one or two.

Above: SIMON JOE BENALLY IS LOOKING FOR A RICH GIRLFRIEND bronze edition 15 ©1996 Below left: THE BIG ONE AND US acrylic on canvas Below right: GROWING STRONGER bronze edition 12 © 2010





“Originally some of the dogs were going to be containers so you could put food inside them and steam would come out of their ears. I’d really like to turn them into tableware, because you know, “ she adds with that grin, “animals aren’t supposed to be on the table.”

For some of the same reasons, the figure of Raggedy Ann also finds her way into many of her collage pieces. She’s small, she has red hair and may seem funny looking to some. But, Yazzie contends, she also has a big heart, and people find so much to love in her.

Top left: TWINS AT DAWN monotype
Lower left: STRENGTH FROM WITHIN aluminum edition 30 © 2004
lower right: JACKIE IS TOM BALDWIN’S HORSE acrylic on canvas © 2009



An American sculptor, painter and print-maker. Yazzie was born in Ganado, Arizona, and she is of Navajo/Diné descent. She is an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder: she teaches two-dimensional art. The artist is a sought-after lecturer. Melanie Yazzie's art is accessible to the public on many levels. Her work is witty and usually is colorful. It is significant because the serious undertones reference native post-colonial dilemmas. Her work often features images of women from many indigenous cultures. Her work references matrilineal systems and points to the possibility of female leadership. Yazzie leads collaborative international projects for example, with artists in New Zealand, Siberia, Australia, Canada, Mexico, Germany and Japan. A recent portfolio, "Hello Kitty and Pocahontas" examined world artists' analysis of the commercialization of ethnic identity. In addition to teaching at the Institute of American Indian Arts, the College of Santa Fe, and the University of Arizona, Yazzie taught at the Pont-Aven School of Art in France.

Yazzie earned a BFA at Arizona State University (1990) and an MFA from the University of Colorado at Boulder (1993). A selection of major exhibitions from the 1990s to present include "Varied Voices" (2008) at The Denver Art Museum's new contemporary wing, "Between Two Worlds" (2008) at Arizona State University, "Traveling" at the Heard West Museum (2006), "About Face: Self-Portraits by Native American, First Nations, and Inuit Artists" at the Wheelwright Museum (2005), "Making Connections" (2002) in Bulova, Russia, "Navajo in Gisborne" (1999) in Gisborne, New Zealand and "Watchful Eyes" (1994) at the Heard Museum. The artist is included in seminal books by Zena Pearlstone (About Face), Lucy Lippard (The Lure of the Local) and Jackson Rushing (Native American Art in the Twentieth Century).

SELECTED COLLECTIONS: Australian National Gallery, Rhodes University, South Africa, University of Alberta, Canada, Corcoran Museum, Washington, D.C., Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI., Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, NM., Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI., Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO.

TWO MINDS MEETING steel with powder-coated finish ©2003 The artist working on a clay sculpture.

