

Reading Beneath the Surface: Joe Feddersen's Parking Lot

Author(s): heather ahtone

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Reading Beneath the Surface

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beather abtone

INDIGENOUS AESTHETIC

Every time an Indigenous artist creates an object that reflects concepts rooted within her culture, this same artist is perpetuating that culture one more day as an act of self-determination. This is done every day, as artists across the continent participate in the creative process that has served as a cornerstone within Indigenous cultural communities. While every effort of political and religious assault has been made historically to subdue these same cultures, their survival can be partially attributed to the continued production of visual and performance arts. As long as Indigenous people continue to use the arts to reflect unique experiences within a contemporary society, they are fundamentally breathing life into these cultures. Because the vitality of these cultures is so closely tied to the creative process, it is important, therefore, that work by Indigenous artists be considered within a framework that incorporates Indigenous epistemology. Analyzing the arts from a cultural perspective will reinforce these acts of self-determination, both bolstering how we understand these individual artistic expressions and expanding our capacity to understand and share this Indigeneity.

The methodology employed here is based on research involving the analysis of cultural materials, including how these materials were constructed, the traditions involved therein, and their function within a traditional Indigenous community. What I hope to offer is an example

of the value of applying an Indigenous-based methodology as a basis for interdisciplinary research. Ideas about what might constitute an Indigenous aesthetic are still in their infant stages of development, and should not be assumed to reflect a comprehensive or thoroughly vetted methodology. There are flaws, as there will be with this kind of exploration. But the need to develop a framework that centers on Indigenous cultural values and beliefs bolsters my courage, and so I offer my ideas here for consideration.

In order to develop a language addressing this cultural perspective, one must acknowledge that Indigenous epistemology does not coalesce with Western epistemology. Perhaps this is self-evident, but it must be stated in order to allow for the discussion that just as they do not coalesce, nor do they run parallel or perpendicular. This distinction between “ways of knowing” is important, as it allows that bodies of knowledge reflect the cultural values and beliefs on which they are grounded—there does not exist a universal measure. Thus one cannot imagine an Indigenous aesthetic while using Western cultural standards. If we allow that this shift from a Western to an Indigenous paradigm is possible, then we must look to the cultural source in seeking a foundation.

The framework needed to analyze an Indigenous aesthetic must come from within the cultures themselves. Each tribal culture has local ideals, values, and beliefs that necessarily require consideration. These can be incorporated into a larger framework that allows for discussion of the art in a broader continental manner, which I assert can be useful in understanding the Indigenous aesthetic. Through careful consideration of an object’s materiality, the artist’s use of metaphor and symbolism, and the role of cultural reciprocity, it can be placed within a context that will lend a fuller understanding of the object as contemporary art.

JOE FEDDERSEN'S PARKING LOT

This essay will focus on *Parking Lot* by Joe Feddersen (b. 1953, Colville Confederated Tribes) to explore how this methodology can reveal the cultural context of an object that might otherwise be unavailable. In Feddersen’s case, it is relevant to consider an author who has proven insightful and intuitive in his approach to contemporary Indigenous art. Jackson Rushing delivers a sensitive review of Joe Feddersen’s *Plateau Geometrics* in his essay “Sacred Geometry,” writing:

The “Plateau Geometric” prints are “open” and accessible to a modernist reading based on formalism and the linear logic of “advanced” art. But contained within them are kinds of knowledge—personal and tribal—that are no less codified but are based on poetic responses to living



Joe Feddersen, *Parking Lot*, 2003, blown and sandblasted glass, 14 x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (35.56 x 27.30 cm.), Collection of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, Kansas. Courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Bill Bachhuber.

in a particular place. Access to this information is, if not "closed," then certainly experientially restricted. By way of his homesickness, Feddersen gives a glimpse of that knowledge. But because that glimpse takes the form of discrete symbols derived from stylized patterns that are historically and culturally constructed, we must accept that a vast space lies between "here" and "there."¹

I quote Rushing because he is expressing an honest recognition that more is present in Feddersen's work than is accessible through a Western art historical approach. Rushing's acknowledgment of this allows me to offer a bridge to traverse the "vast space" that exists between a Western and Indigenous approach to the object.

The "here" lies in the tangible presence of *Parking Lot*. This glass form is from the *Urban Indian* series (2003 onward), when printmaker Joe Feddersen began working with glass artist Preston Singletary to create a new body of work to be exhibited at the NMAI. These three-dimensional forms were a culmination of several ideas coming together for Feddersen through a new medium. Within this work, Feddersen integrated references to the Okanagan basket forms he had woven since the mid-1990s, the traditional symbols found in his tribe's Plateau-based cultural materials, and the signs that marked his two-dimensional print work.

The milky white glass of *Parking Lot* is presented in a wide cylinder form, referring to a wide-mouthed Plateau-style storage basket called a "sally bag" (14 x 10¾ in.). With three layers of textures on its exterior surface, the form carries a juxtaposition of symbols. The under layer of glass is etched with a contrapuntal chevron design that repeats four times around the exterior of the form. Over the entire surface is a shallower etched grid of irregular tiny squares that reference the warp and weft texture of a twined basket. On the surface, in each of the four voids between the chevron designs, is laid a diagram with four vertically oriented linear arrangements—the eponymous parking lot. The interior of the vessel is smooth and has a contrasting glassy sheen to the matted exterior. The rim of the vessel has an olive green band. The base is slightly rounded along the exterior edge, referencing the curve of a handwoven basket. The scale of the vessel is relative to a gathering basket, large enough to carry a bushel of fruit. *Parking Lot* is striking with the gentle glow of the etched white glass underneath the simplicity of the black lines.

MATERIALITY

In order to fully appreciate the elements that Feddersen has incorporated into *Parking Lot* and how they reflect an Indigenous aesthetic, I have paid attention to the object's materiality—a term used here to describe how materials and designs serve as extensions of the Indigenous traditions.² The Okanagan people are part of the Colville Confederated Tribes, whose lands are located in Washington State, where Feddersen was born. The Okanagan people are also recognized in the Canadian province of British Columbia, where Feddersen's mother was born. Located in the intermountain western area of the Plateau region, Feddersen's tribe speaks the Okanagan language, which

is part of the Salish language family. Unique linguistic affiliations and design elements thus relate to many of the tribes that have occupied the region between the Columbia River and the Pacific Northwest coast since time immemorial.

The geographic location of the Okanagan people in Washington State also implicates the sharing of ideas, designs, and forms with other tribes of the Plateau area and the Northern Plains, via an expansive trade system that existed in the region. The Okanagan are situated within one of the most important trade centers in western North America at the confluence of the Columbia, Fraser, and Dalles River systems. The interactive range of this trade system was instrumental in connecting people from the upper West Coast with the Northern Plains cultures and beyond. These multiple influences have imposed limitations for scholarship in that the provenance of specific forms and designs is difficult to ascertain. As Gaylord Torrence points out in his analysis of the parfleches materials from this region, designs become difficult to attribute to a particular tribe: "Parfleches were freely traded throughout the region, to the extent that all types were almost equally dispersed among all the tribes by the time substantial collecting had begun. With this trade occurred the continuous exchange of design concepts, so that any design developed by one group was very likely to have been appropriated by others."³ Since baskets were used in the trade commerce of the region, it is logical to expect that baskets and related designs were likewise shared and appropriated. But Torrence has based his comments on catalog information largely available through museum and private collections, though these sources are known to be woefully superficial in their documentation of historically collected materials.⁴ I offer that local tribal artists, such as Feddersen, can be considered valuable resources for information about how the designs and materials were and continue to be used, especially as these traditions persist into present-day cultural production.

Along this vein of reasoning, *Parking Lot* is similar in form to other known Plateau baskets. In all three essays in Feddersen's mid-career retrospective exhibition catalog, *Vital Signs*, the authors reference the form of a "sally bag"⁵ as an inspiration for Feddersen's own weaving work and as a formal reference in the shapes of the glass vessels. Within a Plateau cultural premise, women would use these bags specifically as gathering baskets. A brief comparison between the glass vessels and the basketry reflects the three-dimensional reading as similar, but there is a difference in the proportion and scale. Sally bags are commonly smaller in height and narrower with softened sides.⁶ The sally bag forms do not have the wide, open mouth, and substantive structure seen in glass form of *Parking Lot*. When asked about this difference in the structure of the baskets, Feddersen said, "Part of that is that I was working with somebody, and trying to have a glass form makes it more difficult, because it

goes against everything that the glass wants to do. I was working with Preston and he can make beautiful cylinder forms because the glass wants to do that and it's hard for him not to do that. . . . And it's also about referencing and mimicking. Sometimes you use the basket as a departure point in creating something, but I don't think I have to mimic it."⁷ The reference to mimicking explains the autonomy that Feddersen exercises in using the traditional designs and forms within his art. This autonomy makes the glass vessel more complex to interpret formally, because it is difficult to gauge what is a direct act of cultural mimesis and what is artistic innovation. For this reason, Feddersen's cooperation has been instrumental in the research for this essay.

The glass cannot be dismissed as simply an exploration on the artist's part into new materials. Feddersen's knowledge of basket making and previous work in installation could certainly have been used to create the spatial expanse he was seeking for the gallery at the NMAI. Additionally, glass is not limited in color or scale, as exemplified in the work of Singletary. The choice to use milky white glass has to be considered more closely. Elizabeth Woody, who described Feddersen's work for the *Continuum 12* exhibition catalog, wrote, "Feddersen's use of glass speaks of our human fragility."⁸ One can also see the glass as a delicate metaphor for the relationship that people have to their cultural materials. The rapid decline of traditional art forms over the last hundred years for many tribes has had a significant impact on the process of passing traditional knowledge on from one generation to another. Using a traditional form in concert with the glass, the color white can be seen as Woody describes, "the shell of the basket with the ephemeral density of a cloud."⁹ Perhaps the white glass can also be seen as a transformation of the wax paper Feddersen used in his previous experiments with basket forms, which like glass is altered by the hand and heat. The range of interpretations Feddersen allows in the materiality, through the tribally specific use and reference to materials, is repeated in his direct invocation of design symbols.

METAPHOR / SYMBOLISM

Feddersen's use of signs and symbols has been part of his stylistic exploration as an artist. In 2001 he produced a series called *Plateau Geometrics* that included printmaking and basketry, all incorporating layers of abstractions, both Indigenous and Euro-American. Describing his motivation to develop this body of work, Feddersen said, "I decided I wanted to do work about home, about the Plateau area, because I was really intrigued by how much we use abstract designs. A lot of my early work on the *Plateau Geometrics* series was based on that kind of situation and also being a printmaker. I wanted to celebrate both of those, the designs and the medium and at the same time, I wanted to celebrate where I was

from. I didn't want it to be didactic or anything, I just wanted to align the forms and color, formally."¹⁰ Feddersen's expressed interest in creating a dialogue between the abstract Indigenous cultural designs and non-Indigenous materials, begun in the medium of printmaking, created the impetus for his later work in glass. Within printmaking, Feddersen worked with the ideas that later developed into the *Urban Indian* series.¹¹

Using the sally bag form and tradition as guides, Feddersen provided for the interpretation of symbols on the surface of the glass vessel.¹² In *Parking Lot*, Feddersen offers critical information necessary for reading the chevron design etched into the surface. He said, "When you're looking at the chevron design, those are actually the designs for *woman* in Plateau culture, kind of like an hourglass design, kind of a winding vase."¹³ The symbolic reference to woman is directly drawn from his local community. Feddersen has described learning from Okanagan basket makers the designs and materials related to this artistic tradition:

I did spend a weekend talking with one of our tribal elders. She's known for her baskets and I spent a day talking with her. I wanted to learn about the designs and all of the reeds and their relationship and we talked. . . . And then she does this really wonderful thing where she said at the end of the day this design means this but in the next valley over it means something totally different. So this whole thing about the culture and the context is also kind of idiosyncratic depending on where you're from. The interpretation can be different from just a few miles away.¹⁴

The idiosyncratic nature of Indigenous designs and symbols puts a responsibility on the artist and art historian to consider these as semiotic references in context with their meanings. In this case, when Feddersen uses the symbol for woman, he invigorates it as a continued part of the cultural dialogue and, by doing so, also contemporizes the language in its usage.

Further, by placing the symbol of woman on this form, Feddersen calls into play the concept of woman as the Okanagan people understand it. With this translation of the symbol defined by Feddersen, it cannot be ignored that within Okanagan culture, as part of the larger community of Colville traditions, woman is a living metaphor for the earth. While some may consider this a chauvinistic construct to be used by this male artist, it is necessary to see that aligning the concept of woman with the earth is not held here within the Western dynamic of "woman as nature," with the subtext that both are to be dominated by men. Rather, one must look with the eyes of an Okanagan person, for whom the earth is described as a woman "who gives birth to life

forms."¹⁵ If we look to the genesis story for the Colville, it becomes more evident how woman is a symbolic description of the relationship that these people have with the earth: "Old-One, or Chief, made the earth out of a woman, and said she would be the mother of all the people. Thus the earth was once a human being, and she is alive yet; but she has been transformed, and we cannot see her in the same way we can see a person. Nevertheless she has legs, arms, head, heart, flesh, bones, and blood. The soil is her flesh; the trees and vegetation are her hair; the rocks, her bones; and the wind is her breath. She lies spread out, and we live upon her."¹⁶

The familial affection that many Indigenous community members have for the earth is far deeper than can be examined from a Western perspective, which largely sees the earth as a form of property. Seeing the earth as a woman who is the source for nurturing and creation extends beyond the feminine object and into a broader relationship, which Dennis Martinez has recently coined as "kincentricity."¹⁷ Martinez uses this term to describe the circular interaction between humans and the earth, which makes their relationship more closely guided by principles evident in nature seeking a harmonious balance. For the Colville people, as with many communities, the creative force of woman is evident not only in the role of the human mother but also in the earth's capacity to provide and nurture all that lives on her surface. Feddersen's use of this hourglass symbol is not just an aesthetic design choice, but the invocation of deep emotional and cultural ties to womanhood and all this represents. Feddersen has also symbolically layered the subtle texture of a basket weave on the surface of the glass. By doing so, he draws the reference between the natural weaving materials of grass, seen symbolically as the hair of the earth, and the glass, thereby aligning the delicate nature of the glass to the delicate relationship between Indigenous people and their homelands.

Etching this highly charged symbol for earth below a parking lot design then merits attention to the practical and metaphorical reading of their combination. The parking lot design, really a diagram, was developed in the late 1920s to allow for the development of large department stores and facilitated the advent of the automobile culture.¹⁸ These diagrams can be seen to represent the daily migration patterns of contemporary society—driving to work, to the grocery store, to school, and so forth. Migrating within these terms also requires that we consider that this is done largely on asphalt- or cement-finished roads. Organizing patterns of migration, here represented by a parking lot diagram, form the basis of how most Americans relate to the earth—through a mediated system of transit routes, either roads or sidewalks that "improve" the surface to become more suitable for human use. The roads and sidewalks become a way of marking where humans are encouraged to travel, to move over the surface of the earth, which in

Colville cultural beliefs is mother of us all. The simplicity of the glass surface comes to be seen as revealing a very antithetical relationship between the people and their mother. This juxtaposition of symbols also draws into relationship the two designs as markers of place and belonging, here revealing a contrast between Indigenous and Euro-American ideals of relating to the earth.

The interplay of culture, through layers of visibility, might also read as a metaphorical rendering of the Indigenous experience. Feddersen achieves a subtle tension because of the shared relationship the designs have as simplified geometric symbols. Also, the form of *Parking Lot* as a vessel is closely tied to Feddersen's western Plateau baskets. Through his syncretistic use of abstract designs on this vessel, Feddersen reveals an Indigenous aesthetic emphasis on symbolism and metaphor as a codified subtext to the visually appealing layers.

RECIPROCITY

An emphasis on symbolism and metaphor is intrinsic to the role of reciprocity within Indigenous art. Reciprocity is largely an act of gratitude by an artist for their cultural heritage. By using traditional art forms and designs, artists are actively participating in the continuation of their cultures. Feddersen recognizes this role and sees the need and the potential for evolving the Okanagan traditional forms and designs to reflect a contemporary Indigenous experience. He describes it as follows:

A lot of times our signs are from our surroundings and our landscape. I've always been cognizant of how place is related to the culture. To think about people from the Plateau area going out and recording the landscape for thousands of years and having this relationship is like a coming of age. This tie with the land goes beyond the hundreds or thousands of years of people going out into the land and the way that the land was forming the culture. I think that's really important also. I think part of that is embedded in the visual culture. It's not a singular kind of thing. It was repeated for centuries. We've been in our present place for over a hundred years now. Everyday we see the railroad tracks and we've incorporated that into our traditional designs. I've incorporated the electric lines that got put up in the '20s and '30s. It's not like what I'm doing is anything new, it's just carrying on a tradition.¹⁹

Feddersen uses the term "vital signs" to describe this incorporation of signs into his contemporary visual vocabulary. The term is most often associated with the measurable bodily pulses that signify human life.

In reference to his work, "vital signs" is used to reference the cultural designs, signs, and symbols that have been used within his tribal culture as a contemporary recording of their experience for millennia. He intends the ambiguity of this term, saying, "We think that to carry on the traditions, the mere act of using them enlivens them as active rather than not using them. By using the traditional signs we talk about what the meaning is and they become part of our visual vocabulary rather than something that is purely historical."²⁰ It would seem, then, that "vital signs" signifies the pulse of the culture as it is represented by the designs.

The act of using Indigenous designs is a form of cultural reciprocity, participating in a cycle of accountability that contributes toward the perseverance of traditional culture. When Indigenous people actively practice, participate, and perpetuate their cultures, this is the most basic form of gratitude to those ancestors who made the effort to carry the culture into the future, into our present.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to pursue this kind of cultural and artistic analysis in order to realize the fullest value that the work offers. These references of shape and subtly etched design elements mark it as an extension of the traditions of Plateau baskets and Okanagan culture. Through their applications in a contemporary and nontraditional medium, they refute the historicized context within which Indigenous art is so often placed. It is this invocation of the past into the present that reflects an Indigenous concept of circular time, the importance of cycles and repetition as a conduit to cultural persistence.

Feddersen sees the greater advantage of working toward making traditional values vital in the contemporary world. This is succinctly described by artist-writer Gail Tremblay in *Vital Signs*: "For this series, Feddersen used his new abstract visual language to express the importance of honoring traditional patterns of culture and maintaining its vitality; at the same time, he refused to allow his artwork to lock American Indian people in some strange ethnographic present where they must not be modern if they are to be authentically 'Indian.' In these works, Feddersen makes both tradition and modernity present in contemporary American art and reflects the real lives of people living in twenty-first-century urban Indian culture."²¹ By examining *Parking Lot* through a methodology that addresses the cultural context for its materiality, the artist's use of metaphors and symbols, and how contemporary Indigenous art acts as a form of reciprocity, we arrive at the "there" that Rushing could see but not reach. We are reaching an understanding of the Indigenous aesthetic.

Indigenous people must also exert effort to consider, examine, analyze, and, most important, think constructively about our Indigenous aesthetic as part of the efforts to survive and thrive. As I have done with *Parking Lot*, others are doing with Indigenous languages and literature. Through a process that seeks its foundation within the culture, we gain greater understanding of how the Indigenous epistemology informs our contemporary experience. This process reveals how Indigenous aesthetics are as much about the beauty of the object as they are about the value of beauty.

A U T H O R B I O G R A P H Y

heather ahtone has curated contemporary art exhibits, taught Native science and art history, and researched the evolution of tribal design usage and materials. She is developing an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing Indigenous art, especially tribes' place-based knowledge of the environment and how this is represented in their cosmology and designs. She is committed to supporting the larger Oklahoma tribal community and especially her tribal communities, the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations. She is Curator of Native American and Non-Western Art at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art at the University of Oklahoma.

N O T E S

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- 1 W. Jackson Rushing, "Joe Feddersen: Sacred Geometry," in *After the Storm: The Eiteljorg Fellowship for Native American Fine Art*, 2001, ed. W. Jackson Rushing (Seattle: Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, in association with the University of Washington Press, 2001), 39.
- 2 Materiality as employed here is referring to how the materials implicate a specific cultural practice that is important—that which is not merely of form but of substance, as might be used in reference to legal materiality.

- 3 Gaylord Torrence, *The American Indian Parfleche: A Tradition of Abstract Painting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 229.
- 4 Five years of Native American object research for exhibition development has taught me that museum collections rarely have more than a tribal attribution, seldom identifying a maker or the cultural context of the object.
- 5 According to the University of Washington Burke Museum's online guide to Northwest coast basketry, "Although there are numerous interpretations explaining the origin of this name, there is not one definitive explanation." See <http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/baskets/Teachersguideforbasketry.htm>.
- 6 There is a broad variety of forms referred to as sally bags within museum collection records found

- in the area. Most identified as sally bags are smaller, freestanding with twined exteriors, and lined on the interior with cloth.
- 7 Joe Feddersen, in conversation with the author, March 12, 2010.
 - 8 Elizabeth Woody, "Joe Feddersen: Geometric Abstraction—the Language of the Land," in *Continuum* 12 (New York: National Museum of the American Indian, 2003), 3.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 Joe Feddersen, in conversation with the author, March 12, 2010.
 - 11 Rushing, "Joe Feddersen: Sacred Geometry."
 - 12 The difficulties of establishing an Indigenous cultural provenance for the form also apply to the designs. For this reason, this analysis will limit any specific reading of Indigenous designs to the western Plateau area, except for those that Feddersen identifies as belonging to his community specifically. It may require intensive local research with the Okanagan people to establish the designs as distinctive to a particular tribe or subgroup. For the purposes of this analysis, conversations with Feddersen have been instrumental in clarifying details in relation to *Parking Lot*.
 - 13 Feddersen, in conversation with the author, March 12, 2010.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 John A. Grim, "Cosmogony and the Winter Dance: Native American Ethics in Transition," *Journal of Religious Ethic* 20, no. 2 (1992): 389.
 - 16 Susan Staiger Gooding, "Interior Salishan Creation Stories: Historical Ethics in the Making," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 20, no. 2 (1992): 357.
 - 17 D. Martinez (interviewee) and D. E. Hall (interviewer), "Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Dennis Martinez (O'odham/Chicano/Anglo)," 2008 interview transcript. See the Native Perspectives on Sustainability project Web site, <http://www.nativeperspectives.net>.
 - 18 John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Lots of Parking: Land Use in a Car Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004).
 - 19 Joe Feddersen in conversation with the author, March 12, 2010.
 - 20 Ibid.
 - 21 Gail Tremblay, "Speaking in a Language of Vital Signs," in Rebecca J. Dobkins, *Joe Feddersen: Vital Signs* (Seattle: Hallie Ford Museum of Art, Willamette University, in association with the University of Washington Press, 2008), 48.