

RICK BARTOW, *Maestro of Totemic Liberty*
by Gerald Vizenor

[This essay was originally written for the exhibition of Rick Bartow's work in August 2016, at the Museum of Contemporary Native Arts in Santa Fe.]

Rick Bartow (December 16, 1946–April 2, 2016)

Rick Bartow revered the markmakers, and rightly avowed an aesthetic connection to the primeval painters on granite, sandstone, birchbark, and wood, and in the great shadows of caverns. The visions and natural motion of painted bears, horses, birds, and other creatures in ancient scenes are totemic expressionism, and the grasp of ancient traces and abstract guises, fusions, and colors are relevant in the art of Mark Chagall, Chaim Soutine, George Morrison, Fritz Scholder, Horst Janssen, Francis Bacon, and Rick Bartow.

Bartow creates marvelous scenes of imaginary motion, and his visionary art reveals the countenance of humans, animals, and birds in a great union of consciousness, the scenes of a bygone tradition of totemic liberty. Natural motion is obvious in the migration of birds, traces of seasons, and imaginary in shadows, shamanic visions, and the torment of transmutation in dreams. Totemic rights and images of motion are unmissable in the masks of bears, hawks, mongrels, coyotes, and mark an ethos of native creative art. Bartow continues the practice of imaginary motion and totemic liberty.

David P. Becker observed in "The Visionary Art of Rick Bartow," the "first aspect of his revelatory art that strikes the viewer is its sheer visual intensity, the saturated resonance of color combined with the determined energy of markmaking."

The thematic exhibition, *Things You Know But Cannot Explain*, is presented in five interrelated sections: Gesture, Self, Dialogue, Tradition, and Transformation. The strange contortions of creatures, shadows, and erasures, are gestures, the imaginary motion and visions of a painter. Shadows were once a vital presence in native stories and art, and with no discrete source. Self is elusive, a shadow, “the way we reveal ourselves, we let our life shine,” said Bartow, and he created a sense of totemic presence. Dialogue is a relation with the artistic visions of other painters, the motion, tease and contact faces of animals and birds. The triptych *PTSD*, for instance, confronts a “dark reality and shows how his experiences in a war he did not understand or support continued to shape his identity several decades later.” Bartow painted three chalky masks, each outlined in blue, marked with red, and toothy gestures, fear, desire, and mouth were erased with black, and the masks became a dialogue of similar triptych faces by Francis Bacon. Tradition is motion, change, and not the closure of cultural representations. Transformation is visionary, totemic rapture is sublime, and the contorted coyotes, bears, and avian predators are imagined with beaks and toothy masks.

Bartow creates marvelous visionary characters in the faces of creatures, and his paintings reveal that memorable union of humans and animals, a totemic liberty. Three years ago Bartow granted me permission to use *Raven's Dream*, pastel on paper, for the cover art of my historical novel, *Blue Ravens*, about Native American soldiers in the First World War. The imaginary motion, a distorted face with a rough bloody wash, a yellow hand of malady, and a bold black raven outlined in blue, became a dialogue of visions between the painter and the author. Many readers were convinced at the time that the

painting had been commissioned for the novel. I had imagined in words the stories of war and scenes of blue ravens in the late glance of sunlight, and the painter had envisioned a similar scene on paper, a union of art and totemic liberty.

David P. Becker, "The Visionary Art of Rick Bartow," in *Rick Bartow*, Jamison Thomas Gallery, 1992, page 5.

Danielle Knapp, "My Life is Work. Work is a Blessing!" in *Rick Bartow: Things You Know But Cannot Explain*, Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, University of Oregon, Eugene, 2015, page 28.

Gerald Vizenor, *Blue Ravens*, Wesleyan University Press, 2014.