

BRADLARIAN BAROQUE, The Narrative Art of David Bradley
by Gerald Vizenor

[This essay was written for the catalog for *David Bradley: Restless Native, the Journey*, exhibited January 23–May 10, 2009, at the Nicolaysen Art Museum & Discovery Center in Casper, Wyoming.]

David Bradley is a master of narrative art. He creates distinctive painterly scenes in bold, memorable colors, a marvelous communal and particular presence of ironic characters in the protean traditions and practices of native storiers.

Bradley is a storier with paint.

The Bradlarian baroque is a unique narrative art style. Bradley creates figures that are slightly contorted, whimsical, wittingly eccentric, and freaky at times; and with a conceivable sense of ironic motion in the bright colors, composition, and painterly features. Indian Market, for instance, shows a gathering of zany characters, a native clown on a skateboard with a watermelon, dogs, birds, a buffalo head, a ghostly arm reaching out of a manhole for money, decorative cowboy boots under a table, a satirical tease of Duh Magazine, an ersatz Sikh and four people queued with fists of money to buy native pottery, and other simulated, ironic characters muster one afternoon at the Plaza in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The mountain hues and a perfect rainbow crown the mystical scene.

The End of the Santa Fe Trail, The Immaculate Assumption, Canyon Road Cantina, Pueblo Feast Day, The Last Supper, and The Elaine Horwitch Indian Market Party, and other communal scenes in his masterly paintings are native allegories, baroque by composition, figuration, and coloration, an original painterly style that invites the viewer to the elusive satire of trickster stories on canvas.

Bradley reveals in the composition of his paintings the ironic signatures of open doors and windows, paper money, electrical outlets, power cords, dogs, birds, torn wallpaper, exposed adobe bricks, video cameras, and the visionary presence of familiar characters in the fantastic art world of Santa Fe. Pictures at an Exhibition, for example, shows a mariachi band, a bird, squirrel, monkey, mask, paper money on the floor, and several paintings on the gallery walls by David Bradley. Indian Pow-Wow Princess in the Process of Acculturation is mounted over a power outlet, and the scene outside the open green door is one of his paintings. Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo are poised in front of the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Georgia O'Keeffe stands alone, forever a solitary signature character. An apparent religious figure has a bird on his shoulder and a squirrel on his back. A chubby woman and short stocky man are dancing, reminiscent of painterly scenes by Fernando Botero.

“David Bradley’s paintings offer an invitation to enter into a world within a room,” wrote Elizabeth Sasser in Southwest Art. “‘The room,’ Bradley says, ‘is a stage and the wall is a curtain.’ Windows cut openings into that ‘curtain’ and frame a different kind of reality. . . . ‘People,’ the artist observes, ‘sometimes mistake my windows for paintings. But paintings and windows are synonymous—a painting is a window.’” Sasser noted that the “torn paper is a recurrent motif in Bradley’s rooms. He explained that when the paper is stripped away ‘there’s a hole and you can see the plaster and board. That’s the real wall.’ Lower down the wall is an electrical plate and with a cord which moves out of the picture plane. It too is present in many of Bradley’s interiors; he describes it as ‘a kind of signature.’ To Bradley, the introduction of electricity was a landmark in the lifestyle of the Indians.” The artist explained that the power cords reach into a new and “different dimension.”

Native trickster are a trace of the marvelous, a visionary presence in stories. The Anishinaabe, otherwise known as Chippewa or Ojibway, named their cultural trickster Naanabozho and delighted in the stories of an utmost priapic, elusive, undefined character of transformation, conversion, and trickery. Anishinaabe trickster stories heal the heart by native irony, humor, and by the images of survivance and sovereignty.

“Some people say why not be more serious,” Bradley said in a personal interview. “My response is, Life is humor, life always has mysteries, beauty, chaos, elements of theater, comedy, tragedy, and the tease of a trickster. My art is about life.”

Bradley is aware that some viewers are uncertain about the ironies and sentiments of humor in narrative art, and mainly the incongruities of native trickster stories. He composes distinctive characters in both simulated and ordinary situations. The Lone Ranger, Tonto, and Georgia O’Keeffe, for instance, are cast in the same market scene. The irony is perceived in figures, the integrity of color, and in the curious unity of painterly motion in the communal scenes.

“I think every ethnic group has its own unique brand of humor,” said Bradley. “As an artist, I try to deal with all the human condition. Humor breaks down social barriers and brings people together.”

Bradley creates narrative art with a visionary practice that is similar to the inspired stories about native tricksters. The viewer is stimulated to appreciate the painterly characters and sense of presence as the listener might imagine the marvelous scenes in trickster stories. Naanabozho is an elusive, ironic creator, and, at the same time, the trickster is a contradiction of creation. Tricksters are imagined, and only imagined in stories and narrative art.

Bradley, in his early career as a sculptor, molded a ceramic

Naanabozho, a foot high figure with a small head, thick bound braids, and enormous hands, corpulent shanks, and huge moccasins. The trickster sculpture is baroque, a native trace of visionary stories. Jim Lenfestey acquired Naanabozho about thirty years ago at the Judith Stern Gallery in Minneapolis.

“David is right to call his life and art a symbolic vision quest, but both his vision and quest are as real as they are symbolic,” wrote Suzan Shown Harjo in Restless Native: David Bradley, a publication of the retrospective exhibition at the Plains Art Museum in Moorhead, Minnesota. “Both involve an ideal of and search for justice and beauty, with just enough belly-laughs to keep things lively. . . . David has a great talent for seeing more than most people see, politically and visually.”

Bradley mentioned in various interviews that he was inspired and influenced by other painters and sculptors from the late George Morrison, Patrick Desjarlait, Fritz Scholder, Grant Wood, Robert Rauschenberg, and Diego Rivera, to folk artists in Haiti, and Fernando Botero. Bradley’s Homage to Botero, for example, is a lithograph of a stout native with a pot on her head. The composition is a new native baroque, a signature style of robust figures similar to those created by Botero.

Bradley was exposed as a young man to the ironic characters in trickster stories, the baroque representations of the sacred, depictions of spirits, masks, and native ceremonies, and the audacious renditions of war scenes. Botero was introduced to the baroque interiors of churches in Medellín, Columbia. Neither Bradley nor Botero were exposed as young students to the mighty muse and genius of famous artists in museums.

“The drama of the baroque style was not aimed as aesthetic enjoyment, but as a religious experience that would have a lasting impact on the beholder” wrote John Sillevs in The Baroque World of Fernando

Botero.

“To be called ‘a baroque artist’ could mean an artist who is willing and able to break the classical rules of art,” observed Sillevs. “Another aspect of the baroque is the play of light and shadow, enhancing the tangibility of the subject. Color, texture, and brilliance all contribute to this effect. Emotions are expressed by the human figure with a strong physical presence in which such qualities as opulence, and sensuality are most conspicuous.”

Bradley evades the practice of academism and the cultural sentiments of classical art. He surely teases realism and commercial representations by irony and native coincidence, a narrative art that reveals the fantasies and pretensions of acquisitive cultures and art markets. The play of bold colors enhances a sense of presence, and the diverse characters in his painterly scenes, either particular in a landscape or communal at an art gallery, are associated by native irony and the unity of visionary motion in primary colors.

“Colour is something spiritual, something whose clarity is spiritual, so that when colours are mixed they produce nuances of colour,” asserted the philosopher Walter Benjamin. “When colour provides the contours, objects are not reduced to things but are constituted by an order consisting of an infinite range of nuances. Colour is single, not as a lifeless thing and rigid individuality but as a winged creature that flits from one form to the next.”

Bradley clearly creates nuances of colors in character and narrative scenes, a unique sense of native presence and motion by visual perception. Only a clever colorist can turn the nuance of nature and painterly figures into a narrative art with incongruity and irony.

The concept of a native baroque is borrowed and used in the general

sense of ornamentation, elaboration, bold coloration, whimsy, and the distortion or conversion of authenticity. Botero's painterly figures are rotund distortions of reality, and yet there is always a recognizable actuality in the grotesque. Bradley creates diverse characters in elaborate visionary conversions of the real, the traces of the actual in the ironic narrative art of native survivance.

Bradley is a meticulous painter, even so he has created and sold several hundred paintings, abstract collages, sculptures, and lithographs in the past thirty years since he was a student at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Museums and individual collectors treasure his narrative market scenes, individual portraiture, ironic images, signature collages, and a series of double portraits named the American Indian Gothic. Bradley first studied art and painting at the College of Saint Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota, the University of Arizona at Tucson, and then from 1975 to 1977 he served in the Peace Corps.

Bradley is Anishinaabe, a registered citizen of the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. He bears the common native bruises of ethnic encounters, hues of fosterage and family memories, the tricky humor and politics of gallery associations, and the incongruities and ironies of native survivance. The recollections of his youth, a curious, visionary sense of native stories, his unique personal experiences, and several remarkable teachers provided a natural cause to become an artist. Bradley easily adapted to the style of instruction at the Institute of American Indian Arts. "They gave me a canvas and some paint and told me to start painting."

Nicole Plett interviewed Bradley, early in his career, for Art Lines in Santa Fe. She asked about his training as an artist. "I went to some universities, and the art classes were lousy and I dreaded school," said Bradley. At the Institute of American Indian Art, however, he was "reborn

again or something, because it was just perfectly accommodating in the way I worked and the way I think. It didn't go against the grain like some of the other schools. So from that point on, that's what I really count as getting a serious art education." Bradley returned many years later to teach at the Institute. You "really become aware there. If your identity may have been in doubt before, after two years and the people you meet and the things you go through, why, it clears it up. It did for me. It was like a rebirth. And it was just like I started me whole life over again. And that's where my art is coming from right there."

Bradley was truly inspired by the work of the late Anishinaabe artists George Morrison, an abstract expressionist, and Patrick Desjarlait, a folk art impressionist. Bradley created a diptych in their honor for an exhibition at the Ancient Traders Gallery in Minneapolis. He told a reporter that he did not want to "come home without paying homage to those two giants who influenced all of us." He was not, however, directly influenced by abstract expressionism. Morrison, Hans Hoffman, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollack, and many other renowned abstract expressionists were master painters in a previous generation. Morrison was an apostle of expressionism and native liberty. Desjarlait provided the direction of an artistic style that was understandable. Bradley was influenced, more precisely, by the social realism of Diego Rivera, and the baroque narrative art of Fernando Botero. Bradley turns to expressionism in his abstract collages, and, at the same time, he is pleased to proclaim that he is also inspired by the narrative folk art of Haiti.

Bradley served for two years in the Peace Corps. The first year he initiated a subsistence agricultural program to provide vegetables for natives in the Dominican Republic near the border with Haiti. There, he was inspired by the narrative folk art, the portrait and communal

compositions in bright, primary colors by untutored artists. The second year he was invited to served in rural Guatemala where he established a livestock extension program. "I lived with a Mayan family, and they were terribly poor but with great strength and integrity," he said in an interview. The "Mayan Indians gave me a new sense of vision."

Bradley merged his personal native influences and experiences with the untutored folk art style several years later at the Institute of American Indian Art. The outcome of his early impressions is a unique, baroque narrative style of art, communal scenes in bold colors with a sense of whimsy and native irony.

"Colour, above all, and perhaps even more than drawing, is a means of liberation," declared Henri Matisse. "Liberation is the freeing of conventions, old methods being pushed aside by the contributions of a new generation. As drawing and colour are means of expression, they are modified. Hence the strangeness of new means of expression, because they refer to other matters than those which interested preceding generations."

Haitian art schools in the early nineteenth century encouraged portraiture. Most painters, however, were not recognized until the founding, some sixty years ago, of the Centre D'Art by DeWitt Peters. Hector Hyppolite, a "voodoo priest," was one of the "greatest natural painters" in the "history of the art movement in Haiti."

Dorothy Dunn established formal art instruction at the Santa Fe Indian School in 1932. She encouraged native traditions, for instance, those derived from early native art practices of Winter Counts and Ledger Art, and advanced the naturalistic, or narrative style of art at the school. The native students, however, soon insisted on more liberty of artistic spirit, passion, and expression than the sanctions and practices of naturalism. Allan Houser, Joe Herrara, Pablita Velarde, Oscar Howe, and many other

eminent native artists attended the school. The Studio at the Santa Fe Indian School was the foundation of the Institute of American Indian Arts.

Bradley was inspired by many native artists who had studied at The Studio in Santa Fe, and by the bright compositions of narrative folk art in Haiti. Sooner or later he would have discovered the “passion and color” of these untrained painters of “mundane existence,” but fortuitously his service in the Peace Corps, more than thirty years ago, immediately preceded his studies at the Institute of American Indian Arts. He was ready by experience, by passion, and by coincidence to start his career as an artist and sculptor.

Grant Wood posed his daughter and a dentist for the prominent double portrait, American Gothic. Wood was evasive about the intended satire of his painting, but unintended is no less a satire. Many painters and photographers since then have mimicked the composition and the puritanical characters. Gordon Parks, for example, photographed a woman holding an upright mop in one hand and a broom in the other in front of the Stars and Stripes. Satire is clever and tricky in literature and art, and some photographs are comic teasers, but the extremes can be crude and spiteful, such as Goth American Gothic, and Plastic Surgery American Gothic.

Bradley salutes the American Gothic by Grant Wood with a brilliant painterly satire of a baroque narrative double portrait of Georgia O’Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz. Susan Moldenhauer, in an essay for the exhibition, “David Bradley: Postcard from Santa Fe,” at the University of Wyoming Art Museum, wrote that Bradley’s “masterful American Gothic: O’Keeffe and Stieglitz Meet Tonto and the Lone Ranger is exemplary. This classic double portrait reminiscent of Wood’s best known masterpiece presents Georgia O’Keeffe, her signature initials as an adornment and canvas and

paint brushes in hand, and her husband, photographer Alfred Stieglitz.” The “Lone Ranger stands in the doorway of his Silver Bullet Bed and Breakfast, a brothel of sorts with Marilyn Monroe peering from the upstairs window. A weathervane depicting James Earle Fraser’s signature sculpture, The End of the Trail, is perched above.” Tonto clutches paper money in both hands. The Silver Bullet has a vacancy.

The iconic farmwoman in American Gothic by Grant Wood wears a cameo necklace, a colonial print apron with a rickrack border, and a Peter Pan collar. The puritanical farmer wears a striped Gatsby shirt with no collar, overalls, and a sport coat, and holds a hayfork with three tines.

Georgia O’Keeffe in American Gothic by Bradley wears an identical colonial apron with a rickrack border, and collar, but the necklace is a thick silver cross with turquoise. Stieglitz wears the same Gatsby shirt and overalls, but with paper money tucked in the chest pocket. Steiglitz carries a camera, not a hayfork. Painterly signatures abound, puffy clouds, exposed adobe brick, jewelry and curios on sale, and paper money. Bradley creates many ironic cues in the composition. Stieglitz, for instance, rolls his eyes upward in disgust or arrogance. “Tanto Curios” means “as much” in Spanish, and “too much” in Italian, an ironic variation on the name Tonto, an “idiot” in Spanish.

Bradley has painted several other double portraits in his series American Indian Gothic. Ghost Dancers, Dorothy and Richard Nelson on the Shores of Gitche Gami, Paul Bunyan and Babe, Sitting Bull and Wife, Indian Self Rule, and there are many other double portraits in the series. Abiquiu Afternoon is a variation of the American Indian Gothic, a double portrait of R. C. Gorman, the distinguished artist from Canyon de Chelly on the Navajo Nation, and Georgia O’Keeffe, seated outside at a round table. A signature cat is in one corner and paper money in the other.

O'Keeffe is a caricature of Whistler's Mother by James McNeill Whistler.

Family scenes include Buffalo Dance Feast Day, Chippewa Family, and many individual portraits, Georgia O'Keeffe as Whistler's Mother with paint and a palette, Pow Wow Princess, Pueblo Morning, Sleeping Indian, Dream Near Santa Fe, Homage to Crow King, Pueblo Madonna, and hundreds more, including four color image variations, Homage to Warhol. Bradley created several satire portraits. Land 'O Bucks is a buxom woman in a tight fringe dress. She holds paper money over a sign that reads, "The Wantobe Tribe, Authentic Indian Art and Crafts." Bradley also painted several cowboy scenes, for instance, True Grit, and How the West Was Lost.

Mary Abbe reviewed the exhibition "Restless Native" in the Ancient Traders Gallery and wrote in the Minneapolis StarTribune that "Bradley evidently thinks of himself as something of a tumbleweed, rootless and impatient. . . . Colorful, witty and meticulously rendered, his paintings, collages and mixed-media pieces depict the world with amused detachment, noting its hypocrisies and foibles but also honoring good people, respecting history and celebrating long friendships. In an often cynical age, his work has a guileless intelligence that's terrifically appealing."

Bradley never hesitates to pronounce that art is liberty. "Art is about freedom, and an artist must follow his heart," he has said in many interviews. Bradley follows his heart, and his art heals with humor and liberates with compassion and irony.

