

NEAL AMBROSE-SMITH

The (Tense) Present

Curated by Suzanne Newman Fricke, PhD



516 ARTS

February 27 – May 22, 2021
Albuquerque, New Mexico

NEAL AMBROSE-SMITH

Born 1966, Texas, Flathead Salish, Metis and Cree, Descendent of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation, Montana

EDUCATION

- 2009 M.F.A. Printmaking, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM
- 1989 B.A. Painting, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2020 *Windows on the Future*, 516 ARTS with Albuquerque Museum, Albuquerque, NM
Reflecting on 2020, an international print exchange, Boulder, CO
Allegories of Transformation, PACE Center, Parker, CO
Larger Than Memory: Contemporary Art from Indigenous North America, Heard Museum, Phoenix AZ
- 2019 *Inspired Thinkers Series*, Regis University, Denver, CO
- 2018 *Making Medicine*, Garth Greenan Gallery, New York City, NY
Etlelooaat (Cree) - He who shouts, McNichols Civic Center Building, Denver, CO
In Red Ink Exhibition, Museum of Northwest Art, La Conner, WA
Contemporary Native American Group Show, Chiaroscuro Gallery, Santa Fe, NM
Home: Contemporary Indigenous Artists Responding, West Pattee Library, Penn State University, University Park, PA
- 2017 *Footprints on the Moon*, Northcutt Steele Gallery, Montana State University, Billings, MT
Neal Ambrose-Smith, Burnell R. Roberts Triangle Gallery, Sinclair Community College, Dayton, OH
Exploring Beyond Tradition, Durango Arts Center, Durango, CO
Train of Ink, SGC International Printmaking Conference, Atlanta, GA
- 2016 *Transferring Thought*, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO
- 2015 *Re-Riding History*, The Crisp-Ellert Art Museum Flagler College, St. Augustine, FL
The Map is Not the Territory, P21 Gallery, London, England
- 2014 *Pushing The Limits*, Central Booking Gallery, New York, NY
Terrain, The Evergreen Galleries, Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA
Face to Face: Wall to Wall, Yellowstone Art Museum, Billings, MT
- 2013 *Neal Ambrose-Smith*, The Switzer Gallery, Pensacola, FL
Octopus Dreams, Tomsk Art Museum, Tomsk, Russia

SELECTED PUBLIC COMMISSIONS & AWARDS

- 2021 Nominated, United States Artists Fellowship
- 2012 Denver International Airport, Central Terrazzo Floor, Main Terminal, Denver, CO
Real Deal Printmaking, Bernalillo County for the arts, Albuquerque, NM
- 1991 Denver International Airport, Terrazzo Floor, Main Terminal, Denver, CO

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

- Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO
- Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis, IN
- Flint Institute Art Museum, Flint, MI
- Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe, NM
- Library of Congress, Washington, DC
- Limerick School of Art and Design, Limerick, Ireland
- Missoula Art Museum, Missoula, MT
- Museum of Contemporary Native Arts, Santa Fe, NM
- New York Public Library, New York, NY
- NMAI/Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
- Tia Collection, New York, NY



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516 ARTS is a non-collecting contemporary art museum in the center of Downtown Albuquerque that celebrates thought-provoking art in the here and now. Our mission is to connect contemporary artists and diverse audiences. 516 ARTS presents relevant exhibitions and public programs, which feature a mix of local, national and international artists from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

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ABOVE: Neal Ambrose-Smith

COVER: *Bet the Farm on Bokeh*, 2018, Oil, acrylic, collage, 60 x 48 inches

NEAL AMBROSE-SMITH: THE (TENSE) PRESENT

By Suzanne Newman Fricke, PhD

In *Neal Ambrose-Smith: The (Present) Tense*, the artist shares a body of work he created in the past four years to address the seismic political and cultural shifts that have taken place. While the chaos and upset have left many paralyzed into inaction, the artist was extremely productive. Utilizing many different mediums, including printmaking, painting, drawing, and neon, he captured the cacophony of our times. Incorporating familiar images from popular culture and classic fiction, including trailer homes and *Alice in Wonderland*, Ambrose-Smith encompassed the anger, fear, degradation, and uncertainty of contemporary life. As a parent and as an adult, he finds the lack of manners upsetting and argues for the need to teach good behavior and to accept responsibility. Even with all the confusion, Ambrose-Smith finds a way to express the need to find a way forward with kindness and integrity. As the artist observed, “as a nation, we face a reckoning seen the rise in anger, racism, hatred, destruction of the planet, and illness. As human beings, we have to find a way to work together.”



As a member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Nation of Montana, he feels an obligation to create art that reflects his position as an Indigenous artist. His mother, noted artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, stressed the importance of hard work, and he notes that she often calls and asks, “are you in the studio? Are you working?” She shared her attitude that being an artist requires diligence and persistence in the practice. In his role as chair of the department of studio arts at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, he tries to instill this with his students, many of whom are Native American. He finds the interactions in the classroom inspiring as he offers an alternative for a group with many challenges.

As an introduction to the show, Ambrose-Smith created a large-scale, three-dimensional neon sculpture titled, *c cen u kʷes xʷúyi (Where are you going?)*, which found its inspiration from a sketch of random lines he had made. While most of his work includes representational imagery, for this piece he wanted to create something that expressed chaos with unconnected lines woven together. The construction was challenging as it is difficult to link the different

pieces of neon together. Most neon work sits flush to the wall, but Ambrose-Smith wanted it to be fully three-dimensional, something that changes as you move it around, look at it from different points of view. He had experimented with neon for *Abstract in Your Home* from 2009 and he wanted to collaborate with the neon artist Robert Radazzo again. For Ambrose-Smith, this piece offered an opportunity to find new inspiration in a new space. In 2020, he found his studio space where he not only created his work but also taught classes confining. The work is intended to be cathartic, to show how impossible it is to encapsulate these times while underscoring the need to work with each other.

The #MeToo Movement, especially the Harvey Weinstein case, inspired Ambrose-Smith’s exploration of the character Alice from *Alice in Wonderland*. He had been reading about Lewis Carroll and the accusations of pedophilia due to his interest in photographing young girls. Ambrose-Smith portrayed Alice as an amalgam of different figures. Based on the 1951 Disney cartoon Alice in her iconic blue pinafore dress with a white apron, yellow blond hair, and has tiny Barbie hands. Her eyes are crossed out like the Velveteen Rabbit and she has stitches in her arm like Tank Girl to show how violence leaves scars. Ambrose-Smith combined the physical aspects of Coyote as Trickster with long pointed ears. Both Alice and Coyote travel to strange places and cause change through their actions.

Several images in the exhibition feature mobile homes in different forms, including rickety trailers set on blocks and sleek Silverstreams that look like space ships or some futuristic forms of transportation as in *Mad Max*. Ambrose-Smith grew up in a trailer on his reservation and he has “a pretty good sense of trailer life. It’s a sign of just getting by. It’s better than a tent.” While trailer homes are often seen as a sign of poverty, they are common on reservations, reflecting the historically nomadic life for many tribes, though it can be a poor choice in the humid climate as in Montana because it tends to decompose the materials used. In the extra-long monotype *Traditional Blocks* a long line of trailers winds around a series of drawings reminiscent of a kind of Mad Hatter’s tea party or the Mock Turtle race in a twisted circle.



ward to 2022 when his mother will have a one-person retrospective at the Whitney. These works offer a sense of hope, suggesting ways to move forward and return to a time of love, compassion, and manners.

“*The (Tense) Present* captures the upheaval, uncertainty, protest, and change of the few years, providing a moment to consider, digest, and reflect on recent events.”



LEFT: *Romance is where you find it, it's just the matter of wearing it all the time*, 2019, graphite on paper, 30 x 22 inches

MIDDLE *Coyote whispers in Italian*, 2019, oil, acrylic, collage, 36 x 36 inches

ABOVE: *Providence is only looking up*, 2017, oil, acrylic, collage, 84 x 96 inches

Suzanne Newman Fricke earned her doctorate in Native American art history from the University of New Mexico specializing in contemporary Native American Arts. For over 25 years, she taught a variety of art history courses at the University of New Mexico and the Institute of American Indian Arts. As an independent curator, she organized a number of exhibitions in the United States and internationally. Her writings include a special edition of *World Art Journal* about Indigenous Futurisms. In 2020, she opened Gallery Hózhó at Hotel Chaco in Albuquerque, a fine art gallery dedicated to artists from New Mexico.