

WEISMAN ART MUSEUM

SEPTEMBER 1, 2012

Focus on the Collection – Decoding Jim Denomie’s *Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill*



Jim Denomie *Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill*

In the scholarly field of art history, iconography is the practice of identifying and interpreting symbols, icons, and the content of imagery in a work of art. Jim Denomie describes his painting *Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill* as “a visual story about some of the historical events concerning the state of Minnesota and the Ojibwe and Dakota tribes within its boundaries since the 1862 Dakota War.” A native of the Midwest and a member of the Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Ojibwe,

Denomie paints stories from his own dreams and experiences, as well as historical events, including many that have been harmful and hurtful to the American Indian community. Often these scenes express sarcasm or anger at the attitudes developed during these events.

Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill was one of Denomie's first paintings after his year long project in 2005, during which he painted at least one painting every day of the year. Jim explains that, in many ways, this painting is a continuation of his earlier *Renegade* series, and indeed it repeats icons developed in his previous works. "It is still political, social, and historical commentary, but a different landscape and a much larger canvas," he adds.

Many of the images in this piece represent real historical events that occurred in Minnesota and affected Native Americans since the 1862 US-Dakota War. There are thirty-eight figures in the painting, plus two rabbits, signifying the thirty-eight Dakota men who were hanged on December 26, 1862 in Mankato, plus two others who were captured and hanged three years later. Fort Snelling, depicted at the center of the image, served as an internment camp for imprisoned Dakota men, women, and children during the winter of 1862 and spring of 1863. It also housed the Indian Administration, a federal government agency that was implicated in the withholding of provisions that spurred the 1862 US-Dakota War.

In the upper left corner, an Indian on horseback is mooning Governor Tim Pawlenty, pictured as a farmer, while the sun rises beyond the hill. This scene satirizes the Minnesota state seal in which a white farmer is depicted working at sunrise, with an Indian on horseback in the background.

Further down the left side, a Native American and a horse are in the trunk of a police car. This refers to an incident in April 1993 when two Minneapolis officers were suspended for taking two intoxicated Native Americans to the hospital in the trunk of their car.

The photographer in the lower left of the painting references photographer Edward Curtis. At the turn of the twentieth century, Curtis produced a large series of photographs, *The North American Indian*, through which he sought to document traditional life of what he deemed a "vanishing race." Today his photographs are controversial, and Curtis is often criticized for portraying Native Americans in popular stereotypes and removing objects of Western culture from his images. The Indian couple posing for the photographer in Denomie's painting resembles the couple in the famous 1930 *American Gothic* portrait by the Iowa-born artist Grant Wood. *American Gothic* was seen as a depiction of authentic, rural American life during the Depression era, and the painting has since become one of the most popular and most parodied in American pop culture.

The wide-eyed farmer on the right side of the painting, running down the hill with a mouthful of grass, recalls a historically infamous meeting just before the start of

the 1862 US-Dakota War. After a poor crop season, Indians were starving and the government betrayed its promise to provide the Dakota tribe with food. During a meeting between Indian chiefs and traders, the shop owner Andrew Myrick suggested to essentially let the Indians “eat grass.” War began soon after this meeting.

– *Emily Maple, E. Gerald and Lisa O’Brien Curatorial Fellow. Taken from the Fall 2012 Newsletter.*

DECEMBER 21, 2016

Artist Feature: Jim Denomie

Jim Denomie was a University of Minnesota art student when he began the work of re-claiming his tribal heritage and re-connecting with his Native identity. Nearly twenty years later, he is nationally known for his humorous, critical depictions of United States history and religion. His paintings address colonization, assimilation, white washing, and other violences that the Native population has suffered at the hands of Western European colonizers.

Denomie currently lives in Franconia, MN while his work resides in collections all over Minnesota and throughout the greater United States. His 2007 painting "Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill" is currently on display in the Weisman Art Museum's *Silver River*. I recently caught up with the artist to talk about the work, the rivers, and his artistic practice in general.



EA: Can you tell me about the narrative or impetus behind your 2007 painting *Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill*?

JD: The inspiration for *Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill* came from my wife's, Diane Wilson, involvement with a historical event. Around 2004, as she was doing research for her memoir, *Spirit Car*, she became aware of a group of native educators who were organizing a march to commemorate the forced march of

elders, men, women and children from Mankato, MN to Fort Snelling during a brutally cold November in 1862. Many people died during the weeklong march and over three hundred died in the winter incarceration camp below Fort Snelling on the banks of the Mississippi River. Some people believe that this ugly history makes Fort Snelling a prisoner of war camp and should be demolished.

EA: Fort Snelling is located at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, which are both depicted in Attack on Fort Snelling Bar and Grill. Did you include the two rivers in order to locate the scene geographically or is there a significance to their presence in the piece?

JD: I did include both the Mississippi and the Minnesota rivers to locate the scene geographically.

Both rivers are important to me personally and culturally. As a boy, I used to play on the banks and swim and fish in both rivers. I still visit the rivers to relax and to just sit by the water. Culturally, the Annishinabe (Ojibwe) my tribal affiliation, navigated the lakes, rivers and streams in the Great Lakes area by birch bark canoe including the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers.

EA: Why do you feel that it is important for you to depict historical scenes in your paintings?

JD: When I started painting at the University of Minnesota in 1992, I just naturally portrayed storytelling. Storytelling is used in Annishinabe culture to pass on knowledge from one generation to the next, preserving culture and history. As a student at the U, I also studied U.S. history. I learned about the history between the Federal Government and the native people of this continent. I saw how historical events and government campaigns shaped our current situation today. I learned about the treaties and how the reservation system was developed. Most importantly, I learned how this history shaped my personal identity. Some of these historical events (and my understanding of them) became subject matter for my paintings.

EA: What role do you see art playing in political resistance and activism?

JD: I am not sure how art will play a role in political resistance and activism. I don't think many artists approach an event in those terms. Of course there are the exceptions. I paint about historical and contemporary events to educate people. I suppose that is a form of activism. Even now, I am making sketches of the protest near the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota opposing the construction of an oil pipeline that threatens the safety of the Missouri River. In the past few months, thousands of people have traveled to North Dakota to support the Standing Rock Sioux. Some of these sketches will become paintings and some will be studies for a larger narrative painting about the developing event and its conclusion. Hopefully, the sketches and paintings will be exhibited, or published in print or on the web, possibly informing people (who may or may not know of the protest) of the event and how I perceive it.

SILVER RIVER IS OPEN AT THE WEISMAN ART MUSEUM FROM SATURDAY AUGUST 13, 2016 TO SUNDAY FEBRUARY 12, 2017. [CLICK HERE TO FIND MORE INFORMATION ON THE SHOW AND RELATED PROGRAMMING.](#) THE WEISMAN ART MUSEUM IS OPEN TUESDAY THROUGH SUNDAY FROM 10 AM TO 5 PM AND WEDNESDAY EVENINGS UNTIL 8 PM.

ELISE ARMANI is a fourth year BFA candidate, with a dual degree in Gender, Women and Sexuality studies and a minor in Art History. Elise is an artist and an independent curator, and works as the Projects & Programs assistant at WAM. In the off moments when she isn't working, Elise enjoys reading, frolicking in nature, and spending time with her pitbull (child) Lando.

JIM DENOMIE was born in Hayward, Wisconsin on July 6, 1955 and currently lives in Franconia, MN. Primarily a painter (oil, acrylic and watercolor), he also creates unique works of art in ink, and oil pastel drawings, printmaking, photography, and found object sculpture.