

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Warm Springs Oregon: Lillian Pitt Spirits Keep Whistling Me Home”

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Installation view

From the perspective of mainstream American white culture, the journey to the Warm Springs reservation in Central Oregon is a long one. We pass from the hectic impersonality of freeway driving, through the resource greedy suburbs and strip malls, past polluted rivers and ruthless clear cutting of the forests, to finally come into a sense of quiet and calm in the center of Oregon, where the woods are intelligently harvested, the sky is quiet, and the 600,000 acres of high desert exists in harmony with the people who live there

But this is not a throwback to a prehistoric culture or a Garden of Eden. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, an arbitrary group of disparate natives who were thrown together by the US government in the 1850s in the hopes that they would kill each other off, today work collaboratively to provide jobs and income for their members: they have a resort and industries such as clothing manufacturing and lumbering. Visitors have the choice of staying in a teepee, a camper, a tent, or a four star resort. They can swim, canoe, or gamble.

At the heart of the Reservation is the Museum at Warm Springs, a stunning structure that combines contemporary architectural concepts with the community values and forms of the tribes who carefully care for the surrounding land. Using native stone, timber, brick and glass, it invokes a traditional encampment along a creek. Unlike the gargantuan structures of recent museums, the Museum at Warm Springs is scaled to create an intimate experience. Its permanent display lays out in simple, but sophisticated terms, the beauty and the pain of the history of these tribes.

This summer the Museum featured a major retrospective by Warm Springs/Wasco/Yakama native Lillian Pitt, with the evocative title “Spirits Keep Whistling Me Home.” The exhibition, which will be traveling for five years following its

debut in Warm Springs, was in perfect harmony with its setting, not only because the artist grew up on the reservation and still considers it her spiritual home, but also because her work brings together contemporary emotional and psychological concerns, international technical and formal references, and traditions and tales from her own complex heritage.

Lillian Pitt discovered as an adult that her grandmother came, not from the Warm Springs reservation in Oregon, but from the Washington side of the Columbia River Gorge, a region where ten thousand year old petroglyphs survive to the present. The knowledge of her ancient roots transformed her life.

Yet, one of Pitt's most enduring forms, the clay mask, is not part of the artistic traditions of her particular tribal heritage. When she became interested in working in clay and began to make masks, she found herself inspired by Mexican and Northwest Coast traditions. In order to make the masks more personal, she reconnected with the spiritual stories of her early years in the Basin Plateau. At the same time, she learned of ancient firing techniques from Japan, such as Anagama and Raku.

In the *Stick Indian* series which spans from 1982 to the present, we see these intersecting concerns. The masks invoke the Stick Indian, a spirit who lived in the hills and would whistle you home if you were a good person, and lose you further in the desert or the woods if you were not. These Stick Indian masks are in bronze, in Raku and mixed media, all of them with intricate surfaces that give them various personalities. They are, of course, the theme of the exhibition as Pitt herself is whistled home by them from her geographical home in Portland. At the same time, she is herself a whistling spirit who speaks to those who are in touch with her values

In the 1990s Pitt began a series called *In Conflict* in which the mask format is altered to a more personal statement that departs further from the predictable configuration of the face in order to suggest physical and spiritual changes that the artist was experiencing.

Recently Pitt has also taken the mask form and incorporated it into full length figures on wooden boards. These totems create a powerful sense of protection, at the same time that they feel somewhat dismembered. In *Coyote Musing on His Immortality* or *The Forest is My Secret Home*, the artist has used clay to suggest x ray ribcages, a motif from ancient Wishxam designs, along with beads, sticks chewed by beavers, shells and metal scraps. The results are startling, suggesting the survival of these spirits, even as their homes are interrupted, disturbed or destroyed

Pitt's work in the last few years has also moved into three dimensions in installations, and simple figures set on pedestals or on a flat piece of wood or ceramic that creates an environment. These sculptures still invoke spirits with titles like *Shadow Spirit Walking Between Fire and Ice* or *Amid a Million Untold Stories Raven Remains*, but they also connect to a more abstract sense of space and form that is distilled from Pitt's deepening integration of material and content.

The collective presence of masks, totems, and installations is intensely spiritual. The journey to Warm Springs, which is actually a different country legally and politically, is also a journey to a nurturing sense of harmony and hope that there is another way of thinking in contemporary America. The native traditions have metamorphosed in the work of Lillian Pitt, as well as in the lives and art of many contemporary native artists, in response to the new globalism, new technologies, and late twentieth century culture, but Pitt still chooses to connect to a spirituality that reaches back into prehistoric time. This is a profoundly different worldview from that of capitalism, that was it to be more visible, could perhaps save us, and the extraordinary planet on which we live. Its persistence and metamorphosis, in spite of the ongoing efforts to obliterate it, is inspiring.