

## ABORIGINAL CREATIVITY

[NOTE: This interview and analysis begins a new occasional section of *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies/La Revue Canadienne des Etudes Autochtones* devoted to the scholarly consideration of those who express the Aboriginal world creatively. Contributions to this section may involve any of the areas of the humanities. Original work will be included, along with analyses, interviews, debates, critiques or other expressions of appreciation of the work of those who communicate to us through their exceptional creativity. The intent is to allow a fuller appreciation of the significance of these artists, writers, dramatists, etc. within the Aboriginal world and the world of Aboriginal Studies. Submissions are welcome; they should include both analyses and original works. All submissions will be refereed in the usual fashion. All one-time publication rights must be obtained by contributors. Please query the Editors for further information.]

### A WALKER IN THIS WORLD : AN INTERVIEW WITH DUANE SLICK

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#### **Abstract/Resumé**

The author analyzes the work of Duane Slick, Mesquakie/Winnebago artist who paints and teaches at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The review is enhanced by an interview with the artist, and illustrations of his recent work.

L'auteur analyse les oeuvres de Duane Slick, artiste Mesquakie/Winnebago, peintre et professeur & l'Institut des arts américain-indiens à Santa Fe, New Mexico. La critique est étendue par une entrevue avec l'artiste et par des illustrations de son oeuvre récente.

The work of Duane Slick represents his multiple explorations and interrogations into the self, family, community, and history. Further, he investigates the formal aspects of the painting process relying on both literal and abstract imagery. For Slick, the canvas functions in much the same way a blank piece of paper operates for the writer, in that it is "a fictitious space where anything can happen," but the canvas permits a physical layering which the blank sheet (except in the case of a palimpsest) does not. Slick writes:

Art making is a process of asking questions. These questions exist at the level of form, subject matter, and content. The painting exists as a code: a layering of signs, marks, and symbols that create meaning ("*For the Seventh Generation*," p.18).

This physical layering on the painting surface replicates for the viewer the artist's process of exploring his world. The often-used ink and gesso on vellum paper creates a texture in which a multiplicity of images and perspectives emerge, allowing the viewer to search for possible connections.

The figure of the Walker recurs in Slick's work, and stands for the artist's journey through the world. In one 1991 piece entitled *Walker*, the figure holds a balancing pole while standing on what appears to be a tripod of sorts. In a similarly titled ink on vellum work from the same year, the Walker figure is again holding a balancing pole while walking the Good Red Road. The Walker is framed by a mirror-imaged outline of North America in the background.

Related to the Walker motif is a multi-media sculpture entitled *High Tops/The Shoes* (1991) (Plate 1). Exhibited as part of a larger exhibition, the *High Tops*, placed in the center of the gallery, were surrounded by paintings hung on the walls. Different messages written on the sneakers were revealed as viewers walked around the installation. Repeated three times is the inscription, "In a sacred manner I walk, In a sacred manner I am walking." Other messages focus on aspects of family history and identity:

Carry your name. Sam Slick carries his name. North. Smallpox has killed his family--in Oklahoma c. 1890--Sam Slick walks North--He plants his name with the Red Earth People--Mesquakie. He plants his name.

His memory  
His identity  
Great-Grandfather I carry your name

Other recurring figures in Slick's work are the historical Wovoka and the mythical Red Dog. Each figure makes a connection to the world of Indigenous America. Wovoka, the Paiute Ghost Dance messiah, appears in such works as *Cobalt Darkman (Wovoka)* (Plate 3) and *Purging Wovoka* (Plate 2) (each 1991). In these works the silhouette of Wovoka is recognizable but still is more of an apparition. About his use of Wovoka, Slick has said: "I like putting him in there because he just stands in the work--a shadowy figure--watching, a constant reminder. He's shadowy, but insistent" (Towle, 1992:10). Red Dog is an imaginative creation representing the instantaneous transformation of Native cultures when the first Arawak was killed, thus leading to a radical change in Native people's relationship to their world. In the 1991 *Red Dog Consciousness* Slick writes on the painting: "Red Dog Sings Out I Name Myself Conscious." *Laughing Red Dog* (1991) (Plate 5) also embeds language in the image. Like Wovoka, Red Dog expresses spiritual consciousness and the maintenance of spiritual traditions.

Although much of Slick's work has become more political over the last year or so, addressing such issues as cultural genocide through narrative paintings, works from 1990, such as *Vessel, Red Sage/Black Sage* and *Diagrams for Landscape and Other Manifestations* (Plate 7) hint at abstractions of biomorphic forms to engage natural imagery. *White Hot Landscape* and *Yellow Painting* (both 1991) continue his interest in formal abstraction. Broadly speaking, the story-telling narrative and the abstract are the divergent poles of Slick's art.

Duane Slick was born in Waterloo, Iowa in 1961, and received his B.F.A. in painting and art education from the University of Northern Iowa in 1986, and his M.F.A. in painting from the University of California at Davis in 1990. He has also studied at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Currently Slick is Professor of Painting at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

We talked first in his studio at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, and then a few months later in Santa Fe.

LA: In much of your recent work you use ink on vellum paper. How did that develop?

DS: I began developing those drawings when I was at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown [1990-92]. I had a Fellowship--it's a seven-month period--of just studio time. That's all. Nothing else. That was a real luxury, and I just worked all the time. Those works have what I call "the feel" and they read as diary pages or diary sketches. When I say that, I mean that I begin by taking myself as the subject. My

cultural and personal experiences as an urban Native American male are the startling point for the narrative in these sketches.

LA: Some of the imagery in those drawings appears in some of your earlier works. The Wovoka figure comes in, and the figure of the Walker also appears frequently. How do those recurrent images function for you?

DS: First of all, I treat the canvas or the paper picture plane as a fictional space, using images, shapes -- the visual -- in the same way writers use words to create a setting or to describe a situation. The Walker is autobiographical. The Walker, the Roadman, the wanderer, the journey man, this is the figure walking in the world. It's a quick glimpse, a flash into his "spiritual journey." He carries a balancing rod that keeps him walking the "Red line," the Good Red Road: that line is thin and requires constant attention and a deep level of concentration to stay on it. His balancing rod becomes a tool, a sort of moderator or negotiator, a form of reason and a way of staying on that line.

The figure also has a gourd rattle for prayer: it's another prop of "cultural information" that is the Walker's way of entering a space that empowers him to deal with this world. On another level this is the Walker's blending, or using, traditions, in this case Native traditions, to mediate and negotiate his relationship to this world. It becomes a way of "maintaining a line."

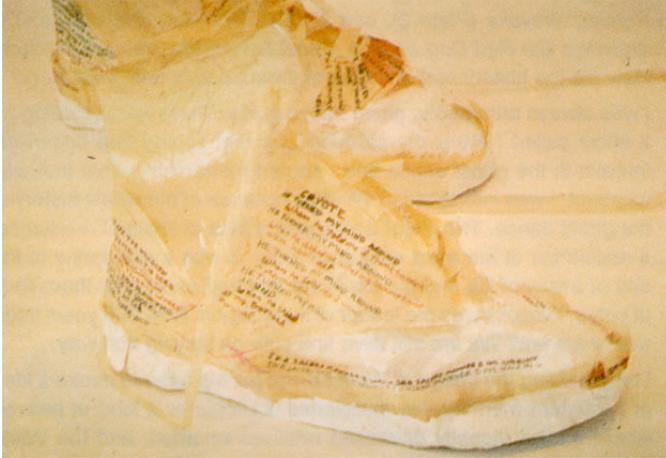
The drawings are just illusions of things. And in that fictional space the Walker becomes a theme of walking into the world. It's his Life Walk, his journey.

LA: Is this figure autobiographical or an alter ego?

DS: The Walker is more autobiographical.

LA: The painting *Black Marker* (1990) is also very much about space and movement in space.

DS: *Black Marker* is a way of marking time, or marking a certain space that you're in. What I was thinking about, now that I look back at the painting, like this area at the top, I treated it as a kind of still life because there are a pile of shapes grouped like food on a plate. This food is intended for the Walker's journey and will give him strength. It was conceived as a painting about a ceremonial space. The marker is about a place where the spirit rests. It's something left to remember a specific landscape, time, or event. So in that sense it was about a kind of ceremonial space with the Mesquakie people. They have ghost feeds where they have food set aside for the spirit of the deceased. So the whole idea of painting about landscape is also about marking



**Coyote**

***He turned my mind around***

**When he told me I think too much**

***He turned my mind around***

**When he asked me what my assumptions were about  
art**

***He turned my mind around***

**When he told me I was a romantic**

***He turned my mind around***

**When he cried at my brothers funeral**

this kind of ceremonial space. My paintings have a simultaneity where the complete narrative is stuffed into one picture.

LA: The figure of Wovoka appears in a number of your paintings, like *Purging Wovoka* (Plate 2), and *Cobalt Dark Man* (Plate 3), and in drawings like *Red Dog and the Ghost Dance Messiah* (each 1991). How did the history and meaning of Wovoka enter into your work?

DS: I was always attracted to ghost dance shirts. There was a catalog for a show called *I Wear the Morning Star* and seeing that began my interest in the ghost dance and I started researching what that was all about. I was interested in Wovoka because of the whole history of the ghost dance. The ghost dance was a kind of spiritual resistance, a resistance at the most desperate hour. It was a resistance to the end of a way of life and the traditions that had existed for thousands of years. Wovoka was the leader of that religion. Now 100 years later, where are we? We are still alive and plan on staying that way.

I began using the image of Wovoka--in his big hat--to evoke a kind of persistent memory. He envisioned a Utopia or a kind of heaven where all the recently deceased relatives returned, and the White invaders were destroyed. It might have been a bit fanatical, but as George Longfish puts it, it was an attempt by a people to use their "cultural information" to "get it together."

Another point I want to bring up is the whole idea of remembering: why Wovoka? Why that particular part of history? I wanted to point out the tragic dimensions of this story. I wanted to ask why this happened. How was it desired? By whom? The unfortunate thing is that "human nature" doesn't seem to change. Atrocities like this are still taking place. I had never thought about it that way before: near genocide as a universal cross-cultural experience.

I really started focusing on Wovoka when my work became more political. Up to 1990, my work was abstract. But then Jaune [Quick-to-See Smith] invited me to participate in the *Submuloc Show*, and I was asked to do something that was overtly political. So I was trying to make some kind of connection where I would be able to talk about things, specific issues dealing with the history of Native American people. And that's when I went into this kind of narrative, and I sort of latched on...well, yeah, just latched on to Wovoka, Red Dog and Coyote. I think of them as people or spirits that address issues.

LA: Was this a big shift for you, going from abstract work that had resonances to nature, like the large pieces in the *OurLand/Ourselves*

exhibition, for example *Vessel* and *Diagrams for Landscape and Other Manifestations* (Plate 7), to a more political dimension?

- DS: Yes, it was a shift. It was a big relief in a way because on the one hand, the work that was in *Our Land/Ourself* dealt with formal issues that I always have to address. And when I paint, I'm really formal. And with these other things, there was just an incredible amount of freedom to just do whatever I wanted without over-intellectualizing or over-thinking about formal aspects of the work. It was just like putting things down and there was very little editing. It was more of a stream of consciousness.
- LA: The landscapes were more abstract, whereas the newer pieces, especially, the Wovoka pieces, do have more of a figurative dimension.
- DS: I had one former instructor tell me the forms were the same, I just made them specific. I was studying under the painter Guy Goodwin, and I showed him some recent work. He said it looked as though I had kept my same structure and composition, but had made things more specific. What was once a shape became a dog or a figure or a feather. I just took whatever I had developed in my formal training, and something that might have been a shape became concretized. An abstract shape became a dog or a gerbil or something [laughs]. But there was always a desire to make the painting have a presence.
- LA: Did that sense of the political--and the anger coming out in them--exist also with the landscape paintings, but maybe on a different type of level?
- DS: Possibly, but I was just trying to find a way of verbalizing or making it apparent. That's what I've been doing for the past two years, trying to find a way of actually saying, you know, "Wait a minute."
- LA: And that idea or message may have been embedded in the landscapes but it wasn't really apparent.
- DS: No, no, it wasn't real overt. Like, for instance, within the last two years the work, the drawings, became very narrative. There were small drawings that came, and then this year was the year that I started doing the Coyote performances.
- LA: That sense of narrative and creating space comes out in a different way in the drawing you did in a Jehovah's Witness Bible. In the Jehovah's Witness book, you're showing a conflict or a collision of stories and creating new meanings.



Plate 2: Purging Wovoka

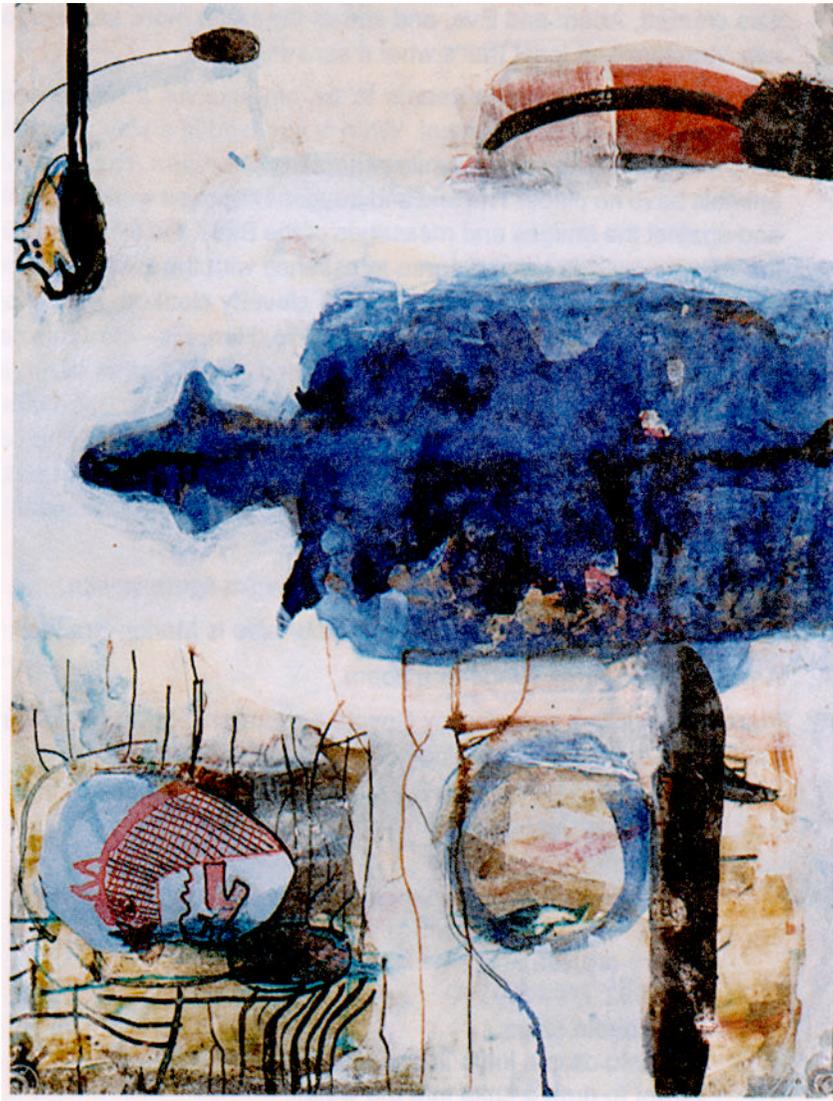


Plate 3: Cobalt Darkman (Wovoka)

DS: It's an older Bible, and there's an inherent kind of racism in it. It shows a 1940s-50s kind of sugar-coated racism, when it was assumed that the dominant culture spoke for everyone. All the illustrations are very one-sided, very Western European. It describes the way the earth was created, Adam and Eve, and shows the world more as a corporate structure--at least that's what it aspires to.

For example, there never seems to be any use for a relationship between man and environment. What is stressed is a way of organizing and converting people, while generating ancestors. The land and animals have no place. The text and images I imposed work both with and against the images and messages of the Bible. On the one hand the new messages I make agree in essence with the Bible, while at the same time pointing out the not very cleverly cloaked, right-wing biased point of view it takes: there are His, Him, He--no females; nature only appears ordered and subjugated. On the other hand, in principle, the Bible calls for a kind of community caring. But overall it's a totalizing choice, and despite its calls for community it never includes people of color. Its presentation is extreme, so it's an easy target for pointing out biases. I doubt that an updated Jehovah's Witness Bible is this blatant.

LA: In this section it looks like you have the Wovoka figure in with...

DS: Noah's ark [laughs]. And then on the other side is Marion Brando.

LA: And you have some songs or a poem.

DS: I turned that into a song for my Coyote performance. What I did was I set it to the rhythm and melody of a peyote song. Coyote sings:

Marion Brando, Marion Brando,  
 where are you now?  
 It's 1992. It's 1992.  
 And everyone needs an Indian.  
 Marlon Brando. Marlon Brando,  
 Where are you now?  
 It's 1992. It's 1992.  
 And coyote sings,  
 I want to drop a knife into the water,  
 I want to drop a knife into the water.  
 I want to make you live in irony.  
 Marlon Brando, Marion Brando.  
 Where are you now?

LA: How did that song come about?

DS: I was watching the Academy Awards and... let's see, the story goes that the Academy Awards were recently broadcast worldwide from Los Angeles. And Coyote was waiting patiently for a good scandal to occur. And all the actors and actresses were wearing the red pins which symbolize AIDS solidarity. Coyote felt that was subtle, but maybe too subtle; maybe it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough for the good scandal--not like 20 years ago. Twenty years ago when Marion Brando was awarded the Best Actor award for his performance as the godfather in *The Godfather*. When the award was announced, Brando sent Sasheen Little Feather, a member of the Apache nation, up to decline his award on the grounds that he was protesting the treatment of Native Americans in this country by the United States government. In April, 1992 I was asked to participate in a show called *Four Directions* with artists James Luna, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith and Joleen Rickard. But James Luna chose not to participate in the exhibition on the grounds that it was called the Columbus Exhibition. So Coyote sang this song dedicated to Marlon Brando and James Luna.

LA: Was the book ever exhibited?

DS: I exhibited it under glass, and I videotaped the whole book with pages being turned. And I had a Xerox of some of the key pages.

LA: You create new meanings by blackening out many of the words. On one page everything is crossed out except the words "fear, the land, and every tree." On the next page what remains is, "It is foolish to think there is no understanding." Was it your intention to subvert the original text in some way?

DS: No, no, it wasn't. The funny thing about that was that all of those were just sort of free association. I just started blackening out words; it was just kind of like a Dada poem or surrealist automatism.

LA: It seems like the figure of Coyote appears in a lot of your work. You've done a performance piece involving Coyote, called *Coyote Looks into His Mind*. Could you talk about the importance of Coyote to you, and his place in your art?

DS: Coyote's not really pictured a lot. He's not in the paintings or the drawings so much but he became like a spokesperson for me. He was saying things that I don't always say..., or would not have said. He was not afraid to speak, and he was, for me, a mixture of my grandfather and the Maya hero Canek. I hate what they did to Coyote in the Southwest. They commercialized him. I understand it, and at the



Plate 4: Red Dog: Consciousness



Plate 5: Laughing Red Dog

same time, I just thought it made him a little too cute. I prefer a Coyote like Jimmy Durham's.

I took Coyote a little more seriously and I combined him with a book called *Canek* by--I can't remember the author--in which he was a Mayan culture hero who led these revolts in 1490. That was one of my references. And then I used grandfather, Pete Rave, Jr., who's a Winnebago--that's my mother's side. And I just combined what I know or understand about them to try to create this kind of voice that addresses the issues.

- LA: Could you talk about the performance piece a little bit, and how that came about, and what you do in it? A sand painting figures in it.
- DS: The sand paintings or sand stories were started in 1990. I was asked by the Provincetown Elementary School to do something for the kids, and I wanted to do something involving their landscape. So we chose to illustrate a Coyote story, with line drawings on black material with white sand. It was called *Coyote in the Dunes*. It was from the book *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with his Daughter*, which are Coyote stories Barry Lopez accumulated. So I was asked to do it my first year [at the Fine Arts Work Center], and then the second year I was asked to do it again for the Fellows at the Center. I wanted to add to it so I ended up writing all these stories, and I read the stories, and then I did more Coyote sand stories. And everything was really sort of autobiographical and contained really overt political material.
- LA: Maybe we could talk just a little bit about autobiographical details. You were born in Iowa and went to high school there?
- DS: Yes.
- LA: Were you artistically inclined as a youth?
- DS: (laughs) Yeah, I was always drawing and stuff like that. Took a lot of painting classes and, you know, my mother wanted to be an artist and I think that was one of the reasons I became an artist.
- LA: You mentioned earlier that you try to create a ceremonial space. What was your upbringing in terms of the tradition and traditional sources of knowledge? When you got into this idea of a ceremonial space, did you have to go back to rediscover that?
- DS: I was raised in a small town--a predominantly White town--and we came from a big family--seven kids. And my parents chose to raise us outside the settlement. The Mesquakie Indians have a settlement. It's land that they bought. It's not a Reservation. And my mother's tribe, the Nebraska Winnebago, are on a Reservation. So in terms of

a traditional upbringing, I was raised in the Native American Church, and we attended meetings mostly on the Winnebago Reservation. And then later, it picked up with the Mesquakie tribe.

LA: What were the influences on the way your work has developed? Did your experience in the Native American Church influence your art at all?

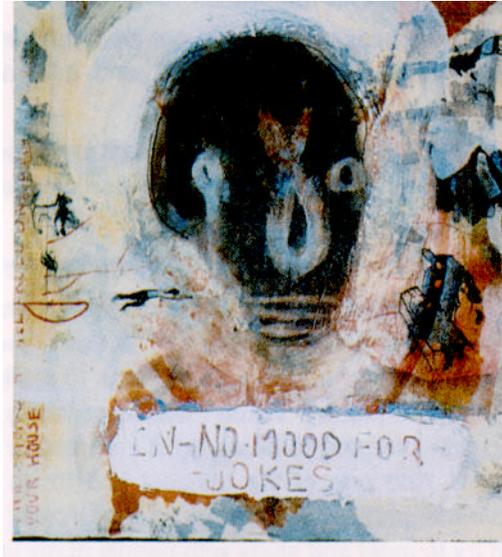
DS: The influence of, let's see, the Native American Church is hard to explain. I think you have to be there. It's just sort of an understanding you end up having.

LA: Were there artists that were particularly interesting to you?

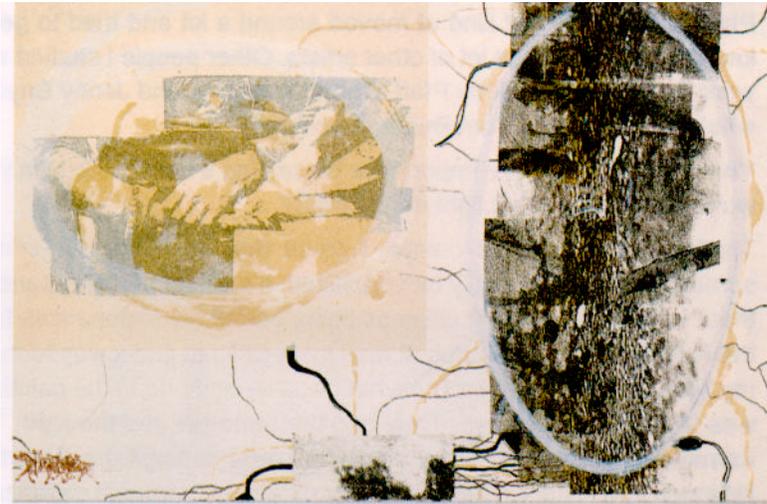
DS: One painter that I looked at was Marsden Hartley. I studied with the painters Bill Jensen, Guy Goodwin, and Peter Saul. One of the things I chose to do in trying to educate myself was to really learn to put myself out there and just try. When I was in my early twenties and was deciding that I wanted to be an artist I wanted to find out what that meant first. And one of the things I had to do was take an aggressive stance, particularly with my education, and to try to be of my time, and try to meet and study with people of my time. So one of the things I did was to work pretty hard. I went to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture [Maine] and the Vermont Studio School, and eventually got into UC Davis. I've moved to New York three times. I've lived in San Diego for a month, and I lived outside Philadelphia. I've just kind of moved around a lot and tried to get to know a lot of people, a lot of other artists. Other people I studied with were Roy DeForest, Judy Pfaff, Robert Arneson, and Jenny Snyder, who's a painter, and Tom Butter, a sculptor.

LA: You've talked about the importance of creating a sense of light in your work. Where does that light derive from?

DS: That's the "feel" that I create. I count that as being non-verbal, something that can't really be verbalized. It's a kind of understanding that I have that I credit or claim as being part of my experiences from the Native American Church. It took me a while to find a way to make my light, to paint my light. But what I was trying to do in the paintings was to have it both ways. They had the narrative and the light. The narrative is learned, and the characters and settings are based on research into history. The light is based more on personal experience and intuition. It sounds like I'm talking about combining reason and feeling.



**Plate 6: In-No-Mood-For-Jokes**



**Plate 7: Diagrams for Landscape and Other Manifestations:  
The Coyote Tree**



**Plate 8: Walker #2**

- LA: Maybe we can talk about the idea of not only narrative, but also adding text to the paintings, which may make it more directly a narrative. I think that a lot of Native American abstract work, so-called, is very concrete in the sense that it does have a story behind it even though that story may be not understandable to someone outside the community.
- DS: I met Brian Tripp [Karak artist] and we were talking about that, talking about how he felt that for Native people there's no such thing as abstract. Everything's a kind of language. Everything has some kind of story involved with it. It's just not apparent.
- LA: Do you structure your canvases in any particular way to emphasize story?
- DS: Well, you know, there's a certain kind of romance in painting. And then there's all the conventions in painting. If you put something in the center, locate it here or locate it there, then it becomes like an icon. And then that becomes what the piece is about. It becomes the force of the piece--part of it. And that's okay. That's something that I think everyone can relate to or feel on a structural level. A lot of times I think that my paintings were about a kind of feeling: you felt the paintings. There's something about the texture and the layering, seeing through things, and at the same time, with all this other information as text, it was a way of trying to deal with that issue--writing the poetry or whatever--like in the *High Tops* piece.
- LA: When did you start to embed text in works?
- DS: The last year after preparing work for the *Submuloc Show*. That's when I created and started using the Red Dog character and Wovoka. And then Coyote came this year.
- LA: Could you talk about how Red Dog evolved and what that figure means?
- DS: Jaune had sent me a lot of information on the Columbus Quincentennial and some of it was from the *Utne Reader*. Red Dog came out of my tendency to be a reactionary. I wrote this story: Red Dog was born in 1492, when Columbus and his gang killed their first Arawak Indians. That was from reading material from Howard Zinn, the *Utne Reader* and Eduardo Galeano. Red Dog became this kind of consciousness. And when they killed the first Indian, Red Dog was born. I quoted Canek from the story in Canek where he'd written, "In faith the spirit rests. In reason it lives. In love it takes pleasure. And only in suffering does it acquire conscience." Red Dog became a symbol of con-

science. I made him red and I put a collar on him. I wasn't thinking blood. I was thinking red as being Indian. And then the collar..., he's not really a wild dog. He's not Coyote. I had to separate him from Coyote, and putting a collar on him is somehow to claim ownership. So Red Dog belonged to the Indian people. Red Dog is more domesticated than Coyote. Red Dog doesn't have a voice. He barks. He's a dog. And so in that sense, he's a guardian. He's an alarmist or whatever. He's--what was the word!--he's sounding out.

LA: Are your writing and painting processes interconnected?

DS: They're interconnected because I don't write anything unless it's connected to the work. Everything, for me, has to mean something. The writing might generate the art or it might come after. It works both ways. I want the writing to somehow integrate into the image. That's why I do a lot of layering.

LA: Maybe we could talk a bit about that layering technique because you've mentioned, "I really work things, sand them down, scrub the paint off, go in again, and it has all these ghosts, the work feels like it has a history."

DS: I create a thick surface. I can build it up. I can hide things inside there when I want to. And I can sand it down as much as I want. Like this one, *Yellow Mapped Desire*, I've been working on it for two years, I'm trying to create this kind of organic feeling.

LA: Could you expand a bit on what that layering does in terms of creating a history in the painting?

DS: The layering, I think, becomes part of the content of the piece because in working it and working it and working it, giving it the feel, that becomes a metaphor in a way. Like in the *Our Land/Ourselves* catalog, Paul Brach talks about how the layering and the painting process becomes a metaphor for the landscape.

LA: On this particular piece you even paint over the text. Is that a deliberate strategy?

DS: Yeah, *Walk Fast Vision*. I was doing all this writing and poetry and just pulling quotes and stuff like that. I wanted to put it all into one painting to create all these different voices.

LA: That idea of different voices comes up in the *High Tops* piece. How did that piece come about? It looks like more of a sculpture.

DS: The *High Tops* are, again, going back to the theme about the Walker and what I wanted to do was create a whole body of work using tracing

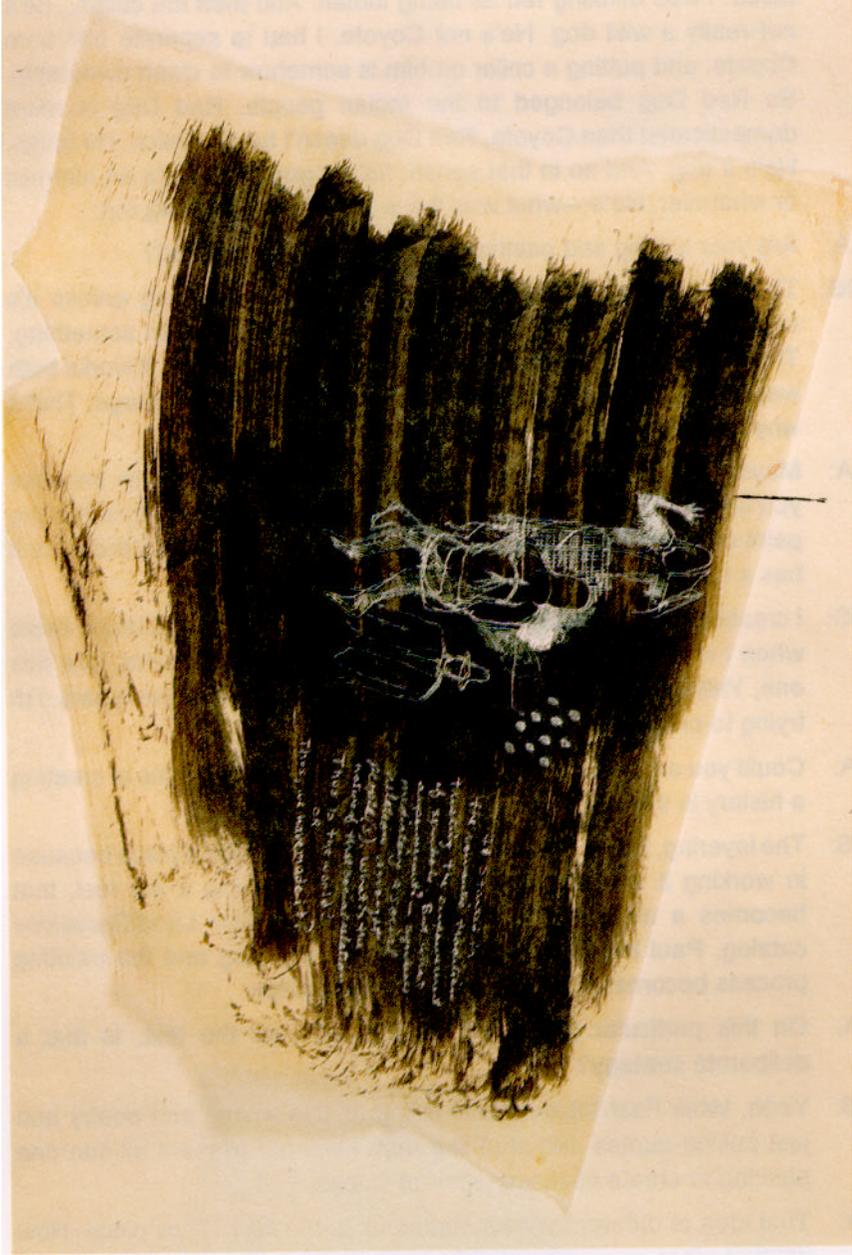


Plate 9: Meditation on Progress

paper. The idea was to paint heavy topics using light materials, and paint light topics using heavy materials. It has this kind of psychological impact when you first see it. That was part of the idea of that whole body of work, using tracing paper because it's so fragile and it needs to be protected.

And then the idea of the shoes. The idea of the Walker was modeled after my size 10 1/2 Reeboks, high top Reeboks, and the text and everything was the idea of all these stories and things that are accumulated as you're walking through your life. It was cultural history and personal history.

The Ghost Dance became my point of departure. I wanted to find out where I was at that point in time, 1890. So I researched both my great-grandfathers, Sam Slick and John Rave. Sam Slick is the lone surviving son of a family of seven. Smallpox killed his brothers and sisters. He and his mother survived, so he left the Sauk and Fox Reservation in Oklahoma for the Sauk and Fox settlement in Iowa. That's how he carries his name. I speak to him in a poem when I tell him, "Great-grandfather, I carry your name." John Rave was actually my great-uncle, but in the Indian way I call him grandfather, and he was one of the founders of the Native American Church.

It had come to the point where everything became complicated and full of questions. Connections between incidents began resembling those 3-D models for molecules, and my work began to look like designs for urban planning. Lines became metaphors for reasons, rationales, boundaries, definitions, and categorizations. Meanwhile landscape and other Native symbols floated in the picture plane isolated in ovals, functioning as statements for an organizing principle.

But you asked about the shoes. I like the idea of installation as a presentation of democratic pictures. The viewer walks into the installation and they start wherever they want. The piece is so encompassing that everything becomes equal.

The idea of the shoes was again the accumulation of experience, from way back when to my present-day journey. The writing on the shoes, books, letter size, print, and so forth, all have ways of prioritizing messages. By placing the writing on the shoes I planned the first impact to be the experience of the physical object. The viewer can then begin to read the text from different locations, like the tongue, the heel, the shoe strings. In that way I could get away from a linear pattern of thinking. The viewer goes in and the shoes, really the artist, weave the story in and out between chants, history, politics, and

recent events. By doing that I was able to make a work that reveals itself slowly.

When Jaune invited me to participate in the *Submuloc Show* she asked for overtly political things. I had never done that before. So this body of work was an attempt to find out what that would look like. Most of the political work I saw or considered political was didactic. I didn't like it. I prefer painting or art work generally that houses subtleties and has a sensual quality and a physical impact that reveals itself over time. I guess that I'd seen too much "one-liner" art.

The point is, the shoes were a part of a search, a part of a body of work that had several points of departure, like the *Ghost Dance* and the self-portrait, all of which began with the question: what does it mean to make a political painting? But over the course of time I've come to regard all art work as embodying the political.

LA: That was all embedded in the text of the shoes?

DS: That's all in the text of the shoes. And then in the whole text of that body of work.

LA: The *High Tops* were exhibited along with a number of other works, including *Red Dog*, *Red Ghost Messiah*, *Purging Wovoka*, *Story Arms*, *Maps*, *Boundaries and Missionaries*, *Red Dog*, *Black Dog*, and *White Hot Landscape* (all 1991). How were they all integrated? Was there one central thematic organizing principle, because it is a diverse body of work in one show?

DS: If you walked into the room with all of them in it, they are all looked pretty much the same size, and they were all on firm paper. I also put these small vellum drawings in with the bigger pieces, and they were able to hold their own kind of light. When you walked in there you were surrounded by paintings and drawings, and the shoes were in the center of the room. You could feel the energy in that entire room.

LA: Part of the text on the *High Tops* struck me as a contrast between consumerist American stuff and more traditional things. How did that part of the text evolve?

DS: When someone dies, we always have these adoption ceremonies. My brother had been living in Colorado, one of my older brothers, and a friend of his had passed away, and the parents adopted him in his place. And Brian was a little bit of a wanderer, and I thought it was good because I think they were a very kind family and were helping him, you know, stay out of trouble, whatever. So I came up with that list like when we have these adoption ceremonies and give-aways;

those are the things they would give you. I tried to prioritize those things, starting with items like towels, socks, and blankets, and ending with time, stories, images, memories and identity. I was going from very specific things to these other things which are entirely different, more value-laden, more culture-specific.

LA: The imagery in the show seems very diverse because you have the semi-figurative pieces of Wovoka along with modernistic basketball shoes. There's a diversity of materials, too.

DS: The shoes were made out of tracing paper.

LA: Made out of tracing paper?

DS: Yeah. They were all the same material. I mean, another part of it was me trying to figure out what a body of work meant and trying to define what that meant for me. And one of the things that I really enjoyed about doing those paintings, making those paintings, was finding out what it means to make a body of work. It was like describing the difference between painting and making paintings. If you're making paintings, you're making like little single images and maybe somehow they'll all connect. But if you're painting, then there's some formal problem or some space problem you're trying to resolve. There's this constant kind of thing that's in front of your face and you're in the studio and you're just locked into that thing, and you're just working on it, and it's consistent. It goes through all the work. And that's what, in my opinion, making a body of work means.

LA: Do you conceive of work in a series? Or does a coherent body of work emerge over a particular time period?

DS: I was never able to do that. I mean, that's my whole thing. I can't really see myself doing that. I guess I am making a consistent body of work, but it was always difficult for me because I'm like this radio where the ideas just keep coming.

LA: You're just over 30 now, and you've been painting pretty seriously since '80. As you look back over your work do you see connections or a sense of evolution?

DS: Some of the work I can say that: it depends. Some of it I connect to. Some of it is kind of embarrassing, But I can see a shift in my attitudes. For one thing, I think I started out being really romantic. I set out like I'm going to paint this, I'm going to paint that, and I'm going to do it, and I was very stubborn. I did things like shield images and pictographs. And it took me a few years before I really just got into being

seduced by painting, and then discovering how to make this light come up consistently, and I wanted to find out what that's about.

LA: Do you work in both large and small formats?

DS: For one thing, to do these kinds of little pictographs and things, somehow it's more believable, or I think I can get away with more when I'm working in a sketch book size, like 14 by 11. Whereas if I try to paint a giant dog head or something, it doesn't have the same impact. It's different: it completely changes the context of it.

LA: Could you talk about the painting *In No Mood for Jokes* (1991) (Plate 6)?

DS: *In No Mood for Jokes... In No Mood...* I was coming up with all these names for the pieces and for characters. Like, I had Red Dog, Wovoka, Coyote, and *In No Mood for Jokes* popped up one day when I was looking at a Coyote story and Coyote was angry. Somebody played a trick on him and he was in no mood for jokes. So I came up with that character, *In No Mood for Jokes*, and one of the things that's particular about that painting is it's kind of ironic. I mean, on the one hand, it's kind of funny. It's a funny image. He looks like a lightbulb, and then to have that written across the painting "In No Mood for Jokes." But then when you look closer, someone's dead in the painting and then there's someone passed out, having drunk too much alcohol.

LA: Do you attempt to put humor in your work at all?

DS: Yeah. That's the thing about the small drawings...it's me. I can be as quirky or as serious as I want to be. And as irreverent as I want to be.

LA: Your work can be directly critical on a political level, like in *The History of North America, perhaps, and Coyote Unfurled, For Franz Boas, Father of Anthropology* (each 1991).

DS: *Father of Anthropology*. Another thing I got into in graduate school was a lot of critical theory. We were reading things by Lévi-Strauss, Barthes and Foucault, and there was another writer I really liked named James Clifford. I collected a lot of their books and I was doing all the reading. And that was one of the things that gave me the impetus to try to change my work because I went through this point where I just lost faith in painting because there's so much that's known about it, and I felt like the paintings sometimes were just mainly about me. Maybe in a way I was second-guessing myself but I felt more like I was kind of grandstanding sometimes, and I felt that art was more

about asking questions, because if you're asking questions, then it's a process, it's a life-long process.

LA: It strikes me that Native artists seem to be less into self-presentation or self-promotion.

DS: In the book, *I Tell You Now: Autobiographies by Native American Writers*, that's brought up constantly, the use of "I" in Native American literature, where I think it's a use that's sort of frowned upon. You don't go around grandstanding or talking about yourself all the time. So in a way it's just like you have to kind of efface, but it's more community-based, I think.

LA: Do you feel that Native artists relate more to "we" than non-Native artists? There may not be any community claims on the non-Native artist.

DS: I'm wondering how much of that depends on assumptions that people make because they're White male in a White male art world. Whereas someone like Jaune or George Longfish or any of us, you know, we go out there and we present our work and all of a sudden we're seen in a certain context, and we're defined by a White male art world. So then we end up, like any other minority, marginalized. You end up having to be seen as a spokesperson for your entire race or whatever. An Indian artist is supposed to be a spokesperson for all Indian artists.

LA: Do you want to be considered Duane Slick, artist, Duane Slick, Indian artist, Duane Slick, artist who is an Indian?

DS: You have to be careful because sometimes I think you can be victimized by your own point of view. If you identify yourself as a certain type of artist, you can become victimized by it.

Scholder was one, and he can't get out of that. R.C. Gorman is totally unaware of what he's doing, and he doesn't care. He's making money. And those are easy targets, I think. The other idea I wanted to get into is that of the artist being taken on his or her own terms. That's my goal, basically. We were talking about identifying yourself. Do you see yourself as a Native American artist or do you see yourself as an artist who's Native American? I see myself as an artist who's Native American because being an artist is something different, and then that's when the idea of the cultural information comes in. Being an artist is being a questioning person. And it's not, you know, media specific. There's an incredible amount of freedom in art.

On the other hand, the art world in general, the magazines and such, dictate the terms and expectations to younger artists. This is espe-

cially true of Santa Fe and some of the students at the Institute [IAIA]. Too often I've come across students working toward the Indian Market mentality. I know you have to eat, but it should be the other way around.

My theory of the now in-bred Santa Fe Indian Market is this: during the 1960s the market and the art world opened to Native artists. The market was waiting to be told who and what we were by Native people themselves. Today that situation has changed. The market expects Namingha or Vigil-Grey look-alikes who cater to that taste. But that's what happens when you cater to the market. You stop making work for yourself and the community.

For me, you have to follow that voice and not give into a market demand. You want to be taken on your own terms. You want to be able to set your own kind of standard. That is what becoming an artist is all about and that's why we keep talking about the shifts in my work, the things that have changed. It's that constant questioning. It's like Jimmy Durham's title for the exhibition *We're Always Turning Around on Purpose*. I think that's a necessary thing.

#### Selected Exhibitions

- 1994      Group Exhibition, *Heard Invitational*, The Heard Museum, Phoenix, Arizona
- 1994      Group Exhibition, *Memories of Childhood*, Steinbaum/Krauss Gallery, New York, New York
- 1994      Group Exhibition, *Artists Who Are Indian*, Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado
- 1993      Solo Exhibition, *Looking for Orozco*, Lawrence Art Center, Lawrence, Kansas
- 1992      Solo Exhibition, UFO Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts
- 1992      Group Exhibition, *For the Seventh Generation: Native American Artists Counter the Quincentenary, Columbus*, New York, Chenango County Council of the Arts, Norwich, New York, and Golden Artist Colors, Columbus, New York
- 1992-93   Group Exhibition, *We, the Human Beings*, The College of Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, Ohio
- 1993-94   Group Traveling Exhibition, *The Submuloc Show/Columbus Woks*, ATLATL, Phoenix, Arizona

- 1991-93 Group Traveling Exhibition, *Our Land/Ourselves*, University Art Gallery, State University of New York, Albany, New York
- 1990 Solo Exhibition, C.N. Gorman Museum, University of California, Davis, California

### Additional Reading

#### Slick, Duane

- 1992 Artist's Statement, in *The Submuloc Show/Columbus Wobs*. Phoenix, Arizona: ATLATL, p.56.
- 1992 The History of North America, in *For the Seventh Generation: Native American Artists Counter the Quincentenary, Columbus, New York*. Norwich, New York: Chenango County Council of the Arts and Columbus, New York: Golden Artist Colors Gallery, p.18.
- 1992 Artist's Statement, in *We, the Human Beings*. Wooster, Ohio: College of Wooster Art Museum, p.37.

#### Towle, Andrew

- 1992 Duane Slick: Expanding a Consciousness, *Provincetown Paper* 2(1): March 18, pp. 9-10.

### List of Plates

1. *High Tops/The Shoes* (Detail). 1991; ink on drafting paper; 17.8 cm x 30.5 cm x 10.2 cm; (Size 11 Reeboks). Photograph courtesy of Duane Slick.
2. *Purging Wovoka*. 1991; oil, gesso, ink; 111.8 cm x 86.4 cm. Photograph courtesy of Duane Slick.
3. *Cobalt Darkman (Wovoka)*. 1991; ink on paper; 21.6 cm x 28 cm. Photograph courtesy of Duane Slick.
4. *Red Dog: Consciousness*. 1991; ink, gesso, on vellum; 28 cm x 35.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of Duane Slick.
5. *Laughing Red Dog*. 1991; ink on vellum; 35.5 cm x 28 cm. Photograph courtesy of Duane Slick.
6. *In.No-Mood-For-Jokes*. 1991; mixed media; 15.25 cm x 16.5 cm. Photograph courtesy of Duane Slick.
7. *Diagrams For Landscape and Other Manifestations: The Coyote Tree*. 1993; lithograph, edition of 18, published by Tamarind Institute. Photograph by Damian Andrus, courtesy of Tamarind Institute, 108 Cornell

Drive, SE, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA, 87106. Sacha Wellborn, collaborating printer. 66 cm x 101.6 cm.

8. *Walker #2*. 1991; ink, gesso, on vellum; 35.5 cm x 28 cm. Photograph courtesy of Duane Slick.
9. *Meditation on Progress*. 1991; ink on drafting paper; 28 cm x 36.8 cm. From *We, The Human Beings/27 Contemporary Native American Artists*, curated by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, organized by The College of Wooster Art Museum. Photograph by Matt Dilyard, reproduced courtesy of The College of Wooster Art Museum, Wooster, Ohio, USA, 44691.